

Secret Service caper rattles the US

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Nothing puts what the Rice Krispies people once called snap, crackle and pop into a news story like old-fashioned illicit sex. That of course is a major reason the US Secret Service scandal at the Summit of the Americas last week in Columbia drew such a strong reaction from the media. Equally important was the close proximity of the story to the life and occasionally precarious fortunes of President Barack Obama.

Several investigations of the case, one internally by the Service itself, are still under way, and so we are some distance away yet from all the facts.

The allegations are more than merely embarrassing for the accused. The heads of some 11 Secret Service agents (or aides) and possibly up to 10 American troops must have been buried collectively in sand if these folks really did “consort” with prostitutes at a five-star hotel on Cartagena on the eve of their president’s arrival for an already uneasy meeting of world leaders.

Even if in the end we find some of the accused exonerated, as one critic on the Internet put it, the aftermath of the scenario amounts to an enormous black eye to the image of the United States and its president.

When I first saw the headlines, my mind flew back to the burning of the Koran in Afghanistan two months ago. The destruction of several copies of the Koran by U.S. military personnel fretting over a prison-based conspiracy thought to be outlined in the margins of the Holy Book led to deeply emotional anti-Americanism in a land where the United States already has a bad name. The burning of the holy books also triggered riots that left 29 Afghans and 6 Americans dead.

Bedroom shenanigans on the part of Secret Service officials and American troops in a country where prostitution is both legalized and thriving may seem quite different than the careless destruction of holy scriptures. We must remember too that the Koran incident was an honest accident. Soldiers had orders to haul off stacks of paper documents to be burned, most of which had been hastily thrown together without thought about religious content or sensitivities.

But in both cases we find again that familiar American thing about blinders. This type of thing just happens too often, Americans all but picturing themselves as the center of the world, and not grasping elementary truths deeply rooted in cultures different than our (their) own.

As a resident of Taiwan who happens to be a foreigner, I am sure I have unknowingly bungled hundreds of moments in which I was wearing blinders and was unaware of the feelings of Taiwanese people around me. People may desperately hope to show respect for a culture not immediately their own, and yet fail the test at the crucial moment. That was not the story on the high-fiving that reportedly went on at Cartagena.

If the reports are accurate, those involved in the Secret Service-military caper would seem to have been blind to the feelings of the people of Columbia about the value of women in their culture. It takes jumbo-sized nerve to waltz into town, tend to their duties to insure security for the president of the United States, possibly members of his family, and surely other public servants, and then to kick back and indulge in behavior Americans back in the USA would call despicable. Let’s not forget either who pays the salaries of Secret Service officials.

I wonder how Americans might respond to Columbian government related security teams soliciting prostitutes while on duty in say, New York, or Washington, D.C. What would that suggest about Columbian respect for the US as a country, and about American feelings for “our women”?

No one owns any human being, of course, so “our women” strikes an uncomfortable note. Still, a blatant lack of regard for the value of Columbian women, and for the families and culture to which they belong, is one very sad aspect of an already sad story.

The burning of the Koran two months ago never should have happened, but at least, we believe, it was unintended. Can we say that about the Secret Service caper in the Caribbean? (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)