

An allegiance without thought

Canada's support of U.S. military action in Iraq has no purpose

Canada's decision to involve itself with American military intervention in Iraq is unlike Canada's ill-fated participation in the U.S.-led invasion of Somalia in 1992-93 but in many respects it's even more worrisome.

In the case of Somalia, public support was based on nightly television newscasts showing the pleading faces of starving Somalis. Canadians had no way of knowing that at least some of this starvation was the product of political tactics by Somali leaders, and that American corporations wanted political stability in Somalia to continue their exploration of oil concessions granted to them by the previous Somali government. Canadians were moved by the undeniable plight of dying Somalis and were willing to send soldiers to ensure the delivery of foreign aid.

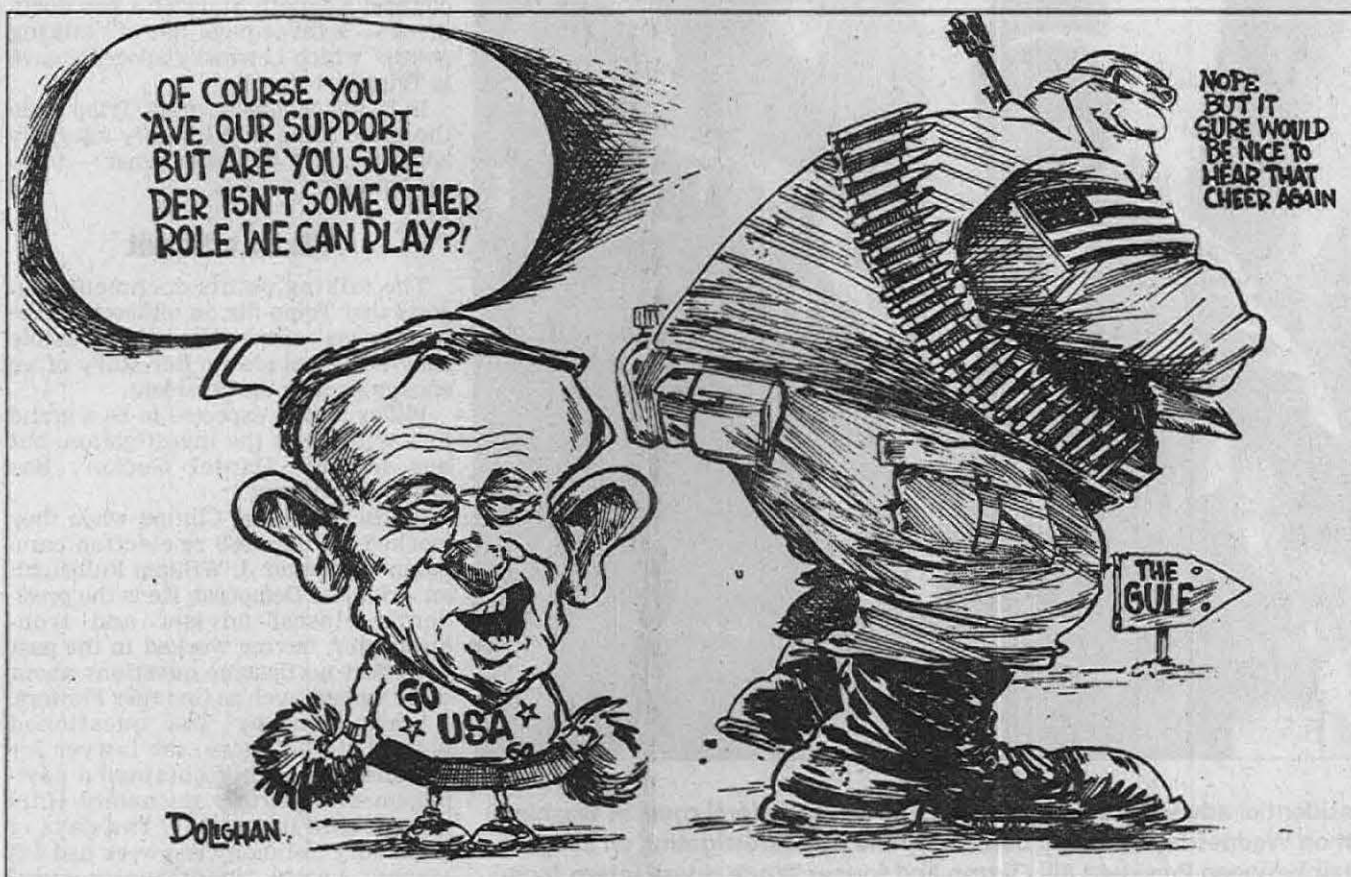
At the time, there was little public discussion about this. Canada's commitment was made in a phone conversation between U.S. President George Bush and Prime Minister Brian Mulroney without much prior awareness of the complex situation in Somalia or the military resources Canada could devote to the mission. As a result, Canada sent an ill-prepared airborne regiment overseas because it was the best available at the time, resulting in the regiment's disbandment, a disgraceful Canadian first, and the subsequent abrupt termination of the Somalia inquiry, another shameful first.

