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SCATTERING CHAFF: Canadian Air Power and Censorship during the Kosovo War by Bob Bergen

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INTRODUCTION

Kosovo: Canada's Unknown Air War

Canada is widely and approvingly thought in many circles to be a nation with a purely peacekeeping military tradition, despite its contribution to two world wars. Since the 1964 White Paper on Defence in which the Liberal government of Prime Minister Lester Pearson made peacekeeping Canada's top priority,¹ it has been a myth that has endured for decades. In 2001, the Canadian government contributed to it by enshrining the humanitarian image of the armed forces as binocular-toting female peacekeeper on the back of Canadian \$10 bills.

One can easily argue that the myth was shattered in that same year when Canadian forces became involved in the Afghanistan conflict with Operation Apollo, which contributed to America's Operation Enduring Freedom there. But even as late as 2007, after years of conflict in Afghanistan, prominent Canadian scholars Janice Gross Stein and Eugene Lang provided stark evidence of a yawning gap in the public perception of Canadian military history in which the peacekeeping myth was allowed to perpetuate itself. In their controversial book *The Unexpected War: Canada in Kandahar*, claiming the Canadian government stumbled into a protracted combat mission in Afghanistan, they traced the decision-making process that resulted in the deployment of an 800-strong Canadian battle group on the ground in Kandahar. It was sent to help fight the Taliban and al-Qaeda in wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks. Canada, Stein and Lang said, was pressured by the United States for ground troops. They wrote:

The choice that the Cabinet made was neither the best option nor the least offensive option: it was the only remaining option on the table.

The Kandahar deployment signaled a major political shift in political and military thinking in Ottawa. It would be the first combat mission for the Canadian Forces since the Korean War, fifty years earlier.²

This book vehemently disagrees with Stein and Lang's contention that there had been no combat mission since Korea. It examines Canada's contribution to the 1999 Kosovo air war authorized by the Liberal government of Jean Chrétien, for which a dedicated campaign medal was struck, and for which Battle Honours were awarded to the 441 and 425 Tactical Fighter Squadrons for their participation in Operation Echo. Operation Echo was the Canadian contribution to Operation Allied Force, the North Atlantic Treaty bombing campaign against Yugoslavia President Slobodan Milosevic's Serbian military and paramilitary forces in Kosovo. It should be noted that Canadian pilots also dropped bombs during the last three days of the 1991 Persian Gulf War, but they were not engaged in protracted combat, flying predominantly escort and sweep roles accompanying coalition aircraft. That is as far as the disagreement with Stein and Lang will go. But Operation Echo does establish a modern baseline departure from Canada's reputation as a purely peacekeeping nation. That this is not general knowledge is not surprising. To put it bluntly, Operation Echo was a black hole from which no light of information could escape by the usual means of mass information dissemination: the news media.

Most Canadians know little if anything about their military men and women who fought that air war and who rightly should be considered modern-day war heroes. Despite the news coverage, Canadians could not have learned how their men and women in uniform dealt with critical equipment shortfalls and personnel problems resulting from years of military budget cuts; the threat levels and the calculated, but terrifying, risks that were taken in combat as a result; the incredible success stories; and the absolute skill, dedication, and bravery of the aircrews.³

The reasons for this failure of knowledge are many and are explored in detail in the following pages, but one of the biggest is that an occupational

conflict of interest lies at the heart of the relationship between the news media and the military. Journalists like to think that the news media, despite its vagaries, “constitutes the foundation of all freedoms” and that they are one of its principal supports.⁴ They are small “I” liberals by nature. They favor openness and think that the news media should provide their readers, listeners, and audiences with the information, ideas, and freewheeling public debate that citizens need to make informed decisions about government and the society in which they live.

