

Nobel Peace Prize to Bradley Manning?

As the Iraq War's architects and boosters remain respected figures in Official Washington, whistleblower Bradley Manning faces possible life in prison. To counter this injustice, media critic Jeff Cohen thinks Manning should get the Nobel Peace Prize, as he explained to Dennis J. Bernstein.

By Dennis J. Bernstein

The grassroots activist group, RootsAction.org, has drafted a petition addressed to the Norwegian Nobel Committee calling for the Nobel Peace Prize to be awarded to imprisoned U.S. whistleblower, Pvt. Bradley Manning. According to RootsAction co-founder Jeff Cohen, the response to the petition has been swift and substantial. More than 30,000 people signed on in a matter of days.

Manning was arrested nearly three years ago on charges that he provided a large number of classified documents to the anti-secrecy group WikiLeaks.

In a recent interview on Pacifica's "Flashpoints," Cohen spoke with Dennis J. Bernstein about why RootsAction launched the petition drive as well as the failure of the mainstream press to report the story in an honest and meaningful way. Cohen is also the founding director of the Parks Center for Independent Media at Ithaca College.

DB: Why the Nobel Prize? What is relevant? Why does it connect up for you?

JC: Well, the prize as it was originally Intended by Alfred Nobel's will is supposed to go to the person who shall have done the most or the best work for fraternity between nations, the abolition or reduction in standing armies. Bradley Manning has been an unbelievable whistleblower for the cause of peace.

He was an Army private; he saw all these documents that showed war crimes, [such as] the U.S. had an official order not to intervene when allies in Iraq were torturing people. The civilian [death] toll is documented, you know, the government has always told us they are not keeping track of civilians. But Bradley Manning released documents that show they are. We saw the videotape of Apache helicopter personnel almost seeming to enjoy the fact that people were being killed on the ground in Iraq. And it turned out to be civilians and at least one or two Reuter's journalists. So there's all this evidence of war crimes, of official misbehavior by both the U.S. Defense Department and the U.S. State Department.

And in the cause of peace, as originally intended by Alfred Nobel, there's a lot

of worthy candidates this year, but it hard to see anyone being more worthy than the guy who might be spending the rest of his life in prison for educating not only the U.S. public but the world about some of the atrocities that are happening in the so-called U.S. War on Terror.

DB: Now, the corporate press would have to accept some responsibility for the lack of knowledge and understanding of what Bradley Manning was doing. I remember very well how the corporate press participated in the release of certain WikiLeaks documents. Everybody went and studied and published. But all of a sudden, that operation, WikiLeaks and anything associated with it became persona non grata. You want to talk about the role the corporate media plays in misinforming the public on something like Bradley Manning and what that means?

JC: Well, there's no doubt that the U.S. mainstream media turned against WikiLeaks; did not defend WikiLeaks. You know, WikiLeaks is a publisher of these documents that they received from Bradley Manning, and from so many other whistleblowers inside governments or corporate world. And I think it reflects in the U.S. mainstream media how far we've declined since the Pentagon Papers. You know, in the Pentagon Papers in 1971, you had newspapers from the New York Times to the Washington Post to the Boston Globe basically engaging in civil disobedience against the Nixon administration.

As soon as one newspaper was stopped from publishing the Pentagon Papers, another newspaper started publishing. And these were highly classified documents from Daniel Ellsberg about the Vietnam War. Much higher classification than what Bradley Manning released.

So jump forward from 1971 to today and you find a U.S. mainstream media that seems uninterested in whistleblowers, unwilling to come to the defense of whistleblowers, and a media that seems to discuss how will the documents that Bradley Manning or WikiLeaks is releasing, how are these documents going to affect U.S. policy? It's more like how are the documents going to undermine the Establishment. than what a journalist should ask, which is "How did these documents shed light on what the government is doing in the name of the American people, that the American people need to know about?"

These documents showed that the U.S. State Department was aligned with the corporate interests in Haiti trying to stop a minimum wage in the poorest country in our hemisphere. That's news. That when there was a military coup in Honduras the U.S. State Department, the embassy there knew immediately this was an open and shut case. This is an illegal military coup d'etat against a democratic president. But that's not what they were saying out of Washington.

