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Former British Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, Pentagon Papers whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg, famed linguist and dissident Noam Chomsky and others gave testimony Friday at the Belmarsh Tribunal in Washington, D.C., calling on President Biden to drop charges against Julian Assange. The WikiLeaks founder has been languishing for close to four years in the harsh Belmarsh prison in London while appealing extradition to the United States. If convicted in the United States, Julian Assange could face up to 175 years in jail for violating the U.S. Espionage Act for publishing documents that exposed U.S. war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan. Friday's event was held at the National Press Club and co-chaired by Democracy Now! host Amy Goodman.

AMY GOODMAN: Former British Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, Pentagon Papers whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg and famed linguist and dissident Noam Chomsky joined others Friday calling on President Biden to drop charges against Julian Assange. The WikiLeaks founder has been languishing for close to four years in the harsh Belmarsh prison in London while appealing extradition to the United States. If he is extradited, tried and convicted, Julian Assange faces up to 175 years in jail for violating the U.S. Espionage Act for publishing documents that exposed U.S. war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan.

On Friday, Noam Chomsky, Daniel Ellsberg and Jeremy Corbyn all took part in the Belmarsh Tribunal held at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. The tribunal was organized by the Progressive International and the Wau Holland Foundation. I co-chaired the tribunal with the Croatian philosopher and activist Srećko Horvat.

Today we'll spend the hour airing excerpts of the Belmarsh Tribunal. We begin with Ben Wizner of the American Civil Liberties Union. He is the lead attorney for NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden.

BEN WIZNER: No government in any kind of system will voluntarily disclose its own crimes. For that, we need brave sources who have firsthand evidence, and we need a free press and brave publishers who are willing to bring this information to the people, to whom it belongs.

Now, in this case, the government characterizes that collaboration between a courageous source and a courageous publisher as a conspiracy. Of course it was a conspiracy. Good investigative journalism is always a conspiracy. It's a conspiracy to end the monopoly on information that governments control and to give people the seat at the table that they must have in order for us to be able to judge powerful people and hold them accountable. But this is the first time, as you've heard already today, under the century-long history of the Espionage Act that the government has charged this kind of collaboration as a criminal conspiracy. And this is vitally important.

Remember, without sources like Chelsea Manning, like Edward Snowden, without publishers like WikiLeaks and the partners that it worked with to bring this information forward, what would we have not have known? Just over the course of my career, we would not have known that prisoners were tortured and sexually humiliated at Abu Ghraib. We would not have known that the CIA set up an archipelago of dungeons where people were held incommunicado and subjected to barbaric treatment. We wouldn't have known that any innocent person ever died in a drone strike. We wouldn't have known that governments developed and deployed systems of mass surveillance without the consent or knowledge of the public. These are all things that governments classified at the absolute highest level of secrecy. And yet, can anyone really say that the public in a democracy doesn't have a right to know or a need to know any of the things that I have just said?

If this prosecution goes forward and ends in conviction, it will be a very dark day for press freedom in the United States. The prosecution has already had a chilling effect in newsrooms around the country. The lawyers for publications are already assessing the risks of publishing certain information in a way that they never had before.

But let's not just focus on the threat to press freedom in the United States, because this is an attack on press freedom globally. And that's because the United States is advancing what I think is really the extraordinary claim that it can impose U.S. criminal secrecy laws on a foreign publisher who is publishing outside the United States. Let's think about that for a second. Let's linger on that for a second. This is opening an incredible Pandora's box. Every country has secrecy laws. Some countries have very draconian secrecy laws. If those countries try to extradite *New York Times* reporters and publishers to those countries for publishing their secrets, we would cry foul, and rightly so. Does this administration want to be the first to

establish the global precedent that countries can demand the extradition of foreign reporters and publishers for violating their own laws? I truly hope not.

SREČKO HORVAT: It is my great pleasure to announce the next speaker, Jeffrey Sterling, who is an American lawyer and former CIA employee, who was arrested, charged and convicted of violating the Espionage Act. Please, Jeffrey, join the stage.

