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Reuters RTR1RERL by Finbarr O'Reilly

Tired Canadian soldiers take a smoke break, 3 July 2007.

"Was It Worth It?" Canadian Intervention in Afghanistan and Perceptions of Success and Failure

by Sean Maloney

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Introduction

In 2012, I was asked by the University of Manitoba to give a conference presentation on Canadian operations in Afghanistan, with an eye on the larger issues of Canadian and Western intervention during the past twenty years. I crafted a presentation based upon my preliminary work dealing with the history of the Canadian Army in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2011, the project with which I am currently engaged for the Canadian Army. However, it was clear during and after my presentation that what I put together was too detailed, and it assumed too much knowledge on behalf of a diverse group. There was not enough time to establish common ground between me and the audience. Furthermore, in informal conversations, and when socializing in various venues leading up to and after my talk, it was evident that many people I spoke with were overly focused upon a specific political-media complex meme to the exclusion of any new information or insight I could provide, given the level of access I have had to the war in Afghanistan, both in terms of documentation, and from the personal experience of ten operational deployments extending from 2003 to 2011.

Needless to say, I was surprised that a media meme[1] could be so overwhelming in such a grouping of academics and practitioners. I have been brought up in an academic tradition where ideas were debated and the search for different angles, new information, and fresh perspectives were the epitome of the profession. This was usually a contentious but professional process. Somehow, the amalgam of these things produced for us either confirmation of our prejudices or some kind of new synthesis that served as a launch-pad for another round of discussion. I did not see that in the Afghanistan case. I saw firmly-held views on Canada's involvement in Afghanistan that were dismissive of the facts, as they were, presented by a person charged with understanding our involvement in that demographically damaged, nearly post-Apocalyptic country. These were opinions shaped by existing academic models of how Canada behaves or has behaved or should behave on the international stage, as well as by media information. None of those models, however, adequately explains, or explains in only an extremely superficial way, why Canada was in Afghanistan and what Canadians did there. Certainly no measure of "worth" has been presented thus far that we can agree upon.

Reuters RTR1RC4Y by Finbarr O'Reilly

A Canadian soldier turns his back on a Blackhawk helicopter taking off from the forward operating base at Ma'sum Ghar, 1 July 2007.

The Meme

The meme "Was it worth it?" emerged in July 2011 as Canada ended operations in southern Afghanistan. The concept of questioning the value of Canada's operations in Afghanistan was itself not new: critics of the mission, especially those in the National Democratic Party (NDP) and those sensitized to casualties, asked similar questions in fall 2006 and again in the spring of 2007. The difference in 2011 was that Operation Athena was completed and so it was a natural break-point to look back and see where Canada stood after so many years. There was no detailed commentary on these matters by the Harper government nor was there any from the unelected bureaucracy. The "Was it worth it?" meme was, essentially, a creation of the media and their fellow travelers, the pollsters.

The ending of the Kandahar portion of the Afghanistan mission and the public announcement that this ended 'combat operations' for Canada in Afghanistan prompted the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation to ask "Was it worth it?" during its Cross-Country Checkup program, aired on 10 July 2011.[2] The Ottawa Sun newspaper commissioned a polling study from Leger Marketing, which they published on 4 August 2011; 30 percent of those polled thought it was 'worth it' and 58 percent did not believe that our goals were accomplished when we 'left' in the summer of 2011.[3] The National Post followed with a story on 8 August 2011, as did lesser known publications like the Socialist Worker.[4] In approximately a four-week time frame, the bulk of Canadian media outlets were asking the same question, posed the same way, but only some were answering it, and then, self-referentially.

Then the meme went dormant, only to re-emerge in media coverage leading up to Remembrance Day in November 2011. As this was the first Remembrance Day since the end of combat operations in Afghanistan, almost all Canadian media elements deemed it useful to re-ask the question. After going dormant yet again, Paul Koring of the Globe and Mail reactivated it in a
6 February 2012 article highlighting the views of former ambassador Chris Alexander, former Canadian Expeditionary Force Command (CEFCOM) commander Lieutenant-General Michel Gauthier, detainee critic Amir Attaran; ex-Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) head of aid Nipa Bannerjee; anti-war activist Raymond Legault; and retired Colonel Pat Stogran, commander of the Operation Apollo contingent in 2002.[5]

The media outlets, all of them, used the same question again and again: "Was it worth it?" None of them provided any further explanation as to what they meant by 'worth.' All these media outlets implied, without stating so up front, that what they meant by 'worth' was the numbers of Canadian dead. Some brought up an estimated monetary cost of Canadian involvement, but it is evident that they really wanted to use the deceased as a measurement of effectiveness.

