

ADVOCATE

Donald Trump Denounces Deal to Free ‘Spoiled’ Brittney Griner

Trudy Ring

August 1st, 2022

In light of a reported proposed prisoner swap to free WNBA star Brittney Griner from Russia, Donald Trump has derided her as a “potentially spoiled person” who entered Russia “loaded up with drugs.”

Trump made the comments Friday on a radio talk show, *The Clay Travis and Buck Sexton Show*, regarding the Biden administration’s offer to trade Russian arms dealer Victor Bout for Griner and Paul Whelan, a former marine convicted on espionage charges in Russia — charges he says are false. The U.S. government has classified both Griner and Whelan as “wrongfully detained.”

“She went in there loaded up with drugs into a hostile territory where they’re very vigilant about drugs,” Trump said of Griner, the center for the Phoenix Mercury. “They don’t like drugs. And she got caught. And now we’re supposed to get her out — and she makes, you know, a lot of money, I guess.”

“It certainly doesn’t seem like a very good trade, does it?” he continued. “[Bout is] an absolute — one of the worst in the world, and he’s going to be given his freedom because a potentially spoiled person goes into Russia loaded up with drugs.”

Griner was arrested in February at an airport near Moscow after it was discovered she had vape cartridges containing cannabis oil in her luggage, and she has been jailed since then. The substance is illegal in Russia. The lesbian star has said she was prescribed it for chronic pain and that she took the cartridges to Russia by mistake. She was in the country to play for a Russian team in the WNBA off-season; WNBA players often take off-season gigs with overseas teams because their salaries are so much lower than those of male pro basketballers.

Over the weekend, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that he had discussed the detainment of Griner and Whelan with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. He said that he pressed the Kremlin to accept the Biden administration's proposal.

Trump said Griner “admitted” to drug possession “without too much force,” but others have noted that her guilty plea in the case was necessary to arrange the prisoner swap. Since she entered the plea, she and others have been giving testimony in hopes that she will be given a lighter sentence than the possible 10 years.

There has been criticism of the proposed swap from other sources as well. Bout, who has been serving a 25-year sentence on his arms-dealing conviction. “I spent nearly 15 years chasing Bout

around the globe to stop his trade in death. ... My life and that of other colleagues and U.N. peacekeepers were put on the line to bring him to justice,” Kathi Austin, founder of the Conflict Awareness Project, told *The Guardian*.

Russian President Vladimir Putin “knew very well what he was doing by making Brittney Griner a bargaining chip,” Austin said, adding that Putin is certain to weaponize Bout in areas of the world where the Merchant of Death has a proven track record.”

But Michael McFaul, who was U.S. ambassador to Russia under President Obama, tweeted that he approved of the deal “even if it means handing over Viktor Bout.” He advised the U.S. government to also include Marc Fogel in the swap. Fogel, who taught history at the Anglo-American School in Moscow, was arrested on cannabis charges a year ago.

“The tragic situations of Brittney Griner and Marc Fogel seem very similar,” McFaul told *The Guardian*. “So I would hope Fogel could be included in a package deal. Getting three innocent Americans back, not just two, for one real criminal, seems like a good trade to me.”

Jordan Cohen, an analyst at the Cato Institute, told the publication that Bout, who was convicted of attempting to sell arms for use against Americans, will probably not be able to do much harm immediately if he is released. “U.S. and western intelligence will likely track him and his network to make sure no sudden arms trafficking deals are happening,” Cohen said. “Beyond that, his years in prison and solitary confinement also likely diminished his ability to quickly mobilize his network.”