

January 23, 2008

## OttawaWatch 155: War by Charlie and John

By Lloyd Mackey

*Foreign affairs issues, particularly those involving military operations, often attract a collaborative or bi-partisan approach. This was the case in the Afghanistan war. And, at times, there are signs that the same bi-partisan approach works to a degree in such matters as a global pandemic.*

*Charlie Wilson's War* is a movie that colourfully interprets a Texas congressman's successful effort to persuade the United States to get involved in the 1980s fight against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

History shows that the Soviets were effectively driven out of the country and that, in due course, Wilson was quietly recognized by the U. S. military establishment for making it possible.

The movie is a good, if slightly oversimplified, preamble to a 90-page report, entitled *Independent Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan*. The report is, of course, the work of a five-person blue-ribbon bi-partisan panel assembled last fall by Prime Minister Stephen Harper and chaired by former Liberal deputy prime minister, John Manley.

To understand the Manley report aright, it is not a bad idea to consider the last words of the movie, emblazoned on the screen. I will paraphrase them slightly for OttawaWatch's gentle readership. In effect, Wilson suggested that the Americans and the Afghans won the war but "f\*\*\*\*\* up the end game." Just insert the word "messed" where the stars appear and you get the picture.

Wilson was, of course, using hindsight to indicate that the driving out of the Soviets ultimately led to another form of repression, coming out of the Taliban insurgency that Canadians are now fighting.

In effect, Manley and his panel reported that the present Canadian campaign in the Kandahar area of Afghanistan is "in jeopardy." And the most feasible way to reverse that situation, they suggest, is strong and firm leadership from the prime minister. That leadership should include the forming of a cabinet committee, chaired by the PM, to provide a clear co-ordinating role among the multiplicity of federal agencies playing a patchwork of roles in Afghanistan.

Interesting that Manley should use such language. Critics of the current prime minister have taken to blasting his allegedly "bullying" leadership style. From this corner, the interpretation is more restrained. Harper listens carefully and well to people who know their fields and their subjects. He challenges them to logically and reasonably prove their

arguments – preferably in writing – when, they attempt, instead, to resort simply to rhetoric.

To achieve what the Manley panel is asking will require a pretty tough-minded approach. Harper, in the panel’s view, must enhance Canada’s defence-diplomacy-development role in Afghanistan and bolster it with a robust presence at the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) meeting set for April in Bucharest.

Critical in the panel’s collective mind is the need for Harper to persuade NATO leaders that Canada needs a strong partner in the south of Afghanistan. And that partner must be willing to augment Canada’s military contingent by 1,000 troops, if it is to stay after February, 2009, and successfully complete its objective to train the Afghan army and police to maintain the security of their own country.

\* \* \*

An interesting aside – but a significant one for readers of *OttawaWatch* – was the Manley panel declaration that CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency) needed to be more proactive in leading Canada’s development and reconstruction role.

Present, on the edges of the press conference the panel convened a couple of blocks from The Hill on Tuesday morning, January 22, were several CIDA-supported non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Among them were some Christian-based agencies, including World Vision Canada, Mennonite Economic Development Associates and Project Ploughshares.

I managed, through the congenial and effective shoe-horning of WVC public relations director Karen Homer (who is a very good journalist in her own right, on Christian social development issues) to get about three-minutes of face time with WVC president David Toycen, before he headed into end-over-end major media interviews.

He made the point, based on long WV experience in Afghanistan, especially working with children, that security forces should avoid having to deliver aid for strategic purposes.

Such action, he suggested turns both aid workers and Afghans into “targets” and, in WV’s case, makes it more difficult to work with the “50 per cent of the children (in Afghanistan) who are chronically malnourished.”

Toycen raises a contentious point that Harper needs to seriously explore. There are two schools of thought on military involvement in dispensing aid. One is what is expressed by Toycen and other experienced NGO leaders – and, ironically, by militarists who insist that military-dispensed diplomacy and aid work is a distraction to the task of maintaining security. The other comes from those who argue for the mixed-message approach that has seemingly become a part of the peace-keeping reputation developed by Canada’s military.

(My own guess was that, while the report did not get into this issue, that the presence on the panel of Jake Epp, former Mulroney health minister, will be quietly significant to the ability of Harper to light a fire under CIDA. Epp is the chair of Health Partners International, a Christian NGO that has been involved in getting pharmaceuticals and medical supplies into Afghanistan. On some of these issues, Manley and Epp, despite being on opposite sides of the political fence, keep in close touch.)

Manley lauded the imprint that Lester Pearson, Liberal prime minister in the 70s, left on the cause of human rights and peace-keeping. But he cautioned that the limitations of such an approach did not work in such hot spots as Rwanda, where Canada's peacekeeping role – and its engendered helplessness – could not block the advance of a major genocide, in the 1990s.

\* \* \*

Taken to something of a logical conclusion, the Manley panel could be seen as, in effect, advocating the present prime minister to take strong leadership – and the present Liberal opposition leader, to support that leadership for the benefit of Canada's longer term role in the world of nations.

War cabinets and grand coalitions – obvious or tacit – are not unknown in the world of diplomacy and international relations. Whether Manley and his fellow panellists intended to suggest so radical a concept, the fact is that, in choosing him to lead the process, Harper was leaving himself open to such prospects.

It would seem, from this corner, that efforts to bring down the government before the fixed election date in the fall of 2009 might, if nothing else, throw a wrench in the idea of Canada playing a constructive role in the rebuilding, both of Afghanistan, and of its role as a credible international player.

Further, it might play havoc with the worthy ongoing objective of encouraging enough bilateral conversation to create the kind of centre-right and centre-left political realignment envisioned by many of our more moderate Canadian leaders.

Just a thought.

\* \* \*