

“THE LAW ENFORCEMENT APPROACH ... MUCKS UP OUR STRATEGIC INTERESTS.”

I’ve been tracking the debate within the Administration over whether we should tolerate corruption in Afghanistan in the name of sustaining a war against someone—anyone—in Afghanistan or not for some weeks. Underlying the entire debate is the fact that our goals in Afghanistan—which started as a pursuit of those who struck us on 9/11 and now, having achieved that in Afghanistan, appears to be “not lose”—are totally unclear and apparently divorced from national interest. The debate pits those who believe corruption discredits the Karzai regime and creates support for the Taliban against those who rely on corrupt members of the Karzai regime who claim cracking down on corruption (which is, effectively, the removal of our aid money to private bank accounts in Dubai) will hurt the goal, which they’ve redefined, without Congressional buy-off, as defeating the Taliban.

Here’s how today’s installment, from By Rajiv Chandrasekaran, captures the debate:

The debate turns largely on how various administration officials view the connection between corruption and the insurgency.

Some officials, principally at the staff level, contend that government venality and incompetence is the principal reason Afghans are joining, supporting or tolerating the Taliban. Other administration and military officials, particularly those at senior levels, maintain that graft is just one of many

factors – along with sanctuaries in Pakistan, historical tribal grievances and anger at the presence of foreign forces on Afghan soil – that fuel the conflict.

Compounding the challenge is that many Afghan officials who are regarded as corrupt also provide valuable assistance to U.S. forces, including sensitive intelligence. Some, including the palace aide, are on the CIA's payroll – a fact not initially known to investigators working on the case.

And while this debate seems to be still raging among those in Afghanistan, Chandrasekaran reports that top officials in the Obama Administration have decided to set aside the law enforcement approach for back room deals.

President Obama's top national security advisers, who will meet with him this week to discuss the problem, do not yet agree on the contours of a new approach, according to U.S. civilian and military officials involved in Afghanistan policy. 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.

Once again, the anonymous official embracing corruption does so in the name of our "principal goals."

"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.”

I’m beginning to believe “our ability to operate there” **is** our “principal goal.”

All of which discussion sets up this quote from an official in Kabul who has concluded we need to abandon a law enforcement approach.

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.

Of course, this comment pertains solely to rooting out corruption in Afghanistan. Not detention of captives. Not corruption of American contractors. Not targeting terrorists.

But it sure reveals, in stark fashion, how far we’ve come from our “principal goal” of governance, which is at least partly to support and defend the Constitution, otherwise known as a law enforcement approach.