

IS THE GOVERNMENT GOING TO CLAIM BRADLEY MANNING “HARMED” THE US BY EXPOSING DRONE DETAILS?

Last week's Bradley Manning hearing signified a focus

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TAGS: PRR, POU, PTER, PIR, PIR, MOPS, MASS, MCAP, SA, AE, UK, ER, DJ, GA, YN
SUBJECT: GENERAL PETRAEUS' MEETING WITH SALEH ON SECURITY ASSISTANCE, AQAP STRIKES
REF: 2009 SANA 1430

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (S//NF) SUMMARY: Commander of the U.S. Central Command General David Petraeus congratulated President Saleh on recent successful operations against AQAP, and informed him that U.S. security assistance to the ROYF would increase to USD 150 million in 2010, including USD 45 million to equip and train a CT-focused aviation regiment under the Yemeni Special Operations Forces. Saleh requested that the U.S. provide 12 armed helicopters and train and equip three new Republican Guard brigades. Saleh rejected the General's proposal to have USG personnel armed with direct-feed intelligence present inside the area of CT operations, but agreed to have U.S. fixed-wing bombers circle outside Yemeni territory ready to engage AQAP targets should actionable intelligence become available. END SUMMARY.

d on how much the government could hide about its witnesses. A big part of the discussion pertained to how a Seal Team 6 member would testify to finding WikiLeaks material at Osama bin Laden's compound. But the government also advanced its case to have a list of other government employees testify, at least partly, in secret, mostly in the “harm” phase of sentencing.

Here's Alexa O'Brien's transcription of that list (click through for the list). There are a number of interesting names on this list. But the one that popped out at me is Ambassador Stephen Seche.

You see, while Seche was Chargé d'Affaires in Syria mid-decade and more recently was in charge of Near Eastern affairs at State, he will almost certainly testify about how WikiLeaks disclosures of cables he wrote while Ambassador to Yemen “harmed” relations with that country.

Indeed, as the image above shows, Seche wrote

one of the most newsworthy cables ever released by WikiLeaks, the January 4, 2010 cable recounting a January 2 meeting between then CentCom head David Petraeus and Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

The cable is best known for this statement, laying out the agreement by which Saleh would lie about missile and drone strikes and pretend they were Yemen's.

"We'll continue saying the bombs are ours, not yours," Saleh said, prompting Deputy Prime Minister Alimi to joke that he had just "lied" by telling Parliament that the bombs in Arhab, Abyan, and Shebwa were American-made but deployed by the ROYG.

But there are several other inflammatory details in this cable. There's the nugget of our agreement to shift from using cruise missiles to drones.

Saleh did not have any objection, however, to General Petraeus' proposal to move away from the use of cruise missiles and instead have U.S. fixed-wing bombers circle outside Yemeni territory, "out of sight," and engage AQAP targets when actionable intelligence became available.

Potentially more damning still, there's the passage that suggests Anwar al-Awlaki was an intended target of the December 24, 2009 attack (a day before the US believed he was an operational and at least a month before it had evidence he was). In addition, there's Petraeus' absolutely incorrect contention that only three civilians had died at al-Majala instead of the Bedouin clan we know died.

(S/NF) Saleh praised the December 17 and 24 strikes against AQAP but said that "mistakes were made" in the killing of civilians in Abyan. The General

responded that the only civilians killed were the wife and two children of an AQAP operative at the site, prompting Saleh to plunge into a lengthy and confusing aside with Deputy Prime Minister Alimi and Minister of Defense Ali regarding the number of terrorists versus civilians killed in the strike. (Comment: Saleh's conversation on the civilian casualties suggests he has not been well briefed by his advisors on the strike in Abyan, a site that the ROYG has been unable to access to determine with any certainty the level of collateral damage. End Comment.) AQAP leader Nassr al-Wahishi and extremist cleric Anwar al-Awlaki may still be alive, Saleh said, but the December strikes had already caused al-Qaeda operatives to turn themselves in to authorities and residents in affected areas to deny refuge to al-Qaeda. [my emphasis]

At the very least, this passage demonstrates how shoddy our intelligence was both before and after we killed a bunch of civilians. But it may also support the case that the first time we tried to kill Awlaki, we didn't believe he met the standards laid out in the memo that would ultimately authorize his killing: being a senior operational leader of AQAP involved in planning attacks against the US.

In other words, this cable, by itself, may include evidence of possible war and domestic crimes.

And yet the government wants to send Seche to a classified hearing to talk about the "harm" Bradley Manning caused.

While I think it possible that release of this particular cable made it harder for Djibouti to partner with us (recall we moved the drones targeting Awlaki to Saudi Arabia in 2011), the government at least maintains that Yemen

continues to allow us to shoot drones in the country.

Yet it seems highly likely the government wants to claim disclosures of crimes like this amounted to “harm” of the US.

But here’s the punchline.

Consider this other cable by Seche, written just a few weeks earlier, in the wake of the al-Majala massacre. In it, he warns – in December 2009, more than three years ago! – that the US role in the al-Majala attack, which we to this day have yet to admit to, will be impossible to deny.

(S/NF) SUMMARY. The ROYG views the December 17 CT operations as a success and a benefit to Yemeni national interests, and appears not overly concerned about unauthorized leaks regarding the U.S. role and negative media attention to civilian deaths. ROYG officials continue to publicly maintain that the operation was conducted entirely by its forces, acknowledging U.S. support strictly in terms of intelligence sharing. Deputy Prime Minister Rashad al-Alimi told the Ambassador on December 20 that any evidence of greater U.S. involvement) such as fragments of U.S. munitions found at the sites – could be explained away as equipment purchased from the U.S. While the ROYG has touted the operation as a victory in terms of the number of al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) members killed or captured, it hasn’t yet decided how, or even if, it should begin to modify its public messaging to address criticism over collateral damage, or the likelihood that the extent of U.S. involvement may become impossible to deny.

Indeed, in the cable, Seche went on to talk about how continuing to tell obvious lies about who is launching missile strikes will undermine support for counterterrorism operations.

(S/NF) Given that local and international media will continue to look for evidence of a U.S. role in the December 17 strikes against AQAP, the ROYG must think seriously about its public posture and whether its strict adherence to assertions that the strikes were unilateral will undermine public support for legitimate and urgently needed CT operations, should evidence to the contrary surface. Thus far, the ROYG has deployed influential local leaders to the affected area in Abyan to explain the need for the strikes in an effort to quell potential unrest; however, it has not attempted to provide any context for the civilian casualties, which might help to counter overblown claims of ROYG disregard for the local population) in this particular case, southerners. [my emphasis]

In other words, it appears likely the government wants to use a classified briefing to send the former Ambassador to Yemen to complain that Bradley Manning revealed what he himself predicted would become obvious (and what had been confirmed long before these cables were released): the US was behind missile strikes in Yemen, including one that killed as many as 41 civilians.

Moreover, almost a year before this cable was leaked, Seche talked about how lying like the US was doing – and continues to do – might diminish support for counterterrorism strikes.

No wonder the government wants Seche to testify in secret.