

**Note to the News Media:** This opinion piece has been provided for your consideration at no cost. Should you publish it in whole or in part, please credit the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute. This piece was published online by the *Globe & Mail* on Wednesday, 18 March 2009.

## **The Americans are Coming—to Afghanistan**

Whatever their views on Canada's mission in Afghanistan, Canadians like to believe that our troops are doing a first-rate job in "Canadahar" and that our allies, especially the Americans, believe this as well. But do the Americans agree with our rosy assessment? Perhaps not if a long article in the *Washington Post* ("Troops Face New Tests in Afghanistan," March 15) is to be believed.

The article by *Post* staff writer Rajiv Chandrasekaran hangs on extensive interviews with Lieutenant-Colonel Daniel Hurlbut, the commander of the U.S. Army's 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiment which operates under overall Canadian command in Kandahar province, and Brigadier-General John Nicholson, the alliance's deputy commander of NATO forces in southern Afghanistan. Neither seems very pleased with the way the war is going.

Hurlbut told the reporter that his unit is making slow progress in the town of Maywand, 45 miles west of Kandahar. The Canadians came every few months to clear out the Taliban, Chandrasekaran reports, but then they left and the insurgents came back almost at once. Hurlbut is trying a different approach, putting his troops into Maywand on a permanent basis. But the locals, after years of watching the Canadians roll in and roll out, "don't yet believe us when we say we're here to stay."

There is not a shred of perspective in the *Washington Post* story. After the Manley Commission report in early 2008, the Canadian government mounted a full court press to get another thousand troops into Kandahar province if its 2500-soldier commitment was to be extended to 2011. The Americans were the only NATO ally to step up to the plate, and Hurlbut's unit was the result. Of course, the Canadians, with under a thousand troops operating in the field, could not hold Maywand and the rest of the province; they lacked the resources to do so. Now the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion is there, doing what Canadian commanders and Canada's Parliament believed essential. But no one expects instant results any longer, not even Col. Hurlbut.

More worrying perhaps are the comments of Brigadier-General Nicholson. Serving as deputy to a Dutch commander in the south, Nicholson sounds as if he's the boss. "If we're going to win," he says, "we have to fight this war differently....We've had a stovepiped approach to combat and to development, too. All that has to change." With the Dutch forces in Uruzgan, the British in Helmand, and the Canadians in Kandahar all following their own approach to combat and reconstruction, the Americans believe, there was a complete lack of coordination. "It's a totally dysfunctional way of fighting a war," another American officer says. "You've got each of these guys doing their own thing...with very little coordination."

Brigadier-General Nicholson clearly sees it as his task to achieve this coordination, to secure "a coherent regional plan for victory, not a bunch of national plans for victory." But Nicholson does not want to "demand" – in Chandrasekaran's phrase – that the

allies scrap their individual approaches. Instead, he is aiming for a regional development scheme that would spend \$700 million on big projects. None of the allies is happy with the heavy-handed American approach, but all recognize that, whatever the official command structure in the south, the Americans, soon to put 17,000 more troops into Afghanistan, control the agenda. They will fight the war their way.

So what does this mean for Canada's Afghan commitment? First and most obviously, it means that the United States Army will soon be directing the battle against the Taliban and the counter-narcotics fight in Kandahar province. The Canadians' ability to determine their own approach will be seriously constrained, if not completely subordinated to American direction, as the U.S. Army sets the tone and gives the orders. Secondly, it means that the "stovepiped" approach to combat and development will disappear, assuming that Nicholson gets his way. He likely will. Reconstruction and the battle against the insurgents will be more closely integrated.

These U.S. plans are not foolish. Almost every Afghanistan watcher recognizes that the International Security Assistance Force command structure is a jerry-built house that must go if the war is to be won. But what will the response in Canada be to its soldiers serving under American command? Not good. And how will Parliament react to tighter links between combat and development, something hitherto anathema to the Liberals, NDP, and Bloc? This may be the issue that brings down the minority government.

In other words, there are certain to be more heated debates about Afghanistan in the coming months. The arrival of more American forces will almost certainly lead the Taliban to ramp up attacks in the south, and the casualties may be heavy. And the insurgents, alarmingly well-briefed on the political weak points of the members of the NATO alliance, will certainly focus on the Canadians and the Dutch forces. Canadians at home and in the field need to be aware that they will be tested. So too do the Americans who might consider developing a more subtle approach at bringing their allies along with them.

**J.L. Granatstein is a Senior Research Fellow at the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute.**