There are media scholars and theories aplenty that examine the way the media present the news and what effects that may have on society. In the context of the Kosovo air war, the most relevant scholars are Murray Edelman, Daniel Hallin, and Lance Bennett.⁵

Political scientist Murray Edelman holds that political reality is socially constructed through shared meanings that shape patterns of belief and how we define or “frame” ideas and concepts in our minds.⁶ Edelman wrote that during the Cold War, governments successfully created the widespread perception among the populations of North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies that NATO military defences were necessary countermeasures to possible Soviet aggression in Europe. The shared perception was that Russian hawks were dominant in the Kremlin and that aggression was likely.⁷ Such perceptions were mobilized in mass publics by political leaders and others skilled in inducing news media coverage that reflected their institutional aims.⁸ Edelman wrote that “the critical element in political maneuver for advantage is the creation of meaning: the construction of beliefs about events, policies, leaders, problems and crises that rationalize or challenge existing inequalities.”⁹ He explained that during crisis, a political leader’s strategic need is to mobilize support for the official policy and to immobilize opposition. To that end, the leader must choose language that evokes interpretations that legitimize the preferred course of action and either “encourage people to be supportive or to remain quiescent.”¹⁰

Later, American political science and communication scholar Daniel Hallin wrote about the news media practices and routines during the Vietnam War. Hallin pointed out that when US president Lyndon Johnson lied to the American news media about his intention to increase the number of US troops in South Vietnam to take over the war from the South

Vietnamese, it wasn't questioned. The press simply hadn't been taught to question the president or that a government would lie and cheat.¹¹

One clear pattern University of Washington scholar Lance Bennett observed that was thought to affect the level of domestic debate from Vietnam to the Falklands, Nicaragua, and the Persian Gulf wars was that journalistic routines drove reporters to official sources and indexed them within the political hierarchy. As a result, debate in the media over American war policy ended when official debate ended.¹² Bennett found that during the 1991 Gulf War, elite opposition was never prolonged or prominent enough to affect President Bush's leading policy options.¹³

Few, however, address the most fundamental, occupational, and direct questions as Jay Rosen does: What do journalists stand for? Rosen wrote: "Freedom of information, an open flow of ideas, honesty and candor in public business, the people's right to know—certainly. But it is equally certain that none of these things matter unless we have not just the right, but the means to know, unless we show a will to inform ourselves, unless we are given a decent chance to get into the game, put our ideas and experience to use."¹⁴

In a 2004 Ontario Superior Court ruling, Justice Mary Lou Benotto said:

It is only through the press that most individuals can learn of what is transpiring in government and come to their own assessment of the institution and its actions. Protecting the freedom of expression of the press thereby guarantees the further freedom of members of the public to develop, put forward and act upon informed opinions about government and other matters of public interest.¹⁵

In this role, journalists perform an often adversarial watchdog function, holding people accountable, as exemplified by the investigative reporting of the *Washington Post's* Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein during the Watergate affair in the 1970s.

Thirteen years after Justice Benotto's statement, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said during a press conference in China in December 2017 that reporters in democracies perform a valuable challenge function. It is

noteworthy that he made the remarks in a communist country where independent journalists who challenge Chinese leaders often end up in jail.¹⁶ “Allow me to take a moment to thank members of the media,” Trudeau began. “You play an essential role: a challenge function, an information function. It is not easy at the best of times. These are not the best of times with the transitions and challenges undergoing the traditional media right now and I really appreciate the work that you do.”¹⁷

Military services, on the other hand, are conservative by nature. In that vein, Canadian military men and women adhere to social convention, duty, and a belief that they answer a higher calling. Their business is national defence, security, and war, which are extremely complex affairs. The official media relations policy of the Canadian Forces claims that it strives to be visible, accessible, and accountable to the Canadian public. Yet because the Canadian military’s business is national defence, the reality is that its members are given to discretion, if not secrecy.¹⁸

Few Members of Parliament, let alone the vast majority of the Canadian public, have sufficient expertise to debate or judge matters of national defence. Still, those who study the relationship of militaries to civilians in democracies, or civil-military relations, hold that there ought to be an unbroken line of accountability from Canadian Forces commanders in the field, to the chief of the defence staff, to cabinet, to Parliament and, ultimately, to Canadian citizens who pay for the troops with their taxes and whose sons, daughters, husbands, wives, brothers, sisters, fathers, and mothers participate in combat operations. There is no greater clash between the news media’s liberal value of openness and accountability and the military’s conservative values of discretion and secrecy than when a country is engaged in war. But, like moths to a flame, journalists and writers have been drawn to military conflicts since Homer composed the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* chronicling the Trojan War and its aftermath. In that tradition, Canadian journalists have a rich history of informing the country about Canadian Forces operations overseas, despite being hampered by military secrecy and often outright censorship.¹⁹

