

Assange: Let's Shoot The Messenger

Ross Welcome to Renegade Inc. Journalist, publisher, activist, son, partner, father and human being. Regardless of what you think about Julian Assange, is it right that anyone is tortured in a British prison?

Ross Taylor Hudak, welcome to Renegade Inc.

Taylor Hudak Yeah, thank you for having me.

Ross You have forensically been following the Julian Assange case. Tell us where we're up to as we sit here now.

Taylor Hudak Well, we just completed the second half of the substantive extradition hearings that took place in London, of course. And then we expect for Judge Vanessa Baraitser to make her final ruling on January 4th of 2021 and then, at that point, either side is likely to appeal and then it will be headed to the appellate court. Meanwhile, Julian Assange is in Belmarsh prison. He has been there for just slightly over a year and a half now.

Ross What are the conditions that he is experiencing in Belmarsh?

Taylor Hudak Belmarsh prison is known as the UK's Guantanamo Bay. It houses some of the country's most notorious and violent offenders. Recently, we did find out on November 18th, in fact, that there has been an outbreak of Covid-19. There were three prisoners who have tested positive at that time. And since then, several more have tested positive. So his wing in the prison has actually been put on lockdown and there have been additional restrictions put in place. He is held in his cell for twenty four hours a day now. He has about a half hour outside of his cell. Showers are no longer permitted. Outdoor exercise is no longer permitted, and also meals are directly placed into the prisoner's cell. So the restrictions are pretty harsh. And not only is his physical health at risk because he has a chronic lung condition and susceptible to catching covid-19 and having a very negative reaction to it, but also this has very serious mental health implications for Assange, who is, of course, a psychological torture victim, and that has not been properly dealt with. And it's still unclear as to how that's going to impact him in years to come. So it's really important that he is let out of that prison as soon as possible. But a hearing is going to take place prior to this final decision and the judge at any time could release him but she hasn't thus far.

Video clip (Nils Melzer) I visited him with two medical experts who came to the conclusion that he had been exposed to psychological torture for a prolonged period of time, that that's a medical assessment. And we asked for involved states to investigate this case and to alleviate the pressure that is being done on him, and especially to respect his due process rights, which, in my view, have been systematically violated in all these jurisdictions. Unfortunately, none of the involved states have agreed to conduct an investigation, although that is their obligation under the convention on torture.

Ross We know all the technical aspects. We've heard at length the technical aspects of the Swedish charges, the UK charges, Ecuadorian embassy, but when it comes to a fellow human

being, this type of treatment, what is driving it? Is it because he published and has embarrassed the deep state in the US so badly?

Taylor Hudak Absolutely. I would say that this is a selective prosecution and a political persecution. The United States is going after Julian Assange specifically because of the information that he revealed through WikiLeaks. They want to scare other journalists and whistleblowers and encourage them not to be publishing information that is embarrassing to the United States government. So this is certainly a retaliation for his good journalism. In fact, it came out during the extradition hearings that WikiLeaks was not the first to publish the leaks and included the names of informants. It was, in fact, Cryptome who published this first. However, it is WikiLeaks and Julian Assange, essentially, that is being prosecuted for this. And I do think that it is, again, the United States retaliating against a journalist and publisher. And I could tell you, Ross, if you look at the conditions that he will face in a US prison system, it is absolutely atrocious. It violates basic human rights. It would be a complete atrocity if the UK government were to grant this extradition. I cannot stress that enough. The conditions he would face are not suitable for his mental health or his physical health. They would not be able to meet his needs.

Ross We'll certainly come to that. But you've been poring over witness statements, haven't you? Just talk to us about what those witness statements contain and why they're relevant now.

