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# How A Drone Whistleblower In Montana

# Survived A Political Prosecution

Not only did drone whistleblower Brandon Bryant and his defense defeat a political case, but they convinced a jury to acquit Brandon a day early.

Brandon Bryant

In July, drone whistleblower Brandon Bryant survived a political prosecution that was launched against him by the Missoula County Attorney's Office in Montana and with support from city council members.

Brandon was accused of making "threats" and "improper influence" in official or political

matters, a felony that carries a potential sentence of 10 years in prison. The charge stemmed from a city council member who googled him after he spoke at a city council meeting during public comment.

City Council member Julie Merritt found a video that was edited by someone who joined the drone program years after Brandon left the Air Force. This “stalker,” as Brandon describes him, took a 14-minute video that was only visible to subscribers of his YouTube channel and edited it to just over four minutes. He then labeled the video, “Brandon Bryant Promises To ‘Eliminate’ People Over the Next Year.”

The video freaked out Missoula city representatives, who already had a low view of Brandon because he called them out for increased gentrification and poverty.

Matt Jennings, the chief criminal deputy county attorney, took prior statements made before the city council, combined snippets with the edited video, and pursued Brandon as if he was a deranged military veteran who could

potentially massacre city council members at any moment.

But the jury heard Brandon testify himself and saw through the prosecution's argument. They acquitted Brandon of threatening city council members on July 8.

"I grew up in a wrestling family, and it kind of felt like being declared the state champion of a tournament," Brandon told The Dissenter in an interview a few days after he was acquitted. "I feel like I've been fighting it ever since I blew the whistle, and this is just an accumulation of a whole bunch of things."

Family visited the weekend after Brandon prevailed. His mother, LanAnn, shared, "It was so cool to be able to talk to them about Brandon being found not guilty, and instead of having to face something else."

**'Everything Came To A Singular Point, And I Won'**

Brandon is a former drone sensor operator, who has been outspoken on the role the U.S. Air Force plays in carrying out CIA drone strikes. He testified to the German parliament in October 2015 and specifically offered testimony about the Ramstein air base in Germany as being integral to the United States drone program.

Hours later, the Air Force sent two men, who represented themselves as officers with the U.S. Air Force Office of Special Investigations, to speak with Brandon's mother. They tried to intimidate her by claiming the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) had her on a "hit list." Both Brandon and LanAnn considered this retaliation.

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In December 2015, Brandon was one of four Air Force whistleblowers, who [signed on to a letter](#) about their experiences to President Barack Obama in December 2015. “We witnessed gross waste, mismanagement, abuses of power, and our country’s leaders lying publicly about the effectiveness of the drone program,” they declared.

“In the trial, we talked about everything. We talked about veterans’ issues. We talked about the whistleblowing. We talked about the people that harassed me online. We talked about my struggles with health. We talked about [tax increment financing],” Brandon added.

“Everything came to a singular point, and I won. Not only did I win, but I won a day early.”

Indeed, closing argument ended in the early evening. The jury deliberated for one to two hours before they informed the judge that they had a verdict. They were under no pressure to come up with a verdict that night. The court was prepared for another day of jury deliberation on July 9.

Brandon said the jury “showed themselves to be intelligent and thoughtful. They listened to the whole [case], and the state really tried some underhanded things, some really cheap shot dishonorable things. They saw it. I haven’t talked to them myself, but I can almost guarantee that they saw it and were not impressed.”

On February 11, 2020, the Missoula police arrested Brandon. Bail was set at \$100,000. “He doesn’t have that [kind of] money,” LanAnn said. “I am a teacher. I don’t have that money either.”

“We ended up doing a GoFundMe, and we raised \$7,000 and then Brandon had to pay the difference to the bail bondsman,” she recalled.

“So it was \$10,000. And then I had to put up my teacher retirement.”

“I didn’t withdraw from my teacher retirement, but I had a note that said if things went awry I had \$98,000 that they still hold a note on. I’ve not received that note back.”

LanAnn is a special education teacher and at an age where she could retire, but she put that on hold while her son was prosecuted.

An ankle bracelet was not put on Brandon so they could track him. He also did not have to check in every week with the prerelease center, according to LanAnn.

LanAnn wondered, if someone can post bail, then all of the sudden, you’re no longer a person who has the potential to commit mass murder?

“It just made no sense to me at all how money seems to be the issue. Money is the driving force. The judicial system, even though they use taxpayers’ money to prosecute Brandon, they



made money because they get money from the bail.”

It was a “big deal” for Brandon that this prosecution took away his ability to travel. “Whenever I would take my dog for a walk, there would be cops circling me,” Brandon shared.

“I was even attacked in September by a local gang member with a knife, and then after that happened, his fellow gang members were kind of stalking me for a bit. It was kind of like being in jail in my own house.”

Brandon had access to the internet and video games. “But it was really upsetting because I didn't really feel safe. That was the one big thing that, I think, that was really going on the last year and a half. I didn't feel safe.”

