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Antiwar.com

How the US Fanned the Flames in Afghanistan

By [Tom Engelhardt](#)

February 28, 2012

Is it all over but the (anti-American) shouting — and the killing? Are the exits finally coming into view?

Sometimes, in a moment, the fog lifts, the clouds shift, and you can finally see the landscape ahead with startling clarity. In Afghanistan, Washington may be reaching that moment in a state of panic, horror, and confusion. Even as an anxious U.S. commander [withdrew](#) American and NATO advisers from Afghan ministries around Kabul last weekend — approximately 300, military spokesman James Williams tells TomDispatch — the ability of American soldiers to remain on giant fortified bases eating pizza and fried chicken into the distant future is not in doubt.

No set of Taliban guerrillas, suicide bombers, or armed Afghan “allies” turning their guns on their American “brothers” can alter that — not as long as Washington is ready to bring the necessary supplies into [semi-blockaded Afghanistan](#) at [staggering cost](#). But sometimes that’s the least of the matter, not the essence of it. So if you’re in a mood to mark your calendars, late February 2012 may be the moment when the end game for America’s second Afghan War, launched in October 2001, was initially glimpsed.

Amid the reportage about the recent explosion of Afghan anger over the torching of Qurans in a burn pit at Bagram Air Base, there was a tiny news item that caught the spirit of the moment. As anti-American protests (and the deaths of protesters) mounted across Afghanistan, the German

military made a sudden decision to immediately [abandon](#) a 50-man outpost in the north of the country.

True, they had planned to leave it a few weeks later, but consider the move a tiny sign of the increasing itchiness of Washington's NATO allies. The French [have shown](#) a similar inclination to leave town since, earlier this year, four of their troops were [blown away](#) (and 16 wounded) by an Afghan army soldier, as three others had been shot down several weeks before by another Afghan in uniform. Both the [French](#) and the [Germans](#) have also withdrawn their civilian advisers from Afghan government institutions in the wake of the latest unrest.

Now, it's clear enough: the Europeans are ready to go. And that shouldn't be surprising. After all, we're talking about NATO — the *North Atlantic* Treaty Organization — whose soldiers found themselves in distant Afghanistan in the first place only because, since World War II, with the [singular exception](#) of French President Charles de Gaulle in the 1960s, European leaders have had a terrible time saying “no” to Washington. They still can't quite do so, but in these last months it's clear which way their feet are pointed.

Which makes sense. You would have to be blind not to notice that the American effort in Afghanistan is heading into the tank.

The surprising thing is only that the Obama administration, which recently began to show a certain itchiness of its own — [speeding up](#) withdrawal dates and [lowering](#) the number of forces left behind — remains remarkably mired in its growing Afghan disaster. Besieged by demonstrators there, and at home by Republican presidential hopefuls [making hay](#) out of a situation from hell, its room to maneuver in an unraveling, increasingly chaotic situation seems to grow more limited by the day.

Sensitivity Training

The Afghan War shouldn't be the world's most complicated subject to deal with. After all, the message is clear enough. Eleven years in, if your forces are still burning Qurans in a deeply religious Muslim country, it's way too late and you should go.

Instead, the U.S. command in Kabul and the administration back home have proceeded to tie themselves in a series of bizarre knots, issuing apologies, orders, and threats to no particular purpose as events escalated. Soon after the news of the Quran burning broke, for instance, Gen. John R. Allen, the U.S. war commander in Afghanistan, issued orders that couldn't have been grimmer (or more feeble) under the circumstances. Only a decade late, he [directed](#) that all U.S. military personnel in the country undergo 10 days of sensitivity “training in the proper handling of religious materials.”

Sensitivity, in case you hadn't noticed at this late date, has not been an American strong suit there. In the headlines in the last year, for instance, were revelations about the 12-soldier [“kill team”](#) that “hunted” Afghan civilians [“for sport,”](#) murdered them, and posed for demeaning photos with their corpses. There were the four wisecracking U.S. Marines who [videotaped](#) themselves urinating on the bodies of dead Afghans — whether civilians or Taliban guerrillas is

unknown — with commentary (“Have a good day, buddy... Golden — like a shower”). There was also that sniper unit proudly [sporting](#) a Nazi SS banner in another photographed incident and the U.S. combat outpost named “Aryan.” And not to leave out the allies, there were the British soldiers who were [filmed](#) “abusing” children.

And that’s just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to how Afghans have often experienced the American and NATO occupation of these last years. To take but one example that recently caused outrage, there were the eight shepherd boys, aged six to 18, [slaughtered](#) in a NATO air strike in Kapisa province in northern Afghanistan (with the usual apology and forthcoming “investigation,” as well as claims, [denied](#) by Afghans who also investigated, that the boys were armed).

