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The Obama Administration “Brainwashes” the Public on Afghanistan

by Sheldon Richman

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In 1967 Gov. George W. Romney of Michigan, a potential contender for the 1968 Republican presidential nomination, abandoned his earlier support for the war in Vietnam, which he had previously called “morally right and necessary.” Asked why he had changed his position, Romney said, “When I came back from Vietnam [in November 1965], I’d just had the greatest brainwashing that anybody can get.” That remark indicating the U.S. military had lied to him was widely interpreted as a fatal gaffe, and Romney pulled out of the race two weeks before the New Hampshire primary.

Of course, the U.S. government was lying about Vietnam. That was the infamous “credibility gap,” documented in the Pentagon Papers, that kept Lyndon Johnson from running for reelection in 1968.

Would a politician suffer the same fate as George Romney today if he claimed the Obama administration is lying about the war in Afghanistan? Perhaps, but Romney’s son Mitt isn’t likely to find out. He’s a fully committed war hawk who takes foreign-policy advice from the architects of George W. Bush’s policy of aggressive war and imperial occupation. He’s not about to declare that the war is a lost cause.

But Barack Obama, in a manner reminiscent of Lyndon Johnson, is lying to Romney and the rest of the country about war. Even politicians who visit Afghanistan have been subjected to military “brainwashing.” As *Rolling Stone* reported last year,

The U.S. Army illegally ordered a team of soldiers specializing in “psychological operations” to manipulate visiting American senators into providing more troops and funding for the war....

... Over a four-month period last year [2010], a military cell devoted to what is known as “information operations” at Camp Eggers in Kabul was repeatedly pressured to target visiting senators and other VIPs who met with [Lt. Gen. William] Caldwell. When the unit resisted the order, arguing that it violated U.S. laws prohibiting the use of propaganda against American citizens, it was subjected to a campaign of retaliation.... The incident offers an indication of just how desperate the U.S. command in Afghanistan is to spin American civilian leaders into supporting an increasingly unpopular war.

The more things change ...

From Obama and his administration we hear nothing but glowing public reports about how things are going in Afghanistan, particularly since his 30,000-troop surge in 2010. In June, when Obama announced his initial timetable for withdrawal, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said, “We have broken the Taliban’s momentum. We do begin this drawdown from a position of strength.” In his State of the Union address, Obama said early withdrawal was made possible by a “position of strength.”

But that’s not what the military says behind closed doors. Thanks to one U.S. military officer, the door has been cracked open so the public can learn what officials really think.

The gulf

Lt. Col. Daniel L. Davis “spent last year in Afghanistan, visiting and talking with U.S. troops and their Afghan partner [in] every significant area where our soldiers engage the enemy,” Davis wrote in *Armed Forces Journal*. “As the numbers depicting casualties and enemy violence indicate the absence of progress, so too did my observations of the tactical situation all over Afghanistan.”

A UN report last year agreed with that assessment. It calculated that violence had increased 40 percent over 2010, with civilian casualties on the rise. The *San Francisco Chronicle* noted, “Forty-five percent of civilian casualties were the result of suicide bombs and improvised explosive devices, the report said. The greatest coalition cause of death remained NATO air strikes.” (U.S. military deaths last year dropped 18 percent from 2010 to 2011, to 405, according to the Pentagon.)

Moreover, a classified NATO report last year stated, “Taliban commanders, along with rank and file members, increasingly believe their control of Afghanistan is inevitable. Though the Taliban

suffered severely in 2011, its strength, motivation, funding and tactical proficiency remains [sic] intact.” This, after more than ten years of U.S. occupation and war.

Davis’s article summarizes longer classified and unclassified reports, bluntly titled, “Dereliction of Duty II: Senior Military Leaders’ Loss of Integrity Wounds Afghan War Effort.” His conclusion is unequivocal:

What I saw bore no resemblance to rosy official statements by U.S. military leaders about conditions on the ground.

Entering this deployment, I was sincerely hoping to learn that the claims were true: that conditions in Afghanistan were improving, that the local government and military were progressing toward self-sufficiency. I did not need to witness dramatic improvements to be reassured, but merely hoped to see evidence of positive trends, to see companies or battalions produce even minimal but sustainable progress.

Instead, I witnessed the absence of success on virtually every level....

... I can say that [official reports] — mine and others’ — serve to illuminate the gulf between conditions on the ground and official statements of progress.

