

Fearmongering accompanies release of John Walker Lindh after 17 years in prison

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Yesterday morning, the Bureau of Prisons released John Walker Lindh, an American captured with other foreign Taliban fighters, from the federal penitentiary in Terre Haute, Indiana, having served his full sentence for carrying arms on behalf of the Taliban in violation of a 1999 regulation deeming the Afghanistan government as “terrorist.”

Because federal regulations require that inmates receive good behavior credit of 15 percent, Lindh served the maximum 17 years of his 20-year sentence. For the next three years he will be on supervised parole near Alexandria, Virginia, the judicial district where he pled guilty in July 2002 pursuant plea negotiations that resulted in dismissal of all other charges, including conspiracy and murder.

Lindh’s punitive parole conditions require him to remain in the United States, although while in prison he became a dual citizen of Ireland and has expressed a desire to emigrate. Any internet use, if allowed, will be monitored, and Lindh is required to communicate in English, although he is also fluent in Arabic. Finally, Lindh must obtain “mental health counseling,” and not watch or read “material that reflects extremist or terroristic views.”

Lindh grew up in an affluent suburb north of San Francisco. After converting to a fundamentalist strain of Sunni Islam as a teenager and moving abroad to study, Lindh entered Afghanistan in May 2001 at age 20 to serve in a military unit to defend the Taliban government against the rebel Northern Alliance, headed by the notorious warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum. Lindh was following a tradition dating to the early 1980s, when foreign mujahideen, funded in large part by the United States, fought next to fundamentalist Afghans against the Soviet-backed government and Soviet troops, glorified in the 1988 Sylvester Stalone film *Rambo III*.

The interests of American imperialism shifted, however, after the Soviet withdrawal. At the time Lindh was receiving training in Afghanistan, the US government maintained equivocal relations with the Taliban. Although President Bill Clinton designated the government “terrorist” in 1999, the

George W. Bush administration provided Afghanistan with \$43 million in mid-2001 to eradicate opium poppies, and Unocal was engaged in intensive negotiations for construction of a gas pipeline.

After the September 11 attacks, however, the United States launched an illegal invasion. Supported by superior US firepower, Northern Alliance troops routed Taliban units stationed in Northeastern Afghanistan, which after surrendering in late November on the promise of safe passage were instead imprisoned in cargo containers and at the Qal-i-Janghi fortress in Mazar-i-Sharif.

On November 25, 2001, an embedded CNN news team accompanied two CIA agents, Johnny “Mike” Spann and Dave Tyson, as they moved through rows of bound young men in the fortress courtyard, one of whom was Lindh.

Lindh refused to speak to Spann, who threatened, “You believe in what you’re doing here that much, you’re willing to be killed here?” Tyson said to Spann, “The problem is, he’s got to decide if he wants to live or die, and die here. We’re just going to leave him, and he’s going to fucking sit in prison the rest of his fucking short life.”

Hours later, after a grenade detonated, Northern Alliance troops began machine gunning prisoners, many of whom were bound behind their backs. In the ensuing chaos Tyson and the CNN crew escaped but Spann was killed.

No details have been made public but there are reports that Spann was beaten to death by prisoners, shot, or both. “Friendly fire” remains a possibility. Regardless, there has never been any evidence that Lindh was involved in Spann’s death.

Lindh, who was shot in the leg, and several dozen others escaped into a basement while US ordnance decimated those who remained exposed. Reporters counted more than 40 missiles hitting the fort, blowing prisoners to pieces. After the bombardment, Northern Alliance troops moved in to kill survivors, dropping grenades and pouring gasoline into the basement. After they flooded it with water, Lindh emerged with a handful of other survivors. Estimates of the number killed in the massacre range from 300 to over 1,000.

Lindh was turned over to the US military, where he was stripped naked, bound with duct tape to a stretcher, blindfolded, and housed in a cold, dark metal shipping container without medical attention for two weeks. During this time both military authorities and the FBI interrogated Lindh, but no recordings were made. The FBI summaries, many of which were exculpatory, equivocal or conflicting, comprised most of the evidence against Lindh.

