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No Return of King

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On the 70th anniversary of the armistice ending combat in the Korean War, relations between the United States and North Korea face a new challenge. Last week, 23-year-old U.S. Army Private Travis King apparently defected to the North. The Biden administration wants him back. But his race to tyranny isn't worth squabbling over.

King was in legal trouble and apparently thought a trip to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was the way out. Jailed by the Republic of Korea after a violent drunken escapade, he was headed back to the U.S. and expected separation from the service. Although facing shame rather than prison, he didn't board his flight and joined a public tour to the border—apparently booked before he did his South Korean time, indicating that his sprint north was well-planned. Indeed, he had previously told his superiors that he would not “return to post or America.”

However, the U.S. government won't accept his bizarre choice. Opined Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin: “I'm absolutely foremost concerned about the welfare of our troop.” Similar were Secretary of State Antony Blinken's sentiments: “We are very concerned, of course, about his well-being. We'd like to know his whereabouts.” The National Security Council spokesman John T. Kirby declared that the administration is “making it clear that we want to see him safely and quickly returned to the United States and to his family.” House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul, a Texas Republican, added: “I think it was a serious mistake on his part, and I hope we can get him back.”

The North has said nothing about King, though apparently military-to-military conversations have begun in what is known as the Joint Security Area, where he made his escape. Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un, to whom such an issue certainly would go, must be trying to decide what to do with his unexpected foreign guest.

In recent years, a score of Americans ended up in North Korean custody. Only one claimed to want asylum in the North. In 2014 Matthew Todd Miller tore up his tourist visa and said he wanted to defect, apparently planning to write about his experience in the DPRK. All were released, usually after a high-level American visit and expression of goodwill. Most did not suffer unduly despite their prison sentences, though those who came to evangelize typically received the harshest punishment. (Miller said he was surprised at how well he was treated.)

Student Otto Warmbier's sojourn ended tragically, but the cause remains a mystery. Back in the U.S. his doctors and the coroner found no conclusive evidence of physical torture. Although the North Korean regime is capable of most any barbarity, it also has proved pragmatic in such cases. Americans have political value only when alive.

Closer to King's case were four U.S. soldiers who defected during the 1960s. All were motivated by personal reasons. Three died in the DPRK. The other was Charles Robert Jenkins, who feared deployment to Vietnam. In 1965, fortified by alcohol, he deserted his patrol and hiked into North Korea. He hoped to end up in the Soviet Union and be traded back to America. Instead, he spent almost 40 years in the DPRK, physically mistreated and used in propaganda films. During a brief spell of warming relations between the North and Japan he was allowed to leave to be with his Japanese wife, who had been released earlier. He died in Japan in 2017.

McCaul worries that the North might demand a high price for King's return. The best response for the U.S. Army would be to indicate that the latter is welcome to return and there would be no retribution for his unexpected jaunt, which violates no law. Going AWOL should matter little since he was likely to receive a dishonorable discharge.

Then Washington should wait to see what happens. If the North wants an American diplomat to visit, that would be a plus. So far, Pyongyang has refused to talk with the Biden administration, causing the latter to essentially beg for attention. Until now the only way to jump start talks appeared to be to drop the demand for denuclearization. If King causes North Korea to engage, Washington should not offer concessions for his return. However, the administration should be ready to discuss substantive issues.

The fact that today the DPRK is rejecting rather than requesting talks makes it more likely that it will keep King for propaganda purposes, at least in the near term. Although he appears to lack both political motivation and useful intelligence, the North Korean authorities could put him to use. Jenkins and his fellow defectors appeared in movies, a favorite propaganda medium at the time. King might be more useful online.

Or the North could return him without conditions lest he cause more trouble than he's worth. He obviously is going through personal rough times. Anyone who imagines that fleeing to the DPRK is the answer to anything has shown extremely poor judgment. He hardly seems friendly to typical authorities, let alone one as harsh as the Kim regime. Dumping him back at the border also would appear to be magnanimous.

In such a case, with the American wanting to defect, the U.S. government should take a relaxed approach. Still, in the past Washington still felt pressure to act. For instance, the Obama administration traded five Taliban prisoners for a soldier, Bowe Bergdahl, who left his post and was captured by the Taliban. The details of his behavior remain controverted, but other Americans apparently died searching for a deserter.

