

Julian Assange SPEAKS OUT For First Time Since Freed From Prison

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Glenn Greenwald (GG): Speaking of foundational rights like free speech and its related cousin, the free press, that is the perfect transition to talk about the very inspiring events involving Julian Assange that took place earlier this week when he travelled with his wife and their two young children to Strasbourg, France, in order to appear before a European human rights group that invited him to come and speak about his ordeal and the lessons that we should draw from it about the dangers of free press in the West. And not only have I always believed that Julian Assange is arguably the most pioneering and consequential activist and journalist in the last 50 years, given his unique insights about how, in the digital age, transparency will be effectuated by anonymous leaks from people inside power centres, the one thing they can't guard against. And his courage in not just creating that system, but then using it to confront the most powerful people all over the planet, despite the immense threats that he faced. He's also always been to me, one of the most articulate speakers and one of the most insightful analysts of very complex issues involving the role of the United States in the world, foreign policy, how profit relates to that, what words are really for. He's not just a hacker. He's a very, very smart and articulate defender of a whole variety of values that the world needs to hear more of.

And yet that Julian Assange, that extremely articulate person that I've heard speak in public, that I've heard when I've met with him in private, visiting him at the Ecuadorian embassy and on other occasions throughout our 14 year friendship or so, is not the Julian Assange that appeared in France this week because he has been subject to extremely brutal prison conditions where he was put in a maximum security prison that the BBC called the British Guantanamo and was kept in sustained, prolonged isolation – which all sorts of studies show will drive you crazy because human beings are political animals. We need connection with other human beings. It's a form of torture to deny us that. John McCain, for whatever else his flaws are, I think says something quite profound about his captivity in the hands of the North

Vietnamese during the Vietnam War, where he said, I was physically beaten and tortured but that didn't even compare to the suffering and pain I was caused by the isolation of sitting weeks and months alone in a prison cell with nobody to talk to. And that was the same that was done to Julian Assange. And so here he is prefacing his remarks to this body and while it was great to see Julian Assange being able to board a plane and freely travel the world to go to conferences to speak about his experience and the political values that it represents, watching him have to say this, to excuse his inability to speak clearly or coherently at certain times because of what happened to him was very, very dark. Listen to what he said.

Julian Assange (JA): The transition from years of confinement in a maximum security prison to being here before the representatives of 46 nations and 700 million people is a profound and a surreal shift. The experience of isolation for years in a small cell is difficult to convey. It strips away one sense of self, leaving only the raw essence of existence. I am yet not fully equipped to speak about what I have endured. The relentless struggle to stay alive, both physically and mentally. Nor can I speak yet about the deaths by hanging, murder and medical neglect of my fellow prisoners. I apologise in advance if my words falter or if my presentation lacks the polish you might expect from such a distinguished forum. Isolation has taken its toll, which I am trying to unwind and expressing myself in this setting is a challenge.

GG: I mean, I can't begin to express how antithetical that is to Julian Assange's lifelong self-Possession, self-confidence, ability to express himself in ways that are sometimes quite stunning in terms of how effective they are. And he's had doctors and psychiatrists attesting to the fact that he was dying in prison, that it was killing him, it was causing mental distress. There was a report from his doctor that he had a minor stroke. There's no question that his physical and mental condition deteriorated greatly, not just from the five plus years in the maximum security prison in the UK, but also for the 9 or 10 plus years that he had to spend in the Ecuadorian embassy with no outdoor space because he knew that the British and the Swedes who wanted to extradite him to Swedish soil had only one goal in mind, which was to turn him over to the United States, which intended to imprison him for the rest of his life for the crime of doing journalism. Let's remember that that is what happened to Julian Assange. The reason he was in prison for five and a half years in the UK without ever being convicted of a crime other than bail jumping, which is a misdemeanour that has a sentence of 11 months that he had served a long time ago, he sat in a maximum security prison for five and a half years without being convicted of a crime just because the British said, no, we can't let him out on bail, we can't let him out on any conditions. And they just stuck him there and tried to kill him. And obviously, though they didn't kill him, they made a lot of progress in weakening him and deteriorating him and deteriorating him in ways that I don't want to say are permanent, but clearly are long-lasting. Here is the part of his message, his address, where he speaks about the very menacing implications of what was done to him, not for himself, but to the cause of core democratic freedoms and the basic cause of a free press.