Taylor Hudak So several witnesses testify in this hearing. I mean, there were many defence witnesses that took the stand and many of them were US attorneys who have represented individuals who are in a similar situation to Julian Assange. And what we learnt from these witness statements is that Assange will be subjected to SAMs or Special Administrative Measures. And this is also going off of the statement that was provided by prosecutor Gordon Kromberg who is the US prosecuting attorney on the case. He said that Assange is likely going to be held under these restrictions if he is extradited. And essentially why they place an individual under SAMs restrictions is because they fear that the case that they're involved with presents a risk to national security. The US government claims that this is not a punitive measure, but if you look at the results of this, it really is punitive because it hinders the defendant's ability to accurately and adequately prepare their case. And then it also presents serious mental health risks for the individual.

Ross Under these measures, is it the case that the US state provide a attorney that has security clearance? Is that the case or can Julian Assange go out and pick whichever legal team that he wants?

Taylor Hudak Well, if it is deemed a national security case, which I believe it will be, many experts believe that it will be, he will be offered an attorney who has a national security clearance. So essentially he would be provided an attorney who is within the system that is prosecuting him. And what's really alarming about these SAMs measures is that it is stated that if extradited, he will be under these restrictions during pre-trial, which means that his attorney would also be subjected to these restrictions. And it has been stated in the past that many attorneys will air on the side of caution and self censor and withhold certain pieces of evidence in fear of being prosecuted under violation of the SAMs measures.

Ross So let's say that he does get extradited. Let's say that the judgement on the 4th is that he has to go. They then appeal it and eventually he ends up on an aeroplane to the US. Where does he go to?

Taylor Hudak It is highly likely that he will be placed in Alexandria Detention Centre and it is believed that he will not be granted bail. So he will be held in this prison. And this prison is a place for high profile defendants and he'll likely be placed under protective custody. Because he is a high profile inmate, it could attract positive or negative attention from other inmates. So in order to protect him, they have to place him in an administrative segregation unit and he would likely be placed in the X Block. Now, the X Block has about four to six cells and he would be in a cell by himself. The cell is rather small and it's about 50 square feet, which is just slightly over 15 metres. And unfortunately, he would be isolated from other inmates. Even the other inmates within the X Block, it would be very, very difficult for him to communicate with them. He would have trouble speaking with family and friends, and much of his calls would be, or almost all of his calls, would be monitored. Now, he would be able to speak with his attorneys. However, it's very difficult for attorneys to contact inmates in this unit because the inmates are often in their cell for about twenty two to twenty three hours per day. And they need to ensure that a deputy sheriff is on duty to take the call, to then notify the inmate so they can speak to their attorney.

Ross Listening to all this and sitting here in 2020 and realising what he has done in inverted commas - just as a fellow human being - you sit here and shudder to understand that a man who's published and highlighted what are war crimes, US war crimes, faces this kind of treatment?

Taylor Hudak Absolutely. It is really disturbing. And we've seen recently that other governments throughout the world, just recently, Chinese state media came out and stated that when Mike Pompeo tried to attack the Chinese government for being an authoritarian regime, someone with the Chinese state media actually came forward on Twitter and said, well, look at what you're doing to Julian Assange. So I think if this continued persecution goes on in Julian Assange's case, that we are going to see more governments stand up and call out the US and the UK for what they are doing. And just to go back to his conditions in the prison, in this X Block, Assange would have little access to natural light, lack of access to fresh air. He would be allowed about a 15 minute phone call with family once a month that would be monitored. And there really isn't any mental health care at this prison. There aren't any doctors on site. There are nurses, but they have to contact doctors to then come into the prison to meet with the inmates. And that could take several weeks. And there is a mental health wing in this prison. However, it is not guaranteed that if an inmate has mental health issues, that they're going to be placed in the mental health unit. Yancey Ellis, who was one of the defence witnesses, stated that he's had clients of his who had serious mental health issues that were still placed in this X Block.

Ross Dr. Bill Hogan, welcome to Renegade Inc.

William Hogan Thank you.

Ross Can I ask, who are Doctors for Assange and what's the goal of the organisation?

