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**In 2010, Chelsea Manning leaked thousands of classified documents in an attempt to shed light on the "true cost of war" in the Middle East. But while other whistleblowers continue to attract media attention and concern, Manning is locked in a maximum-security prison, six years into a 35-year sentence. On the heels of a last appeal to President Obama for clemency, Manning tells Broadly about her struggle for visibility and justice.**

Chelsea Manning is currently incarcerated in a maximum-security facility in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. She's been in United States custody for six years, and spent months in solitary confinement. For that entire time, she has been forced to dress like a man, with her hair cropped close to her head. Her connection with the outside world is limited: There are extremely strict rules about who can visit her, and media isn't allowed to speak with her directly, though she can correspond with journalists by mail. At times, her situation seems hopeless, but she has tried to persevere.

"Courage is not fearlessness," she wrote in a letter to Broadly this December. "Courage is the

ability to keep going, even when you are unsure of yourself, even when you are nervous, and even when you are terrified. If you can still fight when the odds appear to be against you, and when it looks like you might be fighting it alone, then you are genuinely brave."

In May of 2013, Chelsea Manning was [convicted](#) of six counts of espionage and sentenced to 35 years in prison. The former military specialist is responsible for what is considered the largest leak of classified government documents in American history—they include the Iraq War Logs and the Afghan War Diary, two data troves that she believed would shed light on the "[true cost of war](#)" in the Middle East, [such](#) [as](#) the United States' failure to investigate thousands of claims of torture in Iraq, the [detainment](#) of innocent or low-threat-level individuals at Guantanamo Bay, and thousands of civilian deaths.

Manning's sentence is extreme by any metric. Other convicted whistleblowers have had to serve far less time, often in the range of [one](#) to [three-and-a-half](#) years—though Manning is just a sixth of the way through her sentence, she has already been incarcerated twice as long as most other convicted whistleblowers. Earlier this year, she [made a plea](#) to President Obama to alter her sentence from 35 years to time served, which would free her immediately while recognizing her guilt. Last month, over 100,000 people [signed a White House petition](#) making the same demand. The President's second term will end in January, meaning he has less than a month to take action.

Though some people celebrate Manning as a whistleblower—she was the 2013 [recipient](#) of the Sean MacBride Peace Prize—others see her actions as treasonous and damaging to the state. "Let's charge [her] and try [her] for treason," a FOX news national security expert, KT MacFarland, [wrote](#) of Manning in 2010. "If [she's] found guilty, [she] should be executed." President-elect Donald Trump has selected MacFarland to be his deputy national security adviser, [according](#) to CNN.

And even among people who prize government transparency, Manning is often overlooked. The world [seems to have rallied](#) behind other, more visible whistleblowers, such as Edward Snowden, who has become something of a celebrity from his recluse in Russia. One of the

main reasons for this, according to Evan Greer, one of Manning's biggest advocates and the campaign director of [Fight for the Future](#), is that Manning is hidden from sight in prison, denied the right to speak for herself.

### **No one can see Chelsea, and very few people can actually hear her voice.**

"Prisons are designed to dehumanize and hide people from the public. No one can see Chelsea, and very few people can actually hear her voice," she explains. (I conducted my interview with Manning through one of her lawyers at the ACLU, Chase Strangio, who had one of Manning's contacts dictate my questions to her over the phone.)

Manning agrees with this characterization. "I have been disconnected from the world for what's becoming close to a decade now. There isn't even a good photograph taken of me since 2013—and these were taken during my court martial," she said in her letter to Broadly. "It's hard to show the world I exist anymore."

Throughout her life—and certainly her life as a public figure—Manning has struggled against forces that would silence her. She grew up in a society that rejected her womanhood; she later joined the military, a hyper-masculine institution that has been described as "[openly hostile](#)" towards gay and trans soldiers; while serving in the armed forces, she witnessed injustices that were classified by the state; she was subjected to "cruel and inhuman" treatment in the custody of the United States government,

[according](#)

to a UN investigator; when she finally came out as transgender in 2013, she was frequently and intentionally

[misgendered in the press](#)

; and now, incarcerated in a high-security facility in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, she must fight against a system that may soon destroy her.

"Chelsea has a huge amount of support," adds Greer, "but we are fighting an uphill battle against the US government's attempts to silence her important voice through incarceration."

