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We continue our coverage of the 20th anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq by looking at the imprisonment of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, who has been jailed for exposing U.S. war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan. One video released by WikiLeaks showed a U.S. helicopter gunship in Baghdad slaughtering a dozen civilians, including a Reuters journalist. Assange has been held in London's Belmarsh prison since 2019 as he fights the U.S. campaign to extradite him to face espionage charges. If convicted, the publisher faces as much as 175 years behind bars. His legal fight is documented in the new film *Ithaka* that centers on Assange's father John Shipton, who has been crisscrossing the globe to raise awareness of the case and the danger it poses to press freedoms. We speak with Shipton, as well as filmmaker Gabriel Shipton, Julian Assange's brother and a producer of the documentary.

AMY GOODMAN: This is *Democracy Now!*, [democracynow.org](#), *The War and Peace Report*. I'm Amy Goodman, as we continue our coverage of the 20th anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq by looking at the imprisonment of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, who's been jailed for exposing U.S. war crimes in Iraq, Afghanistan and beyond. Julian has spent nearly four years locked up in the U.K.'s notorious Belmarsh prison, often called "Britain's Guantánamo." He's been held there as the U.S. government seeks his extradition to face espionage and other charges. If extradited and convicted in the U.S., Julian faces 175 years in a maximum-security prison.

In 2010, WikiLeaks gained international attention after publishing a trove of classified documents leaked by former U.S. Army soldier Chelsea Manning. Included were numerous accounts of war crimes in Iraq. One video released by WikiLeaks showed a U.S. helicopter gunship in Baghdad slaughtering a dozen civilians, including two Reuters staff — Reuters journalist, the up-and-coming photographer, videographer, 22-year-old Namir Noor-Eldeen, and his driver, Saeed Chmagh, father of four. WikiLeaks titled the video "Collateral Murder." This is an excerpt.

U.S. SOLDIER 1: Let me know when you've got them.

U.S. SOLDIER 2: Let's shoot. Light 'em all up.

U.S. SOLDIER 3: Come on, fire!

U.S. SOLDIER 2: Keep shootin'. Keep shootin'. Keep shootin'. Keep shootin'.

U.S. SOLDIER 4: Hotel, Bushmaster two-six, Bushmaster two-six, we need to move, time now!

U.S. SOLDIER 2: All right, we just engaged all eight individuals.

AMY GOODMAN: Julian Assange [appeared](#) on *Democracy Now!* in April 2010, a day after WikiLeaks published the "Collateral Murder" video.

JULIAN ASSANGE: When we first got it, we were told that it was important and that it showed the killing of journalists, but we didn't have any other context, and we spent quite some months, after breaking the decryption, looking closely into this. And the more we looked, the more disturbing it became. This is a sequence which has a lot of detail and, I think, in some ways, covers most of the bad aspects of the aerial war in Iraq and what we must be able to infer is going on in Afghanistan. ...

These are not bad apples. This is standard practice. You can hear it from the tones of the voices of the pilots that this is in fact another day at the office. These pilots have evidently and gunners have evidently become so corrupted, morally corrupted, by the war that they are looking for excuses to kill.

AMY GOODMAN: So, that's Julian Assange sitting in a Washington, D.C., studio right after he released the, what they call, "Collateral Murder" video. I later [interviewed](#) Julian in 2014 about WikiLeaks releasing the Iraq War Logs. At the time, he was living inside the Ecuadorian Embassy, where he had sought political asylum. We sat together there.

JULIAN ASSANGE: With the Iraq War Logs, which were published in October 2010, which in some ways has been one of our best analytical works, we worked together with not just other media organizations, but a number of statistical organizations to work out what the kill count was for Iraq, and combining with other figures, and we ended up with more than 100,000 civilian casualties — in fact, 15,000 new, completely undocumented civilian kills — and documenting U.S. involvement and approval of Iraqi torture centers within the police and many killings of civilians at checkpoints and some political issues and so on. And that produced a number of inquiries and has fed into cases that have been taken by Iraqis, and that has now ended up with an ICC filing, International Criminal Court filing, against the British military.

AMY GOODMAN: So, that was one of several interviews I did with Julian Assange inside the Ecuadorian Embassy in London when we traveled to interview him there. That was in 2014.

Well, in a moment, we'll be joined by Julian's father, John Shipton, and his brother, Gabriel Shipton. They're here in the U.S. for the opening of a new documentary about John Shipton's struggle to free his son. It's titled *Ithaka*. This is the film's trailer.

ASSANGE SUPPORTER: Julian Assange is the hero of our time.

JOE ROGAN: He was the darling of the left. All of a sudden, he's a puppet of Russia.

JOHN SHIPTON: My name is John Shipton. I'm Julian Assange's father.

MAX FOSTER: WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange has been arrested.

SAVANNAH GUTHRIE: One of the most notorious and controversial figures in custody.

REPORTER: Assange will remain behind bars until that extradition hearing, which has been set down for the end of February.

STELLA ASSANGE: I urge the Department of Justice to drop the charges.

UNIDENTIFIED: The maximum jail sentence of 175 years.

CRAIG MURRAY: Because he published the truth.

REPORTER: How does it feel to be the father of such a controversial figure? I mean, he's known around the world.

INTERVIEWER: Was that him on the phone before?

JOHN SHIPTON: Yeah, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: What are you talking about on a kind of regular basis?

DANIEL ELLSBERG: If Julian is extradited to the United States to face these charges, he will be the first, but not the last.

INTERVIEWER: What are your worst fears?

JOHN SHIPTON: That he just collapses under the strain.

It looks as though what journalists do for a living is seen to be a criminal act.

SUPPORTER: Mr. Shipton, keep it up, man.

JOHN SHIPTON: Thank you.

SUPPORTER: I wish I had your energy. I really do.

JOHN SHIPTON: I'm done. I'm done. I'm done.

REPORTER: Mr. Shipton, just —

JOHN SHIPTON: I'm done.

Going on [bleep] in America?

PROTESTERS: Free Julian Assange!

REPORTER: Why do you think there's not a great public love and support?

AI WEIWEI: This is really, truly a good question.

JOHN SHIPTON: What's at stake? If he goes down, so will journalism.

AMY GOODMAN: That was the trailer of the new film *Ithaka*, produced by Julian Assange's brother, the filmmaker Gabriel Shipton, who joins us in Washington, D.C., along with their father, John Shipton.

We welcome you both to *Democracy Now!* Gabriel, let's begin with you. Talk about just the name of this film, *Ithaka*.

GABRIEL SHIPTON: Well, it's named after a poem by C. P. Cavafy, and it's a poem that John would listen to while we are traveling around the world advocating for Julian. And it's sort of a really grounding, inspiring poem that talks about — talks about the journey, and not the destination. And really, we chose the title because it's really about, you know, when you're fighting for a cause bigger than yourself or for an unachievable or seemingly unachievable goal, you have to live every day or just take — put one foot in front of the other. And that's what, really, *Ithaka* is about. It's about the friends you make along the way, the lessons you learn, the things you see that keep you going every day in this fight to free Julian Assange.

AMY GOODMAN: And, Gabriel, you were a filmmaker already, and then this hits your family. Can you give us the latest, what this hitting your family is? What has happened to Julian and the latest state of affairs? He's been now at the Belmarsh prison for four years?

GABRIEL SHIPTON: That's right. So, it's coming — April 11th will be the four years in Belmarsh maximum-security prison. He has one final appeal, application to appeal, in with the High Court in the U.K. He actually — all the papers in it and all the documents were submitted five months ago, and the High Court is still deliberating on whether to hear this appeal or not. So this is just further evidence that it's this thin veil, this thin legal veil, that is hanging in front of Julian's persecution.

