

True patriot love

Sep. 18, 2006. 03:29 PM

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A soldier, a young man in camouflage, plods along Lake Shore Blvd. carrying a 50-pound pack. He's a reservist in training, he says, not bound for Afghanistan as we might have feared, but for a race in Ottawa. A sigh of relief. He's not going to be in harm's way.

Though brief, this was a complicated encounter: a stirring of unfamiliar feelings — patriotic pride followed swiftly by the fear for other soldiers serving Canada by battling the Taliban. It's a conflict in which 32 soldiers and one diplomat had been killed as of last week. Their names have become familiar to us; we've seen their families in mourning and their flag-draped caskets returning home.

But then another image comes to mind: girls in Afghanistan going safely to school, something that was outlawed by the Taliban in the mid-1990s. There were stories of teachers beheaded in front of their students. But now schools are being rebuilt and, though it's still dangerous to attend, about one-third of Afghanistan's five million students are girls. A step forward; a reason, perhaps, to stay the course.

Today, Toronto will witness a public show of patriotism in one of the biggest military parades in the city's history. Thousands of service men and women and veterans will march along University Ave. to Queen's Park, where a new veterans' memorial will be unveiled. A 30-metre granite wall, the memorial is smaller but similar in style to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C., and a reminder that Canada is again at war.

A war, or a mission — depends who you ask — that summons conflicting loyalties and opens a debate on what constitutes patriotism. How are ordinary Canadians to respond? What's the right patriotic note?

There are bumper stickers these days, imported from the United States but altered with a maple leaf for Canada, that say, "Support our troops."

But there are new ones you see occasionally, too: "Support our troops: bring them home." Can this be a patriotic sentiment — to support our troops but not the mission?

Furthermore, there's the worrisome thought that by supporting our troops we are drawn further into America's dangerous war on terror. Can we support our troops without supporting the Bush administration?

As Canadians, we set limits on patriotism. It's one of the ways we define ourselves as different from Americans, says Sharon Cook, University of Ottawa professor of education and history.

"One of the many things Canadians worry about and that makes us anxious is that we can quickly go



FRED CHARTRAND / CANADIAN PRESS
Stephen Harper, giving a speech on the fifth anniversary of 9/11 last week, surrounded himself with Canadians who lost family in the attacks on the World Trade Center and by family members with loved ones serving with the Canadian Forces in Afghanistan.

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over the edge in support for anything," she said last week. "One way is to become wrapped in the American hyper-patriotism we've come to associate with the post-9/11 world.

"This anxiety about being too extreme is deeply rooted in our history, and you can see it in the struggle in Afghanistan and wanting to support young men and women there while not wanting to be drawn into a conflict with which we don't have complete sympathy."

Recent polls show that about half of Canadians disagree with our role in Afghanistan, saying it has not been debated properly, its purpose and exit strategy are muddy, and the 2,300 soldiers there should be brought home. NDP leader Jack Layton said just that last week at the party's convention in Quebec.

Many people of the baby-boomer generation are not used to seeing young Canadian soldiers, part of a volunteer (as opposed to conscripted) army, facing death. "It's a new feeling for many people and particularly wrenching for many Canadians of my generation," says Cook. "Sacrifice is something we don't see in a public way all that often. It's very striking to see young people who have chosen this path, and who could have done any variety of things in their lives."

Patriotism, as she observed, is more nuanced in Canada — it's held in check — and less strident than in the United States, where it has been ostentatiously embraced by the political right and is used to sell the war in Iraq.

(A University of Chicago survey released in June showed that the United States ranked first among 34 nations in national pride, while Canada ranked sixth.)

It looked like Prime Minister Stephen Harper was doing just that, playing to patriotism to sell the war, when he linked Afghanistan to the war on terror on Sept. 11 in a televised address flanked by soldiers, flags and families who had lost loved ones in the 9/11 terror attacks.

