

AFGHANISTAN'S TROUBLED ELECTION

Introduction



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Focus

This *News in Review* story focuses on the controversial and violent presidential election in Afghanistan that occurred in the summer of 2009. Voting irregularities raised concern among Western nations, including in Canada, where the military mission in Afghanistan has been coming under serious scrutiny.

Definition

The Taliban is a fundamentalist religious and political movement that governed Afghanistan with brute force from 1996 until 2001, when its leaders were removed from power by NATO forces. The Taliban regrouped and since 2004 has been fighting a guerrilla war against the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan and allied NATO forces.

On August 20, 2009, the people of Afghanistan went to voting booths across the country to elect their president. This was only the second time Afghans had voted for a president since the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001. In the first election, in 2004, Hamid Karzai, the head of the pro-Western government that replaced the Taliban, won an easy victory. However, this time Karzai was facing a number of challengers, most significantly Abdullah Abdullah, a key figure in the Northern Alliance, the military group that defeated the Taliban with American and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) assistance in 2001.

Counting the votes was a slow and arduous process, and almost a month after the election, final results had not yet been announced. There were many reasons for the delay: difficulties in delivering ballot papers to and from remote mountain villages; the country's inexperience with holding democratic elections; and most importantly, continuing controversy over the ballot counting and allegations of possible fraud.

By mid-September, Karzai had established a clear lead over Abdullah and his other rivals for the presidency and appeared headed to have won over 50 per cent of the total vote. This figure was important because if Karzai gained an outright majority he would not have to face a run-off against Abdullah, who

was in a strong second-place spot. For many Afghans, the fact that their country, emerging from decades of conflict and still dealing with a serious insurgency from the undefeated Taliban, was able to hold its second set of elections was a matter of national pride. But for others, there was mounting skepticism about the fairness and transparency of the result.

Many election observers were concerned that in certain areas the total ballots cast greatly exceeded the number of eligible voters. In addition, eyewitnesses alleged that Karzai supporters had stuffed the ballot boxes and barred known supporters of Abdullah or one of the other candidates from voting. Abdullah himself accused the Karzai government of conducting a campaign of "massive, state-sponsored fraud," and even the country's Election Complaints Commission (ECC) concluded that there were grounds for investigating a number of cases where ballot-tampering may have taken place.

The troubled election in Afghanistan comes at a time when many Canadians are expressing grave concerns about our mission there and the mounting cost in lives and money. The fact that the result remains shrouded in controversy may do little to ease their doubts about the possibility of establishing a viable democratic government in this war-torn land.

To Consider

1. What is significant about the fact that Afghanistan has held two sets of elections for president since the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001?
2. Why are some Canadians beginning to have doubts about the wisdom of continuing the military mission in Afghanistan?

AFGHANISTAN'S TROUBLED ELECTION

Video Review

Quote

“For the future of this country, it is important that the issue of fraud is cleared up, taken care of, and corrected. The people of Afghanistan will not accept not being able to decide the future of this country.”
— Abdullah Abdullah, Afghan presidential candidate (France 24 International News, September 9, 2009, www.france24.com/en/20090909-presidential-election-abdullah-abdullah-afghanistan-karzai-democracy-fraud-ballot-vote-usa)

Pre-viewing Activity

Before you watch the video, discuss the following questions with a partner or in a small group.

1. What do you know about the Canadian military mission in Afghanistan?

2. What do you believe are the goals of the mission?

3. What is your opinion of this mission? (Do you agree that Canadian troops should be there, or not?)

4. How do you feel about the recent election in Afghanistan? (For example, do you believe it was free and fair?)

5. How would you compare and contrast the election in Afghanistan with a Canadian election?

Viewing Questions

Watch the video and answer the following questions.

