

Afghanistan's war dead could threaten Canada's international voice

By Bob Bergen

The last four sentences of *The New York Times Magazine* article questioning the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's military success in Afghanistan speak volumes about the critical issues facing NATO leaders in Riga, Latvia, later this month.

Quoting an unidentified American soldier, they said:

"...you're not kidding about the Canadians going down.

We kept on having to go to the big ceremonies for their bodies to get loaded on the plane.

It seemed like they were getting messed up pretty bad. I definitely don't get the whole 'success story' thing."

That, in a nutshell, provides critical ammunition to those who question whether the NATO mission in Afghanistan – which to date has cost 42 Canadian soldiers' lives – can ever be successful or whether our military should be involved in a pointless war.

The war in Iraq seemed pointless and un-winnable to sufficient numbers of Americans to the point that Iraq was thought to be a critical factor in the recent mid-term election that handed control of Congress to the Democrats.

That political reality is now forcing America's Republican President George W. Bush to review his seemingly failing policy of building democracy with military might in the Middle East.

Some want a speedy withdrawal of America's troops from Iraq while others suggest a "phased withdrawal" of American troops should begin within the next four to six months.

On the other hand, there are others who argue that even a phased withdrawal will precipitate Iraq's descent into civil war.

They advocate a temporary increase in American troops to provide the security necessary to convince Iraqis rebuilding their war-ravaged country is still possible.

Such a security-oriented mission enabling rapid reconstruction and development is precisely NATO's strategy in Afghanistan.

Despite NATO's many achievements there, the rising fatality counts of Canadian, British and Americans are prompting many – like the American soldier who attended the Canadian ramp ceremonies and others - to question how successful that strategy has been or will be.

No one is talking about a phased withdrawal of Americans from Afghanistan because clearly the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are very different.

America invaded Iraq in 2003 based on erroneous security intelligence that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. The absence of a United Nations mandate undermined its legal and moral authority.

In the case of Afghanistan, America routed the Taliban government for harboring al-Qaeda which master-minded the September 11, 2001, airliner attacks on New York and Washington.

There may be some merit to the argument that America took its eye off the ball in Afghanistan by contributing only 4,500 troops to reconstruct Afghanistan in 2002 instead of some 25,000 thought needed.

But, five years after the UN mandated NATO's International Security Assistance Force to create the conditions necessary for Afghan stabilization and development, much of Afghanistan is relatively secure.

However, in the southern and eastern provinces where the Canadians, Dutch, British, Americans, Romanians, Estonians and Portuguese are fighting Pakistan-backed

insurgents financed by record breaking poppy-opium yields, the Taliban appears to be back with a vengeance.

That resurgence has prompted Britain and the Netherlands to pressure reluctant European Union countries for increased military support to their embattled NATO allies in the south.

There are some 11,000 U.S. and 20,000 NATO troops from 37 countries in Afghanistan, including about 2,300 Canadians.

But, not all NATO troops are available for combat in the most volatile regions.

In particular, Germany's 2,750 soldiers, France's 1,000 and Turkey's 475 have come under criticism for national restrictions – or so-called “caveats” – placed on them by their governments to avoid the fierce fighting and casualties experienced by the Canadians and British.

Germany's and France's caveats keep their troops in the relatively stable northern regions. Turkey's caveats won't let its troops operate outside of Kabul.

Some caveats restrict certain forces from being used at night; others restrict them from fighting against the Taliban; while still others allow soldiers to defend themselves, but won't let them instigate combat.

It is one thing for some Canadians to wonder aloud about the usefulness of such a hamstrung collective security alliance, but it will be totally another if Americans start thinking that way, too.

Although NATO has been a historic cornerstone of America's foreign and defence policies, there is nothing stopping a fed-up United States government from seeking out coalitions of the willing – such as Britain, Australia and Canada – rather than a weak-kneed regional alliance like NATO in the pursuit of its future foreign policy objectives.

Should that happen, Canada stands to lose the institutionalized voice it has had on the international stage in NATO since the alliance was formed in 1949.

That is one reason why the NATO summit meeting in Riga on Nov. 28 and 29 – where pressure will be brought to bear on apprehensive members for more robust contributions – may not only be crucial to the war in Afghanistan, but the future of Canada's defence and foreign policies, as well.

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