**Feeding the Flame of Revolt**

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By Chris Hedges

NEW YORK—I was in federal court here Friday for the sentencing of [Jeremy Hammond](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeremy_Hammond%20) to 10 years in prison for hacking into the computers of a private security firm that works on behalf of the government, including the Department of Homeland Security, and corporations such as Dow Chemical. In 2011 Hammond, now 28, released to the website WikiLeaks and Rolling Stone and other publications some 3 million emails from the Texas-based company Strategic Forecasting Inc., or Stratfor.

The sentence was one of the longest in U.S. history for hacking and the maximum the judge could impose under a plea agreement in the case. It was wildly disproportionate to the crime—an act of nonviolent civil disobedience that championed the public good by exposing abuses of power by the government and a security firm. But the excessive sentence was the point. The corporate state, rapidly losing credibility and legitimacy, is lashing out like a wounded animal. It is frightened. It feels the heat from a rising flame of revolt. It is especially afraid of those such as Hammond who have the technical skills to break down electronic walls and expose the corrupt workings of power.

“People have a right to know what governments and corporations are doing behind closed doors,” Hammond told me when we met in the Metropolitan Correctional Center in Manhattan about a week and a half before his sentencing.

I did not hope for justice from the court. Judge Loretta A. Preska is a member of the right-wing [Federalist Society](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/11/18/federalist-society-post-bush_n_785049.html%20). And the hack into Stratfor gave the email address and disclosed the password of an account used for business by Preska’s husband, Thomas Kavaler, a partner at the law firm Cahill Gordon & Reindel. Some emails of the firm’s corporate clients, including Merrill Lynch, also were exposed. The National Lawyers Guild, because the judge’s husband was a victim of the hack, filed a recusal motion that Preska, as chief judge of the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York, was able to deny. Her refusal to recuse herself allowed her to oversee a trial in which she had a huge conflict of interest.

The judge, who herself once was employed at Cahill Gordon & Reindel, fulminated from the bench about Hammond’s “total lack of respect for the law.” She read a laundry list of his arrests for acts of civil disobedience. She damned what she called his “unrepentant recidivism.” She said: “These are not the actions of Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela … or even Daniel Ellsberg; there’s nothing high-minded or public-spirited about causing mayhem”—an odd analogy given that Mandela founded the *armed* wing of the African National Congress, was considered by South Africa’s apartheid government and the United States government to be a terrorist and was vilified, along with King and Ellsberg, by the U.S. government. She said there was a “desperate need to promote respect for the law” and a “need for adequate public deterrence.” She read from transcripts of Hammond’s conversations in [Anonymous](http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/subcultures/anonymous%20) chat rooms in which he described the goal of hacking into Stratfor as “destroying the target, hoping for bankruptcy, collapse” and called for “maximum mayhem.” She admonished him for releasing the unlisted phone number of a retired Arizona police official who allegedly received threatening phone calls afterward.

The judge imposed equally harsh measures that will take effect after Hammond’s release from prison. She ordered that he be placed under three years of supervised control, be forbidden to use encryption or aliases online and submit to random searches of his computer equipment, person and home by police and any internal security agency without the necessity of a warrant. The judge said he was legally banned from having any contact with “electronic civil disobedience websites or organizations.” By the time she had finished she had shredded all pretense of the rule of law.

The severe sentence—Hammond will serve more time than the combined sentences of four men [who were convicted](http://news.cnet.com/8301-1009_3-57584774-83/lulzsec-case-in-u.k-brings-sentences-for-4-men/) in Britain for hacking related to the U.S. case—was monumentally stupid for a judge seeking to protect the interest of the ruling class. The judicial lynching of Hammond required her to demonstrate a callous disregard for transparency and our right to privacy. It required her to ignore the disturbing information Hammond released showing that the government and Stratfor attempted to link nonviolent dissident groups, including some within Occupy, to terrorist organizations so peaceful dissidents could be prosecuted as terrorists. It required her to accept the frightening fact that intelligence agencies now work on behalf of corporations as well as the state. She also had to sidestep the fact that Hammond made no financial gain from the leak.

The sentencing converges with the state’s persecution of Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden, Julian Assange and Barrett Brown, along with Glenn Greenwald, Jacob Appelbaum, Laura Poitras and Sarah Harrison, four investigative journalists who are now in self-imposed exile from the United States. And as the numbers of our political prisoners and exiled dissidents mount, there is the unmistakable stench of tyranny.

