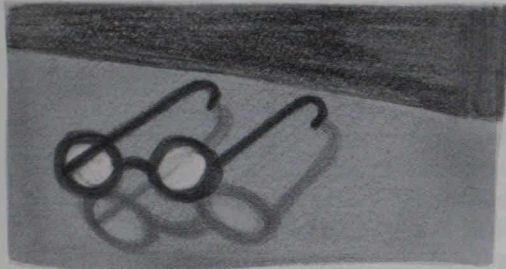


FROM THE DIRECTOR

Of Resigning Admirals and the Challenge of Making Defence Policy



SOMETHING HAD TO GIVE – WHAT WITH THE protracted stresses and strains on Canadian defence policy since the publication of the White Paper of 1987. Now the very public resignation of Vice-Admiral C.M. Thomas, Vice Chief of the Defence Staff, has brought some of the issues into the headlines, though it has not illuminated them all.

For those of us who have pressed for some time for an in-depth public debate of defence policy issues, the current openings should be constructively developed. We certainly hope that the government will not try again to design the “mother of all White Papers” – a fifteen or twenty-year plan, with elaborate re-equipment schemes costing many tens of billions of dollars. Annual White Papers, on the model now used by many other countries, would reduce the paralyzing enormity of the decision-making, and allow enough flexibility for the inclusion of major equipment purchases, along with adjustments to the policy framework.

The central issues now at stake relate to the role of the Canadian armed forces in the international security environment. The fact that that environment is no longer “dominated by the rivalry of East and West,” as it was still (erroneously) assessed in the 1987 White Paper, in no way diminishes the importance of maintaining a coherent defence policy. To the extent that there is any substantial, direct military threat to Canadian territory, of the sort that is the primary defence problem for most countries, the United States can be expected to defend against it as an extension of its own vital security interests. The main territorial defence questions for this country remain how, and how far, to cooperate in this continental effort.

Since 1939, however, Canadians and their governments have rejected a narrow territorial view of Canada’s vital security interests, and accepted that these require our military participation in collective security and collective defence operations – those of the United Nations and NATO respectively. This philosophy was extended with the innovation of peacekeeping, of which Canada was one of the main architects and remains one of the most important participants.

While the military dimensions and demands of NATO are declining substantially, UN

peacekeeping operations will continue to be needed. New forms of collective security and enforcement actions are more likely after the precedent of the action against Iraq. In addition, armed forces are called upon to play other roles, such as aid to the civil authorities in maintaining law and order, responding to natural disasters, or participating in coastal and airspace surveillance against violations of Canadian regulations on fisheries, pollution, immigration, contraband, narcotics, and so on.

When all this is added up, Canada appears transformed from a fortunate middle power relieved of the most compelling demands of military defence, to one faced with a range of serious military challenges, none of which embody the urgency of immediate national survival. In less happy lands, dire circumstances have the effect of simplifying the military choices. Complicating our task even further are the lead- and lag-time problems of acquiring major pieces of military equipment, and the politics of regional distribution of bases and expenditures – factors which are more sensitive than ever in the current, parlous state of the Canadian federation.

DEFENCE IS STILL A MAJOR ITEM IN THE “DISCRETIONARY” portion of federal expenditures, so we need to look at how much Canadians spend on defence, and what they spend it on. As the military historian, Desmond Morton recently pointed out:

Canadians are reminded so often of their meagre defence that they are surprised to find themselves, at \$12 billion, the sixth biggest military spender in NATO. For a little less money, as General Gerry Thériault argues, the Dutch get a well-equipped army corps, a small modern navy and a respectable little air force. Canadians get the best-paid, most rank-inflated military organization in the alliance.

Procrastination on defence issues is no longer an option. Amputations, rather than more dieting, are now inescapable, although the easiest answers are probably wrong. “Time to get out of Europe” would be just as foolish a slogan as “steady as she goes” – what with our troops sitting on a central front that no longer exists. American soldiers will almost certainly continue to be stationed in Europe to guarantee extended deterrence through NATO, so even a token Canadian military presence could yield some of the disproportionate political and diplomatic benefits that were long claimed for our larger contributions in the past.

These forces should probably no longer try to claim instant readiness for high-intensity

warfare. A nucleus left on the ground for potentially larger deployments might now be the appropriate commitment. Canada could pursue some special “niches” – for example, small numbers of military personnel in Europe focussed on verification of arms control agreements, and possibly even training and preparation for such peacekeeping functions as might emerge from the embryonic security frameworks being explored at the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe.

THE SIZE OF THE REGULAR ARMY IS LIKELY TO be reduced. The debate in the Thomas/de Chastelain correspondence about an “expeditionary force” will need to be clarified. What sizes and types of formation can Canada realistically plan on fielding internationally, with which weapons, and with what scale of transport capacity? To what extent will this capability also serve varying levels of peacekeeping, peace enforcement, and domestic requirements? How will the regular force and reserve resources be meshed, and what will it cost? Contrary to some widespread assumptions, neither lighter, air-transportable military formations, nor reliance on reserves, are necessarily cheaper options than what we do now, especially in the short term.

As for the maritime and air forces, there are basic debates about roles and equipment to be resolved. Admiral Thomas’ letter expressed special concerns about the navy, focussing primarily on the extraordinarily long acquisition cycles for warships, and the need to invest today in equipment that might be needed fifteen or twenty years from now. This, just at a time when the first of Canada’s six new frigates are coming into service. However, a simplistic and emotional debate about “blue water” and “coastal” navies is not going to satisfy taxpayers who want some reasonable explanation of the tasks for which the capabilities are supposed to be needed.

Canadians cannot have, will not pay for, and probably do not want the “balanced,” “combined arms” capabilities of a major military power. But going back to basics does not necessarily mean a narrow view of Canadian territorial defence – we are no more an isolated “fire proof house” than we were in the 1920s. In defence, as in many other issues, a new policy will require a much tougher approach to general economies, hard choices among competing possibilities, and some astute assessment of the appropriate niches for the Canadian military effort. □

– BERNARD WOOD