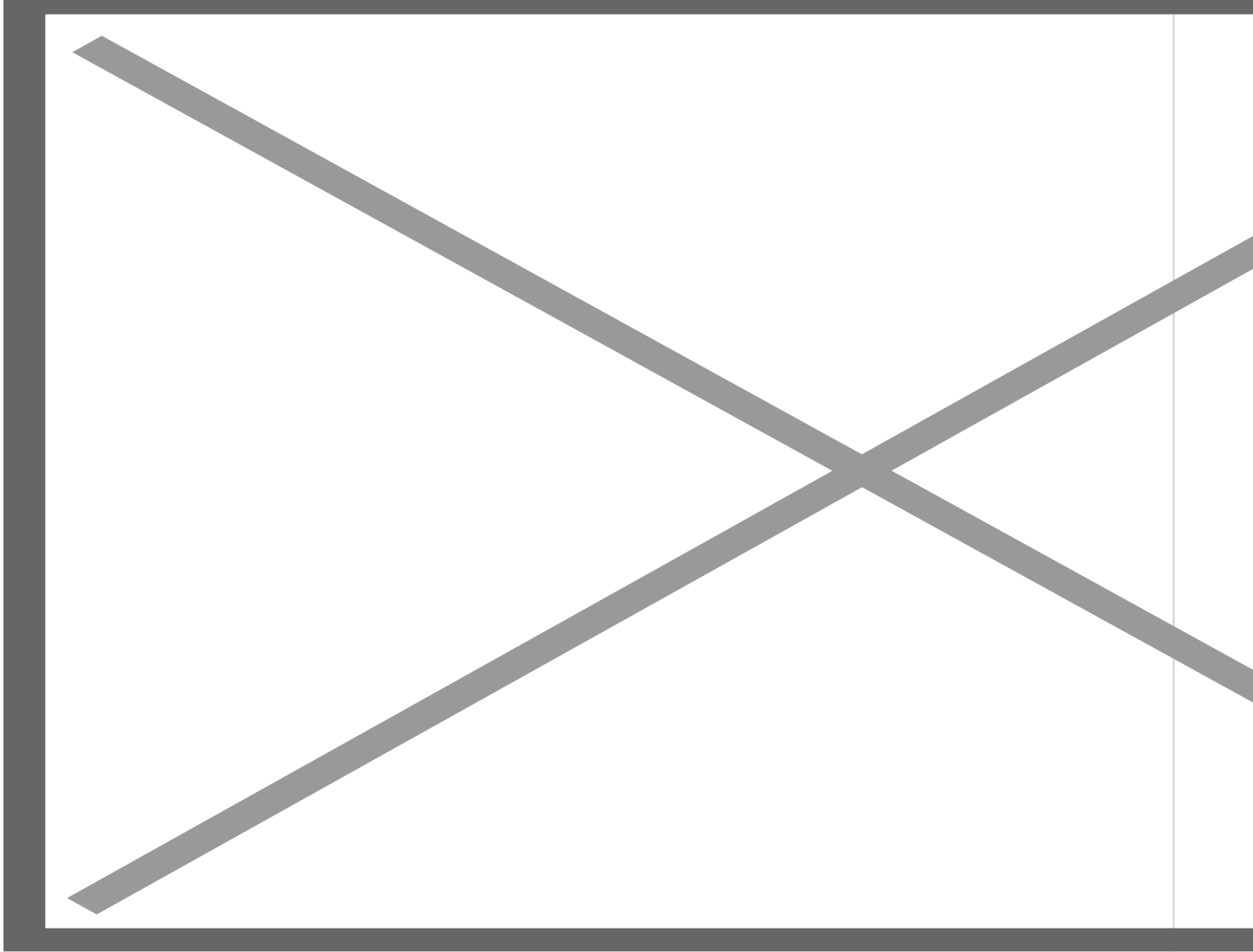


Former U.S. secretary of state calls for news sources to be prosecuted over Julian Assange leaks

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Washington, July 15 (RHC)-- Former CIA Director and former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has called for the criminal prosecution of sources who spoke to Yahoo News for a story detailing proposals by the intelligence agency in 2017 to abduct WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and discussions within the Trump administration and CIA to possibly even assassinate him.

Pompeo, appearing on Megyn Kelly's podcast, was asked to respond to the Yahoo News story, which was based on interviews with 30 former U.S. intelligence and national security officials with knowledge of the U.S. government's efforts against WikiLeaks.

"I can't say much about this other than whoever those 30 people who allegedly spoke to one of these [Yahoo News] reporters — they should all be prosecuted for speaking about classified activity inside the Central Intelligence Agency," Pompeo said.

At the same time, Pompeo declined to respond to many of the details in the Yahoo News account and confirmed that "pieces of it are true," including the existence of an aggressive CIA campaign to target WikiLeaks in the aftermath of the organization's publication of highly sensitive so-called Vault 7 documents revealing some of the CIA's hacking tools and methods.

