

So we lost.

We know now that more than ten-years after the invasion of Afghanistan - it will all end in failure. Like much connected with this odd war, there was no formal announcement, no hauling down of flags, rather the news came last month in a secret report written by NATO officials and leaked to the BBC which says that the Taliban will probably take over once western forces leave the country. This report was, in part, corroborated by the Congressional testimony of a senior American field commander who this month spoke out in Washington about the “*absence of success on virtually every level*” in Afghanistan. Last week, we had the news that Hamid Karzai’s administration is negotiating with both the Taliban and the Iranian government (there is no better indicator that NATO has lost, than the rise of the influence of the Iranians). And this week, the Karzai Defence Minister stated that if the Afghan forces are cut (i.e.: 4 billion dollars is not given to the government) it could all end in a catastrophe.

At this point, we need a Royal Commission into Canada’s part in NATO’s failure in Afghanistan. The Commission should be established in an innovative fashion – to borrow something from the Afghans – more a Loya Jirga than a traditional Canadian Royal Commission. For too often Royal Commissions descend into partisan sniping and the failure in Afghanistan goes deeper than simple Liberals versus Conservatives (both administrations helped in this war) it goes to the very heart of the Canadian political and military systems. In a Loya Jirga, all stake-holders (Afghan-Canadians, ordinary foot soldiers, translators, officers, senior generals, aid workers, politicians) get to enter into one large hall and speak their minds. Some of the meeting is on-the-record, some is off-the-record, but it goes on until answers are found and our entire system is rethought and reimagined.

We must undertake this exercise. Over one hundred-and-sixty of our people died there. Their sacrifice demands that we find out answers as to why our system failed. Here then to get the conversation started are a couple of possible explanations for the failure.

I suspect that NATO as a whole, and Canadians specifically, fought too much like Americans. This is not a mean-spirited jibe. Lots of American soldiers are deeply principled and courageous, but from my experience in Iraq watching the current U.S. military in action is like seeing the part of the novel *Catch-22* where Milo Minderbinder has taken over the war and brave people are being sacrificed for a system that is profiting off them. Currently, it seems the American military system is not set up to win wars, but rather to prolong them so lots of US-based defence companies can make lots of money.

There are alternative ways of fighting. For example, the 19<sup>th</sup> century British regime in India (which leaving morality aside was more successful than NATO operations in Afghanistan) emphasized that most senior officials, including all military officers had to learn an indigenous language. Capacity in languages could and did extend all the way to regular soldiers. As well, the regiments of Sikhs, Pashtuns and other troops were not

asked to swear allegiance using quasi-western methods – as they often are in modern-day Afghanistan, which allows Taliban traitors to regularly enter training camps and kill their trainers – but their own oaths based on their own religions and cultures.

This inability to consider seriously, that our people - from foot soldiers to high-ranking diplomats - should be trained for years in Afghan culture is based, in part, on systemic racism. It is the same kind of institutional racism that gave rise to the idea of NATO training the new Afghan military. Twenty-five years ago, which set of fighters kicked the Soviet war machine's butt – NATO or the Afghans? Instead of Canadians teaching their foot soldiers basic military manoeuvres could we not have hired many of the former senior Afghan commanders to teach our officers and men their indigenous fighting methods? After all to beat an enemy like the Taliban you have to understand them. How much useful cultural, linguistic and military training did our people actually have before setting foot in Afghanistan?

However, the real issue may be that we, as Canadians, never knew what our people were fighting for. At first, it was to hunt down Osama bin Laden. Now we know that for most of the time he was actually living in a comfortable house next to a military base in Pakistan. Then the casus belli was to bring democracy to Afghanistan. That claim went out the window when the 2009 elections were riddled with fraud and the U.N.'s own deputy election monitor resigned in protest. Then it was to teach the Karzai administration good governance. If good governance means widespread corruption and offshore bank accounts then we succeeded, by any other measure we failed. Then Canada and NATO were supposed to be in Afghanistan to reduce drug trafficking. Whereas United Nations statistics actually show that the drug trade has expanded exponentially since 2001 and some NATO officials even claimed that Hamid Karzai's own brother had been heavily involved in the trafficking. Then came the nebulous claim that Canada was in Afghanistan so that our officials could be at some metaphorical table where they could share our unique views on international dialogue. This particular shibboleth was destroyed by WikiLeaks, when those previously-secret diplomatic papers revealed not a single instance of Canadian diplomats having any worthwhile influence to speak of in Afghanistan. Then we were in Afghanistan to teach human rights. This view is challenging, as for years whenever our military captured any Afghans, they promptly put them in local jails where many innocent people were tortured.

In short, NATO and Canada failed because we did not know what we doing or how to go about doing it. Finding out how we came to be in this situation means asking profound and complicated questions of our very system of government and military command. There will be few easy answers. Nor are they the fault of one particular political party. But over-one-hundred-and-sixty of our best people died in Afghanistan. We owe it to them to find out the answers and make sure that this failure never happens again.

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