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The Classic Military Runaround

Posted By Tom Engelhardt

July 7, 2013

The 30-year-old history of U.S. foreign policy: now, there's a dynamite issue! Explosive, in fact. Far too dangerous, it turns out, for Americans to be informed about or have access to basic documents about – so you might conclude from a recent report at Steven Aftergood's website Secrecy News.

According to him, "A 1991 statute mandated that the State Department publish the documentary record of U.S. foreign policy (known as *Foreign Relations of the United States*, or *FRUS*) no later than 30 years after the events described." They were years behind when President Obama, still in his sunshine mode**,** hit the Oval Office and ordered State "to complete the processing of the backlog of 25-year-old records awaiting declassification by the end of December 2013."

Didn't happen, of course. And that, it turns out, is the least of it. A State Department historical advisory committee (HAC), a "panel of distinguished historians," has just weighed in with its own fears that "a substantial percentage of those records that have been reviewed by the NDC [National Declassification Center] have not been cleared for release to the public. In the opinion of the HAC, the relatively high number of reviewed documents that remain withheld from researchers and citizens raises fundamental questions about the declassification guidelines." The historians wonder, in fact, whether the majority of the *FRUS* volumes will ever see the light of day.

History, too, may need its Edward Snowden, a rogue historian with access to those State documents and the urge to travel to Hong Kong or tour the bowels of Moscow's international airport terminal. If no such historian appears, then Americans curious about the documentary history of our past may get another 30 years of the good old runaround – and even then it'll be nothing compared to what TomDispatch Managing Editor Nick Turse, author of the bestseller *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam*, received from the U.S. military. *~ Tom*

Your Tax Dollars at Work Keeping You in the Dark

By Nick Turse

There are hundreds, possibly thousands of U.S. personnel – the military refuses to say how many – stationed in the ochre-tinted country of Qatar. Out in the searing heat of the desert, they fly fighter jets or fix them. They equip and arm troops headed to war. Some work in a high-tech command-and-control center overseeing U.S. air operations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and elsewhere in the Greater Middle East. Yet I found myself sitting in a hotel room in Doha, Qatar's capital, about 30 miles east of al-Udeid Air Base, the main U.S. installation in the country, unable to see, let alone talk, to any of them.

In mid-May, weeks before my arrival in Qatar, I sent a request to the public affairs office at the base to arrange a visit with the 379th Air Expeditionary Wing, the unit that, according to the military, carries out a "critical combat mission that spans nearly 6,000 miles from the Horn of Africa to Northern Afghanistan." Or at least I tried to. Day or night, weekday or weekend, the website refused to deliver my message. Finally, I dug up an alternate email address and sent in my request. Days passed with no word, without even an acknowledgement. I followed up yet again and finally received a reply – and then it began.

The initial response came on May 28th from the Media Operations Chief at Air Forces Central Command Public Affairs. She told me that I needed to contact the 379th Air Expeditionary Wing's Public Affairs liaison, Captain Angela Webb, directly. So I repeatedly wrote to Captain Webb. No response. On June 10th, I received an email from Susan Harrington. She was, she told me, "taking over" for Captain Webb. Unfortunately, she added, it was now far too close to my arrival in Qatar to arrange a visit. "Due to time constraints," she wrote me, "I do not think it will be possible to support this request since we are likely already within that 30 day window."

Don't think I was surprised. By now, I'm used to it. Whether I'm trying to figure out what the U.S. military is doing in Latin America or Africa, Afghanistan or Qatar, the response is remarkably uniform – obstruction and obfuscation, hurdles and hindrances. In short, the good old-fashioned military runaround. I had hoped to take a walk around al-Udeid Air Base, perhaps get a glimpse of the jumbotron-sized screens and rows of computers in its Combined Air and Space Operations Center. I wanted to learn how the drawdown in Afghanistan was affecting life on the base.

Instead, I ended up sitting in the climate-controlled comfort of my hotel room, staring at a cloudless sky, typing these words behind double-paned glass that shielded me from the 106

degree heat outside. For my trouble, on my return to the United States, I was detained at Kennedy Airport in New York by agents of the Department of Homeland Security. Their question for me: Was I planning to fight against U.S. forces in Afghanistan?

