

It seemed to sneak up on us, really – this awareness that our country is at war. One day, our soldiers were peacekeepers, performing what we thought were benign and thoughtful deeds somewhere out there in the world. The next, they were in Afghanistan, fighting “the enemy.” The head of the Canadian military, General Rick Hillier, told us our soldiers had to “kill scumbags.” The media gave us a daily score of how many Taliban insurgents we had blown away. Canadians were left wondering when everything changed.

It’s more than just our role in Afghanistan that gives people the sense that we’ve turned to another chapter in this country’s history or that maybe we’ve cracked open a whole new book. The story we’ve read to ourselves so many times that we’ve memorized it – that of a wide-eyed young nation of peacekeepers, earnest and caring, punching above our diplomatic weight and having some modest but important effect on international affairs; crafting a “just society” on the home front and redistributing our collective wealth from rich to poor; a conscientious people, perhaps a bit dull but nonetheless aware of the world in a way our neighbours to the south could never be – is our cherished mythology. Most of you weren’t even born when that narrative was written. But you’ve inherited it. You breathe it in your Canadian air. But it’s changing.

Al Gore noticed the change, lamenting recently in a speech that we had lost our way and the world needed for us to get it back: “There is very strong support for Canada once again providing leadership in the world, fighting above its weight class and showing moral authority to the rest of the world.” Gore was complaining about the Harper government’s plan to opt out of Kyoto but the idea of Canada as a beacon of moral guidance is our international reputation, deserved or not. “That’s what Canada is known for,” Gore concluded.

The former U.S. vice president is not the only one who wonders what’s come over us. Britain’s celebrated environment writer George Monbiot wrote in the Canadian forward to his book *Heat* that “in the court of international opinion, Canada has been let off lightly.” Monbiot painfully pokes at our time-honoured narrative: “You think of yourselves as a liberal and enlightened people,” he says of our environmental record, “but you could scarcely do more to destroy the biosphere if you tried.”

He goes on to say:

“Thanks to the efforts of (your prime minister), Canada’s global reputation is now beginning to catch up with its performance. When your government says that Canada cannot reach its Kyoto targets for green house gas emissions, it means that Canada does not intend to try. ...Having presented himself as a man who can make tough choices, your prime minister declared himself an irresolute wimp as soon as he was presented with upsetting a few industrial lobbyists or helping to save the planet.”

Monbiot says this did not begin with the Conservatives: “It’s true that the Liberal party made it easy for him. When Harper took office, Canadian emissions were twenty-four to thirty-five percent higher than they were in 1990....they talked a better line than Harper but presided over just as much environmental destruction.”

As for our economic promise: what of the just society? We think back to Pierre Elliott Trudeau. The redistribution of wealth. Take from the rich and give to the poor? Many Canadians like to believe this is what distinguishes us from the sharply divided class society of the United States. But the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives burst another of our mythic bubbles in a recent study. The income gap between rich and poor is the widest it’s been in thirty years. The wealthiest ten per cent of Canadians earn eighty-two times what the most disadvantaged Canadians earn. That’s three times the difference that existed in 1976. Both the Liberals and the Conservatives continue the tradition of taking from the advantaged and giving back to them. Tax cuts instead of income distribution has been the way we look at fairness. Our income distribution has become, for the first time, the same as that of the United States.

The hard truth is that Canada’s love affair with its self-image has not been supported by reality in many years. Contrary to popular perception, we have not been a nation of peacekeepers since the last century. We now rank 52<sup>nd</sup> on the list of nations contributing soldiers to UN missions. But even the assignments we accepted over the past fifteen years were often violent and coercive, and I’m not just talking about Afghanistan. The iconic image of the Canadian in a blue beret, handing out candies to kiddies, dissolved long ago in far away places such as the Medak Pocket of Croatia in 1994, where Canadians fought with every weapon they had in order to secure a region they found had already been brutally ethnically cleansed. They possibly killed as many as fifty-seven Croats in the battle. After they returned home, soldiers of the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry were instructed by their commanders to keep the nightmare to themselves, lest the Canadian public be faced with a reality that contradicts the more comfortable narrative.

