We Are Bradley Manning

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By Chris Hedges

I was in a military courtroom at Fort Meade in Maryland on Thursday as Pfc. Bradley Manning admitted giving classified government documents to WikiLeaks. The hundreds of thousands of leaked documents exposed U.S. war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as government misconduct. A statement that Manning made to the court was a powerful and moving treatise on the importance of placing conscience above personal safety, the necessity of sacrificing careers and liberty for the public good, and the moral imperative of carrying out acts of defiance. 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.

This trial is not simply the prosecution of a 25-year-old soldier who had the temerity to report to the outside world the indiscriminate slaughter, war crimes, torture and abuse that are carried out by our government and our occupation forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is a concerted effort by the security and surveillance state to extinguish what is left of a free press, one that has the constitutional right to expose crimes by those in power. The lonely individuals who take personal risks so that the public can know the truth—the Daniel Ellsbergs, the Ron Ridenhours, the Deep Throats and the Bradley Mannings—are from now on to be charged with “aiding the enemy.” All those within the system who publicly reveal facts that challenge the official narrative will be imprisoned, as was John Kiriakou, the former CIA analyst who for exposing the U.S. government’s use of torture began serving a 30-month prison term the day Manning read his statement. There is a word for states that create these kinds of information vacuums: totalitarian.

The cowardice of The New York Times, El Pais, Der Spiegel and Le Monde, all of which used masses of the material Manning passed on to WikiLeaks and then callously turned their backs on him, is one of journalism’s greatest shames. These publications made little effort to cover Manning’s pretrial hearings, a failure that shows how bankrupt and anemic the commercial press has become. Rescuing what honor of our trade remains has been left to a handful of independent, often marginalized reporters and a small number of other individuals and groups—including Glenn Greenwald, Alexa O’Brien, Nathan Fuller, Kevin Gosztola (who writes for Firedog Lake), the Bradley Manning Support Network, political activist Kevin Zeese and the courtroom sketch artist Clark Stoeckley, along with The Guardian, which also published the WikiLeaks documents. But if our domesticated press institutions believe that by refusing to defend or report on Manning they will escape the wrath of the security and surveillance state, they are stunningly naive. This is a war that is being played for keeps. And the goal of the state is not simply to send Manning away for life. The state is also determined to extradite WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and try him in the United States on espionage or conspiracy charges. The state hopes to cement into place systems of information that will do little more than parrot official propaganda. This is why those with the computer skills to expose the power elite’s secrets, such as Aaron Swartz, who committed suicide in January, and Jeremy Hammond, who is facing up to 30 years in prison for allegedly hacking into the corporate security firm Stratfor, have been or are being ruthlessly hunted down and persecuted. It is why Vice President Joe Biden labeled Assange a “high-tech terrorist,” and it is why the Bradley Manning trial is one of the most important in American history.

The government has decided to press ahead with all 22 charges, including aiding the enemy (Article 104), stealing U.S. government property (18 USC 641), espionage (18 USC 793(e)) and computer crimes (18 USC 1030(a)(1))—the last notwithstanding the fact that Manning did not hack into government computers. The state will also prosecute him on charges of violating lawful general regulations (Article 92). The government has refused to settle for Manning’s admission of guilt on nine lesser offenses. Among these lesser offenses are unauthorized possession and willful communication of the video known as “Collateral Murder”; the Iraq War Logs; the Afghan War Diary; two CIA Red Cell Memos, including one entitled “Afghanistan: Sustaining West European Support for the NATO-Led Mission—Why Counting on Apathy Might Not Be Enough”; Guantanamo files; documents of a so-called Article 15-6 investigation into the May 2009 Garani massacre in Afghanistan’s Farah province; and a Department of Defense counterintelligence report, “WikiLeaks.org—An Online Reference to Foreign Intelligence Services, Insurgents, or Terrorist Groups?” as well as one violation of a lawful general order by wrongfully storing information.

Manning’s leaks, the government insists, are tantamount to support for al-Qaida and international terrorism. The government will attempt to prove this point by bringing into court an anonymous witness who most likely took part in the raid on Osama bin Laden’s compound in Pakistan. This witness will reportedly tell the court that copies of the leaked documents were found on bin Laden’s computer and assisted al-Qaida. This is an utterly spurious form of prosecution—as if any of us have control over the information we provide to the public and how it is used. Manning, for substantial amounts of money, could have sold the documents to governments or groups that are defined as the enemy. Instead he approached The Washington Post and The New York Times. When these newspapers rejected him, he sent the material anonymously to WikiLeaks.

