



The Strategic Counsel



Foreign Affairs and
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Public Perceptions of Canada's Role in Afghanistan

Communicating Afghanistan – Challenges & Opportunities

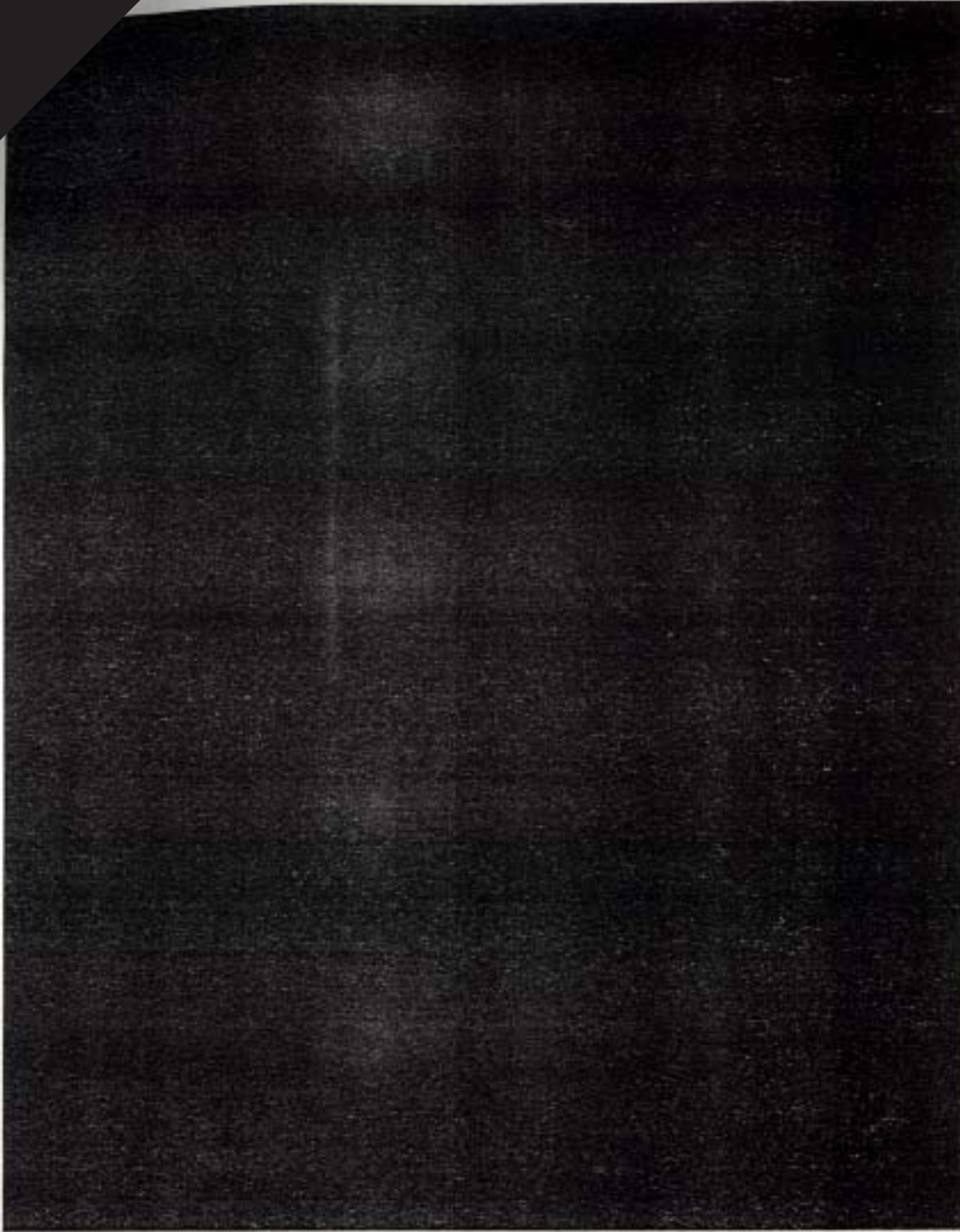
June 28, 2007

Gregg, Kelly, Sullivan & Woolstencroft
The Strategic Counsel

www.thestrategiccounsel.com

21 St. Clair Avenue East
Suite 1100
Toronto, Ontario
M4T 1L9
Tel 416 975-4465
Fax 416 975-1883

60 George Street
Suite 205
Ottawa, Ontario
K1N 1J4
Tel 613 236-0296
Fax 613 236-1290



The Research
Program:
Objectives &
Methodology



Research Objectives & Methodology

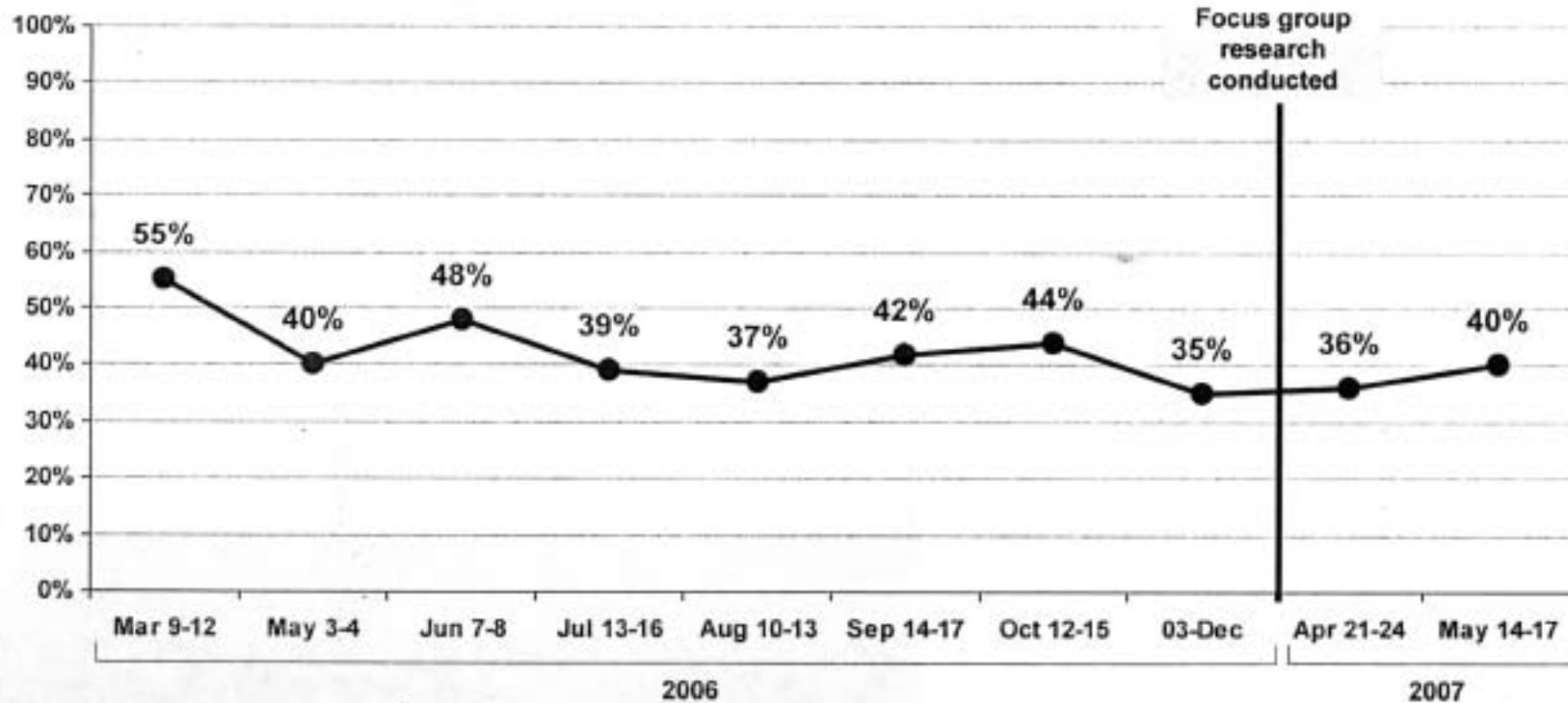
- ◆ In order to better understand the underlying reasons for varied levels of support for the mission in Afghanistan, DFAIT mandated *The Strategic Counsel* to conduct in-depth focus group discussions on perceptions of Canada's involvement and role in Afghanistan.
- ◆ Key research objectives were to:
 - Understand the feelings that underpin attitudes towards Canada's mission in Afghanistan;
 - Examine reaction to key themes and messages that may be penetrating the public consciousness;
 - Test response and reaction to new key themes, messages, information and facts; and
 - Evaluate the effect of information on participants' attitudes with a view to better understanding how and on what basis opinions are formed.
- ◆ A series of 14 focus group discussions of 2 hours each were conducted in 7 locations across Canada between November 14th and November 20th.
 - Groups were held in Halifax, Toronto, Oshawa, Laval, Drummondville, Saskatoon and Vancouver.
- ◆ Participants were recruited to ensure an appropriate mix of the general public from rural, urban and suburban areas in all regions of the country.
- ◆ One group in each center was conducted among those aged 18 to 35 years, another with those aged 36 years and older as a means of isolating possible age or generational effects.



Trends in Level of Support for the Mission in Afghanistan

Public opinion polls regarding the presence of Canadian troops in Afghanistan have highlighted the very uneven and fluctuating levels of support for the various aspects of the mission.

% Strongly/Somewhat Support Sending Troops to Afghanistan



Q. Overall, do you strongly support, support, oppose or strongly oppose the decision to send Canadian troops to Afghanistan?

