

## **DOING THE RIGHT THING IN AN AGE OF CYNICISM**

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**CAROL OFF**

Good afternoon everyone. Special greetings to Dr. Hubert, to Mrs. Ellis and her daughter Leslie.

I am very happy to finally be here at the Centre for Military and Strategic Studies. The date of this lecture has changed more often than Art Eggleton changes his mind.

This has been an extraordinary year for journalists – for everyone – and I want to thank Professor Bercuson, Nancy Pearson-Mackie and all those who worked to accommodate my schedule.

In preparing for this lecture, I was fascinated to learn about Lt. Col. Ross Ellis. This remarkable man made the difficult transition from soldier to politics and showed great leadership in both arenas. What impressed me most in his biography was that, in the 1950's, he was an MLA for the Liberal-Conservative Coalition. Think of it! What a political concept! How come we can't unite the right? But Colonel Ellis knew, I think, what it is to serve your country. Which brings me back, not deftly, to the Canadian Defence Minister.

At *The National*, we get a lot of mail, not all of it nice. We often get letters and phone calls from people wanting to know why we are belabouring some little scandal in Ottawa. I'm sure you know the kind of story they're complaining about: What did Art Hangar really say about Stockwell Day? What is going on between Alan Rock and Paul Martin? Most recently, I noted nearly four pages of coverage one morning in both the National Post and the Globe and Mail, dedicated to the dust-up between Rock and Martin. I heard a giant "who cares!" go up from the country. This is often called Gotcha

Journalism. I call it Banana Peel Journalism. It's just about catching someone in a gaff. But often, I think the failing on our part is to explain why some of these things matter. Instead, we in the media get obsessed with the minutiae and neglect to tell you why you should care about the goings on in Ottawa.

I recently read several complaints from viewers who wondered why we were dedicating so much time to the Art Eggleton hearings. People asked: so he made a mistake – why should it matter so much? I realized, when I read this that we had done a terrible job at explaining why it matters. We perhaps didn't tell you - or tell you clearly enough - why it is so important to know what Minister Eggleton knew about the Canadian Forces in Afghanistan who were arresting Al Qaeda members. Why we need to know when, exactly, he first learned that Canadian soldiers were part of that operation, and why he didn't think it was important to tell Canadians – or even the Prime Minister – that Canadian Forces were performing a task that he, and the Prime Minister, had said they were not.

Why was it so important? Because these days, Canadians are asking fundamental questions about our forces: What do we want them to do on the international stage? What is the military role Canada should play in world affairs? How closely should we work with the United States in the so-called War against Terrorism? How much are we willing to pay for our military? This debate is long overdue. And yet I wondered, while watching the House hearings and the performance of the Defence Minister, whether our political leadership could lead that debate or have any answers.

This has been a very unusual year for all of us. On September 11, when we were struggling to put together the first of many nights of coverage following the World Trade Centre attack, my boss said: "What happened today changes everything." I thought that was a fairly grandiose declaration. But within days, I realized he was right. Our universe was turned on its head. As journalists, we began to see and write about things differently.

In some cases, there are issues that have been bubbling under the surface for years but are only now really coming to the top. One of those issues is the role of the Canadian Forces.

For the past decade, I have been reporting on – and thinking a lot about – our military role in Canada and in the world. It's been a steep learning curve, and only possible because the CBC has sent me to so many of the places that the Canadian forces have operated: Serbia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia; the Gulf and the Middle East; most recently Afghanistan; but also to Oka, the Arctic and to Canadian Forces bases across the country – though these days, that's not a long tour.

In many cases, I was also able to see the forces of other countries and to make a comparison. I have to say – in all honesty – I have been very impressed. There is something quintessentially Canadian about the way we function in the field. And I hear it most from local residents who – even when they disagree with the peacekeeping mission in their country – claim Canadians are the most professional and the most engaged of all the contingents.

But it is quintessentially Canadian for other reasons as well. In Bosnia, the foreign reporters always conspired to get “stuck” for the night at a Canadian IFOR and SFOR base when it got to dark and dangerous to travel further. Maybe it's because Canadians grew up as campers but the CF really know how to recreate the creature comforts. Among my finest moments of life is having the first hot shower in a month in a tent on a night when it was 15 below. No spa was ever better.

