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Heath: Stephen Harper, warmonger



JOSEPH HEATH

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Published on: March 20, 2015

Last Updated: March 20, 2015 4:46 PM EDT



No one should have been surprised when Stephen Harper announced that the Canadian combat mission against ISIL will be renewed, or perhaps even expanded, next week. After all, the Prime Minister is a warmonger.

I don't mean that in a bad way. I'm just observing a fact. Harper is pro-war. He thinks that war is something worth doing. He thinks that war has numerous redeeming qualities.

Various commentators have pointed this out. After all, how many political leaders go out of their way to celebrate the beginning, rather than the end, of the First World War? Or who thinks that the War of 1812 is more worthy of commemoration than the adoption of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms? The Harper government is constantly sending out weird press releases, celebrating the anniversary of some battle or skirmish that no one has ever heard of.

And yet, the basis of this enthusiasm is difficult to pin down. There is some level at which Harper clearly likes war, and would very much like to see Canada get involved in more of them. And yet he is a peculiar sort of warmonger, in that he also doesn't seem to have a lot of stomach for the reality of it. For instance, he has none of the grudging respect for men like Vladimir Putin that one finds on the right wing of the U.S. Republican Party. His reaction to the Ukraine crisis was more like "Oh my God, how could you?" rather than "This is how the great game is played, we must learn to play it better..."

All of this led me to thinking about the various sorts of warmongers who are out there. What kind of young man reads *All Quiet on the Western Front*, or watches a movie like *The Deer Hunter*, and comes away thinking "true, but on balance war still seems to me worthwhile"? I can think of several possible motives for such a view, and thus at least four different

categories:

The Macho: The most common stereotype of the warmonger is the macho type, who sees human relations in terms of a dominance hierarchy. Typically this sort of person began, at a young age, to use force and intimidation as a way of moving up the dominance hierarchy, and over time allowed this to become something of a worldview (often couched in terms of “respect” or “honour”). The attitude toward war is basically a projection onto the nation-state of the lessons learned in interpersonal relations – you have to show people who’s boss, you can’t let your guard down, if they don’t fear you they will conspire against you, etc. This is the sort of person for whom the chant, “we’re number one,” resonates deeply.

The Realist: The realist is far less emotional than the macho warmonger – in fact, he is often better described as being “in the grip of a theory.” The theory in question is usually a somewhat reductionist view of human relations, which maintains that “when push comes to shove,” or “when you get down to brass tacks,” it is force that maintains social order. Thus the realist is inclined to view international law, negotiations and deliberations, to be potentially useful, but only when backed up by the use of force. The public, however, tends to forget this, which is why it is necessary to have a war every so often, in order to remind everyone how things really work.

The Nation-builder: Some see war more instrumentally, as part of a larger nation-building project. Nothing unifies people like having a common enemy. And as the Weimar-era political theorist Carl Schmitt argued, the nation is fundamentally about drawing the distinction between friend and foe. The nation-building warmonger initiates conflict, not only to distract from difficult domestic issues, but to enhance social solidarity, and to create a sense of national purpose.

The Romantic: In this day and age, the romantic militarist is a bit of an odd duck, despite the fact that it used to be a very popular view. Consider the passages in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, where Count Rostov expresses his fervent desire to die for the Tsar. This is the sort of romanticism that the mechanized slaughter of the First World War largely put an end to. At the same time, you can still find echoes of it, particularly among those who are intensely patriotic, or committed to the virtue of “sacrifice” – which always seems to mean dying rather than, say, paying taxes – or who think that war helps the nation to achieve “moral clarity.”

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If one had to slot Stephen Harper in somewhere on this list, I think one would have to classify him as a romantic militarist. This is mainly due to the fact that his attitude toward the military, like much of his more general political conservatism, seems to be based on nostalgia. His book on hockey made it clear that this is a significant aspect of his temperament. Beyond the bundle of resentments that constitutes his attitude toward the modern world, his only core conviction seems to be that things were better back in the old days. A hazy romanticism about Canada’s military past is part and parcel of all this.