"When bad guys steal those secrets we have a responsibility to go after them, to prevent [that] from happening," Pompeo said. "We absolutely have a responsibility to respond. ... We desperately wanted to hold accountable those individuals that had violated U.S. law, that had violated requirements to protect information and had tried to steal it. There is a deep legal framework to do that. And we took actions consistent with U.S. law to try to achieve that."

Pompeo's comments came as some human rights activists, civil liberties groups and supporters of Assange said the revelations by Yahoo News should be investigated and were grounds to drop the Justice Department's efforts to extradite Assange from a British prison in order to face criminal charges in the U.S. for publishing classified government secrets in violation of the World War I-era Espionage Act as well for allegedly conspiring to hack into a classified U.S. government network.

"We now know that this unprecedented criminal case was launched in part because of the genuinely dangerous plans that the CIA was considering," said Ben Wizner, director of the American Civil Liberties Union's Speech, Privacy and Technology Project. "This provides all the more reason for the Biden Justice Department to find a quiet way to end this case."

Also weighing in about the Yahoo News story was Nils Melzner, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture. "This is not about the law. It is about intimidating journalism; it's about suppressing press freedom; it's about protecting immunity for state officials," he said in a video he posted on Twitter.

Assange's case has "become impossible to ignore," he added. "And I would encourage journalists from all media outlets to look deeply into this case, assemble all the evidence and expose misconduct, because the public deserves to know the truth."

Although the Justice Department under two attorneys general appointed by President Trump brought indictments against Assange, federal prosecutors under President Biden's attorney general, Merrick Garland, are continuing to pursue the case. They have filed appeals of a British judge's ruling earlier this year that Assange should not be turned over to the U.S. government because he would pose a risk of suicide in a U.S. prison.

Assange's lawyers are now filing responses to the Justice Department's arguments and are actively considering ways to raise issues of government misconduct based in part on many of the details in the Yahoo News story. Among them is the revelation that in the aftermath of the Vault 7 leak, viewed at the time as the largest data loss in the CIA's history, Pompeo was enraged and demanded a multi-pronged campaign to dismantle WikiLeaks. Publicly, he described the group as a "non-state hostile intelligence service." But privately, he pushed for aggressive action at meetings with top Trump administration officials, including a snatch operation to abduct Assange from the Ecuadorian Embassy in London.

Sources told Yahoo News that at the White House and CIA there were also discussions regarding a possible assassination, although former officials said the idea of killing Assange was not taken seriously. But when White House lawyers learned about some of the agency's plans targeting Assange, particularly Pompeo's rendition proposals, they raised objections, resulting in one of the most contentious intelligence debates of the Trump presidency.

Pompeo's comments on Kelly's podcast came the day after he appeared on Glenn Beck's podcast and asserted: "I'm all about a big, bold, strong First Amendment." But his call Wednesday for the criminal prosecution of sources who spoke to Yahoo News drew a strong rebuke from a member of Assange's legal team.

"I find it highly disturbing that his reaction is to try to prevent information about misconduct from being known by the American people," said Barry Pollack, Assange's U.S. lawyer.

Wizner, the ACLU lawyer, said Pompeo's comments effectively "just verified the truth of the [Yahoo News] story. Because the only reason to prosecute someone is that they revealed legitimate classified information. ... This was public interest journalism of the first order and the question is whether the public has a right to know that the government is engaged in this kind of conduct."

When first asked about the Yahoo News story by Kelly, Pompeo responded: "It makes for pretty good fiction." But when pressed by the host whether that meant he was denying what Yahoo News reported, he acknowledged "there are pieces of it that are true."

"Were we trying to protect American information from Julian Assange and WikiLeaks? Absolutely, yes. Did our Justice Department believe it had a valid claim that would result in the extradition of Julian Assange to stand trial? Yes. I supported that effort, for sure. Did we ever engage in activity that was inconsistent with U.S. law? We are not permitted by U.S. law to conduct assassinations. We never acted in a way that was inconsistent with that. ... We never conducted planning to violate U.S. law — not once in my time."

He did not address any of the details about other actions the CIA was contemplating, such as Assange's possible abduction, or steps U.S. intelligence actually took, including conducting audio and visual surveillance of Assange inside the Ecuadorian Embassy or monitoring the communications and travels of his associates throughout Europe.

But Pompeo did take issue with a statement made by Trump, who had embraced WikiLeaks during the 2016 campaign after it published Democratic Party emails embarrassing to Hillary Clinton. Asked for comment in the Yahoo News story, Trump said that Assange was being treated "very badly."

Pressed by Kelly if he agreed with that assessment, Pompeo said: "No. Assange treated the U.S. and its people very badly."

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