

Afghan Raids Target Taliban Families

As the Afghan War drags on and surviving Taliban commanders prove elusive U.S. forces are targeting friends and families, according to a new study, Gareth Porter reports for Inter Press Service.

By Gareth Porter

U.S. Special Operations Forces have been increasingly aiming their night-time raids, which have been the primary cause of Afghan anger at the U.S. military presence, at civilian non-combatants in order to exploit their possible intelligence value, according to a new study published by the Open Society Foundation and The Liaison Office.

The study provides new evidence of the degree to which the criteria used for targeting of individuals in night raids and for seizing them during raids have been loosened to include people who have not been identified as insurgents.

Based on interviews with current and former U.S. military officials with knowledge of the strategic thinking behind the raids, as well as Afghans who have been caught up in the raids, the authors of the study write that large numbers of civilians are being detained for brief periods of time merely to find out what they know about local insurgents a practice the authors suggest may violate the Geneva Conventions on warfare.

A military officer who had approved night raids told one of the authors that targeting individuals believed to know one of the insurgents is a key factor in planning the raids. "If you can't get the guy you want," said the officer, "you get the guy who knows him."

Even when people who are known to be civilians have not been targeted in a given raid, they have been detained when found on the compound of the target, on the ground that a person's involvement in the insurgency "is not always clear until questioned," according to military officer who has been involved in operational questions surrounding the raids interviewed for the report.

Raids prompted by the desire for intelligence can result in the deaths of civilians. The Afghan Analysts Network, a group of independent researchers based in Kabul, investigated a series of night raids in Nangarhar province in October-November 2010, and found that the raids were all targeting people who had met with a local religious cleric who was believed to be the Taliban shadow province governor.

Two civilians were killed in those raids when family members came to the defense

of their relatives.

The report notes that many Afghans interviewed said night-time operations had targeted a number of compounds simultaneously, in some cases covering entire villages.

In a village in Qui Tapa district of Konduz province, SOF units, accompanied by Afghan army troops, conducted a raid that detained 80 to 100 people, according to the report. The interviewees said a masked informant pointed out those people to be taken a U.S. base to be interrogated.

The idea of using military operations to round up civilians to exploit their presumed knowledge of the insurgency has a long history in the U.S.-NATO war in Afghanistan.

The Pentagon official in charge of detainee affairs until the end of 2005 told IPS that concerns about “over-broad detention” in Afghanistan – meaning the practice of sweeping up large numbers of civilians – were countered by pressures for “more aggressive detention operations.”

As then head of NATO intelligence in Afghanistan, Canadian Brig. Gen. Jim Ferron, explained in a newspaper interview in May 2007, “The detainees are detained for a reason. They have information we need.”

It is not clear that civilians actually provide important intelligence on insurgents, however. The civilian victims of night raids are family and friends of Taliban fighters and commanders, who have no incentive to provide information that would make it easier for SOF units to track them down.

But another factor inclines the Special Operations Forces commanders in Afghanistan to focus more on people for whom the evidence of involvement in the insurgency is weak or nonexistent, according to the new report.

After taking heavy losses, in 2010, Taliban commanders at district level and above are increasingly residing in Pakistan rather than in towns in Afghanistan where they can be more easily targeted.

Without those targets on their lists, SOF units in Afghanistan may have had to choose between going after more civilians or reducing the number of operations. And the growth in the number of operations and the statistics on alleged insurgents killed or captured are a key measure of the relevance of SOF units.

An average of 19 raids per night were conducted during the period from December 2010 through February 2011, according to data published by Reuters last February. But a senior U.S. military adviser interviewed for the report in April

2011 said that as many as 40 raids were taking place in a single night.

A military officer involved in the night raids told an author of the study that there were no longer enough mid- to high-level commanders still active in Afghanistan to justify the present high rate of raids, and many raids were now likely to be targeting people who are known not to be insurgents but who might know something about specific insurgents.

Other officers interviewed for the report denied that contention, however, claiming there were still plenty of commanders left to target.

The report suggests that it is dangerous to detain family members in particular in order to exploit their knowledge of relatives in the insurgency, because it further inflames an already angry population across the country.

“If that is the criteria, they might as well arrest all southerners,” said one Afghan journalist living in Kandahar. “The person who is an active Taliban is either my uncle, cousin (or) nephew”

Based on interviews with residents in villages where raids have taken place in the past several months, the report concludes that communities “see raids as deliberately targeting and harassing civilians, in order to discourage communities from providing food and shelter to insurgents, or to pressure them to supply intelligence on the insurgency.”

