

“So How Many Children Did You Say You Have?” The Right Hand and the Left Hand

by Polly Mann, W A M M

From The New York Times of March 7th, 2010:

The Marines in a recent ‘cultural awareness’ class scribbled careful notes as the instructor coached them on do’s and don’ts when talking to villagers in Afghanistan: Don’t start by firing off questions, do break the ice by playing with the children, don’t let your interpreters hijack the conversation...

These are not your mother’s Marines here in rugged Camp Pendleton, Calif. Forty young women are preparing to deploy to Afghanistan in one of the more forward leaning experiments of the U.S. military.

Next month they will begin work as members of the first full-time “female engagement teams,” the military’s name for four- and five-member units that will accompany men on patrols in Helmand Province to try to win over the rural Afghan women who are culturally off-limits to outside men. The teams, which are to meet with the Afghan women in their homes, assess their need for aid, and gather intelligence are part of Gen. Stanley McChrystal’s campaign for Afghan hearts and minds...

As envisioned, the teams will work like U.S. politicians who campaign door to door and learn what others care about. A team is to arrive in a village, seek permission from the male elder to speak with the women, settle into a compound, hand out school supplies and medicine, drink tea, make conversation and, ideally, get information about the village, local grievances, and the Taliban.

How could anything be more patronizing than this proposal? It manages to insult, in my opinion, both groups of people—the Afghani women and the female U.S. marines. But how could either group complain? Certainly not the Afghani, for theirs is a country occupied by the most powerful military force in the history of the world, and certainly not the Marines, because they are under the discipline of that same force.

It is amazing that the U.S. military still believes in the myth that the good-natured rifle-toting soldier who, with a smile, distributes chocolate bars to children in an occupied country actually disseminates goodwill. Even if the Marine women momentarily lay their weapons down, it’s quite a stretch to consider them to be like campaigning politicians knocking on doors to “learn what others care about,” when, in fact, they are gathering intelligence.

Is it possible that the U.S. military does not realize that while many Afghani women may be uneducated, they are not ignorant. Their intelligence is, no doubt,

comparable to that of American women. And I suspect that notwithstanding the implications of the veil and the burka, they recognize condescension probably more than American women, as they've probably had to put up with more of it.

As an example of the kind of communication with which the Afghani women are familiar, the following is from that same New York Times of December 11, 2009:

Afghan Civilians Handcuffed and Killed by US Occupation Forces: Report Western troops accused of executing 10 Afghan civilians, including children.

The second example, from the Times of December 21, 2010:

American-led troops were accused yesterday of dragging innocent children from their beds and shooting them during a night raid that left ten people dead.

Afghan government investigators said that eight schoolchildren were killed, all but one of them from the same family. Locals said that some victims were handcuffed before being killed.

Western military sources said that the dead were all part of an Afghan terrorist cell responsible for manufacturing improvised explosive devices (IEDs), which have claimed the lives of countless soldiers and civilians.

"This was a joint operation that was conducted against an IED cell that Afghan and US officials had been developing information against for some time," said a senior NATO insider. But he admitted that "the facts about what actually went down are in dispute."

The allegations of civilian casualties led to protests in Kabul and Jalalabad, with children as young as 10 chanting "Death to America" and demanding that foreign forces should leave Afghanistan at once.

Come on, General McChrystal, I don't care how many uniformed women engage in a goodwill campaign designed to mollify Afghani women, I don't think they are going to respond to anything except a total withdrawal of troops who kill unarmed children and women—even if, as is claimed, it was done accidentally.

Polly Mann is a co-founder of WAMM and continues to be active with the organization.

Her column appears regularly in the WAMM newsletter. Also find her writing online in the Middle East Committee section of www.worldwidewamm.org.