



IS CANADA AT WAR?

by General (Ret'd) Paul Manson

President, Conference of Defence Associations Institute

Good question.

The recent House of Commons debate on our military involvement in Afghanistan has drawn attention to the larger question of Canada's status in the so-called War on Terror. Are we in fact at war?

A visitor to Canada from another planet would probably conclude that we are not. He would see no declaration of war such as occurred in 1914 and in 1939, but that in itself is not particularly meaningful. Since 1945, when the Soviet Union opportunistically declared war on Japan in the final days of World War II, the old diplomatic nicety of a formal declaration of war has gone into disuse.

Nor would our visitor see any of the usual outward manifestations of a nation at war: no massive recruitment of civilians into the military, no C.D. Howe leading the mobilization of industry, no ubiquitous propaganda, no rationing, no war bonds or tax increases, nor other measures of the kind Canadians experienced in the world wars.

On the other hand, though, our citizens are exposed daily to news

from Afghanistan that sounds ominously like real warfare, with reports of firefights, bombings and casualties. It was also interesting to note recent calls for the government to define "victory" in Afghanistan, which suggests that a state of war exists, at least in the view of some Canadians.

Then there is the frequent reference to "the War on Terror", especially since 9/11. That dreadful event was surely an act of war which, together with later attacks on London, Madrid and Bali, left no doubt that the democratic West faces a dangerous and determined enemy. Does the existence of such an enemy mean that the West, including Canada, is at war?

The answer is very much a matter of definition. What, in fact, constitutes "war" in the year 2006?

There can be no doubt that the nature of warfare has changed greatly in recent decades.

Since the end of the Cold War (which was not a war) the classical concept of two more or less similar nations or groups of nations facing each other symmetrically across a clearly demarcated battle line has given way to what is commonly called "asymmetrical warfare", of which Iraq is a good example.

In this model, one of the

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belligerents is an amorphous, elusive entity, devoid of the traditional combatant trappings like recognizable uniforms, heavy military equipment, or status as a national armed force. To them, the classical rules of warfare have no meaning.

Consider, for example, the 9/11 attacks on the United States. On that day twenty-four Canadians died, tragic victims of a new and utterly different form of armed conflict.

In this changing scene, it is a stark reality that Canada and like-minded democratic nations face a very real enemy. Various called islamists, islamic extremists, islamo-fascists, jihadists or al Qaeda, they have a clearly stated goal: to impose their radically distorted version of Islam upon the whole world in the form of a caliphate.

As astoundingly ridiculous as this may seem to us, they are deadly serious about it, and their fanaticism will take them to great extremes in an effort to achieve their ambitions.

This raises an interesting point. Does a state of war exist when only one side is a declared belligerent? It touches on the whole question of pacifism, vigorously espoused by some as an alternative to war, but which most Canadians reject as being naive, impractical and even dangerous—especially in the present situation—given the goal and determination of our self-declared enemy.

Even pacifists would find it difficult to ignore the reality of a war waged by one side only. It is still a war.

That brings us back to the original question: “Is Canada at war?”.

Scholarly definitions aside, whether or not Canada and Canadians look upon the current conflict (not just in Afghanistan, but globally) as a formal state of war, practical circumstances demand that there be resistance to those who would impose their distorted politico-religious ideology upon us and our allies.

The first lines of defence must be diplomatic, ideological, humanitarian and economic.

In the final analysis, however, Canadians must be prepared to exercise military force at home and abroad in defending ourselves and our friends against those who strive to change our way of life radically, and to deprive us of our hard-earned freedoms.

If that defines Canada’s situation today as a state of war, then so be it.

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The Conference of Defence Associations
359 Kent St., Suite 502
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K2P 0R6
Telephone : (613) 236-1252
Facsimile : (613) 236-8191
E-mail : cda@cda-cdai.ca