

SO THERE WAS ONE CULTURAL DIFFERENCE THE MILITARY RECOGNIZED IN AFGHANISTAN

Joseph Goldstein broke a devastating story this afternoon in the New York Times:

In his last phone call home, Lance Cpl. Gregory Buckley Jr. told his father what was troubling him: From his bunk in southern Afghanistan, he could hear Afghan police officers sexually abusing boys they had brought to the base.

“At night we can hear them screaming, but we’re not allowed to do anything about it,” the Marine’s father, Gregory Buckley Sr., recalled his son telling him before he was shot to death at the base in 2012. He urged his son to tell his superiors. “My son said that his officers told him to look the other way because it’s their culture.”

Goldstein goes on to reveal that Gregory Buckley, Jr’s killer was in fact one of those boys whose screams he heard. The killer, Ainuddin Khudairaham, was one of many “tea boys” being held by the police commander on the base, Sarwar Jan. But Jan came to the base with a history. Again from Goldstein:

Lance Corporal Buckley and two other Marines were killed in 2012 by one of a large entourage of boys living at their base with an Afghan police commander named Sarwar Jan.

Mr. Jan had long had a bad reputation; in 2010, two Marine officers managed to persuade the Afghan authorities to

arrest him following a litany of abuses, including corruption, support for the Taliban and child abduction. But just two years later, the police commander was back with a different unit, working at Lance Corporal Buckley's post, Forward Operating Base Delhi, in Helmand Province.

Lance Corporal Buckley had noticed that a large entourage of "tea boys" – domestic servants who are sometimes pressed into sexual slavery – had arrived with Mr. Jan and moved into the same barracks, one floor below the Marines. He told his father about it during his final call home.

As if that's not enough, Goldstein goes on to note that the only person punished over the killings by the tea boy was one of the officers who had gotten Jan arrested previously and contacted the new base where Jan was assigned to warn them of his pedophilia.

Goldstein's report blows the lid off a disgusting practice by the military to allow Afghan officers to engage in what they refer to as "bacha bazi", or "boy play" and to ascribe it to cultural differences rather than calling out criminal behavior. This practice of looking the other way has gone on for a very long time. An article Goldstein linked had this to say:

With the agreement on an action plan to combat the problem, the government will for the first time officially acknowledge the problem of child sex slaves. As part of the Afghan tradition of bacha bazi, literally "boy play," boys as young as 9 are dressed as girls and trained to dance for male audiences, then prostituted in an auction to the highest bidder. Many powerful men, particularly commanders in the military and the police, keep such boys, often dressed in uniforms, as constant

companions for sexual purposes.

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Asked about the military's policy regarding commanders who abuse children, a spokesman for the NATO-led military alliance, Lt. Col. John L. Dorrian, said that if any members of the military encountered such abuse they would be obliged to report it. But in the past year, he said, he was not aware of any such reports.

When we go back to the reports on the trial where Ainuddin Khudairaham was convicted for the killings, we have the military scrambling to cover up the pedophilia that may well have prompted Ainuddin to act, as they provided a list of different accusations against Jan:

The investigation into what happened at FOB Delhi has been dogged by allegations that the police chief, Sarwar Jan, the shooter was working for was closely aligned with the Taliban. He previously had been removed as the police chief in another district in Helmand province in 2010 after Marines suspected he was providing supplies to the Taliban.

Nevertheless, Sarwar Jan was installed by the Afghan government as the police chief in Garmsir district in the months ahead of the shooting. A Marine officer who worked with him in 2009 and 2010, Maj. Jason Brezler, sent a warning to deployed Marines in 2012 about the police chief, but he kept his position. To do so, Brezler sent classified information over an unclassified network, and reported himself.

Yes, Brezler is the person mentioned above as the one person to be punished over the killings. And in the Washington Post piece (from July, 2014) quoted above, we see that the real meat of

Brezler's warning about Jan and his entourage of young boys is completely left out. And that seems to be as a product of the policy that Goldstein revealed today where the US military actively avoids calling out or punishing the abuse of young boys. But why would the military avoid calling it out? One hint comes from the the 2011 piece Goldstein linked and I quoted earlier:

The practice of bacha bazi is known throughout Afghanistan but is particularly notorious in Kandahar. The Taliban originally came to prominence in Kandahar when they intervened in a fight between two pedophile warlords over the possession of a coveted dancing boy. The Taliban also oppose the practice, and banned it when they were in power.

Ah, now it begins to make sense. The US has to back the monsters it is backing because they oppose the Taliban. The Taliban actively oppose the practice, so the US has to keep any actual occurrences of it quiet because they could provide ammunition against the coalition.

In the end, the US military chose to accept the practice of sexual abuse of young boys by Afghan commanders and to overlook it whenever it took place, ascribing it to a cultural difference. They even went so far as to punish those who took steps to point it out.

This practice comes off as particularly abhorrent when we put in into the context of other blunders by the US military relating to cultural differences. Just a few months before Buckley was killed, the military took the absurd step in January of 2012 to retroactively classify a report (pdf). The name of that report is particularly important with today's revelation by Goldstein: "A Crisis of Trust and Cultural Incompatibility". The report was prepared in response to the then growing trend of green on blue killings, where Afghan military and police personnel turned their weapons on US

troops, often those who were training them. The report provided significant insight into how Afghans perceived US troops, and the results were not pretty. This depiction of the occupying US force as brutal and culturally insensitive likely was why the military tried to classify it even though it already had been released.

But the study also interviewed US troops for their views of Afghan personnel. And there is one brief mention of bacha bazi:

Several U.S. Soldiers reported that they had observed many cases of child abuse and neglect that infuriated them and alienated them from the civilian populace. They made it very clear that they wanted nothing to do with people who treat children so cruelly. Although not reported by the U.S. Soldiers who participated in this study, there have been numerous accounts of Canadian troops in Kandahar complaining about the rampant sexual abuse of children they have witnessed ANSF personnel commit, including the cultural practice of bacha bazi, as well as the raping and sodomizing of little boys. (One reason some Afghan civilians prefer insurgents over the ANSF are the latter's propensity to seize their little boys at checkpoints and sexually assault them.) U.S. Soldiers witnessing such barbaric acts may likely lead to violent confrontations with the perpetrators.

Viewed in the context of what we know now, it appears that those US soldiers who participated in the study already knew that they were not to report or even mention bacha bazi. Canadian soldiers appear not to have been under the same prohibition (they also were more consistent in calling out Afghan torture of prisoners), so the interviewers clearly knew the practice was widespread.

Just a few months before Gregory Buckley, Jr's death, the military attempted to hide a study that revealed how culturally disconnected US troops were from those they were attempting to train. And after that attempted silencing, Buckley and two others died at the hands of a victim of the only cultural difference the military was aware of, but chose to cover up in a different way.