

Canada in Afghanistan: The New Conquistadores

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The Harper government is seeking to prolong Canada's military involvement in Afghanistan. So far, Canada has spent six years, billions of dollars, 78 young lives (many more wounded) and inflicted unknown casualties on that country.

The terms used to describe our occupation and ongoing war are remarkably similar to those used over a century ago by colonial powers to justify their ruthless wars of colonization. Then, it was the white man's burden to "civilize" the non-whites of the Americas, Africa and Asia. As cub scouts we were taught Kipling's unforgettable prose about the "lesser breeds," but nothing about the real people who paid horrendous costs in death, suffering, destruction and theft of their land and resources.

Today, we are involved in a "mission" in Afghanistan to "improve" the lives of women and children, to install "democracy," to root out corruption and the drug trade.

Waging war with bombs and guns is not helping women or installing democracy. It is, however, strengthening the Afghan resistance — hence our increasingly shrill cries for more help from NATO.

The U.S. is involved in a similar "mission" in Iraq. So far, over a million Iraqis — many of them children — have died, some two million have fled the country, another two million are "internally displaced," untold hundreds of thousands wounded in an endless war waged by the world's most advanced military almost entirely against civilians.

The toll of dead, wounded and displaced for Afghanistan is not being published.

The deadly effects of radioactive, depleted uranium (DU) ammunition being inflicted on both countries (some originally from Saskatchewan) haven't begun to be tabulated or understood, let alone reported back to us. The idea that bombing the population will improve the lives of women and children could only come from those who have never experienced war.

As for narcotics, in 2001, when the West's attack on Afghanistan began, its opium trade was approaching eradication. Today, Afghanistan produces over 90% of the world's heroin and the U.S. is proposing mass aerial spraying of pesticides.

Those of the writer's generation and older will remember the U.S. onslaught against little Vietnam — the long unspeakable war — which left six million Vietnamese, Laotians and Cambodians dead, wounded or deformed.

In that extraordinary country one sees miles upon miles of neat graves in the cemeteries,

thousands of acres — aerial sprayed with horrific chemicals — still lying waste, craters left from ten million tons of bombs dropped, hand excavated underground tunnels in which the people were forced to live for years on end. An ancient African saying goes, “the axe forgets, but not the tree.” Today, over four million Vietnamese still suffer, many indescribably so, the effects of Agent Orange and other chemicals, and genetic damage is continuing from generation to generation.

In the case of Vietnam, Canada kept its troops out. Over the past decade, however, Canada has bombed Yugoslavia, helped overthrow Jean Bertrand Aristide’s democratically elected government in Haiti, is occupying Afghanistan and now, we learn, is getting involved more deeply in the U.S. devastation of Iraq. (Something Stephen Harper and Stockwell Day openly advocated from the beginning of the U.S. “Shock and Awe” assault on that defenceless nation.)

What gives the rich, powerful, white West the right to wage unending, merciless wars against small, largely non-white, Third World countries? (Yugoslavia, where the west invented “humanitarian” bombing was not a Third World country, but according to President Bill Clinton, it needed to accept the benefits of “globalism.”) The torment of civilians being subjected to the impact of modern weaponry is rarely reported in the West. Canadians, as a matter of policy, are not informed of the number or types of casualties we have inflicted.

The modern concepts of “humanitarian intervention” and the “duty to protect” which seek to override international law and national sovereignty are, in this writer’s view, simply 21st century terminology for colonization.

Military assaults against the poverty stricken farmers of Afghanistan and Haiti, and an Iraqi population struggling for its very survival, are part of a long, barbarous tradition going back to slave ships and colonial resource wars and will some day, I believe, be seen in that context. In the meantime, the agony of millions does not reach our ears or eyes, and Prime Minister Harper is busy working the phones to shore up the U.S.-led war, seeking more troops and helicopters to “finish the job.”

When Canada assisted the British Empire in the Boer War over a century ago, it was Québec that led the opposition. It was again Québec’s vocal resistance — and former Prime Minister Chrétien’s attention to it — that helped keep Canada’s troops out of Iraq. Today, it is up to Canadians who can feel the anguish of the Third World to speak for the voiceless against Canada’s new government of would be conquistadores.

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