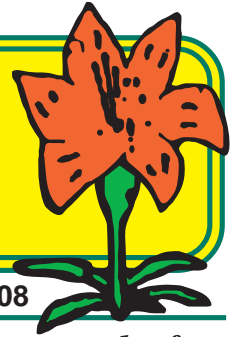


Seniors' Voice



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Eternal Vigilance is the price of Liberty. Power is ever stealing from the many to the few.

Afghanistan Transforms Canada

To play junior partner to empire, we've militarized our identity.

– By Murray Dobbin, August 11, 2008

Some government policy decisions are so profound in their impact that they can actually change the nature of the country. Medicare was one such policy decision and so was the signing of the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement.

It could be argued that the decision to take on an explicitly war-fighting role in Afghanistan will turn out to be another watershed decision, this one at odds with Canadian values and Canadians' convictions about the military's role in the world and society.

It also is having the effect of transforming both our foreign policy and our foreign aid policy. Our role in the war is dominating our international reputation and integrating us into the U.S. and its imperial designs on Middle East oil. In order to justify this colonial occupation, Canada now spends so much of its (paltry) aid budget on Afghanistan (much of it finding its way into the pockets of corrupt officials) that there is barely any financing left over for other developing countries' needs.

Meanwhile, the conflict and its "war on terror" rationale are being used to justify massive increases in military spending, distorting the role of government and the spending priorities of Canadians.

Lastly, the military's role in Canadian politics and culture is being rapidly Americanized. Canadian military spokespersons now openly promote their

war-fighting role and take part in cultural events, and the media (most notably the CBC) promotes this new expansive role.

Why we fight

It is hard to imagine a less honourable "mission" on which to base such fundamental changes to the country. There are no longer any secrets about the Afghan conflict or Canada's continuing role in it. It is an increasingly brutal occupation, unwinnable in any foreseeable circumstances, threatening to become an even wider regional conflict involving Pakistan. The war's "building democracy" cover story has been debunked by countless sources. The initial invasion was justified on the basis of destroying al-Qaeda, a loosely organized force of no more than 300 fighters. The Taliban government, as hideous and deeply reviled as it was, had nothing to do with 9-11.

Any military action that followed the rapid rout of al-Qaeda was directed at occupying the country as part of the U.S. plan to control Middle East oil and gas. Alan Greenspan, the former head of the U.S. Federal Reserve, stated this year that Afghanistan and Iraq were all about oil. The Taliban had broken off negotiations with the U.S. for a pipeline from the Caspian Basin. According to Middle East expert Eric Margolis, "In early 2001, six or seven months before 9-11, Washington made the decision to invade



"The price that good people pay, for their indifference to public affairs, is to be ruled by evil men." — Plato

Afghanistan, overthrow Taliban, and install a client regime that would build the energy pipelines.”

A ‘good war’ winnable?

Afghanistan is increasingly framed as the “good war” by those who have long since given up portraying the Iraq quagmire as morally justified. Even the “hope” candidate in the U.S. election, Barack Obama, is now running on the good war myth, promising to send soldiers from Iraq to bolster the 60,000 NATO and U.S. troops now there and to “win” the war.

But winning in Afghanistan is sheer fantasy. Just ask the British and the Russians. U.S. General Dan McNeill, the former commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan recently stated that it would take 4000,000 troops just to pacify the country. Even if every U.S. soldier in Iraq transferred tomorrow, they would be 200,000 short. The UN has said that its analysis shows one third of the country is literally a no-go zone, controlled by insurgents, **and an additional one half is “high risk.” Even Kabul is not safe,** as attacks in and near the capital have increased by 70% since January. Supply lines from Pakistan **are under constant attack.**

A report in the **International Herald Tribune** claims the Taliban’s “resilience and ferocity are sowing alarm” in Washington and NATO capitals and that “security officials **talk of a noose tightening around the capital.**” Tensions between the Karzai government and its U.S. backers have reached the boiling point over the opium trade, which helps finance the Taliban. Thomas Schweich, until recently the U.S. coordinator for counter-narcotics for Afghanistan, said in a New York Times feature article that Karzai himself was “deeply involved in protecting the opium trade” because his supporters depend on it.

The “hearts and minds” struggle is in even worse shape. With so few troops, occupying forces have to rely increasingly on U.S. air power just to maintain the status quo, with predictable results: up to 1,000 civilians killed in the past six months

(with 260 of those in July alone), including a wedding party of 47 slaughtered in Helmand province recently. The NGOs trying to deal with this catastrophe are now in full panic mode, cutting back their operations. Their network, ACBAR (Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief), representing 100 Afghani and international organizations, issued a statement on Aug. 1 drawing attention to the civilian casualties, the spread of danger to previously secure areas and increasing attacks on aid agencies and their staff (19 killed since January, twice the total for all of 2007).

