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

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Context-Less Facts, Ambiguity, Half-Truths, and Outright Lies

The largest study on Canadian journalism, the *Royal Commission on Newspapers*, was published more than thirty years ago. Clearly, much has changed in the world since 1981, and it would take a whole series of books to chronicle the technological tools alone that media now have at their disposal: powerful desktop and tablet computers, cellular phones that take pictures rivalling some single-lens reflex cameras, digital photography, communications satellites, satellite phones, and the Internet, to name but a few. One thing, however, hasn't changed: the principle that the best journalism "has as its philosophical ideal the quest for what it is right and true."[1] At the same time, the commission admitted that it was difficult to turn that principle into a yardstick to measure the media's performance.[2] This book examined the performance of the media's coverage of the Kosovo air war and found it sorely wanting. But this wasn't the fault of some of Canada's best journalists, who did their best to determine what was right and true, but failed.

This book is also a study that goes far beyond Kosovo. Initially, it was based to a large degree on interviews with journalists who were open and forthright about the challenges they faced trying to cover Canadian operations in Aviano, Italy, in 1999. As such, it adds to our knowledge of media-military relations in Canada and contributes to this aspect of Canadian journalism history. Finally, this study assesses the nature of military policy in a democracy and the uses of secrecy and censorship. The hope

is that it will stir debate about strategic and media studies and the lessons that can be learned. That is the ultimate goal. It was first driven by the research question: What could Canadians have learned from the national news about the Canadian air force's exercise of its military skill during the Kosovo air war? The answer is simple: not much at all.

There was a contention that the news media were drawn to the Canadian Forces during the bombing campaign simply for information they could package and sell. On one hand, that is a gross oversimplification of the state of the Canadian news media. The largest journalistic organization in Canada is the CBC, a public broadcaster. One of its stated mandates is to contribute to Canada's shared national consciousness and identity. There could have been no better way to raise Canadians' consciousness of their country's role in the world than by the CBC reporting on what the Canadian Forces were doing in Aviano and in the skies over Serbia and Kosovo. On the other hand, part of the argument that the news media were drawn to the war for information they could package and sell rings true: the majority of the journalistic organizations are commercial in nature, and it is true that profits drive news media in a free society. But that is a valuable democratic construct because it is what keeps the media at arm's length from government and enables it to hold governments and their institutions accountable. The reporters who travelled to Aviano were serious journalists who went there to do serious work. They simply should not have been dismissed so cavalierly by a commander who was trained to do otherwise but who rejected his training as a result of operational security considerations that were fundamentally flawed.

This book explores the operational security argument that the news media's identification of air force members during the 1991 Gulf War resulted in body bags being placed on the lawns of their families in Canada and that the Forces did not want a replication of such harassment. That story is an urban myth. The question remains: Why did that myth take on such importance in Canada and Aviano? The answers may be found in the news media policies of US General Wesley Clark in Belgium and in the half-baked public affairs plan developed by the Department of National Defence in Ottawa.

As SACEUR, Clark played an active role in NATO's public affairs activities, to the point of ordering his staff to call NBC on the first night

of the bombing campaign to correct a report. He appeared before press briefings in Brussels on five separate occasions. Clark initially wanted as little information about the war to get out as possible in the interest of operational security. Despite that, some of the US military appeared on television and gave interviews allowing their names to be reported. That policy was amended within a few days to allow the identification of pilots by first names only.

A spokesman said the rationale for the restrictive public affairs policy was that American pilots who might be shot down preferred the news media not to publish or broadcast their names or identify their families or hometowns. The shooting down of an F-117 Stealth fighter on the fourth day of the war provided a rationale for that argument. The predisposition toward secrecy won the day. The identification of downed pilots became associated with a threat to their families. That threat had two effects. First, the policy stole the life from news reports on the bombing campaign in the way of names, faces, and points of reference such as hometown information. Second, it also softened the media exposure of the war's deadly consequences on Americans at home. Gen. Clark drew the lesson that attention to the news media is a must for future military commanders, because public support is necessary for sustained operations. As the bombing of the Chinese Embassy showed in stark contrast, an absence of criticism over the long term may also have important consequences.

