

Defense Secretary Leon Panetta was to address a mixed U.S.-Afghan audience at Camp Leatherneck in Afghanistan only weeks after six American soldiers were killed by Afghan soldiers, and days after an American soldier allegedly killed 16 Afghan civilians. That circumstance alone would ensure a tense atmosphere, but the decision to disarm the 200 Marines who planned to hear the secretary should set off further alarm bells.

The Marines were told to take their weapons out of the tent, deposit them in another location, and to return unarmed. Sgt. Maj. Brandon Hall [told news outlets](#) that he was acting on orders:

Something has come to light. ... I was told to get the weapons out. All I know is I was told to get the weapons out. ... Somebody got itchy, that's all I've got to say. Somebody got itchy; we just adjust.

Helmand province Commander Mark Gurganus [told](#) the *New York Times*:

You've got one of the most important people in the world in the room.

He denied any link to the alleged murder of the Afghans. On the other hand, Gurganus [also said](#) he gave the order because he didn't want the Afghan soldiers — disarmed as they normally are under such circumstances — treated differently from the Americans:

This is not a big deal.

Oh, yes it is.

When a U.S. cabinet official presents in a war zone, the first concern has to be that enemies of the United States would try to attack such a high-profile target. The current circumstance in which Afghan soldiers have proved to be somewhat less reliable partners than one might hope (to say this gently) is all the more reason to have the Marines armed and ready for an unexpected circumstance — a hidden knife, or someone charging through the door with an AK-47. Disarming the extra layer of security that the Marine audience would provide is foolish. Even more foolish is the general's politically correct decision to assuage the potential hurt feelings of the disarmed Afghan soldiers by disarming his own.

Unless he's worried about the Marines, which puts us in scary territory.

The president and the defense secretary have not defended the good name of American troops in the past few weeks. The president apologized to President Karzai for the accidental burning of Korans mutilated by Afghan Muslim militants before the whole story came to light. Karzai [responded by demanding punishment](#) under Afghan law and then an investigation. General John Allen, commander of the international force in Afghanistan, apologized to the Afghan government and the "noble Afghan people" even as American soldiers were being killed in what should have been the secure confines of the Afghan Interior Ministry. Karzai didn't seem to feel the need to apologize, nor did our government seem to feel the need to press him.

On the subject of the American soldier suspected of killing Afghan civilians, [Gen. Allen said](#):

The evidence at this point, both in terms of observations and reports and interviews, leads us to believe that he acted as an individual at this point.

This curiously echoes the words generally associated with "lone wolf" terrorists in the United States. Secretary Panetta opined on the "lone wolf" soldier on the plane to Afghanistan: he might face the death penalty, Panetta said, an egregiously prejudicial remark about a man who hasn't been charged yet and who had been diagnosed with a traumatic brain injury during the last of his three tours in Iraq. The soldier was found fit for duty and sent to Afghanistan, raising serious questions that will have to be part of the investigation. But Secretary Panetta appears already [to have determined the outcome](#): soldier fit for trial, let's talk about the death penalty.

The series of remarks by administration officials and military commanders, solicitous of Afghans and tin-eared towards the American soldiers [who fight, build schools, and learn about Afghan agriculture](#) before they deploy emphasizes the distance between the commander in Chief, his deputies, and the troops.

It is more than tin-eared; it is disrespectful of our troops to think the Marines had to be disarmed before they listened to the secretary of Defense.