

# Operationalizing the State:

## Notes on Military Responses to Environmental Disasters

by David Tough

Over the past decade, Canadians have seen our armed forces increasingly deployed in response to environmental disasters. In 1996, the Saguenay River in eastern Quebec flooded, destroying homes in the region and bursting hydroelectric dams. In 1996 the Red River overflowed its banks, flooding large areas of central Manitoba; the largest Canadian military force deployed since the Korean War (8400 personnel) was sent in to contain the flood and deliver emergency supplies under Operation Assistance. In response to the Ice Storm in 1998, which left millions of Canadians in Quebec and eastern Ontario without power, the Department of National Defence launched Operation Recuperation, which it called “the largest deployment of troops ever to serve on Canadian soil in response to a natural disaster” ([www.forces.gc.ca/site/operations/recuperation\\_e.asp](http://www.forces.gc.ca/site/operations/recuperation_e.asp)). Climate change and the growing incidence of extreme weather mean we have most likely not seen the last of this new humanitarian role for the military.

To many Canadians, military responses to environmental disasters have become an important part of our public life and our sense of nationhood and shared citizenship. Beyond their direct purpose of enforcing the continuation of basic human capabilities (access to food, shelter and clean water) when normal civilian infrastructure is threatened or destroyed, these interventions play a key symbolic role as the embodiment of our national mythology of mutual concern at a time when the direct institutional expressions of that mutual concern (universal health care, provincial equalization, social assistance) are being undermined. The symbolic nationalist role that humanitarian military deployments play in Canada is particularly strong in contrast to the United States, where the sense of shared risk seems to be much less deeply entrenched. But the proliferation of humanitarian military deployment in Canada – and, more crucially, the nationalist and collectivist cultural value we attach to that deployment – needs to be stud-

ied. What conception of government does it validate? To what extent is that conception opposed to the prevailing values of the privatized neo-liberal state? In other words, does the valuation of humanitarian military deployment point us towards a generous and democratic vision of citizenship, or away? The sections that follow offer a very preliminary way of beginning that investigation.

### The Environment as Military Theatre

Paul Virilio, in his little book *Popular Defense and Ecological Struggles*, examines the history of military power and its relation to civilian politics. Although the title might suggest otherwise, Virilio treats the environment less as a locus of politics itself than as a theatre, a terrain upon which military power is performed. Even the rare instances in which he does grant the environment power are quickly brought into step with the relentless march of Virilio’s argument about military politics. He writes, for example, that

Ecological catastrophes are only terrifying for civilians. For the military, they are but a simulation of chaos, and consequently a subject of study and an opportunity for large-scale maneuvers in open terrain, beyond the constraints of national boundaries. (1990: 65-66)

For the military, that is, the environmental disaster is just another operation; its humanitarian role notwithstanding, the military is still a conquering force, Virilio says, despite the “old illusion” that “the military which no longer fights but ‘helps’ society is peaceful, and that the military institution can even be beneficial, once it stops attacking” (36). This illusion, for Virilio, is a simple inversion of the actual situation: the military that helps society is at war; the military institution, even when it stops attacking, is harmful – all the more so “as the political state dies out” and, separated from “the historical conceptualizer and from

national and other ideologies, [military action] becomes once more a pure operation, a phenomenon without true intelligence” (66).

### **The Military and Civil Society in Canada**

The role of the military in our own history and our own genealogy of the state has been poorly understood and poorly theorized – largely thanks to cultural theorists and cultural historians abandoning the field of military history to ideologues and war-mongers. But the military has been a key institution in shaping Canadian political life. As the historian W. J. Eccles was fond of pointing out, “war, and the threat of war, was one of the great staples of the Canadian economy” (in Dorland 1997: 12) throughout much of its history. Canada began as an absolutist, fully militarized state under the French Crown, and, after falling to the British Crown in 1763, developed under conditions of war or imminent war at least until Confederation in 1867.

