

Sometimes, making peace means making war

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American Myths, a five-part series aimed at addressing Canadian misapprehensions about our southern neighbour, is a joint project of the National Post, the Dominion Institute and the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute. In this first instalment, historian J.L. Granatstein writes on the myth of Canada as a nation of peacekeepers and the U.S. as a nation of warmongers.

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'Canadians keep the peace; Americans fight wars.' That cliched statement, that Canadian myth, is now accepted as gospel truth from St John's to Vancouver. Canadians proudly cite Lester B. Pearson's Nobel Peace Prize, won for his role in stabilizing the Suez Crisis of 1956. They point to the grand peacekeeping monument in Ottawa and to the back of their \$10 bill showing Canadian peacekeepers. We are the good guys in white hats or, at least, blue berets. Canadians, we like to think, are natural-born peacekeepers.



And the Yanks? The Americans are the superpower that fought in Vietnam and sprayed its jungles with Agent Orange. They waged war against the Nicaraguan and Cuban peoples, invaded Iraq twice, and continue to station troops all over the world to serve U.S. interests and ensure control over oil supplies. If we're the good guys, the Americans are the world's bullies. Too many Canadians accept this view of their neighbours.

Yes, the Americans are a troublesome people. They are suffused with a grandiose sense of their "manifest destiny." They want to make the world's peoples more like them, with a McDonald's in every town and Coke in every grocery store. They bluster and boast, and wave the flag.

But let's look at the last 100 years. Would the Allies have won the Great War if Woodrow Wilson's America, promising a war to end all wars and pressing idealistically for the creation of a League of Nations, had not entered the conflict in 1917? Would Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini and Hideki Tojo have been defeated if America had not sent its soldiers and sailors and the products of its factories and fields to war? Would Western Europe have been protected from Soviet aggression if the United States hadn't galvanized the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty?

Yes, Canadians have done their part in the great conflicts, too. There are more than 100,000 dead soldiers, sailors and airmen to testify to our commitment to freedom and democracy. But Canada is a small, relatively weak country and the United States is a superpower. However much Canada contributed, none of it would have mattered without the support of allies. And the most powerful ally, the indispensable ally, was and remains the United States.

Yet Canadians sneer at their neighbours. They were late into the First World War and then claimed they had won it, we say. They were late again in the Second World War and once again believed they had saved Britain's bacon.

In the Korean War that began in 1950, Mike Pearson -- then Canada's foreign minister -- pressed so hard at the United Nations for a truce that the Americans came to resent his preaching bitterly. Those moralistic Canadians were at it again while the United States paid most of the price.

But unhappy as they may have been over the Canadian position on a Korean armistice, the Americans did listen to Canada at the UN and in Washington. Ottawa had earned the right to be heard by sending a brigade group of 5,000 soldiers to fight in Korea, by dispatching destroyers to serve off the coast of that Asian peninsula, and by using the air force's transports to ferry men and supplies to the Far East. Canada paid its dues in the war and, because it did, Washington, grumpily heard the nation's voice.

A few years later, the United States even listened to Canada's demands that the air defence of North America, the defence of America's own soil, be shared. The North American Air Defence Command, created in 1957-58, was a joint operation with Canadian officers sitting side by side with their U.S. counterparts. But when the Cuban missile crisis exploded in 1962 and North America was threatened by a Soviet nuclear attack, the Canadian public belatedly realized their surface-to-air missiles were unarmed, their aircraft ill-equipped, and their government reluctant even to put its military on full alert. The Americans did the heavy lifting, just as they had always done.

Canada had become tired. Our governments didn't want to pay the bills for real defence. Our politicians sought after Nobel Prizes by tilting toward neutrality in the Cold War. And over time, the country's contribution to NATO's forces were progressively cut, then eliminated entirely in 1993. Let someone else pay the bills, our prime ministers said. If the United States wanted to be a superpower, always flexing its muscles, let U.S. taxpayers carry the can.

When this slackness in defence is pointed out, we revert to the claim that we are the world's pre-eminent peacekeepers. The Americans fought the wars, sure, but we kept the peace. That was useful, wasn't it?

Well, sort of. For years, from 1950 onward, Canadians claimed they were the only nation to be represented in every UN peacekeeping mission. Kashmir, the Israeli-Arab borders, Cyprus, Yemen, West New Guinea -- the list went on and on. The record was good, no doubt about it, but Canadians forget too much. Most of the crises were never resolved and most of the missions went on forever. Canada went to Cyprus in 1964 and finally pulled out, completely frustrated, three decades later. The Arab-Israeli conflict is never ending, and the tussle between India and Pakistan over Kashmir can flare up at any moment. Peacekeeping has its benefits -- but without peacemaking to force all parties toward a resolution, it didn't work.

When peacekeeping morphed into more vigorous, more dangerous peacemaking and peace enforcement in the 1990s, Canada suddenly discovered that its shrunken military couldn't do the job for long. In Somalia, our Airborne Regiment saw two of its soldiers murder a young boy, and the unit was ultimately disbanded. Our troops serving in the former Yugoslavia performed well, but they also seemed to be hampered by Ottawa's limited rules of engagement and shoddy equipment. When a single infantry battalion was dispatched to Afghanistan in 2002 to serve under U.S. command in the war against terrorism, the soldiers wore the wrong uniforms for desert conditions and had to rely on the American forces for helicopters and close air support.

The harsh truth is that Canada has largely had a free ride while the United States has taken most of the risks, paid the lion's share of the bills and, for its pains, borne the brunt of the world's abuse. The Canadian Forces, its strength shrunken, much of its equipment obsolete, cannot even credibly defend this nation's air space, sea approaches and land mass. The only question is how much longer the United States will wait before it declares that its own national security makes it necessary for Washington to openly assume responsibility for Canadian defence. Can we still call ourselves a sovereign state if that occurs?

Canadians need to be more clear-headed about the world. They have national interests, not just values. They must defend them or see them overridden by others. The Americans have their own national interests, and have demonstrated they will do what is necessary to protect them.

Sometimes, the Americans make mistakes, and Canadians will let them know they're wrong. But is shouting abuse the way to be heard in Washington? Or is co-operating with the U.S. politically and, if it serves Canada's interests, militarily a better way to proceed? It worked for Mike Pearson during the Korean War. It might still work in a very different but no less dangerous world.

Canada is part of Western civilization, and we share the values and beliefs of that civilization. So do

Americans. We must get beyond the reflexive desire to criticize the superpower next door and to understand that if the United States is crippled, we too will suffer. We can pretend we keep the peace if it pleases us to do so, but we simply must recognize that without America's strength and will, our civilization will disappear. More realism, fewer myths, please.

Historian J.L. Granatstein writes on Canadian defence and foreign policy. He is a fellow of the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute.) American Myths is made possible in part by a grant from the Donner Canadian Foundation. For more information on the Series visit www.cdfai.org or www.dominion.ca; Tonight: Watch the American Myths TV series exclusively on Canadian Learning Television, 10:30 p.m. EST.

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