



[Back to Ottawa leaves Colvin high and dry](#)

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As the Afghan detainee debate continues, I look around Ottawa with increasing concern. Who among my acquaintances was involved? Who raised tough questions in 2006, and who remained silent? It's hard to know, because so few bureaucrats in this town are talking publicly.

I've seen this movie before. Sixteen years ago, I left Israel because it was too hard to live among friends who were politically supportive of peace but personally unwilling to blow whistles.

I left, seeking a country that sent its troops into battle with respect for international law and the determination to expose its own wrongdoings when required.

Until two weeks ago, I thought I'd found that Shangri-La right here.

I'd been searching for a Canada-style haven ever since the 1980s, when a UN peacekeeper watched my military colleagues and I do something unjust.

On the day in question, my platoon had swept into a Lebanese village, seeking information about Israeli soldiers captured nearby. A colleague and I were told to accompany an intelligence officer and two Lebanese informants on a routine arrest, the kind of operation Canadian forces must do every day in Kandahar.

We pushed into someone's home, pulled a man out, and walked round the back of his building. The intelligence team blindfolded his eyes, pushed him to his knees, and placed a gun to his head, demanding answers to questions posed in Arabic.

Perhaps they were bluffing, but it seemed to me that they were about to shoot him dead. I had received no training in the Geneva Conventions, but it didn't take much legal sophistication to realize something was badly amiss. Prisoners, I knew, shouldn't be shot in the head, and even mock executions were a serious form of abuse.

Despite this knowledge, however, I did absolutely nothing. I was 19 years old, and the notion of speaking out publicly was very much beyond the pale.

Suddenly, a blue-helmeted UN officer appeared, and under his unwavering gaze, the incident quickly petered out. The intelligence team disappeared into the morning fog, and my colleague and I walked back to our unit. We never spoke of the incident again.

Ever since that day, I've wanted to live in the kind of country that sends UN peacekeepers abroad to make the world a better place, rather than one that sends its soldiers to fight in dirty wars.

Until last week, I was sure Canada was what I was searching for. As best I could tell, it was a peacekeeping country par excellence, the kind of nation where people did good things abroad and blew whistles on their own misdeeds without fear.

Many immigrants from other war-torn countries probably feel similarly, as well as many of this country's native-born citizens.

Even when Canadian officials embraced war in Kandahar, I believed things would not go too badly awry. Counter-insurgencies were always ugly, but I believed Canadian soldiers and bureaucrats would be different. They would respect the spirit of international law, and would never subject prisoners to real or mock executions. Nor, I believed, would they ever let others do their dirty work for them, the way Israel so often did with its Lebanese militias.

Yet if Richard Colvin's allegations are true, Canada did precisely that in 2006. Hundreds of Afghan men were transferred by Canadian forces to local allies, and at least some of these were brutally tortured. Many, moreover, may have been entirely innocent of any crime, mistakenly swept up in the confusion.

Here in Ottawa, at least 75 people received copies of those reports, and others must have heard word of their content. Many must be dedicated civil servants, keen to serve with honour. Yet very few have publicly admitted reading Colvin's early memos, and even fewer have said they shared his concerns.

And yet, Colvin was promoted to a prestigious position in Washington shortly after his Afghan tour, indicating that his colleagues and superiors must have thought quite highly of his work.

Most troublingly, Colvin's colleagues kept silent two weeks ago even as he was publicly humiliated by elected officials. In the days following his testimony, not one of his colleagues dialled up a journalist and said, "Hi, my name is X, and I read those reports in 2006. Colvin's a respected guy; many of us took him seriously."

The silence of Ottawa's bureaucrats is fuelled by different fears. Some may be loath to speak out because they invested a lifetime in the civil service and fear that whistle-blowers will face boring jobs and reduced pay. Others may fear for their jobs and pensions, and with mortgages or retirement at stake, these worries are real.

Still others may be cowed by the contempt heaped by politicians on Colvin, or be unsure of their rights under Canadian law.

In fact, some of those 75 may have spoken up internally in 2006, adding their voices to Colvin's through internal channels. It may not be their style to speak out, and they thus remain publicly silent, praying that Colvin somehow survives.

Despite all these good reasons, I still find the silence in Ottawa deafening. Soldiers do know right from wrong, and so do policy bureaucrats. When mistakes are made and bad things ensue, everyone involved has a duty to step up, speak out, and take responsibility.

In Israel today, conditions for security whistle-blowers are not nearly as dire as they once were. After the recent war in the Gaza Strip, for example, many soldiers spoke out publicly, telling their countrymen that severe abuses had been done in their name. In today's Israel, the mainstream media are often freer and more self-critical than anything available in Canada.

In the U.S., moreover, the use of allied intelligence agencies to conduct brutal interrogations has been discredited and exposed for what it is: abuse by proxy.

Here in Canada, however, the quality of moral debate is still quite immature. Whistle-blowing on issues of national security is still not on, and senior soldiers continue to monopolize the debate, telling those who do not fight that they cannot understand the realities of war. Arguments against torture, moreover, are hampered by tacit disdain for international law, coupled with contempt for the rights of Afghans suspected of being pro-Taliban.

Canada is not the U.S. or Israel. Not yet. But as the debate over Colvin's allegations continues, I fear that the first steps on a slippery slope are in the process of being made.

Canada may never be Shangri-La, and perhaps no such place even exists. Still, the world needs role models to emulate, and until two weeks ago, this country was one of the best ones around.

Just now, however, the silence of the bureaucrats is all I can hear, and that scares me no end.

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