More generally, there are the hated [night raids](#) launched by special operations forces that break into Afghan homes, cross cultural boundaries of every sort, and sometimes leave death in their wake. Like [errant](#) American and NATO air operations, which have been [commonplace](#) in these war years, they are reportedly deeply despised by most Afghans.

All of these, in turn, have been [protested](#) again and again by Afghan President Hamid Karzai. He has regularly demanded that the U.S. military cease them (or bring them [under Afghan control](#)). Being the president of Afghanistan, however, he has limited leverage and so American officials have paid [little attention](#) to his complaints or his sense of what Afghans were willing to take.

The results are now available for all to see in an explosion of anger spreading across the country. How far this can escalate and how long it can last no one knows. But recent experience indicates that, once a population heads for the streets, anything can happen. All of this could, of course, peter out, but with more than 30 protesters already dead, it could also take on a look reminiscent of the escalating civil war in Syria — including, as has already happened on a small scale in the past, whole [units](#) of Afghan security forces [defecting](#) to the Taliban.

Unfolding events have visibly overwhelmed and even intimidated the Americans in charge. However, as religious as the country may be and as holy as the Quran may be considered, what’s happened cannot be fully explained by the book burning. It is, in truth, an explosion a decade in coming.

Precursors and Omens

After the grim years of Taliban rule, when the Americans arrived in Kabul in November 2001, liberation was in the air. More than 10 years later, the mood is clearly utterly transformed and, for the first time, there are reports of “[Taliban songs](#)” being sung at demonstrations in the streets of the capital. Afghanistan is, as *The New York Times* [reported](#) last weekend (using language seldom seen in American newspapers) “a religious country fed up with foreigners”; or as Laura King of the *Los Angeles Times* [put it](#), there is now “a visceral distaste for Western behavior and values” among significant numbers of Afghans.

Years of pent-up frustration, despair, loathing, and desperation are erupting in the present protests. That this was long on its way can’t be doubted.

Among the more shocking events in the wake of the Quran burnings was the discovery in a room in the heavily guarded Afghan Interior Ministry in Kabul of the bodies of an American lieutenant colonel and major, each evidently executed with a shot in the back of the head while at work. The killer, who [worked](#) in the ministry, was evidently angered by the Quran burnings and possibly by the way the two Americans [mocked](#) Afghan protesters and the Quran itself. He escaped. The Taliban (as in all such incidents) quickly took responsibility, though it may not have been involved at all.

What clearly rattled the American command, however, and led them to withdraw hundreds of advisers from Afghan ministries around Kabul was that the two dead officers were “[inside](#) a secure room” that bars most Afghans. It was in the [ministry’s command and control complex](#). (By the way, if you want to grasp some of the problems of the last decade just consider that the *Afghan Interior Ministry* includes an area open to foreigners, but not to most Afghans who work there.)

As *The New York Times* [put it](#), the withdrawal of the advisers was “a clear sign of concern that the fury had reached deeply into even the Afghan security forces and ministries working most closely with the coalition.” Those two dead Americans were among four killed in these last days of chaos by Afghan “allies.” Meanwhile, the Taliban urged Afghan police and army troops, some of whom evidently need no urging, to attack U.S. military bases and American or NATO forces.

Two other U.S. troops died outside a small American base in Nangarhar province near the Pakistani border in the midst of an Afghan demonstration in which two protesters were also killed. An Afghan soldier [gunned the Americans down](#) and then evidently [escaped](#) into the crowd of demonstrators. Such deaths, in a recent *Washington Post* piece, were [termed](#) “fratricide,” though that perhaps misconstrues the feelings of many Afghans, who over these last years have come to see the Americans as occupiers and possibly despoilers, but not as brothers.

Historically unprecedented in the modern era is the way, in the years leading up to this moment, Afghans in police and army uniforms have repeatedly turned their weapons on American or NATO troops training, working with, or patrolling with them. Barely more than a week ago, for instance, an Afghan policeman [killed](#) the first Albanian soldier to die in the war. Earlier in the year, there were those seven dead French troops. At least [36](#) U.S. and NATO troops have died in this fashion in the past year. [Since 2007](#), there have been at least 47 such attacks. These have been regularly dismissed as “[isolated incidents](#)” of minimal significance by U.S. and NATO officials and, unbelievably enough, are still being [publicly treated](#) that way.

Yet not in Iraq, nor during the Vietnam War, nor the Korean conflict, nor even during the Philippine Insurrection at the turn of the 20th century were there similar examples of what once would have been called “native troops” turning on those training, paying for, and employing them. You would perhaps have to go back to the [Sepoy Rebellion](#), a revolt by Indian troops against their British officers in 1857, for anything comparable.

