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BY EVE OTTENBERG

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The Biden-Trump Persecution of Julian Assange



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For a good while one could blame Trump for the prosecutorial monstrosity perpetrated on journalist Julian Assange. But now it's time for Trump to move over. The single worst assault on the first amendment and a free press in recent centuries is no longer solely his. Biden owns it. Biden could end this state persecution of a journalist today, if he felt like it. A persecution that a U.N. expert has called torture. A persecution that could easily lead to Assange's death.

But maybe that's the point. Indeed, if killing Assange isn't the point, Biden should prove it, by pardoning him now. Biden doesn't feel like it. Unlike Jamal Khashoggi, whose murder he deplored before he didn't, Biden never censured the years of abuse heaped on

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Assange by the U.S. government. He enabled it. Unlike Trump, who may very well have been threatened with impeachment by senators like Mitch “Democracy’s Gravedigger” McConnell, if Trump dared dream of pardoning Assange, Biden was never vulnerable to such a hypothetical menace. In fact, he’s in McConnell’s corner. By his inaction, it’s clear that Biden approves of the criminal state attack on Assange.

Both Biden and Trump look like moral midgets compared to Mexican president Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, who last month handed a letter to Biden about the besieged journalist. In this epistle, according to Reuters July 18, Lopez Obrador “defended Julian Assange’s innocence and renewed a previous offer of asylum to the Wikileaks founder,” in Mexico. This offer came in the month after the U.K. approved Assange’s extradition to the U.S., where he faces up to 175 years in prison on what everybody knows are trumped up charges under a law that shouldn’t even exist, the Espionage Act.

This law served solely as a bludgeon against political enemies and their speech since it was enacted in 1917. It battered socialists and communists like Eugene Debs, Emma Goldman, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, and whistleblowers like Daniel Ellsberg and Edward Snowden. According to the PEN American Center, this edict “had been used inappropriately in leak cases that have a public interest component.” That’s putting it mildly. One year after enactment, by 1918, 74 newspapers had been denied mailing privileges under the Espionage Act. This law was birthed to harass and jail opponents of what nowadays many knowledgeable people regard as a catastrophe that should never have happened, namely Woodrow Wilson’s blood-drenched folly, World War I. This law exists for one purpose: chilling freedom of speech.

Indeed, that’s why the Espionage Act shouldn’t exist. Lopez Obrador said that arresting Assange “would mean a permanent affront to freedom of expression.” He sure got that right. But nothing other than sour silence about his latest offer has emanated from the white house. In fact, Lopez Obrador never got a response to his first letter to Biden over a year ago. When faced with a gracious gesture to do the humane, moral, civilized thing and end this grotesque perversion of justice, Biden just acts like he hopes this opportunity for compassion will go away and everyone will forget that he’s doing something unspeakable. Assange’s attorney and wife, Stella Assange, heroically flung herself into this battle. It is a fight against a Goliath, the U.S. security and carceral state. But this Herculean task is not entirely hopeless. As a few, lightly armed Afghan tribesmen recently proved, the giant has feet of clay. Still, it would have been better if Assange had fled the west entirely; instead of travelling to London from Sweden, as he did early on in this saga, had he flown to

Russia, like the very lucky Snowden, who found himself there by accident, and thus saved from the iron talons of the American so-called justice system. And now it's clear that Mexico, indeed possibly any number of Latin American countries, would have been happy to shelter him. Well, water under the bridge, but still a lesson, a byword for any other journalist who ever finds him- or herself on this high road to hell.

The 18 actual charges against Assange, including conspiracy-to-hack, provide the flimsiest excuse to jail him. The real imperial gripe is that he dared to embarrass the U.S. security state. He did so most flamboyantly with the video *Collateral Murder*, based on leaked footage from Chelsea Manning, also tortured by U.S. jailers, to the point of attempting suicide in her cell, after what was de facto and can only be called a second, double-jeopardy prosecution. That video showed the true colors of much of the American military – and those colors are blood red, as in murderous – as they assassinated eleven innocent Iraqi civilians, including two Reuters reporters, and injured two children, from their Apache helicopter, as if it were some sadistically perverted video game. Assange dared to show the world who imperial America is. And the portrait of this deformed visage was exceedingly ugly.

In the past, whistleblowers fared better. True, that state came for Ellsberg, responsible for the Pentagon Papers, first published in 1971, but he escaped. Nowadays, the U.S. government won't let leakers and whistleblowers slip through its claws. They will suffer state violence. And the upward trajectory of this violence from Ellsberg's day to Assange's inversely mirrors the downward slope of empire, the decline, if you will, of decency, of fairness, of openness, of all the civilized virtues, as the huge imperial edifice rots from within. Cruelty is what replaces those virtues, which anyway were never anywhere near as widespread as so-called American patriots would have you believe. Cruelty and lust for vengeance. Biden has done nothing to correct this. Worse than nothing. During his reign, the iron wheels of punishment ground on, inexorably, endangering Assange's sanity and very life.

But to repeat, maybe that was the point all along – for Assange to die in prison. It doesn't matter when, sooner or later, the CIA, the military, the political bigwigs – they will have their petty, repulsive revenge. It will be worth it to them, because the spectacle of Assange's destruction will so terrify journalists, that none will dare do again what he did. If Biden pardoned Assange, the whole world would resound with the ringing bells of press freedom (and who knows what those reporters would then bravely, brazenly attempt?) Otherwise, with the state destruction of Assange, there will be only the silence of

stenographers, who call themselves journalists, and of the prison cell in which Assange is entombed. So, continuing to follow Trump, Biden doesn't merely muzzle a free press, he helps crush it for good.

