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The Bergdahl Saga Could Explode in the GOP's Face

Bob Dreyfuss

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Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl, still in recovery, has become a political football to be kicked around by just about everyone, including Hillary Clinton—who is using Bergdahl's release to distinguish herself, just ever so slightly, from President Obama. In her book, whose release this week will dominate the airways and news media, and in an interview tonight with Diane Sawyer, Clinton finesses the fact that she originally opposed making a deal with the Taliban for Bergdahl, a decision she portrays as one of the “hard choices” she had to make. Though now she's defending Obama over the Bergdahl decision, she stressed to ABC's Sawyer that there were “competing interests and values” involved in the decision. It's a waffle typical of Clinton, who tries simultaneously to pander to hawks while placating the liberal base of the Democratic party.

Here's the bottom line: if Bergdahl did desert, or leave his post without permission, then bully for him. If only more American troops had deserted that war, or refused to serve, or simply stopped enlisting in the “volunteer army.” Perhaps Bergdahl was simply shell-shocked, or suffering from PTSD. Perhaps he had just had enough. Perhaps he did indeed intend to seek out the Taliban in his own version of peace talks. Perhaps he, himself, can't really explain why did it, although—as reported here last week—the evidence reported two years ago in *Rolling Stone* suggests that he had thoroughly been alienated by the war and by the conduct of American forces. If any of that is true, than the Republicans ought not wish to out Bergdahl on trial. Because he, and his lawyers, could turn such a trial into a broader inquiry into the insanity of a war that has lasted thirteen years, and which appears will continue through 2016 at least.

The say-anything conservatives and Republicans—many of whom slammed Obama for years for not doing more to get Bergdahl released, only to say now, like Charles Krauthammer, that Bergdahl is a deserter and a traitor—aren't daunted by the fact that Bergdahl has described his years in captivity in stark terms. After twice trying to escape, he was put in a cage, and tortured. But that hasn't stopped Senator Saxby Chambliss, the Georgia Republican, from saying that he doesn't necessarily believe Bergdahl's account:

I think there are going to be a lot of things that Bergdahl tells the Army and the medical folks that he's talking to now that is going to be very difficult to validate.... That's not to say they're not absolutely true, but we weren't there.... We have nobody who was on the inside. So we don't know exactly what happened in his life over the last several years, except we do know he was captured and he's been in the Taliban's hands.

Yesterday, appearing on ABC's *This Week*, the leader of the House intelligence committee raised what appears, at first, to be a legitimate point about the negotiations to free Bergdahl. His release, said Mike Rogers, the Michigan Republican who heads the House intelligence committee, was initially designed as part of a broader set of talks to make a deal with the Taliban. (Let's leave aside Rogers's comment that the White House "made a serious, serious geopolitical mistake," adding, "We've empowered the Taliban"—who, of course, have a lot of muscle and don't need any empowering by the United States.) Rogers, along with Dianne Feinstein, the Democratic chairman of the Senate intelligence committee, reports the *New York Times*, "argued that in 2011 the discussion of releasing Sergeant Bergdahl was couched as a 'confidence-building measure' to allow a broader reconciliation with the Taliban." Though efforts were made to strike such a deal, the talks eventually went nowhere. Said Feinstein, according to the *Times*:

If you release them upfront, there would be no reconciliation; if you release them after progress or at the end and had the agreement to do so, that you might get a reconciliation agreement. And that, subsequently, apparently, fell apart.

But that's all mixing apples with figs. As both President Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry have pointed out repeatedly, and as even Hillary Clinton acknowledges, getting Bergdahl released was a good thing, in itself, whether or not it led to or helped engineer a reconciliation with the Taliban. On the other hand, it's fair to question whether or not the Obama administration has done everything it could to negotiate a deal with the Taliban. For years, and especially since Obama took office in 2009, it's clear that the only way out of Afghanistan that could result in a relatively stable political arrangement was to rebalance the Afghan government, bring the Taliban in, set up some sort of federal system giving the southern, Pashtun areas a measure of autonomy, and—above all—getting Pakistan, India, Iran and others in the region to buy in to the new set-up. Despite efforts along those lines, beginning with Richard Holbrooke's work years ago, the administration never really invested appropriate energy in that direction.

For the Republicans who are accusing the Obama administration now of mismanaging the Bergdahl release, however, the real issue isn't whether or not Washington was working hard enough to make a deal with the Taliban; indeed, had such a deal been reached, most Republican would probably have condemned it as appeasement or worse.

Meanwhile, in a sign of how despicable some anti-Obama people can be, the FBI is now investigating threats made against Bergdahl's parents—threats that may have been made made by people angered by charges, whether spurious or not, that American troops were killed while conducting searches for Bergdahl.

The controversy will continue all week, during briefings by US intelligence and other officials on Capitol Hill and when Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel testifies on Wednesday before what is sure to be a raucous and hostile House Armed Services Committee.