The short, slightly built Manning told the military court Thursday about the emotional conflict he experienced when he matched what he knew about the war with the official version of the war. He said he became deeply disturbed while watching a video taken from an Apache helicopter as it and another such craft joined in an attack on civilians in Baghdad in 2007. The banter among the crew members, who treated the murder and wounding of the terrified human beings, including children, in the street below as sport, revolted him. Among the dead was Reuters photojournalist Namir Noor-Eldeen and his driver, Saeed Chmagh. Reuters had repeatedly asked to see the video, and the Army had repeatedly refused to release it. [Click here to see the “Collateral Murder” video.]

“Using Google I searched for the event by its date and general location,” Manning said in reading from a 35-page document that took nearly an hour to deliver. “I found several new accounts involving two Reuters employees who were killed during the aerial weapon team engagement. Another story explained that Reuters had requested a copy of the video under the Freedom of Information Act, or FOIA. Reuters wanted to view the video in order to be able to understand what had happened and to improve their safety practices in combat zones. A spokesperson for Reuters was quoted saying that the video might help avoid the reoccurrence of the tragedy and believed there was compelling need for the immediate release of the video.” [Alexa O’Brien, another journalist who attended Thursday’s proceedings, has provided a full transcript of Manning’s statement: Click here.]

“Despite the submission of the FOIA request, the news account explained that CENTCOM [Central Command] replied to Reuters stating that they could not give a time frame for considering a FOIA request and that the video might no longer exist,” Manning said. “Another story I found written a year later said that even though Reuters was still pursuing their request [the news organization] still did not receive a formal response or written determination in accordance with FOIA. The fact neither CENTCOM or Multi National Forces Iraq, or MNF-I, would not voluntarily release the video troubled me further. It was clear to me that the event happened because the aerial weapons team mistakenly identified Reuters employees as a potential threat and that the people in the bongo truck [van] were merely attempting to assist the wounded. The people in the van were not a threat but merely ‘good Samaritans.’ The most alarming aspect of the video to me, however, was the seemly delightful bloodlust they [the helicopter crew members] appeared to have.

“They dehumanized the individuals they were engaging and seemed to not value human life by referring to them as quote ‘dead bastards’ unquote and congratulating each other on the ability to kill in large numbers,” Manning said, speaking into a court microphone while seated at the defense table. “At one point in the video there is an individual on the ground attempting to crawl to safety. The individual is seriously wounded. Instead of calling for medical attention to the location, one of the aerial weapons team crew members verbally asks for the wounded person to pick up a weapon so that he can have a reason to engage. For me, this seems similar to a child torturing ants with a magnifying glass.

“While saddened by the aerial weapons team crew’s lack of concern about human life, I was disturbed by the response of the discovery of injured children at the scene. In the video, you can see the bongo truck driving up to assist the wounded individual. In response the aerial weapons team crew—as soon as the individuals are a threat, they repeatedly request authorization to fire on the bongo truck and once granted they engage the vehicle at least six times. Shortly after the second engagement, a mechanized infantry unit arrives at the scene. Within minutes, the aerial weapons team crew learns that children were in the van, and despite the injuries the crew exhibits no remorse. Instead, they downplay the significance of their actions, saying quote ‘Well, it’s their fault for bringing their kids into a battle’ unquote.

“The aerial weapons team crew members sound like they lack sympathy for the children or the parents. Later in a particularly disturbing manner, the aerial weapons team verbalizes enjoyment at the sight of one of the ground vehicles driving over a body—or one of the bodies. As I continued my research, I found an article discussing the book ‘The Good Soldiers,’ written by Washington Post writer David Finkel. In Mr. Finkel’s book, he writes about the aerial weapons team attack. As I read an online excerpt in Google Books, I followed Mr. Finkel’s account of the event belonging to the video. I quickly realize that Mr. Finkel was quoting, I feel in verbatim, the audio communications of the aerial weapons team crew. It is clear to me that Mr. Finkel obtained access and a copy of the video during his tenure as an embedded journalist. I was aghast at Mr. Finkel’s portrayal of the incident. Reading his account, one would believe the engagement was somehow justified as ‘payback’ for an earlier attack that led to the death of a soldier. Mr. Finkel ends his account of the engagement by discussing how a soldier finds an individual still alive from the attack. He writes that the soldier finds him and sees him gesture with his two forefingers together, a common method in the Middle East to communicate that they are friendly. However, instead of assisting him, the soldier makes an obscene gesture extending his middle finger. The individual apparently dies shortly thereafter. Reading this, I can only think of how this person was simply trying to help others, and then he quickly finds he needs help as well. To make matters worse, in the last moments of his life he continues to express his friendly gesture—his friendly intent—only to find himself receiving this well known gesture of unfriendliness. For me it’s all a big mess, and I am left wondering what these things mean, and how it all fits together. It burdens me emotionally. …

