



The GOP talking points in response to the release of Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl in a trade for five former officials of the 1990s Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Taliban) focused on a few basic premises. 1. You don't negotiate with terrorists; 2. such a swap would encourage terrorists to capture Americans; 3. these officials are the worst the worst.

Tagging movements as "terrorist" and then refusing to deal with them is frankly stupid. The Taliban in Afghanistan are not a small terrorist group like, say, the Italian Red Brigades of the 1970s and 1980s. They are guerrillas belonging to a movement that at one point had captured the state and run it. The Taliban are now a guerrilla group, holding territory.

The US has all along negotiated with the guerrillas it has fought on the battlefield. William Howard Taft (later president) in the Philippines was all for negotiation with Filipinos who rejected US rule, and he created "attraction zones" to win them over. At the conclusion of the Aguinaldo resistance to US occupation in 1902, Teddy Roosevelt declared a general amnesty for the resistance fighters. These resistance fighters had committed some atrocities, including on captured US troops, but Roosevelt just let them walk free. Talk softly, carry a big stick, and let all the terrorists go, seems to have been his motto.

The US negotiated with the Viet Cong in South Vietnam, who were very much analogous to the Taliban and whom the US would now certainly term "terrorists." In 1973, the US used intermediaries to negotiate with the Viet Cong for release of captured US soldiers at Loc Ninh. Americans on the political right made a huge issue about 1300 US soldiers never having been released by the Viet Cong (only about 400 were), and the shame that these men were left on the battlefield by the Nixon and Ford administrations.

Conservatives seem to want to have it both ways. If you negotiate the release of US captives with the enemy you are "negotiating with terrorists." If you don't, then you have left soldiers behind on the battlefield. The fact is that the only way to have freed them was to have offered something for them in detailed negotiations. As for the Viet Cong "terrorists," many of them are in government now and the US has cordial relations with them.

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