

USA - Chelsea Manning: Heroism Against the Machine

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We know about heroes of social justice and liberation who come “organically” from the movements: Nelson Mandela. Rosa Parks, Ella Baker and Martin Luther King, Jr. Eugene V. Debs. Chico Mendes. Bernadette Devlin McAliskey. Heroes of grassroots resistance in Palestine, in the Philippines, in Central America and so many other struggles, those with names we know and so many more we don’t.

Then there are those heroic individuals who seem to come out of nowhere, perhaps influenced in some ways by the atmosphere of dissent but with no indication that they ever were, or intended to be, part of an organized movement let alone symbols of it. That’s who Chelsea Manning seems to be, pretty much an ordinary woman with ordinary human qualities and problems — who didn’t check her moral compass at the door when she signed up for the military. It is all the more critical now for the social justice movement to defend and, yes, celebrate her as one of our own.

Maybe she was indirectly influenced by the example decades earlier of Daniel Ellsberg, who revealed the “Pentagon Papers” with their revelations of the lying fraud behind the United States’ war in Vietnam. Maybe not. In any case, you can and should read the statement of this hero [1]:

“The more I read the cables, the more I came to the conclusion this was the type of information that should become public. I once read [unavailable] a quote on open diplomacy written after the First World War [about how] the world would be a better place if states would avoid making secret pacts and deals with or against each other. I thought these cables were a prime example of the need for more open diplomacy...I believed the public release of these cables would not damage the United States. I did believe that the cables might be embarrassing since they represent very honest opinions and statements behind the backs of other nations and organizations. In many ways these cables are a catalogue of cliques and gossip. I believed exposing this information might make some within the DoS, [Department of State] and other government entities, unhappy.”

Because of the political and judicial climate at the time of Daniel Ellsberg’s revelations, Richard Nixon’s attempt to destroy his life didn’t succeed. It’s different in the more reactionary age of George W. Bush and Barack Obama. As Chris Hedges writes, “Manning will surely pay with many years — perhaps his entire life — in prison. But we too will pay. The war against Bradley Manning is a war against us all.” [2]

Hedges is right, of course. Self-interest as well as basic morality and human decency demand that the antiwar and civil liberties movements stand in solidarity with Chelsea Manning as well as with Wikileaks, which published her revelations after mainstream corporate newspapers’ cowardly refusal to be the primary recipients. You can follow developments and offer support through

Manning's defense committee website [3].

In its lust for revenge, the government and the military wouldn't accept Manning's statement of responsibility exposing her to 20 years prison, but pressed the ridiculous charges of "aiding the enemy," "espionage" and "computer crimes."

Manning had no contact with "the enemy," didn't spy for anyone and hacked into no government computers. No matter. The military judge ruled not guilty on aiding the enemy — a charge which would have exposed any media reporting leaks to the same charge — but convicted Manning on almost everything else. Her sentencing is pending as this editorial is written, but it's clear that the public struggle for his ultimate freedom will last for many years to come.

There's another comparison worth thinking about: What made Chelsea Manning behave differently from the flyboys she saw on the video in their Apache helicopter, gunning down civilians on a Baghdad street and then returning to incinerate a van (including kids) who were trying to assist the wounded victims?

Those guys weren't necessarily cynical psychopaths when they joined the military. Nor were those who have raided village homes in Afghanistan, shot the men, raped teenage girls and burned the bodies to hide the evidence.

We don't know when and why they shed their moral compasses, or how many of them will return to become violent abusers or PTSD-afflicted human time bombs. The military and the government have every reason to keep us from finding out any time soon. The truth would expose too much about what these wars have done to our society as well as those we've pulverized with our smart weapons and stupid leaders.

Why Truth is Needed NOW

Decades from now when it's too late, there will be studies that provide considerable detail like Nick Turse's new book *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam*. Turse's research showed that routine civilian massacres "were the inevitable outcome of deliberate policies, dictated at the highest levels of the military," and that "It was not out of the ordinary for U.S. troops in Vietnam to blast a whole village or bombard a wide area in an effort to kill a single sniper."

The real story of the Iraq and Afghan wars remains largely hidden. Right now, we need the heroism of Chelsea Manning and more like her to lift the information blackout. That's why the system is determined to crush her and anyone else who might follow her example of ordinary, and extraordinary, heroism.

The truth is needed now for our society to face its real condition, which is partly exposed yet too much hidden. As everyone knows, president Obama spoke eloquently about the killing of Trayvon Martin after the acquittal of the murderer George Zimmerman. (Articles in this issue by Malik Miah and Meleiza Figueroa discuss the case and the realities of racism in the United States.) Trayvon was an unarmed, innocent American teenager killed while doing nothing wrong. But so was 16-year-old Abdulrahman al-Awlaki, a name Barack Obama never pronounces in public.

Abdulrahman was the son of Anwar al-Awlaki, the jihadist Yemeni-American preacher whose death in a U.S. drone strike Obama reported to the U.S. public with satisfaction. It was a couple weeks later that his son, never accused of anything, was blown to pieces by another drone while eating with friends in a café. That attack was presumably ordered by the lying John Brennan, then Obama's

“counterterrorism director” and now head of the CIA, who stated with a straight face that drone attacks have killed no noncombatant civilians, and rubber-stamped by the president who’s said to approve all drone targets.

