

CANADA'S MISSION IN AFGHANISTAN: BEYOND THE RHETORIC

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At the end of March 2006, newly elected Prime Minister Stephen Harper flew into the forward operating base in Kandahar. The purpose behind his unannounced, whirlwind trip was ostensibly to visit the Canadian contingent on the front lines, but in reality it was a flagrant attempt to bolster public support for the war in Afghanistan. As long as our troops had been deployed to the relatively safe Kabul region as part of the UN sanctioned International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the mission in Afghanistan had been a relatively easy sell.

Our casualty count had been comparatively light and only one fatality – Cpl. Jamie Murphy, suicide bomber – had been the result of hostile enemy action. However, all of that changed abruptly when our soldiers were re-roled and redeployed south from Kabul into the volatile Taliban heartland of Kandahar. No longer part of ISAF, our soldiers were now assigned to the U.S. forces as part of Operation Enduring Freedom. Instead of providing an armed presence to ensure a secure environment in the Afghan capital, Canadian troops were now expected to launch combat operations against the Taliban holdouts who have successfully resisted the American military occupation for the past five years.

Although Chief of Defence Staff Gen. Rick Hillier, and former Liberal Defence Minister Bill Graham had warned Canadians to expect an increase in casualties as a result of this new mandate, nobody had really paid much attention until the body bags

started to return home with alarming regularity. When headlines began detailing drastic increases in suicide attacks, improvised explosive device detonations and brazen daylight guerrilla attacks against our troops, Canadians suddenly woke up and began asking, "When the hell did we agree to go to war?" With opinion polls showing just 30 per cent support for the new mission in Afghanistan, Harper mounted his public relations counterattack.

Mingling with the troops in Kandahar, our prime minister gave the media entourage the sound bite they were waiting for: "Canada will not cut and run." The troops dutifully cheered, and Harper's comment was picked up by commentators as a battle cry from coast to coast across Canada. Even Hockey Night in Canada's Don Cherry jumped on the nationalist bandwagon and echoed the prime minister's tough guy quip. It was a clever PR tactic and it worked like a charm. Instead of actually explaining to Canadians why our soldiers were fighting and dying in a remote corner of the world, Harper simply appealed to our latent macho pride.

On the flip side, anyone who questioned the purpose of our mission or asked what was our national exit strategy from this expanding conflict was accused of being unpatriotic. According to the government spin doctors, to question the mission was to question the professionalism of our troops and to ask for a definition of our ultimate objective was only aiding and abetting the Taliban.

Opposition parties tentatively requested that the Afghan mission be debated in the House of Commons, but the Harper Kandahar visit had dramatically shifted public opinion in favour of continuing the deployment. As a result, the April 10 "take notes" parliamentary debate about the Canadian military commitment to Afghanistan proved to

be an absolute waste of time. Rather than taking this opportunity to air out the complex challenges that our troops are facing under their new aggressive mandate in Kandahar, our political leaders used this occasion to simply re-affirm their "support for the troops." Not one parliamentarian asked how Canada's contingent planned to bring about unity among the diverse Afghan factions (Pashtun, Uzbek, Tajik, Turkmen, Persian etc) that are divided by ethnicity, geography and language. If they did, the question was drowned out by the collective shouts of, "We support the troops." Of course the answer to the above might be found in the supplementary question: "Why is it that of the \$20 billion estimated to rebuild Afghanistan's war-ravaged infrastructure, only \$13.9 billion in international aid money was every pledged, just \$3.9 billion contributed, and only \$900 million ever spent?"

I'm sure someone intended to ask this, but was too busy shouting, "We support the troops." To keep those numbers in perspective, the Pentagon originally budgeted \$40 billion for their campaign in Afghanistan, and have to date spent some \$70 billion with the end of military operations still nowhere in sight. The original Canadian deployment of 2,300 troops to Kandahar for 12 months is expected to cost us nearly \$600 million. Did any of our politicians inquire as to the cost effectiveness of spending on security operations more than twenty times the amount of aid money delivered? Nope, too busy shouting, "We support the troops."

As for those military objectives, I find it hard to believe that no one questioned how it is possible that our soldiers are still fighting the same Taliban that the Pentagon pronounced as "defeated" in November 2001. Given the Taliban's recent resurgence, shouldn't we be wondering why the U.S. military is choosing this particular juncture to

hand over the Kandahar operations to a NATO coalition force. Far easier to just yell, "We support the troops."

The controversy and discussion about Canada's new mission in Afghanistan did allow Defence Department officials to explain to the public the nature of the dual role, which our troops are now playing. In addition to the combat patrols being mounted to hunt down the Taliban holdouts and drug lords, Canadian soldiers are involved in Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT).

