
A DECADE AFTER GOING TO WAR IN AFGHANISTAN, THE WINS ARE FADING

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The Globe and Mail, February 05, 2012 Whether the 10 years of fighting and dying in Afghanistan was worth the Canadian blood spilled and bullion spent remains in doubt because Afghanistans future is so uncertain. Yet now is a time for assessment, even if the moment is not being officially acknowledged: It was 10 years ago this week that Canadian troops landed in Kandahar, battle-ready and girded for combat, the first time since Korea the nation had sent ground troops to war. When the final Canadian combat forces were pulled out last summer, it was the first time in the nations proud military history that Canada quit a fight before it was over. Canadians stopped fighting not because of victory or defeat but because of a political decision predicted on declining public approval. But if the war wasnt worth fighting any more, was it worth fighting at all? Reports last week that the Taliban is poised [] at least by its own assessment [] to retake Afghanistan will feed the uncertainty over the military mission. That was followed by the stunning announcement by the Obama administration that the 100,000-plus troops will also end their combat role next year. This comes as the U.N. reported that more than 3,000 Afghan civilians were killed last year, the worst death toll of the decade. Whether President Hamid Karzais corrupt regime survives or is soon swept away after Western troops pull-out may ultimately become the measure of the wars success or failure. Clearly, a decade of nation-building has failed to create a democratic, civil Afghanistan. For Canada, judging whether the war was worth the costs is even harder. The Taliban regime, with its ruthless version of medieval Islam and repressive treatment of women, had been toppled before Canadas first combat troops streamed into Kandahar a decade ago. And Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda cohort had already fled across the border. But Canadas first [] and perhaps finest [] battles would pit a few hundred of the Princess Patricias 3rd Battalion against fierce and battle-hardened Afghan warriors in the high mountains surrounding the Shah-i-Kot Valley. The Canadians won, without losing a single soldier. But winning battles in a war eventually deemed pointless is an empty victory, even if it demonstrates military prowess. Canada paid dearly for the Afghanistan mission. More than 150 soldiers were killed and 2,000 wounded, many of them disabled for life; at least \$18-billion was spent, perhaps double that, if the costs of replacing a worn-out army and caring for the mentally and physically shattered and their families are counted. So what was achieved? By the crudest military metric [] kill ratios [] Canadas soldiers proved tough, effective warriors. Well-informed, Canadian officers refer, quietly, to 100-to-one kill ratios, suggesting that far more than 10,000 Taliban fighters may have been killed by Canadians over more than five years of counter-insurgency operations in Kandahar. Retired Lieutenant-General Andrew Leslie toured with a powerful video of a Canadian attack on a Taliban compound; first an artillery barrage, then encirclement by armoured vehicles and finally a overwhelming assault by infantry. [] wont show you the messy bits, A Gen. Leslie used to tell audiences. That sort of effective soldiering was repeated hundreds and hundreds of times, mostly hidden from and unknown to ordinary Canadians. Yet no matter how combat-effective Canadian soldiers were, there were rarely more than 500 of them [] the wire A in Kandahar, a wild and remote mix of

desert, valleys the size of Nova Scotia with nearly 1-million people and a porous border. After President Barack Obama ordered a surge in what he called the "surge" war, the Pentagon poured more than 10 times that many U.S. troops into Kandahar, reinforcing then replacing the Canadian contingent. The sheer scale of the American effort — with inconclusive evidence that it has yet routed the Taliban — reinforces the notion that Canada's contingent was always too small to wage an effective counter-insurgency campaign. For most Canadians, Afghanistan was an almost entirely sanitized war. No battlefield pictures of war dead from either side, no images of the wounded, at least not until they were in rehab or chatting to politicians. Ottawa managed even to suppress pictures of a beaten detainee — even after an investigation concluded that he had been appropriately subdued after trying to escape. Much of the difficulty in determining "success" in waging war against insurgents is the impossibility of counting "bodies" and minds won, at least in the short term. No Canadian flags flew over captured towns after battles won. There will be no Afghan children putting candles on Canadian gravestones — as still happens every year in Holland three generations after liberation. In terms of governance and development, the two areas alongside security that Ottawa set as the triad of Canadian policy, the results are mixed, at best. Kandahar political factions continue to wage a bloody fratricide, assassinations are frequent, including the mayor and Ahmed Wali Karzai, the president's half brother. A still-lawless and corrupt power structure prevails. On the home front, Canadian public support for the war declined steadily during the decade as the death toll mounted amid a persistent cloud of alleged detainee abuse — that Ottawa was forcing Canadian troops to turn captured Taliban over to known torturers, a war crime. Ottawa vigorously fought the allegations, initially denying it knew that torture was rife in Afghan prisons. It belatedly started follow-up inspections but kept secret that it had halted transfers, at least twice, after discovering brutal ill-treatment persisted.

Kaynak/Source: