

Afghanistan: painful displays of ignorance and arrogance

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My, what an Afghanistan-y week or so it's been and thus, frankly, a breathtaking display of almost marvellous ignorance.

We had, in no particular order, the following - Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion appearing on television from Kandahar wearing a Canadian CADPAT (for Canadian Disruptive Pattern, or camouflage) outfit; U.S. Defence Secretary Robert Gates moronically complaining about NATO forces not knowing how to fight a counterinsurgency then beating a hasty retreat; reports of a small-minded diplomatic hissy fit that threatens the very existence of Canada's nifty Strategic Advisory Team (SAT) working in Kabul; yet another CTV-Globe and Mail public-opinion poll showing Canadians' unhappiness with the notion of combat, and, of course, rampant rumours about what John Manley's panel will or will not have to say about the future of the Canadian mission.

While bureaucrats and politicians fiddled and diddled and columnists who have never set a foot anywhere near Afghanistan did what they do best and nattered on, Canadian soldiers in Kandahar resolutely kept on doing what two governments, Afghanistan's and Canada's, have asked them to do there.

This, sadly, includes dying, with another soldier, Trooper Richard Renaud, killed on Tuesday by an improvised explosive device, or IED. He was the 78th Canadian to die in Afghanistan since 2002, a toll that includes one diplomat, Glyn Berry.

The Taliban also continued to do what they do best, launching an all-out assault on the Serena Hotel in Kabul and bravely attacking those working out in the hotel gym or relaxing in the spa.

I pretend no expertise in politics, diplomacy, soldiering or Afghanistan, but I have been in Kandahar, well outside the safety of Kandahar Air Field, four times in less than two years, and note the following.

On Mr. Dion: A few days before Mr. Dion and his No. 2, Michael Ignatieff, made their surprise tour to Afghanistan last weekend, the federal Liberal Party made its formal submission to Mr. Manley's panel.

In other words, *before* the Liberal leader met Canadian troops and posed in the cute camo outfit (I would knock the block off whoever lent the gear to him, by the way) he had his mind made up - the combat mission, as the party's submission said, should end as scheduled in February, 2009. His visit there was a disingenuous and fraudulent exercise in bullshit public relations.

On Mr. Gates: The defence secretary's remarks to the Los Angeles Times, to the effect that some of the NATO armies in Afghanistan "don't know how to do counterinsurgency operations," were profoundly inaccurate and disrespectful, particularly of the British and Canadians, who have been running the show respectively in Helmand and Kandahar provinces.

His absolute arrogance - that only Americans know how to fight - and ignorance aside, Mr. Gates ignored the indisputable fact that what the Brits and Canucks have run into in the fiery south is a direct result of too few

U.S. troops having been left in the country after the so-called fall of the Taliban. In other words, the Americans created the difficult conditions its NATO allies are now trying to manage, which management Mr. Gates is criticizing.

Moreover, as Lieutenant-Colonel Mike Capstick, who was the head of the first SAT in Kabul, says, the counterinsurgency is but one part of the larger security issue that encompasses training the Afghan National Police and disarming some of the many other thugs and warlords.

But that effort can go on until the cows come home and will be ineffective until someone "cleans out the Ministry of the Interior," Lt.-Col. Capstick says.

In his year in Kabul, Lt.-Col. Capstick deliberately kept his high-level strategic planners out of the troubled ministry, which is responsible for the police and district administration and is notoriously corrupt, as *Cops or Robbers? The Struggle to Reform the Afghan National Police*, a report released last summer from the respected Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, proved.

And the international community, including Canada, has failed to get tough with Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai and make donor aid conditional on comprehensive ministry reform.

Of course, for that to work, the Afghan president would have to have faith that Western governments and their armies were steadfast allies, were in his country for the long run. And why would he ever believe that, when in most NATO nations, including this one, the mission to Afghanistan is "re-evaluated" with the death of every single soldier and the politicians quiver and tremble anew with each casualty?

On the future of the SAT: The effort to undermine the SAT, which is staffed mainly but not exclusively with military planners, appears born in the jealousies of the gentler folks at the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade and the Canadian International Development Agency. Presumably, they believe they could do it better. But the truth is, neither DFAIT nor CIDA has the people with comparable expertise to staff a team of 20 every year. They can't do it. So they'd rather no one do it, least of all soldiers, even if they don't wear those nasty uniforms.

On combat: All those, including the CADPAT kid, Mr. Dion, babbling on about whether or not to end Canada's "combat role" in Afghanistan should give their tiny heads a shake.

Canadian soldiers are not routinely involved in combat any longer, nor have they been for more than a year.

The last Canadian soldiers to die in purely offensive combat operations - that is, when they were aggressively trying to take ground - were Private Will Cushley, Warrant Officers Frank Mellish and Rick Nolan and Sergeant Shane Stachnik, killed on Sept. 3, 2006, as part of Operation Medusa in the Panjwai district.

In fact, it was the soldiers of the first two rotations in the south - chiefly, the battle groups respectively led by the 1st Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry and the 1st Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment - who consistently had to fight in Afghanistan.

Of the fatalities since that date - 46 since Sept. 3, 2006 - the bulk were killed by IEDs, roadside bombs and suicide attacks, with a handful of others (Sergeant Craig Paul Gillam, Corporal Robert Mitchell, Sergeant Darcy Tedford, Private Blake Williamson and, most recently, Corporal Nathan Hornburg) dying in insurgent-instigated attacks and the remainder in accidents of various kinds, from chopper crash to vehicle rollover, friendly fire and shootings.

This isn't because the Canadian soldiers deployed since have changed their way of doing business, either, rather that the Taliban has.

In other words, just as Canadian soldiers are, in my view, more highly evolved than their equivalents in Foreign Affairs and CIDA, so has the mission evolved - naturally - far beyond the political debate here at home.

Mea culpa: Despite having his judgment before me, and looking at it repeatedly, I nonetheless managed to misspell the name of the Ontario appeal court judge I quoted yesterday. It is Judge Bert MacKinnon.

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