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CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES OF RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM IN THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES

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CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES OF RIGHT WING EXTREMISM IN THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES

The threat posed by right wing extremism (RWE) is increasing throughout the western world. A 2019 study found that there had been an increase of 320% in acts of far-right extremism between 2014 and 2019¹. Cases of RWE have emerged in the United Kingdom (UK), the United States of America (US), France, Australia and Canada both within society in general but also within the confines of their armed services. While Canada has not experienced RWE motivated acts of terrorism in great numbers or on a large scale, the threat is trending upwards commensurate with other western countries.

Militaries and police forces have long been attractive organizations to those with Right Wing ideologies. This is because these two uniformed services have traditionally been more conservative in nature, holding rules based values as a critical importance as well as having a strong foundation of law and order. Western world news is riddled with examples of current and former service members having links to extreme right groups either actively participating in rallies, protests and, in extreme cases, plotting attacks. Despite the military being an appealing organization to right wing extremists, Canada's military and police forces do not have a notable history in dealing with RWE. This concern has been relatively recent. The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) recruits from mainstream society. With the increasing upward trend of RWE ideologies, it is nearly inevitable that those with RWE interests would also be swept up in the military recruiting net. As such, it should be of no great surprise that recent cases of RWE have very publicly emerged within the CAF.

The CAF cannot be perceived to be a safe-haven for those with extremist ideologies. It directly counters the democratic principles for which its members are sworn to uphold. As the CAF doctrine *Duty with Honour* articulates: "The legitimacy of the profession of arms in Canada essentially depends on members fulfilling their professional responsibilities in accordance with Canadian values, Canadian and international laws, and the Canadian military ethos"². Because of the absolute trust required of the CAF, any incident will have a disproportionate negative effect towards the reputation and credibility of the institution. The CAF has recently made effort to thwart RWE within its ranks. This paper will address that the current CAF actions against RWE offer no emphasis on the culture and sub-cultures that are prevalent in the military that could contribute to the existence of RWE within the institution. First it will examine the increasing RWE organizations in Canada and their link to the CAF. Second this paper will discuss what the CAF has done to counteract RWE influences to its organization. Finally it will use the Winslow three perspective model of Integration, Differentiation and Fragmentation to analyze military culture in relation to RWE in the CAF.

¹ Jacob Davey, Mackenzie Hart, and Cecile Guerin. *An Online Environmental Scan of Right-Wing Extremism in Canada*. (Toronto: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2020), 1.

² Canada. Department of National Defence. *Duty with Honour: The Profession of Arms in Canada*. (Ottawa: DND Canada, 2009), 16.

The Increasing RWE Threat in Canada

The number of identified hate groups in Canada has tripled in a short period of time. In 2015, there were 80-100 white supremacist groups operating within Canada. In 2019, this number jumped to nearly 300³. Global incidents and events indicate a corresponding spike in RWE activity. A 2020 study revealed that spikes correlated with the March 2019 Christchurch attack in New Zealand and the October 2019 Canadian federal elections⁴. Since 2017, high profile RWE incidents have emerged involving active members of the CAF who are also affiliated with RWE groups. Most notably, in 2017, military members who were also members of The Proud Boys disrupted a peaceful protest in Halifax. In 2019, a military reservist, Patrik Mathews was revealed as a recruiter for The Base.

The CAF is a valuable recruiting and support base to RWE organizations by unintentionally providing training and inside knowledge of key infrastructure to those members with RWE ideologies. Consequently, it unwittingly makes RWE group members who are militarily trained extremely valuable members to have within the extremist organization. RWE groups have boasted on their social media sites that their membership includes both former and active military as well as law enforcement personnel⁵. A popular Quebec RWE organization, La Meute was founded by two Canadian military veterans who structured their organization based on their experience within the military⁶. Should a number of RWE sympathizers be identified within the CAF, the most immediate consequence would be a significant lack of credibility to the institution. Second, the most dangerous consequence is of the participation of military trained extremists inciting violent clashes and attempting to overthrow or influence a democratic government. In Canada's closest neighbors, such fears were nearly realized in January 2021 during the storming of the Capital Building in the United States.

