

Julian Assange: An Opportunity for the US and the UK to Change Direction on Press Freedom

May 3 was World Press Freedom Day. The annual observance usually focuses on the World Press Freedom Index published each year by Reporters without Borders. Break out the champagne! The United States ranked 48th of 179 countries this year, falling three places from 2018.

A day earlier, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange appeared in court in London (the United Kingdom ranked 33rd on the Index this year) to contest his proposed extradition to the United States. He faces spurious US “hacking” charges framed to avoid taking official notice of the indisputable fact that his actual “crimes” consist entirely of engaging in journalism.

Not a good World Press Freedom Day look for the UK or the US. But the plodding pace of the UK’s judicial system — his next hearing comes at the end of May, a second one is scheduled for mid-June, and the matter may drag on for months — offers an opportunity to turn things around and get them moving in the right direction.

Reporters Without Borders postures as politically neutral, but their current ranking of the US is largely based not on a deterioration in actual press freedom, but rather on US president Donald Trump’s big mouth. He says mean things — some true, some false, some downright stupid — about the media.

Trump could redeem himself on the press freedom front, essentially wiping the slate clean, by pardoning Assange for all alleged “crimes” committed prior to May 1st, 2019.

Even better, he could publicly justify the pardon, pointing out that this is solely and entirely a political prosecution premised in the notion that it’s a “crime” to embarrass politicians by revealing verifiably true information about their actions.

Alternatively, US Justice Department prosecutors could save him the trouble by just dropping the charges and withdrawing the extradition request.

A pardon and public statement from Trump would be better, though, both for press freedom and as red meat for his own political base. After all, the American politician most frequently and badly embarrassed by Assange’s work is Trump’s own bete noire, Hillary Clinton. The WikiLeaks “Cablegate” dump exposed her plan to have US diplomats bug the offices of their UN counterparts. Then WikiLeaks doubled down and outed her for the DNC’s rigging of the 2016 Democratic presidential nomination.

Failing both of those perfectly reasonable courses of action on the US government’s part,

the UK courts could find a reason to free Assange (currently serving 50 weeks for jumping bail on charges that were non-existent rather than merely spurious) instead of handing him over.

Whatever — just pick one and make it happen, guys. The most important outcome here is a free Julian Assange. The bonus material would be explaining why: He's a political prisoner and journalism is not a crime.