

President Trump, Please Free Ross Ulbricht

Say what you will about President Donald J. Trump — his politics, his policies, his business dealings, his personal peccadilloes — the man demonstrated possession of a heart when he commuted the sentence of grandmother Alice Johnson 21 years into her life term for non-violent drug offenses. He's asked protesting NFL players to send him a list of people who deserve clemency in lieu of continuing to kneel in protest during the national anthem. It's encouraging to find mercy among his many and varied qualities.

On July 3, the Libertarian Party's national convention unanimously requested that President Trump exercise that mercy in the case of Ross William Ulbricht.

In 2015, Ulbricht — better known to the public as “Dread Pirate Roberts” — was sentenced to life without the possibility of parole for creating and operating the Silk Road “darknet market” web site.

Please set aside for the moment your opinion of Silk Road — whether or not it was moral, or beneficial, or legal, to operate a web site facilitating the sale and purchase of illegal drugs — and of Ulbricht's guilt or innocence, to consider the bigger issues.

Ulbricht's trial was clearly unfair. His defense team was denied access to information on the state's investigative methodology and not allowed to present an alternative theory as to the identity of “Dread Pirate Roberts.” They were forbidden to reference the fact that at least two of the federal agents investigating Silk Road (who had access which might have allowed them to fabricate evidence) were themselves caught in corrupt activities and are now in prison. The trial was a railroad job from beginning to end.

Ulbricht's sentence is also clearly unreasonable. Having poisoned the jury pool with claims of murder-for-hire schemes on Ulbricht's part, the prosecution then dropped the charges. But the trial judge nonetheless factored those unproven claims into her sentencing.

As of this coming October, Ulbricht will have spent five years behind bars. He's appealed his conviction and sentence all the way to the US Supreme Court, which declined to hear the case on June 28. At this point, presidential clemency would seem to be his only hope of ever walking free again.

There is no universe in which life without the possibility of parole is a reasonable penalty for the crime of running a web site. Especially a web site which arguably reduced both drug-related street crime and death by drug overdose.

Mr. President: Please set Ross Ulbricht free.