

John Walker Lindh agrees to surprise plea bargain

By John Riley
Newsday

ALEXANDRIA, Va. — John Walker Lindh, the 21-year-old Californian who converted to Islam and fought for the Taliban in Afghanistan, agreed to a surprise plea bargain in federal court Monday that could keep him in jail for 20 years.

Lindh pleaded guilty to supplying services to the Taliban and carrying a rifle and grenades while supplying services. But prosecutors dropped the most serious charge against him — that he conspired to kill American soldiers while fighting in Afghanistan — and other charges

that could have led to his imprisonment for life.

"I provided my services as a soldier to the Taliban last year from August to November," Lindh told U.S. District Court Judge T.S. Ellis III during a one-hour hearing on the plea. "In the course of doing so I carried a rifle and two grenades, and I did so knowing that it was illegal."

The plea deal, lawyers said, was reached late Sunday night, on the eve of a scheduled hearing Monday on Lindh's efforts to suppress statements he made on CNN and to military and FBI interrogators in Afghanistan. The talks were moved along by remarks Ellis

made in court Friday indicating he was unlikely to grant Lindh's motions, which would have strengthened the government's case.

Prosecutors said that the proposed sentence — 10 years on each count, served consecutively — was a tough one, and that the plea deal would free up resources for the war on terror rather than calling on soldiers involved in Lindh's case to spend their time testifying. It was cleared by the White House, according to administration officials.

"Twenty years is a period of time almost as long as he's been alive," said Virginia U.S. Attorney Paul McNulty. "This is a major sentence."

Lindh's lawyers and family said that, in deciding to plead guilty, Lindh was conscious that public opinion was not favorably disposed toward him. The government's willingness to drop any counts that charged Lindh with involvement in terrorism or efforts to kill Americans cleared the way for the deal, they said.

"Anyone who knew John would be proud to have him as a son," said Lindh's father, Frank

Lindh. "I am very glad the government has dropped all the terrorism charges. That was never an appropriate charge."

"I'm relieved he's not facing three life sentences and 90 years," said James Brosnahan, Lindh's lawyer. "Realizing how tough it is, we feel pretty good."

Lindh, after attending religious school in Pakistan, joined the Taliban in its war against the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan last year. Prosecutors alleged that he received military training at an al-Qaida camp. He was fighting on the front lines when the U.S. joined the war after Sept. 11, and eventually surrendered.

While confined in a prison near Mazar-e-Sharif, Lindh was caught up in a riot that led to the death of CIA officer Johnny Spann. Prosecutors conceded they had no evidence Lindh played any role in Spann's death. But the conspiracy charge in his indictment, which was dropped Monday, had cited Spann's death as an overt act in the charge of conspiracy to kill Americans.

Spann's mother, Gail, Monday said the plea deal for Lindh was-

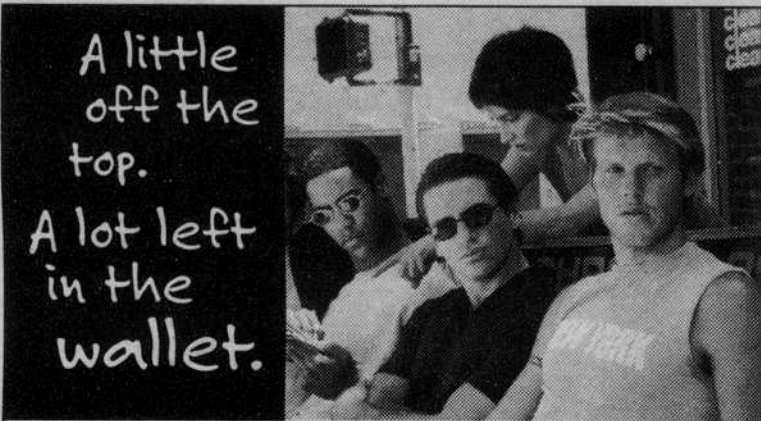
n't fair. "I'm sure it is to John Walker's family, but we don't think it is to us, of course," she said. "As Mike's mom, I would like for Mike to have had 20 years to live."

Lindh himself, according to later statements, barely survived the prison riot, after spending several days in a flooded basement with a bullet in his leg. In early December, dirty and bedraggled, he was filmed and interviewed by a CNN reporter in northern Afghanistan, and said his "heart became attached" to the Taliban.

Under the terms of Monday's plea bargain, Lindh is required to cooperate with the government in any terrorism investigations, and is prohibited from profiting from the sale of his story. He also withdrew his claims of mistreatment by U.S. troops in Afghanistan.

His sentencing is set for Oct. 4. If Ellis, as expected, approves the 20-year sentence agreed on by the two sides, Lindh would be eligible for release with credit for good behavior in about 17 years.

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SPORTS

NBA lacks good role models

What's bigger than an NBA player's ego? His mouth. When I was at the young and impressionable age of 12 or so, some fat, bald-headed giant got on TV, sold sneakers, and had the audacity to say — get this — "I am not a role model."

Parents screamed, kids cried, Nike wondered, and Charles Barkley laughed.

Not because he had an epiphany. No, Charles laughed because he knew then what we are just beginning to know now: An NBA

player is working magic if he can manage his own life. Asking him to father a nation is like having R. Kelly over to baby-sit your kids — it's a big no-no.

But now we understand. Thanks for the heads-up, Charles.

Year in and year out, NBA players collect seven-digit paychecks by satisfying our interests via a ball

and a basket. Tough gig, right?

What else could explain Allen Iverson's alleged outburst that landed him four felony charges and, today, a likely arrest?

What else would provoke former Net Jayson Williams to play cowboys and Indians inside his house with loaded weapons?

What else would cause the Snow Man, er, Reign Man to take up a coke habit that landed him in rehab — not once, but twice?

Surely, it must be the pressure of professional basketball, the stress of life on the road and the entrapment of always being in the public eye.

NBA players probably do lead tough lives. It would be impossible to say that we know what superstardom is like unless we've actually lived it. I for one, have not.

But what I do know is this. One — count them, one — college senior was chosen in last month's lottery. Two years ago, high school kids littered the NBA Draft like \$100,000 cars fill the garages of players who sign multiyear deals. And rumor had it that a high school junior — yes, a junior — would have been the top pick in the 2002 draft had NBA rules not required a diploma.

The bottom line: While NBA

players are getting younger and younger, a handful of experienced veterans are acting like juvenile delinquents. Not only are they setting a bad example for fans, they're telling rookies that their antics are acceptable. Hate to break the news, but that's not the case.

Ten years ago, Charles got himself in hot water for speaking his mind and warning us of impending doom. And, in essence, he was right. Is an NBA player a role model? Nope.

Not unless you want to make millions of dollars, that is — all before the age of 30, mind you — doing what you love.

No, don't believe what Charles' sneaker campaign of yesteryear tried to sell us. Despite their actions, NBA players are role models, and it's high time they started acting like it. Call it an occupational hazard, if you like.

NBA players are in the limelight, and it's about time they grew up and take some responsibility for their actions.

It's pretty simple, really. If the shoe fits, wear it.

Contact the sports editor at bradschmidt@dailymerald.com. His opinions do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald.



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Black & white and READ all over campus.

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