

Mackay met with head of 'PSY-OPS'

TOM BLACKWELL (feat. BARRY COOPER)

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Soon after meeting U.S. General William Caldwell in Afghanistan last June, Bob Rae offered the strongest signal to date his party would support keeping Canadian troops in the country past 2011 to help train Afghan troops.

That was exactly the kind of response the U.S. commander allegedly went to unusual lengths to try to achieve, according to an eye-opening media report Thursday.

The officer in charge of NATO's Kabul-based training mission assigned his psychological operations, or "psyops," unit to build up background information and develop personalized strategies to influence such visiting politicians, according to the story in Rolling Stone magazine.

It is not clear if Mr. Rae, Peter MacKay, the Defence Minister, or any other Canadian visitors were targeted.

"My job in psy-ops is to play with people's heads, to get the enemy to behave the way we want them to behave," said Lieutenant-Colonel Michael Holmes, who headed the propaganda unit.

"I'm prohibited from doing that to our own people. When you ask me to try to use these skills on senators and congressman, you're crossing a line."

A Pentagon spokesman said Thursday the U.S. Defence Department was preparing to investigate the allegations, while Gen. Caldwell's office denied the charges in a statement to the magazine.

Mr. MacKay met the U.S. commander last April, but a spokesman said it would be "improper" for him to comment while the matter is under investigation.

"Suffice to say, Minister MacKay has enjoyed a positive working relationship with numerous colleagues from across NATO, including General Caldwell," said Jay Paxton of the minister's office in an email response to queries.

"Minister MacKay knows the importance of the NATO training mission and is proud of its numerous successes."

Neither Mr. Rae nor the other Liberal, Conservative and NDP MPs who met the general last June could be reached for comment.

But a Canadian security expert said the allegations seemed to involve the kind of activities the average publicrelations or lobbying firm engages in every day.

According to Rolling Stone, the commander assigned the psy-ops unit to target visiting U.S. lawmakers, including Senator John McCain, the 2008 Republican presidential candidate, fellow senators Joe Lieberman and Al Franken, Admiral Mike Mullen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Czech ambassador to Afghanistan and the German interior minister.

Col. Holmes told the magazine he was given the job of digging into the backgrounds of visiting officials to craft "a deeper analysis of the pressure points we could use to leverage the delegation for more funds."

The article, which said the events took place in the first few months of 2010, did not mention any Canadian politicians.

After his visit, Mr. Rae said the Liberals were open to talking about keeping Canadian troops in Afghanistan after the July 2011 pullout approved by Parliament.

"We have an obligation to see this thing through," he said at the time. "I just want to say on behalf of the Liberal party that we are very committed to a role post-2011."

The Conservative government has since said it would keep as many as 1,000 troops in Kabul for three years to train Afghan security forces, considered key to the country's stable future.

Barry Cooper, a senior fellow with the University of Calgary's Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute, said he suspects the article stemmed from a dispute between Col. Holmes -who ended up being reprimanded for alleged rule breaches during the affair -and his superiors.

"There is some kind of internal bureaucratic squabble," he said. "Here is some colonel who is in psy-ops and is being asked to do PR, and he doesn't like it . The hierarchical thing is probably more significant. Whether or not Lt.-Col. Holmes is the good guy is very hard to judge"

The difference between public-relations and psy-ops is usually only a matter of who is being targeted, a domestic audience or the enemy, Prof. Cooper added.

It is only natural military leaders would try to persuade politicians to back their own institutional interests, though seasoned politicians are not likely to swallow such lobbying uncritically.