Base: Total sample (n=1000)

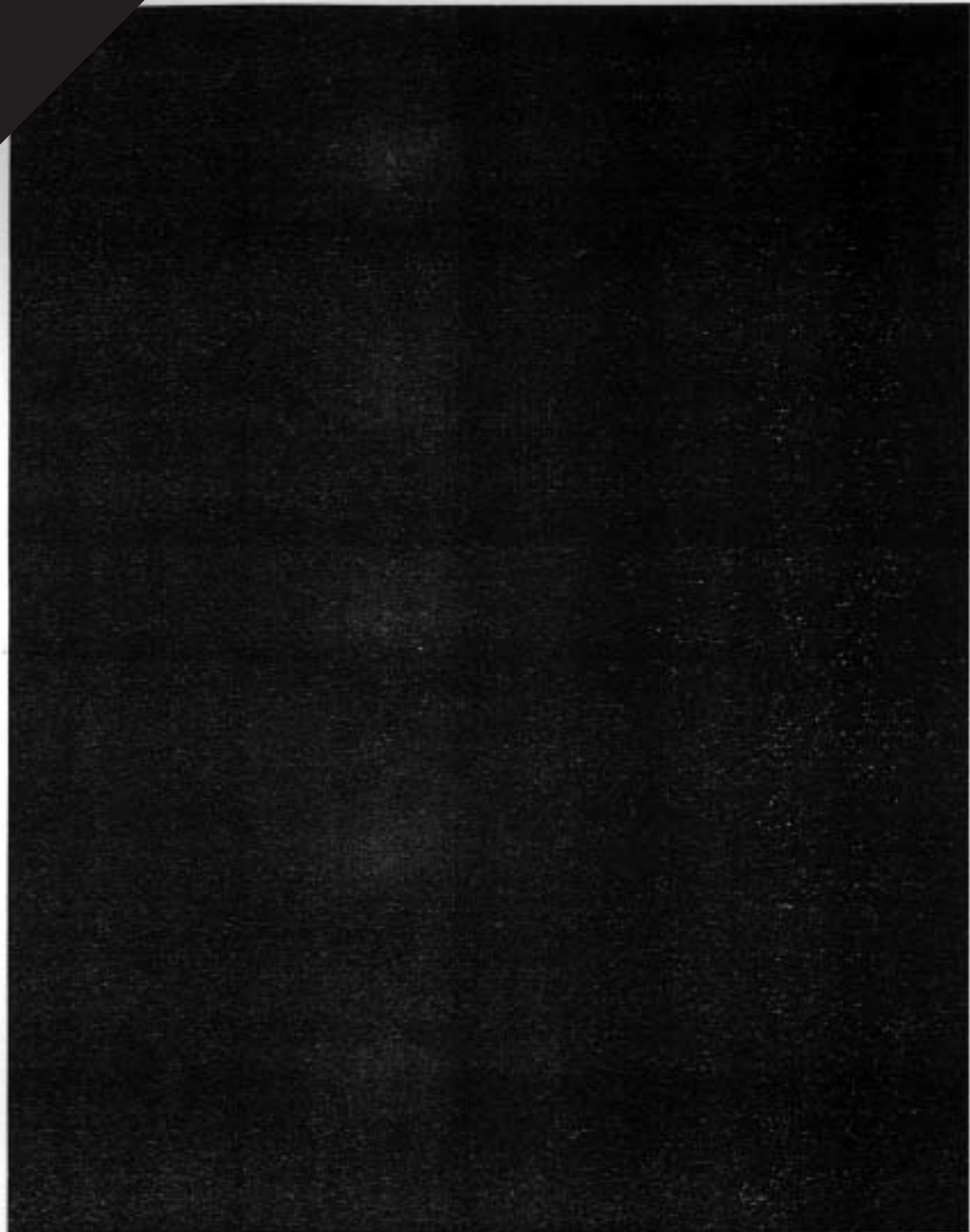
a Point of Concern and

Afghanistan in Perspective



The Afghanistan Mission is Becoming a Point of Concern and Anxiety

- ◆ This issue has the potential to become a "lightning rod" for the government. While many do not form their impressions of the government around this issue, it is becoming a point of concern across the country, especially in Quebec where opposition is strongest.
- ◆ With the passage of time and the continuously negative media coverage (casualties, lack of results, United States' difficulties in Iraq), this issue is likely to become even more pressing and may become a source of questioning regarding the legitimacy of Canada's involvement.
- ◆ The public needs to hear more of the positive reasons why Canada is involved in Afghanistan:
 - Lack of public discussion, visible and sustained government communications on the progress in Afghanistan created a deep information gap that is being filled with mainly negative reporting.
 - This void is contributing to a lack of understanding about the Canadian mission which is in turn allowing the negative reporting to dominate public views and impressions toward the country's involvement in Afghanistan.
 - This prevalence of negative reporting has given the public additional reasons to oppose the mission.
 - By the same token, this negative coverage is also diminishing the intensity of support for the mission because the general public is not hearing enough about the rationale for being in Afghanistan.
 - Suspicion and cynicism are taking hold in the absence of hard facts and positive stories about progress. There is a growing belief that the government is trying to avoid talking about the issue to play down the grim reality that the mission is failing.