Throughout the conflict, Canadian media continuously focused upon ramp ceremonies and Canadian deaths and woundings to the near-exclusion of any other Afghanistan topic. The coverage of Canadian deaths had a direct effect on the Opposition leader and his demands for Canadian withdrawal in 2006, and again in 2007. Mr. Layton expressly referred to Canadian casualties as a prime motivator for his opposition to continued combat operations.[6] It is not surprising that the media, and critics of Canadian involvement, wish to use their measurement of effectiveness when analyzing 'worth.'

This meme, then, is thus defined:

- Canada's involvement in Afghanistan resulted in dead Canadians and the expenditure of lots of taxpayer money.

- There hasn't been any real progress made.
- Canada withdrew in 2011.
- It wasn't worth it.

Again, this meme is implied in the sample of media outlets: CBC, The Sun, The National Post, The Globe and Mail, and overtly stated in The Socialist Worker.

This is our common starting point. There is some debate on the matter (for example, Rosie Dimanno in The Toronto Star,[7] and the minority opinions in the Koring piece,[8]) but, for the most part, the meme was deployed far and wide through Canadian media outlets from July 2011 to February 2012. And, for the most part, it tended to dominate the belief systems of a wide variety of people I encountered at the conference, whether they were for or against Canadian involvement.

Reuters RTXIYA6 by Jorge Silva

Canadian soldiers sleep as a flare burns over them during a special operation at Sanjaray in Kandahar Province, 18 May 2009.

Measurements of Effectiveness (MOE)

The MOE for the war in Afghanistan bedeviled almost every Joint Task Force Afghanistan headquarters I visited in Afghanistan from 2006 onward, especially when we entered the war's provincial-and district-level counterinsurgency phase in 2007. A combination of Ottawa bureaucrats and media connected the idea of 'effectiveness' to the concept of 'progress.' If we were 'progressing,' we were 'effective.' It was a question of what was selected for examination: development and reconstruction was one area, detainees was another. Now I will not get into the deep details of Western 19th Century historical proclivity towards 'progress,' although it definitely played a role, right up there with the scientific method and provability. The concept that the insurgency was worsening because there was not enough 'development' held sway with some commentators, but few could actually connect data to those pronouncements.

I would equally argue that North American sports-based cultures have deep-seated need for scoring as a mean of determining who is 'winning' and who is 'losing.' Many, rightly so, shudder at the use of body-counts as a progress measure in the American phase of the Vietnam War. Yet, that is what the meme uses as its MOE- in this case, a one-sided Canadian body count. Not a Canadian body count versus an enemy body count. Just Canadian bodies... The assumption that Canada could somehow fight a bloodless war boggles the rational mind. Given how horrified some Canadians were over the relatively small number of Canadian dead, it is likely that some might have even started to feel pity for the enemy, in that the ratio of Canadian deaths to insurgent deaths may be between 1:20 to 1:50, or even higher.

The meme does not like to use the number of schools built and manned as a measurement of effectiveness, but those against the Canadian project in Afghanistan love to use the amount of poppy grown and turned into opium. However, they only like it if the argument uses United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) figures out of context to ensure that they grow exponentially every year. On a yearly basis, newspapers and other media outlets unthinkingly used virtually the same headlines on this topic.[9]

The lack of 'progress,' however, becomes the major sticking point for close observers of the conflict. They never define progress, but again imply that it involves reducing the levels of corruption and the levels of violence. The argument, then, is that if drug production, corruption, and violence trends are all up, progress is not being made. Underpinning this argument is that reductions in all of these areas are necessary to reduce 'violence,' and this will somehow lead to reconstruction and then to an end to the conflict. "Progress,' it appears, cannot exist outside these categories. Nor, apparently, can incremental progress in any area. It had to be gross progress, right now. It also had to be gross progress made understandable to the common Canadian, or it did not count.

The connection between timeliness and progress is strong. It has to be done now or it is not progressing enough. Or, we have a short attention span: If it is not accomplished between now and when that attention shifts, than there is no progress. There is no room for error is this perfect, critical world, no room for wrenches thrown into the works, and inefficiency generated within what is supposed to be a 'perfect machine-perfect' it must be because we are spending so much money on it. Perfect, critical, consumerist…It is not really surprising that critics of Canada's involvement in Afghanistan want simplistic metrics that reinforce their existing views.

DND photo KA2005-R105-0163d by Corporal Dan Shouinard

A crew commander from B Squadron, Royal Canadian Dragoons, serving with the Kabul Multinational Brigade (KMNB) Recce Squadron, receives a call while enroute to Sarobi, Afghanistan, 16 March 2005.

> "The lack of 'progress,' however, becomes the major sticking point for close observers of the conflict."

