

Canadian “Peacekeeping” Troops in Afghanistan: Keep Pearson out of it

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The Harper government’s flagging campaign to sell Canadians on extending our combat mission in Afghanistan has clearly found new legs since the release last month of the pro-war Manley report.

The turnaround moment probably came at a press briefing when John Manley, head of the government’s advisory panel on Afghanistan, defended the mission by invoking the name of Canadian peacekeeping hero Lester Pearson.

Since Canadians have tended to associate Afghanistan with torture and a cowboy-style “war on terror,” the invocation of Pearson’s name – from fellow Liberal Manley – was highly potent.

It was also absurd, even preposterous – like invoking Abe Lincoln as a nation-building forerunner of George W. Bush.

Indeed, Francis Boyle, professor of international law at the University of Illinois College of Law, argues that Manley’s attempt to place Pearson’s mantle on the Afghan mission amounts to a “real desecration of (Pearson’s) memory and his monumental achievement for world peace.”

Boyle says that he’s made his students study the UN peacekeeping model devised by Pearson for the Suez Crisis of 1956. “It was the first, and the model for all that came after it ... Pearson richly deserved his Nobel Peace Prize.”

“How dare Manley invoke his name,” Boyle continued. “The offensive use of military force (in Afghanistan) bears no similarity at all to Pearson’s peacekeeping force in the Sinai, which was genuine and legitimate peacekeeping.”

The notion of the Afghan mission as a moral, legal war pervades the Manley report. Contrasting it to the invasion of Iraq, Manley portrays the intervention in Afghanistan as a law-abiding, UN-authorized venture. But Boyle says that the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan were both illegal under international law, in that neither received Security Council approval.

The Manley report implies that the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan was endorsed by the Security Council, but Boyle notes that the Security Council resolution cited by Manley in no way authorized military action. Rather, it called for the perpetrators of 9/11 to be brought to justice – suggesting they be dealt with as criminals through extradition and the judicial

system, not war.

After invading Afghanistan and toppling the government, Washington won UN authorization for the new government it installed, and for its ongoing intervention through NATO. As a result, the U.S. presence in Afghanistan – like the one in Iraq – now has “a veneer of UN authority,” notes Osgoode Hall law professor Michael Mandel.

Manley has long been a proponent of closer relations with the U.S., and he and his panellists met with top U.S. officials, including Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Yet the Manley report avoids any suggestion that Ottawa’s involvement in Afghanistan is about pleasing the Bush administration, which is widely disliked in Canada.

Indeed, the Manley report makes Washington all but disappear, emphasizing the UN and NATO, and Canada’s role within NATO.

But NATO is just a military alliance ultimately run by Washington. Indeed, since it came into being in 1950, NATO has always been headed by a U.S. general (currently John Craddock).

In addition to NATO forces in Afghanistan, there are another 13,000 U.S. troops under direct U.S. command. This means that all troops serving in Afghanistan are ultimately under commander-in-chief George W. Bush, whose shadow looms large over the country.

But in urging Canadians to keep fighting over there, Manley somehow found it more relevant to mention the name Lester B. Pearson.

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