In April 2011, in the most devastating of these incidents, an Afghan air force colonel [murdered](#) nine U.S. trainers in a heavily guarded area of Kabul International Airport. He was reportedly

angry at Americans generally and evidently not connected to the Taliban. And consider this an omen of things to come: his funeral in Kabul was openly attended by [1,500 mourners](#).

Put in the most practical terms, the Bush and now Obama administrations have been paying for and training an Afghan security force numbering in the hundreds of thousands — to the tune of billions dollars annually ([\\$11 billion](#) last year alone). They are the ones to whom the American war is to be “handed over” as U.S. forces are drawn down. Now, thanks either to Taliban infiltration, rising anger, or some combination of the two, it’s clear that any American soldier who approaches a member of the Afghan security forces to “hand over” anything takes his life in his hands. No war can be fought under such circumstances for very long.

Apologies, Pleas, and Threats

So don’t say there was no warning, or that Obama’s top officials shouldn’t have been prepared for the present unraveling. But when it came, the administration and the military were caught desperately off guard and painfully flatfooted.

In fact, through repeated missteps and an inability to effectively deal with the fallout from the Quran-burning incident, Washington now finds itself trapped in a labyrinth of investigations, apologies, pleas, and threats. Events have all but overwhelmed the administration’s ability to conduct an effective foreign policy. Think of it instead as a form of diplomatic pinball in which U.S. officials and commanders bounce from crisis to crisis with a limited arsenal of options and a toxic brew of foreign and domestic political pressures at play.

How did the pace get quite so dizzying? Let’s start with those dead Afghan shepherd boys. On Feb. 15, the U.S.-led International Security Force (ISAF) “extended its deep regret to the families and loved ones of several Afghan youths who died during an air engagement in Kapisa province Feb 8.” According to an official [press release](#), ISAF insisted, as in so many [previous incidents](#), that it was “taking appropriate action to ascertain the facts, and prevent similar occurrences in the future.”

The results of the investigation were still pending five days later when Americans in uniform were spotted by Afghan workers tossing those Qurans into that burn pit at Bagram Air Base. The Afghans rescued several and smuggled them — [burnt pages and all](#) — off base, sparking national outrage. Almost immediately, the next act of contrition came forth. “On behalf of the entire International Security Assistance Force, I extend my sincerest apologies to the people of Afghanistan,” Gen. Allen announced the following day. At the same time, in a classic case of too-little, too-late, he issued that directive for training in “the proper handling of religious materials.”

That day, White House Press Secretary Jay Carney was on the same page, [telling](#) reporters that the burning of the Muslim holy books was “deeply unfortunate,” but not indicative of the Americans’ feelings toward the religious beliefs of the Afghan people. “Our military leaders have apologized ... for these unintentional actions, and ISAF is undertaking an investigation to understand what happened and to ensure that steps are taken so that incidents like this do not happen again.”

On Feb. 22, an investigation of the Quran burnings by a joint ISAF-Afghan government team commenced. “The purpose of the investigation is to discover the truth surrounding the events which resulted in this incident,” Allen said. “We are determined to ascertain the facts, and take all actions necessary to ensure this never happens again.”

The next day, as Afghan streets exploded in anger, Allen called on “everyone throughout the country — ISAF members and Afghans — to exercise patience and restraint as we continue to gather the facts surrounding Monday night’s incident.”

That very same day, Allen’s commander in chief sent a letter to Afghan President Hamid Karzai that included an apology, expressing “deep regret for the reported incident.” “The error was inadvertent,” President Obama wrote. “I assure you that we will take the appropriate steps to avoid any recurrence, to include holding accountable those responsible.”

Obama’s letter drew instant fire from Republican presidential candidates, most forcefully former House speaker Newt Gingrich, who called it an “outrage” and demanded instead that President Karzai issue an apology for the two Americans shot down by an Afghan soldier. (Otherwise, he added, “we should say goodbye and good luck.”)

Translated into Washingtonese, the situation now looked like this: a Democratic president on the campaign trail in an election year who apologizes to a foreign country has a distinct problem. Two foreign countries? Forget it.

As a result, efforts to mend crucial, if rocky, relations with Pakistan were thrown into chaos. Because of cross-border U.S. air strikes in November which killed 24 Pakistani soldiers, ties between the two countries were already deeply frayed and Pakistan was still blocking critical resupply routes for the war in Afghanistan. With American war efforts suffering for it and resupply costs sky-high, the U.S. government had put together a well-choreographed plan to smooth the waters.

Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was to issue a formal apology to Pakistan’s army chief. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton would then follow up with a similar apology to her Pakistani counterpart.

