

US, UK Governments Should Free Julian Assange

Leaders across political divides should be pressured by the public to free Assange and defend press freedom.

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*In Steven Spielberg's 2017 historical thriller *The Post*, the Washington Post's publisher Katharine Graham (Meryl Streep) wrestles with a harrowing choice: should she authorize further publication of the "[Pentagon Papers](#)"—and risk financial ruin and possible prison time? Spoiler alert: Graham takes the courageous path and informs the public of systematic government lies regarding one of America's bloodiest and most polarizing conflicts. Near the end of the film, as the Supreme Court [rules](#) in favor of "a free and unrestrained press," Graham confides to the paper's editor (a hardboiled Ben Bradlee played by Tom Hanks), "I don't think I could ever live through something like this again." Spielberg concludes *The Post* with a wink, reminding us that Watergate lurks right around the corner.*

Although if we consider Mark Twain's adage about "history not repeating itself but often rhyming," the situation that most closely rhymes with the "Pentagon Papers" would not be the ensuing Watergate scandal, but the alarming plight of WikiLeaks founder **Julian Assange**, who is currently in London's [notorious](#) Belmarsh prison. Like Graham and *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times* which broke the story of the "Pentagon Papers" in 1971, Assange's WikiLeaks has also released leaked, classified materials that in 2010 exposed a [vast range](#) of staggering U.S. government misdeeds.

For these revelations, President Barack Obama's Department of Justice (DOJ) [convened](#) a grand jury in 2011 to explore the possibility of indicting Assange and prosecuting him for espionage. But despite years of rigorous investigation, and the interrogation and imprisonment of Assange's source, Army intelligence analyst **Chelsea Manning**, the Obama administration [opted not](#) to prosecute Assange for fear it would overturn the press freedom precedent established with the "Pentagon Papers."

The Trump administration, by contrast—and with [no new evidence](#) since the time of Obama—has dashed across that red line with its charges against Assange.

In an unprecedented attempt to exercise universal jurisdiction to extradite a foreign national for publishing newsworthy information in the public interest, the Trump DOJ has created [the false perception](#) that Assange conspired with Manning to hack into government systems to obtain classified documents.

But through her position with the U.S. Army, Manning [already had access](#) to all the documents she would give to Assange. In fact, underpinning the Trump DOJ's [initial allegations](#) is the charge that Assange told Manning he might be able to help her crack a password that would have given her administrative privileges, allowing her to evade

detection. But even if Assange had attempted this—there is no evidence he did—helping one’s source not get caught, as Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Glenn Greenwald [reminds](#), “is not only the right of journalists, it’s the duty of journalists.”

Piling on to their flimsy password gambit, which carries a maximum sentence of five years, the Trump DOJ issued a chilling [superseding indictment](#) in May of 2019. Assange now faces 175 years imprisonment.

Barton Gellman, who has won three Pulitzer Prizes with *The Washington Post*, [sums up](#) the current charges against Assange this way: “Assange is charged with asking for information, with receiving information, and with publishing information... exactly the things that I do... If that’s allowed to stand, there’s absolutely no reason why it couldn’t be used against *The Washington Post* or *The New York Times* or *CNN*.” Gellman’s assessment is undoubtedly shared by [over](#) 1,500 journalists and writers—including “Pentagon Papers” whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg—and [more than](#) 40 press freedom, human rights, and privacy rights organizations who are all calling for the U.S. and U.K. governments to release Assange without delay.

Earlier this year, when Brazilian prosecutors charged Glenn Greenwald in a case that [mirrors the U.S. case against Assange](#), the world got its first unwelcome taste of how Assange’s continued prosecution poses an extreme danger to journalists everywhere. And there [has never been any evidence](#) that WikiLeaks’ 2010 publications have harmed a single person; yet, despite garnering a [trove](#) of prestigious journalism awards, they are the sole reason for which Assange is behind bars.

President Trump has a golden opportunity to pardon Assange, which would go a long way toward transforming the outgoing president into a defender of American values. President-elect Biden, for his part, will have to decide whether he follows the footsteps of Obama, or, to this point, Trump. Leaders across political divides should be pressured by the public to free Assange and defend press freedom. Recognizing the crucial role of journalists, Hanks’ Bradlee in *The Post* perhaps said it best: “We have to be the check on their power. If we don’t hold them accountable, I mean my God, who will?”

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Featured image: Julian Assange court sketch, October 21, 2019, supplied by Julia Quenzler.

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