Martin's legacy, Harper's war

Janice Gross Stein and Eugene Lang

In this excerpt from their important book, *The Unexpected War: Canada in Kandahar*, the authors tell the story of how Canada's redeployment from Kabul to Kandahar under the Martin Liberals in 2005 became the Harper Conservatives' war, from the moment the House passed a resolution extending the Afghan mission in May 2006.

Dans cet extrait de leur important ouvrage intitulé *The Unexpected War: Canada in Kandahar*, les auteurs décrivent comment le redéploiement des Forces canadiennes de Kaboul à Kandahar, décidé en 2005 sous le gouvernement Martin, s'est transformé en véritable guerre pour les conservateurs de Stephen Harper dès ce jour de mai 2006 où la Chambre des communes a adopté la résolution prolongeant la mission en Afghanistan.

Stephen Harper's Conservatives made defence and national security a central pillar of their campaign in the 2006 election. On the campaign trail they pledged to commit 5.3 billion dollars to the budget of the Canadian Forces over five years. During the campaign, the Conservatives released a paper on the Canadian Forces, "Canada First," which accompanied their election platform. Written by Gordon O'Connor, the Tory defence critic and a retired brigadier general, it put the emphasis squarely on domestic and continental defence. It called for major investments to assert Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic, as well as new "territorial defence units" in every major Canadian city. This last proposal led the increasingly desperate Liberals to produce a tasteless television advertisement alleging that the Tories wanted "soldiers in the streets." While the ad never aired on television, it did appear briefly on the Liberal Party website and television newscasts then showed the short clip. The Liberals consequently found themselves in the middle of a heated controversy in the middle of the campaign.

The Conservatives had said very little about the Afghanistan mission during the election. The "Canada First" plan centred on protecting Canada at home and in North America, and had only a thin overseas dimension. The Conservative election platform could not have been more different from the Defence Policy Statement that emphasized intervention in failed and failing states, which Rick Hillier had written for the Martin government. The Tories wanted to improve the Canada-US relationship and to deal explicitly with the accusation that Canada was a free rider in North American defence and security. The emphasis was on the home front, what the Americans called "homeland defence," not on overseas "adventures."

Prior to the election the Conservatives had shown no serious interest in Afghanistan, although they did support the Kandahar mission. O'Connor and his colleague MP Cheryl Gallant, whose riding includes CFB Petawawa, the military base of many of the soldiers sent to Kandahar, had requested briefings on the mission shortly after it was announced. But O'Connor expressed no interest in going to Afghanistan to assess the situation on the ground.

It was not only O'Connor who was uninterested. The House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence paid little attention to Afghanistan. Graham's office had urged the Liberal chair of the committee to hold hearings on the Kandahar mission to help educate parliamentarians and the public. But the committee had other more pressing priorities to investigate; it was focused on the process of defence procurement. When the government was defeated, the committee still had not scheduled hearings on the mission to Kandahar.

On January 23, 2006, Stephen Harper was elected Canada's twenty-second prime minister as the head of a minority government. Gordon O'Connor, the retired army general, lobbyist, and author of "Canada First," was appointed minister of national defence. Peter MacKay, Harper's erstwhile leadership rival, became foreign minister.

Even though Canadians paid very little attention to foreign and defence policy during the election, Canada's new mission in Afghanistan would soon became the dominant national issue. After thirty-seven soldiers were killed, *Maclean's* magazine named the "Canadian Forces Soldier" the newsmaker of the year for 2006. By the end of that year, Canada's military suffered more casualties in a single twelve-

month period than it had since the Korean War of the early 1950s. By some measures, the war in southern Afghanistan was more dangerous to Western troops than the bloody civil war raging simultaneously in Iraq.

Once Canadians woke up to the reality that their soldiers were fighting and dying, their indifference to Canada's role in Afghanistan dissipated quickly. The mission in Kandahar would become synonymous with Stephen Harper's prime ministership, a defining feature of his government.

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The public and the media quickly forgot that the Liberals under Paul Martin had made the decision to send Canada's military into the most dangerous region in Afghanistan. This was now Stephen Harper's war.

