



## North Korea's Latest American Hostage

By [DOUG BANDOW](#) on 8.23.13

Should it be up to Washington — or Dennis Rodman — to rescue ill-fated activists?

Kenneth Bae apparently entered North Korea to do good, which in Pyongyang's view is bad. He ended up in prison. He and his family are calling on Washington to do something. However, Americans who travel the globe on personal missions to undermine foreign governments shouldn't expect rescue if they are caught.

Bae is a 44-year-old Christian missionary. He was arrested last November while leading a tour of Chinese businessmen in the Rason special economic zone. His courage clearly exceeded his judgment. He apparently explained his plans for proselytizing in an online video posted two years ago. He suffers from an enlarged heart, diabetes, and a bad back, a dubious trifecta for someone playing secret agent. And the Democratic People's Republic of Korea views religion as a particularly serious threat. The only thing in his favor is the fact that as an American he is of value to Pyongyang as a bargaining chip.

After being convicted of "hostile acts" four months ago, he was sentenced to 15 years of hard labor. His family received letters from him last month which, said his sister, Terri Chung, "contained the same message — Kenneth's health is failing, and he asked us to seek help from our

government to bring him home.” He urged Washington to send an envoy to seek a pardon for him.

Bae apparently was transferred to a hospital earlier this month. Chung observed: “There’s more urgency than ever to bring him home.” Bae’s mother was even more insistent: “I don’t see any action. I want to ask them, send an envoy or do something. As a mother, I am really getting angry, really getting angry. What do they do?”

It’s a tragic situation. The last thing one should wish on anyone is a lengthy stay at the Pyongyang Hilton.

But it isn’t the responsibility of the U.S. government to win the release American citizens who voluntarily and knowingly violate the laws of other nations. I say that as someone who traveled multiple times with ethnic Karen guerrillas in eastern Burma. Things could have gotten ugly, but I accepted the risk; I didn’t expect a dramatic rescue from Washington. After all, I’d chosen to walk into a war zone.

In Bae’s case the U.S. has called for his humanitarian release. The DPRK almost certainly wants to use him to win one concession or another. In the past that usually meant a high-level visit to Pyongyang. In 2009 the visitor was Bill Clinton, in 2010 it was Jimmy Carter, and in 2011 it was Robert King, America’s official human rights envoy for the North. Years earlier Bill Richardson, who served as everything from UN ambassador to New Mexico governor, visited North Korea and returned with an American released from prison.

This time there have been rumors of a Carter trip, as yet unrealized. Former basketball player and apparent Kim Jong-un buddy Dennis Rodman offered to visit.

However, Pyongyang might want more this time. And State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf said that the administration was “willing to consider a number of different options to secure his release.”

A visit by either Carter or Rodman is a small price to pay for anything, and especially the release of a brave if foolhardy American seeking to better other people’s lives. However, Washington really can’t get into the business

of buying the release of official hostages. Bae's mother wants to see action, but that is precisely the wrong reaction from America's standpoint. There's a good argument for changing U.S. policy toward Pyongyang, which has been a notable failure under successive presidents. But the adjustments shouldn't be made under duress, in an attempt to free Bae or anyone else. From the standpoint of official relations, Washington needs to ostentatiously stand aloof from Bae's plight.

In general, the more the U.S. invests in releasing prisoners in foreign lands, the more valuable they will come to be seen — thus creating a greater incentive to grab Americans in the future. The problem goes well beyond the North. It's why Washington takes the tough but sensible position of refusing to ransom kidnap victims, unlike many other governments. Refusing to buy hostages' freedom seems harsh, but groups ranging from the Taliban to Somali pirates have helped fund their activities with money earned by Westerners.

A willingness to dicker also inevitably invites policy as well as financial demands. Americans would be particularly vulnerable because of their government's promiscuous interventions around the world. Changes, big or small, might be desirable — occupying other nations has proved to be far more costly than predicted — but Washington can't change course every time a U.S. citizen is threatened. Officials should take the risk to Americans into account when designing policies around the world. However, Uncle Sam shouldn't change those policies because Americans have been placed at risk.

Especially when prisoners, like Bae, are the authors of their own plight. One of the nation's strengths is people's willingness to risk their lives and freedom to help others. Often they are doing what the U.S. government cannot or does not want to do — act within other countries without official approval, back insurgents or human rights activists, proselytize their faith, and more. However, in challenging the local authorities when Washington is unwilling to do so, such people must understand that they are acting on their own. If the U.S. government doesn't sponsor and oversee their activities, it cannot be expected to take responsibility for them if things go wrong.

Indeed, active government efforts to win the release of activists who violated other nations' laws could be taken as evidence that the freelancers actually were official agents. That could force Washington to bear the political consequences of actions of which it did not approve, complicate international relations already likely to be difficult, and raise the price for the release of future American prisoners. Every U.S. traveler would be at risk if other governments decide that arresting someone is the most effective way to get Washington's attention.

We should all wish a speedy return home for Kenneth Bae. But in seeking a special envoy he should be addressing Dennis Rodman rather than Barack Obama. The U.S. didn't put Bae into a North Korean prison. It shouldn't be expected to get him out.