

DUNFORD DEMONSTRATES FUTILITY OF MILITARY'S DOUBLESPEAK ON AFGHANISTAN

Reuters is carrying a remarkable article today on an interview conducted with the current US Commander in Afghanistan, Joseph Dunford. I say the article is remarkable because it is a perfect embodiment of the extreme dishonesty the military has used so that it can continue to convey the message that we are "winning" in Afghanistan. Neither Dunford nor the Reuters reporters or editors appear to catch the glaring contradiction inherent in Dunford's statements and the current situation in Afghanistan.

Reuters has titled the article "Afghanistan's future depends on foreign soldiers: US commander" and opens with this paragraph:

Afghanistan's future security will remain dependent on international troops for many years after most foreign combat forces leave by the end of 2014, the U.S. commander of the NATO-led force in the South Asian country said.

Okay, so the future security of Afghanistan depends directly on the presence of foreign (that is, US) troops after 2014. But aren't we handing over security responsibility? Oh yes, see the next paragraph:

With the formal security handover to Afghans closing in, intense debate is underway about how many troops the United States and its mainly NATO allies should leave behind to conduct training, support and counter-terror operations.

Which is it, then? Are we handing over security

responsibility to Afghanistan or is security dependent on US troops remaining there? Dunford can't have it both ways, but he is caught up in the dishonesty that the military has used in order to claim it is making progress in the training of Afghan security forces. When training had been ongoing for many years without any Afghan units getting to the point that they can function entirely on their own, the military simply removed that category from their reporting on training. Now, the most advanced category is "independent with advisors". The tenacity with which the military is hanging onto its desire to keep those "advisors" on duty in Afghanistan beyond 2014 suggests to me that the military has stretched a long way to put Afghan units into this category and the lie will be exposed when US troops leave for good and the dysfunction of the Afghan units becomes clear.

Dunford's dishonesty here is hardly unique just to him. One of my favorite figures in the military, Lt. Colonel Daniel L. Davis, has come forward with a proposal aimed at ridding the military of its current penchant for lying in order to claim success. Writing in the Armed Forces Journal, Davis tells us to "Purge the generals":

The U.S. Army's generals, as a group, have lost the ability to effectively function at the high level required of those upon whom we place the responsibility for safeguarding our nation. Over the past 20 years, our senior leaders have amassed a record of failure in major organizational, acquisition and strategic efforts. These failures have been accompanied by the hallmarks of an organization unable and unwilling to fix itself: aggressive resistance to the reporting of problems, suppression of failed test results, public declarations of success where none was justified, and the absence of accountability.

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Over the past two decades, Army generals have consistently insisted that various acquisition, organizational and even combat efforts were on course despite substantial and frequent expert testimony to the contrary. They rejected alternative courses of action that independent analysis suggested might have produced superior results, and reaped failure after expensive failure.

Davis provides us with a list of failed, expensive weapon system boondoggles (to which I would add the scandal that nearly 35 years after the failed hostage rescue mission in Iran and decades of desert fighting, the US still can't manufacture a helicopter that is reliable in the desert) and then goes on to give chapter and verse on the dissembling that has brought us to where we are in the Afghanistan fiasco:

This sad pattern extends into combat operations, as well. Since 2004, senior American military leaders have consistently made claims of combat success in Afghanistan. In the face of substantial evidence to the contrary, they repeatedly argued that the Taliban were being defeated and the Afghan National Security Forces were steadily improving. After I chronicled these claims in a February 2012 essay in AFJ, Lt. Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti told reporters at a Pentagon news conference that he had read the article but remained confident in DoD's assessment that the war was on the right track. The general, who was then the commander of NATO's Joint Command in Afghanistan and who now directs the Joint Staff, said the Taliban had been "unsuccessful at even reaching the level" of past violence and would fail again in the coming year.

Unfortunately, Scaparrotti's confidence turns out to have been misplaced. In April, the independent Afghanistan NGO Safety Office released its report for the first quarter of 2013. Flouting the general's expectations, the reports states that "the opening dynamics of 2013 all indicate the likelihood of a return to 2011 levels of violence [the all-time high]. Though grim, this assessment only represents a further escalation in the perpetual stalemate that has come to characterize the conflict."

When the New York Times tried to compare the ANSO report to official U.S. accounts, it discovered that the American military, "which last year publicized data on enemy attacks with meticulous bar graphs, now has nothing to say. 'We're just not giving out statistics anymore,' said a spokesman, Col. Thomas W. Collins."

Davis' primary prescription for addressing the multiple failures by the military is short and simple:

Replace a substantial chunk of today's generals, starting with the three- and four-star ranks.

What I would add to Davis' analysis is that this whole process of systemic failure by those in command coupled with the continued promotion of those who fail was aided significantly by developments early in the first term of George W. Bush. Our military saw a large exodus of the most capable and most principled of its leaders, while those who endorsed the illegal and unethical goals of the Bush administration were promoted quickly even after failing miserably. I would add that many of those high ranking officers who left rather than take part in Bush's war crimes would be prime candidates to

come back into service and restore the high standards for which our military has previously been known.

Returning finally to the Reuters article, we see that it ends with a discussion of the “bilateral security agreement” [also known as the Status of Forces Agreement, or SOFA], where we see once again that Dunford is allowed to spread more rosy information that has no basis in reality. Dunford claims that he has talked to Afghans at many levels of responsibility and is sure the new agreement will be signed. The article goes on to note that the equivalent agreement in Iraq failed to be signed. What we don’t learn from the article, though, is that the same issue that torpedoed the Iraq agreement, immunity for US troops remaining in the country, is almost certain to prevent the Afghan agreement from being signed, too. Remarkably, the article goes on to allow Dunford to claim that our final shot at claiming Afghanistan as a successful mission depends on completion of the agreement because it would lead to a “secure” Afghanistan. At least that bit from Dunford can be believed. Take a look at the current violence levels in Iraq if you want a preview of Afghanistan after US troops leave when they aren’t granted criminal immunity.