

Heed the Words of Sayed

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We do not fight insurgencies successfully because American military leadership, by and large, has not walked in the tattered shoes of Third World poverty, has not lived inside its hungry skin, and has utterly failed to have understanding and empathy for a Third World mindset. Worse yet, our heedless consumerist lifestyle is why we must fight Third World insurgencies in the first place.

We were in Afghanistan to “help” the Afghans, but somehow the average American soldier was rarely mindful of the one hundred Afghans who would stand in line for the pair of worn-out running shoes that the soldier would casually throw in garbage bound for the burn pit. It was from that smoldering black pit of discarded First World opulence where Third World Afghans picked for discarded metal near piles

Afghan men and young boys attempt to grab bags of trash and pull them off a garbage truck as it leaves Forward Operating Base (FOB) Gardez (aka FOB Goode, but seldom called that) in late summer or early fall 2011 in Paktia Province, Afghanistan. This photo was taken from a guard tower—later flattened by a truck bomb—looking toward the FOB exit. (Photo by author)

of burning plastic, where goats were brought to graze on lettuce leaves cast aside by American chow halls, and the goat herder might, himself, find a choice leaf to munch to assuage his constant hunger.

In the summer of 2011, at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Gardez, in addition to my duties as a 68X (behavioral health), I was constantly tasked to supervise Afghan work crews. “You got three damn college degrees, maybe you can figure them out,” I was told. I spent all my deployment earnestly engaged in the task of understanding, of helping, of “figuring them out.”

These men, including some of whom fought for the Taliban before 9/11, were given menial “make work” jobs on the FOB such as picking up trash. My first moment of meeting my work crew and a translator is burned into my mind. At the entry control point (ECP), two Afghans were ready to come to blows over ownership of a stained and tattered



Discarded boots and shoes collected by Afghan men scavenging the Forward Operating Base Gardez in Afghanistan. (Photo by author)



Two Afghan men almost come to blows in a dispute over a discarded mattress at the entry control point outside Forward Operating Base Gardez in 2011. (AI-generated image by Charlotte Richter, *Military Review*)

mattress they had salvaged and were hauling off, for it was the end of the day. They would have to walk for miles with that mattress, unless they were lucky and caught a ride or had one arranged.

Two bearded, angry men wearing what soldiers would call “man jams,” in their distinctive Pashtun hats, had their hands upon a filthy corner of the mattress, like it was a contest to see who would let go first. They shouted; they pointed at each other accusingly. An older, gray-haired man stood in the middle, making calming motions, like he was trying to mediate the dispute under Sharia law.

Ignoring the hubbub, the translator I shall call “Sayed” introduced himself. He was an engineering student in Kabul, he told me, a little bit proud. But he

was originally from this area. His village was nearby. He knew these men well; they were all from his village.

“Please,” he said, in those first few moments, “let me deal with the work crew, and all will go smoothly.” If there were any issues, we should come directly to him.

It took me a long time to realize it was unusual to have a translator who was from the local area. Most translators go to other areas and work under assumed names. Instead, in that moment, I was thinking about the fact I had seen a discarded mattress near my own hut and giving these upset men that mattress might settle the dispute

nicely; plus, it would clean up the area where I lived. So, I quickly suggested it. There was some back and forth, and then, finally, Sayed followed me to check out these reports, rumors, and anecdotes of a second precious mattress. Along with us came (I shall call him) “Firoz,” the angriest man in the dispute, missing most of his right hand and (as it turned out) the most former Taliban of them all, and the most devout. Like in a pistol duel, where a “second” must step in and perform his duty, another man took Firoz’s place, placed his hand upon the corner of the mattress, and glared at his opponent, albeit with less ferocity and more hope ... perhaps bloodshed could be averted if the American soldier had a solution!

Before following me behind the huts, my companions stopped dead in their tracks.

“We are told not to go in this area,” Sayed explained.

“I am your escort. It’s okay,” I assured them. An American soldier performing some personal task—hanging wet underwear on a nail or something—looked



Sayed, a translator from the local Gardez area, looks for salvageable items in a burning pile of garbage. Sayed not only provided important information and advice regarding how to deal with the Afghan people but he also served as an effective interlocutor for resolving problems arising between the U.S. military and Afghan locals. (AI-generated image by Charlotte Richter, *Military Review*)

at me and the Afghans, dubiously. “Getting rid of that crappy mattress back there, sergeant,” I explained, and I received a disinterested nod of permission.