JEFFREY STERLING: I spent two-and-a-half years in prison after being wrongfully convicted — on no evidence — of violating the Espionage Act. It was a travesty of a trial. And that sentence was held up as a shining example of the reasonableness and fairness that Julian Assange will face being tried here for violating that same Espionage Act. I remain sickened to this day that my persecution was held up as the benchmark of what Julian Assange is going to face in trial here.

Of course, the benchmarks they did not talk about include my experience fighting against the Espionage Act, a biased criminal justice system and the realities of being behind bars here in the United States. I can tell you that any claims of fair or humane treatment in store for Julian Assange here within our criminal justice system and prisons were outright lies.

But I would like to focus on the law that Julian Assange has supposedly violated. First and foremost, it is virtually impossible to defend against the Espionage Act. Truth is no defense. In fact, any defense related to truth will be prohibited. In addition, he won't have access to any of the so-called evidence used against him. And to make it even more difficult, the government doesn't have to show any harm. It is a law and prosecution in which the government says what it wants. It's a "because we say so" law, not to be questioned, not to be challenged. The trial will be nothing more than an affirmation and continuation of the character assassination that the government has launched against Julian Assange from the moment that he spoke up.

So, but what are we really talking about here? I mean, what is this law, the Espionage Act, that he's accused of violating, and that I was accused of violating? You know, we're led to believe that Julian and other whistleblowers are threats to the national security of this country, hence

being charged with violating the Espionage Act. But I'm living proof of what national security actually means here in the United States.

Here's a real benchmark they don't tell you about. In my example, I sued the CIA for racial discrimination because they said I was too big and Black to serve my country. According to the government, in that instance, and upheld by the same courts that they're intending to try Julian Assange, was that a Black man fighting for his constitutional rights is a threat to national security. Not a surprise, really. One of the original and enduring threats to the national security of this country is and has always been African Americans. And to punish me as an African American for having the audacity to sue the CIA

, I was falsely accused of and put on trial for violating the Espionage Act and, by default, our national security. The only evidence needed to convict me was the color of my skin.

SREĆKO HORVAT: I'm really happy that I can now announce our next member of the tribunal, Margaret Kunstler, the legendary American civil rights attorney, who has spent her whole career providing support and protecting the rights of activists. She was the co-chair of the Belmarsh Tribunal together with me in New York City, but this time she is coming to this stage, to this room, to Washington, D.C., as a witness to speak about the lawsuit against the CIA

. Please, Margaret, join us.

MARGARET KUNSTLER: Well, I'm not only deeply involved in this lawsuit as a witness, but I am deeply involved in this lawsuit as a plaintiff. And there are many people who — perhaps who are not with us today who would be very happy to hear that the name of the lawsuit was Kunstler against Pompeo.

This is a lawsuit that we hope will, in fact, be one of the major ingredients about why the United States cannot try Julian in this country. They cannot try Julian in this country because they've overdone their misconduct. They've engaged in the level of misconduct in interfering in the defense of Julian Assange that cannot be tolerated.

And it's brought in this country so that people can understand just the tip of the iceberg about what has been done to Julian Assange, the actions that have been taken against him. Here, lawyers, doctors and other professionals who visited Julian Assange were — their conversations were recorded. But more than that, their equipment was taken — their telephones and their computers — and they were gone through.

Now, this started happening in 2017. Before that, we had thought that the surveillance of the embassy was to protect Julian. But we found out, through a lawsuit that was brought in Spain, that starting in 2017, the lawsuit had completely — the type of surveillance that was going on had completely changed. And now the surveillance was on a level that has been unheard of in this country and unheard of anywhere in the world, that you would record and take information about conversations, about what plans were being drawn up, about — specifically about the health of Julian and about what was going to be the defense at trial. Now, you're not allowed to do this. This absolutely violates the concept of justice in this country.

And what caused this? How did we reach this level of hatred, of disobedience of law when it comes to Julian Assange? Well, it's significant that it began in 2017, because that was the year that Pompeo came into authority. And Pompeo's very first speech was that he considered Julian and WikiLeaks a nonstate hostile intelligence agency. Now, to say that was an explanation that Julian had no rights left to him, that they could go in, they could kill him, anything they wanted to do was fair game. And that is something that is so astounding to our level of understanding of justice in this country, that that was the cause of this lawsuit.

AMY GOODMAN: Civil rights attorney Margaret Kunstler testifying at the Belmarsh Tribunal at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., Friday. Coming up, we'll hear from former British Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, Noam Chomsky, Daniel Ellsberg and more. Stay with us.

[break]

AMY GOODMAN: "Wish You Were Here," a special performance by Roger Waters for Julian Assange at the Belmarsh Tribunal, which took place at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. This is *Democracy Now!*, [democracynow.org](https://www.democracynow.org), *The War and Peace Report*. I'm Amy Goodman. We return now to the tribunal held Friday at the National Press Club. I chaired the

proceedings with the Croatian philosopher and activist Srećko Horvat.

SREĆKO HORVAT: With us, the British politician, former Labour Party — former Labour Party leader, a great friend of ours, a member of the Progressive International and a vocal supporter of Julian Assange. If he was prime minister of the United Kingdom today, perhaps Julian Assange would have been free already. But it's never too late. So, it's my great pleasure to present Jeremy Corbyn today in Washington, D.C.

JEREMY CORBYN: Thank you. Thank you, Srećko, and thank you, Amy, for presiding over today's event in this amazing setting of the National Press Club, where Julian Assange revealed uncomfortable truths to the world about the murder — the murder — of innocent civilians in Iraq, by specific military orders to do so, knowing full well they were breaking the law.

What's Julian charged with? Telling the truth. Telling the truth all over the world about what governments do and what governments want to hide from. I, as an elected politician, am very well aware that elected politicians don't like being questioned on the decisions that they make. But it's fundamental to a democratic society that they are constantly under surveillance and under question. They're very keen on putting everybody else under surveillance. Their decisions should be under surveillance at the same time.

And so, Julian published, through WikiLeaks, huge volumes of information. He went to extraordinary lengths to anonymize the sources and protect the sources at the same time. He was extremely responsible in his journalistic approach to this.

And the way his character has been denigrated all over the world is a shame and a disgrace. He's threatened with the Espionage Act — the Espionage Act, for somebody who revealed truths. And if he arrives in this country and is put on trial here, which I hope he never is and I hope he never does, would then face a 175-year sentence. It is, in effect, a death sentence, and he would be left for the rest of his life in a maximum-security prison in the most appalling conditions.

So, let's get a message out here today from this National Press Club in Washington. We are bearing witness to a travesty of justice, to an abuse of human rights, to a denial of freedom of somebody who bravely put himself on the line that we all might know that the innocent died in Abu Ghraib, the innocent died in Afghanistan, the innocent are dying in the Mediterranean, and innocents die all over the world, where unwatched, unaccountable powers decide it's expedient and convenient to kill people who get in the way of whatever grand scheme they've got. We say no. That's why we are demanding justice for Julian Assange. Hear the call. Let's free Julian Assange, and we will all be safer as a result of that. Thank you very much.

SREĆKO HORVAT: Unfortunately, some people who are connected to WikiLeaks couldn't have been today with us. I want to remind of two names, particularly, who were, besides Julian Assange, working on the leaks and analyzing all these secret documents, who are still not allowed to come to the United States because they would probably end up in Virginia or in a high-security prison. One name is Sarah Harrison, and the other name is Jacob Appelbaum. We were supposed to have Kristinn Hrafnsson with us today, but he was advised by his lawyers not to travel to the United States, similar to some other members of the tribunal who didn't arrive today. So much about the United States again. Kristinn Hrafnsson is an Icelandic investigative journalist, who became, unfortunately, because Julian Assange is in prison, the editor-in-chief of WikiLeaks in 2018.

KRISTINN HRAFNSSON: In recent weeks I've traveled to several Latin American countries and met presidents who are very concerned about the precedent set in the Assange case.

After meeting President Alberto Fernández of Argentina and his vice president, Cristina de Kirchner, they both sided with the Assange campaign, urging the Biden administration to drop the charges against him. Argentinians, as do others in the region, know fully well the capability of the CIA in planning, kidnapping or killing of individuals. As we now know, the agency was plotting against Julian in 2017.

I met Luis Arce, the president of Bolivia, who fully committed himself in support of Assange.