1. Why is organizing an election in a country like Afghanistan a challenge?

2. Why were some Afghans afraid to cast their votes in the election?

Quote

“The Afghans know the next year is critical. The level of violence is going up. The enemy is extremely resilient. For me, next fall—2010—the key question will be, is the Taliban degraded? [Do] the ordinary Afghan man and woman have confidence in the government of Afghanistan to deliver good enough security, good enough governance?” — Lieutenant-General Marc Lessard, who led the Regional South command in Afghanistan for most of 2008 (*National Post*, September 24, 2009)

3. What role did Canada play in assisting in the election process?

4. What risks do Canadian forces face in Afghanistan?

5. Who were the two main candidates for president of Afghanistan? In what part of the country do they receive most of their support?

6. Why is the current president of Afghanistan unpopular with some of his fellow citizens?

7. What criticisms does the main opponent of the president make of his record in office?

8. What evidence of election fraud is presented in the video?

9. What is the name of the group that tried to sabotage the election? Did it succeed?

10. What were the results of the election? Why were many observers skeptical of them?

11. How did the main opposition candidate for president react to the results?

Post-viewing Activities

After you have watched the video, discuss and respond to the following questions. Your teacher may choose to place you in a small group with other students.

1. Based on what you have seen in the video, do you think the election in Afghanistan was free and fair? Why or why not?

2. Do you think that Canada and other countries participating in the military mission in Afghanistan should accept the results of the election? Why or why not?

3. How might the controversy surrounding the election in Afghanistan affect the views of Canadians about continuing the military mission there?

4. Is it possible for a country like Afghanistan to establish a working democratic system of government? Why or why not?

AFGHANISTAN'S TROUBLED ELECTION

FAQs on the Election

Quote

"We want women to learn how to obtain their political rights in a society dominated by men. Men will realize we have a voice. We need more women ministers, more diplomats, and for those who are there to come together and speak in one voice."
— Shinkai Karokhail, Afghan member of parliament, speaking on the importance of having women participate in the political process (aljazeera.net, August 19, 2009)

Who were Afghans voting for on August 20, 2009?

An estimated 15 to 17 million Afghans, many of them newly registered female voters, were eligible to choose from 30 candidates for president and were also electing representatives for positions on provincial councils across the country. The minimum voting age is 18, and there are separate polling stations for men and women. Afghans living abroad, including many in refugee camps across the border in Pakistan, were ineligible to vote. As vote counting progressed, it was projected that between 40 and 50 per cent of eligible voters had actually cast ballots. If this figure is accurate, then it will mark a substantial decline from the 70 per cent who took part in the first presidential election in 2004.

How did the elections proceed?

Despite warnings of widespread violence in the run-up to the election, voting throughout Afghanistan proceeded relatively peacefully. The Taliban had pledged to disrupt the voting and threatened to intimidate people from casting ballots, especially in their southern stronghold of Kandahar, where Canadian troops are stationed. NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the multinational force of which Canada is a part, reported over 400 attacks on polling stations by Taliban insurgents, making August 20, 2009, one of the most violent days the country had experienced since the toppling of the Taliban regime in 2001. However, if the Taliban's intention had been to derail the election, then it could be concluded that they failed in the attempt.

Afghan and foreign election observers estimated that the voter

turnout was between 40 and 50 per cent of eligible voters. This was a drop from the 70 per cent voter turnout in 2004. But considering the substantial spike in Taliban-inspired violence, and the corresponding escalation of NATO military operations against the insurgency, the fact that so many Afghans braved the conflict to turn up at the polls at all could be viewed as a qualified success for the process.

What were the problems with the election?

The independent Election Complaints Commission (ECC), a body established to investigate allegations of election fraud, received over 2 000 complaints about incidents of ballot-box stuffing, people being denied the right to vote, and outright intimidation of voters. In over 600 polling stations where serious abuses were believed to have occurred, the results were suspended or "quarantined" until a full investigation could proceed. This delayed the vote-counting process and lengthened the wait for the final results to be announced. The majority of the rejected ballots came from areas in southern Afghanistan such as Kandahar where Hamid Karzai—who comes from this region—was expected to gain significant support.

On September 10, 2009, the ECC stated that it was declaring a number of ballots invalid, casting even more doubt about both the process itself and the overall result of the election. In a press conference days after the election, Abdullah Abdullah, President Karzai's main opponent, denounced the election as rigged and totally fraudulent and appealed to the international community not to recognize the results.

