

By Mark Mardell

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If you are out and about in Washington today, between the US state department and the White House you might see a group of half-naked people in chains. They are protesting about the treatment of Bradley Manning and promise "other creative visuals".

[Private Manning](#) is the soldier accused of being behind handing about a quarter of a million secret documents to [Wikileaks](#).

However creative they get, the protesters will hardly focus people's attention more than a retired air force colonel and government appointee. [PJ Crowley](#), Hillary Clinton's spokesman and the state department's on-camera briefer, has resigned after calling Pte Manning's treatment "ridiculous, counterproductive and stupid".

His comments to a small group at a top American university were first made public by my colleague [Philippa Thomas, in her blog](#). According to [Bradley Manning's lawyer](#) he's being kept in solitary confinement in a windowless cell for 23 hours a day. He's being treated like this, even before trial, because he is regarded as a risk to himself, although apparently few agree with this assessment. Last week the authorities at the

[Marine prison in Virginia](#) stripped him of his underpants at night, because he made a sarcastic joke that if he really wanted to harm himself he could hang himself with his boxer shorts. American officialdom has a problem with jokes at the best of times, regarding humour as a subversive activity, so it is easy to see that they would react this way, although they deny it was punitive.

PJ Crowley, on the other hand, often has a smile around his lips and has a dry sense of humour, but his actions over Pte Manning are deeply serious and I feel sure he knew what he was doing. [Various reports](#) suggest he was not a favourite of Mrs Clinton's and was heading towards the door anyway. His resignation statement is earnest, if a bit convoluted:

"The unauthorized disclosure of classified information is a serious crime under US law. My recent comments regarding the conditions of the pre-trial detention of Private First Class Bradley Manning were intended to highlight the broader, even strategic impact of discreet actions undertaken by national security agencies every day and their impact on our global standing and leadership. The exercise of power in today's challenging times and relentless media environment must be prudent and consistent with our laws and values."

Which I translate as: "We can't preach to the world about human rights and freedom if we carry on like this." It is a point President Barack Obama has often made in the past, but he seemed less than delighted when asked about Pte Manning last Friday. He said: "I have asked the Pentagon whether or not the procedures that have been taken in terms of his confinement are appropriate and are meeting our basic standards." Pentagon officials, he said, "assure me that they are. I can't go into details about some of their concerns, but some of this has to do with Private Manning's safety as well."

Embarrassing the president probably sealed PJ's fate. But he's made his point, even without the dramatic visuals.