Fortunately, and almost miraculously, no Canadian pilots were shot down during the war. Still, in the absence of a public affairs plan to handle media requests for interviews with air force members in Aviano, the half-remembered and false stories about harassment of air force families during the 1991 Gulf War spurred the military's disposition toward secrecy. During the Kosovo air war, the Canadian Forces were able to define the news through security measures based on a myth driven by slipshod military public affairs and sloppy media coverage during the 1991 war. If ever there was a myth, the 1991 body bag is it. Nonetheless, its use prohibited journalists, with rare exceptions, from talking to the pilots and prevented Canadians from identifying, even vicariously, with hometown heroes.

It is entirely conceivable that out of the ashes of other wars, new myths about security threats to pilots' families resulting from news postings on the Internet will emerge. The information highway offers newspaper

readers, television viewers, and social media observers alternatives and opportunities to obtain more information and diversity of views. If the contents of a local newspaper could pose an operational security concern, then one posted on the Internet can be seen to pose an exponentially greater threat to operational security. The short combined history of militaries, the Internet, and the news media has borne that out. As the Kosovo air war showed, myths don't need to be true; they need only to be believed. Myths should not drive operational security considerations.

Due to a series of minor miracles, the combat operations had a relatively happy ending: no Canadian died. It was a minor miracle that one or more of the pilots strung out in single line formations weren't picked off by enemy fire. It was a minor miracle that one or more of the pilots weren't shot down because their radars were trained not on potential oncoming threats but on the CF-18s in front of them so they didn't collide in the fog of war. It was a minor miracle that the lack of night-vision goggles didn't have catastrophic consequences. As a result, there was no outpouring of emotion for the CF-18 crews as there was for Canadian soldiers when their losses began to mount in Afghanistan. Members of the Canadian Forces accept that they may be killed or harmed in the performance of their duty to their country. The corollary is that they should have the right tools to carry out their missions. The politicians and top military brass in the Canadian military insisted that the CF-18 squadrons in Aviano were well equipped and well trained. This book finds much differently. They weren't well equipped, and being well trained wasn't the issue: pilot performance was the issue. Some were on probation, more were under supervision. Some were even grounded and returned to Canada because, although they could fly warplanes, they came up short fighting a war. However, and remarkably, those who remained accomplished their mission.

It has been argued that the Forces' hastily developed public affairs policy during the Kosovo war was based on the best available information at the time given operational security concerns. But it merits examining the assumed source of the threats to air force families in Canada in 1999 that bolstered such concerns. There were thousands of anti-war protesters outside the gates at the Aviano air base and protests against the war in Canada. But in the eyes of the military, the protesters in Canada were linked not to those in Aviano but to war criminals in Serbia. An enduring

feature of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* is the democratic right of freedom of association and speech. Even during a war, protesters have a right to gather within the legal limits as prescribed in Canadian law. They were protesters, not war criminals. Could the military have done more to ascertain the threat to military families in Canada in 1999? The answer is yes. Gen. Raymond Henault told the news media that the Forces were attempting to assess the threat to military families, but there is no documented evidence that a threat assessment was ever conducted.

Notwithstanding the best efforts of public affairs officers in Aviano who worked on their own to help the news media as much as they could—even when journalists were not present—their work resulted in the military controlling the news agenda. The only options for the news media were to take or to leave what was given to them. Once the TV outlets accepted the military's film footage—even when identified as military footage—public affairs effectively circumvented the media's function of gathering its own footage independently. The sanitized images provided could not possibly convey audio and visual actualities of the horrible business of humans bombing, killing, and maiming other humans. That brutal reality evaded Canadians during the Kosovo air war.

Political scientist Murray Edelman wrote that reality is socially constructed through shared meanings that shape patterns of belief and frame ideas and concepts. The strategic need, he said, is for leaders to either create support for their policies or to immobilize opposition. Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, Minister of Foreign Affairs Lloyd Axworthy and Minister of National Defence Art Eggleton never did call the Kosovo aerial bombardment a war. The closest Chrétien came was to say that it was a military action meant to force the Yugoslav president to accept a peace agreement. Axworthy said the bombing campaign was part of the international community's response to Yugoslavia's failure to protect the human rights of Kosovars. Eggleton called it a humanitarian mission. That was entirely in keeping with Edelman's writings on socially constructed reality and framing. It can't really be said that the Canadian population was mobilized to support the 78-day bombing campaign, but it can be said it remained largely quiescent, which met the strategic need.

