February 21, 2024

The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

As you are no doubt aware, Julian Assange’s final extradition appeal is now taking place in the UK, and the future of press freedom is as tenuous as his health. After nearly five years in the high security Belmarsh Prison, Julian is too ill to attend the hearing, even via video. If his persecution continues and his extradition and continued prosecution are allowed to go forward, not only will Julian very likely not survive but it will also be a death blow for investigative journalism based on classified information.

On May 3rd, 2022, World Press Freedom Day, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken stated that “protecting press freedom and supporting journalists is a pillar of democracy.” On that same day, you made a lengthy statement about the importance of protecting journalists which included in part:

> Journalists cover war, expose corruption, document environmental damage, lift up the marginalized, champion our communities, and hold the powerful to account. And for this, too often, they are killed, jailed, raped, threatened, and harassed.

> ... Collectively, we can and must do more to protect and sustain independent media, and to hold to account those that seek to silence voices essential to transparent, trustworthy, and responsive governance.

> On this World Press Freedom Day, I honor the courage and sacrifice of journalists around the world, and commend all those who strive to inform, educate, and enlighten. The work of free and independent media matters now more than ever.
Under President Obama’s administration, the Department of Justice made the decision not to bring charges against Julian Assange. This decision was, in large part, because it had been established that the prosecution of Mr. Assange under the Espionage Act could be used to justify the targeting of investigative journalists for their everyday activities. When the US government shifted its position under President Trump and announced it would seek the extradition and prosecution of Mr. Assange, it became a common trope to skirt the free press issue by stating that Julian Assange is not a journalist and that his design and construction of Wikileaks did not make him a publisher. This argument is belied, however, by a ruling of the US Supreme Court in 1973, in which Justice Byron White wrote that the “liberty of the press is the right of the lonely pamphleteer who uses carbon paper or a mimeograph just as much as of the large metropolitan publisher who utilizes the latest photo composition methods.”

Mr. Assange has also been recognized as an exceptional publisher and journalist by organizations around the world. He has received dozens of awards for his journalism, including the Gavin MacFadyen Award, The Economist New Media Award, the Martha Gellhorn Prize for Journalism and the Walkley Award, Australia’s equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize. Just this month, an exhibition marking his many awards and honours is being held at the European Parliament in Strasbourg.

In their open letter in November 2022, The New York Times, The Guardian, Le Monde, Der Spiegel and El País said the prosecution of Mr. Assange under the Espionage Act “sets a dangerous precedent” that threatened to undermine the First Amendment and the freedom of the press. The letter went on to say that “Obtaining and disclosing sensitive information when necessary in the public interest is a core part of the daily work of journalists, .... “If that work is criminalized, our public discourse and our democracies are made significantly weaker.”

Along with writers and leading publishers around the world, many literary and human rights icons also stand for Julian Assange. People such as Nils Mezler, Noam Chomsky, Glenn Greenwald, Oliver Stone, Alice Walker, Mairead Maguire and the late Daniel Ellsberg and John Pilger -- along with organizations such as the International Bar Association, Amnesty International, Reporters Without Borders, Human Rights Watch, the Committee to Protect Journalists, the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, the International Federation of Journalists and PEN International -- oppose the persecution and extradition of Julian Assange, and fight for his release.

Along with tens of thousands of ordinary people, government leaders and officials the world over (including 160 former and current world leaders and diplomats) have called
for the charges to be dropped, and, Australian Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese, and the Australian parliament have asked that the matter be brought to a close and Mr. Assange allowed to return home to Australia.

On World Press Freedom Day in 2020, you wrote that “Journalists hold those in positions of authority accountable, investigate and document abuses of power, and expose the truth for everyone to see.”

You cannot have it both ways, Mr. President. Please do the right thing. Withdraw the request for extradition of Julian Assange so that this matter can be brought to an end and Julian Assange can be freed. As Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1786, “our liberty depends on the freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost.”

Respectfully,

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