

Canada's Withdrawal from War in Afghanistan

By Julius H. Grey

I am not a dogmatic pacifist. History teaches us that there are certain wars which are worth fighting, either because of human rights violations or in order to preserve a nation or a way of life. Because of the nature of Nazism, World War II remains the prime example of a just war. It could be argued as well that for a patriotic America, the American Civil War was worth fighting, both to preserve the Union and to end the blight of slavery. A positive view could be taken of certain surgical humanitarian interventions, for instance Tanzania's removal of Idi Amin and Viet Nam's elimination of the Khmer Rouge.

That said, it cannot be doubted that most wars are atrocities, destructive of life and dignity and are profitable only to arms dealers and megalomaniacs. For instance, World War I should not have been fought and it ranks high among the many horrors of the 20th century. Virtually all of the other wars of that century fall into this category.

Most wars are accompanied by deafening propaganda in order to induce people to fight, to risk their lives and to accept unnecessary bereavement. In World War I we invented the scary Germanic Huns who were going to destroy democracy; Germany on the other hand, claimed to defend Western civilization against the Asiatic forces led by the Tsar. Little credence can therefore be given to the justification which any government presents for its decision to fight.

Since the Munich accords of 1938 which failed to stop Hitler, the war party invariably accuses its opponents of "appeasement." It extrapolates from 1938 the theory that compromise is invariably wrong with respect to an ideological opponent and that only the hard-line works. In reality the opposite is usually true. In most cases, patience and negotiations are a wiser course of action than war. Would not the world be a worse place if we had yielded to the anti-appeasement lobby and fought the USSR in the 1950s? Would it not be a better place with fewer victims if the U.S. had negotiated with North Viet Nam instead of bombing it and bringing about the Cambodian genocide? Only in the small minority of cases when we are dealing with a Hitler is war an acceptable alternative.

Our present war in Afghanistan must therefore be weighed in accordance with two criteria, human rights and the preservation of Canada, keeping in mind that only in the most extraordinary cases will war be justified.

The "national interest" argument can be quickly dismissed. There is no evidence that either Canada or the democratic systems of government depend on the U.S. winning in Afghanistan. The notion that Afghanistan poses a particular threat of terror flies in the face of the evidence that much of Islamic terrorism can be traced to a U.S. ally, Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, the exaggeration of the threat and the absurd claim that there is an organized conspiracy to destroy the west centered in the caves near Kandahar are reminiscent of the anti-Communist propaganda which brought us Viet Nam and McCarthyism. There always exists a risk of terrorist activity, but it has no connection to the Afghanistan conflict, and, if anything, our participation on the frontlines exacerbates it.

The United States may well have other reasons for its wars, related to the imperial ambitions and to great power politics. We have no stake in this and our friendship with the U.S. should not lead us to make major decisions contrary to our own interests.

The human rights argument is more complex. There is no doubt that the Taliban in power was a nightmarish government and that it mistreated both women and perceived infidels. The difficulty is that there is little evidence that the warlords and tribesmen whom we support, are any better. Once the war is over, whatever the result, women's schools and women's rights will be in

great peril again and a strict Islamic state will be established.

If the war is being fought for women's rights it is difficult to see why the U.S. undermined the Soviet-installed government which really did try to emancipate women or why it has presided over a deterioration of women's rights in Iraq since the invasion of 2004.

The doubts about the virtues of our Afghan allies became even more stronger when we consider that they, even more than the Taliban, are involved in the drug-trade and that the potential of creating a new kingdom of the mafia is very high.

While financial considerations are secondary in determining whether or not to fight, they cannot be entirely overlooked. It is very difficult to find any justification for throwing away hundreds of millions in a doubtful cause, while cutting our spending on culture, the environment, social development and sometimes even the health system.

It follows that Afghanistan simply does not qualify as one of the rare cases where military action is justified. It is not worth losing more soldiers and tolerating the moral devastation and civilian losses that always accompanies war. We must plan and execute a withdrawal.