The economics of invasion

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by Chris Walker

The importance of language and public opinion in the modern era is well understood. We can see this in [Jürgen] Habermas's discourse ethics, the Chomskian Propaganda Model or in Hitler's observation that "the power which has always started the greatest religious and political avalanches in history... [is] the spoken word."

If we can accept that language and public opinion are as much a factor in how current and future events are shaped, it is critical that we pay attention to the careful, objective research that has been done on Afghanistan and the Occupied Territories. The student of the early 21st century should resist the dual temptations of partisan politics and jingoist flag waving, and deeply consider the crisis of this era. If it is true that a well-informed public discourse can help us to avoid catastrophe, then we are obligated to do our utmost to pursue this goal.

In 1919, Economist John Maynard Keynes rose from his sick bed to write the Economic Consequences of the Peace, in response to what he called the "murder of Vienna." It was a condemnation of the Versailles peace treaty. Keynes was adamant that the non-viability of economic restoration under the crushing conditions of the treaty would inevitably bring about a resurgence of German militarism, autocratic rule, and imperial expansion. Keynes wrote that "men will not always die quietly," and that in "their distress they may ... submerge civilization itself."

Keynes goes on to state that the avoidance of this situation is what "all our resources and courage and idealism" must work toward. At that time however, the focus was on punishing the Germans, not restoring a functioning German economy, so the insight of Keynes was dismissed. Only after the horrors of WWII was he invited to discuss the reconstruction of Europe. Today we are faced with similar situations in Afghanistan and the Occupied Territories.

Gordon Smith, director of the Center for Global Studies at the University of Victoria and Advisory Council Member of the Canadian Defense & Foreign Affairs Institute, published an extensive report on the current situation in Afghanistan this spring. He asserts that criticizing the current situation is an easy task, and a much greater challenge is establishing how to resolve the crisis.

One conclusion of the report is that time is running out. He asserts that support on the ground is rapidly diminishing and that unless substantial benefits can be brought to the Afghan people, support for al-Qa'ida is going to spike.

Similarly, while the Taliban does not represent the general will of the people, they do offer more security than what NATO has been able to provide. He claims that it is a matter of time before there is a groundswell of support for the Taliban. The report also details how there is no feasible military victory against the Taliban, since, among other reasons, the border with Pakistan is porous. Therefore, as a guerilla force, the Taliban is truly transnational and virtually invisible.

This in turn leads to his conclusion that the alleviation of poverty, reconstruction and economic development is the primary defense against disaster in this realm. In the report, one rather remarkable observation is on the destruction of opium poppies. Poppy is the only source of income for a majority of rural poor, and attacking this source of income is counterproductive in the extreme. The report advises a different strategy that turns the poppy crop into a legitimate enterprise, which supplies medical opiates while expelling elements of the illicit drug trade.

The issue of economic development is not a trivial matter. The report indicated that "in the south, one in four children will die before the age of five." It also indicates that "70 percent of children are malnourished, and 2.5 million people are in urgent need of more food assistance."

At present NATO has the task of convincing people who are dying that they should continue to endure so the West can have security. This is transparently idiotic and untenable. The issue at hand is how to alleviate the urgent need for basic amenities while fostering grass roots economic development. If we are at all serious about "security," these are the harsh realities we have to address in Afghanistan.

On January 24th, 2007, the British House of Commons released a report on the current economic conditions of the Occupied Territories (OT). One of the topics considered in the report was the boycott of the Hamas government and the impact of the boycott. The report tells us that, aside from creating a higher level of suffering on the ground, the boycott has pushed the Palestinians to seek economic assistance elsewhere. Now Iran and the Palestinians have more deeply integrated finances and relations.

The report also discusses how the OT have the potential for developing a vibrant economy due to their natural resources, human capital and access to the sea. However, the conditions of the occupation and the boycott have disrupted the flow of goods and people with quantifiable results. Real GDP declined by 9 percent in the first half of 2006. The World Bank is cited in the report for mentioning the need for capital growth in the OT since Israel has decided to reduce its Palestinian work force to zero for security reasons.

