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## Decisions, not excuses in Afghanistan

Spare us and the US public the apologies, the psychiatry, and more useless trials and meaningless investigations.

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On Sunday, a US soldier murdered 16 civilians in Afghanistan's Kandahar province [Reuters]  
I am sort of glad President Obama didn't apologise for the recent US soldier **killing spree in Afghanistan**, leaving it to his "inferiors" to do the embarrassing bidding.

Obama's failure to apologise was not for the same reasons as Newt Gingrich, who reckons the US president shouldn't apologise - rather Afghans should be making apologies for getting in the way of occupying their country, or for getting killed by US troops!

Obama's campaign advisers have their own reasons for not wanting him to apologise: namely, forthcoming US screw-ups overseas will require too many apologies for an incumbent president, especially one who didn't "serve" his country.

After all, it has been only days since **Obama apologised** for the presumed "accidental burning" of Qurans by US soldiers in what appears to Afghans as an anti-Islamic ritual.

Obama's previous apology for past US mistakes is seen by his Republican opponents as "un-American". Leading Republican candidate Mitt Romney **promised**: "I will never, ever apologise for America."

In the real world, President Obama shouldn't apologise because it's insulting to the memory of those who will continue to die as a result of Washington's shortsighted war policies in Afghanistan and its super(power) pride to admit defeat.

Indeed, if it wasn't for the pain and horror caused to Afghan families, I would say repeated apologies are too boring to bear.

This is a war, stupid. Invading another country and occupying it for more than a decade cannot come on the cheap, morally or humanely.

This is not a diplomatic or PR challenge that requires media theatrics. It's a disaster that requires strategic and political decisions.

### **Spare us the psychiatry babble**

If apologies are insulting to Afghan intelligence, the psychiatric argument is pathetic.

Explaining the sergeant's shooting spree and the horrific killing of 16 civilians, including nine children, and badly injuring others isn't the culmination of mere mental distress.

That's not to say US soldiers are not under pressure. They most surely are tired, frustrated, lost, depressed, and perhaps many are going crazy.

Fighting unwinnable war thousands of miles away in unfamiliar lands, inhabited by a hostile population, is no picnic.

Nor does it bode well for morale knowing all too well that the US will withdraw sooner if not later.

Major Nidal Hasan, who worked as a psychiatrist treating troops returning from combat at the US' largest military base, was apparently broken by the testimonies he heard about the wars in

Afghanistan and Iraq. He's scheduled to be on trial this month for the killing of 13 soldiers and injuring many in a shooting spree at the Fort Hood base.

Hasan reportedly didn't want to go to Afghanistan along with dozens of other mental health professionals needed in the combat area.

According to one **US army survey**, counsellors cannot reach many of the 350-odd areas of Afghanistan where the US military is deployed, leaving one out of three soldiers in need of a counsellor unable to reach one.

In short, US soldiers might be in bad need of mental health counselling. But, more importantly, it's the politicians who need political counselling and the generals who need strong political leadership.

### **Trials and investigations**

The sergeant *won't* be surrendered to Afghan authorities. No surprise there. According to the status of forces agreement (SOFA) signed between the occupier and its client, even if the sergeant were held by the Afghans, they would have to turn him over to the US forces.

The same applied to Iraq.

No US soldier of the empire will be tried, let alone imprisoned in a client state. He will be tried in US courts.

So what happened to those who did go on trial in the US? (Not so dissimilar from Israeli soldiers committing murder in Israel's occupied lands.)

Take the case of Staff Sergeant Calvin Gibbs, of Billings, Montana, who was accused of exhorting his bored underlings to slaughter three Afghan civilians for sport in one of the most gruesome cases to emerge from the conflict. He was later convicted of murder, conspiracy and other charges in the deaths of civilians.

According to news reports cited by Al Jazeera DC correspondent Tom Ackerman, although the US military jury sentenced Gibbs to life in prison, he will be eligible for parole in less than nine years!

In another case, Frank Wuterich, the 2005 US squad leader who gave his Marines the order to "shoot first, ask questions later" in Haditha - causing the killing of 24 Iraqi civilians, including children - pleaded guilty to "negligent dereliction of duty", and was merely **discharged** from the Marine Corps. Likewise, all his companions had all the charges against them dismissed or were acquitted.

In return for such a masquerade of justice, as usual, the US military promises to open an investigation into the mass murder as a way of preventing another - as if investigations can overcome or diminish the horror produced by a war killing machine, on or off-duty.

President Obama and Defence Secretary Leon E Panetta **called Mr Karzai**, "expressing condolences and promising thorough investigations".

Oh, now you're talking: "thorough investigations". Now that's impressive and assuring, right?

Wrong!

### **The 'right war' is wrong**

Afghanistan was supposed to be the "right" war, and Iraq the "stupid" one, according to Obama.

Now the US is out of the latter and stuck in a 10-year war that seems to get worse by the day.

Regardless of why this was ever considered "right", the horrific attacks of 9/11 withstanding, it has certainly gone terribly wrong.

Despite President Obama's Af-Pak strategy, a big surge of troops and the successful killing of bin Laden, there is no end in sight to the decade-old occupation, the longest declared US war in recent memory.

The whole strategy and endless jargon of the shift from counter-terrorism to counter-insurgency strategy (COIN) proved to be a farce.

As I wrote back in August 2010 and as reported on **Empire** the same month, getting the "job done" was hardly getting done at all as the war moved from one area of the country to another and the Taliban proved all but invisible.

Nor is the Afghan army ready to take on the Taliban by itself. Indeed, according to observers I spoke to, it could be overrun soon after NATO withdraws from the country. And time isn't on their side.

More importantly, there is no longer majority support for the war in the US. There's even less support in Europe.

The wise and arguably the popular, decision to take now is to find a political exit and withdraw sooner rather than later.

This is best achieved by involving *all* the regional players with a stake in Afghan security and stability.

This, of course, takes more than psychology, investigation and apologies.

It takes leadership.