


THE IRONY OF TORA BORA

Understand that—for better or worse—the new report released by John Kerry on how Osama bin Laden escaped at Tora Bora is a designed to be a political document. It offers the following “irony” to the chattering classes the weekend before Obama announces his new Afghanistan strategy, 

Ironically, one of the guiding principles of the Afghan model was to avoid immersing the United States in a protracted insurgency by sending in too many troops and stirring up anti-American sentiment. In the end, the unwillingness to bend the operational plan to deploy the troops required to take advantage of solid intelligence and unique circumstances to kill or capture bin Laden paved the way for exactly what we had hoped to avoid—a protracted insurgency that has cost more lives than anyone estimates would have been lost in a full-blown assault on Tora Bora. Further, the dangerous contagion of rising violence and instability in Afghanistan has spread to Pakistan, a nuclear-armed ally of the United States which is now wracked by deadly terrorist bombings as it conducts its own costly military campaign against a domestic, Taliban-related insurgency.

The report relies on just a few interviews, but mostly on existing histories (including a Special Ops Command history included as an appendix) and even an extended column from Michael O’Hanlon (also included as an appendix)—not exactly the kind of guy I’m thrilled to see at the center of a taxpayer funded report. I view the report as the logical endpoint of Kerry’s decision to hire journalist Douglas Frantz (whose biography of AQ Khan is

cited once) to head investigations.

Which is not to say the research isn't valid. Rather, that the timing and format of the report seems designed to emphasize the irony, noted above, and other little ironies such as the way our desire to get the corrupt Hamid Karzai installed as leader of Afghanistan affected our willingness to commit troops at Tora Bora.

[Franks' second-in-command during the war, General Michael DeLong] amplified the reasons for not sending American troops after bin Laden. "The real reason we didn't go in with U.S. troops was that we hadn't had the election yet," he said in the staff interview, a reference to the installation of Hamid Karzai as the interim leader of Afghanistan. "We didn't want to have U.S. forces fighting before Karzai was in power. We wanted to create a stable country and that was more important than going after bin Laden at the time."

And the conclusion (less well supported by the facts presented in the report) that the same unwillingness to commit troops to Afghanistan in 2001 led to Mullah Omar's escape.

The same shortage of U.S. troops allowed Mullah Mohammed Omar and other Taliban leaders to escape. A semi-literate leader who fled Kandahar on a motorbike, Mullah Omar has re-emerged at the helm of the Taliban-led insurgency, which has grown more sophisticated and lethal in recent years and now controls swaths of Afghanistan. The Taliban, which is aligned with a loose network of other militant groups and maintains ties to Al Qaeda, has established shadow governments in many of Afghanistan's provinces and is capable of mounting increasingly complex attacks on American and NATO forces. Bruce Riedel, a former CIA officer who helped develop the Obama

administration's Afghan policy, recently referred to the mullah's return to power "one of the most remarkable military comebacks in modern history."

All these ironies, delivered just in time to play into the debate that will intensify next week.