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Bradley Manning Sentenced To 35 Years In Prison For WikiLeaks Disclosures

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Matt Sledge

Bradley Manning was sentenced to 35 years in prison on Wednesday for handing WikiLeaks a massive cache of sensitive government documents detailing the inner workings of America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Manning, 25, was not allowed to make a statement when his sentence was handed down by military judge Col. Denise Lind. Guards quickly hustled him out of the courtroom, while at least half a dozen spectators shouted their support.

"We'll keep fighting for you, Bradley," one exclaimed.

Manning was also dishonorably discharged and demoted from the rank of private first class to private. He was ordered to forfeit all pay and benefits.

Manning was convicted on July 30 on 19 of the 21 contested charges in his trial, including six Espionage Act violations, for his role in the largest leak of classified information in U.S. history. The charges carried a maximum sentence of 90 years, and the prosecution had requested Manning serve 60. His sentencing brings to a close a three-year saga in which he endured nine months in solitary confinement and saw himself transformed into a symbol of one individual's potential in the Internet age to roil the world's sole superpower.

He will most likely serve out his sentence in the United States Disciplinary Barracks at Fort Leavenworth in Kansas. The 1,182 days he has spent in confinement since he was arrested in May 2010 will be applied toward his term. Added to the military's extensive credits for good behavior, Manning could be eligible for parole in about 8 years, when he is 33.

Yochai Benkler, a Harvard professor who has studied WikiLeaks and testified in Manning's defense, said those reductions in time served would certainly be a "relief" for Manning.

But "the bottom line is it's 35 years, that's what everyone will know," he said. "Basically the decision has done more damage to the American Constitutional order than all of the disclosures put together did to any other kind of American interest."

Amnesty International immediately called on President Barack Obama to commute Manning's sentence to time served.

"Bradley Manning acted on the belief that he could spark a meaningful public debate on the costs of war, and specifically on the conduct of the US military in Iraq and Afghanistan," Widney Brown, senior director of international law and policy at Amnesty International, said in a statement. "The US government should turn its attention to investigating and delivering justice for the serious human rights abuses committed by its officials in the name of countering terror."

The sentencing phase of Manning's trial revealed that contrary to the claims of pundits and politicians, Manning had no blood on his hands -- the Departments of Defense and State were unable to tie his releases to the deaths of any U.S. informants.

Manning's small but vocal contingent of supporters, many in the anti-war movement, have argued that his massive document dump accelerated the pullout of U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan and helped spark the Arab revolutions in 2010 and 2011. His detractors, noting that Manning could not possibly have had time to read through the 700,000 documents he leaked, claim that he recklessly put his fellow soldiers and U.S. informants at risk.

His leaks included a video of an Apache helicopter attack in Baghdad that killed civilians including two Reuters journalists, 250,000 State Department diplomatic cables, and 500,000 battlefield action reports from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Before the trial Manning admitted to 10 lesser charges that could have given him a 20-year sentence on their own. He also pleaded guilty to a minor charge relating to one diplomatic cable, and the government accepted the plea. But military prosecutors pushed ahead with trying to prove his guilt on 21 other charges, including aiding the enemy.

Aiding the enemy is a charge analogous to treason. It carries a maximum life sentence. Because prosecutors insisted that Manning had aided al Qaeda simply by knowing his documents, once leaked on the internet, would wind up in the terrorist group's possession, some press freedom advocates claimed that in a sense journalism was also on trial.

Lind acquitted Manning of aiding the enemy but gave little explanation as to why. And she did so only after allowing the charge to proceed for so long that advocates still worry it could be used against whistleblowers -- or even organizations like WikiLeaks.

"The fact that Manning was ultimately found not guilty will likely influence the cost-benefit calculus of future prosecutors about whether it is worth their while to try again to stretch for such a draconian verdict," Benkler said. "But the acquittal did not close off that legal avenue."

As Manning's 38-day trial came to an end, his lawyer, David Coombs, asserted in his closing sentencing argument on Monday that Manning was far more complex than partisans on either side acknowledged.

"The government has labeled him as a traitor, as an insider. Others have labeled him as a hero," Coombs said. "Either one of those are overgeneralizations. They ignore who he is as a person."

Coombs' sentencing pitch to Lind for lenience was filled with references to Manning's difficult upbringing and his struggles within the Army as someone considering transitioning genders.

To the prosecution, meanwhile, Manning was an "arrogant" young soldier who had usurped the military's right to decide which documents remained classified and deserved to spend most of the rest of his life in prison.

Under military law, Manning's sentence will be subject to immediate review by Maj. Gen Jeffrey Buchanan, the commander of the Military District of Washington. Buchanan can only reduce Manning's sentence or toss convictions against him.

After that, the verdict can be reviewed by the Army Court of Criminal Appeal and the Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces.

Coombs told a group of supporters gathered outside Manning's courtroom on Friday that the conditions at Fort Leavenworth "did not look anything like Quantico," where Manning spent months in solitary confinement and was forced at times to strip down naked at night.

UN special rapporteur on torture Juan Mendez found after a 14-month investigation that Manning's treatment at Quantico was cruel, inhuman, and degrading. Lind said the conditions had been "excessive" in relation to the government's legitimate interest in holding Manning. She granted the soldier an additional 112 days credit for enduring those conditions, which will also be applied to shorten his sentence.

"He's made friends there," Coombs said of Leavenworth. He added that Manning will finally be able to respond to supporters' letters. Manning will also be within driving distance of his sister Susan, who testified during the trial about their life growing up with two alcoholic parents.

But Manning also faces a spartan, monotonous life in prison. He will also not be allowed to grant interviews to the media, according to a Fort Leavenworth spokesperson.

Manning's sentence is one year longer than that given to a man who offered to sell secrets to Iraq during the first Gulf War, and five years longer than that of a man who passed "sophisticated defense secrets to communist East Germany."

Speaking on Monday before the sentence was handed down, Andrea Prasow, senior counterterrorism counsel and advocate in Human Rights Watch's U.S. Program, told HuffPost that the massive investigation involving hundreds of State and Defense Department employees into Manning's leaks stood in stark contrast to the government's unwillingness to prosecute those involved in torture and abuse at places like Abu Ghraib.

"It's hard to look at the aggressive prosecution of someone so young, who is clearly troubled, and probably did have a fair bit of concern about the public interest ... and compare that to people who authorized a regime of torture and abuse and will remain free," Prasow said.