So, these are huge stories, they are being covered as big stories across the

globe, but as you said Dennis, in our mainstream media it's sort of a ho-hum attitude and with this young man, Bradley Manning, who is now 25 years old, looking at perhaps his life in prison. In fact, quite likely his life in prison, that's why I think, that people who know the true story of Bradley Manning have rushed to RootsAction.org. The signatures are exploding today.

Norman Solomon wrote a whole column with just comments from Americans who are getting the news about why Bradley Manning does deserve a peace prize, and the peace prize was originally intended to give some cash so these people who received the peace prize could continue working for peace. Well, Bradley Manning has a major, major law bill, legal defense bill. He needs help. And it's a long shot but if the Nobel committee ever gave a peace prize to Bradley Manning it would really say something to the U.S. war machine about where international opinion is moving on the so-called War on Terror.

DB: One of my favorite reporters, Jeff, is Amira Haas. She works for Ha'aretz and she reports from the West Bank, and she says the job of the media is to monitor the centers of power, whether they be in the government, in corporations, wherever it happens. But it does seem now that instead,... the media has become one of the centers of power, one of the buddy buddies, and they do appear to believe that their job is more as patriots than as reporters.

JC: There's no doubt, the higher you go up in the mainstream media, and I used to work in mainstream television, the more these people see themselves as part of the establishment. Editors of Newsweek have admitted, "We are part of the Establishment, that's how we see things. We don't want the boat rocked." And there's no doubt that as the media have become bigger and more corporate, there's less willingness to go out on a limb and question something that the two parties are doing together. That's the essence of the problem.

When the two parties agree on a military adventure like invading Iraq or trying to get some sort of confrontation going today with Iran, when the two parties are in alliance as they usually are on foreign policy – there's obviously a lot of fighting about domestic policy, but on foreign policy there's often a lot of alliance between the two parties – well, the mainstream media, the corporate media, basically is acting as parts of the Establishment, don't see an issue.

And anyone who does is obviously liberally biased or progressively biased. If you think there's a problem here with the thrust of the War on Terror, well you must be one of those people, those Pacifica-Bradley-Manning-WikiLeaks-type people. But we in the Establishment know that since the two parties aren't in an active fight about U.S. foreign policy, there's not a real story here.

DB: You know, Jeff, I used to do a lot of reporting, as you know, for the print

press, and as an investigative reporter working for some of the mainstream newspapers who actually at that time had some decent editors. I remember I worked for Les Payne at Newsday who got a Pulitzer prize for reporting on South Africa, there were some great people. And one of the things that meant a great deal to a journalist doing these hard stories was to get a document, because just an eyewitness' account could be questioned but if you have the document.

For instance, we were covering the first Gulf War. And we got a document that said that the public information part of the military was going to lie about the obvious exposure that vets would be exposed to chemistry during the first Gulf War because the U.S. knew it, because they sold the material to Iraq. We love those documents because you couldn't question. Yet, here [regarding Manning], the media laugh at the documents. It's almost as if they've been hoodwinked by giving a document that reveals a crucial story that the people need to know about.

JC: Yeah, I think you've touched on it. Because the journalists used to salivate over documentation and the people in power can't deny it's true. You've got the document, you've got someone in power talking to someone else in power. But instead of just wanting to grab onto these documents, there's been a sense in the mainstream media, "Oh, okay, this is problematic."

I think what the Bradley Manning, WikiLeaks documents show is the U.S. mainstream media have been asleep at the wheel the last decade. That's the point. If you've been in mainstream media, whether National Public Radio or whatever, to grab onto these documents now might make people question "Well, why weren't you on the story before?" I mean these documents show the U.S. leaning on democratic governments in Europe to prevent them from prosecuting CIA officials, CIA agents that engaged in kidnap and abetted torture. That's pretty serious.

These are huge stories in the German mainstream media, the Spanish mainstream media, the British mainstream media but these are largely stories about the U.S. war effort, the so-called War on Terror and they just haven't been that big a story in the country where the public really needs to know what is being done in our name.

DB: Now, there's certainly something else at play here in terms of corporate reporting because if on the one hand you have all these independent sort of internet-related journalists now putting out a story based on significant information the corporate press has a lot to lose, including their credibility, what's left of it, if here you've got this small outlet putting out crucial information. So the corporate press has to walk all over it. They have to pooh-pooh it. They have to make believe that these folks that are working in smaller

organizations are crazy and shouldn't be believed. Or they look really bad.

