

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



Rampant orientalist stereotypes

Your editorial note on the Rushdie imbroglio and Stephen Handelman's "Letter from Soviet Uzbekistan" (*Peace&Security*, Spring 1989) both play on simplistic images of Islam and its political dimensions. While the editorial note apparently does so unconsciously and even benignly, Handelman forthrightly wields an axe.

On the one hand, you judiciously question the logic of severing diplomatic relations with Iran and undermining "civilized discourse among diverse cultures" over an issue immersed in ethnocentric as well as religious complexity. Whatever the literary merits of *The Satanic Verses* (and there is no consensus among the book's reviewers that Rushdie is "among the very people we need most"), it has given profound offense to millions, a fact that should be kept in perspective despite the melodramatic execution order from Teheran.

But you fall into the familiar trap of reducing the debate to an easy dichotomy between absolute free expression in the West and absolute communal conformity in the Muslim world. Individual freedom of expression is as *relative* under the Canadian Criminal Code and the 1982 Charter of Rights, as is the priority accorded to communal rights under Islamic legal doctrine. If many Muslims "don't buy" the free expression argument when it comes to Rushdie, Canadians also seem to have trou-

ble acknowledging that there is a legitimate argument involved over the scope of free speech in this matter, under our own legal precepts.

After all, such arguments occur daily over the language issue in Quebec and over granting public platforms to "experts" who are anti-semitic or otherwise racist. Why do we abruptly develop an absolutist paralysis when it comes to Muslim sensibilities?

The answer lies partly in the legacy of orientalist discourse in the West, predicated on stereotypes of an irrational and exotic Muslim East contrasted with a rational and orderly Judeo-Christian West. Instead of being exposed and replaced by a more meaningful discourse, orientalism threatens to gain new ground for reasons evident in Handelman's report on Soviet Muslims.

Somehow the nationalism of Estonians, Latvians and Armenians against Moscow's overreaching authority is deemed perfectly reasonable, but that of Uzbeks, Tadzhiks or Kazakhs is portrayed as some dark fundamentalist prospect. Never mind that the churches have played a prominent role in rallying nationalist sentiment from the Baltic to the Caucasus. The slightest hint of Muslim fervour conjures up images of militancy on the march. For Handelman, even "afternoon prayers in Bukhara contain an ominous message for Moscow itself."

By comparison, Richard N. Ostling's essay on the same subject in *Time* ("Islam Regains its Voice," 10 April 1989) observes: "In Azerbaidzhan, a few Muslims have been waving photos of the Ayatollah Khomeini or sprouting Iranian-style beards. However, there is sparse evidence of religious fanaticism, either inspired by neighboring Iran and Afghan-

istan or encouraged by the Soviets' own tolerance."

Now that even *The New York Times* has proclaimed the Cold War to be dead, are we going to see a new bogeyman in Islam? To paraphrase von Clausewitz, prejudice is the conduct of war by other means.

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Low-level flying issue not going away

In "This Labrador Business" (*Peace&Security*, Autumn 1988), Jocelyn Coulon's observation that the Montagnais Indians in Quebec appear to view the militarization of their lands as secondary to their land claims, deserves some clarification, lest readers go away with the impression that the Montagnais are just a few more red-skinned opportunists.

European pilots have been training in the hunting and trapping grounds of the Montagnais along the north shore of the St. Lawrence rivers since the summer of 1983. The hunters and their families from La Romaine have suffered most from the exercises in this area; only on occasion have band members from other communities been overflown. As military conquest has played an important role in the colonization of native people in North American and elsewhere, Montagnais leaders at La Romaine and at the offices of the Conseil Attikamek-Montagnais (CAM) were quick to react. They denounced the intrusions and spent approximately \$100,000 of council money on field studies and literature surveys in order to give their complaints

some credibility. (Native peoples are painfully aware that their opinions have not historically been held in very high esteem.)

La Romaine band, however, is only one among ten member bands of the CAM; the vast majority of the council members live far away from the training area. Naturally, they do not share the same concern over low-level military flight training as their La Romaine brothers and sisters. An all-out campaign centred on military flight training, along with categorical opposition to the training, is therefore out of the question. Furthermore, the Montagnais believe that through land claim negotiations they will be able, if not to eliminate the undesirable flights, at least to reduce the negative impact to their satisfaction. This process of negotiated mitigation of the impact of the flights would stand in stark contrast to the unilaterally imposed measures that the Department of National Defence has taken to reduce overflights of native encampments.

The CAM is now well on the way to land claims agreement after the signing of a framework accord with the two levels of government on 16 September. It is most likely that they will approach military flights in a less salient fashion, preferring to negotiate in private.

But the Innu in Labrador are a long way from negotiating any kind of agreement; they, in fact, produced a document in the 1970s that called for the virtual separation of the Innu nation from the rest of Canada. As their recent occupations of the runway in Goose Bay and the ensuing arrests attest, this issue is not about to go away.

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Quebec □