The report further discusses the trade barriers imposed by Israel that disrupt the movement of goods between the OT. Under these conditions, we are told that, the OT has been steadily de-industrialized and the work force is becoming deskilled. This in turn creates the sort of hopelessness and economic destitution that Keynes saw as dangerous.

All of these facts, derived from bipartisan research, are of tremendous importance if we are interested in understanding the dynamics of the areas in question. I think it is self-evident that if we want to develop appropriate interpretations of reality and institute programs of action that are rational, our first step is to understand the issues.

In the West however, we face a paradox. While we enjoy considerable freedom, and our leaders face the constraints of public opinion, our existing systems of national media also face constraints such as concision, the elite addenda [sic] and so on, which in turn disrupt the flow of information. For example, the British report was not mentioned in North American media. The Canadian report, while mentioned, was only treated to 426 words, and the salient features of the report were not discussed at all.

Therefore, our job is to seek out these important studies of current events, and see that they are not buried. If we are to stand any chance of elevating the level of public discourse and penetrating the issues of the day, this is the first step we must take.

Canadian siege on gaza

by Asaf Rashid

On Thursday, April 5th (Head Hall auditorium, at 7 pm), there will be chance for people in Fredericton to hear and see the work of Jon Elmer. This Canadian freelance writer and photojournalist covers, up close, the stories of people who live in some of the most difficult conditions in the world, the people of Gaza. These people's daily struggles under Israeli occupation largely escape the radar of the mainstream media channels.

The title of Elmer's presentation is Siege on Gaza and Canadian Foreign Policy in the Middle East.

The siege refers to the escalation of the violent, crippling economic and social conditions that the imprisoned communities of Palestinian people in Gaza have endured under occupation.

In a particularly painful episode of this siege, during the summer and fall of 2006, more than 450 Palestinians were killed under Israeli aerial bombardment, artillery barrages and two major ground invasions. Overall, the casualty count for 2006 released by Israeli human rights group B'Tselem reports that Israeli forces killed 660 Palestinians, while 17 Israeli civilians were killed, 13 of them in the West Bank.

Putting this violence in context is important.

"The situation in Gaza before the siege was already characterized by an economic collapse that the World Bank has described as 'among the worst in modern history.' More than three quarters of Gaza's population is living on two dollars or less a day. Israel controls the borders, the airspace, the sea, and has carried out several large-scale invasions of Gaza since the so-called 'disengagement' of Jewish settlers from the strip in 2005," Elmer explained.

These are conditions that have only been exacerbated by Canadian-supported economic sanctions placed on Palestinians by Israel upon the 2006 democratic election of Hamas (80 percent voter turn-out), a resistance movement recognized more for their armed struggle against Israeli occupation than for their diplomacy. In an April 2006 interview with Elmer, Palestinian Legislative Council Member Hanan Ashrawi explained the elections as follows:

"There was quite a bit of a protest vote, and there was also a vote that sent a message to Israel and the U.S. People said to Israel, if you are going to be violent and hardline, we are going to elect your counterparts in Palestine -- hardline and violent... They felt that the failure of the peace camp and the moderates meant there is only one option: Hamas and the agenda of resistance and reform."

In reference to Canadian support of the Israeli state-imposed sanctions against funds and other resources being sent to the Hamas government, Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Peter MacKay made the bold statement, "not a red cent to Hamas." Elmer views these sanctions as further injury upon the already injured. "The sanctions have exacerbated an already significant humanitarian crisis, as all forms of international organizations and human rights groups that have operated in Gaza have been saying for years."

But such a bold statement by Peter MacKay is not an isolated incident in terms of trends in Canadian foreign policy in general; neither is the Canadian government's support for the state of Israel despite the intrusive actions that state is taking with the Palestinian people.

Canadian foreign policy has taken on a markedly more aggressive character in the last few years, supporting violent economic and social control in the Middle East that fits neatly within a neo-colonial paradigm of economic and social expansionism. Canada's cooperation in the U.S.-led War on Terror's front in Afghanistan displays this character.

Part of Elmer's presentation will be to convey the much under-reported dynamics of the changing face of Canadian foreign policy. He will detail what is really meant when high-level Canadian military officials such as Canada's top soldier Rick Hillier say that Canadian forces will transition from peace-keeping to war fighting.