Karzai’s cardboard presidency

But what of the democratically elected government of Hamid Karzai? The man they call the mayor of Kabul — because that is as far as his government’s authority extends — is perhaps the best evidence of the real purpose of the occupation as well as its inevitable failure. The U.S. blithely “appointed” Karzai as interim president and then manipulated the political process to ensure that he won the subsequent election. A former consultant for U.S. oil giant Unocal, Karzai (a former Taliban supporter) was part of negotiations between the Taliban and Unocal for a gas pipeline through Afghanistan to Pakistan and India from the Caspian Basin. The U.S. was negotiating with the Taliban until four months before 9-11.

Karzai has literally no political base amongst the competing tribes in the country. His support is American fire power and cash and Afghan opium producers. Most observers agree that he was elected president primarily because he was, at least, not a warlord. Yet his election was the result of systematic manipulation by the U.S. and by the changing of the 1964 secular constitution to one that declared Islam supreme: no laws could violate “the sacred religion of Islam.” The new Political Parties Law also restricted parties. They were not allowed to pursue policies that were “contrary to Islam.” Many secular parties were effectively excluded from the parliamentary elections of 2005. These largely unknown details of the Afghan political system are detailed in Jack Warnock’s excellent new book: **Creating a**



Failed State: The US and Canada in Afghanistan.

Warnock, author of many acclaimed books on international affairs, also details the systematic breaking of the law banning political parties or individual candidates associated with armed groups. He quotes the Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit's analysis of the election results: of 249 members elected to the House of the People, 133 had fought in the internecine mujahideen war. The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission concluded that "80 per cent of winning candidates in the provinces and more than 60 per cent in Kabul have links to armed groups."

Promoting an Islamist state

Following his own election, Karzai appointed some of the most reviled war lords in the country to senior posts, including Abdul Rashid Dostum, known as the "butcher of the north", to be the new army chief of staff. All of this, of course, was done with the approval and connivance of the U.S.

Despite the talk of democracy, the U.S. — with Canada in obsequious support — still holds to its strategic position that it is better to have an Islamist state than a secular one that might actually be committed to modern government: industrial development, social programs, public education, human rights and the strengthening of civil society. This strategy goes back to the days of Jimmy Carter's administration, the one which created the mujahideen on the theory that religious fanatics would be the most determined foes of the godless Russian communists then occupying Afghanistan.

Warnock quotes Dan Everts, the former NATO special representative in Afghanistan, about the systematic sabotaging of genuinely democratic government: "...the result has been an extremely chaotic parliament. There are 248 talking heads with very little discipline and little organized deliberations that are meant to produce legislation which the country so badly needs. We deliberately did this." Combine this with a constitution that put enormous powers in the hands of the president and you have a political

structure designed to ensure American dominance.

Dying to protect a pipeline

The definitive piece of evidence about the real goals in Afghanistan arrived a few weeks ago with the announcement that Afghanistan had signed a major deal to build the pipeline the U.S. has wanted all along. If the reports are accurate, the \$8 billion pipeline will go through the southern part of the country — and right through Kandahar. **With this final piece of the puzzle in place, Canada's role becomes even more clear: a private protection force for the American pipeline.**

Right now the Canadian military are riding high, arrogant and confident that their new war-fighting role as junior partner to the U.S. empire, and their new billions in spending money, are secure. Maybe. But the Afghan conflict is set to bleed America, just as it bled the Soviet Union. As time passes, the unfolding catastrophe might just drive the Canadian generals back into their cushy quarters and convince Canadians to demand their money back. And to demand back, as well, the traditional peacekeeping role of Canada's military. ■

Seniors' Voice

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Our Cry for Cheap Oil Is Crude and Deadly

The Niger Delta should now be an oasis of riches. But the people live with nothing. — by Johann Hari

When you cry for cheaper oil, do you know what you are really asking for? Gordon Brown has just shown us. He has unwittingly exposed the pipeline that runs from your petrol station to the poisoned people of the Niger Delta. The more you howl for cheap oil, the more they will be Shell-shocked into submission.

To understand, you need to know the story of the Niger Delta, a once lush land of mangrove swamps at the base of Nigeria. In the late 1950s, in the final days of British imperial rule, Shell's local subsidiary discovered it lay on top of vast pools of oil. Britain immediately became its number one user, with the US close behind. In the long decades since, more than \$200bn worth of oil and gas has been pumped from beneath the Delta people's feet.

So you would imagine the Niger Delta must now be an oasis of riches, with its 30m people bathing in wealth. But no: they live with nothing and die by the age of 40. While the lifeblood of twenty-first century techno-life is pumped from their land, they live in the Stone Age, with no schools, no hospitals and barely any electricity. They have felt three effects from the petrol. Their land has been poisoned by oil spills; the fish they lived off have been turned into stunted, toxic rarities; and when they ask for compensation, they are shot at.