JA: This unprecedented global effort was needed because the legal protections of the legal protections that did exist, many existing only on paper, were not effective in any remotely

reasonable time. I eventually chose freedom over unrealisable justice after being detained for years and facing a 175 year sentence with no effective remedy. Justice for me is now precluded, as the US government insisted in writing into its plea agreement that I cannot file a case at the European Court of Human Rights or even a Freedom of Information Act request over what it did to me as a result of its extradition request. I want to be totally clear: I am not free today because the system worked. I am free today after years of incarceration because I pled guilty to journalism. I pled guilty to seeking information from a source. I pled guilty to obtaining information from a source. And I pled guilty to informing the public what that information was. I did not plead guilty to anything else.

GG: I mean, I think there are so many important points embedded within that, beginning with the fact that one of the things that makes me sickest about employees of corporate media is how self-glorifying they are, how much they love to posture as these combative reporters defending a free press when the reality is, is that if you actually do your job as a journalist in the West, if you actually confront power in a meaningful way, they will try to prosecute you. They will spy on you. They will try and punish you. And as Julian Assange says, that's exactly what was done to him and nothing else. And the fact that he was finally released, as he says, was not a testament to the system working. It was a testament to the fact that all of these principles and these laws that the United States and the UK claim they stand for and uphold are a farce. Because the condition for him getting out of prison, avoiding life in prison in the United States in some hellhole of a maximum security prison, for him to get back to his wife and his young children to try and rebuild his life was to plead guilty to doing journalism, to doing reporting. And that's precisely what he did – reporting. And that's precisely why he was in prison.

Now, I do think it's very important to remember who is the author of what happened to Julian Assange. The Obama administration hated Julian Assange. That was when he released all of those State Department memos while Hillary Clinton was secretary of state. And released all of those Afghanistan and Iraq war logs while President Obama was in office and they were desperate, the Obama administration, to find a way to prosecute Julian Assange. They convened grand juries, they looked under every rock to try and find some way that they could justify it. And ultimately, what they concluded was there was no legitimate way to accuse Julian Assange of a crime without also accusing the New York Times and The Guardian and El País and multiple other media outlets around the world that published the same information. There was no way to charge him but not all those other media outlets. And so it looked like once the Obama administration decided not to prosecute him, that he was free and clear. And as he explains here, what changed was the ability of two people, in particular, Mike Pompeo and Bill Barr, to burrow their way into the Trump administration by pretending that they shared Trump's ideological outlook, even though they didn't. And that is who concocted these dangerous theories, Mike Pompeo in particular, as the head of the CIA, in order to justify criminalising Assange's reporting and that it was the Biden administration that continued that effort by prosecuting him and refusing to drop the case. Here's what Assange has to say about that.

JA: President Obama's Justice Department chose not to indict me recognising that no crime had been committed. The United States had never before prosecuted a publisher for publishing or obtaining government information. To do so would require a radical and ominous reinterpretation of the US Constitution. In January 2017, Obama also commuted the sentence of Manning, who had been convicted of being one of my sources. However, in February 2017, the landscape changed dramatically. President Trump had been elected. He appointed two wolves in MAGA hats: Mike Pompeo, a Kansas congressman and former arms industry executive as CIA director. And William Barr, a former CIA officer as US Attorney General.

