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Why We Are In Afghanistan

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The assassination of Canadian diplomat Glyn Berry and the grievous wounding of Pte. William Edward Salikin, Cpl. Jeffrey Bailey and Master Cpl. Paul Franklin by a terrorist suicide bomb cell in Kandahar Sunday is a personally shocking but not unexpected event. I have recently returned from Kandahar, where I spent a month with the Canadian-led Provincial Reconstruction Team. As a military historian, I usually don't deal with diplomats and aid workers but the nature of Canada's war in Afghanistan put me in contact with Glyn and his counterparts: we had many fruitful conversations on our progress in the region and the new relationship between National Defence, Foreign Affairs, and the Canadian International Development Agency. I also had extensive contact with the soldiers from Patrol Company, who I accompanied on numerous patrols throughout Kandahar Province: theirs is a dangerous job in an unforgiving environment and Canadians need to know how professional and dedicated their soldiers are in the face of this. Those dangers were driven home for me personally when I arrived on 4 December right after a coalition patrol in Kandahar was hit with a suicide bomber, and then again on 12 December 2005 when I changed my plans at the last minute to attend a briefing. The G-Wagon I would have been traveling in on a long-range patrol was blown up by a Taliban road side bomb, seriously wounding Pte. Ryan Crawford and Capt. Manuel Panchana-Moya.

In the current election campaign, questions have been raised: why, exactly, is Canada in Afghanistan? What is it that demands that Canadians are placed in harms way in that country?

Canada has been engaged in Afghanistan militarily since 2001. This engagement has taken many forms and has evolved over the years, yet the objectives remain the same. Al Qaeda used Afghanistan as a training base, recruiting centre, and safe haven, hiding behind the Taliban shield after Osama Bin Laden's organization was forced to de-camp from the Sudan in 1996. The parasitical relationship between Al Qaeda and the Taliban "host" nation ensured, along with the rugged terrain and relative remoteness of Afghanistan, a substantial amount of security from any potential intervention. Al Qaeda facilities in Afghanistan were diverse and numerous, including biological and chemical weapons laboratories and multi-national terrorist training camps. Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, which Canada participated in immediately after the attacks on New York and Washington, was designed to pierce the Taliban exoskeleton so that special operations forces could attack the Al Qaeda "meat" underneath. Coalition operations ripped out the Al Qaeda infrastructure, in the main by working alongside the Afghan people, many of whom resented the use of their country as a base for international terrorism and who were willing to take up arms to eject them.

Canada, along with the other coalition partners, committed to ensuring that Afghanistan could no longer be used as a safe haven and base area for international terrorists or their sympathizers. This, of course, was easier said than done. The remnants of the Taliban and their Al Qaeda support networks continue to operate from Pakistan and are committed to re-taking Afghanistan. The critical battleground, once the Taliban were physically removed from power and put to flight, are the peoples of Afghanistan. Back in 2002-03 the danger lay in the possibility that anarchy would reign in a power vacuum, and armed groups with no popular legitimacy would plunge the country into an inter-tribal or inter-ethnic civil war similar to what happened in 1993, which lay the ground work for the original Taliban intervention in 1996. Skillful use of military force and capacity building by Canada and her allies has, from 2002 to today, borne fruit. The Taliban, as a movement, enjoy

almost no popular support outside of the front-line Pashtun-dominated provinces that border Pakistan: even there, their influence is shaky at best and they know it. The danger now lies in the possibility that the Afghan people may become disenchanted with the slow government reconstruction process, one which has many problems including corruption, and turn on the government or even side with elements of the Taliban out of mutual convenience.

Glyn Berry, working in the Provincial Reconstruction Team, was part of a Canadian effort to stop this slide back from the successes of 2001-02. The Canadian PRT in Kandahar is structured to help the Afghan government build its ability to govern and police this disparate and strategically critical province. At the same time, the PRT works with the Afghan people to convince them to support counterinsurgency efforts conducted by military forces against Taliban urban terrorist cells and guerilla fighters in the hills.

Closer to home, Canada's credibility within the Western coalition of forces is at stake. The failure of Canada to lead an effective multinational coalition into Zaire in 1996 damaged Canada's reputation amongst the ABCA countries, countries who are the mainspring of the effort in Afghanistan. Canada's commitment to lead the military effort in RC South in Afghanistan will be part of the long road back from the debacles of the early and mid-1990s. That process started with Kosovo in 1999 and has continued throughout our time in Afghanistan.

If we fail in Kandahar, we may fail in Afghanistan. And we cannot afford to fail in Afghanistan: it is the closest thing we have to a regional or campaign victory in our global war against the Al Qaeda movement. Afghanistan has critical psychological properties: it is widely called the Graveyard of Empires- and with good reason. Al Qaeda never anticipated we would come after them there. We have a moral and psychological success as much as a material one, but that success remains to be consolidated. The Canadian effort is a critical part of that consolidation. Al Qaeda was

emboldened by the international community's failure in Somalia, particularly when coalition forces took casualties and departed. We have to prove that Canada can stick with the Afghanistan project, despite the casualties. The Afghan people have put their trust in us and we are partners with them in this enterprise. Glyn Berry knew this and was committed to the effort to capacity build in Kandahar. And that is what he gave his life for.

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