

Bowe Bergdahl sentenced to dishonorable discharge, avoids prison in court-martial for desertion

By Shelley Connor
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Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl, who was imprisoned by the Taliban for five years after walking off his army base in 2009, was dishonorably discharged on Friday but avoided a prison sentence for the charges of desertion and misbehavior before the enemy.

Bergdahl, who had been stationed in Afghanistan, walked off his base in 2009 with the intent to hike 18 miles to another military base to report poor leadership in his platoon. “All I was seeing was basically leadership failure to the point that the lives of the guys standing next me to were literally, from what I could see, in danger of something seriously going wrong, and somebody being killed,” he would later report on a podcast.

Bergdahl never made it to the base, however. He was captured by the Taliban within less than two hours of leaving. He was imprisoned for five years, during which he was beaten with copper cables and kept in a seven by seven foot cage. He recalls having to wash his hands with his own urine in order to eat the meager rations of bread his captors fed him, and waking every day to wonder if he would be killed.

Bergdahl was released as part of a prisoner of war swap with the Taliban in 2014. “They get five people that they’ve wanted for five years, and we get a dirty, rotten traitor,” Donald Trump fumed at the time.

Trump used Bergdahl’s release as political capital on the campaign trail, redoubling his characterization of Bergdahl as a traitor. He explicitly called for Bergdahl’s execution multiple times during his campaign. On one occasion, he said, “You know, in the old days--Bing, bong,” mimicking a shooter as he spoke.

As the elections neared, the military moved to charge

Bergdahl not only with desertion, which carries a five-year maximum sentence, but also with the rarely-used, ancient charge of misbehavior before the enemy. Gen. Robert Abrams convened the court martial despite Trump’s inflammatory remarks as well as threats by Senator John McCain to call a congressional hearing if Bergdahl was not punished as a result of his trial.

Bergdahl pleaded guilty to both desertion and misbehavior on October 16. Army Colonel Jeffrey Nance, the judge in Bergdahl’s case, rejected the defense team’s request for dismissal or for a capped sentence in light of Trump’s inflammatory remarks about Bergdahl, both as a candidate and as the commander in chief of the Armed Forces. Nance asserted that he was capable of granting Bergdahl a fair hearing despite the comments, which he called “disturbing and disappointing.”

However, he went on to state: “I will consider the president’s comments as mitigation evidence as I arrive at an appropriate sentence.” He cited the “command influence” that Trump could possibly exercise over those charged with sentencing Bergdahl.

On Friday, it took Nance mere minutes to hand down Bergdahl’s sentence. He reduced Bergdahl’s rank to private; Bergdahl had been promoted to sergeant during his captivity. He was dishonorably discharged, and Nance further ordered Bergdahl to forfeit \$1,000 a month of his pay for ten months.

Trump immediately took to Twitter to denounce the sentence as a “complete and total disgrace to our country and to our military.”

The sentence is effective immediately, except for the dishonorable discharge, which triggers an automatic

appeal. Bergdahl's defense attorney, Eugene R. Fidell, called the sentence a "tremendous relief."

"President Trump's unprincipled effort to stoke a lynch-mob atmosphere while seeking our nation's highest office has cast a dark cloud over the case," Fidell stated. "Every American should be offended by his assault on the fair administration of justice and disdain for basic constitutional rights."

Fidell went on to express hopes that Bergdahl's dishonorable discharge would be overturned, saying that it would deprive Bergdahl of medical care, mental health care and other "benefits he badly needs."

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in 2015, "The real reason for the ferocity of the attack on Bergdahl was his public disaffection from the war in Afghanistan and, in particular, his caustic criticism of the conduct of the American military in that devastated country."

In 2012, *Rolling Stone* magazine published excerpts of emails from Bergdahl to his parents in Idaho in which he declared, "I am ashamed to even be American. The horror of the self-righteous arrogance that they thrive in. It is all revolting."

"I am sorry for everything here," he continued. "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." Referring to a particularly gruesome incident he had witnessed, he added, "We don't even care when we hear each other talk about running their children down in the dirt streets with our armored trucks."

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