During Manning's childhood, "it was like trans people didn't exist at all," she told Broadly. She remembers the difficulty growing up as a young, feminine person. She had never heard about

real people who had changed their sex, or escaped its strictures; the only representation of transgender people that she remembers from back then were characters from horror stories, like Buffalo Bill in *Silence of the Lambs*, and caricatures on sensational crime dramas, like *Law & Order*

Today, Manning reflects on her coming of age with the understanding that she was "shoved into the social role of a male." She believes her attempt "to meet other people's expectations of what a 'man' should be like" influenced the choices she made throughout her life. She once [s](#)  
[aid](#) she was bullied for being a "girly boy" when she was young. Hoping to curb discrimination in school, she tried to disappear among the boys by playing sports. Later, as an adult, Manning was [encouraged](#) by her father to join the army, and she enlisted in what is perhaps the most aggressively masculine institution imaginable in the summer of 2007—three years before she was arrested, and six years before she came out as transgender.

Before she was deployed to Iraq in October of 2009, Manning was stationed at Fort Drum in upstate New York. For the six months she was there—between February and August—she corresponded via AOL Instant Messenger with [atheist vlogger Zinnia Jones](#). Jones was a young queer person with a relatively large audience. At the time, neither she nor Manning had come out as transgender or begun transitioning. Manning was presumably drawn to Jones because they both identified as gay men at that time, and they were both atheists who were interested in computers and mathematical theory.

Jones' videos, which she still makes today, had titles like "[The Meaningless Death of Jesus](#)," and "

[It Doesn't Matter if Being Gay is a Choice](#)

." Manning quickly opened up to her, telling Jones about her life and discussing her experience in the military. "It took them awhile," Manning

[wrote](#)

, referring to her fellow soldiers, "but they started figuring me out, making fun of me, mocking me, harassing me, heating up with one or two physical attacks."

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While other soldiers succeeded in completing basic training in the standard 10 weeks, Manning—who is slender and stands 5'2" tall—said that it took her six months. Eventually she got through the program, despite her small size, and entered the army as an intelligence analyst. The broad, dark green military uniform sat heavily on her slight frame; she had officially become Private First Class Manning, someone her father had wanted her to be. In 2009, she was deployed to a remote location outside of Baghdad.

In the writing she produced during her service—correspondence with people such as Jones—Manning says that she feels an immense sense of responsibility to the men and women that she worked with. Though she took her work seriously, and she was good at it, that did not reconcile the deep anguish she experienced because of her gender identity. While Manning was working hard, she was also coping with worsening gender dysphoria. No one knew her as a woman, and she was alone in that way.

In November of 2009, one month following her deployment, Manning [was reportedly in contact](#) with a "gender counselor" back in the United States who specialized in treating military personnel with gender identity issues. She told him she felt "like a monster."

[According](#) to the American Medical Association, if left untreated, gender identity disorder "can result in clinically significant psychological distress... debilitating depression and, for some people without access to appropriate medical care and treatment, suicidality and death."

On April 24, 2010, Manning [confessed](#) her gender identity issues to her superior, master sergeant Paul Adkins, in an email. A few days later, she

[sent a similar email](#) to military psychologist, Capt. Michael Worsley. Manning attached a grainy black and white photograph of herself wearing a wig to the email and wrote, "This is my problem. I've had signs of it for a very long time. I've been trying very, very hard to get rid of it. It is not going away." In the email, she told Adkins that these issues were the cause of her "pain and confusion" and that they made "the most basic things in my life very difficult."

"It is difficult to sleep and impossible to have conversations. It makes my entire life feel like a bad dream that won't end. I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do," she continued. "I don't know what will happen to me. But at this point I feel like I am not here anymore. Everyone is concerned about me, and everyone is afraid of me. I am sorry." Adkins [later testified](#) that he didn't pass the message onto military commanders because "I really didn't think at the time that having a picture floating around of one of my soldiers in drag was in the best interests of the intel mission."

On May 8, 2010, Manning was found curled in the fetal position, having carved the words "I want" into the back of an office chair. "[She] felt that [she] was not there; was not a person," master sergeant Adkins wrote in a [memorandum](#) read at trial.

"They treated all of this with deliberate ignorance, assuming the situation would simply go away," Jones claims. "Gender dysphoria does not go away. I am very certain that this deliberate medical neglect and intentional withholding of necessary mental health treatment contributed heavily to her ongoing distress at that time. The Army failed her on this front."

