

Date: Fri, 31 Dec 2010 14:33:35 -0500

To: "Dr. Baruch Fischhoff - Chair, US National Academy of Sciences Committee on Improving Intelligence" <baruch@cmu.edu>

From: Lloyd Etheredge <lloyd.etheredge@policyscience.net>

Subject: 193. The Rosen-Brooks Hypothesis: Does the U.S. Misinterpret Corruption in Afghanistan?

Dr. Fischhoff and Colleagues:

As you may have seen, David Brooks (NYTimes) gave an award to an article by Lawrence Rosen [an anthropologist and lawyer at Princeton University] and a theory that the US misinterprets corruption in Afghanistan. If the hypothesis is true, the elimination or reduction of corruption - a highly public US priority that is believed to make the Karzai government more viable as an effective controller of the Taliban - may be misguided, unnecessary, or counter-productive.

A Red Team project, recommended by the National Academy of Sciences, should quickly evaluate this hypothesis drawn from cultural anthropology. Afghans are against corruption, but they might mean something quite different than what US planners and foreign journalists believe them to be saying. [For example, using official positions to enhance personal wealth from helping the American government achieve its goals - and distributing this largesse widely to kinsmen - may not be corrupt in Afghan society. And it may be morally sanctioned.]

Rosen's hypothesis is plausible, given research about the *de facto* sociology of civic order.

Transformative Options for a Political Settlement?

The National Academy of Sciences also should recommend an urgent evaluation of the Rosen-Brooks hypothesis because a thoughtful Red Team analysis may open transformative options for a political settlement. The Taliban - about whom there is only a vague understanding

in the American electorate - is not an Enemy caricature. It began as a highly moral religious/political movement in outrage against corruption that abused and damaged human beings (e.g., alleged rape of young women by powerful people), the (different) kind of corruption that a renewed jihadist commitment to Islamic fundamentalism might remedy.

If the National Academy of Sciences, and a Red Team analysis, press this analysis from cultural anthropology, there could be much less good reason for the Taliban, American soldiers, and even the current Karzai government to be killing people than it appears.

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Here is an excerpt from the article cited by Brooks:

From Lawrence Rosen, "Understanding Corruption," The American Interest. March-April, 2010.

"English-language dictionaries define corruption as "morally degraded", "debased in character", or "the perversion of an original state of purity." But you do not have to be an unrepentant relativist, or even to have experienced an undergraduate course in anthropology, to suspect that this definition begs many questions. When, for example, I asked the men in Hussein's village, as I have so many in the Arab world, what passes for corruption in their view, I always receive the same answer: Corruption is the failure to share any largess you have received with those with whom you have formed ties of dependence. There is a world in which the defining feature of a man is that he has formed a web of indebtedness, a network of obligations that prove his capacity to maneuver in a world of relentless uncertainty. It is a world in which the separation of impersonal institutions from personal attachments is very scarce. Failure to service such attachments is thus regarded as not only stupid but corrupt. "

From a description of Dr. Rosen's project at the Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars:

Project Summary

“Studies of democratization in the Arab world rarely consider the cultural factors that contribute to governance. Concepts of self and time, reciprocity and the moral equivalence of social units are crucial to the ways a government of limited powers may be formed. By focusing on the encounter with Western forms of colonial governance, the social meaning of corruption, and the struggle over codes of personal status this study will suggest how power is limited in Arab cultures and how a comparative understanding of this process can contribute to studies of the cultural foundations of democracy more generally. “

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