

Liberal leadership race needs honest foreign policy debate

By Bob Bergen

Canada's military mission in Afghanistan is emerging as a central and likely decisive issue in the federal Liberal Party leadership race.

When the Liberals were in power, it was easy to tell where they stood on foreign policy and national defence.

However, the leadership race has exposed the New Democratic Party's influence on high-profile leadership candidates like Bob Rae and some anti-American sentiments on the part of both Rae and Joe Volpe that muddies the water considerably.

Only two of the 11 candidates supported extending Canada's mission in Afghanistan, but Rae and Volpe are using the Liberal leadership race as a platform to argue that Canada risks losing its way as a nation of peacekeepers by following America's lead.

They both ought to know that the Liberals got out of the peacekeeping business a long time ago and have a made-in-Canada record of sending the Canadian Forces into combat when necessary.

For starters, it was Jean Chretien's Liberal government which sent Canadian Forces peacemakers – not peacekeepers – into the former Yugoslavia as part of a United Nations effort to put an end to Slobodan Milosevic's reign of terror in the early 1990s.

Not to put too fine a point on it, it was Chretien's Liberal government that sent CF-18 warplanes with our North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies to bomb Milosevic's military and government into submission and end Serbian "cleansing" of ethnic Albanians during the 78-day Kosovo air war in 1999.

It was the Chretien Liberal government that originally committed Canadian land, sea and air forces to the international war against terrorism in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attack in New York.

Further, it was the Chretien Liberal government that was the driving force behind "The Responsibility to Protect", the Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty also in 2001.

In the aftermath of the Rwanda genocide in 1994, the Srebrenica massacre in Bosnia in 1995 and Kosovo, the Report advanced a case for muscular military intervention by the international community to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing when their own governments fail to do so.

That "Responsibility to Protect" initiative was adopted by the United Nations at the World Summit at UN headquarters in September 2005.

It was also Paul Martin's Liberal government which produced the Canadian International Policy statement in 2005 that guides Canada's current foreign policy in defence, diplomacy and development.

At the heart of the policy statement is, in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, that Canada needs a robust military to protect Canada against terrorism and the spillover of failed and failing states like Afghanistan.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservative government is following the International Policy Statement's lead, but appears to be taking it many steps further by beefing up Canada's military and extending to 2009 the Afghanistan mission the Liberals initiated.

But, by some unfathomable twist of logic, former Ontario NDP premier Rae now argues against the Liberal party's foreign policy thinking and history, saying that Canada risks losing its way as a nation of peacekeepers in Afghanistan.

Just when and where have Canadians been acting as a nation of peacekeepers since the early 1990s? Meanwhile, Volpe disingenuously argues that Canada has moved away from peacekeeping into peacemaking in Afghanistan with a made-in-Washington foreign affairs policy.

The front-runner in the race is reportedly Michael Ignatieff, a well-traveled journalist, a former Harvard scholar and a widely-published author with a highly-developed view of Canada's place in the world. Ignatieff's critics label him un-Liberal and un-Canadian for the decades he spent at Harvard. Volpe has called him Republican-minded.

They ignore the fact that Ignatieff wrote about NATO's Kosovo intervention in his book *Virtual War*, which served as a virtual blueprint for the Liberals' "The Responsibility to Protect".

Ignatieff was one of the commissioners who sat on the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty which authored "The Responsibility to Protect".

Ignatieff's thinking, if not variations of his exact phrasing from *Virtual War*, can be found throughout it like a watermark.

Should Ignatieff come to lead the Liberals in opposition, he will bring a sophisticated world view to the difficult defence and foreign policy issues facing Canada and the United States.

The problem is Ignatieff may be surrounded in his own caucus by the likes of Rae and Volpe who don't debate at the same level and prefer to simply bash Ignatieff and Washington instead.

Still worse, Ignatieff's opponents don't appear to think that Canadians need to hear an enlightened and honest debate on these central issues, which is a sad enough commentary in itself.

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