

The military is a central actor in Canada's story

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It is entirely appropriate that the Canadian military play an important role in Canadian citizenship ceremonies and in all other manner of public celebrations in Canada from the welcome of foreign leaders, to major national sports celebrations, and even to provincial and civic ceremonious occasions. Such participation not only reflects historical reality, it also signifies that the Canadian Forces are a central institution of Canadian government, because the defence of the nation is key to both Canadian governance and independence.

Some Canadians believe that the most important challenges Ottawa faces at any given moment are to ensure the efficient execution of social, economic, fiscal or environmental policies – protecting medicare, or ensuring a sound currency. These are certainly sufficient roles for Canada's government, but the necessary roles are to proclaim and safeguard Canada's borders and to maintain "peace, order and good government" within those borders.

This dual responsibility is the bedrock of our nationhood. Everything else undertaken by federal, provincial or municipal governments in Canada depends on the successful execution of those two conjoined tasks. And although the establishment of our borders and the safeguarding of our sovereignty within those borders does not depend on military power alone, the military is essential to that task because it is the only instrument of government sanctioned to use deadly force – the ultimate policy instrument – to protect Canadian sovereignty.

But there is another major reason why the Canadian Forces should visibly participate in Canadian public ceremonies: Since the 18th century, Canada's soldiers have played a central part in shaping the nation we are today. Canada's borders, its French-English constitutional and cultural duality, its unique form of constitutional monarchy, its relationship to the United States, its role in major multinational institutions, its very independence were all shaped by wars that were either forced on Canada (the War of 1812 being the best example) or wars Canada chose to take part in out of higher principles or national self-interest or both (the two world wars).

It is quite simply a historical fact, for example, that the participation of 600,000 Canadian soldiers in the British Expeditionary Force in the First World War (through the Canadian Expeditionary Force that formed part of the BEF) was so vital to the BEF that prime minister Robert Borden grew determined to seek a new postcolonial status for Canada when the fighting ended. He decided – correctly – that colonial status was no longer acceptable for a Canada that had played such a major role in the fighting and the Allied victory.

It was not simply the change in Canadian constitutional status coming out of that war that marked the beginning of Canadian nationhood. It was also the very experience of the horrors of war in the trenches and the growing realization that although Canada may have been part of the British Empire (or Commonwealth as it became), Canada was not Britain and Canadians were not British. Thus the 20 years from the end of that world war and the beginning of the next witnessed an upsurge in the new symbols of Canada's national narrative from Canadian painting, poetry and literature, to new roles for government in protecting Canadian culture and communications and a new self-image of Canada as a North American political, cultural and economic reality.

And if the First World War created Canadian political and cultural independence, the massive effort made by Canadians in the Second World War afforded its diplomats, politicians and economists a significant role for a "middle power" – a Canadian concept – in shaping the modern multilateral world.

Today, as both prime ministers Brian Mulroney and Stephen Harper have demonstrated, Canada's otherwise small say in shaping global policies that ultimately affect every Canadian is at least a little larger due to our being military participants in important multinational events, not just spectators.

Governments come and governments go and the Canadian society they reflect may play down the importance of the role of the armed forces in creating and sustaining Canadian nationhood, or they may play it up. That is essentially a political decision made for partisan reasons. But any government that ignores that role cuts a large hole out of Canada's story. The Harper government is entirely right in restoring the Canadian military as a central actor in the Canadian story.

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