The one measurement of effectiveness we have on hand and in the public domain was the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS). The ANDS, dating from 2005-2006, laid out critical objectives with a timeline. A partnership between Afghans and Canadians, it was based upon hard-learned lessons in Bosnia. I have yet to see a Canadian media product that explains the ANDS and its importance to Canadians. To that end, I 'locked horns' with a journalist in Kandahar in 2007, and again in 2008. I challenged him when he claimed there was no strategy and no objectives, and pointed him towards the ANDS website. Did an explanatory article result? No. It was easier to count Canadian dead as if it was some grim hockey score, rather than to explain that the fact there was now a strategic plan in a near-post-Apocalyptic environment, and that this was in itself an achievement and it 'could-and-would-and-did' lead to better things. But strategic planning is boring. And people who use the media want to be entertained. Death and violence and excitement entertains. Creating a strategy that will give the

Afghans governance structures so that the global community will be more inclined to provide monies in order for reconstruction to take place is not particularly entertaining, nor is it exciting. We are presented with a challenge: how do we move beyond the morbid death complex that our media, with societal complicity, has created, and find a means of explaining what we have accomplished in Afghanistan that is understandable to the common Canadian?

DND photo APD02 5000-149 by Corporal Lou Penney

Scouts from the 3rd Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (3 PPCLI) Battle Group, advance into a ravine to search caves for Taliban and al Qaeda fighters during Operation Anaconda, 15 March 2002.

Academic Approaches

I would have thought that the academic community might have stepped up and tried to meet this challenge, particularly during this conflict. On the whole it did not. The "Was it worth it?" question quickly morphed into the "Should we have gone in the first place?" debate, a related entity to the media-generated meme. From the academics canvassed by myself during this conference, I found generally that the Canadian Afghanistan project was projected through existing biases and approaches, and it was not seen as a unique series of events deserving of detailed and specialized analysis. I identified three broad 'stove pipes.'

First, there is the 'Stay at Home' or 'Isolationist' viewpoint. This approach applies a simplistic cost-benefit analysis using Canadian bodies and Canadian dollars, compared to the state of Afghanistan today as portrayed by the media and by various reports from 'think-tanks' and international organizations. The situation is bad in Afghanistan, we have spent enough, we should leave, or, we should not have deployed there in the first place. This view tends to emanate from Quebec, and it is an echo of voices raised in opposition to the First and Second World Wars.

The obvious flaws in this argument relate to its simplicity. The argument does not take into account the progressive deterioration of the situation in Afghanistan, which only became broadly apparent around 2005-2006. It avoids any analysis of Canadian interests or values and the role they play in decision making. It ignores the role that credibility plays in international affairs. In essence, it is an adolescent approach to international relations.

Second, there is the 'UN Supremacy' viewpoint. Within this construct, the United States is 'evil' and must not be permitted to act unilaterally in order to prevent it behaving illegally in the context of the International Criminal Court. Canada must distance herself from the United States to avoid being infected by this 'evil.' Therefore, Canada should only have engaged in Afghanistan under the rubric of the United Nations and UN-controlled organizations.

Once again, the Canadian UN peacekeeping mythos is active in this view, operating under cover of the extreme criticism voiced against the United States because of 'extraordinary rendition' policies, Guantanamo, Abu Gharib, oil conspiracy theory, and so on, and so forth. From this viewpoint, the only means of protecting Canadian values is through the UN, and Canada can only be saved through the ministry of the UN.

Third, there is the 'Canada-US Relations' viewpoint with multiple variants in play. Academia in Canada created an industry out of analyzing Canadian-American relations dating back to the 1950s, but most particularly in the 1960s and 1970s as petite nationalism fostered by the Trudeau regime sought to identify and inflate as many differences as possible between Canada and the United States. In many cases, it is easier to assess 'Canada in Afghanistan' as an extension of 'Canada and the United States' than it is to peer deeply at the plethora of bureaucratic and emotional motives that may have played a role in Canadian decision-making vis-à-vis Afghanistan.

There are three variants of the 'Canada-US relations' approach. First, there is the trade variant. The vast bulk of Canadian trade is with the United States, so it behooves Canada to operate alongside the United States as part of a North American bloc. Second, there is a variant that suggests that Canada is being coerced, either subtly or not, into siding with the United States in order to bolster coalition credibility. Third, we can identify a 'solidarity' variant, a 'brothers in arms/we're all in this together' feeling.

DND photo KA2004-A073D by Master Corporal Brian Walsh

Lieutenant-General Rick Hillier, Commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), speaks with Sergeant Gaétan Cyr of the Third Battalion Royal 22nd Regiment Battalion Group in Kabul, 14 February 2004.

Finally, there is the 'Hillier's War' theory, whereby former Chief of Defence Staff Rick Hillier pushed the government to increased depths in Afghanistan for dubious reasons associated with American solidarity and/or to get the Canadian Forces into a fight, any fight, while Foreign Affairs tried valiantly to hold him back.

In none of my conversations did the words "al Qaeda" come up unless I initiated a discussion of 9/11 and the long history of al Qaeda's war against its 'near enemy' and 'far enemy' dating back to the early-1990s. The enemy was always labeled by most conversants as "The Taliban" and no connection was made between the two, or any other organizations. Certainly, no connection was made between the 9/11 attacks and the presence of al Qaeda in Afghanistan. There was also little-or-no discussion of Pakistan's role in events.