But precisely such secrecy and censorship is what happened in the months after 24 March 1999, the day the Liberal government’s minister of national defence, Art Eggleton, rose in the House of Commons to make one of the most serious announcements any government official can. He

reported that six Canadian Forces CF-18 fighter aircraft had participated earlier that day in NATO bombing operations against military targets in Serbia. Canada's military strategy had quietly been in place for months, but Eggleton refused to use the term "war," preferring to euphemistically call these operations a "humanitarian mission."²⁰ Canada's military action, Minister of Foreign Affairs Lloyd Axworthy later elaborated, was part of the international community's response to the failure of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to provide basic rights to its own citizens in the province of Kosovo. He reported that Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic had been using military force to crush Kosovar Albanian dissidents, murdering innocents and destroying their villages, leaving some 450,000 homeless. In the House, Axworthy said: "Humanitarian considerations are the main impulse for our actions. We cannot stand by while an entire population is displaced, people are killed, villages are burned, and people are denied their basic rights because of their ethnic background."²¹

The immediate concern for both Axworthy and Eggleton was the safety of some 130 Canadian Forces personnel based in Aviano, Italy, who were taking part in the action to halt the violence in Kosovo and avert an even bigger humanitarian disaster. Eggleton assured the House that the Canadian Forces in Aviano were well equipped and well prepared for the role they would play in the days ahead. The CF-18s would participate in ground attacks with new precision-guided munitions and could engage in aerial combat with air-to-air missiles.

Notwithstanding the Yugoslav military's sophisticated air defence systems, Eggleton explained that NATO commanders had taken all necessary measures to reduce risk and that the Canadian CF-18s would have the support of NATO escort aircraft on their missions. In other words, the Canadian government's strategy for the deployment of its CF-18s was well underway even if Eggleton preferred to define the conflict as a humanitarian mission, as opposed to a war.

Axworthy had earlier told the House, on 7 October 1998: "No one in Canada and in the international community supports the use of violence to achieve political ends."²² But according to one of history's most influential strategic thinkers, Carl von Clausewitz, that is precisely the point of war in strategy: the application of military force as an instrument of policy to achieve political ends.²³ That aim was precisely the point of the NATO

bombing campaign. It was strategic, because the air war had specific, if unrealistic, Canadian political goals. Axworthy further told the House: “We have stated very clearly that the solution for Kosovo is independence within Yugoslavia.”²⁴ Axworthy’s goals were ridiculed by some, including Roy Remple, who asked: “Could one speak about Quebec’s independence within Canada?”²⁵ On 12 April 1999, some twenty days into the bombing campaign, Eggleton described the five ongoing policy objectives of the Canadian application of military force with its NATO partners: “We seek the immediate end to violence in Kosovo; the complete withdrawal of the military forces; the unconditional and safe return of all refugees, a million of them; the stationing in Kosovo of a military presence; and the establishment of a political framework under which the Kosovars can be appropriately governed.”²⁶

Outside the House on 24 March 1999, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien obfuscated regarding whether Canada was at war, by asking and answering his own rhetorical question while speaking to the news media: “There is an attack. Do you call that a war? It is certainly a military act which is being done to force the President of the Yugoslav Republic to accept the [Kosovo peace] agreement, and to settle the problem in a peaceful manner.”²⁷

Six days into the NATO bombing campaign, Canada escalated its commitment of CF-18s from its original six by committing six more warplanes to the conflict. Four weeks into the campaign, Eggleton committed another six CF-18s from 4 Wing at Canadian Forces Base Cold Lake, bringing the number of Canadian CF-18s in the bombing campaign to eighteen. At that time, on 27 April 1999, Reform Party MP Leon Benoit asked Eggleton point blank in the House if Canada was, in fact, at war. Eggleton responded by saying that most people would call it a war but argued there were legal reasons for not using “that term,” without explaining what they were.²⁸ After all, the term “war” was not officially used in Korea, even though everyone called it a war. What Eggleton meant is not possible to ascertain. An *Access to Information Act* request seeking records about those legal reasons was denied to the author under grounds stipulated by two sections of the *Act*. The first was that disclosing such information could reasonably be expected to damage international affairs or the

defence of Canada.²⁹ The second was that such information is exempt from disclosure on the grounds of solicitor-client privilege.³⁰

