

RETHINKING AFGHANISTAN: ECHOES OF ULSTER AND THE IRA?

Thomas H. Johnson and Richard English



The US and NATO sit precariously perched on the precipice of failure in Afghanistan. As suggested by Lieutenant-General David Richards, former commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan, “We need to realize we could actually fail here.” Such a failure could irreparably damage NATO’s credibility and create a regional crisis throughout central and south Asia. In this article, Thomas H. Johnson and Richard English suggest that the lessons drawn from British experience in Northern Ireland might be constructively applied to the situation in Afghanistan — offering a way for NATO to edge back from the brink of failure and regional catastrophe.

Les États-Unis et l’OTAN se retrouvent aujourd’hui en équilibre instable tout juste au bord du gouffre afghan. « Nous devons envisager la possibilité d’un échec », prévient à juste titre l’ancien commandant des forces de l’OTAN en Afghanistan, le lieutenant-général David Richards. Un échec qui ferait un tort irréparable à la crédibilité de l’OTAN et provoquerait une crise dans toute l’Asie centrale et du Sud. Thomas H. Johnson et Richard English proposent ici d’appliquer à la situation afghane les leçons de l’expérience britannique en Irlande du Nord. Et d’offrir ainsi à l’OTAN un moyen d’éviter tout autant cet échec qu’une catastrophe régionale.

Often maligned, Canada’s commitment in Afghanistan as part of the NATO/ISAF alliance is a serious one, in one of the most dangerous parts of the country. Now Canadian forces in Kandahar find themselves beset both in the field and at home. Political discussions in Ottawa and tribal machinations in Kandahar have created a situation in which the force finds itself hobbled by constraints dictated by Canadian domestic politics, unaided by other NATO/ISAF allies either facing their own difficulties or unwilling to help the Canadians, and under incessant attack by a resurgent Taliban and their allies. According to the *Afghanistan Conflict Monitor*, Canadian soldiers, as of late 2007, were dying at a rate thrice that of their British counterparts and four times that of their American colleagues. Recent debates in Canada have pledged a presence in Afghanistan through 2011, and the US “mini-surge” of Marines in the south promises to ease some of Canada’s woes, but the force in Kandahar still has a tough row to hoe, as do forces in other parts of the country.

On April 27, 2008, during ceremonies near the Presidential Palace in Kabul commemorating the 16th anniversary of the fall of the Afghan communist government an assassination attempt was made against President Karzai. While Karzai survived the attack, during the subsequent 30-

minute fire fight three Afghan political officials were shot dead and 11 people wounded. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack, which it attributed to a dedicated six-man cell, three of whose members were killed during the attack. This event highlights the insurgents’ growing capability to attack the Afghan regime and its supporters anywhere and at any time, as well as possible fissures in (or at least incompetence of) Karzai’s security detail.

These disturbing events are compounded by the fact that the ongoing political and military crisis in Afghanistan has been partially eclipsed by contemporary problems in Iraq. But it is arguably Afghanistan, rather than Iraq, that is the more significant theatre for the War on Terror. The depth and urgency of the Afghan crisis are evident from the escalation of insurgent violence, with 2007 being the most deadly year since the initiation of Operation Enduring Freedom. Last year witnessed a significant increase in Taliban and insurgent operations, making for a destabilization “surge.”

Things are obviously not well in Afghanistan and it seems unlikely that things will improve dramatically in 2008. The insurgency has moved significantly beyond the south and east of the country and is now even closing in on Kabul as suggested by the events of April 27. The Senlis Council has

recently written that “the Taliban has shown itself to be a truly resurgent force” with an “ability to establish a presence throughout the country.”

The current approach of the US and its NATO allies, including Canada, in Afghanistan is simply not working, and our strategy in this vital setting for the struggle against terrorism urgently requires rethinking. This article is

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based on the assumption that such a rethinking requires both a deep contextual knowledge of the Afghan political and security situation, as well as an ability to learn from the lessons of post-conflict and violence-plagued zones elsewhere. We draw on lessons learned from recent Irish experiences of terrorism and counter-terrorism and consider these in relation to how best we might proceed in the current and future situation within Afghanistan.

