

THE BLAME GAME BEGINS: WHO WILL BE HELD RESPONSIBLE FOR CREATING THE AFGHAN “VERTICALLY INTEGRATED CRIMINAL” GOVERNMENT?

Last Sunday, the Beltway professed to be shocked – shocked!! – that the CIA has been bribing Hamid Karzai for years.

Moreover, there is little evidence that the payments bought the influence the C.I.A. sought. Instead, some American officials said, the cash has fueled corruption and empowered warlords, undermining Washington’s exit strategy from Afghanistan.

“The biggest source of corruption in Afghanistan,” one American official said, “was the United States.”

Fred Kaplan, author of a fawning David Petraeus biography, described how Petraeus tried to fix that corruption but was stymied by practicality.

Petraeus was impressed with their analysis but found their proposals impractical. First, he couldn’t simply bypass Karzai. One of his strategic goals was to help stabilize Afghanistan. Overhauling the districts’ governing boards and transferring power to new officials—who may themselves just be a new array of warlords—was hardly a recipe for stability. Second, the plan would undermine another strategic goal—protecting the Afghan population. The local officials who were taking

bribes and extorting merchants were also helping out with local security, sometimes guarding convoys of NATO supply trucks. If the cash spigot were shut off, they might let the Taliban attack those trucks, maybe even join in.

Then Sarah Chayes, one of the civilian advisors who fought against Afghan corruption in the transition period from Stanley McChrystal to Petraeus, wrote an account of what Petraeus really did.

Our PowerPoint presentation spelling out this plan ran to more than 40 slides. We selected a dozen we really planned to brief, but at a meeting with the entire command staff, General Petraeus read through every one. With a calculated flourish, he marked a check on each page as he turned it over. Petraeus was on board.

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But when he stood up to address the assembled brass, Petraeus seemed to skip past – or even argue against – the slides we had prepared explaining the new governance approach. We were stunned. What had happened? Had we misunderstood? Had he changed his mind?

For another month, we kept at it; I hammered out a detailed implementation of our general concept to be employed in Kandahar province, alongside the troop surge. But by mid-September 2010, it was clear to me that Petraeus had no intention of implementing it, or of pursuing any substantive anti-corruption initiative at all. Four months later, in an intense interagency struggle over the language of a document spelling out objectives for Afghanistan by 2015, the U.S. government, at the cabinet level, explicitly reached the same decision.

That was the moment I understood the Afghanistan mission could not succeed.

Like Kagan, Chayes ultimately blames CIA. But she does so, specifically, in the context of the attempted July 2010 arrest of the CIA's bagman, Muhammad Zia Salehi.

I spent weeks wracking my brain, trying to account for the about-face. Eventually, after a glance in my calendar to confirm the dates, it came to me. It was the Salehi arrest. The Salehi arrest had changed everything.

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Throughout the unfolding investigation, two senior U.S. officials have told me, through Salehi's arrest and release after a few hours of police detention, CIA personnel never mentioned their relationship with him. Even afterwards, despite pressure in Kabul and Washington, the CIA refused to provide the ambassador or the key cabinet officials a list of Afghans they were paying. The CIA station chief in Kabul continued to hold private meetings with Karzai, with no other U.S. officials present.

So whom did Salehi call from his jail cell the afternoon of his arrest? Was it Karzai, as many presumed at the time? Or was it the CIA station chief?

However lethal our bribes to Karzai have been to our so-called strategy in Afghanistan (though I wonder: have they simply forestalled an all-out civil war?), he's still going to proudly receive the cash.

"Yes, we received cash from the CIA for the past 10 years. It was very useful, and we are very thankful for this aid," the president said during a news

conference Saturday in Kabul.

"Yesterday, I thanked the CIA's chief in Kabul and I requested their continued help, and they promised that they will continue."

If all this sounds vaguely familiar, it should.

That's because much of this dispute played out in reporting at the time. After NYT first reported CIA's ties to Salehi a month after the attempted arrest in 2010 – and quoted one official saying "Fighting corruption is the very definition of mission creep" – the WaPo reported more anonymous sources almost boasting of the bribes (and reminding they went back to the mujahadeen era). A month later, the WaPo quoted several anonymous military officials (in an article that quoted then Afghan Commander David Petraeus and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates on the record), anxious to show progress by that December, saying they had to tolerate some corruption.

Military officials in the region have concluded that the Taliban's insurgency is the most pressing threat to stability in some areas and that a sweeping effort to drive out corruption could create chaos and a governance vacuum that the Taliban could exploit.

"There are areas where you need strong leadership, and some of those leaders are not entirely pure," said a senior defense official. "But they can help us be more effective in going after the primary threat, which is the Taliban."