The battle of Medak Pocket was the first occasion, for me, when I noticed this disconnect between what we do and what we think we do, who we are and who we think we are. And it also made me realize that we cannot become ourselves until we acknowledge that contradiction.

The wars in the Balkans – Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia – were not well covered by Canadian journalists even though Canadian soldiers played a pivotal role there. But we journalists failed to show up. We failed to inquire and to investigate. We missed the boat. If we had been there, the Canadian public would have been there and then, perhaps, we would have a better understanding of what we are now doing in Afghanistan.

In the summer of 1993 a battalion of the PPCLI were moved into an area of Croatia known as the Medak Pocket. Croat forces had ethnically cleansed most Serbs from the region and all that was left was a small group who were unwilling or unable to relocate. The Croats began to eliminate the last remaining holdouts right under the noses of the Canadian peacekeepers.

Colonel Jim Calvin, the battle group commander, decided that he would not and could not sit by and allow the ethnic cleansing to continue, even though as peacekeepers they were required to only engage with the Croatian or Serbian military if it was in self defence.

The PPCLI soldiers quickly found themselves in full combat – in fact, they fought the biggest battle Canadians had been part of since the Korean War. The Princess Pats killed an unknown number of Croats that day, possibly as many as fifty-seven. When the battle was over, the Canadian peacekeepers moved into the Medak Pocket to liberate the civilians there. But they found only corpses. Mutilated, murdered, robbed and annihilated. Their wells were poisoned, their houses blown up or burned down.

Back in Ottawa, the DND was facing another crisis: the Somalia Affair. Canadian soldiers had killed two Somali youths – one of them was tortured to death. The Canadian government was engaged in a cover up. And so when Ottawa heard about the battle in Medak, the government went into damage control. As the PPCLI soldiers returned home after the Medak Pocket event they were warned to tell no one what had transpired.

Had we been doing our jobs as journalists, such a cover-up would have been impossible. But the story remained a secret, more or less, for years. Until the soldiers began to get sick. Some went blind. Others became mentally ill. Several committed suicide.

A board of inquiry conducted an investigation into all of the illnesses and concluded that the soldiers suffered a kind of post-traumatic stress disorder. The trauma of the events in Medak was compounded by the denial of those events. They could not be who they were – heroes – because Canada could not acknowledge what they did. Killing people, even in self-defence, is a violation of our self-image as peacekeepers.

I'm concerned that we are facing something similar in Afghanistan. General Rick Hiller, as ham-fisted as he might be, is telling the truth. We are at war; our soldiers are killing people, and not just the Taliban.

Canadians are ambivalent about the mission. The government of the day (the Liberals were no different) know this and attempt to put the best face on the mission. Stability. Nation-building. Peace-making. These are euphemisms for war.

An important book by an Australian social scientist called *A History of Killing* describes what happens to soldiers when they are not acknowledged. If their societies do not embrace their war efforts – celebrate them – then the anti-social act of killing – even if it's state-sanctioned killing – begins to eat away at them. I saw it happen to the soldiers who were in Medak.

Canadian soldiers sometimes kill people. They engage in combat. If we don't want this to be part of who we are, we must decide that categorically. And decide what role we want to play.

Years later when the soldiers of Medak began to tell people about their experiences, their friends and even their family members reacted with disbelief. If such a large battle had taken place, they would have read about it or heard it on the news. They didn't, so it didn't happen. The soldiers themselves began to doubt their own experience.

Those of us who have covered Afghanistan are only too aware of the spin that the government has attempted to put on our mission in South Asia. Embedded reporters have limited access to the action. When we do accompany the soldiers, all too often they express, privately, their exasperation with a mission gone wrong or ill-conceived from the beginning. The humanitarian part of the project – the nation-building of Afghanistan that was the bedrock of our commitment there – has hardly materialized. We observers fear we are in a quagmire that may take years more than Canadians will commit to, in order to dig our way out.

