

The Return to Kandahar – Are We Up to It?

By Nic Boisvert

This question is usually framed in media commentary in the context of the readiness of our troops to meet their coming mission in southern Afghanistan. Although it cannot be the authors' intent, doing so portrays a lack of confidence in the men and women who are in the process of deploying – and just as importantly does nothing to still the fears of their families. To be sure, our troops are going into hostile territory and will encounter forces dedicated to their destruction. The return to Kandahar will be no vacation. But there should be no questioning of their ability to meet the challenges. The operational pause of the past year has been put to good training advantage, and with the government purse strings finally loosened, it appears for a change they will be properly equipped for the expected scenarios. Indeed, they are more likely to give better than they get. No, it is we – the Canadian public and our government – to whom the question is directed: are we up to it?

The mission might have a different name, and to many it will be an exotic locale, but the role is one that is all too familiar to the Canadian Forces. “Provincial Reconstruction Team” (PRT), effectively, a relatively small contingent of troops providing security protection for civil agencies to restore the trappings of civilized society to areas wrought by war and violence, has all the hallmarks of our decade in Bosnia. That was an immense success, but it came at a price – Canada suffered over a hundred casualties there, nearly a quarter of them deaths, not in road accidents or accidental weapons discharges as reported by the government, but the majority the direct result of intentional enemy action. Didn't know that? If not, it was because our government did not want us to, thinking we were not up to facing the hard truth, and the Department of National Defence, to their eternal shame, went along with the charade.

The attitude changed with the accidental bombing deaths of four soldiers on the first mission to Kandahar in the spring of 2002. Maybe it was the heightened atmosphere in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States; more likely it was the fact that it was friendly fire by an American pilot. Certainly our national outpouring of grief was immensely cathartic to the affected families and the regiment, but it entailed little recognition of the operational circumstances that surrounded the incident. The so-called Tarnak Farms Inquiry was a farce, heavily censored in its “release,” but also seriously flawed in its methodology, which left too many questions unasked, and hence unanswered. Far easier to let the blame fall on a rogue American fighter jock.

However, it did set the context in which we would address all subsequent loss of life. Why otherwise should a tragic industrial accident, the death of a sailor by fire in the submarine *Chicoutimi*, lead to a parliamentary inquiry that threatened the existence of a vital military capability? That revealed our national propensity to obsess on a diversion while missing the big picture of events. Indeed, it was all too reminiscent of the Somalia Commission of Inquiry a decade earlier. That should have challenged our comfortable notions of classic peacekeeping, but instead of dealing swiftly and effectively to correct a discipline problem in one particular company, the government opted for the easier optics of disbanding the entire Airborne Regiment.

The Canadian Forces have been twisting themselves into a pretzel ever since to re-establish that valuable capability by any other name. Stealthy submarine surveillance and airborne insertion are just two of the many critical elements described in the recent Defence Policy Statement that are necessary to restore the capacity of the Canadian Forces to re-establish Canada's place in the global order.

Underpinning our military's renaissance is the government's pledge to bring order to failed and failing states. That is a noble aim. But Canadians – we and our government – are going to have to learn to accept that dispensing and suffering death and mutilation are part of the unlimited liability pact that is the flip side of the social contract we have with our military, our part of the bargain being to ensure their dispatch only on viable missions and that they be properly equipped to undertake them. (Readers of the previous column will recall failure to meet those criteria as the reason for objection to the ill conceived and thankfully scuttled Darfur mission.) If we are going to rip ourselves apart with an outpouring of angst every time our troops suffer casualties, we will soon dissolve into a national post-traumatic stress disorder. If we are not up to it, we might as well recognize the hypocrisy inherent in the moralistic notion of the “Responsibility to Protect,” and save ourselves the billions of dollars needed for the revitalization of an effective Canadian Forces.

The example of the United States engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan is instructive. They have recognized the challenge and stepped up to it. Yet even there, the outwardly resolute President George W. Bush has not declared “war” to mobilize American society, and public support is faltering. Can we expect our complacent Canadian society, saddled with ambivalent leadership in all parties, to react any better?

We have to believe that we can rise to the challenge and make an effective contribution. Generations of Canadians before us have done so many times in the past, but only when society mobilized to meet the challenge – in two world wars, the Cold War, and arguably even for peacekeeping, in which cause more than a hundred Canadian service people have died over the past half-century, and which we have internalized as a national calling.

Kandahar will be the acid test of whether or not we can bear the price of our latest goal, to re-introduce the non-functioning regions of the world to global society. It is best to find out now if we don't have the royal jelly to handle the task. It is going to take moral courage and political leadership. Are we up to it?

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