

# Assange to Extradition Court: 'I Won't Surrender to the US for Doing Journalism'

The *WikiLeaks* founder appeared via video link in Westminster Magistrates Court for the first hearing in what could be a lengthy process in the US request for extradition.

**By Joe Lauria**

*Special to Consortium News*

**J**ulian Assange had his first day in court on Thursday in his fight against extradition to the United States in an historic press freedom case that could have a profound impact on the future of journalism.

Dressed in jeans, a dark jacket and a T-shirt, Assange appeared on a video screen inside a cramped courtroom in Westminster Magistrates Court in London. "I won't surrender to the U.S. for doing journalism that has won many awards and protected lives," Assange told the court, according to a [tweet](#) from a USA Today correspondent.

Assange was arrested on April 11 after Ecuador lifted his political asylum at its embassy in London where Assange had lived since June 2012. On that day the U.S. unsealed an indictment against the publisher for conspiring with *WikiLeaks'* source Chelsea Manning to crack a password needed to hide Manning's identity. Protecting a source is a routine part of investigative journalism.

**Watch the replay of a Special Extradition Vigil for Assange webcast Thursday on *Consortium***

## **News .**

(Story continues below video)

The U.S. also filed a request that day to the British government to extradite Assange to face the charges, which carry a maximum sentence of five years in prison. Thursday was Assange's first appearance in the extradition case before Judge Michael Snow.

A large group of Assange supporters gathered outside the courthouse as well as inside Court Three, where many sat on the floor for the 10-minute hearing, the *Daily Express* in London reported. Many reporters and supporters were unable to gain entry after the hearing was moved to the smaller courtroom from Court One.

A further procedural hearing was scheduled for May 30, and a substantive court date was set for June 12. On that day the U.S. faces a deadline to reveal any further charges against Assange for which the British courts must base their extradition decision. The court was told resolution of the case was still months away, the *Express* reported.

The U.S. is weighing charging Assange under the 1917 Espionage Act for unauthorized possession and dissemination of classified material. It would be the first time the Act would be used to prosecute a journalist for receiving and publishing secret information. "It is not just a man who stands in jeopardy, but the future of the free press," NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden said in a message to a pro-Assange rally in Berlin on Wednesday.

Assange is serving an 11-month sentence for skipping bail

imposed on him on Tuesday connected to a Swedish investigation of sexual abuse allegations that was dropped in 2017. “Julian Assange’s sentence is as shocking as it is vindictive,” *WikiLeaks* tweeted. “We have grave concerns as to whether he will receive a fair extradition hearing in the UK.”

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## First-Hand Account of Protecting the Venezuelan Embassy in Washington

Kevin Zeese, co-founder of the Venezuelan Embassy Protection Collective, described the situation inside the embassy on Wednesday.

### ‘Focused on Sovereignty and Peace’

By [Dennis J. Bernstein](#)

*Special to Consortium News*



On May 1, I conducted this phone interview with Kevin Zeese, co-director of Popular Resistance, and co-founder of the [Venezuelan Embassy Protection Collective](#), about the occupation of the embassy.

**Dennis Bernstein:** Where exactly are you now Kevin Zeese?

**Kevin Zeese:** I’m talking to you from the Venezuelan embassy

in Washington, D.C., as part of the Embassy Protection Collective, a group of organizations and individuals who are standing in solidarity with the Venezuelan people to protect their embassy from takeover by the Trump administration and the state government they have picked for Venezuela, which just had a failed coup yesterday. I am co-director of Popular Resistance.org, which grew out of the Occupy movement and is a daily movement and organizing site which carries on the issues which were raised by the Occupy movement. We are one of the initiators of this collective at the embassy, along with Code Pink, the Answer Coalition, Black Alliance for Peace, and other organizations.

**Dennis Bernstein:** Tell us exactly what you are doing there in the embassy and what people in Washington, D.C., are trying to do in the context of what appears to be a U.S.-supported coup and advanced destabilization.

**Kevin Zeese:** We have upwards of 50 people living here every night. We began on April 10 and it is ongoing. We work here, we sleep here, we cook here. This has become our home and we see ourselves as tenants of the Venezuelan government. We live here with the permission of the elected Venezuelan government. There was no unlawful entry, there is no trespass. We see ourselves as interim protectors because the U.S. embassy in Caracas is vacant and the U.S. wants to have Switzerland serve as a protectorate for that embassy. Venezuela is negotiating with other countries to be a protectorate for this embassy. We are hoping that the two countries will mutually agree to having protectorates and that way both embassies will remain sovereign. Once that is negotiated, we hope that will begin an ongoing

dialogue that can resolve a lot of the disputes between the U.S. and Venezuela.

