

# The Plot to Free JULIAN ASSANGE

**World Press Freedom Day** in May includes the annual publication of the *World Press Freedom Index* 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 U.S. "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 U.K. or the U.S. But the plodding pace of the U.K.'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 U.S. 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 1, 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, U.S. Justice Department prosecutors could save him the trouble by just dropping the charges and withdrawing the extradition request.

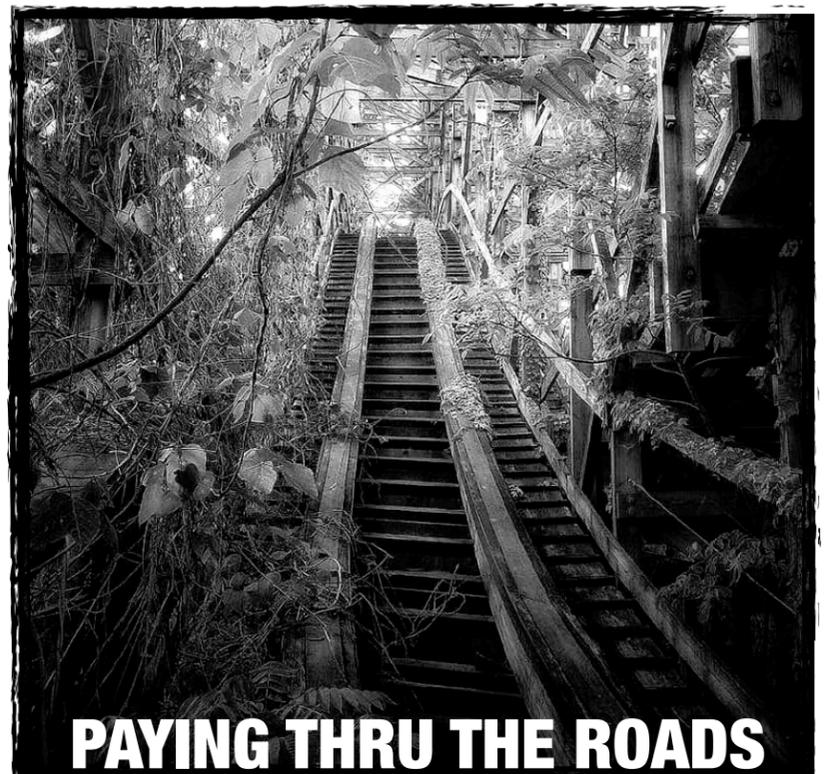
A pardon and public statement from Trump would be better though, both for press freedom and as red meat for his own political base. After all, the American politician most frequently and badly embarrassed by Assange's work is Trump's own bete noire, Hillary Clinton. The *WikiLeaks* "Cablegate" dump exposed her plan to have U.S. diplomats bug the offices of their U.N. 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 U.S. government's part, the U.K. 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.



**Thomas L. Knapp**  
 Director and Senior News Analyst  
 William Lloyd Garrison Center for  
 Libertarian Advocacy Journalism  
[thegarrisoncenter.org](http://thegarrisoncenter.org)



## PAYING THRU THE ROADS

**Well, howdeedoo.** CalTrans will have to shitcan (for a few years at least) its plans to desecrate Richardson Grove. A Clinton appointee, Judge William Alsup, found that the agency failed to address **four** main issues: (1) the **roots** of several ancient redwoods would **risk suffocation** due to increased paving in their root zones; (2) **construction** within their structural root zones has the **potential to impact or topple trees**; (3) **heavy oversized trucks** are more likely to collide with trees in the grove and the **damage to redwoods** could be **more severe**; and (4) **noise impacts** from more and larger trucks rumbling through the park will be **much worse** than Caltrans is admitting and would diminish public enjoyment of the grove.