Base Desires in Africa

If you are an American citizen, you're really not supposed to know about operations at al-Udeid Air Base. The men and women there on your dime can't even "mention the base name or host nation name in any unsecured communications." Instead, they're instructed to say that they are at an "undisclosed location in Southwest Asia" instead of "the Deid," as they call it.

It isn't the only base that the Pentagon wants to keep in the shadows. You're also not supposed to know how many bases the U.S. military currently has in Africa. I learned that the hard way. As a start, let me say that, officially speaking, there is only a single U.S. facility on the entire continent that the military formally calls a "base": Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, a tiny nation in the Horn of Africa. U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) is adamant about this and takes great pains to emphasize it. Internally, however, they do admit that they also have forward operating sites (aka "enduring locations"), contingency security locations (which troops periodically rotate in and out of), and contingency locations (which are used only during ongoing operations). But don't try to get an official list of these or even a simple count – unless you're ready for the old-fashioned runaround.

In May 2012, I made the mistake of requesting a list of all facilities used by the U.S. military in Africa broken down by country. Nicole Dalrymple of AFRICOM's Public Affairs Office told me the command would look into it and would be in touch. I never heard from her again. In June, Pat Barnes, AFRICOM's Public Affairs liaison at the Pentagon, shot down my request, admitting only that the U.S. military had a "a small and temporary presence of personnel" at "several locations in Africa." Due to "force protection" issues, he assured me, he could not tell me "where our folks are located and what facilities they use."

That July, with sparing assistance from AFRICOM, I published an article on "Secret Wars, Secret Bases, and the Pentagon's 'New Spice Route' in Africa," in which I attempted to shed light on a growing U.S. military presence on that continent. This included a previously ignored logistics network set up to service U.S. military operations, with critical nodes in Manda Bay, Garissa, and Mombasa in Kenya; Kampala and Entebbe in Uganda; Bangui and Djema in the Central African Republic; Nzara in South Sudan; and Dire Dawa in Ethiopia. I also drew attention to posts, airports, and other facilities used by Americans in Arba Minch in Ethiopia, Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso, and the Seychelles Islands in the Indian Ocean.

U.S. Africa Command took great exception to this. Colonel Tom Davis, their director of public affairs, wrote a detailed, irritated response. I replied to him and once the dust had settled, I asked him for, among other information, a full listing of what he called "temporary facilities" as well as all other outposts, camps, warehouses, supply depots, and anything else that might be used by U.S. personnel in Africa. He ignored my request. I followed up. Four days later, AFRICOM spokesman Eric Elliott emailed to say Colonel Davis was on leave, but added, "Let me see what I

can give you in response to your request for a complete list of facilities. There will [be] some limits on the details we can provide because of the scope of the request."

Were there ever!

That was August 2012. For months, I heard nothing. Not an apology for the wait, not a request for more time. A follow-up in late October was ignored. A note in early November was finally answered by still another AFRICOM spokesman, Lieutenant Commander Dave Hecht, who said he was now on the case and would get back to me with an update by the end of the week. You won't be shocked to learn that the weekend came and went without a word. I sent another follow up. On November 16th, Hecht finally responded: "All questions now have answers. I just need the boss to review before I can release. I hope to have them to you by mid next week."

Take a guess what happened next. Nada. Further emails went unanswered. It was December before Hecht replied: "All questions have been answered but are still being reviewed for release. Hopefully this week I can send everything your way."

He didn't.

In January 2013, answers to some other questions of mine finally arrived, but nothing on my request for information on U.S. bases. By now, Hecht, too, had disappeared and I was passed off to AFRICOM's chief of media engagement, Benjamin Benson. When I asked about the ignored questions, he responded that my request "exceed[ed] the scope of this command's activities, and of what we are resourced to research and provide under the Public Affairs program." I should instead file a request under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). In other words, I should begin what was guaranteed to be another endlessly drawn-out process.

I was, shall we say, irritated. Somehow, it had taken six months to get me nothing and send me elsewhere – and somehow neither Colonel Davis, nor Eric Elliott, nor Dave Hecht had realized this. I said as much to Benson. He wrote back: "Lastly, you state, 'I've been led astray for the better part of a year and intend to write about it', which of course is your right to do in our free society. We expect that as a professional, you convey the correct facts, and ask that you note that we did research, and provide answers to the questions you posed."

