



MIKE OTTO

CAN YOU SAY QUAGMIRE? US Ambassador David Wilkins knows what his country's doing in Iraq—getting its ass kicked.

Canada needs its own plan of attack

We need to figure out what we're doing in Afghanistan, and then stick to it



GRAHAM LETTNER

As the US proceeds with its latest scrambling effort of injecting 21 500 new troops into Iraq, Canada should take stock of its own efforts in Afghanistan. Because without learning from the failed US effort, Canada risks its own foreign policy failure.

To start, unlike America's ever-shifting rationale for the occupation of Iraq, Canada should define the Afghan mission plainly and unambiguously. Unfortunately, Gordon O'Connor, Canada's Minister of Defence, wasn't anywhere close to getting it right this past Saturday here at the Edmonton Garrison.

Speaking to the Canadian rationale for the current mission at a symposium on the war in Afghanistan, O'Connor made a chilling statement: "The previous government and this government will not allow Canadians to be killed without retribution." He went on to say, "I don't believe the Liberal government would have committed us to Afghanistan had there not been Canadians killed [in the 9/11 attacks]."

If vengeance is our national policy, then I will suggest that we've already killed our quota of Taliban fighters. If not, these statements by O'Connor serve only to blur the understanding of our role in Afghanistan by introducing the element of retribution. And unless our government is clear about its reasons for sending Canadians into Afghanistan, the Canadian people have

no reason to support the effort.

Beyond clarifying the rationale for its engagement in Afghanistan, our government has to broaden its methods for bringing about peace and stability. Combat operations versus the Taliban are only one piece of a greater combined effort, and Canada risks exacerbating other problems if military operations remain the default method of engagement.

For example, a key political effort needed is to engage the leadership of Pakistan. One of the world's foremost experts on Afghanistan, Dr Barnett R Rubin, recently wrote in the magazine *Foreign Affairs* that "the argument that poverty and underdevelopment, rather than Pakistani support, are responsible for the insurgency does not stand up to scrutiny."

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Other regions of Afghanistan are plagued by the same economic problems, yet they don't have the problem of coordinated anti-government violence. Therefore the goal of creating peace and stability in Afghanistan won't be achieved without Pakistan's continued involvement. A policy of isolating regional neighbours on the other hand, such as that which the Bush Administration is pursuing with Iran and Syria, won't build lasting peace.

Another key issue is that of opium production. This could be a great example of building cooperation and

stability rather than undermining it: by constructing roads, cold-storage facilities and other rural developments, the NATO-led coalition can slowly wean farmers off their reliance on the opium trade. According to Rubin, the alternate policy of poppy crop eradication—possibly by aerial spraying—endorsed by the US "puts more money in the hands of traffickers and corrupt officials by raising prices, and drives farmers toward insurgents and warlords." Many overly aggressive anti-insurgency tactics used in Iraq were overwhelmingly detrimental, and there's no reason why they should work in Afghanistan either.

Finally, the Canadian government must be honest about the evolving situation on the ground. At the recent Edmonton symposium, Master Cpl Mark Frere, speaking to O'Connor's focus on the positive developments in Afghanistan, said, "I definitely don't think there's enough of that in the media, or they're not covering that as much as they should." I starkly disagree. The practice of government officials consistently speaking to only the best-case scenario has disastrous consequences. The rhetoric emanating from Washington, as reported by Thomas E Ricks in his book *Fiasco: the American Military Adventure in Iraq*, is hauntingly similar to that being voiced by our Canadian officials. If Canadian decision-making rests on a skewed, irrationally optimistic frame of reference, our initiatives will have little chance of success.

What Canada needs to avoid is finding itself in the position of the Americans: choosing the best of a bad lot. Embracing a broad, multi-faceted strategy, and learning from mistakes made will give Canada a real chance for success in Afghanistan—that is, peace and stability, not retribution.

This man was last seen entering a limousine at the Vancouver International Airport on Thursday, 18 January 2007. If you have any information as to his whereabouts, please email opinion@gateway.ualberta.ca immediately.

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