There are, of course, some significant differences between the two settings considered here. The timeline is different, with the Northern Ireland conflict erupting in the late 1960s and the immediate Afghan crisis emerging as a 21st-century phenomenon; the historical contexts of the Afghan state and the Northern Ireland state are different; the religious cultures involved in the combatant groups diverge in some key respects; and the respective scales of disorder, crisis and military engagement have been different in the two places.

Equally, however, there are striking echoes and similarities between the Northern Irish and Afghan cases and between, for example, the violent resistance characterizing the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Taliban. In each case, we find the extraordinary power of religiously infused ethnic identity; in both set-

tings we find the profound intersection of rival nationalisms with violence, as well as considerable tension between nation and state; in each setting there has been the deployment of a mixture of terrorist and insurgent violence for political ends; and there have also been some more mechanical or organizational similarities between the two cases (involving the dynamics of relevant international support for vio-

lence; porous borders; safe havens; the local autonomy of violent operatives; and the business of intra-communal control on the part of violent agents).

There exist sufficient similarities between the Irish and Afghan cases for consideration of the former to illuminate our reading of the latter. In both settings we have witnessed the profound and durable strength of ethno-religious identity. The Provisional IRA emerged and fought as an explicitly nationalist movement, pursuing the goal of national self-determination and attempting to further the communal interests of the Irish people as such. But it did so with backing from a very particular ethnic community within Northern Ireland — the nationalist community there — and this community was overwhelmingly drawn from one side of a starkly drawn religious divide between Catholics and Protestants. In terms of membership, the IRA was almost exclusively Catholic; Irish nationalism had, since the early 19th century, effectively been a Catholic phenomenon. The conflict during the 19th and 20th centuries, between Irish nationalism and its unionist/British opponents in Ireland, was a battle between two rival national or ethnic groups. But these two national traditions were profoundly influenced by

religious identifications, organizations, cultures and grievances. The nationalism of Irish nationalists was heavily Catholic in identity and composition, while the British state and its unionist adherents and their own associated national identities were in turn deeply influenced by Protestantism.

Parallel to the conflict in Ireland is that of Afghanistan; proto-nationalist Taliban and other insurgent groups are seeking to overthrow the democratically elected Afghan government in favour of a state run almost exclusively by leaders of the Ghilzai tribe of the Pashtun ethnicity, along a very specific (and bastardized) code of Deobandi Islam. Fiercely xenophobic and long the rivals of other ethnicities in Afghanistan, the Taliban have also sought to construe their opponents as un-Islamic for their belief in other sects or schools of Islamic law.

Clearly, both the IRA and the Taliban also exemplified the way in which ethno-religious nationalism could intersect with violent struggle, and both groups pointed also toward the political importance of historic tensions between nation and state, and the significance of fierce opposition toward foreign rule. In Ireland, the IRA felt that the six-county state in the northeast was wrongly incorporated into a hostile state (the United Kingdom) and that violence was legitimate as the only effective means of liberating that territory from British control. The IRA sought the establishment of an independent and united Ireland: a state comprising the whole of the Irish island and one that was fully independent of British power. Similarly, the Taliban seek to establish an Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan, of the type they almost had from 1996 to 2001. To their minds, all that prevents them is the presence of foreign troops, even if the majority of Afghans have no desire to return to Taliban rule either.

Both the IRA and the Taliban have practised violence that has straddled the

division between terrorism and insurgent or guerrilla warfare. This is a vital point. If terrorism is defined as the US State Department has defined it ("Premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by sub national groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience"), then it is clear that both the IRA and the Taliban have indeed practised terrorism, but also that not all of their violence has been terrorist in nature. The IRA did kill hundreds of civilians, many of them murdered in unambiguously terrorist fashion. But it also more frequently killed military or security personnel, and the history of the IRA has in practice involved something between terrorism and irregular or guerrilla warfare.

The Taliban tread the line between terrorism and insurgency as well. Undoubtedly they would like to *be* insurgents, but without true popular support they are relegated to terrorist and criminal acts in order to perpetuate their organization. This can most easily be seen in the surge in the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and in suicide attacks, as well as their increasing reliance on narcotics as a source of revenue. Additionally, the Taliban have been attacking in much larger units than they were previously and over-running district centres with alarming frequency.