While the Department of Justice is being asked to bring civil rights charges against George Zimmerman, it should also be investigating the murder of Abdulrahman al-Awlaki by his own government. If the former prospect is a long shot, the latter is a bad joke. As for the thousands of dead civilians from drone attacks in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Yemen, no one even has the jurisdiction over those covered-up crimes.

Most of the U.S. population, understandably, tends not to see the acts of our government in faraway covert operations as directly impacting our own lives. That leads us directly to the case of National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden. What makes Snowden so “dangerous” is, above all, his tearing away the veil that tries to hide what these wars actually mean for the rights that U.S. citizens are supposed to enjoy.

The fact that every phone call, email, google search, etc. are all stored in black-site NSA metafiles stuns many folks whose daily lives are too insecure and stressed to worry much about whom we’re killing this week in tribal North Waziristan or the Yemeni desert. It poses the question point-blank: Is the government’s “war on terror” protecting the U.S. population from potential harm, or targeting it?

President Obama’s statement, claiming that “before Mr. Snowden’s leaks,” he was ordering a review to bring greater oversight and “transparency” to the secret monitoring programs, is “transparently” an after-the-fact cover story that fools no one. Whatever pale “reforms” may be made to the NSA domestic spying programs will be due directly to Snowden’s revelations.

The U.S. government enraged people throughout Latin America, including its friends, when it ordered the interdiction of Bolivian president Evo Morales’ plane on suspicion that Snowden might be aboard. And raising a noisy public demand that Russia turn Snowden over, which obviously wasn’t going to happen, just gave the Putin regime a free shot to kick sand in Washington’s face. None of this has exactly been a domestic or diplomatic triumph for the current holder of the imperial presidency.

To be sure, Russia’s granting temporary asylum to Snowden has nothing to do with that regime’s support for human rights. Its treatment of its own dissidents, from opposition political figures to Pussy Riot, and its almost-medieval criminalization of LGBT people, are beyond barbaric. Sheltering Snowden now is an action based on Russian state and regime interests, and certainly not reliable in the long run. But it is a very good thing indeed that Snowden, for the present, is beyond the reach of the U.S. government, and in Russia at least he is not going to be vulnerable to a drone strike.

The U.S. government’s pursuit of Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden also demonstrates the continuing importance of Wikileaks, and what lies in store for its founder Julian Assange if the “criminal justice” system gets hold of him. Without Wikileaks, how much would we not know? The call for Assange to face questioning on sexual assault allegations in Sweden is legitimate in itself; what makes it impossible is the near-certainty that once there, he’d be trundled off to the United States on a sealed “espionage” indictment.

As we argued in our previous editorial statement (<http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/3926>), the presidency of Barack Obama has been a human rights disaster. That is not fundamentally because of his own deficiencies, and not really because of the power of the right wing in Congress either. It is above all because of the U.S. imperial drive to dominate and police the world, and the inevitable

consequences and blowbacks it produces.

Those individuals who defy the imperial machine and its national security secrecy state, whether they come from the movements or seemingly out of nowhere, are priceless. Chelsea Manning is worthy of the Nobel Peace Prize, and Edward Snowden of a Medal of Freedom. They deserve our gratitude and whatever solidarity the movement can offer.

Editorial Postscript - August 27, 2013

VERY SHORTLY AFTER Against the Current went to press, the judge in the court-martial trial of Bradley Edward Manning handed down a sentence of 35 years - less than the 60 or more years demanded by the prosecution, but shockingly harsh for Manning's "crime" of exposing U.S. war atrocities in Iraq, none of which have been punished. Soon afterward, as everyone now knows, Manning announced that she wishes to be known as Chelsea Elizabeth Manning and to be recognized as a woman.

What hasn't changed, of course, is the heroism and extraordinary courage that Manning showed in maintaining a moral compass when so many military personnel from soldiers to commanding officers to high-level bureaucrats, to say nothing of lying politicians hiding behind the face of "supporting our troops," have abandoned theirs. The added factor now is Chelsea Manning's decision to live openly as who she really is, and the struggle that must be waged to defend her right to do so within the confines of a military prison.

This struggle includes her right to hormone therapy, which the military says it will refuse to provide. In addition, the regulations that govern military prisons make Manning eligible for programs and release on parole in less than ten years. Chelsea Manning must not face the loss of these rights in retaliation for her gender identity. The movement that has risen in Manning's defense must, and undoubtedly will, redouble its efforts now.

What justice really demands is that Chelsea Manning be unconditionally freed now. That decision rests with president Barack Obama, who has the powers of pardon or commutation of sentence. To do that would require that Obama display a tiny fraction of the courage that Manning has shown. We add our voices to the calls for a presidential pardon for Chelsea Manning, while certainly not holding our breath awaiting the outcome.

The Editors
Against the Current

P.S.

* From Against the Current n° 166, September/October 2013:
<http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/3965>

Footnotes

[1] See here:

<http://www.bradleymanning.org/news/bradley-mannings-statement-taking-responsibility-for-releasing-documents-to-wikileaks>. Here's a brief excerpt explaining her actions

[2] http://www.truthdig.com/report/print/we_are_bradley_manning_20130303/

[3] www.bradleymanning.org