

The Weight of War  
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UCV

As anyone who's done it for some time can tell you, sitting on a fence has its ups and downs, its positive and negative sides. On the plus side, fence sitting can give you a better, wider view of things, some perspective above the fray. Climbing up and perching atop a fence challenges muscles and builds strength and balance. As well, if you are a claustrophobe or inclined to neatness, let's say you have a new outfit or pair of shiny shoes or high heels, sitting above the crowd, or a muddy or dusty worn out patch of ground, can give you needed breathing space and save your wardrobe from unwanted wear and tear.

The down side of fence sitting is that if you're on pickets, their pointed tops begin to dig into the flesh; narrow, flat railings cut off circulation. What you've perhaps gained in vista and sweep by clambering up and sitting there aloft, you lose in face-to-face, immediate encounter with those standing and acting below. Eventually, fence sitting induces vertigo, a wobbling effect so distracting that what you've strived to see from the heights gets lost from view; a sliding feeling, an ungainly momentum takes over, and eventually you're confronted with a decision: which side of the fence am I going to come down on?

One more, personal observation about fence sitting: If the ground down there below your dangling feet is not your native soil; if you don't share legal citizenship yet with the people acting out on the firm ground beneath *their* feet, let me tell you, in *that* situation fence sitting presents a seemingly attractive, polite, appropriate option, in spite of pickets, numbness, vertigo, and distance.

Well I've sat up there as long as I can; and with both feet now on the ground, there are things I want to say about our nation's military incursion and ongoing combat action in Afghanistan, and our own core Unitarian values about war and peace.

First, some data. We are now approaching the seventh year mark of Canada's military involvement in Afghanistan, with over 13,500 Canadian military personnel having served tours of duty as part of the UN mandated, NATO led International Security Assistance Force. Currently, there are approximately 3000 Canadian military personnel in Afghanistan, most of who are serving in the South East Province of Kandahar. To date, Canadian forces casualties include 88 killed, and over 400 wounded, which represents the highest per capita casualty rate of any NATO member on the war. Estimates in 2006 of the military costs for our presence in Afghanistan were projected to reach about \$5.5 million a day, or \$2 billion a year which, if current spending holds through our present commitment to 2011, will end up costing more than \$12 billion. This compares to the \$1 billion, over ten years that Canada's providing for reconstruction and development for Afghanistan's 31 million people. [FYI: Canadian military spending exceeded \$18.2 billion in 2007-08. The size of the Canadian military has remained relatively constant over the last ten years, roughly 62,000 regular force members and 25,000 reserve force members.]

In October 2006, Professor Michael Byers, the Canada Research Chair in Global Politics and International Law at UBC, delivered a speech to Senators and members of Parliament where he reviewed arguments both for and against conducting counter-insurgency warfare in Kandahar Province.

Professor Byers listed the following arguments in favour of the Canadian military mission: that it was necessary to protect Canada and Canadians from the threat posed by the Taliban and Al-Qaida; that counter-insurgency was needed to restrict the production of opium; that it was needed to protect the Afghan people; that NATO's and Canada's credibility were at stake; and that if we were to pull out from this mission, Canada's credibility in Washington would suffer.

Byers noted that collectively, these arguments seemed to make for a compelling case. However, on closer scrutiny, and when considered one-at-a-time, the arguments, he concluded, are seriously flawed. Byers asserted that neither the Taliban nor Al-Qaida poses a threat to the existence of Canada; and that Pakistan's support and harbouring of militants and insurgents, and Washington's fixation on Iraq seriously undermine arguments that anti-western Afghan insurgents pose a serious, existential threat to the international community. Nor have Afghanistan's people been made safer by our mission there. Vice Admiral Michael McConnell, the US intelligence czar has admitted that the Karzai government controls less than 1/3 of the country. The rest of the nation is either dominated by the Taliban or by warlords, many of whom sit in the Afghan parliament and who stand accused of drug trafficking and of siphoning off billions of dollars of foreign aid. Thousands of civilian deaths due to Allied bombing and weapons has alienated wide swaths of the populace and promoted the legitimacy of the Taliban as a nationalist movement fighting western occupation armies.

As well, Byers noted that if NATO credibility is really at stake, why did Washington choose not to call on it for help when it intervened in 2001, and why have so few of the 26 member nations of NATO not made a serious attempt to shoulder the burden proportionate to their size and capabilities? Is France or Germany less credible, he asked, because they refused to deploy into southern Afghanistan, or do we honestly regard Spain and Italy as of no account because they withdrew their forces from Iraq? Indeed, he cited Senator Romeo Delleaire's contention that the biggest blow to Canada's credibility today is our reluctance to field peacekeepers in Darfur and Lebanon. And finally, Byers asked, would our standing vis a vis the US suffer irreparably by standing down from counterinsurgency in Afghanistan? Our experience with Washington during the Vietnam and Iraq wars show, as Byers concluded, that "Canadians are better judges of the Canadian national interest" than are US administrations.