In both the Irish and Afghan cases, therefore, we have seen a deployment of violence for political ends, in ways that include (but that are not neatly contained by the term) terrorism. And, despite an understandable tendency for Western governments to highlight the terrorist complexion of their enemies' campaigns, this combination of different forms of violence is very commonly what we actually face when dealing with terrorism across much of the world. An effective response to this

challenge requires honest recognition of such a reality.

There are also numerous mechanical or organizational similarities between our two case studies. Both the IRA and the Taliban have benefited very significantly from international support. In the IRA's case, this involved both the backing of some US sympathizers and the help offered by sympathetic regimes (most significantly, that of Libya's Colonel Gaddafi). Such international support networks provided money, weaponry and other forms of important backing for the IRA's lengthy campaign. The IRA also made good use of the

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porous border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, storing weapons in the latter (beyond the jurisdiction of the UK state), and often launching attacks from or establishing safe havens in the Republic rather than in the more deeply hostile atmosphere of the north.

Outside support and areas of safe-haven have also been vital for the Taliban. In terms of comparison, one could easily equate the financial support of Irish-Americans for the IRA to that given the Taliban by the Saudis and Pakistan's ISI. The Taliban, reliant on external funding, have managed to

maintain strong financial ties outside Afghanistan's borders, and gun-running has been closely linked to financial support in the Afghan as in the Irish case. Again the Taliban have enjoyed the benefits of secure and reliable areas of geographic safe haven in Pakistan.

The Provisional IRA, particularly from the mid-1970s onwards, gave great organizational autonomy to local operatives. Initially organized along traditional military lines (into brigades, battalions and so forth), the IRA then moved during the 1970s toward a more flexible cellular structure, with the result that

considerable initiative and autonomy were enjoyed by local units. This reflected and reinforced the varied pattern of IRA activity (with some areas, such as south Armagh, becoming particularly dynamic and active), and it is a pattern echoed in Afghanistan too. During the period of Taliban control in Afghanistan, the Kandahar Shura controlled by Mullah Omar was able to exert its will throughout much of the area controlled by the Taliban. In the current insurgent environment, however, it has proved much more difficult for the Taliban to maintain any effective central control over the various commanders throughout the provinces. Today's Taliban are being forced once again to

depend on operations originated and executed at the local level, with the shuras attempting to at least exude the appearance of control. This has led to a number of localized political and tribal accommodations and complexities.

Within Northern Ireland, much IRA energy and activity has been devoted to intra-communal efforts at control, a phenomenon that has existed long into the peace process period of the 1990s and beyond. Punishment beatings, shootings, intimidation and murder have all been used in order to establish, maintain and



Jason Ransom, PMO

President Hamid Karzai and Prime Minister Stephen Harper at a formal ceremony at the presidential palace in Kabul. A government perceived as weak and corrupt is part of the problem in winning the hearts and minds of Afghans.

enforce control in areas populated by republican constituencies. This intra-communal dimension of the IRA's long war was often eclipsed by its conflict with the British state and with the unionists of Northern Ireland. But intracommunal punishment attacks occupied much of the Provisionals' energy, as those Catholics in the north who were deemed to be engaged in antisocial action (such as repeated house robberies, car thefts or joy-riding) were brutally punished with, for example, beatings or kneecappings (the shooting of victims through their knees). These were extremely numerous, Irish republicans carrying out 1,228 punishment shootings between 1973 and 1997, and a further 755 beatings from 1982-97. Clearly, there was a problem in some

republican areas with petty (and with not so petty) crime; and it also seems clear that in some cases people's real crime was to have defied the writ of the IRA. Intracommunal vendettas and power struggles played their part in these gruesome IRA policing methods.

In Afghanistan, a significant part of the Taliban's appeal and strength has been its willingness and ability to impose law and order amid chaos. Prior to their ouster in 2001, many crimes in areas they controlled were punished summarily and brutally. It may not have always been the guilty party punished for the crime, but someone was always punished. Despite economic reliance on opium production, the Taliban did wage a short yet successful campaign, against the cultivation of poppy throughout

much of the country. Today the Taliban are forced to deal with a number of rival internal and external factions oft-times with competing interests: Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami (HiG), the Tora Bora Front, the Haqqani network, various warlords and other groups linked to the former Northern Alliance. While the Taliban may show a willingness to cooperate with some of these groups due to a shared animosity toward the Karzai government and international forces, they harbour no long-term power-sharing plans with these factions. The result is occasional violent clashes between these groups and a willingness to betray their temporary partners to the coalition or the Karzai government. Indeed, groups such as HiG are consistently formulating

plans to supplant the Taliban in case the Karzai government falls.