William Hogan So we're a group of, I think now, 300 doctors across the world from multiple countries on multiple continents who are advocating for Julian Assange from the medical standpoint. The group was formed in response to not only the fact that Nils Melzer, the UN special rapporteur on torture, issued a finding that Julian Assange has been tortured. But then the fact that some of the legal proceedings in the UK last fall, the evidence of that torture appeared in court where Julian was unable to state his own name at one point. And so then my colleagues in the UK wrote a letter to the UK government condemning the torture and the treatment of Assange and issued a widespread call for doctors to join. And that's the point at which I joined the group.

Ross From a medical point of view, we all have heard about the conditions in which Julian Assange is held. What will those conditions be doing to him physically and of course, emotionally and mentally?

William Hogan So we know that he's under severe psychological pressure, as it was described by the experts who visited him in Belmarsh. Physically, we know he has chronic lung conditions. And the combination of the psychological torture and the chronic physical illness makes him extremely susceptible to additional illness, especially infectious diseases, including the current Covid epidemic. We know that Covid is raging through his wing of Belmarsh. Up to 30 percent of prisoners in his wing as of a week or two ago, could be probably higher today. So he is vulnerable. He's more susceptible to catching diseases and suffering the consequences of diseases up to, and including, death.

Ross Half an hour exercise a day or half an hour out of his cell a day, I don't know if that does constitute for exercise. What does that do to the human body?

William Hogan Well, it does terrible things to the human body. So it starts with the psychological stressors which causes a release of stress hormones, adrenaline, epinephrine, and being in a constant state of fright or flight status continues to cause inflammation and destruction of organs and tissues in the body and that weakens the immune system.

Ross Again, yeah, I mean, it's just the fact that we're sitting here having this conversation and a few miles down the road, there is such casual cruelty going on - a faceless establishment with a man who went out there played by the rules and published the truth. It simply beggars belief.

William Hogan It does. As a human being, where's our humanity? Where's our compassion? Where's our consideration for how we all would like to be treated? Where is, you know, even the doctors in the prison? The psychiatrist at Belmarsh purposefully omitted the fact that Julian had a razor blade as a possible suicide risk from her reports. And the prosecution and his extradition hearing used that against an expert for the defence to say, how can you say there's this razor blade that's not in the reports when it absolutely happened that it was in the prison reports, but not the prison psychiatrist reports. Absolute malpractice to leave that fact out of her our reports. I don't know how she can call herself a physician or compassionate in any way.

Ross Dr. Thomas Schulze, welcome to Renegade Inc.

Thomas Schulze I'm very happy for you to have me here. Thanks a lot, Ross.

Ross Dr. Schulze, when it comes to Julian Assange, from a psychological point of view, how much Julian be feeling now? We all know the conditions in which he's held. He must feel a total sense of abandonment. What does that do to someone psychologically?

Thomas Schulze Oh, absolutely. That's why we at Doctors for Assange, have been crying out this so loud and have been decrying what we call torture. It's not what we call torture, we call it, but a UN special rapporteur calls it that way. Many other people call it. It goes back to the first time when he sought shelter in the embassy, when he applied for asylum there. But from that time on, he has been under constant surveillance. It's 24/7. He has never been allowed to be a human being anymore because he has been constantly watched. Now, this pressure has been mounting. All these accusations, he couldn't defend himself, really. Rapist this, weird character, whatever narcissist, all these things. So what does that make with anyone? I mean, this is a huge amount of stress. And now he's in solitary confinement. He's shackled when he is moved from one cell to another. That's why Nils Melzer and two experts, medical experts, that I know, distinguished scholars, have said clear signs of torture. I mean, psychological, lack of sleep, depression, anxiety, and now even hallucinations, auditory hallucinations, suicidal thoughts, high risk of suicide. So it's a constant feeling of being left alone. Everybody knows, every kid on the street knows what happens if you are in solitary confinement and then have this sword of Damocles hanging over your head, being extradited to the US where, you know, they want to send you to prison, to supermax prison for 50 years, whatever. So this is from a psychological, psychiatric point of view, a horrible pressure that he is suffering, that he's under. And that leads to all sorts of psychological symptoms.