He remains in a maximum-security prison. He is not convicted of any crime. He's held there solely at the request of the U.S. DOJ. The prison has 800 inmates, 20% of whom are convicted murderers. Julian shares a cell block with these people. He spends most of his days isolated in his cell. It really is a dire situation for Julian. And I really just have to compel people that, you know, we have to act to free him now.

AMY GOODMAN: I want to turn to a clip from *Ithaka* where our guest John Shipton, Julian's dad, talks about visiting him at the Belmarsh prison for the first time.

INTERVIEWER 1: Can we talk about the day Julian asked you to help? Can you talk me through that?

JOHN SHIPTON: I don't really remember. What I remember is that he got arrested, and so I came here and went and saw him in the — went and saw Julian in the jail. Anyway, he was in a very bad way.

INTERVIEWER 2: OK, yeah, just tell me: How was Julian Assange?

JOHN SHIPTON: Well, he's lost about 10 kilos' weight. And he's psychologically under a lot of stress and pressure. The visiting hours are very, very precious. Sorry, I'm getting upset.

INTERVIEWER 2: This is your first visit?

JOHN SHIPTON: Yes, this is my first visit, yes.

INTERVIEWER 3: Were you able to give him a hug?

JOHN SHIPTON: Yes, yes. That — yeah, yeah.

INTERVIEWER 3: How was it? Was that a moving —

JOHN SHIPTON: It was pretty moving, as you would expect. Pretty tough for him. I guess that was it.

INTERVIEWER 3: Thank you.

JOHN SHIPTON: Thank you.

INTERVIEWER 2: Thank you very much. Thank you.

UNIDENTIFIED: Thank you.

JOHN SHIPTON: So, I said, "I'll be back. I won't stop coming until you can come home."

AMY GOODMAN: So, that's John Shipton just outside of Belmarsh after seeing Julian inside for the first time. John Shipton, joining us from Washington, D.C., just before he heads up here to New York with Gabriel for the film's showings in various theaters around the U.S. We'll be there tonight. I'll be doing the Q&A with John and Gabriel. John, talk about that moment seeing your son, what this means to you, and having a film about your decision to travel the world to garner support for Julian Assange.

JOHN SHIPTON: Good morning.

Well, you know, it's a bit heartrending. When I went in and saw Julian, he was a bit, you know, wobbly. He had just — was still in what the prisoners call the hell wing, which the prison governor calls the health wing. It's a part within the prison where the prison isolates those it

considers ill. Julian was considered so depressed that he had to be watched 24 hours a day to prevent any self-harm. And he had lost a lot of weight.

Usually, you know, Julian is a very strong-minded man. He never asks me for anything. But he, at that stage, just asked: Could I come and give a hand for — could I come and work at getting him free from the circumstances? And that was about three-and-a-half years ago. So, that's the circumstances. Actually, it will be four years in April.

Since then, we've built a worldwide movement. Every single parliament in the Western theater has a cross-party Assange group. The United Nations have involved themselves. The Council of Europe have involved themselves. And every single major civic organization in the United States — ACLU, Asylum, Human Rights Watch — 27 of them in all, have involved themselves. And the five great newspaper outlets, that partnered with Julian in the release of the Iraq War files, the cables and the Afghanistan War files, they have written a letter to Merrick Garland asking that the charges be dropped. Of course, the publishers have written this letter, as Julian is a publisher. All publishers realize that this prosecution has brought a chill to the capacity to analyze policy and a capacity to print that analysis, so thereby to inform the public.

AMY GOODMAN: Newspapers that have called for his release, *New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *El País*, *Der Spiegel*.

. But I'd like to go back to a 2010 *Meet the Press* interview with then-Vice President Joe Biden. ABC host at the time David Gregory questioned Biden about Assange.

DAVID GREGORY: Should the United States do something to stop Mr. Assange?