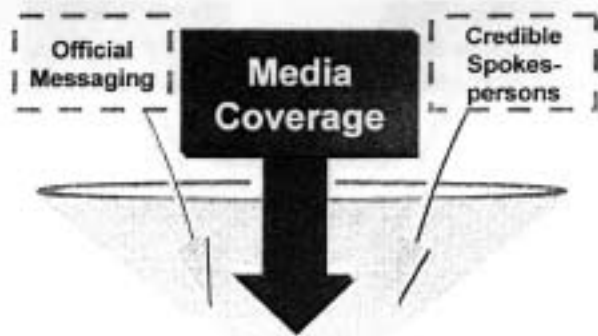
The Information Gap: Key Driver of Negative Perceptions

Information Gap
Trust is not developed
and maintained



Current Communications Landscape

Information Sources Unbalanced, mostly negative



Messaging

- Mounting casualties
- Things are getting worse
- Canadians are doing most of the fighting
- War on terror is not succeeding

Negative

Cynicism

- U.S.-led mission
- Iraq and Afghanistan are the same
- Not the Canadian way
- Too close to U.S. administration

More negative

Perceptions

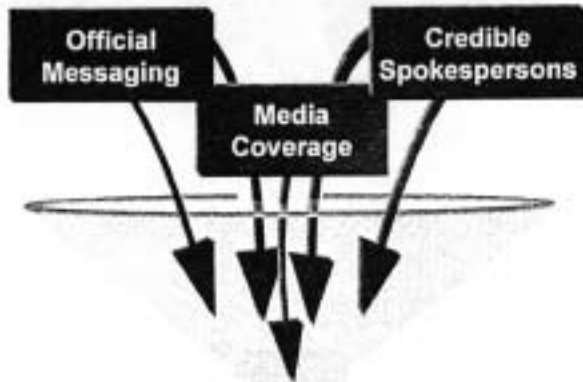
- No international support
- Canada invaded Afghanistan
- Canada's image is tarnished
- Little chance of success
- Troops are ill-equipped and ill-trained

= Large Information Gap



Preferred Communications Landscape

Information Sources Balanced, sustained



Messaging

- Ownership and responsibility
- Highly professional troops
- Getting results even if it's difficult
- Helping people of Afghanistan
- UN and NATO involvement

Strong, balanced messages

Cynicism

- *U.S.-led mission*
- *Iraq and Afghanistan are the same*
- *Not the Canadian way*
- *Too close to U.S. administration*

Diminished by cynicism but more reassured

Perceptions

- Sense of legitimacy
- Sense of responsibility
- Pride in Canada's role in the world
- This mission is not a quagmire

= Better Understanding



Communicating on
Afghanistan: Key
Audiences

Opinion on the Issue Breaks into 3 Key Audiences

Principle Communications Targets

Those somewhat
supportive
"Soft Supporters"



Those in the
grey zone
"Wafflers"



Those strongly
opposed



**Communications
Challenges:**

Information gap
(The gap is widest among those opposed and those in the
"grey zone", but doesn't necessarily disappear even
among those who are somewhat supportive)

**Ideological
opposition (e.g.,
Canada is not a
fighting nation/we
are peacekeepers/
we are a peace
loving nation)**



The Soft Supporters



◆ Who are they?

- This group is supportive of the mission, although their support could be described as "soft."
- Supporters were more predominant among the older age cohort (aged 36 years and older), with the exception of Saskatoon where all those in the younger age cohort (aged 18 to 35 years) expressed support for the mission, and in the Quebec locations where support was virtually non-existent.
- Within this group, many would say that while they support the Canadian troops in Afghanistan, they likely would not have supported the initial decision to send troops into the region.
- In as much as those opposed do so based on an ideological perspective, this group expresses a sense of altruism stemming from a belief about Canada's larger role in the world and the nation's responsibility to respond in crisis situations.

◆ What do they think?

- Relative to others, this group tends to exhibit a more well-formed sense of the bigger picture (e.g. need to stabilize the region in order to effectively rebuild infrastructure and make other improvements) and a higher purpose to this mission.
- Typically, they express a higher level of knowledge about the history of the region and they believe that it would be severely detrimental to the Afghani people and to Canada to withdraw at this time.
- In their comments, soft supporters frequently cast the Afghanistan mission as a peacekeeping effort, although they are grappling with reconciling their understanding of
- Their key concerns center on a perception that there is no plan for Canada's mission and that no markers for success have been clearly set out. Related to this concern, this group also takes issue with what they view is an apparent lack of accountability for the significant \$ investment in Afghanistan.
- They worry that the past five years of Canadian involvement in Afghanistan have not resulted in greater success and progress.



The Soft Supporters (cont'd.)



◆ What do they say?

- "We are fighting terrorists and those who want to re-establish an oppressive regime in Afghanistan."
- "We're doing what's right. As a country, we have no right to voice an opinion [on human rights, for example] if we are not actively engaged in fighting for and protecting human rights around the world."
- "We have a responsibility to our fellow human beings."
- "Canadians are in Afghanistan. We need to back a decision that's already been taken."
- "I don't entirely agree with our reasons for being there, but our troops are doing an outstanding job."
- "We are proud to serve in Afghanistan and not in Iraq."

◆ Communications Approach: Filling the information vacuum

- A pro-active "push" strategy of getting information out would address the information vacuum.
- Regular information and updates would serve to reinforce their inclination to support the mission.
- In particular, they are looking for information that sets out clear objectives and timelines for the mission as well as progress reports.



Those Waffling between support and opposition – in the “grey zone”



◆ Who are they?

- The majority of participants fall into this category.
- They tend to fluctuate in that “gray zone” between support and opposition often balancing competing concerns for the legitimacy of the mission, but also recognizing, at least to a limited extent, that there is some merit to restoring human rights and freedom to the Afghan people.
- Headlines are shaping their views and tending to push them in a negative direction.

◆ What do they think?

- They are unclear on exactly why Canadians are in Afghanistan, what they are doing, and what we can expect to accomplish.
- While they have some grasp of the benefits to the Afghani people such as reinstating human rights, especially for women and children, they no clear sense of what the benefit of being in Afghanistan is to Canadians.
- Some also question whether we are imposing our western values on a nation which isn't ready or willing to accept a western way of life.



Those Waffling between support and opposition – in the “grey zone” (cont'd.)



◆ What do they say?

- “Canadians are peacekeepers not fighters. I’m concerned that we are losing our reputation as peace brokers.”
- “Canadians are taking a disproportionate share of the casualties.”
- “Our troops are not well prepared or equipped to do this job.”
- “Are we making any progress?”
- “What is the plan for Afghanistan?”

◆ Communications Approach: Bridging the information gap

- On balance, this groups has very little knowledge and understanding about the Canadian mission to Afghanistan.
- Their views tend to moderate with additional information and facts, including:
 - Concrete examples of progress (focusing mostly on the benefits for Afghan women and children)
 - UN and NATO involvement demonstrating a broader international commitment to this effort
 - Additional clarity around the need for security and stability in order to provide aid and undertake diplomacy initiatives. Generally this group will support this notion or the premise that security is necessary in order to make progress in conducting humanitarian and other efforts, however, they don't instinctively make the connection between security, development and diplomacy.



Those **Strongly Opposed** to Canada's involvement in Afghanistan



◆ Who are they?

- Firm opposition is most apparent among the younger age cohort – those aged 18 to 35 years.
 - The exception was in Saskatoon where the younger age group all expressed “soft” support for Canada's role in Afghanistan
 - Participants in the Quebec groups (Laval and Drummondville) also tended to be strongly opposed to the engagement

◆ What do they think?

- Their opposition is principally centered around an ideological stance against war. They fundamentally believe that conflict is better resolved through peaceful, diplomatic means and that there is virtually no circumstance under which armed combat would prove a more successful or appropriate strategy.
- Other sources of concern are:
 - Afghanistan is an American not a Canadian cause;
 - The dollars being spent on the military effort in Afghanistan. They tend to exhibit an inward rather than a global focus vis a vis their view on Canada and its role in the world – they believe this money could be better spent tackling domestic issues and challenges
 - This group also feels that the situation in Afghanistan is a hopeless cause. They believe that it would take years to establish stability and that there is a strong likelihood the country will revert back into chaos upon the withdrawal of Canadians and other forces. They point to the opium-based economy and religious divisions as insurmountable issues.



Those **Strongly Opposed** to Canada's involvement in Afghanistan (cont'd.)



◆ What do they say?

- "This is George Bush's/America's war."
- "You're never going to change those people. They want to live like that. They don't want our help or our values."
- "I'm against war for any reason. And, in Afghanistan, there is no good reason why Canadians are dying."
- "We should fix our problems here at home before trying to fix problems half way around the world."

◆ The communications approach: **Blunting the edges of opposition**

- There is likely little that can be done to substantially soften the views of this group. The best approach is likely one that will simply blunt the edges of their opposition.
- The peripheral fall-out from Information and outreach strategies aimed at those in the "grey zone" and soft supporters may have some moderating impact.
 - However, many are poorly informed about the balance and interconnectedness of domestic and foreign policy.
 - They will not actively seek out information on this issue, particularly if it supports a view contrary to their own.
 - They are unmoved by any arguments of the merits of humanitarian efforts in Afghanistan, given their inward focus. At the same time, reinforcement of the progress being made and of the key role played by the Canadian military, via reports from aid and development workers on-the-ground in Afghanistan, may yield marginal positive benefits.



Myth-Busting: Addressing Misperceptions and Misinformation

- ◆ The information vacuum has allowed myths about the nature of the Canadian mission in Afghanistan to perpetuate. Key myths/misperceptions include:
 - Canadians invaded Afghanistan.
 - Canadians are acting as aggressors in this conflict.
 - The Afghan people and government did not ask for our help and don't want our help. Canadians are uninvited.
 - Canadians are acting unilaterally or in concert with and under the direction of the United States in Afghanistan.
 - The Americans pressured Canada into going into Afghanistan after 9/11. (Note: there is virtually no awareness of UN Security Council Resolution 1386 and of the larger UN/NATO presence in Afghanistan.)
 - The United States is withdrawing from Afghanistan and leaving Canadians exposed and vulnerable – "cleaning up their mess."
 - Iraq and Afghanistan are part and parcel of the same thing (an American response to 9/11). (Note: many participants assume that what they hear about Iraq is also what is happening in Afghanistan.)
 - Canadians are fighting and killing Afghan civilians. By the same token, Canadians are at risk from almost everyone in Afghanistan. The Afghan people view Canadians as a threat.
 - More Canadians are being killed by friendly fire incidents than are fighting the Taliban and al-Qaeda.
 - There is no progress being made in Afghanistan. (Note: few have a sense that the most intense conflict in Afghanistan is limited to three southern provinces in Afghanistan and that the remainder of the country is relatively peaceful.)



Myth-Busting: The Tradition of Peacekeeping at Risk?

- ◆ Perhaps the most significant communications challenge is the perception that Afghanistan represents a substantial shift away from Canada's tradition as a peacekeeping nation rather than an evolution and adaptation of its peacekeeping role to the changing nature of global conflict (which has already been occurring throughout the 1990's and even previous to that).
- ◆ There are really two issues at play here:
 - First, is the perception that since WWII, Canada has not engaged in "risky" combat situations. There is a belief that the role of a peacekeeper precludes seeking out and eliminating insurgent forces. Many view it as a "defensive, non-combat-oriented" role.
 - The lack of public discussion and acknowledgement of Canada's military commitment and role in the Balkan conflict has only served to reinforce misperceptions about Canada's military tradition. As a result, the public sees peacekeeping in very black and white terms. They tend to think of the Suez Canal and Cyprus as typical of Canadian peacekeeping engagements, rather than the examples of the Balkans and the Congo.
 - Second, and related to the above point, is the belief that peacekeeping requires skills of diplomacy and negotiation, rather than those typically associated with a "professional soldier." There is a default belief that the Canadian Forces are poorly prepared for this type of mission. This is borne out of several issues/factors:
 - Media reports and political commentary in recent years over the deteriorating state of the Canadian Forces, both with respect to equipment and the quality of recruits, have left many questioning the caliber and professionalism of the Canadian military. The CF image has suffered as a result of issues such as:
 - Incidents involving the Sea King helicopters;
 - Submarines recently purchased from the British Navy that don't appear to be sea-worthy;
 - Media reports that the initial contingent of Canadian Forces were outfitted with camouflage gear that was not suitable for a desert environment;
 - The very public inquiry following Somalia; and
 - Years of cuts to DND budgets and public commentary by various Chiefs of Defense Staff about the need to improve the state of the Canadian Forces.



Broadening and Deepening Public Understanding of Afghanistan and of Canada's Role in the World

- ◆ Many are unfamiliar with the history and geo-politics of Afghanistan.
- ◆ The facts/perceptions that tend to penetrate and therefore influence public perceptions of the likely success of the Canadian mission in Afghanistan are:
 - Afghanistan is an opium-based, narco-economy.
 - What is happening in Afghanistan is essentially a drug war between rival drug lords.
 - Afghanistan is a "backward" country and a history of tribal conflict.
 - What is happening in Afghanistan is essentially a religious war.
 - Afghanistan and the Afghan people do not have a history of democracy and adherence to the rule of law. Therefore, we are imposing western values on a country that does not respect and is not committed to the same principles.
 - The Taliban are a legitimate force in the Afghanistan political landscape. As such, Canadians should be negotiating a cease-fire with them.
- ◆ The concept of "failed states" and their broader implications along with a sense of a "smaller" or "shrinking" globe and the interconnectedness of nations in ways other than simply by trade/commerce, is a view held and understood only by a very few.
 - Notably, more seem to grasp and support, after some discussion, the notion of Canada's responsibility in the international community (principally from an altruistic perspective) and our obligations to the U.N. and NATO.



Chipping Away at Public Cynicism

- ◆ The public views reports and information emanating from the federal government through a thick lens of cynicism.
 - They feel that much of what government says is propaganda, intended simply to appeal to the voting public and to spin stories in a positive manner.
- ◆ This cynicism is then exacerbated by a deep mistrust of the media, although the traditional media remains the main source of information.
 - Many believe that the media are influenced by and report only on what politicians/the government want them to know.
 - They also feel that the media tends to sensationalize reports from Afghanistan, focusing mainly on the loss of Canadians' lives.
 - They do sense there are some positive stories, but they haven't heard/seen any and believe media outlets are less inclined to focus on successes and the "human interest stories" as opposed to the more dramatic incidents.
- ◆ The issue vis a vis the role of the government and the media is one of direct versus third-party spokespersons. Participants mentioned they would be far more likely to find credibility in spokespeople on-the-ground in Afghanistan.
- ◆ The Internet is viewed as offering a more balanced perspective given that the reader can scan several sites and delve into more detail.
 - A few are obtaining their information off the Internet, although most of these are still accessing media sites
 - No one mentioned either the Canadian Forces or the www.canada-afghanistan.gc.ca sites



Recommendations
for
Communications



Morphing the Canadian Forces Brand

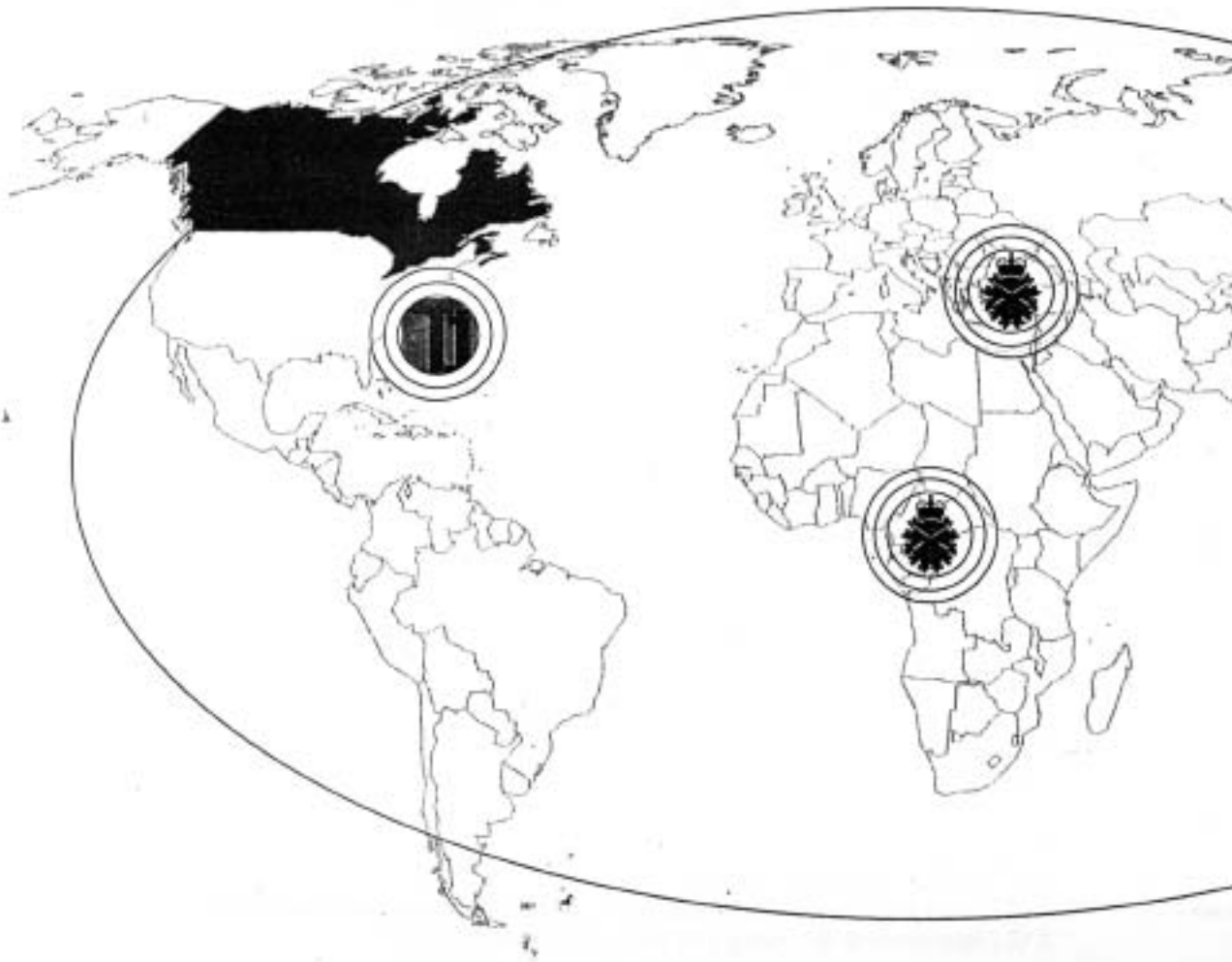
Context



**The multi-skilled, flexible and professional
Canadian Forces – providing peace support.**



Developing a New Narrative for the Canadian Forces: A Broader Context

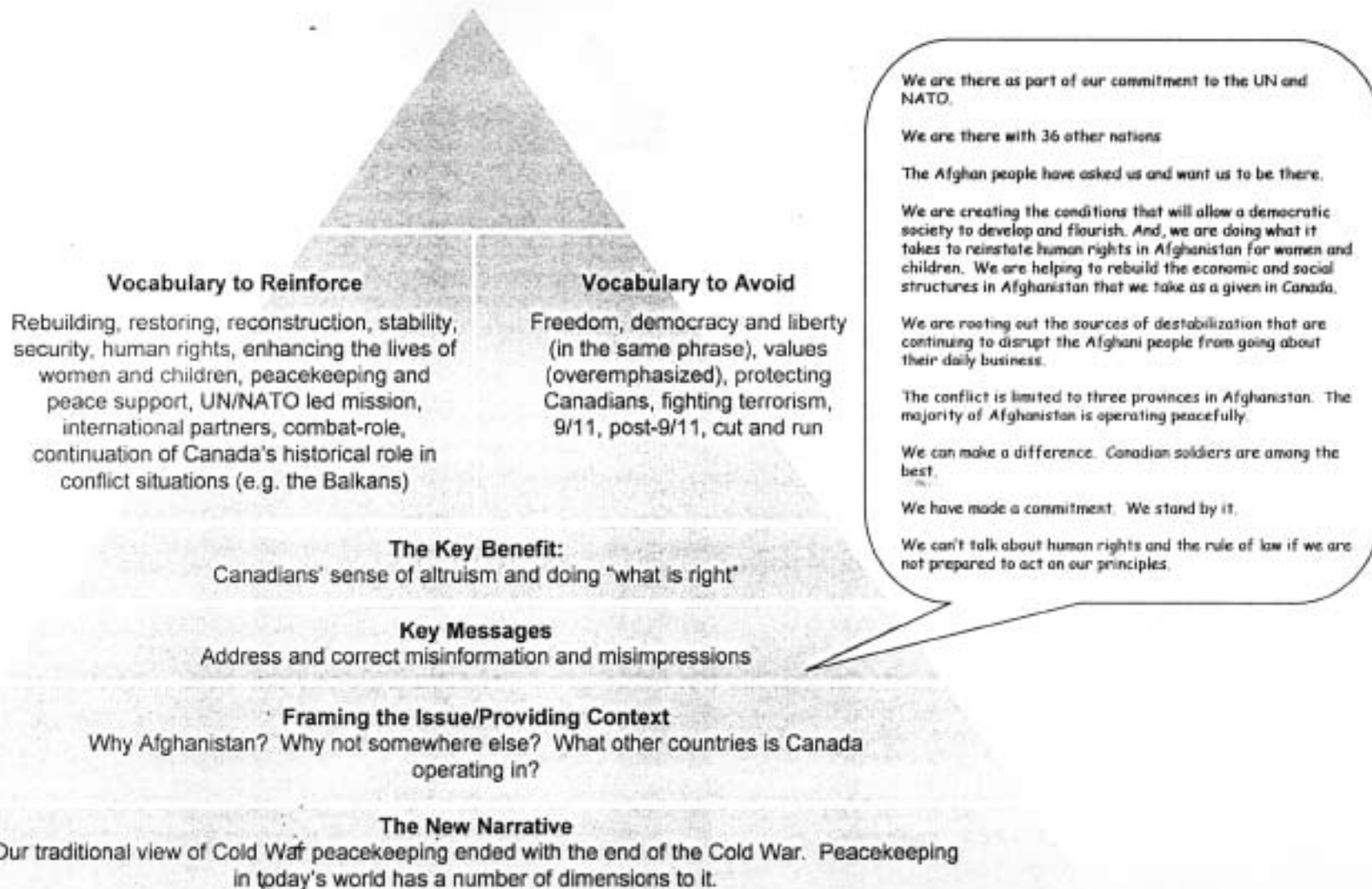


Canada has played a historical role in promoting and ensuring stability around the world. This is part of a decades long tradition that Canadians are proud of. Our commitment in the Balkans throughout the 1990's and in the Congo in the 1960's are examples of Canada carrying out this tradition.

The flexibility and professionalism of the Canadian Forces allows them to operate along the full continuum of peacekeeping and peace support operations from unarmed observation and reporting to development work and humanitarian assistance to fighting to ensure the physical security of those who are being threatened.



Communicating on Afghanistan: A Proposed Framework





Communications Framework (cont'd)

Spokespersons: Afghan people, Afghan journalists, prominent Afghan women, on-the-ground aid and development workers, military personnel (who wouldn't be seen as "political" – e.g. Paul Franklin, other junior officers), Afghan Ambassador to Canada, key Canadian journalists committed to writing in-depth stories/segments (e.g. Stephanie Nolan, Celine Galipeau)

2-way communication strategy

The New Narrative (Placing Afghanistan in an Appropriate Historical Context): Refresh Canadians' memories of the experience in the Balkans and focus on flexibility required for peace support missions, peacekeeping is a process of continual reinvention

Information Outreach: Facts and Myth-Busting, Role of other countries (Britain, France, Poland, etc.)

