

SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE ENTERS FANTASYLAND IN HEARING ON AFGHANISTAN WITHDRAWAL

Yesterday, while much of the world's attention was focused on emerging details relating to the Boston Marathon bombings on Monday (along with a tiny bit of attention on the Constitution Center's report on torture that Marcy was banned from improving), the Senate Armed Services Committee held a hearing on the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. This was the first hearing for new ISAF Commander General Joseph Dunford since he was confirmed.

I was only able to watch the first half of the hearing as it unfolded, but my overwhelming impression was that the committee felt it could put words into Dunford's mouth. He mostly went along with that although at one point he finally did get fed up with John McCain speaking for him and pushed back a bit.

Completely missing in the hearing (at least in the part I was able to watch) was any perspective on the real controlling factor on whether the US leaves any troops in Afghanistan after the planned "end of combat operations" set for the end of 2014. The precedent of the Iraq full withdrawal once Iraq refused to grant criminal immunity to any US troops remaining there demonstrates that the Obama administration views criminal immunity as a controlling prerequisite for whether we will leave troops in Afghanistan. To that end, then, negotiation of a Status of Forces Agreement, or SOFA, is the most important step in determining whether we will keep troops in Afghanistan past 2014 and how many there will be.

Despite all the feel-good talk from the Defense Department and Capitol Hill, it seems very unlikely that Afghanistan will agree to grant immunity to US troops. However, an idea was floated by NATO back in February that I viewed as a very thinly veiled offer of an additional \$22 billion dollars for Afghan officials to embezzle in return for a grant of immunity. The proposal was in the form of suggesting that NATO (primarily the US) would provide financial support for Afghanistan to maintain its Afghan National Security Force at 352,000 (a number that is more myth than reality) through the end of 2018 rather than reducing the force size by about a third once we leave.

Committee Chair Carl Levin opened the hearing by endorsing this purchase of a \$22 billion SOFA. From his transcript of his opening statement:

It is in everyone's interest to promptly set the conditions for any post-2014 partnership with Afghanistan. NATO defense ministers have already begun consideration of the size and mission for a post-2014 force in Afghanistan. One factor that will influence that decision is the size and capacity of the Afghan security forces. In this regard, the recent decision by NATO defense ministers to support maintaining the Afghan security forces at the current 352,000 level through 2018, rather than reducing the support to a level of 230,000 as previously planned, sends an important signal of our continued commitment to a safe and secure Afghanistan, and may make it feasible for us to have a smaller U.S. and coalition presence after 2014.

Jim Inhofe's opening statement was a magnificent exercise in ignorance and obfuscation. He chastised Obama for his "precipitous withdrawal" from Iraq and never acknowledged the lack of criminal immunity as the reason for the full and rapid withdrawal. Is there any doubt that if the

US had left troops in Iraq without immunity that Inhofe would have been among the first to criticize Obama for leaving them there under those conditions once the first soldier was arrested?

The Tulsa World covered his statement:

U.S. Sen. Jim Inhofe on Tuesday criticized administration plans for withdrawing from Afghanistan.

"I am concerned, as many of my colleagues are, that we might squander the sacrifice of American lives and investment of over \$80 billion in assistance to Afghanistan by a precipitous withdrawal of forces at the end of 2014," Inhofe said. "We have seen this happen before with this Administration, in December of 2011, when all of the U.S. forces were removed from Iraq."

Later, during his first questioning period, Inhofe couldn't resist chuckling at himself over calling Karzai rogue:

You can almost see Inhofe thinking "This Karzai guy is toast once he's out of office. Even though he eventually "came around", that didn't save Gaddafi."

But the real trip to fantasyland by the committee occurred during questioning by Jack Reed, where Reed pushed for Dunford to confirm that we can still say that we are winning in Afghanistan:

Dunford's three steps to winning are to effect security transition, effect political transition and to deny al Qaeda sanctuary. As I alluded to above, my opinion, with support from SIGAR, is that the widely cited 352,000 figure for ANSF forces size is more myth than reality. Further, the military has played many games in choosing how to evaluate the effectiveness of these

Afghan troops so that they can inflate their claims on effectiveness. In the end, Afghan troops often are shown to be ineffective on their own and that is my sad expectation for the future. Note also that violence is once again on a significant upswing even while the US still maintains a significant presence, so imagine how bad it will be once all responsibility for security lies with the Afghans.

However, the claim that political progress can be made is the true delusion here. Recall that "political reconciliation" was one of the keys during the Petraeus surge in Iraq. All the new violence from sending in more troops (and providing a freer hand to the death squads) was to provide space for political reconciliation which still has not occurred and sectarian violence continues to plague the country. I see no reason for Afghanistan to fare any better on the political front, so the shared delusion in this hearing that a smooth political process will magically appear in Afghanistan has no basis in reality.

Perhaps the most alarming part of the hearing comes from an exchange that Marcy has alerted me to that took place after I had to stop watching. It was pointed out in late March that DoD was about \$7 billion over budget for Afghanistan and that much of that overage was related to costs for removing troops and equipment. It appears from this question from Mike Lee that the estimate of overage has now grown to \$10 billion. Shockingly, Dunford has no knowledge of this key development:

It would appear that Dunford is so caught up in the idea that we are winning in Afghanistan that he forgot to check on how the budget is affected by our withdrawal. That is not a welcome development.

For those who can stomach it, here is the hearing in its entirety: