

# Would you trust this man with any soldier's life?

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

If you still harbor any illusions that Donald Trump is fit to be commander in chief, consider his latest salvo against Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl.

Bergdahl, a Ketchum native, walked away from his post in Afghanistan and was taken prisoner by the Taliban in 2009. Five years later, President Obama exchanged five Taliban commanders for his release.

Bergdahl faces charges of desertion and misbehavior before the enemy. That last count could put him behind bars for the rest of his life.

Not good enough, says Trump.

"We're tired of Sgt. Bergdahl, who's a traitor, a no-good traitor, who should have been executed," Trump told a rowdy audience in Las Vegas recently. "Thirty years ago, he would have been shot."

Talk about an utter indifference to justice.

Bergdahl stands accused, but convicted of nothing.

So far, the facts are trending toward leniency. After investigating the case, Maj. Gen. Kenneth R. Dahl concluded an "unrealistically idealistic" soldier sought to draw attention to his grievances against his superiors by walking away. But he had no intention of permanently leaving his post - the technical definition of desertion.

"I think he absolutely believed that the things that he was perceiving were true," Dahl said. "And I equally believe that he was completely wrong in that, which is just, you know, the sad irony of it."

If the recommendations of Lt. Col. Mark Visger, the officer who presided over Bergdahl's military tribunal, are followed, the soldier faces a reduction in rank, a bad-conduct discharge and another year in confinement - although Visger has urged against more jail time.

Talk about dereliction of presidential authority.

Bad as it is for presidential candidate Trump to demagogue and scapegoat Bergdahl, President Trump would be at the top of the chain of command.

Theoretically, he would appoint the three- and four-star generals who decide Bergdahl's guilt or innocence at a court-martial and then impose sentence. Career officers in charge of the case naturally would be hesitant to contradict a commander in chief.

Or the public's confidence in those officers' impartiality would be fatally compromised. What they'd expect - with ample justification - is a show trial.

And if President Trump had his way, he would be the last to sign off on Bergdahl's death sentence. No military execution can be carried out without the president's consent.

The closest analogy - and it's a distant one at best - would be U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts publicly weighing in on the guilt of a murder suspect and then promising to uphold his possible death sentence.

Talk about a breathtaking ignorance of history.

In all of World War II, when more than 10 million Americans were in uniform, only one man - Pvt. Edward Donald "Eddie" Slovik - was executed for desertion.

The case occurred in January 1945, amid rising casualties in the final push toward Germany. Meanwhile, the war in Japan was expected to last another two years. Desertions were mounting, and to send a message, the U.S. military opted to execute Slovik by firing squad.

Since then, no American soldier has been executed for leaving his post. The military death penalty has been reserved for soldiers convicted of rape and murder. Six people are sitting on the military's version of death row.

To suggest a soldier who has yet to be convicted of anything deserves to be the second American executed for desertion in 70 years is out of all proportion to the alleged offense.

And to accuse Bergdahl of treason betrays a mind-boggling incomprehension about that crime. To satisfy the Constitution's narrow definition of treason, Bergdahl would have had to take up arms against his own country or train Taliban operatives to kill Americans - and done so in the company of at least two witnesses.

Five years of captivity do not equate to giving "aid and comfort" to the enemy.

Trump has displayed a bombastic recklessness with the life of one American soldier. He should never get the chance to decide the fate of

another. - M.T.