Earlier this year, Harper was reluctant to permit a debate on Canada's role in Afghanistan. Questioning the mission might have been demoralizing for Canada's troops, he said, though he finally relented.

Carleton University Professor Andrew Johnston says patriotism is a political tool often used by vested interests to create internal solidarity. Questioning the government in wartime can be interpreted as aiding the enemy — a charge the Bush administration has levelled more than once at U.S. media.

It leads people to say that, if you're not in agreement with government policies, you're not patriotic or, worse still, you're a traitor.

"Patriotism can be dangerous because it implies an `us,' those who adopt an uncritically loyal stance to government policies, versus `them,' people who call for debate or ask tough questions," says University of Ottawa professor Joel Westheimer.

On the other hand, worrying about the fate of our troops might be bit of a cop-out.

"Nobody wants to see 19- and 20-year-olds die," says Westheimer. "Who doesn't want to support our troops? `Support our troops' is a vacuous cliché. It's not a call to anything.

"Being patriotic is critically examining and having public debate on where our troops should be sent and why."

In its broadest interpretations, patriotism is love of country, but it can also be love of the land and the principles underlying democracy, says Westheimer, who holds the University Research chair in Democracy and Education. It can be something definably Canadian — our health-care system, multiculturalism, even poutine, sugar pie, the romantic North, the Maple Leafs and Les Canadiens.

Professions that emphasize public interest over self-interest — firefighters, nurses, political and social

activists — can be thought of as patriotic, too. Just think of the New York City firemen and police officers killed in the line of duty on Sept. 11, 2001.

Patriotism is also about fighting for your country's values, especially when the government of the day challenges those values: think of the civil rights activists in the U.S. in the 1960s, anti-apartheid fighters in South Africa or, less dramatically, citizens here in Canada demanding that the government explain why Canadian troops are in Afghanistan.

"Clearly, a patriotic citizen is one who has the courage to stand up and say the emperor has no clothes," says Westheimer.

But patriotism has always been most closely associated with the military. The new Canadian Forces television recruitment ads, with bombs exploding and armed soldiers bursting through doors, boost the heroic images of soldiers in danger, a change from the previous images of earnest peace-keeping men and women armed with radar and binoculars.

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Joel Westheimer

University of Ottawa

"We have plenty of crises, so we don't need a war to galvanize a nation. But war captivates public interest in a way ongoing, endemic social problems have not," says Westheimer.

The war in Afghanistan has done just that — galvanize the nation. It is forcing us to question our assumptions about who we are.

Quebec pollster Alain Giguere, president of CROP Inc., says his research shows when Canadians are asked for symbols of their national identity, they chose the health-care system above all else — above hockey, the beaver and bilingualism. "The fact that we shared the wealth, that we didn't want people to die in the streets, showed that in this country was a very high level of humanism."

Giguere thinks this explains our conflicted feelings toward the Canadian Forces, because they have become, in the minds of many, a peacekeeping entity. "We see boys getting killed for reasons we may not understand. Will they really make a difference there? Canada, as a sort of brand, incarnates humanism and the army incarnates that as well, helping people in need around the world. It explains why we are uncomfortable when they are killing people when we are at war."

Even so, when it comes to war and young Canadians dying in foreign lands, something hardens; absolutes are invoked. Can you be patriotic and still call for Canada's troops to come home?

"It *is* patriotic to recall our troops," says Jack Layton. "The most important thing we can do to support and respect our troops is by asking questions and then crafting, with the utmost care, the missions we ask them to complete."

In contrast, there's the view of Harry Giles, lawyer, educator and founder of the Toronto French School.

"Absolutely not, I think it's treason," he says.

"We are involved in a life-and-death struggle, and if we in the West don't stop them (fundamentalist fanatics in Afghanistan), they will destroy Western civilization."

Giles, who is 77 and credited with bringing French immersion to Canada, is not opposed to criticism of government policy. But if Canada pulls out of Afghanistan, leaving behind its NATO partners, "we'd be publicly proclaimed as cowards and treaty-breakers."

