

Our own little Abu Ghraib?

By Rick Salutin

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The nauseating component in current claims and reactions about Canada's role in turning Afghan detainees over for torture does not lie in the betrayal of some mythic Canadian role as an idealistic actor on the world stage -- as opposition questions implied in the House of Commons yesterday. We have always played an ambiguous, often duplicitous, role in international conflict. It began with our original peacekeeping foray at Suez in Lester Pearson's days, and continued in Vietnam, Haiti and now Afghanistan. Foreign policy equals deceit.

It doesn't lie in the Conservative refusal to call an inquiry. They simply learned from Jean Chrétien, who shut one down (on Somalia) and stonewalled others.

Nor does it lie in the odd absence from the debate of Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff, Mr. Human Rights. It's true his own writing on torture led to charges he was ready to accept versions of it, and he might like to avoid the predictable Tory gibes. But in that case, he may as well resign altogether.

Nor is the disgust due mainly to Defence Minister Peter MacKay's loutish claims that critics were accepting the word of "the Taliban," by which he seems to mean prisoners turned over. The sorest point in allegations by Canadian diplomat Richard Colvin isn't that "bad guys" were sent for torture but that a lot "were picked up ... during routine military operations, and on the basis typically not of intelligence [reports] but suspicion or unproven denunciation. ... Many were just local people: farmers; truck drivers; tailors, peasants -- random human beings in the wrong place at the wrong time."

The truly sickening part is that it provides one more proof, a uniquely Canadian one, that the war *on* terror has become the chief incubator *of* terror, and recruitment for it, post-9/11.

In this respect, it isn't crucial what is proven about Richard Colvin's accusations, though it's hard to imagine what reason he had for lying about any of it, especially his attempts to convey the truth and being told to shut up. The story is out there: A Canadian official says our soldiers handed over Afghans, innocent or not, for what they knew would be torture. It's like painting a fresh bull's eye on the backs of our troops, in addition to the ones already on them. Whatever good may have been accomplished by helping to build a school or road is counteracted. To the extent the charges are true, innocent people who have been tortured get out with a new grudge against Canadians, and pass that on to their families and communities.

The damage doesn't end there. These stories spread globally and spur reactions. The obvious comparison is Fort Hood. As Patrick Cockburn wrote, "Interrogation of would-be suicide bombers captured before they could blow themselves up reveals that their prime motive since 9/11 has been opposition to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This was evidently the motive of Major Nidal Malik Hasan." The strategic intent of al-Qaeda was explicitly to cause these Western responses, and the backlash to them in the Muslim world. It is the Abu Ghraib effect, but now it has the imprint of a Maple Leaf.

By attacking and occupying two Muslim countries instead of selectively pursuing a small band of terrorists, decision-makers caused great, mounting danger to their own people, as well as devastating two societies. They must have known these would be the results. I have never been able to believe they didn't realize it. They went ahead because the gains to be made outweighed in their minds the costs.

In the case of the United States, the gains might have been in terms of oil, as well as ideology. In the case of Canada, the stakes may be pettier: to curry favour with the U.S. or rebuild what was seen as a wrecked military.

Who really cares? It ought to have been foreseen and probably was. No good could come of this war.