

Stunning Alcohol Abuse Revealed at U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan

Inspector General details troubling statistics

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Each U.S. diplomat in Kabul is limited to no more than one bottle of hard liquor, three bottles of wine and two cases of beer per day.

This stunning information is contained in the report of the State Department's Inspector General dated February 10, 2010 (report #ISP-I-10-32A). The findings were so controversial that the Inspector General felt compelled to conduct a follow-up inspection last year. In his updated report in June 2011, he vaguely found that some additional restrictions had been added, but he refused to list them, apparently because the alcohol limits per diplomat remain outrageously high. As our inquiry revealed, this is only the tip of the iceberg.

On March 31, 2010 the U.S. Department of Defense issued a document entitled. "SOP for Customs Clearance Requirement Operations - U.S. Embassy, Kabul, Afghanistan." Under the section "Importation of Alcohol," it reads as follows:

"Afghanistan is a Muslim country and the import, sale and consumption of alcohol is forbidden. The U.S. Embassy is exempted from this ban."

Despite the fact that all U.S. military bases in Afghanistan are officially "dry," the State Department has decided that its employees need alcohol on a daily basis, hence the exception. Our inquiry reveals that alcohol is dispensed through at least three mechanisms within the Embassy.

1. The first mechanism is that the State Department uses taxpayer funds to purchase alcohol for diplomatic functions. During the period 2004 - 2009, State Department annual purchases of alcohol officially went from \$64,000 to \$294,000. It is believed that these numbers are low, but they are the numbers that the Department formally reported. WikiLeaks published an August 1, 2006 cable from Ambassador Richard Hoagland at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul describing an alcohol sodden lunch with Tajikistan Defense Minister Sherali Khairulloyev. While the use of public funds for such alcohol parties has been denounced by members of Congress, including Congressman Vern Buchanan, the practice continues.

2 The second mechanism is that the State Department lends its diplomatic privileges to select contractors so that they can import banned alcohol into countries such as Afghanistan. That alcohol is then sold (duty-free) within the grounds of the U.S. Embassy. In

Kabul, the contractor is deceptively called the “Kabul Embassy Employees Association” or “KEEA.” It informally enforces the one bottle of hard liquor, three bottles of wine and two cases of beer per day limit for embassy employees. It should be noted that this “limit” was apparently introduced years ago because the drinking was even worse at that time.

3. The final mechanism is that KEEA and other contractors are permitted to operate bars and clubs within the Embassy grounds. These clubs have cute military names such as “the Recreation Hooch” and “the Duck and Cover club.” This allows diplomats to image that they are part of the military’s counterinsurgency effort. There apparently are no limits as to how much alcohol these clubs can sell.

In Kabul there is a steady stream of alcohol parties. For example, for the supposedly dreary month of February, the Embassy creatively formed a “Feb Club.” The Feb Club stages a drinking party every night of February for the weary diplomats. One of the Feb Club’s signatures is to chug-a-lug alcohol out of a huge silver champion’s cup, similar to what one would win at the end of a Formula One road race.

The State Department has records that detail every pint, quart, liter and gallon of alcohol shipped to and sold at its Kabul Embassy, but it refuses to release this information, classifying it as secret. The U.S. secrecy rules are being misused to cover up misconduct and to protect senior officials from embarrassment, which is not their purpose.

If anyone in Afghanistan needed a cold beer at the end of the day it would be the U.S. troops who have just returned from a hot and dangerous patrol. U.S. diplomats, who sit comfortably in air-conditioned offices in Kabul and who earn \$150,000+ per year, with two months annual out-of-country vacation, do not need alcohol. It is an insult to the U.S. troops fighting and dying in the countryside for American diplomats to party every night in Kabul.

U.S. tax dollars should not be spent for alcohol. In addition, the unseemly Embassy alcohol parties place the United States in a bad light among Afghans. President Obama can begin to reduce his budget deficit by eliminating the State Department’s alcohol spending and he can begin to improve America’s image abroad by having his embassies show some respect for Muslim values.

Finally, this author might have more sympathy for U.S. diplomats if the civilian surge in Afghanistan was being effectively managed and if it was succeeding, but the multi-billion dollar program remains a failure, as it was in Iraq. If the alcohol parties were canceled, then State Department employees could devote more time to learning Dari and Pashto, and USAID officials might actually begin traveling into the field to manage their projects.



I would drink to that.

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