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Inside/Sommaire

History Debates the Issues

L'histoire dans le débat publics : 1

Some Military Historical Reflections
on Afghanistan
By Desmond Morton 1, 4-6

Editors' Note / Note de la rédaction 2

Félicitations ! / Congratulations!

Par / by Margaret Conrad 7

Recherches en cours / Research Underway

La culture politique contemporaine
Par Martin Paquet 8
Situating Quebec in Global
Environmental History
By Liza Piper and Shannon Stunden Bower
Translation by Stephan Gervais 9
Positionner le Québec dans l'histoire
environnementale mondiale
Par Liza Piper et Shannon Stunden Bower 9

History Debates the Issues

L'histoire dans le débat publics : 2

Political Change at the Grand River Reserve,
1917-1924
By John Moses 11

Le monde des musées / World of Museums

Museum Research: Dinosaur or Phoenix?*

*Announcement of panel at forthcoming
meeting of the CMA, Ottawa,
March 28-31, 2007 15
Exhibition Review: Clash of Empires:
The War that Made Canada, 1754-1763
By R.H. Caldwell 15
Expositions en cours / Current Exhibitions 17

Publications reçues / Publications Received 18

Calendar / Au programme 18

Appel de contributions / Call for Papers 18

Our Loyal Members / Nos fidèles membres ..19

Prizes of the CHA / Les Prix de la SHC 20

The Graduates / Étudiants diplômés !

By Heather Steel 25

Fellowships and Grants: Bourses etc. 26

Teaching History

L'enseignement de l'Histoire

"Ropes and Pulleys": Reflections on a Conference
on the Preparation of History Teachers
By Peter Seixas 27
Les manuels universitaires d'histoire sont-ils
devenus désuets ? Bien sûr que non !
Par Mélanie Méthot 29
Textbooks: Past Imperfect?
By Graham Broad 30

HISTORY DEBATES THE ISSUES L'HISTOIRE DANS LE DÉBAT PUBLICS : 1

SOME MILITARY-HISTORICAL REFLECTIONS

ON AFGHANISTAN

By Desmond Morton

For the past year, Canadians have been waking up about once a week on average to learn that a fellow Canadian, perhaps even three or four of us, have been killed or terribly mangled somewhere in Afghanistan. Early on September 18, as I set out to try to explain all this to the Canadian Women's Club of Montreal why this was happening, we learned that four more had been killed by an elderly suicide bomber on a bicycle. So why are we in Afghanistan? Or, to get closer to the nub, why are Canadian soldiers killing and being killed in a dusty, impoverished corner of the world almost none of us have ever seen?

Let me confess right away. I would just as soon not see the Canadian Forces in Afghanistan. That is NOT because our soldiers are dying or, worse in some minds, are killing others. As professionals, they would do the same, if they were sent to Darfur, or if UNIFIL had really been designed to demilitarize southern Lebanon and not simply to encourage the Israelis to leave. What I hate about our Afghanistan commitment is its history and our dependence on our allies. What I hate even more is the echo of schoolyard bullying rant from our current government. What I would hate even more is complicity in the fate of Afghans who trusted us.

Perhaps most of us absorbed a myth that Canadian peacekeeping was non-violent? It usually was in the Cold War, once the super-powers had decided to shut down their clients. What Canadians accomplished in the Middle East, central America and Indochina was well worth doing but, as Sean Mahoney has made clear, Canada served its super-power neighbour as loyally as Polish peacekeepers served Moscow, and who should be ashamed of that? As a vast, underpopulated country in a dangerous world, Canada has had a lifetime commitment to having and serving our allies, be they France, Britain or the United States. If we ever really wanted to know, our peacemakers might have shared some awful stories.

Here's one that made it into print. In *Peacemaker*, Major General Lewis Mackenzie recalled being a young officer in the Gaza Strip. One day, he asked some Gurkha officers in a neighbouring Indian Army unit how they controlled pilferage. They invited him to stop over until nightfall to see.

At dusk, he saw a smart, well-armed sentry march down his beat, stamp out his about-turn and march back. All was quiet. A grey shape whisked up to the patrol line, paused, listened, and scuttled across. Like the intruder, Lew hadn't noticed another Gurkha, padding softly behind the sentry. His kukri slashed down. The intruder sagged. A chop at the neck, and the intruder's head was hurled out into

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the desert darkness. His friends would find it at dawn. Indians troops, of course, were the world's ideal as Gandian-style peacekeepers.

