

‘You Failed to Break the Spirit of Bradley Manning’: An Open Letter to President Obama

By [Norman Solomon](#)

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Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

Dear President Obama:

As commander in chief, you’ve been responsible for the treatment of the most high-profile whistleblower in the history of the U.S. armed forces. Under your command, the United States military tried — and failed — to crush the spirit of Bradley Manning.

Your failure became evident after the sentencing on Wednesday, when a statement from Bradley Manning was read aloud to the world. The statement began: “The decisions that I made in 2010 were made out of a concern for my country and the world that we live in. Since the tragic events of 9/11, our country has been at war. We’ve been at war with an enemy that chooses not to meet us on any traditional battlefield, and due to this fact we’ve had to alter our methods of combating the risks posed to us and our way of life. I initially agreed with these methods and chose to volunteer to help defend my country.”

From the outset, your administration set out to destroy Bradley Manning. As his biographer Chase Madar [wrote](#) in The Nation, “Upon his arrest in May 2010, he was locked up in punitive isolation for two months in Iraq and Kuwait, then nine more months at the Marine Corps brig in Quantico, Virginia. Prohibited from lying down during the day or exercising, he was forced to respond every five of his waking minutes to a guard’s question: ‘Are you OK?’ In his final weeks of isolation, Manning was deprived of all clothing beyond a tear-proof smock and forced to stand at attention every night in the nude.”

More than nine months after Manning’s arrest, at a news conference you [defended](#) this treatment — which the State Department’s chief spokesman, P.J. Crowley, had just lambasted as “ridiculous, counterproductive and stupid.” (Crowley swiftly lost his job.) Later, the UN special rapporteur on torture issued a report on the treatment of Manning: “at a minimum cruel, inhuman and degrading.”

At a fundraiser on April 21, 2011, when asked about Manning, you flatly [said](#): “He broke the law.” His trial would not begin for two more years.

Bradley Manning’s statement after sentencing on Wednesday said: “It was not until I was in Iraq and reading secret military reports on a daily basis that I started to question the morality of what we were doing. It was at this time I realized that (in) our efforts to meet the risk posed to us by the enemy, we have forgotten our humanity. We consciously elected to devalue human life both in Iraq and Afghanistan. When we engaged those that we perceived were the enemy, we sometimes killed innocent civilians. Whenever we killed innocent civilians, instead of accepting responsibility for our conduct, we elected to hide behind the veil of national security and classified information in order to avoid any public

accountability.”

Public accountability is essential to democracy. We can’t have meaningful “consent of the governed” without informed consent. We can’t have moral responsibility without challenging official hypocrisies and atrocities.

Bradley Manning clearly understood that. He didn’t just follow orders or turn his head at the sight of unconscionable policies of the U.S. government. Finding himself in a situation where he could shatter the numbed complacency that is the foundation of war, he cared — and he took action as a whistleblower.

After being sentenced to many years in prison, Manning conveyed to the American public an acute understanding of our present historic moment: “In our zeal to kill the enemy, we internally debated the definition of torture. We held individuals at Guantanamo for years without due process. We inexplicably turned a blind eye to torture and executions by the Iraqi government. And we stomached countless other acts in the name of our war on terror.

“Patriotism is often the cry extolled when morally questionable acts are advocated by those in power. When these cries of patriotism drown out any logically based dissension, it is usually the American soldier that is given the order to carry out some ill-conceived mission.”

Clearly, Mr. President, you have sought to make an example of Bradley Manning with categorical condemnation and harsh punishment. You seem not to grasp that he has indeed become an example — an inspiring example of stellar courage and idealism, which millions of Americans now want to emulate.

From the White House, we continue to get puffed-up sugar-coated versions of history, past and present. In sharp contrast, Bradley Manning offers profound insights in his post-sentencing statement: “Our nation has had similar dark moments for the virtues of democracy — the Trail of Tears, the Dred Scott decision, McCarthyism, and the Japanese-American internment camps — to mention a few. I am confident that many of the actions since 9/11 will one day be viewed in a similar light. As the late Howard Zinn once said, ‘There is not a flag large enough to cover the shame of killing innocent people.’”

Imagine. After more than three years in prison, undergoing methodical abuse and then the ordeal of a long military trial followed by the pronouncement of a 35-year prison sentence, Bradley Manning has emerged with his solid humanistic voice not only intact, but actually stronger than ever!

He acknowledged, “I understand that my actions violated the law; I regret if my actions hurt anyone or harmed the United States. It was never my intent to hurt anyone. I only wanted to help people. When I chose to disclose classified information, I did so out of a love for my country and a sense of duty to others.”

And then Bradley Manning concluded his [statement](#) by addressing you directly as president of the United States: “If you deny my request for a pardon, I will serve my time knowing that sometimes you have to pay a heavy price to live in a free society. I will gladly pay that price if it means we could have a country that is truly conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all women and men are created equal.”

You failed to break the spirit of Bradley Manning. And that spirit will continue to inspire.

Norman Solomon is co-founder of RootsAction.org and founding director of the Institute for Public Accuracy. His books include "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death." Information on the documentary based on the book is at www.WarMadeEasyTheMovie.org.

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