

US media campaign targets released Afghan war POW Bowe Bergdahl

Patrick Martin
4 June 2014

In the 72 hours since he was released by the Taliban in exchange for five prisoners held at Guantanamo Bay, Army Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl has come under increasingly vitriolic attack from right-wing US political circles and the media, which have denounced him as a deserter and traitor. There have been calls for him to be tried and even shot.

His father, Bob Bergdahl, has likewise been vilified for his efforts to obtain his son's release, which included learning Pashto and Dari, the main languages of Afghanistan, communicating via the Internet with the Taliban, and growing a long and uncut beard to mark the time his son was held captive.

Media outlets from CNN to NBC and the other major broadcasters have repeatedly run interviews with soldiers who served with Bergdahl accusing him of deserting his post. Some of them have placed the blame on Bergdahl for the death of six US troops who, they claim, were killed during a six-month intensive search for the missing soldier.

The media has also made a great deal of recent Twitter posts from Bob Bergdahl expressing sympathy for Afghans killed in the war and their families and calling for the release of all detainees being held at Guantanamo.

Prior to his disappearance, Bowe Bergdahl made clear in letters to his family and discussions with fellow soldiers his revulsion over the US war in Afghanistan and his sympathy for the Afghan people. There is little doubt that the primary factor behind the vitriol against the Bergdahls is their antiwar sentiment and the fear in ruling class circles that it will further fuel already broad popular opposition to the war in Afghanistan and the general warmongering policy of the Obama administration.

Bowe Bergdahl had been a Taliban prisoner since June 30, 2009, when he was captured while his unit was on patrol in Paktika province in eastern Afghanistan. The Pentagon promoted Bergdahl twice during his captivity,

from private first class to corporal and then to sergeant, something the military brass would be unlikely to do for a known deserter. At the same time, the military compelled soldiers who served with Bergdahl to sign nondisclosure statements.

The Pentagon and State Department pushed aggressively to obtain Bergdahl's release, with a series of military sweeps aimed at rescuing him, followed by on-and-off negotiations with the Taliban using the government of Qatar, a Persian Gulf sheikdom, as the intermediary.

The talks resumed last fall after a Taliban commander long opposed to any deal stepped down and the Islamic fundamentalist group supplied a "proof-of-life" video of Bergdahl. There were press reports of ongoing talks in February, suggesting the one-for-five trade that was eventually made, but the deal was not finalized until last week. The actual exchange took place on Saturday, May 31.

The initial criticism of the deal came from congressional Republicans and the right-wing press, including Fox News and the *Wall Street Journal*, along predictable partisan lines. The deal was held up as another example of the Obama administration's supposed weakness in foreign policy, alongside Syria, Ukraine and Benghazi.

The Republicans are clearly hoping to use the Bergdahl case to whip up their right-wing base and sections of the military in advance of the November congressional elections.

The White House response was equally predictable—pointing to its killing of Osama bin Laden and expansion of drone warfare as proof that the administration is not "soft" on terrorism, and citing similar exchanges conducted by Israel, such as the trading of 1,000 Palestinian prisoners for a single soldier, Gilad Shalit, held in Gaza for three years.

The axis of the right-wing campaign shifted Monday and Tuesday to focus on attacks on both Sergeant Bergdahl and his family. The commentaries took on an increasingly frenzied tone, with Fox News claiming that “many members of the intelligence community suspect he may have been an active collaborator with the Taliban.” The *Wall Street Journal* published a column suggesting that the proper treatment for the returning soldier was a firing squad.

The circumstances under which Bergdahl was captured remain obscure. The returned POW is undergoing medical treatment in Germany at the main overseas US military hospital and has not yet spoken publicly.

Several former members of his unit have been quoted by the media claiming that Bergdahl left his post in the middle of the night, without his rifle, and went out into Taliban-controlled territory. Facebook pages with headlines like “Bergdahl is a traitor” and “Bowe Bergdahl is not a hero” have attracted tens of thousands of supportive postings.

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, said in a posting on his Facebook page Tuesday that the issue of rescuing Bergdahl was completely separate from any ensuing investigation into his conduct while on patrol in Afghanistan. “Like any American, he is innocent until proven guilty,” Dempsey said. “Our Army’s leaders will not look away from misconduct if it occurred. In the meantime, we will continue to care for him and his family.”

Unnamed Pentagon officials subsequently told the press that there would be a “full inquiry” into the circumstances of Bergdahl’s disappearance and capture.

According to the *New York Times*, Bergdahl “left behind a note in his tent saying he had become disillusioned with the Army, did not support the American mission in Afghanistan and was leaving to start a new life.”

The *Wall Street Journal* reported: “An Army investigation of why Sgt. Bergdahl left his post was never completed because officials were unable to talk to him. But many military officers reviewing the material gathered for the investigation concluded that he had walked off the outpost because he became disillusioned with the war, according to a senior defense official.”

Rolling Stone magazine reported in 2012, based on an interview with Bergdahl’s parents, that three days before he disappeared he sent them an e-mail that said, “I am ashamed to even be American,” and “The horror that is America is disgusting.”

“I am sorry for everything here,” Sergeant Bergdahl wrote. “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.”

He described seeing an Afghan child run over by a US military vehicle. “We don’t even care when we hear each other talk about running their children down in the dirt streets with our armored trucks,” he wrote.

Bowe Bergdahl’s father, despite his conservative religious views—Bowe was home-schooled by his mother in their hometown of Hailey, Idaho—came to deeply oppose the foreign policy of American imperialism in the Middle East and Central Asia. He openly sympathized with other long-held prisoners, including those in Guantanamo.

As for the five prisoners released from Guantanamo, four were former high-level officials of the government of Afghanistan when the Taliban was in power, captured in the initial US-led invasion in late 2001. They are Mohammad Fazl, deputy defense minister; Mullah Norullah Noori, governor of Balkh province; Khairullah Khairkhwa, governor of Herat province; and Abdul Haq Wasiq, deputy minister of intelligence. The fifth prisoner, Mohammed Nabi Omari, was a military commander with ties to the Haqqani network, formed under CIA auspices to fight Soviet forces in the 1980s.

These were public officials of a state overthrown by US military action, and thus entitled to treatment as prisoners of war. Instead, they have been held indefinitely as “terrorists,” subjected to interrogation and likely tortured, all in violation of the Geneva Conventions. Some 12 years later, the Obama administration has suddenly reclassified them as POWs for the purposes of the Bergdahl trade.

Part of the bitterness in the right-wing attack on the prisoner exchange is that the Obama administration has undercut any rationale for holding Taliban captives at Guantanamo Bay after the official end of the US combat role in Afghanistan at the end of 2014. Under international law, POWs must be repatriated at the end of hostilities, and if the senior Taliban at Guantanamo are now regarded as POWs, all other Afghans held there should be eligible for release as well.



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