

In rushing to defend, what is the end?

by Ralph C. Martin

“Why do the nations so furiously rage together,
And why do the people imagine a vain thing?”
Psalms 2:1

There was a time in my youth when stories about fast cars and races held my attention. During a huddle of swapping such tales, Fred, who was somewhat senior to the rest of us, drawled wryly as he pulled away, “Yeah sure, speed is fun and it’s not speed that kills; it’s the sudden stop at the end.”

I thought again about Fred’s comments as I read recent stories about Canadian veteran soldiers succumbing to despair with post traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) and dying of suicide. In contrast, the Canadian Forces recruiting page features job opportunities and education with world-class qualifications and development of leadership skills, in defense of democracy. The photos and videos of aircraft and ships in dramatic movement are compelling.

PTSD has been recognized at least since WWI. The psychological and emotional horrors of those afflicted with PTSD are real, with attendant social and economic costs. Perhaps truth in advertising policies should stipulate that recruiters for armed forces must reveal probabilities and consequences of PTSD and environmental destruction.

Any government assessing a military mission could reasonably be expected to include anticipated long term social and economic costs of PTSD in their cost-benefit assessment. Unfortunately, there is an increasing data set to validate such calculations. The data represent damaged lives and arguably there is a moral imperative to, as much as possible, prevent further despair. If a decision to engage our troops is taken, it should be with planning and budgeting to mitigate PTSD. The costs of prevention and mitigation are almost certainly lower than the costs of neglect and pretending the problem will evaporate.

Today Canadian companies are accelerating their sales of guns and ammunition. From 2011 to 2012, exports of Canadian made weapons increased by 100% to Bahrain, Algeria and Iraq. These countries are anything but politically stable. In addition, exports to Pakistan increased by 98%, to Mexico by 93% and to Egypt by 83%. Is it wise to sell advanced

destructive tools to combatants with cash who are in a hurry to defend narrowly defined ideologies, at all cost?

One wonders when one of these conflagrations will burst into the next political crisis and our leaders will have to defend democracy with more Canadian arms and more Canadian youth and more PTSD agony and more waste on all sides.

What are the comprehensive and long term costs of Canadian companies profiting from arms sales? Do we want to subsidize our economy by taking advantage of the cash extracted from developing economies caught up in urgent quarrels and thus further destabilize their political, social and economic base?

It is understandable that some groups feel hard done by and want to redress wrongs or gain access to resources in short supply. As food prices rise or as competition for water increases unrest tends to rise. What are the costs of addressing underlying grievances with humanitarian assistance and environmental restoration, contrasted with the costs of military force?

Pierre Trudeau, while Prime Minister, advocated for a "strategy of suffocation" of the arms race, which he unveiled at the United Nations in 1977. Geoffrey Pearson notes this strategy (www.peacemagazine.org/archive/v17n1p07.htm) included a comprehensive test ban, a ban on the flight testing of new strategic missiles, a stop to the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons, and reductions in defence spending.

Patrick Lane, in a Convocation address at the University of Victoria, in November talked about men he observed killing a cougar in 1949. "They were born into the first Great War of the last century. Most of their fathers did not come home from the slaughter. Most of their mothers were left lost and lonely.... And then came the Second World War and more were lost.... But we sometimes forget that untold numbers of creatures died with them: the sparrow and the rabbit, the salmon and the whale ... And trees died too, the fir and spruce, the cedar and hemlock. Whole forests were sacrificed to the wars."

By any measure, wars run counter to sustaining a healthy environment and vibrant social relationships. Wars also damage agricultural land and farmers and exacerbate food insecurity. And yet global annual military expenditures rose to \$1.6 trillion in 2008, the year economies contracted and governments chose to reduce other expenses. This vain splurge has not subsided.

As a species with advanced technical prowess, we still indulge in immature actions so one group can acquire more than another. It's time to grow up and understand what we really

need; healthy relationships, a resilient environment and spiritual peace. The thrill of rushing to defend consumption, consolidation and control has not killed our species yet but unless we slow down and change course, the stop at the end will.

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