

## **Top Ten Reasons Why Canada Needs a Debate About Afghanistan**

Written by

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**PEJ News** - M. Wallace - The Canadian mainstream media refuses any challenge to our role in Afghanistan, with almost no critical voices, despite polling that indicates at least half of Canadians not only question but oppose our deployment. Prime Minister Harper resues a Parliamentary debate over Afghanistan, and impugns the loyalty of critics. But as Plato said 2,500 years ago, only a tyrant refuses to debate the wisdom of a foreign war.

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### **Top Ten Reasons Why Canada Needs a Debate About Afghanistan**

**M. Wallace**

PEJ News

March 20, 2006

Here are the top ten reasons why we do need a national debate, and soon.

The Canadian mainstream media has been promoting our role in Afghanistan, with almost no critical voices, despite polling that indicates at least half of Canadians not only question but oppose our engagement of troops in this war-torn country.

Prime Minister Harper dismisses the possibility of a Parliamentary debate over Afghanistan, and (like former US President Nixon) impugns the loyalty of critics. But as Plato said 2,500 years ago, only a tyrant refuses to debate the wisdom of a foreign war.

Here are the top ten reasons (ignored by the mainstream media) why we do need a national debate, and soon.

NUMBER 10:

Canada's Defense Minister, Gordon O'Connor, was a senior associate with Hill & Knowlton, one of the world's largest and most controversial public relations firms. Among their former and present clients: the tobacco lobby, the government of Kuwait (to lobby for Gulf War I), the US Government, the Catholic Bishops of America (to oppose abortion), the State of Florida (to convince voters the 2004 elections were fair), Boeing, Enron, and Wal-Mart. Until June 2004, O'Connor was a registered lobbyist in Ottawa for at least four major military contractors.

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### NUMBER 9:

The Afghan Parliament is run by warlords and druglords. Human Rights Watch estimates that 60 percent of the new legislators have links to warlords. The New York based rights group singled out Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, a powerful militia commander whose forces ravaged Kabul in the 1990s, and Mohammed Fahim, a former defense minister, who has been accused of war crimes. A European diplomat, who asked not to be named, reckoned that about 20 legislators still have active private militias and that at least 20 more have been involved in drug smuggling, said that the general consensus among the international community was that the warlords were a greater danger than the Taliban. Druglords are among the key officials in the Karzai government, for whom opium is the major source of their personal income. From which follows:

### NUMBER 8:

The Afghan economy has become increasingly dependent on opium cultivation. The Taliban regime greatly reduced opium poppy cultivation. But under Karzai, opium production is approaching record highs, with poppies now being grown in all of Afghanistan's 32 provinces. Afghanistan has re-emerged since the U.S.-led war as the world's leading source country for opium and heroin ? rapidly returning to levels of the 1990s, when it produced about 70 percent of the world's illicit opium supply. UN and US sources estimate that a half-million people are involved in Afghanistan's trafficking chain and estimated an annual income at \$25 billion. Nearly two million hectares of land are under opium cultivation, producing 90% of the world's opium, accounting for more than 60 percent of the country's gross domestic product and employing over two million Afghans. Critics say the country is turning into a narco-state under the noses of coalition forces.

### NUMBER 7:

Opposing the warlords and druglords can be dangerous to your health, especially if you're a woman! In the new Parliament, one of the most controversial figures is Malalai Joya, a 27-year-old woman, who has emerged as a fearless critic of the warlords that control the country. Women's activist turned politician, she has picked up where she left off three years ago, condemning Afghanistan's warlords, some of who now sit with her in Parliament. In 2003, Joya, then a women's literacy and health worker, had stood up at a public meeting to discuss the new constitution and denounced the factional leaders as 'criminals' who should be taken to the world court. ?I can see them sitting here in this House?, said Joya, who earned an international reputation when she spoke against warlords and drug smugglers in the Loya Jirga national meeting to discuss the country's constitution. Her speech earned her powerful enemies. Despite her immense popularity, which led to her winning the September election from

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the border province of Farah with no party assistance, she rarely travels alone. She employs at least 12 security

guards -- there have been at least four assassination attempts -- and is always seen in public wearing a burqa (a veil that covers the body and face from head to toe).

### NUMBER 6:

Afghan women continue to face open repression despite their supposed "liberation" after the overthrow of the Taliban. Violence against women and girls in Afghanistan is pervasive; few women are exempt from the reality or threat of violence. Afghan women and girls live with the risk of abduction and rape by armed individuals, forced marriage, being traded for settling disputes and debts, and face daily discrimination from all segments of society as well as by state officials. Strict societal codes, invoked in the name of tradition and religion, are used as justification for denying women the ability to enjoy their fundamental rights, and have led to the imprisonment of some women, and even to killings. Should they protest by running away, the authorities may imprison them. Worse yet, Afghan farmers prevented from growing poppies under the UN eradication program have been forced to hand over their daughters to drug traffickers to settle their debts, according to reports. In most of Afghanistan outside Kabul, women cannot perform on radio or television, as provincial administrators have declared female entertainers "un-Islamic". Women are similarly prohibited from being news presenters, or even reading weather reports. Ironically, the areas where the ban is most strictly enforced include those now being patrolled by Canadian Forces.