Most of those civilians targeted or swept up in night raids are released within a few days, according to the report.

That assessment is consistent with the revelation, reported by IPS in September 2010, that roughly 90 percent of the individuals who were said by ISAF in August 2010 to have been “captured insurgents” were in fact released either within two weeks of initial detention or within a few months after being sent to Parwan detention facility.

The authors of the report conclude that deliberately targeting and rounding up civilians who are not suspected of being insurgents merely to exploit possible intelligence value “may constitute an arbitrary deprivation of liberty” and thus “inhumane treatment” in violation of Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions.

The report suggests there is “anecdotal” evidence that the targeting for the raids has become more accurate. But that anecdotal evidence appears to be contradicted by other anecdotal evidence that the targeting has become more indiscriminate in deliberately targeting civilians.

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The Dark Legacy of Reaganomics

Exclusive: For half a century from the depths of the Great Depression until the rise of Ronald Reagan the U.S. government invested in building the nation and funding key research. And the country flourished. But Reagan then reversed those priorities. The results are in, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

It may be political heresy to say so, but a strong case could be made that the greatest American “job creator” over the past 80 years has been the federal government or put differently, the government built the framework that private companies then used to create profits and jobs.

This heretical view also would hold that it was Ronald Reagan’s deviation from this formula for success some 30 years ago that put the United States on its current path of economic decline by starving the government of resources and providing incentives for the rich, through sharply lower taxes, to get super-greedy.

Rather than continuing a half century of policies that made smart investments in research and development along with maintaining a well-educated work force and a top-notch transportation infrastructure Reagan declared “government is the problem” and built a political movement for deconstructing it.

That movement, which boasts powerful right-wing media outlets and well-funded think tanks, now dominates the American political landscape. And, today it presses even harder than Reagan did for dismantling government programs while rejecting the slightest revenue enhancements, like closing tax loopholes for corporate jets or any other tax advantage favoring the rich.

In the future if the American Right and its Tea Party foot soldiers have their way the federal government would be reduced to doing little more than paying the Pentagon’s bills and eliminating regulations.

According to the Right’s economic orthodoxy, the rich or the “job creators” as the Republicans like to call them would then be freed up to create millions of

jobs. That's their plan, even though the available economic data indicates that the reason for corporations not hiring is a lack of demand because so many Americans are out of work or deeply in debt.

Almost certainly, if the Right's economic prescription is filled again, there will just be more retrenchment among companies, big and small, and large corporations will continue sitting on the sidelines with trillions of dollars in cash. Economic times will likely get appreciably worse.

The hard truth for the Republicans and the Right to swallow is that a three-decade experiment with historically low tax rates on the rich has done little more than concentrate America's wealth at the very top and leave everyone else either stagnating or falling backwards.

Yet, what is ironic about this dilemma is that none of it needed to happen. Without doubt, there were painful economic dislocations in the 1970s caused largely by Middle East oil price hikes and inflationary effects from the Vietnam War but the United States was on the cusp of what could have been a new golden era.

A half century of wise policies by the federal government from the depths of the Great Depression through Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, Harry Truman's Fair Deal, Dwight Eisenhower's Interstate Highway System, John Kennedy's Space Program, Lyndon Johnson's civil rights laws, Richard Nixon's Environmental Protection Agency and Jimmy Carter's commitment to renewable energy had created momentum for a resurgent middle class in which average folk could have enjoyed a level of comfort and security unparalleled in human history.

That was the potential payoff from all the achievements and innovations that had been accomplished through investments by the American taxpayers and their government, in collaboration with U.S. industry. Productivity was about to skyrocket.

National Progress

Government-backed projects had extended electricity and communications to all corners of the nation; created a transportation infrastructure that was the envy of the world; spurred development of microprocessors for computers; funded advances in pharmaceuticals, agriculture and science; and opened the door to a new information age with the early development of the Internet.

Despite the tough challenges of the 1970s, the jump in productivity from these technological advancements could have been shared broadly with the American people, who had after all paid for them with their tax dollars.

And even if most productivity gains did go to the top percentiles of wealthy Americans, a robust and progressive tax system could have ensured that the profits were recycled through the country, via the government, in the form of middle-class jobs to upgrade the infrastructure, improve quality of life and keep the nation competitive.

Instead, Reagan and his insurgent right-wing Republicans arrived in Washington in 1980 bearing false promises of how drastically lower tax rates on the rich would produce more revenue. They also claimed that slashed government spending would make almost everyone better off.

