

Afghan success and critical context available on the Internet

By Bob Bergen

Much like YouTube changed the way the world regards video news, critical information on NATO's successes in war-torn Afghanistan is readily available on the Internet for those who think, if not fear, that Canadian soldiers are dying there for naught.

This vital context is found on a government of Canada website that contains authoritative evidence presented to Parliament's Standing Committee on National Defence by military and academic experts. It is at: <http://cmte.parl.gc.ca/cmte/CommitteePublication.aspx?SourceId=172369>

By going there, clicking on the evidence button and getting past the six pages or so of petty politics, you will be rewarded with an opportunity to examine more than 40 pages of expert testimony on the Canadian military contribution in Afghanistan.

The witnesses appearing before the committee are retired Lt.-Gen. Richard J. Evraire, chairman of the Conference of Defence Associations, retired Col. Brian S. MacDonald, a senior analyst with the CDA; and Dr. Sean Maloney, an associate professor of history at the Royal Military College of Canada.

In more than an hour and a half of testimony, the three are peppered with the truly most important and difficult questions surrounding the mission by Liberal, Bloc, NDP and Conservative MPs alike.

They include:

- Who are the Taliban; to what do they owe their existence; what do they want; and what outcome are they seeking?
- How can the newly-deployed Canadian tanks – known more for blasting, demolition and destruction – contribute to reconstruction and development?
- Is there a risk that Afghans will stop viewing NATO troops as an army of liberation and more as an occupying force?
- Can democracy be restored and the country rebuilt by solely resorting to weapons?
- Are frontline troops put at a greater security risk by the NDP's recent call for the withdrawal of the Canadian military from Afghanistan and what would it mean to Canada, NATO and Afghanistan?
- Can the Taliban ever be defeated and who will do it?
- Are the Canadian public and politicians the targets of Taliban information operations?
- Is Canada a potential terrorist target like New York, London, Madrid and Bali?

The answers to those questions, as you might expect, are complex but the tone is conversational and they are explained in refreshingly direct language.

Those who invest the reading time will be left with little doubt about the value of the Canadian contribution and with an informed view of the admittedly difficult challenges that lay ahead.

For example, despite the grim news about the 42 Canadians killed there so far, little has been said about NATO's successes in Afghanistan since 2001.

Evraire points out that 4.8 million children, one third of them girls, are back in school; 12,000 villages now have access to clean drinking water or funding to secure it; 63,000 soldiers have been disarmed; 11,000 pieces of heavy military equipment have been secured or eliminated and 3.7 million refugees have returned.

It hasn't been easy and it should never be forgotten that the deaths of two Canadians and injuries to five others in early October occurred even as they were guarding precisely such road-building reconstruction work.

Dr. Maloney, meanwhile, noted that frontier justice at the end of a rope has been stamped out, the streets of Kandahar are clean and irrigation systems have dramatically improved. Unfortunately rebuilding the war-torn country could take at least a decade, if not longer.

Admittedly much of the success has taken place in the north of Afghanistan and only to a lesser extent in the south where the Canadians are going head to head in combat with the al-Qaeda supported Taliban and other insurgents.

Their aim, Evraire thinks, is to drive NATO out and to establish a radical Islamic enclave, supported by al-Qaeda training centres in nearby Pakistan, that can't be assailed by the international community.

His testimony provides valuable context for this week's missile strikes against an al-Qaeda training centre in Pakistan by Pakistani forces and the international effort it will take to defeat the insurgents.

Within Afghanistan, the greatest challenge is said to be properly training and equipping the corrupt Afghan national police and the only marginally better national army which will ultimately and eventually be responsible for the country's security.

Dr. Maloney explained that a Canadian pull-out from the mission, as the NDP suggests, would not only result in a psychological victory for the enemy but would severely damage Canada's reputation in the world.

The worst-case scenario, Evraire's testimony revealed, would be a NATO failure because a neo-Taliban structure financed by a projected \$1.9 billion in drug money in 2006 that could easily overthrow the national government forces.

The evidence before the Standing Committee on National Defence is admittedly not light reading, but because the issues in Afghanistan are so complex and the outcomes so critical to the post-9/11 world, it is valuable – if not imperative – reading.

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