### NUMBER 5:

According to Human Rights Watch, U.S. and Coalition Forces continue to use excessive force and arbitrary detention in Afghanistan. U.S. and coalition forces active in Afghanistan under Operation Enduring Freedom since November 2001 continue to arbitrarily detain civilians and use excessive force during arrests of non-combatants. Ordinary civilians arrested in military operations are unable to challenge the legal basis for their detention or obtain hearings before an adjudicative body. They have no access to legal counsel. Generally, the United States does not comply with legal standards applicable to its operations in Afghanistan, including the Geneva Conventions and other applicable standards of international human rights law. At least six detainees in U.S. custody in Afghanistan have been killed since 2002. U.S. Department of Defense

documents show that five of the six deaths were homicides. From 2002 to the present, Human Rights Watch estimates that at least one thousand Afghans and other nationals have been arrested and detained by U.S.-led forces in Afghanistan. There are numerous reports that U.S.

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forces have used excessive or indiscriminate force when conducting arrests in residential areas in Afghanistan. U.S. military forces have repeatedly used deadly force from helicopter gunships and small and heavy arms fire, including undirected suppressing fire, during what are essentially law-enforcement operations to arrest persons in uncontested locales. The use of these tactics has resulted in avoidable civilian deaths and injuries, and in individual cases may amount to violations of international humanitarian law. Human Rights Watch has also documented that Afghan soldiers deployed alongside U.S. forces have beaten and otherwise mistreated people during arrest operations and looted homes or seized the land of those being detained. Some recent examples: In early May 2005, sixteen Afghan protesters were killed by police and army troops during violent demonstrations in several cities in response to reports of U.S. interrogators desecrating a copy of the Koran during interrogations at Guantanamo Bay; A US air raid in Afghanistan's rugged eastern

mountains killed 17 civilians, including women and children, an Afghan official said yesterday. The US military confirmed civilian deaths but said the numbers were unclear.

### NUMBER 4:

Canada is fully complicit in the creation of a system of vigilante justice in Afghanistan that flouts both international law and Canada's traditional values when in foreign combat. Again, according to Human Rights Watch, "U.S. partners such as Britain and Canada compounded the lack of human rights leadership by trying to undermine critical international protections. Britain sought to send suspects to governments likely to torture them based on meaningless assurances of good treatment. Canada sought to dilute a new treaty outlawing enforced disappearances." (Human Rights Watch, Press Release, Jan. 18, 2006)

### NUMBER 3:

Contrary to endless misleading stories in the mainstream media, the Canadian mission in Afghanistan is NOT a NATO mission, nor has it been specifically authorized by the UN. It is, in fact part of the American Operation Enduring Freedom begun in 2001. (My source? The Canadian Department of National Defense: [http://www.forces.gc.ca/site/newsroom/view\\_news\\_e.asp?id=1703](http://www.forces.gc.ca/site/newsroom/view_news_e.asp?id=1703) ) To be sure, this mission was endorsed by the UN under Article 51, giving every UN member the right to act in its own defense. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, this seemed almost reasonable, and everyone knew the U.S. was going to do it anyway. But five years after the event, the self-defense justification is well past its sell-by date, and is beginning to look to many like an American imperial venture to dominate the entire Central Asian region, what the British called "The Great Game" in the 19th century. Is this really in the Canadian tradition? Is this what Canada wants its armed forces to do in the 21st century?

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### NUMBER 2:

The Afghan mission is even more dangerous than Iraq, calculated on a ?per soldier, per day? basis. Total U.S. casualties in Afghanistan since the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom are about 10% of those in Iraq, but the number of ground troops deployed by the U.S. never exceeded a few thousand, compared with the 170,000 in Iraq. Prime Minister Chr?tien would scornfully claim that if Harper were Prime Minister Canadian troops would be in Iraq. In fact, he had already committed Canadian Forces to an even more dangerous mission, and Harper now presides over a far larger Afghan deployment planned by his predecessor!

Finally, the number one reason for having a debate is,

### NUMBER 1:

Ghengis Khan! He was the last non ? Muslim ruler to subjugate the Pushtun tribal areas (southeast Afghanistan and northwest Pakistan). Within a few generations his descendants had embraced Islam and, with Afghan help, conquered an empire that stretched from Central Asia to the subcontinent. When it fell apart, successive centuries saw the Sikhs, the British, the Russians, and most recently the Americans try to retake and hold Afghanistan with no lasting success. Assuming our ?rules of engagement? in Afghanistan are a tad less bloodthirsty than those of the Great Khan, how could our plan possibly work? You disagree? THAT?S WHY WE NEED A DEBATE!

Dr. Wallace has ben a professor at UBC for 36 years and a poiltical activist for 47.