

REVIEW ESSAY

## **Social Science and the Afghan War** Canadian Perspectives

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Janice Gross Stein and Eugene Lang. 2007. *The Unexpected War: Canada in Kandahar*. Toronto: Penguin Group. ISBN 9780143055372. Paperback: 20.00 CAD. Pages: 304.

Warnock, John W. 2008. *Creating a Failed State: The US and Canada in Afghanistan*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing. ISBN 9781552662625. Paperback: 21.95 CAD. Pages: 150.

There is a growing consensus among policy makers and international relations specialists that the western-led military mission in Afghanistan has reached an impasse. After eight years of conflict, the political, economic and military objectives of western states have yet to be achieved. The Taliban is inflicting major losses on NATO forces, and the most recent Presidential election was mired by fraud and corruption. Civilian casualties are rising, and there is a growing fear within NATO of replicating the Soviet failure in Afghanistan. While the Obama administration is currently debating a Pentagon request for tens of thousands of additional troops, public opinion in the US and other NATO countries is polling against both the current mission and the plans for a 'surge.' At the time of writing, it is unclear if the Obama administration will expand the war against the Taliban, or reconfigure the mission to focus more on aid and counter-terrorism operations.

The current debate on Afghanistan in the US is not new for Canadians. Since 2005, Canada has been fighting a counterinsurgency war in Kandahar. Prior to that, Canada participated in the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001 and in NATO-led ISAF missions beginning in 2003. Canada has spent tens of billions of dollars on a 'whole-of-government' approach to nation building and counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. This strategy has been implemented through a 'Provincial Reconstruction Team' in Kandahar, where the Department of National Defence (DND), the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA),

and the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFAIT) jointly operate military, developmental and diplomatic projects. According to Moens (2008), this intervention has triggered a 'revolution in Canadian foreign policy,' most notably a rapid increase in defence spending, a militarization of Canadian security doctrine, and a new alignment with US foreign policy. Given these changes, the war in Afghanistan has become a flashpoint in Canadian politics and media. There is an ongoing public debate on the goals, methods, failures and achievements of Canada's mission.

This debate has also emerged in the social sciences. Starting in 2007, there has been a proliferation of scholarship on Canadian foreign policy and the war in Afghanistan (e.g. Bell 2009; Nef and Robles 2008). This paper looks in detail at two important books by Stein and Lang (2007) and Warnock (2008). These books utilize different methods to examine the crisis in Afghanistan. The first is structured around a liberal theory of international relations and foreign policy decision-making, while the second is shaped by the methods of Marxism and critical political economy. These different approaches lead to very different assessments of the mission and to opposite conclusions on how Canada should proceed. While the former lends itself to a strategy of tactical reorganization, the latter marks out an anti-occupation position.

*Unexpected War* by Stein and Lang offers a detailed narrative of Canada's role in Afghanistan since 2001. The book is structured around a series of interviews with Canadian policy makers such as Paul Martin, John McCallum and Bill Graham, who were key decision-makers in the early stages of the war and in the lead up to Canada's relocation to Kandahar. Based upon these interviews, the book presents an inside account of the conflict.

The narrative is highly engaging. Stein and Lang reveal the internal confusions of the Chretien and Martin governments, the fierce competition between DFAIT and DND, the extraordinary influence of General Rick Hillier, and the outside pressures of the Bush administration. According to the authors, it is this mix of government uncertainty, bureaucratic infighting, personality politics, and external influence that shaped and directed Canada's role in Afghanistan.

The book's discussion of Operation Apollo in 2001, for example, reveals a welter of contradictions inside the state. While Canada offered naval units and JTF2 commandos to the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom, cabinet decisions were made on the assumption of an 'early in, early out' scenario. The DND, however, viewed the emerging 'war on terrorism' as a new opportunity for both re-equipping the military and

redefining Canadian foreign policy. To this end, Canadian officers based at US Central Command in Tampa Bay, Florida, passed on requests from US military personnel for a combat deployment in 2002. Cabinet approved this deployment, which committed 800 combat troops to Kandahar on a stabilization mission, even though the request for this mission emerged outside the normal channels of inter-state diplomacy.

As the authors reveal, this was not the only time that DND officials engaged in mission prodding. In Summer 2002, DND officials briefed cabinet members on the merits of extending the mission in Kandahar instead of joining the ISAF operation in Kabul. This briefing was presented as a tip-off on a forthcoming US request to stay in Kandahar. However, when Minister of Defence John McCallum visited Washington in January 2003, Donald Rumsfeld requested Canada's leadership of ISAF. McCallum and Rumsfeld struck an informal agreement: Canada would not join the US in Iraq, but would instead command the ISAF/NATO mission in Kabul. The tacit agreement was that Canada would oversee and manage the Afghan theater as American forces left for the Gulf. Canada's role in ISAF would also be to mediate any potential conflicts with Europe.