There were other [reports of unstable behavior](#) during Manning's service: She [lashed out](#) at her colleagues and allegedly displayed "

[erratic](#) conduct. But those who knew Manning personally caution against conflating her deteriorating psychological state with her decision to leak classified materials, as if the former wholly explains the latter. "I trust that her decisions hold more significance than some random event emerging from processes of pathology," says Jones. "I would be very hesitant to describe her disclosure of materials as being the byproduct of a mental health condition."

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Indeed, Manning believes in government transparency and has been vocal and passionate about her politics since before she deployed to Iraq. In her correspondence with Jones in 2009, she fiercely critiqued the military's Don't Ask Don't Tell policy. When she was stationed at Fort Drum in Upstate New York prior to her deployment to Iraq, Manning [participated in a rally](#)

protesting Proposition 8.

During Manning's trial, her ACLU lawyer, David Coombs, called on Jones to testify, speaking to the defendant's character. "He felt my story would provide information that would be helpful to Chelsea," Jones says, "by showing that she understood the importance of national and global peace and security and that she did not intend to harm the United States."

Manning has said that she wanted to help people in this nation to be informed and to have a say in the actions of their government, and still, after everything, she believes in this country. "It is so important that we continue to fight, even when we are cornered, even when we are desperate, and even when we are afraid," she wrote in her letter to Broadly, referring to LGBT Americans who may feel hopeless during these difficult political times. "There is a tendency in certain parts of our community to take a step back during a crisis, to wait and see what happens, and hope for the best. We absolutely cannot afford to do that."

On February 3—almost three months before she emailed Adkins about her struggles with gender identity—Manning uploaded the Iraq War Logs and the Afghan War Diary to WikiLeaks, a media organization that accepts anonymously submitted classified documents in the interest of transparency. Manning had first tried to bring the files to the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, but she felt the former didn't take her seriously, and the latter did not return her phone call. She then turned to WikiLeaks, which she had previously become aware of after seeing the site publish a collection of [pager messages from 9/11](#) that she immediately recognized as authentic documents from the NSA. When Manning leaked the Iraq War Log and the Afghan War Diary, she was in the US on leave from her deployment in Iraq.

Manning returned to Iraq on February 11. [During that timeframe](#), she overheard some of her colleagues discussing footage in an Army server that showed an American Apache helicopter firing on a group of men on the street in Baghdad in 2007. She researched the time and date of its occurrence, and what she found shocked her: The footage shows soldiers in the US military aircraft opening fire on a Reuters photographer, [Namir Noor-Eldeen](#), mistaking the telephoto lens in his hand for an rocket-propelled grenade (RPG). Noor-Eldeen appears to die immediately, though the helicopters spray the area back and forth with heavy artillery, killing several Iraqi men in the crossfire. [Saeed Chmagh](#)

, Noor-Eldeen's assistant, begins to crawl away from the dead bodies, pulling himself onto the sidewalk in an effort to find safety, and the soldiers beg for an excuse to kill him; they say they hope he'll reach for a weapon, any weapon, apparently so that they will be allowed to shoot him.

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When a van of good Samaritans appears and tries to help Chmagh into their vehicle, the soldiers in the helicopter beg again for, and are granted, permission to fire. They were unaware at the time that children were inside the van; a US military ground unit would later find the kids alive but injured. In all, 12 people were killed in the air strike.

Manning eventually uploaded the video to WikiLeaks on February 21 of 2010, and the organization published it on April 5, 2010, dubbing the footage "Collateral Murder." (At this point, the Iraq War Logs and the Afghan War Diary had not yet been published.) The "Collateral Murder" footage directly, and damningly, contradicted the US military's official account of what had taken place that day: In response to a Freedom of Information Act [filed](#) by Reuters in 2007, the military had claimed it could not estimate when, or if, the footage could be produced, saying in a [statement](#) released after the shooting that both Noor-Eldeen and Chmagh died as the result of an attack following insurgent fire, including RPGs.

"The most alarming aspect of the video to me," Manning later [testified](#), "was the seemingly delightful bloodlust [the US soldiers] appeared to have. They dehumanized the individuals they were engaging, and seemed to not value human life by referring to them as 'dead bastards' and congratulating each other on the ability to kill in large numbers." She also likened one soldier's behavior to "a child torturing ants with a magnifying glass."

