

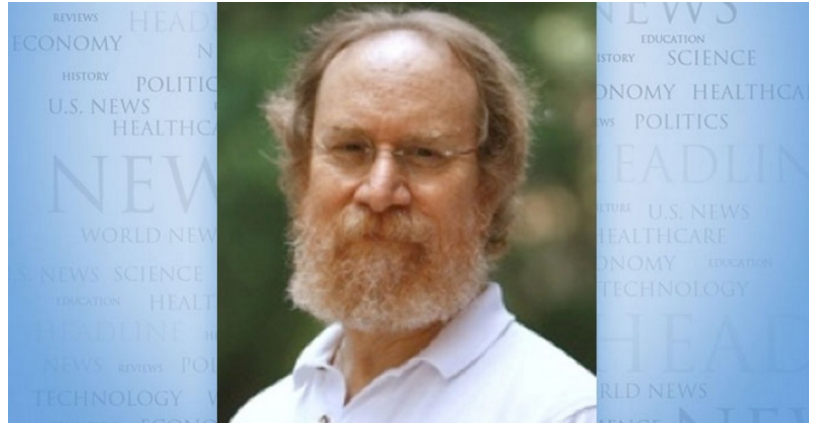


Written by [Sheldon Richman](#) on June 12, 2014

News Coverage Misinforms Americans on the Bergdahl Swap

In national-security matters, the news media couldn't do a better job misinforming the public if they tried. The latest example is their portrayal of the five Taliban officials traded for Bowe Bergdahl.

The media of course have an incentive to accentuate controversy. In the Bergdahl deal, this includes portraying the five Taliban prisoners as, in [Sen. John McCain's words](#), "hard-core jihadis responsible for 9/11." McCain is wrong, but the major news outlets don't care. Over and over, the five are identified as terrorists. Facts take a back seat to drama and conflict.



President Obama [fed this narrative](#):

In terms of potential threats, the release of the Taliban who were being held in Guantánamo was conditioned on the Qataris keeping eyes on them and creating a structure in which we can monitor their activities. We will be keeping eyes on them. Is there a possibility of some of them trying to return to activities that are detrimental to us? Absolutely.

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The media simply take the government's word that the five Taliban figures are international terrorists. But the [Taliban are not al-Qaeda](#). They were the theocratic government overthrown by U.S. forces. So when Taliban insurgents attack American forces, it is not terrorism but war, which the U.S government started.

There have been a few hints that the prisoners are not accurately described. A rare example is from the government's former chief prosecutor at the American prison at Guantánamo Bay, retired Air Force Colonel Morris Davis. Davis punctured the "hardest of the hard-core" narrative when [he said](#):

We had screened all of the detainees and we had focused on about 75 that had the potential to be charged with a crime. When I saw the names [of those traded] ... [I] wasn't familiar with any of these names.... If we could have proven that they had done something wrong that we could prosecute them for I'm confident we would have done it, and we didn't.

In fact, the story behind the five Taliban prisoners reflects poorly on the U.S. government's conduct of its supposedly good war. Maybe that's why this story gets so little attention.

Before being captured, these Taliban officers were treated as potential allies by the CIA or the U.S.-installed government of Hamid Karzai. Anand Gopal, author of [No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and War Through Afghan Eyes](#), writes that

all five of the swapped prisoners were initially captured while trying to cut deals, and ... three had been attempting to join, or had already joined, the Afghan government at the time of their arrest.



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This history shows that the categories we take as rigid and unchanging, such as “terrorist,” are in fact remarkably fluid in the context of Afghan politics. Uncovering the stories of these men tells us much about Guantanamo, the Taliban, and the possibility of a negotiated end to the conflict.

How did these men end up in U.S. custody? The U.S. government offered [attractive bounties](#) to Afghans who turned alleged Taliban and al-Qaeda members over to American authorities. This created a strong incentive to rat out personal enemies, rival warlords, and others, many of whom had nothing to do with the Afghan insurgency or international terrorism. Many were sent to Guantánamo.

For example, Gopal writes, Mohammad Nabi Omari, who was part of the Bergdahl exchange,

was a small-time commander linked to pro-Taliban strongman Jalaluddin Haqqani in the 1990s. After 2001, he was among the many Haqqani followers who switched allegiances to the Karzai government.... [Omari] and other former Haqqani commanders began working for the CIA.... Some Afghan officials in Khost allege that Omari reaped profits from falsely accusing others of al Qaeda membership. If so, he certainly accrued enemies, and in September 2002, he, too, was accused of insurgent membership by rival warlords and politicians, despite being publicly aligned with the Karzai government.

His next stop was Guantánamo.

“Instead of being recalcitrant terrorists bent on fighting America,” Gopal concludes, “this history indicates that all five can make pragmatic deals if the conditions are right.”

The U.S. invasion-occupation of Afghanistan was a war of choice, not necessity. American forces made it worse by indiscriminately placing a price on the head of any Afghan whom someone else was willing to destroy.

Sheldon Richman is vice president and editor at [The Future of Freedom Foundation](#) in Fairfax, Va.



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