



The US does nothing to punish those guilty of war crimes or Wall Street fraud, yet demonises the whistleblower.

Over the past two and a half years, all of which he has spent in a military prison, much has been said about Bradley Manning, but nothing has been heard from him. That changed on Thursday, when the 23-year-old US army private accused of leaking classified documents to WikiLeaks testified at his court martial proceeding about the conditions of his detention.

The oppressive, borderline-torturous measures to which he was subjected, including prolonged solitary confinement and forced nudity, have been known for some time. A formal UN investigation denounced those conditions as "cruel and inhuman". President Obama's state department spokesman, retired air force colonel PJ Crowley, resigned after publicly condemning Manning's treatment. A prison psychologist testified this week that Manning's conditions were more damaging than those found on death row, or at Guantánamo Bay.

Still, hearing the accused whistleblower's description of this abuse in his own words viscerally conveyed its horror. Reporting from the hearing, the Guardian's Ed Pilkington quoted Manning: "If I needed toilet paper I would stand to attention and shout: 'Detainee Manning requests toilet paper!'" And: "I was authorised to have 20 minutes sunshine, in chains, every 24 hours." Early in his detention, Manning recalled, "I had pretty much given up. I thought I was going to die in this eight by eight animal cage."

The repressive treatment of Bradley Manning is one of the disgraces of Obama's first term, and highlights many of the dynamics shaping his presidency. The president not only defended Manning's treatment but also, as commander-in-chief of the court martial judges, improperly decreed Manning's guilt when he asserted in an interview that he "broke the law".

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