

“Crazy Mike” in “Indian Country”

By Jim Lobe | September 28, 2004

The reason why Washington is having such a difficult time persuading the world of its good faith and its good works in the “war on terror” was best illustrated on the day U.S. President George W. Bush went to the United Nations.

While he told the UN General Assembly that Washington’s belief in “human dignity”—a phrase he used no less than 10 times in his speech—was the main U.S. motivation for pursuing the war, two articles that appeared in two major U.S. newspapers the same morning offered the delegates an altogether different subtext.

The first piece, titled “Indian Country,” was written by one of the administration’s geo-strategic gurus, Robert D. Kaplan, a favorite of national security adviser Condoleezza Rice, and published on the staunchly hawkish editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*.

Kaplan, who is writing a series of books about the U.S. military, extolled U.S. Special Forces operating in small units from “forward operating bases” (FOBs) without direction from any “Washington bureaucracy” and outside the scrutiny of the global media as the new perfect weapon in the thankless task of protecting civilization against the barbarians at the gates.

As “in the days of fighting the Indians,” wrote Kaplan, “the smaller the tactical unit, the more forward deployed it is, and the more autonomy it enjoys from the chain of command, the more that can be accomplished.”

Unbeknownst to Kaplan and, presumably, to Bush as well, the *Los Angeles Times* that same morning published a front-page article that showed just how much could be accomplished by such units in faraway FOBs.

“Crazy Mike” in Afghanistan

Based on reports by a UN team, the Washington-based Crimes of War Project, and the office of the Afghan Armed Forces attorney general, the *Times* described how U.S. Special Forces at one FOB in southeastern Afghanistan last year beat and tortured eight Afghan soldiers over no less than 17 days, until one of their victims, 18-year-old Jamal Naseer, died.

The eight were taken to the Special Forces FOB near Gardez on Mar. 1, 2003, after they were seized while manning a security checkpoint amid reports, apparently planted by local faction leaders competing for U.S. support, that Afghan army units in the area were selling arms to the Taliban.

According to the consistent testimony of the men, they were “pummeled, kicked, karate-chopped, hung upside down and struck repeatedly with sticks, rubber hoses and plastic-covered cables,” the *Times* reported. “Some said they were immersed in cold water, then

made to lie in the snow. Some said they were kept blindfolded for long periods and subjected to electric shocks to their toes.”

During their ordeal, they were never given medical help or even provided with a change of clothes. For 17 days.

After Naseer’s death, his battered body and the seven survivors were handed over to local Afghan police by a Special Forces commander who threatened to kill the police chief if he released any of the prisoners, according to an official of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), who witnessed the warning.

They were held at the local jail with as many as 13 other inmates in a “secret detention room” that was built for five for the next month and a half—apparently until their wounds had healed. UNAMA, however, interviewed them during their stay and found that their injuries were consistent with their testimony.

They were finally transferred to a prison near Kabul and released after authorities there found no evidence that they had committed any crimes or had ties to anti-government groups. The prison also referred the case to the attorney general.

The Afghan military has requested an explanation of the incident from the U.S. military authorities, according to the attorney general’s report, but, as of the time of Bush’s speech to the UN, had received no response. The Pentagon announced that it has launched a criminal investigation.

Investigators told the *Times*, however, they did not know who precisely was running the Gardez base, other than units from the 20th Special Forces Group based in Birmingham, Alabama (which, ironically, is Rice’s hometown and from which the hawkish group that has surrounded Bush since the election campaign in 2000—“the Vulcans”—derives its name).

Consistent with Kaplan’s notion that the Special Forces should operate as independently as possible from Washington bureaucrats, however, an Army detective in Kabul told the *Times*, “There are no records... There are no SOPs (standard operating procedures)... and each unit acts differently.”

“Mike,” the name used by the commanding officer of the FOB at the time, is a common pseudonym for intelligence and Special Forces officers working in Afghanistan, although this particular “Mike” apparently stood out for his aggressiveness, because at least one of his fellow soldiers referred to him as “Crazy Mike,” the *Times* reported.

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At a March 10, 2003 meeting—that is, 10 days into the victims’ captivity—“Crazy Mike” attended a security meeting sponsored by UNAMA in Gardez during which he warned local Afghan commanders that he would kill any of them if they released prisoners taken by his unit.

It’s unclear whether “Crazy Mike” was also the commander who threatened the local police chief with death if he released the prisoners or if he only had to give that one warning, as seems more likely.

The commander of the detained Afghan unit was Naseer’s older brother. He testified that after Naseer’s death, there was an argument between two U.S. officers during which one grabbed the other by the collar and said that Naseer should have been shot rather than tortured. One U.S. officer offered condolences and money, which was refused, according to the brother’s account.

Naseer’s death was never officially reported up the chain of command, so that the Pentagon’s recent report in the wake of the Abu Ghraib scandal that a total of 39 detainees have died in U.S. custody in Iraq and Afghanistan now appears incomplete.

How incomplete is, of course, unknown, and the incident at Gardez may, indeed, be another case of a “few rotten apples” that the administration has tried blame for the abuses at Abu Ghraib.

On the other hand, this latest incident—and particularly the fact that it was carried out over almost two weeks—certainly adds to the impression that abuses of detainees were indeed far more pervasive than the administration has ever admitted. (They also lend credence to the case presented by Jonathan Idema, the former Special Forces officer, recently sentenced by an Afghan judge to eight to ten years in prison for running a “private jail” and torturing prisoners, that he was acting with the knowledge and authority of the Defense Department.)

Kaplan, whose 2001 best-selling book, *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos*, extolled waging war

without mercy, has long argued that maintaining global order is a rough business and that even “successful” wars like those against the Indians or the U.S. counter-insurgency campaign in the Philippines a century ago inevitably lead to excesses. The extent that they can be kept out of the media spotlight—which, of course, is precisely what the Bush administration has tried to do—is all to the good, according to Kaplan’s perspective.

“In Indian country, as one general officer told me, you want to whack bad guys quietly and cover your tracks with humanitarian-aid projects,” Kaplan wrote Tuesday.

“The red Indian metaphor is one with which a liberal policy nomenclatura may be uncomfortable,” Kaplan went on, “but Army and Marine field officers have embraced it because it captures perfectly the combat challenge of the early 21st century.”

Noting that it was the great Victorian leader, William Gladstone, who called on British troops to protect “the sanctity of life in the hill villages of Afghanistan,” Kaplan stressed that U.S. leaders must also appeal to the idealism of their citizens in another article he wrote last year on U.S. supremacy.

“Americans are truly idealistic by nature, but even if we weren’t, our historical and geographical circumstances necessitate that U.S. foreign policy be robed in idealism,” Kaplan wrote in the same article. “And yet security concerns necessarily make our foreign policy more pagan.”

“Speak Victorian, Think Pagan,” he advised U.S. policymakers. And, thus, while Bush drawled on and on about “human dignity,” the assembled delegates in the hall may well have been thinking of “Crazy Mike,” out there in “Indian Country.”

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p. 2

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