None of the conversants mentioned the defence of or projection of Canadian values, or the fact that al Qaeda and Taliban values were in direct opposition to Canadian values. The idea that the enemy represented something other than a local terrorist threat to reconstruction did not register at all with some conversants. Indeed, it was only when prompted with this line of reasoning did one academic dismiss the whole involvement in Afghanistan because, to this individual, the Taliban and al Qaeda did not constitute an "existential threat" to Canada.

Nobody referred, in any way, to any possible humanitarian imperative or the fact that Afghanistan was the poorest country on earth and the most damaged in terms of demographics and infrastructure. Nor did the idea that Canada was helping Afghans and Afghanistan bear mentioning at all.

The Complex Reality

The idea that Canada made choices to get deeply involved with Afghanistan over a ten-year period, and the idea that those decisions were, perhaps, based upon Canadian interests and values, has not been explored by either the media or academia to a wide extent. Generally speaking, the idea that Canada acts independently is lauded when it runs counter to American decision-making. The idea that Canada independently chooses to side with and to operate alongside the United States is usually written off under some kind of coercive rubric. Perhaps we should entertain this idea: that Canada made choices, in the case of Afghanistan, several choices at different times, to remain engaged, and that those choices were made because of the increasingly shaky nature of the international project to assist Afghanistan. That also pre-supposes that our participation in that international project somehow reflected our values system as well.

We should also entertain the possibility that there was an underlying concept of national and international credibility that crept into the progressive nature of our involvement in Afghanistan. We committed to something. That 'something' was important to us for a variety of reasons, and we repeatedly re-committed to preserve Canadian credibility within the international system as well as maintaining the credibility of the Afghanistan project. I would suggest that the argument that Canada did all of this solely to develop or cultivate credibility with the United States is a far too narrow view.

As far as I can determine, Canadian involvement in Afghanistan passed through several phases.

1. Operation Apollo, 2001-2002: the deployment of a battle group to southern Afghanistan as part of the American-led Operation Enduring Freedom.
2. Operation Athena, 2003-2005: Canada led the way in 'NATO-izing' the international project in Afghanistan in the Kabul area and in converting a European-led ISAF mission to a NATO-led one.
3. Operation Argus, 2005-2008: Canada mentored Afghanistan in the creation of a national development strategy and in Kabul-based governance structures. This was a bilateral arrangement between Afghanistan and Canada.
4. Operation Archer, 2005: Canada accepted responsibility for a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Kandahar, and worked to identify the major issues afflicting the province. Initially, this operated under the auspices of Operation Enduring Freedom, and transitioned to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in August 2006.
5. Combined Task Force (CTF) Aegis, and Task Force (TF) Orion, 2006: Op Archer was augmented with combat forces as the situation deteriorated in Kandahar Province, until Stage III expansion was completed in the summer of 2006, and the mission became 'NATO-ized.'
6. Operation Athena, 2006-2011: This counterinsurgency mission continued as Canada mounted a disruption campaign under the auspices of ISAF to stave off insurgent interference with reconstruction and capacity building. After a three-year disruption operation, Canadian forces were progressively relieved in place by American forces in 2010-11.
7. Operation Attention, 2011-2012: The mission in Afghanistan shifted to provision of mentors and trainers for the Afghan National Army, mostly in Kabul.

DND photo KA2005-R105-0156d by Corporal Dan Shouinard

A little too long on deployment? A crew commander from B Squadron Royal Canadian Dragoons puckers up for a kiss with a local in Sarobi, Afghanistan, 16 March 2005.

If we are to measure the effectiveness of the missions, we need to understand what objectives were set for them. Only then can we ask, were they realistic objectives, given the circumstances, resources, and what we knew at the time? This is very different from 'counting coffins' coming off aircraft at CFB Trenton, or waving the annual UNODC narcotics report around like a bloody shirt. Or complaining about 'corruption...'

The main Canadian objectives can be boiled down into two things, First, the removal of the Taliban 'shield' that was protecting the al Qaeda 'parasite' that fed off the Taliban. Once the Taliban government and its forces were removed, then headway could be made at attacking al Qaeda globally. Second, al Qaeda developed its parasitical relationship with the Taliban because of the disruptive civil war conditions prevalent in Afghanistan after the collapse of the Najibullah government in 1993. The second Canadian objective was to ensure that al Qaeda and other global terrorist groups were unable to use Afghan territory for their operations, and reconstruction was the means to do this. Fundamentally, these Canadian objectives remained in play the entire time Canadian forces were on the ground in Afghanistan.

These objectives were established after examining the direction that the American Operation Enduring Freedom was heading in November 2001. The strategic target of the whole exercise was the al Qaeda organization. Nobody knew what al Qaeda was capable of next. There were over 30 al Qaeda facilities in Afghanistan: training, communications, and research. The only way to understand what al Qaeda was up to was to go in, seize these facilities and key personnel, and exploit them to build the larger global picture of their activities. Canada provided forces in Afghanistan and elsewhere as part of this larger effort.