As for our commitment to international environmental standards, Canada as a champion of the Kyoto Accord is another myth even under the Liberals who have touted its virtues, if you can believe Jean Chretien's former policy adviser. In a speech in London, Ontario last year, Eddie Goldenberg admitted that the previous Liberal government took on its Kyoto commitments knowing full well we would never meet them: "I am not sure that Canadian public opinion – which was overwhelmingly in favour of ratifying Kyoto in the abstract – was then immediately ready for some of the concrete implementation measures that governments would have to take to address the issue of climate change," Mr. Goldenberg said.

Our involvement at the last Kyoto summit in Bali left people from around the world wondering, what had Canada become? Once the leader of the Kyoto initiative and celebrated as one of the great champions of the environment, we were all but invisible at Bali, with the exception of Environment Minister John Baird padding around in his flip-flops, ducking in and out of sessions. The new Canadian image projected around the world is that of the sprawling tar sands project in Alberta and photographer Edward Burtinsky's spectacular images of one of the biggest manufactured landscapes on the planet.

To get another picture of ourselves abroad, you only have to ask the Mayan Q'echi of Guatemala whether or not Canada is kind and decent. Since Canadian-owned Skye Resources had them evicted from mineral rich land the natives claim is theirs, our name is mud in the community of El Estor. Mining rights to the land have been disputed since 1965 when INCO obtained the nickel deposit from a violent military dictatorship in power at the time. But a few years ago, our name became well known to Indians who clung to what was left of their land rights, as they fought to stay where they had been for centuries.

But in truth, it's become unwise for travelers to sport their maple leaf decals on their back packs in many parts of the world where Canadian mining companies are flourishing – and helping to pad out our mutual fund values, I might add. We profit from these adventures.

As we did in southern Sudan.

I investigated the role that Talisman Energy of Calgary played in the development of the oil fields there, where ethnic cleansing – on the part of the Sudanese military – was the precursor to fossil fuel extraction. It was only when the United States threatened to remove the company from the stock exchange that it finally backed down from production.

The truth is that Eddie Goldenberg is right. We are not ready to slow down our consumption or our extraction. Life is too good, too comfortable. We think that recycling exonerates us. That green technology will replace traditional technology and all will be corrected. Meanwhile, Canadians are among the most wasteful citizens of the planet. We have to see ourselves for what we are. Not custodians of the earth but consumers of it.

The classic Canadian story has been questionable for more than a dozen years, if the story of our generosity and caring was ever accurate in the first place. It's only now becoming obvious to observers outside of Canada like Al Gore and George Monbiot. But if the old narrative doesn't work, then what's replacing it? Are we becoming a country that projects power? That engages in war without end? That fails to live up to its environmental commitments? A society where a small minority is to enjoy the vast majority of wealth? Are we to wake up, some day soon, and look in the mirror to see a collective image we don't like: the Ugly Canadian staring back from the glass?

And most important, for you and for me, what role do we play as journalists? The place where the new narrative will be written, revised, shaped, critiqued and edited will be in our domain. Even more than the politicians, the social scientists, the pollsters, the professors, the soldiers and the students, journalists will be the ones through which the ideas will be communicated. Not just through what we quote or cover, but in what we choose to cover. In our selection of stories. In the voices we include or fail to include. In the

degree to which we are even open to the idea that the country is changing. We will write the first and maybe even the final draft of the new narrative.

Have you noticed that our national media are covering United States politics more closely than Canadian these days? In part, it's our endless fascination with all things American. But it's also because something extraordinary is going on south of us. The United States appears to be re-inventing itself – again! As it has many times before. A black man and a woman are vying to lead the Democratic Party. One of them may become president. The excitement around that campaign, at least for now, is palpable.

When we cast our eyes on our own political landscape though, we feel cheated, disappointed. But we are in the same political moment. None of the old truisms work, just as they don't in the U.S. That may frustrate us, even scare us. But this could be a moment of our greatest inspiration. As dull as our politics might seem, so was Lester Pearson against the backdrop of the Kennedy era. Or Tommy Douglas against FDR. And yet look at the legacy of those two men, the Canadian self that came from the vision of those Canadian leaders. They wrote the narrative that now needs revisions and we need visionaries to do it again.

