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FAREWELL TO THE GWOT: WHAT WE LEARNED FROM THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR

A Policy Paper

By

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September, 2011

Prepared for the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The so-called Global War on Terror (GWOT) is coming to an end after ten years. It has been one of the strangest “wars” in history, one that asked little or no sacrifice from those on whose behalf it was being fought. Nor were the objectives of the “war” ever clearly explained. The GWOT has, therefore, turned out to have been a financial and political disaster for the world’s greatest democracy. War, the great historic change agent, has once again wrought its “magic” on a world that is a considerably different place than it was when the GWOT began. NATO, the greatest military alliance in modern history, could eventually become a casualty of the GWOT.

The political and diplomatic price for the GWOT in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan has yet to be fully paid. When it is, it will be far from the triumphal nation building aims that were trumpeted when the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan began. This “little war” against a third class enemy has not been worth the candle. The “GWOT warriors” spent too much money on the wrong strategies and continually failed to make the Clausewitzian connection between armed conflict and politics. The final political settlement in Afghanistan remains obscure. Fighting the GWOT was indeed an unfortunate way to begin a new century.

“Nothing except a battle lost can be half as melancholy as a battle won.”

- The Duke of Wellington in a
Dispatch from the field of
Waterloo, June, 1815

“A great country ought not to make little wars.”

-The Duke of Wellington

“There is no terror in the bang, only in the
anticipation of it.”

-Alfred Hitchcock

The Global War on Terror (GWOT), which was “declared” by President George W. Bush a few days after September 11, 2001, has been the strangest war since the War of Jenkins’s Ear between Great Britain and Spain in the mid-18th century. As in the War of Jenkins’s Ear, there has been no clear winner of the decade-long GWOT. There will be no victory parades on either side, although military medals for those who fought in the GWOT have been struck in the United States. The Duke of Wellington, who knew something about judging the outcomes of wars, would probably have described the end results of the GWOT as “melancholy”.

From its bizarre beginnings in the days following the stunning attacks on the twin towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, the GWOT always seemed to possess a surreal quality. How could one be at “war” against an abstract noun like “terror”? And how could one be at “war” with “terrorism”, which is merely a technique that has been used from time immemorial to strike fear into human populations? The careless interchangeability of the words “terror” and “terrorism” on the lips of politicians and commentators only served to blur their meaning and to spawn a slipperiness that few seemed eager to analyse seriously. George Orwell would have had a field day trying to fathom the real meaning of these fuzzy words. And changing the name of the GWOT to “Overseas Contingency Operations”, as the Obama administration has attempted to do, is beyond Orwellian.

In the total international wars of the 20th century, citizens of the countries engaged in war were asked to sacrifice seriously to help their country win the war. War bonds were sold; gold wedding rings were donated; pots and pans were melted down; and rationing of food and fuel took place. In the GWOT, no sacrifice was demanded of the citizens of the United States of America. The multi-trillion dollar cost of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq – not to speak of the money needed to support the massive bureaucracy of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) – was paid, not with a special war tax, or by war bonds bought by citizens, but with borrowed money, much of it loaned by a rising China. (Canada resisted the urge to create a clone of the DHS; the multi-billion dollar cost of running the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority (CATSA) was paid entirely by airline passengers, not by a tax on the non-air-travelling public.) A new military draft was not imposed on Americans: the soldiers of the GWOT were all volunteers, or dragooned reservists, most of whom came from small towns or rural America. Accordingly, the GWOT, unlike the Vietnam War, never reached into either the pockets, or the lives, of the urban upper and middle classes of America.

One of the GWOT’s most disturbing features was that many of those responsible for the conduct of the war, whether politicians or military people, were unwilling to predict how long

the GWOT would last. Some military leaders called it “the long war”, a struggle that might perhaps more resemble the Hundred Years War than World Wars One or Two. If, as some said, the GWOT was to be an Orwellian perpetual war for perpetual peace, suspension of civil liberties and informed citizen consent to curtailment of their civil rights became a problem. As the GWOT ground on, citizens of western democracies began to realize, as Benjamin Franklyn observed, that those who give up their liberty for security might wind up losing both. Certainly, free citizens in other wars throughout history have always shown a willingness to forego many civil rights as long as they knew what war aims had to be achieved before these rights could be restored. Is the objective the unconditional surrender of the enemy, as it was in World War Two, or a cease-fire along a border, as it was in the Korean War? Or containment of the enemy, as it was in the Cold War? Or is it something else? No one knew because the managers of the GWOT were never clear about what the final objectives of the war were, or what the metrics of victory would look like.

