

Koran Burning and the U.S. Role in Afghanistan

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The latest round of violence in Afghanistan demonstrates the need to continue to withdraw from Afghanistan as quickly as possible. The immediate cause of this upsurge in violence has been the burning of Korans by American troops. President Obama, in a fit of decency, apologized for American actions that could be generously described as insensitive. Obama's apology was met by attacks from, among others, Newt Gingrich, arguing essentially that the U.S. should never have to apologize for anything. This argument is axiomatically wrong, but it is also very disturbing. Being truly patriotic means loving and caring about your country enough that when those ideals are violated you want your country to act accordingly. Believing you never need to apologize is territory best left to megalomaniacs and bullies, qualities we do not need in an American president.

The most perplexing thing about this incident is not Obama's apology or Gingrich's predictable, if destructive, response, but the question of how the decision to burn Korans in Afghanistan was made in the first place. How anybody thought this could be done without any Afghans learning about it, or how the reaction in Afghanistan could have been anything other than what it was is puzzling. Burning other people's religious texts is never a good idea. Moreover, burning books is something that a country that claims to stand for liberty, freedom and democracy should never do. Regardless of the content of those, or any other books, if people want to read them, they should be allowed to. If the military wanted to get rid of the Korans, they should have sought to donate the books, not to burn them. Right wing posturing aside, true American patriots should be much more upset that our government is burning books than that our President had the decency to apologize when we had made such a mistake and offended so many.

It is appalling that ten years into this war, the U.S. is still making mistakes of this kind, and suffering the entirely predictable consequences. Almost from its inception the military and civilian effort in Afghanistan has been as much an effort to win hearts and minds as an effort to defeat an opponent on the battlefield. Burning Korans sets this effort back quite a bit and suggests that winning in Afghanistan is a Sisyphean task not least because of Americans' own lapses of judgment which are as devastating as they are predictable.

The reaction in Afghanistan to this incident, while also predictable, underscores the difficulty facing the U.S. project in Afghanistan. After a decade trying to demonstrate, through words and actions, that the U.S. can play a constructive role in building the post-Taliban Afghan state, it is clear that the reservoir of anger towards the American presence is deep and easily tapped. In other words, the U.S. is still seen as an occupier first and foremost and faces all of the resistance and distrust that accompanies that position anywhere.

The most interesting thing about Gingrich's remark is not this criticism of President Obama, but what he said later in his statement, "and candidly, if Hamid Karzai, the president of Afghanistan, doesn't feel like apologizing, then I think we should say, 'Good bye and good luck, we don't

need to be here risking our lives and wasting our money on somebody who doesn't care". Although Gingrich's reasoning and tone do not accurately reflect the complexity of the conflict in Afghanistan it suggests a frustration with the U.S. failure in Afghanistan, although Gingrich would probably not use the word failure, that is widespread among the American people and, if Gingrich's remark is indicative, increasingly widespread among the foreign policy elite as well. Obama has stated that the war will end in Afghanistan, but this incident where the U.S. has another lapse of judgment which is met by another round of violence setting back the goals of the mission even more makes it clear that ending the war cannot happen soon enough.