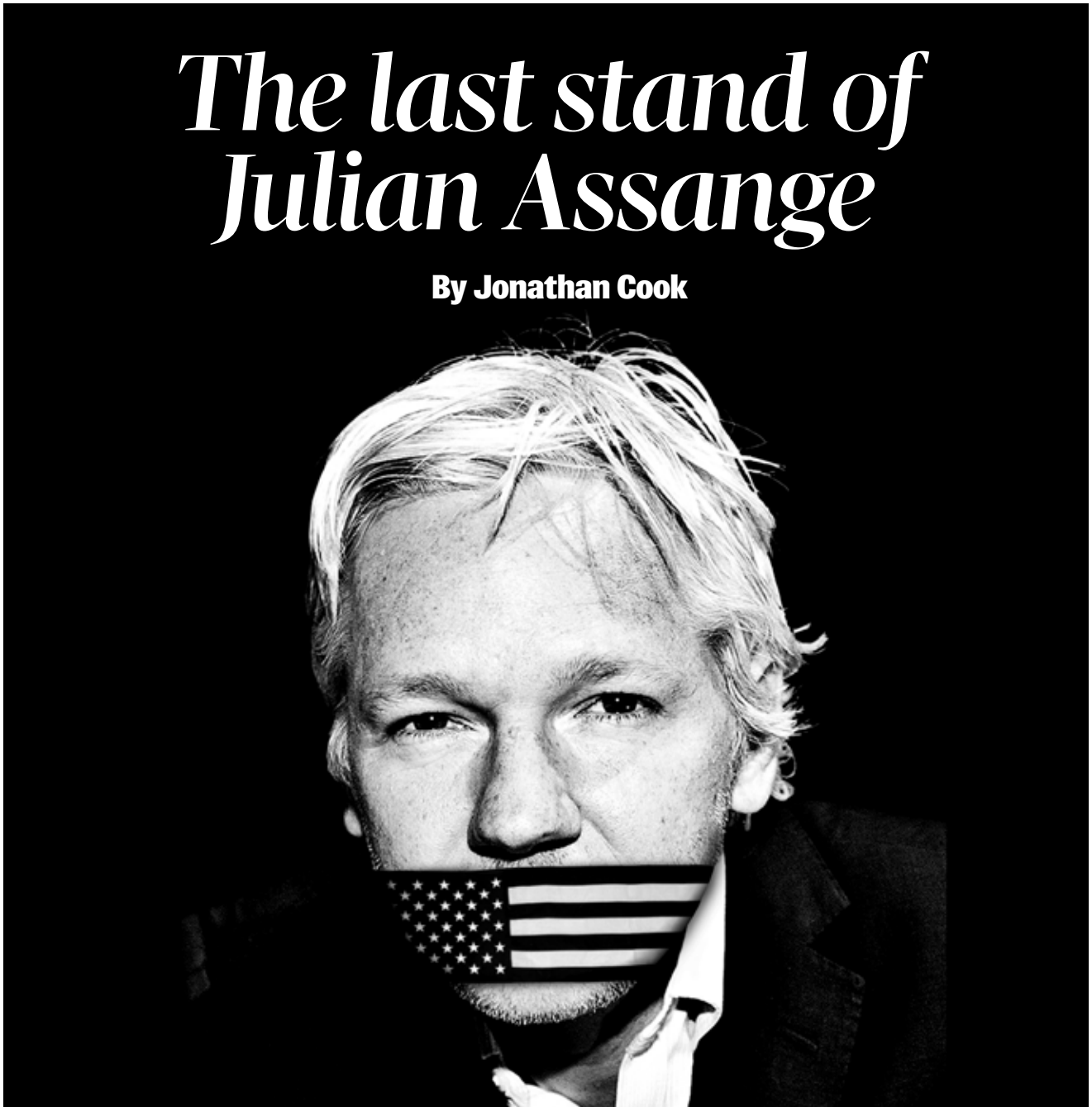


# **ColdType** Extra

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## *The last stand of Julian Assange*

**By Jonathan Cook**



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# *For years, journalists cheered the abuse of Julian Assange. Now they've paved his path to a US gulag*

By JONATHAN COOK

**C**ourt hearings in Britain over the US administration's extradition case against Julian Assange begin in earnest on September 7. The decade-long saga that brought us to this point should appall anyone who cares about our increasingly fragile freedoms.