Just as those deemed to be cooperating with the IRA's enemies in Ireland were frequently targeted and punished as a result, so too the Taliban wages a constant campaign against those who may sympathize or work with the Karzai government, international forces, or even international aid organizations. Ignoring the Taliban's threats has often resulted in bombings, assassinations, public executions, and increasing levels of threats.

What lessons can we draw from reflection on these significant Afghan-Irish comparisons? Are there broader implications for how to deal with the crisis in Afghanistan, and indeed with the problems posed by terrorist and insurgent violence in other settings? Five points are especially important.

First, in both the Northern Irish 1970s and the post-9/11 era of the War on Terror, we can clearly see the counter-productive dangers of over-militarizing our response to terrorism. In this sense, the War on Terror model has arguably been an obstacle rather than an advantage in recent years. Superior military force, well-suited to the winning of formal military conflict, has proved repeatedly counter-productive in settings where the state faces embedded terrorist and insurgent violence.

In 1970s Northern Ireland the British Army did eventually help to contain the worst excesses of inter-communal disorder, but at a high price in terms of the anti-state disaffection that they had generated in the process. One-sided curfew and internment policies in 1970-71 — combined with heavy-handed treatment of internees and of suspect communities beyond the jails — helped to stimulate precisely the kind of anti-state terrorist violence that such measures had been intended to uproot. Friction between the British Army and

the Catholic working class in Belfast and Derry during 1970-72 pushed people toward rather than away from the Provisional IRA and made the IRA a far more significant force than they otherwise would have been.

In Afghanistan there is a similar dynamic in effect. As one Pakistani diplomat told the International Crisis Group, "When a child is killed in one of these villages, that village is lost for 100 years. These places run on revenge." Given the current methods of dislodging hostile elements via long-range weaponry, civilian casualties have plagued US and NATO efforts since the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001. The Taliban and other groups have used this to their advantage by sheltering themselves within civilian areas, using the population as a shield. Some villages have resisted these Taliban incursions, but many are unable to do so, so that when artillery and aerial bombardment strike the village, it bears a US stamp.

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60 Minutes in October 2007, up to 30 civilians may be killed in order to kill or capture a high-value target. This is absolutely unacceptable and extremely detrimental to the stated mission of the US government in Afghanistan.

There is a very counter-productive set of effects that can be produced when states drift across the Weberian line of legitimacy that divides them from their terrorist opponents. The abuse of human rights in settings such as Northern Irish internment in the

1970s, or in Guantanamo Bay or Abu Ghraib more recently, might be considered slight when set against the atrocities of either the Provisional IRA, al-Qaeida or the Taliban. But this misses the central issue: namely, that our primary objection to such human rights abuses should be that they demean both state and victim, and that they simultaneously widen the pool of disaffected opponents willing to join precisely those terrorist groups we want to stifle.

In Northern Ireland the embryonic IRA told people that the British state was a brutal colonial power, hostile to the Catholic community. The one-sided Falls Curfew of 1970 in Belfast, the internment of many innocent Catholics from August 1971 onwards, and the fatal shooting by the Parachute Regiment of fourteen Catholic civilians on Bloody Sunday in January 1972, all seemed to make the IRA's case more plausible. IRA recruits swelled as a result, and the lessons for our own times are clear enough.

In a counterinsurgency, it is important that civilian casualties be kept to

an absolute minimum. When they do occur, it is important that the military force involved take responsibility for its actions, and if necessary make restitution or punish the guilty parties.

While the military response to insurgency is far from ideal, coupled with good intelligence it can produce very successful counter-terrorist efforts. By the latter days of the Northern Ireland conflict, the state had developed an extensive range of agents and informers within paramili-

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tary groups such as the IRA and this proved of greater value in countering their terrorist campaign than had the all-out deployment of the Parachute Regiment. By the late stages of the Northern Ireland Troubles, many (if not most) IRA operations came to be thwarted on the basis of prior state information; while the IRA's campaign was not ended as a result, a ceiling was put on its capacity.

