



THE VICE CHAIRMAN OF THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20318-9999

30 June 2014

The Honorable Senator Levin
Chairman, Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Levin,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to provide my views on whether I personally support the decision to exchange five Taliban detainees for the transfer of Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl to the nation of Qatar for one year.

I support this decision for the following reasons:

First, we have a sacred commitment to the young men and women we place in harm's way that we will never leave any of our fallen on the battlefield. We must reinforce this principle any time it arises. This is expressed in many of our forces' credos, and is a most important signal we send to our people.

Second, the future prospects for rescuing this American soldier were not at all promising. We were not able to locate him with any precision, and a rescue operation would have exposed both a rescue force and Sergeant Bergdahl himself to great danger.

Third, we were genuinely worried about Sergeant Bergdahl's health. Here, we were looking through a glass darkly. His last proof-of-life video was taken seven months before his transfer was arranged. While we did not see any indication of imminent death from that video, his decline was very concerning compared to his apparent status in Sept 2011. CIA physicians at the time said his condition appeared to have significantly deteriorated. Six months later, we simply had no idea whether his health had further declined, leveled off, or improved; we had to assume the worst.

Fourth, we were satisfied with the assurances the Qataris provided regarding the security of the then to-be-transferred detainees, which included the personal guarantee of the Qatari Amir. All indications are that the Qataris are thus far living up to their obligations.

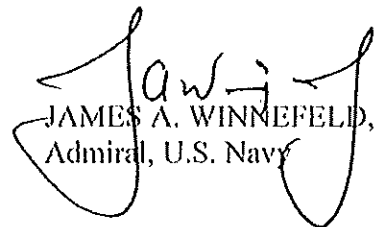
Fifth, while the five detainees are indeed hard core Taliban, they never posed a direct threat to the United States homeland or our interests outside Afghanistan. I do not consider any of them to be "game changers" in being able to substantially alter the military situation or otherwise provide considerable benefit to the Taliban campaign. If, in a year, these detainees travel to Pakistan to rejoin the Taliban leadership, they will be among leaders with 13 more years of experience living comfortably in Quetta doing the same thing, and in my view will provide marginal additive benefit.

Sixth, based on the Taliban's long standing but unsuccessful intent to capture other American soldiers, this transfer would not seem to increase that risk. Moreover, our force profile will be considerably lower one year from now, and based on their projected employment, our soldiers will be less exposed to capture risk.

Leaders are put in place to make hard choices amidst the risk and moral ambiguity that accompanies war. In the end, this was a fleeting opportunity to recover an American soldier, with the clock running out on our future ability to do so. This was a very difficult decision based on what was known at the time, and I support that decision. Sergeant Bergdahl's future should reside in our hands, not the Taliban's.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide my views, and for your enduring support for our men and women in uniform.

Sincerely,



JAMES A. WINNEFELD, JR.
Admiral, U.S. Navy