

The Release of Chelsea Manning

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It was one of the brighter acts in a darkening turmoil in the last parts of the Obama presidency, but the decision to commute Chelsea Manning's sentence added a zest of enlightenment. Manning had already found herself on the slippery slope to doom, having made two attempts at suicide the previous year, and facing the torment of incarceration in a men's military prison at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

Such a commutation was the sensible antidote to an insensible reaction from a tribunal that found her guilty of nearly all of 20 charges, six of which were drawn from that bestial relic, the Espionage Act. The outcome of that trial was a prison sentence of 35 years, of which seven had already been served.

The failure to appreciate proportionality during proceedings for leaking material to WikiLeaks, not to mention a viable public interest defence, was a demonstrable marker in a new information war of increased ruthlessness.

Even now, that sense of proportionately is not always conveyed. The magic 700,000 number, or more, in terms of the number of US secret documents is relayed with casual media analysis, while the nature of what these items disclosed is deemed less significant.

A review by the Defence Intelligence Agency concluded that the risk emanating from the disclosures was moderate to low. Ditto the unofficial review conducted by the Associated Press, which found a conspicuous lack of understanding in how sensitive sources were to be evaluated.[1]

"I don't think I said anything that would put me at risk," noted the surprised Italian diplomat Federica Ferrari Bravo in a meeting with US diplomats in Rome, during which she is featured as a sensitive source.

As with other forms of conflict, the campaign against whistleblowers would involve targeting canon fodder, the cogs and gadgets rather than the masterminds and the big defectives. All along in this episode of vengeful cruelty, the dysfunction was hardly with Manning but with a security establishment run riot, unaccountable and in need of a decent chastising.

In Manning's own troubled words, recorded at her court martial, the military had become "obsessed with capturing and killing human targets on lists", behaviour encapsulated by the "delightful bloodlust" of the helicopter crew featured in the disclosed video *Collateral Murder*. There were unjustified civilian deaths, murders by military contractors in Iraq, and the Guantanamo detention regime.

But there had also been another obsession Manning had shed light upon: the desire to treat the world of information from diplomatic and military channels as holy, classified as of

course, made inaccessible till declassified by committee or executive wisdom.

The reaction to pardoning Manning has been variable and crude. The vox pops meter on the New York Times story announcing Obama's decision was ruthless about favouritism, snorting at identity (forget gender dysphoria!) and indifferent to trauma. Manning, went one line of noisy opposition, had been favoured for being transgender.

"The Corporal Klinger strategy," claimed a disgruntled Esteban, "finally paid off."

There is little doubt that much of this was fueled by Manning's own very public expression of being, as her statement claimed, changed "from inside prison walls and through letters that I have received from veterans, trans young people, parents, politicians and artists." [2]

Another staple response was the softening of a stance on someone who had disclosed classified material. The Heritage Foundation's Cully Stimson proposed that the commutation of Manning's sentence "sends a horrible message to everyone who serves in the US military, emboldens those who seek to harm the United States, and disheartens countless Americans - in and out of uniform." [3] Illusions, in short, had to be kept fluttering in the breeze along the Stars and Stripes.

Obama's successor, who has also found himself accused of recklessness in disclosing rather compromising material to traditional adversaries, had little time for Manning's plight. For according to President Donald Trump, Manning had been an "ungrateful traitor" and "should never have been released from prison."

Manning may well have walked free, but her conviction remains on the books, a dangerous profanity in the edifice of the security state. It is important, in that sense, to note that Manning did not receive a pardon, but a commutation.

To that end, a legal campaign fronted by Courage, Reporters Without Borders Germany and the Wau Holland Foundation, has aimed to gather funds for what has become an ongoing legal challenge.

"Chelsea's appeal," observed Nathan Fuller, a campaigner for Courage, "is our only hope of challenging [the Espionage Act] and improving the situation for the whistleblowers Trump will prosecute in the future. It's also our best chance of enabling Edward Snowden to come home." [4]

The next stop in the Manning-WikiLeaks saga promises to be a decision from the US Army Court of Criminal Appeals, hearing an application from Manning's legal team filed in 2016. Reform in this area is a wheel grinding with nail growing slowness, but there has been no better time than now to press it. Optimistically, Courage promises that this "process will continue through 2017 and if unsuccessful, it will continue to higher levels, possibly to include the US Supreme Court."

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Notes

[1] <http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/ap-review-finds-no-threatened-wikileaks-sources>

[2] <https://www.gizmodo.com.au/2017/05/chelsea-manning-free-after-seven-years-in-military-prison/>

[3] <http://dailysignal.com/2017/01/17/obamas-commutation-of-manning-sentence-sends-a-horrible-message-to-service-personnel/>

[4] <https://couragefound.org/appeal-fund/>

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