Firoz’s eyes lit up when we turned the corner and when he beheld this treasure. Firoz touched the mattress tenderly like it was a fine horse. It was in better shape than the one at the center of the dispute. Several times, in different ways, I was asked if I was sure it was okay if they took the mattress. There would be no trouble.

Could they take this mattress? I placed my life, fortune, and sacred honor into the deal. Hoff said it was okay. I turned to the disinterested sergeant, “I’m telling them it’s okay to take it; Sarge, you’re my witness!” I received a slightly irritated shrug in return. F-ing whatever.

Young Afghan men who joined a garbage crew to support Forward Operating Base Gardez in early fall 2011 began to work with the garbage contractor in Paktia Province instead of being bitter rivals in the cutthroat salvage game. (Photo by author)



My work with the Afghans, after that first day, became more constant, and I took on more responsibility and more levels of risk as we expanded the FOB with HESCO barriers, as disputes with competing crews were, in my somewhat able hands, turned into opportunities for cooperation and mutual benefit. One day, I was called into the first sergeant’s office along with Sayed. Something had come up. There was a concern that my crew might be trying to get their hands on papers, on intel.

I advocated for my crew with all the skill of somebody who went to law school, but never (at that time) had taken any bar exam. At one point, I had to send Sayed out, so I could talk privately to the first sergeant. My crew wasn’t taking any papers, never, not once, none, ever. Why was this a concern at all, first sergeant? All kinds of stuff in trash bags went to the burn pit just outside the FOB where goat herders and metal scroungers could pick through it at their leisure. From a tower, when I pulled guard duty often enough, especially on the Muslim Sabbath when my crew had the day off, I saw activity in the burn pit for entire shifts. And nobody seemed to be taking papers at the burn pit either, even though (presumably) innocuous paperwork and tendrils of “shred” would blow in the wind, blow into the fire, and I constantly breathed that dioxin-laden filthy air through a scarf.

“They’re going to get sick,” the first sergeant said, “from the germs.”



As viewed from the guard tower, a crowd of Afghan civilians scavenge through the garbage dump used by Forward Operating Base Gardez in Paktia Province, circa 2011. The dump is on fire, but people can be observed continuing to scavenge anyway despite the noxious fumes resulting from burning plastics and other hazardous materials. (Photo by author)

“Sicker than breathing the burning plastic from our dump?” Here I quote the conversation as well as I can remember. “Please, let me tell you what I think I know, first sergeant. They love our garbage so much they don’t want to kill us. Our garbage is their social welfare program. They’re salvaging shoes. I mean, why are soldiers throwing shoes away at all, when these people lack shoes? I’m waiting for a couple duffel bags of shoes that my sister in Minnesota is mailing me, but in the meantime, why should shoes be thrown away in front of men who have no shoes?” And I am sure, at some point, I always respectfully added the first sergeant’s title. “I mean, guys are taking goats to the garbage dump just to eat the discarded lettuce leaves from our chow hall!”

I received a merciful reprieve for my crew. They could continue to salvage, but everything had to be

carefully checked before they left. Plus, I had to demand more handwashing from the crew. Of course, hand sanitizer was out of the question for devout Muslims. It might contain alcohol.

My crew hated to wash their hands. Each one treasured the bottled water ration they carted home at night in a scarf. Firoz told me, “Baby, baby,” after Sayed taught Firoz that word. The good, clean water was for his baby. Could he maybe have just a few extra bottles? There were other babies. Other babies to help! Pointing left, right, in the middle: “Baby, baby, baby!”

Much later, Firoz would smilingly bring me goat milk, warm from the goat and warmer from the long journey in a salvaged one-liter Pepsi bottle. This was the only Afghan food and beverage offering I ever tried to refuse. I imagined the fat cells of that goat were full of dioxins from burning plastic at the garbage pit and my internal organs would be doomed, my skin would break out in adult acne. The milk, I pleaded, was too precious! It was for these men and for babies! But finally, I agreed to take *just a little milk* in my tea.