On American NATO bases Bosnia, the US would fly in fresh food to cook sumptuous meals for the soldiers. They take their cues from the American television networks that often rent houses and travel with Italian chefs. But they're snobs and not very much fun. Canada just can't compete in the luxury department, but for good old fashion humour and irony, you can't beat them. The British have the blandest food, the worst jokes, but the best-stocked bar. I'll stick with the Canucks.

But over those years, I have watched the Canadian Forces diminish both in size and in self-esteem. And I have watched the Canadian public fall into a profound confusion about what is happening to the forces or why. A large part of the problem is undoubtedly the funding levels. But the difficulties go far beyond a lack of adequate financial support. Canadians see themselves as international do-gooders. Boy scouts to the universe. And it is increasingly clear, not just in the in the 1990's but to this day, that our role has changed.

I was in Afghanistan when I got the news that the Canadian battle group was going to Kandahar as part of Operation Enduring Freedom. When we first heard Canadians were coming, everyone presumed our forces would come as peacekeepers. When we heard it was a combat role, I admit I was initially taken aback. But on reflection, it made perfect sense. It's a role Canadian soldiers are suited for, trained for, and eager to take on. The problem is that most Canadians don't seem to know, or want to know, that reality.

The weeks preceding the Canadian deployment was probably the only time during my tour on Afghanistan that I would have preferred be in Canada covering the story. I wanted to hear the debate, to follow the coverage; to gauge the confusion I knew would spread through Canadian society as it agonized over what the public conceived of was a change of role for our forces; from peacekeeping to combat.

We are squeamish about war. We like to think of the Canadian Forces as peacekeepers, not warriors. But this deployment to Afghanistan is part of a coming of age process – when we are compelled to face how much the military role has evolved (or been restored) and to determine what we really expect and want from our military. What we really see as our role in the world. Maybe it's wishful thinking but I have been waiting and watching for something that would finally focus our attention on that specific question: what do Canadians want our forces to do? Only when we've answered that question can we figure out how to build our armed forces and how much we want to pay for them.

What the Art Eggleton debacle suggests is that the minister didn't seem to know how much this matters to Canadians. We are ambivalent about the American arrests of the "unlawful combatants" in Afghanistan but not about how they should be treated. We are ambivalent, as always, as to how closely we want to follow the Americans, especially when the US is prepared to enter so much uncharted legal and military water. Canadians always want to do the right thing.

Doing the right thing in an age of cynicism is extremely difficult but that's the task ahead of us. As I cover conflicts and disasters of one kind or another, I hear from people that they just don't understand – or trust – the coverage. The media doesn't tell you everything, they say. The media is biased. The media makes things up. I talk to a lot to students who tell me they don't read the papers or follow current affairs because you can't trust the information.

What I also hear is that everybody does bad things in those foreign countries. Why should you help one side in any conflict? There are no good guys. There is no truth worth defending. In this cynical mindset, people check out. They resign from any knowledge of world events and our role in them.

I'm sure that I am following the trial of Slobodan Milosevic more closely than it is healthy to do so. The first time I was in a courtroom of International Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, I found it both awesome and absurd. The court is divided between spectators and participants, as is the case in all courts. But they are separated by a floor to ceiling, wall to wall, sheet of bulletproof glass. The effect is that you are looking into a fishbowl. Or perhaps more accurately, you are looking into a laboratory where some wild and dangerous experiment is taking place. And it is.

The tribunal is compared to Nuremberg, but it really is unique. To follow the trials is to watch as dozens - now hundreds – of lawyers attempt to piece together what happened during ten years of war. What emerges, painstakingly, is a rather complete

picture. I don't think a war – or a group of wars - has ever been re-assembled so minutely, in one place, exclusively for the purposes of justice.

What fascinates me most about the Milosevic trial is his defence, conducted by himself. Milosevic questions: Why is he now called the Butcher of the Balkans when world leaders knew what he was doing all along? And seem to have approved it. They knew Belgrade's role in the wars when Madeleine Albright was calling him a man of peace. British Lord Douglas Hurd thought him a man we could do business with. Canada was the strongest supporter of the arms embargo that prevented the Bosnians from legally arming themselves in defence against Milosevic's well-funded forces. And we were among the most vocal proponents of the idea that "there are no good guys over there. Everyone is doing bad things" that created the atmosphere of indecision.

