

Trump's war crime pardons: Cultivating a fascistic base in the military

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The extraordinary and repeated interventions by President Donald Trump in the case of Navy SEAL Edward Gallagher, culminating in Sunday's firing of Navy Secretary Richard Spencer, has further laid bare the deep-going crisis at the heart of the US capitalist state and its massive military apparatus.

Gallagher was charged by his fellow SEALs with war crimes and acts of sadistic violence that stood out as egregious even in the bloodbath unleashed against the Iraqi city of Mosul, where, according to one estimate, as many as 40,000 people were killed. He was accused of picking off civilians, including a young girl, with a sniper rifle and stabbing to death a wounded teenaged Iraqi fighter, even as a SEAL medic was treating him. He then texted out a photo of himself with the corpse, along with the caption, "Got him with my hunting knife." Not coincidentally, Gallagher's nickname among fellow SEALs was "Blade."

In spite of, or rather because of, these crimes, Gallagher was lionized by the extreme right, Fox News and the US president himself. Trump first ordered the Navy to release him from the brig where he had been placed in advance of his court martial for threatening to kill members of his unit who had testified against him. After he was convicted only on the lesser charge of posing with the corpse of his victim—thanks to the change in testimony of the SEAL medic, who now faces perjury charges—Trump pardoned him and ordered the Navy to withdraw its minimal penalty of reducing him by one rank and cutting his pay accordingly.

Finally, in the action that led to the Navy secretary's firing, Trump demanded that a routine review board to determine whether Gallagher should be removed from the SEALs be called off. With the president as his champion and a defense team made up of close

associates of the Trump Organization and Trump's personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, Gallagher, who is to retire before the end of the month, felt free to publicly berate his senior officers.

Trump's unprecedented micro-managing and overruling of the military justice system has escalated tensions between the White House and the Pentagon command, which were already strained by his abrupt and abortive order for a partial troop withdrawal from Syria.

Gallagher is one of four members of the US military charged with war crimes whom Trump has pardoned over the last few months, two of them for summarily executing unarmed prisoners and then trying to cover up their crimes by burning the bodies, and one for ordering troops to fire upon and kill Afghans who he knew were unarmed.

Speaking to the White House press corps on Monday, Trump hailed Gallagher as "one of our ultimate fighters" and insisted, "I have to protect my warfighters." He declared that he was "sticking up for our armed forces."

He went on to compare his behavior to that of his predecessor, Barack Obama, whom he falsely accused of issuing pardons for Army Sgt. Bowe Berghdahl, who walked away from his unit in Afghanistan and was held prisoner by the Taliban for five years, and Chelsea Manning, the courageous US Army soldier who leaked the historic exposures of US war crimes published by WikiLeaks in 2010.

Trump railed against Berghdahl during his campaign for the presidency, suggesting he should have been executed, and denounced Manning as a "traitor." Berghdahl was sentenced by a court martial to a reduction in rank and dishonorable discharge. Manning's sentence was commuted by Obama on his

last day in office after she had served seven years of a 35-year sentence. She has been imprisoned again since May for refusing to testify before a grand jury convened against WikiLeaks's Julian Assange.

Trump's lionizing of convicted war criminals and denunciation of two former soldiers who opposed Washington's criminal wars—an opposition that is widely shared among the nearly three million veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq—has an unmistakable political logic.

With the case of Gallagher and the other pardoned war criminals, he is feeding a narrative that the “warfighters” have been held back by a “politically correct” political establishment and even an insufficiently bloodthirsty Pentagon command.

It is a variation on the stab-in-the-back myth propagated by the right wing in Germany in the wake of World War I, blaming the country's defeat on the betrayal of the army by civilians, particularly socialists and Jews. This myth became a central ideological pillar of the so-called Freikorps, armed militias comprised of ex-soldiers, which were unleashed against the German working class, killing thousands in order to crush revolutions. It likewise was an essential component of Nazi ideology.

Trump has reportedly told his closest advisers that he wants the war criminals he has pardoned to join him on the campaign trail in 2020 and even play a starring role in the Republican convention. Clearly, the aim of these pardons is not only to encourage war crimes abroad, but to build up right-wing forces to be used against the working class at home. He is encouraging the creation of a Freikorps, American style.

The timid opposition to Trump's actions expressed in statements by Democrats and in mealy-mouthed editorials in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* has nothing to do with countering a growing threat to basic democratic rights. On the contrary, they are aimed at defending the authority of the military high command, while promoting the pretense that what is at stake is the US military's operating according to the “laws of war” and observing a “higher standard.”

What nonsense! For nearly 30 years, ever since the Stalinist bureaucracy's dissolution of the Soviet Union, the US military has been engaged in wars of aggression, the principal crime for which the surviving leaders of the Third Reich were tried at Nuremberg.

The victims of these wars number well over a million, while much of the Middle East has been laid waste. The war crimes pardoned by Trump are the inevitable byproduct of the far bigger war crimes pursued by every administration, Democratic and Republican alike, for three decades.

The Democratic Party's opposition to Trump is of an entirely tactical character, bound up, as the congressional impeachment hearings have shown, with the drive by sections of the US intelligence apparatus and the State Department to escalate a military confrontation with Russia that could end in nuclear war. Within this reactionary political operation, the assault on democratic rights, the destruction of social programs and the vicious attack on immigrants are not even issues.

Both major parties defend an American capitalist system within which the massive concentration of wealth by the richest one percent and unprecedented levels of social inequality are wholly incompatible with traditional democratic forms of rule.

The threat of fascist reaction and dictatorship is not merely the product of the criminal mind of Donald Trump. It is bound up with the frightened response of the US ruling establishment to the eruption of the class struggle in the US and the mass working class upheavals internationally.

The working class, against whom these threats are directed, is the only social force capable of conducting a fight against them, uniting its struggles across national boundaries against their source, the capitalist system.



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