Over decades and now more than a century, it's become clear that we don't want to be a global dominatrix, a nuclear power, an economic bully, an international scoundrel. We want to be the world's nice guys, sporting the flag on our luggage, arriving at hot spots as the conciliator, respected as fair and decent partners of industry. But can we be fighting a war in Afghanistan and pursuing the idea of being an energy super-power, as Stephen Harper has told international audiences, while holding to our former self-image? Can we export our knowledge of resource extraction without exploiting others? Can we take the best of what we were and apply it to what we are becoming?

Shortly before Canada went to war in southern Afghanistan, Harper himself started to bandy about the idea that Canada was on the cusp of a new narrative – one that he planned to author. The same notion turned up among leadership candidates for the federal Liberals who argued that “the natural governing party” should be the scribe, with Michael Ignatieff insisting that he has the first draft ready to go. None disputed that the Canadian story is – in fact needs – changing. The argument is about who should shape it.

My sense is that the new narrative that's emerging is a coming of age story. A tale of lost innocence. This isn't necessarily a bad thing. Like people, nations grow up and they often go through the same pains and longings as budding adults do. As innocence is replaced with experience; it matters less what the experience is than what it is we do with the experience.

Letters and e-mails I have received from people over my years as a journalist show me that people have a striking capacity to learn and accept new things. In the 1990s, I was often surprised by sentiments from viewers or readers who thought Canada should consider having no military at all, to send only aid workers and development professionals into the foreign field. Now I find it just as intriguing to hear from people who think there is a reason to be aggressive in Afghanistan, that the only way to defeat the Taliban is to stand up to them militarily.

It's of interest that – according to the opinion polls – Canadians now accept that we must kill in certain circumstances. And even more surprising, there's an understanding that our own soldiers will die. Considering our engagement in two world wars, this should not be shocking. Yet for post-colonial Canada it has not been easy to accept. Most important, though, is the sentiment that we want to decide for ourselves what is an appropriate use of lethal force. We don't want to be lured into U.S. interests of which we have never been more skeptical than we are now.

I don't think it's enough merely to say that we want the Canadian Forces to return to the former role of peacekeepers. Classic peacekeeping hardly exists anywhere in the world anymore. Nor can we deny what we are doing to the environment. Blaming it all on the U.S. or the oil companies doesn't work either.

These conditions are part of our songs of experience. A lament for lost innocence but nonetheless, the beginning of a new narrative. How will you help to tell the story? How will you engage Canadians?

In my travels, I often heard incredible stories of human suffering mixed with fear, escape and hope from ordinary people whom I interviewed. In Africa, Bosnia, Ukraine, China, Afghanistan, I have left behind people in the worst of circumstances, taking with me

only their tales of woe. I often wondered why they told me these very personal narratives. Did they think I could help them? That the cavalry would arrive? That they would be saved? I rarely got that sense, even though it's what we both wished for.

I believe they were caught up in the overwhelming human need to share experiences. To communicate. And by doing so, to join with the rest of humanity in one shared experience. To add to that universal jest of God.

Canadian soldiers returning from Afghanistan carry with them experiences that are life altering. Their stories could be the raw material of the new narrative and perhaps the soldiers could even be some of the authors. They have faced the cold new reality of Canada on the world stage. Or we could cling to more comfortable, sentimental tales of what we would like to be.

Over the next two decades, the complexion of this country will change almost entirely, as we become probably the most multi-ethnic state on the planet, and so will the national narrative change. More likely, and more appropriately, the new Canadian narrative will be written by an entirely different author – by Canadians who look at themselves in the mirror and see a face of colour looking back at them. These Canadians are people who have come from places of conflict and have seen, first hand, what's required to stop aggression; they know the effects of severe environmental degradation and they know from experience what happens when globalization arrives in places where people have no rights.

Whether the established minority likes it or not, these are the people who will craft our story and define the national myth. I say pass them the paper and pen and let them begin. We have everything to gain.

And I pass the torch to a new generation of journalists. I hope that you will have the opportunity to tell peoples' stories. But I also hope that you will accept the responsibility of informing our songs of experience.

Thank you.