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Your Tax Dollars Bankroll Afghan Child-Molesters



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Donald Trump was hailed by the media last August when he announced he was sending more U.S. troops to fight in Afghanistan. A Washington Post editorial praised his “principled realism” and saluted “a rare but welcome story of self-correction” (since Trump had portrayed Afghanistan as a lost cause when he was a presidential candidate). A New York Daily News op-ed praised the president because “Trump said ‘win’ and ‘victory’ more times in 15 minutes than President Barack Obama did in eight years.” CNN cheered that expanding the Afghan war allowed Trump to “stake out a more conventional presidential posture.”

Trump assured the American people that “to prosecute this war, we will learn from history.” But his revised mission to Afghanistan — a low-wattage repeat of Obama’s 2009+ “surge” — ignores the atrocities that the U.S. government has long bankrolled in that sprawling nation.

Since 2002, the United States has spent more than \$70 billion financing Afghan security forces, including the Afghan military and police. A law sponsored by Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) prohibits the Pentagon from bankrolling any foreign military units if there is “credible information that the unit has committed a gross violation of human rights.”

But members of Congress have finagled to allow the U.S. military to continue bankrolling Afghan units who are committing atrocities. Congressional appropriations bills have specified that funds for Afghan Security Forces “shall be available to the Secretary of Defense, notwithstanding any other provision of the law.” This provision has allowed the Pentagon to completely ignore the record of Afghan units that the U.S. government supports. This clause, which is referred to by Pentagon policymakers as the “notwithstanding authority,” removes legal and moral limits on U.S. government spending in Afghanistan.

The Pentagon did not provide any guidance to troops on reporting human rights violations until a decade after the U.S. invasion. The U.S. government has long known that U.S.-funded Afghan units routinely engage in *bacha bazi*— boy play. Afghan military commanders and police kidnap boys and use them as sex slaves. American troops have complained of seeing boys chained to beds and hearing their screams at night as they are assaulted. U.S. soldiers who forcefully tried to stop the abuse were punished by their superiors. Rep. Vern Buchanan (R-Fla.) complained to the Pentagon, “It is bad enough if the Pentagon is telling our soldiers to ignore this type of barbaric and savage behavior, but it’s even worse if we are punishing those who try to stop it.”

After the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, *bacha bazi* was punished with a death penalty, and the abuse became far less pervasive. But that prohibition ended after the U.S. invasion toppled the Taliban. Army captain Dan Quinn complained that “we were putting people into power who would do things that were worse than the Taliban did — that was something village elders voiced to me.” Aaron MacLean, who served in Afghanistan with the Marines, observed that the “Taliban have long used reports of rapes committed by government agents as a recruiting tool. Indeed, among the elements of Mullah Omar’s rise to power was his reputation for taking violent action against those who kidnapped and raped children.”

The Pentagon ignored bacha bazi abuse until a 2015 New York Times exposé of American soldiers' being punished for protesting atrocities against boys was published. The Times reported that U.S. troops were confounded that “instead of weeding out pedophiles, the American military was arming them in some cases and placing them as the commanders of villages — and doing little when they began abusing children.” Obama White House press secretary Josh Earnest responded to the Times’s bombshell, “The United States is deeply concerned about the safety and welfare of Afghan boys who may be exploited by members of the Afghan national security and defense forces.... Protecting human rights, including by countering the exploitation of children, is a high priority for the U.S. government.” Thanks to the Times report, the U.S. military finally “issued clear guidance and required related training that personnel should report suspected child sexual assault,” according to a recent report — 14 years after the U.S. intervention began.

After the Times’s blockbuster article, 93 members of Congress requested that the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) investigate the problem. SIGAR finished and submitted its report in June 2017. In a brief section in its July 31, 2017, quarterly report, SIGAR noted, “Afghan officials remain complicit, especially in the sexual exploitation ... of children by Afghan security forces.” But the rest of the report was bottlenecked by the Pentagon. The Washington Post reported on November 26 that the Pentagon was blocking the release of the SIGAR report, instead releasing “its own report offering a far less authoritative review” of the abuses.

