

Press Freedom Coalition Calls on Biden's Department of Justice to Drop Case Against Julian Assange

By [Reporters Without Borders](#)

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Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has joined a coalition of two dozen press freedom, civil liberties, and international human rights organizations in urging the Biden Department of Justice to stop pursuing an appeal against the extradition decision and drop the charges against Wikileaks founder Julian Assange.

The full text of the letter is below.

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U.S. Department of Justice

950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW

Washington, DC 20530-0001

February 8, 2021

Acting Attorney General Monty Wilkinson:

We, the undersigned press freedom, civil liberties, and international human rights advocacy organizations, write today to share our profound concern about the ongoing criminal and extradition proceedings relating to Julian Assange, the founder of Wikileaks, under the Espionage Act and the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act.

While our organizations have different perspectives on Mr. Assange and his organization, we share the view that the government's indictment of him poses a grave threat to press freedom both in the United States and abroad. We urge you to drop the appeal of the decision by Judge Vanessa Baraitser of the Westminster Magistrates' Court to reject the Trump administration's extradition request. We also urge you to dismiss the underlying indictment.

The indictment of Mr. Assange threatens press freedom because much of the conduct described in the indictment is conduct that journalists engage in routinely — and that they

must engage in — in order to do the work the public needs them to do. Journalists at major news publications regularly speak with sources, ask for clarification or more documentation, and receive and publish documents the government considers secret. In our view, such a precedent in this case could effectively criminalize these common journalistic practices.

In addition, some of the charges included in the indictment turn entirely on Mr. Assange's decision to publish classified information. News organizations frequently and necessarily publish classified information in order to inform the public of matters of profound public significance. We appreciate that the government has a legitimate interest in protecting bona fide national security interests, but the proceedings against Mr. Assange jeopardize journalism that is crucial to democracy.

The Trump administration positioned itself as an antagonist to the institution of a free and unfettered press in numerous ways. Its abuse of its prosecutorial powers was among the most disturbing. We are deeply concerned about the way that a precedent created by prosecuting Assange could be leveraged — perhaps by a future administration — against publishers and journalists of all stripes. Major news organizations share this concern, which is why the announcement of charges against Assange in May 2019 was met with vociferous and nearly universal condemnation from virtually every major American news outlet, even though many of those news outlets have criticized Mr. Assange in the past.

It is our understanding that senior officials in the Obama administration shared this concern as well. Former Department of Justice spokesperson Matthew Miller told the Washington Post in 2013, "The problem the department has always had in investigating Julian Assange is there is no way to prosecute him for publishing information without the same theory being applied to journalists." It was reportedly the press freedom implications of any prosecution of Mr. Assange that led Attorney General Eric Holder's Justice Department to decide against indicting him after considering doing so.

It is unfortunately the case that press freedom is under threat globally. Now more than ever, it is crucial that we protect a robust and adversarial press — what Judge Murray Gurfein in the Pentagon Papers case memorably called a "cantankerous press, an obstinate press, an ubiquitous press" — in the United States and abroad. With this end in mind, we respectfully urge you to forgo the appeal of Judge Baraitser's ruling, and to dismiss the indictment of Mr. Assange.

Respectfully,

(in alphabetical order)

Access Now

American Civil Liberties Union

Amnesty International – USA

Center for Constitutional Rights

Committee to Protect Journalists

Defending Rights and Dissent

Demand Progress

Electronic Frontier Foundation

Fight for the Future

First Amendment Coalition

Free Press

Freedom of the Press Foundation

Human Rights Watch

Index on Censorship

Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University

National Coalition Against Censorship

Open The Government
Partnership for Civil Justice Fund

PEN America

Project on Government Oversight

Reporters Without Borders

Roots Action

The Press Freedom Defense Fund of First Look Institute

Whistleblower & Source Protection Program (WHISPeR) at ExposeFacts

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