This draconian sentence, like the draconian sentences of other whistle-blowers, will fan revolt. History bears this out. It will solidify the growing understanding that we must resort, if we want to effect real change, to unconventional tactics to thwart the mounting abuses by the corporate state. There is no hope, this sentencing shows, for redress from the judicial system, elected officials or the executive branch. Why should we respect a court system, or a governmental system, that shows no respect to us? Why should we abide by laws that serve only to protect criminals such as Wall Street thieves while leaving the rest of us exposed to abuse? Why should we continue to have faith in structures of power that deny us our most basic rights and civil liberties? Why should we be impoverished so the profits of big banks, corporations and hedge funds can swell?

No one will save us but ourselves. That was the real message sent out by the sentencing of Jeremy Hammond. And just as Hammond was inspired to act by the arrest of Chelsea (then Bradley) Manning, others will be inspired to act by Hammond and the actions taken against him. And we can thank Judge Preska for that.

Hammond is rooted in the [Black Bloc](http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/the_cancer_of_occupy_20120206%20). As he was escorted out of the courtroom on the ninth floor of the federal courthouse at 500 Pearl St. on Friday he shouted to roughly 100 people—including a class of prim West Point cadets in their blue uniforms—gathered there: “Long live Anonymous! Hurrah for anarchy!” In a statement he read in court he thanked “Free Anons, the Anonymous Solidarity Network [and] Anarchist Black Cross” for their roles in the fight against oppression.

Hammond has abandoned faith not only in traditional institutions, such as the courts, but nonviolent mass protest and civil disobedience, a point on which he and I diverge. But his analysis of corporate tyranny is correct. And the longer the state ruthlessly persecutes dissidents, the more the state ensures that those who oppose it will resort to radical responses including violence. “Those who make peaceful change impossible make violent change inevitable,” John F. Kennedy said. And the corporate state is not only making peaceful change impossible but condemning it as terrorism.

In late October I spent an afternoon with Hammond in New York’s Metropolitan Correctional Center, where he had been held for 20 months. He said during our conversation, parts of which his lawyer requested be published only after his sentencing, that he believed that the sole way the people will now have any power is to rise up physically and seize it. My column last week was about that interview, and now I am including previously withheld parts of the conversation.

Hammond defines himself as “an anarchist communist.” He seeks to destroy capitalism and the centralized power of the corporate state. His revolutionary vision is “leaderless collectives based on free association, consensus, mutual aid, self-sufficiency and harmony with the environment.” He embraces the classic tools of revolt, including mass protests, general strikes and boycotts. And he sees hacking and leaking as part of this resistance, tools not only to reveal the truths about these systems of corporate power but to “disrupt/destroy these systems entirely.”

He participated in the Occupy movement in Chicago but found the politics of Occupy too vague and amorphous, a point on which I concur. He said Occupy lacked revolutionary vigor. He told me he did not support what he called the “dogmatic nonviolence doctrine” of many in the Occupy movement, calling it “needlessly limited and divisive.” He rejects the idea of acts of civil disobedience that protesters know will lead to their arrest. “The point,” he said, “is to carry out acts of resistance and not get caught.” He condemns “peace patrols,” units formed within the Occupy movement that sought to prohibit acts of vandalism and violence by other protesters—most often members of the Black Bloc—as “a secondary police force.” And he spurns the calls by many in Occupy not to antagonize the police, calling the police “the boot boys of the 1 percent, paid to protect the rich and powerful.” He said such a tactic of non-confrontation with the police ignored the long history of repression the police have carried out against popular movements, as well as the “profiling and imprisonment of our comrades.”

“Because we were unprepared, or perhaps unwilling, to defend our occupations, police and mayors launched coordinated attacks, driving us out of our own parks,” he said of the state’s closure of the Occupy encampments.

“I fully support and have participated in Black Bloc and other forms of militant direct action,” he said. “I do not believe that the ruling powers listen to the people’s peaceful protests. Black Bloc is an effective, fluid and dynamic form of protest. It causes disruption outside of predictable/controllable mass demonstrations through ‘unarrests,’ holding streets, barricades and property destruction. Smashing corporate windows is not violence, especially when compared to the everyday economic violence of sweatshops and ‘free trade.’ Black Bloc seeks to hit them where it hurts, through economic damage. But more than smashing windows they seek to break the spell of ‘law and order’ and the artificial limitations we impose on ourselves.”