Ross Why is it that we can't, in a much broader way, empathise with that - that it's a fellow human being, regardless of what the so-called crime was? Nobody deserves that. Why isn't that level of outrage coming through in so-called developed democracies?

Thomas Schulze Because I think when WikiLeaks came to the world stage, I think it was heralded as something really amazingly great. And then the person, Julian Assange, became a hero in many circles. And then came this other thing. So I think the problem is that we do not, or the world at large or maybe the corporate media, whatever, that many people, they don't look at him as a human being anymore just because of that. There is either the hero of free press and then there was the evil guy who actually abused his status of heroism and did atrocious things. So this is where we are. And I think what I hope that by the work, like Doctors for Assange is doing and other organisations, is we can bring the public to a more balanced viewpoint of these things and focus on the human being, as you said.

Ross And it's important to note that he's also a father?

Thomas Schulze Oh, absolutely, yes. That's also taken out of the equation all the time, yeah.

Ross Dr. Thomas Schulze, thank you very much for your time.

Thomas Schulze Well, thanks Ross for having me. It was a pleasure. Thank you.

Ross Taylor, in that first half, you talk about the Chinese starting to say, look, there's no way that you can point fingers when we see the treatment of the UK and the US of Julian Assange. Is this going to become a geopolitical issue? Is it already a geopolitical issue?

Taylor Hudak I think so. If you look at the nature of the US-UK extradition treaty, it is a lot easier to extradite someone from the UK to the US than it is from the US to the UK. There is a lower standard, a lower level of proof that the US has to show to extradite somebody from the UK to the US. So it's a very unbalanced treaty and many MPs and other legal experts have said that this needs to be revisited. So I think it's definitely a geopolitical issue. And, unfortunately, the UK, I have doubts that they're really going to stand up against the US empire on this case, but we're still very hopeful, of course.

Ross So if it has become a geopolitical issue and obviously over governments looking very closely what the US and the UK are doing, is it possible an outgoing Donald Trump might give a pre-emptive pardon? Because looking at Stella Morris saying thank you to Edward Snowden on Twitter, Edward Snowden obviously in Russia, but he tweets, Mr President, if you grant only one act of clemency during your time in office, please free Julian Assange, you alone can save his life. What is the probability of him issuing a pre-emptive pardon?

Taylor Hudak Well, of course, that is the hope here, and that would be fantastic. Now, many people may be watching and wondering why would President Trump issue a pardon, when it's essentially his administration in his DOJ that requested the arrest of Julian Assange and is prosecuting him? Well, the thing is with Trump is that right now especially, he is very upset and perhaps agitated with what he calls the deep state, the establishment, the intelligence community, and, of course, his ongoing issues with the Democratic establishment, in particular.

Video clip (Donald Trump) WikiLeaks. I love WikiLeaks. We've learnt so much from WikiLeaks. We love WikiLeaks. WikiLeaks, WikiLeaks. I mean, this WikiLeaks is fascinating. The WikiLeaks revelations...

Taylor Hudak So what better way for President Trump to stand up to all of these entities that have really been trying to undermine his presidency for the past four years than to issue a pardon to Julian Assange, the individual who exposed intelligence, corruption and wrongdoing? It would be a really unprecedented move, but I could tell you President Trump would be remembered favourably for doing that. President Trump's secretary of state is Mike Pompeo. Why he chose to surround himself with Mike Pompeo is beyond me. But Mike Pompeo has stated that WikiLeaks, the hostile intelligence organisation, and he has made it very clear that he does not view Julian Assange as a journalist. He does not see WikiLeaks as a publishing organisation. So being surrounded by these people who are probably feeding him misinformation about the organisation and about Julian Assange, it is somewhat difficult to imagine that Trump would issue a pardon. However, I'm still hopeful and I encourage everybody to continue to put the pressure on.