I drank tea with my crew constantly during lunch and breaks. If it takes three cups of tea to know an



Got milk? This is the bottle of goat milk described in the text. The photo was taken at an Afghan-operated laundry facility at Forward Operating Base Gardez in summer 2011. Here, the author's work crew drank tea most days. (Photo by author)

Afghan, like the saying, let me tell you ... I must have known my Afghans a thousand times over. Their tea tasted like cooked hay, and I drank it until it grew on me. It amused the Afghans greatly when I used excessive amounts of sugar that I brought from the chow hall. Once, they brought some of their own crude sugar

for me. Was it good? Their sugar? Oh, I agreed, it was very good. It was better than the chow hall sugar. And, actually—I was telling the truth. I liked their food, and I particularly loved their bread. My crew did favors for me, and I tried to do much greater favors in return. The duffel bags of shoes finally arrived from my sister.

That was a day of great joy, and complications over the shoe distribution. Again, men in need almost came to blows. And sensitivities had to be explored and explained. To toss a shoe at somebody is, in some cultures, an insult. When Sayed brought up this idea, I had to explain that “shoe insults” are an Arab thing. That is not an American thing. The reason for used shoes, instead of new shoes, was because many used shoes could be bought for little money, to help more people. Putting my hand to my heart, the Afghan gesture for “I am being sincere,” I said, “Sayed, I am your friend. We work together every day. I know your men need shoes. Would I try to insult you in any way?”

And Sayed's answer was, “I know this, but some of the men, they asked.”

I transformed into a low-rent FOB Santa. What pork-free gifts could I salvage? How could I help the Afghans, understand them, and get work out of them? When it was Firoz's son's birthday, I obtained a toy car.

Firoz kept asking me for “biscuits, biscuits.” Firoz, using a word learned from Sayed, actually meant “cookies,” but Sayed's English tended toward British-isms at times. I had to explain, through Sayed, that not a single “biscuit” could be obtained by me that would be, guaranteed, free of pork. Why would I offend Firoz? Why would I give Firoz something possibly with pork lard for his precious son? Please, take this toy car as a consolation gift.

Often, as in the “biscuit versus toy car incident,” I had the sense I was being played. Firoz, whose motives and loyalties were constantly in doubt, who was always scrutinized, was perhaps trying to create some incident over religious sensitivity. I had avoided the trap. Later, when I told the story of the mattress dispute, my NCOIC suggested they were playing me. The entire drama over the mattress had been staged for my benefit, he insisted, to obtain that other mattress in the off-limits area.

Let us suppose that is true, I argued back, good-naturedly. Then they are even more poor and desperate than they appear. They not only wanted that second used-up mattress, but they also went to elaborate lengths to fake a conflict where the obvious solution was “Give 'em that other mattress.”

One of my fellow soldiers came to me one day, holding a pair of used running shoes. He had obtained a new pair, he said, and I could give this old pair to somebody on my work crew. Hoping to build upon this little deed, and create a second “FOB Santa,” I told the soldier he could come meet my crew and give away the shoes himself.

No, the soldier insisted. I should do it. If he gave the Afghans something they would want more, then they would hound him. There would be no end to it because their need and their poverty was bottomless. He explained he had bad experiences, in the past, trying to help beggars. But the Afghans were clearly in need. Please, he said, take the shoes. You handle Afghans so well.

I didn't even know this guy. And yet somehow, he knew I was the soldier who “handled the Afghans well.” I was often told to keep my ears open for “actionable intelligence” that I might pick up from my work crew. I was told, “They love you so much, they wouldn't kill you ... they'd try to capture you and convert you to Islam.” The nickname “Hoff the Haji Lover” started to stick.

One day, in my barracks, I looked for something under my cot. I was kneeling on a blood-red rug I purchased in the bazaar, and a sergeant first class jubilantly

exclaimed he had “done caught Hoff the Haji Lover” praying toward Mecca!

At the beginning of the workday, with great smiles and upraised hands, my crew would greet me, though I was not always their supervisor when I had other duties. Sayed told me, “When you are the supervisor, that is a good day. It is not a good day when it is somebody else.”

“I found myself in the awkward position of explaining the way we live in America is so different, it is hard for us to understand other ways of living, like the way it is hard for the Afghans to understand Americans.”