I disagree with Hammond over tactics, but in the end this disagreement is moot. It will be the ruling elites who finally determine our response. If the corporate elites employ the full force of the security and surveillance state against us, if corporate totalitarian rule is one of naked, escalating and brutal physical repression, then the violence of the state will spawn a counter-violence. Judge Preska’s decision to judicially lynch Hammond has only added to the fury she and the state are trying to stamp out. An astute ruling class, one aware of the rage rippling across the American landscape, would have released Hammond on Friday and begun to address the crimes he exposed. But our ruling class, while adept at theft, looting, propaganda and repression, is blind to the growing discontent caused by the power imbalance and economic inequality that plague ordinary Americans at a time when half of the country lives in poverty or “near poverty.”

“The acts of civil disobedience and direct action that I am being sentenced for today are in line with the principles of community and equality that have guided my life,” Hammond told the courtroom. “I hacked into dozens of high-profile corporations and government institutions, understanding very clearly that what I was doing was against the law, and that my actions could land me back in federal prison. But I felt that I had an obligation to use my skills to expose and confront injustice—and to bring the truth to light.”

“Could I have achieved the same goals through legal means?” he said. “I have tried everything from voting petitions to peaceful protest and have found that those in power do not want the truth to be exposed. When we speak truth to power we are ignored at best and brutally suppressed at worst. We are confronting a power structure that does not respect its own system of checks and balances, never mind the rights of its own citizens or the international community.”

“My first memories of American politics was when Bush stole the election in 2000,” he told me at a metal table as we met at the prison in a small room reserved for attorney visits, “and then how Bush used the wave of nationalism after 9/11 to launch unprovoked pre-emptive wars against Afghanistan and Iraq. In high school I was involved in publishing ‘underground’ newsletters criticizing the Patriot Act, the wars, and other Bush-era policies. I attended many anti-war protests in the city [Chicago] and was introduced to other local struggles and the larger anti-corporate globalization movement. I began identifying as an anarchist, started to travel around the country to various mobilizations and conferences, and began getting arrested for various acts.”

He said that his experience of street protest, especially against the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, was seminal, for he saw that the state had little interest in heeding the voices of protesters and others in the public. “Instead, we were labeled as traitors, beaten and arrested.”

“I targeted law enforcement systems because of the racism and inequality with which the criminal law is enforced,” he admitted in court. “I targeted the manufacturers and distributors of military and police equipment who profit from weaponry used to advance U.S. political and economic interests abroad and to repress people at home. I targeted information security firms because they work in secret to protect government and corporate interests at the expense of individual rights, undermining and discrediting activists, journalists and other truth seekers, and spreading disinformation.”

An FBI informant, Hector Xavier Monsegur, posing as an Anonymous member and using the online name “Sabu,” prodded Hammond to break into Stratfor and informed him of technical vulnerabilities in websites of the company.

“Why the FBI would introduce us to the hacker who found the initial vulnerability and [allow this hack to continue](http://www.deathandtaxesmag.com/209817/did-the-fbi-use-jeremy-hammond-to-hack-foreign-governments/%20) remains a mystery,” Hammond said as he faced the judge.

“As a result of the Stratfor hack, some of the dangers of the unregulated private intelligence industry are now known,” he said. “It has been revealed through WikiLeaks and other journalists around the world that Stratfor maintained a worldwide network of informants that they used to engage in intrusive and possibly illegal surveillance activities on behalf of large multinational corporations.”

At Sabu’s urging, Hammond broke into other websites, too. Hammond, at Sabu’s request, provided information to hackers enabling them to break into and deface official foreign government websites, including some of Turkey, Iran and Brazil. The names of these three countries are technically under a protective court order but have been reported widely in the press.

“I broke into numerous sites and handed over passwords and backdoors that enabled Sabu—and by extension his FBI handlers—to control these targets,” Hammond said.

“I don’t know how other information I provided to him may have been used, but I think the government’s collection and use of this data needs to be investigated,” he went on. “The government celebrates my conviction and imprisonment, hoping that it will close the door on the full story. I took responsibility for my actions, by pleading guilty, but when will the government be made to answer for its crimes?”

“The hypocrisy of ‘law and order’ and the injustices caused by capitalism cannot be cured by institutional reform but through civil disobedience and direct action,” Hammond told the court. “Yes, I broke the law, but I believe that sometimes laws must be broken in order to make room for change.”



AP/Seth Wenig

Protesters stand in front of the federal courthouse during the arraignment of Jeremy Hammond in Manhattan on May 14, 2012.

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