



Be skeptical of accusations against Julian Assange, WikiLeaks: Today's talker

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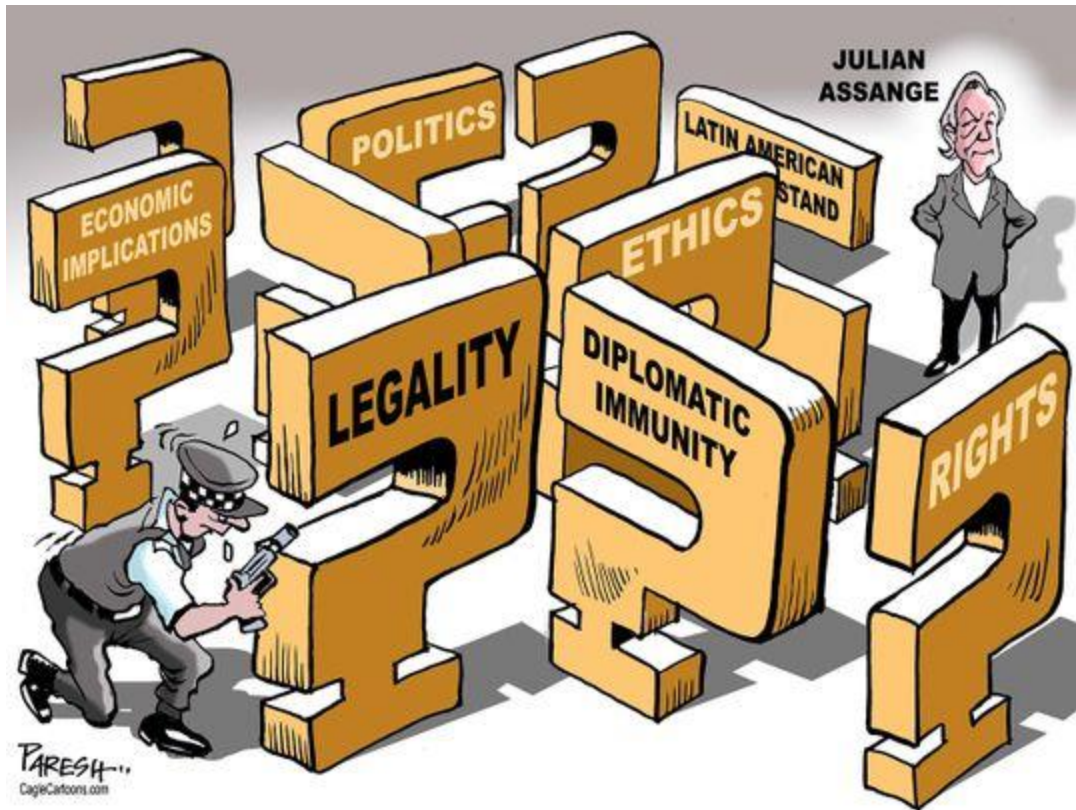
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British police, with the cooperation of the Ecuadorian government, arrested WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange on Thursday. He has already been convicted of jumping bail and on that count alone could face up to a year in prison. That charge is related to a prior rape investigation in Sweden, which was closed because Assange fled that country before he could be questioned in the matter. And he should be forced to answer those charges.

But the Swedish case has been overshadowed by a not-so-secret grand jury indictment in the U.S. regarding WikiLeaks' publication of thousands of classified government documents — some of which detailed the killing of civilians and journalists in Iraq, as well as acts of torture committed by U.S. forces.

Assange's defenders claim that U.S. and U.K. government pressure on Ecuador led to Assange's previous grant of asylum being revoked. Those supporters, along with Assange and WikiLeaks, claim their acts of "radical transparency" are legitimate exercises of free speech under international law. Many U.S. politicians have claimed that Assange and WikiLeaks are nothing more than either witless tools of foreign intelligence services (Russia's specifically) or active collaborators with the same.

In light of Attorney General William Barr's letter on special counsel Robert Mueller's report, which apparently clears President Donald Trump of collusion with Russia in the 2016 presidential election, it would be wise not to take allegations of Assange or WikiLeaks witting collusion with Russian intelligence at face value. And history tells us to be skeptical about federal allegations against people like Assange or groups like WikiLeaks.



Questions on Assange (Photo: Paresh Nath/The Khaleej Times, United Arab Emirates/PoliticalCartoons.com)

In multiple episodes over the last 100 years, the FBI and Justice Department have asserted that a range of domestic actors — from the American Civil Liberties Union to the Quakers — were under the influence of or actively controlled by Soviet agents or other hostile powers. In fact, the overwhelming majority of Americans investigated by the FBI or the House Un-American Activities Committee were innocent and loyal. The multiple "Red scare" witch hunts spanning decades destroyed the reputations of innocent people or organizations, while government officials who made the allegations were never punished for bearing false witness against those they accused of treason.

Assange is not the most sympathetic of characters. If a man flees a country based on a credible rape allegation, he needs to answer that charge in a court of law. If a government alleges that a person or organization has conspired with a foreign power to undermine that nation's electoral process, it should have the integrity to make that case in public in a judicial proceeding. But if a government uses such an allegation simply as a pretext to try to silence a publisher of information — and that is what WikiLeaks is — that exposes potential or actual crimes by the government itself, that government needs to be held to account first.

Every news organization in the free world should be terrified of an Assange prosecution under U.S. law.

In the case of Assange and WikiLeaks, the situation is reminiscent of the famous Pentagon Papers case of 1971. The Pentagon Papers, like the material Assange and WikiLeaks put into circulation, were classified. In both cases, the material revealed misconduct, mismanagement and even criminality by government officials. Federal officials want to make any case against Assange and WikiLeaks about the publication of classified material. The case should be about whether the government can use the classification system to conceal its own criminal conduct from the press and the public and to misuse the judicial process to silence those who exposed its misdeeds.

In the Pentagon Papers case, the Bill of Rights won. Whether it will win in any Assange prosecution remains to be seen.

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