I know that Venezuela wants to have a good relationship with the United States and does not see the United States as an enemy. They want peace, but they will protect their sovereignty and independence and they are prepared to do so with their military as well as their civilian militia. We hope to avoid such a conflict and use this embassy dispute as a way to open up diplomatic relations and end the economic attack as well as the threats of military force.



**Dennis Bernstein:** What confirms this to be a coup, an overthrow of the government there?

**Kevin Zeese:** There is no question that this is a coup. This was discussed by the OAS [Organization of American States] in January and February by the U.S. and its allies. They picked [National Assembly President Juan] Guaidó to be their puppet president, someone who had never run for presidency and had come from the second smallest state with 24 percent of the vote, which was enough to get into the national legislature. By appointing himself interim president he violated the Venezuelan constitution in a multitude of ways.

The coup tried yesterday to conduct a takeover of the country and failed miserably. Guaidó – along with the leader of the opposition, Leopoldo Lopez, who has been convicted of inciting violence that killed more than 140 people – fled and are hiding in the Spanish embassy. So our understanding of the reality of the coup is not just that it was discussed at the OAS but also that the night before the coup [Vice President] Michael Pence called Guaidó and said that he has the full support of the U.S. government. As soon as he was self-appointed, Trump called him and recognized him and got the right-wing Lima Group countries to go along with that as well as many Western European countries. One hundred and fifty nations have not recognized Guaidó, neither has the United Nations. The OAS, which has always been under the thumb of the United States, had to change its rules because they could not get the two-thirds vote required to recognize Guaidó, and then they barely got the majority. That has resulted in the OAS ambassadors from Venezuela leaving. The Caracas embassy has been used as a place for organizing opposition for many years. They worked very hard to undermine the 2018 reelection of President [Nicolás] Maduro. There were more than 150 election observers from around the world and they unanimously found that the election met international standards and was free of fraud.

**Dennis Bernstein:** Meanwhile we have the Trump administration trying to install part of the coup leadership that apparently failed in a coup attempt yesterday. It was an amazing day for U.S. intelligence when they were talking about this plane, all the leaders agreed to go and something had to be done. It was right out of the textbook of CIA destabilization and overthrow. It is a throwback but is

extremely disturbing. What are those who support the government saying to you inside the embassy? Are they willing to fight all the way?

**Kevin Zeese:** If you go to our website, you can read the declaration of our collective, which lays out how Maduro was reelected legitimately, how the Vienna Convention requires the U.S. government to protect the embassy and not turn it over to a fake government, and how Guide's election violated the Venezuelan constitution.

Of course, there are many people from Venezuela here who take a very different position. Maduro's supporters are for the most part in Venezuela, which is why they keep winning elections and defeating these coups. The people who fled Venezuela, the business people and government people from the pre-Chavez era, are forming a violent mob outside the embassy. Yesterday they were abusing us with sound cannons and racist slurs. Today an opposition person snuck into the basement, got to the third floor and locked himself in a room and we had to negotiate with the secret service to remove him. Unfortunately, the secret service removed the police barriers and told us we were on our own. So, we now feel that we are under siege. But people are confident. We know we are acting lawfully, that we are on the right side of history. We are standing against a U.S. coup, a U.S. military threat, and with the Venezuelan people.

**Dennis Bernstein:** [President Donald] Trump, [National Security Advisor John] Bolton and others at the top are calling for a coup. They said they were ready to fly to

Havana but, according to Bolton, that plan broke down at the last minute, they chickened out.

**Kevin Zeese:** John Bolton is a known liar. He was convicted of lying to Congress. He is a known war criminal who has been involved in genocide in Central America during the Iran/Contra era. He was pardoned by [President] George H. W. Bush. Everything he is saying about Venezuela is a lie. I am sure that Maduro never planned to leave the country. Bolton made another false statement about us at the Atlantic Council when he said that we were here in violation of the law. He said that we have been asked to leave, which is not true. I have absolutely no doubt that there was never any plan by the Venezuelan government to leave the country. I was in Venezuela a few weeks ago and we actually ended up meeting with President Maduro after American Airlines cancelled all flights out of the country on the false claim that there was widespread civil unrest, when there was none at all. We went out and filmed the streets to show that there was no unrest. But that day President Maduro asked to meet with us. We were there for 90 minutes and he talked about how he was willing to put his life on the line to protect Venezuela's independence.

