

Why Are Canadians Dying in Afghanistan? For Oil?

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Remembrance Day this year brought home to many Canadians the reality of Canada's war in Afghanistan. Despite a campaign by the mass media, recent public opinion polls reveal that around fifty percent of Canadians think the government should bring our kids home. Our Conservative and Liberal leaders insist we must stay the course and continue to back the U.S. government and NATO. The Bloc Quebecois says we should pull out. Jack Layton and the NDP have offered a qualified call for withdrawal. Elizabeth May and the Green Party have maintained a strange silence on the issue.

Hardly a day goes by that we don't hear some Canadian general or colonel strongly advocate an active military role in Afghanistan. We are told that Canadian forces are fighting a war to defeat the Taliban, defend the democratic government in Kabul, and help with economic reconstruction. But when U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice comes to Canada, she emphasizes that Canada is in Afghanistan to support U.S. policy objectives.

The U.S. in Afghanistan

The U.S. government has been in Afghanistan since July 1979, when President Jimmy Carter issued directives to aid the right wing forces trying to overthrow the leftist government headed by Noor Mohammad Taraki. In concert with the governments of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, the mujadiheen resistance movement grew, with its core support among militant Muslim fundamentalists and those from the old deposed feudal order. With cash, arms and training from these sources, the Islamic resistance forced the Soviet Union to withdraw in January 1989.

In 1984 Osama Bin Laden founded Makhtab al Khadimat, which recruited Muslims from the Middle East to go to Afghanistan to fight in the war against the Soviet Union. His operation was heavily financed by Saudi Arabia, but also the United States. The aid was funneled through Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Bin Laden went back to Saudi Arabia in 1989 but returned to Afghanistan in 1996 to set up his al-Qa'eda operation with the toleration of the Taliban leadership.

Once the Soviet Union withdrew, the U.S. government abandoned the country, focusing on events in Iran, the breakup of the Soviet Union, and the first Gulf War. The Afghan government under Dr. Mohammed Najibullah lasted for another three years. When he was ousted in 1992, Afghanistan collapsed into a vicious civil war between various political-military forces, ethnic groups, and religious factions. Kabul was destroyed by artillery and rocket assaults from all sorts of warring groups. An estimated 50,000 civilians were killed. Massacres were common. Women and children were murdered. Hundreds of thousands of people became refugees. Chaos reigned. From 1992 to 1996 the Northern Alliance between Tajik and Uzbek warlords ran the Afghan government, supported by the U.S. government.

In 1994 the Taliban emerged, primarily a Pushtun group of Sunni Moslems with a

fiercely radical political and religious orientation. They received strong support from the government of Pakistan. The Taliban military force moved north to unite the country. Like the other political factions, they launched a murderous assault on Kabul and seized power in 1995. Many commentators have attributed their success to the desire of the Afghan people for an end to civil war and a stable government. The Taliban forces then pushed further north to take possession of 90 percent of the country. Very quickly they received the full support of the governments of both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. Why was this the case?

The Struggle for Oil

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the U.S. government sought political and military agreements with the new Central Asian governments. The key here was the undeveloped oil and gas deposits in the Caspian Sea region. U.S. national security policy shifted from the Cold War against communism to protection of existing sources of oil and diversification away from reliance on the Persian Gulf. In support of this goal, the United States today maintains 250,000 service men and women overseas at 725 bases in 38 countries, in addition to five aircraft carrier battle groups. This is outside their commitments to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Central Asia has been a key focus of U.S. policy. The goal has been to tie the oil and gas resources to the West and block Russian domination of the area. As always, the U.S. government operates closely with U.S. oil corporations. In 1993 Chevron ventured into Kazakhstan. In 1994 a consortium of oil corporations, including Amoco, BP, Unocal and Pennzoil signed a joint venture with Azerbaijan. The American Petroleum Institute supported this objective, calling the Caspian region "the area of greatest resource potential outside of the Middle East."

From the beginning, the U.S. government strongly supported the building of an oil and gas pipeline from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Arabian Sea. They refused to support a pipeline through either Russia or Iran. The American oil corporations also supported this policy, preferring the major markets in India, China, Japan and the west coast of the United States to the more competitive markets in Europe.

In 1993 the governments of Turkmenistan and Pakistan negotiated the building of the pipelines. They were joined by the Union Oil Corporation of California (Unocal), who hired Henry Kissinger, Hamid Karzi and Zalmay Khalilzad as advisers. Amoco hired Zbigniew Brzezinski. Turkmenistan hired U.S. General Alexander Haig. When the Central Asia Gas and Pipeline Consortium (CentGas) was created in 1996, both Enron (Kenneth Lay) and Halliburton (Dick Cheney) were to be involved with the development. Condoleezza Rice, then on the board of directors of Chevron, supported the project.

