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## **IN THE EYE OF THE STORM The twisted road to Kandahar 'Canada slipped into war in Afghanistan, step by step, incrementally, without fully understanding that it was going to war'**

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MARGARET WENTE In December of 2003, Canada's then-defence minister, John McCallum, met a journalist named Arthur Kent over lunch. Mr. Kent (best known to TV viewers as the Gulf war's Scud Stud) was by then an old Afghan hand. For an hour, he regaled the politician and his aides with tales of that wild and complex land. On the way out of the restaurant, a senior Department of National Defence staffer said anxiously, "We don't know anything about this country." Indeed, we didn't. We didn't know the language, culture, values, customs, history. We didn't have a clue. But we did have 2,000 troops there - "stabilization forces." Officials figured that, by the fall of 2004, the number would be reduced to a mere 200, engaged in some small, safe mission. Afghanistan was barely on the radar screen.

Nobody had uttered the word "war." No one expected the Taliban to come back.

Three years later, Canadian troops were fighting a war nobody had foreseen, for reasons no one in the political class could decently articulate. Afghanistan was in the headlines, and most of them were bad. Canada was paying a higher price in casualties than other NATO nations. We had made the most significant defence and foreign policy decision of a generation, one that would shape our sense of place in the world for years to come. Yet, no one could really explain how we'd got there.

Now we know. The Unexpected War: Canada in Kandahar , by Janice Gross Stein and Eugene Lang, is a revelation, an inside account of how things work in government. You won't be surprised to learn that it's a messy business, fraught with competing agendas and internecine wars, and heavily influenced by personality.

"There was never a medium- or long-term Afghanistan policy," says Prof. Stein, a well-known political scientist with sharp instincts for the way foreign policy gets made. "There were several distinct missions in Afghanistan, and decisions taken by different governments at different points in time." Prof. Stein and Mr. Lang (who was chief of staff to both Mr. McCallum and Bill Graham) are deeply sympathetic to the mission. But they are also unsparing in their descriptions of dysfunction in Ottawa.

Few people come off particularly well in this account, with the exception of the men and women in uniform who are ably fighting off the bad guys while

the men and women in uniform, who are busy fighting off the bad guys while doing their best to win hearts and minds.

Take the senior officials who were feeding the politicians their best policy advice. They were obsessed with the Americans. Canada had turned down Washington on Iraq and turned it down again on ballistic missile defence. They were certain that, if we turned them down on Afghanistan, "catastrophic" consequences would ensue. This was not the case. The Americans, in fact, scarcely noticed that we'd stayed out of Iraq and BMD, and didn't really care.

"We grossly overstate our importance in Washington," says Mr.

Lang. "They really don't care that much about us. But the advice our politicians get is that they care deeply. It's self-absorbed.

It's not a realistic view of Canada's role in the world and our relationship with the U.S." So here's what you really want to know. Did Paul Martin's dithering send our boys to the killing fields, as Jean Chretien alleges? No.

Like everything about Afghanistan, things were way more complicated than that. A lot of people in the military wanted to go there from the start. The troop commitment was supposed to be very small. There was no shooting war back then. In any event, the bureaucracy was paralyzed until Rick Hillier came along. Mr. Martin, who had finally become prime minister, was demanding a "transformation" in defence and foreign policy. He wanted something bold and dazzling, something that would differentiate him from his loathed predecessor. The confident and charismatic Chief of the Defence Staff had the answers: General Hillier sold a vision of how the military should be overhauled to fight 21st-century wars, the ones with no safe places and no front lines.

Ironically, Mr. Martin was never enthusiastic about Afghanistan, an obligation he'd inherited from Mr. Chretien. He had romantic fantasies of sending Canadian troops to straighten out Darfur and the Palestinian mess. Gen. Hillier assured Mr. Martin that he could do Afghanistan and also, if necessary, Darfur. No one talked much about the operational realities of Kandahar.

Gen. Hillier was a strong force operating in a vacuum, with very weak civilian oversight. "Hillier's leadership has unbalanced the relationship between civilian and military," the authors write.

The Prime Minister's Office was consumed by the sponsorship scandal, and nobody read the tea leaves. In January of 2006, the Kandahar deployment was still being described as a "more robust peace role." Afghanistan did not figure in the election that brought the Conservatives to office. The mission was turning dangerous, but Gen. Hillier pressed for a two-year extension, and Stephen Harper gave it to him. That decision, too, had almost nothing to do with what was happening on the ground. It was all about Canada's obligations to its NATO allies. And that is how "Canada slipped into war in Afghanistan, step by step, incrementally, without fully understanding that it was going to war." Now that we are there, alas, we're punching well below our weight.

The much vaunted 3-D strategy - defence, development and diplomacy - is a mess. One reason, say the authors, is the black hole where our foreign policy apparatus ought to be. "In Ottawa, words like dysfunctional, debilitated and broken are common descriptions of the institutions at the centre of Canadian foreign policy," they write. The Department of Foreign Affairs, gutted during the 1990s, is basically a glorified travel agency. The Canadian International Development Agency focuses on long-term "capacity building," which is largely irrelevant to the immediate needs of the Afghan populace.

What it doesn't do is build schools. The three institutions that need to work together - Defence, Foreign Affairs and CIDA - might as well exist on different planets.

To be fair, Canada is not alone. No one in NATO knew what they were getting into, either. What began as a short-term stabilization exercise has turned into a nation-building commitment that will take at least 15 to 20 years - if we stay the course.

Will we? Not likely. Canadians will only tolerate an extended troop commitment if the troops stop getting killed. There's no appetite for fighting a war or long insurgency. The other NATO countries have been conspicuously unenthusiastic about replacing us. And the Afghan government, such as it is, is shaky. "Sometimes, I think the government is [President Hamid] Karzai with a cellphone," said one Canadian official. But no nation wants to be the first to pull its forces, because it's a house of cards. "That's why Canada is in the eye of the storm," says Prof. Stein.

"We're not saying it was a mistake to do this," says Mr. Lang.

"We're saying we didn't understand what we were getting into." Not surprisingly, a lot of people are hopping mad about this book.

The authors leave the readers to draw their own conclusions, so here are two of mine: This 21st-century fighting isn't going to be a piece of cake. And our reasons for going to war in Afghanistan have hardly anything to do with that mysterious country at all - they are overwhelmingly about us.

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