Elmer has recently been writing about a new "counter-insurgency" manual produced by the Canadian Forces. The manual states that counter-insurgency (Canada's war on Afghanistan) is a "...multi-agency approach -- military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological and civic actions -- that seeks to not only defeat the insurgents themselves, but the root causes of, and support for, the insurgency." This is essentially a definition of colonization: complete subjugation of occupied people by force and pacification.

The more aggressive and subjugating foreign policy of the Canadian government should not be taken lightly according to Elmer. "There are consequences to aggressive interventions: it is reasonable to expect that if Canada is going to commit violent acts at home and abroad, it is leaving itself open to violence in return. This country's policies around the world are not simply matters of debate; they have real consequences."

Jon Elmer will have a lot more to say and show on April 5th, bringing his rich experience of the last several years as a writer (as of recently working for the EU-based Inter Press Service) and photojournalist. He draws on his work in a dozen countries, with the most significant being over the last few years in the West Bank and Gaza. He has resided in these difficult environments during his assignments, "reporting on the receiving side of the overwhelming military force, not accompanying it," he explained.

Jon Elmer's presentation will take on Thursday April 5th, at 7 pm. The location will be the UNB's Head Hall Auditorium (HC 13). There is no cost to the event and there will be some refreshments. To see more of Jon Elmer's work, visit his website, jonelmer.ca.

Pots vs. kettles, the saga continues

GRINDS MY GEARS

by Courtenay Courrier

Living in a University town, I'm subject to all sorts of people. This ranges in stereotypical categories from the nerds to the jocks, the hippies to the goths, and the Bible-thumpers to hardcore atheists. Universities have them all.

What gets me every time are the people who are always talking about equal rights and acceptance of everybody by using other people's intolerance as examples of people they can't tolerate. Of course, I've no problem with people who accept everybody; this is not the issue in the least. It is those who say they accept everybody yet shut out all of those who don't have the same view, even as a group.

If they sound at all hypocritical, it's because they are. The sad part is that they don't even realize the oxymoron they've become. An example of this would be someone who dislikes Christians because they believe them to be close-minded fools who hate everyone who isn't Christian themselves. When talking to someone of this view, you might hear something like this: "I really hate those Bible-thumpers. They go on about how great they are and about love and charity when they are the most judgmental people around. They are always behind the hatred of everyone else, even other denominational Christians just because they don't believe the exact same way as they do. They don't really accept everyone, which is what Christianity is about anyway. I've no tolerance for that kind of intolerance."

Not only is this person using their belief in Christian intolerance of others as a reason to hate them, but they hate them for the very same reason they claim not to like them. Even more interesting is the possible rebound response: "I hate those people who think we're all about hatred. Christianity is all about love and tolerance, and if they can't see that then they can go to Hell."

Clearly there is a lot of opinion on either end of the spectrum, but both are guilty of the same thing -- intolerance -- which happens to be their excuse for hating each other. Backwards? Yes. Surprising? No. The fact is that there are many people in this world who, although they have the best of intentions, are so concerned with the actions and beliefs of others that they don't even realize that they are guilty of the same thing they are so strongly opinionated against.

This doesn't only follow with Christian versus non-Christian beliefs, of course; this covers all topics and ideas. What it has to do with is not necessarily the important issue, but it's that people are so concerned about everyone else's opinions and how to change them (all the while hating anyone who may try to change themselves) that they fail to see their own shortcomings.

If they are unable to see this, the possibility of people seeing their hypocritical, sour attitude becomes all too easy, and then they have no validity. While it's not wrong to disagree with someone, it is wrong to say you disagree with them for what they do or say when you have the same problem: you might as well just hate yourself. And c'mon now, who wants to do that?

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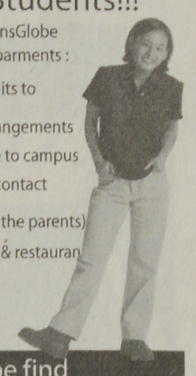

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ALPS Call for Nominations: March 19–30, 2007

The ALPS (Adult Learners, Part-Time Students) Executive Board of Directors is calling for nominations for the term of May 2007-April 2008.