I purchased a small battery-powered radio and my crew had music as they shoveled dirt into HESCO barriers in the hot sun. Firoz scowled. He did not approve of music, even though the song themes were usually Islamic, such as a popular tune about the beauty of the Holy City of Medina. But during a break, when a local radio announcer began to read the names of those men fortunate enough to book a trip to Mecca, Firoz gathered close with all the others, squatting, almost holding his breath. When a certain name was read, they all cheered in unison. One of the crew seemed ready to weep with joy, and others pounded his back, seemingly giving congratulations. They all talked, excitedly, afterward, heads nodding with, it seemed, lingering satisfaction.

“This,” Sayed told me, “is the happiness you have brought with that radio.” Sayed asked me one day why the soldiers on the FOB were throwing away so much food, enough to feed whole villages. Were we afraid somebody was poisoning our food? I had to explain Americans come from a wealthy country, and we like everything “fresh.” If something is not “fresh” enough, Americans will throw it away.

Why throw it away, Sayed insisted, when all kinds of people could use it? I found myself in the awkward position of explaining the way we live in America is so different, it is hard for us to understand other ways of living, like the way it is hard for the Afghans to understand

Americans. “Let me tell you how it is in America,” I said. In America, a person who is considered “poor” will still have a house, an air conditioner, a radio, a television, and all the food he wants to eat. If he does not have enough food, our government will give him money to buy food. If he does not have a house, the government will give him money to pay for rent. The government helps with medical care, and medicine. This is how we live. And because we live this fortunate way, it is hard for some Americans (not all Americans) to understand countries where people are poor.

“Was your family poor or rich?” Sayed asked.

I admitted my family was very poor. We did not have a toilet in our house until I was (calculating on my fingers how old I was in fifth grade) about eleven years old. We heated our house with wood instead of gas until I was almost eighteen. It is cold in Minnesota. I had to help my father cut and haul the wood. My father was too proud to take money from the government, so we would go behind the stores, and salvage the thrown-away food.

Sayed had no sympathy for my tale. My family heated our house with wood? I had to help my father with the wood? Of course, that is how everybody lives. I should count myself lucky if I lived around trees and wood was easy to find!

“Sayed,” I explained, “hardly anybody in America heats a house with wood anymore. We have metal gas pipes that come to every house, or a truck comes with gas, or we heat with electricity. Oh, and another thing, even the poorest people have electricity in their homes.”

“Did you have electricity in your house?” Sayed asked.

“Yes,” I admitted. “Always! And a television. And a radio. Yet my family was considered among the very poorest.” I should hasten to add ... my supervisors gave me permission to speak in depth with the Afghans. Most soldiers are told to avoid that, for a good reason. It takes some American soldiers with a GED or a high-school degree about ten minutes to start talking about bacon, and how delicious it is, or to ask why so many Afghans like to have sex with bacha bazi dancing boys.

I have a theory about future success on the battlefield, and I have gotten it down to two lines of doggerel poetry, as follows:

*No soldier who lacks a college degree
Should ever fight an insurgency!*

Sayed told me I was different than most of the other Americans. Sayed said I was kind and I really seemed to

care about the welfare of his crew. And this, of course, was a very troubling utterance. It was not the most heart-rending and troubling thing Sayed ever told me. I will tell you later what Sayed told me, for it is the central theme of this essay.

You see, there was conflict, at first, between the dozen members of my crew, and a second crew, which was a truck, a man, and two boys. The truck crew had a contract to haul garbage off the FOB. So, the competition for salvage was intense. One day, some members of my crew asserted the driver of the truck often engaged in, shall we say, “the love that dare not speak its name” with one of the young boys. I dutifully passed this up as intelligence.

Later, during Ramadan, my crew told me, emphatically, they had lied to me. There was no sexual relationship like that, they said, and their fibbing had caused the truck crew a problem. They explained they were just having some fun, but they had hurt a fellow Muslim with their joke and deeply regretted it especially during Ramadan. Please, would I tell the first sergeant this rumor was false? (This was accompanied by our own special sign language gesture, a single finger pointed upward and laid upon the rank of the chest, while enunciating “First Sergeant.”) Dutifully, I forwarded this information, in fact moving rather quickly to relay this “exculpatory testimony.”

