



Is It Time to Cut and Run from Kandahar?

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Perhaps, before we do decide to cut and run from Kandahar, and from Afghanistan, we should take a moment to reflect on why we are there in the first place.

Perhaps we might remember that at one time Afghanistan was a very different country from the one that appears daily on our television screens.

It was a Third World country, with Third World incomes, and Third World public services, and great distortions of wealth and power—but it was also a Third World country with an educated middle class, and a government that did provide some public services, and which was not particularly oppressive by Third World standards.

And there was hope—hope for a future with economic growth, hope for increasing levels of education, hope for better health services, hope for a gradual move towards the political and democratic rights that we in the First World take so easily for granted.

Then came the overthrow of the Afghan government, the Soviet invasion of 1979, and the installation of a Stalinist puppet regime of a cruelly repressive and barbarous nature, followed by the rise of a brave and defiant movement of Afghan Freedom Fighters determined to regain their country.

The war against the Soviet invaders and their puppet administration, though

ultimately successful, left the country in ruins—with much of the arable land rendered unusable by the 15,000,000 mines scattered by the Soviet invaders, including the small “butterfly” mines designed to attract a child’s attention—and with the subsistence infrastructure of the economy destroyed.

Next came the era of the warlords, the regional barons whose power came out of the barrels of the guns which they employed so freely to protect the revenues that came from the opium poppies and the drug trade, and what little economic infrastructure that had survived the resistance to the Soviets crumbled further.

The emergence of the Taliban from its roots in the socially and religiously conservative south seemed, at first, to be a tiny flame of hope that would mark the end of the oppression of the warlords, and the beginnings of economic recovery and social stability.

Sadly, it was not to be. The new Taliban government imposed a brutally repressive regime of its own, one devoted to imposing the harsh customs of an adamantly fundamentalist sect of Sunni Islam on all of the citizens of Afghanistan.

Theirs was a regime devoted to preventing little girls from going to school, devoted to sending their mothers back under the burkha, to desecrating the symbols of other religions such as the great Buddhist statues carved out of the living rock at Bamiyan, which had stood for centuries

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as one of the wonders of the world

And, finally, theirs was a regime that offered refuge and training camps for the followers of Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda.

That dark alliance led to the tragic events of 9/11, the American retaliation with the invasion of Afghanistan, and the overthrow of the Taliban.

It also led to an economy even more devastated than at the end of the Soviet invasion, and to the fearful prospect of the return of the warlords, the return of the opium poppies, and the extinction of that tiny flame of hope that had flickered so briefly

That is why we are there—to help rekindle that tiny flame of hope.

The Canadian International Development Agency, with the partnership of the Canadian Departments of Foreign Affairs and National Defence—the “Three Ds” of Development, Diplomacy, and Defence—has funded programmes to help the new Afghan government collect and store 10,000 heavy weapons such as artillery, tanks, and rocket launchers, programmes to help with de-mining and the destruction of ammunition stockpiles, programmes to provide savings and micro-loan services to 140,000 clients, 89 percent of them women.

With our NATO partners in the International Security Assistance Force, Canadians have helped the Afghan government and the Afghan people to develop a new constitution; helped them to conduct successful presidential and legislative elections; helped them to get more than one million girls enrolled in school; helped them to begin reforms in defence, justice, and finance; and helped them begin the reintegration of

nearly three million Afghan refugees.

And the role of the Canadian Forces in Afghanistan is to protect that work, by the use of deadly force if necessary, against those who would seek to kill the civilians, the Afghans, the Canadians, and our other partners, who are engaged in the reconstruction of Afghanistan—to accept the responsibility to protect them against those who would destroy all that we have achieved, and who would turn back the clock to the oppressions of earlier regimes.

That is why the Canadian Forces are there.

And that is why the Conference of Defence Associations honours the memory of the Canadian soldiers, and the Canadian diplomat, who gave their lives so that that work could go on.

And we know that we will equally honour the memories of future Canadian soldiers who will also make that sacrifice.

For without the protection provided by Canadian soldiers, willing to give their lives to protect the work of the diplomats and development teams, that work will end, and that tiny flame of hope in Afghanistan will go out.

No, now is not the time for Canada to cut and run from Afghanistan.

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