Is The Army Responsible for the Afghan Massacre?

By Jim Frederick March 14, 2012

Time

With the U.S. war effort in Afghanistan already at unprecedented lows, news on Sunday threatened to push U.S.-Afghanistan relations to a new crisis: a U.S. Army staff sergeant stationed in southern Kandahar, a married father of two children, had allegedly shot and killed 16 civilians, including 9 children, during a harrowing house-to-house killing spree.

American and Afghan authorities are scrambling to ensure this tragedy does not derail the planned departure of NATO forces in 2014, and it is smart to keep looking forward, but we must also not flinch from looking back as well: every war crime committed by U.S. forces calls for a reassessment and examination into how the tragedy could have been prevented. President Obama has the Pentagon moving swiftly and would “spare no effort in conducting a full investigation.”

Let us hope that that’s the case. If the allegations prove true, there is of course nothing that can absolve the soldier of the personal responsibility that is his and his alone for the cold blooded murder of even one innocent life, let alone 16. But let us hope that the military also has the courage, self-confidence and capacity for self-introspection to investigate not just the crime, but the atmosphere—in Army parlance, the “command climate”—in which a crime like this could have taken place.

An unsigned [editorial](http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/editorials/story/2012-03-12/Afghanistan-shootings-16-dead/53503092/1) in Tuesday’s *USA Today* said, “In all probability, the weekend slaughter of 16 innocent Afghans by an American soldier will turn out to have been no more preventable than last month’s shooting of five Ohio high school students by a classmate.” But the premise of the comparison is a faulty one: the Army is nothing like general society. The Army is a uniquely hierarchical and regimented sub-society in which its members are, by design, observed and directed by superiors virtually every waking hour of every day. Likewise, a mass shooting in Ohio, while a tragedy, is not something that jeopardizes U.S. national security, while the massacre of Afghan civilians most definitely is. For these reasons, the military hierarchy is more responsible for the failure of one of its own than broader society is when a citizen commits a similarly heinous crime. While there is likely to be far more unknown than known about the exact circumstances of this case for months to come, I suspect we may learn that this crime could probably have been prevented at several junctures.

Two aspects of the crime deserve particular attention to determine whether there is more to the story than the sudden, inexplicable, unpredictable and unstoppable snapping of a single crazed gunman. First: what the Army knew about the soldier’s mental state and when it knew it. This soldier was four months into his fourth deployment in a decade. Senior defense officials told NBC News that the soldier had no history of behavior problems but also acknowledged that in a previous deployment in Iraq [he had suffered traumatic brain injury](http://battleland.blogs.time.com/2012/03/14/afghan-massacre-army-docs-say-brain-injury-could-have-sparked-attack/). As my TIME colleague Mark Thompson [notes](http://battleland.blogs.time.com/2012/03/14/afghan-massacre-army-docs-say-brain-injury-could-have-sparked-attack/), TBIs can bring on a variety of mental health problems, which renders the official’s statement confusing and contradictory. Other news reports have suggested the sergeant was suffering from marital problems after his last deployment. As I researched a similar crime—the rape and murder of a 14 year Iraqi old girl and the murder of her parents and her 6 year old sister by four 101st Airborne Division soldiers in South Baghdad in 2006, an event that became the focus of my latest book *Black Hearts*—I was shocked to discover that several of the unit’s leaders were aware that the mental state of the murderous foursome’s trigger man was severely degraded, yet they kept him on the front lines of combat. (As an example of just one missed red flag: During a session with a combat stress counselor, this soldier described his intense desires to kill Iraqi civilians. The next day, after two of the unit’s soldiers were killed in a roadside bomb explosion, the counselor told the unit’s battalion commander that she considered the entire platoon psychologically unfit for combat, yet the commander put them back on the front line within 48 hours). TIME’s Mark Thompson also recently [interviewed an Army psychiatrist](http://battleland.blogs.time.com/2012/03/12/battlefield-stress-could-have-triggered-afghan-massacre/) who said anyone who left the confines of his post in the region in the middle of the night by himself, as the alleged mass shooter did, was “crazy.” Colloquially, that may be the case, but if the soldier’s defense lawyers are hoping to mount an insanity defense, they will have a very tough job ahead of them.

Putting his mental state aside, the logistics of this crime is another part of the story that suggests a breach in safety protocol: How was a lone soldier able to wander off a base? One of the bedrock troop management principles of the U.S. Army is that a soldier should never be unsupervised for any length of time. (Usually this is for the soldier’s own safety, but it has the added benefit of preventing soldiers from doing stupid or criminal things). Likewise, in a combat zone, it should be literally impossible for a soldier to walk “outside the wire” solo. Most Forward Operating Bases are heavily fortified, with elaborate processes for units and convoys to get on and off post. According to reports, this base appears to be a much smaller setup, sometimes called combat outposts or patrol bases, which do have much more porous entry points. Even so, where was this sergeant’s platoon sergeant or platoon leader? The crime happened at 3 AM, but every military post has some sort of 24-hour duty rotation. If this sergeant was able to leave through extraordinary evasion and deceit that no leader, battle buddy, or perimeter guards could have prevented, that is one thing. If however, this unit had developed lax troop management practices where soldiers could go unsupervised or unaccounted for for significant stretches of time, then that is a systemic leadership problem which should be brought to light.

Unfortunately, in cases of extreme military malfeasance, the Army has a poor track record of assessing, acknowledging and punishing the leadership breakdowns that allow war crimes to take place. As Army Lieut. Colonel Paul Yingling noted in a 2007 article in the Armed Forces Journal, “A general who presides over a massive human rights scandal or a substantial deterioration in security ought to be retired at a lower rank … As matters stand now, a private who loses a rifle suffers far greater consequences than a general who loses a war.” Perhaps *USA Today* is correct in concluding, “People crack, and they kill—the danger they pose obvious only in hindsight.” In this case, let us devoutly hope so. But if it is not, if this soldier demonstrated clear warning signs of instability that were ignored, or if troop management standards had become lax, then the Army has a responsibility to Americans, Afghans and its own ranks to hold the unit’s leaders accountable for contributing, even unintentionally, to an atrocity.