Eggleton was correct on the terminology used in the case of Korea. Although the Korean conflict was a UN operation, it was a struggle against communist forces by an American-led coalition, nominally called a “police action” by Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent, not a war.³¹ However, scholarly opinion is clear: the Korean conflict—in which more than 22,000 Canadians served—was a war, however much about it was forgotten. In it, Canadians suffered more than 1,500 casualties, including 312 who died in action or were missing and presumed dead; 1,202 wounded; 33 prisoners of war; and 94 non-battle related fatalities.³² Canadian military historian Jack Granatstein termed the distinction between Korea being a police action and a war *picayune*, because the soldiers who died were “just as dead as if it was a war.”³³

If the Liberal government was reluctant to describe the Kosovo conflict as a war, opposition members were not. Reform Party MP Bob Mills told the House on the first day of the bombing campaign that while some would call the Kosovo military action “peace enforcement” or “forceful diplomacy . . . Let’s not mince words. We are at war and while we find that word distasteful, I believe that is the word we need to use.”³⁴ Still, weeks into the bombing Chrétien remained loath to use the word “war.” On 12 April 1999, he likened Kosovo to the Balkans in 1995, when a brief NATO bombing campaign forced Milosevic to comply with the Dayton Accords.

Not until a year after the NATO bombing campaign ended did an official Liberal government document use the word “war.” That document was the June 2000 *Report of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade*, chaired by Foreign Affairs and International Trade Minister Bill Graham. He acknowledged in passing the title of Michael Ignatieff’s book on the Kosovo campaign, *Virtual War*,³⁵ as “prescient”, but otherwise couched any other use of the word war in quotation marks.³⁶ Throughout the text, the words “conflict” and “intervention” are used repeatedly, but “war” eventually slipped into the language used in the report’s consideration of “the ensuing conduct and consequences of the war, including the impact on civilian populations.”³⁷

American General Wesley Clark, NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander in Europe during the conflict, later wrote in his book *Waging Modern*

War that NATO commanders were never allowed to call the Kosovo military intervention a war, but “of course, it was.”³⁸ Similarly, former US President Bill Clinton does not provide the rationale for his use of the term, but he interspersed the terms “conflict,” “air campaign,” and “bombing campaign” to describe the military action in the Balkans with the words “war” three times and “air war” twice in his autobiography *My Life*.³⁹ The nomenclature is central to this book’s argument that the Canadians who fought there deserved a warrior’s honour for risking their lives in military operations mandated by the Canadian government, even though it was long been denied to them.

Swiss strategic theorist Baron de Jomini’s theories, which reduced war to an intellectual fixed order, are generally known only to military specialists.⁴⁰ Jomini also wrote about the political nature of war, but he argued that the political direction in the form of a war council of generals and ministers must be limited to only broad general plans of operation. Once a decision is made to go to war, it is up to the general directing the war to decide on the manner in which he should achieve the war’s objective. If he is unable to do so, Jomini wrote, “the unfortunate general would certain[ly] be beaten, and the whole responsibility of his reserves should fall upon the shoulders of those who, hundreds of miles distant, took upon themselves the duty of directing the army—a duty so difficult for anyone, even upon the scene of operations.”⁴¹

Because Operation Allied Force was an air war, it also merits briefly revisiting the writing of Giulio Douhet, the Italian air war strategist who wrote as early as the 1920s about the importance of air power. It can be argued that many of Douhet’s theories set out in his later work, *The Command of the Air*, proved to be true in the skies over Kosovo and Serbia. “To have command of the air,” he wrote, “means to be in a position to wield offensive power so great it defies human imagination.”⁴² Douhet set out systematic, if not scientific, plans for air attacks that took every conceivable variable into account, including: weights of aircraft, armaments, and crew; the air force’s organization into tactical groups based on air speed capabilities of the planes; fuel; plans of operations; and the air organizations needed to achieve them. But his one single overwhelming principle for air war, which he said governed warfare whether it was on land or sea, was surprise, and to “inflict the greatest damage in the shortest time

possible.²⁴³ Douhet also envisioned strategically targeting cities or major population centres for aerial bombardment, as opposed to strictly tactical military targets, to break the population's support for the war. He wrote: "A nation which at once loses the command of the air and finds itself subjected to incessant aerial attacks aimed directly at its most vital centres and without the possibility of effective retaliation, this nation, whatever its surface forces may be able to do, must arrive at the conviction that all is useless, that all hope is dead. This conviction spells defeat."²⁴⁴