Reuters RTRNYSY by Ho New

Still image taken from archive video shows top Bin Laden aide Ayman al-Zawahri and Osama Bin Laden at an unidentified location, but believed to be an al Qaeda base in Afghanistan, 21 May 2003.

In essence, Operation Enduring Freedom pulled away the Taliban shield, and put al Qaeda to flight from Afghanistan. Their facilities were exploited to great effect by coalition forces. Multiple '9/11-like' attacks that were in the planning stages were 'cut off at the knees,' as were plans to acquire bio-chemical and nuclear weapons or material. Indeed, no al Qaeda attack of the same magnitude has taken place since the 9/11 attacks of 2001, though there were several in the advanced planning stages.[10] That alone should be considered a major success, yet it was all subsumed by the hullabaloo over the American mounting the Iraq conflict. Indeed, the reduced level of credibility that al Qaeda has today and its inability to effectively subvert the 'Arab Spring' thus far should be directly attributable to the Operation Enduring Freedom operation in Afghanistan, coupled with the destruction of al Qaeda in Iraq. Canada played a role in the Afghanistan portion of that coalition effort. Al Qaeda's objectives, as stated by Osama bin Laden, have still not been met over ten years after 9/11, and nearly twenty years after al Qaeda initiated operations.[11]

During the early phases of the anti-al Qaeda effort, it was increasingly evident to Canadian planners and representatives in Tampa, Florida, (where US Central Command is located), as well as their counterparts from other Commonwealth countries, that American plans did not really address what happened after the exploitation effort took place. In a general sense, the American political leadership worked with other international partners to establish the Bonn Process, which was supposed to play a major role in reconstruction. Operation Enduring Freedom shifted focus elsewhere in 2002-2003: Specifically, Iraq and the Horn of Africa.

There were many complicated reasons for Canada to re-commit to Afghanistan, this time under the auspices of the International Security Assistance Force. For our purposes here, however, the ISAF mission had stalled out by 2003, and nobody wanted to take on a leadership role with it. The interim Afghanistan government was beset with innumerable problems: it had no credibility with those who possessed the heavy weapons and the factional armies, and it had no legitimacy with the population. There was no bureaucracy to absorb the international donors' monies needed for reconstruction. In effect, the possibility of a return to the conditions of 1993-1994 was very real in 2003. And, as we will recall, the creation of the Taliban movement in 1996 was a direct result of those conditions in the first place.

DND photo KA2003-A344A by Master Corporal Brian Walsh

Major-General Andrew Leslie, Deputy Commander ISAF, in a Light Armoured Vehicle (LAV III) prior to departing Camp Julien for a tour of the Canadian Area of Operations in Kabul, 30 October 2003.

In a campaign formulated by then-Major-General Andrew Leslie and his staff, the NATO-led but Canadian-dominated ISAF achieved several objectives. First, the heavy weapons controlled by the various factions in Kabul were cantoned. Second, a coup attempt against the interim government was thwarted. Third, intelligence cued special operations neutered the Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin (HiG) terrorist group as it sought to undermine Kabul. Fourth, the Afghan National Army received more and more Canadian and American trainers and mentors, so that it could compete with the armed factions.

These steps created a positive psychological environment so that the Constitutional Loyal Jirga and the 2004 elections could move forward. Only then, with a legitimate, internationally-recognized government, could monies be made available for reconstruction. That effort, however, was threatened by two things.

First, there was a failure in the strategic plan. Canada stepped in, as requested by the Afghan government, and worked together with the Afghans to formulate a strategic plan for the country. The Canadian Strategic Advisory Team Afghanistan (SAT-A) was a key player in this effort. The Afghan National Development Strategy was the product, and it was accepted in the London conference in 2006 along with the Afghanistan Compact. SAT-A also worked to help build a national civil service and to improve government capacity. Essentially, the ANDS helped link the security and development processes, and recognized the key components of development that reached down to the community level.

> “In essence, Operation Enduring Freedom pulled away the Taliban shield, and put al Qaeda to flight from Afghanistan.”

By 2005-2006, great strides had been taken by Canada, working alongside its coalition allies, to prevent Afghanistan from relapsing into a 1993-1994 state. There was now a government; there was a plan; there were reconstruction monies; and threats to the government and the plan were reduced as much as feasible, particularly in Kabul. This was amazing progress in three years, given the fact that Afghanistan was essentially a post-Apocalyptic environment. The next challenge was extending the government’s presence and authority outside of Kabul. And this is where the Afghanistan project encountered serious difficulties…

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Map of Afghan tribal distribution.