Canada went into Somalia without any clear understanding of the situation there, its military mission or the ultimate objective. As a result, the lives of almost a thousand Canadian military personnel were jeopardized. Had the Somalis seriously resisted the invasion instead of trying sensibly to profit from it, Canada could have suffered a military disaster for which it was totally unprepared as an army and as a nation. In the long run, Canadians and Americans accomplished absolutely nothing in Somalia — political conditions there remain chaotic — except to demonstrate the impotence of Western military might in this type of situation.

Regardless of the risks

The whole episode also confirmed the impression Canada will blindly follow the United States into almost any military adventure. All it requires is a phone call from the White House, regardless of the risks involved. This response seems to be growing more and more automatic. Sun Media's Ottawa bureau reported Tuesday that the current commitment was made during a phone call between Prime Minister Jean Chrétien and U.S. President Bill Clinton before it was discussed in cabinet and that some cabinet ministers were unhappy about this lack of process.

Despite the Somalia fiasco, Canada seemed willing to make a commitment to action against Iraq with even less justification. This time there were no



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starving faces on our television screens. On the contrary, the prospective bombing of Iraq threatened to put them there in large numbers. Canada has no direct interest in Iraq. All we had was the American insistence that military action is necessary to get rid of dictator Saddam Hussein or at least bring him under control, and the Chamberlain-like threat that appeasement would bring even greater perils in future.

Ever since the Second World War, the example of Munich and Chamberlain have been used to justify military action by the United States, from Vietnam to Grenada. Canadians seem to have forgotten that even in 1939, Canada deliberately delayed its declaration of war in order to underline our independence from Britain. By then, it had become important for us not to automatically say, "ready, aye, ready," as soon as London called for aid from the Empire.

After the Second World War, this spirit of independence was expressed in Canadian relations with China and Cuba in opposition to the wishes of the United States. In following this policy, Canada gained international respect, not to mention customers for exports, without seriously endangering diplomatic or commercial relations with the United States. In both cases, Canada's independent actions strengthened

moderate forces in the United States and promoted a lessening of international tensions.

Now, Canada seems to have slipped back into a diplomatic embrace that is more restrictive than anything experienced under Britain. Canada has started to act as if alternative options are closed to us at the outset, as if the phone call from the White House is not an invitation to consider but an order to be obeyed blindly. That kind of unthinking response doesn't serve Canada or the U.S. well.

It is true the Canadian response this time betrayed an underlying reluctance. Canada provided the very least it could, one frigate and two transport planes with a grand total of 400 personnel. The frigate will be lost in the American flotilla headed by two aircraft carriers. Providing transport planes to a country that had to help us fly in our own soldiers to Somalia in 1992 is in the coals-to-Newcastle category. Does Canada really believe it gains the respect of Americans by providing this kind of measly contribution while insisting, "No, it's not symbolic" — to quote Chrétien — and making hypocritical noises about defending democracy?

Sign of progress

The only sign of progress is that Canadian reaction to the prime minister's commitment has been more uncertain, qualified and concerned than was the case of Somalia. This time there are critics of the stature of retired Major-General Lewis MacKenzie, whom the prime minister can't just ignore. MacKenzie has outlined both the futility of bombing Iraq and the option

of a more enlightened response by Canada. The latter would help Canada "regain the moral high ground," as he put it, as well as respect in the Arab world, by showing concern for the people of Iraq.

Opposition to the prime minister's policy, or lack of it, seems to be growing in Canada as the mysterious American deadline for intervention approaches. The high-school girl in Winnipeg, the daughter of a soldier, who asked Chrétien last Friday what she and other Canadian citizens can possibly gain from a war with Iraq, spoke for many of us. The prime minister's pitiful response, "Your dad is in the army... he knows that some day he might be called to serve his country in a dangerous situation," was the same lack of thoughtful leadership that got us into the mess in Somalia.

Everyone hopes Clinton will come to his senses, or be sideswiped by Monica Lewinsky, or that Saddam will end the game of chicken at the last moment, at least temporarily. But if the bombing starts, and it doesn't work, and the carnage horrifies decent North Americans on both sides of the border, the reaction could be devastating for Clinton and the United States. If something like that is what eventually happens, Canada's timid me-too participation in Clinton's venture will be seen to have served no purpose at all except, one can hope, to start a process in Ottawa of regaining some measure of diplomatic independence and international respect.

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