Judge Alsup stated that, "**All of these old-growth redwoods have lived many times longer than our nation has existed,**" and "**If we were today considering building a major highway through a grove of ancient redwoods, almost certainly the public would demand that the grove be spared and that the highway bypass the park.**"

Tell that to CalTrans, Judge, all you want. They aren't listening. Look at the story of the New York City desecrator, Bob Moses, who destroyed the neighborhoods of half a million New Yorkers in the name of money and the automobile. Like a veritable Moses, CalTrans has had absolute power over the highways and politicians of California. They are a Big Cook in the Petroleum Barbecue of the planet.

**Has CalTrans really hit a snag?** There will be no Willits replay right now, with squads of CHPers shooting rubber bullets at environmental resisters, dragging people out of trees, all in the service of the highest possible speed between two points. There are more maneuvers to come. The court will be taking arguments on whether Caltrans should start this charade all over again.

**There was a day** when people stood before the Grove's *Gift Shop* at its edge, sometimes in the middle of the road, pointing their cameras upward, oblivious of the traffic. Us commuting long-timers would shake our heads in amused disbelief. But it refreshed our own respect for these towering trees. Even as a tiny remnant these trees could bring your mind to a stop. Their presence could actually slow us regulars down. But CalTrans is not going to put that *Gift Shop* on the road again or set up a flashing light at that crucial curve. That might work. The flashing light solved the problem of speeding on the southern approach to French's Camp, once the haunt of the CHP ticket chasers.

Nonetheless, the road that says **slow** - there at that curve - will still awhile not say **fast**. Once upon a time 101 was a slow slow highway that meandered through the Redwoods from San Francisco to Eureka and beyond, passing through Richardson Grove. It was a carnival of sorts. Commercial establishments like the Grove's *Gift Shop* lined the road in stretches. The dead zone between Confusion Hill and Leggett was once one of these live wires.

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# If Notre Dame were a Mosque in Gaza

As the 300-foot spire of the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris tragically came tumbling down on live television, my thoughts ventured to Nuseirat Refugee Camp, my childhood home in the Gaza Strip. Then, also on television, I watched as a small bulldozer hopelessly clawed through the rubble of my neighborhood mosque. I grew up around that mosque. I spent many hours there with my grandfather, Mohammed, a refugee from historic Palestine. Before grandpa became a refugee, he was a young Imam in a small mosque in his long-destroyed village of Beit Daras. My grandfather and many in his generation took solace in erecting their own mosque in the refugee camp as soon as they arrived to the Gaza Strip in late 1948. When I was still a child, he used to hold my hand as we walked together to the mosque during prayer times. When he aged, and could barely walk, I, in turn, held his hand.

Many generations of French Catholics have assigned significance to the Notre Dame Cathedral with its layered meanings and symbolism since the 12th century. When the fire consumed the oak roof and much of the structure, French citizens and many around the world watched in awe. It is as if the memories, prayers and hopes of a nation that is rooted in time were suddenly revealed, rising, all at once, with the pillars of smoke and fire. But the very media that covered the news of the Notre Dame fire seemed oblivious to the obliteration of everything we hold sacred in Palestine which, day after day, Israeli war machinery continues to blow up, bulldoze and desecrate.

It is as if our religions are not worthy of respect, despite the fact that Christianity was born in Palestine. It was there that Jesus roamed the hills and valleys of our historic homeland teaching people about peace, love and justice. Palestine is also central to Islam. Haram al-Sharif, where Al-Aqsa Mosque and The Dome of the Rock are kept, is the third holiest site for Muslims everywhere. Yet Christian and Muslim holy sites are besieged, often raided and shut down per military diktats. Moreover, the Israeli



army-protected messianic Jewish extremists want to demolish Al-Aqsa. And the Israeli government has been digging underneath its foundation for many years.

Although none of this is done in secret, international outrage remains muted. In fact, many find Israel's actions justified. Some have bought into the ridiculous explanation offered by the Israeli military that bombing mosques is a necessary security measure. Others are motivated by dark religious prophecies of their own.

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