

Staying the Present Course in Afghanistan Means Abandoning Reason

Canada's Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Foreign Minister Peter MacKay have repeatedly exhorted the public to "support our troops" and "stay the course" in Afghanistan.¹ It's become the standard mantra that Canada will not cut and run; we will stay the course and support our troops until the job is done.

Now our government tells us that questioning its foreign policy somehow undermines our deployed military members – the very people whose lives have been put at risk for the claimed purpose of promoting freedom of speech and transparent democratic government.

Cognitive dissonance anyone? Some theatre of the absurd, perhaps?

Let's give Canada's military the benefit of the doubt and assume its members are not nearly as delicate or maudlin, or ignorant of Canada's parliamentary democracy, as Harper and company appear to believe. So what are the relative merits of Canada's violent foray in Afghanistan? I'll examine this question from two points of view: the people of Afghanistan, whom we're ostensibly there to help; and the people of Canada, who bear the considerable burden of this mission.

Effects on the People of Afghanistan

Afghanistan has never in its history been peacefully occupied by foreign invaders. After six long years of war since the US-led armed overthrow of the Taliban government, ordinary residents of Afghanistan are no better off today than they were in 2001, and objective first-hand accounts suggest they're actually in worse straits.² The ordinary Afghan remains the world's fifth poorest citizen, and one in five is unable to meet his or her daily food requirements.³ Afghanistan still features the world's worst education system⁴ and one of the worst health care systems.⁵ The country's vital physical infrastructure, demolished most recently by the bombs and artillery of the US-led "coalition of the willing," still remains in ruins.

Opium production has exploded, becoming the country's economic mainstay as civilians grow the cash crop to finance essential needs that now include physical protection from and by rampant warlords.⁶ Entrepreneurial criminals and their private militias effectively control half the country. The ineffectual central government of President Hamid Karzai, which nominally controls the rest of the country, has become one of the most corrupt in the world.⁷

Compounding the problem of widespread violent anarchy, Karzai has knowingly recruited war criminals into positions of high authority within his government. In June 2006, he appointed to senior positions in the national police force 13 former commanders closely connected with drug smuggling, organized crime and illegal militias.⁸ Karzai's cabinet is reportedly pursuing reinstatement of the notorious Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Punishment of Vice,⁹

the very cornerstone of the so-called “detestable murderers and scumbags” that the Canadian Forces were apparently tasked to defeat.¹⁰

What Afghans need most to allay the lure of violent extremism is a marked and rapid improvement in their standard of living. The recently appointed commander of all NATO forces in Afghanistan, British General David Richards, has asserted that up to 70% of Afghan civilians could ally themselves with the Taliban if their quality of life did not improve within the next six months.¹¹ He made that well-publicized statement in October 2006.

Unfortunately, Canada’s commitment to inflicting violence in Afghanistan outweighs manifold its commitment to help the civilian populace regain a tolerable standard of living. The Canadian government recently committed over \$17 billion to buy newer and more weaponry, added to the expenses of additional military recruiting and combat operations abroad for an indefinite period of time. By contrast, the Canada International Development Agency (CIDA) has so far committed less than \$1 billion in total to development and humanitarian assistance that could in theory help to rebuild Afghan society.¹²

I say “in theory” because Canada has a shameful record of dissipating much of its aid funding into domestic corporate subsidies. Action Aid International reported in 2006 that almost 40% of Canada’s declared development assistance is actually “phantom aid” that’s principally designed to benefit Canadian businesses rather than the announced beneficiaries.¹³

Remarkably, CIDA announced in 2006 – and reversed only after intense public outrage – its intention to stop, of all things, supplying essential food to impoverished Afghan war widows and children.¹⁴ Apparently, starving widows and orphans don’t qualify for Canadian aid unless the public back home hears about it.

Equally disturbing, CIDA claims to be unable to provide such basic data as would enable the public to assess how much of its aid funding actually reaches its professed beneficiaries rather than the multitude of profiteering intermediaries; nor can CIDA explain how effectively the funding achieves its programs’ stated objectives.¹⁵

In short, our government seems to use Afghanistan largely as an opaque money laundry to subsidize the profits of Canadian businesses with funds that are claimed to provide humanitarian aid. Such an operation may help to keep the government in power here at home, but it does precious little for the intended beneficiaries in Afghanistan.

