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Afghanistan War Not Worth the Burning of Children and Treasure

By Derrick Crowe
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Afghanistan, killed nine boys gathering firewood on a mountainside. General Petraeus says he's sorry.

"We are deeply sorry for this tragedy and apologize to the members of the Afghan government, the people of Afghanistan and, most importantly, the surviving family members of those killed by our actions," Gen. Petraeus said in a statement. "These deaths should have never happened."

Too little, too late, general. Nine boys now lie among thousands of others who had a right to life independent of U.S. goals in Afghanistan, and "sorry" doesn't cut it, especially from the general who's tripling the air war over Afghanistan. Air strikes are the leading tactic involved when U.S. and coalition forces kill civilians. We know this. We use them anyway. These boys' deaths, or at least the idea of these boys' deaths, were factored in to a calculation and deemed insufficient to deter the use of air power long before they died, and their deaths don't seem to have changed Petraeus' or ISAF's calculus. Sorry doesn't cut it.

But at least Petraeus didn't try to blame the boys' families for blowing them up to frame him this time.

Sorry certainly doesn't cut it for the brother of one of the dead:

"I don't care about the apology," Mohammed Bismil, the 20-year-old brother of two boys killed in the strike, said in a telephone interview. "The only option I have is to pick up a Kalashnikov, RPG [rocket-propelled grenade] or a suicide vest to fight."

President Obama says he's sorry, too:

President Obama expressed his deep regret for the tragic accident in Kunar Province in which nine Afghans were killed. The President conveyed his condolences to the Afghan people and stressed that he and General Petraeus take such incidents very seriously. President Obama and President Karzai agreed that such incidents undermine our shared efforts in fighting terrorism.

Oh, good, he takes such incidents "very seriously." Here's a fun thought experiment: can you imagine President Obama (or any high-ranking visiting U.S. dignitary, for that matter) scheduling a visit to the graveside of any civilian victim of U.S.-fired munitions on his next trip to Afghanistan? Give me a call when the images from that photo-op make the front pages, would you?

I don't doubt for a second that President Obama and much of Washington officialdom think that they take these deaths very seriously. Yet, they continue to rubber-stamp funds and to approve a strategy and various supporting tactics that are guaranteed to cause future incidents like these. Because that's the case, they're conscripting tax money that we send to D.C. every year for the purpose of building our nation together into policies that we don't support and which kill people for whom we feel no malice. In fact, the strategies and tactics are so ill-conceived that they're putting our money into the hands of insurgents who kill U.S. troops.

From Talking Points Memo:

After nearly a decade of mismanagement, theft and fraud, the U.S. military still hasn't found a way to staunch the flow of what is likely hundreds of millions -- if not billions -- of dollars in lost fuel in Afghanistan, some of which is sold on the black market and winds up in Taliban hands, a TPM investigation has found. ...When TPM asked Rep. Jim Moran (D-VA), a longtime member of the defense spending panel, about the fuel losses on Wednesday, Moran was well-versed on the topic, noting that he and other members of the committee had received private briefings by defense officials about the thorny security, logistics and corruption issues posed by the fuel theft.

Over the years, the transport of the fuel into the country at times has involved agreements to siphon a portion to outside parties in order to guarantee safe passage of the trucks, Moran said, and some of that fuel has ended up in enemy hands.

This same news story also included mention of a report from last year that showed that U.S. taxpayer funds funneled through protection rackets was one of the insurgents' most significant sources of funding:

...A House Oversight and Government Reform subcommittee investigation last year revealed that the companies under the host-nation contract often paid private security contractors to ensure safe passage through Afghanistan. The security contractors, in turn, made protection payment to local warlords in exchange for their agreement to prevent attacks.

Even completed big-ticket completed projects intended to win hearts and minds for the coalition have resulted in new funding streams for insurgents. From Yahoo! News:

By pumping more than \$100 million into a hydropower plant, the United States sought to improve the lives of Afghans and win the hearts and minds of tribesmen and farmers who might otherwise turn to the Taliban insurgency. Instead, a prominent outside Pentagon adviser argues, the bungled boondoggle ended up funding the insurgents while doing little to help the United States end the war and bring troops home.

With our money fueling the insurgency and our killing of civilians driving more people to join the Taliban's side every week, it's little wonder that the insurgency continues to grow in size and sophistication. But that brings us back to that calculation, the one that put those nine dead boys in the column titled "Acceptable Losses." With official promises that more troops would lead to more security for ordinary Afghans having collapsed so badly that they read like a bad joke, what could possibly justify this continued bonfire of lives and resources in Afghanistan? The war's not making us safer and it's not worth the cost. Dragging this out until 2014 won't change that one bit.

This week U.S. forces burned children along with the firewood they were gathering. If we allow this brutal, futile war to continue, you can bet that more children and more of our resources will be kindling to a fire that's not keeping anybody warm. The American people want our troops brought home, and it's time President Obama and Congress took that "very seriously."