

HOME GROWN SKIRMISHES: CANADA AND THE WAR

The fighting is over, but arguments about how the Persian Gulf war got started, and Canada's role in it, go on.

BY CHARLOTTE GRAY

CANADIAN FORCES MAY ALL BE SAFELY HOME FROM THE MIDDLE East by now, but according to Canada's peace activists, the war in the Persian Gulf is not over. "Over a thousand people are still dying every day," proclaimed an appeal dropped through my mailbox in July. "There are no missiles or bombs – and the victims are not soldiers. They are children." The appeal came from the Canadian Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, a group that hit the news last spring with a sit-down protest by local physicians outside the Canadian Forces recruiting office in Hamilton, and an impassioned speech in Toronto by Nobel Laureate Dr. John Polanyi against the use of force.

By and large, the position adopted by CPPNW was the mushy middle ground of last spring's peace activism: a distaste for the bulldozing speed of Canadian government involvement (and for the Prime Minister's eagerness to shadow US actions), without a rigorous examination of the alternatives. "We didn't say that the use of force is never justified," explains Bill Singleton, executive director of CPPNW. "Our position was that, in this case, the scale of damage produced by a war would be so great, there was no way that the medical profession could cope with it. It's no pleasure to have been proven right."

In fact, the Gulf War provoked an intellectual crisis for many peace lobbyists. They differed amongst themselves on the appropriate response from the international community to a ruthless dictator, and on how Canada should position itself before and after the war. Ironically, there is more unanimity today, as they review events in the Middle East from the safe haven of officially-declared peace.

Post mortems on the conflict by critics like Singleton share an "I told you so" edge. With Saddam Hussein still in Baghdad, Iraq in ruins and Kuwaiti oilfields in flames, they argue that war achieved nothing. Each succeeding report of renewed Middle East arms sales or famine in Iraq re-ignites a moral certitude that had been shaken by the reality of Hussein's cruel ambitions.

THE DISARRAY OF CANADA'S PEACE MOVEMENT DURING THE CRISIS WAS hardly surprising, given its heterogeneous make-up. Some groups seek a radical restructuring of society, others search for progress in arms control and disarmament through established institutions. There is the turn-the-other-cheek pacifism of Mennonites and Quakers, reflected in the positions of Project Ploughshares (a broadly-based peace group sponsored by the Canadian Council of Churches since 1976). Then there is the feminist rejection, by the Voice of Women, of the patriarchal values of military alliances in particular and governments in general.

Many of the groups come under the umbrella of the Canadian Peace Alliance (CPA): a national coalition founded in 1985 which consists of 300 organizations (including labour and women's groups) and thousands of individuals. About seventy percent of the rank and file are women, a factor which is not reflected at the executive level.

Parallel to but independent of the peace movement are various think tanks, such as the Canadian Centre for Arms Control and Disarmament (CCACD) and the Canadian Institute for International Peace and Security (CIIPS).

These public policy research institutes bristle at the label "peace lobbies," because of the ideological freight it carries. Nevertheless, their mandate is to help mould public opinion on the need for international security and the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

They fed into the public debate last spring because their regular, formal briefings received better media coverage than ragtag demonstrations outside government offices. They helped shape public opinion – and public opinion helped shape policy. "The peace movement *per se* had little influence on ministers," a senior official at the Department of External Affairs told me, "but public opinion polls had a significant impact."

GIVEN THE JUMBLE OF INTERESTS AND INTENTIONS, IT WAS PREDICTABLE that the Gulf crisis highlighted the divisions within a movement in which idealism, legalism, internationalism and kneejerk anti-Americanism burn like unreliable propane jets. "For weeks," recalls Thomas Homer-Dixon, coordinator of Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Toronto, "many of us walked around feeling personally sick. We didn't come to our positions flippantly."

Despite his own impeccable credentials within the peace movement (he was a vociferous opponent of the US invasions of Grenada and Panama), Professor Homer-Dixon found himself a hawk among campus doves when he reluctantly concluded that force was the only recourse when dealing with a malevolent tyrant like Hussein.

We only had choices between terrible options. I didn't believe that sanctions could achieve peace without horrible human suffering. If Saddam Hussein had been allowed to continue, it is highly likely that he would have used nuclear weapons against Israel. I therefore felt that the wisest choice was the use of force as quickly and decisively as possible.

Last spring, however, the most audible voices from the peace movement were those which condemned the Persian Gulf War. And their loud condemnations helped electrify – albeit temporarily – a movement that was collectively running out of power. By mid-1990, trendier causes (campaigns to free Mandela or save the rain forest) had elbowed the peace movement out of the public eye. "But the Gulf refocused us on the issue of war itself," explains Singleton. At a February conference of the CPA in Montreal, leaders of peace groups from all over Canada united to lobby against the war. "Finally," said classical pianist Pierre Jasmin, a long-time separatist who is president of the Quebec group Artists for Peace, "Canadians and Québécois agree on something. Peace."

WHILE THE GULF WAR GALVANIZED THE PEACE MOVEMENT, PEACE ACTIVISTS did not produce solutions to the fundamental issue in the crisis: how the international community should deal with oppressive and dangerous dictators. This was partly because everything happened too fast. People accustomed to thinking in terms of East-West conflict struggled to adapt their intellectual analyses to a different context. Moreover, little leadership was given by the most visible spokespeople on the issues.

The absence of informed discussion was deplored by various analysts. "The Parliamentary debate was particularly unimpressive. Before