

The Bowe Bergdahl Story: His Five Year Ordeal as America's only Prisoner Of War is Over

But the Rush to Judgment has Just Begun

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The Bowe Bergdahl story has created an international firestorm this week. The Army private from Hailey, Idaho had become so disenchanted and disillusioned with the war he found himself fighting in Afghanistan, on June 30th, 2009 he walked away from his unit.

A short time later he was picked up by nearby enemy Taliban forces and ever since has been a Prisoner of War (POW) until a week ago May 31st. After five years in captivity the Obama administration negotiated a deal with the Taliban whereby Bergdahl as the sole American POW held by any enemy during the Afghanistan or Iraq Wars was released in exchange for five Taliban detainees from Guantanamo Bay Prison.

[Republicans](#) in Congress and their propagandist mainstream media wasted no time spearheading a bandwagon campaign to demonize the 28-year old Bowe Bergdahl as “a traitor who should be shot.” Senator McCain four months ago told CNN he would consider a deal bringing Sergeant Bergdahl home. But now he and his fellow Republicans have been shamelessly attempting to capitalize on the controversial situation by waging their never ending politics war against Obama. Expressing upset and disdain over what they considered Obama’s grandstanding celebration in successfully negotiating the release of an alleged “cowardly deserter,” Republicans and media are crying foul citing the administration’s failure to comply with rule of law. The snipe that Obama ignored the law requiring a 30-day advance Congressional approval on top of not bothering to notify them until less than twenty-four hours before the prisoner trade caused big political egos to be badly bruised. Also high on their political agenda is criticism over the potential cost of securing the freedom of one undeserving soldier for the freedom of five terrorists comprising so called high ranking leadership within the Afghan Taliban enemy’s army. Hence, the venomous attacks and relentless spectacle designed to both demonize and shame Obama, Bowe and his entire family.

In fact it is the Republicans and media that should be ashamed for preying on what should be a happy, long-awaited homecoming reunion for a family suffering this last half decade not knowing whether they will ever see their son alive again. Turning what should be one American family’s momentous, heartwarming occasion into just another opportunity to engage in the relentless pathetic game of partisan politics is atrocious. Yet this is what we all have come to expect from the most dysfunctional, fractured Congress in US history. Once again like always petty ego games take priority over serving the needs of American people.

Another quick accusation to emerge in the recent controversy is that Sergeant Bergdahl’s so called desertion directly caused the death of a number of his fellow GI’s. According to

accounts from [Republican operatives](#) who have ensured that a couple of soldiers from Bergdahl's unit went to the press to claim that on several subsequent rescue missions specifically seeking Bergdahl resulted in the deaths of fellow soldiers. In fact from prior records at the time the deaths were unrelated to Bergdahl's captivity but strategically utilized to cast false blame and shame on the now former POW and his family. The rush to judgment was extended to Bergdahl's father because he has grown a long beard and has learned Arabic in an effort to attempt to communicate with the Taliban to bring his son home. Rather than acknowledge the father's dedication and committed love for his son, he was targeted as a Taliban-looking disloyal American trying to protect his cowardly deserter of a son. The low blows that certain political and media predators will go to exploit lies for their own selfish agenda.

Eight American soldiers killed in action during the three months after Bergdahl's disappearance had more to do with the Taliban influx in Paktika Province than anything else. In fact throughout Afghanistan during those same three months of July through September before winter set in a total of 122 Americans died in the country, 58 more than the year before. In response to the increasing number of Taliban fighters, in the spring of 2009 when Private First Class Bergdahl first arrived in Afghanistan, he was part of Obama's order committing a surge of 30,000 more troops. At the time Bowe was captured by the Taliban, most of that surge deployment had not yet arrived. One month prior to Bergdahl's disappearance the [New York Times](#) documented that "hundreds of foreign fighters" had joined the Taliban cause in the country which was the reason to send more US troops.