Quote

"Everyone was cheating in my polling station. Only 10 per cent voted, but they registered 100 per cent turnout. One man brought five books of ballots, each containing 100 votes, and stuffed them in the boxes after the elections were over." — Unidentified Afghan election official (<http://guardian.co.uk>, September 18, 2009)

Quote

"I believe firmly, firmly in the integrity of the election and the integrity of the Afghan people, and the integrity of the government in that process." — President Hamid Karzai (<http://guardian.co.uk>, September 18, 2009)

What happened after the election?

As final results trickled in by mid-September, it appeared that Karzai was going to secure the magic number of 50 per cent and win an outright victory over his main challenger, Abdullah Abdullah. This would mean that Karzai would avoid a run-off pitting him directly against Abdullah with the possibility that he might lose if all the other candidates who had to drop out of the race threw their support behind his main challenger. There was some speculation that in light of the allegations of fraud arising from the voting, the United States and NATO were both putting considerable behind-the-scenes pressure on Karzai to "rerig" the election so that he would end up with less than an overall majority. This would enable a second, and presumably fairer and more transparent, round of voting to be held. However, as he was on the brink of securing a first-ballot victory, there appeared little likelihood that Karzai would agree to such a proposal.

What does the election reveal about Afghanistan's society and political system?

Elections and democracy are relatively new concepts to Afghanistan. During the past few decades, the country has been ruled by a monarchy, a communist dictatorship, a rotating succession of corrupt warlords, and the extremist Taliban regime. After the NATO-led invasion and the overthrow of the Taliban, the incoming Northern Alliance government pledged to hold the first

free elections the country had ever experienced. Generally speaking the Afghans were unfamiliar with the concept of competing political parties and the democratic process. Afghanistan is also a deeply traditional, conservative, and tribal society. Despite having a president, in Afghanistan the real power tends to be focused at a more local level, in the hands of the provincial governor or village chief.

In addition, Afghanistan is also a nation with clearly defined divisions and rivalries among its main ethnic groups: the Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and others. These divisions are often reflected in the nation's politics. For example, Hamid Karzai, a Pashtun, enjoys overwhelming support from this group, which makes up just over 40 per cent of the nation's population and is mainly concentrated in the southern part of Afghanistan. On the other hand, Abdullah Abdullah is of mixed Pashtun-Tajik background and tends to draw most of his support from the Tajiks, who represent just over one-quarter of the population.

Sources: Information in this feature adapted from: "Q and A: Afghan Election," http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/817984; "Afghan election fraud row mounts," http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mappas/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/823465; "Life in Afghanistan," http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7741767.stm; "Elections in Afghanistan: Rerigging Hamid Karzai," www.economist.com/opinion/displaystory.cfm?story_id=14419168

Follow-up

1. Based on the information provided in this section, would you conclude that the election in Afghanistan was a success? Why or why not?
2. What are some of the main difficulties involved in creating a functioning democratic system of government and politics in Afghanistan? What steps do you think are necessary to ensure that such a system is finally established in that country?
3. What are the main differences between the Canadian and Afghan political systems?

AFGHANISTAN'S TROUBLED ELECTION

Canada's Role in Afghanistan

Did you know . . .

The Afghan government has tried to negotiate with the Taliban as a way to have them participate in the governing of the nation and give up their violent tactics.

Canada's military mission in Afghanistan was the direct result of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States. In the aftermath of these dramatic events, then-U.S. president George W. Bush focused his wrath on the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. He accused the Taliban of providing a base of operations for Al Qaeda (the extremist Islamic group responsible for the strikes against New York and Washington, D.C.) and of offering sanctuary for its elusive leader, Osama bin Laden. After the Taliban refused to hand over bin Laden, the United States and other NATO countries launched an all-out military invasion of Afghanistan to drive them from power, destroy Al Qaeda, and capture bin Laden.

Less than a month after the attacks, NATO troops and the forces of the Afghan Northern Alliance entered Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, in triumph. Ousted but not totally crushed, the Taliban retreated into the rugged mountainous regions of the country to regroup and resume their armed struggle against the invaders, a fight that continues to this day.