The same applied to the newly elected president of Brazil, Lula da Silva, who understands better than most the nature of the lawfare against Julian, having himself spent more than 500 days in prison because of such lawfare, a lawfare where it is well documented that the U.S. Department of Justice was involved. President Lula assured me that the fight to end the injustice entailed in the Assange case would be a priority in his foreign policy.

I got the same strong support from Gustavo Petro, president of Colombia, who called for Julian's release and the end of the persecution.

Lastly, I met Andrés Manuel López Obrador, president of Mexico, who has been a constant supporter of Julian, and one who understands that this case is more than the battle for the freedom of one individual, but a priority fight for underlying principles. It was Obrador who said that if Julian is extradited to the United States, the Statue of Liberty should be dismantled and returned to the France. The Mexican president received us in the WikiLeaks delegation earlier this month and assured us he would take the matter up personally with President Biden. They met last week in Mexico City.

It is not just the political leaders of every major country south of the border of the United States that now recognize the gravity of Julian's case, as Anthony Albanese, prime minister of Australia, has recently added his voice to the demand for Julian's freedom. He said in the Australian Parliament that enough is enough. And we agree.

AMY GOODMAN: Our next speaker is Jesselyn Radack, human rights attorney, renowned for her work protecting whistleblowers and journalists. While working at the Justice Department, she disclosed the FBI committed ethics violations in their interrogation of John Walker Lyndh. Among her many roles, Jesselyn is the director of national security and human rights at ExposeFacts.

JESSELYN RADACK: I'm Jesselyn Radack, and I represent whistleblowers and sources for a living, basically. I have defended the most number of media sources in the U.S. who have been investigated and charged under the Espionage Act. Most recently, I represented, and still represent, Daniel Hale. Huge shoutout to Daniel. I know he's paying attention to this. But, basically, Daniel had to navigate an Espionage Act prosecution in the most conservative federal court in the country, the exact same court where Assange is indicted, in front of the same judge.

Daniel is a veteran of the U.S. Air Force who participated in the U.S. drone assassination program. After leaving the Air Force, he became an outspoken opponent of the U.S.'s targeted killing program. He basically called out and informed the public about targeting ineffectiveness and casualties and consistently exaggerating the accuracy of drone strikes and underreporting civilian deaths. Daniel's house was searched in 2014. Like Julian Assange, he lived under a sword of Damocles for a better part of his adult life. In May 2019, he was finally arrested and indicted on allegations that he disclosed classified documents to the U.S. military's clandestine drone program, believed to have been the source material for a series in *The Intercept* called "The Drone Papers."

Daniel pleaded guilty to a single count under the Espionage Act and was sentenced to 45 months in prison. I think his case is a prescient warning of how an Espionage Act case against Assange would proceed. Bear with me. At sentencing, the judge recommended — he recognized that Daniel was a whistleblower, and recommended that he be placed in a minimum-security medical prison. But the Bureau of Prisons instead sent him to an Orwellian communications management unit, nicknamed Gitmo North. There are only two such facilities in this country. Created in the aftermath of 9/11, they were intended to house terrorists. Daniel is a pacifist with no priors. Until recently, he has been housed in this special prison with the "Merchant of Death," Viktor Bout, who was recently released.

So, when the U.S. gives assurances that Assange won't be put in a supermax, don't be fooled, because he'll end up in a far worse place, one of these communications management units. In the CMU, Daniel is far more isolated from his support network, unable to receive the medical and psychological care he so desperately needs, and has more restrictions on his communications, reading materials and visitors, with other people, than anyone on death row.

SREČKO HORVAT: There are a few people in Washington, D.C., who were not afraid to talk about Julian Assange all these years, and our next member of tribunal is one of them. So, it's my big pleasure to present the one and only Chip Gibbons, policy director of the organization Defending Rights & Dissent.

