

Edward Gallagher, Donald Trump and America's criminal wars

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On Friday, the *New York Times* published leaked videos and photos documenting US war crimes in Iraq. The material included a photo of a dozen US Special Operations soldiers posing with the corpse of a teenager they had just murdered.

Special Operations Chief Edward Gallagher, holding up the teenager's head as if he were a slaughtered deer, had moments before killed the injured and captive teenager by repeatedly stabbing him.

Gallagher was exonerated for the murder of the teenager by a military court and then pardoned by President Donald Trump for a string of other crimes that were part of a homicidal rampage during his deployment.

The photo and accompanying videos are reminiscent of the shocking 2004 photos of torture at the Abu Ghraib prison. But while 15 years ago the White House, Congress and the media made pronouncements deploring the depraved treatment of Iraqi prisoners—while suppressing the bulk of the incriminating photos and covering up for the masterminds of torture such as President Bush, Vice President Cheney and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld—today the lead perpetrator of this war crime is praised as a “hero” by the American president.

The military brass and the *Times* object to Trump's glorification of Gallagher in large part because it illuminates the fact that the mass murder and destruction carried out in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and other countries targeted by Washington are not the deeds of “bad apples,” but rather crimes of US imperialism.

In an appearance Sunday on ABC News' “This Week” program, National Security Advisor Robert C. O'Brien defended Trump's intervention in the Gallagher case. “Ultimately, the president as

commander in chief has said that he's got the back of our men and women in uniform,” O'Brien said. “Look,” he continued, “it's very troubling that we send folks out that have to make split-second decisions dealing with terrorists... And what the president has said is we're going to stand behind our warriors.”

The *Times* report, based on a leak of internal Navy investigative materials, gives a grisly picture of the activities of Gallagher, one of a trio of war criminals who were pardoned by Trump in November.

Gallagher was not making a “split-second decision” when he used his hunting knife to execute a teenage prisoner. He escaped conviction on murder charges only after a dubious military trial in which a medic in his unit unexpectedly took responsibility for the death, after having been given immunity from prosecution. Gallagher was convicted only of posing for a photograph with the body of the victim, a trophy-taking action that is a crime under the Geneva Conventions.

Video recordings of interviews conducted during the investigation into Gallagher by the Navy Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS) give a harrowing portrait of his war-zone conduct over a lengthy period. Hardened soldiers and veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan describe their former unit chief as “freaking evil,” “toxic” and “perfectly OK with killing anybody that was moving.” They recount Gallagher killing civilians, including children, and prisoners, culminating in the incident for which he was prosecuted.

The *Times* was given access to both investigative interviews and thousands of text messages exchanged by many of the 22 members of Alpha Platoon, Seal Team Seven. The scale of the leak demonstrates the widespread opposition within the military brass itself to Trump's intervention to overturn any administrative punishment of Gallagher, a clear case of illegal

“command influence” to rig the outcome of a military judicial proceeding.

Trump stepped in with an order on November 15 that pardoned two Army officers accused of war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, Captain Matt Golsteyn and First Lieutenant Clint Lorance, as well as Gallagher, and reversed the decision of the Navy to penalize Gallagher, who has now retired, by reducing his rank and stripping him of his Seal pin. When Navy Secretary Richard Spencer objected to this interference in the military chain of command, Trump fired him.

Trump’s critics within the ruling elite particularly objected to his statement, in an October tweet announcing that he would review the three war crimes cases, “We train our boys to be killing machines, then prosecute them when they kill!”

They opposed this statement only because it is too bald an admission of the real role of the American military, particularly the tens of thousands of Special Forces troops like the Seals and the Army’s Delta Force, recruited and trained to be ruthless assassins. Prosecutions are extremely rare, and likely to be nonexistent going forward based on the precedent set by Trump.

Trump expects to enlist Gallagher, Golsteyn and Lorance in his reelection campaign. He paraded the war criminals at a campaign donors’ function this month, and Gallagher was photographed with Donald Trump Jr. at the Turning Point USA Student Action Conference, an assemblage of fascist-minded youth addressed by the president on December 21. This is part of his effort to base his reelection on appeals to the most violent and reactionary elements of the state apparatus, including the police, Border Patrol, and military Special Forces, and to fascist elements and disoriented social layers within the electorate.

Gallagher and his wife Andrea also posed for photos with the president during the visit, and reportedly gave him a gift to express their appreciation for the pardon—a black-and-white flag of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) captured in Mosul, Iraq. The gift certainly symbolized the connection between the war criminal in chief, Donald Trump, and his accomplice and instrument, Gallagher. Mosul was targeted for nonstop bombardment by US artillery, rockets and warplanes, which reduced the city to rubble and killed tens of thousands of people.

Gallagher may be the personification of homicidal violence, an individual for whom killing became an obsession. But Trump took incalculably more innocent lives through his orders as “commander in chief” to destroy cities like Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria.

And Trump is not an aberration. He follows a long series of presidents who could and should have stood trial for war crimes. These include, to name only the most recent, the elder George Bush for the Persian Gulf War and the US invasions of Panama and Somalia; Bill Clinton for military intervention in the former Yugoslavia and bomb and missile attacks on Iraq, Afghanistan and Sudan; Bush junior for the Iraq War and the invasion of Afghanistan; Barack Obama for continuing these wars and launching new attacks in Libya and Syria and drone warfare around the world.

Gallagher too is in no way exceptional. Crimes like his, and even worse, are the hallmark of all imperialist wars of conquest against impoverished and oppressed nations. From the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, to the atrocities at Abu Ghraib in Iraq, to the murder of 16 Afghan civilians by Sergeant Robert Bales in 2012, the US military has demonstrated its capacity for brutality and wanton violence.

These war crimes were carried out on a bipartisan basis, under Democratic and Republican presidents, supported and generally covered up by both Democrats and Republicans in Congress. It is worth pointing out that the House Democrats have not impeached Trump for pardoning war criminals, let alone for ordering mass murder in Iraq and Syria, and in the ongoing drone warfare across North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia. They have chosen, instead, to impeach Trump for not sufficiently backing war crimes in Ukraine and undermining the longstanding US operation to arm Ukraine and turn it into a military spearhead against Russia.



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