This is what Johnston calls a masculinized version of patriotism: "Standing tough is more important than anything else... and withdrawing from Afghanistan is an emasculating retreat; stepping down from a fight is a form of defeatism."

Retired Maj.-Gen. Lewis MacKenzie doesn't view NDP leader Layton's call to return the troops as unpatriotic. Instead, he says, it merely smacks of domestic politics.

"I don't believe in 'my country right or wrong,'" MacKenzie says. "If an individual recognizes national policy is not appropriate, the whole basis of democracy obliges you to disagree and not just line up behind the flag."

And those who want Canadian soldiers to withdraw from Afghanistan because they are being killed haven't got it right either.

"If you want the (troops) to be safe and not put in danger, you haven't accepted that the mission they were sent to execute is honourable and achievable. Because you're concerned with their safety is understandable... but that's not patriotism. That's sympathy and empathy."

Box scores and body counts are not reason for leaving a mission, he says emphatically.

Doug Pritchard, co-director of Christian Peacemaker Teams, sees it differently and feels no less patriotic for his views. His patriotism is linked to Canada's role in international affairs and support for organizations like the United Nations.

"Absolutely, the troops should come home," Pritchard says. "That's the best way to support them. I'd like to see them bring home 2,000 troops and send 2,000 peacemakers, because violence begets violence."

He recalls a story told by Jim Loney, the Christian Peacemaker Team volunteer kidnapped in Baghdad and held for 118 days until his release last March.

"One of Jim's captors was prepping him for a video and said, 'I want you to thank Martin.' Jim couldn't think of what he meant and then he understood that he was referring to Canada's refusal to be part of the coalition that attacked Iraq. There is an acute awareness of our country's actions around the world, and what troubles me about this adventure in Afghanistan is much of what we've built up in Canada is at risk in this impossible mission."

This being Canada, some are advocating a third way. "We have to get out of the trap of either/or: that we have to be completely out of Afghanistan or we have to be proud of our boys and they have to be fully involved," says Cheshmak Farhoumand-Sims, an assistant professor of conflict studies at St. Paul's University in Ottawa. "There's a middle ground."

That middle way is to keep troops in Afghanistan but not in combat. They should protect civilians and work toward stabilization, she says.

There's something different in this war, though. Canada's army is small and every death has been reported, the biographies of the fallen fleshed out and made human. We have to come to grieve for each one of them. This is new.

"Casualties are getting way more publicity than should happen," says MacKenzie. "Traffic accidents in Afghanistan and a poor unfortunate soldier killed — there's national coverage of the funeral in Canada. It's in the face of people on a daily basis. People say we're not winning, you should bring our troops home. If that's the case — we're leaving because it's difficult — then everyone else leaves too and the Taliban takes over."

"It relates to patriotism, because our soldiers are there trying to keep that from happening."

MacKenzie recalled while serving in the Balkans between 1992 and 1996 that about 24 Canadian soldiers were killed and more than 100 seriously injured.

"I don't recall one comment or article calling for our withdrawal. There was no controversy back home whether we should be there or not. It had the mantle of peacekeeping, even though it wasn't. They accepted it was this touchy-feely peacekeeping and Canada should be there.

"The difference is now it's a controversial mission that isn't well understood."

And yet soldiers long to be there. It's what they are trained to do. It's their definition of patriotism. Charles Pitkin, 24, a lieutenant in the Royal Regiment of Canada, a reserve unit, says his goal is to serve overseas in a few years. For now, he works out of local armouries overseeing basic qualifications for reservists.

Four generations of his family have served in the military, starting with his great-grandfather in World War I. Like them, he was drawn to military service because of love of country. He says part of a soldier's task is a willingness to die in service of his country and to help others in distant lands live in the same safety Canadians enjoy.

"It's an honour to go," he says.



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