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- Tania Kajner, Equal Voice Alberta

March 20, 2007
University of Alberta
T-B5, Tory Building
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Mo Elsalhy, MLA and Kevin Taft, MLA, Leader of the Alberta Liberal Caucus

US blunders threaten Afghan mission



GRAHAM LETTNER

On the concrete island in the middle of the campus bus loop, taped to a lamppost where students wait for their rides home, is an outdated poster that reads “Afghanistan: Canada’s Iraq.” It advertises an event that was hosted by the Muslim Students’ Association back in February, but it’s a bold statement—and it may yet prove prescient.

Afghanistan could indeed become Canada’s Iraq—but not with our nation playing the role of America, though. Instead, in Afghanistan, Canada risks becoming the Britain of Iraq: first a willing partner, then a rueful accomplice, and finally, a tarnished and dejected former occupier.

Britain recently began the process of extricating their forces from southern Iraq—a response to seeing the American military blunder along for far too long. It’s appetite for war lost, with British public opinion finally having gnawed through whatever cords of comradeship had bound Bush and Blair.

In Afghanistan, it’s further US blunders—three in particular—that imperil the mission there, and which risk leaving Canada in the same unfortunate position as its colonial counterparts.

The first of these took place on Sunday, 4 March. While making its way through a crowded civilian street, a US convoy was targeted by a suicide car bomber and then by small arms fire in what US officials would later describe as “a complex ambush.” US troops returned fire on their

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attackers while attempting to flee the scene. Afghan witnesses allege that US troops fired indiscriminately, while US officials reported that Afghan civilians were unfortunately caught in a deadly crossfire. The final casualty count: 16 Afghans dead, 24 Afghans wounded; no Americans dead, but one wounded.

Lt Col David Accetta, a US military spokesman, released this statement: “We regret the death of innocent Afghan citizens as a result of the Taliban extremists’ cowardly act. Once again the terrorists demonstrated their blatant disregard for human life by attacking coalition forces in a populated area, knowing full well that innocent Afghans would be killed and wounded in the attack.”

The second such blunder came on the heels of the first: after documenting this attack on a US convoy and the subsequent US response, journalists and cameramen had their equipment confiscated by US troops. Their pictures and video footage were then deleted. The third of these incidents saw two 2000-pound bombs pulverize a family of nine. After coming under rocket fire, US troops spotted two men with Kalashnikov rifles entering a nearby compound. US troops called in an air strike to end the engagement. The family had been staying in the same compound.

Again, Lt Col Accetta responded, “Coalition forces observed two men with AK-47s ... entering the compound. These men knowingly endangered

civilians by retreating into a populated area while conducting attacks against coalition forces.”

There’s an underlying malaise of thought eating away at the possibility of peace and resolution in Afghanistan. This malaise is found in the ugly disregard for Afghan lives when returning heavy gunfire into crowded civilian areas. It’s in the oppressive and highly suspect deletion of journalists’ documentation at point of force. And it’s in the blaming of militants for bringing death and destruction to Afghan civilians. This hypocrisy reveals just how woefully skewed the use of force has become when little or no responsibility falls on the military who recklessly authorizes its disgustingly disproportionate use.

Each of these errors was deadly and tragic. They were also completely counterproductive. What’s more, the negative effects of American military blunders will fall to rest on the entire NATO-led coalition—Canada included—just as US errors in Iraq stung the British military and its other coalition partners.

All of this is bad news for the Afghan mission, and bad news for Canada in particular. It turns out the MSA was right, though perhaps not in the way they first thought. The dynamic of the Afghan mission is still being decided. But if the dynamic becomes more and more that of America’s Afghanistan, the risk is that Afghanistan will indeed become Canada’s Iraq.

The West is in—finally



COLIN KEIGHER

In 1987, at the first major convention of the Reform Party of Canada, Preston Manning uttered four infamous words: “the West wants in.” With the recent release of population statistics gathered in the 2006 census, one can say that the West almost is.

Between 2001–2006, both British Columbia and Alberta grew to the point where their combined populations now almost equal Québec—7 403 837 to be exact, or just 142 294 short. In the next few years, Alberta itself will cause the balance in population to shift towards the West’s favour even further, and while the greatest number of people will still be in both Québec and Ontario—which rests at a combined 19.7 million, or about two-thirds of the country’s population—the voice of the lands beyond the Great Lakes will continue to become stronger.