For Stein and Lang, Canada's role in Afghanistan became less clear in December 2003 after Paul Martin assumed the Prime Ministership. Martin viewed the mission as a legacy of Chretien and was more interested in charting his own course in 'failed states' such as Darfur and Haiti. However, after ruling out a Canadian role in BMD, a consensus emerged in cabinet, DFAIT and DND to make a recommitment to Afghanistan. As compensation to the Americans, Canada would participate in the NATO effort to expand PRTs throughout the country. These PRTs would combine defence, developmental and diplomatic functions in a single setting, and test the '3D' strategy of the International Policy Statement, Canada's new foreign policy doctrine. Unfortunately, the delay in making this decision left Canada with only one option for deployment: Kandahar. In a 'classic case of bureaucratic dithering and bickering' (134), Canada was forced to establish a PRT in the Taliban homeland.

Canada's PRT was designed around four elements: the deployment of 1,000 infantry and JTF2 commandos to Kandahar; a command responsibility over Kandahar multinational headquarters; the implementation of aid and development projects through CIDA; and the establishment of a 'Strategic Advisory Team' within the Presidential Office of Hamid Karzai. The goal of the PRT was to stabilize Kandahar militarily in order for aid and development projects to succeed. The Canadian mission

was expected to end in 2007, after which Canada would assist in 'troubled spots' such as Darfur or Palestine.

As Bill Graham recalls, 'We were probably drinking too much of our own bathwater' (186). Despite gung-ho rhetoric from military officials, Canada was unprepared for the conflict that ensued. Canada ignored intelligence on the growing strength of the Taliban insurgency, took few precautions in turning over detainees to torture in Afghan jails, utilized counterinsurgency methods that alienated the population, and allocated funds for military purposes at a level ten times higher than that for development. Despite these trends, the Conservative government of Stephen Harper claimed ownership of the war and succeeded twice in extending the mission with Liberal support.

Stein and Lang close their book with a critical assessment of Canada's 'unexpected war.' First, they identify key contradictions in the 3D strategy, in particular, the bureaucratic rivalries between DND, DFAIT and CIDA. Second, they highlight continental relations as the primary concern of policy makers:

The Canada-U.S. relationship framed every major recommendation that Canada's military leaders made to their minister. Afghanistan was never the subject but only the object, the terrain in which the Canadian Forces operated as they struggled with an assertive Bush administration. Afghanistan could have been anywhere. It was no more than a spot on the map (262).

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Nevertheless, Stein and Lang argue for a mission extension. They acknowledge ongoing problems of warlordism, corruption, civilian casualties and torture, yet argue that Canada must stay the course to support a UN-sanctioned mission, to preserve NATO as an alliance, to 'build schools and clinics,' to enhance democracy and women's rights, and to prevent civil war and terrorism. To meet these challenges, Canada must 'reconfigure its military and its development assistance program, as well as the way its departments work together outside Canada' (297). Political leaders must 'speak clearly to the public' and explain why 'we are there for a generation' (297).

For Stein and Lang, this commitment is warranted as a positive example of liberal internationalism:

When Canada commits to rescue failed and failing states, its political leaders are asking for an extraordinary act of imagination, one that asks Canadians to accept that they share a common fate, a destiny, with people who live halfway around the globe. Those in Britain who led the anti-slavery movement in the nineteenth century made this heroic leap, and saw their own humanity bound

with the humanity of slaves. When Canadian soldiers go to Kandahar – or to Darfur or to Haiti – Canadians must be able to make this same leap (302).

To emphasize their point, Stein and Lang end their book with a quote from an Afghan named Farid, who told John Manley that, 'Afghanistan is your child. If you do not support a child, teaching it how to walk, it cannot stand on its own two feet. Afghanistan is your child' (304). Through such metaphors, Stein and Lang stake their case for a generation-long war.

This paternalistic conclusion is one of many problems. For example, the liberal methodology of interviewing key decision-makers has mixed results. On the one hand, it offers a unique understanding of personality politics inside the state. On the other hand, the interview material is not compared to other evidence on the background to the conflict, the motivations of western policy in Central Asia, and the course of events in Afghanistan since 2001. The liberal approach is *idealist* in that it focuses on *ideas of individuals in power* as the main determinant of foreign policy. Left out of the analysis are *material* factors such as geopolitical rivalries, economic interests, and the history of western foreign policy. The authors ignore these structural variables and instead develop their narrative largely on the basis of interviews with powerful politicians. The final product, while informative in many respects, offers little more than a 'great leader' understanding of the conflict.

