

March 2012 Teachable Moment: The Case of SSGT Robert Bales in Afghanistan

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“US Soldier Accused in Killing of 16 Afghan Civilians.” The tragic news of the alleged actions of 38 year old US Army Staff Sergeant Robert Bales came as a tremendous shock to the American public. Recent reporting claims Bales left his operating base on the night of March 11, entered two Afghan villages and methodically went about shooting 16 civilians, including 9 children. Afghan outrage, understandably, was immediate. The international outcry was equally immediate. Just over a week after the incident speculation as to what drove Bales to this act is rampant. There’s been much discussion about his recent legal and relationship troubles, failed investments, and physical suitability for redeployment. All of these details will be picked through in detail in the coming weeks and months. One thing is certain at this point and that is US-Afghan relations will be forever altered. The war may in fact be at a turning point. The direction of America’s future in Afghanistan is impossible to predict. Political and military leaders alike will attempt to mitigate the situation. US servicemembers and Westerners working in Afghanistan are at far greater risk as a result of this tragedy. We can safely say that no possible good can come from this incident. What can be safely claimed is that much needs to be done to prevent such incidents in future.

But what can be done? The very nature of the war in Afghanistan resists obvious solutions. I am reminded of the words of Brigadier General S.L.A Marshall in his 1966 article *Some Thoughts on Vietnam*, “There is only one way to conduct war as I read history: Deploy to the war zone as quickly as possible with sufficient forces to end it at the earliest moment. Anything else is a gift to the enemy.” Clearly, Marshall did not fully account for the added complexities of failed states, nation building, and non-state actors in his maxim. Since those elements are all part of the current Afghan reality, the political dimensions of Afghan policy are endlessly debatable. The imperative of adequately preparing and caring for the warfighter engaged in that volatile fight is not.

For several years I had the great privilege of addressing our servicemen and women in Department of Defense-sponsored “Returning Warrior Workshops.” These weekend events, staged around the US for warriors and their significant others were at once a labor of love and an opportunity to learn about the ever-changing challenge faced by our warfighters. This work built on my previous experience directing the leadership and ethics institute for the US Marine Corps—particularly in the wake of disturbing findings in surveys about attitudes concerning non-combatants in the Iraq War. What I learned was predictable; we can never totally prepare warriors for all the psychological stressors they will encounter on the modern battlefield and we can never invest too much care and attention to them upon their return. It was nearly unanimous among those who had returned from the fight that the secret lies with small unit leaders, NCOs and young officers charged with the most direct form of personal leadership.

That SSGT Bales was by most descriptions “affable, level-headed, and experienced” is significant. That he joined the US Army in the months after the 9-11 attacks is also significant. That he was decorated and wounded in combat may be most significant of all. Our warriors today are tough,

competent, and experienced to an unprecedented degree. The systems in place for their preparation for combat and care upon their return from combat are also unprecedented. However, the Bales case, if the allegations are true, demands we redouble our efforts to both prepare our warriors and care for them upon their return. That care cannot be effectively provided by “experts” echelons about the warfighters daily reality.

But what should be done? At minimum, greater time must be allocated in educating leaders at every level to recognize and intervene when their warriors are beyond their capacity to cope with the strain of combat deployment. This is not to suggest that Bale’s leadership in the 3rd Stryker Brigade Combat Team of the 2nd Infantry Division failed to do so. On the contrary, there is evidence that Bale’s expressed sentiments such as (he was) “proud...his unit discriminated between the bad guys and the noncombatants and then afterward... ended up helping the people that three or four hours before were trying to kill us,” reveal someone who understands the complexity and difficulty of counterinsurgency operations. His three previous combat tours in Iraq offer no evidence otherwise. Yet something went terribly awry in the recognition of his stability and intentions.

Unquestionably, this incident is a cautionary tale to leaders and care providers. The specific lessons are open to question. When Major Nidal Malik Hasan massacred 13 of his fellow soldiers at Fort Hood Texas in November of 2009 demands were made to examine our ability to “spot radicalization.” It is unclear if that demand has been answered adequately. In the wake of incidents at Haditha, Hamdaniya, and Abu Ghraib, reports were staffed, Congressional testimony provided, training curricula upgraded, and mental health care guidelines improved. We’d all like to think those actions had a positive impact. The Bales incident demands we reconsider. Are such tragedies even avoidable? Are they a by-product of the terrible reality of war? While they may in fact be unavoidable and an inherent consequence of combat, we at least must agree to redouble our efforts when they occur.

The best remedy for avoidable battlefield tragedies is good leadership. The supervision military leaders’ exercise must be intrusive. The care they provide all encompassing. Until every small unit leader recognizes and embraces his or her responsibility to advocate for those in their charge, we will continue to experience these incidents. By “advocate” I mean to intervene in such a way as to demand certain behaviors—and even beliefs. When it becomes clear that a warrior is incapable or unwilling to perform to the standards expected by the institution, it is the small unit leader who must be the point of decision. Until then, we will continue to be shocked by “avoidable” tragedy.

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