But the Pentagon’s report was also damning. The Pentagon Inspector General report revealed that some U.S. troops were “told that nothing could be done about child sexual abuse because of Afghanistan’s status as a sovereign nation, that it was not a priority for the command, or that it was best to ignore the situation and to let the local police handle it.” Regarding pedophilia, the Navy gave its members training that “advises readers to control and overcome any frustration caused by cultural differences that they may experience during their deployments,” while Marines were told “to be mentally prepared to encounter this attitude, and to ‘move on,’” according to the IG report.

Eleven allegations of child sexual abuse were reported to the Afghan government but the IG refused to disclose whether anything happened to the perpetrators. Steven Aftergood of the Federation of American Scientists said the Pentagon’s secrecy “looks like an attempt to evade public accountability for criminal acts.”

But the Pentagon still found a way to declare victory. Acting Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Robert Karam asserted that the IG report vindicated the Pentagon because it

“did not identify official guidance that discouraged DoD-affiliated personnel from reporting incidents of child sexual abuse.” If investigators did not find written proof of government malfeasance, then the Pentagon must be presumed innocent. The fact that no paper trail was discovered was no consolation to the vast number of Afghan boys who were molested.

This past February, the Pentagon finally approved release of the SIGAR report. SIGAR has done superb work exposing the failures and follies of U.S. operations in Afghanistan since 2008. SIGAR delivers clear English without the toxic fog of bureaucratese that blights most Washington reports.

Abuses such as *bacha bazi* have proliferated in part because the Afghan justice system exempts vast classes of offenders. SIGAR reported that an Afghan government official was surprised that there were not more reports of child-molesting and that “‘maybe most of the cases are not reported or investigated’ because the police do not self-report cases, and people often do not report these cases because they feel they will get in more trouble.... Low-level officers and soldiers have been prosecuted for child abuse because senior-level officers have money and power and can easily threaten someone to keep quiet about a crime.” A non-government organization official told SIGAR investigators that “‘even though her organization receives reports of child sexual abuse, it did not share information on the allegations with the U.S. government because of fear of reprisal toward victims, their families, or those who report incidents.’” This is similar to the lawless situation that exists in some American cities where people are afraid to testify against well-known killers for fear of becoming the next homicide victim.

The U.S. government has spent more than a billion dollars specifically to boost the rule of law in Afghanistan. A 2015 SIGAR report concluded that the program was a dismal failure that had produced almost zero visible benefit. Instead, deluges of U.S. aid have helped make Afghanistan one of the most corrupt nations on Earth. And the United States has provided a horrible example to the Afghans with the games played by the “notwithstanding” clause in congressional appropriations. That Congress proudly bans financing of foreign atrocities, and then quietly adds an opaque phrase to appropriations bills permitting such funding, epitomizes why people cannot trust politicians to stand up for decency.

The February SIGAR report warned that “the full extent of child sexual assault committed by Afghan security forces may never be known.” But part of the reason that the “full extent” will never be known is that U.S. government agencies did not want to know.

Admitting the “full extent” of Afghan government crimes would have made it more difficult to justify the continued U.S. support of an oppressive Afghan regime. And what the American people didn’t know would not hurt Pentagon appropriations.

In his August speech announcing more troops for Afghanistan, Trump declared that “we will not dictate to the Afghan people how to live.” But, similarly, Trump has no right to force Americans to pay taxes for activities that shock their conscience. Americans would never tolerate paying federal funds for a notorious child-rape regime in Cincinnati or Omaha. But your tax dollars are underwriting similar sordid abuses in Kandahar and Kabul. Doctors, teachers, and social workers can be jailed for failing to report child abuse here at home. But, 6,000 miles away, U.S. troops risk their career for protesting pederasty. Bacha bazi is not the only barbaric Afghan practice countenanced by the U.S. government. In 2009, the U.S.-appointed president, Hamid Karzai, approved a law entitling husbands to starve their wives to death if they denied them sex. That edict did not deter Obama from boasting about America bringing “democracy” to Afghanistan.

In his August surge speech, Trump declared, “In every generation, we have faced down evil, and we have always prevailed.” But too often, U.S. government interventions have merely covered up evil — at the same time that U.S. aid allows the evil to multiply.

Americans have been encouraged to believe that U.S. foreign policy is on moral automatic pilot and that good things happen wherever the United States intervenes. But piety too easily obscures atrocities. And the media cheerleaders for U.S. warring cannot be trusted to consistently expose the moral and other carnage abroad.

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