In 2018, a Military Police Intelligence report revealed that between 2013 and 2018 there were 53 CAF members connected to RWE groups⁷. Despite this, there is currently no concrete data on the extent to the amount of personnel within the CAF who have been radicalized or have RWE sympathies. Concrete data is difficult to ascertain because expressing openly controversial views are contrary to the CAF's code of ethics and values. Any significant political or controversial behavior could present a detrimental effect to a member's career therefore it behooves the member to remain discreet. It is, however, potentially easier to determine the extent

³ Craig Kielburger and Marc Kielburger, "Hate is Canada's National Crisis", Postmedia Network Inc., 5 April 2019. <https://search-proquest-com.cfc.idm.oclc.org/blogs-podcasts-websites/kielburgers-hate-is-canadas-national-crisis/docview/2203772046/se-2?accountid=9867>

⁴ Jacob Davey, Mackenzie Hart, and Cecile Guerin. *An Online Environmental Scan of Right-Wing Extremism in Canada*. (Toronto: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2020), 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Jonathan Monpetit "Inside Quebec's Far Right: A Secretive Online Group Steps Into the Real World", Canadian Broadcast Corporation, 4 December 2016. www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/quebec-far-right-la-meute-1.3876225

⁷ Daniel Koehler, "A Threat from Within? Exploring the Link between the Extreme Right and the Military," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism Policy Brief*, (n.p.: September 2019).

of those with RWE views or sympathies amongst members of the Primary Reserve. Some members of the reserves may not hold the same reservations as the Regular Force personnel as, in many cases, the CAF is not their primary career or source of income. Primary Reserve personnel are also held to different standards when “off-duty” while Regular Force personnel are bound by duty for the entire duration of their employment contract. Reservists generally serve for shorter periods and are at liberty to release at any time. The issue with the reserves being a more attractive option for RWE is echoed in the *Journal of Intelligence, Conflict and Warfare*⁸. The Primary Reserves is a valuable model for RWE as once they have received the requisite training and knowledge that they were seeking, they are permitted to leave at any time where as a Regular Force member could conceivably have several more years of a contract before they are at liberty to pursue a new career, openly express political opinion and display hateful conduct. Both, Patrik Mathews, a recruiter for the RWE group *The Base* and the July 2020 Rideau Hall Intruder, Corey Hurren, a CAF Ranger who expressed RWE motives were Reservists.

What Has Been Done

Several western countries have established their own way of mitigating the impact of RWE within their militaries. The United Kingdom has established training for government employees on how to recognize those with extremist values⁹. The Australian military has established blanket training against what they term as “unacceptable behavior”¹⁰. The United States have set their policies with a leaning towards individual rights vice collective rights. Within the US military, it is not forbidden to join RWE groups. It only bans active participation in supremacist, extremist, ideology, or causes as defined in the DoD instruction¹¹. Countering this, the US Department of Defense has a Centre for Development of Security Excellence (CDSE) with a robust Insider Threat Program¹². Amongst other things, the Insider Threat program promotes a culture of awareness and reporting within the department. Furthermore, the US is implementing enhanced social media screening for potential recruits and currently serving members¹³.

The CAF’s knee jerk reaction to countering recently exposed RWE incidents involving military members was to create more administrative instructions and media response lines vice creating tools in order to more quickly identify signs of RWE ideologies in individuals similar to

⁸ Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies. “Right Wing Extremism Elements in the Canadian Armed Forces,” *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare*, Volume 2, Issue 2 (21 November 2019). <https://journals.lib.sfu.ca/index.php/jicw/article/view/1059>

⁹ The UK military training plan falls under the Prevent strand of the government’s counterterrorism strategy entitled “Contest”.

¹⁰ The term “unacceptable behavior” in the Australian military context includes extremist behavior.