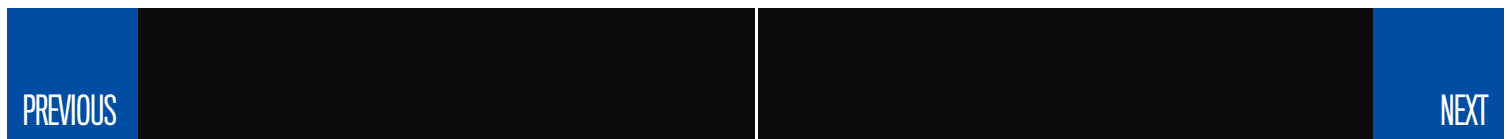
My inclination is to dismiss this as mostly just foolishness. As far as rebranding Canada as a “warrior nation” is concerned, the government seems to me to have been spinning its wheels. This is for two reasons:

First, there is the fact that they have been unable to figure out, any better than the Liberals before them, how to solve the problem of military procurement in this country. As a result, there is little danger of Canada actually becoming a fighting nation – we simply don’t have the hardware to do it. Furthermore, the lack of equipment — or even competence in the acquisition of equipment — betrays a fundamental lack of seriousness, which in turn makes a lot of the militarism seem like just play-acting.

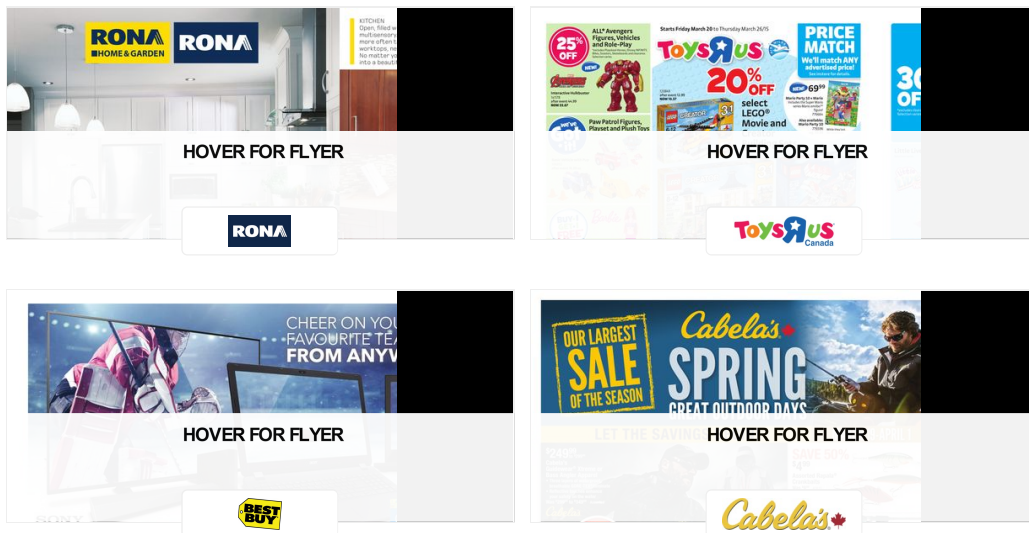
Second, there is the fact that Canada does not need a fighting military. Americans often accuse other Western nations, particularly some European states, of free-riding on U.S. military power. And while this may not be true of some nations, it is certainly true of Canada. Part of what's nice about having the world's largest undefended border with the U.S. is that they would never tolerate the invasion of Canada by a hostile power. As a result, we have to be prepared for minor border skirmishes, but we don't really need to have a full-scale military, sufficient to defend the country from attack.

The fact that the Canadian military is essentially otiose provides one way of understanding our past enthusiasm for peacekeeping – at least it provided some rationale for maintaining something like an able fighting force. Take away the peacekeeping, and what becomes the new *raison d'être* for the Canadian military? The Conservative government has yet to provide one — indeed, it seems not to be even aware of the need to. The boyish enthusiasm for the military that you find in the current government is essentially a matter of personal temperament and political ideology, but it lacks any underlying national or geopolitical rationale.

Joseph Heath is a professor in the department of philosophy at the University of Toronto. His book *Enlightenment 2.0: Restoring Sanity to Our Politics, our Economy, and Our Lives*, recently won the *Shaughnessy Cohen Prize for Political Writing*.




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 **Neal McCarten** · ★ Top Commenter · Ottawa, Ontario
Mr Harper likes war like he likes hockey. He likes to watch other people do it while having never bothered to try himself.
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 **Michelle Groulx** · ★ Top Commenter · Seneca
You are indeed correct. I do believe that he has no idea what reality is, sitting up there in his ivory tower.
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 **Eric Sablone** · CBC



Frits Scheltema · CBC

So what if he has not played hockey. Many people have not but still watch and comment on the game.

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Robbin Penney

Mchelle Groulx Re: Harper - You mean sitting in his 'broom closet' I'm sure...