Canada's Role

Canada dispatched a naval task force to the Persian Gulf in support of the NATO invasion in October 2001, and sent its first troops—a battle group from the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry—to the southern province of Kandahar in February 2002. At this time, NATO was conducting an intensive military effort called "Operation Enduring Freedom" whose goal was to eradicate the Taliban resistance, eliminate Al Qaeda as a terrorist threat to the world, and capture bin Laden and Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader. This operation proved to be unsuccessful in

all of its objectives and was only the beginning of a protracted military effort in Afghanistan that shows few if any signs of winding down even seven years after it began.

From 2003 to 2005 the focus of Canada's military operations shifted from Kandahar to the area near the capital, Kabul, as part of the International Security Assistance Force in the run-up to the first national elections. But by early 2006, the situation in Kandahar had deteriorated dramatically as a result of a resurgent Taliban presence in the area. To deal with this threat, Lieut.-Gen. David Richards, the British commander of NATO forces in southern Afghanistan, called for the deployment of 8 000 troops, including 2 200 Canadians, to fight alongside Afghan National Army (ANA) units to secure the region against the Taliban. By September 2006, over 2 500 Canadians were taking part in this effort, code-named "Operation Medusa" after the creature from Greek mythology whose horrifying face was believed to turn her enemies into stone.

At the beginning of Canada's military involvement in Afghanistan, the government of the time, led by Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chretien, had imposed a deadline of February 2009 for the withdrawal of the country's troops. But as NATO's struggle against the Taliban proved more difficult than expected, the new Conservative government of Stephen Harper looked for ways to extend the length of the mission after being elected in January 2006.

Extending the Canadian Mission

In October 2007, Harper asked former Liberal cabinet minister John Manley to conduct an investigation of Canada's

Did you know . . .

When Barack Obama was elected President of the United States in November 2008 he publicly urged Canada to reconsider its decision to withdraw troops from Afghanistan because the stubborn Taliban insurgency shows no signs of ending any time soon.

commitment to Afghanistan. In January 2008, Manley's commission recommended that the life of Canada's mission be extended beyond its original deadline. However, Manley stipulated that this should only occur if two key conditions were met: 1) that other NATO countries commit more troops to the volatile Kandahar region and 2) that Canada's forces be equipped with new, state-of-the-art equipment and weapons. Manley also advised that Canada's role should shift away from a strictly combat mission to one that would focus more on diplomacy, the training of Afghan police and security forces, and providing humanitarian and development aid to the country.

On March 13, 2008, over objections from the Bloc Québécois and the NDP, Parliament voted to extend Canada's mission to Afghanistan to December 2011. The official Government of Canada Web page titled "Canada's Approach to Afghanistan" refers to the country's mission there as a "whole of government" approach. This means that while Canada's involvement would still mainly be military in nature, there was also a much higher priority attached to helping the Afghan people develop their country and establish their own agencies of national security. This included such activities as bringing health clinics and irrigation projects to remote villages and building schools where young

Afghans, especially girls, could obtain an education for the first time.

Current Controversies

Canada's mission to Afghanistan has been controversial, especially from the time that Canadian forces began to sustain heavy casualties in the troubled Kandahar region in 2006. Opinion polls have indicated that Canadians are deeply divided on the war, with a small majority supporting a withdrawal of our troops as soon as possible. Opposition to the war is strongest in Quebec, the province that supplies most of the recruits serving in Afghanistan. The war has also been very costly, both in terms of lives lost and financial price. As of mid-September 2009, 131 Canadian soldiers had been killed in Afghanistan, and many more had suffered serious injuries. It was estimated that the total financial cost of the mission will run into the billions, with projections of as much as \$18-billion by the time Canada's involvement is expected to wind down, in December 2011. This amounts to \$1 500 per Canadian household.

