

PJ CROWLEY'S ACTING REPLACEMENT CAN'T DIFFERENTIATE US FROM CHINA ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND TRANSPARENCY

Josh Gerstein provides the entirety of an exchange between former State Department spokesperson PJ Crowley's acting replacement, Mark Toner, AP reporter Matthew Lee, and Reuters reporter Arshad Mohammed. At issue is how State can still claim to be transparent when it won't explain why it refuses to allow the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture to have an unmonitored visit with Bradley Manning. It's not quite Baghdad Bob ... quite. But it would be pure comedy gold if it weren't about our hypocrisy on human rights.

At first, Toner responds to criticism on Manning's treatment by blaming DOD (as if State can't be held responsible, in the international community, for anything DOD does).

LEE: Can you explain why, if the United States is proud of its human rights record, that the UN special rapporteur has complained that you're not allowing him independent access to Bradley Manning?

TONER: We've been in contact with the UN special rapporteur. We've had conversations with you in terms of access to –

LEE: With me?

TONER: I'm sorry. We've had conversations with the special rapporteur. We've discussed Bradley Manning's case with him. But in terms of

visits to PFC Manning, that's something for the Department of Defense.

LEE: And the ICRC with the same problem? You are – the State Department is the direct contact with the ICRC. At least it was for the Guantanamo inmates. Have you had any contact with them?

TONER: I'm not aware. I don't know. I'd have to look into that. But in terms of the UN special rapporteur, we've had conversations with him. We have ongoing conversations with him. But in terms of access to Manning, that's something for the Department of Defense.

Then the discussion moves into Toner's difficulties with the meaning of the word "scrutiny."

MOHAMMED: If you welcome scrutiny, where's the harm?

TONER: I said we're having conversations with him. We're trying to work with him to meet his needs. But I don't understand the question.

MOHAMMED: Well, you said you welcome scrutiny from outsiders of the United States human rights record –

TONER: Right. We do.

QUESTION: – that you feel that it speaks to the strength of the U.S. system. So why does it take very lengthy conversations to agree to let a UN special rapporteur have access to an inmate?

So Toner retreats back to blaming DOD.

TONER: Well, again, for the specific visitation requests, that's something that Department of Defense would best answer. But look, we've been very clear

that there's a legal process underway. We've been forthright, I think, in talking about Private – PFC Manning's situation. We are in conversations, ongoing conversations with the special rapporteur. We have nothing to hide. But in terms of an actual visit to Manning, that's something that DOD would handle.

LEE: Well, but you have conveyed messages from DOD back to the UN on this?

TONER: Well, no. We're just – look, we're aware of his requests. We're working with him.

I would imagine Toner got very uncomfortable when Lee noted that PJ Crowley had been ousted after he spoke the truth about Manning's treatment.

LEE: Can – you said you've been forthright in your discussions of his treatment. It seems to me that the only person who was forthright in discussions of his treatment resigned several days after making those comments. What – can you explain what you mean by you've been forthright in terms of his treatment?

At which point Toner tries to equate an opaque legal process with forthrightness.

TONER: He is being held in legal detention. There's a legal process underway, so I'm not going to discuss in any more detail than what I – beyond what I've just said because there's a legal process underway.

LEE: So that's what you mean by forthright?

TONER: I can't discuss – I can't discuss his treatment.

LEE: Being forthright is saying nothing

because there's a legal process underway; is that correct?

So then Toner tries to claim that ongoing discussions with Special Rapporteur Juan Mendez—about which State will neither talk about directly or comment on Mendez' version of the discussions—equate to forthrightness.

TONER: That's not correct at all. And we've — we continue to talk to the special rapporteur about his case.

LEE: Well, okay. So if you've been — what do you talk to him about?

TONER: I'm not going to talk about —

LEE: He says, "I'd like to visit him and I need to do it privately," and you say, "No," and that's —

TONER: I'm not going to talk about the substance of those conversations. I'd just say we feel we've been —

LEE: Well, then I don't understand how you can say that you're being forthright about it if you refuse to talk about it. And if you don't talk about it, at least — forget about what the actual conditions of his treatment are, but if you're not prepared to talk about your conversations with the special rapporteur, that's being even less than not being forthright because you're not telling us what you told him.

Toner then retreats to the old canard the Bush Administration used when asked about the CIA leak investigation: "ongoing legal process."

TONER: But you understand the legal constraints that I'm operating under because this is an ongoing legal process.

LEE: Right. But —

TONER: He is being held –

With Toner in complete retreat, Lee raises China.

LEE: I understand that you're put in a difficult position where you say that you're willing, as Arshad noted when the – that you're – you don't understand why China is so upset because the U.S. is willing to open up its human rights situation to all kinds of scrutiny –

TONER: And, Matt –

LEE: And then the first example that anyone raises, you're not.

All of which ends with this bizarre Toner comment.

TONER: And, Matt, I would raise with you the fact that much of China's report came from open source, which is what an independent media does, and would note that that kind of independent media does serve a function. And there are details about the Manning case and other human rights concerns out there, but I'm not going to talk about it here.

Toner seems to be saying, with his allusion to “details about the Manning case and other human rights concerns out there” that because dirty fucking hippies report on our abuses, it makes it okay for State to hedge in this unseemly fashion.

Is Toner then, like Crowley, confirming that Manning's treatment is “ridiculous and counterproductive and stupid”? I think not (after all, he has just been reminded of what happens to spokespeople who say such things).

But it sure seems like the State Department is might confused about what to do when the international community calls you on your human

rights abuses.