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Canada is different

We've gone from sympathy to Yankee-bashing

By Greg Weston

OTTAWA -- In the aftermath of the horrific events of 9/11, as Prime Minister Jean Chretien confronted his country's hour of need with embarrassing silence, then Liberal cabinet minister John Manley stepped forward to steel a nation's spine.

Promising we would stand shoulder-to-shoulder with our American friends under siege, Manley declared Canada "at war" with terrorism.

Five years later, Manley -- long gone from government -- candidly admitted in an interview last week that no one had any idea at the time that Canada would wind up fighting that war in far-flung Afghanistan.

In fact, at the time Canadian troops were committed to Afghanistan, there wasn't supposed to be much of a war left to fight. The Taliban supposedly had already been defeated by the American invaders, and the Afghan leaders were talking about a new democratic constitution.

At the same time, the Chretien government wanted to commit all of our military resources to Afghanistan specifically so there would be none left to send to Iraq in the likely event the U.S. decided to go after Saddam Hussein.

It must have seemed like a good idea at the time. Today, as the Taliban resistance grows and the Canadian body count mounts, Manley admits the Afghan conflict "looks more like Dieppe than D-Day."

However the Afghan conflict unfolds, it remains Canada's most visible remnant of the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing "war" on terrorism.

In fact, one of the only remnants.

In a recent edition of Foreign Affairs magazine, a thought-provoking analysis of the lasting impact of 9/11 on global affairs carried the equally catchy headline: "The day nothing much changed."

"We were told the world would never be the same," the piece begins. "But ... for all the sound and fury, the world looks much like it did on Sept. 10." For the most part, so does Canada.

Air travellers may not be able to carry toothpaste or duty-free booze on board their flights, but neither is Canada a nation of terror-stricken citizens cowering in their bomb shelters.

As articles elsewhere in this paper attest, whether the country overall is any safer from terrorist attacks than it was five years ago continues to be the subject of widespread debate.

After expenditures of something in excess of \$10 billion of taxpayers' money on new security measures, governments and emergency services agencies across the country are surely better equipped to handle a terrorist-inspired catastrophe today, if only by comparison to their unconscionable lack of preparedness five years ago.

On the other hand, some would argue that we live in a generically more dangerous country today.

Indeed, where the international intelligence community rated Canada something like 22nd on the al-Qaida hit list immediately post-9/11, we have more recently been mentioned by name in Osama bin Laden's periodic broadcasts.

Canada's relations with the U.S. haven't fundamentally changed, however. Almost from the moment the first plane hit the twin towers, the Canadian government hit the U.S. with a huge campaign to convince Americans that terrorists are not pouring over the border from this country.

Despite signs of our slowly winning that crucial PR war to keep the borders open and commerce flowing, George Bush was back at it this past week, the U.S. president citing Canada as a potential breeding ground for terrorists.

In this country, while most Canadians remain friendly toward Americans, fuzzy feelings for the U. S. prez are becoming increasingly scarce -- in both countries.

Whatever the reasons, we are certainly a long way from the love-in for America that spontaneously attracted 100,000 of us to Parliament Hill three days after 9/11.

So much Yankee-bashing and Bush-whacking was confirmed in a recent Sun-SES Research poll that found the perceived closeness of Stephen Harper's government to the White House is the single largest source of Canadian voter dissatisfaction with the Conservatives.

Notably, concerns over terrorism and security didn't even make the list.

greg.weston@tor.sunpub.com