

What we didn't know about the war in Afghanistan

BRIAN STEWART

CBC

October 28, 2011

It sometimes feels as if our distant war in Afghanistan never really happened, so rarely is it analyzed or discussed any more.

Perhaps we all feel it's over and done with. But wars never let you get away that easily. One can only hide for so long from history before its inconvenient facts seek you out and demand answers.

Such is the case with "Lessons learned? What Canada should learn from Afghanistan," a 54-page study for the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute and a powerful examination of our stunningly incoherent approach to that war.

The writers are two of our most respected military historians, professor emeritus Jack Granatstein and David Bercuson, of the University of Calgary, who also happen to be two well-known supporters of the war.

Yet they manage to peel away layer after layer of weak political leadership, jealous bureaucratic infighting, and the complete lack of strategic insight in Ottawa, which bedevilled Canada's mission there from start to finish.

What gives their assessment all the more punch is that they believe the mission was a noble one and don't see the war as lost. But they never shy away from revealing some truly horrible mismanagement.

After reading "Lessons learned," you will be left with the alarming thought that Ottawa ministers and bureaucrats never had a clue how to run a big military operation overseas, and never took the trouble to learn.

More mystery

Even the way Canada volunteered itself, in the spring of 2005, to take control of the dangerous Kandahar province is a murky subject all these years later.

A Canadian soldier in Kandahar, June 2011. A Canadian soldier in Kandahar, June 2011.

We've heard it said that the commitment was driven by the military. But Bercuson and Granatstein reveal that Foreign Affairs and CIDA were enthusiastic hawks and that there was a strong desire in cabinet both to please the U.S. and elevate Canada's international influence.

The study also has a hint of something more sinister.

Some months before the then Liberal cabinet discussed sending in a force of any size — and this was a minority government, remember — at least one senior U.S. general in NATO told a Canadian liaison officer that Ottawa had told Washington it would send in a battle group.

Where exactly did that promise originate from, and on what basis could it have been made? These are just some of many mysteries crying out for investigation.

The big one, of course, is why the Paul Martin government in 2006, and then the Stephen Harper one just months later, failed so spectacularly to recognize the risks they were allowing our troops to face.

As these two historians point out, Ottawa was gambling that our soldiers would be well supported in Kandahar by NATO, even though senior Canadian officers attached to NATO were already warning that our European allies were putting "caveats" on their troops.

These were restrictions that would limit their ability to fight and make them dangerously undependable, as events quickly proved.

In short, Ottawa put great faith in an alliance that its own military distrusted, and Ottawa was dead wrong.

No intel

As we now see, Canada committed itself to Kandahar, home of the Taliban, without even conducting a serious intelligence study of the area and, incredibly, without taking into account Kandahar's long undefended border with Pakistan, which proved to be a sanctuary for insurgents.

The report quotes an early Canadian commander in Afghanistan, Gen. David Fraser, saying "Nobody was collecting information on Pakistan. Pakistan was a black hole. I went to various agencies in Ottawa and said can you help me and they said no, but we'll change our collection plan" and try to find you more intelligence.

Still, Ottawa did not hurry. According to U.S. officials, Canada didn't increase its intelligence effort in the region for two more years, when CSIS, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, became involved.

Even military intelligence that resourceful officers were able to pick up from their U.S. colleagues was often ignored.

The first Canadian commander to go in, Col. Ian Hope, had been briefed by his U.S. colleagues to expect a Taliban surge that first summer. Yet a blasé Ottawa refused to give Canadian troops their own helicopter support for medical evacuation, something that had to be begged from the Americans.

The less said

Because of Canadian cabinet secrecy, we know far less about our route to war and the decisions that were made than citizens in Britain and the U.S. know about what their governments did.

We don't, for example, know if the Martin government even asked the Canadian military for a detailed appreciation of the coming mission, apart from a superficial scan of maps, before it decided "let's go."

The study is equally blunt about the failings of the Harper government's almost incomprehensible management of the war.

Was our mission about defeating the Taliban? Or promoting human rights? Or reconstruction? Were we really determined never to "cut and run," or were we actually anxiously packing up to get out?

"It is impossible to discern a clear and consistent line on the Kandahar and Afghanistan mission over the course of five years," Bercuson and Granatstein state.

This was clearly Prime Minister Harper's fault as his office (the PMO) rigorously controlled every aspect of communications, muting the military's own voice. And Harper, for reasons still unknown, seemed to feel that feeding Canadians as little information as possible was appropriate war management.

"The prime minister" the study suggests, "may have concluded that the war could not be won, was politically costly and therefore, the less said of aims and objectives the better."

Lessons learned

In the end, Canada never even sought to use the new diplomatic influence that it believed this war and the sacrifice of our troops would give it. That may be the cruellest rebuke of all.

Even when Afghanistan was being discussed in Washington, there was no mechanism to ensure that we would be heard at the highest level. As the historians conclude, "Canada apparently did not try very hard to raise its voice and had no impact whatever on key U.S. decisions regarding Afghanistan."

So much for the old boast that military sacrifice will at least "give us a seat at the table."

The study's lessons for future conflicts emphasize the need for better government leadership, clear communications, solid intelligence, and a deep suspicion of military alliances.

"Lessons learned" should be a must-read for all members of Parliament and Ottawa bureaucrats. And for anyone else who wishes to know what it is we still need to know about our years in a distant war.