

Canada's second forgotten war

Losing interest in Afghanistan will hurt us in the eyes of Washington and Europe. Most of all, it will hurt our soldiers

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Afghanistan is rapidly becoming Canada's second "forgotten" war.

Korea was the first. Although nearly 27,000 Canadians served in the Korean theatre from the fall of 1950 until the end of the war in the summer of 1953 (most of them ground forces) and 516 were killed in action or died on active service, Canadians lost interest in the Korean War less than a year after it began when truce talks started in the late fall of 1951. The fighting continued and, ironically, more Canadians were killed while those talks dragged on than had been killed before they started. But at home, all was apathy.

The war in Afghanistan is starting to go the same way. The very first foreign visit by Prime Minister Stephen Harper after his election victory in January of 2006 was to Canadian troops in Kandahar. Many visits followed both by Mr. Harper and by cabinet ministers. But not recently.

And media coverage of the war has generally subsided. There are fewer stories about the soldiers and their mission and more stories about wheat seed going to Kandahar farmers.

Even the once ubiquitous yellow lapel pins worn around Ottawa by civil servants, especially ministers' political staffs in National Defence, Foreign Affairs and other departments, have disappeared.

The war in Afghanistan has been slipping from the immediate attention of Canadians.

The process is partly a result of deliberate government policy and partly a coming together of other non-related circumstances. Decisions were made in Ottawa last spring - even after the passage of the parliamentary motion extending the Kandahar mission to February of 2011 - to play down the military aspects of the mission and place the civil reconstruction tasks more at the centre of government policy.

That decision reflected the growing apathy of many Canadians toward Afghanistan and the continued strong opposition of the mission in Quebec. It was obvious from late winter that election speculation was growing in the capital and that attention to the war - to the fighting - was dialled back in direct proportion to the growing proximity of a national vote. War doesn't play well in Quebec.

If playing down the war was the deliberate intention of the government, that intention was given a major boost by the growing economic crisis that started to unfold in late summer. With U.S. auto sales tanking, the Ontario economy going into recession and commodity prices across Canada taking a nosedive, the media paid far less attention to Afghanistan.

The departure of the outspoken and pragmatic Rick Hillier from his post as chief of the defence staff no doubt hastened the process. His successor, General Walter Natynczyk, has been no less diligent in visiting the troops in Afghanistan, but the press coverage given those trips has been melting away.

It's also possible that the shock effect of Canadians being killed in action has worn off after almost three years in Kandahar province.

Then, of course, there were two elections, one in Canada and one in the United States, that filled the broadcast news reports and pages of the print media. In the Canadian election, Afghanistan was a forgotten topic even when the Prime Minister suddenly announced during the campaign that, instead of re-evaluating the Kandahar mission before 2011, as the parliamentary vote had called for, Canada would get out, period.

That was the ultimate wet blanket thrown over the Afghan war. Suddenly, there seemed nothing to report on; the war was going to end for Canada no matter what happened. It was time to move on to other things.

But the war isn't ending for Canada or anyone else involved in it.

Four more rotations of Canadian troops will go to Kandahar province between now and February of 2011, from 5,000 to 8,000 soldiers. And when the heavy fighting resumes, as it does every spring, there is a better than even chance that more Canadian casualties will result.

Although Canada has announced its departure, Pakistan is ramping up its war against the Taliban both in Pakistan and along the Afghan border. The U.S. has started a major buildup of its troops. President-elect Barack Obama has announced his determination to prevail there no matter what it takes, and will no doubt make a herculean effort to increase NATO strength.

Forgetting the war in Afghanistan is going to hurt Canada in many ways - in the eyes of Washington at the very time Ottawa needs to get close to the Obama administration, and in the eyes of European leaders if they are swayed by Mr. Obama to get more involved (after all, he isn't George Bush).

But most of all, it will hurt our troops.

It is true that Canada has a thoroughly professional military that goes where it is sent and gives the best account of itself no matter the political circumstances. But it is also true that soldiers who go into harm's way want to believe that what they are doing means something to the folks back home. When they are fighting a forgotten war, it's hard to feel that.

Just ask those veterans who served in Korea. They'll tell you.