Post-Kosovo air war scholars Peter Wijnnga and Richard Szafranski wrote that the 1991 Persian Gulf War and the Kosovo air war demonstrated the strategic worth of axiological air operations. The term axiological combines the Greek words "axios," meaning worthy, and "logos," meaning reason or theory, and involves a philosophical investigation into the nature of value. Wijnnga and Szafranski wrote that axiological bombing operations go beyond the focus of "utility bombing" of military infrastructure and its war-fighting tools—including industrial capacity, aircraft, tanks, and troop formations—to non-military targets that political leaders value or hold dear. In the case of Kosovo, that included the state-controlled media outlets by which then Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic attempted to control his people's minds. Wijnnga wrote: "While a totalitarian leader is certain that he can control people's actions, he is uncertain that he has control over their minds. If he does not attempt to control their minds, he knows he may lose control over their actions in the long run."²⁴⁵

More recently, Paul Rexton Kan wrote that whereas early air power theorists like Douhet concentrated on the breaking of civilian morale by bombing major population centres, the NATO bombing campaign Operation Allied Force would appear to offer the most persuasive case for axiological targeting. Early in the bombing campaign, conventional military targets were struck by NATO forces without having the desired effect of halting the humanitarian catastrophe caused by Serbian ethnic cleansing. Only when NATO's bombing was broadened to include institutions crucial to Milosevic's rule did he capitulate. Having said that, Kan wrote that it is not clear that such coercive axiological bombing alone resulted in capitulation because, at the same time, NATO ground troops were being assembled on Kosovo's borders while Russians engaged the Serbs diplomatically.⁴⁶

The Kosovo war was NATO's first air war and was the first in which Canada's airmen had fought in Europe since the Second World War, when some 10,200 of the aircrew fought in Royal Canadian Air Force squadrons and some 16,000 others in the British Royal Air Force.⁴⁷ The Kosovo war provides a rich opportunity to examine the relationship between the Canadian news media and the Canadian Forces, and the conflict of interest that emerged. It studies an asymmetric power struggle between the Canadian Forces, which commanded all the information, and journalists who attempted to uphold the democratic principle of accessibility. This war occurred three years before Canada's involvement in Afghanistan began and makes it clear that Canadians must shed their peacekeeping view of the armed forces in favour of what those forces were doing, and have been doing before and since, this historic international event: warriors.

This book also examines the notion that the news media plays a vital democratic role in informing Canadians about federal government policies, thereby allowing the government to be held accountable for its military policies. It argues that this expectation went unfulfilled in the case of the Kosovo air war. It challenges fundamental Canadian Forces security considerations that undermined any democratic role the Canadian news media might have played during the Kosovo conflict. It shows that the censorship invoked by Canadian Forces over the news media was driven by myth. It argues that operational security considerations must be based on meticulously documented evidence of security threats, not myth, and that censorship is a government—not a military—responsibility.

At the heart of the book is this question: What could Canadians have learned from their news media about the RCAF's exercise of its military skill in pursuit of the government's policies during the Kosovo air war? The research pursued three objectives: The first was to discover what the Canadian Forces did in Aviano, Italy, and in the skies over Kosovo and Serbia during the Kosovo air war. In the process this portion of the book provides details about that war that never have been made public. The second was to learn what English-language Canadian journalists could have learned about Canadian Forces participation in the air but didn't. The author interviewed military personnel involved in the air war and journalists involved in its coverage. The interviews were conducted in person, by telephone, and through email exchanges. Many of those interviews

are quoted extensively because they offer unfiltered evidence about the experiences of Canadian personnel in the Kosovo war, evidence that is otherwise difficult to find. Military ranks used are those held at the time of the conflict or interviews. The third goal was to learn about the interaction between the news media and the military, which held all the information cards about the war close to its chest and actively prevented the news media from learning about its activities in Aviano, Italy, and in the skies over Kosovo and Serbia. This book deliberately makes no distinction between what the different media—print, radio, or television—could have learned because it will be shown that the results were the same for all. It is not what is contained in the news media that threatens the foundations of liberal democracy; it is what is *not* found in the media, that which is absent from the public record. The danger is that a Canadian public ill served by its news media will be unable to make informed judgments about the government and its military policies.