

# Iraq and Afghanistan: Maybe we should admit mistake

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Global Research, April 08, 2008

Esprit de Corps 2 April 2008

Region: [Canada, USA](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

## Maybe we should admit mistake

Last week marked the fifth anniversary of George Bush's invasion of Iraq.

As it stands, the death toll of American service personnel has reached 4,000, with an additional 40,000 suffering serious wounds. Those who track such things are also forecasting an ultimate price tag for this disaster to be as high as \$3 trillion.

However, back in 2003 the Pentagon never cautioned Americans about such a possible quagmire. In an effort to drum up support for the war, Bush's advisers warned about the threat of weapons of mass destruction and deputy secretary of defence Paul Wolfowitz claimed the intervention would not last more than six months.

Of course, there never were any such weapons found and once the American troops were on the ground, they could not be safely withdrawn due to the inability to create a stable environment in Iraq.

While American planners actually claimed they would be welcomed as liberators in Iraq, my discussions with Iraqis before the invasion proved to be far more accurate: They knew that if the iron fist of Saddam was removed, it would have to be replaced by an equally firm grip or civil war would be the result.

Mukhabarat secret service agents assigned to watch me predicted in the spring of 2003 that there would be a battle in the south between secular and fundamentalist Shiite factions for control of Basra's oil wealth, while in the north Sunni Arabs, Turkmen and Kurds would fight each other over the oilfields of Kirkuk. It was also widely understood that the American troops could enter Iraq, but if they decided to remain as occupiers they would pay a hefty price.

However, it would seem smug of us as Canadians to point to the American fiasco in Iraq and pride ourselves on the fact that we turned down Bush's offer to join in on the fun. We have become embroiled in our own Afghanistan quagmire, which, given our relative military resources, is a blunder of equal proportions.

In the immediate wake of 9-11, the U.S. launched Operation Enduring Freedom, which succeeded in toppling the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in a matter of months.

Canada did not participate in that initial offensive, but we did contribute a 700-strong light

infantry battle group in 2002 to help mop up Taliban holdouts around Kandahar. These troops encountered little resistance and spent most of their time chasing shadows on long-range patrols.

The following year, Canada was asked to contribute a sizable contingent to the International Security Assistance Force. This mission was to be under NATO command and was primarily concerned with securing the Afghan capital so that the fledgling Hamid Karzai government could get itself established and an Afghan security force could be trained and equipped.

Then Liberal finance minister John Manley set aside a total budget of \$200 million and Canada agreed to a two-year troop commitment to the rebuilding of Afghanistan. At that point, we had suffered four soldiers killed by U.S. friendly fire, and two others killed when their jeep struck a mine. None of our casualties had been the result of being targeted by hostile Afghans. It was just a matter of them suffering mishaps in a dangerous environment.

When the first six were killed in the summer of 2003, critics warned that Canada's death toll "may climb as high as 10 killed" if we kept troops on the ground through 2005. Manley's estimate of \$200 million for the mission had doubled before the first soldier boarded an Afghanistan-bound aircraft. Military analysts suggested that, due to having to rent strategic airlift from the Russians, our total cost might reach the staggering sum of \$1 billion.

Fast-forward to March 13, when Parliament agreed to extend Canada's commitment to Afghanistan through December 2011. Ironically, this vote was based on the independent report tabled by none other than John Manley.

In the interim, the Canadian contingent has moved south from Kabul to Kandahar and the casualties have climbed to 82 killed and 650 wounded, and Manley's projected \$200 million has become an expense of \$7.5 billion for the military mission, nine times the amount spent on civilian aid to Afghanistan.

The situation on the ground is less stable than it had been in 2006, and far less stable than when Afghans still had post-Taliban hopes for a better future in 2002. Like the Americans in Iraq, one of the primary rationales our parliamentarians used for extending the mission was that this was easier to do than to admit that so far we've failed to achieve our stated goal of assisting Afghans in creating their own secure environment.

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