GG: So I just need to, in case there is some ambiguity there, just clarify one thing, which is that it was absolutely true that Trump, upon being elected, selected Mike Pompeo, a very standard, classic war mongering Republican. And made him the director of the CIA. And one of the very first things Mike Pompeo did – I reported it at the time – was he went to the CIA headquarters and gave a speech vowing to destroy Julian Assange and Wikileaks. And to particularly destroy the notion that they have any constitutional right to do reporting or anything else, that they are a criminal organisation, an arm of the Russian government and therefore should be treated as a criminal organisation. Trump didn't appoint Bill Barr as attorney general at the start of his administration. He actually appointed Jeff Sessions and it was Jeff Sessions who greenlit the indictment that everyone understands Mike Pompeo engineered, along with pressuring the Ecuadorian government to withdraw its asylum protection so that the London police could go in and arrest him, which is what happened. That was when Trump moved Mike Pompeo from the head of the CIA to running the State Department as Secretary of State. And it was only a couple of years later when Jeff Sessions left and Bill Barr became attorney general – and it was both Jeff Sessions and Bill Barr, whose Justice Department then pursued those charges. Here's what he says – here's the rest of what he says.

JA: By March 2017, Wikileaks had exposed the CIA's infiltration of French political parties, its spying on French and German leaders, its spying on the European Central Bank, European Economics Ministries and its standing orders to spy on the French industry as a whole to reveal the CIA's vast production of malware and viruses, its subversion of supply chains, its subversion of antivirus software, cars, smart TVs and iPhones. CIA Director Pompeo launched a campaign of retribution. It is now a matter of public record that under Pompeo's explicit direction, the CIA drew up plans to kidnap and to assassinate me within the Ecuadorian embassy in London and authorise going after my European colleagues, subjecting us to theft, hacking attacks and the planting of false information. My wife and my infant son were also targeted. A CIA asset was permanently assigned to track my wife. And instructions were given to obtain DNA from my six month old son's nappy.

GG: He essentially then went on to accuse both Mike Pompeo and Jeff Sessions. And he suggested that he or rather Mike Pompeo and Bill Barr are being basically frauds masquerading as MAGA but in wolf's clothing, which has always been the number one danger and flaw of Donald Trump, is empowering people who have ideologies flagrantly

different than the one Donald Trump claims to believe in. Remember, Donald Trump went around in 2016 heralding Wikileaks and Assange as a hero for having done and enable the reporting on Hillary Clinton and the DNC that helped Trump win. And then the first thing Mike Pompeo does is get in as part of this embedded arm of the Deep State or the national security state, and vows as one of his first acts to destroy Julian Assange and Wikileaks. And one of the things that Assange discussed in this speech was that he had a certain kind of naivete, as he called it, because he really did believe that the law, the Constitution of the United States and the law in Europe would prevent anyone from criminalising the reporting that he did. And as it turns out, he said he realises now that the law is a fraud – though it exists as a kind of thing on a parchment or a piece of paper, it doesn't actually impose any real guidelines, principles or limits on what powerful people can do.

And in fact, that's one of the reasons I stopped practising law was because I quickly saw that all of these principles you learn at law school, all of these precedents, all of these rules get instantly disregarded the minute some judge or some court wants to do it. It's a fraudulent game where the rules that you learn govern it, have actually no role to play in at all. It just serves as a cover or a pretext for weaponizing the law in the way that they want. And obviously I have seen that in my own work. I remember very well during the Snowden reporting, lots of lawyers saying to me, there's nothing the U.S. government can do to you. You're protected by the First Amendment. Only as the reporting ended up suggesting that the CIA was advocating that both myself and Laura Poitras be reclassified as a journalist into an information broker so that we could be prosecuted. Both the US and British government spied on us based on that theory. Same thing happened when I was reporting in Brazil. All I ever heard from my lawyers in 2019 and 2020 is, oh you have nothing to worry about, what you're doing is absolutely legal, there's no way anyone could criminalise it. And in the end of that reporting I ended up being criminally prosecuted by the equivalent of the Justice Department. Even though the court ended up dismissing it, I was still prosecuted with something like 126 felony charges. And then recently in the reporting that I'm doing in Brazil now with the Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes, I'm hearing from lawyers as well: you have nothing to worry about. And yet almost immediately he opened a criminal investigation as part of his pending criminal investigation, the fake news, and included our reporting in it. So it absolutely is true that the laws are nice principles. They are things you want to believe actually protect you. They are things you kind of instinctively are indoctrinated to assume do place limits on what people in power can do in the West. And very quickly, you see that it's utterly illusory. It's worse than nonexistent. It's affirmatively dangerous because it takes radical abuses of power and justifies them under this fraudulent cover of the law and legal principles.

Just to remind you of what happened in the proceeding that the United States, under what both the Trump and Biden administration has pursued, from Reuters in June 2024, quote: *The US calls Julian Assange's actions dangerous even as a judge notes there's no victims*. Quote: "The US State Department said on Wednesday that Julian Assange's actions put lives at risk, even as the judge who accepted the Wikileaks founder's guilty plea to resolve his case noted that no victims had ever been identified. A State Department spokesman was repeatedly

asked by reporters to give examples of harm caused by the Wikileaks releases, but he did not provide any." There were never any victims to any of this. One of the only good things to come out of all of this – besides seeing Julian Assange again, speaking in public, able to travel, even if he doesn't have his full faculties yet enough to do what we just watched him do – is that the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the body to which he spoke voted to recognise him as a political prisoner.

Here is from that group's release yesterday. Quote: *PACE recognises Julian Assange as a political prisoner and warns against the chilling effect of his harsh treatment.* Quote: "The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) has expressed deep concern at the, quote, 'disproportionately harsh treatment' faced by Julian Assange and said this has had, quote, 'a dangerous, chilling effect' which undermines the protection of journalists and whistleblowers around the world. Approving a resolution based on a report" – by one of those officials who investigated it for them, I'll leave it to you to try and pronounce that name, it's on the screen, feel free to have at it – "the assembly said Mr. Assange's treatment warranted his designation as a, quote, 'political prisoner' under a definition it agreed to in 2012, citing the severe charges brought against him by the United States of America, exposing him to possible life imprisonment, combined with a conviction under the US Espionage Act, quote, 'for what was – in essence – news gathering and publishing'. The Assembly – which brings together parliamentarians from the 46 nations of the Council of Europe – also called on the US to investigate the alleged war crimes and human rights violations disclosed by him and Wikileaks."

There was a lot of criminality exposed by Assange and Wikileaks, the role of journalists. None of them were convicted or charged. The only one who got charged in this incident was Julian Assange, because, unlike corporate journalists who work in Washington and serve the government or who pretend to oppose it only in the most trivial and performative ways, actual dissidents in the West, actual journalists in the West are threatened with and often subjected to the kind of treatment to which Assange was subjected. Although for many reasons, including the fact that Wikileaks was a massive threat to the US security state, that Assange himself had made clear he would refuse to back down. The ease of demonising him because he wasn't an American citizen, he was instead an Australian hacker, throwing in these sex crime allegations that never amounted to anything, made it a lot easier to demonise Julian Assange. And more than anything, the 2016 release of documents incriminating about Hillary Clinton, the Democratic Party, though not part of what he was charged with, turned basically every Democrat, every liberal into a sworn enemy of Julian Assange, who believed he was an arm of the Russian government and wanted to see him imprisoned for the crime of reporting in a way truthful, authentic documents in a way that reflected negatively on Hillary Clinton. In their view, it helped to commit the gravest crime in American history, which was having Donald Trump win the 2016 election over Hillary Clinton. So it's good to see Assange back, and it's even better to see him back in a way that really illustrates the extremely serious and ongoing threats to basic press freedoms that that case by design, justified not just in his case, but future cases as well.

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