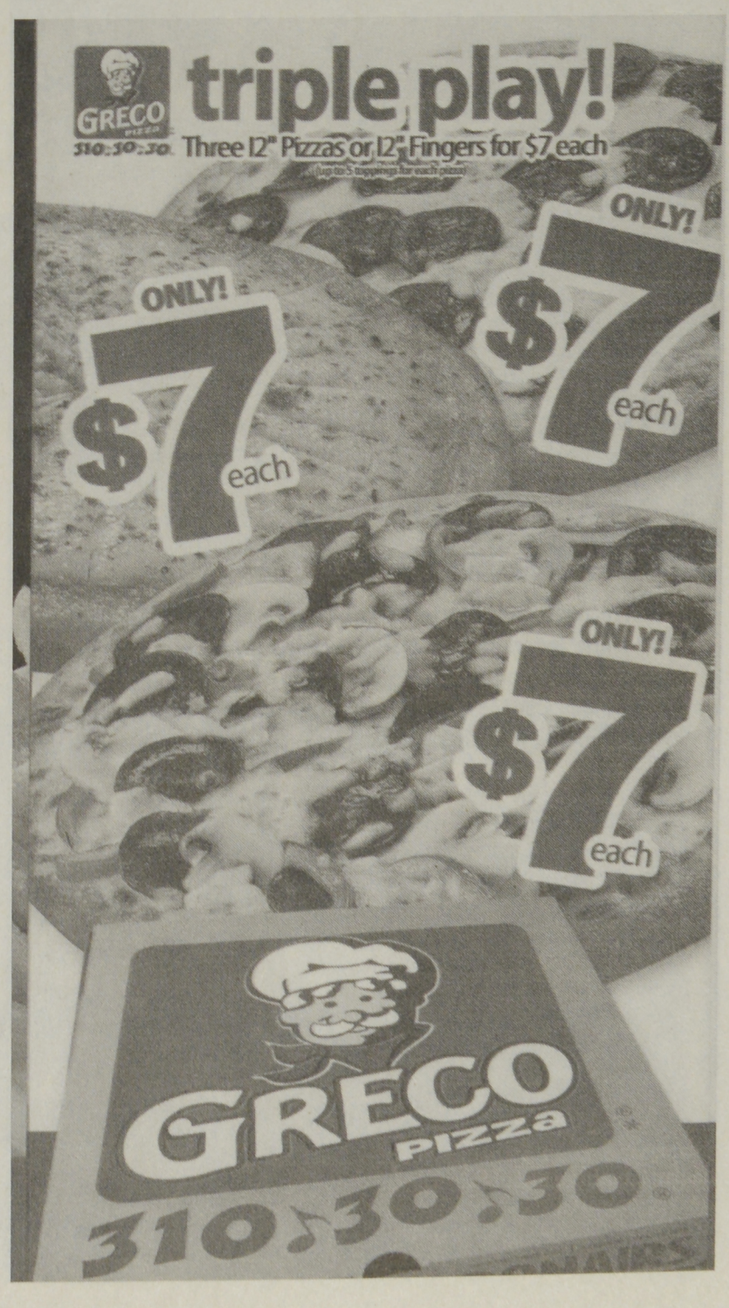
Students must have a GPA of 2.0 or above and meet one of the following criteria:

- Be a Registered Part-Time Undergraduate Student on the Fredericton Campus
- Be a Registered Part-Time Undergraduate Student Off-Campus/OALP
- Be a Registered Full-Time Undergraduate Adult Learner (25 years old and over)

The following positions are available:
President
VP Administration
VP Finance
VP Promotions
VP Social Events
VP Student Services
ALPS Senate Representative

Nomination forms and detailed terms of reference for each position can be picked up at the ALPS office located in 130A of Marshall D'Avray Hall.

Deadline for nominations is Friday, March 30, 2007.

Elections will be held the week of April 9-12, 2007.

For more information, contact ALPS at 453-3596 or *alps@unb.ca*