

The political vendetta against John Walker Lindh continues

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The Bush administration this week stepped up its campaign against John Walker Lindh, the American youth captured fighting alongside Taliban forces in Afghanistan. At the same time a federal grand jury piled up a series of charges against Lindh, intended to intimidate the 20-year-old, his family and defense team.

Announcing the 10-count indictment, US Attorney General John Ashcroft sought to poison the atmosphere further against Lindh, blatantly disregarding Justice Department rules barring statements that might influence the outcome of a trial. "Americans who love their country do not dedicate themselves to killing Americans," Ashcroft declared, adding he was confident US attorneys trying the case would "secure justice for the nation that John Walker Lindh betrayed" and "uphold values that he dedicated himself to destroy."

Ashcroft also implied that Lindh—in reality, at most a foot soldier for the Taliban—was a key operative in Al Qaeda's operations. "As terrorists made their final preparations for the September 11 attacks," Lindh was "forging ever-deeper bonds with Al Qaeda. He met with Osama bin Laden. He chose to go to the front lines to fight with the Taliban."

James Brosnahan, the lead defense lawyer, urged Ashcroft to stop commenting on the case and accused the government of trying to evoke popular rage against his client because it had not been able to locate bin Laden or Taliban leader Mohammad Omar. "They have brought up the cannon to shoot the mouse," Brosnahan said.

The grand jury, which added six counts to the original complaint filed by the government, indicted Lindh for engaging "in a conspiracy to kill nationals of the United States, including civilians and military personnel." He is also charged with providing material support and resources and supplying services to "foreign terrorist organizations," namely Al Qaeda, the Taliban and a Pakistani fundamentalist group. He faces up to three life sentences plus 90 years, if convicted on all 10 counts.

The criminal charges are shoddy and vague at best. They are chiefly based on Lindh's own alleged confession, extracted by US military forces and the FBI after subjecting the youth to brutal conditions.

Although Lindh asked for an attorney, he was denied one, despite the fact that his parents had secured a lawyer who was ready and willing to see him in Afghanistan. According to a motion filed Tuesday by defense attorneys, Lindh was denied legal representation for 54 days while being interrogated.

The government's chief contention is that Lindh conspired to kill American nationals by joining Al Qaeda and the Taliban. As his defense attorneys have pointed out, however, when Lindh joined the Taliban they were engaged in a civil war with the Northern Alliance, not a war with the United States. As far as Lindh knew on September 6, when he was on the front lines fighting the Northern Alliance, Brosnahan said, the Taliban regime enjoyed the backing of the US, since the Bush administration had recently given \$43 million to the Taliban to eradicate poppy fields in Afghanistan. There is no evidence that Lindh made any attempt to engage in combat with the US military forces, let alone harm any American

civilian, the defense said.

According to the government's own account, Lindh left a religious school in Pakistan in May 2001 and joined a paramilitary camp run by an Islamic fundamentalist group concentrated on fighting in Kashmir against India. In late May he traveled to Afghanistan, where he went to a Taliban recruiting center in Kabul. Because he spoke Arabic and not any of the Afghan languages he was assigned to the Al Qaeda group. Lindh was allegedly offered the option of continuing to train in one of bin Laden's camps or travel outside of Afghanistan to conduct operations against the US or Israel. Lindh declined the offers and chose instead to go to the front lines to fight the Northern Alliance.

In October as the US began extensive bombing of Taliban forces in the Takhar region, Lindh's unit retreated toward Kunduz where the Taliban soldiers surrendered to the Northern Alliance on November 24. They were transported to the Qala-i-Janghi prison fortress near Mazar-i-Shariff, where hundreds of prisoners were massacred by US and Northern Alliance forces during a so-called prison rebellion. Lindh emerged from a basement in the fort on December 1 after US and Alliance forces used burning oil, freezing cold water, rockets and grenades to flush out the remaining prisoners.

The charges against Lindh are based on one of the most coerced confessions in US history. According to a motion filed by his defense attorneys, Lindh emerged from the fort's basement starving, freezing and with shrapnel and bullets still in his body. He was taken into US custody, restrained and blindfolded. Then the youth was driven to a location where he was held in a dark room for five or six days. He was denied medical care and sufficient food before unidentified agents began their interrogation. During this time Lindh repeatedly asked his interrogators when he could see a lawyer and a doctor. They answered they did not know when he could see a lawyer and continued to question him in violation of his rights.

On December 6 or 7 he was brought to Camp Rhino, a US Marine outpost 70 miles south of Kandahar. In transit he was blindfolded and tightly handcuffed and guards repeatedly threatened him with death and torture. When the plane landed, soldiers cut off all of Lindh's clothes and left him completely naked, other than his blindfold. He was bound to a stretcher with heavy duct tape, which was wound around his chest, upper arms, shoulders, ankles and the stretcher itself.

Lindh was then put inside a large metal cargo container, which sat on the desert floor at Camp Rhino, surrounded by rolls of barbed wire and a watchtower. There was no light, heat source or insulation, and only two holes for air, through which guards shouted epithets at Lindh. He was kept in these conditions for three days, with minimal food, medical attention and with his hands and feet handcuffed in such a way that his forearms were forced together and fully extended—making it almost impossible to sleep.