Using the conflict as a “teaching moment,” I suggested the two crews should cooperate. The guy with the truck had the garbage contract, but he lacked manpower to process all his discards and extract their value efficiently. In a corner of the FOB, where he was allowed to keep his treasures for a short while, boxes of vegetable and fruit discards baked in the sun. He sometimes left a boy there, tasked with guarding the garbage goodies.

Sayed wasn’t sure his crew was “allowed” to jump in and help the other crew. Didn’t they have to stick to walking around, and not be on the truck? I checked to make sure. Nobody in authority cared as long as contracts were



Near the entry control point at Forward Operating Base Gardez in late summer or early fall 2011, an Afghan boy works his trade of carting fuel to local trucks parked inside a secure area. On this day, the boy is visibly happy because he has successfully scrounged Styro-foam containers with the remains of soldier meals. The boy was willing to have his photo taken in exchange for a Hershey chocolate bar, missing only one bite. He sat down by the front driver’s side tire of a mine-resistant ambush protected (MRAP) vehicle and gobbled the candy immediately. When offered a bottle of water, the boy did not open the bottle but took it with him unopened. (Photo by author)

fulfilled and security threats were avoided. What I passed back to Sayed was of course it was okay to cooperate, because more work would get done, and how happy the first sergeant (our special sign language gesture) would be!

And so, the two crews cooperated, and the fantastic, discarded wealth of the FOB “trickled down.” Understandings grew deeper. I remember the day a black American soldier joined us, wearing a white garment, to participate in Muslim prayers.

“Hoff, you can also be Muslim,” Sayed said.

“Hoff a Christian,” I answered. In that place I was, in fact, on my own journey of deeper Christian faith, my prayers to Almighty God often consisting of “Oh, please don’t let me die in a port-a-john.” When a lieutenant shot himself dead in a port-a-john, and I heard the news, my blood froze. Almighty God had heard my desperate prayer in Jesus’ name, and the angel of port-a-john death passed me over. The sound of a minaret

became a call to prayer for me, as well. To this very day, if lunch consists of a pickle, I pray over a pickle.

With my crew I would always eat from my own plate, instead of sharing a plate in the Afghan way, but how often one of the crew would put their fingers in the cooking pot and pull out a prized morsel to smilingly place upon my plate. I learned to be careful eating the meat because, lacking meat saws, goat bones apparently got smashed apart with a clean rock, leaving razor sharp splinters.

Other soldiers asked me for insights about Afghans. I passed around a well-worn copy of *Afghanistan Human Terrain Team Pashtun Homosexuality Report*, and a thumb drive of movies, telling soldiers to watch *The Kite Runner*. Asking soldiers to read my copy of *The Kite Runner* was asking too much, though I finished reading it before my feet hit the ground in Afghanistan, while I was still in Kyrgyzstan. Caring about the culture of the place where I was going enough to read a book caused me to be regarded as an egghead, a bookworm, and probably lacking in common sense.

Because of my efforts to understand the Afghans, my own loyalty to America as well as my adherence to Christian faith were sometimes subtly questioned. "So, a lot of Afghan men do have sex with boys," was the conclusion of many a soldier, upon caring and taking in any of my proffered study material.

"But it's much more culturally complicated than just that, wouldn't you agree?" I argued. "It's like their whole society is a prison, and this is how it goes down in that prison. You can't put them in the same category as some neighborhood child molester in America."

"That shit's f---d up, man," was a phrase I heard many a time, to avoid dwelling on the precise and complex way things are "f---d up." But let us circle back to Sayed, and his troubling utterance, which involved a girl in the village, the most beautiful girl in his entire village.

I knew, because I paid attention to training and took notes, that to even inquire if an Afghan had sisters, as well as brothers, would be setting off cultural land mines. The closest I ever came to an Afghan woman was when a mother and daughter, covered head-to-toe, came within ten feet of a vehicle in which I was riding.

It was near the end of my time at FOB Gardez, before I went to COP Arian and my famous skills "understanding the Afghans" got harnessed to manage a small fleet of Afghan sewage trucks, when I was put in charge of "shit trucks." I laughed at Almighty God's subtle sense

of humor. And I prayed even harder, "Dear God, please don't let me buy it while I am riding around in a sewage truck." But on this day, still at FOB Gardez, I could see Sayed was troubled, and he had been troubled all day. I sat down to speak with him. Sayed poked at the dirt with a stick, like an upset farm boy.