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The book is also limited by an uncritical acceptance of the 'war on terror.' Not mentioned is the history of US intervention in Afghanistan since 1978, when the Carter administration first provided funds to the mujahideen. The authors also leave aside the connection between 9/11 and the history of US foreign policy in the Middle East, as well as the political motivations of al-Qaeda (Mohamedou 2006). The historical narrative is also quite narrow, and ignores the civil war period of 1992-1996 and the crimes committed at the time by our current allies in Afghanistan. More importantly, there is little information on the wider context of state building and reconstruction in Afghanistan since 2001. Left out, or glossed over, are troubling issues such as the external manipulation of state-building assemblies in 2001 and 2002; the reconstitution of the Northern Alliance militias; the repression of women's rights by fundamentalists in the new Afghan Parliament; the growing restrictions on civil liberties; the imposition of an externally-devised neoliberal development plan; the manipulation of aid as a weapon of counterinsurgency; the sectarianism of the occupation; the Karzai government's role in drug production and distribution; and the systematic

use of torture by American and Afghan forces (Kolhatkar and Ingalls 2006; Johnson and Leslie 2008; Rashid 2008). As a result, the book does not make a convincing argument for mission extension.

Lastly, there is a problem with the notion of 'unexpected war.' A comparative analysis of Canadian foreign policy might show similarity between Canada's current role in Afghanistan and its recent roles in Haiti, Iraq, Serbia and Somalia. Each of these cases demonstrates a militarization of Canadian foreign policy, an alignment with American objectives, a commitment to neoliberal economics, and an opposition to popular governments and insurgencies. In the field of international political economy, these conflicts are often viewed as part of a *single war* against the Global South.<sup>1</sup> Given Canada's rank and position in the capitalist world system, it is hardly surprising that Canada has been engaged in a military occupation of Afghanistan, a coup d'etat in Haiti, and constant war in the Middle East. These are the primary fronts of the 'new imperialism' (Harvey 2003), in which Canada plays a rather consistent and considerable role. For this reason, the theory of 'unexpected war' is not the best guide for mapping Canada's role in Afghanistan.

*Creating a Failed State* by John W. Warnock offers such a map.

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Warnock argues that western foreign policy before and after 9/11 *created* the ongoing crisis in Afghanistan. The evidence for his book is drawn from a systematic survey of recent scholarship on American foreign policy, Afghan history, and global political economy. The book also references key reports by think tanks and human rights organizations based in Afghanistan and the west. As a result, the book offers a convincing framework and set of evidence. It begins with the war in 2001, which killed up to 3,400 Afghans (16). Warnock recapitulates the story of how the US employed the militias of the Northern Alliance, whose 'boots on the ground' complimented US air power (12-13). He also covers the offers of negotiation by the Taliban and the violations of international law by US and NATO forces.

Warnock investigates 'failed states' discourse as a pretext for western intervention. States such as Afghanistan and Haiti are 'failures' not because they have been ignored by western powers, but because of economic and military domination *by* western powers. Warnock demonstrates how the current failure of the Afghan state results, in part, from an externally driven, free-market development agenda of privatization, liberalization and government austerity. Warnock also

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<sup>1</sup> I need to thank Adam Hanieh for this formulation of a 'single war.'

critiques the role of NGOs, which created a property bubble in Kabul and pursued development plans outside the reach and influence of the state.

After setting this framework, Warnock reviews the history of Afghanistan. He examines the social structure of the country, the movement towards liberal democracy across the twentieth century (particularly in the 1960s during the 'New Democracy' movement), and the rise of the urban left and communist parties. The 1979 Soviet invasion is described as an attempt to leverage control in Central Asia and to stop the feuding amongst Afghan communists. Warnock emphasizes, however, that US aid to the mujahideen began prior to the Soviet invasion. Over the period of a decade, the US provided more than \$7 billion through CIA channels. This aid was used to fund the military activities of Afghan mujahideen and foreign fighters. More than one million Afghans were killed in the war, and the state and national infrastructure destroyed. After the fall of the Soviet-backed government in 1992, the mujahideen fought a civil war for control of the country. Thousands more died in this conflict, which only ended after the Taliban imposed order on most of the country in 1996.