Sources: Information in this feature adapted from: "Canada in Afghanistan," CBC News In Depth, www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2009/02/10/f-afghanistan.html; "Canada's Approach in Afghanistan," www.afghanistan.gov.gc.ca/canada-afghanistan/approach-approche/index.aspx?menu_id

Analysis

1. Based on the information presented above, do you think that the results of Canada's mission to Afghanistan have been worth the cost in lives and money? Why or why not?
2. Canada is currently expected to end its commitment to Afghanistan by December 2011. What would happen to Afghanistan and the Afghan people if all NATO allies took similar action? Do wealthy and secure countries like Canada have an obligation to help those who live in unstable, violent parts of the world?

AFGHANISTAN'S TROUBLED ELECTION

Hamid Karzai: Afghanistan's Embattled Leader

Further Research

To learn more about Hamid Karzai, you may wish to read the interview conducted by the Academy of Achievement and posted to their Web site at www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/kar0int-1.

Quote

"Karzai turned a golden opportunity into disaster. There's no point giving him five more years."
— Abdullah Abdullah, a former member of Karzai's cabinet, and his main rival in the 2009 Afghan presidential election (BBC news at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/1672882.stm)

Hamid Karzai, Afghanistan's incumbent president, has cut a dramatic figure on the international stage since rising to prominence following the ouster of the Taliban regime in late 2001. Born in 1957 in the southern province of Kandahar, Karzai is a member of the Pashtun ethnic group that comprises just over 40 per cent of the country's population. His family is related to Mohammed Zahir Shah, the last king of Afghanistan. He was educated in Kabul and Simla, India, where he learned to speak English fluently. Forced into exile in neighbouring Pakistan following the Soviet invasion of his homeland in 1979, he became active in the anti-Soviet *mujahaddin* resistance movement. After the withdrawal of Soviet forces in the late 1980s, Karzai returned to Afghanistan and began to lay the groundwork for his own political career.

Rise to Power

In January 2002 Karzai made a powerful presentation to an international donor's conference in Tokyo, where he appealed to Western nations for \$4-billion in aid to help rebuild his shattered country. After building up his international profile by visiting a number of foreign capitals, especially Washington, D.C., where he established a strong relationship with then-U.S. president George W. Bush, Karzai returned home ready to assume power.

At the *loya jirga*, a meeting of Afghan tribal chiefs and other prominent figures in June 2002, Karzai was chosen to head the country's first interim government. The United States had exerted its considerable pressure in order to smooth Karzai's path to the leadership. Karzai was acceptable to most of the tribal

chieftains because he was not too closely tied to the Northern Alliance, the military group that had fought alongside NATO forces to drive out the Taliban. Many of the Alliance's leaders were former warlords linked to the unpopular regime that had brought the country to the brink of anarchy as a result of its involvement in the drug trade in the early 1990s. He also found favour among ordinary Afghans by appearing to rise above petty ethnic rivalries by downplaying his Pashtun roots and because he took pains to distance himself from the United States despite Washington's strong support for his presidency.

Nonetheless, to some Afghans, Karzai appeared to be an "American stooge," forced to apologize for NATO military strikes that took the lives of innocent civilians—who were classified as "collateral damage" in the ongoing war against the Taliban. He was also unflatteringly nicknamed the "mayor of Kabul," referring to the fact that his government lacked real authority in many remote regions of the country outside the capital. He enjoys a positive image in the Western media for his stylish dress, including his trademark green-and-white chapan, an Uzbek coat, and his ceremonial karakul hat. He even won recognition from Gucci fashion house for his elegant wardrobe and grooming. But after he handily triumphed as the country's first democratically elected president in 2004, criticism of his regime's heavy-handedness and corrupt policies began to mount.

The 2009 Election

Facing re-election in 2009, Karzai ran on his record of achievement and the claim

that he was the only figure of unity in the country. However, unlike in 2004, this time he faced a serious challenger in Abdullah Abdullah, a former member of Karzai's cabinet who had been fired in 2006. Abdullah had played a significant role in the Northern Alliance prior to the defeat of the Taliban and was a close aide to the legendary Ahmed Shah Masoud, the hero of the anti-Soviet resistance who had been assassinated by the Taliban just one day before the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Like Karzai, Abdullah is stylish, well-educated, and fluent in Western languages, including English and French. He is also a powerful orator who has directed strong attacks on what he views as the failures of his opponent's record as president.