Well, here you go, Ben. Duly noted. But of course, the "correct facts" are that neither Benson nor anyone else at AFRICOM ever provided answers to the crucial basing questions I posed. And Benson continues not to provide them to this very day.

When we last spoke by telephone, several weeks ago, I reiterated that I understood he couldn't offer me a list of the locations of American bases in Africa due to "security of operations," so all I now wanted was a simple count of facilities in Africa. "That's tricky. We have teams coming in and out of Africa to different locations all the time," he replied. "Places that they might be, the range of possible locations can get really big, but can provide a really skewed image of where we are… versus other places where we have ongoing operations. So, in terms of providing number, I'd be at a loss of how to quantify this."

It seemed easy enough to me: just count them and include the necessary disclaimers. So I asked if AFRICOM kept a count of where its troops were located. They did. So what was the problem? He launched into a monologue about the difficulty of ascertaining just what truly constituted "a location" and then told me: "We don't have a way that we really count locations."

It couldn't have been clearer by then. They had a count of all locations, but couldn't count them. They had lists of where all U.S. troops in Africa were based, but not a list of bases. It was a classic runaround in action.

The First Casualty

And don't think that was the worst of it. The most dismissive response I've gotten recently from anyone whose salary we pay to keep us (nominally) informed about the U.S. military came from Marco Villalobos, the FOIA manager of U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), responsible for Central America and South America.

Last year, reports surfaced of civilians killed during operations conducted or overseen by U.S. personnel in Honduras. In at least one instance, the Honduran Air Force shot down a civilian plane thanks in part, it seems, to intelligence provided by SOUTHCOM. Since the U.S. military is heavily involved in operations across Latin America, I requested records relating to civilian casualties resulting from all operations in the region.

That was in July 2012. In February 2013, I got a peculiar response from Villalobos, one I've never seen otherwise in hundreds of replies to FOIA requests that I've ever received from various government agencies. He didn't say there were no such records. He didn't tell me that I had contacted the wrong agency or bureau. Instead, he directed me to the United Nations Statistics Division for the relevant data.

The trouble is, the U.N. Statistics Division (UNSD) doesn't collate U.S. military data nor is it devoted to tracking civilian casualties. Instead it provides breakdowns of big datasets, like the Food and Agriculture Organization's figures on how many hectares of apricots were harvested in Afghanistan in 2007 (3,400) or the prevalence rate of contraceptive use for women ages 15 to 49 in Uganda in 2005 (19.7%).

I was surprised to say the least. And I wasn't alone. When I checked in with the U.N., the Statistics Division wrote back: "could you please forward us the email you received from SOUTHCOM in which they suggest UNSD as a source, so we can contact them if they continue to give our address out in response to such inquiries which don't pertain to our work."

So I called Villalobos to complain. It wasn't his fault, he quickly assured me. The decision had been made, he claimed, by the director of personnel. I asked for his name, but Villalobos refused to give it: "He's not a public person."

That's the nature of the runaround. Months later, you find yourself back in the same informational cul-de-sac. And when it comes to the U.S. military, it happens again and again and again. I had a similar experience trying to embed with U.S. units in Afghanistan. I was rebuffed

repeatedly for reasons that seemed spurious to me. As a result, however, a never-used Afghan visa for that trip sits unstamped in my passport – which brings me back to my recent trip to Qatar.

The American Taliban?

In the airport upon returning to the United States, I was singled out by a Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agent. He directed me to a "girl" at a far counter. When I got there, I was admonished by her for being in the wrong place. Finally, I was sent to see a third CBP officer at a different workstation. Think of it as the runaround before the runaround.

This agent proceeded to question me about the contents of my bag, pulled out my papers and began reading them. She also wanted to know about my profession. I said I was a writer. What did I write about? National security issues, I told her. She asked what I thought about national security and the role of the U.S. military in the world. In my estimation, I said, it tended to result in unforeseen consequences. "Like what?" she asked. So I described my most recent article on blowback from U.S. military efforts in Africa.