CHIP GIBBONS: I want to start by acknowledging three people who cannot be here today. One is Julian Assange, who is imprisoned in a dungeon called Belmarsh. The second is Daniel Hale, who is currently being held in a communications management unit. I've been told that Daniel watches *Democracy Now!*, which is streaming this. Daniel, if you can hear this, I want to say, on behalf of everyone in this room, you have our solidarity. Never let them break your spirit. A better world is possible only because of people like you. And the third person who can't be here is, of course, Edward Snowden, who exposed that our government was lying to us about how they were spying on us, and, for this patriotic act, was driven into exile, while the lying spies continue to enjoy lucrative careers with war profiteers and cable news programs. And you have to ask yourself: Do they view those as two different jobs? Because, after all, someone has to sell the wars that line their pockets.

The U.S. government knows, like we know, that without sources, there is no journalism. But the U.S. government is no longer content with merely going after the sources. They have made Assange the first person ever indicted under the Espionage Act for the crime of publishing truthful information. Make no mistake: The attempts to silence Assange is part of a larger war to silence those who expose the crimes of empire, militarism and the U.S. national security state.

And it's not just a legal war involving a prosecution, but an extralegal war involving covert action and propaganda. While the U.S. security state is cloaked in secrecy, there have been a steady trickle of revelations about the three-letter agencies' war on WikiLeaks. The NSA added Assange to their man-hunting database. The

CIA

plotted to kidnap and maybe even kill Assange. Various agencies sought to get around rules protecting press freedom by arguing WikiLeaks were not journalists. The

NSA

discussed the idea of declaring WikiLeaks a malicious foreign actor. The

FBI

and the

CIA

demand a personal audience with Barack Obama to persuade him that rules protecting

press freedom should not apply to WikiLeaks, as WikiLeaks should instead be classified as information brokers. I'm not sure what an information broker is; I don't think the CIA and the FBI know, either. And finally, they invented the term "hostile nonstate intelligence agency" to allow the CIA to engage in offensive counterintelligence against WikiLeaks, something previously reserved only for rival spy agencies, and requires even less oversight — and there's the very little oversight over the CIA — over CIA covert action. The U.S. government's legal and extralegal war on WikiLeaks is a war on journalism itself.

AMY GOODMAN: Chip Gibbons, policy director of Defending Rights & Dissent, testifying Friday at the Belmarsh Tribunal in the case of Julian Assange in Washington, D.C. Coming up, Noam Chomsky, Daniel Ellsberg and more.

[break]

AMY GOODMAN: "At My Window Sad and Lonely" by Billy Bragg and Wilco. This is *Democracy Now!*, [democracynow.org](https://www.democracynow.org), *The War and Peace Report*. I'm Amy Goodman. We return now to the Belmarsh Tribunal on the case of Julian Assange, held Friday at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. I co-chaired the proceedings with the Croatian philosopher and activist Srećko Horvat. This is Betty Medsger, former *Washington Post* reporter, who helped expose COINTELPRO. She's the author of the book *The Burglary: The Discovery of the J. Edgar Hoover's Secret FBI*.

BETTY MEDSGER: I'm here with a case study, something that I think shows very clearly the great importance of protecting whistleblowers and the necessity of a free press. And it is the story of the people — the impact of the people who burglarized an FBI office in 1971 and then stole every file in the office and made them public. I've worked with them twice — when I didn't know them, and they sent files to me, back in 1971, and then when I worked on the book, when they revealed their identity, even though the FBI had at that time the largest search that they had ever had and didn't find the burglars. They came out in 2014.

These eight people were outside whistleblowers. They were average citizens, though they did extraordinary things. In fact, they called themselves a Citizens' Commission to Investigate the FBI. They had decided that because Congress and the executive branch had never carried out responsibility to oversee the FBI, they would exert oversight, as citizens, in order to get documentary evidence of whether the government was suppressing dissent. And they made the decision to do this after thinking very seriously about it. Three of them had very young children, and they realized that, if arrested and convicted, they could serve many years in prison. But they thought it was so important to uncover what this hidden, all-powerful agency was doing, that they decided to break in to an office. They used tools quite different from the tools of today's whistleblowers. Instead of multiple thumb drives or vast spaces on the internet, their tools were a crowbar, a carjack, large suitcases, flashlights and getaway cars, and eventually copiers. But their motivation — their motivation was the same as the motivation of other whistleblowers: get important information to the public about injustices being done secretly by the government.