Abdullah's "time-for-a-change" rhetoric appeared to strike a responsive chord with many Afghans, and, as the results of the disputed August 20, 2009, election continued to trickle in, it was clear that he had secured a

strong second-place position behind Karzai. In the aftermath of the voting he spoke out vehemently against what he claimed were widespread examples of voter fraud, for which he held Karzai and his supporters directly responsible. However, whether he would be able to persuade a sufficient number of Afghans and foreign powers that the election had been rigged against him and refuse to recognize its results remained to be seen. As far as Karzai was concerned, it seemed likely that he would emerge from the election chaos as the re-elected president of Afghanistan, albeit with his reputation both at home and abroad severely tarnished by the controversy surrounding the vote.

Sources: Information in this feature adapted from: "Profile: Hamid Karzai," http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/313593; "Profile: Abdullah Abdullah," http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/167288

Follow-up

1. What are Hamid Karzai's main strengths and weaknesses as president of Afghanistan. Which do you consider to be greater: the strengths or the weaknesses? Why?
2. If you had been voting in the 2009 presidential election in Afghanistan, who would you have supported: Hamid Karzai or Abdullah Abdullah (or neither candidate)? Give reasons for your choice.

AFGHANISTAN'S TROUBLED ELECTION

A Mission in Trouble?

As the death toll of Canadian troops serving in Afghanistan continues to mount, and the military situation against the Taliban appears to be deteriorating, many people are expressing doubts about the wisdom of continuing the mission there. Here is a selection of opinions:

Jonathan Couturier and his family

Twenty-three-year-old Private Jonathan Couturier was killed by a roadside bomb on September 18, 2009, making him the 131st Canadian killed in Afghanistan. His family revealed that he had voiced deep reservations about the war prior to his death. According to an article in the *Toronto Star* (September 19, 2009), Couturier had told his brother Nicolas that the Canadian effort in Afghanistan was “useless” and that he and other soldiers fighting there were “wasting their time.” His sister-in-law Valerie echoed these comments, stating that “Jonathan didn’t want to know anything about being there. He wouldn’t talk about it, he stayed positive, but at some moments he said he was fed up.” Although his mother, Celine Lizotte, said that her son had enjoyed his military service and volunteered willingly for it, “he was anxious to return to the country and rejoin his girlfriend.”

The anti-war comments of Couturier and his family were highly unusual and may point to a shift in opinion among military families regarding the Afghan mission and its cost to them. In the past, grieving relatives of Canadian servicemen killed in action have uniformly expressed support for the goals of the mission and indicated that they believed their family’s sacrifice was worth the cost. According to retired Major-General Lewis Mackenzie, who once headed a Canadian UN

peacekeeping force in Bosnia, “the fact is that it’s totally and absolutely unique to date in the mission. It’s one in over 130 fatalities, so I’m amazed and emotionally encouraged by the support the military and the mission [have] had to date” (*Toronto Star*, September 19, 2009). But Claude Bachard, a Bloc Québécois MP who serves as his party’s defence critic, offered support for the Couturier family’s anti-war comments, suggesting that it may be the first but certainly would not be the last military family to indicate similar concerns about continuing the military mission in Afghanistan.

Robert Fowler

Robert Fowler is a distinguished Canadian career diplomat who once served as ambassador to the United Nations. While acting as a special UN envoy in the African country of Niger, he was kidnapped by Al Qaeda militants, in December 2008, and spent the next 130 days in captivity, moving around the Sahara desert and wondering if he would survive the ordeal. In an interview with the CBC, Fowler was asked his opinion on Canada’s mission to Afghanistan. He expressed grave reservations about it continuing past the 2011 deadline: “I cannot object to the objective in Afghanistan,” he stated, “but I just don’t think in the West that we are prepared to invest the blood or treasure to get this done” (“Fowler questions Canada’s Afghan mission,” *cbc.ca*, September 9, 2009). Fowler characterized the Afghan mission as a “noble objective,” but at the same time questioned whether the effort was worth the cost in lives and Canada’s international reputation. “It’s not just the commitment and the wasting of our youth and the enormous cost in difficult financial times. It’s to get it done we will

have to do some unpleasant things. This is not a nice war.”