Nor did the generals or senior politicians foster any spirit of resilience in civilian populations. Any foiled attack by pathetic “enemies” like the “shoe bomber”, the “underwear bomber”, or the “Times Square bomber” was an occasion to spread more fear, not a “spirit of the Blitz”. Few commentators noted how fortunate western democracies were when beholding the incredible incompetence, if not the sheer stupidity, of most of their GWOT enemies. Indeed, and extraordinarily, during the 2004 election, Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry was flayed mercilessly by Republicans and the media millionaires of Washington for having the temerity to suggest the best America could hope for in the GWOT was that it would become “manageable”. In the new “asymmetric war”, or “fourth generation” warfare involving states battling against non-state actors like al Qaeda, the meaning of “war” became hopelessly hamstrung. “War” became a *status mixtus* struggle in which the difference between war and peace became blurred so completely that even the fictional Chairman of the Joint Chiefs in the TV series, *The West Wing*, was once made to blurt: “I can’t tell when it’s peacetime and wartime anymore.” The killing of the paleo-narcissist Osama bin Laden, has finally handed America and its allies, including Canada, their best chance to end the GWOT and to reflect upon what its lasting impact would be.

The overwhelming lesson of the GWOT was that nation-states in the 21st century should – unless fighting an existential battle against a barbaric, totalitarian, Nazi-type political system – only fight wars that are feasible financially. When the Soviet Union collapsed, most experts agreed that the costly and failed 10-year invasion of Afghanistan played a major part in that collapse. And there is no doubt that bin Laden and his “freedom fighters” – who were trained and equipped largely by the U.S. – believed they alone had brought down a great empire in a place that, for centuries, has been correctly called “the graveyard of empires.” Unfortunately, Bin Laden, in a halo of hubris, then concluded he might also be able to bring down America, the world’s greatest late 20th century “empire”. And so the planning for 9/11 began.

Despite bin Laden’s alleged wealth he did not start the GWOT with huge resources. He would have to fight an inexpensive “Walmart war”, not an expensive “Cartier conflict”. And so he did. The “ROI” (return on investment) that bin Laden and his official and unofficial allies achieved in the GWOT would gladden the heart of any graduate of the Harvard Business School. The 9/11 attack cost al Qaeda hundreds of thousands of dollars. The bill for America for the Iraqi and Afghani wars, plus its massive domestic spending on security, is probably close to \$4 trillion to date and counting.

Money that could have been spent improving the American economy, its health care system, its schools and universities, and its infrastructure has been sent to obscure corners of the globe and is gone forever. Trust in those who did this, and citizen confidence in the future prospects for America, has been permanently eroded. And still, there is no defined Powellian endgame for the GWOT. War, the great historic change agent, had worked its “magic” once

again. There can be no return to the *status quo ante* of early 2001: that tranquil time has been consigned to the overflowing dustbin of history. It is even conceivable that, for America, the GWOT was the biggest financial and military disaster since the Civil War. The jury is still out on that question.

Despite all the war scares, the confirmed number of terrorist plots against the United States perpetrated by Muslims in 2010, according to *Harper's* magazine, was only 10. And, according to the same magazine, the number of American civilians who died worldwide in "terrorist attacks" in 2010 was eight. Just as when one installs an expensive security system in one's home and, following that, no one breaks in for ten years, one is never sure whether the system defeated all the burglars, or whether burglars even tried to break in. The results look the same. Those, therefore, who claim great benefits from the vast amounts of money spent on the GWOT must be made to prove any assertions that the expenditure was worth it.

The second great lesson of the GWOT was Clausewitzian, i.e. failing to remember that war is the conduct of politics by another means. Perhaps the most astonishing aspect of the GWOT was the failure by America in Iraq and NATO in Afghanistan (and now Libya) to comprehend the cultures, languages and histories of the places where they were fighting. The struggle in Afghanistan was, and is, a civil war among Pashtuns. Once al Qaeda was ejected from that country, what possible interest could the great trans-Atlantic alliance of NATO really have in this civil war? And why did NATO, with barely a murmur, accept the open collaboration between criminals cultivating and peddling drugs and the Taliban paymasters? It is not as though criminal-terrorist connections were not well known in other historic struggles against "terrorists" like the IRA, or the Tamil Tigers. When the Iraqi invasion took place, it soon became clear that the Bush administration and the "coalition of the willing" had little or no appreciation of facts as basic as the enormous differences between Sunnis and Shi'ites. Nor did the American belief system brook any doubt that Iraqis would not embrace free markets and the American way of life. In both these conflicts, as in Vietnam, there were precious few Americans (or Brits, or Canadians) who could speak the local languages or appreciate the centuries of history of these locales. The regular six-month rotation of forces from the U.S., Britain and Canada ensured that few learned enough to be useful long-term.

Worst of all, the constant reluctance of the western allies to admit that so-called terrorists, like the Taliban, had political as well as military objectives made efforts in these countries lopsided. The over-reliance on military personnel and military means of struggle severely hindered progress on the ground, particularly in Afghanistan. The hard truth, after all that has been done and spent in Afghanistan, is that the local military and police will probably be no better able to beat the Taliban than South Vietnamese soldiers and police were able to defeat the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese after the helicopters lifted off the American embassy roof in Saigon in 1975. One trusts the ultimate political settlement in Afghanistan will be less depressing than the one concluded in post-American Vietnam. And the newfound reliance on using drones will never solve the long-term political problems of the AfPak neighbourhood. (Objective observers continue to wonder whether the American "Thor Complex", or its exaggerated belief in the efficacy of air power over infantry, will ever end.)