The key to the building of the pipelines was always the creation of a stable government in Afghanistan. Even before they seized power, the U.S. government supported the Taliban, concluding that it was the only political force which could create a national government. The Clinton Administration actively supported the pipeline agreement with Turkmenistan. Khalilzad became the special link between Unocal, the Taliban and the U.S. government. Unocal and the CentGas consortium were quite willing to deal with any government which could control the country.

The pipeline plan received a setback in 1998 when terrorists with supposed links to bin Laden bombed two U.S. embassies in Africa. Bill Clinton responded by launching Cruise missiles on bin Laden's bases in Afghanistan. The Taliban government agreed to extradite bin Laden to Saudi Arabia for trial for terrorism, provided evidence of his complicity was produced. None was produced. But Unocal withdrew from the pipeline project, concluding

that the Taliban government was unstable and unreliable.

The Pipeline Must Go Ahead

In 1999 the governments of Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan signed a new agreement to promote the pipelines. The following year Unocal resumed talks with the Taliban government. Additional UN Security Council sanctions were imposed on Afghanistan after the bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen in October 2000. The Taliban government continued to agree to extradite bin Laden provided proof was presented tying him to the terrorist acts. But still no evidence was produced. The Taliban government hired Laila Helms, niece of Richard Helms, former director of the CIA, as their negotiator in talks with the U.S. government.

The new administration of George W. Bush began talks with the Taliban government, which went from February 2 to August 6, 2001. Dick Cheney's report on U.S. energy needs, released in May 2001, called for major U.S. involvement in the development of the Caspian Sea reserves. The allies for this project were the Taliban and Pakistan governments, both of which were strongly anti-Iranian.

What could be done with the Taliban government? In June 2001 Chokila Iyer, the Indian Foreign Secretary, reported that the United States and the Russian government were planning a military attack on the Taliban through the borders of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. They were to back the warlords of the Northern Alliance in an effort to overthrow the Taliban government. The Indian government agreed to "facilitate" this action. The planned attack on Afghanistan was widely discussed at the July 2001 meeting of the G-8 countries in Geneva.

Shortly after in July the United Nations hosted a meeting between the U.S., Russia and the six countries that border Afghanistan in Berlin. The eight governments agreed that what was needed was a new government of national unity which would be followed by international economic aid and the building of the pipelines. Naif Naik, the Pakistani Foreign Minister, reported that at the meeting the U.S. government threatened the Taliban that if they did not agree to this proposal they would bring on "a military operation." Naik reported that U.S. officials told him that military action against the Taliban government would begin by the middle of October 2001.

Then came the events of September 11, 2001. The Bush administration made new demands on the Taliban government. Once again, the Taliban agreed to extradite bin Laden to another country for trial, but only if some evidence was presented demonstrating that he had some ties to the U.S. airline hijackings. An agreement was reached to extradite bin Laden to Pakistan, but this was then rejected by President Pervez Musharraf, now closely allied with the U.S. government. The White House stated that "there would be no negotiations, no discussions with the Taliban." On October 7 US and UK bombers attacked Afghanistan and increased their economic and military aid to the warlords of the Northern Alliance.

The New Afghan Government

Under massive air attack from the US and UK forces, the Taliban government was rapidly defeated. Hamid Karzai was chosen by the U.S. government to head the new regime in Kabul. He had long been closely linked to the U.S. government, as the CIA agent, based in Pakistan, who channeled the \$2 billion in U.S. aid to the mujahideen. The core of power in the new government is held by the Tajik and Uzbek warlords.

By February 2002 the Karzai government had revived plans for the oil pipelines, a new

proposal was drafted in May, and a formal agreement was signed in December. Unocal is again the lead company.

However, construction has been blocked by the advancing resistance to the government in Kabul, which is corrupt, incompetent and very unpopular. The legislature is dominated by regional warlords, drug traffickers, members of known criminal gangs, and many who should be indicted for war crimes and murder. Other forces have joined the revived Taliban in the resistance movement. The rallying cry, once again, is to rid Afghanistan of foreign occupiers.

Despite what we hear from our political and military leaders, this war to support U.S. oil policy is not going well. Just recently it was reported that in 2005 there were 150 insurgent attacks against NATO forces each month; this has risen to 600 in 2006. Back in 1979 Zbigniew Brzezinski urged President Jimmy Carter to lure the Soviet Union into Afghanistan to trap them in their own "Vietnam war." How long will Canadian forces stay in Afghanistan? We have already surrendered our long tradition of peacekeeping under the United Nations.

John W. Warnock recently retired from teaching at the University of Regina where he specialized in the political economy of Canada-U.S. relations.

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