

US Army Charges Bowe Bergdahl with Desertion

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On Monday, General Robert Abrams, the head of US Army Forces Command, ordered that Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl, 29, face court-martial for desertion and misbehavior before the enemy for his actions leading up to his capture by the Taliban in 2009. The charge of desertion would carry a maximum sentence of five years, while conviction on misbehavior could result in life imprisonment.

Although desertion can carry the death penalty, the Army has stated that will not be requested in this case.

The severity of the charges has all the hallmarks of a political decision to make an example of Bergdahl. Since Bergdahl was first released in a prisoner exchange with the Taliban in 2014, right-wing politicians and the sections of the news media have called for his conviction and even his execution as a traitor.

During a New Hampshire campaign stop last August, Republican presidential hopeful Donald Trump called Bergdahl a “dirty, rotten, traitor” and demanded his execution. In October Senator John McCain (R), Chairman of the Armed Services Committee, said that Bergdahl was “clearly a deserter,” and that he would call for hearings if Bergdahl was not punished. Significantly, every promotion in the army above second lieutenant, including those of the officers presiding over the court-martial, needs to be confirmed by McCain’s committee.

Bergdahl has been the target of outrageous accusations, including defecting to the Taliban or indirectly causing the deaths of soldiers searching for him, since emails to his parents sent before his capture, in which he expressed opposition to the occupation of Afghanistan, first became public.

Abrams’ decision overruled the recommendation of the army’s own preliminary hearing in October, which determined that Bergdahl should not receive jail time or be punitively discharged. Instead, the hearing officer, Lt. Col. Mark Visger, had recommended a special court-martial, where the maximum sentence would have been confinement for a year and would have precluded a dishonorable discharge.

The decision to charge Bergdahl with these serious offenses may have been immediately prompted by material from interviews between Bergdahl and movie director Mark Boal, which was published in the podcast “Serial.” In it, Bergdahl describes more of his thoughts and motivations when he first left his post on June 30, 2009 before being captured by the Taliban just a few hours later.

According to Bergdahl, he intended to hike 18 miles from Observation Post Mest-Malak,

where he was stationed, to the larger Forward Operating Base Sharana, in order to get the attention of senior officers and relay concerns he had about leadership problems that he felt were endangering his platoon.

A turning point for Bergdahl appears to have taken place a few days earlier, on June 25, when a young officer whom he knew and liked was killed by a roadside bomb.

Shortly after leaving his post, Bergdahl said he recognized the depth of trouble he was going to be in and decided to scout a Taliban position on his way to Sharana. Within a few hours he got lost and was captured by Taliban soldiers on motorcycles.

They then transferred him across the border in Pakistan. For the next five years he was held and tortured in deplorable conditions.

Bergdahl had been deployed in the Spring of 2009 as part of Obama's "surge" that would triple the number of troops in Afghanistan to 100,000 by the end of 2009.

In emails to his parents before his capture, Bergdahl talked about his growing disgust with the occupation as a whole:

"These people [Afghans] 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... We don't even care when we hear each other talk about running their children down in the dirt streets with our armored trucks... I am sorry for everything."

The picture that emerges is that of a young man, disgusted by the daily brutality of the occupation, taking drastic measures to try to find some officer who could improve the situation.

Shortly after being captured, the Taliban began using Bergdahl in propaganda videos, which prompted the attacks on him from right-wing politicians and media commentators. These attacks redoubled when Bergdahl's anti-war sentiments became widely known after a 2012 article in *Rolling Stone*.

According to the Army's own investigation, led by Lt. Gen. Kenneth Dahl, no soldiers died while searching for Bergdahl, and there is no evidence that he had intended to defect or aid the Taliban.

The vitriol coming from Army officials and politicians towards Bergdahl expresses their deep fears about the potential impact of future imperialist adventures on the discipline of the armed forces. Bergdahl had joined the army in 2008, but within a few months of deployment was willing to break discipline over the outrages he had seen.

As US imperialism prepares for an escalation in Syria, potential conflict with Russia and heightened tensions with China, officials wish to send a clear message to any soldiers growing disillusioned with the government's efforts to reshape the world by force.

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