Retired Major General Lewis Mackenzie, perhaps best summarized this two-pronged approach as trying to "suck and blow" at the same time. Traditionally in post-conflict resolution scenarios, international peacekeepers are deployed to enforce ceasefires and to provide a stable environment, while civilian non-government organizations (NGOs) attend to the delivery of humanitarian aid and relief efforts.

Indicative of how little progress is being made in Afghanistan is this evolution of the military into PRTs. With the U.S.-led coalition still unable to provide the necessary security, the NGOs have been sorely restricted in their ability to assist in the necessary rebuilding efforts. With aid agencies reluctant to work in tandem with military forces, it has now become the job of the coalition soldiers – including Canadians, to travel around the countryside handing out blankets and foodstuff at gunpoint.

Given that diplomat Glyn Berry was killed by a suicide bomber (that also left three Canadian soldiers badly wounded) while returning from a PRT meeting, and Captain Trevor Greene was brutally attacked with an axe when he removed his helmet at another PRT discussion with local Afghan leaders, one might question whether or not this "sucking and blowing" is such a good idea.

Without any real debate or educated questions being asked, the fickle public was easily wooed into backing a two-year extension to our Afghanistan commitment. The 70 per cent opposed to the war had now become 70 per cent in favour. However, as the Taliban attacks become more brazen and the casualty lists continued to lengthen, the new soft support for our Kandahar deployment quickly dissipated. Pressed once again to answer why Canada won't "cut and run" from this mission, the Defence Department has mounted its own major public relations campaign which in their own words is intended to "sell" Canadians on the war in Afghanistan. There exists a short list of talking points which are seemingly repeated ad nauseum in a deliberate attempt to confuse the public. For those of you following this debate closely the following statements will be all too familiar.

The first talking point is that "we have been invited into Afghanistan by a democratically elected government." The reality is that following the U.S.-led invasion in 2001, which collapsed the Taliban regime, Hamid Karzai was appointed to the presidency by the U.S. State Department. Propped up by U.S. and international security forces, Karzai's interim government was finally elected into power by fewer than one million voters in a country of 23 million citizens. Karzai's first act as a democratically elected official was to invite the foreign forces that installed him to power, to remain in his country to prop up his administration.

Another little nose stretcher is the old line about Canada's obligations to fight the war on terror because "24 Canadians died in the 9-11 attacks." Despite the insinuation of Afghanistan's involvement in the twin tower strikes, not a single Afghan was listed

among the hijackers, and Osama bin Laden's operatives on the mission included sleeper cells in the U.S. – not Central Asia.

General Rick Hillier's personal favourite sales pitch includes the Afghan drug trade. One of his oft used quips is that heroin and opium are "weapons of mass destruction" and that Canada's presence in Afghanistan is helping to shut down the source. Of course the tough-talking Newfoundlander also likes to denigrate the Taliban followers as "scumbags and murderers." The irony of all this is that the one singular accomplishment of the Taliban regime was that it had successfully shut down the Afghan drug trade. The resurgence of the opium exports coincided with the U.S. occupation.

In fact, in the Kandahar region the Americans actively enlisted the aid of former drug lords to help them overthrow the Taliban. The payoff for their military assistance was that U.S. forces would turn a blind eye to the resumption of the warlords' opium production. For the past five years the renewed drug trade has artificially boosted the Afghan economy and is estimated to constitute up to 60 per cent of the country's GDP and things are not improving. In August a western anti-narcotics official told the Associated Press opium cultivation has increased by 40 per cent in 2006 from the previous year. Now that NATO forces want to destroy the poppy fields, the drug lords feel that since America has reneged on the original deal, they have nothing to lose by once again co-operating with the Taliban insurgents. More importantly, without a replacement income source or increased foreign aid, the elimination of drug exports will once again collapse the Afghan economy.

The standard prediction is that the rebuilding of the "failed state" of Afghanistan will take "at least a decade," and can only be accomplished through a long-term commitment of foreign troops. The hope is that by demonstrating to the various Afghan ethnic and tribal factions the benefits of a big happy democratic federal state, we will have effectively recreated their social fabric into our own likeness.

This "back to the future" prediction was recently taken to an entirely new level by the new NATO commander in Kandahar. With the handover ceremony staged July 31, our 2,300 troops are now officially under NATO authority and under the direct command of British Lt.-Gen. David Richards.

Readers may be forgiven if they mistakenly believe that the Canadians in Afghanistan had already been part of either a "UN-sanctioned" force or a "NATO coalition" in Kandahar. Those terms purporting a wider "coalition of the willing" were bandied about by both the Harper government and the military brass in an attempt to prop up sagging support for the war effort.

For the past six months, our troops have, in fact, been paving the way for NATO to officially take over the reins from the U.S. in the volatile southern Afghan sector. Now that this transfer of responsibility is complete, Richards has tactical control over some 18,000 NATO personnel, including the sizeable Canadian contingent.

