

Scoundrels of Patriotism: The Freeing of Chelsea Manning

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'Patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel.' Samuel Johnson, Apr 7, 1775 in *Boswell's Life of Johnson*.

He might have had a sharp attack of conscience, but President Barack Obama decided, in the flickering days of his administration, to do good by Chelsea Manning, forever linked to WikiLeaks and the disclosure of US military war logs and 250,000 state cables to the organisation.

On May 17, Manning, labouring under a brutally hefty sentence of 35 years for disclosing classified information, will be released. Obama's decision overruled the disapproving Defense Secretary Ashton Carter. Much of this was a question of patriotism, that ever confused, and confusing word that remains painfully elusive.

The question of patriotism tends to be one left begging rather than one answered. Everyone has a version of it. Where the light of patriotism merges with the falling nightfall of treachery, the question becomes even more complex. A traitor is often a patriot turned inside out; a patriot is often a cretin following regulations.

The Republican response to Manning's commutation predictably endorsed one element, crude and simple. There was little need to examine motive, intent, or even philosophy behind the actions. There was even less need to examine the effect of Manning's disclosures - the national interest remains a fabled construction, impossible to measure or identify.

'This is outrageous,' clamoured the Speaker of the House, Paul Ryan (R-Wis.). 'Chelsea Manning's treachery put American lives at risk and exposed some of our nation's most sensitive secrets.'

Statutes and legislation had been breached. A patriot, by definition, is obsequious; a patriot, through action, follows unreflectively, immune to the dangers of wobbly contrariness. 'President Obama,' Ryan went on somewhat nonsensically, 'now leaves in place a dangerous precedent that those who compromise our national security won't be held accountable for their crimes.'[\[1\]](#)

The converse is true. The Obama administration has been the exemplar of prosecuting fervour against whistleblowers. Under this president's stewardship, nine cases have made their way through the system, easily doubling the number of all previous presidents combined. That, Ryan ignores, is the dangerous precedent the Obama administration set, flying very much in the face of his own electoral promises to embrace transparency.

There was also another much neglected fact. Manning was a patriot, almost adolescently so. He was one of the better scoundrels, if we are mindful about Samuel Johnson's meditations on the subject.

'When I chose to disclose classified information, I did so out of love for my country and a sense of duty to others.' (Samuel Johnson's own suggestion of what a patriot is considers one 'whose ruling passion is the love of his country'.) Principles, ideas, all dangerous things in the business of reflecting upon the needs of the patria.

Another concept is also salient here: the concept of the bumbling, foolish patriot, addled by sexual consideration, the need for publicity, or a mix of the two. Such a patriot, provided he is in a suitably high position, will be treated with a mix of pity and regret. In few cases will actual prosecution take place. Sentences will often be mild.

Obama gave an excellent example of this with his treatment of General James E. Cartwright, former vice-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Cartwright was rather loose with journalists in disclosing details of a top-secret cyber attack operation on Iran's nuclear program. He subsequently lied to FBI investigators that he had done so. Obama's pardon effectively exempted the general from any prison time or the need for community service. 'The President's decision,' claimed Cartwright's lawyer, Gregory Craig, 'is wise and just and achieves the right result.'[\[2\]](#)

The once feted General David Petraeus, who subsequently migrated to the position of CIA chief, let sex muddle his approach to classified data. His eager biographer and lover, Paula Broadwell, secured notebooks packed with 'the identities of covert officers, war strategy, intelligence capabilities and mechanisms, diplomatic discussions, quotes, and deliberate discussions from high-level National Security Council meetings and... the President.'[\[3\]](#)

When FBI investigators in October 2012 decided to interview the careless general, they faced a denial that the exchange had ever taken place. But Petraeus was set, not for the stockade or a lengthy period of incarceration: he had been a fool for his country, rather than an ill-intentioned traitor. As a patriotic scoundrel of a lowly calibre, with book-heavy credentials, many in Congress thought he deserved better.

In the scheme of things, it is probably best to stay faithful to friends and fashioned principles than brutally abstract states, with policies written in water in the name of the national interest. To interpret, in other words, that national interest, is to give form to a shape shifting aberration. How best to be a scoundrel in patriotism remains a near impossible question to answer. Manning, at least, came closer to a better response than most.

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Note

[\[1\] http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/paul-ryan-manning-commutation-outrageous/article/2612117](http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/paul-ryan-manning-commutation-outrageous/article/2612117)

[\[2\] https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/17/us/politics/obama-pardons-james-cartwright-general-who-lied-to-fbi-in-leak-case.html?_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/17/us/politics/obama-pardons-james-cartwright-general-who-lied-to-fbi-in-leak-case.html?_r=0)

[\[3\] https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/mar/16/whistleblowers-double-standard-obama-davi](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/mar/16/whistleblowers-double-standard-obama-davi)

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