

HIDING REPORT ON FRATRICIDE IN AFGHANISTAN DOESN'T MAKE IT GO AWAY

UNCLASSIFIED

A CRISIS OF TRUST AND CULTURAL INCOMPATIBILITY:

A Red Team Study of Mutual Perceptions of Afghan
National Security Force Personnel and U.S. Soldiers in
Understanding and Mitigating the Phenomena of
ANSF-Committed Fratricide-Murders

May 12, 2011

On
January
20,
the
New
York
Times
carried
what
they
at
first

thought was a scoop on a “classified” report (pdf) on Afghan military and police personnel killing NATO forces. After they were told that the Wall Street Journal had written on the report back in June, they admitted as much in a correction. They later added another correction after I pointed out that a version of the report clearly marked “unclassified” could be found easily even though the Times referred to the report as classified. It turns out that the report had indeed been published first as unclassified but then was retroactively classified while the Wall Street Journal article was being prepared.

Events over the last few days serve to demonstrate the folly of trying to hide damaging information rather than openly reviewing it and trying to learn lessons from it. The report in question went into great detail to document the cultural misunderstandings that exist between NATO forces and their “partner” Afghan forces, and how these misunderstandings escalate to the point that Afghan personnel end up killing NATO personnel. In the executive summary of the report, we learn that “ANSF members identified numerous social, cultural and operational

grievances they have with U.S. soldiers.”
Arrogance on the part of U.S. soldiers often was cited, as well.

This clash of social values is at the heart of the newest wave of anti-US and anti-NATO violence in Afghanistan which erupted after an Afghan employee found Korans among materials being burned last week at a NATO base. A part of the response to the Koran burning is that on Saturday, two NATO personnel were killed inside Afghanistan’s interior ministry building. BBC reports that an Afghan police officer is suspected in the shootings:

Afghanistan’s interior ministry has said one of its own employees is suspected of the killing of two senior US Nato officers inside the ministry.

Officials earlier named police intelligence officer Abdul Saboor from Parwan province as the main suspect behind Saturday’s attack.

The NATO response to the killing was swift:

Nato withdrew all its personnel from Afghan ministries after the shooting.

The importance of this move cannot be overstated. At a time when the plan calls for an accelerated schedule of handing over security functions to Afghan military and police, NATO is now admitting that relations with them are so bad that no NATO personnel can be present inside the very ministries with which they need to work.

Refusing to address the issue of cultural clashes didn’t make them go away. In fact, cultural differences are at the heart of the current crisis that threatens to disrupt the entire plan for withdrawing from Afghanistan. Ironically, when I first wrote on the New York Times’ discussion of the report, I speculated that it was being used as a vehicle for senior

military personnel to describe how we can't possibly withdraw from Afghanistan on the current timetable because Afghan security personnel aren't up to the task. With the cultural backlash fueling this latest crisis, the call to extend the occupation has now spread beyond the military to the State Department, as US Ambassador to Afghanistan Ryan Crocker took to the airwaves on CNN yesterday to argue that the withdrawal plan needs to be delayed:

The United States should resist the urge to pull troops out of Afghanistan ahead of schedule due to the violence against Americans over the burning of the Koran at a U.S. military base, U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ryan Crocker said on Sunday.

"Tensions are running very high here. I think we need to let things calm down, return to a more normal atmosphere, and then get on with business," Crocker said in an interview from Kabul on CNN's "State of the Union."

/snip/

"This is not the time to decide that we are done here. We have got to redouble our efforts. We've got to create a situation that al Qaeda is not coming back," Crocker said.

When even "diplomats" refuse to understand the underlying cause of violence in the current situation, it's hard to see how it will be defused. An extreme clash of cultural values has been shown to underlie the tensions between NATO and Afghan personnel, but the response to having this pointed out has been to attempt to bury the report by retroactively classifying it and to declare that we need only to "get on with business" to complete the failed mission in Afghanistan.

Update: Oh look. CNN's Barbara Starr does more stenography to spread the idea that the Afghans

are not doing enough to quell the violence and that this is just spontaneous violence in response to the Koran burning:

In the latest sign of how strained U.S. and Afghan military relations have become, a senior U.S. official tells CNN, "There is a strong sense inside the Obama administration that the Afghans did not do enough to quell the violence" that has erupted since the burning Qurans and other religious material a week ago.

/snip/

But the ministry killings are generating exceptionally raw feelings because they took place inside a secure Afghan government building.

"There is no doubt an incident like this chips away at trust," the military official told CNN. "I am not going to tell you there hasn't been concern."

Both officials said the United States believes many of the violent demonstrations have sprung up spontaneously and while the Taliban has claimed some credit so far, there is no evidence of a broadly organized effort.

Yup, these are just spontaneous demonstrations and there is no reason to look at underlying reasons for why Afghan personnel would attack NATO personnel. After all, that report has been classified, so we shouldn't mention it.