

## Questions of Confidence

by Nic Boisvert

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As the war in Iraq progresses into its second week, Canada's holiday from history is ending. The willful neglect of the Canadian Forces over the last decade, and the preference for soft power bromides over real influence within established alliances, have painted the government into a corner.

For the second time, Prime Minister Chretien has chosen not to field a fighting Army to help bring an effective end to an international crisis. The failure in Kosovo at least was committed openly, and shared with fellow NATO members of 'Old Europe'. The recent announcement that Canada would dispatch troops to Kabul was a dishonest pre-emptive effort to avoid joining the action in Iraq with our traditional allies.

Worse yet, the new Afghan commitment was made in clear disregard of the best military advice. With memories of the Somalia Inquiry hanging in the air, Defence Minister McCallum was obliged to declare that, "I as a member of the government take responsibility for the decision, and I think if things go wrong, and we all hope and pray they will not, then that responsibility will come back to the government, and I accept that responsibility."

It is clear, nonetheless, that the government's constantly shifting policies are putting Canadian military commanders in increasingly untenable positions. Unlike earlier incidents (remember the 'unavailability' of a Challenger to fly Chretien to King Hussein's funeral?), the military stood its ground when former Minister Eggleton couldn't remember his brief. This time, General Cam Ross had the decency to announce his early retirement "for personal reasons" when his military advice was overturned by the Prime Minister's Office and the DND policy wonks. It is hard to imagine that Chief of Defence Staff Ray Hénault was not equally conflicted: he either knew in advance of the changes to the Iraq-Afghan commitment but was prevented from advising his subordinates, or he was not given the opportunity to inject his military advice into the decision.

There may be a small consolation that going to Kabul has precluded the Army's deployment to Iraq. A Canadian brigade most likely would have been tasked to secure the extended supply lines that are proving so difficult for the US Marines. Why the difficulty? Like our Land Forces, the USMC went 'light', operating with the same LAV IIIs that are proving vulnerable to simple RPG-7s (rocket-propelled grenades). As the US calls up heavy reserves, the lesson is as clear as it ever was: if you intend to place forces where they may draw fire, they must have the capability to protect themselves and to return fire. And yet in the face of competent military advice – and without the benefit of a Defence Policy Review – NDHQ's civilian deep thinkers have convinced the Minister that tanks can be abandoned as passé constructs of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The gang who gave us the 1987 and 1994 White Papers (both discredited almost as soon as they were

published) have just swung at 'strike three'. Perhaps the struggle around Nasariya will begin to shake McCallum's confidence enough that he will also review their advice against an independent Canadian Forces strategic airlift capability – if we had wanted to go to Iraq, would the French or Germans have lent us the planes?

McCallum claims the Army has the confidence of the government, and so it should. Clearly it is the government that has no confidence in the exercise of military power. Our prime minister gives no sign of understanding things military. Jean Chretien's views on the CF have not advanced since the unification controversies of the mid-sixties, when he first entered politics. True, too much of the CF's equipment also dates back to that period, but for him to accuse the generals of being caught in the past is incredible. This from a man who parrots the words of Pearsonian internationalism without any understanding that peacekeeping originally was invoked to preserve the Atlantic Alliance and further its Cold War objectives, not as an excuse to avoid a war.

Fortunately, our forces still enjoy the confidence of our allies. The US Navy is not known for signing their warships over to another nation's command. Yet they have done just that, and in an active theatre. The Canadian Commodore leading a multinational force in the Persian Gulf has under his command ships from (among others) the United States, Italy, Greece – and France.

But ultimately the question of confidence returns home. The Cabinet gambled that the Americans would not whack us because of Canada's refusal to support the war in Iraq. We must hope the government is right, even if we doubt it. Opinion polls are beginning to show decreasing public confidence in the government. Minister Manley speaks forcefully and consistently on the issue. The daily 'clarifications' by Ministers McCallum and Graham suggest they understand deep down where Canada's priorities lie. Who knows what heir-apparent Paul Martin thinks? But the sooner regime change mercifully arrives in Canada the better for all of us.