There is much greater sympathy for Americans arrested as a bargaining chip to spring foreign prisoners from American institutions. For instance, in March the Russian government seized *Wall Street Journal* reporter Evan Gershkovich on espionage charges. The claim is almost certainly

false, with his detention aimed at winning the release of Russian prisoners, and the Biden administration is willing to deal. Before that Moscow arrested the WNBA player Brittney Griner on drug charges, which, in contrast, apparently were true, though still perhaps politically motivated. She was swapped for a major Russian arms dealer, Viktor Bout, then in U.S. prison.

Surrendering major criminals for civilians who voluntarily venture to authoritarian states hostile to Washington is a dubious practice. First, it releases people thought to have endangered all Americans and who may be capable of doing more harm. Second, it creates a market for American hostages. Had Bout not been traded for Griner, would Moscow have taken Gershkovich? The Putin government may be cruel and brutal, but simply filling its jails with innocent travelers offers little benefit. Washington's willingness to yield Russians valued by Moscow is what greases the wheels of this peculiar commerce.

Of course, we should sympathize with those held unjustly. Personally, I would support the U.S. threatening nuclear war if necessary to recover Americans kidnapped by evildoers—if the victim was me. After all, my “vacation” spots have included North Korea, Syria, Sudan, Pakistan, Haiti, and Zimbabwe. I've even wandered around active conflict zones in Afghanistan, Burma, Kosovo, and Indonesia.

However, why should other Americans be held responsible for my global peregrinations? Ironically, I might have been safer if Washington hadn't made such a fuss in the past when Americans were treated badly by countries and groups.

Consider the case of Austin Tice, grabbed a decade ago after voluntarily venturing into the Syrian civil war, in which hundreds of thousands of people died. Damascus says it does not have him. The U.S., which supported insurgents seeking to overthrow the Syrian government and continues to impose brutal economic sanctions on the country, has given Damascus no reason to cooperate. At this point the al-Assad regime could not easily admit to holding him, even if Washington offered a good price for his release.

Families understandably want action but ignore the role played by their loved ones. Another victim in Syria, kidnapped and murdered by jihadists, was journalist James W. Foley. The foundation named after him complained that “every day we wonder how much longer our loved ones must endure their captivity, not knowing when they will return home, and not being able to fully understand the efforts the United States government is undertaking to secure their freedom.”

His case is tragic. Yet in no way are Washington or the American people responsible. Foley, though courageous, was foolish. Syria was his *second* capture. Before that he was seized, but thankfully later released, in Libya. He had been warned in the most dramatic fashion of what can happen to journalists in a war zone. Alas, mocking fate a second time proved fatal. Even so, the Obama administration attempted a military rescue, which failed.

U.S. officials should press other governments to treat visiting Americans fairly. Diplomatic pressure can be backed by issuing travel warnings, expelling foreign personnel, and cutting financial aid. Only rarely should Washington exercise coercion—most notably economic

sanctions and military action. Of course, the U.S. has a special responsibility to those who represent it overseas, typically diplomatic and military personnel. For that reason, Washington should be especially cautious before putting them in danger.

Indeed, the best way to protect all Americans, whether acting in private or public capacities, is for the U.S. to make fewer enemies and intervene in fewer conflicts abroad. Unfortunately, every entanglement seems to beget additional entanglements. Over the last three decades no country has been more aggressive, with Washington sanctioning, droning, bombing, invading, and occupying other nations and peoples essentially at will. Millions have been displaced, wounded, or killed in those conflicts. America possesses the most powerful military, so other governments and organizations seek to respond asymmetrically. Most dramatic are terrorist attacks on civilians, an evil but predictable response to Washington making someone else's fight its own. Imprisoning American citizens is a lesser but similar indirect tactic.

Americans should wish the best for Travis King. Nevertheless, he might not want to come home. His northern rush, though irrational, was not rash. While welcoming King's return, Washington should make no special effort to win his release. Or that of other Americans, even those imprisoned by hostile governments and movements. Unfortunately, past efforts have perversely put the rest of us at greater risk.

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