In an article written two years ago by the late Rolling Stone journalist [Michael Hastings](#) who died suspiciously in a car crash a year ago this month just before he was about to reveal damaging evidence against US intelligence agencies, it was reported that Obama was hard at work trying to negotiate Bergdahl's release in time for boosting his 2012 reelection prospect. Obama has hit a few walls banging up his record with lots of scandalous blemishes and blackeyes, like Benghazi that won't go away. But in back to back weeks he has been reeling from his West Point speech fiasco where his arrogance was overly apparent in his once again using his exceptionalism card, then immediately followed by the VA scandal forcing him to get rid of scapegoated General Shinseki. So this week the opportunist suddenly rolls out his triumphant negotiated resolution to the Bergdahl POW case while taking a baby step toward fulfilling another one of his unkept promises in trying to shut down [Guantanamo](#).

After two full years of apparently still negotiating Bergdahl's long awaited release, last weekend Taliban soldiers finally handed Bergdahl over to Special Forces personnel who flew him by helicopter to safety. The American POW was then transported to a military hospital in Germany for evaluation this week and is scheduled to arrive home to his family in Idaho later this month. The long ordeal for Bowe and his family is finally over.

Surrounded by all this rancorous controversy, Bergdahl's [hometown](#) decided to cancel the big hoopla homecoming scheduled June 28th that had been in the works. The small town offered the excuse that it would be ill prepared to handle the influx of people if rolling out the full red carpet were to go forward. Seems odd because there will be a media circus mob in town covering the soldier's return anyway, big hoopla or no big hoopla. It likely has a bit more to do with succumbing to the up-in-arms backlash that various veterans groups and others railing in such harsh judgment against Bergdahl calling him a coward and a traitor. Their vehement reaction would be in an uproar if his big celebrative return treated him to a

national hero's welcome. So the town that relies so heavily on tourism next door to America's very first ski resort Sun Valley decided not to risk incurring the wrath that could tarnish its fine upstanding reputation, pristine image and bottom line revenue.

Of course the debate will go on for months over the potential consequences of releasing the five Taliban soldiers. The deal requires them to return to [Qatar](#) where they came from and have the Qatari government saddled with the responsibility of keeping tabs on their whereabouts ensuring that they do not return to fight in Afghanistan. And because skeptics claim that since they are supposedly higher ranking Taliban members (though there is evidence disputing that claim), of course many hawkish Republicans and others are certain that they will slip through the cracks once back in Qatar and soon enough end up back on the battlefields fighting against the Afghan National Army and the 9800 US troops that Obama committed expected to remain in the war torn nation until 2017.

There are those critics who maintain that the US government should have never negotiated with terrorists. But prisoner exchanges as a war winds down have always taken place in every war. So that argument is both false and irrelevant. Another barb that has Republicans fuming is the way their adversary Obama handled the release, neither gaining their approval nor informing them with any advance notice. The Obama camp refused to apologize for either, other than a last hour call to Intelligence Committee Chair Feinstein, insisting that due to Bergdahl's alleged failing health issues it became a now or never proposition. According to the White House, waiting to adhere to bureaucratic protocol would delay and could have sabotaged the successful release and only further endangered the POW's health.

At one point during his five year ordeal in captivity, Bowe actually did escape in 2011 but was recaptured a short time later. In 2012 when Hastings was writing his article he wrote how senior Obama administration officials were working feverishly on cutting a deal with the Taliban for a prisoner swap timed with gaining election dividends. But Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Defense Secretary Leon Panetta were still employing General Petraeus' failed Counterinsurgency manual as their Afghan exit plan strategy and squashed any deal at the time. They felt that an end of war prisoner exchange could be viewed in the months leading up to the election as a sign of weakness. Senator McCain also put the kibosh on a deal, claiming that the five Taliban detainees at Guantanamo "are the five biggest murderers in world history." No doubt they murdered less people than the bombs McCain knowingly dropped on human targets in Hanoi before his plane got shot down in the Vietnam War. But he was called a hero and elected senator.