Further, the military absolutely mastered the news media during the technical briefings at National Defence Headquarters. It scattered

context-less facts, ambiguity, half-truths, and outright lies like chaff from a CF-18 trying to thwart a radar-guided missile. Communications scholar Daniel Hallin wrote about American president Lyndon Johnson lying to the American news media about his intention to increase the number of US troops in Vietnam in the 1960s. US journalists, Hallin wrote, had not been taught to question whether a president or government would lie and cheat. The same thing happened in Canada during the Kosovo air war, although it wasn't the US commander-in-chief lying, it was a handful of Canadian generals and colonels. Canadians simply deserve better from their military leaders. The military is not an island unto itself. The values of Canadian society, which include freedom of the press, must be reflected in the military's professional values. The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*' guarantees must be embraced by the Canadian Forces in a way that includes more than the charade of openness and transparency perpetrated in Ottawa during the Kosovo air war. What took place in Aviano, Italy—far beyond the farce taking place in Ottawa—ought to be viewed as censorship.

Journalists accept the need for some military secrecy, but because of nebulous security concerns, the Canadian Forces undermined the media's democratic role in holding the Liberal government of Jean Chrétien accountable for its slashing and burning of military budgets in the 1990s. Its security policy also forbade pilots from disclosing anything but the vaguest details about their missions. But precisely the kind of information desired by reporters in Aviano and in Canada appeared later in great detail in the *Maple Leaf*. Similarly, in Ottawa, journalists were denied information about how much was being spent on bombs by Brig. Gen. Jurkowski for operational security reasons one day, yet it was released by Gen. Henault the next. Both examples indicate of how cavalierly and unnecessarily operational security was invoked in Aviano and Ottawa.

If Canadians were as unaware of what their Forces had done during the bombing campaign as Gen. Jurkowski claimed, then he must bear some of the responsibility for that fact. Gen. Jurkowski doubted the body bag story, but he let his subordinates undermine him. But, that being said, the restrictive media strategies that kept Canadians from knowing of the air force's role in the Kosovo air war were not the failures of a few men but

of the Canadian Forces as an institution. This was an institutional failure for several reasons.

First, the Kosovo air war was only the second war the Canadian Forces had fought since the Korean War. The most recent war before Kosovo was the 1991 Persian Gulf War. After that war, the Forces compiled a voluminous lessons-learned report on how to improve its dealings with the media. The key lesson was that the Forces should learn from their more experienced allies and adopt more liberal policies regarding the release of operational information.

Second, the air force failed to learn from the navy and the army, both of which anticipated news media coverage in theatre and stipulated that commanders must prepare for that eventuality. As an institution, the Canadian Forces developed a guiding public affairs policy document, DAOD 2008, which was in place in 1998–1999. DAOD 2008 required national and operational public affairs plans in the event of escalating military tension or war. Astonishingly, the air force deployed in June 1998 with the intention of fighting an aerial bombing operation without considering the possibility that news media might want to interview pilots. The only guidelines developed were produced ad hoc and were founded on myth, not fact. This failure was not of men but of an institution that did not function as a whole.

University of Washington scholar Lance Bennett wrote that the level of domestic debate from Vietnam, the Falklands, Nicaragua, and the Persian Gulf wars was driven by journalistic routines driving them to official sources who were indexed within the political hierarchy. As a result, the prolonged debate in the media ended when official debate ended. The main official sources for information about Canadian involvement in the Kosovo air war were, in indexed order: Minister of National Defence Art Eggleton, Lt. Gen. Raymond Henault and Brig. Gen. David Jurkowski in Ottawa, and Lt. Col. Dwight Davies in Aviano, Italy. Eggleton revealed nothing in Parliament about the bombing campaign. When parliamentarians complained, they were told to attend the media technical briefings, where Henault and Jurkowski were evading reporters' questions and not telling the truth. As a result, there was neither prolonged official debate in Parliament nor in the media. There was nothing that affected the Liberal government's policy options.