Did I write books?

"I do," I replied.

"What are the titles?"

"The latest one is called *Kill Anything That Moves*."

"Kill what?"

"*Kill Anything That Moves*."

She turned to her computer, promptly Googled the book, went to the Amazon page, and began scrolling through the customer reviews. She asked if my book was, as the page said, a *New York Times* bestseller. I assured her it was. After a short while, she told me to stay put and disappeared into a back room with my personal papers – writings, notes, reading materials. When she returned, she told me that she couldn't conduct the rest of my "examination" in public. She would have to bring me "back." I asked if there was a problem. No. Could I have my papers back? The answer was again no.

I was soon deposited in "Area 23" of New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport and I was definitely the odd one out. Not that there weren't plenty of other people there. The Muslim man in the *taqiyah*. Three women in head scarves. Another wearing a *niqab*. Everyone's skin color was at least several shades darker than mine.

I waited for a while, taking notes, before my name was called by an Officer Mott. The badge on his shirt made that clear, but he spelled it out for me anyway. "It seems like you're taking notes on everything, so I might as well get that out of the way," Mott said visibly perturbed, especially

when I asked for his full name. "I'm not giving you my first name," he said with palpable disgust.

Like the previous CBP agent, he also asked about my writing interests. I told him it mostly centered on U.S. foreign policy.

"Are you for or against it?"

"Am I for foreign policy?" I asked.

"Well, I'm reading that your last book is *Kill Anything That Moves*. That was about what?"

"The Vietnam War."

"What about the Vietnam War?"

"Civilian casualties."

"Sensitive topic," he said.

"Especially for the Vietnamese," I replied.

"Well, in this day and age with the whole war going on, that's a sensitive issue you're writing about… Do you get any heat or problems writing about war and civilian casualties?"

"It comes with the territory," I told him.

As he typed away at his computer, I asked why I was singled out. "I think because some of the material you have is of interest… What you're writing, traveling with." I asked how they would know what was in my bag before I was detained. "Why the officer stopped you is beyond me, but what the officer discovered is something of interest, especially for national security… It's not every day you see someone traveling with information like this."

It was probably true. The contents of my bag were splayed out before us. The most prominent and substantive document was "Qatar: Background and U.S. Relations," a report prepared last year by the U.S. Congressional Research Service.

Agent Mott rifled through my papers, tapped at his keyboard some more, breathed in deeply and then launched into a series of questions designed to make sure, he told me, that nothing "jeopardizes our national security."

"How long have you been writing about wars and things like that?"

"About 10 years."

He did a double take, looked at my passport, and typed feverishly. "I thought you were younger," he told me. I took it as a compliment. He wanted to know if I'd traveled anywhere in the last five years as he flipped through my passport, filled as it is with visas and entry and exit stamps from around the world. The answer was obviously yes. "Pakistan? Afghanistan?" he asked.

Immediately, I thought of the unused Afghan visa in my passport and started to explain. After instructing me to get a visa, the U.S. military had strung me along for months before deciding I couldn't embed with certain units I requested, I told him.

"Doing journalistic stuff, not fighting with them or anything like that?"

Fighting? Was I really being accused of heading to Afghanistan to join the Taliban? Or maybe plotting to launch an insider attack? Was I really being questioned about this on the basis of having an Afghan visa and writing about national security issues? "Nope. I'm a writer," I told him. "I cover the U.S. military, so I was going to *cover* the U.S. military."

Agent Mott seemed satisfied enough. He finished his questions and sent me on my way.

The next morning, I checked my email, and found a message waiting for me. It was from the Media Embed Chief in Afghanistan. "You are receiving this email because in the past you have been an embed with ISAF [International Security Force in Afghanistan] or requested an embed," it read. "Your opinion and satisfaction are important to us."

"You can't make this shit up," an old editor of mine was fond of saying when truth – as it so often does – proves stranger than fiction. This sequence of events certainly qualified. I could hardly believe my eyes, but there it was: a link to a questionnaire about how well served I was by my (nonexistent) 2012 embed in Afghanistan. Question number six asked: "During your embed(s) did you get the information and stories you require? If no please state why."

Let me count the ways.