

The Future of Press Freedom Depends on Assange Case

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The world awaits the [decision of U.K. Home Secretary Priti Patel](#) in the case of Julian Assange, the WikiLeaks publisher who has been a political prisoner in London since his arrest at the Ecuadorian Embassy in 2019. Last month, a British court sent the case to Patel, who is now charged with deciding whether to hand Assange to the United States – a decision that entails a judgment about whether the U.S. will kill him. Dozens of international human rights and press freedom groups – including Amnesty International, the ACLU, Human Rights Watch, and Reporters Without Borders – have opposed extradition as a [“grave threat to press freedom both in the United States and abroad.”](#)

The WikiLeaks revelations, described in greater detail elsewhere, laid bare the unspeakable horror of the [United States’ war crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq](#) and its [torture of hundreds of people at its prison in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba](#), among other grave human rights violations. The world learned, for example, that those detainees at Gitmo included a 14-year-old child and hundreds of innocent people, and that US military forces and their corporate agents wantonly killed tens of thousands of non-combatants, including innocent families with small children. We learned that the US government consistently lied to the public about these and other crimes, obstructing journalists’ attempts to uncover and share the truth.

Ultimately, what we really learned from these revelations is that there is nothing the United States foreign policy establishment says that can be taken at face value, without questions and close scrutiny. The hypocrisy of US claims that Assange’s actions present a threat to the safety of Americans is blindingly clear to students of American foreign policy. The problem for Assange is that his public service *actually did* serve the people – not the Washington, DC military and intelligence community, the political elite, and the arms manufacturers.

The United States is arguably the world’s least trustworthy state actor; it is also among the worst offenders when it comes to waging aggressive wars of choice, attacking journalistic freedoms, torturing perceived enemies, and detaining prisoners indefinitely and without

charges or due process. The United States has consistently flouted its obligations under existing nuclear nonproliferation agreements and, in 2019, withdrew from the Reagan-era [Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty](#). As [Phyllis Bennis](#), Director of the New Internationalism Project at the Institute for Policy Studies, [has said](#), “The US believes it can have non-proliferation globally without taking any responsibility to implement its own obligations under the Nonproliferation Treaty.” Similarly and unsurprisingly, the US has also long rejected efforts to add accountability mechanisms such as inspections provisions to the Biological Weapons Convention, designed to prevent governments from developing and stockpiling bioweapons.

The United States’ record of lies and broken promises makes Assange’s case particularly important not only to Americans, but to the entire world. Were we not so desensitized by decades of focused, expertly-crafted propaganda, we couldn’t live with these facts without ourselves joining the Assanges of the world in a truth-telling mission to stop every organization that participates in these crimes. Americans simply do not live in the country they hear about on the news, the government again and again failing to live up to the high ideals expressed in its founding documents and its pretty PR.

We need more Julian Assanges, not less – more who are willing to sacrifice everything to cut through the fog of euphemism and propaganda that gives cover to the prevailing system: we call it “foreign policy,” but we are talking about war and imperialism. We call them “defense contractors” when what we mean is “war profiteers.” We now have the system of which President Eisenhower warned: we see the total, all-consuming, “economic, political, even spiritual” influence “of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry.” We see the “disastrous rise of misplaced power” that has subordinated our “liberties and democratic processes.” We cannot hope to topple this system in favor of genuinely democratic institutions if we are not willing even to confront the truth, and we cannot confront the truth if no one is permitted to publish it.

It is time for all Americans to have an honest conversation about the kinds of actions we permit our government to carry out around the world. The hope after Vietnam was that the conversation on the US Empire and its destructive role in the world had fundamentally changed, that Americans were no longer willing to tolerate endless wars that harm both ordinary Americans and the rest of the world. To be clear, this is not about Julian Assange or WikiLeaks, not really. Because when Assange is no longer with us, which could be tragically soon if the US government has its way, there will be others brave enough to bring the truth to the people, who believe that we deserve to see it and understand what’s being done in our names.

[Whatever your politics](#), whether you know it or not, Assange’s case affects you and your freedom to think, say, and write what you believe. It affects our collective ability – as a species – to live in societies in which information is not tightly controlled by a very small group of the rich and powerful. Again, some perspective is in order: Assange, like every one of us, will be gone soon, regardless of what the United States does with his case from here on. What we’re really talking about, then, is the future of the freedom to think, to inquire, and to publish, all of which are necessary conditions for anything that can appropriately be called a free society.

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