He believed someone could take matters into their own hands and try to hurt him or interfere with his life, and there was nothing he could do. The judge took away his ability to defend himself, and he could no longer hang out with

his friends.

“All those stipulations and restrictions on me were way, way more than they should’ve been, and I just had to sit there and endure it,” Brandon said.

## **The Missoula Mayor Testifies In Brandon’s Defense**

Jacob Coolidge, Brandon’s defense attorney, clearly demonstrated how the charge against Brandon failed to state an actual offense and infringed upon his freedom of expression.

To convict someone of “threatening” or “improper influence,” prosecutors have to show that the person communicated a threat with the intent to change the behavior of public officials. But Brandon did not record the video for city council members. He never named a single city council member in the video. He also never made any specific demand in the video.

Jennings relied on city council members, who claimed they felt threatened. The problem, however, was that Brandon convinced an equal number of city council members to testify that they never believed Brandon posed any danger. In fact, Missoula Mayor John Engen testified as a defense witness.

During a 2019 city council meeting, where Brandon spoke for three minutes during public comment, he pointed at Engen as he told a religious parable. That did not make Engen afraid.

The mayor saw Brandon in the following days as he was leaving another city council meeting. Brandon apologized, and they discussed how he had gone to school with one of his uncles, who was a class president.

Stereotypes of military veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder were deployed by Jennings in order to help him overcome the lack of evidence, which Brandon viewed as a “greater reflection of how the government treats veterans.”

The Veterans Affairs Department is “not there to take care of veterans,” Brandon contended. “It’s there to make sure that they don’t take care of veterans enough. It’s like an insurance company. I’ve been fighting for my own health care with the VA—and maybe my whistleblowing has gotten in the way of that and they’ve politicized my own healthcare.”

“But it really is reflective they tell us, thank you for your service. Then they go behind your backs and just fuck us over repeatedly. And it’s not just modern veterans. It’s Korean War veterans. It’s Vietnam War veterans. It’s Gulf War veterans. It’s like five generations of veterans.”

“I’m really disappointed that the Montana state, which has the highest per capita of veterans of any other state in the nation, decided to weaponize my own service against me,” Brandon confessed.

LanAnn acknowledged how sad and frustrating it is that prosecutors can accuse someone of something serious with so little evidence, and

there's nothing you can do about it. "You can't get your life back. You don't get that 17 months back. You don't get lost money. Brandon was going to travel. He had speaking engagements."

"I was invited by a series of universities in the United States to come do a talk, and I had to tell them no," Brandon shared. His family is well-known in the community, which made the case further humiliating.

## **'We Just Need To Make Our Voices Louder'**

These types of political cases seem like an unfortunate byproduct of the era under President Donald Trump, where more and more elected officials believe they must protect themselves from their constituents.

Brandon agrees that the public could see a trend, where there are more prosecutions that target individuals for speaking out at city council meetings.

According to Brandon, fewer people address the city council because they do not want to be indicted. "I don't blame them at all actually. The only reason I went through with everything I did was because I felt it was my duty and necessary for me to do. And not very many people have that depth of commitment to something."

"We pay them for our basic needs and then they take those basic needs from us and don't provide [them]." Brandon described such acts as "worse than criminal."

Repeatedly during the trial, Brandon's attorney reminded the jury that this case started with a city council member googling Brandon's name. Elected representatives are not supposed to be searching for derogatory information so it is easier to dismiss their constituents' concerns. But that is what several Missoula City Council members have done.

"The parable that I told that started this whole thing off, the prosecution tried to use it against me. The reason that I yelled and didn't finish the story was because they were sitting there

looking at their phones and not even paying attention to anything anyone had to say," Brandon recalled.

When Brandon spoke before the city council, he was protesting Tax Increment Financing (TIFs), which funnel tax revenue into a special fund that is supposed to aid economic development but effectively functions as a slush fund for private corporations. It tends to divert money away from public services that citizens need.

Two banks, the Stockman Bank and the First Interstate Bank, received TIF money that the Missoula City Council said was for "infrastructure." In truth, the funds paid for bank building renovations, which is unusual.

"The big thing that got me in trouble was our River City Triangle that's been pretty much derelict since the late '90s," Brandon said. The city also had plans to award \$20 million to a wealthy individual from Wisconsin, whose father profited from selling "faulty medical equipment."

Brandon has no intention of staying away from city council meetings. When the pandemic subsides and representatives are meeting in person again, he plans to address them during public comment. He expects they are not going to like what he has to say, but he does not care.

“At this point, we just need to make our voices louder and make them heard, and if it causes problems for people in power, then that’s the whole point.”

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AUTHOR

## Kevin Gosztola

Managing editor of Shadowproof, host of the "Dissenter Weekly," co-host of the podcast "Unauthorized Disclosure," and member of Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ)

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