

The Ugly Canadian

Yen Chu

In the 1963 film the *Ugly American*, Marlon Brando plays Harrison Carter McWhite an ambassador who is dispatched to Sarkhan, a fictional Southeast Asian country where the Americans are building a road called Freedom road. The anti-imperialists, in this case communist, have been attacking efforts to construct the road. McWhite doesn't understand his friend's opposition to the road; after all it is suppose to help the country and its people with transportation. His friend, Deong, a leader of a nationalist party who is contemplating joining the communists, sees the road as a symbol of imperialism and dismisses the humanitarian propaganda of how the road is to help his country. The road is intended to facilitate the movement of military vehicles into rebel territory, but is being promoted as a goodwill gesture from the Americans in the hopes of winning the hearts and minds of the Sarkhan citizens. The film, based on the 1958 novel of the same name, was staunchly anti-communist, but was a harsh indictment of America's foreign aid policy in Southeast Asia. It criticized the Americans for failing to win hearts and minds in the region because of their arrogance and ignorance towards the local citizens.

Over 40 years later, the *Ugly American* still speaks to geopolitical events in our world today. The plot in the film practically mirrors Canada's involvement in Afghanistan, where Canada is also constructing a road. The road, known to the Canadian military as Route Summit, is being built through the Zhari district, west of Kandahar. It is being promoted as part of the reconstruction efforts to improve the country's transportation system. But its intention is to transport military vehicles through the rough terrain to fight against the insurgency. The construction of the road, started in the fall of last year, is yet to be completed due to attacks from the Taliban. Last fall, three soldiers were killed defending the road.

Rather than helping the Afghan people, the road has created further tensions. The Canadian Press reported that many farmers were frustrated by the construction of the road as they were not consulted and the road dissects across their farms where they had grown grapes, melons and wheat before the war. It is not lost on the Canadian military that many who joined the Taliban were poor farmers and so compensation has been given to the farmers for the damage to their land.

The road along with other foreign aid projects is part of



Canada's effort to create a humanitarian spin to the war in Afghanistan. Winning hearts and minds abroad and particularly at home through humanitarianism is a political strategy used by the West to bolster support for war. This strategy (along with fear-mongering) is essential. A democratic nation can go to war without public debate, but in the long run it is difficult for a democratic nation to sustain a war with little or no support from its citizens, especially if it claims to be spreading freedom and democracy. It is also an effective strategy in obscuring political and economic grounds for war with moral ones. With support for the war in Iraq losing ground in the USA, the humanitarian argument is crucial in the debate on Afghanistan.

Iraq has widely been seen as an illegitimate war, whereas the argument for security and humanitarianism somehow legitimized the war in Afghanistan for many. Iraq was not endorsed by the United Nations, whereas Afghanistan was. In the United States, while the Democrats are now calling for the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, some are arguing that they should be redeployed to Afghanistan. Afghanistan is being promoted as a humanitarian success both by NATO and the United Nations, but reports from NGOs and even the media have disputed those claims.

No Humanitarian Success

In January, Foreign Affairs Minister Peter McKay visited Afghanistan to counter claims made by an American journal that the country was sliding into chaos. He promoted the success of Canada's reconstruction and development projects by citing new schools, hospitals, and roads. He also announced that Canada will send an additional \$10 million to the Afghanistan Law and Order Trust Fund and additional funding to the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development's micro-credit loan projects. →

Shortly after his trip, the major media outlets, while still supportive of the war, started to question Canada's achievements in reconstruction and aid in Afghanistan. It was reported that Canada had earmarked \$100 million for reconstruction, aid and development: of which \$10 million went to the World Bank. The amount of the reconstruction budget is a tiny fraction of the military budget. The Conservatives approved \$15 billion dollars in military spending last June. Canada has already spent billions of dollars in its military budget, but most of the money allocated to reconstruction has yet to be spent. Senlis Council, an international think tank, released a report in January on health care in Kandahar. The report found that hospitals there lacked heating, air-conditioning, essential medical equipment and medicine. Edward McCormick, one of the authors of the report, stated that there was no sign of international aid and that the state of health care in Kandahar was an indication of a humanitarian crisis.

While the Senlis reports contradicts Conservative claims of success in aid and development, the Council continues to support the war but argues that Canada is fighting the war ineffectively because it fails to properly link combat with aid, stating that Canada needs to improve their foreign aid or else they will lose the battle in winning hearts and minds, fuelling the insurgency.

However, the failures of foreign aid go beyond mismanagement and lack of foresight, it is symptomatic of the politics of imperialism. Imperialism is the process where one nation expropriates and dominates the resources, labour, land and markets of another nation. In the case of foreign aid, the donor country of-

ten expropriates the markets of the recipient by requiring recipients to purchase resources and services from corporations or companies of the donor country instead of using local organizations and local resources. The local population also has no say on how the aid is to be used. The World Bank provides aid in the form of loans in which the recipient is often required to pay back with interest, putting the recipient further into debt and impoverishing their country in order to meet the demands of the World Bank. The World Bank is currently providing most of the Afghan government's budget.

In response to the criticisms on the success of Afghanistan's reconstruction, the Conservatives at the end of February announced an additional \$200 million in foreign aid. The money, however, does not address the issue of health care. Instead, it will go to policing, counter narcotics, de-mining, governance and development, and road construction. It is evident that this funding is to benefit Canada in the long run.