Fearing further Republican backlash, however, the Obama administration quickly altered its timetable, putting off the apology for at least several more weeks, effectively telling the Pakistanis that any regrets over the killing of their troops would have to wait for a time more convenient to the U.S. election cycle.

Trading apologies to Afghans for those to Pakistanis, however, turned out to mean little on the streets of Afghanistan, where even in non-Taliban areas of the country, chants of “Death to America!” were becoming commonplace. “Just by saying ‘I am sorry,’ nothing can be solved,” protester Wali Mohammed told *The New York Times*. “We want an open trial for those infidels who have burned our Holy Quran.”

And his response was subdued compared to that of Mohammed Anwar, an officer with the U.S.-allied Afghan police. “I will take revenge from the infidels for what they did to our Holy Quran, and I will kill them whenever I get the chance,” he said. “I don’t care about the job I have.”

A day later, when Anwar’s words were put into action by someone who undoubtedly had similar feelings, Gen. Allen announced yet another investigation, this time with tough talk, not apologies, following. “I condemn today’s attack at the Afghan Ministry of Interior that killed two of our coalition officers, and my thoughts and prayers are with the families and loved ones of the brave individuals lost today,” he said in a statement provided to TomDispatch by ISAF. “We are investigating the crime and will pursue all leads to find the person responsible for this attack. The perpetrator of this attack is a coward whose actions will not go unanswered.”

Allen also took the unprecedented step of severing key points of contact with America’s Afghan allies. “For obvious force protection reasons, I have also taken immediate measures to recall all other ISAF personnel working in ministries in and around Kabul.”

Unable to reboot relations with allies in Islamabad due to the unrest in Afghanistan (which was, in fact, already migrating [across the border](#)), the U.S. now found itself partially severing ties with its “partners” in Kabul as well. Meanwhile, back home, Gingrich and others raised the possibility of severing ties with President Karzai himself. In other words, the heat was rising in both the White House and the Afghan presidential palace, while any hope of controlling events elsewhere in either country was threatening to disappear.

As yet, the U.S. military has not taken the next logical step: barring whole categories of Afghans from American bases. “There are currently no discussions ongoing about limiting access to ISAF bases to our Afghan partners,” an ISAF spokesperson assured TomDispatch, but if the situation worsens, expect such discussions to commence.

The Beginning of the End?

As the Quran-burning scandal unfolded, TomDispatch spoke to Raymond F. Chandler III, the sergeant major of the U.S. Army, the most senior enlisted member of that service. “Are there times that things happen that don’t go exactly the way we want or that people act in an unprofessional manner? Absolutely. It’s unfortunate,” he said. “We have a process in place to ensure that when those things don’t happen we conduct an investigation and hold people accountable.”

In Afghan eyes over the last decade, however, it’s accountability that has been sorely lacking, which is why many now in the streets are demanding not just apologies, but a local trial and the death penalty for the Quran burners. Although ISAF’s investigation is ongoing, its statements already indicate that it has concluded the book burnings were accidental and unintentional. This ensures one thing: those at fault, whom no American administration could ever afford to turn over to Afghans for trial anyway, will receive, at best, a slap on the wrist — and many Afghans will be further outraged.

In other words, twist and turn as they might, issue what statements they will, the Americans are now remarkably powerless in the Afghan context to stop the unraveling. Quite the opposite: their actions are guaranteed to ensure further anger among their Afghan “allies.”

Chandler, who was in Afghanistan last year and is slated to return in the coming months, said that he believed the United States was winning there, albeit with caveats. “Again, there are areas in Afghanistan where we have been less successful than others, but each one of those provinces, each one of those districts has their own set of conditions tied with the Afghan people, the Afghan government’s criteria for transition to the Afghan army and the Afghan national police, the Afghan defense forces, and we’re committed to that.” He added that the Americans serving there were “doing absolutely the best possible under the conditions and the environment.”

It turns out, however, that in Afghanistan today the “best” has not been sufficient. With even some members of the Afghan parliament now [calling for](#) jihad against Washington and its coalition allies, radical change is in the air. The American position is [visibly crumbling](#). “Winning” is a distant, long-faded fantasy, defeat a rising reality.

Despite its massive firepower and [staggering base structure](#) in Afghanistan, actual power is visibly slipping away from the United States. American officials are already talking about [not panicking](#) (which indicates that panic is indeed in the air). And in an election year, with the Obama administration’s options desperately limited and what goals it had fast disappearing, it can only brace itself and hope to limp through until November 2012.

The endgame in Afghanistan has, it seems, come into view, and after all these fruitless, bloody years, it couldn’t be sadder. Saddest of all, so much of the blood spilled has been for purposes, if they ever made any sense, that have long since disappeared into the fog of history.