Three problems emerged. First, few countries wanted to join and lead the reconstruction effort in the provinces, and Afghanistan lacked this capacity at this time to do it herself. Second, there was unrest in a key southern province, Kandahar. Some believed the unrest was related to disproportionate development efforts that favoured northern Afghanistan at the expense of the south. The unrest itself deterred effective international efforts in a variety of ways. Third, it looked like the Taliban was resurgent in the south after resting and regrouping in Pakistan with new international backers.

It was crucial to the larger international project that the problems in Kandahar be defined and addressed. Again, Canada chose to commit to this course of action with Operation Archer. First, a Canadian Provincial Reconstruction Team deployed, followed by a brigade headquarters and a battle group. Once on the ground, however, the security situation deteriorated, and a resurgent Taliban, propped up by al Qaeda's global support network, expanded the insurgency in the province. The Taliban's objectives included isolating and then taking over Kandahar City by coup de main and/or by foco (focalism, or revolution by way of guerrilla warfare ~ Ed.). From 2006 to 2009, Canada disrupted their designs. The Taliban never isolated the city, regional trade continued unmitigated, and the insurgents were unable to seize control of the city.

It is during these three years that Canada immersed herself in interagency counterinsurgency and reconstruction efforts in the districts around Kandahar City. Numerous problems were encountered during this period. None of those problems, however, stopped Canada from disrupting the insurgents' plans and forcing the insurgency to continuously alter its methods.

Note also that during this period, the Canadian project had a fluctuating end-date. This was, to an extent, a product of minority government politics. It is easy to look back and apply some definition to the whole period but at the time, Canadian planners had to plan for a less than two-year window, which, in turn, meant there was substantial discontinuity to the effort.

Canada also sought reinforcement during this time, but was unable to gain any from its NATO allies. At the same time, American policy was in a state of tremendous flux. There were problems in Iraq, and there were national elections in the United States. Reinforcement of the Afghanistan project in Kandahar was not guaranteed, but

Canadian efforts tipped the balance, and by 2009 and into 2010, the Americans massively reinforced in Kandahar province. Canada played some role in pressing the American administration to make up its mind on a future course of action in Afghanistan at this time.

All the while, al Qaeda was under pressure elsewhere, mostly in Pakistan, and unable to mount extensive or damaging international operations, as they had pre-9/11. The organization was unable to re-establish its infrastructure in Afghanistan and was under continual attack by armed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and Intelligence/Surveillance/Reconnaissance (ISR) platforms operating from Afghanistan. In other words, Canadian strategic objectives circa late-2001 were still being achieved by 2010. Al Qaeda remained disrupted. The Taliban and other insurgent groups, however, continued to challenge the Afghanistan project in myriad ways.

These and other challenges only have slowed down the reconstruction effort and have not stopped it in its tracks. There is an Afghan governance system in place. Is it perfect and incorruptible? No. There are Afghan military forces and police that report to the national government. Are they somewhat corrupt and inefficient by Western standards? Yes. Are they an improvement over armed bands with fealty to a local power broker? This is debatable in some areas. There were no such forces ten years ago.

The technical capacity of Afghans has significantly improved, particularly in terms of construction. The geometric proliferation of construction companies with contracts from the Afghan government, international agencies, and so forth, should be noted. Is all this construction capacity and activity above board? No. The idea of contracting anything, let alone an Afghan construction company with a range of heavy equipment, was unheard of in 2001. The continual proliferation of consumer goods, particularly electronic goods, at the district level is a strong indicator of an increasingly functional economy. Somebody is procuring and selling these goods, and somebody buys them.[12] That money comes from somewhere.

Reuters RTR4XQ0 (Anonymous Reuters photographer)

Canadian soldiers walk through a poppy field in Markhanai village, 5 May 2002.

However, those critical of the Afghanistan project seldom look at this micro level, and instead focus upon the lack of progress in the poppy economy, corruption, and gender quality. The increasing level of violence is taken as a given that things are not working. I have yet to see a breakdown of that violence. How much of it is insurgent violence and how much of it is commercial violence? Is any of it attributable to Pashtunwali or other tribal dispute-resolution mechanisms? How much of it relates to tribal rivalry? At what point does this all intersect? There are high levels of violence and corruption in other countries (like Colombia and Mexico), but there is still steady economic and social progress overall. Indeed, for point of comparison, the kill-rate for Mexican civilians in the city of Cuidad de Juarez, at 2000 per year, compares to the kill rate of Afghans civilians in the entire country (9759 dead from 2006 to 2011).[13]

All this is to say that it has only been ten years since the removal of the Taliban and the prevention of another civil war. Afghanistan suffered over 20 years of war and had 1.5 to 2 million people killed in the 1980s alone.[14] The fact that the Afghanistan project has progressed this far in this short a period of time is remarkable when the lens is adjusted away from the immediate problems and challenges, and some perspective is restored.