At the beginning of the Iraqi invasion in 2003, many US units with

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language and cultural training were shifted from Afghanistan to Iraq. The overall value of such experience and training became quickly evident as intelligence collection declined precipitously in Afghanistan. Evidently, the US has ignored the value of experience in the theatre of war, deploying divisions to Afghanistan, then Iraq, then back to Afghanistan.

Second, in many of the settings in which the War on Terror is being fought, we face in fact a combination of the terrorist and the communal-insurgent, and we have to recognize the frequently ethno-national basis for the resistance that we encounter.

The implications of this understanding are huge if what we seek is the basis for an end to conflict in settings such as Afghanistan. Not all conflicts can be resolved, of course. Where they can, however, it seems clear that durable and pervasive state legitimacy is the truly vital foundation for such resolution. This was certainly the case in Northern Ireland. The failure of the IRA's violence to achieve its ostensible goals (British withdrawal or the defence of Catholic communities) established the basis for peace talks

and some form of compromise deal. But the essence of that deal was the creation of a Northern Ireland state that could command the allegiance of the majority of both warring communities. This necessitated significant reform, and it involved recognition of the rival ethno-national aspirations and interests of the competing groups.

This leads to a third point: if we do acknowledge (and seek) the possibility of a lasting settlement, then we have to recognize both that this will

involve protracted negotiation and also that it will result in disagreeable ex-opponents being in power and pursuing what might seem unappetizing policies. In Northern Ireland's recently established power-sharing government, a prominent ex-IRA man (Sinn Fein's Martin McGuinness) is the Deputy First Minister. McGuinness is on record as having been a proud member of the IRA, an organization that killed more people than did any other group in the Northern Ireland conflict. Yet his inclusion in government exemplifies two key and encouraging realities: first, that the method of campaign previously espoused by such figures has been judged by them not to be successful; second, that such figures have the capacity to bring with them into peaceful politics a constituency previously hostile to the state and previously supportive of anti-state violence.

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Many former pre-9/11 Taliban have been incorporated into the present government. It is entirely possible that the neutralization of the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan will require the co-option of some of their leaders by the national government.

Also related to the overlap between terrorism and insurgency is a fourth point: the vital question of state credibility in response to terrorism. Clearly, terrorist violence — whether that of the Provisional IRA or of al-Qaida — lacks moral or political legitimacy when considered in terms of its supposed justifications and efficacy. But there are dangers also in states drawing implausibly stark, Manichaean contrasts between their own violence and that of terrorist opponents. In terms of the terrorists' support community, a depiction of the terrorist group as merely criminal, gangsterish, inherently evil, fanatical or insane will make it more difficult for the state to win the vital battle of hearts and minds within that constituency.

The Northern Irish experience is telling here. During the late 1970s and early 1980s the UK authorities attempted to present the IRA and other terrorist groups in Northern Ireland as ordinary criminals, and they sought to deal with paramilitary prisoners just as any other prisoners were treated.

Prisoners refused to conform with the prison system, friction escalated between prison warders and inmates, and by 1980 and 1981 they had reached such a stand-off that republican prisoners embarked on two hunger strikes in pursuit of political status, the latter strike involving ten prisoners famously starving themselves to death.

It was quite understandable that the UK authorities wanted to delegitimize the actions of groups such as the IRA. And it is important to remember that, while the funeral of an IRA hunger striker like Bobby Sands gained



Canadian Armed Forces Photo

Canadian forces training Afghan troops in southern Kandahar province, where the Canadian component of the NATO mission is based. The Taliban insurgency has become increasingly bold, as evidenced by the attack in late April on the presidential precincts in the heart of the capital, Kabul.

much attention, the funerals of the 472 people killed by the IRA during the years of the 1976-81 prison protests should demand at least as much attention when we reflect on this era.

Yet this prison war reflected the problems of states when they present terrorist opponents in ways that lack credibility. Even those Irish nationalists who did not support the IRA (and this represented the majority of Irish nationalists) knew that the IRA's activities were primarily motivated by political rather than merely criminal ambition. When the government forced people to decide between starving IRA prisoners' claim to be political, and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's denial of such status, very many non-IRA nationalists lost sympathy with the government, and UK credibility in the counter-terrorist campaign was undermined. Moreover, there were alternatives. The state presented a choice between seeing the IRA

as political (and therefore legitimate) or criminal (and therefore illegitimate). But a far more persuasive and credible way of presenting matters would have been to acknowledge the political nature of a group such as the IRA, but to point out that not all political campaigns are legitimate. History abounds with clearly political movements that are rightly denied legitimacy for their brutal actions (Hitler was unambiguously political), and such an approach would have allowed the government to retain more sympathy among the IRA's potential support community.