**Dennis Bernstein:** Would you say a little bit more about the Embassy Protection Collective?

**Kevin Zeese:** We are a collection of organizations and individuals. Our declaration has been signed by about 1,500 people and organizations. You can support us through [Popular Resistance](#) or through [Code Pink](#) or the [Black Alliance for Peace](#).



**Dennis Bernstein:** So just to be clear, you are saying that you and the folks in this collective feel under siege now. The police have told you they would not protect you until after you are hurt or wounded. There are a series of anti-government protests supported by the U.S. government outside the embassy.

**Kevin Zeese:** We have agreed to withdraw inside the embassy while these rallies go on.

**Dennis Bernstein:** By the way, what did you talk about all night? I'm sure you didn't sleep all that well.

**Kevin Zeese:** We discussed the day's events and how we responded. It was a very tense situation. We reviewed what we had done and what we could do better. We discussed what was expected the coming day. And we were able to get online through social media so that more people can get involved and support our actions.

**Dennis J. Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of "[Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom.](#)" You can access the audio archives at [www.flashpoints.net](http://www.flashpoints.net). You can get in touch with him at [dbernstein@igc.org](mailto:dbernstein@igc.org).**

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## The Tragedy of Venezuela is the Tragedy of the US

Trump doesn't give a farthing about Venezuela and is letting his underlings let slip the dogs of war in so long as it secures Florida's electoral votes for Trump 2020, says

Lawrence Wilkerson.

**By Lawrence Wilkerson**

*Anti-War.com*



**K**nowing what I know about my own administration's attempt to unseat Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez in 2002, I was not surprised when the effort was recently renewed by the Trump Administration, particularly when such arch-defenders of Latin American rights as Elliott Abrams, Marco Rubio, and Rick Scott – not to mention John Bolton – began to appear on the White House payroll.

Knowing as well that Trump did not give a farthing for what happened in Venezuela but was concentrated on what he is always focused on, domestic politics, I knew these underlings would be allowed to cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war in Venezuela so long as doing it secured Florida's electoral votes for Trump in 2020.

What I did not know – but looking back to 2002, should have – is how utterly incompetent the CIA would be in pulling off the “soft coup d’etat” that its leaders promised Trump. The events of the past 48 hours have demonstrated that incompetence markedly, as well as the real motivations of Trump's lackeys on Venezuela, from the shrimp-lusting-after-Cuba Marco Rubio to the bombastic former governor of Florida Rick Scott, to the pardoned criminal Abrams, to the supine and totally incompetent Juan Guaido and his backer, Leopoldo Lopez in Caracas. What a crew the GOP can muster!

And they just might have let slip the dogs of war.

And they let them slip into a potentially first-class disaster – just like Somalia in 1992, Iraq in 2003, Libya in 2011, Syria in 2012, Afghanistan today and yesterday, and on and on.

I know the Venezuelan military; I've trained some of them. They are not your usual "I want to shower after meeting them" crowd, as I would describe for instance the Honduran military. Instead, they are reasonably professional, reasonably aware of Venezuela's historical commitment to democracy, and reasonably competent at their day jobs. They are proud of the fact that they are not Panama, i.e., a country into which the U.S. can send paratroopers overnight, kill several thousands, grab a narco-trafficker, and leave.

The majority of them, if the U.S. military arrives in Venezuela, will take to the hills – very formidable hills, with jungle-like backdrops – and they will harass, kill, take prisoner from time to time, and generally hold out forever or until the "gringos" leave. We might remember how the North Vietnamese and the Taliban accomplished this; well, so will the Venezuelans.

Were I looking down from Mars and with no dog in this fight, I might say that it would be suitable comeuppance for the sheer stupidity of the Trump gang. One might shout loudly as the quagmire develops, "Get elected now, Mr. Reality-TV man!"

But the bloodshed in Venezuela – military and civilian – and the dead and wounded U.S. Marines and soldiers will afford this old soldier no comfort at all. Instead such an outcome will make me regret even more profoundly our Founding

Fathers' grievous error in creating the Electoral College because they feared the *demos* in democracy.

Keep going, Trumpster. You'll founder this ship of state soon enough.

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**Larry Wilkerson is a retired colonel, U.S. Army (ret.), and former Chief of Staff for Secretary of State Colin Powell.**

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