Keep in mind also that the Afghanistan project has been under continual attack by outside forces that do not want to see it succeed. I specifically refer to Pakistan, but also to those who provide weapons to insurgents. In my travels, I have encountered factory-fresh Chinese 82mm recoilless rifles and their ammunition, Iranian RPGs and explosively-formed penetrators, Iranian factory-made, mass-produced IED detonation components, and Pakistani copies of plastic Italian anti-tank mines. There is far too much criticism directed at the international effort, and not nearly enough directed against those who have set out to thwart it. This tends to be a particularly Canadian problem in that anti-American elements in our culture easily lock on to and disproportionately criticize American activities, and do not provide fair coverage of the nefarious behaviour of others. There have been no Canadian news stories, let alone academic analysis, excoriating Iran, China, or Pakistan for facilitating the flow of weapons to the insurgents in Afghanistan.

Reuters RTXF64N by Stringer Afghanistan

Taliban militants in an undisclosed location in Afghanistan, 8 May 2009.

Let us never forget from where and why the Taliban movement emerged. Despite the media's repeated assertions that Kandahar is the "spiritual home of the Taliban," the movement initially acted as a militia on behalf of economic interests in Quetta who wanted Highway 4 from Quetta to Kandahar free from interference, so their trade could flow to the 'Stans.' Later on, the Taliban received a variety of support when elements inside the Pakistani security system realized that if Pashtuns energies were focused elsewhere, they would not pursue 'Pashtunistan' at the expense of Pakistan. Still others accepted the idea that an independent Afghanistan might ally itself with India, with dire strategic consequences for Pakistan.[15] If the motivation behind support for the Taliban and other anti-Afghan groups is the neutering of Afghanistan, we might even make the case that Pakistan is engaging in colonialism, and that Canadian efforts to protect the Afghan people from this external threat are laudable, morally acceptable, and thus far successful.

Pitched higher, the variant of Islam that historically dominates southern Afghanistan is Sunni Sufism. Islamic fundamentalists, be they Shi'a or Sunni Wahabbist, find inclusive sufist mysticism to be heretical. Indeed, the Deobandists in Pakistan, who are closely aligned with Saudi Sunni Wahhabists and the Taliban, are violently opposed to Sufism. Shi'a Iran aligned itself with Hazara groups and supported the Northern Alliance against the Taliban…but did not arm Sunni Sufist groups. Given these facts, we could also make the case that Canada has protected a moderate Islamic minority from ethnic cleansing, or more appropriately, genocide in its proper definition: the destruction of a culture.[16] Although the Canadian government's ability to comprehend such

matters was limited at the time, the unintended results remain the same. We have done what we can to protect the Afghan people in southern Afghanistan, regardless of what frame we want to put on it.

DND photo IS2011-1013-10 by Sergeant Matthew McGregor

After being thoroughly searched, two men and a child on a motorcycle are allowed to pass through Canadian soldiers leading an early morning operation to conduct searches of fields and compounds during Operation Athena, Kandahar, Afghanistan, 4 June 2011.

Dispensing with "Was it Worth It?"

I would suggest that the crippling and discrediting of the al Qaeda movement was worth the effort alone. This terrorist corporation had momentum and increasing credibility in the Muslim world prior to and well after 9-11. Success breeds success. The momentum was checked by the intervention in Afghanistan, which allowed us to examine the movement's interior and put it to flight. The continual pressure on al Qaeda's remnants in Pakistan via Afghanistan, coupled to the Afghanistan intervention and the defeat of al Qaeda in Iraq, has not allowed it to gain purchase in the 'Arab Spring' environment (yet), and, in the eyes of the West, the elimination of Osama bin Laden established a book-end to the 9/11 attacks. Although we can quibble over the actual dimensions of the impact of the bin Laden 'hit,' al Qaeda no longer terrorizes the West's psychology in the ways it did in 2001 and 2002. If the elimination of Osama bin Laden in 2011 played a role in this reduction, and that assault was launched from Afghanistan, we must consider the possibility that there is some measureable success to intervening in Afghanistan. Clearly other means employed by the Clinton administration in the form of cruise missile volleys were ineffective, diplomatic and other attempts to separate bin Laden from the Taliban were fruitless. The only way to attack al Qaeda was to go after their facilities and leadership in Afghanistan.

And, if we apply the axiom "you broke it, you buy it," it was morally incumbent upon the international community to assist the Afghans in regaining their balance in the post-Taliban world. The same critics who have vocalized about the inefficient efforts to stabilize Afghanistan would have likely been equally critical had there been no reconstruction effort at all, and Afghanistan lapsed back into a repeat of the events of 1993-1994. Canada chose to be part of that effort in 2003, and played a lead role in stabilizing Kabul and backstopping the Afghan Transitional Administration. Those efforts had measureable, positive effects. In Kandahar, Canada embarked upon a stabilization and reconstruction operation, but found herself under attack by an increasingly sophisticated insurgency. The inability of the insurgency to attain its primary objective in southern Afghanistan from 2006 to 2009 because of the presence of Canadians and their disruptive activity is a measurable success. Yes, progress in terms of reconstruction was not what it could or perhaps should have been. Yes, gender equality is not in general practice. Yes, schools remain unmanned. But the alternative was far worse. Collapse of the coalition effort in Kandahar would have doomed the international effort in Afghanistan half a decade ago. Instead, the Afghanistan project struggles along, five steps forward, three back.

