

Freedom nears for American convicted of spying for Israel

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Washington: Nearly 30 years to the day after his arrest for turning over classified information to Israel, convicted spy Jonathan Pollard is to be released from federal prison in the culmination of an extraordinary espionage case that divided public opinion and became both an irritant and a periodic bargaining chip between two allies.

Pollard, 61, is scheduled to be freed Friday from the medium-security prison at Butner, North Carolina, after being granted parole this summer from a life sentence imposed in 1987.

His lawyers have said that they have secured a job and housing for him in the New York area, without elaborating. The terms of his parole require him to remain in the United States for at least five years.

His release caps one of the most high-profile spy sagas in modern American history, a case that over the years became a diplomatic sticking point between the United States and Israel. Supporters say he was punished excessively for actions taken on behalf of an American ally while critics, including government officials, deride him as a traitor who sold out his country.

"I don't think there's any doubt that the crime merited a life sentence, given the amount of damage that Mr. Pollard did to the United States government," said Joseph diGenova, who prosecuted the case as U.S. attorney in Washington, D.C. "I would have been perfectly pleased if he had spent the rest of his life in jail."

Seymour Reich, a former president of B'nai Brith International who visited Pollard twice in prison, said that while he believed Pollard broke the law and deserved to be punished, his sentence was overly harsh. Like other supporters, he believes Pollard was "double-crossed" into thinking he'd be afforded leniency in exchange for a guilty plea.

"I hope that he settles down and lives the remaining years as best as he can," Reich said.

Pollard, a former Navy intelligence analyst, was arrested on Nov. 21, 1985, after trying unsuccessfully to gain asylum at the Israeli Embassy in Washington. He had earlier drawn the suspicion of a supervisor for handling large amounts of classified materials unrelated to his official duties.

U.S. officials have said Pollard, over a series of months and for a salary, provided intelligence summaries and huge quantities of classified documents on the capabilities and programs of both the U.S. and of Israel's enemies. He pleaded guilty in 1986 to conspiracy to commit espionage and was given a life sentence a year later.

Though he has said his guilty plea was coerced, he has also expressed regret, telling The Associated Press in a 1998 prison interview that he did not consider himself a hero and was not in it for the money.

"There is nothing good that came as a result of my actions," he said at the time. "I tried to serve two countries at the same time. That does not work."

Under sentencing rules in place at the time of his crime, he became presumptively eligible for parole in November 2015 30 years after his arrest. The Justice Department agreed not to oppose parole at a July hearing.

The parole decision was applauded in Israel, which after initially claiming that he was part of a rogue operation, acknowledged him in the 1990s as an agent and granted him citizenship. Israelis have long campaigned for his freedom,

and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said last summer that he had consistently raised the issue of his release with American officials.

Pollard's lawyers also have sought permission for him to travel immediately to Israel, and two Democratic members of Congress — Eliot Engel and Jerrold Nadler, both of New York — have called on the Justice Department to grant the request so that Pollard can live with his family and "resume his life there."

The White House has said that it has no intention of altering the conditions of Pollard's parole, and even friends and supporters say they don't know exactly what's next for him.

Last year, the U.S. dangled the prospect of freeing Pollard early as part of a package of incentives to keep Israel at the negotiating table during talks with the Palestinians. But the talks fell apart, and Pollard remained in prison.

More details about his plans were expected to emerge after his release.

"It's a very unusual situation ... I've been working with Mr. Pollard for 20 years, and even I don't know where he is going or what he will be doing," said Farley Weiss, an Orthodox rabbi who has been lobbying on Pollard's behalf for two decades.

- AP