A journalist and publisher has been deprived of his liberty for 10 years. According to UN experts, he has been arbitrarily detained and tortured for much of that time through intense physical confinement and endless psychological pressure. He has been bugged and spied on by the CIA during his time in political asylum, in Ecuador's London embassy, in ways that violated his most fundamental legal rights. The judge overseeing his hearings has a serious conflict of interest – with her family embedded in the UK security services – that she did not declare and which should have required her to recuse herself from the case.

All indications are that Assange will be extradited to the US to face a rigged grand jury trial meant to ensure he sees out his days in a maximum-security prison, serving a sentence of up to 175 years.

None of this happened in some Third-World, tinpot dictatorship. It happened right under our noses, in a major western capital, and in a state that claims to protect the rights of a free press. It happened not in the blink of an eye but in slow motion – day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year.

And once we strip out a sophisticated campaign

of character assassination against Assange by western governments and a compliant media, the sole justification for this relentless attack on press freedom is that a 49-year-old man published documents exposing US war crimes. That is the reason – and the only reason – that the US is seeking his extradition and why he has been languishing in what amounts to solitary confinement in Belmarsh high-security prison during the Covid-19 pandemic. His lawyers' appeals for bail have been refused.

While the press corps abandoned Assange a decade ago, echoing official talking points that pilloried him over toilet hygiene and his treatment of his cat, Assange is today exactly where he originally predicted he would be if western governments got their way. What awaits him is rendition to the US so he can be locked out of sight for the rest of his life.

There were two goals the US and UK set out to achieve through the visible persecution, confinement and torture of Assange.

First, he and Wikileaks, the transparency organisation he co-founded, needed to be disabled. Engaging with Wikileaks had to be made too risky to contemplate for potential whistleblowers. That is why Chelsea Manning – the US soldier who passed on documents relating to US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan for which Assange now faces extradition – was similarly subjected to harsh imprisonment. She later faced punitive daily fines while in jail to pressure her into testifying against Assange.

The aim has been to discredit Wikileaks and similar organisations and stop them from publishing additional revelatory documents – of the kind that show



**FIRST THE SCOOP:** Julian Assange holds the *Guardian* of July 26, 2010. The paper, along with other major international publications, gladly used the WikiLeaks leaks to sell their products. Then the *Guardian* turned its back on Assange.

western governments are not the “good guys” managing world affairs for the benefit of mankind, but are in fact highly militarised, global bullies advancing the same ruthless colonial policies of war, destruction and pillage they always pursued.

And second, Assange had to be made to suffer horribly and in public – to be made an example of – to deter other journalists from ever following in his footsteps. He is the modern equivalent of a severed head on a pike displayed at the city gates.

The very obvious fact – confirmed by the media coverage of his case – is that this strategy, advanced chiefly by the US and UK (with Sweden playing a lesser role), has been wildly successful. Most corporate media journalists are still enthusiastically colluding in the vilification of Assange – mainly at this stage by ignoring his awful plight.

### Story hiding in plain sight

**W**hen he hurried into Ecuador’s embassy back in 2012, seeking political asylum, journalists from every corporate media outlet ridiculed his claim – now, of

course, fully vindicated – that he was evading US efforts to extradite him and lock him away for good. The media continued with their mockery even as evidence mounted that a grand jury had been secretly convened to draw up espionage charges against him and that it was located in the eastern district of Virginia, where the major US security and intelligence services are headquartered. Any jury there is dominated by US security personnel and their families. His hope of a fair trial was non-existent.

Instead we have endured eight years of misdirection by the corporate media and its willing complicity in his character assassination, which has laid the ground for the current public indifference to Assange’s extradition and widespread ignorance of its horrendous implications.

Corporate journalists have accepted, entirely at face value, a series of rationalisations for why the interests of justice have been served by locking Assange away indefinitely – even before his extradition – and trampling his most basic legal rights. The other side of the story – Assange’s, the story hiding in plain sight – has invariably been missing from the cover-

age, whether it has been CNN, the *New York Times*, the BBC or the *Guardian*.

