

Afghan insurgents hold US soldier

David Walsh
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Within the wider tragedy of the brutal US occupation of Afghanistan, the fate of Private Bowe Bergdahl has its own tragic dimension. The 23-year-old soldier from Hailey, Idaho was apparently captured by Afghan insurgents June 30 and remains in their hands.

A 28-minute videotape, released by the insurgents last Saturday, shows Bergdahl, sitting cross-legged and dressed in Afghan fashion, speaking with one of his captors. He expresses regrets about the US role in Afghanistan, saying “This is a waste, we shouldn’t be here.”

There are numerous questions about the manner in which Bergdahl fell into insurgent hands. The military told the Associated Press (AP) on July 2 that a US soldier had disappeared after walking off his base in eastern Afghanistan, reportedly in Paktika province, with three Afghan counterparts. The Army said Bergdahl was last seen when he was released from guard duty.

On July 6, according to the AP, “the Taliban claimed on their web site that five days earlier ‘a drunken American soldier had come out of his garrison’ and was captured by mujahedeen.”

P. J. Tobia, a freelance writer in Afghanistan, asserts that Bergdahl, a member of the 1st Battalion, 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment, based at Fort Richardson, Alaska, “went AWOL on his own, just wandering off the base.” Tobia claims that he was told by someone close to the search that Bergdahl left a note behind indicating “he was going to the mountains to find himself. He took a journal and 4 or 5 knives with him.”

In the video made by his captors, Bergdahl says that he was captured when he was “lagging behind” while on patrol.

Whatever the reality, one feels sympathy for the young man and his family. Their painful circumstances are entirely the responsibility of the American government and military, who are prosecuting a neocolonial war aimed at bringing the entire region under US control.

The military, which informed Bergdahl’s family of his disappearance weeks ago, has obviously been attempting to suppress the story. The release of the video this weekend disrupted that effort.

Bergdahl’s family issued a statement: “We’ve been overwhelmed with the outpouring of support and concern towards Bowe and our family. As you know, the situation is extremely difficult for everyone involved. We’d like to remind all of you our sole focus is seeing our beloved son Bowe safely home.”

Relatives and friends describe Bergdahl as adventurous. The *Washington Post* notes that those close to him paint him “in turns as a ballet dancer, a fencer, a voracious book reader and a young man fascinated by guns. Educated at home, friends say he always wanted to be ‘part of that warrior world.’” Sue Martin, owner of a coffee shop in Hailey where Bergdahl worked, told the media that “He’s a strong presence, very interesting, very diverse.”

The Pentagon has denounced the release of the video showing Bergdahl in captivity. “We condemn the use of this video and the public humiliation of prisoners. It is against international law,” said US military spokesman Col. Greg Julian.

This is monumental hypocrisy. The US government has made it a principle that its forces are not obliged to follow international law in their treatment of Afghan and Iraqi prisoners, detaining, abusing and torturing them at will. Some 600 prisoners are currently protesting their indefinite detention at the US prison in Bagram Air Base, a facility notorious for its barbaric conditions.

On CBS’s *Early Show* July 20, “terrorism expert” Jere Van Dyk pointed out that the insurgents are “sending a message to the United States and its allies, and equally they’re sending a message to the Afghan public: We can treat soldiers—we can treat prisoners better than the Americans are treating us.” Van Dyk cited numerous reports of abuse in US-run prisons.

“What they are saying to the Afghan public is that we can do a better job,” Van Dyk commented, “Do not be afraid of us.”

A Taliban spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, told Reuters, “He is fine and healthy as you saw in the video tape. We will decide in future as to what needs to be done with him.”

The US military and media condemn the Bergdahl videotape as “propaganda,” and argue that the views he

expresses on the war are “coerced.” Undoubtedly, the circumstances are coercive—Bergdahl is a prisoner, his captors have the upper hand. Nonetheless, while somewhat awkward, the nearly half-hour conversation does not appear to be scripted. Bergdahl is giving responses that his English-speaking interviewer wants to hear, but that does not mean everything he says was either forced out of him or is not true.

On the tape, after Bergdahl identifies himself and gives a version of his capture, his interviewer asks, “What did your leaders tell you? Who [did they say] you were fighting?”

Bergdahl replies, “Our leaders told us that we would be fighting the Taliban. They gave us no more information on that other than we’re fighting the terrorist group, the Taliban.” He later explains that the insurgents in Afghanistan were painted “as evil men, who killed and murdered anybody.”

Asked whether he thought the conflict in Afghanistan would be “easy or difficult,” the American soldier answers, “I think the history of Afghanistan is proof enough that the war is going to be extremely hard.”

Bergdahl asserts that US military commanders instruct their forces to do whatever they have to do to defeat the enemy. “There are no rules as to what they have us do.”

In regard to American troops, he says, “They want to go home. They don’t want to be here,” and that morale “is low... They want to go home to their families.”

Bergdahl states that during his time in captivity he has found that the insurgents are “normal people,” without powerful weapons or resources, “just like Americans when we were fighting for our country.” He declares that “nothing positive” has come out of the US intervention. “We’ve wasted our money and wasted our lives.” He goes on to assert that Americans have been “misinformed and lied to by our government” about the Afghan reality and the nature of the Karzai regime in Kabul.

“The best thing for us is to leave,” Bergdahl comments. The “security situation” is very bad, “American forces have no control outside of their bases... The moment we leave the Green Zone we are in danger.”

In response to a question about Barack Obama, the US prisoner of war says that the new president “has nothing new” to offer, other than to send in more troops, an act which only increases the “hatred...violence.” He says, “I am one of the new soldiers he [Obama] sent over here.”

Bergdahl tells his interrogator, “I am scared. I’m scared I won’t be able to go home. It is very unnerving to be a prisoner. I have my girlfriend who is hoping to marry. I have my grandma and grandpas. I have a very, very good family that I love back home in America.”

He continues, choking back tears: “And I miss them every

day that I’m gone. I miss them and I’m afraid that I might never see them again and that I’ll never be able to tell them that I love them again. I’ll never be able to hug them.”

Asked if he has a message for the American people, Bergdahl says: “Yes. To my fellow Americans who have loved ones over here, who know what it’s like to miss them: You have the power to make our government bring them home.”

Military spokesman Col. Julian, with typical arrogance, commented in response: “Basically they [the insurgents] would like us to go home. That is just simply not going to happen. We are here to support the Afghan government to improve security and we will stay as long as the Afghan people want us here.”

Right-wing forces are denouncing Bergdahl as a traitor for his comments. On “Fox News Sunday,” retired US Army Lieut. Col. Ralph Peters, a frequent and bloodthirsty commentator, suggested that the Taliban should execute Bergdahl.

Peters commented, “Nobody in the military that I’ve heard is defending this guy. He is an apparent deserter... On that video, he is collaborating with the enemy. Under duress or not—that’s really not relevant—he’s making accusations about the behavior of the military in Afghanistan that are unfounded, saying that there are no rules.”

Later, the Fox analyst continued: “If, when the facts are in, we find out that through some convoluted chain of events, he really was captured by the Taliban, I’m with him. But, if he walked away from his post and his buddies at wartime... I don’t care how hard it sounds, as far as I’m concerned, the Taliban can save us a lot of legal hassles and legal bills.”

The case makes Peters and his fellow warmongers at Fox nervous. While there may well be individual peculiarities to the case of Private Bergdahl, as well as details about which we don’t yet know, his wandering off, in either disillusionment or disorientation, must say something about the broader condition of US forces in Afghanistan.



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