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The release of the footage was [met](#) with [outrage](#) toward the army's apparently indiscriminate killings, both by the American public as well as people in Iraq. "At last the truth has been revealed," said Noor-Eldeen's father after the footage was leaked, [according](#) to the New York Times. "I would have sold my house and all that I own in order to show this tape to the world."

Manning had a reasoned explanation of her motivation for the leaks, which she [told to](#) a hacker named Adrian Lamo in May of 2010. "I want people to see the truth, regardless of who they are, because without information, you cannot make informed decisions as a public," she wrote.

When Manning uploaded the Iraq War Logs and the Afghan War Diary to WikiLeaks in February she added a note, which [ended this way](#) : "This is possibly one of the most significant documents of our time, removing the fog of war and revealing the true nature of 21st century asymmetric warfare."

In May of 2010, Adrian Lamo, the hacker with whom Manning had corresponded after uploading massive amounts of data to WikiLeaks, turned her over to the Department of Justice. She had sought out Lamo a week earlier, apparently lonely and trying to make some human connection. Lamo was publicly [connected](#) to WikiLeaks, which may have made Manning see him as a relevant contact.

On May 27, Chelsea Manning was arrested. She was put in an "8' x 8' x 8' wire mesh cage in Kuwait," [according](#) to VICE, and held for two months before being transferred to the United States, where she was put in an even smaller cage at Marine Corps Base Quantico, in Virginia. Here, Manning was kept in solitary confinement for nine months, frequently stripped and left naked, and awoken when she fell asleep. A dentist provided mental health evaluations.

During this period, WikiLeaks was actively publishing the rest of the documents that Manning

sent to them, including the Afghan War Diaries, the Iraq War Logs, and a massive collection of US diplomatic cables. (Manning's leaks clarified previously opaque international affairs and embarrassed US state officials, but their impact on our nation's relationship with foreign powers were "fairly modest," [according](#) to former Defense Secretary Robert Gates.)

While Manning's actions as a whistleblower sent shockwaves around the globe, the American government's treatment of her in state custody has become a human rights crisis in itself. In 2011, PJ Crowley, then the Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs, [resigned](#) from his position following public

[remarks](#)

that he made about Manning. "What is being done to [Chelsea] Manning is ridiculous and counterproductive and stupid on the part of the Department of Defense," Crowley had said. His statement prompted President Obama to speak on Manning's experience at Quantico. At a press conference in 2011, Obama appeared satisfied with the Pentagon's assurance that the treatment of Manning was "

[appropriate](#)

."

A month after Obama was forced to confront Manning's treatment at Quantico, he publicly [stat](#)  
[ed](#)

that she "broke the law," despite the fact she had not yet been convicted of any crime.

Manning's defense attorney would later cite this statement by Obama as an example of the way that the US government affected public perception of Manning's guilt prior to her trial. In January of 2013, the pretrial imprisonment of Manning was indeed

[deemed illegal](#)

in a court ruling.

When her trial finally came, Manning pled guilty to lesser charges in hopes that the judge would be lenient in sentencing. She did not plead guilty to the charge of aiding the enemy. As the prosecution prepared to argue that Manning had aided an enemy of the state, Crowley spoke out again, this time in a [column](#) for the *Guardian* in which he lambasted the US government for "making a martyr" of Manning.

Manning was ultimately [acquitted](#) of the aiding the enemy charge, but she did not receive the leniency she had counted on.

The conditions Manning faces in prison are brutal, and some of her advocates say they're tantamount to state-sponsored harassment. "The US military has kept her in a constant state of stress by continually harassing her with frivolous prison infractions," said Greer, the advocate who helped Manning to petition President Obama. Like Manning's lawyers and other supporters, Greer believes that Manning is "being denied the mental health support and gender-related health care that she desperately needs."

Until 2015, Manning was [denied hormones](#) to help her transition, and she's still required to wear her hair cropped closely to her head, in line with the military's standards for male inmates. In 2015, she was threatened with indefinite solitary confinement for [possessing "contraband"](#)—toothpaste and LGBTQ reading materials. This summer she was [placed in solitary](#), as punishment for attempting to take her own life. In September, after Manning staged a hunger strike, the military [guaranteed in writing](#) that it will provide her with gender reassignment surgery, though she has yet to receive that treatment.

