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The Consequences of Living with Afghanistan's Culture of Child Sex Exploitation

By Robert Long

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For over a decade, NATO troops have been bewildered and outraged at the practice of pederasty in Afghanistan ^[1]. This is one of the reasons that, several years ago, the American military recruited anthropologists to help the military navigate Afghan culture.

Like many anthropologists, Richard Shweder of the University of Chicago was deeply skeptical of the program, fearing that his academic colleagues would put a friendly face on violent occupation. But then he heard an NPR story about anthropologists working with the military, and wrote this ^[2] for the *New York Times*:

Nevertheless the military [anthropologist] voices on the show had their winning moments, sounding like old-fashioned relativists, whose basic mission in life was to counter ethnocentrism and disarm those possessed by a strident sense of group superiority. Ms. [Montgomery] McFate stressed her success at getting American soldiers to stop making moral judgments about a local Afghan cultural practice in which older men go off with younger boys on “love Thursdays” and do some “hanky-panky.” “Stop imposing your values on others,” was the message for the American soldiers. She was way beyond “don’t ask, don’t tell,” and I found it heartwarming. [emphasis added]

Granted, Professor Shweder and his fellow anthropologists are right and good to challenge “a strident sense of group superiority.” But countering “moral judgments” is anything but a “winning moment” when it involves older men having “hanky-panky” with young boys—what we in the West call child rape.

While the main victims of this practice are the children, encountering this cultural practice takes a considerable toll on US service members, despite the efforts of cultural sensitivity trainers.

Take Major Bill Steuber, who returned earlier this year from Sangin district, Helmand province, where he worked closely with Afghan local forces. While he made significant progress on challenges like fuel logistics and rule of law, he says, he could not crack down on the pervasive problem of his Afghan counterparts in the national police keeping “chai boys.” (In a VICE documentary ^[3] filmed during his deployment, Steuber pleads in vain with an Afghan police chief to arrest commanders who are keeping boys on police bases.)

“I have a lot of guilt with that,” Steuber says. Even though he “did everything, wrote every letter, screamed up and down the chain of command,” he made little headway: “It’s not that people didn’t care. It’s just a problem that was so prevalent and culturally ingrained that it was literally just like pushing a boulder up a mountain with that issue.”

And at the end of the day, he believes, the military won’t jeopardize the entire mission by harping on the child abuse issue and potentially alienating its Afghan partners.

Steuber emphasizes that cultural training is important, helpful, and necessary. “But I refused to accept,” he says, “on an intellectual level, what the anthropologists and cultural advisers were telling me.”

I wear the uniform of the Marine Corps. And by wearing that uniform, and wearing that flag, I am therefore a proxy of the American people. Regardless of the culture we are fighting in, and helping to support, we do not tolerate those things. We as a people stand for individual freedom and liberty, and the protection of those people who are not strong enough to protect themselves...

So I told my men: be true to yourself. Be true to what your community, your parents taught you. If you see something that you would not tolerate at home, do not tolerate it over here. I never ask them to compromise their values over what some anthropologist thinks is Afghan culture.

Practically speaking, though, cultural relativism will likely prevail. It would be preposterously optimistic to think that, while helping a corrupt government fend off a shadowy insurgency in one of the poorest countries in the world, the US military could do much to “impose their values” against culturally sanctioned child sexual exploitation.

But that form of cultural relativism is not “heartwarming.” It is a scandal and a shame.