

# The Unexpected War - Canada in Kandahar

Review of book by Janice Gross Stein and Eugene Lang

By [Jim Miles](#)

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Region: [Canada](#)

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Afghanistan may have been a war unexpected in Canada, but a familiarity with American expectations concerning the New American Century combined with the fawning willingness of the Canadian military would make it more probable than improbable. In "The Unexpected War" the authors Stein and Lang continually highlight two motifs: first, the degree of appeasement towards Americans by the Canadian government for its lack of commitment to Iraq and its lack of commitment to missile defence; second the obsequious manner in which the Canadian military tried to ingratiate itself to its American counterpart, wanting to prove itself with the big boys.

All the politicians and military personnel involved in this current events history come across as not being able to provide Canada with an independent stance across the board with the U.S., allowing us to become entangled in the Afghan war. The politicians of all labels acted as typical politicians, highly susceptible to manipulation and as is unfortunately too frequent in Canada, unable to strike a truly independent pose from the United States.

Ostensibly for the restitution of the Afghan government, the broader view of the Afghan geopolitical landscape is that of an American imperial conflict to control the territory for both oil and natural gas resources and to isolate and contain Russian and Chinese moves into South Asia. It is a complex situation that members of the Canadian government, from the members of parliament up through to the higher echelons of government, obviously have not understood. Canada became entangled in Afghanistan partly through our own subservience to the U.S., partly through sheer ignorance. One member from a representative of the current Conservative government attempted to contradict one of my many submissions to all parliamentary members by saying there was no oil in Afghanistan. I had not stated that, but what that member and probably many others were ignorant of was the issue of transporting oil through Afghan territory to avoid Iran and Russia. As well, there are some valuable natural gas fields in the northern Caspian end of Afghanistan.

It is this ignorance of both American intentions and of the actual situation and its complexities within the region that have led to so many problems for the Canadian military - now nearing its first century of 100 killed in combat - and for its interpretation and attempts to garner public support for it in Canada. A Canadian deputy minister of policy in the Defence Department is quoted as saying "We don't know anything about this country." All too true, and that ignorance has led to all too much political confusion at home and the unnecessary endangerment of Canadian forces in Afghanistan.

The authors do provide a reasonable if brief background to the situation in Afghanistan, starting with the Russian invasion - perhaps one could call it assistance as the Americans

tend to do for their client states. No mention is made however of the Brzezinski comments about having the CIA operate within Afghanistan prior to this date to create a more destabilized situation that would draw the Soviets in. The artificiality of the border, the Durand Line, that cuts through Pashtun territory, leaving them split between Afghanistan and Pakistan, is recognized as being a significant factor in developments. Also recognized is the American support of the Pakistani ISI through generous CIA monetary donations and military supplies, in particular the effective Stinger missiles. Another missed factor is the broader effort by the Americans to develop the overall mujahideen fighting force throughout the region.[1]

While the U.S. (and thus Canada) thought they faced only “stabilization and reconstruction,” the authors’ conclusion is that “Ignorance and arrogance were both at play in this judgment.”

From there, the book develops the Canadian story, a typical history of who said what to whom, or how they remembered saying what to whom. The theme of “maintaining credibility” vis a vis the Americans is reiterated continually: getting Canada “off the hook” in Iraq, the “tremendous pressure on the politicians” from the military concerning the BMD, fear that Canada “will alienate the White House,” and again, “a renewed sense of urgency to do something significant to offset” the Iraq decision...Afghanistan seemed a logical place to start...an initiative that would impress the Pentagon,” and one of Stephen Harper’s favourites, to “make a mark for Canada in the world.” Later in the book the theme returns as the military is accused “of working with their friends in Washington to drive policy,” and that “Canada’s military missions were largely, if not exclusively, determined on the basis of Ottawa’s relationship with the United States,” to the point of “obsession.”

To front all this, both Canadian governments (Liberal and Conservative, almost equivalent to the Democrats and Republicans respectively) have applied much spin doctoring to the Canadian public through a typically compliant media that also seemed as ignorant of the real situation as the politicians are. As with the Americans, it is about establishing freedom and democracy, in the western image, in an area where tribal and village governance was generally not a concern of the central government in Kabul.

Canadian ignorance also follows the American line on the global war on terror as being a global battle to defeat militant Islamists wherever they are. The authors’ correctly identify the Afghanistan position as being a Muslim society “inflamed by local grievances, with a local political agenda...The Taliban are local, sons of the soil of the Pashtun,” something few Canadian politicians are able to recognize, among their other areas of ignorance.

Although both major parties hold responsibility for Canada being in Afghanistan, it has become “a defining feature of [Harper’s] government.” Under his leadership, parliament was given “a woefully inadequate amount of time” for a debate in a “Parliament that was largely ignorant of Afghanistan.” Implicit in the writing is the view that “Harper was displaying a lack of respect for Parliament even as he was manipulating the vote for political purposes.” He used the Bushism “Canada will not cut and run from Afghanistan”, and his view also included that of “retribution for 9/11.”

The final chapter questions the future, wondering how Canada will decide to proceed in Afghanistan. Since the book was written Harper applied his political skills well, manipulating parliament, in particular the Liberals who had started it all, into supporting an extension into

2011. The situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated significantly, and with Bush's new inclusion of Pakistan in the Islamist war front (where it has been for some time but not necessarily as perceived by Bush) the situation will degrade even further. That also adds another dimension of ignorance to the Canadian forces and Canadian politicians as they presumably know less about the convoluted nature of both Pakistan's internal affairs and its foreign affairs vis a vis Afghanistan and India. Two other aspects to consider are Canada's relationship with NATO, an area that receives many questions in the final section, and the question of international law.

Harper is currently in an election in Canada, being held prematurely against his own law to have a fixed date election every four years (another Harper contrivance to American expectations) except in case of a vote of confidence (not taken). His timing could be argued to place his government ahead of the coming recession and to avoid having to discuss more foreign interventions with the arrival of a newly mandated American government, of which both American parties are intending to increase military involvement in Afghanistan and Pakistan, a dangerous and ignorant extension of past disastrous policies. Given Canada's military tendency to fawn over the American military, and Harper's disguised right wing militancy, it would not be surprising to see Canada continue alongside the Americans in an extended war should Harper win the election.

The issue before the Canadian electorate should not be considered one of the concept of "traditional peacekeeper" as opposed to a warrior status against a "counterinsurgent" (or invader or occupier in other peoples' terms), but one of independence of Canadian foreign policy versus a fawning subservience to an American foreign policy that has brought death and destruction to many parts of the world.

That could well be volume two of this work. More ignorance, more western style arrogance, more obeisance to American desires, and "The Unexpected War" will continue longer than anticipated. The authors have constructed a well-written current events history of Canada's involvement in Afghanistan alongside U.S. interests, and while there are some minor omissions in their initial summary of events, the general picture is clear, direct, and with appropriate questions applied. I would hope that five years from now, a volume two will not be able to be written.

[1] for much more detailed information on the complexities of this area see Michael Scheuer's *Marching Toward Hell - America and Islam After Iraq*, Free Press, New York, 2008; and Ahmed Rashid's *Descent Into Chaos - The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia*, Viking (Penguin), 2008

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