It would be mistaken to ignore the geopolitical interests of the United States in the Middle East and Central Asia. Warnock describes how US foreign policy since the Cold War has been to maintain hegemony in the context of growing competition from Europe and Asia. The United States has articulated a new military strategy based on 'preventative warfare,' and has begun the process of encircling China and Russia with military bases. In the context of shifting power relations in the world economy, the energy resources of the Middle East and Caspian Sea basin have been imbued with new significance. The western strategy is to maintain leverage over hydrocarbon distribution networks in the Middle East and Central Asia, so as to limit or shape the development paths of China, Russia and other competitors. Warnock suggests that the decision to wage war in Afghanistan was likely made in the summer of 2001, when the 'Six plus Two' negotiations involving the US, Russia and the six neighbouring countries of Afghanistan failed to gain agreement from the Taliban for a power-sharing deal with the Northern Alliance and a new pipeline in the country (83). Whether or not this claim is true, Warnock makes a strong point on the geopolitical and economic conflicts at the heart of the war. In his view, the war is inextricably linked to the agenda of western imperialism: the effort to expand NATO into new territories, gaining control over key resources, and preventative action against China and

Russia. The war, in other words, is a conflict over power and resources in Asia and the wider world system.

After establishing this framework, Warnock turns to the occupation of Afghanistan, depicting the violence and corruption at the centre of the state since 2001. He describes the way in which the Bonn Process imposed a highly centralized Presidential system under the control of Hamid Karzai, whose main base of support was the militias and religious fundamentalists of the Northern Alliance. Warnock describes how the new Afghan constitution and the Political Parties Law restricted the role of secular, democratic parties in elections and Parliament. He also demonstrates how Karzai incorporated factional warlords into the highest echelons of the state, and supported policies that limit the rights of women (126). He emphasizes that:

the reversal of the general trend towards the liberation of women began when the US government gave massive economic and military aid to the Islamist mujahideen rebellion between 1978 and 1992. They expressed no concern for the plight of women during the Islamist Rabbani government from 1992 to 1996. They supported the Taliban until 2001, hoping that they could provide a stable government and allow the construction of the oil and gas pipelines from the Caspian Sea basin to the Arabian Sea. Only when this joint effort with the Unocal consortium failed...did they show any concern for the status of Afghan women (149).

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Warnock dedicates one chapter to Canada's role in Afghanistan. Canada supported the Bonn Process of establishing a client state, and played an instrumental role in facilitating NATO's entry into the conflict. Canada expanded operations in Afghanistan in order to replace US forces leaving for Iraq, and worked at the centre of the Afghan state through a 'Strategic Advisory Team.' Canadian aid policies have had little effect on development and reconstruction, and Canadian Forces have been implicated in civilian casualties and the transfer of detainees to torture. The war in Afghanistan thus marks a complete 'integration and subordination' of Canadian foreign policy to US empire-building (171).

According to Warnock, the solution for Afghanistan is not an increase of foreign forces or a redoubled aid and humanitarian effort in support of the occupation. Instead, what is needed is a 'broad peace settlement that includes the countries that neighbour Afghanistan' (176). In other words, Canada must support a withdrawal of foreign troops in conjunction with an international peace agreement between Pakistan, Russia, Iran, India, the Central Asian states, and key stakeholders in

Afghanistan, including the Taliban. Canada must support democratic and secular parties in Afghanistan, and reject 'the neoliberal development plan imposed on [the country]' (179). To achieve these goals, the Canadian left must reinvigorate the anti-war and global justice movements and build support for an 'independent foreign and defence policy' in Ottawa (185). While Canada 'share[s] the responsibility for the tragic situation that exists today in Afghanistan,' it can still effect positive change through peaceful development efforts (186, 183). Through such methods Canada can work against the logic of state failure.

In making these arguments, *Creating a Failed State* offers a counterpoint to *Unexpected War*. It is framed by the insights of Marxist political economy and thus considers a wider set of variables for explaining the war and occupation. Yet it shares one key weakness: the theorization of Canada as a *dependency* of the United States. There is a tendency in both books to overlook Canada's independent interests in the new imperialism. While Canada is highly integrated economically with the United States, recent scholarship has established the independent set of economic relations through which Canada articulates to Europe, Asia and increasingly the Third World (Klassen 2009). Foreign control of has declined since the 1970s, and Canadian MNCs have expanded into North America and Europe. Recent studies of directorship interlocks also indicate the existence of an independent corporate elite with effective control over the national economy (Carroll 2004; Carroll and Klassen 2010). In this context, it would be an analytic mistake for the left to view US-Canada relations solely in terms of dependency, and a political mistake to advocate 'independence' in matters of foreign policy, when such independence would merely express the singular interests of Canadian capital and the state it controls. As many in the global justice and anti-war movements argue, any movement against capitalism and war must address Canada's own brand of secondary power imperialism. By locating the impetus to war and militarism not just in Washington but also in the boardrooms of corporate Canada, it might be possible to devise more effective strategies of international solidarity. At the very least, such an analysis would orient the left towards a structural critique of Canadian capitalism and a socialist or anti-capitalist politics. In the long term, this kind of consciousness and organization will have to be nurtured to avoid wars of empire. In the meantime, John Warnock's *Creating a Failed State* offers a good point of departure.

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