The facts on the ground and the allocation of resources to tasks clearly reveal that, among the competing priorities in Canada’s mission, the welfare of ordinary Afghan civilians falls very low indeed. While isolated instances have been reported of Canadian soldiers and diplomats benefiting individual residents of Afghanistan, the net effect on Afghan civilians of the international presence there has overwhelmingly been, in the words of The Senlis Council, “more destruction than reconstruction.”¹⁶

Effects on the People of Canada

The Canadian government's stated objective of "taking the fight to the terrorists" to prevent damage at home has manifestly backfired in at least three ways.

First, Canada has adopted a foreign policy whose detrimental effects on Afghanistan have increased the number of people who understandably seek to end and remedy, by violence if necessary, the injustices that continue to be perpetrated upon their communities. Second, our government's approach has consumed huge amounts of taxpayer dollars whose disappearance erodes the well-being of ordinary and, especially, disadvantaged Canadians. And third, Canada's misguided policies have caused immense lasting damage to our own troops and their families.

In all three respects, it's readily apparent that things will only get worse until the government of Canada dramatically changes its approach.

Fuelling the Enemy Factory

Canada is learning, as America should have done many times by now, that people the world over share at least one common trait. They do not easily forgive the unredressed destruction of their homes, their livelihoods, or their scarce food supplies, nor the killing or wounding of innocent civilians, no matter how noble may be the perpetrators' professed intentions.

Added to the daily instances of unintended injustices are wrongs which are less innocent. As much as we may hate to admit it, sustained combat operations inevitably give rise to soldiers wrongfully inflicting violence on civilians. When soldiers are exposed to the threat of death or serious injury at the hands of people who appear indistinguishable from anyone else, it's only a matter of time before some soldiers direct their frustration, fear, career aspirations or a thirst for vengeance, toward innocents who happen to be at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Note the pattern of conduct in recent theatres of armed conflict involving Western armies:

- the US military's mass murder of hundreds of civilian refugees during the Korean War¹⁷
- America's systematic murder and torture of thousands of unarmed civilians during the Vietnam war¹⁸
- the Canadian Airborne Regiment's killing of at least two harmless civilians in Somalia¹⁹
- numerous killings of unarmed civilians by US forces in Iraq²⁰
- torture killings,²¹ rapes and sexual humiliations²² of unarmed prisoners by US special forces in Afghanistan.

Recorded history is replete with evidence of wartime atrocities by "the good guys." Only in rare cases, such as those cited above, are the persistent denials and cover-ups by their perpetrators, their superiors and the governments of the day penetrated, sometimes decades later. Although

we in the West remain oblivious to any atrocities committed by our forces in Afghanistan, there can be no doubt that the memory of each one burns strong in the local survivors, the victims' families, and their communities.

Whether any given act of destruction by Canadian forces or their more notorious battlefield colleagues is deliberate, reckless, negligent or even accidental, it's only natural for several years of unredressed damage to Afghan civilians to transform the perspectives of those whom we claim to "liberate from tyranny." Only someone with a reckless disregard for human nature could expect that white-washing our continuing harm as "collateral damage incurred within our rules of engagement," and occasionally expressing official regret for the losses, would stem the natural desire of a victimized community to end and perhaps avenge that continuing injustice.

Canadians would be no less intent on retribution and self-defence if our own territory were subject to control by foreign militaries that inflict injury and destruction without end in sight.

Investing in Ignominy

Canada's war in Afghanistan has also cost Canada's people considerable foregone quality of life. The Department of National Defence (DND) has already spent well over \$4 billion on military operations related to the mission in Afghanistan,²³ with the promise of billions more in years to come in addition to over \$12 billion for new equipment. In April 2007, DND announced the expenditure of \$650 million on tanks to better protect our soldiers on the ground, adding to \$200 million already spent in 2006 for that same purpose. None of these figures includes the immense future costs of health care for our freshly disabled veterans or of survivor benefits to the families of killed soldiers.

Had Canada foregone its military expedition in Afghanistan, our government could have directed those funds to dramatically improve education and training, health care, affordable housing, mass transit, employment re-training, veterans benefits, and any number of other programs that advance the welfare and prospects of ordinary people throughout Canada – or for that matter, in Afghanistan, Sudan and elsewhere. Some of those funds could also have supported the vastly more constructive UN peacekeeping missions that Canada has now virtually abandoned despite them having earned this country so much accumulated goodwill the world over.²⁴

Instead, Canada's violent foreign policy in Afghanistan – prosecuting what arguably began as an illegal war of aggression²⁵ the gravest criminal act of all – has steadily eroded what once was the greatest guarantor of security for any Canadian abroad: the moral authority and global respect earned by Canada's longstanding commitment to the resolution of disputes by non-violent means.