Less than one month after the Harper government was elected, the combat infantry task force began operations in Kandahar province. It became apparent that conditions in Kandahar were far more dangerous than the Canadian Forces had expected. "There is a school of thought," said General Rick Hillier, Canada's chief of the defence staff, "that argues that the victory of the insurgents over U.S. forces in Iraq encouraged the Taliban to take on ISAF. They [the Taliban] learned that insurgency could defeat well-equipped forces. It came as a strategic surprise in 2004-2005. What was surprising was not their numbers, or the ferocity of their attack, but their tactics."

To put this in context, before February 2006, Canada's military had suffered eight fatalities over the previous four years. In four months, the Canadian army lost as many soldiers as they had lost in four years. It was now starting to look like Canada's troops were at the epicentre of an unanticipated, well-organized, and lethal insurgency, fed from sanctuaries inside Pakistan. As Bill Graham reflected, "The hornets' nest we poked had a hell of a lot more hornets than anybody thought."

The mission became more and more controversial and unpopular with each passing week. Other NATO countries, particularly the Dutch, were questioning NATO's strategy in southern Afghanistan. They thought that it was overly aggressive and confrontational, likely to provoke and destabilize when NATO's purpose was to contain the insurgency and to stabilize the south. Canadians, uncomfortable watching their soldiers in combat on the nightly news and unaccustomed to watching military funerals for fallen soldiers, were seeing both with increasing frequency throughout the spring of 2006. The Canadian public and the soldiers' families would have to watch these pictures for another year until Canada was scheduled, in the NATO tradition of burden sharing, to hand off its responsibilities to another member of the alliance.

Then something odd happened in Ottawa.

On a warm evening in early May 2006, John McCallum, now the Liberal finance critic, and his former chief of staff were eating dinner at a bistro in downtown Ottawa. They were catching up after the sobering election defeat of the previous winter. As they were finishing their meal, a mutual friend came into the restaurant, saw them, and headed to their table. It was Bill Graham, who had become leader of the Opposition after Paul Martin had resigned as Liberal Party leader following the election.

Graham told McCallum that several hours earlier, the Prime Minister's Office had called to ask him to meet with Harper later that day on an urgent matter. Graham of course agreed. He met with Harper alone, one on one. The prime minister told a stunned leader of the Opposition that he planned to extend Canada's commitment to the mission in Kandahar to 2009, two years beyond the original date. Harper asked for Graham's support and that of the Liberal caucus.

Earlier that day Harper had convened a meeting with his chief of staff, Ian Brodie, Hillier, and the deputy minister, Ward Elcock, when they effectively made the decision to extend the mission. Neither the minister of national defence nor the foreign minister was present. Gordon O'Connor confirmed that officials made the recommendation directly to the prime minister. "There was a meeting of senior officials from Foreign Affairs, CIDA and Defence that made a recommendation to the Prime Minister to extend for two years," recalled O'Connor. "The two years was an estimate of the time we needed to make progress. It was brought to Cabinet before the Prime Minister announced the decision to extend… The Prime Minister spoke to me and Peter MacKay before we made the announcement, but it was primarily the Prime Minister's decision."

O'Connor's absence from the discussions seems somewhat unusual — and troubling — but it might have reflected his well-known views on the mission to Kandahar. O'Connor, like Hillier, had spent years in West Germany during the Cold War. Unlike Hillier, he had not served with the

Canadian Forces in failed states like Bosnia in the post-Cold War period. He was known as one of the "sausage generals" who had served in the safety of Germany. During the transition from the Martin to the Chrétien government in February 2006 [sic], O'Connor had been briefed by his officials on the proposed extension of the mission to 2009. Senior officials at NDHQ soon learned that Gordon O'Connor was no fan of the Kandahar deployment. He thought it far too dangerous. However, it was a legacy from the previous government and he was forced to defend it in public, at least for another year. But Prime Minister Harper saw things differently than did his defence minister, and acted on the advice of officials to extend the mission.

Gordon O'Connor reflected on the rationale for the extension. "In one year we could not make progress. We took over the government on February 4 [2006], just at the moment our troops were going into combat. We inherited this mission. We realized that we couldn't complete the job in one year. We needed to do both security and development. I personally checked to see what was going on in development even though this wasn't my responsibility."

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Bill Graham was taken aback by Prime Minister Harper's intention to extend the mission in Afghanistan. Already the mission had proved far more dangerous than Graham had imagined when he recommended it to Martin. The infantry task force had been operational in counterinsurgency warfare for only two months, yet it was sustaining significant casualties. Harper had been prime minister for only three months. What was the compelling reason to extend the mission now? Why the urgency? Harper was not clear. He simply asked Graham whether he could count on the support of the party that had sent the Canadian Forces to Kandahar and the party leader who had recommended the mission when he was minister of national defence.