In fighting terror, states damage themselves if their rhetoric, policies and pronouncements lack credibility, among one's own backers as well as among the potentially disaffected. The presentation of widespread support for violent movements must resonate with what people will see on the ground to be the case.

The Taliban movement initially came into being in an anarchic void; they had popular support because the southeast of the country existed without law or order, and the Taliban's justice, however harsh, was still justice. One Afghan farmer tellingly remarked, after the chaos of the early 1990s, that at least with the Taliban, one could leave their plow outside overnight, and in the morning it would still be there. This is precisely why the Taliban are trying to destabilize the security situation to the greatest extent possible, instead of focusing on strikes against foreign forces. They want to recreate the anarchic circumstances that led them to power in the first place. It was also this power vacuum that encouraged so many capable men to join the Taliban's ranks; it was simply the only game in town. These men may not be in complete agreement with the Taliban leadership, but they have goals that can be utilized by the

Afghan government, namely the hope for a better Afghanistan. With the exception of the hard-core extremists, the Taliban can be co-opted. Karzai has publicly stated that all but a few of the Taliban are “reconcilable.”

Fifth, we must recognize and utilize the essential rationality of our opponents and their support group. The lesson of the Northern Irish peace process is that it was (in the end) the

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pragmatic rationality of the IRA that allowed for establishing an end to the conflict. The IRA had mistakenly thought that their violence was necessary and that it would produce victory. When (by the late 1980s) they recognized that violence would produce lasting stalemate rather than victorious success, they began to be open to the possibility of alternative means of achieving political momentum. States are often wary of acknowledging that their terrorist opponents act with the same mixture of the rational and the visceral that motivates most other people in politics. But we should, in fact, use this reality to our advantage. In Ulster, when the IRA recognized that elections would yield greater results than car bombs, they eventually swapped the latter for the former.

As previously stated, the Taliban is an organization with methods that serve articulated goals, even if there is dissension among the ranks. To a certain extent, these goals are those of a legitimate government: the safety, security and independence of Afghanistan. These aims, then, can be presented in such a way as a function of the present government of Afghanistan as to induce some insurgents to pursue their goals through other means. Just as the Taliban have moved from an insurgent force to a national government to an

insurgent force again, so perhaps can some part of their force be persuaded to present their ideas in a civilized, democratic manner.

Were the Taliban to participate fully and openly in the democratic process in Afghanistan, there is a significant chance they could eventually push their politics to the dominant position in the state. If this were to happen, if they were slowly to be inte-

grated into the process, they might eventually buy in to the system, having some stake in it. This could result in their attempting to protect the system and prevent their more zealous compatriots from subverting the government.

There are those who would argue that no understanding can be reached with the opponents in a counterinsurgency, and that victory can only be won when the last insurgent is in his grave. Unfortunately, insurgencies are not tangible things; they exist in the minds of men, and their physical manifestations are but extensions of that thought process. In order to truly pacify a troubled land such as Northern Ireland or Afghanistan, opponents must be co-opted whenever possible, and force used only as a last resort.

The British experience and time served in pacifying Northern Ireland holds a number of valuable lessons for foreign forces in Afghanistan today. Over decades the British sought through a combination of carrots and sticks to bring that fractured territory to heel, and their lessons learned deserve careful study for students of counterinsurgency. The five points mentioned above — avoiding an overmilitarized response whenever possible; understanding the ethno-national nature of the conflict; seeking settle-

ments through political accommodation wherever possible; and recognizing and co-opting the rationality of the insurgents’ platform — are all notions that have carried the day in the durable peace created in Northern Ireland, and can work in Afghanistan.

