

Canada in Afghanistan: Rash Afghanistan mission produces corporate profits

By [Sid Shniad](#)

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It is not unusual for invader-occupiers to describe their efforts as humanitarian initiatives. Britain, which waged three bloody wars to colonize Afghanistan, insisted throughout that it was supporting the country's legitimate leaders against foreign interference.

Sixty years after the British left, the Soviets tried their hand at subduing Afghanistan. Years later, Nelofer Pazira, an Afghan author now living in Canada, travelled to Russia to interview Soviet officers who had fought in her country. These officers denied they had been part of an occupation. They firmly believed that theirs had been an effort to provide the country aid and stability.

In yet another intervention designed purely to help the people of Afghanistan, the Canadian military mission there is being expanded. Ottawa has spent more than \$2 billion on the mission to date. More than 7,000 Canadian military personnel have served there during the past four years. In that time, Afghanistan has become a major focus of Canadian military and foreign policy.

Despite the Harper government's sales job, Canadians appear skeptical about the merits of expanding the military venture. In February, a Globe and Mail/CTV poll found that 62 percent of Canadians opposed sending more troops to Afghanistan. A different poll, published in March by the Winnipeg Free Press, found that 83 percent of Canadians opposed expanding our military deployment there.

It's essential to keep in mind that Canada's effort in Afghanistan was initiated in the political environment that prevailed after 9/11. Like their American counterparts, important segments of this country's corporate sector have jumped on the security bandwagon, promoting a sharp increase in the military's influence over our politics and a beefed-up role for the arms industry in our economy. For example, the Canadian Council of Chief Executives (formerly the Business Council on National Issues), whose membership includes almost 150 of the most powerful capitalists in Canada, is circulating a document entitled "North American Security and Prosperity" and argues for the creation of a "North American Defence Alliance". According to the council, the United States is carrying a disproportionate part of the responsibility for protecting our continent. For the CEOs who make up the membership of the council, the fact that doing more to live up to Canada's military "responsibilities" will provide their companies with lucrative investment and sales opportunities is strictly serendipitous.

The jostling for contracts for military transport aircraft for use in expanding missions such as

in Afghanistan offers a case study of Canada's very own military-industrial complex. The Lockheed Martin and Boeing companies are competing for Ottawa's favour on these contracts. Patrick O'Donnell is a principal at CFN Consultants, the lobbyists for Lockheed Martin. Formerly a general in the Canadian military, O'Donnell was the superior officer of Canada's new Chief of Defence Staff, General Rick Hillier. Gordon O'Connor, Canada's new defence minister, is also a former general. After retiring from the military, O'Connor worked for Hill & Knowlton, lobbyists for the Airbus Military company, which is also seeking to sell military transport aircraft to Canada.

Some people buy the government's argument that Canada's efforts are helping to bring democracy to Afghanistan. But is there reason to believe that the people who engineered the David Emerson affair are any more interested in bringing democracy to Afghanistan than they are in practising it here in Canada? Furthermore, in our excitement about the advent of formal democracy there, we should not forget that a substantial number of the members of the country's parliament who were elected in the widely praised 2005 Afghan election are warlords.

Foreign governments are actively collaborating with these warlords. The latter control not only private armies but the production of opium in Afghanistan, which is the source of 87 percent of the world's opium. Despite repeated promises from democracy promoters George W. Bush and Tony Blair that there would be substantial increases in foreign aid to deal with the plight of the war-ravaged country, such undertakings have been ignored in practice. As a result, a significant portion of the Afghan population has become dependent on opium production for their very survival. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, drugs generated 52 percent of Afghanistan's gross domestic product in 2005.

As for the insufficient amount of aid that is being sent, it is being handled disastrously. Doctors Without Borders has withdrawn from Afghanistan, declaring that by dressing as civilians U.S. military personnel were undermining aid efforts. The soldiers' behaviour—giving aid one day and attacking and killing the next—has served to discredit real aid workers in the eyes of Afghans, placing aid workers' lives in danger.

Bear in mind that the Canadian government, which claims to be in Afghanistan to protect human rights, is handing over captured prisoners to the Afghan military without even minimal guarantees of their safekeeping. This despite the fact that prisoners in Afghan custody are often tortured and abused. According to NDP defence critic Dawn Black, "[Canada's prisoner-exchange agreement with the government of Afghanistan] shows a total lack of real commitment to human rights."

International law obliges Canada to ensure that detainees are protected against torture, not only when they are transferred to Afghan custody but when they are sent onward to a third nation, such as the United States. Two reports released at a joint news conference held by Amnesty International and the Ottawa-based Polaris Institute this week, written by legal experts, explains that Canadian soldiers abiding by the terms of the Canada-Afghanistan prisoner-exchange agreement could be charged with war crimes in the International Criminal Court. Furthermore, if soldiers who transfer prisoners to another party even suspect that their captives could be abused or tortured, the troops and their commanders could face war-crimes charges.

Chief of Defence Staff Hillier recently announced that Canada's mission in Afghanistan will require a commitment of at least 10 years. So we have at least a decade of more killing to

look forward to, a decade during which the lives of Afghans will descend further into hell, a decade during which more young Canadians will be killed, a decade during which the lies about this war will become as obvious as the lies used to justify the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

The sooner Canadians force our political leaders to rethink this misguided mission, the better.

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