

Chelsea Manning, WikiLeaks source, thanks Obama for clemency ahead of early release



This undated file photo provided by the U.S. Army shows Pfc. Chelsea Manning wearing a wig and lipstick. Manning, a transgender soldier imprisoned for releasing classified military information, issued a statement Tuesday, May 9, 2017, ahead of her scheduled release... more >

By Andrew Blake - *The Washington Times* - Wednesday, May 10, 2017

Convicted WikiLeaks source Chelsea Manning praised former President Barack Obama on Tuesday for commuting the bulk of her 35-year prison sentence during his final days in office.

Manning, a former Army intelligence analyst, thanked Mr. Obama among her attorneys and supporters in a statement issued by her legal team Tuesday ahead of her release from military prison next week on May 17, seven years since being taken into custody and decades earlier than previously anticipated.

"I am forever grateful to the people who kept me alive, President Obama, my legal team and countless supporters," Manning said Tuesday in her first full statement since receiving clemency.

Manning, 29, was arrested in 2010 and charged with leaking classified documents to the website WikiLeaks. She was ultimately convicted of espionage, theft and other crimes related to her conduct and was sentenced in 2013 to 35 years behind bars. Mr. Obama intervened days before leaving office in January, however, commuting the majority of Manning's remaining sentence and paving the way for her imminent release.

"I feel very comfortable that justice has been served," Mr. Obama explained at the time. "Let's be clear: Chelsea Manning has served a tough prison sentence."

Indeed, Manning's stint in military custody has been marred by controversy since shortly after her arrest in 2010 at a base near Baghdad, Iraq. She was briefly held in a makeshift cell there under Army custody before being transferred to the brig at Marine Corps Base Quantico in northern Virginia, where a military judge later agreed she was abused by jailers and subjected to nonviolent harassment.

Formerly known as Pfc. Bradley Manning, the soldier came out as a transgender woman in 2013 and subsequently sued the Defense Department from prison in pursuit of being treated as such. While the Pentagon ultimately agreed Manning could receive hormone-therapy to assist with transitioning, she continued to struggle with her identity behind bars and cited the lack of treatment for triggering two failed suicide attempts in 2016.

"For the first time, I can see a future for myself as Chelsea. I can imagine surviving and living as the person who I am and can finally be in the outside world," Manning said Tuesday. "Freedom used to be something that I dreamed of but never allowed myself to fully imagine. Now, freedom is something that I will again experience with friends and loved ones after nearly seven years of bars and cement, of periods of solitary confinement, and of my health care and autonomy restricted, including through routinely forced haircut."

"Chelsea has already served the longest sentence of any whistleblower in the history of this country. It has been far too long, too severe, too draconian," Manning's attorneys, Nancy Hollander and Vincent Ward, said in a joint statement. "President Obama's act of commutation was the first time the military took care of this soldier who risked so much to disclose information that served the public interest."

The Army acknowledged Manning's imminent release Tuesday but declined to comment otherwise, CBS reported. The Trump administration, meanwhile, announced last month that federal prosecutors are pursuing charges against WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange, an Australian citizen residing in London, for charges related to Manning's disclosures.