"Am I not your friend?" I asked. "Can you tell me why you are upset?"

It was not for an American to understand, he said. It involved a woman. A beautiful woman.

Quickly, I answered, "I know it is not for an American to speak to an Afghan about such things." I started to stand up to leave.

"No," Sayed said, gently pulling me back. "This concerns you. Let me tell you what happened. It is," he laughed bitterly, "kind of your fault."

"Kind of my fault?" I asked. "Please explain."

"Remember," Sayed said, "when you urged the work crews to cooperate? Well, they had been cooperating, and everybody prospered, but of course the garbage man with the contract prospered the most of all. And because the garbage man prospered, now he had enough money to pay the 'bride price' for the most beautiful woman in the village." This was a woman Sayed had known since childhood. Sayed did not say so openly, but I understood. Sayed had dreamed of making this woman his wife.

"I am an engineering student at the University of Kabul!" Sayed explained. "I am the hope of my village. And she is

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promised to this man who hauls garbage. This situation would not be possible if you Americans did not throw so much away! The way you Americans live doesn't make any sense. My whole country is ..." here there was a desperate, twisting hand gesture, a mental search for English words, and at last Sayed found the phrase, "... UPSIDE DOWN!!!"

What could I say? Better not to speak at a moment like this. I made a facial expression, and a gesture like, "How could I have possibly known this would happen?" I thought for a long time, and the silence grew awkward, and finally I said, "Sayed, may I ask ... how do you know this woman is beautiful?"

He answered, "We see each other when we are children. So, it is possible to know which ones will be beautiful."

I was struck by the purity of this. Sayed loved a woman from afar, whose face he had never seen since childhood. Sayed admitted things were different in Kabul. Many women did not cover themselves. Just like the American women on the FOB.

Many days later, Sayed took me aside and told me how happy I had made him. Often, I would buy trinkets and souvenirs from the work crew, including rings featuring fake gemstones. I haggled, of course, because Afghans believe one who will not haggle must be a fool. By some arrangement, Sayed got a cut of all these sales on the FOB. Sayed told me that, with his wages as an interpreter, and the cut of trinket sales, he had enough money for his next round of college tuition.

And somehow Sayed even seemed less upset about the girl from the village. On the one hand, he'd lost this girl to the garbage man. But on the other hand, he was no longer obligated to marry a girl from his village. He was somewhat (not completely) free to choose a modern educated woman in Kabul.

All things, we agreed, were the Will of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.

But these words have never stopped ringing around in my skull, like the sniper round I always worried could get me inside a port-a-john or riding around in a well-used shit truck that apparently originated in India, with a lotus painted on the tank, which gave me a feeling of serenity of the soul albeit not so far as embracing Hinduism.

Heed the words of Sayed: The way you Americans live doesn't make any sense.

We daily cast aside enough resources to keep Third World villages alive while we spend billions to defend

"Heed the words of Sayed: The way you Americans live doesn't make any sense."

our access to more resources. The crews of my sewage trucks at COP Arian did not understand why we put "poison" (blue disinfectant) in our port-a-johns. How valuable all that sewage would have been for fertilizer! They were aghast at how we poisoned our own precious, valuable feces! While Afghans made desperate deals for wood to bake bread, Americans burned piles of pallets which were merely in the way.

I gave an Afghan a stocking cap one day. He was a big guy and seemed mentally disabled. It was awfully cold out. The next day, a different Afghan had the stocking cap. An interpreter explained, "This one ... he owes a debt to the other one."

The obvious solution was to obtain more stocking caps and become a bottomless well of FOB Santa stocking cap riches. Always, there was the desperate Afghan drama to squeeze out the smallest of treasures from the Americans. Now that we have pulled out, I imagine little Afghan boys fight over brown plastic MRE spoons, so sturdy, so good for digging in the dirt. For an American soldier, use it one time and throw it away, without a second thought.

If you read history, you understand the chain of causality leading to the 9/11 attack. In 1990, American soldiers deployed to Saudi Arabia to protect Saudi oil. A certain Osama bin Laden took offense. What is my proposal, here? That we Americans, as an entire society, should live in a way that makes more sense, so American soldiers don't have to kill ragged men from Third World nations to protect the petroleum to make the plastic to manufacture a brown MRE spoon that we use one f-----g time and throw away. ■