Many discrete and many malicious, secret steps led to this current freedom of speech debacle. The U.S. directed its U.K. vassal to ditch its own legacy of press liberty by hounding Assange – but not harassing the newspapers, like the Guardian and the New York Times, which printed Assange's scoops. Those papers were not martyred, instead they were given front row seats, as a warning, at Assange's crucifixion. They watched, while for seven years, the U.K. effectively locked Assange up in the Ecuadorian embassy, and they, like other newspapers, bruted about and thus participated in the Swedish rape slander against him. Then America's attack dog got tired of that, charged into the embassy over three years ago and threw Assange into a dungeon in a prison reserved for extremely violent and dangerous felons. Or possibly the chronology had more shadowy fine points and was more convoluted: maybe the U.S. helped get rid of a left-wing Ecuadorian president, Rafael Correa, who protected Assange, assisted in replacing him with someone who would make a good puppet, Lenin Moreno, who greenlit Assange's eviction from the embassy and thus his eventual destruction. Maybe even some people, somewhere in the bowels of the U.S. security state, strung all of these steps together, on purpose, just to get Assange. Paranoid and conspiratorial? Yes. But never underestimate official American hatred of Julian Assange.

After all, Hillary Clinton had lamented "can't we just drone him?" So the U.K. had its marching orders from way back, and Assange's survival was the least of its concerns. Once they shackled him in prison, they dosed him up with psychotropic drugs, impairing his memory and general mental function. Erasing his personality, that appears to be the aim. And revenge for imperial humiliation, that's the goal for which the U.S. and U.K. sabotaged their rule of law and their hallowed history of press freedom. To get even with an uppity publisher who believed in the truth.

Journalist Chris Hedges called Assange's first trial in judge Vanessa Baraitser's courtroom a farce. The proceedings afterward were no better. As Hedges wrote of that first trial, it lacked a legal basis from the getgo – for holding Assange in prison or to try an Australian citizen under the U.S. Espionage Act. "The CIA spied on Julian in the embassy...recording the privileged conversations between Julian and his lawyers as they discussed his defense. This fact alone invalidated the trial."

Indeed, on August 15, a group of lawyers and journalists sued former CIA director Mike Pompeo. They had visited Assange in the Ecuadorian embassy and, according to the Dissenter on August 15, “allege that the agency under Pompeo spied on them in violation of their privacy rights.” The suit also names a private security company in Spain, UC Global, and its director as defendants. UC Global handled security for the Ecuadorian embassy. According to plaintiffs’ lead attorney, Richard Roth, quoted by the Dissenter, Assange’s visitors “had a reasonable expectation that the security guards at the Ecuadorian embassy in London would not be U.S. government spies charged with delivering copies of their electronics to the CIA.”

The visitors had to surrender their electronic devices to these guards when they came to the embassy, and did not know that the security company “copied the information stored on the devices,” the Dissenter reports, “and allegedly shared the information with the CIA. Pompeo allegedly authorized and approved the action.” In addition, “Pompeo allegedly approved the placement of hidden microphones in new cameras at the embassy. He allegedly approved bugging the embassy with hidden microphones. He allegedly signed off on a plan to allow the CIA to ‘observe and listen to Assange’s daily activities at the embassy.’” So Mike “We Lied, We Cheated, We Stole” Pompeo, was clearly up to his old tricks – ruses and stratagems that should get this case against Assange thrown out of any court with a modicum of respect for the law. (It’s a northern Virginia court, primo U.S. security state territory, so don’t hold your breath.)

Apparently, the Dissenter reports, “well over 100 American citizens who visited Assange at the Ecuadorian embassy” had their privacy rights violated. “The CIA-backed spying operation began around January 2017 and lasted until UC Global’s contract was terminated around April 2018. By that time, the Justice Department under President Donald Trump already had a sealed indictment against Assange.”

Also invalidating Assange’s trial were later revelations that the CIA planned to kidnap or assassinate him, while he holed up in the Ecuadorian embassy. As did news that a key witness against Assange, an Icelandic hacker and alleged pedophile, Sigurdur Ingi Thordarson, perjured himself. Thordarson admitted to an Icelandic newspaper that “he lied about being asked to hack computers in order to get immunity and misrepresented his ties with the Wikileaks founder,” the Wire reported on July 7, 2021. This bombshell, exploding the credibility of the U.S. justice department’s case, was barely and only grudgingly reported in the United States.

Journalist and former diplomat Craig Murray called Assange's trial "judicial pantomime." That's because the U.S. government directed the London prosecutor John Lewis. "Lewis presented these directives to Baraitser. Baraitser adopted them as her legal decisions." Baraitser and Lewis thus trashed one thousand years of English law.

Biden is set to do the same for the far shorter 250-year history of U.S. jurisprudence. Biden claims to support free speech. This is risible, because such a claim is incompatible with allowing the prosecution of Assange to go forward. If the president really supports the first amendment, he should prove it. Until he gets those charges against Assange dropped, or pardons him, or does something to quash this case, Biden is no different from any of the authoritarian rulers he loves to denounce. History is watching. It dares Biden to act on the principle of a free press. I predict he won't.

Eve Ottenberg is a novelist and journalist. Her latest book is *Hope Deferred*. She can be reached at her [website](#).

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