They found what they were looking for: evidence of massive suppression of dissent. Campus employees were hired as FBI informers to inform on students and faculty. And every Black student on at least one campus in the Philadelphia area was under FBI surveillance. They also found that Hoover operated a massive, Stasi-like program throughout the country against Black Americans. Every agent in the country was forced to participate and had to hire an informer to create files on Black people. To be Black, in Hoover's mind, was to be dangerous, and therefore subject to surveillance by the FBI. A plot was designed to cause Martin Luther King to commit suicide and murder. An FBI informer provided the Chicago police with the crucial information that made it possible for police to shoot Fred Hampton dead as he slept.

In January 1975, thanks to all this information that came out, both the House and the Senate opened investigations of FBI and all intelligence agencies. It was the first time Congress had done such a thing. At hearings, high FBI officials testified under
oath that bureau officials had never considered the legality or ethics of
COINTELPRO
or any other operations.

These hearings and the reforms the senators successfully recommended would not have happened without whistleblowers who risked their freedom and a free press that reported their important revelations, and, ultimately, a Congress that finally was willing to act, including establishing permanent intelligence oversight committees and strengthening the Freedom of Information Act. All of these reforms, as probably everybody in the room knows, have been battered and bruised at various times since then, but they exist, and they are still valuable.

It was Joe Biden's Congress that put in place the reforms that flowed from the Media burglary. The Biden administration surely knows, from the very important revelations made by whistleblowers in the past, that this source of crucial information must not only not be threatened, but must be protected. To continue the prosecution of Mr. Assange under the Espionage Act of 1917 could not only continue Mr. Assange's imprisonment for decades, it also could, in violation of the Constitution, gut the First Amendment rights of journalists — a radical result that surely neither President Biden nor Attorney General Garland wants to have as their legacy. Thank you.

SREĆKO HORVAT: So, the next speaker at this tribunal, and we have three more left — thanks a lot for the patience of all of you — is one of the most famous whistleblowers, not in U.S. history but in global history. And it's my great honor to present him today, Daniel Ellsberg.

DANIEL ELLSBERG: One of the foundation stones of our form of government here in the United States and democracy in our republic is our First Amendment to the Constitution, which forbids any law by Congress or the states abridging freedom of speech or of the press, along with freedom of religion and of assembly. That press precluded the passage of a British-type

Official Secrets Act, which most countries have. Almost no other country has a law singling out the press as protected by our freedom by the First Amendment. And the British-type Official Secrets Act, which criminalizes any or all disclosure of information protected by the government, by the executive branch, even disclosure to the public or to the press or to the Congress or Parliament, is criminalized and subject to prison. We've never had such an act because of our First Amendment.

In fact, one was almost inadvertently passed by Congress in the year 2000, but it was vetoed by President Clinton as a clear-cut violation of the First Amendment. He cited in his opinion accompanying that some of the opinions in the Pentagon Papers case of half a century ago. That had resulted from my disclosure of information that I had authorized possession of as a contractor to the government at that time, 7,000 pages of top-secret documents about the history of U.S. decision-making in Vietnam, which disclosed a repeated sequence by four different presidents of lies and, in effect, violations of the Constitution, treaties, and, in particular, misleading Congress as the costs for war.

I was facing 115 years in prison, but not for an Official Secrets Act, which we don't have. It was an experiment by President Nixon to use our Espionage Act, which had always been directed and intended for use against spies giving information secretly to a foreign government, especially in time of war, had never been used, as it was by Nixon in my case, in substitute for an Official Secrets Act for disclosure to the public. Up until Julian Assange's indictment, the act, however, had never been used as an Official Secrets Act, yes, against other than sources, like myself, who had possession of information, who disclosed it to the public. It had never been used against a journalist, like Julian Assange, although in each case, of course, of such disclosures or leaks, some form of media was involved, many, many people involved in that, but they had never been indicted for that before.

Actually, if you're going to use the act against a journalist, in blatant violation of the First Amendment's denial of Congress's ability to criminalize acts by journalists, by the press, the First Amendment is essentially gone. As I say, we're almost the first to have it. We fought a War of Independence and established a Constitution, so we have a First Amendment. Britain does not, where Julian now is. And they have an Official Secrets Act, which we don't. If we acquire that, we give up the main result, I would say, of that War of Independence, in the sense that we are no longer really a republic or a democrat. We have monarchical powers, imperial powers, formally. And every empire requires secrecy to cloak its acts of violence that maintains an empire, the American. It's a major change in our form of government.