VICE PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN: We're looking at that right now. The Justice Department is taking a look at that. And I'm not going to comment on that process.

DAVID GREGORY: Do you think he's a criminal?

VICE PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN: If he conspired to get these classified documents with a member of the U.S. military, that's fundamentally different than if somebody drops on your lap — "Here, David, you're a press person. Here is classified material."

DAVID GREGORY: Mitch McConnell says he's a high-tech terrorist. Others say this is akin to the Pentagon Papers. Where do you come down?

VICE PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN: I would argue that it's closer to being a high-tech terrorist.

AMY GOODMAN: "A high-tech terrorist," Gabriel Shipton. That's now-President Biden. He said that as vice president on NBC, *Meet the Press*. That seems to be a comment across the political spectrum, from Biden to the former director of the CIA, Mike Pompeo, who could be running for president. Your response, and what sense you're getting from inside the Biden administration right now on this extradition request?

GABRIEL SHIPTON: Well, this was, you know, an extradition prosecution that was pushed by, as you say, Mike Pompeo and the Trump administration. And now under the Biden administration, it continues on, so the Biden administration is owning this prosecution at the moment. And they're continuing and continuing pushing forward with it. The national security DOJ, you know, is fighting Julian's application to appeal. And so, we see that they're pushing forward with this prosecution.

What we are seeing, though, and what John was talking about, is this worldwide movement for freedom of expression that has grown up around the fight to free Julian. And that is now

coming into the Congress in the United States. Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib has a “dear colleagues” letter that’s coming from the Progressive Caucus. We know there are four other congresspeople signed on from the Progressive Caucus. So we’re really seeing some movement in Congress from the Democratic side, as well as Republicans, like Thomas Massie, who have been longtime supporters of Julian.

So, we are hopeful that this sort of pressure will help the Justice Department, help Merrick Garland, really have a look at this Trump-era prosecution that criminalizes what journalists should be doing every day, publishing without fear or favor. They need to have another look at it and really come to the conclusion that *The New York Times* has, that the ACLU has, that this is a threat to press freedom and the First Amendment.

AMY GOODMAN: And finally, John Shipton, you’re Julian’s dad. Do you, does he, in Belmarsh, hold out hope?

JOHN SHIPTON: Sorry, I missed the question.

AMY GOODMAN: Do you hold out hope for his freedom?

JOHN SHIPTON: Oh, yeah. Yes, most certainly. I use the word “faith,” you know, every second, every minute, devoted to continuing. It benefits, first of all, Julian; and secondly, our family; thirdly, all of those people who believe in the great artifact of the United States Constitution, the First Amendment, whereby we can freely read, freely comment, and, as a consequence of that, build an understanding of the government policy or the cultural or social movements. It’s just absolutely vital.

And it was first discovered or first announced by Goodale, who was the — first announced by Goodale as a global problem. Goodale was the attorney who fought on behalf of *The New York Times* back in the Pentagon Papers day.

Also, I would add that the support of Daniel Ellsberg has been, you know, stalwart over the last

14 years. And the last time we were here, he invited us into his house. And it's with considerable sadness that Gabriel and I received a note from Daniel the other day that he would be leaving us soon.

AMY GOODMAN: Meaning he's announced that he has pancreatic cancer, and doctors have said he has months to live. John Shipton, I want to thank you so much for being with us, father of Julian Assange. I also want to thank Gabriel, Gabriel Shipton, Julian's brother, who is the producer of the new documentary *Ithaka*, which was written and directed by Ben Lawrence. *Ithaka* will be

screening in New York

[tonight](#)

at the New Plaza Cinema on 67th Street in the Upper West Side, where I'll be doing a Q&A with John and Gabriel after the film. On Saturday, it'll be screening at the Cinema Arts Centre in Huntington, Long Island; on Sunday, at The Picture House in Bronxville; and on Monday, at the Alamo Drafthouse in New York City. You can go to democracynow.org for details.