

Murderous Fantasies: The US Intelligence Effort Against Assange

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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If there was any reason to halt a farcical train of legal proceedings, then the case against Julian Assange would have to be the standard bearing example. Since last year, the efforts by the US government to pursue his extradition to the vicious purgatory of American justice has seen more than a fair share of obscene revelations. While prosecutors for the US insist that the publisher must find himself in freedom land for having, incongruously, violated provisions under the Espionage Act of 1917, the broader political elements to this are impossible to shake.

From the moment classified US documents were released with daring aplomb on the WikiLeaks site, Assange was treated as a political target sneeringly condemned by Joe Biden (then Vice President) as a “cyber terrorist”. It did not matter that he had been granted political asylum by a foreign government, or that he had exposed the vicious nature of the US war machine in foreign lands.

The central strategy of the enraged in the face of such exposure is conventionally dull. Mock the publisher; redirect attention away from exposing the bloody mischief of empire. In the court of public opinion, such an individual can be queered and rendered indigestible, motives rubbished, intentions trashed. Cheeky public disclosure contrarians can be dismissed as cranks and discredited.

Once Michael Pompeo assumed the reins at the Central Intelligence Agency, WikiLeaks became something of an obsession, fascinating given Donald Trump’s sheer delight over its releases of those Democratic emails that holed Hillary Clinton’s campaign in 2016. “It’s time to call out WikiLeaks for what it really is,” [he told an audience](#) at the Center for Strategic and international Studies (CSIS) on April 13, 2017, “a non-state hostile intelligence service often abetted by state actors like Russia.”

Such a perspective led to brazen efforts by the Spanish private security firm UC Global, hired to furnish surveillance equipment to the Ecuadorian embassy in London, to spy upon Assange and his various colleagues and confidantes. The firm, through its chief executive David Morales, was knee-deep with the Central Intelligence Agency and delighted to be of

assistance.

The extent of Morales's zeal [alarmed](#) a few former employees of the company, a point they were unreserved in expressing in the Old Bailey proceedings in September last year. "Around June 2017, while I was sourcing providers for the new camera equipment, David Morales instructed that the cameras should allow streaming capabilities so that 'our friends' in the United States', as Morales explicitly put it, would be able to gain access to the interior of the embassy in real time. This request alarmed me greatly, and in order to impede the request, I claimed that remote access via streaming via the camera circuit was not technically achievable." That witness noted Morales's wish to bug the entire embassy and suggested that the purpose of installing microphones had been at the behest of the United States to target Assange's legal representatives.

This was merely the start. One of the witnesses (for convenience, called Witness 2), revealed how Morales [had asked him](#) to "steal a nappy of a baby which according to the company's security personnel deployed at the embassy, regularly visited Mr Assange." The act was designed to ascertain whether, in fact, it came from "a child of the asylee." It was "the Americans", Morales claimed, "who wanted to establish paternity."

Frustrated by a lack of movement on expelling Assange from the embassy, US officials began teasing out options. According to the second witness, "the Americans were desperate [in December 2017] and that they had even suggested that more extreme measures should be employed against the 'guest' to put an end to the situation of Assange's permanence in the embassy." An "accident" was proposed, one that could be claimed for covering an operation "which would allow persons to enter from outside the embassy and kidnap the asylee". And just in case such a scenario would not unfold, another, more final suggestion was [put on the table](#): a handy poisoning.

As is often the nature of the modern news cycle, such damnable revelations are dips in what is otherwise a more substantive, disturbing story. It takes [such reports](#) as those of *Yahoo!News* to add a chilling confirmation. To the credit of the authors, much flesh is added to the narrative. A former Trump national security official is cited as claiming that the administration was "seeing blood" after WikiLeaks [published the Vault 7 files](#), a set of hacking tools developed by the CIA. "This extraordinary collection, which amounts to more than several hundred millions line of code," crowed WikiLeaks in a press [release](#) at the time, "gives its possessor the entire hacking capacity of the CIA."

But the interest in gathering material on the organisation in the intelligence community began prior, inspired by the revelations of Edward Snowden in June 2013 about the warrantless and expansive surveillance programs of the National Security Agency. Within the CIA, the Office of Transnational Issues got busy [establishing its own](#) "WikiLeaks team". The intelligence community was abuzz with efforts to give the publishing outfit a different designation as "information brokers".

With the publication of leaked Democratic Party emails, the belief among some intelligence operatives that Assange "was acting in collusion with people who were using him to hurt the interests of the United States" became, according to the community's senior lawyer Robert Litt, palpable. With Trump taking up residence in the White House, a counterintelligence official [could only remark](#) that, "Nobody in that crew was going to be too broken up about the First Amendment issues."

The *Yahoo* report is also filled with the wet dreams of adolescent functionaries pondering how the Australian might have made a dash for it. One of these involved the prospect that Assange might be spirited away by Russian agents after being granted diplomatic status by Ecuador. Scenarios involved crashing into any vehicle transporting Assange, snatching him and shooting the tyres of any plane intended to carry him to Moscow. “It was going to be like a prison break movie,” one former senior administration official [fantasised](#) with relish.

Outside the embassy, the area got cluttered with spooks and operatives. “It got to the point where every human being in a three-block radius was working for one of the intelligence services – whether they were street sweepers or police officers or security guards.”

Within some channels of the US government, concerns were aired that the rendition and kidnapping enthusiasts were getting out of hand. The fairly obvious point [was expressed](#) by some NSC officials that any such operation would be illegal. “You can’t throw people in a car and kidnap them,” a former national security official warned.

In the spring of 2017, assassination made it to the front of the queue as a possible remedy. President Trump put out the feelers for some advice. “It was viewed as unhinged and ridiculous,” a former senior CIA official is reported as saying. Another claimed that those proposing the idea “were just spitballing”, all part of an atmosphere where Trump was just being Trump. The spit balls in question evidently lingered long enough for rough sketches to be drawn up contemplating Assange’s murder and WikiLeaks members with access to the Vault 7 trove.

Assange’s US lawyer Barry Pollack [wishes](#) that this grubby state of affairs will lead to a sensible conclusion. “My hope and expectation is that the UK courts will consider this information and it will further bolster its decision not to extradite to the US.” The US appeal against the refusal to extradite Assange will be doing its best to avoid such thorny, and telling, revelations. Assange’s defence team will be doing their best to foil such efforts.

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Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research and Asia-Pacific Research. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

Featured image: Julian Assange in Belmarsh Prison in 2019 (Source: WSWS)

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Kampmark](#)

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