

Afghanistan prisoner of war Bowe Bergdahl pleads guilty to desertion

By Niles Niemuth
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Appearing Monday before a military judge at Fort Bragg in North Carolina, former prisoner of war Bowe Bergdahl pleaded guilty to the separate charges of desertion and misbehavior before the enemy, related to his decision in 2009 to walk off a remote military outpost in Afghanistan.

Army Sergeant Bergdahl was taken prisoner by the Taliban and held under brutal conditions for five years until he was exchanged for five Taliban prisoners held at the US detention camp in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Bergdahl's decision to plead guilty and avoid a trial is the outcome of a relentless right-wing vendetta aimed at intimidating rank-and-file soldiers and suppressing any opposition to the neocolonial war in Afghanistan, now in its 17th year.

"We may as well go back to kangaroo courts and lynch mobs that got what they wanted," Bergdahl said in a 2016 interview first broadcast by ABC News on Monday in which he responded to the right-wing campaign to punish him after his years spent in captivity in Pakistan. "The people who want to hang me, you're never going to convince those people."

The persecution of Bergdahl is seen as critical as the Trump administration dispatches thousands of more soldiers to fight and die in the effort to assert the hegemony of American imperialism over Central Asia. Underlying the campaign against Bergdahl are fears of the growth of demoralization and disillusionment within the ranks which could undermine the expansion of American war efforts in the Middle East, Africa and Southeast Asia, which are aimed ultimately at Russia and China.

From the moment that it became clear that he had walked off the base in opposition to the prosecution of the war, there were efforts by Fox News and other right-wing media outlets to falsely vilify Bergdahl and

his family as Taliban converts.

Military figures and right-wing pundits called repeatedly for the young soldier to be executed as a traitor who is responsible for the injury and death of soldiers dispatched to locate him. Republican Senator John McCain, himself a former prisoner of war during the Vietnam War, had threatened to hold congressional hearings if the military trial did not result in a conviction and punishment for Bergdahl.

Bergdahl's plea came after his attorney's efforts to have the charges thrown out earlier this year were rebuffed. The judge overseeing the trial, Colonel Jeffery A. Nance, rejected the argument that the election of President Donald Trump, who had made derogatory comments about Bergdahl on the campaign trail, had made a fair trial impossible.

Trump, to whom all military officers, including those involved in Bergdahl's prosecution, answer as commander-in-chief, had declared the young soldier a "dirty, rotten traitor." He called for Bergdahl's execution multiple times on the campaign trail. "You know in the old days: Bing. Bong," Trump said on one occasion, mimicking a firing squad. "When we were strong."

Nance found the president's remarks on the campaign trail "disturbing and disappointing," but he allowed the prosecution to continue, ruling that Trump's comments were not enough to sway the outcome of the trial or justify the dismissal of the charges.

Bergdahl's punishment will be determined after a hearing next week; the charge of desertion carries a maximum penalty of five years in military prison, but the charge of misbehavior carries with it a possible life sentence. According to the *New York Times*, there was no plea deal with the prosecution, meaning it will be

entirely up to Nance to determine any possible leniency in sentencing.

Bergdahl was captured by the Taliban after walking off his military outpost in Paktika province, on the border with Pakistan, in a failed attempt to report to senior officers the incompetence of his battalion commander.

The young private first class, 23 years old at the time of his capture, was tortured and starved by his captors, confined to a six-foot-by-seven-foot cage for years and severely beaten after two escape attempts. Bergdahl was held for five years in Pakistan by the Haqqani Network, a faction of the Taliban with connections to Pakistani intelligence. He was eventually released in a 2014 prisoner swap for five Guantanamo Bay detainees, approved by the Obama administration.

In the final e-mail sent to his parents before walking off the base in 2009, Bergdahl complained of his commander's incompetence and the broader criminality which he had witnessed.

"I am sorry for everything here. 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," Bergdahl wrote.

"We don't even care when we hear each other talk about running their children down in the dirt streets with our armored trucks. ... We make fun of them in front of their faces, and laugh at them for not understanding we are insulting them. ... I am sorry for everything. The horror that is America is disgusting."

His father, Bob Bergdahl, wrote back a short time later counseling his son to "OBEY YOUR CONSCIENCE!"

Launched by Republican George W. Bush in October 2001, escalated by Barack Obama and continued by Trump, the war in Afghanistan has killed an estimated 111,000 Afghans directly, while another 360,000 have died as an indirect result of the war. Nearly 2,300 American soldiers have been killed in the war, with yearly fatalities peaking during the so-called surge ordered by Obama in 2009-2011.

Despite the nearly two-decade effort of the US to prop up a puppet government and assert military control over the country, many provinces have fallen back under the control of the Taliban. The American military has committed countless war crimes, from the

massacres of wedding parties to the recent dropping of the MOAB, the most powerful bomb dropped by the United States since the nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II.

The unrelenting campaign to punish Bergdahl is a warning that further war crimes are being prepared in Central Asia and beyond in the effort to suppress any opposition to American dominance of the entire world.

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