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Rick Perry: Marines purportedly shown urinating on corpses should not be prosecuted

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Republican presidential hopeful said that marines purportedly shown urinating on corpses should not be prosecuted.



Republican presidential hopeful Rick Perry and former Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad

The Republican presidential hopeful Rick Perry has accused the Obama administration of "over-the-top rhetoric" and "disdain for the military" with its condemnation of a video that purportedly shows four US marines urinating on corpses in Afghanistan.

Perry's comments also put him at odds with Senator John McCain, the top Republican on the Senate armed services committee.

Perry said the marines involved should be reprimanded but not prosecuted on criminal charges.

The Texas governor said on CNN's State of the Union programme: "Obviously, 18 and 19-year-old kids make stupid mistakes all too often. And that's what's occurred here.

"What's really disturbing to me is the kind of over-the-top rhetoric from this administration and their disdain for the military."

McCain, who expressed concern that the images could damage the war effort, had said: "The Marine Corps prides itself that we don't lower ourselves to the level of the enemy. So it makes me sad more than anything else, because I can't tell you how wonderful these people [marines] are. And it hurts their reputation and their image."

No one has been charged in the case but officials in the US and abroad have called for swift punishment of the four marines. The defence secretary, Leon Panetta, has said that he worried the video could be used by the Taliban to undermine Afghan peace talks.

A military criminal investigation and an internal Marine Corps review are under way. The Geneva conventions forbid the desecration of the dead.

Later, appearing on the same show, as Perry, McCain said: "We're trying to win the hearts and minds" of the Afghanistan population. "And when something like that comes up, it obviously harms that ability."

Meanwhile, another Republican presidential candidate, Rick Santorum, has boasted of an 11th-hour endorsement from conservative Christian leaders for his bid, in the runup to South Carolina's crucial primary vote – but it appeared to have little influence on churchgoers.

Time is running short for Santorum and other Republican candidates who hope to slow frontrunner Mitt Romney's drive towards the Republican presidential nomination.

Santorum said that Saturday's endorsement by evangelical leaders proved he was a better choice than Romney to take on President Barack Obama.

"They know I'm the consistent conservative," Santorum said on the programme Fox News Sunday. "They saw me as someone who has the best chance of winning."

The backing appeared to have little impact among evangelicals, who account for more than half of South Carolina's Republican voters.

"I make decisions for myself and I don't listen to what a bunch of leaders say to do," said Victoria Jaworowski, who was attending the Cathedral of Praise mega-church in North Charleston.

The Christian leaders meeting in Texas only endorsed Santorum narrowly in a vote that went to a third ballot. It is not clear how they will help the former Pennsylvania senator in terms of money or campaign staff .

Romney has opened up a 21-point lead in the state ahead of the primary as the conservative vote remains splintered, according to a Reuters/Ipsos poll released on Saturday.

Many voters say they are willing to overlook Romney's moderate past in order to unite behind a candidate who can beat Obama.