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The Afghan Strategic Review: Speak the Truth About Corruption

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The leaked diplomatic cables from Afghanistan show deep and pervasive corruption.

So what else is new? Other than having this conclusion candidly expressed by American officials who thought they were writing private dispatches.

The much more important question today is: What is the United States going to do about it? Much of the writing about the cable leaks has focused on the vivid official descriptions of corruption, but not on whether those descriptions are going to cause an official rethink of our Afghan strategy. They should.

In fact, one year after President Obama's decision to deploy more troops to Afghanistan, a strategic review of that decision is taking place right now in Washington. Yet officials have downplayed its import, saying to multiple media outlets that it portends no large strategic shifts. For example, the *New York Times* quoted Lt.Gen. Douglas Lute, President Obama's top White House Afghan advisor, as saying: "I don't think you'll see any immediate adjustments."

The day after the *Times* published a front page story headlined "Cables Depict Heavy Afghan Graft, Starting at the Top," President Obama made a secret trip to Afghanistan to speak to the troops at Bagram Air Base. Repeating themes from his West Point speech on December 2, 2009, and a speech to the troops at Bagram in late March of this year, he observed, as if there were no bad news: "We said a year ago that we're going to build the capacity of the Afghan people. And that's what we are doing, meeting our recruitment targets, training Afghan forces, partnering with those Afghans who want to build a stronger and more stable and more prosperous Afghanistan."

Yet there is little dissent from the view that on the issues of governance and anti-corruption, the situation in Afghanistan has only worsened over the past year. (See my *Atlantic* piece, "[The Afghan Black Hole: Governance and Corruption](#).")

And there is little question that the whole counter-insurgency doctrine is built, not on military victory, but on military efforts to create "space" for building institutions and establishing stability that will win the allegiance of the Afghan people and weaken claims by the Taliban. Hence the mantra: "clear, hold, build and transfer."

But the leaked cables only underscore the infirmity of this "good governance/anti-corruption" pillar of our current counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan.

The current Afghan Strategy Review must address -- and then the American people must be told -- one of two things in clear and convincing terms (given the erosion of credibility on this subject).

- Either creating legitimate institutional infrastructure and mounting anti-corruption efforts is possible -- and explaining how, contrary to most indications, this is can be done in Afghanistan by 2011 (when we begin to transition out) or by 2014 (when complete U.S. handover to the Afghans is to occur).
- Or this fundamental pillar of American strategy will not stand; the civilian part of counterinsurgency doctrine is flawed in Afghanistan; and U.S. strategy needs to be changed.

We don't need to wait six more months or another year to know how cancerous corruption is to American strategy -- or how difficult to treat. Everyone talks about listening to the generals on the ground on military matters. Well, on the question of corruption, the cables have given us insight into what the civilian and military officials on the ground are telling Washington.

President Obama needs to level with the American people now with corruption casting such a long shadow over his basic goal of achieving enough Afghan governance and stability to secure the support of the country's people.

There are many reasons for this, but one is surely the tragedy of soldiers dying not to keep Afghan free of the Taliban but free for corrupt acts by malign actors at all levels of Afghan society.

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