

The Pentagon's Vendetta against Former Afghanistan Prisoner of War Bowe Bergdahl

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The decision by the Pentagon to bring charges of desertion and misbehavior before the enemy against former Afghanistan prisoner of war Bowe Bergdahl is vindictive and politically reactionary. Its purpose is to intimidate rank-and-file soldiers who, like Bergdahl, turn against the savagery of the wars American imperialism is waging in the Middle East and Central Asia, or who oppose future American wars around the world.

Bergdahl, a private first class near the beginning of a yearlong tour of duty in Afghanistan, walked away from his unit in Paktika province in June 2009. He was captured by the Taliban and held as a prisoner, often under barbaric conditions, and forced to participate in propaganda videos. The Obama administration negotiated his release last May as part of a prisoner exchange in which five long-held Taliban prisoners were allowed to leave Guantanamo Bay.

While the American media and the ultra-right have long peddled myths about Vietnam War-era POWs in an effort to retrospectively justify that imperialist bloodbath, these same elements immediately launched a campaign of vilification against the sole Afghan War POW upon his return home from captivity. Former members of Bergdahl's unit played a prominent role in these efforts.

There were claims—all later proven false—that Bergdahl had left his unit in order to join the Taliban and fight on their side, and that as many as a dozen American soldiers had been killed in the course of fruitless efforts to find and rescue him in the months after his disappearance. At the height of this campaign, the *Wall Street Journal* published a commentary suggesting that Bergdahl should face the death penalty for desertion under fire in wartime.

The real reason for the ferocity of the attack on Bergdahl was his public disaffection from the war in Afghanistan and, in particular, his caustic criticism of the conduct of the American military in that devastated country. In 2012, *Rolling Stone* magazine had published excerpts of emails from Bergdahl to his parents in Idaho in which he declared, "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.”

In response to the right-wing campaign against Bergdahl, the machinery of the Pentagon began to grind out the mockery that passes for “military justice.” Lt. Gen. Kenneth Dahl interviewed Bergdahl and other members of his unit and filed a report with the top brass. Last week, Gen. Mark Milley, head of the Army Forces Command at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, authorized charges against Bergdahl. A preliminary hearing is set for April 22 to determine whether to order a court-martial, accept a negotiated plea, or dismiss the charges.

Eugene Fidell, one of Bergdahl’s attorneys, said the Army report contains evidence that Bergdahl left his post not to desert, but to go to another military outpost to report on the conditions in his own unit. In a memorandum that he made public, Fidell wrote:

“[T]he report basically concludes that Sgt. Bergdahl did not intend to remain away from the Army permanently, as classic ‘long’ desertion requires... It also concludes that his specific intent was to bring what he thought were disturbing circumstances to the attention of the nearest general officer.”

This might have been a violation of military discipline, but it hardly warrants the charge of desertion.

Two military officials confirmed Fidell’s account of the secret report in interviews with CNN. “This was a kid who had leadership concerns on his mind,” one of the officials said. “He wasn’t fed up, he wasn’t planning to desert.”

The vendetta against Bergdahl reveals two interconnected political facts. First, the military brass is determined to make an example of the former POW because, in addition to popular opposition to the wars in the Middle East and Central Asia, there is increasing turmoil within the ranks of the military itself, as the Afghanistan War approaches its fifteenth year and the war in Iraq is resumed twelve years after the US invasion of that country.

Second, the Obama administration, which initially hailed Bergdahl’s safe return as a diplomatic triumph, to be celebrated with photo ops with the POW’s parents in the White House Rose Garden, takes its lead from the Pentagon chiefs. It is the military-intelligence apparatus, not its nominal civilian “commander,” that calls the shots in Washington.

Behind the vendetta against Bergdahl is the fear of a Vietnam War-like growth of demoralization and opposition within the ranks, under conditions of a continuous escalation of US military operations, not only in the Middle East, but directed increasingly against major powers such as Russia and China.

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