Storytelling (Making it Real and Relevant): Stories about real people. How real people are benefiting from concrete actions of Canadians

Opinion Leader Strategy: Engage opinion leaders in conferences, town hall and other public for a with debates/discussions led by individuals such as Thomas Homer Dixon, Robert Kaplan both seen to be authorities



Success in Afghanistan: How is it measured and what would it take?

- ◆ Indicators of success in Afghanistan encompass a basket of social, economic and political measures:
 - Rebuilding: Demonstrate that core infrastructure is being built and will be sustainable.
 - Number of schools being built
 - Number of children being educated
 - Number of Afghans now with access to proper health care and health facilities
 - Institutions: Need to emphasize how the country's democratic institutions and rule of law are being put in place and function quite well in most of the regions in Afghanistan.
 - An effective police and army
 - Stability: Highlight the fact that most of the country is now stable, but that some parts in the South pose important challenges.
 - Economic growth: Show examples of sustained economic development in communities across Afghanistan.
 - Number of jobs created
 - Reduction in unemployment levels
 - Ploughing over of Afghan poppy fields
 - Reduction of trade in heroin
 - Resumption of trade and commercial relationships
- ◆ Autonomy and the sustainability of progress is seen as the ultimate measure of success.
- ◆ Participants seek out facts, figures and stories about the Afghan people as evidence of progress. They reserve the right to question the sources and the interpretation of data. It must be simple, clear and unambiguous.