Byers concluded his address on Parliament Hill with a detailed argument against the counter-insurgency mission citing ballooning costs to taxpayers at the expense of development and assistance aid elsewhere in the world that could save millions of lives; and that by fixating on Afghanistan Canadian forces are unable to be deployed elsewhere in crucial international peacekeeping missions. As well, Byers feared that from violations of the 1997 Ottawa Landmine Convention, to transferring captured insurgents to US or Afghan custody, Canada's military involvement "is contributing to a decline in [our] country's commitment to strong rules of international humanitarian law." And that by focusing the development of Canadian forces, in its training, ethos, and equipment, to fight counterinsurgency wars conducted alongside or for the United States, the government is degrading our reputation for objectivity and independence on the international stage. He concluded that clearly a counter insurgency mission in Afghanistan is wrong for Canada. (see Byers, *The Tyee*, October 6, 2006, and Byers *Intent for a Nation...2007*, 173-190)

In the two years since this assessment, things have gone from bad to worse. Thomas Schweich a former Bush administration counternarcotics official claims that 90% of the world's heroin is currently being supplied by Afghanistan and that its government is riddled by corrupt officials tied to the narcotics trade. Irrigation canals and roads built with foreign aid are being used to grow and transport opium poppies and narcotics. (NYT Magazine, 27 July, 08) Indeed, a recent report by the Kabul-based Integrity Watch Afghanistan claimed that of the \$15 billion spent since 2001, only 20% has actually reached Afghans who needed help. (Macleans, June 23, 08) The Afghan government has established neither its authority nor credibility with its own people. Civil servants are either poorly trained, corrupt or both. (Rory Stewart, *Time*, 17 July, 08) The RAND Corporation study released last month called the Afghan National Police "[predatory], corrupt, incompetent, and under-resourced." (Macleans) The March 2008 Manley Panel report stated that "security...deteriorated through 2007 and early 2008.... Levels of both insurgent and criminal violence rose in many regions, and more civilians were killed in 2007 than in any years since the fall of the Taliban in 2001." (ibid) The Afghanistan NGO Safety Office's May report asserted that "[insurgent] attacks are at a record high, and that information received during this reporting period suggests that the worse is yet to come." (ibid)

After years of fighting, undermanned and overwhelmed NATO forces still don't have a grip on the fundamentals of counterinsurgency warfare: the enemy is well-funded, it moves unhindered across porous borders, and is increasingly well-embedded in the local population. And does anyone think that NATO nations are going to commit the hundreds of thousands of troops and the decade or more that it will take to secure a semblance of peace congruent with our lofty goals? Does anyone think that the Karzai government, deeply corrupt and implicated in running what's now being called a "narco-state," is going to clean up its act and win the respect and support of its people?

All of this, and more, has led Rory Stewart, probably the one non-Afghan who's best informed about what's going there, to conclude that "pushing for a military expansion is wrong...A troop increase [and continued counter-insurgency action] is likely to inflame Afghan nationalism," he asserts, "because Afghans are more anti-foreign than we acknowledge, and the support for our presence is declining.... Nor should we increase our involvement in government and the economy. The more responsibility we take in Afghanistan, the more we undermine the credibility and responsibility of the government and encourage it to act irresponsibly. Our claims that Afghanistan is the 'front line in the war on terror' and that 'failure is not an option' have convinced the Afghan government that we need it more than it needs us. The worse things become, the more assistance it...receives. This is not an incentive for reform." (Stewart, "How to Save Afghanistan," *Time*, 17 July, 2008)

Meanwhile, Thomas Schweich, the counternarcotics official writes: Karzai plays us "like a fiddle." We spend "billions on infrastructure improvement...and fight the Taliban...[while] his friends get rich off the drug trade...He blames the West for his problems...and in 2009 [he'll run for election] to a new term."

