

Shredding Asylum: The Arrest of Julian Assange

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The man seemed like a bearded emissary, a holy figure nabbed in his sleep. He looked similarly pale as to how he did in 2013, but he cut a more shocking figure. Most prisoners would have had room to move in a compound. The Ecuadorean embassy in London only offered modest space and access to sun light. Hospitality of late was in short supply.

Julian Assange had been ill. His advocates had bravely insisted that he needed treatment.

“As a journalist who has worked as media partner of @Wikileaks since 2009,” [reflected](#) a near grieving Stefania Maurizi, “it has been so painful to watch Julian Assange’s health completely declining in the last 9 years as a result of confinement with no end in sight, tremendous stress, threats.”

Sir Alan Duncan of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office was happy to offer it, provided Assange step out of the embassy.

But Assange’s time had finally come. The embroiling of the Moreno administration in the [INA Papers affair](#) suggested that the president needed an out. Images of Moreno’s family skirting around the internet in various fora during days of plenty, and the suggestion that he had been profiting from a Panama offshore account, put Assange back in the picture. Who better to blame than a man in confinement, whose communications had been restricted, whose health was failing? WikiLeaks duly [received](#) a tipoff from a “high level source within the Ecuadorean state” that the offshore scandal would be used “as a pretext” to remove difficult tenant.

The writ and run of asylum has been shredded, and the conduct of Ecuador’s president Lenín Moreno is worth noting. In his [address](#) explaining the abrupt termination of Assange’s stay, Moreno was a dissembling picture. Assange, he had been assured by UK authorities, would come to no harm. He would not be facing torture or the death penalty (a reassuring red herring, given that the death penalty is off the table in extradition matters dealing with the UK in any case).

He had been “discourteous” and “aggressive”, WikiLeaks “hostile and threatening” to Ecuador. Ecuador had been “generous” and “respectful of the principles of international law, and of the institutions of the right of asylum.” Self-praise tends to increase in volume the more guilt is assumed, and Moreno made it clear that the law of asylum was a “sovereign right of the Ecuadorean state”. It was Assange who was the violator of diplomatic protocols, refusing to abide by “the norm of not intervening in the internal affairs of other states.”

Specific reference was made to the leaking of Vatican documents in January 2019; Assange was still “linked” to WikiLeaks. He blocked security cameras; he used “distorting” equipment. He even “confronted and mistreated guards”. He communicated via a mobile phone “with the outside world.” And he dared taking his case through Ecuadorean legal channels.

Moreno’s justification received much steam from UK Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt, who [claimed](#) that Assange was “no hero and no one is above the law. He has hidden from the truth for years.” (Psychological slip, perhaps? Is it Assange allergic to the truth, or the security establishments he wishes to prize open?). Both Moreno and Ecuador were to be thanked for their cooperation with the Foreign Office “to ensure Assange faces justice.”

President Donald Trump has been even more brazen on the subject of Assange’s arrest, [feigning](#) an attack of amnesia. “I know nothing about WikiLeaks. It’s not my thing.” During the 2016 campaign, WikiLeaks had been very much Trump’s “thing”, praised some 140 times for revealing email correspondence from the Democratic National Committee. “Oh, we love WikiLeaks,” he cheered at a North Carolina rally. No longer.

Critics of WikiLeaks and Assange have always presumed exaggeration. The narcissist had nothing to fear except model British justice, the same justice that has gone to extraordinary lengths over the years to affect various, high profile miscarriages. Skipping bail was tantamount to a parking offence; face the music. Instead, WikiLeaks was shown to be correct: Assange is facing the full force of an extensive investigation against a publisher by the self-touted leader of the free world.

Ever since the publication of Cablegate, WikiLeaks has been the subject of a multi-organisational investigation by US prosecutors and defence personnel keen to sketch a legal basis for targeting the organisation. Assange has figured prominently. Despite the niggling problems associated with the Free speech amendment, legal personnel have been stretching the grounds on how to circumvent it.

Some few hours after Assange was bundled out of the embassy and into a van by the London Metropolitan Police, a US extradition request was revealed. He would not be prosecuted as a journalist, which would bring up press freedom issues, but as a hacker under the [single charge](#) of conspiracy to commit computer intrusion. “Assange, who did not possess a security clearance or need to know, was not authorized to receive classified material from the United States.”

The golden thread in the argument is Chelsea Manning, and four databases “from departments and agencies of the United States.” Both Manning and Assange had entered into an agreement to crack “a password stored on United States Department of Defense computers connected to the Secret Internet Protocol Network”. The alleged conspiracy “was to facilitate Manning’s acquisition and transmission of classified information related to the national defense of the United States so that WikiLeaks could publicly disseminate the information on its website.”

Stripped bare, the issue for Assange is this. Dislike him, loathe him, and feel your skin crawl before him. Fantasise about what he might or might not have done in Sweden. Sanctify and scribble hagiography about him. Speculate about how he might have been as a tenant of asylum. He remains a publisher and a journalist, unconventional, daring, a vigilante of

sorts who sought to etch himself into history while giving the world a very cogent, thrilling idea: opening the darkened corridors of corrupting power and holding them accountable.

As the Centre for Investigate Journalism [states](#),

“Whatever your view of its philosophy of radical transparency, WikiLeaks is a publisher. Any charges now brought in connection with that material, or any attempt to extradite Mr Assange to the United States for prosecution under the deeply flawed cudgel of the Espionage Act 1917 is an attack on all of us.”

Edward Snowden [added](#) a concurring voice: Ecuador’s invitation for the UK secret police “to drag a publisher of – like it or not – award winning journalism out of the building are going to end up in the history books. Assange’s critics may cheer, but this is a dark moment for press freedom.”

Even if he has never been fully accepted within the fraternity of the press, he has, in many ways, led its change. His forensic style of journalism, with its techniques of placing original documentation upon sites for readers to consult, has brought greater scrutiny of sources. His embrace of secure systems for sending classified material, and his [pioneering](#) of international cross-border collaborative reporting, transformed the nature of modern journalism. But pioneers tend to find themselves in the colosseum facing the hungry lions of state.

The pursuit of Assange, as British Labour’s Diane Abbott quite accurately [assessed](#), was not done “to protect US national security” but “because he has exposed wrongdoing by US administrations and their military forces.” Former Greek finance minister and rabble rousing economist Yanis Varoufakis [saw](#) the clouds lift on the sham. “The game is up. Years of lies exposed. It was never about Sweden, Putin, Trump or Hillary. Assange was persecuted for exposing war crimes.” Punish Assange, punish the press. Punish Assange and condemn the Fourth Estate.

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