

Who's giving the orders in Afghanistan?

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The recent front page pictures of Defense Minister Bill Graham grinning as he engages in a “flag war” with Denmark distracts attention from a far more serious war – one that will bring few smiles to Canadians. Canada’s elite Joint Task Force Two (JTF2) and other military forces are headed to Afghanistan as part of a 2,000-troop deployment.

Canadian troops will be taking over many tasks from the United States military in their latest mission, but the Bush administration will continue to call the shots – literally – in Afghanistan. Graham has avoided public and Parliamentary debate, preferring to cozy up to the Bush administration and their disastrous foreign and defense policies.

Our bellicose Chief of Defense Staff General Rick Hillier says Canadian troops will go after “detestable murderers and scumbags”, “radical murderers and killers” and “despicable murderers and bastards”. “We are the Canadian Forces,” says Gen. Hillier. “Our job is to be able to kill people.”

Okay, but who exactly is giving the orders to our troops? Who will separate innocent civilians from “scumbags”? Who will decide which “bastards” will be shot dead and which will be spared?

Serious questions deserve serious public debate

These are serious questions that deserve a serious public debate in Parliament and in Canada. • What is the detailed mission of the Canadian Forces in Afghanistan? • How will our troops contribute to the development of a peaceful, just and democratic society in Afghanistan? • What are the rules of engagement for the Canadian Forces in Afghanistan? • What level of effective operational control will the Bush administration and the U.S. military have over Canadian Forces? • If our military captures people, will the Canadian Forces respect the Geneva Conventions and international law? Or, will our military continue to hand over prisoners to the United States, which refuses to recognize either the Geneva Conventions or international law? • What happens when prisoners captured by the Canadian Forces and given to the United States military suffer illegal and inhumane treatment, including torture, by American military staff, civilian contractors working for the Bush administration or other states collaborating with the Bush administration?

Aid and guns: A bad combination

Military officials say that they will work with international aid agencies in Afghanistan, but virtually every Canadian non-governmental organization working in that country has said that they won’t get involved with our military. It’s a bad idea for aid agencies to be tied to the military. It prevents them from developing strong relationships with the local

community. The Canadian military would know that if they had talked to aid agencies, or if there had been a public debate on the role of our military in Afghanistan.

The civilian who is supposed to be in charge of the Canadian military is none other than Bill Graham. But Graham is maintaining his characteristic silence when it comes to military collaboration with the Bush administration.

During the last federal election, Graham remained mute about the Bush administration's Star Wars missile defense scheme, only to emerge after the election as the key advocate in the Canadian cabinet for the dangerous U.S. scheme to put weapons into space.

Now, as more Canadian troops are being sent to Afghanistan, Graham is silent about their role and responsibilities.

The recent execution-style slaying of a Brazilian electrician on a London subway train – which the British police admit was a tragic mistake – shows exactly what happens when military forces with lethal capability are let loose with over-heated rhetoric and told to “shoot-to-kill” anyone who looks like a bad guy.

Shameful Project Thread had consequences

Graham should know from his own experience with the ill-fated Project Thread that Canadians are not immune from overblown fantasies that lead to tragic consequences.

Project Thread hit the front page of The Toronto Star on August 22, 2003, when unnamed officers with Canada's Public Security and Anti-Terrorism unit leaked the “news” that 19 youths from Pakistan had been arrested and were linked to terrorism.

Within days, anonymous sources in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and other security services upped the fear-mongering. They arrested two more people. By August 27, the youth were labeled “a sleeper cell” of Al Qaeda. They were accused of plotting to bomb the Pickering nuclear power plant and also of attempting to topple the CN Tower.

A handful of community-based human rights advocates, backed by federal New Democrats (including former MP Svend Robinson), sounded the alarm, but Graham and the federal Liberals remained silent.

The federal government's smear campaign began to unravel on August 28 – as soon as the first man charged appeared in court – when a federal adjudicator ordered his release. “Nothing has ever been proven about anybody arrested,” said the adjudicator, Aina Martens.

Everyone was cleared after fair trial

In fact, none were terrorists. None were part of a sleeper cell. None had committed any criminal acts. Within a month of the original headlines, all the men were cleared. RCMP and immigration spokespeople then insisted that they never suspected a terrorist link, despite the fact that anonymous sources in those same departments were the ones who whispered into unquestioning reporters' ears in the first place.

A tragic footnote: Even though the victims of Project Thread were cleared of criminal

charges, the federal government insisted on deporting them to the military dictatorship of Pakistan. Just before the last federal election, I joined with other human rights advocates for the deportation hearing for Fahim Kayani. He asked to remain in Canada as a refugee. He said that, if forced back, he could be tortured by Pakistan. The federal judge dismissed his fears, and the federal Liberals – keen to see Fahim and his colleagues bundled out of the country where they would be less of an embarrassment – also turned a cold shoulder.

The only positive in the shameful Project Thread is that, once the men got a fair hearing on the “terrorism” charges, they were completely cleared. The people in Afghanistan who may end up staring down the barrel of a JTF2 weapon won’t have a chance for a fair trial. There will be just seconds before Canadian troops pull the trigger.

Canadian values need to be projected

That’s why it is absolutely crucial that there is a full and open public debate on the role of our Canadian Forces in Afghanistan. Canadians want our military to project our values to the world.

War is messy and bloody and people die. Since the end of the second world war, more civilians have died in military conflicts than military personnel. That makes it even more critical that the troops who go overseas in our name are expressing our values.

Martin Luther King said it best about forty years ago: “When evil people burn and bomb, good people must build and bind. Where evil people would seek to perpetuate an unjust status quo, good people must seek to bring into being a real order of justice.”

In his latest report to the residents of Toronto Centre, Graham is proudly pictured posing in a military flight suit in front of a fighter jet. It must have been fun to be a junior pilot for a day, but as defense minister, Bill Graham has a lot more serious work to do. Graham will be making a rare visit to Toronto Centre on August 4 for his annual community picnic. That would be a good place to start talking with Canadians about the rules of engagement for our military in Afghanistan.

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Making Government Work for Canadians

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