Before World War Two began, the British ministry of war predicted the inevitable bombing of British cities by Nazi planes would spark "a mass outbreak of 'hysterical neurosis' among the civilian population." These officials also claimed civilians would not be able to take the bombing and would break under the strain. That did not happen, despite the deaths of more than 43,000 that were caused by Luftwaffe bombs. Quite the opposite: when the official grids went down, the social grids lit up and people helped one another in outstanding ways. That would probably happen if another devastating attack hit the North American "homeland." Why are governments not being better at preparing its citizens for such an eventuality?

With the benefit of hindsight, it is now clear that the GWOT should never have been fought the way it was fought. Using a post-Cold War, conventional order of battle in its early days did not help the west much in the conduct of what was essentially a “little war” against pre-modern, pre-Enlightenment enemies. Shifting the battle plan to one of counterinsurgency and then to one of counterterrorism did not “win” the “war”. The sad fact is that the GWOT was not worth the terrible fiscal and political damage it wrought, particularly in the world’s greatest democracy. There is no question the GWOT severely weakened NATO – perhaps fatally? – and has allowed China to move up to the “premier league” of world powers more quickly than otherwise would have been the case.

What should Canada now do in the wake of the lost decade of the GWOT? First and foremost, Canada must rebuild its relationship with an America that is confused and hurting badly. Bragging about how well we endured both the GWOT and the Great Recession should be assiduously avoided. Successfully negotiating a security and trade perimeter agreement with the U.S. will be a good first step. Then, deciding what Canada’s core national interests really are in its dealings with the U.S., and the broader world, will be an important next step that will include attempting to insulate Canada from the economic stagflation and political demoralization that is currently haunting both America and Europe. Delineating a post-GWOT “strategic narrative” for Canada for the next ten years should, therefore, be an urgent priority in Ottawa. Espousing policies that will rebuild the almost terminal trust in politics, politicians and government should be central to this “narrative”.

Canada must continue to be vigilant in trying to protect itself from violent extremists, whether “home grown” or otherwise. That will mean investing more in local “first responders” and creating a non-fear-based resilience in the Canadian populace. To achieve that goal, public and visible exercises should be conducted regularly to prepare people for possible disasters whether they are initiated by humans or, increasingly, generated by nature.

Finally, Canada rebuilt its military prowess and reputation during the GWOT. How Canada will now use this finely-tuned instrument in the aftermath of the GWOT will take some imagination and debate. That debate will be an important feature of the search for a new “strategic narrative.” But Canada’s armed forces should never be used again to fight more 21st century clones of the War of Jenkins’s Ear or surreal struggles like the GWOT.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brian Flemming, CM, QC, DCL, is a Canadian policy advisor, writer and international lawyer. He spent more than five years at the “front” in the GWOT, first as founding CEO and Chair of CATSA and then as a founding member of the federal government’s Advisory Council on National Security.

Previously, in 2000-01, Mr. Flemming was Chairman of the Canadian Transportation Act Review (CTAR) Panel, a major statutory decennial review of Canada’s transport policies. His report to the Government of Canada was widely hailed for its vision and balance. In 2003, he was awarded the National Transportation Week “Award of Achievement”.

Mr. Flemming is a former senior partner of the law firm of Stewart, McKelvey, Stirling & Scales and a former lecturer in public international law at Dalhousie Law School. He has been chairman as well as a director of scores of public, private and not-for-profit corporations. His public company directorships have included Noranda, Brunswick Mining & Smelting, Enheat, VGM Capital, First Choice Canadian Communications, Azure Resources and Homburg Invest. He is currently Chairman of the Board of Trustees of PDM Royalties Income Fund.

Between 1976 and 1979, he was Assistant Principal Secretary to Prime Minister Pierre E. Trudeau. In recent years, he has spoken at international meetings or universities in North America, Europe, Asia and Africa on transport policy, general security issues, air transport security in Canada and internationally, the war on terrorism and the public international law of the sea.

He has been the vice chairman of the Canada Council for the Arts, a board member of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, chairman of the International Centre for Ocean Development, founding chairman of Symphony Nova Scotia and a board member of: the Canadian Institute of International Affairs, the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research, the Institute for Research on Public Policy, the Van Horne Institute, Pearson College of the Pacific and the International Oceans Institute of Canada.

Mr. Flemming has degrees in science from Saint Mary’s University, Halifax, and in law from Dalhousie University, Halifax. He did post-graduate work in public international law at University College London, England, and at the Hague Academy of International Law, Netherlands.

He has an honorary doctorate from the University of King’s College where he was chairman of the Board of Governors for nearly 10 years. He became a Member of the Order of Canada in 1989. He lives in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, is married and has two adult children.

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