It was argued there was no expectation that the Canadian air force would be fighting over Kosovo for five years or that the military would need Canadians to do without shoes in order to produce war materials to win, in which case the hearts and minds of Canadian people would be needed. That was true, but winning the hearts and minds of Canadians was not the point. The Liberal government sent the air force to fight from Italy because of the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Serbia, but there was no accountability to Parliament, the democratic source of that military action. Those who study the relationship of militaries to civilians in democracies 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, voters who pay for the troops with their taxes and whose sons, daughters, husbands, wives, brothers, sisters, fathers, and mothers participate in combat operations. During the Kosovo war, that unbroken line of accountability utterly failed, and with it the principles that give democracy meaning.

In absence of such institutional accountability, if the news media is to serve as an intermediary that informs Canadians about what the military does, how it does it, and why, in a meaningful way, there are several things that must happen in the future. The Canadian Forces must get beyond its empty, meaningless public affairs rhetoric that most Canadians will learn about the Forces in both peacetime and wartime through the news media. Militaries are being called upon more and more to resolve humanitarian and terrorist crises in failed and failing states. Canada is expecting to be one of these militaries, but what is to be learned from the Kosovo war?

Some of Canada's most accomplished and respected journalists travelled to Aviano to cover the Canadian Forces there and came away empty-handed. Would there have been more or better coverage of the air force if more media outlets had made greater efforts, spent more money, and committed journalists in greater numbers to the air war's coverage in Kosovo? The answer can only be speculative given the military's success in neutralizing the parliamentary press gallery in Ottawa and those who travelled to Aviano. Yet the evidence from this research is clear: most Canadian journalists do a poor job of covering the Canadian Forces. The journalism industry must shoulder the responsibility for that. Covering the military is a challenging undertaking that should be taught by journalism

schools, yet Canadian universities are woefully deficient in this regard. Aspiring journalists ought to learn how to cover the Canadian military in the same way the best of them cover health, the arts, the courts, business, and municipal, provincial, and federal politics. The use of military force, after all, is the pursuit of politics by other means.

Journalists believe that a talented reporter can take on almost any topic and produce a good story, but there is more to responsible journalism than that. The best journalists approach their subject areas knowledgeably, critically, with an in-depth understanding developed over time. To argue that a general reporter, court reporter, police reporter, or legislature reporter can seamlessly be assigned to cover an organization as complex as the Canadian Armed Forces on a story-by-story basis—and do it well—is wrong.

It has been suggested that journalists train with the military and have exposure to it well before a crisis unfolds to build expertise in what the military is doing and why. There are many problems associated with that suggestion. The problems are not insurmountable, but they are significant. The first is that the journalists must be exposed to the Forces in garrison and in the field over time. They must observe and understand its training, understand its culture, and ultimately understand what they do and why they do it. All of that takes time and money. Given the increasingly profit-driven nature of the news media organizations in Canada, that may be a hard sell, but it shouldn't be. The editors and news directors who assign stories must understand the importance of military news when it comes to deciding which stories are to be covered. Senior editors and managers with an eye on budgets must be prepared to bear the costs associated with military journalism. News organizations should be more than a collection of writers, photographers, cameramen and women, editors, and news directors packaging information like sausage stuffers in a meat-packing plant as efficiently as possible in order to maximize owners' profits.

In a perfect world, profit-driven publishers and owners would learn from the great news organizations that they have a social responsibility of public service to their readers and viewers. One can be forgiven for not being overly optimistic that owners, already coping with the migration of advertisers to the Internet, will embrace the concept of an overhead-laden social responsibility and, more critically, the diminished profits that might go with it. Yet the best news organizations don't bleed to death

by paying for quality journalism, they profit from it. Perhaps events after Kosovo—September 11, 2001; the Canadian missions in Afghanistan; Libya and Iraq—have changed journalists' attitudes toward the need to be better informed about national defence, security, and foreign affairs matters. Even if attitudes have changed, the entire parliamentary press gallery cannot be expected to become experts on the Canadian Armed Forces. How many should become military experts is unclear, but having more would enhance the diversity of news coverage.

