

DEFENCE POLICY FOR A NICE COUNTRY

With truly impressive consistency, defence policy makers in Canada get their futures wrong.

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THE RESIGNATION OF VICE-ADMIRAL CHARLES Thomas last spring told Canadians what a few nervous defence insiders had known for months: Ottawa was again in the throes of making defence policy – a trying experience for its primary victims, those who have chosen careers in the Canadian Forces.

It is hardly more reassuring for the rest of us. As of June 1991, the government is claiming its post-Cold War peace dividend. Whether all three services share comparable cuts or, as Admiral Thomas argues, the navy and air force survive at the expense of the army, the government is bent on drastic savings. The army, in particular, could lose its expertise in armoured warfare and in modern artillery. Where, after all, would such expertise, and the costly equipment it entails, be used? Where will we use the patrol frigates or the CF-18s? Even thinking about such possibilities is an activity fit only for wild-eyed warmongers.

The answer, of course, is that we don't know – but then we never do. Forecasting is a key skill in defence policy and a rare one, as authors of Perrin Beatty's blueprint discovered. The 1987 White Paper assured Canadians that we would still be toe-to-toe with the Warsaw Pact's huge tank armies well past the year 2000 and that we desperately needed nuclear-powered submarines to join the hunt for future unfriendly *Red Octobers*. By 1989, that seemed like ancient history. But who, in June of 1990, predicted that a quarter of the army would spend the summer camped around Montreal or that Canadian ships and CF-18s would be engaged in a full-scale war in the Persian Gulf?

WITH TRULY IMPRESSIVE CONSISTENCY, DEFENCE POLICY makers in Canada get their futures wrong. However, the thinkers of 1987 can also ease their chagrin by discovering how short-sighted were their predecessors. In 1949, the highly intelligent Brooke Claxton insisted that home defence would be the most probable role of Canada's defenders. The army was re-equipped to drop on Soviet lodgements in our Arctic. Within months we had sent ships and troops to Korea. By 1951, we were dispatching soldiers, fighter squadrons and every weapon we could spare to defend Europe. Paul Hellyer's 1964 white paper put peacekeeping first; Donald MacDonald, eight years later, put it last. In neither case were the results any different.

Our distant ancestors were no smarter. Until late August 1939, no one predicted that Canada would go to war to save Poland and only Winnipeg's J.W. Dafoe even dared to suggest that it might be a good thing. In July 1914, Toronto's *Globe* sternly warned Canada to look to its defences – against communicable diseases from the United States. Three weeks later, the Great War began. To be fair, staff officers in the Militia Department had a mobilization

scheme in their usual stack of plans. Sam Hughes, their redoubtable minister, tore it up and proceeded on his old wild intuition.

Even more important than bad guessing is the fact that Canadians have never paid a price for our mistakes. Not since 1814 has Canada been invaded, pillaged or even seriously threatened. We have no Pearl Harbour, no Rotterdam, no Blitz in our collective subconscious. The awful paradox for those of us who desperately believe in preparedness is that our scoffing enemies have been right. Canada's defence policies, politically-driven and dreadful as they are, have been a brilliant success. Even when we went to war in 1914, and 1939 and 1950, our allies bore the heat of battle until we had recruited, trained and equipped our forces. We blame the British for Hong Kong or Dieppe.

FUTURES GROW OUT OF THE PAST BUT THEY DON'T necessarily resemble them. A post-Cold War world is already more complex for Canada than the bi-polar world of 1987. Conceivably, it is even more dangerous. The notion of the US as an all-powerful arbiter of world peace ignores the profound limits of American economic and military power. The idea that the USSR is finished as a major power is a comparable self-deception.

Instead of the prudently-managed confrontation of two super-powers with attendant allies, we now live in a multi-polar world. Instead of the Middle East as uncontested winner in the instability sweepstakes, we face a smorgasbord of real and potential conflicts from the troubled frontiers of the USSR the Balkans, the Horn of Africa and the restless nations of South-East Asia.

This matters to a Canada that depends utterly on world trade for its standard of living. It also matters to the people of an increasingly multicultural country, reinforced by refugees from every troubled corner of the globe. Far from forgetting their homelands, Canada has always been populated by people who expect their adopted country to get involved – British ethnic loyalty made Canadians answer "Ready, Aye Ready," in 1914 and 1939. If Canadians really don't care about this world, why were we in the Gulf?

Canadians also face the horrid prospect of domestic conflict – further Okas promised by Canada's First Nations and the lurking possibility of civil disorder if

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Confederation shatters. While Canadians are nearly unanimous in rejecting force as an option in their future, there is enough intransigence in national attitudes to make explosions a frightening likelihood. As last summer revealed, the Canadian Forces are a last resort that can get involved very quickly. Setting aside the nightmare of civil war, we need to remember that the October Crisis of 1970 never pitted French against English but a democratically elected government against murderous fanatics.

Predicting specific scenarios is a mug's game. A country that buys more insurance than any other should understand that you don't pay premiums only