Before becoming a soldier in the US Army, Bergdahl went to Paris to learn French and tried enlisting in the French Foreign Legion but was rejected. So with the recruiter's promise of "helping Afghan villagers to rebuild and defend their lives," [Bowe enlisted](#) in the Army for a tour he figured to be the next best prospect of measuring up to his zest for adventure. Just before being shipped off to the warfront, Bergdahl told a fellow soldier, "If this deployment is lame, I'm just going to walk off in the mountains of Pakistan." Having grown up in the wilds of Idaho, the state among the lower 48 with the most wilderness area, Bergdahl fashioned himself a survivalist who could make it on his own.

Not long after arriving in Afghanistan, Bergdahl and his company were captured on film by a British documentarian working for the Guardian. Bowe's unit reacted to deteriorating conditions on the battlefield under poor leadership and increasing low morale. There were constant mistakes made by officers in command. Eventually a popular lieutenant Bowe

knew in another company was the first US casualty in their battalion killed by an Improvised Explosive Device.

Three days prior to going AWOL, Bowe Bergdahl wrote in his final [email](#) to his parents:

“In the US army you are cut down for being honest... but if you are a conceited brown nosing shit bag you will be allowed to do whatever you want, and you will be handed your higher rank... the system is wrong. I am ashamed to be an american. And the title of US soldier is just the lie of fools. The US army is the biggest joke the world has to laugh at. It is the army of liars, backstabbers, fools and bullies.”Bergdahl had witnessed a military truck run over an Afghan child. Growing more and more unhappy reacting to what he observed, he questioned America’s involvement. His email concluded:

“I am sorry for everything here. These people need help, yet what they get is the most conceited country in the world telling them that they are nothing and that they are stupid. We don’t even care when we hear each other talk about running their children down in the streets with our armored trucks.”His father Bob’s sound advice was to “obey your conscience.” To his son that meant quietly slipping away from his outpost without his gun into the mountains. But within 24 hours he was in the enemy’s hands.

As both a West Point cadet and Army officer, no doubt along with perhaps millions of other ex-US soldiers, I can vouch for Bowe’s exact same feelings. Young men and women start off as idealistic patriots, believing in their country and their country’s cause in war, only to have their belief system and sense of right and wrong challenged when facing such shattering and bitter disillusionment. It is always a soul searching struggle to realize and reconcile that the military is never what it has been cracked up to be when impressionable young people are brainwashed by all the constant lies that TV commercials, recruiters, politicians and movies. The cold hard reality never measures up to expectation and hope. The callous acceptance of being part of a corrupt and broken institution that takes pride in being the biggest killing machine on earth is repugnant to anyone with a conscience and compassion toward fellow human beings.

Those who have experienced similar living nightmares in the course of their military service can easily understand why Bowe Bergdahl walked away from the war. For those who stay and serve their nation in combat, perhaps becoming injured and/or have to watch their buddies die, it may be more difficult to accept Bowe’s behavior as an honorable choice without passing negative judgment. But Bowe was merely following his dad’s advice and left his unit because in good conscience he no longer believed in the insanity of war and wanted no part in it any longer. Had he been aware that he had the option of filing a conscientious objector claim, perhaps he would have chosen that path. But he could not live the lies and pretend that what he saw was okay any longer.

Like Private Bradley Manning who did what he had to when he encountered war atrocities being committed by his nation, Manning chose to be a courageous whistleblower. In fact it is written in Geneva convention rules that a soldier not only has the right but is mandated by law to refuse an order that knowingly violates others’ human rights as civilians. Manning bravely followed Geneva convention rules and his moral conscience in doing the honorable thing, and as a result is serving a grossly unjust 35 year prison sentence.

I believe Bowe Bergdahl acted morally on his own conscience like his father advised and paid dearly for his decision by suffering the last five years as a Prisoner of War. Though the

Army plans to reopen an investigation over the circumstances of his leaving his unit in 2009, with time served as POW and the unfair and harsh judgment from many Americans, Bowe Bergdahl deserves America's compassion and support.

Joachim Hagopian is a West Point graduate and former US Army officer. He has written a manuscript based on his unique military experience entitled "[Don't Let The Bastards Getcha Down.](#)" It examines and focuses on US international relations and national security issues. After the military, Joachim earned a masters degree in Clinical Psychology and worked in the mental health field for more than a quarter century. He concentrates now on his writing.

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