

US Charges WikiLeaks Founder Julian Assange With Hacking Conspiracy

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11/04/2019



**WASHINGTON:** US prosecutors announced charges on Thursday against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, accusing him of conspiring with former Army intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning to gain access to a government computer as part of one of the largest compromises of classified information in U.S. history.

[Assange, arrested by British police in London](#) and carried out of Ecuador's embassy there, faces a maximum penalty of five years in prison on the American charges, the U.S. Justice Department said in a statement. His London arrest paved the way for his possible extradition to the United States.

Assange's indictment arose from a long-running criminal investigation dating back to the administration of former President Barack Obama. It was triggered in part by the publication by WikiLeaks in 2010 of hundreds of thousands of U.S. military reports about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and American diplomatic communications.

The Justice Department said [Assange, 47, was arrested under an extradition treaty](#) between the United States and Britain and charged with conspiracy to commit computer intrusion.

The indictment said that Assange in March 2010 engaged in a conspiracy to assist Manning in cracking a password stored on U.S. Department of Defense computers connected to the Secret Internet Protocol Network (SIPRNet), a U.S. government network used for classified documents and communications.

Representatives for Manning had no immediate comment on the indictment.

The Justice Department said Manning had access to the computers as an intelligence analyst and was using them to download classified records to transmit to WikiLeaks. Cracking the password would have enabled Manning to log on to the computers under a username other than her own, making it more difficult for investigators to determine the source of the illegal disclosures, the department said.

Manning was jailed on March 8 after being held in contempt by a judge in Virginia for refusing to testify before a federal grand jury in what is widely believed to be related to the Assange investigation.

Manning was convicted by court-martial in 2013 of espionage and other offenses for furnishing more than 700,000 documents, videos, diplomatic cables and battlefield accounts to WikiLeaks while she was an intelligence analyst in Iraq. Obama commuted the final 28 years of Manning's 35-year sentence.

The Obama administration decided not to prosecute WikiLeaks and Assange on the grounds that the work of the website was too similar to journalistic activities protected by the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment.

## **SPECIAL COUNSEL INQUIRY**

Special Counsel Robert Mueller also underscored the role of WikiLeaks in his 22-month investigation into Russia's role in the 2016 U.S. election. The website published emails damaging to Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton that Mueller and U.S. intelligence agencies have said were stolen by Russia in a bid to boost Republican Donald Trump's candidacy.

The Justice Department said Manning and Assange engaged in real-time discussions concerning Manning's transmission of classified records to Assange in which Assange encouraged Manning to provide more information.

The department's statement quoted an exchange between the two in which Manning told Assange that "after this upload, that's all I really have got left," with Assange replying that "curious eyes never run dry in my experience."

WikiLeaks has faced criticism from U.S. officials including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. In a 2017 speech when he was CIA director, Pompeo called Assange a "fraud" and WikiLeaks a "hostile intelligence service often abetted by state actors like Russia."

But Trump praised the group during the 2016 presidential race. At a campaign rally shortly before the November 2016 U.S. election, Trump said "I love WikiLeaks" after it released the hacked Democratic emails that harmed Clinton's candidacy.

Assange, who took refuge in Ecuador's London embassy in 2012 to avoid extradition to Sweden in connection with a sexual assault investigation, has said he does not know where Democratic Party-related emails WikiLeaks published before the election originated, though he has said he did not get them from Russia.

The fact that the United States was pursuing charges against Assange emerged in November,

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when a document errantly filed by federal prosecutors in Virginia in an unrelated terrorism investigation indicated that he had secretly been indicted by U.S. authorities. The indictment was issued in March 2018, a U.S. law enforcement official said.

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