Reagan fronted, too, for ideological assaults on unions, de-regulation of banks and corporations, and scrapping plans for solar and other alternative energy sources. Reagan combined these strategies with a massive military build-up even though the chief U.S. rival, the Soviet Union, was in rapid and irreversible decline.

Contrary to Reagan's assurances, the promised surge in tax revenue never materialized and the deficit swelled to then-record levels. Other negative effects of Reagan's "trickle-down" strategy were quickly apparent with homeless people wandering the streets and with the decay of once thriving industrial cities.

But other consequences were slower to materialize because the United States had so much wealth that the nation could absorb misguided policies for brief periods.

Thanks to Reagan's political skills, however, his strategies became deeply entrenched in Official Washington. "Free-market" orthodoxy was in; crank philosophers like Ayn Rand and cruel economic gurus like Milton Friedman were cool. Even middle-class Americans began to worship the "market," increasingly risking their hard-earned money on Wall Street.

Reagan's personal appeal helped sell this anti-government philosophy even to many people who were being savaged by the policies. Especially working-class white men were encouraged to blame their declining status on programs that were helping to correct historic discrimination against women and racial minorities.

Even during the eight years of Democratic President Bill Clinton, when there was a counter-surge of government activism, there was still a growing Washington consensus about "the magic of the markets," further deregulation and continued exporting of American factory jobs. Too many insiders, both Republican and Democrat, were getting rich from the Wall Street gold rush.

Another important turning point came in Election 2000 when American voters

narrowly favored Democrat Al Gore but instead thanks to the intervention of Republican justices on the U.S. Supreme Court got George W. Bush.

Back came the Reaganesque orthodoxies of tax cuts for the rich, disdain for alternative energy, and even more corporate deregulation, plus after the 9/11 attacks another jump in military spending for two unfunded wars. From a budget surplus under Clinton, the United States was back deeply in debt under Bush.

A Legacy of Despair

The Reagan/Bush legacy is now painfully apparent for many Americans. As the nation's wealth was concentrated in the top few percentiles, the middle class stagnated and shrank and the ranks of the desperate poor swelled.

A new survey by the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University found 37 percent of young families with children stuck in a life of poverty last year. That level was even worse than the survey's previous high of 36 percent in 1993, the end of the first round of Reagan economic policies.

Under President Clinton, the percentage of young families in poverty declined to 25 percent by 2000. But it then started up again with the resurgence of Reaganonomics under President George W. Bush, reaching the 37 percent mark in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, which led to the worst economic recession since the Great Depression.

The United States also has squandered much of its technological leadership. Solar panels, which Carter proudly placed on the White House roof and which Reagan defiantly ripped down, are now being made in China with U.S. firms hopelessly behind in the competition.

Even some thoughtful billionaires have begun lamenting the mess that Reaganonomics has caused. The likes of investor Warren Buffett and Google's Eric Schmidt have warned about the dangers from extreme economic inequality and stressed the need for greater consumer demand.

That consumer demand could be brought about by using a progressive tax structure to divert some of the excess wealth from the top money that was generated from opportunities created by the government's investments during much of the 20th Century to put Americans back to work rebuilding the country's roads, bridges, airports, schools, etc.

The idea would be to recreate, as much as possible, the virtuous cycle that existed from the post-World War II era until Reagan's presidency. Though it is surely true that some of those conditions can't be replicated global competition is much stronger today the dramatic advances in technology and productivity

should be able to support a vibrant middle class.

This course of action is increasingly obvious to policymakers and is reflected modestly in President Barack Obama's latest comments about the need for higher taxes on the rich and greater investment in jobs for struggling Americans.

However, the national political framework that Reagan left behind an intense right-wing media, an interlocking network of think tanks shaping Washington's "group think," corporate-funded "grassroots" organizations like the Tea Party, and a Republican Party wedded to the most extreme interpretation of Reagan's anti-government message makes it almost impossible to change the country's direction, short of an electoral revolt.

While the Right deserves most of the blame for putting the United States into this mess, the Left, the Democrats and the broad public are not without fault. They have either failed to build counter-institutions that can make the case for a return to the pre-Reagan economic policies that worked or they have let themselves be easily duped into abandoning their own interests.

Only a revitalized democratic process can change the nation's dangerous course and that will require speaking some heresies, like acknowledging the federal government's central role in creating the prosperity that Americans came to take for granted.

[For more on these topics, see Robert Parry's *Secrecy & Privilege* and *Neck Deep*, now available in a two-book set for the discount price of only \$19. For details, [click here.](#)]

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at neckdeepbook.com. His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'* are also available there.