## From Sweden to Clinton

First, it was claimed that Assange had fled questioning over sexual assault allegations in Sweden, even though it was the Swedish authorities who allowed him to leave; even though the original Swedish prosecutor, Eva Finne, dismissed the investigation against him, saying “There is no suspicion of any crime whatsoever”, before it was picked up by a different prosecutor for barely concealed, politicised reasons; and even though Assange later invited Swedish prosecutors to question him where he was (in the embassy), an option they regularly agreed to in other cases but resolutely refused in his.

It was not just that none of these points was ever provided as context for the Sweden story by the corporate media. Or that much else in Assange’s favour was simply ignored, such as tampered evidence in the case of one of the two women who alleged sexual assault and the refusal of the other to sign the rape statement drawn up for her by police.

The story was also grossly and continuously misreported as relating to “rape charges” when Assange was wanted simply for questioning. No charges were ever laid against him because the second Swedish prosecutor, Marianne Ny – and her British counterparts, including Sir Keir Starmer, then head of the prosecution service and now leader of the Labour party – seemingly wished to avoid testing the credibility of their allegations by actually questioning Assange. Leaving him to rot in a small room in the embassy served their purposes much better.

When the Sweden case fizzled out – when it became clear that the original prosecutor had been right to conclude that there was no evidence to justify further questioning, let alone charges – the political and media class shifted tack.

Suddenly Assange’s confinement was implicitly justified for entirely different, political reasons – because he had supposedly aided Donald Trump’s presidential election campaign in 2016 by publishing

emails, allegedly “hacked” by Russia, from the Democratic party’s servers. The content of those emails, obscured in the coverage at the time and largely forgotten now, revealed corruption by Hillary Clinton’s camp and efforts to sabotage the party’s primaries to undermine her rival for the presidential nomination, Bernie Sanders.

## Guardian fabricates a smear

Those on the authoritarian right have shown little concern over Assange’s lengthy confinement in the embassy, and later jailing in Belmarsh, for his exposure of US war crimes, which is why little effort has been expended on winning them over. The demonisation campaign against Assange has focused instead on issues that are likely to trigger liberals and the left, who might otherwise have qualms about jettisoning the First Amendment and locking people up for doing journalism.

Just as the Swedish allegations, despite their non-investigation, tapped into the worst kind of kneejerk identity politics on the left, the “hacked” emails story was designed to alienate the Democratic party base. Extraordinarily, the claim of Russian hacking persists even though years later – and after a major “Russiagate” inquiry by Robert Mueller – it still cannot be stood up with any actual evidence. In fact, some of those closest to the matter, such as former UK ambassador Craig Murray, have insisted all along that the emails were not hacked by Russia but were leaked by a disenchanted Democratic party insider.

An even more important point, however, is that a transparency organisation like Wikileaks had no choice, after it was handed those documents, but to expose abuses by the Democratic party – whoever was the source.

The reason that Assange and Wikileaks became entwined in the Russiagate fiasco – which wasted the energies of Democratic party supporters on a campaign against Trump that actually strengthened rather than weakened him – was because of the credulous coverage, once again, of the issue by almost the entire corporate media. Liberal outlets like the *Guardian* newspaper even went so far as to openly fabricate a

story – in which it falsely reported that a Trump aide, Paul Manafort, and unnamed “Russians” secretly visited Assange in the embassy – without repercussion or retraction.

## Assange's torture ignored

All of this made possible what has happened since. After the Swedish case evaporated and there were no reasonable grounds left for not letting Assange walk free from the embassy, the media suddenly decided in chorus that a technical bail violation was grounds enough for his continuing confinement in the embassy – or, better still, his arrest and jailing. That breach of bail, of course, related to Assange’s decision to seek asylum in the embassy, based on a correct assessment that the US planned to demand his extradition and imprisonment.

None of these well-paid journalists seemed to remember that, in British law, failure to meet bail

conditions is permitted if there is “reasonable cause” – and fleeing political persecution is very obviously just such a reasonable cause.

