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Manning's sentence an injustice masquerading as justice

Tony Magliano | Sep. 3, 2013 Making a Difference

It's downright unjust.

The 35-year military prison sentence handed down to U.S. Army Pvt. Chelsea Manning, formerly Bradley Manning, for leaking classified government files is more severe than the sentences many convicted murderers and rapists receive.

In fact, according to Ben Wizner [1], director of the American Civil Liberties Union's Project on Speech, Privacy and Technology, "Among the more blatant injustices of the Manning case is that Manning was prosecuted more intensely, and punished far more harshly, than other soldiers (and their superiors) who authorized and engaged in war crimes, including the torture of prisoners and the killing of civilians."

In an attempt to frighten future whistle-blowers, the Obama administration went all-out to punish Manning: Military prosecutors sought a 60-year sentence.

But such intimidation did not stop former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden from releasing secret files revealing that the U.S. and British governments are engaged in mass surveillance programs, including millions of everyday cellphone calls of average citizens.

In the spirit of St. Augustine's teaching that "an unjust law is no law at all," we are morally obliged to disobey laws that cover up harm. Secrecy laws that hide evil deeds demand disclosure.

Whistle-blowers are often people of selfless courage who risk much to expose serious misconduct and corruption for the sake of the "common good," an important principle of Catholic social teaching.

Instead of being traitors, it could be argued that many are actually true patriots.

The Continental Congress declared it the duty of "all persons in the service of the United States, as well as all other the inhabitants thereof," to inform the Continental Congress or proper authorities of "misconduct, frauds or misdemeanors committed by any officers or persons in the service of these states, which may come to their knowledge" (Journals of the Continental Congress: 1774-1789 [2]).

In the case of Manning's whistle-blowing, much of the secret information exposed serious misconduct and even grave evil.

Slate magazine reported [3] 10 key U.S. government secrets revealed in the classified documents Manning provided. Four of the more disturbing revelations:

- "During the Iraq War, U.S. authorities failed to investigate hundreds of reports of abuse, torture, rape, and murder by Iraqi police and soldiers, according to thousands of field reports.
- "There were 109,032 'violent deaths' recorded in Iraq between 2004 and 2009, including 66,081 civilians. Leaked records from the Afghan War separately revealed coalition troops' alleged role in killing at least

195 civilians in unreported incidents, one reportedly involving U.S. service members machine-gunning a bus, wounding or killing 15 passengers."
- "A leaked diplomatic cable provided evidence that during an incident in 2006, U.S. troops in Iraq executed at least 10 Iraqi civilians, including a woman in her 70s and a 5-month-old, then called in an airstrike to destroy the evidence."
- "In Baghdad in 2007, a U.S. Army helicopter gunned down a group of civilians, including two Reuters news staff."

At a pretrial hearing in February, Manning said she leaked information, including diplomatic cables and U.S. military war logs from Afghanistan and Iraq, to "spark a domestic debate on the role of the military and our foreign policy."

Mature, honest and ethical people of every nation should demand an open debate on the role of military and foreign policy. Such policy is far too important to be decided just by the privileged few in government while millions of citizens are kept in the dark.

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