

Canada's mission in Afghanistan is not America's Iraq

As America's failing war in Iraq loses ever greater public support, there are many in Canada who would link our military mission in Afghanistan to Iraq at every opportunity.

They are wrong, but they persist.

For example, when six Canadian soldiers were killed in Afghanistan last week by one of the biggest roadside bomb or improvised explosive device yet blew up their RG-31 Nyala troop carrier, one headline screamed "Taliban adopt deadly Iraqi tactics."

When six Canadians were killed in April by an improvised explosive device or IED as they are known, hit a LAV III, one headline proclaimed "Taliban importing skills from Iraq."

What nonsense.

When Canada decided last year to send a squadron of Leopard tanks to Afghanistan, one Canadian reserve infantryman I know said if he was a Taliban commander, one of the first things he would try would be to blow up one of the Leopards, purely for the psychological damage it would cause.

How would he do that?

He'd stack landmines, one on top of the other, possibly up to three of them, just as insurgents in Iraq are doing.

That isn't an Iraqi tactic, that is a military tactic.

And every time the Taliban escalate their attacks, Canada's soldiers improve their equipment to match and even overwhelm their enemies. That's just what war fighters do.

Canada didn't start out in Afghanistan with tanks, they began with Iltis jeeps and LAV IIIs.

When the Iltis jeeps were found to be too vulnerable, the Canadians switched to G-Wagons. When the G-Wagons were found to be too vulnerable to yet bigger IEDs, the Canadians switched to the boat-hulled Nyalas, designed to withstand mine blasts.

Canadians in Leopards may one day be killed by stacked mines, as my soldier friend suspects the Taliban will try. So far the tanks have faced rocket propelled grenades, mines and smaller IEDs.

This is war, but it's not a George W. Bush-style war, as New Democratic Party leader Jack Layton claims; Layton who uses the American president's name in the same sentence as Prime Minister Stephen Harper at every opportunity.

Layton would pull the Canadian troops out of Afghanistan now.

It is true that the American war in Iraq is going very badly; even the prestigious New York Times editorial board now argues as it did on the weekend that it is time for the United States to leave Iraq without any more delay than the Pentagon needs to organize an orderly exit. That's a sure sign elite public opinion has shifted dramatically against President Bush's war.

In Canada, Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion seems to have conveniently forgotten that it was the Liberals who sent our troops to Afghanistan following the 9/11 attacks, which was entirely the right thing to do.

He was a cabinet minister, in fact, in the Liberal government which committed Canadians to combat in Kandahar, as opposed to peacekeeping in Kabul.

Now, Dion says, the Liberals will not support keeping the troops in Afghanistan past February 2009.

One hates to be cynical, but one can't help but wonder if Dion has his eyes on the public opinion polls in Quebec which indicate the vast majority of Quebecers want to abandon any combat role for the Canadian Forces and a clear majority want Canada to pull out of the Afghan mission.

The Liberals need votes where ever they can get them, but Canada's defence and foreign policies ought to be based on national interests, not crass partisan politics.

The previous Liberal government committed Canadian troops to Afghanistan for exactly the right reasons.

We did not invade Afghanistan unilaterally looking for non-existent weapons of mass destruction.

Canadians were first sent there in early 2002 to fight the Taliban and al-Qaeda in the wake of 9/11, which was a direct attack on our most important NATO ally by al-Qaeda which was supported by the Taliban.

It doesn't get much simpler than that.

Canada is now involved there as part of a much larger NATO coalition reconstruction effort that is supported by the United Nations.

This war can be won.

The one thing that is admittedly wrong with the complex Afghan mission is that it is not well understood by most Canadians.

The Harper government has done an admirable job in its attempts to supply the Canadian Forces the equipment it needs to do the job, but now in a leadership position, it has not done a good job of explaining Afghanistan to Canadians.

A very good place to start would be in three by-election campaigns in Quebec expected later this fall, two later in Ontario and one in Vancouver to fill six vacant seats in the House of Commons.

The word has to get out: Stop conflating the two.

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Bob Bergen, Ph.D., is a Research Fellow with the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute (CDFAI) in Calgary. The opinions expressed in this document are those of the author and not necessarily those of CDFAI, its Board of Directors, Advisory Council, Fellows or Donors. Bergen's column appears bi-weekly. Learn more about the CDFAI and its research on the Internet at www.cdfai.org