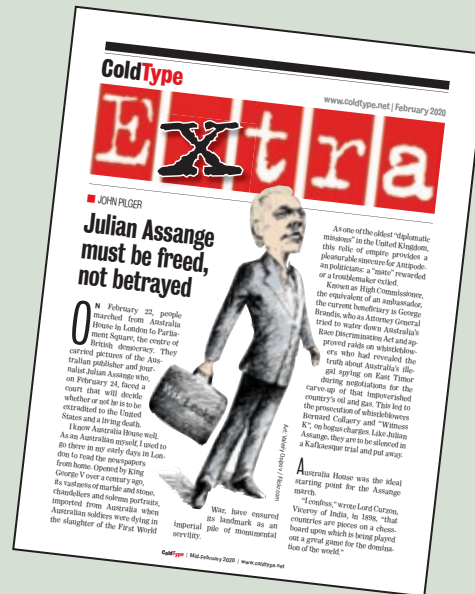
Similarly, the media wilfully ignored the conclusions of a report by Nils Melzer, a Swiss scholar of international law and the United Nations’ expert on torture, that the UK, US and Sweden had not only denied Assange his basic legal rights but had colluded in subjecting him to years of psychological torture – a form of torture, Melzer has pointed out, that was refined by the Nazis because it was found to be crueller and more effective at breaking victims than physical torture.

Assange has been blighted by deteriorating health and cognitive decline as a result, and has lost significant weight. None of that has been deemed worthy by the corporate media of more than a passing mention – specifically when Assange’s poor health made him incapable of attending a court hearing. Instead Melzer’s repeated warnings about the abusive treat-

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ment of Assange and its effects on him have fallen on deaf ears. The media has simply ignored Melzer's findings, as though they were never published, that Assange has been, and is being, tortured. We need only pause and imagine how much coverage Melzer's report would have received had it concerned the treatment of a dissident in an official enemy state like Russia or China.

## A power-worshipping media

Last year British police, in coordination with an Ecuador now led by a president, Lenin Moreno, who craved closer ties with Washington, stormed the embassy to drag Assange out and lock him up in Belmarsh prison. In their coverage of these events, journalists again played dumb. They had spent years first professing the need to "believe women" in the Assange case, even if it meant ignoring evidence, and then proclaiming the sanctity of bail conditions, even if they were used simply as a pretext for political persecution. Now that

was all swept aside in an instant. Suddenly Assange's nine years of confinement over a non-existent sexual assault investigation and a minor bail infraction were narratively replaced by an espionage case. And the media lined up against him once again.

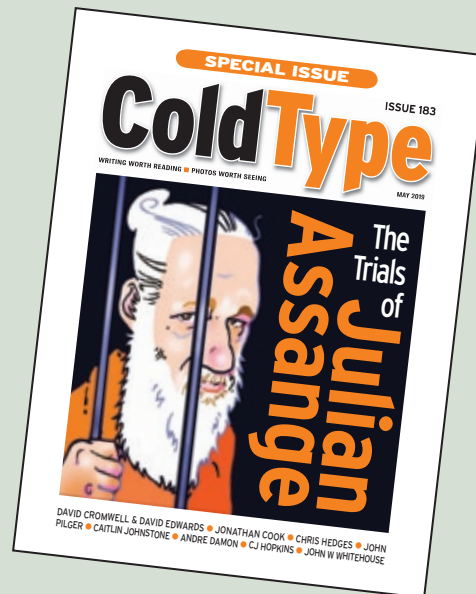
A few years ago the idea that Assange could be extradited to the US and locked up for the rest of his life, his journalism recast as "espionage", was mocked as so improbable, so outrageously unlawful that no "mainstream" journalist was prepared to countenance it as the genuine reason for his seeking asylum in the embassy. It was derided as a figment of the fevered, paranoid imaginations of Assange and his supporters, and as a self-serving cover for him to avoid facing the investigation in Sweden.

But when British police invaded the embassy in April last year and arrested him for extradition to the US on precisely the espionage charges Assange had always warned were going to be used against him, journalists reported these developments as though they were oblivious to this backstory.

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The media erased this context not least because it would have made them look like willing dupes of US propaganda, like apologists for US exceptionalism and lawlessness, and because it would have proved Assange right once more. It would have demonstrated that he is the real journalist, in contrast to their pacified, complacent, power-worshipping corporate journalism.