Like Indians and Pakistanis, I don't much like Afghanistan. Its history makes it a place do-gooders should avoid. Engraved on my childhood memory is an illustration from a book called *British Battles on Land and Sea*. Most of the battles, as you might imagine, were British victories, but in the middle of the book was an exception, illustrated by a lonely figure slumped on a donkey and entitled: "Dr. Bryden's Return to Jellalabad". The text reminded me that Bryden was a British army surgeon and sole survivor of the army of 19,000 British and Indian soldiers, plus wives, children, servants and camp followers that Lord Elphinstone had led up the Khyber Pass in 1839 to overthrow a wicked Afghan tyrant and to bring the blessings of good government under their man, Dost Mohammed, to a much-oppressed people. Dr. Bryden had been spared the imprisonment, torture and death of thousands of British and Indian men, women and children and their Afghan allies, to bring word of the outcome.



Canadian soldiers incorporated with US soldiers into the same patrol in Afghanistan. Source: Department of National Defence, Combat Camera, AR2006-P008 0019

Of course the Raj did not accept that verdict. A fresh army was launched into Afghanistan, more tribesmen — and women — were duly slaughtered, but this time, like George Bush the Elder after the First Gulf War, the British did not stay. Certainly they returned at intervals until 1922. In the process, they learned a lot about mountain warfare. but they also learned not to stay. Dr. Bryden's image shaped my misgivings about our Afghan future.

In 1994, McGill's dean of arts, John McCallum hired me away from the University of Toronto. Later, he served in the Chrétien government as defence minister, and his duties took him to Kabul. It was, he assured me later, a miserable place, oppressively hot by noon; frigidly cold at night. Day and night, the air was full of tiny dust particles whipped incessantly by the mountain winds. He felt constantly filthy.

Afghanistan is also desperately poor. Only one crop flourishes, as it does in other desperately poor economies: poppies, a raw material for the drug trade. Canadians may associate the poppy with Flanders' Fields; Afghan farmers know it is their only cash crop. Dried and easily processed, it provides Afghans and their warlords with a billion-dollar share of the heroin trade. The market is in America and Europe. Heroin addiction is a devastating affliction, and who would want to encourage it? The quiet truth is that we do. When Afghanistan's Taliban rulers, as strict Moslems, tried to wipe out the narcotics trade, the Warlords opportunely joined the Northern Alliance, and backed "our guy", Hamid Karzai. When foreign invaders began burning the poppy fields, some Warlords quietly shifted back to the "the other guys". What would you honestly expect?

How do you win a guerilla war? You win the hearts and minds of the people. When the foreigners who promised democracy, elections and equality for women deliver starvation for the poor and hard times for the wealthy, a few schools, clinics and orphanages are meagre compensation. Currently, I am told, NATO has allegedly had the sense to quietly put the brakes on the war on poppy fields. It is hardly a joyful or easily publicised compromise.

So why, in the face of all that, are we there? For a start, unlike Iraq, the U.N. approved. As devout multilateralists, this made a huge difference to Canada. Having shared in the initial defeat of the Taliban by U.S. Special Forces and a few of our own Joint Task Force (JTF), the U.N. invited NATO to provide security for constitution-making leading to general elections. Once that process had produced Hamid Karzai's government, NATO continued to provide security in the capital, Kabul, and through civil-military "Provincial Reconstruction Teams" (PRTs) in the regions. Canada signed on to provide a reinforced infantry battalion in Kabul. While PRTs seemed to work, establishing them in Taliban strongholds in southern Afghanistan proved a lot harder. Without them, reconstruction was stalled. As NATO commander of ISAF, General Rick Hillier shared this brutal reality with Ottawa. Finally, the Liberal government stepped up while most other NATO members fumbled with alibis ranging from George Bush to inadequate training. The result was our commitment to Kandahar while the British took on the adjoining and equally dangerous Helmand province.

How long will Canadians be there? Official deadlines aside, the real answer is that we will be there until an Afghan army and police force can replace NATO forces. How long is that? Don't hold your breath. Currently, the toughest, most dangerous soldiering and police work in the world is being tackled by men with fourteen day's training and a salary of about \$10 a week. You get what you pay for.

In any guerilla war, you must isolate insurgents from their sources of supply and reinforcements. Afghanistan defeated the Soviet Army because the U.S. persuaded Pakistan to funnel weapons, explosives and *talibs* or religious students across the Waziristan border. Now the U.S. and NATO are the targets. So why not overthrow General Pervez Musharref, and treat his country like Iraq. Remember that, unlike Iraq or Iran, Pakistan really has about fifty nuclear warheads and some fanatics obviously eager to use them. Next question?

