

The “Lone Gunman” of Kandahar Province? “The Dehumanization of the Enemy” Engrained in the Behavior of US Soldiers...

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The official line for the atrocity carried out in Kandahar has now been clearly established: a US soldier went off base alone in the night and proceeded to kill 16 civilians in a nearby village before setting fire to the bodies. Condemned as “intentional murderers” by Afghan President Hamid Karzai, the US government has announced the obligatory “rapid and thorough” investigation. Tensions were already inflamed over the burning of the Quran by American soldiers, and following on from the revelation of “kill teams” collecting body parts as “trophies” and the leaked footage of troops urinating on dead Afghans, there is much concern that the latest atrocity will escalate tensions and stretch even thinner an already fragile relationship between the occupying US Army and the local population.

The latest line from the US government on the killings has been to discuss at length the mental state of the gunman. Initially, he was described as being possibly “deranged” at the time of the shootings; then, it was stated that he had suffered a “mental breakdown”, yet another soldier from Fort Lewis-McChord (described by the military newspaper *Stars and Stripes* as “the most troubled base in the military”) to have buckled under the strain of warfare and gone on a killing spree (a considerably more common trait for US soldiers than their NATO allies).

It’s certainly plausible: on his fourth tour and allegedly undergoing marital problems, it doesn’t take a great stretch of the imagination to accept that this extreme outburst of violence may have been the result of insurmountable psychological pressures. Additional reports have since emerged pointing to a “traumatic brain injury”, although since this alleged injury he has had at least two health checks, including a mental health screening as part of his sniper training back in 2008, so the role this may have played in the killings is unclear.

So far, nothing seems out of the ordinary with this narrative – until you include the eyewitnesses.

According to [PakTribune](#): “One Afghan father who said his children were killed in the shooting spree accused soldiers of later burning the bodies.” Reuters were told by witnesses that “a group of US soldiers” arrived at the village and were responsible for the killings. Resident Haji Samad said: “They (Americans) poured chemicals over their dead bodies and burned them ... I saw that all 11 of my relatives were killed, including my children and grandchildren.” A neighbour, Agha Lala, added, “They were all drunk and shooting all over

the place.”

The official response from the US came shortly after: “Based on the preliminary information we have this account is flatly wrong,” the official said. “We believe one U.S. service member acted alone, not a group of U.S. soldiers.” No information has been provided to refute the testimony of the eyewitnesses, who also described shots being fired from several directions. As Afghan lawmaker Abdul Rahim Ayubi observed, “It is not possible for only one American soldier to come out of his base, kill a number of people far away, burn the bodies, go to another house and kill civilians there, then walk at least 2 kilometers and enter another house, kill civilians and burn them.” Local Panjwai councilman, Abdul Ghani, corroborated the unlikelihood of a single shooter, stating, “The villagers said they were hearing machine gun fire and pistol fire from different directions.”

But while objectively-speaking the evidence would point towards multiple shooters, once again the media has taken the pronouncements of unnamed “US officials” as gospel: the official line has been set in stone in print and on the news and the eyewitness accounts of drunken troops killing over a wider area, firing wildly and burning bodies has been expunged from the record. It is indicative of the culture of misinformation we live in that the US narrative is implicitly accepted as “the truth” despite the lack of corroborating evidence, their track record of deceptions and cover-ups and the obvious motivation to downplay the scale of the attacks in light of the other numerous atrocities carried out by US soldiers.

Despite the well-documented, deep-rooted culture of racism and violence within the US military towards the indigenous populations of the lands they occupy (as Iraq war veteran Kevin Baker has said, “When I was in the military, racism was a very vital tool for the military to encourage soldiers to hate the people that they’re occupying”), the PR machine continues its desperate drive to maintain the public image of the mission in Afghanistan as one of “nation building” and “winning hearts and minds”. Portraying these killings as an aberration – the acts of a single, disturbed soldier – is a crucial component of “damage limitation”.

The reality is that such atrocities have become engrained in the behaviour of many US soldiers, a product of the dehumanization of the enemy from the moment they enter boot camp to institutionalized racism throughout the ranks following deployment. As Kevin Baker observes, “If you look at these situations, they are not single acts of isolation. The Afghan kill team that was done by the US military out of Fort Worth, this situation, the desecration of the Qu’ran, the kill teams in Iraq. These are not isolated incidents; they are organic in the way the US military fights and it’s organic in the nature of imperialism.”

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