Branding through Women's Rights

In her article, Dust in The Eyes of the World, Anna Carastathis writes in ZNet that the war in Afghanistan from the very beginning was promoted as a way to restore women's rights through overthrowing the Taliban. This strategy was effective in demonizing the Taliban and Islam as many people including some feminists believed that the war would help women. But women are being used as pawns in an imperialist strategy to assert moral



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superiority to justify war. In the past, European colonizers used racism to justify violence and exploitation for profit by claiming that they were bringing civilization to the colonies, as the locals were morally inferior. The argument is pretty much the same today in Afghanistan.

In Caratathis' interview with Rokhsana Bahramitash, a feminist scholar at McGill University, Bahramitash points out that there is no historical evidence that war has ever liberated women. Furthermore, conditions for women have actually worsened with the start of the war. According to a 2005 Amnesty International Report, women and girls live in fear of abduction and rape, they are still forced into marriages, and they are being traded for opium debts.

While it is important to acknowledge that women were victims of violence and oppression under the Taliban, it is also important to acknowledge that they are also victims in this war. Feminists must recognize that victims can be agents and that the political struggle against violence and oppression against women is universal and not limited to Afghanistan. Part of this struggle includes exposing and challenging Canada and America's claims on women's rights. The Americans supported Islamic fundamentalists for years against the Soviet occupation and was an ally to the Taliban afterwards without too much thought to the conditions of women. The feminist struggle should also be linked with the struggle for refugee rights by demanding an end to restrictive and inhumane refugee policies.

The politics of the refugee system

The U.S., claiming that they are helping women in Afghanistan, does not recognize gender persecution as part of their refugee system. Women who face domestic violence or persecution in their country face an arbitrary system in which they could very well be deported. Gender persecution is recognized in Canada, but Canada's refugee system is also arbitrary with hearings presided by a single person who is often a political appointee. Women still face deportation to countries in which they face persecution. Last year, Canada's Federal Court rejected an anti-sharia activist's refugee claim that she would not face persecution if she were deported to Iran. This verdict came down despite evidence of Iran's poor record on human rights and women's rights. She has since won an appeal on humanitarian and compassionate grounds. Also, the arbitrariness of our immigrant and refugee system is taken to the extreme when our democratic government can detain people without charge on security certificates without ever facing a trial. It was only recently in late February that the Supreme Court overturned the federal security certificates ruling they were unconstitutional.

According to UN there are over 6 million refugees from Afghanistan, the second largest group of refugees after the Palestinians. Most Afghan refugees flee to neighbouring countries such as Pakistan and Iran where they live in refugee camps with deplorable conditions for years in limbo as the West increasingly restricts their refugee policy. In 2005, Canada accepted only 35,768 refugees. Of this total only 2,644 were from Afghanistan. This number is extremely low when you consider that Canada admitted nearly 40,000 Hungarian refugees in 1956 and 60,000 Vietnamese boat people in 1979. Both groups were from communist coun-

tries considered enemies of the USA. Canada's immigration and refugee policy is anything but humanitarian, but based on politics and economics that are in line with their foreign policy, which often parallels American foreign policy.

In Harsha Walia's article *The New Fortified World* (NS magazine May-June 2006), Walia documents Canada's racist immigration policy before and after 9/11. Canada's immigration policy has always been based on economic need, yet it is also a policy that marginalizes and criminalizes immigrants and refugees. Walia points out how the state separates refugees into genuine refugees, those who are forced to flee, and economic refugees, those who flee searching for a better life. However, both refugees are victims of Canada's and the West's foreign policy, which have eroded living conditions with structural adjustments programs and globalization, consistent with war and imperialism.

Troops Out

No war is ever fought for humanitarian reasons. In this case the war, brought on by the events by 9/11, is being fought to maintain NATO's political and economic control and influence in the Middle East. The USA's long history of dominance and imperialism in the region is being challenged and unfortunately for the left, the anti-imperialists happen to be the Taliban and other extreme Islamic fundamentalists. This has resulted in some divisions on the broader left; some are unwilling to condemn the war believing that life will be better for the Afghan people with the NATO occupation. However, a political and historical understanding of imperialism shows that throughout history there have been many totalitarian regimes that the U.S. has propped up and supported, including the Taliban, to further their economic interests or to prevent the spread of communism, which has resulted in declining living conditions, increasing poverty and more war. While it is tempting to argue that Afghanistan would have been better off under the Soviets, a nation foremost has a political right to self-determination. A country must find its own way and external interference only serve to aggravate further conflicts.

Canadians are pretty much evenly divided on the war, however the humanitarian propaganda seems to have some impact. According to a CBC-Environics poll conducted in November 2006, 24% of respondents believe Canada is in Afghanistan for peacekeeping and 18% believed Canada is providing humanitarian assistance and reconstruction, whereas 22% of respondents believed that Canada is in Afghanistan to support U.S. foreign policy.

The war in Afghanistan ended Canada's myth as neutral peacekeepers. But by adding a humanitarian dimension to the war, pro-war advocates have blurred the distinction between war and peacekeeping. One of the solutions the NDP and other leftists have put forward is to change the mission in Afghanistan from a military deployment to a peacekeeping one. But how will a peacekeeping mission be different? Who will the peacekeepers keep the peace between? The insurgency is fighting against Canadian and NATO troops because they want the foreign troops out of their country. A peacekeeping mission will look much the same as the current military mission. The only solution is to pull the troops out. **R**

Yen Chu lives in Toronto.