Graham made no commitment to Harper that day. He told Harper that he would consult his caucus and get back to the prime minister in due course. Harper asked him to do so quickly, as he planned to make an announcement soon.

Shortly thereafter Graham requested a meeting with Hillier to get a detailed briefing on the reasoning behind the proposed extension. "The raison d'être Hillier offered for going to 2009 was two-fold," Graham recalled:

> *Within Afghanistan, 2009 was a threshold year when one could ascertain whether one was being effective or not, because that is the year Karzai's mandate ends, and we could say democracy was or wasn't taking hold by then. So it was a logical thing to commit to 2009. Secondly, our going there was inextricably linked up with our partners, the British and the Dutch. The Dutch and British had agreed to stay until 2009 [In fact the Dutch hadn't committed to 2009, but only until 2008]. Therefore, since we were committed to them as part of the team, Hillier argued we needed to commit to 2009. Who started the 2009 business I don't know. Maybe it was the British that started it and dragged us and the Dutch along. I'm sure it wasn't the Dutch because they were always very cautious about this stuff.*

A year after the extension was approved, Hillier made a similar argument: "The one year timeline was much too short a window for NATO. The mission would have been a failure if we had extended for only one year. We needed the time badly and we are seeing the results on the ground."

The ongoing challenges of Kandahar were not central to the discussion about the extension, even though eight Canadian soldiers had been killed in less than four months' time. The conversation revolved around NATO and Canada's obligations to its allies.

Within two weeks of his meeting with Graham, Harper announced that he intended to extend the Kandahar mission for an additional two years, until 2009, and that he would put this issue to a vote in the House of Commons. It is not unprecedented in Canada's Parliament to hold a vote on overseas military deployments, although in a Westminster parliamentary system like Canada's, military deployments are the exclusive purview of the executive — the Cabinet and the prime minister. But the Conservatives had taken a page from Paul Martin's book. They had committed in their election platform to address the "democratic deficit" and expand the role of Parliament. They would put all foreign military deployments to a vote in the House of Commons. Even though the Harper government was in a minority and might lose this vote, the prime minis-

ter evidently felt it necessary politically to hold a vote.

There was a significant inconsistency in the Conservative approach to expanding the role of the House of Commons. The government would allow only six hours of parliamentary debate on the extension of the mission to Afghanistan. This was a woefully inadequate amount of time for considered debate in a Parliament that was largely ignorant of Afghanistan and had spent almost no time in debate or discussion of the mission until very recently, when the casualties began to mount. Gordon O'Connor claimed that the debate was limited because "everyone knew what everyone's position was; further debate would not have clarified anything." Not surprisingly, the Opposition parties were outraged at having the debate cut so short.

Editorialists across the country were mystified. What was going on here? Why was a new prime minister, who led a minority government, taking a political risk to extend a mission put in place by his predecessor? With public support for the mission waning, perhaps it was nothing more than a shrewd political strategy to take a potentially divisive issue off the table well in advance of the next election, which would likely not come for a year or so. Or perhaps Harper was extending the mission to appeal to his political base early in his prime ministership. The Conservatives were now visibly demonstrating that they were much stronger than the Liberals on defence, much more committed than their predecessors. The prime minister was not simply talking the talk — he was walking the walk.

Perhaps, as Bill Graham speculated, Canada's allies had pressured Ottawa to extend its deployment. The escalating violence in Kandahar was making it increasingly difficult to find a replacement nation for Canada. NATO and Canada might need more time to persuade one of their allies to fill the gap. Gordon O'Connor rejected this argument out of hand: "The allies put no pressure on us [to extend]. This was our decision and our decision alone."

Senior officials, both military and civilian, had their own agenda and in this case their agenda seems to have been decisive. There was no doubt that Hillier and Elcock wanted the Canadian Forces to stay in Kandahar for a longer period of time. The ink was barely dry on Martin's signature approving the Kandahar deployment when Hillier and Elcock began to suggest that the government should seriously consider extending the mission beyond 2007.

But their advice ignored the political priorities of the Martin government. Paul Martin was preoccupied with Darfur and Haiti. It was crystal clear to Graham that the prime minister's priority was to have the capacity by 2007 to deploy troops to one or both. An extension of the Kandahar mission could well eat up that capacity and put the prime minister's priorities at risk. Moreover, it was not certain that the government had the political will to finance the existing mission in Afghanistan for an additional year. Pressing for another billion dollars per year for an extension beyond 2007 would not sit well with the finance minister and the prime minister, especially after they had just agreed to pump thirteen billion dollars into the Defence Department.

Prime Minister Harper, on the other hand, had different priorities than his predecessor. Yet he has still said relatively little in public about why he took the risk of extending the mission just three months into his minority government. In Parliament, the government limited debate and reduced its argument to "Canada will not cut and run from Afghanistan," suggesting that a refusal to extend the mission in Kandahar until 2009, an arbitrary date, was tantamount to abandoning the Afghans. Months later, O'Connor argued in public that the Canadian Forces were in Afghanistan for "retribution" for the 9/11 attacks. The implication was that Canada would continue to fight in Afghanistan as long as the Americans, the principal victims of 9/11, were fighting or as long as they asked for Canada's help. A failure to extend the mission would not only abandon the Afghans but also the United States.

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Nothing could be further from the truth. After 2006, Canada had other military options in Afghanistan. It could contribute in many different ways. Canada could, for example, send additional PRTs to other parts of the country or take a major role in training the Afghan National Army, a suggestion that Donald Rumsfeld had originally made. But the Conservatives would not discuss these options, which they labelled "cutting and running."

True to his word, on May 17, 2006, Stephen Harper put the extension of the Kandahar mission to a hastily arranged vote in the House of Commons. The prime minister was putting his government at risk. Both the NDP and the Bloc had made their intentions known; each party would vote against the extension. They did not support the mission now that it was clear the CF were fighting a war under the umbrella of the United States. They were also enraged by the truncated debate, which they thought offensive and contemptuous of Parliament. Harper therefore needed the support of two dozen Liberals to carry the vote.

Canadian Forces

Prime Minister Harper meets Canadian troops on the ground in Afghanistan in 2007. Harper inherited the mission in Kandahar from the previous Martin Liberal government. But now he owns it.

The government would not have fallen if it had lost this vote, as the resolution was not a matter of confidence. The weight of Parliament's views on the mission, moreover, did not seem to be the prime minister's main concern. Harper said that if Parliament did defeat his motion he would extend the mission for one more year; and, further to that, if he had trouble securing parliamentary agreement to extend the mission again, he would seek a mandate from the people of Canada. Nevertheless a defeat on the motion would certainly have been a serious if not a debilitating political setback early in the Harper government. Had he lost the vote, Harper's judgment would certainly have been questioned. Harper badly needed the support of Bill Graham and as many members of Parliament as he could bring with him.

After agonizing over the issue, Bill Graham decided that members of the Liberal caucus would be free to vote according to their conscience. The Interim Liberal leader would not impose his view on his colleagues. The Liberal Party was in the early stages of a leadership race and the front-runner, Michael Ignatieff, announced that he would support the Conservative motion to extend the Kandahar mission. Ignatieff had far more caucus support than any of his competitors at this point — about a quarter of the Liberal members of Parliament — and these MPs were expected to follow Ignatieff's lead. But the majority of Liberal MPs and leadership candidates, some of whom, like Bob Rae and Gerard Kennedy, were not in Parliament, opposed the extension.

Even John McCallum, the former minister of defence and now a strong and vocal supporter of Ignatieff's leadership, voted against the motion to extend. McCallum found the parliamentary tactics of the government appalling. As he said in public, the government had two options. The prime minister could make an executive decision and live with the political consequences, with no vote in Parliament. Foreign military deployments are usually handled this way in Canada. But if the government wanted the imprimatur of Parliament, McCallum felt that the government was

obliged to ensure that MPs had sufficient time — weeks, if not months, as was the case in the Netherlands — to examine the issue carefully and make an informed judgment. The prime minister was following neither course of action. Nevertheless, McCallum's friend Bill Graham would vote in favour of the extension. Hillier's arguments had convinced him that extending this mission was the right thing to do.