Much of the population growth in Alberta has been intra-provincial—this author being one of the guilty parties. Our booming economy does not appear to be showing signs of slowing down any time soon, and that’s causing most other provinces’ growth to be either non-existent or reliant on immigration. For example, British Columbia’s population grew by over five per cent due to immigra-

tion, while Alberta’s grew by over ten per cent due to both intra-provincial increases and immigration combined.

So what does this mean for us out here in the West? Well, there’s still not going to be cause for much celebration any time soon. While we may be experiencing a population boom, it may take centuries before the total population of Western Canada will be of equal to that of its eastern counterparts. As well, even though BC and Alberta experienced positive growth, Manitoba only swelled its ranks by 2.6 per cent, and Saskatchewan, despite all of its quality-of-life advertisements, actually saw a 1.1 per cent decrease.

Ottawa can no longer ignore the fact that the balance of power is starting to equalize in some ways. As a Westerner, Stephen Harper can’t afford to lose the western provinces’ vote. Alberta didn’t give all 28 of its federal seats to the Conservatives to have nothing done, and there’s little chance of the party making much headway in Québec, as the Liberals and the Bloc will be dominant there for the foreseeable future. If future federal elections are going to be more reliant on votes from the western provinces, the parties that want the role of Prime Minister in their hands will need to be aware of what importance Western Canada plays in the national scene not only today, but as well as tomorrow.

Perhaps we can now say that the west is truly in, but both Ottawa and Western Canada will still need to leave the “friend zone” before its citizens can truly be represented in Parliament.

THE BURLAP SACK

Have you picked up a copy of *See or Vue* lately? If so, then chances are you’ve been building a healthy rage at what they pass off as news coverage. Both of these publications carry a slant and lack of journalistic integrity that should make anyone sick.

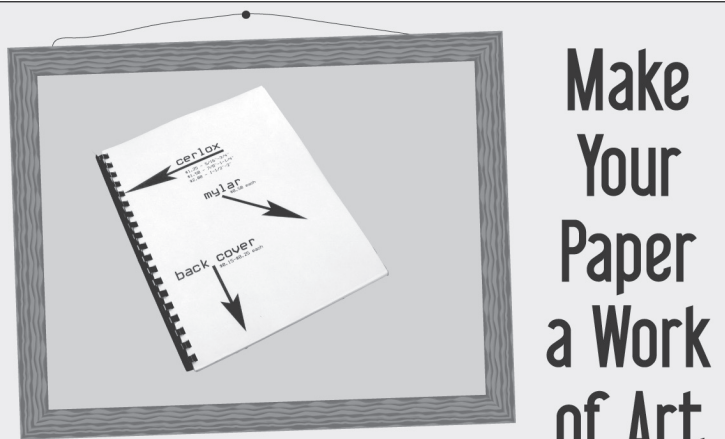
Now, some of our dear readers may not consider the *Gateway*’s news that important, since we focus on the University—and often times, let’s be honest, it’s not the most riveting stuff. However, at least the *Gateway* tries to show some integrity and to put the notion of accuracy and fairness above sheer entertainment value.

Vue Weekly, on the other hand, devoted an entire issue to attacking our former premier last September, even managing to turn a video game article against him. Now I’m no King Ralph lover, but that was just ridiculous.

Pick up just about any issue of *SEE* magazine and you’ll immediately be able to see how dangerously close they hug the line between opinion and news—a line that’s only further blurred when these slanted “news” briefs are more often than not unsigned.

The so-called news sections of these publications taint what limited credibility these magazines have as legitimate journalism, and everyone involved should feel responsibility. It makes one wonder if they even read what they write. Of course, they’ll have to get out the sack first before we can find out.

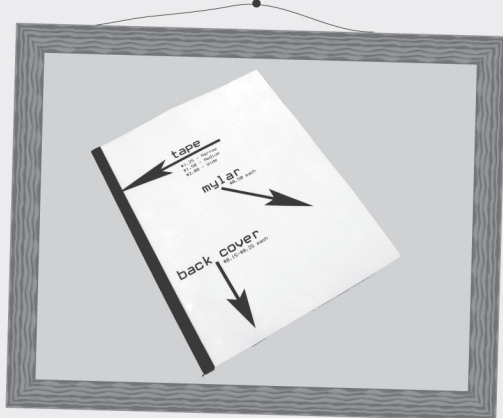
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