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## Review of "The Politics of War: Canada's Afghanistan Mission, 2001-14" by Jean-Christophe Boucher and Kim Richard Nossal

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Jean-Christophe Boucher and Kim Richard Nossal. *The Politics of War: Canada's Afghanistan Mission, 2001-14*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2017. Pp. 282.

For the authors, each of them university professors of political science, this volume was the result of attempting to solve a puzzle. As they write, the Canadian military was clearly fighting a war in Afghanistan and taking casualties, “[y]et the political elite in Ottawa was not treating this as a war; politicians were certainly not talking as though Canada was at war” (p. xiv). Boucher and Nossal came to believe that the political powers that be were using the Afghan campaign politically, and asked: “Why was there such a deep disconnect between what was happening on the ground in Afghanistan and how this war was being treated by politicians in Ottawa?” (p. xiv)

Boucher and Nossal tackle this “disconnect” through a series of separate, yet interdependent, chapters—some of which were originally delivered as conference papers or have been published previously. Many of the sources originate online, including parliamentary debates, ministerial and prime ministerial speeches, and newspaper reports. Memoirs for the period—including those by former Minister of Foreign Affairs Bill Graham, Chief of the Defence Staff General Rick Hillier, and Prime Minister Paul Martin—are also used extensively, although the recent nature of the subject means that volumes that might subsequently be written by others—such as Prime Minister Stephen Harper—have not yet appeared. Amongst the secondary sources consulted was Dr. Sean Maloney’s as-yet-unpublished “magisterial multivolume history of the Canadian Army’s role in the Afghanistan mission” (p. xviii), in addition to a wide array of political science and historical secondary material.

As the authors note, the 2001 to 2014 period fell under both Liberal (Prime Ministers Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin) and Conservative (Prime Minister Stephen Harper) governments. It is their contention that both the Liberals and Conservatives “conspired with each other to make sure that Canada’s war in Afghanistan eventually became as invisible as possible” (p. 6). Boucher and Nossal state that both parties consistently referred to the Canadian involvement in Afghanistan as a “mission,” not a “war” and argue that the “careful avoidance of the word ‘war’ was purposeful and deeply political” (p. 7). Instead of the focus being on explaining the

campaign to Canadians, the focus of federal politicians was on the “home game, the domestic politics of the Afghanistan mission” (p. 8).

To “examine the interlinked nature of domestic politics and the engagement in Afghanistan” (p. 8), the authors provide a series of chapters on different subjects, starting with a brief history of the “away game” (p. 8), a survey of what Canadians were doing in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2014, and then turning to coverage of the “home game” with chapters on what kind of mission it was, “selling” the mission to Canadians, the role of Parliament, electoral politics, the matter of detainees, the minority governments, public opinion, casualties, and anti-mission groups.

Various themes reappear throughout the narrative, such as the lack of clarity over what kind of mission it was (peacekeeping, war, national reconstruction, etc.) and the resulting difficulty in defining the Afghan campaign amongst politicians, the public, and anti-campaign groups alike. There was also the overriding politicisation of the mission at home, a theme the authors expound upon extensively through the examination of the role of Parliament, public relations, political campaigns, public opinion, and specific issues such as detainees and military casualties. Likewise, there is the theme of the apparent dominance of the “home game” over the “away game” across nearly all areas of the campaign described in this book.

Take one chapter as an example—in this case, Chapter Ten—and its discussion of the overall passivity of those Canadians opposed to the Afghan mission. As the authors put it: “if Canadians were increasingly opposed to the mission, why did so little public mobilization on this issue occur?” (p. 193) To examine this issue, Boucher and Nossal begin by looking at the political science-defined relationship between public opinion and the creation of foreign policy. They then turn to the matter of how “the political opportunity for such a protest movement to form was lacking” (p. 200) in the Canadian political arena. Finally, they address factors specific to the mission which made public opposition to the campaign more difficult, such as the multilateral nature of the campaign, the humanitarian and development aspects of the Canadian effort, and the “human cost” of the mission in terms of military fatalities.

In essence, following the initial chapter’s description of the campaign overseas, the remaining narrative deals with the authors’ contention that it was “clear that Canada’s politicians were driven not so much by the strategic and military considerations of what was

happening in theatre in Afghanistan, but rather by the imperatives of a constant struggle for domestic political advantage back in Canada" (p. 43).

Overall, the authors have a valid point which they have articulated well on a number of different fronts—politicians in Ottawa treated the military and development campaign in Afghanistan in a political manner, even if the authors' conclusion that they "broke faith with Canadians and, in particular, with those Canadians who died in Afghanistan" (p. 223) might appear a bit dramatic. In the mind of this reviewer, the book raises some further questions: how did the political parties act in similar circumstances during the First and Second World Wars? Did Canadians really want to know the intimate details of what the country was doing in Afghanistan?<sup>1</sup> How did the actions of the different federal governments regarding the Afghanistan mission fit within the larger context of their overall governance?

*The Politics of War* definitely adds to our understanding of how the campaign in Afghanistan was managed and articulated politically on the home front between 2001 and 2014. In that sense, it adds to the existing literature focusing on political facets of the mission such as, for example, Rick Hillier's *A Soldier First: Bullets, Bureaucrats and the Politics of War* (2009), Stephen M. Saideman's *Afghanistan as a Test of Canadian Politics: What Did We Learn from the Experience?* (2012), and Janice Gross Stein and Eugene Lang's *The Unexpected War: Canada in Kandahar* (2007).

Although written by political scientists, this book is very accessible to students of the campaign in Afghanistan—whether they be academics, military personnel, or the general reader. It is highly recommended for the view of the "home game" it provides and as a reflection of the military "away game" being played out overseas.

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<sup>1</sup> The online meme "America is not at war. The Marine Corps is at war; America is at the mall" comes to mind. Did Canada experience the same perceived indifference or lack of attention?