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The great Afghan juggle Both the Grits and the NDP will take shelter in anti-Americanism

J.L. GRANATSTEIN Writes on behalf of the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute At the end of January, John Manley's panel on Canada's future role in Afghanistan will report to the government. We don't know how it will phrase it or what nuances will be encompassed, but the Manley report is likely to recommend that Canada continue its military presence in Afghanistan, if not necessarily in Kandahar. If so, what will the political response be? There is no doubt about the New Democratic Party's position. Leader Jack Layton wants Canada out of Afghanistan immediately rather than waiting for the mandated end of the mission in 2009. He also wants negotiations with the Taliban. Those who faithfully parrot the NDP line put it more baldly. Steven Staples of the Ottawa-based Rideau Institute sees Canada as "part of a NATO force but really fighting for George Bush," while the University of British Columbia's Michael Byers argues that "it's time to move from a combat-oriented approach to one that focuses on negotiation, peacemaking and nation-building.

. . . It's time to move NATO troops out, and UN peacekeepers in." If only there was some peace to keep, someone with whom to negotiate and enough stability to permit nation-building to take hold.

The Liberals' position has been different than the NDP's. They were, after all, the government when the decision was made to go into Afghanistan in 2002 and into Kandahar in the current combat role in 2005. Officially, the Grits still continue to support the continuation of the mission until 2009, something for which many Liberal MPs voted - including deputy leader Michael Ignatieff and Bill Graham, the defence minister when the decision to go into Kandahar was taken.

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But Bob Rae, the party's foreign affairs critic and now a candidate in the St. Patrick's Day by-election in Toronto Centre, Mr. Graham's old riding, is pushing the party position leftward. "If we continue down the path that [Prime Minister Stephen] Harper wants to take us on, we're really going to be essentially engaged in a counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan, and I think that's extremely unwise," he was quoted as saying in an article published at year-end. "I don't think that's where people want to be. I think they want to see us in a peacekeeping role. I think they want to see us in a peacemaking role." You can take Bob Rae out of the NDP, it seems, but it's going to be pretty difficult to get NDP ideas out of Bob Rae's orations.

But recent opinion polls do suggest that Mr. Rae is correct in describing public attitudes. Leaders, however, are supposed to help shape public opinion, not simply follow it. Does Mr. Rae now reflect the new Liberal position? Paul Martin's government sent troops to Kandahar precisely to play a counterinsurgency role, not for peacekeeping or peacemaking. The government of 2005 understood that there could be no peace until the Taliban were either defeated or had their support reduced to a level at which the elected Karzai government could gradually extend its control across the country. What has changed since 2005? Perhaps the Liberal foreign affairs critic will enlighten us.

What these opposition positions mean is that the Manley report and the Harper government's probable decision to try to extend the Afghan mission beyond 2009 will face a rough ride in the House of Commons. But should it? The opposition parties and those who support them have forgotten a few facts. Yes, the United States led the way into Afghanistan after the attacks on New York and Washington on Sept. 11, 2001.

The Taliban regime had given terrorists sanctuary, and the plans for 9/11 had been hatched there. The United Nations authorized the intervention and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization picked up the burden.

In other words, Afghanistan is part of a UN-authorized mission now being conducted by NATO-led forces. Canada, then, is not, as Mr. Staples puts it so crudely, "really fighting for George Bush." It is, in fact, trying to help fulfill a UN mandate. Nor, as Prof.

Byers has it, "is it time to move NATO troops out, and UN peacekeepers in." The NATO troops are the UN forces.

Canadians are quick to argue that they stayed out of Iraq in 2003 because it was not an approved UN mission. Fair enough (although, contrarily, most Canadians approved intervening in Kosovo in 1999 even though the Security Council pointedly did not authorize that war). But consistency surely demands that, when UN authorization is given, Canadians, as

self-professed enthusiasts for the world body, support its efforts.

The NDP and the Liberals talk a good game on the UN, praise Mike Pearson, and prattle on about peacekeeping's great virtues (which are many). The contradictions in their positions, however, suggest that sanctimonious, opportunistic anti-Americanism plays a large part in deciding where they sit. Nothing Washington supports can be good in Liberal and NDP eyes, it seems, not when anti-Americanism remains a prime vote-getting tactic in Canada.

The opinions expressed are the author's own.