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To some, Manning's treatment at the hands of the US military and her prolonged suffering is justification enough to commute her sentence. "Chelsea's mistreatment by the military and in their custody has been so protracted and indefensibly cruel that she should certainly be released immediately," insists Jones. Others, like Greer, note that Manning's continued incarceration essentially deprives the world of a vocal advocate for freedom and transparency. "She is an incredibly strong person with a brilliant and strategic mind, and she wants to use her talent and passion to make positive change in the world," Greer says. "The fact that she is kept away from us, locked behind bars, is truly a tragedy for our whole society."

Manning's lawyers at the ACLU, conversely, argue that her sentence should be overturned because her First Amendment rights were violated during her prosecution. In a [brief](#) filed earlier this year, the organization [argues](#) that the fact that she was prosecuted under the Espionage Act—a law first introduced during

World War I that targets spies and traitors but has been used against whistleblowers and government officials who have communicated with the press in recent years—was unconstitutional.

One thing most of Manning's advocates unequivocally agree on is the fact that she will suffer immensely if she's not freed soon—and, with a looming Trump presidency, that her future may be frighteningly uncertain. While conditions have been brutal, Manning has at least finally been able to access healthcare. Many fear that such treatment could be threatened under Trump, who has been [openly dismissive](#) of the rights of trans people serving in the military.

Manning told Broadly that she suffers from feelings of desperation at times. "Sure, I have been surviving, and I plan on fighting to survive and move forward in the years to come," she said. "But I have no idea what challenges lie ahead."

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Many advocates acknowledge that the present situation isn't very encouraging: President Obama has been [notoriously tough](#) on the prosecution of whistleblowers, and it doesn't help that many in the government still see Manning's actions as harmful to national security. "I will be surprised if President Obama commutes her sentence," PJ Crowley tells Broadly, adding that he does not consider Manning to be a whistleblower and considers her actions irresponsible and dangerous: "While serving in a war zone, she forwarded intelligence information and other sensitive material to someone not authorized to possess it," he says.

But even an establishment figure like Crowley, who believes that Manning's sentencing was just, recognizes that she should not have to spend 35 years in prison. "Chelsea Manning should be paroled at the first opportunity and allowed to go home and reconstruct her life," Crowley said.

According to Manning's lawyer, Chase Strangio, she "is seeking clemency and relief from her egregiously long sentence precisely so that she can, as Crowley suggests, 'go home and reconstruct her life', and so that she can, as Manning explains, finally live as the woman she was always meant to be." Strangio reiterates that Manning pled guilty, that she's not asking to

be pardoned, and that she understands that she will "continue to face the consequences of her actions." Those actions, Strangio emphasizes, were motivated by a sense of duty to the American people.

"Chelsea acted in the service of the public interest to disclose information she believed imperative to inform people of harms perpetrated in the government's name around the world," Strangio explains. This is something that President Obama could consider when deciding whether or not to commute Manning's sentence to time served before he leaves office in January. According to Strangio, "her chances of surviving in prison much longer are slim, and action now will prevent the government from overseeing her unnecessary and untimely death."

Due to her belief that the American people have a right to know what their representative government is doing, and at whose expense, a woman is now locked in a prison in Kansas, where, among other injustices, she has been forced to fight legal battles to be given healthcare, punished for attempting suicide, and required to cut her hair because the state considers her to be a man. With incoming President Donald Trump's [expansive](#) military and surveillance [powers](#), his apparent [disinterest](#) in truth, and [cavalier attitude](#) toward potential Russian interference in American politics, transparency in government is more important than ever before, as is the informed participation of the public in the sometimes disturbing behavior of the state.

Though there are platforms that share her writing, Manning, who risked her life and liberty to advocate for transparency, is now barely visible. Other than a digital black and white photograph taken during the first time that she dressed as a woman, the world has never even seen her. "I often worry that I have become more of a symbol than human," Manning wrote in her letter. If people forget that she is more than a whistleblower or a hero, then they'll never really know her, or understand the urgency and the severity of her situation.

"The truth is that I am just as vulnerable, and lonely at times, as everyone else," Manning continued. "I have my flaws. I have strengths. I have weaknesses. I also have talents. I have faults. There are a lot of things I can do. But there are also a lot of things I cannot do. I am only human."