Historians look for patterns in the past. Afghanistan's internal conflicts have always made it easy to conquer. The problem, whether for the Russians, the British, the Persians or Alexander the Great, was gaining anything from the conquest. For the Soviet Union, defeat in Afghanistan dissolved its empire and ended the Cold War. Afghans gained nothing but a cruel regime of religious fanatics which provoked its own downfall but not its legitimate replacement. It remains to be seen if the Karzai regime, with all its incredible challenges and meagre material support, can eventually develop its own legitimacy behind the helicopters, armoured vehicles and machine guns of a reluctant NATO.



*Two more Canadian soldiers killed in Afghanistan are carried into a C-130 Hercules aircraft for repatriation to Canada.
Source: Department of National Defence, Combat Camera, AR2006-G017-0010*

Meanwhile, like the British learning the rules of mountain warfare, Canadians are testing tactics borrowed from their American mentors. In the wake of the Cold War, U.S. generals recognized that they would no longer fight armies similar to their own but enemies "asymmetric" in every way. Instead of the "bear", as they described the huge, mechanized Soviet Army, they would be fighting "snakes", ill-armed, uncoordinated, but deadly enemies, fuelled by idealism and rage. One answer was a "Revolution in Military Affairs", or RMA, linking command, control, communications and intelligence in the same computer. Enthusiasts spoke of "net-centric warfare". They boasted that they could locate Ossama bin Laden even under a mountain, and blast him to atoms with a "bunker buster" launched from a UAV — an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle. Never again would enemy commanders have secrets.

Did it work? Wasn't the collapse of the Taliban an answer? Yes and no. RMA sounded more amazing than it was. "Snakes" proved tougher and much less predictable than well-trained generals. Ossama, as I write, still lives, an inspiration to anyone in the world with a bad hate for imperial arrogance. RMA has been overshadowed by a new doctrine, the so-called "three block war". Recognizing that future wars will take place in cities and in densely populated third-world countries, General Charles Kruhlak, head of the United States Marine Corps, foresaw full-scale combat in one block, coinciding with rescuing the devastated survivors in the next block, and winning hearts in the third block. All would be accomplished by the same sweaty soldiers.

In combat, soldiers shoot first and ask questions later. Those who forget get killed, or so badly wounded they wish they had been. Changing from killer to social worker in minutes is a stretch. Can soldiers be trained, equipped and commanded to do it? Daily in Iraq, Americans try to learn how. We and they have an awful lot to learn. Currently, that's what Canadians learn in Edmonton, Petawawa and Valcartier before their next six-month stint in Kandahar.

Why do Canadians embrace American military doctrine? Back in 1948, Ottawa formally decided to abandon the British doctrines and equipment we had adopted in 1908 and clung to during two world wars. Fed up with inferior equipment and an enfeebled postwar Britain, we embraced our newly-powerful neighbour. This little-noticed but crucial transformation now defines our Navy, our Air Force and, a little more reluctantly, our Army. Remember the green uniforms of Armed Forces Unification? Blamed on Paul Hellyer, they were devised by General Jean-Victor Allard, modelled on U.S. air force dress uniforms, and purged the new Canadian Forces of most of their "British" look. Of course we are unique. Americans give their generals little silver stars; we issue them little gold maple leaves.

As they once headed to Camberley or the Imperial Defence College, Canadian colonels, admirals and sergeant-majors head south for advanced military education. We strive to be "interoperable" throughout NATO and NORAD but the Americans set the standard in weapons, equipment and, therefore, doctrine. Our burly and outspoken Chief of Defence Staff, General Rick Hillier, polished his military expertise as deputy commander of a U.S. army corps at Fort Hood, Texas, before commanding NATO forces in Afghanistan. His watch-word, "Transformation", just happens to be the slogan Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld imposed on the Pentagon to reshape the American armed forces to win his administration's "Three-Block War" against asymmetric opponents in Iraq.

On the whole, Canadian troops have cheerfully embraced their Americanization. All armed forces want to match up to the current leaders in their trade. Equally obviously their fellow Canadians give less priority than Americans to issues of national security. "Canada's military problem", declared R.M.C.'s Joel Sokolsky in May, 2001, "is that we have no military problem". That happy claim was undermined on 9/11 or, more precisely on 9/12 when, in response to the previous day's events, the United States slammed its border shut, potentially eliminating 80 per cent of our exports and 42 per cent of our Gross National Product. That reminder of our deep dependence on our neighbour was a powerful incentive to Ottawa to enhance American security in every feasible way we could, from buying more X-ray machines for airports to doubling our Joint Task Force (of which most Canadians had never heard). Promptly fulfilling alliance commitments under the U.N. and NATO was an obvious added step.

