

The NDP, the War, and the Americans

J.L. Granatstein

New Democratic Party leader Jack Layton has been demanding that Canada cease its combat role in Kandahar, a war, he says, that cannot be won, and devote itself to aid and development efforts there. In arguing this, he is on the moderate edge of his party--constituency associations at the NDP's recent convention proposed resolutions that called Canadian troops "terrorists" and an "occupation" force—but he easily carried his delegates with him. Support the troops, the New Democrats cry. Bring 'em home. Opinion polls suggest that preaching against the Afghan War resonates with Canadians.

The New Democratic Party is not one with much military expertise in its ranks. Layton himself has none; nor does Alexa McDonough, the former party leader. Only Nova Scotia M.P. Peter Stoffer (who spoke in opposition to Layton's Afghan policy at the convention) and Winnipeg M.P. Bill Blaikie speak with any authority on military matters.

And yet, the NDP is scoring points with its Afghanistan position, especially as the casualties in the Canadians' Kandahar operation continue their steady rise. Why?

The NDP always harks back to Canada's proud tradition of United Nations peacekeeping. Canadians love peacekeeping which they associate with doing good, amilitary on the cheap, no casualties, and a role that differentiates them from their superpower neighbour. For a half-century, Canadians kept the peace in Cyprus, the Middle East, and the Congo with their blue berets and white-painted vehicles, while the United States makes war everywhere. This popular belief bears scant connection with either history or the reality of modern UN operations, but neither the NDP nor the public seems to care.

In fact, the NDP would far prefer Canada's troops be deployed to Darfur in Sudan than to Kandahar. There, the UN would be in charge, or so Layton appears to believe. There are, of course, a few practical problems with a Darfur operation. The Khartoum government refuses entry to UN troops and threatens a jihad against them if they dare to come. Then, Canada has no way to get troops, even if it had the troops to send, to Darfur, no way to support them logistically in a barren area of the world, and no way to get them out in an emergency. Moreover, the casualties in Darfur might be far higher than in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, because the United States is (relatively) uninvolved and because women and children are being brutalized, Darfur is the NDP's preferred operation.

The Afghanistan operation by contrast is portrayed as the work of a coalition of the willing—the United States, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and a few other American satraps such as Australia. To Layton, Kandahar is just another part of George Bush's Great War on Terror. "It's time," he said on September 26, "for a new approach. One that puts reconstruction, development and aid ahead of counter-insurgency."

What Layton refuses to acknowledge is that the Afghan operation has been sanctioned by repeated United Nations resolutions, and is yet another military operation sub-contracted by the UN to those who are willing to pick up the burden. The UN's undersecretary-

general for peacekeeping, Jean-Marie Guéhenno, says bluntly that traditional UN peacekeepers can't do the job in Afghanistan where robust forces are needed to take on the Taliban insurgents. The world organization wants its political and humanitarian efforts—and, not least, its efforts to assist women and children--in Afghanistan to succeed, and Guéhenne understands that without military action, the development and stabilization efforts could be stymied. The undersecretary-general last week even congratulated Canada for sending tanks to Kandahar!

Not one Canadian in a hundred, and certainly not Jack Layton and friends, understands that the United Nations considers the troops fighting in Afghanistan to be carrying out a Security Council mandate. The Canadian government would be wise to make this clear to the public.

That won't stop the NDP, of course. While Jack Layton's every instinct is to say that the United Nations is always good, his true default position is that the United States is forever evil. In Orwellian terms, the New Democrats equivalent to "four legs good, two legs bad" is "UN good, US evil." Anti-Americanism sells well in Canada today, and President Bush is arguably the president of the last hundred years most despised by Canadians. So long as Stephen Harper insists on operating from what Layton calls "President George Bush's tired playbook," he will be painted as sharing a bed with the unpopular U.S. president. Canadians unhappy with the softwood lumber deal, with tightening border controls, and the Arar case are quick to accept Layton's anti-Americanism at face value.

So, claiming to support our troops, Layton's NDP wants our soldiers to concentrate on reconstruction and to opt out of an unwinnable war. Every Canadian wants an end to the war in Afghanistan and the establishment of government that can control this tribalized, dangerous state. Unfortunately, it will take combat to hold down the Islamist terrorists sufficiently to allow reconstruction and development to proceed. Ottawa understands this and even the United Nations does.

Why doesn't Jack Layton get the message? The reason is clear: he believes that he can parlay Canadian casualties in Kandahar and the strident anti-Americanism in Canada into votes in the next election. He might be right, but Canadians should understand the bald-faced cynicism that underlies his policy.

(J.L. Granatstein writes on behalf of the Council for Canadian Security in the 21st Century (www.ccs21.org).)