Here's just one everyday story about how that feels, unusually well documented because some journalists happened to be there. In October 1998, there was a leak of raw petroleum near one Delta village. Somehow - a stray cigarette, perhaps - a spark hit it, and a huge fireball whooshed up to incinerate over 700 people.

Three years later, the journalist Greg Campbell went back to see some of the victims. They had

received no medical treatment. Christiana Akpode, a 24-year-old mother, could barely walk; her legs were forced into a permanent kneel. Campbell explained: "Her legs are hard to look at: from the shin to the knee, her legs are little more than red and purple scabs bleeding white pus. She scratches this section incessantly. Her days are spent warding away flies from the open wounds." As the journalist left, she pleaded: "You should kill me."

The people of the Niger Delta have not watched this destruction of their homeland - for us - passively. They signed petitions, went to the oil barges to ask for a fair share of the proceeds, and refused to co-operate with the oil companies. The response? According to Human Rights Watch, the Nigerian military - hungry for its own hefty cut of the cash - beat, tortured or killed them, sometimes with the active help of some of the oil companies.

For example, in 1998, more than 100 ordinary villagers went to one of Chevron's barges to ask peacefully to speak to the company's managing director. They were told to wait.

They saw helicopters approaching, and assumed they were Chevron spokespeople - until the gunfire began. Two of them were shot dead. Others were taken away and tortured. The rest managed to flee. A Chevron spokesman admitted the corporation flew in the Nigerian soldiers who did the shooting - and that the protestors they murdered were unarmed.

Peaceful protests had been swelling in popularity since the early 1990s - so the movement's leaders were seized. The head of the local Internal Security Task Force, Lieutenant-Colonel Paul Okuntimo, made clear why, in a 1994 memo that was later leaked: "Shell operations are still

impossible unless ruthless military operations are undertaken,” he wrote, including “wasting targets ... especially vocal individuals.” (Shell claims the memo is fake, and if it is real they find it “abhorrent”.) One of the arrested leaders, the playwright Ken Saro-Wiwa, said: “This is it - they are going to execute us. For Shell.” In his final plea before he was hanged, he asked: “Why should the people on oil-bearing land be tortured?”

After that, silence. The people were too terrified to act. But two years ago they tried a new tactic. Non-violent resistance got them massacred, so some turned to violent resistance. The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (Mend) emerged from the mangrove swamps to vandalise oil pipelines and kidnap oil industry workers. “We are not communists or even revolutionaries,” their spokesman explained. “We are just extremely bitter ... We are people who would rather be with our families raising our children, sending them to school. We want all this to be over, but what future do our children have?”

Mend has issued three simple demands. It wants \$1.5bn in compensation already awarded to it by the courts for damage to the environment; a 50 per cent claim on all oil pumped out of their land; and the release of their captured leaders. That’s it. A former oil worker hostage of Mend told Vanity Fair: “Their grievances are legitimate ... To be out in the swamp with no water or electricity, of course they’re upset. They are looking through our fence at golf courses and tennis courts where the floodlights are on at midnight [when] they are without electricity for days.”

Mend has so much support in the Deltas that it has now been able to disrupt oil pumping by 30 percent. This shooting up of the pipelines is one of the main reasons why oil prices have shot up across the world. There are two possible responses now. The first is to meet Mend and the Delta’s demands: let the people have a fair share of their own oil profits. The second is to

violently suppress the population with a renewed mass terror.

Enter Gordon Brown. Last week, he offered Britain’s help to achieve the second option. He offered British troops to “train” Nigeria’s “security forces” so they can “restore order” and get the oil flowing fast again.

Why did he choose this? Because compromise would take time and - if the people of the Delta really got to keep a share of the profits - it would cost. Oil prices here won’t come down. That’s no good: he is being screamed at by us to deliver cheap oil, whatever the human cost, today, tomorrow, and forever. He is reacting to pressure from you. Heroin addicts will rob grannies for their next fix; oil addicts like us will plunder Africa and the Middle East.

No doubt Brown will say the British soldiers would also provide human rights training to Nigerian soldiers. But the reason Nigerian soldiers are there is to suppress the local people so their oil can be seized. How can you claim human rights training on top of a mission like that?

An old woman from the Delta tries, in the new American documentary *Sweet Crude*, to talk directly to you. She says: “I’d like people all over the world to realise there’s a segment of humanity suffering as a result of oil production - ordinary men, women, children. They should think about them and not think simply of energy. Think of us as people. That’s more important than anything.”

But while we are unrepentant junkies, howling for cheap petrol, will we be able to hear her? ■

Editorial question: Would it not be wiser to fight the causes of terrorism rather than the symptoms?