All the world leaders are happy to see Milosevic where he is today and they are right to be so. But it was the years of wilful ignorance about his actions and those of the Bosnian Serb militias - that prolonged the wars and led to the unprecedented defence of Kosovo in 1999 when we found ourselves bombing Europe for the first time since the Second World War.

To my mind, the decade of the 1990s goes down as an age of moral equivalency. A time when we lost or misplaced our ability to see clearly what is right and wrong and act upon it. It doesn't mean that, in the past, we were correct in that assessment of what was right or wrong or that we had the best reaction. But it mattered to know what was right and wrong and to act on it. It has somehow ceased to matter. I think we have lost our moral compass and our ability to determine how to do the right thing.

If I were really smart, like the French philosopher Foucault or American Noam Chomsky, I could probably explain why the 1990s became so morally adrift. Those erudite intellectuals would probably theorize about the post-modern world and the lack of finite truth. We have – apparently - returned to some pre-intellectual time when truth

is personal and just how you feel about it. Historians could perhaps explain that the moral ambivalence of the 1990s was the inevitable fall-out of post Cold War thinking. In the absence of an Evil Empire we - collectively – didn't know how to define our enemies. Because I'm not really smart, I will just call moral equivalency downright cynical.

The practical application of moral equivalency in the Balkan wars of the 1990s seems to have started as a way of being impartial and neutral during the conflict. But it eventually morphed into something more sinister.

Declaring oneself neutral and impartial is one of the key components of traditional peacekeeping. An International peacekeeping force cannot take sides. Neutrality probably works in situations where two armies have agreed, grudgingly, to stop killing each other and the foreign troops have come in to guard a negotiated green line— usually for the rest of time. But it's a lousy device in ethnic cleansing. Neutrality does not work in an arena where you have an aggressor and a victim. To be impartial in that case is to actually take sides, because you inevitably help the aggressor. We did this in the Balkans and it had devastating consequences.

Happily, the United Nations later recognized that the application of neutrality was a principal failing of foreign intervention in the Balkans. A UN report from 1999 – mostly dealing with Srebrenica but taking in the whole Bosnian war – denounced the use of impartiality and the concept of moral equivalency. The UN later tabled another report reaching the same conclusion about neutrality and moral equivalency in the Rwandan Genocide. In both cases, the UN stated that what was really required was decisive and timely military intervention.

Moral equivalency is when you see both sides as equal. In a killing field such as a war, moral equivalency inevitably expands to a declaration that there are no good sides: that everyone is doing bad things. Those of you who have read my book *The Lion the Fox and the Eagle*, or more likely just heard about it, will know that I cited Major General Lewis MacKenzie as a celebrated proponent of this approach. He said of the Serbs, Croats and Muslims in the Bosnian war that they were like three serial killers:

one has killed 15, another 10, the other 5. Why would you help the one who killed five? But General MacKenzie was only among the most outspoken on ideas of this nature. He hardly represented the full extent of the problem.

The breadline massacre of May 1992 is a case in point. Two shells fell on a group of people lined up to buy bread in downtown Sarajevo. Images of the massacre beamed around the world and viewers everywhere were outraged. Within the coming days and weeks, though, we heard rumours that it had not been a massacre by Serbian forces, but an inside job. General MacKenzie was one of several members of the international community who helped to disseminate a theory that the attack was planned and performed by the Bosnian government against its own people in an effort to win international sympathy. Watching the coverage from home at the time, I had no reason to doubt such charges and I remember concluding that the Bosnians didn't deserve our support. They too were bad guys. There was no one good or worthy of our support.

More reports of a similar nature emerged throughout the war. No one could prove it but officials like Lewis MacKenzie would tell reporters – on and off the record – that they just had a “hunch” that it was the Bosnians and not their enemies. The fog of war became denser. I became more cynical about the Balkan conflict. I'm sure I wasn't alone.

During a period of about five years following the Bosnian war, I investigated the breadline massacre and the sources of the story that it was the handiwork of the Bosnian government striking at its own people. I can't say it's impossible that the Bosnian government didn't do it. The problem is that there is simply no evidence that they did. No one investigated the event; no one filed a report. UNPROFOR chief General Satish Nambiar said it was probably an underground explosion detonated remotely. And yet, anyone can see the two mortar craters that are still in the sidewalk in Sarajevo, right beside a plaque commemorating the seventeen people who died there.