AMY GOODMAN: Thank you, Dan Ellsberg. Before we turn to Noam Chomsky, attorney Suchitra Vijayan is — formerly worked for the United Nations war crimes tribunals in Yugoslavia and Rwanda. She is founder now of the Polis Project, a New York-based research and journalism organization supporting civil resistance around the world.

SUCHITRA VIJAYAN: The persecution of Julian Assange is not just about First Amendment. It's not just about the freedom of press. It goes to the heart of the crisis of citizenship, the rapid erosion of civil liberties in the hand of deeply authoritarian democracies in the West. We need to name the beast. We have to start calling Western liberal democracies what they are. They are deeply authoritarian, totalitarian, with deep lines of fascist ideologies that get implemented not today, but for many, many years. Criminalizing dissent, persecuting dissidents, political trials, imprisoning journalists in high-security prisons and treating them as terrorists are not new. These are part of the long-established strategies of state terror. Throughout history, the U.S. government has incarcerated its political opponents — Black activists, students, labor organizations, writers, intellectuals, antiwar activists, protesters. The list is long. Today the U.S. considers its most dangerous enemies those who challenge its abuse of power and expose its crimes both at home and abroad.

Assange is a political prisoner. He is a dissident of the West. His crime? Exposing brutal acts of violence, abuse of power, and about the crimes against innocent civilians. For this, every legality, deception and malice has been deployed against him — systematic violations of due process, judicial bias, manipulated and manufactured evidence, constant surveillance, defamation, lies, propaganda, denial of basic dignity, assassination attempts and threats. Just let that sink in.

But why is Assange a threat? I came of age in the age of the aftermath of 9/11. In the past 20 years, we've witnessed a proliferation of militarized borders, camps and carceral citizenships. As a young lawyer, I worked providing legal aid for Iraqi refugees in Cairo. During this time, we served over 800 families. Hundreds of legal summaries that I wrote were not just about asylum petitions or resettlement requests. These were also biographies of a destruction of a nation and its people, imperial violence unleashed on them, torture, death, mutilation, rapes, disappearances. In 2010, WikiLeaks posted classified U.S. military videos depicting the killing of dozens of unarmed Iraqis, including two Reuters journalists. The release confirmed what many of us had already known. The War in Afghanistan was no different.

Orwell wrote, “The frightening thing about totalitarianism is not that it commits 'atrocities' but that it attacks the concept of objective truth: it claims to control the past as well as the future.”

SREĆKO HORVAT: Last but not least, we have a very short message by one of the most important living public intellectuals of the United States, Noam Chomsky.

NOAM CHOMSKY: Our message for today is quite simple: Free Julian Assange.

Assange has been indicted under the Espionage Act. It's another shameful chapter in its sordid history from its origins, should be stricken from the books. The act has no place in a free and democratic society. We should, perhaps, not be surprised that the act is now being used to punish the exercise of journalism. Letting citizens know what is being done in their name is an unforgivable assault against the majesty of the state. The crime of the indictment under this disgraceful legislation is compounded by the years of imprisonment and torture that Julian Assange has already suffered.

The targets of the indictment, however, reach far beyond their immediate victim. They reach, in fact, to all of us who hope to understand what is happening in the world, and to the journalism profession, whose task it is to perform this essential service in a democratic order. Those who seek to perform this honorable task are under harsh attack in these troubled days. That's more reason to assure the attack on journalism will not be joined by the most powerful state in human history.

In short, free Julian Assange, without further unconscionable delay.

AMY GOODMAN: Noam Chomsky, speaking before the Belmarsh Tribunal on the case of

Julian Assange, which took place Friday at the National Press Club. To watch the [full two-and-a-half-hour tribunal](#), go to democracynow.org. Special thanks to Charina Nadura, Denis Moynihan, Ishmael Daro, Mike Burke, Robby Karran, Deena Guzder and Julie Crosby. I'm Amy Goodman. Thanks for joining us.