Just a week after that WaPo article, another reported that Obama's top national security aides – not just the CIA – were reaching a consensus that cracking down on corruption would impede our efforts to "achieve our principal goals."

But the officials said there is a growing consensus that key corruption cases against people in Karzai's government should be resolved with face-saving compromises behind closed doors instead of public prosecutions.

"The current approach is not tenable," said an administration official who, like others interviewed, agreed to discuss internal deliberations only on the condition of anonymity. "What will we get out of it? We'll arrest a few mid-level Afghans, but we'll lose our ability to operate there and achieve our principal goals."

It was a view shared by officials in Afghanistan.

There is a growing view at the U.S. and NATO headquarters in Kabul that "the law enforcement approach to corruption mucks up our strategic interests," said the U.S. official there.

The following year, in January 2011, when the Beltway professed to be shocked – shocked!! – that the Kabul Bank had "lost" \$900 million, similar hints came out. The last two paragraphs of the NYT's account, for example, hinted that we couldn't attack Kabul Bank directly because it would reveal that we've been propping up a bunch of crooks (and blowing millions to have Karzai "re-elected" in an obviously fraudulent election).

Kabul Bank has extensive links to senior people in the Afghan government. In addition to Mahmoud Karzai, other shareholders included Haseen Fahim, the brother of the first vice president, and several associates of the family from the north of Afghanistan. Afghan officials said the bank poured millions into President Karzai's election

campaign.

It is the loans and personal grants made by the bank to powerful people, including government ministers, that could prove the most explosive, Western and Afghan officials said. "If people who are thought to be clean and who were held up as 'good' by Western countries suddenly are caught with their fingers in the till, it will cause questions from donors," said a Western official in Kabul. "They will say, 'Why are we here?' "

Dexter Filkins provided far more detail of the many top Karzai officials who were on the take.

The evidence, according to American officials close to the inquiry [into the collapse of the Kabul Bank], appears to implicate dozens of Afghan officials and businessmen, many of them, like [Karzai's finance minister and campaign treasurer, Omar] Zakhilwal, among Karzai's closest advisers, with regulatory responsibilities over the Afghan financial system. Among the others are Afghans regarded by American officials as among the most capable in Karzai's government: Farouk Wardak, the Minister of Education; Yunus Qanooni, the speaker of the Afghan parliament; and Haneef Atmar, the former Minister of the Interior.

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"Just straight bribes," a senior NATO officer said of the payments to Afghan officials.

Filkins also made it clear Karzai – and with him, the US – decided to stop pursuing corruption because Salehi threatened to expose everything.

Salehi telephoned Karzai from his jail cell. "He told Karzai, 'If I spend one night in jail, I'll bring the whole thing down,' " the Western official recalled.

So forgive me if I'm dubious of the professed shock – shock!! – coming from Beltway figures who presumably have been following this for three years.

What's new is not knowledge of Karzai's corruption. Indeed, as the ease with which Karzai speaks of ordering up the Kabul Station Chief to continue the bribes make clear, all this is not secret in the least.

What's new, apparently, is an attempt to blame all this – and with it, our imminent failure in Afghanistan – exclusively on the CIA.

I confess, I'm a little confused how you can cast blame exclusively on the CIA in an administration where the Secretary of Defense when these decisions were made was a former CIA head who oversaw the earlier generation of such bribes in Afghanistan, the Afghan Commander would become the CIA Director, the CIA Director would become the Secretary of Defense, and Obama's top counterterrorism advisor, who had already overseen his share of bribes while at CIA, and would go on to become the CIA Director. In an Administration where everyone is a former or future participant in CIA's bribery, it's sort of pointless to try to cast blame exclusively on the CIA.

The other problem with this tale is the claim that bribery is now interfering with our exit strategy.

Back in 2010, when tolerating Afghan corruption became the formal policy of the Obama Administration, the entire rationale was that tolerating corruption would help American focus on its so-called strategic goals. Only, in truth, they weren't so much strategic goals as a hope to claim political success for all the top

figures involved, from the Generals on up to the Cabinet Members and the President. And now that the game of musical chairs has advanced three rounds and failure seems assured, the various parties are attempting to place blame for a decision they, at the very least, ultimately agreed to (interestingly, Hillary was perhaps the most vocal against this organized bribery at the time; perhaps she realized she was the only one whose time horizon would have to account for this failure).

Besides, I'm not sure why the Beltway gets to feign shock that Afghanistan has a system of legalized corruption. While Karzai's corruption may be more blatant than our own, it's not like the Beltway has fought against its own system of legal influence peddling.