

## Seeing ourselves through Afghan eyes

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In-depth Report: [AFGHANISTAN](#)

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Whenever a nation is at war, it is very easy to polarize all public opinion based upon the simplified premise of “us” versus “them.” Soldiers simply follow orders, while the political and military leadership puts forward talking points to justify the military intervention. A large percentage of the media eagerly parrots the government press lines, and the Canadian public is more than content to be placated by the official reassurances that our cause is just. This makes for a relatively easy sales job as we all believe that we are inherently good people.

Therefore, if strange foreigners attack our soldiers with suicidal fanaticism, it is very easy to convince ourselves that our enemy is evil incarnate. When NATO artillery or airstrikes cause the deaths of innocent women and children, naturally we blame the dastardly insurgents for using their own families as human shields.

However, in the fall of 2006, following the successful conclusion of Operation Medusa, our soldiers walked among the throng of Afghan refugees returning to the Panjwai district. When a Taliban suicide bomber detonated a bicycle bomb in the midst of that crowd—killing and injuring soldiers and civilians alike—we heaped all the blame for the collateral damage into the coffin of the Taliban attackers. When our soldiers shot and killed an unarmed 10-year-old boy at the scene of an IED ambush, we said the Taliban bore full responsibility because they had created such an insecure environment that our troops had little recourse but to shoot first and take no chances.

Last week’s attack against Canadian soldiers involving another 10-year-old boy would—at least on the surface—appear to substantiate that rationale.

However, if we are trying to justify our soldiers’ sacrifice with the notion that our Canadian troops are in Afghanistan to protect the weak and the innocent, the fact that we are engaging and being engaged by 10-year-old boys should give us pause for thought. The official NATO spin on the Taliban’s use of a young boy in a suicide attack was that this is further proof of a desperate defeated foe.

Last year, when the Taliban in Kandahar province abandoned any attempt at conventional attacks and began relying solely on IEDs, we were told this meant our tactics were working because we’d driven them underground. On May 6, when Corporal Michael Starker was killed in a rare firefight with insurgents, again we were told this was a positive step forward because we were now driving the Taliban out into the open.

Regardless of how the tactical battle is waged, the Canadian public have been repeatedly reassured that our soldiers are in Afghanistan at the request of the democratically-elected government of President Hamid Karzai.

Of course, that rosy little picture was irreparably ruptured last month when Foreign Affairs Minister Maxime Bernier denounced the governor of Kandahar as a corrupt official. While I have little doubt that Bernier has concrete proof of Governor Asadullah Khalid's sticky fingers in the funds, demanding that Afghan public officials be shuffled and replaced on demand would make the Karzai government appear to be nothing more than puppets of the Western occupation force.

On top of that, his comments only seemed to illustrate just how out of touch Bernier is with the situation on the ground in Afghanistan. While corruption is certainly rife among Afghan public officials, politicians, and security forces, they are nothing more than petty criminals compared to the foreigners who are plundering the Afghanistan mission for what it's really worth.

For instance, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) recently discovered a case wherein a 22-year-old American businessman sold some \$300 million worth of old and mostly defective ammunition to the Afghan army and police forces. To make matters worse, the ammo cartridges were purchased and shipped from China, which is a violation of U.S. law. The same GAO report found a \$32-million payment for an airfield in Iraq that was never built, and more than \$8 billion in contractor incentive fees and bonuses that were paid—even if the work was not complete.

With lawlessness and violence rampant throughout Kandahar, and with foreigners lining their pockets with obscure profits, it is no wonder that Governor Khalid felt slighted when Bernier singled him out as a corrupt official.

If we are ever going to succeed in overcoming this challenge in Afghanistan, we need to start seeing ourselves through the eyes of those we are purporting to assist, not simply how we want to see ourselves.

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