



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on March 17, 2016

North Korea Sentences U.S. Student to 15 Years of Hard Labor

On March 16, North Korea's Supreme Court sentenced Otto Warmbier (shown), a student at the University of Virginia, to 15 years of hard labor on March 16 for committing a "hostile act" against the state.

North Korea's state-controlled KCNA news agency released the following statement about Warmbier's sentencing:

The accused confessed to the serious offense against the DPRK [Democratic People's Republic of Korea] he had committed, pursuant to the U.S. government's hostile policy toward it, in a bid to impair the unity of its people after entering it as a tourist.



As for Warmbier's "serious offense," he had tried to steal a propaganda banner from the staff area of the Yanggakdo International Hotel in Pyongyang, where he was staying.

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The North Korean government tried from the outset to gain as much publicity value as it could from Warmbier's arrest. It supplied CNN with a video of the American's February 29 press conference, which a North Korean official claimed was held "at his own request" at the People's Palace of Culture in Pyongyang. The idea that the brutal communist government would assent to an accused American's request was about as credible as any belief that the statement he made was anything other than his reading of a script provided by his captors in the hope of receiving more lenient treatment. Warmbier said at the press event:

I apologize to each and every one of the millions of the Korean people, and I beg that you see how I was used and manipulated. My reward for my crime was so much smaller than the rewards that the Z Society and the Friendship United Methodist Church get from the United States administration.

He continued:

I never, never should have allowed myself to be lured by the United States administration to commit a crime in this country. I wish that the United States administration [would] never manipulate people like myself in the future to commit crimes against foreign countries. I entirely beg you, the people and government of the DPRK, for your forgiveness. Please! I made the worst mistake of my life!

A CNN report written just after that statement stated that Warmbier's parents had asked the North Korean government to accept his apology and to "consider his youth and make an important humanitarian gesture by allowing him to return to his loved ones."

Another report from AP noted that before his trial, Warmbier had said he tried to steal a propaganda



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banner as a trophy for an acquaintance who wanted to hang it in her church — an offense that would be grounds in North Korea for a subversion charge. Warmbier identified the church as Friendship United Methodist Church in his hometown of Wyoming, Ohio. Meshach Kanyion, pastor of the church, declined to comment to AP on March 16.

Back in February, after an unidentified North Korean official told CNN that Warmbier had been accused of meeting last year with a member of the Friendship Church to plan the theft of the propaganda banner, Kanyion said that Warmbier is not a member of the church. “I’ve never met his family. Clearly there are some people who know him and went to school with him. If his family went to our church, we would’ve been much more involved” in pushing for his release, Kanyion told CNN.

The North Korean official cited by CNN said that the communist state had accused Warmbier of surfing the Internet to study different North Korean political slogans and of plotting to steal one by folding up a thin rectangular metal sheet containing a slogan and concealing it in his suitcase.

The official said that Warmbier put on “quiet shoes” and just before 2 a.m. on January 1, 2016, entered the staff-only second floor of the hotel intending to steal such a sign.

“The slogan was bigger than he had thought. So he couldn’t take it away and turned it upside down and deserted (it) on the floor when he had pulled it from the hangers,” the official told CNN.

Though the unnamed official had identified the hotel’s second floor as the “scene of the crime,” our own research uncovered an interesting fact about the Yanggakdo International Hotel that leads us to believe he might have been wrong about which floor Warmbier had visited in his quest to purloin a propaganda sign.

The official charged that Warmbier had surfed the Internet to study North Korean political slogans, and if there is any truth to those accusations, it is probable that the American might have come across the same article we did from the *Business Insider* of April 24, 2013. That article, [“A Creepy Journey to the Hidden 5th Floor of a Pyongyang Hotel,”](#) explains that elevators in the Yanggakdo International Hotel do not have a fifth-floor button. The reason is because that floor is private and is off limits to hotel guests. However, it can be accessed via the stairs.

Business Insider contributing writer Calvin Sun had once gone to the “forbidden floor” with a video camera he had smuggled through North Korean customs and *Business Insider* posted several stills from his footage that can be viewed in the article linked to above. These shots are of several very large propaganda posters, complete with translations explaining what they say. Although no source has confirmed our suspicions, it is theoretically possible that Warmbier made his way to the fifth floor, tried to take one of the smaller signs, but (true to the official’s account) found it too unwieldy to take with him and abandoned it. His middle-of-the-night activities would have been likely to have been captured on the government’s security cameras.

If the communists were so intent on keeping the goings-on on the hotel’s fifth floor under wraps, this might explain why they came down so hard on Warmbier, who might have further exposed the activities reported by *Business Insider*.

Even if these suspicions are unfounded, however, it is not at all unusual for the North Koreans to dish out harsh sentences to any Westerners caught violating even minor infractions of their repressive laws.

As we reported in a [September 2014 article](#), North Korea’s Supreme Court had just convicted U.S. citizen Matthew Miller of committing “hostile acts” and sentenced him to six years of hard labor. Miller



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was one of three Americans being held in North Korea at the time, according to the *Los Angeles Times*. The others were Jeffrey Fowle, who was detained in May 2014 and told CNN that he was arrested after trying to leave a Bible at one stop on his tour. Fowle was released in October 2014 after five months' detention, and returned to the United States. The other was Kenneth Bae, who had been held since 2012 and given a 15-year sentence — also for “hostile acts.”

However, both Miller and Bae were released by North Korea in November 2014. The U.S. government denied giving the North Koreans anything in exchange for their release, but James Clapper, the director of national intelligence, who was reportedly responsible for negotiating their release, flew to Pyongyang to accompany them home.

Many observers believe that North Korea tries to detain Americans on the flimsiest of charges, hoping to use the detained U.S. citizens to force high-level visits from Washington, in order to negotiate relief from the UN sanctions imposed on the state in response to its nuclear and missile programs.

The communist nation has persisted in building up its arsenal by testing long-range missiles and in working on nuclear weapons. Back in January, North Korea claimed to have successfully detonated a hydrogen bomb, though this has not been verified. These activities have resulted in repeated UN sanctions against the nation.

Most recently, the UN Security Council voted on March 3 to impose a broad array of sanctions against North Korea because of that nation's January nuclear test and February launch of a long-range missile putting a satellite into space, both of which defied current international sanctions.

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