Bowe Bergdahl, former POW critical of war in Afghanistan, charged with desertion

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Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl, an American soldier released in a prisoner exchange in May 2014 after being held by the Taliban-aligned Haqqani network for five years, faces the possibility of life imprisonment after the US Army brought criminal charges against him Wednesday.

The US Army is charging Bergdahl with "desertion with intent to shirk important or hazardous duty" and "misbehavior before the enemy by endangering the safety of a command, unit, or place." A conviction on either charge could lead to demotion, dishonorable discharge, and/or imprisonment. The case has been referred to a military preliminary hearing, which will determine whether or not the case will proceed to a general court-martial.

The then 23-year-old from Hailey, Idaho was captured by Haqqani network insurgents on June 30, 2009, after disappearing from his base in Paktika province in eastern Afghanistan. Bergdahl was imprisoned for almost five years, and was exchanged last year for five Taliban members who were held prisoner at the Guantánamo Bay detention complex.

Before his capture, Bergdahl made clear his opposition to the war in Afghanistan in letters to his family and conversations with fellow soldiers. His father, Bob Bergdahl, has publicly expressed sympathy for the plight of the Afghan people and called for the release of prisoners from the notorious Guantánamo Bay prison complex.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote at the time of Bergdahl's release, "There is little doubt that the primary factor behind the vitriol against" Bergdahl and his family "is their antiwar sentiment and the fear in ruling class circles that it will fuel already broad popular opposition to the war in Afghanistan and the general warmongering policy of the Obama administration."

In an email sent to his parents prior to his capture, Bergdahl expressed his disgust with the horrors being committed as a result of the US invasion and the ideological justifications behind it. "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… We don't even care when we hear each other talk about running their children down in the dirt streets with our armored trucks… I am sorry for everything."

Bergdahl's father, Bob Bergdahl, received death threats after publicly expressing sympathy for Afghans killed in the war. Right-wing talk show host Bill O'Reilly declared that Bergdahl's father, who had grown out his beard to mark the time that his son had spent imprisoned, "looked like a Muslim." A welcome-home celebration in Bergdahl's hometown of Hailey was canceled after threats were made against the safety of the town's residents.

A concerted effort in the American media to vilify Bergdahl and his family followed his release last May. Commentaries in the right-wing press, including Fox News and *The Wall Street Journal*, insinuated that Bergdahl had collaborated with the Taliban, and suggested that the returning soldier be greeted with a firing squad.

Eugene R. Fidell, Bergdahl's lawyer, wrote in a March 2 letter to the commanding general of United States Army Forces Command at Fort Bragg that obtaining a fair trial would be difficult given the media firestorm. "While many Americans have taken a broader and more sympathetic view, the depth and breadth of the current hostility to Sergeant Bergdahl are extraordinary and have enveloped the case with a lynch mob atmosphere," Fidell wrote.

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Fidell's letter summarized an unreleased report by Maj. Gen. Kenneth R. Dahl, who conducted the Army's investigation into Bergdahl's disappearance. "The report properly dismisses a variety of contentions that have been made about Sergeant Bergdahl," Fidell wrote. "No, he was not planning to walk to China or India. No, there is no evidence that any soldier died searching for him. No, there is no evidence of misbehavior of any kind while he was held captive. Nor is there any credible evidence that Sergeant Bergdahl left in order to get in touch with the Taliban."

Following the Army's announcement of the charges against him, Bergdahl released a graphic first-person account of his imprisonment. Bergdahl said he was kept in constant isolation during his five years of captivity, blindfolded and chained spread-eagle to a bed. Open wounds developed under the shackles on his ankles. Bergdahl was repeatedly told that he would be imminently executed. He claimed that he attempted to escape at least a dozen times, the first attempt just a few hours after his capture.

The charges against Bergdahl come just a day after US President Obama announced the reversal of earlier plans to withdraw some 5,000 US troops from Afghanistan, leaving 10,000 troops in the country until the end of this year. The past 14 years of war in Afghanistan have claimed at least 2,215 American lives and the lives of countless tens of thousands of Afghans.

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