



The Hillier Factor

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In General Rick Hillier, Canada has a Chief of the Defence Staff whose unique style has garnered a lot of attention, while generating a degree of controversy. He has been criticized in particular for his outspokenness and directness.

But Canadians should consider themselves fortunate to have a CDS who is prepared to tell it like it is.

Not only has Hillier's straight shooting done wonders for the morale of the troops he commands; it has also allowed him, as Canada's top military officer, to catch the attention of government and public about the important issues at stake in a way no previous chief, myself included, was able to. As a result, we are all the better for it.

Past Chiefs of the Defence Staff, with few exceptions, have been low profile generals or admirals having virtually no name recognition amongst the general public, in keeping with the

longstanding tradition in this country that senior military persons not intrude upon the domain of the politicians, nor enter the public limelight unless absolutely necessary. Today, by contrast, scarcely a day goes by without a media story in which General Rick Hillier is highlighted.

Times have changed, and the reasons are evident. The transition began with the end of the Cold War, and it accelerated with the sad Somalia episode in the early nineties, with the replacement of classical peacekeeping by near-war operations of the kind encountered in Bosnia and Kosovo, and now with Canada's involvement in a real shooting war in Afghanistan, with its unaccustomed level of casualties and controversy.

In this changed environment, General Hillier has been criticized from time to time for his frank language, using terms like "scumbags" and "a bag of snakes" in describing Canada's Taliban enemies in Afghanistan.

Due allowance in made, however, for the fact that he is a colourful Newfoundlander, given to refreshing directness in public pronouncements about the armed forces. Average Canadians seem to

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like it, and the media, always ready for a good story when they see it, play up the Hillier angle with glee.

There are critics, however, who feel that his outgoing style transcends the bounds of good governance. In a recent article in the *Globe & Mail* entitled "The Perilous Charms of Rick Hillier", Lawrence Martin suggests that Hillier's silver-tongued persuasiveness led - or misled - the Liberals into what might become an Iraq-type quagmire in Afghanistan.

There have been rumours that he is at odds with the current Minister of National Defence, Gordon O'Connor, or that the Harper government is uncomfortable about Hillier's past closeness to Paul Martin Liberals, who appointed him as CDS back in early 2004.

These criticisms are largely a matter of opinion, there being no serious suggestion that General Hillier has exceeded the legal authority of his office.

What really matters, then, is whether he is providing the kind of leadership that Canada needs for its armed forces at this critical time in its history.

On balance, it appears that he is. From the moment he put the fourth maple leaf on his epaulettes, Hillier took charge in a top-down, activist approach to the job of CDS.

He made radical changes to the organizational structure of the Canadian Forces, by eliminating

some organizations and creating a whole range of new operational commands.

He has advised the Harper government, with considerable success, on the need to re-equip the military and to streamline the dysfunctional procurement system, which had degenerated to the point where the introduction of a new piece of hardware typically took fifteen to twenty years.

He has begun to increase the size of the armed forces through improvements to the recruiting system.

Just as important, he has done much to bring the military back into national prominence, after years of obscurity.

Historians will ultimately judge his performance on what happens in Afghanistan. As a former Commander of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Kabul, he probably knows as much as any Canadian about the military situation in that country.

There can be no doubt that this command experience in Afghanistan, together with a similar tour of duty as commander of a NATO multinational division in Bosnia-Herzegovina six years ago, gives him a level of operational credibility rarely seen in the Canadian military since the Second World War.

To be sure, there is some uneasiness amongst the navy and air force communities about the CDS's



intense emphasis on the army, and what is seen by some as a subjugation of the sea and air elements, with possible long term detriment to the concept of balanced forces.

In response, he would probably point to recent government announcements about plans to purchase major new equipment for the navy and the air force. The real test will come when the new command structure matures and shows its worth, and when the new equipment finds its way into the hands of those in uniform.

But the best measure of General Hillier's effectiveness is the extent to which he is revered by the rank and file of the Canadian Forces. He is seen as a straight-shooter, who tells it like it is without bureaucratic embellishment. He talks to the troops at every opportunity, directly and without notes, and he does it exceedingly well.

In spite of the casualties, morale is higher than it has been in a long time, and it shows in the military's performance, not just on the ground in Afghanistan, but in all environments these days. For this alone, he deserves full credit.

He is still relatively new in the job, and there will be tough times ahead. There will continue to be sniping by those who do not like or appreciate his style.

To this point, however, General Rick Hillier has shown Canadians

that he is the right man to be Chief of the Defence Staff at a time when the demands of the position are very high indeed.

For this, Canadians can be thankful.

A lightly edited version of this paper appeared on the op-ed page of The Globe and Mail on August 25, 2006 with the title:

***"He's our man:
Rick Hillier tells it like it is, and that's
what we want in our top soldier,
says former chief of the defence staff
Paul Manson"***

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