As Canada's "deep integration" into the US continues apace, of which our subservient foreign policy is but one manifestation, there is ever-diminishing reason for others around the world to distinguish Canada from its southern neighbour.²⁶ At this rate, how much longer before the coveted Canadian passport, or the trusty Canadian flag patch on a backpack, becomes a traveller's liability rather than an asset?

And will we too then be found asking ourselves with studied innocence, “Why do they hate us?...”

Damaging Our Troops

The war in Afghanistan has already exacted significant sacrifices from the our military members. To date, 54 of our soldiers and one diplomat have been killed.²⁷ An undisclosed number estimated in the hundreds have been seriously injured, many of them for life.

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives provided in September 2006 a measure of the toll on Canada’s troops relative to their colleagues in the firing line:

“When adjusted for the relative size of troop commitments, a Canadian soldier in Kandahar [Canada’s area of operations] is nearly three times more likely to be killed in hostile action than a British soldier, and four-and-a-half times more likely than an American soldier in Afghanistan... A Canadian soldier in Kandahar is still nearly six times more likely to die in hostilities than a U.S. soldier serving in Iraq.”²⁸

Among Canada’s casualties to date, five are known to have been killed by US troops – no great surprise given that 25% of US soldiers who died in combat during the 1991 Gulf War were killed by their own forces.²⁹ Canadian casualties of undisciplined American trigger fingers are almost certain to rise since the US government seems to pursue a policy of shielding its troops from the legal consequences of their conduct.³⁰

Of Canada’s soldiers who return from combat in one piece physically, roughly one in five are expected to suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder for an indefinite period of time.³¹ For some unfortunates, their mental injuries will develop into major depression, substance abuse, violence, and suicide. The affected soldiers’ families, friends and colleagues will not emerge unscathed,

Moreover, lasting damage to the Canadian Forces as an institution of democratic government may be as profound as the damage done to individual soldiers and their loved ones.

In 1997, a public inquiry properly excoriated the failed leadership and ethics of Canada’s officer corps.³² It was a judgement long in coming and sorely needed at the time. Since then, the Canadian Forces have worked hand in glove for the past six years with an American military that, with the exception of a handful of brave and patriotic dissenters, carries out manifestly unlawful orders that are now well known to include:

- violently invading and occupying other countries without lawful justification
- perpetrating and assisting the forced disappearance, humiliation, torture, occasional murder, and indefinite imprisonment without due process, of suspected combatants
- systemically violating international humanitarian law, including the Geneva Conventions and other foundational treaties.

Despite the Harper government's apparent campaign to bury the facts and deceive the electorate, Canadians have recently discovered that our military's National Defence Headquarters knowingly made our soldiers complicit in suspected war crimes in Afghanistan.³³ Such staggering conduct at the very top suggests that the Canadian Forces' increasingly intimate operational alliance with the US military has hardly had a salutary influence on the already precarious professionalism of our senior military leadership.

Staying the Course for Whose Benefit?

If we all agree that it's not appropriate to appease violent extremists, then why does Canada's foreign policy remain "Would you like anything else with that, Dubya?"

Desperate to project success to the home front in the face of abject failure in Afghanistan, the US-led multinational force in Afghanistan has lately taken to reporting body counts of killed civilians as "suspected Taliban insurgents," just as the US military routinely branded dead Vietnamese civilians as "suspected VC guerrillas" to portray success during an earlier doomed enterprise.

After consuming tens of billions of dollars, and the lives of 54 dedicated Canadians and countless Afghans over 6 long years, the Harper administration insists on prolonging this lunacy unaltered?

For the sake of the troops and every other Canadian, a better way than this fraud must be found, and quickly.

Contrary to Harper and company's repellent assertions, dramatically reconfiguring Canada's overall mission in Afghanistan – military, diplomatic and humanitarian – would not "dishonour our fallen troops" but would instead respect the many more soldiers and their families, and the innocent civilians abroad, who will otherwise be additionally consumed by our current folly. It would also pay tribute to the Canadian Forces' longstanding commitment and sacrifice to the pursuit of peace, a unique heritage that's a touchstone of justifiable pride for all Canadians.

By every meaningful measure, Canada's misadventure in Afghanistan is a disaster. This dismal episode in our history could serve as no better proof of the necessity for our federal government to urgently and openly debate, formulate, and execute an independent foreign policy – one that is founded on reason and the pursuit of peaceful conflict resolution instead of fundamentalist zealotry and the infernal sport of kings.

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