“I hoped that the public would be as alarmed as me about the conduct of the aerial weapons team crew members. I wanted the American public to know that not everyone in Iraq and Afghanistan are targets that needed to be neutralized, but rather people who were struggling to live in the pressure cooker environment of what we call asymmetric warfare. After the release I was encouraged by the response in the media and general public who observed the aerial weapons team video. As I hoped, others were just as troubled—if not more troubled than me by what they saw.”

Manning provided to the public the most important window into the inner workings of imperial power since the release of the Pentagon Papers. The routine use of torture, the detention of Iraqis who were innocent, the inhuman conditions within our secret detention facilities, the use of State Department officials as spies in the United Nations, the collusion with corporations to keep wages low in developing countries such as Haiti, and specific war crimes such as the missile strike on a house that killed seven children in Afghanistan would have remained hidden without Manning.

“I felt that we were risking so much for people that seemed unwilling to cooperate with us, leading to frustration and anger on both sides,” Manning said. “I began to become depressed with the situation that we found ourselves increasingly mired in year after year. The SigActs [significant-acts reports of the Army] documented this in great detail and provide a context of what we were seeing on the ground.

“In attempting to conduct counterterrorism, or CT, and counterinsurgency, COIN, operations we became obsessed with capturing and killing human targets on lists and being suspicious of and avoiding cooperation with our host nation partners, and ignoring the second- and third-order effects of accomplishing short-term goals and missions. I believe that if the general public, especially the American public, had access to the information contained within the CIDNE-I and CIDNE-A tables [a reference to military information] this could spark a domestic debate on the role of the military and our foreign policy in general as it related to Iraq and Afghanistan.

“I also believed the detailed analysis of the data over a long period of time by different sectors of society might cause society to re-evaluate the need or even the desire to engage in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations that ignore the complex dynamics of the people living in the affected environment every day.”

It is certain that with this “naked” plea Manning will serve perhaps as much as 20 years in prison. The judge, Col. Denise Lind, who will determine Manning’s sentence, warned him that the government could use his admissions to build a case for the more serious charges. Manning faces 90 years if he is convicted on the greater charge of espionage, and he faces life if convicted of aiding the enemy. Military prosecutors have made it clear they are out for blood. They said they will call 141 witnesses, including 15 who will charge that Manning caused harm to national interests; 33 witnesses, the government claims, will discuss information so sensitive or secret that it will require closed court sessions. Four witnesses—including, it appears, a Navy SEAL involved in the bin Laden raid—will give testimony anonymously. Army Maj. Ashden Fein, the lead prosecution attorney, has told the court that the government witnesses will discuss issues such as “injury and death to individuals” that resulted from the WikiLeaks disclosures, as well as how the “capability of the enemy increased in certain countries.” The government is preventing Manning’s defense team from interviewing some of the witnesses before the trial.

When he was secretary of defense, Robert Gates said a Defense Department review determined that the publication of the Iraq War Logs and the Afghan War Diary had “not revealed any sensitive intelligence sources and methods.” In the trial, however, the government must prove only that the “disclosure could be potentially damaging to the United States” and need only provide “independent proof of at least potential harm to the national security” beyond mere security classification, writes law professor Geoffrey Stone.

The government reviews determined that the release of Department of State “diplomatic cables caused only limited damage to U.S. interests abroad despite the Obama administration’s public statements to the contrary,” according to Reuters. “We were told the impact [of WikiLeaks revelations] was embarrassing but not damaging,” a congressional official, briefed by the State Department, told Reuters. The “Obama administration felt compelled to say publicly that the revelations had seriously damaged American interests in order to bolster legal efforts to shut down the WikiLeaks website and bring charges against the leakers,” the official told the news outlet. Government prosecutors, strengthening their case further, have succeeded in blocking Manning’s lawyers from presenting evidence about the lack of real damage caused to U.S. interests by the leaks.

Manning has done what anyone with a conscience should have done. In the courtroom he exhibited—especially given the prolonged abuse he suffered during his thousand days inside the military prison system—poise, intelligence and dignity. He appealed to the best within us. And this is why the government fears him. America still produces heroes, some in uniform. But now we lock them up.

The court has not yet issued an official text of Bradley Manning’s statement. Thanks to Alexa O’Brien for providing a transcript.