JC: There's no doubt about that. That a group like WikiLeaks – and I hope there will be many successors to WikiLeaks – has sort of abrogated, diminished the gate-keeping function of the mainstream media. And that's another resentment. A lot of small outfits have gone to town, and thank God for WikiLeaks as the original releaser, have gone to town on these documents.

And I think there's a sense, in the mainstream media, that they are losing their power; losing their ability to control what gets out to the public and what doesn't. And I just feel that you look at the evolution from Daniel Ellsberg in 1971 to Bradley Manning today and the different way that the New York Times and Washington Post oriented toward Ellsberg and the way they orient to Bradley Manning today, who was so mistreated in custody. It's really night and day.

And the good news, though, Dennis as you pointed out – and I remember your investigative reporting over the years, and when you were doing articles sometimes in Newsday actually – the real good news is that independent media are stronger than ever. As long as the Internet remains free and as long as there's community radio. Stories are getting out.

I think in the last ten years the corporate mainstream media has lost some of its clout. They've certainly lost credibility. The mainstream media was largely wrong about the invasion of Iraq, factually. It wasn't an ideological thing. They got the facts wrong. They missed the story of the financial meltdown on Wall Street. And there's a lot of people who don't trust the mainstream media anymore, that's a good thing.

And there's a lot of those people looking for independent outlets, alternative to the mainstream media. And that's a great thing. And as long as the Internet remains free, and that's a big if. And as long as community radio continues to exist and that depends on peoples' donations. Then independent media will continue to grow. And that's one of the few bright spots in our society, the growth of independent media and the decline of corporate mainstream media.

DB: Final question now, and it has to do with people often think that community media is National Public Radio. Big story in the news today is that Talk of the Nation with Neal Conan, a former Pacifica person who was a good reporter in New York, is being discontinued. I wasn't crazy about the show, but people are moaning because this is an in-depth program, in an in-depth network, and we were getting information where we wouldn't get anywhere else. But you wouldn't agree with that, would you?

JC: No. I've not been a big fan of National Public Radio's national

programs. They sometimes have some great local shows. But just think about the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, we were just referring to. Who was the NPR reporter that distinguished him or herself during that period? There weren't any.

DB: No, they were all quoting Judith Miller.

JC: Yeah. Right. The New York Times and NPR have always enjoyed a special relationship. Who was the [NPR] reporter who distinguished him or herself on Wall Street meltdown, and the housing crisis? They missed it. And I think NPR is very much, at the national news level, intimidated by right-wing forces and corporate forces. It's become like bland corporate centrist reporting. And there's very little investigative reporting because the right wing in Congress is always threatening to cut off their funds.

DB: And a lot of corporate sponsorship.

JC: Oh, no doubt...

DB: One of the most well-endowed stations here in the Bay area, KQED, does Chevron commercials.

JC: No doubt. No doubt. Again, it's a sad thing because in other countries the mainstream media is more vibrant because they have genuine public, insulated funding to genuine public broadcasting. And public broadcasting sets a tone for the rest of the commercial, more commercial, and more corporate media. We've never had that. We've always had weak public TV and public radio. The big media corporations have never allowed it to be genuinely public, they've always hemmed it in.

The National Association of Broadcasters has always been the main foe of public broadcasting. It has a huge audience. There's millions and millions of people. The news coverage, and I listen to it every single day, is so bland. If you place yourself between the two parties scrupulously and you believe you are on the 50-yard line, then you are not paying attention. If you put yourself between the elites of the Democratic and Republican parties, you may be somewhere between the 10- and 20-yard lines. But if you pretend that's mid-field, which is what gets done on NPR, it's not really solid reporting.

Solid reporting has to somehow, sometimes take itself out of Establishment group think and go outside of what the two major or three major political parties are in a society. And our public radio news, it seems to be imbedded inside the elites of the two-party system and rarely wanders outside of that. That's not helpful to the public.

DB: Alright, Jeff Cohen, how can people get more information about RootsAction and about what RootsAction is doing in the context of Bradley Manning and the Nobel prize.

JC: If people go to the home page which is simply www.RootsAction.org, you'll see it at the top of the page. You can sign that petition, the most important thing is send it to your friends. Forward that thing around. And we're having explosive growth. And feel free to add your comments, wonderful, and very warm comments from people that know the Bradley Manning story, respect the bravery. They've been making comments and those comments will also be delivered to the Nobel Peace Committee. We have weeks to do this, but I encourage people to start building the numbers today.

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