

Opening a new front

Is the Canadian military trying to win the media war too?

Kady O'Malley | Jul 11, 2007 | 5:17 pm EST

The day after six more young men were **killed** in Afghanistan, soldiers from CFB Edmonton took centre stage at a press conference to **assure** Canadians that every one of the deceased supported the country's mission.

"We must ensure that their families hear a clarion call of love and support from Canada," one colonel said. "No matter what your opinion is, these soldiers are working on behalf of all Canadians. They are pursuing a mission they believe in and, in fact, to the reasonably well-informed, has demonstrated some progress."

The deliberately plainspoken General Rick Hillier, meanwhile, has become the most media-friendly Chief of Defence Staff in the country's history - showing up on *Hockey Night in Canada* and at the Canada Day celebrations on Parliament Hill. And before the vaunted **Van Doos** shipped out to Afghanistan, the Quebec-based soldiers engaged in a goodwill tour of sorts, including a much-photographed trip to a CFL game in Montreal, at the same time that anti-war protesters were descending, en masse, on the same city.

Individually, these might seem unremarkable instances, but together they present a military with a keen interest in public relations. Indeed, it's increasingly clear the Canadian Forces are taking a far more aggressive approach to courting media coverage - whether embedding reporters on the ground in Kandahar or, as we saw recently, allowing rank and file soldiers to publicly defend government policy.

As the **Rideau Institute's** Steven Staples sees it, this is very much part of a concerted effort by the military. He points to a departmental communications strategy, produced by National Defence and released via Access to Information that foretold such a strategy.

"They felt that soldiers were held in much higher esteem by the public and would be much better salespeople for the war than politicians," he says. "Politicians are reluctant to debate anyone who isn't also a politician, especially someone in uniform."

For his part, the Prime Minister - who regularly made impassioned and inflammatory arguments against opponents of the Afghanistan mission during the spring session - has sounded almost **muted** of late when musing about Canada's mandate.

"I don't think you can underestimate the powerful impact of the visuals of having someone in uniform, male or female, do a press conference," adds pollster Nick Nanos. "It conveys a certain authority and expertise related to a subject."

But this, Staples argues, can raise concerns about the separation of political and military. "I've been on panels where a serving member of the Canadian Forces was sent to debate me and they went far beyond providing information... There's a conflict there because you have the military becoming a lobbyist to try to influence the decisions of government. It's a slippery slope."

There's a thin line too between implementing policy and advocating it, Nanos adds. "It would only take one comment to really turn things sour. There isn't much of a downside for Harper and the Conservatives, because they can compartmentalize the issue and let the military take the bad news. It's risky for the military, because they'll either shine, or run into problems."

Of course, no matter how meticulously planned a p.r. strategy, its ultimate success - or failure - depends on whether the media accepts the message. And, at the moment, it's safe to say military officials elicit a far less confrontational response from reporters (at least when compared to the rough ride politicians tend to receive).

"I've seen many journalists fall head over heels for soldiers in uniform and it absolutely colours their view of the war," Staples said. "Canadian journalists used to chide their American colleagues for their coverage and now they're almost worse."

"[Journalists] should be asking different types of questions, but definitely questions that are as difficult as those that they ask politicians," Carleton University professor Chris Waddell adds.

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During the last federal election, the Liberals commissioned a **commercial** that warned of soldiers in city streets should the Conservatives ever gain power. Never officially released, the ad was leaked and immediately became the stuff of legend. And inflammatory as the spot was, the controversy spoke to how complicated matters of politics can get when the military is involved.

Communications strategist Scott Reid, a member of the ill-fated Paul Martin campaign that produced that ad, is (perhaps not surprisingly) skeptical that a more visible military presence in the media will increase public support for the mission. Although it could stymie some of the mission's most vocal critics, it may just delay the inevitable buck-stopping.

"The Prime Minister has tied himself to this mission. This is his war - he has made it his war," Reid says. "That's life in the big chair."

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