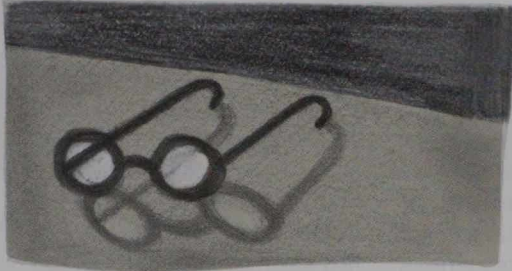


FROM THE DIRECTOR

Debating war and peace, morality and order



WE ARE BACK INTO THE UGLY, PRIMITIVE business of war. Every thinking person is grappling with revulsion, horror and bitter disappointment – the end of the Cold War had led us all to hope for better. In open societies, people are also wrestling openly with agonizing questions about the lead-up to war, its conduct and termination, and its aftermath.

In all decency, Canadians should begin by recognizing that while this is the first time that we have been at war in nearly forty years, much of the planet has suffered devastating conflict over that same period, at immeasurable human, economic and ecological cost. Even in the present conflict, the direct exposure of Canadians is limited. Our sheltered position should lead Canadians to exercise humility in our debate of the issues involved.

Our national debate since 2 August has done us no credit as a people. Some critics believe that they have seen a “bloodlust” unleashed, although by the standards of past conflicts, this has so far been quite muted in Canada. From the other side of the debate, critics of the coalition’s policies and Canada’s support, have widely been portrayed as merely emotive or viscerally anti-American, when in fact, the critics and the criticisms cover a wide spectrum.

NO ONE WAS READY FOR THIS CRISIS, EXCEPT possibly Saddam Hussein who triggered it. Nevertheless, few could argue that the post-Cold War world could simply have ignored such a frontal challenge to the most basic rule of international order – the non-acquisition of territory by force. But from the earliest days of August, too much of the public discussion focussed on side issues: other violations had gone unchecked in the past; the Kuwaiti regime was more plutocratic than democratic; the borders in question were “unnatural”; the outside world had armed Saddam Hussein; or that the world’s stake in the region’s oil supply somehow invalidated the world’s concern for order.

Worst of all, there was a gut reaction of many North Americans, Europeans and Japanese, that the conflict had nothing to do with us.

The growth of interdependence in recent decades should have led to a strengthening of the sense of collective security, yet somehow the idea of a responsibility of all nations to come to the aid of one that is a victim of aggression seemed to have fallen into disuse. The debates of the 1930s were replayed as though the Second World War and the UN had never happened.

We have all seen that when the international community, through the UN Security Council, is faced with a case of clear-cut aggression, it can set in motion machinery which – though long unused – amounts to a policing process with teeth. At the penultimate stage of this path toward military enforcement, the imposition of non-military sanctions, there was a widespread perception that these were “soft” measures, in contrast with military action. Comprehensive sanctions are coercive measures one step short of war, and are designed to hurt, frequently without discriminating between the guilty and the innocent.

The argument can be made that non-military sanctions should have been allowed to run much longer, but no one can claim that there was any assurance that by themselves they would work, or that the sanctions or the coalition would not be broken. Thus a judgement had to be made, for good or ill, and it was made most – under the authority of the UN Security Council – by those who had contributed most to confronting the aggression.

ONE CAN PROPERLY QUESTION THE JUDGEMENTS or tactics of the decision-makers, but one cannot legitimately assume that they were insensitive to the moral weight and the competing moral claims in their decisions. Those who criticize the UN’s approach of confronting Saddam Hussein because it has led ultimately to large-scale hostilities, are possibly not conscious how deeply held is the moral conviction, on the other side, against sacrificing small states to aggressors.

None of this holds, of course, if one is an absolute pacifist and would not countenance the use of force under any circumstances, against any threat, and under any auspices. However, such absolute pacifists are obliged to distinguish themselves from others who oppose involvement in this particular war on other bases.

Of the four broad types of pacifists identified by Elise Boulding, the three groups other

than the “absolutists” are deeply torn by this war. The “internationalists” have long recognized the enduring reality of lawlessness and aggression, and have called only for the exercise of legitimate restraining force under the auspices of the UN. While the prior arrangements necessary to follow the Charter’s procedures to the letter were not in place in this case, the world has come closer than ever before. The anti-war persons who oppose only some wars, see in this case that the Baghdad regime began the aggression, and refused to reverse it. They also see Saddam’s appalling record of internal and external brutality. Some can advance extenuating arguments, but many cannot. Finally, there are those pacifists who refuse personal involvement in war on grounds of conscience, but acknowledge the legitimacy of democratic governments, and so accept alternative service. This option has not yet arisen on any scale in this war, although some seem to prescribe that Canada as a nation adopt a similar kind of “non-combatant” status. This raises entirely different issues.

ALL MEMBER STATES OF THE UN ARE BOUND by international law to apply non-military sanctions against Iraq, and the progression of coercive measures toward military compulsion is clear in the Charter. As a respected member of the Security Council, Canada was directly involved in each decision. Conscious of the need to avoid abdicating the UN’s work to any one power, Canada was one of those nations that chose to send its ships to participate directly in enforcing the sanctions – in effect, an act of war – as authorized by the Security Council.

Canada then sent its fighter squadron to help protect the ships enforcing sanctions, and those aircraft have since been authorized to help protect other enforcement actions by the coalition. The debate over “offensive” and “defensive” roles is irrelevant in any war zone. It is the capabilities of the Canadian aircraft and their crews that shape what they do.

Canada can play a full role in efforts to bring hostilities to an end, and in post-war peacekeeping and reconstruction, as well as new cooperation and security arrangements in the region. Baghdad’s attacks on the UN testify that in the eyes of the violators, and their few supporters, the law and all its agents are now suspect. But for the rest of the world, there is an unprecedented consensus on which we can and must build for the future. □

– BERNARD WOOD