It seems to me that Ottawa has not once really come clean with the Canadian people about our perilous military mission in Afghanistan. Troops were initially sent in there to fight without due deliberation and consent. The Canadian military mission on the front lines has now been extended twice, first to 2009, and now to 2011, with precious little debate in Parliament. While at the same time the official, ambitious goals set by the government keep getting changed, downgraded and remain, to this day, elusive to pin down. *The Globe and Mail's* Jeffrey Simpson stated as recently as July 14<sup>th</sup> that: "Canadians are still getting spin" and that the spin from Ottawa "is getting further removed from...reality." (see "Canada's...goals downgraded," GB, 22 July, 08; Simpson in GB 22, and 14 July 08; for more, see "Afghanistan..." GB, 1 March, 08; "Corruption..." GB, 3 May, 08 )

All of this has pushed me off the fence and brought me down to earth. For years I've been reading about our nation's military mission in Afghanistan, I've thought things out, and made up my mind where I stand, while remaining open to new information, but I've kept my own counsel and thoughts to myself. But finally, last May, I joined with my Unitarian ministerial colleagues in Canada in writing a public Social Action Resolution that called for an end to Canadian counter-insurgency action, for the redeployment of forces to serve as peacekeepers and to work with nongovernmental organisations addressing health, infrastructure and education efforts, and for Canadian representatives to lead in peace negotiations. Even here there were a few dissenting votes, but the resolution passed overwhelmingly.

Sitting on a fence...reading and thinking things through...dissenting votes by colleagues...fighting extensive and flagrant violations of human rights..."failure is not an option"...mounting Canadian forces casualties...credibility on the line.... *indeed, the weight of war*, the decision making process of whether or not to resort to the sword, weighs heavily on our minds and hearts.

Here, at this point, I think it is essential that we pay close attention to the process we undertake when we approach and enter that zone of radical coercion that is the domain of fighting, of war making. The Unitarian community, our association of congregations, is not one of the historical "peace churches." Mennonites,

Amish, and Quakers, for example, believe in principle that war is never justified, under any circumstances. For them, this belief and practice, their pacifism, is mandated by revelation; by the authority they invest and reverence in passages in the Bible, such as the command “thou shalt not kill”, and “do not resist evil...turn the other cheek.”

Our tradition, by contrast, is not rooted in articles of faith, but in principles of natural law; it is grounded, ultimately, in reason, empathy, and conscience, not in revelation and dogma. (see Paul Rasor, “Prophetic Nonviolence...”, *UU World*, Spring 08) As a result, Unitarians weigh, judge, and feel things through when the nations in which they reside are confronted with a call to armed conflict. As well, that means we have dithered, argued, disagreed, and at times, been bitterly divided in times of war from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to this very day. What continues to hold us together is a history and practice of principled commitment to conscience and the democratic process, our acceptance and encouragement of one another in our search for truth and meaning, and our firm commitment to justice and compassion in human relations.

Our head and heart, our analysis and feelings, begin with a presumption against war. We ask and demand, is it a just, or *justifiable cause*? Is the resort to arms justified by legitimate self-defence in response to foreign aggression or a humanitarian crisis such as genocide? Is our *intention* right? Is the goal of violent intervention ultimately one of reconciliation and the restoration of justice? Are we acting, not out of arrogance and ignorance, but with knowing humility and regret? In view of **the harm that will be done**, is it a determined, indeed desperate *last resort*, have all means of nonviolent resolution been exhausted before we rush to arms? Is the good that state-sanctioned violence may possibly accomplish, or the evil it may prevent, *proportional*, or outweighed by the suffering it will inevitably cause? And finally, is there a clear probability of success, a reasonable expectation that our nation can achieve its goals of peace and the restoration of justice? (See Rasor on Just War theory and prophetic nonviolence in *UU World*, op.cit.)

These questions we weigh deeply because so much is at stake: the lives and well-being of our sons and daughters, their families, the precious resources and treasure of our land, and those against who we struggle. Decisions about war and peace must always be subject to debate and moral criticism. We must hold public officials accountable, for their decisions affect the lives of human beings and the fate of nations. This is not just a question of politics, or of where we line up in the partisan fray as we approach elections; it strikes at the very meaning of who we are and want to become as a people and a nation.

In view of the principles we hold and the questions we must ask, in light of the mounting evidence about the nature of Afghanistan's domestic culture and politics, and the rationale, prosecution and prospects of the Canadian military mission in Afghanistan, I am compelled to conclude that Canadian counter-insurgency action should end; that our forces should be redeployed as peacekeepers and partners with nongovernmental organisations addressing health, infrastructure and education efforts in Afghanistan; and that Canada should resolutely lead out in efforts to negotiate and secure some measure of meaningful peace for that long occupied and afflicted land.

Blessed are the peacemakers; may it be so.

ACCORDING to the Jewish calendar we are now in the month of Av, a period of increasingly intense mourning that, if you're traditionally observant, culminates with a total fast on the Ninth of Av, which this year coincides with Sunday, Aug. 10.

One of the customary practices in these nine days is the avoidance of meat: it's the way we commemorate the destruction of the Temple, where daily animal sacrifices were once brought.

Refraining from food is symbolic, of course. The idea is not just to avoid meat but to limit ourselves so that we can better focus on the spiritual.