### **The death of journalism**

**R**ight now every journalist in the world ought to be up in arms, protesting at the abuses Assange is suffering, and has suffered, and the fate he will endure if extradition is approved. They should be protesting on front pages and in TV news shows against the endless and blatant abuses of legal process at Assange's hearings in the British courts, including the gross conflict of interest of Lady Emma Arbuthnot, the judge overseeing his case.

They should be in uproar at the surveillance the CIA illegally arranged inside the Ecuadorian embassy while Assange was confined there, nullifying the already dishonest US case against him by violating his client-lawyer privilege. They should be expressing outrage at Washington's manoeuvres, accorded a thin veneer of due process by the British courts, designed to extradite him on espionage charges for doing work that lies at the very heart of what journalism claims to be – holding the powerful to account.

Journalists do not need to care about Assange or like him. They have to speak out in protest because approval of his extradition will mark the official death of journalism. It will mean that any journalist in the world who unearths embarrassing truths about the US, who discovers its darkest secrets, will need to keep quiet or risk being jailed for the rest of their lives.

That ought to terrify every journalist. But it has had no such effect.

The vast majority of western journalists, of course, never uncover one significant secret from the centres of power in their entire professional careers – even those ostensibly monitoring those power centres.

These journalists repackage press releases and lobby briefings, they tap sources inside government who use them as a conduit to the large audiences they command, and they relay gossip and sniping from inside the corridors of power.

That is the reality of access journalism that constitutes 99 per cent of what we call political news.

Nonetheless, Assange's abandonment by journalists – the complete lack of solidarity as one of their number is persecuted as flagrantly as dissidents once sent to the gulags – should depress us. It means not only that journalists have abandoned any pretence that they do real journalism, but that they have also renounced the aspiration that it be done by anyone at all.

It means that corporate journalists are ready to be viewed with even greater disdain by their audiences than is already the case. Because through their complicity and silence, they have sided with governments to ensure that anyone who truly holds power to account, like Assange, will end up behind bars. Their own freedom brands them as a captured elite – irrefutable evidence that they serve power, they do not confront it.

The only conclusion to be drawn is that corporate journalists care less about the truth than they do about their careers, their salaries, their status, and their access to the rich and powerful. As Ed Herman and Noam Chomsky explained long ago in their book *Manufacturing Consent*, journalists join a media class after lengthy education and training processes designed to weed out those not reliably in sympathy with the ideological interests of their corporate employers.

### **A sacrificial offering**

**B**riefly, Assange raised the stakes for all journalists by renouncing their god – “access” – and their modus operandi of revealing occasional glimpses of very partial truths offered up by “friendly”, and invariably anonymous, sources who use the media to settle scores with rivals in the centres of power. Instead, through whistleblowers, Assange rooted out the unguarded, unvarnished, full-spectrum truth whose exposure helped no one

in power – only us, the public, as we tried to understand what was being done, and had been done, in our names. For the first time, we could see how ugly, and often criminal, the behaviour of our leaders was.

Assange did not just expose the political class, he exposed the media class too – for their feebleness, for their hypocrisy, for their dependence on the centres of power, for their inability to criticise a corporate system in which they were embedded.

Few of them can forgive Assange that crime. Which is why they will be there cheering on his extradition, if only through their silence. A few liberal writers will wait till it is too late for Assange, till he has been packaged up for rendition, to voice half-hearted, mealy-mouthed or agonised columns arguing that, unpleasant as Assange supposedly is, he did not deserve the treatment the US has in store for him.

But that will be far too little, far too late. Assange needed solidarity from journalists and their media

organisations long ago, as well as full-throated denunciations of his oppressors. He and Wikileaks were on the front line of a war to remake journalism, to rebuild it as a true check on the runaway power of our governments. Journalists had a chance to join him in that struggle. Instead they fled the battlefield, leaving him as a sacrificial offering to their corporate masters.

This essay first appeared on Jonathan Cook's blog:  
<https://www.jonathan-cook.net/blog/>

*Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His books include "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is [www.jonathan-cook.net](http://www.jonathan-cook.net).*

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