

COL. DAVIS GOES TO WASHINGTON: A ONE-MAN BATTLE FOR TRUTH-TELLING ABOUT AFGHANISTAN

When separate classified reports casting doubt on the military's claims of progress in the Afghanistan war were discussed in the New York Times on January 20 and then by BBC (and Times of London) on February 1, my response to both incidents was to blame upper-level military figures for releasing the damaging information in order to reach the higher goal (for them) of maintaining the war effort in Afghanistan beyond the planned hand-off to Afghan forces. The timing seemed to fit well with a hope on their part that Republican presidential candidates would grab onto a campaign promise not to end the US war effort. However, after the second leak, I did receive one third- or fourth-hand report suggesting that it had been leaked by senior military officer upset by the lack of progress in Afghanistan who most definitely did not aim to prolong the war effort there.

With the publication of a story about him in today's New York Times and publication yesterday of his own statement in the Armed Forces Journal, Lt. Col. Daniel L. Davis becomes the first mid-level officer willing to speak out about the lack of progress in Afghanistan and the military's insistence on painting a false picture of success. [It should be noted up front that it seems quite unlikely Davis is behind either of the earlier leaks, as evidenced by the steps he has taken to separate public from classified information in the actions he has taken.] The Times article, titled "In Afghan War, Officer Becomes a Whistle-Blower", describes the actions Davis has taken:

Since enlisting in the Army in 1985, he

said, he had repeatedly seen top commanders falsely dress up a dismal situation. But this time, he would not let it rest. So he consulted with his pastor at McLean Bible Church in Virginia, where he sings in the choir. He watched his favorite movie, "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," one more time, drawing inspiration from Jimmy Stewart's role as the extraordinary ordinary man who takes on a corrupt establishment.

And then, late last month, Colonel Davis, 48, began an unusual one-man campaign of military truth-telling. He wrote two reports, one unclassified and the other classified, summarizing his observations on the candor gap with respect to Afghanistan. He briefed four members of Congress and a dozen staff members, spoke with a reporter for The New York Times, sent his reports to the Defense Department's inspector general – and only then informed his chain of command that he had done so.

The statement in the Armed Forces Journal opens in this way:

I spent last year in Afghanistan, visiting and talking with U.S. troops and their Afghan partners. My duties with the Army's Rapid Equipping Force took me into every significant area where our soldiers engage the enemy. Over the course of 12 months, I covered more than 9,000 miles and talked, traveled and patrolled with troops in Kandahar, Kunar, Ghazni, Khost, Paktika, Kunduz, Balkh, Nangarhar and other provinces.

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.

The entire statement is compelling reading, and he provides ample evidence from his own direct experience of Afghan security forces openly cooperating with the Taliban rather than fighting them. These observations lend significant credence to the conclusion in the NATO report leaked to the BBC stating that the Taliban is poised to rapidly re-take control of Afghanistan once NATO troops withdraw.

Davis provides an equally compelling closing of his statement:

When it comes to deciding what matters are worth plunging our nation into war and which are not, our senior leaders owe it to the nation and to the uniformed members to be candid – graphically, if necessary – in telling them what’s at stake and how expensive potential success is likely to be. U.S. citizens and their elected representatives can decide if the risk to blood and treasure is worth it.

Likewise when having to decide whether to continue a war, alter its aims or to close off a campaign that cannot be won at an acceptable price, our senior leaders have an obligation to tell Congress and American people the

unvarnished truth and let the people decide what course of action to choose. That is the very essence of civilian control of the military. The American people deserve better than what they've gotten from their senior uniformed leaders over the last number of years. Simply telling the truth would be a good start.

It should be noted that Davis titled his statement "Truth, lies and Afghanistan". Davis holds no illusions about what these actions will mean for his military career. Although the Times article notes that the officers to whom he reports have told him that right now he will not face "adverse actions", he told the Times "I'm going to get nuked."

It now appears that at least a few military officers have decided that they no longer can take part in painting a falsely optimistic picture of a war effort that is over ten years old and showing no path to anything close to "victory". And although it now looks less likely that top military leaders were responsible for leaking the damaging information that is coming out, I still look for them to present the argument that the "best" strategy is to continue fighting and that "victory" still can be achieved. As the Times article notes, that attitude is simply ingrained in military leadership:

But Martin L. Cook, who teaches military ethics at the Naval War College, says Colonel Davis has identified a hazard that is intrinsic to military culture, in which a can-do optimism can be at odds with the strictest candor when a mission is failing.

"You've trained people to try to be successful even when half their buddies are dead and they're almost out of ammo," he said. "It's very hard for them to say, 'can't do.' "

Davis' approach has been a very interesting one in the way he has briefed both members of the House of Representatives and Senators before taking his story public. By paying careful attention to what is classified and to whom he can speak on classified issues, Davis may have managed to avoid the whistle-blower persecution that characterizes the Obama administration. Will his actions prompt others to speak up along with him? Will he be able to change the official military narrative to one that is more realistic? Or will there be backlash of "patriotism" and militarism that relegates him to the dustbin of history as the "forever war" contingent wins yet again?