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Rick Hillier is revered by troops in Afghanistan, which predictably -- and unfairly -- makes him the target of a shooting gallery at home

By **PETER WORTHINGTON, TORONTO SUN**

No question about it: They are out to "get" Rick Hillier, the general who has revived Canada's army as a fighting force.

Who are "they?"

Well, some are politicians (not all of them in opposition ranks), some are anti-military peace-at-any-pricers, some (these are among the most dangerous) are insiders at DND, and some are unwitting media types who mindlessly regurgitate what they are told.

The "why" is more difficult to explain.

Why would anyone want Hillier removed or replaced as chief of defence staff (CDS) when his leadership has effectively raised morale and made the army more like it was when Canadian troops fought in world wars?

Our military's role and effectiveness in Afghanistan have boosted Canada's reputation and status in the world. It has done Canada and Canadians proud.

Credit for this isn't all Hillier's, but irrefutably he's the face of our "new" army and he relishes the spotlight -- which in a way is part of his trouble.

Under the last Liberal government of Paul Martin, Canada opted to change its role in Afghanistan from mostly security and constabulary work in Kabul, to a peacemaking and fighting role in Kandahar -- while still maintaining its tradition of reconstruction and assisting the civilian population. Not an easy task, but one Canada has always done well.

TOO VALUABLE

Stephen Harper's Conservatives have used the military (and Hillier) to their advantage as well as Canada's -- par for the political course. Some feel after three years of Hillier as CDS, it's time for a new one. Others argue he's too valuable to lose, and there's no time limit for the job.

Some points:

- Real or imagined differences between Hillier and former defence minister Gordon O'Connor led to O'Connor being replaced by Peter MacKay, who, unlike O'Connor, knows zilch about the military. As an Armoured Corps brigadier-general in his former life, O'Connor had commanded Hillier, and some believe friction developed between the two. True or not, Harper bounced O'Connor, Hillier stayed.

- The media has churned up controversy over the recent Throne Speech and the PM's

suggestion that Canada's military role in Afghanistan should continue past the 2009 deadline to 2011, while Hillier insists the Afghan National Army and police won't be fully trained for at least a decade.

DND RESENTMENT

These two views aren't incompatible. The date for withdrawal is a political decision not necessarily connected to the military situation. As a soldier, Hillier's estimate of the time needed to adequately train an army is more realistic than a civilian's, even if the civilian is PM.

- More significant is what seems a growing concern about Hillier inside DND, which has always been a nest of intrigue. DND bureaucrats resent military commanders who are comfortable with publicity and not shy about speaking their mind -- witness resentment toward Maj.-Gen. Lewis MacKenzie when he returned as something of a folk hero from commanding UN troops in Sarajevo.

To many, MacKenzie was a soldier of the Hillier mold who would have been an ideal CDS of a "fighting" army. But he was ahead of his time, and lesser rivals nibbled him into retirement where he now makes sensible observations about things military, and is highly respected by our allies.

- Quiet accusations are made that Hillier has effected something of a coup inside DND by placing Armoured colleagues into senior administrative posts. "The black hats (the armoured beret) in control are Hillier's men," said one, forgetting that the Patricias and Vandoos previously held sway.

- As CDS, Hillier is responsible for all of Canada's military -- but critics say he's obsessed with the army in Afghanistan and neglects navy and air force needs. Also, they say, he ignores northern security and sovereignty. Until Hillier, the navy and air force were more effective military lobbyists than army types. Still, sharpened knives are poised in Ottawa if Hillier stumbles.

- Another concern that reflects on Hillier is a feeling within the army that only those who've been shot at in Afghanistan are "real" soldiers, with non-combatants second-class. There's even a move that soldiers who serve "outside the wire," or in combat situations, get a special medal, different from the service medal for the majority in Afghanistan in less dangerous jobs. Already a "wound medal" is in the works -- a Canadian version of the U.S. Purple Heart for being wounded.

If this happens, it'll cause resentment and something of a chasm among soldiers, and will reflect on the guy at the top -- Hillier, whose background is combat arms and who obviously relishes visiting Afghanistan. Also there's evidence that those who've served in Afghanistan tend to regard those who haven't as somehow second-class, or inferior. Not a healthy sign.

- Hillier's greatest political vulnerability may be his popularity among the troops. Rarely (if ever) has a Canadian CDS been venerated among the rank-and-file as Hillier is. At a time when the country pays homage to its soldiers, Hillier's rock-star popularity represents political clout -- if he chose to exercise it, which he hasn't ... so far.

WATER TORTURE

In democracies, politicians are uneasy when military people become too popular, and are

therefore potentially powerful -- witness Gen. Douglas MacArthur, who was fired by less-popular U.S. President Harry Truman. Dwight Eisenhower's popularity as a soldier won him the U.S. presidency -- likewise Ulysses S. Grant. (When Lord Nelson was killed at the battle of Trafalgar, British politicians sighed with relief).

- Maclean's magazine cast a first stone at the reputation of Rick Hillier, as if signaling the media that it was safe to go after him. The Globe and Mail seems eager to test if Hillier may have clay feet, if not a glass jaw. The media's version of water torture is dropping hints, veiled criticisms, cautious innuendo, until vague perceptions become hard facts.

This seems underway right now -- creating doubts about Hillier.

While some concern is understandable and may even be valid, reality is that the Canadian army under Hillier is the best it has been since bygone days when it actually went to war. Morale is high, the country well-served; let's not jeopardize what is working well by undermining our top soldier.