



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on August 20, 2018

Former NSA Contractor Faces “Longest Sentence” Ever Under Espionage Act

A woman in Georgia is facing what some observers are calling “the longest sentence” ever imposed on someone convicted of leaking sensitive federal data to news outlets.

Reality Winner — an ex-NSA contract employee — is the young woman looking at spending 10 years in federal prison, should the judge impose the harshest possible penalty at her sentencing hearing scheduled for August 23.



Winner has been incarcerated since June after being charged and convicted of passing to *The Intercept* a classified NSA document detailing Russian attempts to meddle in the 2016 presidential election. Winner was eventually identified as the source of the document and was apprehended and convicted.

At her trial, Winner pled guilty, but she knew she was in the unenviable position of not only being charged under the Espionage Act, but she was denied bail twice because of the similarity of her story to that of Edward Snowden and Snowden’s flight to Russia.

At the trial, Winner agreed to a plea bargain that would have sentenced her to five years and three months. The judge is not, however, bound to abide by that agreement and may yet impose the maximum penalty: a decade behind bars.

Here’s a brief background of the woman and the way she wound up in federal prison, as published by *The Guardian*:

When Reality Winner got out of the US air force last December, she was despondent.

The 25-year-old vegan yoga enthusiast, who enjoyed adopting abandoned pets and sending shoeboxes full of gifts to Afghan children, was repulsed by the US president-elect, her polar opposite.

A passionate environmentalist, Winner grew heavy-hearted as Donald Trump quickly gave the go-ahead for construction of the controversial Keystone XL and Dakota Access oil pipelines.

“I’m losing my mind,” she wrote in a Facebook post on 9 February. “He’s lying. He’s blatantly lying.”

Four days later, Winner arrived for her first day of work as a contractor at Trump’s NSA.

The Trump administration now alleges that Winner used that job, at the NSA’s campus in Augusta, Georgia, to take and leak a top-secret document on Russia’s alleged efforts to swing the presidential election in his favour [sic].

Winner has told the FBI that she printed out the document and mailed it to reporters at *The Intercept* on May 9.



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She will be the first person prosecuted under the Espionage Act during the Trump administration.

Perhaps the most famous of the whistleblowers was Edward Snowden. As mentioned earlier, he too was an NSA contract employee when he leaked thousands of documents to reporters. He fled to Russia for asylum, and has been living there since 2013.

Snowden sees the president's prosecution of Reality Winner as an extension of the previous administration's war on whistleblowers.

"The war on whistleblowers continues under a new White House: the first journalistic source prosecuted under Trump, Reality Winner, was denied a defense, jailed over 5 years. Her 'crime'? Showing us @NSAGov suspected Russia of hacking an election vendor," Snowden tweeted.

Former President Obama's zeal in pursuing, prosecuting, and punishing those he once described as courageous and patriotic was remarkable for its relentlessness.

Why a president would want to prosecute people exposing corruption in our own government is understandable. A candidate could sound conciliatory and a friend of transparency, and, upon settling in at the Oval Office, he would likely come to understand that any time a whistle blows, so to speak, it could be blowing for him.

In closing, consider these words written in 1721 by John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon. Their *Cato's Letters* were the most widely published in America before the War for Independence, and their intellectual fingerprints are found in the writings of nearly all our own Founding Fathers. Here's an excerpt from *Letter Number 15* regarding the silencing of speech:

This sacred privilege is so essential to free government, that the security of property; and the freedom of speech, always go together; and in those wretched countries where a man cannot call his tongue his own, he can scarce call any thing else his own. Whoever would overthrow the liberty of the nation, must begin by subduing the freedom of speech; a thing terrible to publick [sic] traitors.

Until the hearing on August 23, Winner will remain incarcerated at the Lincoln County Jail in Lincolntown, Georgia.



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