Ross When you look from the US at this case, what does it say to you about the future of journalism, the future of free speech and the future of transparency when it comes to a media that has teeth and genuinely holds power to account?

Taylor Hudak Well, it tells me that the United States government and establishment do not value the First Amendment and that they do not value free speech and a free press. And the fact that the media has largely gone along with this prosecution and the smear campaign against Assange, it is very disheartening. However, I do think that more and more people in the mainstream press and within our government will continue to speak out in support of Assange because as the persecution against him intensifies, you'll see more and more people come forward and say, 'enough is enough. This cannot continue'. I was really shocked to see Rachel Maddow and Chris Hayes come forward about a year ago and give a slight amount of support to Julian Assange. Of course, it wasn't as much as we would like, but to have them speak out and say, hey, charging him under the Espionage Act is not appropriate. That's a big deal. So I think as this persecution continues, hopefully more and more people will come forward and stand up for him. And I think the only way out of this, of course, is to prevent the extradition.

Ross People watching this may think, well, you know what, that is a case of a publisher and he put some stuff out and he's obviously annoyed the American deep state. It's nothing to do with me. He's got to fight his own corner. Let him get on with it. I've got my busy life to lead. What is the impact on people who think that ultimately? How does it impinge on their lives now, or further down the road?

Taylor Hudak Well, it certainly does. And well, it's an abstract concept that could be difficult for people to understand, because right now I do realise that people are worried about putting food on the table and meeting their basic needs. But this case will impact everybody, not just journalists, not just activists, but it'll also impact the public because it will impact their right to know. It was in the public interest to know about war crimes being committed in the Middle East. People deserve to know that. And by criminalising this, it is an assault on the public's right to have information about what their governments are up to in their name. So this certainly does impact people's lives. And what I'd like to say, too, is that whatever cause you are passionate about, whether it be animal rights or gay rights, free speech, whatever your cause is, this case and its outcome will have an impact on your ability to successfully fight for the causes that means so much to you.

Ross So we hear that message and the first thought is it just seems so unassailable and big. Where on earth do I start? How do I make my voice heard? How do I make an impact? Because I've agreed with what you said, what do I do?

Taylor Hudak I would turn people to the various campaigns throughout the world that are going on in support of Julian Assange. There's campaigns in the US, in the U.K. and like I said, throughout the world. So if you just go online, if you go to the DEA campaign's website, that's the Don't Extradite Assange Campaign. It's based in London. They provide fantastic resources on how to get involved. And it answers those basic questions of how do I help? What do I do now? How can I make a difference? Social media is a great place to become familiar with the various initiatives throughout the world. And then also, too, just keeping up with independent media coverage of this case, because there is a handful of people in independent media who are doing a fantastic job covering this case. So sticking with that regularly, you'll be able to see initiatives in your area.

Ross Really when it gets to this stage and the lawyers are involved and the judiciary is involved, and actually we know it's a political matter, surely what has to happen is politicians have to get together and gift the other side an opportunity to get themselves out of this mess? The Americans and the Brits, this is going to be a huge stain on both reputations. Wouldn't they come together and say, look, we're going to grant you the opportunity to give this pardon for all the reasons that we know - freedom of speech, transparency, freedom of the press - and then the American ambassador or whoever stands makes a statement says, actually, we realise we've got this wrong and at that point, a pardon is gifted or the charges are dropped? Surely, at the political level, that's still an option and that stain, if you like, on both countries magically goes away?

Taylor Hudak Certainly. That's why I think public pressure is a really positive thing here, because if the UK government and US governments realise that this is going to be looked upon by other governments throughout the world, if it's going to be looked upon very negatively, perhaps there will be an agreement made where charges could be dropped or pardon could be issued. However, it all goes back to how badly they want this precedent to be set. It essentially criminalises investigative journalism and criminalises journalism that exposes war crimes and intelligence corruption.

Ross Taylor, your journalism has kept us up to date throughout this trial. Thank you very much for that. And also thank you very much for your time.

Taylor Hudak Absolutely. Thank you.