I learned there had been another mortar attack, minutes earlier, at a nearby location, again pointing to a shell attack on the breadline and not an underground detonation. Again, is that conclusive proof? No one investigated that shell at the time. But all three shells were consistent with attacks from Serb positions that had been happening several times a day for weeks, and would continue for the next three years.

I have read books and articles since the attack referring to “UN reports” and unnamed and un-sourced “documents” about the nature of the breadline massacre. Sometimes people are anonymously quoted. And yet, I know for a fact there was no report. There was no investigation. Lewis MacKenzie wasn’t even in Sarajevo at the time. The Military Observers in place say they never went to the scene to investigate: it was too dangerous. It’s possible the Bosnians bombed themselves. Anything is possible. But given that the Serbs were lobbing as many as 2,000 shells a day into Sarajevo while targeting clearly civilian positions, what seems more likely? To declare that a government has murdered its own people strikes me as an enormous charge. One you don’t make lightly or on “a hunch”. Not when such a declaration can – and did – affect the will of the international community to intervene. The charges – that the Bosnians were killing their own – continued throughout the war without the support of evidence until Bosnian President Izetbegovic declared: “If I was killing my own people, don’t you think I would have learned by now that it wasn’t going to work?”

But what was the point of claiming that the Bosnians were killing their own people? The prevalent theory is that it was a way of making the side equal. Thus, not allowing any “side” to have moral superiority.

The point of moral equivalency is to make a level playing field. And then you can force people to negotiate to end the war. The problem with that theory in Bosnia is that - here was a sovereign country, recognized by the world, with a seat at the UN, with a multi-ethnic government, being attacked by a well-armed military force, financed by Belgrade with the goal of cleaning other ethnicities out of a given territory. It was not a war between two countries. It was a war of aggression. That truth becomes more clear

and defined with each passing day in The Hague. But it was well documented at the time.

Neutrality and impartiality during ethnic cleansing is a stupid idea. If it was used as a device to force people to negotiate, then it's also deeply cynical. The problem with moral equivalency is that people actually start to believe it. It stops being a device and start to serve as an easy truth. A reason not to care.

Whenever I travel in Bosnia I try to talk to as many Canadian soldiers as possible. And when I meet them anywhere, those who have served in Bosnia, I ask them what they think of the situation. They almost inevitably recite what has become a mantra for peacekeepers: there are no good guys over there; everyone does bad things. And if pushed, I'm loathe to say, most often they will tell me it's the Muslims who are the worst of it.

I have no doubt that the so-called Muslims (a euphemism for the multi-ethnic forces defending Bosnia) were the most difficult to deal with during the Bosnian war. They were – undoubtedly – the least co-operative. And I would tell you that we would be the least co-operative if our sovereign rights and security was treated as the Bosnians' were. It's not the fault of the Peacekeepers but of the mission itself, which even the UN now says was seriously flawed, both in concept and execution.

William Fenrick is formerly with the Canadian Forces and he's now with the war crimes tribunal in The Hague. Fenrick did many site reports in Bosnia and says he's never found any evidence that the Bosnian government was behind any of the massacres. He finds that UNPROFOR was much too quick to blame the Bosnians for things. I asked him why he thinks moral equivalency is so prevalent, even when it's not employed as a peacemaking device. His conclusion is revealing. In peacekeeping operation - like the one in Bosnia – soldiers are deeply frustrated by their inability to do very much. When you are in a situation like Bosnia, or Rwanda, you are armed, you are seeing atrocities, but it's not your job to act, it's your job to remain neutral. It's too

difficult to turn off the moral tap. To believe there are no good guys here makes it easier to cope. I think Fenrick's is an interesting theory that I'm still testing.

But perhaps more important is to determine how to break from this dependence on moral equivalency as explanation for complex situations. It's difficult but not impossible to see that complexity and respond to it militarily but it takes tremendous personal and international courage. There are many examples of it but curiously, they remain unreported or even unknown.

One of the most conspicuous for me was the action of the second battalion of the Princess Patricia's Canadian light infantry in the fall of 1993. Led by Colonel James Calvin, those UNPROFOR soldiers engaged in a battle to stop ethnic cleansing in the Medak Pocket. They came between Croat forces attacking a Serb-dominated UN protected area and engaged them with deadly force. The story of the Medak Pocket remains for me as one of the most important moments in Canadian peacekeeping. And yet, few people know what Colonel Calvin and the others did. I'm hoping to help make the story better known in the future.

