

Looking Backward on Bradley Manning

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A military judge sentenced 25-year-old Bradley Manning to 35 years in prison for leaking classified documents including evidence of U.S. war crimes and proof the U.S. public was being manipulated. Yet, the perpetrators of the crimes and lies face no accountability in an upside-down case of moral justice, writes Robert Parry.

In 2009 – faced with undeniable evidence of major war crimes by President George W. Bush and his administration – President Barack Obama famously chose to “look forward, not backward,” a political calculation, not a rational argument for jurisprudence.

For his decision not to prosecute his predecessor, Obama received many kudos around Official Washington, especially among the “talking heads” who had cheered Bush on when he was committing his worst war crimes, especially the unprovoked invasion of Iraq in 2003 which inflicted hundreds of thousands of deaths on the Iraqi people.

Bush’s torture policies also elicited excuses from Washington’s “wise men,” who suddenly saw all the grays of moral ambiguity about practices like waterboarding, stress positions, wall-slammings, sleep deprivation, forced nudity, etc. These acts of torture – at least when U.S. enemies used the techniques – were now points for abstract discussion, certainly not cause for prosecution.

Yet, on Wednesday, when Pvt. Bradley Manning, 25, was sentenced to 35 years in prison for exposing damning details about those war crimes, some voices even on liberal-leaning MSNBC were adopting a firm law-and-order stance. By releasing 700,000 classified documents – even if many disclosed government wrongdoing – Manning had violated the law and deserved punishment, they said. Indeed, one pundit said that was the price for wanting to be a hero.

Some pundits intoned how necessary it was to establish a precedent to discourage other low-level military analysts or government bureaucrats from deciding that some evidence of wrongdoing needed to be shared with the American people.

Yet, the pundits didn’t seem to feel that it was necessary to put Bush and his underlings in prison to discourage future acts of aggressive war and torture. To do that, in Official Washington’s view, would simply have fanned the flames of partisanship with Republicans resenting that “their” president was being prosecuted by his successor. No one suggested that Bush might like to spend several decades in jail to prove his heroism.

Thus, the conventional wisdom in 2009 — and even today — has been the need to “look forward, not backward” regarding Bush’s crimes. But there is no credible way for President Obama or anyone else in Washington to continue insisting that we live under a system of

laws, not men – or that justice is blind to a person’s social and political standing.

If your friends are powerful or intimidating enough, you can apparently get away with mass murder. If you’re just an average guy (albeit Bradley Manning displayed extraordinary integrity), you can expect the book to be thrown at you.

Rather than all the technicalities being arrayed to prevent your conviction and punishment, you will be held to account for every detail of your “offense,” with little or no attention to the larger context, that you found yourself in the middle of an historic war crime and tried to do something to stop it.

And, Manning’s actions did have powerful effects. His disclosure of the “Collateral Murder” video showing U.S. helicopter gunners in 2007 casually mowing down civilians, including two Reuters journalists, on the streets of Baghdad contributed to Iraqi government resistance to allowing a U.S. military stay-behind force. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[The Moral Imperative of Bradley Manning.](#)”]

His revelation that the new head of the International Atomic Energy Agency had been installed by the United States and was meeting secretly with Israeli officials with the goal of hyping nuclear allegations against Iran alerted the public to a possible propaganda trick that could have plunged America into another Mideast war. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[Did Manning Help Avert War in Iran?](#)”]

Yet, while Manning is punished for his service to peace and to the principle that high officials should be held accountable, Bush and his subordinates walk free despite their crimes against peace and their reckless disregard for the human consequences of their rush to war.

Perhaps this is a time for President Obama to neither look forward nor backward, but into his conscience.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, America’s Stolen Narrative, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes America’s Stolen Narrative. For details on this offer, [click here](#)

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