In the belly of the beast

Janice Stein and Eugene Lang. *The Unexpected War: Canada in Kandahar*. Toronto: Viking Press, 2007.

Review by Hugh Segal

If I have learned anything that is absolutely essential to an understanding of the foibles of government and public policy, it is the corrosive nature of two compelling conceits that aggressively infect governing cultures. The first, the concept of "being in control," is perhaps the most insidious, because it implies rewards for a *dirigiste* approach to governing and policy that do not now and have never existed. The second conceit, which follows upon the first and is its logical spawn, is the conceit that "governments can plan to manage any contingency, within reason."

While it is not without flaws, *The Unexpected War* is valuable as a record of what people thought about and did not adequately think about in the lead-up to and engagement of Canada's commitments, first to Afghan liberation from the Taliban and their al-Qaeda tenants and co-conspirators, and then to stabilizing the new and marginally democratic Afghan administration. These commitments were made at the request of our NATO allies and the international community as reflected through the United Nations decisions and resolution that preceded Canada's engagement.

That both decisions to engage were taken by Liberal governments, and that it is a Conservative government that must now manage the decision spectrum for the future, speaks eloquently to the extent to which the Afghan commitment is in a sense greater than any of the political parties now dominating the politics of Canada's parliament.

And the value of the book is the extent to which it connects the decisions made by official Ottawa to the two conceits of "being in control" and being able to adequately "plan" to meet contingencies. The book's strength is in the relentless facility for letting both politicians and public servants reflect on what they believed they were doing when they did it, and what they believed others might feel and how they might react. This is done through the words of interviewees, with only minor analysis by the authors. This compelling strength affords the reader the chance to embrace how the Ottawa-centric culture sometimes operates in a way that is disconnected from the larger international and even the continental contexts. This disconnect can be, at best, marginally dysfunctional and, at worst, seriously delusional; and whether it is the former or the latter, it is not without serious consequence.

This appears to be true of aspects of both Jean Chrétien's and Paul Martin's foreign policies. It remains to be seen whether the present Conservative government can avoid the contagion. The immense value of this book is that it exposes the contagion at its full viral intensity, in the context of real events, in very recent history. As an incentive for reform, as an invitation for a work plan to redo our foreign policy and defence planning functions, it is cogent and coherent. Mistakes it does make, no doubt in good faith, because one of the authors (Eugene Lang) was directly involved as a ministerial chief of staff for one of the key Liberal actors. A few incongruities relating to the military chain of command or appropriate kit terms and titles do not detract from the core analysis and anecdotal clarity of message.

Had the authors taken more time to reflect on policy advice offered by the public service and from embassies, and the layered advice from the military itself, their picture might have been more complete and even more balanced. But then it would not have been available for another five years, long after Parliament was asked to pronounce upon the future of our commitment following the report in January of the Manley task force.

Clearly, there have been years of neglect of both our foreign intelligence capacity and our hard-edged military deployability, brought on by diminished national security and defence-related expenditures that failed to keep pace with Canada's growth, the increasing complexity of the world and new kinds of threats and challenges to our geopolitical interests. These, and even a fear of defining those interests too broadly, have taken their toll on Ottawa and on

the relevance and grounded reality of our foreign and defence policy capacity. In the book one can sense the enduring impact on the Liberal actors and their public service collaborators of a general misunderstanding of the Pearsonian lesson for Canadian foreign and defence policy. Today's media and other pundits view Mike Pearson as a peacemaker, an innovative proponent of new instruments that were, frankly, much better and more high-minded than war, with the Nobel Peace Prize as massive justification of this view. In hard reality — and for this he deserves even greater praise — Pearson was a competent and effective Cold Warrior. He defeated John Diefenbaker in 1963 because Diefenbaker and his Progressive Conservative government divided and collapsed over Diefenbaker's inability to keep a promise to extend the anti-Soviet bomber defence ring to nuclear-tipped missiles in North Bay, Ontario, and La Macaza Quebec. This was despite firm undertakings with the United States to do so. Pearson did not equivocate on the principle that a promise made should be a promise kept.

In the mid-1950s, NATO and the relatively new Atlantic Alliance were threatened by US President Dwight Eisenhower's firm opposition to and intense irritation about the Suez venture planned and executed by Israel, France and the United Kingdom, in response to Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal. Pearson's United Nations Emergency Force, deployed between Israel and Egypt (with the Soviet bloc sending the Poles to work with the Canadians), was as much about sustaining the NATO alliance and keeping Russia's support of Egypt from escalating toward a thermonuclear conflict as it was about United Nations innovation. As NATO was a linchpin of our own Canadian foreign policy, his gesture was magnificently a marriage between the most narrow of Canadian self-interests and the most pressing opportunity for third-party stabilization between two consenting and sovereign states. (He did this while Canada's RCAF strike capacity in Germany was deployed with nuclear-tipped airborne ordnance.)

Part of our problem in Afghanistan, and this emerges clearly in this book, is the extent to which officials and politicians failed to understand the Pearson tradition in terms of self-interest as opposed to abstract global instrument design.

In that very specific context, what Canada does next about Afghanistan has to be about our self-interest, as a NATO ally, as a UN supporter and as a country very much on the al-Qaeda hit list, should Afghanistan once again become an inviting host to al-Qaeda plans and deployment capacity.

It is absolutely no indictment of the hard-working public servants, CIDA aid project leaders or superb military who have worked in Afghanistan to point out, as the book deftly does, that whatever joined-up government may mean, in terms of focus, coherence and effectiveness on the ground, it has not, as of the book's writing (last spring and summer), yet transpired. That is because of the way Ottawa has operated for many years before the Afghan commitment, the uncommon control Finance and PCO exert over budgets in Defence and Foreign Affairs and the relative lack of control over CIDA. But the sinews of detachment, the lack of properly staffed and coherently managed joint operational capacity between CIDA, Defence and Foreign Affairs, while improving, continue to weigh down the impact of our idealism, the defence of our national interest, the effective execution befitting a G8 country. (The excellent public servant with the most service with respect to coordinating all Afghanistan-focused activity also carried other unrelated duties!)

The questions that *The Unexpected War* raises are much broader, although its focus is on Afghanistan. In the face of a growing military capability and robust foreign policy on the part of a wealthier Russia and a growing and militarily significant China; in the face of what appear to be radical militant jihadist destabilization efforts and assassinations in Pakistan; in the face of non-state actors financed by Iran and others with similar goals, like Hezbollah and Hamas; in the face of potential crises in Africa and elsewhere where Canadian geopolitical and humanitarian interests are very much at play — what has happened since the Afghan engagement decision to ensure that we get it right going forward? How have we increased our intelligence capacity, deployability, coordinated and joined-up policy and delivery skill sets at home to respond to these escalating pressures?

It is by raising this question, albeit unspoken, that the book will serve Canada and all who care about its future more than moderately well.

The book's strength is in the relentless facility for letting both politicians and public servants reflect on what they believed they were doing when they did it, and what they believed others might feel and how they might react. This is done through the words of interviewees, with only minor analysis by the authors. This compelling strength affords the reader the chance to embrace how the Ottawa-centric culture sometimes operates.

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