In a recent conversation I had with a retired general, we discussed obliquely the "Was it worth it?" meme. One means by which he attempted to answer the question was to search for enduring effects of Canadian involvement, particularly in reconstruction. That was his measurement of effectiveness. Is it too soon to tell if we have enduring effects? Yes and no. A paved highway has a significant effect on the movement of goods: that can be measured. Ideas also follow roads into rural areas that were previously cut off from mainstream society. Measuring the impact of this will take years, perhaps decades. We may not have been able to force the Pashtuns to alter course on gender equality issues in accordance with Canadian values. But how do we know that somewhere a young Afghan girl who had positive exposure to female Canadian soldiers may decide to break out of the societal system-or even challenge it? We just don't know yet.

All of this to say that Canada, through her contributions to the international Afghanistan project, has done what can be done to set the Afghans up for success. What the Afghans choose to do (and they are more than capable of making such decisions) with all this is another matter. Whether they have the capacity as a society to continue along this trajectory or relapse is in their hands, not ours. The enduring legacy of Canada's involvement in Afghanistan should consist of an amalgam of these aspects. This is not the Second World War with VE Day-like parades. The enduring legacy of Canada's involvement in that war, it could be argued before 1990, was not only the destruction of Nazi totalitarianism, but also a bombed-out divided Germany and a world on the brink of nuclear holocaust over access to Berlin. After 1990, things looked a bit different. The enduring legacy now is a pacifist, unified Germany with immense economic growth and the highest standard of living in the world. We cannot predict with certainty what Afghanistan will look like 20 and 40 years downstream. To answer the question "Was it worth it?" is, in some ways, necessarily tentative, premature, and politically motivated.

DND photo IS2011-1013-31 by Sergeant Matthew McGregor

Afghan children surround Corporal Marie-Anne Hardy as she takes a break during an early morning operation to conduct cordoned searches of fields and compounds, 4 June 2011.

Notes

1. A meme is an idea, behaviour, or style that spreads from person to person within a culture ~ Editor
2. CBC Cross Country Check Up, 10 July 2011, "Canada's Combat Role in Afghanistan Ends… . Was it Worth It?"
3. Thane Burnett, "War Wounds: Polls Suggest we don't feel Afghanistan Mission was Worth It." in The Ottawa Sun, 4 August 2011.
4. "The Afghanistan War: Was it Worth It?" in The Socialist Worker, Issue 533, August 2011.
5. Paul Koring, "Was it Worth It? Canadians Reflect on the War in Afghanistan," in The Globe and Mail, 6 February 2012.

6. (20 November 2007) Library of Parliament, “Afghanistan: Chronology of Canadian Parliamentary Events”; (February 2008) CBC News, “The Afghan Debate: Where the Parties Stand on the Deployment of Troops”; Hansard, 16 April 2007; www.ndp.ca “Debate Fact Check: Duceppe Wrong on NDP Afghan Vote.”
7. Rosie DiManno, “Little Reason to ask of the Afghanistan Mission was worth it,” in The Toronto Star, 8 July 2011.
8. Koring, “Was it Worth It?”.
9. Sean M. Maloney, “On a Pale Horse? Conceptualizing Narcotics Production in Southern Afghanistan and its relationship to the Narco-Terror Nexus,” in Small Wars and Insurgencies, Vol. 20, Issue 1, 2009.
10. George Tenet, At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), Chapter 14.
11. See Osama bin Laden, Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden (London: Verso Press, 2005), and Anonymous (Mike Sheuer), Through Our Enemies’ Eyes: Osama bin Laden, Radical Islam, and the Future of America (Washington DC: Brassey’s, 2002), for a depiction of al Qaeda goals.
12. Based upon the author’s observations in Panjwayi and Zharey districts over a five-year period.
13. See June S. Beittel, “Mexico’s Drug Trafficking Organizations: Source and Scope of Rising Violence,” Congressional Research Service, 7 January 2011, and http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2010/aug/10/afghanistan-civilian-casualties-statistics#data (based on UN data) for Afghanistan.
14. See Stephane Courtois et al, The Black Book of Communism (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997) for a breakdown of what pain the Soviet Union inflicted upon the Afghans.
15. See Zhaid Hussain, Frontline Pakistan: The Struggle with Militant Islam (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007) and Neamatollah Nojumi, The Rise of the Taliban In Afghanistan: Mass Mobilization, Civil War, and the Future of the Region (London: Palgrave publishing, 2002) on the origins of the Taliban.
16. John R. Schmidt, The Unraveling: Pakistan in the Age of Jihad (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011), Chapter 3.

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