

Fate of Anti-War Journalism Lies in Upcoming Assange Hearings

The press still has the power to challenge and prevent U.S. wars. However, this power hangs in the balance in the form of Julian Assange's fate.

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Within just a few days, the United States will once again make its case in a UK court that it has a right to extradite WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange to be tried under the Espionage Act, in what remains this century's most dangerous attack on global press freedom.

These hearings, taking place on October 27 and 28, are an attempt to appeal the decision that Judge Vanessa Baraitser made earlier this year to not extradite Assange to the United States because it is likely he will commit suicide if subjected to the inhumane conditions of the U.S. prison system. However, while this decision was focused on his health, these hearings are really about what the Assange case has always been about: the United States' determination to silence anyone who exposes the crimes of the U.S. empire.

Leading press freedom and human rights organizations have been clear about the implications of a potential Assange extradition and have called on President Biden to drop the case. If there were still any doubts that the Department of Justice's focus on Assange was corrupt and politically motivated, those who remain skeptical should consider two major revelations about the U.S. campaign against Assange since the last hearing.

Earlier this year the Icelandic news outlet Stundin reported that a key witness in the prosecution against Assange admitted to lying in his indictment. This witness was Sigurdur Ingi Thordarson, a convicted pedophile and fraudster. The FBI promised Thordarson immunity from prosecution under the condition that he lie about his relationship with WikiLeaks in an indictment which would strengthen the DOJ's conspiracy charge against Assange. Along with the debunked claim that Assange pressured whistleblower Chelsea Manning into hacking a U.S. government computer, Thordarson's indictment was supposed to paint Assange as having a pattern of pressuring sources to commit cyber crimes. The Stundin article should put to rest any belief that the United States is being honest about its stated reasons for going after Assange.

But the Stundin article is not even the most concerning glimpse into the prosecution's true character. Just this month, Yahoo News reported that Mike Pompeo, the main force behind Trump's decision to pursue extradition, was obsessed with punishing Assange for publishing the Vault 7 documents which revealed the CIA's activities of electronic surveillance and cyber-warfare. Though The Grayzone initially broke this news in May 2020, the recent Yahoo News report includes additional details of Pompeo's obsession. Most shockingly, Pompeo held such a vendetta against Assange that he considered arranging a shootout in the streets of London with the British government to assassinate Assange.

It is still unclear if either of these facts will be considered in the UK court's upcoming hearings. There remains a dangerous lack of solidarity with Assange from the press, which is exactly why it is so important that this extradition not happen. As mainstream news outlets become increasingly complacent, and even supportive of pro-war policies, it becomes more essential that anti-war voices, and anti-war journalists in particular, resist the attempt by the United States to set the precedent that the act of publishing war crimes is a punishable offense.

After 20 years of the United States military destroying entire countries under the guise of fighting terrorism, there is finally a partial reckoning with U.S. warmongering around the world. It cannot be said that Americans are particularly anti-war now, but at the very least, Biden's decision to pull U.S. troops from Afghanistan was widely popular across the political spectrum. Yet, many news outlets instead chose to emphasize the minority position on Afghanistan by prioritizing commentary from interventionists and weapons lobbyists over anti-war scholars and activists, and by falsely representing the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan as a positive. This sudden emphasis on the supposedly positive role of U.S. occupation in Afghanistan is a particularly dangerous line for journalists to push considering how little effort the U.S. media placed on covering the conflict prior to withdrawal. One study found that in 2020, three major news outlets gave the conflict a combined coverage of less than five minutes.

In contrast to publications that take such a careless or outright supportive stance on the irreparable harm of U.S. foreign policy are WikiLeaks and its founder, Julian Assange. Following his view that "if wars can be started with lies, they can be stopped by truth," Assange has published some of the most vital information on U.S. foreign policy of the 21st century with perfect accuracy. Some of the information provided to the public (thanks to the anonymous online source submission system developed by Assange) includes the CIA rendition program, detainee abuse at Guantanamo Bay, and U.S. war crimes in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, and more. It is this view on publishing which understands war as something to be exposed and resisted that has made Assange such a hated figure by warmongers in the United States.

However, as every Assange supporter knows, a potential extradition of Assange will not just stop with Assange. The fear is that the torture he has endured and a possible extradition and even sentencing under the Espionage Act would enable the U.S. government to do the same to anyone else who exposes the crimes of the U.S. military. Even if the United States cannot successfully imprison every journalist who exposes its crimes, such a precedent would likely scare publications into even greater submission to the state. The desired outcome is the complete neutering of anti-war journalism.

Despite the many problems with the mainstream press, journalism as an institution remains

one of the most effective methods of resisting, and at times, ending wars. Even those distrustful of the press should be willing to oppose attacks on the right to a free press when such attacks occur. It is the guarantee of press freedom that enables anti-war reporting to make its way into the mainstream at times, shifting people's understanding of what their government does.

One recent example of the power of the press is the reporting that the New York Times and Washington Post did on the U.S. military's drone strike of an Afghan aid worker, Zemari Ahmadi, and his family. Though these two publications are often the principal cheerleaders of U.S. foreign policy, their recent independent investigations into Biden's drone strike brought the U.S. drone program to the attention of the American public. As a result, the Pentagon had to admit it not only killed a civilian and his loved ones, but knowingly lied to the public by falsely claiming they had proof that this man was an ISIS-K operative. That admission of guilt and dishonesty may not have come if not for the power that the reporters at the Times and the Post chose to wield over the warmongers in the Pentagon.

One has to wonder: if these publications chose to routinely use their immense resources and platforms to scrutinize the military, rather than provide PR for it, would the drone program even still be operating? Would the war in Afghanistan have ended much sooner? Could the invasion have been avoided entirely?

These are questions that cannot be answered, but they should be asked of journalists as the U.S. continues to prioritize military spending and beat the drum for a new war with China. The press still has the power to challenge and prevent U.S. wars. However, this power hangs in the balance in the form of Julian Assange's fate. Recent coverage of the Afghanistan withdrawal shows the potential for two types of press. One which sees its role as the mouthpiece for the most war-hungry members of a global empire or one that shows the true nature of war to the public, enabling them to oppose it and giving its victims some justice. For anti-war advocates who would rather see the latter option covering foreign policy, it is essential to show strong support for Julian Assange and demand the charges against him be dropped immediately.

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