The Obama administration leads the American public to believe that the government of Hamid Karzai, president of Afghanistan, has established a credible government and that U.S. and NATO forces have enabled local governments to create stability. Davis says that is untrue.

I saw little to no evidence the local governments were able to provide for the basic needs of the people. Some of the Afghan civilians I talked with said the people didn’t want to be connected to a predatory or incapable local government.

From time to time, I observed Afghan Security forces collude with the insurgency.

He also saw widespread incompetence.

Fantasy, not logic

Davis’s 84-page unclassified paper begins with this hard-hitting note about the military’s systematic lying:

Senior ranking US military leaders have so distorted the truth when communicating with the US Congress and American people in regards to conditions on the ground in Afghanistan that the truth has become unrecognizable. This deception has damaged America’s credibility among both our allies and enemies, severely limiting our ability to reach a political solution to the war in Afghanistan. It has likely cost American taxpayers hundreds of billions of dollars Congress might not otherwise have appropriated had it known the truth, and our senior leaders’ behavior

has almost certainly extended the duration of this war. The single greatest penalty our Nation has suffered, however, has been that we have lost the blood, limbs and lives of tens of thousands of American Service Members with *little to no gain to our country as a consequence of this deception*. [Emphasis added.]

... As I will explain in the following pages I have personally observed or physically participated in programs for at least the last 15 years in which the Army's senior leaders have either "stretched the truth" or knowingly deceived the US Congress and American public.... [If] the public had access to these *classified* reports they would see the dramatic gulf between what is often said in public by our senior leaders and what is actually true behind the scenes. It would be illegal for me to discuss, use, or cite classified material in an open venue and thus I will not do so; I am no WikiLeaks guy Part II.

For example, Davis quotes 2011 congressional testimony by Gen. David Petraeus, who at the time was commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan (before becoming director of the CIA): "As a bottom line up front, it is ISAF's [the International Security Assistance Force's] assessment that the momentum achieved by the Taliban in Afghanistan since 2005 has been arrested in much of the country, and reversed in a number of important areas."

And the April 2011 Defense Department report said,

International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and its Afghan partners have made tangible progress, arresting the insurgents' momentum in much of the country and reversing it in a number of important areas. The coalition's efforts have wrested major safe havens from the insurgents' control, disrupted their leadership networks, and removed many of the weapons caches and tactical supplies they left behind at the end of the previous fighting season. The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) continued to increase in quantity, quality, and capability, and have taken an ever-increasing role in security operations....

In response, Davis wrote, "The following pages quantitatively demonstrate that much of the two public statements above are either misleading, significantly skewed or completely inaccurate. Also I'll demonstrate how this pattern of overt and substantive deception has become a hallmark of many of America's most senior military leaders in Afghanistan."

He concludes his report by noting the fantasy that has replaced logic: namely, the idea that Americans' safety depends on what happens in Afghanistan,

And a few men have convinced virtually the entire Western world that we *must* stay on the ground in one relatively postage-stamp sized country — even beyond a *decade and a half* — to prevent "another 9/11" from being planned, as though the rest of the world's geography somehow doesn't matter, and more critically, that while the rest of the world does its planning on computers and other electronic means, al-Qaeda must be capable only of making such plans on the ground, and only on the ground in Afghanistan.

When one considers what these few leaders have asked the country to believe in light of the facts pointed out above, the paucity of logic in their argument becomes evident. What *has* been

present in most of those arguments, however, has been emotionally evocative words designed to play strongly on American patriotism: "... this is where 9/11 was born!" "these young men did not die in vain" "this is a tough fight," etc. It is time — *beyond time* — for the evidence and facts to be considered in their comprehensive whole in a candid and honest public forum before we spend another man or woman's life or limbs in Afghanistan.

Davis's investigation confronted him with the heart-wrenching fact that American and NATO forces are put at risk (not to mention the people of Afghanistan) for a hopeless cause and to no good purpose:

In August, I went on a dismounted patrol with troops in the Panjwai district of Kandahar province. Several troops from the unit had recently been killed in action, one of whom was a very popular and experienced soldier. One of the unit's senior officers rhetorically asked me, "How do I look these men in the eye and ask them to go out day after day on these missions? What's harder: How do I look [my soldier's] wife in the eye when I get back and tell her that her husband died for something meaningful? How do I do that?"

That is reminiscent of John Kerry's question to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on April 23, 1971, after his time in Vietnam: "How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?"

Obama, like his predecessor, systematically lies to the American people about the war. But don't expect the Republican nominee (unless it's Ron Paul) to expose the deceit.