



Idaho Politicians Calling for Clemency for Local Soldier Convicted of Murder

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Two Idaho politicians are calling for clemency for a local soldier who was court marshaled and convicted of murder without premeditation.

Senator Mike Crapo and Representative Mike Simpson have each written letters to Major General Rick Lynch on behalf of Sergeant Evan Vela of St. Anthony.

Sergeant Vela was convicted of killing an unarmed Iraqi civilian and planting evidence on the body.

Throughout the investigation and trial, Vela maintained -- and his superior officers have confirmed -- that he and fellow soldiers were following orders. The incident happened in May 2007 near Iskandariyah, Iraq, which is about 30 miles south of Baghdad.

In his letter, dated March 7, 2008, Crapo wrote: "Soldiers are trained to follow orders issued to facilitate order and safety on the battlefield. When orders issued in high stress situations, such as Sgt. Vela found himself, contravene order, safety and perhaps the Rules of Engagement, more than one individual must be held accountable for the outcome, and the responsibility for errors in judgment must be shared by all involved. The outcome of this case could create an environment where under fire or in a threatening situation [a soldier] could hesitate to defend themselves or their comrades from a perceived threat. In my view, the final judgment in Sgt. Vela's case calls into question the standard evaluation of basic rules of engagement, creating uncertain and dangerous operational environments for commanders and soldiers involved in day-to-day combat missions."

In Simpson's letter of April 3, 2008, he wrote: "In addition to conflicting accounts of the rules of engagement, I also have strong concerns over reports of Sgt. Vela's physical and mental conditions at the time of the incident," said Simpson. "There are a number of mitigating factors and extenuating circumstances in this case that make a compelling argument for clemency."