Another unsung hero is Lieutenant-Colonel Pat Stogran, now leading the Canadian battle group in Kandahar. In April 1994, then major Stogran was a UN military observer in eastern Bosnia. I have never researched more on this extraordinary story and only learned it recently. The *National Post* wrote: "Despite difficult conditions and extreme personal danger, Stogran was instrumental in saving the town of Gorazde and its 45,000 inhabitants." Stogran insisted on strategic air strikes to save the "so-called UN safe haven" from a massacre. NATO eventually yielded to his demands and sent out an ultimatum that prevented the all-out attack. But he took the heat for years. UNPROFOR force commander Lt.General Michael Rose from the UK apparently launched a campaign to prove that Colonel Stogran exaggerated the danger. General Rose was a proponent - perhaps more than any other - of the code of moral equivalency. He had insisted that air strikes on the Serbs would be taking sides and would prevent peace. As everyone knows, lift and strike - lifting the arms embargo on Bosnia - coupled with an air bombardment ultimately ended the war.

I am reading a fascinating book right now – *An Intimate History of Killing* by Joanna Thorpe. Thorpe says she wanted to put killing back into military history; that we have attempted to sanitize war by showing it as something full of camaraderie and men just trying to defend themselves. In fact, we are at war to kill. That's the job. Thorpe says we do ourselves no service by pretending that's not the case. By putting killing back into military history, we recognize it's moral place. I know that sounds extreme. But I understand where she's coming from.

Thorpe has interviewed dozens of soldiers who have killed and finds what they want more than anything is for their societies to recognize what they did and – not to enjoy it – but to endorse it as morally right. I think only when we've done that – faced up to what our job is – even the killing part – can we determine when it's not right. When it's morally wrong.

Despite what we accomplished – and suffered – in the world wars, I think Canadians have a hard time with that notion. In contemporary society, we want to see our forces as benign peacekeepers, distributing food and protecting the peace. But the truth is, Canadian forces have been involved in bloody awful wars and conflicts all over the world under the rubric of peacekeeping. Canadian soldiers take fire and give it back. They are often aggressive and frequently involved in combat. While the Canadian public likes to bask in the glow of what they perceive peacekeepers are doing, our armed forces often don't even call what they do peacekeeping, but "Operations other than war." How much does the Canadian public understand of this evolved role of peacekeeping? Would they support it? Isn't it time for the debate?

In Afghanistan last month I filmed a documentary on the return on the warlords. The shocking thing is that we are helping them return – this thuggish band of criminals who helped the US-led alliance defeat the Taliban.

I can understand why we have to sleep with dogs sometimes. I can understand when the aid agencies tell me they must get the help of warlords in order to do their work. What I can't understand is when they tell me they have no problem with this. When they say it's appropriate to work with warlords and that we shouldn't impose our values on these countries. We have to recognize right and wrong – whether we're soldiers, politicians, aid workers or reporters. And we have to accept what is required of us in the pursuit of doing the right thing.

Canadians want to do the right thing. But people have lost sight as to what it is. We have turned cynical in our inability to figure it out. That's why I'm fascinated with the Art Eggleton affair. Why I think there is no time more interesting to be reporting on the Canadian forces. Yes, they need more money. What they need – first - is a rethink with Canadian deciding what we want from our military. What role we want to play on the international stage?

I don't want anyone to go from this lecture thinking I'm denouncing peacekeeping. Though I think most of recent the missions were seriously flawed in their conception and where they succeeded, it was only when commanders took the initiative and often broke the rules. And it seems most of the UN missions of the 1990s were in an effort to avoid real decisive military intervention. The International Community throws peacekeepers at situations where they didn't have the political will to do what was really necessary.

Part of our foreign policy is something called The Human Security Agenda – the brainchild of Lloyd Axworthy. It's a huge idea and – if applied in earnest – could be grossly expensive. But if we really want to be the world's do-gooders - to do the right thing - we have to think through where that takes us as a nation. What are we willing to spend? What are we willing to risk? In the age of cynicism we must determine what is the right thing to do – and to act on it.

Thank you.