Fowler suggested that his exposure to members of the Al Qaeda cell that held him hostage in Africa gave him some insights into the mindset of militant Islamic groups such as the Taliban. “They live in a world that I couldn’t understand,” he said. “There was no fun, there was no love, and there was no joy.” However what his captors did possess was a fanatical dedication to their cause, for which they were ready and even eager to give their lives if necessary. The most popular DVDs screened at the movie nights he was forced to attend with his captors depicted the exploits of suicide bombers driving vehicles into buildings. According to him, every time such episodes were shown, the audience would erupt into cheers. He sees many similarities between the Al Qaeda militants that held him hostage and the Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan and wonders how many more Canadian lives will have to be lost in the difficult and possibly futile effort to subdue them.

Colin Kenny

On September 13, 2009, Senator Colin Kenny, chair of the Standing Committee on National Security and Defence, and a widely respected authority on Canadian foreign and defence policy, published an article in the *Montreal Gazette* that called on the Harper government to accept that Canada was unable to achieve its military goals in Afghanistan. He went so far as to use the word *retreat*,

claiming that although Canadian forces had performed magnificently in difficult circumstances, it was time to conclude that the mission’s goals—to defeat the Taliban and help the Afghan government stabilize the nation—were unattainable. In Kenny’s view, the NATO countries fighting in Afghanistan had failed to learn the lesson of history: that the Afghan people will always resist foreign invasions of their country. From the time of Alexander the Great through the British colonial occupation of the late 19th century and the Soviet conflict in the 1970s and 1980s, outside forces had always failed to impose their will on the proud people of Afghanistan.

Accepting the fact that Canada was committed to staying in Afghanistan until the end of 2011, Kenny nonetheless called for a gradual winding down of the mission there and a reallocation of development aid money to countries where it would be better spent. He also urged the government to reassign Canadian forces serving in Afghanistan to the task of training the Afghan National Army and to reduce risky “search-and-destroy” missions against the Taliban to the bare minimum in order to limit casualties. Acknowledging that his views would spark controversy, especially given his earlier support for the mission, Kenny concluded his article by stating, “What we hoped to accomplish in Afghanistan has proved to be impossible. We are hurtling toward a Vietnam ending” (*Montreal Gazette*, September 13, 2009).

Analysis

1. After reading the selections above, are you persuaded that Canada should start scaling down its military mission in Afghanistan or even withdraw its troops prior to the 2011 deadline? Give reasons for your viewpoint.
2. Which of the three opinions presented above do you find most persuasive? Why?

AFGHANISTAN'S TROUBLED ELECTION

Activity: Debating the Future of Canada's Mission

In this activity, your class will debate the following resolution:

"The Canadian mission to Afghanistan has failed to achieve its objectives, and the government should begin an orderly withdrawal of our troops as soon as possible."

Class debates can assume a number of different formats and levels of formality. They are a good way of exploring different sides of a complex issue and arriving at a conclusion. Here are two ways you may wish to structure the debate on this issue:

Formal Debate

Students choose teams and prepare their arguments for the affirmative (supporting the resolution) and the negative (opposing it). Present your arguments in the form of an opening statement from each team, question-and-answer sessions where the teams have the opportunity to challenge each other's arguments, and then closing statements where each team restates its position and concludes its arguments. The class may then determine which team won the debate by a show of hands. Or you may wish to vote on the resolution prior to the debate and again after it is finished. The winner may then be the team that convinced the most students to change their positions.

Four-corners Debate

Create four signs that read "Strongly Disagree," "Disagree," "Agree," and "Strongly Agree" and place them in different corners of the room. After the teacher reads out the resolution, each student should move to the corner of the room that best reflects their position on the resolution. You will be given time to discuss your viewpoints and then have a volunteer from each group present its position. After listening to all the arguments, the teacher will ask you if you want to change position and move to another part of the room. When all the presentations are finished, discuss which arguments were the most persuasive.

Notes:
