

To the Editor May 11, 2020

Free Reality Winner *Updated*

Former Airman Reality Leigh Winner was a 25-year-old federal contractor employed at the NSA in Georgia as a cryptolinguist who in May 2017, was arrested and accused by the Justice Department of sending a classified document to a news organization. She was convicted of leaking classified info to the media about 2016 election hacking by the Russians, *which was unknown to the public at the time*. In 2018, she was sentenced to five years and three months in prison for violating the [Espionage Act](#). Prosecutors said her sentence was the longest ever imposed in federal court for an unauthorized release of government information to the media.

Reality told the FBI that while in the Air Force at Ft. Meade, she worked in the drone program and her job was to translate communications so that drone operators would know whom to target. She watched people die. As a matter of record, she helped kill hundreds of people. A commendation she received in October 2016 praises her for “assisting in geolocating 120 enemy combatants during 734 airborne sorties.” She is commended for “removing more than 100 enemies from the battlefield.” She aided in 650 “enemy captures” and 600 “enemies killed in action.”

In Georgia as a NSA intelligence specialist contractor, she translated Farsi in documents relating to Iran’s aerospace program. She also had access to documents outside her area of expertise, for example, a five-page classified report detailing a Russian attempt to access American election infrastructure through a private software company. She eventually leaked this document to the news media. According to the analysis in the report, Russian intelligence sent [phishing](#) emails to the employees of a company that provides election support to eight states. After obtaining login credentials, the Russians sent emails infected with malware to over 100 election officials, days before the election, spoofed to look like the software company’s email address.

Russian military intelligence executed a cyberattack on at least one U.S. voting software supplier and sent spear-phishing emails to more than 100 local election officials just days before last November’s presidential election, according to a [highly classified intelligence report](#).

She released this document to the media, because it seemed to her that this specific account should not be hidden from public, especially in light of the massive public drama and confusion regarding the validity of the election results. ***The states in which the election systems were hacked did not know about it until she released the document.***

After seeing what happened to previous whistleblowers like [Thomas Drake](#) and [Bill Binney](#), when they used internal government whistleblowing channels, she, like Ed Snowden, chose this different path to try to avoid having her life destroyed by the US government.

Her case in the courts was watched by a growing class of intelligence professionals now burdened by knowledge of an existing surveillance state, its mass surveillance programs and extralegal excesses. We all had to watch as Reality’s lawyers struggled to defend her in a venue designed for WW1 spies. She was not able to argue that leaking evidence of Russian

interference in an American election was in the best interest of the American public, and thus a selfless and patriotic act.

In recent Espionage Act cases, prosecutors have successfully argued that the intention of the leaker is irrelevant, as is the perceived or actual value of the leak to the public. Reality found herself trapped in a strange logic of secrecy, in which her coworkers, friends and family cannot defend her character, *and the only room in which her intentions do not matter is the one in which she is on trial.*

Reality's parents tell a story about a vacation to SeaWorld when Reality and her sister were just girls. The Winners took in a show, watched sleek gray dolphins leap in unison, their sweet-sounding squeals elicited on command. Her sister was loving it, but Reality explained that in captivity, the dolphins' signals bounce crazily off the walls; so their capacity for echolocation drives them mad. For her sister, the show was ruined. It had been easier not to know what was hidden below the visible, beneath the bright surface of the cage.

We should all be concerned about this injustice. **Free Reality Winner!**

1/16/2020 [FBI Changes Policy for Notifying States of Election Systems Cyber Breaches \(wsj.com\) 2](#)

The Federal Bureau of Investigation will [notify state officials when local election systems are believed to have been breached by hackers](#) [*the link is pay walled*], a pivot in policy that comes after criticism that the FBI wasn't doing enough to inform states of election threats, *WSJ* reported Thursday, citing people familiar with the matter. From a report: *The FBI's previous policy stated that it notified the direct victims of cyberattacks, such as the counties that own and operate election equipment, but wouldn't necessarily share that information with states. Several states and members of Congress in both parties had criticized that policy as inadequate and one that stifled state-local partnerships on improving election security.*

Further reading: [Despite Election Security Fears, Iowa Caucuses Will Use New Smartphone App. https://slashdot.org/](#)

Now this all seems a bit ironic, doesn't it? She remains in prison for doing a public good.

"One has an obligation to disobey unjust laws." Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reality_Winner

<https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/12/who-is-reality-winner.html>