

Article for Brandon Sun "Small World" Column – Sunday, August 13/06

Fast Food Prominent in Slow War

By Zack Gross

Current wars being fought in the Middle East and Western Asia are about resources, land, religious and ethnic differences, geopolitics and culture. Traditional cultures are affronted by modern trends and seemingly frivolous Western fads. One of the less publicized but very intriguing parts of this puzzle is fast food and the corporate chains that dispense it. While Tim's, Subway or Pizza Hut may be staples in our lives, they are red flags being waved at a bull in war-torn Iraq and Afghanistan.

One of the great challenges facing armies over the centuries has been supplying troops in foreign wars. The US economy – let alone shouldering the cost of armaments - has taken a large hit in the past five years from equipping soldiers with clothing, food, medicine and other items that we take for granted. One way to take some of the financial pressure off the budget – and psychological pressure off the troops – is to set up franchises of the eateries they are used to patronizing back home.

Pizza Hut and Burger King set up their first franchises in Iraq at the British military base at Basra in 2003, while aid convoys were still sitting on the country's borders waiting to be allowed in to feed the needy population. Before proper toilets and showers were available to all soldiers, pizzas and hamburgers were going at a steady clip.

Kuwait, Iraq, Afghanistan and other states now "boast" of Starbucks, Charley's Grilled Subs, Taco Bell, and other chains, provided by the US Military's quartermaster, Army & Air Force Exchange Service (AAFES). "It's a taste of home and an instant morale boost...for hungry troops looking for relief from the realities of serving in a hostile location so far from home", says the Department of Family Programs of the Association of the United States Army.

Not to be totally outdone, Canadian Forces in Afghanistan have set up a Tim Horton's shop at their base in Kandahar, ten thousand miles and nine time zones from home. Non-military Canadians were invited to apply for jobs at the Kandahar Tim's, with equivalent wages to restaurants here, but with added free travel, room and board and extra allowances. Recruiting continues in Canada for workers at this far-flung Tim's as existing staff rotate back to Canada. "American coffee just isn't the same thing", says a soldiering Tim's fan. (Of course, Tim Horton's has now surpassed McDonald's as Canada's most popular fast food outlet.)

Not everyone is excited by these culinary developments, of course. Many traditionalist or nationalist members of the affected Middle Eastern and Asian public see fast food joints as another part of a Western military invasion. While many Canadians may object rather mildly to "US cultural imperialism", we would be "up in arms" if that culture was brought north of our border by soldiers.

Demonstrations were touched off in Kabul, the Afghan capital, a couple of months ago when a US military truck's brakes failed, causing it to plunge into a dozen parked cars, killing and injuring many bystanders. People were beaten, buildings were ransacked, and protesters shouted "God is Great" and "Down with Bush"! When the Taliban were in power, ordinary citizens may have felt downtrodden by the harsh "born-again" Islamist rule. These riots, said the Washington Post at the time, showed, along with frustration and fear with the war, displeasure with the growing Western influence that has taken the Taliban's place – fast food shops, rap music and modern fashions.

The mood of anti-Westernism in the region has led to growing boycott campaigns. For instance, in Pakistan, both radical and more liberal groups are calling upon citizens to choose local alternatives rather than dining at KFC or drinking Coke. Their argument is that the companies and countries that bring you the bucket of chicken or the soft drink are responsible for foreign policies that are impoverishing and killing Muslims. These groups are also targeting other consumer items, such as cosmetics and junk food.

For community economic development groups, this public objection to Western products has been an opportunity to promote local products and employment. You can now buy Mecca Cola and local equivalents to our fast food. It is understandable that many associate Western products with war and poverty, and just as understandable that these "modern" products are also very attractive to average shoppers. This ambivalence in the population also causes internal tensions, intolerance and frustration.

War is fought, of course, with more than bullets and bombs. Western lifestyle and fast food culture are parts of the military landscape that don't often make the news. For some, a pizza, hamburger or bucket of chicken is just that – a food item. For others, dollars to donuts, these treats – fed to soldiers and taking hold in the local lifestyle - represent a tool being used to dismantle their state, their national identity and their culture.

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