

Ignatieff and Peacekeeping

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By J.L. Granatstein

Now that the election is over, we can do some sober analysis, and one area that deserves parsing is the Liberal and NDP platform positions on peacekeeping. Both were enthusiastic about serving the United Nations. Neither seemed unduly interested in war-fighting, although the Liberals, whose agreement was essential for the 2008 three-year extension of combat in Afghanistan and for the three-year training commitment there, did seem to concede it as a possibility.

Nonetheless, the now-defeated Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff made some interesting comments in the French-language leaders' debate that deserve to be remembered, if not heeded. The UN Security Council, he maintained, should decide if Canadian troops are to be committed to operations: "The Canadian Army must never be used outside the country without the authorization of the UN."

Ignatieff seemed to have forgotten that China and Russia have vetoes in the Security Council, and neither nation necessarily has Canadian or western interests at heart, to say the least. When he was reminded of this by a journalist, Ignatieff conceded that while "Canada has always believed as a matter of international law... that the use of force in international affairs should be authorized by the Security Council of the United Nations," there were exceptions.

"When you can't get authorization... you'd better have an extremely good case in which you can use force... [as in] Kosovo, where international authorization was not granted." The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq was another case, but one that Ignatieff, who supported the intervention, was careful not to cite, this being an unhappy memory that had to be buried in an election campaign.

The real question, however, is whether Canada and the western nations should put future military action in the hands of the United Nations and the Security Council. Ignatieff had not always been in favour of this.

As he told Maclean's in 2003 before he returned to Canada to enter politics, "the UN screwed up in Rwanda, it screwed up in Bosnia - it screws up most of the time. The United Nations is a messy, wasteful, log-rolling operation." So it has been.

Why the switch in attitude about who should authorize the deployment of Canadian troops abroad, a matter of substantial importance? The reason is clear: political expediency. The Liberal party, like the New Democratic Party, is essentially against military operations led by the United States, and it has been ever since the first Gulf War at the beginning of the 1990s. Peacekeeping is good, most of the Grits say, tilting leftward and flashing their anti-American credentials, and war-fighting is always bad, especially when the Yanks are involved. In his televised election town hall, Ignatieff said, "We oughta be out there on the front lines making sure people don't kill each other. It's a good thing for Canada to do." Ideally, Canada should do only peacekeeping, or so most Liberals and all NDPers believe.

Unfortunately, this position almost completely ignores reality.

Peacekeeping nowadays is not a matter of slapping a blue beret on a Canadian soldier and patrolling a ceasefire line to stop people from killing each other. Instead, today's peace interventions seem to involve killing and being killed, as in Congo and Darfur. In fact, many peacekeeping operations in the past have been far from benign -Canadian soldiers in their three decades of peacekeeping service on Cyprus, for example, lost 28 men killed and had to fight off a Turkish invasion force in 1974.

Nonetheless, Ignatieff was half right: Canada should do United Nations peacekeeping when it can. The tests for participation are clear, something Ignatieff surely knew, even if he did not feel he could say so during a campaign. There must be a clear UN mandate, something that has not always been the case in the past half-century. There must be the agreement of the warring parties on a UN force and a desire for a peace settlement. There must be a definite exit date -no more endless missions, as in Cyprus. And the Canadian Forces must be able to do the job with the available personnel and the right equipment. In addition, Canada should pick and choose its missions carefully. There is no value in putting our soldiers into the jungles of Congo, for example, not least because white troops are unwelcome to the factions at war there.

Above all, each and every deployment of Canadian troops, whether for the UN or for a coalition operation, must serve Canada's national interests. That is the sine qua non, and to ensure this requirement is met, Parliament should be asked to vote to support every substantial deployment overseas. Without a parliamentary mandate, there cannot be long-lasting public support, and it is always important for the people's elected representatives to accept the burden of responsibility for putting the lives of Canadian Forces soldiers at risk.

A few years ago, when he was a conservative liberal living in the U.S., Michael Ignatieff would most likely have agreed with every word in this column. In the 2011 election, he ran, like his party, from the left and against his better -earlier -judgment. No one can suggest his position on peacekeeping shaped the election result, but his personal and party defeat does suggest that no leader should run against his convictions.

Or, perhaps, that political expediency is not always the best course.

Now that he's a professor again, Ignatieff can contemplate such questions at leisure.

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