The party that decided to send Canada's military to Kandahar was deeply divided over extending this deployment. The motion to extend would pass, with about twenty-five percent of the Liberal caucus voting in favour. Harper had gambled and won. The divided Liberal Party immediately lost credibility on the mission in Afghanistan and struggled with the issue throughout the rest of the leadership campaign and into the next year.

By spring 2006 it was glaringly apparent that the security situation in southern Afghanistan had deteriorated badly. Kandahar and adjacent provinces were in the grip of a new, intense insurgency — the most serious challenge to the government since it was created after the United States and the Northern Alliance drove the Taliban out in late 2001. Southern Afghanistan was now engulfed in an unexpected war, one that neither the Canadian Forces nor NATO nor the United States had predicted. Everyone was caught off guard.

Canada's military leaders were also surprised by how quickly and how thoroughly the war consumed the Canadian Forces. Hillier had promised Paul Martin that, beginning in February 2007, the Canadian Forces would have the capacity to mount a second international mission elsewhere. Hillier made this unequivocal commitment even though, from the outset, he clearly wanted to extend the Kandahar mission beyond 2007. He believed that while the mission in Kandahar would be challenging, the Canadian Forces would still be capable of managing a second, simultaneous operation somewhere else. Running two missions simultaneously was in fact consistent with the Defence Policy Statement that Hillier had penned. However, by spring 2006, as the conflict in Kandahar escalated, the new government began to signal that this optimism was no longer warranted. In testimony before a Senate committee after the vote on the extension, Gordon O'Connor said, "We can maintain Afghanistan, as is, into the future basically forever, but we would be greatly challenged for a substantial commitment elsewhere in the world." Hillier reinforced the message later that year when he made it clear that the war in Kandahar precluded the Canadian army from mounting a second operation for the foreseeable future. The mission in Kandahar was consuming resources and manpower at a rate unforeseen either by military leaders or by the government. "I underestimated the demands of the Afghan deployment, what it would consume," said Hillier. "It includes a conventional force component — which I did not foresee — which demands so many enablers [support elements]. Our C-130s [Hercules transport aircraft] are dying by the month and we have no replacement in sight. The intensity of the fighting required all our enablers."

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At one point during discussions with Graham, Hillier had suggested that sending Canadian CF-18 aircraft to bomb targets in Afghanistan might be necessary. But Graham rejected this option and got no push back from the CDS. "I was opposed to putting in CF-18s," recalled Bill Graham. "I didn't see how they fit with this mission. I remember Hillier telling me 'It's sort of like the cavalry…the modern cavalry is your air force, they go over the top, you call them in for precision strikes.' All of which is great in theory, but the problem is the strikes are never very precise, they kill the people you are trying to win over to your side." Although Canada didn't send in fighter bombers, other NATO states did. During 2006 NATO flew some 2,600 bombing sorties in Afghanistan, killing scores of civilians. The "collateral damage" from these air strikes has been a serious strain on the relationship between the Karzai government and NATO. It also threatens to undermine continued support among the Afghan population for the ISAF troops in their country.

The Canadian Forces are now locked in this unexpected war until at least February 2009. Recent experience shows that the longer a country commits to multilateral missions, the harder it is to withdraw. The Canadian Forces were in Bosnia, for example, for nearly fifteen years. As challenging a conflict as Bosnia was, it pales in comparison with the complexities of Afghanistan. It will also be much harder to find a replace-

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The decision to extend the mission of the Canadian Forces in Kandahar creates formidable challenges for Canada's military and for its government. Canada is now at war. Canada slipped into war in Afghanistan, step by step, incrementally, without fully understanding that it was going to war, until it woke up to mounting casualties and grim battles. Paul Martin looked back at the decision-making process and saw the gaps: "We didn't have detailed discussions about the challenges of Afghanistan." The government first committed only to a short-term combat mission in 2002, then to a short-term stabilization mission in 2003 to 2004, then to provincial reconstruction, and then, almost imperceptibly, to battle — all for short periods of time. In 2006, thirty-four soldiers would die in combat in Kandahar, the largest number since the Korean War. Canada was most certainly at war.

Canadian soldiers are now locked in a battle for the "hearts and minds" of Afghans, a battle that will shape the future of Afghanistan. It will also shape the future of Canada's armed forces and it will colour government thinking about the use of its army as an instrument of foreign policy for years to come. It will shape Canada's development assistance program, who is sent abroad, and under what circumstances. It will shape Canadians' thinking about Canada as a global power for a generation.

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