The young man was eventually taken to a nearby tent. When his blindfold was removed he faced an individual who identified himself as an

FBI agent. When Lindh again asked for a lawyer the agent said there were none available. He was not told that his parents had retained a lawyer for him who was ready and willing to see him in Afghanistan. The government had also prevented the Red Cross from delivering a note that Lindh's parents sent to him on or about December 3, stating they had retained a lawyer. This was the first of several attempts his parents made to communicate with Lindh through the Red Cross, all of which were denied.

After giving information, Lindh continued to be held in the container but his treatment began to improve. His bindings were loosened, he was no longer blindfolded at all times, he received more food and eventually received a thermal blanket. "Mr. Lindh believed that the only way to escape the torture of his current circumstance was to do whatever the agent [interrogating him] wanted," his attorneys wrote.

This horrendous treatment is what Attorney General Ashcroft was apparently referring to when he said, with a straight face, that Lindh had "been treated well and received adequate food and medical treatment while in custody of US officials. At each step in this process, Walker Lindh's rights, including his rights not to incriminate himself and to be represented by counsel, have been carefully, scrupulously honored."

The Bush administration is using the Lindh case in an effort to intimidate and silence any political dissent. This was revealed in the arguments used by government attorneys Wednesday to persuade a US magistrate to reject a request that the 20-year-old be released to the custody of his parents pending his trial.

In its motion, the government cited a series of email messages Lindh sent to his parents from Central Asia that allegedly demonstrated his "disloyalty" and "hostility" to America. The news media echoed this theme, including the *Associated Press*, which headlined its story on the letters, "E-Mails show Lindh despised America."

The letters included one written by Lindh to his mother on December 3, 2000, which referred to Bush as "your new president," adding, "I'm glad he's not mine." In another email, Lindh suggested it was the United States that had provoked the Gulf War and that Saddam Hussein had been "heavily encouraged" by an American official to invade Kuwait. A September 1998 letter to this mother suggested that the bombings of US embassies in Africa "seemed far more likely to have been carried out by the American government than by Muslims."

The publication of these letters indicates how the Bush administration intends to use this case to elevate political criticism of the present government and US policy in general to the level of a crime, if not treason.

In early December 2000, as Republicans were busy stealing a national election, millions of Americans, just like Lindh, did not consider Bush "their president." Despite the fraudulent campaign to portray Bush as wildly popular, this feeling no doubt still exists within wide layers of the population. Moreover, like Lindh, hundreds of millions of people throughout the world, and increasing numbers within the US itself, know full well that the US government uses deceit, provocation and violence to defend the global interests of corporate America.

One does not have to sympathize with Lindh's misguided support for Islamic fundamentalism, a deeply reactionary ideology, to realize that the attempt to legally crucify him is a profound threat to democratic rights.

The case against Lindh has a further political aim. It is being used to conceal who is really responsible for the tragic events in New York and Washington.

The grand jury indictment alleges: "At all relevant times from in or about 1989 until the date of the filing of this indictment, al Qaeda was an international terrorist group dedicated to opposing non-Islamic governments with force and violence." Within a short time of the Taliban consolidating power in 1996, the indictment continues, "Bin Laden and the Taliban made Afghanistan a destination point and training center for

thousands of young would-be terrorists from around the world."

But the Al Qaeda, the Taliban and Osama bin Laden are inseparable from the bloody and criminal relationship of the US government to Afghanistan. It is well known the US State Department and CIA encouraged, financed and armed Islamic fundamentalists to wage a war against the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul during the 1970s and 1980s, and stir up religious opposition in the Central Asian Republics to undermine the USSR.

It was former president Ronald Reagan's CIA director, William Casey, who made Afghanistan a destination point for would-be terrorists by initiating a campaign to recruit Islamic militants from all over the world to come to Afghanistan and fight in the anti-Soviet cause. This was part of the longstanding effort by the US government to utilize Islamic fundamentalism as a weapon against the influence of the secular left.

Bin Laden himself was a product of this process. He first went to Afghanistan in the early 1980s as a sympathizer of the Afghan mujahedin, whom Reagan and the American media praised as "freedom fighters." In Afghanistan bin Laden established the contacts with Islamic fundamentalists worldwide that made possible the organization of later terrorist attacks on US targets.

The Taliban regime grew out of the disaster left by the US when it abandoned Afghanistan following the departure of Soviet troops. The Taliban emerged from the bloody civil war between the various warlords who had been cultivated by the US. In fact, the Taliban was initially viewed sympathetically by American officials who hoped the regime would stabilize Afghanistan and allow US oil companies, such as Unocal, to build pipelines to transport oil and gas reserves from the lucrative Caspian Sea region. The Bush administration kept those connections open until negotiations on the pipeline deal collapsed and a decision was made to initiate military action against Afghanistan, well before the September 11 attacks occurred.

What the Bush administration and the American media today demonize as a global conspiracy of Islamic extremists—in which Lindh participated—is in large measure the product of American policy. The effort to condemn a 20-year-old youth for crimes that ultimately have their origins in US foreign policy must be rejected and opposed. One hopes that Lindh's defense team will not be intimidated by the piling on of charges and will use the case as an opportunity to educate the American people about these historical and political truths.



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