Although much is made (as it should be) of the development of responsible government in the 19th century and the slow process of democratization in the 20th, the colony’s military past and the absolutist concept of the state that is rooted in that past have meant that Canada has developed what Michael Dorland has called “a weak civil society in its differentiation of the political, the economic and the cultural” (1997: 9). Alongside the development of democratic institutions of governance, that is, “the contemporary Canadian state remained an absolutist state” in its culture of “bureaucratic rationality” – which has had “grievous consequences for the development of Canadian public life” (9).

### **Managing the Public**

One of the truisms of the popular opposition to neo-liberal globalization is that the global ascendancy of free-market capitalism has meant a withering of the state, particularly in countries like Canada that once boasted deeply entrenched if not altogether generous commitments to public welfare. While the state’s redistributive functions have been withered, more precise critics of neo-liberalism have pointed out that this paradigm entails more of a transformation of the state than a shrinkage. It is obvious, as Stephen Brooks says, that “economic and social interventionism has been curtailed” (2003: 137).

But in certain spheres of activity a “strong state” has been retained. Strong government is necessary to uphold authority in society – which clearly implies a role for the state in defence of the institution of private property and, perhaps, of institutions such as the family (Brooks 2003: 137).

But even this phenomena of the state as a blunt force object with which to strike back against demands on it by the disenfranchised is only half of the recent transformation of government. In fact, the state as expert manager of economy and society, rather than being destroyed, has been transformed. This phenomenon, which has been called the New Public Management (NPM), entails a reorganization of the public service from enlightened reflection to recognizable actions and results, and from long-term planning to short-term projects (Tupper 2003).

New Public Management’s model of executive power as action and results, not as reflection - as doing rather than thinking – is also the essence of the military ethos. The military is the absolute embodiment of the depoliticized executive power NPM imagines itself to be. Certainly there is some truth to the popular view that NPM is an intrusion of corporate values into public administration, but the narrow focus on executive action, which appears to come from the business world, is as much an inheritance of the military as of business. New Public Management, from this perspective, is in fact indigenous to the public sector, but a public sector that predates the rise of liberalism and democracy. It reflects a public ideology left over from the absolute state, freed from under the dissipating shadow of democracy and civil society. NPM makes government active – and unreflective – again. It operationalizes it. It makes it do things. Like the military, NPM is the operationalized state, freed from its reliance on politics, on ideology, on reflection.

### **The Earth as Constitution**

The despotism of the militarized state is all the more absolute when it is allied with the more abstract despotism of the environment itself, and the seemingly inarguable demands it makes on our civil society. In the case of environmental dis-

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asters or, even more, in the case of long-term environmental apocalypse (like climate change) there is no place for a rational position against executive action, for even the entertaining of critical reflection on what the response should be. This effect seems not to be disturbing to leftists, even though the same argument used by rightists about the inescapable ‘realities’ of the market are rightly seen as being in bad faith. If it is true that a key difference is that the demands of the environment are more real than the demands of the market, it is also true that this very fact makes the environment even more of an absolute ruler than the economy.

The Earth, that is, is an inescapable imperative: a good more concrete than the public good and more unitary (because non-partisan) and more authoritative (because ‘natural’) than the traditional political goods – a wealthy society, an equitable society, a just society, a free society. Along with this displacement of traditional political goods, the environment and the absolute state effect together a more fundamental reorientation of politics: the disintegration of politics based on precedent, on the rule of law, on the history of the legitimate exercise of power. The impending ecological catastrophes, in the absence of an imaginative and multifaceted defense of humanism and political freedom, will spell the absolute despotism of a putrefying ideology that was born with the iconization of the image of the Earth. While the shock of seeing the Earth whole and vulnerable for the first time from space is widely credited with kick-starting a new environmental consciousness, it’s important to remember that “photographs [of the Earth] were only possible as a result of military technology” (Wilson 1991: 167). When we look at the image of the Earth, we see a despot through a despot’s eyes.

Military responses to environmental disasters may make us feel good, and may take the place of the social state as it disintegrates before our eyes. But, to the extent that they aren’t critically unpacked as politically meaningful cultural phenomena, they bode very badly for the future of democratic citizenship in this country. A truly generous politic requires a strong state, but more importantly it requires a state that is open and reflective, that governs with the riddle of social justice steadfastly unsolved. Anything less is a despot – a horror we do ourselves an injustice by our worship of it.

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