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BLATCHFORD'S TAKE: AGE OF PROPAGANDA

In Afghanistan, it's more than the mission that's failing

CHRISTIE BLATCHFORD

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It took "a long time for this elementary truth to be spoken," my colleague Jeffrey Simpson wrote this week under a headline, "Yes, the Afghan mission is 'failing' and, yes, the rituals continue."

He was quoting, with approval and that weary wisdom common to those who live in Central Canada, Prime Minister Stephen Harper's recent remarks on CNN to the effect that military victory isn't possible in Afghanistan.

"Now pouring out of Stephen Harper," wrote James Travers of the Toronto Star on the same subject, "is the smoke that the Taliban can't be beaten." His colleague, Haroon Siddiqui, said, "the Prime Minister says NATO cannot win, period. So what are we doing there?" The previous week, Mr. Travers's and Mr. Siddiqui's colleague, Thomas Walkom, said of the PM's acknowledgment, "I find this admission breathtaking ... if the Taliban can't be beaten, what are Canadian troops doing in Afghanistan? If the Taliban can't be beaten, why are our soldiers still dying?"

Collectively, the pundits were surprised, if modestly pleased, that the Canadian PM had finally smartened up and was now seeing the war as they do, to quote Mr. Simpson, as "an ill-defined mission that defied all the rules of counterinsurgency," led by "an enthusiastic general [this would be the former Canadian Forces' boss, Rick Hillier]" who bamboozled both press and politicians.

Wow: I don't know where these boys, including the PM, have been since 2006, when Canadian troops arrived in Kandahar; well I do know, and the answer is Ottawa and Toronto.

But that the Afghan mission, certainly once it moved to the south, was always going to be bloody difficult, fraught with peril, complicated, lethal and perhaps even doomed is not news. It isn't news to Canadian soldiers or to those who have covered them in Afghanistan, and it ought not to come as a shock to Canadians, either.

As my critics will tell you, I have been to Kandahar only as a reporter embedded with Canadian soldiers, the army's program which sees journalists travel outside the big safe base at Kandahar Air Field with the troops.

In journalism schools and in some newsrooms too, embedding is seen as synonymous with shilling. At the very least, the best of those who do it, including several prominent reporters who have also travelled and worked in Afghanistan on their own, are seen as having sacrificed objectivity.

In my case, because I also wrote a book about Canadian troops, and because I make no secret of

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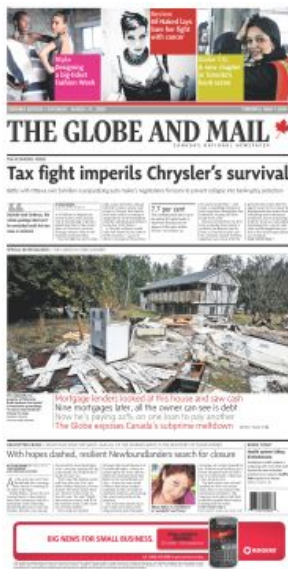
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my general affection for the breed, I am probably seen by some as embedding's most egregious offender.
Yet most of the embedded Canadian journalists I can think of were also simultaneously managing to tell the objective truth about the mission from the moment it began.
Even I was doing it. In the summers of 2006 and 2007, when I was there frequently, I wrote several long stories, all of which appeared prominently in this paper, about the grim prospects for success in Kandahar.

I quoted the former Canadian ambassador to Afghanistan, Chris Alexander, now working with the United Nations there, in a lengthy interview in which he described in detail the country's problems - particularly the rising insurgency being run from Pakistan (it was already rising then), the futility of relying on military action alone and the sheer mind-numbing complexity of the task. I wrote about Canadians having to repeatedly retake the same tiny patches of ground because whenever they left, Afghan security forces couldn't hold them. I wrote about a terrific report on the mess that was being made by the West of reforming the Afghan National Police, done by a respected independent research agency - and how just about every other fledgling Afghan institution was in the same boat as the police. I repeatedly quoted Canadian battle commanders saying that this mission was not going to be easy, bloodless or even necessarily successful.

I didn't go half the places Rosie DiManno of the Star did, didn't stay as long as Graeme Smith of this paper or as often as Steve Chao of CTV, but even I, a soldier-loving army shill, could stumble upon and report what smart, informed people, none of whom sugarcoated a damn thing, were saying.

Mr. Simpson mentioned rituals, by which he meant the return of a soldier's casket to Canada, reporters dwelling "yet again on the bravery of the departed," official statements of regret.

Instructively, however, it was the death this week of another man, an Afghan "fixer" named Jawed (Jojo) Ahmad, that got as much if not more attention than the Canadians who were returning home dead.

Fixers used to be the smooth operators who reporters hired to drive them around the war zone, provide them with intelligence, arrange interviews and translate.

These days, however, some of them, such as Jojo, actually do for some organizations the on-the-ground interviews in places that are deemed too dangerous for Western reporters to go or where Western news agencies don't want their reporters to go. The result, for the fixer who does this, is more money than he could have imagined, and for the news organization, a new form of journalism - reporting at a real remove, whereby the fixer-journalist takes the risks and does the interviews and hands the results over to the reporter.

I knew Jojo too, although not well, and he was a likeable, canny, balls-out young guy who thrived for a time in the corrupt, divided, dangerous place that is his country - until he didn't, and then he was shot and killed. No one could fault him for being an opportunist.

But it is saying something - about Afghanistan and Canada and journalism - that he should have been as publicly mourned here as the returning Canadian troops, who whatever else you might say about them, were killed serving something greater than themselves.

In what a friend of mine calls the age of propaganda, where the most cynical citizens choose to believe that their government (and thus their army) lies to and manipulates them all the time, men such as Jojo, and even their excellent Taliban contacts, are ascribed virtues they may not have, and emerge as reliable truth-tellers.

That isn't so, which is why I think that it isn't the mission, or only the mission, which is failing here.

cblatchford@globeandmail.com

