

Prisoner Exchange With the Taliban: The Release of Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl

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Global Research, June 05, 2014

[World Socialist Web Site](#)

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

The American media is once again exhibiting its boundless capacity for dispensing propaganda and promoting the most backward and reactionary conceptions. Such is the campaign of vilification directed against Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl, released May 31 in Afghanistan in a prisoner exchange with the Taliban.

An op-ed column in the *Wall Street Journal* Tuesday reached new depths by floating the suggestion that the proper response to the return of Bergdahl was to assemble a firing squad. The column quoted Article 85 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice: "Any person found guilty of desertion or attempt to desert shall be punished, if the offense is committed in time of war, by death or such other punishment as a court-martial may direct."

The campaign against Bergdahl has featured a group of former members of his platoon in Afghanistan who have been organized and mobilized by right-wing political operatives of the Republican Party. Richard Grenell, a former aide to then-US Ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton, who went on to work in 2012 for the Mitt Romney presidential campaign, has been identified as the main go-between for the former soldiers and their media publicists.

The networks are putting these men on the air to make various allegations against Bergdahl without having carried out any independent investigation into their veracity. The target of this coordinated attack, confined to a US military hospital in Germany, is unable to respond to the charges against him and defend himself.

Besides the usual suspects at Fox News, talk radio, and ultra-right blogs, the so-called "mainstream media" has joined in the onslaught. While interviewing an ex-soldier who had served with Bergdahl, NBC Today Show host Savannah Guthrie asked directly whether the former POW should be prosecuted for desertion.

On the op-ed page of the *New York Times*, Alex Berenson, a former embedded *Times* reporter in Iraq and Afghanistan, also cited Article 85, adding, "Sergeant Bergdahl may have broken any number of military laws." He continued,

"I don't see how the Pentagon can avoid re-examining what happened on June 30, 2009" [The day Bergdahl left his unit and was captured by the Taliban]. "If Sergeant Bergdahl is proved mentally competent to stand trial, maybe he deserves a few years in Leavenworth to reflect on his dereliction of duty."

Some media reports have quoted snippets of e-mail messages sent by Bergdahl to his

parents during the months before his capture by the Taliban, demonstrating his increasing disillusionment with the war in Afghanistan. Long extracts of these e-mails appear in a profile of Bergdahl and his family in the June 21, 2012 issue of *Rolling Stone*, headlined [America's Last Prisoner of War](#). Bowe apparently reached the breaking point on June 25, 2009, after a young officer he knew and liked was killed by a roadside bomb.

Two days later he wrote his parents, "... I am ashamed to even be American. The horror of the self-righteous arrogance that they thrive in. It is all revolting."

"I am sorry for everything here," he continued. "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, that they have no idea how to live."

Referring to a particularly gruesome incident he had witnessed, he added, "We don't even care when we hear each other talk about running their children down in the dirt streets with our armored trucks."

Shortly thereafter, Bergdahl left his unit, armed only with a knife, apparently intending to walk to Pakistan or China, and was captured soon after by the insurgents. According to the *Rolling Stone* account, he escaped at least once, in August or September 2011, but was recaptured.

The most odious smear against Bergdahl is the suggestion that he is responsible for the deaths of American soldiers, supposedly because they were searching for him in eastern Afghanistan and ran into IEDs or Taliban ambushes. A list of either six or eight soldiers has been given enormous media publicity, and the supposed link between their deaths and Bergdahl's disappearance asserted as fact.

Wednesday's *New York Times*, however, in a front-page report citing evidence from the Afghanistan war logs leaked to WikiLeaks by Army private Chelsea (Bradley) Manning, acknowledged that there was no evidence of a connection between these deaths and Bergdahl.

Perhaps the most apt response came from Thomas Ricks, former *Washington Post* reporter and author of several books on the Iraq war, who wrote on Twitter, "Re Bergdahl: If we're trying people for causing the deaths of soldiers, I know of a lot of people more culpable than a depressed private."

At the top of such a list would be George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

The real purpose of the campaign against Bergdahl is to counter his antiwar views, which give expression to the sentiments of the vast majority of the American population. It is a continuation of the media's efforts to conceal the criminal and neo-colonial character of the war. The witch-hunt against Bergdahl is of a piece with the US media's campaign of denigration and slander against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and Private Manning in retaliation for their exposure of war crimes in Afghanistan, Iraq and other countries.

As far as the media apologists for imperialism are concerned, a soldier who is horrified by crimes against humanity and refuses to participate in them is a criminal, while those who obediently carry out atrocities are heroes. It should be recalled that the defense of "just carrying out orders" was flatly repudiated by the Nuremberg Tribunal into the crimes of the Nazis during World War II. Those who would revive it today are paving the way for even

greater crimes.

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