The Need For A National Water Policy

We are in the midst of a crucial political moment in the fight to protect Canada's water. All four opposition parties are calling for a ban on bulk water exports and stronger environmental protections for the water in Canada's lakes, oceans and rivers. Even prominent Conservative politicians are admitting that Canada's water is under threat, due to trade agreements like NAFTA and the SPP. The question is, how much pressure will it take before the Harper government finally takes action?

The federal government knows that citizens are concerned about Canada's water. In 2005 the Prime Minister's Office received 120,000 letters, emails and phone calls on the subject of bulk water exports and water privatization. This was the second largest volume of communications on any issue.

SUDDEN INTEREST

The Liberal party is in the midst of crafting a policy that they saw will beef up the government's management and protection of water. The party has also tabled a proposal for a new Water Stewardship Minister, who could help bring order to a maze of more than 20 departments that set federal policies affecting water.

Last spring, the Bloc Québécois introduced a motion to the Stranding Committee on International Trade that recommended that the government quickly begin talks with its American and Mexican counterparts to exclude water from the scope of NAFTA. It passed in June 2007 with support from all of the parties except the Conservatives.

In March, Peggy Nash of the NDP introduced a motion in the House of Commons calling for a comprehensive water policy that recognized access to clean water as a human right, prohibits bulk water exports, invests in infrastructure and ensures water does not become a commodity.

The Green Party has also demonstrated support for a federal water policy.

MISSING IN ACTION

The overwhelming chorus of support for stronger policies that would protect Canada's water has left the Harper government isolated. Even Conservative Senator Par Carney, who was one of the chief negotiators of NAFTA, now acknowledges that the agreement could open the door to bulk water exports, and has put forward a bill to change this.

Meanwhile, Canadian infrastructure is crumbling. The Canadian Federation of Municipalities reported at the end of 2007 that national infrastructure is "near collapse" and that a \$123 billion injection is needed immediately to address the crisis, including \$35 billion for water services alone. The Harper government responded by saying that it is not in the "pothole business," flippantly ignoring municipalities' desperate need for new resources.

And while the feds may not be in the pothole business, they sure are in the public-private partnership business. In November, the Conservatives unveiled a \$1.25 billion Public Private Partnerships Fund, which seeks to "support innovative projects that provide an alternative to *traditional government infrastructure procurement*" (emphasis ours) and "facilitate a broader use of P3s in Canadian infrastructure projects."

Canadian Perspectives readers are well aware by now of the problems associated with P3s, including skyrocketing costs, diminished quality and unaccountable management. But the Conservatives are determined to push the P3 model, at the expense of Canada's deteriorating water infrastructure.

CELEBRATE WORLD WATER DAY!!! ■

IF YOU ARE A SENIOR:

Your “Ordinary” Life Is Unusual Today

Even if you didn’t do something dramatic in your life, like stowing away on a steamship in the 1920s at age 13, your personal history can be fascinating to your family, friends and others.

If you were born in the early part of Canada’s 20th century, you experienced powerful events. Two world wars, a depression, new widespread use of the automobile, development of the movie industry, the growth of “labour-saving” devices and much more affected lives in small and large ways.

What you have to relate about the everyday effects of these events is interesting — because it is about you (told to people who care about you), and because it provides details, emotions and insights that bring past events to life in wonderful and meaningful ways.

Many of the most interesting personal histories are *verbal* — simply telling stories.

Think about it: we have seen movie westerns. But what a difference it is to hear about one of the last real cattle drives in the late 1890s from an elderly gentleman who “rode drag” — as he describes the dust and soreness, the dangers, boredom and beauty as he crossed the Prairies..

All it takes to create your personal history is a tape recorder and a remembering spirit, to share what life was like for you 50, 60 or more years ago; told when the mood strikes, perhaps with a loved one nearby to ask questions and prompt your recollections.

You might pick a time of year, like Christmases or Hanukkahs you remember celebrating as a child. Or a theme — the pets you enjoyed, your first attempts at cooking or your first job. Perhaps you recall significant news headlines, and can describe what was happening in your life at the

time and how the events affected you. How did you feel? Was it warm or cool? What did you see and touch and smell? What did your surroundings look like? Tell as many details as possible, so your listeners can see the pictures you are painting with your words.

At some later date, your stories might even be transcribed and collected, to share or document or teach. The most important thing is that your voice, spirit and legacy of living will have a way of being heard by your grandchildren, nephews, nieces and others for generations to come.

You may not have a dramatic experience to recount, such as stowing away aboard a steamship, but many will treasure your description of ordinary life as it was years ago, because it is no longer “ordinary” today. Give it a try! ■

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Submitted compliments of Dar Ruecker, Certified Senior Advisor, Conexus Credit Union, 780-1868



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Getting older is essential. Getting old is optional.

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