The second problem with the suggestion that journalists train with the military and have exposure to them well before accompanying them on operations is that it would only work with the army and the navy. Journalists can accompany the army and the navy on exercises or missions. That is better than nothing, but covering the air force or tank regiments presents a much different set of problems. For example, even during training exercises like Maple Flag at CFB Cold Lake, there is little else for observers to do but watch scores of NATO aircraft thunder into the sky and disappear out of sight. Journalists can't accompany pilots in their one-seat fighter aircrafts like they can accompany soldiers in many of their fighting vehicles and sailors on their ships. With air forces, there is little for journalists to do but photograph jets taking off and landing or interview airmen before and after missions.

A third problem is operational security. Viewed through the prism of operational security, what needs to be considered is that which might jeopardize a mission at the secrecy end of the spectrum, what might not at the transparent other end, and where a balance can be struck in the subtle middle range. At the conservative end of the secrecy spectrum, it is not reasonable to expect that the Canadians should have revealed that flying without night-vision goggles forced them to fly in dangerous formations or reveal the tactics they developed in order to avoid colliding with each other during the Kosovo campaign. At the transparency end, disclosure of the costs of a bombing campaign to taxpayers would not have compromised operational security, despite what Brig. Gen. Jurkowski said. That much is intuitive.

In the subtle middle range of the operational security spectrum, it was argued in Aviano that the pilots' mission focus should not be needlessly jeopardized simply to satisfy information-starved journalists in pursuit

of a story, any story. On one hand, Canadian historian Jack Granatstein is right: the public's right to know is not absolute and is not worth the life of one Canadian soldier. Freedom of the press simply does not trump the sanctity of life. On the other hand, there was no evidence that the pilots were concerned about news media reports or that their mission focus was compromised by them. The Task Force Aviano commander simply didn't like what was written in just one article. The news media can accept that operational security requirements will, at times, restrict the freedom of journalists to report on all aspects of operations. But the military should not use the comfort blanket of operational security to shut the door on media scrutiny of its operations in their entirety as it did during the Kosovo air war.

A balance needs to be struck that bridges the military's conservative value of discretion, if not secrecy, and the media's liberal value of openness. Journalists should be allowed to report on the challenges overcome, the dangers faced, the hardships endured, and the sacrifices made by military personnel without compromising operational security. Allowing journalists to see that the Canadians were retooling US bombs and that they relied on the Americans, in many ways and more than anyone knew, presents a case where a balance might be struck. On one hand, while such a revelation shedding new light on the state of the Canadian Forces would not have provided comfort to an enemy that wouldn't have cared where the bombs that were being dropped on them came from, there might well have been have political and diplomatic repercussions. On the other hand, revealing that the ground crews not only met the challenges of long hours; had little sleep and inappropriate footwear; slogged through the rain; and persevered through insufferable heat and injuries that debilitated crew members who were too old to do their jobs would have enabled Canadians to know about their commitment to duty and dedication to their country.

As a result, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the Canadian Forces and news media could learn from the Kosovo air war and that they should discuss aspects of future media coverage that would and would not constitute legitimate threats to operational security. To that end, it is suggested that military and journalistic leaders engage in dialogue to strike such a reasonable balance between their respective and competing imperatives. The likelihood of that happening in my lifetime, if ever, is

remote. Although it is a highly romantic—if not idealistic—notion, the Canadian public does have the right, if not always the ability, to make informed decisions about the government and its policies. This includes the application of military skill in combat. For this reason, when operational security is invoked by the military to restrict, if not censor, the Canadian news media, the reasons for it must be based on empirical facts and must be explained in clear, concise terms.

The news media's coverage of the Kosovo air war presents the question: Could the media's readers and audiences have known about the Canadian military's participation in a war that wasn't covered by the media? The answer is they couldn't have. As mentioned earlier, Canadians could not have made informed judgments about the Canadian military's prosecution of the Kosovo air war in an information vacuum.