At the same time, very few Canadians outside the military community wanted to match the billions that Congress has lavished on modernizing U.S. forces at the expense of a ballooning deficit and a strange dependence on China as its dominant creditor. Last June, with a new Conservative government in office. Canadians saw how quickly Stephen Harper could run through C\$17 billion to buy a few ships, aircraft and vehicles, without even a reference to our obsolete tanks, artillery, destroyers or the \$3.5 billion Lockheed F-35s needed to replace the air force's twenty-five year-old CF-18 Hornets as guardians of our skies. Defence is expensive.

If our Canadian Forces seldom complained out loud about their worn-out and faulty equipment, it is chiefly because they are disciplined professionals, responsive to a long tradition of civil supremacy. Most are recruited from a shrinking sub-set of Canadians from small towns and rural regions, where life offers few easy rewards. Their pride comes from succeeding in active and dangerous service, especially in the sight of their allies. Despite the losses and the danger, serving in the heat, dirt and danger of Afghanistan is more satisfying than playing make-believe war with obsolete gear at Petawawa, Valcartier, or Wainwright. Dutiful to their calling, journalists will be tireless in challenging this boring truth but most soldiers know what to expect by the time the harsh rituals of their training are complete. Disciplined, submissive armed forces are sadly rare beyond the First World. One of the realities of countries afflicted by poverty and civil war is civilian populations menaced by corrupt or fanatical militias, submissive only to those who pay them, like the condottiere of mediaeval Italy. Canadian peacekeepers have met them in Bosnia, Kosovo and Kandahar, and they lie in wait for us in Darfur or Lebanon or Sri Lanka.

Back in Canada, Afghanistan could easily be the most unpopular commitment the Conservatives have inherited from the Liberals. Ujal Dosanjh, the Liberal defence critic, claimed last summer that the Tories had changed the rules and declared

war, not peace in Afghanistan. Dosanjh's leader, Bill Graham, had made the commitment as defence minister and repudiated Dosanjh. One wonders whether the next Liberal leader will feel similarly bound.

Could Stephen Harper change his mind to become more popular with voters. Should he, as many have urged, abandon Afghanistan and redeploy our troops to Lebanon or Darfur? Odder things have happened. NDP leader Jack Layton urges Canada to save our troops, cut our losses, and abandon the awful contradictions of any Afghan enterprise. What happens to the people who trust in our protection and help? History suggests that they will eventually be abandoned. If any successor regime makes it utterly unsafe for western journalists to report, as happened in Vietnam after 1975, few in the West will know or mourn their fate.

After abandoning Afghanistan, could we then bring peace to Lebanon or Darfur? With a few thousand discredited Canadian troops, could the United Nations make UNIFIL powerful enough to do what Lebanon obviously will not do: disarm the Hezbollah? Would Canadians fight and die to force a largely Shiite region to repudiate its defenders? Israel lost more troops than it could stomach when its defence forces tried last summer.

Like Lebanon and Afghanistan, Darfur is very much a heritage of 19th Century imperialism. Can Canadian troops stop rape and murder by the dreadful Janjaweed without bloodshed? Have we really chosen sides in a civil war for a secessionist Sudanese province? Or could we stand guard selectively, repelling only rapists and murderers while the civil war goes on around us? It seems improbable, and perhaps even more improbable if we have just ducked out of commitments made with adequate but imperfect knowledge of the consequences.

Most Canadians tell pollsters that they would like our troops to be popular peacekeepers. Is that possible if there is no peace to keep? In our earlier "peacekeeping" experiences, the fighting had effectively ended before most of the blue berets arrived, and powerful interests wanted peace kept. That was not the case in 1991 when Canadians deployed to the former Yugoslavia, and it is decidedly not the case in Afghanistan, Lebanon, Darfur or Sri Lanka. Imposing peace before both parties to a struggle are exhausted, as any police officer knows, usually involves further force. Proving, even against historical experience and the current odds, that Afghanistan can be stabilized and rendered prosperous, would be an amazing triumph well worth achieving. Could it happen? "Only God knows what's going to happen", I once told a Senate committee, "and She isn't telling."

Desmond Morton retired last May (2006) as Hiram Mills Professor of History at McGill University. He is currently up-dating his *Military History of Canada*.