On December 14, almost three weeks after being shot, Lindh was finally transferred to a US warship for treatment of his bullet wound.

Although Lindh's parents had hired a prominent San Francisco law firm during early December 2001, the US government held Lindh incommunicado for 55 days—until January 24, 2002, when the criminal prosecution began in Alexandria, Virginia. Lindh was charged with multiple crimes, including conspiring to murder Americans, among other charges carrying life sentences.

The trial was engineered to take place a few miles from the Pentagon on the first anniversary of the September 11 attacks.

On July 15, at the outset of a hearing on Lindh's claim that the government obtained his statements through mistreatment tantamount to torture, the prosecution caved, and agreed to drop all of the most serious charges in exchange for a plea to one count of providing services to a designated terrorist organization, the Taliban, a felony charge with a maximum sentence of 10 years. Because Lindh, as an admitted Taliban soldier deployed before the September 11 attacks, had carried grenades and an assault rifle, he was exposed to a 10-year enhancement for using a firearm and explosives in the commission of a felony.

In the plea agreement, Lindh was compelled to recite “that he was not intentionally mistreated by the US military,” an obviously coerced lie. The plea agreement also contained a sinister provision that “for the rest of the defendant's natural life, should the Government determine that the defendant has engaged in [proscribed] conduct ... the United States may immediately invoke any right it has at that time to capture and detain the defendant as an unlawful enemy combatant,” in other words incarcerate him for life without due process as a prisoner of a never ending “war on terror.”

The Bush administration's attorney general, John Ashcroft, called the plea agreement “an important victory in America's war on terrorism.” The *New York Times* dutifully hailed the deal as “a reasonable conclusion” that “honors the demands of criminal justice, national security and America's commitment to constitutional rights.”

Because of the mandatory good time credits, 17 years is the maximum time Lindh could be forced to serve for the offense to which he pled guilty, and he served every day.

Nevertheless, politicians from both capitalist parties and corporate media outlets have denounced the Bureau of Prisons for releasing Lindh, even demanding President Trump keep Lindh behind bars.

Last week, Senators Richard Shelby, a Republican from Alabama, and Maggie Hassan, a Democrat from New Hampshire, wrote the Bureau of Prisons “to express concern over the anticipated release of convicted American Taliban fighter John Walker Lindh and request information about what steps the US government is taking to ensure public safety.” They suggested that Lindh and other “terrorists who may soon exit federal custody” be subjected to “behavioral programming and intervention efforts.”

The day before Lindh's scheduled release, the *New York Times* published an incendiary and misleading report about Lindh, a “filthy 20-year-old held in the aftermath of a prison uprising that claimed the first United States casualty of the [Afghanistan] war, a 32-year-old CIA officer named Johnny Michael Spann.”

The *Times* did not explain to its readers that Lindh was a victim, not a perpetrator, of the so-called “prison uprising”—more accurately a massacre—and that he had nothing to do with Spann's death, which was obviously provoked by the Northern Alliance's brutal treatment of Taliban prisoners.

The *Times* reported uncritically that the “National Counterterrorism Center” claimed that while in prison Lindh “continued to advocate for global jihad and to write and translate violent extremist texts,” adding a comment by Seamus Hughes, deputy director of George Washington University's program on extremism, “From all I'm hearing inside of government, he is still as radical as he went in.”

While Lindh continued to adhere to the Islamic faith in prison, where all his actions and communications were closely monitored, there is no evidence to support those accusations.

Appearing on the right-wing “Fox and Friends,” Secretary of State Mike Pompeo denounced Lindh's release as “unexplainable and unconscionable,” adding “There is something deeply troubling and wrong about this.”

Trump said at a press conference yesterday afternoon that he tried to stop Lindh's release, but the “best lawyers in our country that work for government” told him there was no way to do so.



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