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Melvin Winkystink

I cant believe this drivel was published. Lets make up a position on Harper, then make up 4 types of 'warmongers', then arbitrarily decide where to place our PM. And then argue that our country doesn't need a military? Clearly the writer believes that there is absolutely no reason that we should stand up for something. Ever. Nothing is worth fighting for. And lets just forget that the military responds to domestic crises as well (IE floods and other natural disasters, etc)

This article is just....ridiculous

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Frits Scheltema · CBC

Too many professors live in a fairy tale world. Too many of them have never had a real job in the real world. Universities are often hot beds of leftist ideals. War is not a good thing but if we said that with WW 1 and 2 we would have been living under German rule or Nazi rule. It is not a matter of liking war. It is a matter of having principles. Harper knows what reality is as does the UK, France and many other countries including Arab countries. It is not just non Arabs who are fighting ISIS. It is a stupid statement when one says he likes to watch hockey and not trying it. What do you expect a PM to do? Carry a rifle and go and fight. Be realistic. By the way he did write a book on hockey, a lot more than others did. Oh I am not a pansy just following the PM and his beliefs and just accept that war is good. I was always against the Afgan war. We could not win that and we did not.

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Neal McCarten · [★](#) Top Commenter · Ottawa, Ontario

He never played hockey even before he was PM and reportedly can't even skate. He never volunteered for service when he was young, but will send off others to fight a secret war without even seeking the permission of Parliament. All while building monuments and \$100 million dollar art center renovations and shutting down veterans' affairs centres around the country.

The Second World War is a poor example, as most historians will tell you, the conditions of Hitler's rise to power were created by the treaty conditions of the First World War. And so it was a failure of diplomacy and lack of foresight that begat WW2, not the failure of Leaders to act more quickly against Hitler (by that point it was largely too late). And for God's sake stop trying to make ever argument about the Nazis.

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Derek Goodchild · Toronto, Ontario

Can you tell me why we are over in the middle east fighting for? So women dont cover their faces? Lets focus on protecting our borders! We dont have to have injured (mentally or physically) or dead solders fighting in the middle east. Lets have them here protecting us as Canadians, at our borders. All thats happening is that isis, isl, whomever terrorist over there is getting more of a hate on for us. There is a huge ocean separating us from them they are not our imminent danger. The danger comes from someone who has taken over not as a leader but as a dictator! Lets start by trying to pay off our debt and working on our deficit instead of throwing the anchor overboard with a short rope pulling us deeper under water. The only thing I am scared of is our taxes going up from Harpers overspending!

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Frits Scheltema · CBC

I wont stop making arguments about the Nazis. They built up their war machine and the British and the Americans did nothing until it was too late. The Germans broke the agreement they made after WW1. If we do nothing now we will be faced with far bigger problems down the road. Remember Trudeau rode around Quebec wearing a Nazi helmet. Harper did not have to serve as there was no conscription. Why take a job in the army if you are not going in that direction? Harper won the election fair and square. Trudeau introduced the War Measures Act which took away many liberties yet that is forgotten. You made a point about waiting in 1939 before doing anything. That is exactly my argument. Act before it is too late. Germany was over the ocean from the States as was Japan. Hitler was a dictator who thrived in killing people as did his henchmen. No I am not Jewish but I can see that doing nothing and sitting back is not an option.

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Brian Veysey · ★ Top Commenter · Hard Knocks University

Harper is not demonstrating that he likes war if he directs the Canadian Forces to help eradicate ISIS the scourge of the Middle East! He is demonstrating that he recognizes we cannot sit on the sidelines and let monsters murder and terrorize helpless human beings in the middle east!

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Andrew Sloss · ★ Top Commenter · North Vancouver, British Columbia

Monsters like who..the anglo american militaries..guaranteed they have caused the death of more innocents in the middle east than Isis..the only difference is the immense difference in power, and that the military is our monster..I think that is supposed to make all this chaos O.K.

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Ros But · ★ Top Commenter · Kelowna, British Columbia

You forgot Hypocrite. I have hard time with with the warmongering types, that could never find the time to sign up. Putting someone elses kids in harms way is not an attribute.

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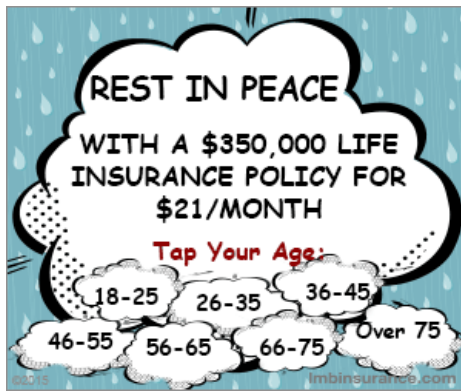
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