Thrust into the media spotlight as a result of the recent heavy losses, Richards proclaimed himself to be a "lifelong" military historian. In-depth knowledge of the theatre of operations is certainly a welcome asset in a commander and the British undoubtedly have their share of 'lessons learned' from their prior ventures into Afghanistan. However, the fact that their repeated historical attempts to subdue this region resulted in

a series of unmitigated military disasters for the British Empire should be factored into Richards' optimistic outlook.

Gen. Richards believes he has about a five-month window of opportunity to win over the "hearts and minds" of the Afghans in the Kandahar region and, if successful, another five years of international assistance should see Afghanistan on the road to becoming a successful, happy democracy.

This is all well and good, but it is the rationale used by Richards to justify Western military intervention in Afghanistan that is the most puzzling. In an interview with the Canadian Press, Richards says that we must "stay the course in Afghanistan" because we owe these people a debt of gratitude for toppling the Soviet Union. That's right, the very same Islamic Taliban mujahedeen that are now killing our soldiers (including Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda) deserve our respect because they helped to end the Soviet's Evil Empire.

Confused? Let's back up and follow the bouncing ball.

In 1979 the embattled Communist government in Afghanistan invited the Soviet Union armed forces to assist them in combating rebellious warlords. The Soviets rolled in approximately 115,000 troops to shore up the Kabul regime and the Americans decided to up the ante by flooding arms and Islamic jihadist fighters into the wartorn country. The CIA actually funded and trained bin Laden's organization, which was comprised mostly of fanatical Arab fighters.

The goal of the Soviets was to stabilize a volatile region and thereby secure their own satellite republics bordering Afghanistan. By using a large number of Islamic Soviet troops from Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, Moscow felt it could diminish any

cultural and religious divide with the local Afghan population (particularly the Turkmen, Tajik and Uzbek minorities). Crushing the rebellious warlords, eliminating the poppy trade, suppressing radical Islamic ideals, training and equipping an Afghan force, and establishing a strong central education and health system were all stated objectives of the Soviet Union's mission in Afghanistan.

Sound vaguely familiar? Of course, in the black and white definition of the U.S. Cold War doctrine, such an end result would have been "catastrophic" for the cause of the "free world." So instead, the U.S. fuelled the Afghan's traditional hatred for foreign occupiers, provided the warlords with high-tech weaponry, and encouraged the drug trade to flourish. (Come on, they had to pay for Stinger missiles somehow.) The resultant nine-year bloody campaign of the Soviets in Afghanistan cost them over 15,000 soldiers killed and an additional 50,000 wounded.

Gen. Richards also supports the notion that the economic cost of this lengthy war is what eventually bankrupted the entire Soviet Union. Therefore, we owe a debt of gratitude to those resolute Afghan "freedom fighters" who refused to submit themselves to a foreign army's occupation and would not accept an imposed social and religious revolution on their Islamic tribal societies.

What could possibly be a more ironic way to demonstrate that gratitude than by bringing in our own foreign troops to force Afghans to accept our democratic capitalist values at gunpoint?

Conclusion

There is no question that Afghanistan is a failed state, and that if abandoned by the international community it will once again become a breeding ground for terrorists. That being said, Canada's current contribution of troops to a NATO military force is doomed to failure unless we begin analyzing the problems from a realistic perspective. Never in its 3,000 year history has the region of present day Afghanistan been successfully occupied by a foreign army. It was in the mountains of the Hindu Kush that Alexander the Great suffered his first military setback. The local tribesmen did not stand up an army to resist the Macedonians, they simply allowed them to enter the territory unmolested and then launched a relentless guerrilla campaign against Alexander's supply lines.

The stated objective of training and equipping the Afghan security forces to eventually replace all foreign troops is a valid one. However, at present we are not committing the necessary resources to make this a reality. The current criteria for training an Afghan policeman is just two weeks for illiterate recruits and a full month for those who can read the training manuals. Such a stop-gap measure may seem to be an economical solution in the short term, but such a blatantly racist policy will not create the necessary public trust in the new law enforcement agencies. (We would not think of putting an illiterate cop with 14 days instruction on our city streets with an assault rifle. In fact Canadian civilian workers destined to make donuts at the Camp Kandahar Tim Hortons receive a minimum of six weeks military training before we deploy them overseas)

Ultimately Afghans will have to determine their own future, and we may have to accept the fact that they don't fully embrace our democratic, capitalist values. Already the "elected" government of Hamid Karzai has proposed the reinstatement of the infamous "Department for Promoting Virtue and Preventing Vice" that was the cornerstone of the oppressive Islamic Taliban. Our soldiers deserve our support and their sacrifice must be honoured. Putting a flag on our front lawn or a yellow ribbon on a tree or car may demonstrate recognition for the troops, but only an educated populace can truly support the troops by ensuring that the Afghanistan mission concludes on a positive note.