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Those who loved the advisory team should not forget their efforts were a dismal failure

By SCOTT TAYLOR | ON TARGET

IN EARLY August, there was a brief clamour in military circles over the decision to shut down the Strategic Advisory Team in Kabul.

Unfortunately, the majority of Canadians had no clue what this organization was and could care less about the cancellation. This was despite the fact that most journalists who have visited Afghanistan in the past four years, myself included, have written feature stories about the advisory team.

In brief, this was a team of Canadian officers established to mentor the government of Hamid Karzai and "build capacity" within the fledgling democratic administration. The bilateral arrangement was drafted between none other than Karzai and former chief of defence staff Rick Hillier in 2004. The normal tour of duty for team members was a full year, and although they were all serving military personnel, in the course of their duties, they wore civilian clothes.

In principle, Canadian officers with a specific area of expertise would be assigned to the appropriate ministry. For instance, a legal officer would work with the Afghan justice department or a finance officer with the revenue department. Although administratively the team was supported by the Canadian Expeditionary Force Command, they were a completely separate entity from the battle group in Kandahar. In fact, they answered more or less only to Hillier himself.

Needless to say, certain cheerleading Canadian journalists that had reported on the team touted it as something just short of the second coming of Christ, miracle workers one and all. Upon learning that the team was to be discontinued, the usual Colonel Blimps kicked awake these military establishment media guard dogs and sent them barking madly into the fray.

Jealousy on the part of the Foreign Affairs Department was the oft-cited culprit behind the Harper government's decision to pull the plug on this incredible military venture. The barking dogs argued that the very success of the team had doomed it to destruction by the envious, cowering, incompetent bureaucrats at Foreign Affairs who could no longer stand

seeing the laurels heaped upon their military counterparts.

What everyone failed to realize in the heat of the moment was that the team was never meant to be a permanent fixture. In those first early days of the Karzai regime, there certainly was a vacuum of expertise that needed to be filled. Like a paramedic arriving on the scene to find a patient near death, the team was meant to monitor the vital signs until more qualified assistance could be given. No one expected the team to fully rehabilitate the Afghan government. As competent as they may be within their trades in the Canadian Forces, the team members could not possibly have been expected to effectively mentor Afghan ministers in the management of entire government departments — especially since the Canadians assigned did not speak either Dari or Pashto and all their experience has been in a G8 nation in the Western Hemisphere. Even experienced senior bureaucrats from Canada would have a difficult job trying to adapt their administrative skills to coach their counterparts in an impoverished, wartorn, Islamic, central Asian nation.

At the time that the team was established, many other NATO members questioned why Canada alone would send our military personnel in particular to take on such a challenging role. Since then, other nations have taken on specific rebuilding projects within the Afghan administration.

The fact remains that the Karzai government — even with all its foreign mentoring — is one of the most impotent, corrupt and hated regimes on the planet. No matter how much some of my colleagues wish to bay at the moon in defence of the team, the Afghan government's woeful track record is the Strategic Advisory Team's legacy.

While I will deal with Foreign Affairs ineptitude in Afghanistan in a separate column, I hardly think that they were jealous of the team's success, given that their efforts were in fact a dismal failure.

(staylor@herald.ca)

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