Delaying the implementation of the points presented here will prolong the Afghan insurgency and keep NATO troops, including Canada’s, in harm’s

way, and as the British learned, every trooper on the ground, every armoured vehicle patrolling a neighbourhood was a victory for the insurgent propaganda. In Afghanistan the circumstances are even more dire: a successful insurgency in

Afghanistan affects not only the nation itself, but its neighbours as well. And as we have seen, failure there can easily and quickly result in death and destruction on our own shores.

The parallels of the two conflicts are true for many insurgencies. Ethnic, political and religious grudges are not so dissimilar from one another that certain themes cannot be isolated. By doing so, we can not only better understand the nature of the insurgent and insurgency, but we can seek to minimize that disagreement. To paraphrase Mao, if an effective insurgent must move among the people as a fish in the sea, the trick then is to get the fish out of water. In Northern Ireland the British eventually produced conditions within which popular support for IRA violence could be eroded. In Afghanistan, we must strive to do the same. Only then will the insurgency wither.

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Throughout history, amazing opportunities have sprung from seemingly insurmountable challenges. In Canada, there has been talk for quite some time from academics that Canada's productivity performance has not been strong enough to help us close the income gap with leading countries. There are arguments that Canada's economic competitiveness is weakening, innovation is lagging and our education system is not stimulating enough students to complete post-graduate degrees – especially in science and technical disciplines, which underpin innovation.

But for Anne Golden, President and CEO of The Conference Board of Canada, these discussions contain a silver lining – one that holds great opportunities for those who are willing to invest in a new vision for Canadian prosperity.

"The challenge facing business leaders, academics and governments is to encourage young Canadians to seize the opportunities available to them and, more importantly, to do everything we can to help them succeed," says Golden. "We must do this not only for the benefit of our children, but in order to ensure that our envied Canadian standard of living is both protected and enhanced."

Young Canadians have an unprecedented opportunity to contribute to this country's economic prosperity. The recent boom in the oil and gas and resource sectors aside, the long-term foundations of the Canadian economy are shifting from resources and manufacturing industries towards knowledge-based, highly skilled job sectors.

According to The Conference Board of Canada's study, *Securing Our Future: Components of a Comprehensive IT Workforce Development Strategy*, almost 90,000 IT jobs will need to be filled in the Canadian economy in the next three to five years. This is a remarkable opportunity for young Canadians looking for a dynamic career path, as well as those who are interested in retraining.

To help energize young people about jobs in the computer science and IT sectors, Microsoft founder and Chairman Bill Gates regularly visits North American University campuses to drum up excitement about the innovations and career opportunities in these fields. He visited the University of Waterloo in February to demonstrate cutting-edge tomorrow's reality.

However, it will take more than just recruiting more students into these programs. The opportunities are so vast and the need for qualified people is so strong that Canada has to look beyond training our sons and daughters if we are to succeed. To truly reap the rewards of the knowledge economy we need to find ways to attract highly skilled foreign workers to Canada.



The knowledge economy is made up of well educated, highly trained and very mobile people. There are more jobs than people to fill them, so this sought-after group is flexing its muscles by taking its pick of destinations and demanding more of potential employers. Canada is now competing against countries with well-developed IT sectors, like the United States and Ireland, as well as emerging powerhouses like India, China, Brazil and Russia.

Success means that Canada has to keep the graduates we produce and attract highly sought-after graduates from other countries. Fortunately, we're in a strong position to realize opportunity from this challenge.

Groundbreaking work by Richard Florida, Professor of Business and Creativity at the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto (and himself a recent immigrant to Canada), shows that many of the things we value about Canada – our multicultural cities, our great outdoors, our quality of life and our accepting society – are exactly what these young workers, whether Canadian or foreign, are seeking when they decide where they'll start their careers.

Canada is becoming, more and more, a beacon to attract this talent.

This was central to Microsoft's decision to locate the Microsoft Canada Development Centre in Richmond, British Columbia in late 2007. The MDCDC, as it is known, is now home to more than 200 young software developers from Canada and around the world. In order to remain innovative and attract the best and brightest, Microsoft is becoming a progressive, leading-edge company where people will be proud to work. Microsoft understands that an important part of this equation is locating in places like the Greater Vancouver Area because it will attract the best Canadian and foreign workers.

Canada once again is a land of opportunity. For young, well-educated, tech-savvy workers our country provides nearly limitless potential. Our challenge is to provide the right environment to ensure that all young people have the support and encouragement they need to reap the benefits.

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