¹¹ United States. Department of Defense. *Instruction: Handling Dissident and Protest Activities Among Members of the Armed Forces. DoD Directive 1325.06*. (Washington, DC: 22 February 2012).

¹² United States. Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency. Centre for Development of Security Excellence. *Insider Threat Program*. <https://www.cdse.edu/catalog/insider-threat.html>

¹³ Stephen Losey. “Pentagon Eyes Plan to Intensify Social Media Screening in Military Background Investigations,” *Military.com*: 3 March 2021). <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2021/03/03/pentagon-eyes-plan-intensify-social-media-screening-military-background-investigations.html>

the US Insider Threat Program. The CAF promulgated Military Personnel Instruction 01/20¹⁴ regarding Hateful Conduct superseding the 2016 CANFORGEN on Racist Conduct. The most marked change was an inclusion of the terminology “hateful conduct”¹⁵ despite the CAF having in place existing disciplinary and administrative measures as well as ethics training that could be used to address this type of conduct deficiency. Notably, however, Personnel Instruction 01/20 introduced a Hateful Conduct Incident Tracking System (HCITS)¹⁶ to track hateful incidents across the CAF. Not wanting to be caught silent, the Navy, Army and Air Force each followed suit with their own instructions on Hateful Conduct to reinforce and amplify what was already written in the higher instruction. Media response lines and printable posters were generated. This knee jerk reaction is not uncommon. Governments must be perceived to be doing something even if that something is not the most impactful action. Following the Christchurch massacre in New Zealand, the Australian government created more laws on top of their existing 70 counter-terrorism laws vice putting efforts into early detection¹⁷.

What Needs To Be Done

Any behavior in the range between unconscious bias and micro-aggression to hate crimes and terrorism is harmful within the CAF but also to the external image and credibility of the institution. The CAF needs to ensure that RWE behavior and hateful conduct is addressed at all phases of a CAF member’s journey from recruiting to the duration of the member’s career and beyond into the transition to civilian life upon retirement. In January 2020, a round table discussion on Hateful Conduct was held where Vice Admiral (VAdm) Edmondson, Chief of Military Personnel Command noted:

Our premise to date is that we seek to screen out applicants who are not likely to conform to CAF ethos and values through the recruitment process. Then develop CAF ethos and values from the point of enrollment and initial training that carries through until transition. We continue to train and educate our force on proper conduct and behavior, (though not specific to hateful conduct) through multiple levels of training and education and development throughout a career. We act when a member has demonstrated unacceptable behavior¹⁸.

Indeed, VAdm Edmondson is correct that training and reinforcement of ethos and values needs to occur for enrolment as well as the duration of the member’s career. This reinforcement signifies a top down perspective. However, a top down application of change does not

¹⁴ Canada. Canadian Forces Military Personnel Command. *CF Mil Pers Instruction 01/20 – Hateful Conduct*. (Ottawa: DND Canada, 10 July 2020, modified on 07 December 2020).

¹⁵ The CAF defines Hateful Conduct as any “act or conduct, including the display or communication of words, symbols or images, by a CAF member, that they knew or ought reasonably to have known would constitute, encourage, justify or promote violence or hatred against a person or persons of an identifiable group, passed on their national or ethnic origin, race, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, marital status, family status, genetic characteristics or disability”.

¹⁶ As of 31 January 2021, the CAF is tracking 193 reported incidents from between January 1997-January 2021.

¹⁷ Kieran Hardy, “Countering Right-Wing Extremism: Lessons From Germany and Norway,” *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, Volume 14, Issue 3 (September 2019): 262-279.

¹⁸ Military Personnel Command. “Hateful Conduct: Policy Awareness Deck”, PowerPoint presentation, (Ottawa: June 2020), <https://cmp-cpm.mil.ca/en/support/hateful-conduct.page>

holistically address the entire problem. What is not addressed in any avenue is the multifaceted cultures that exist within the CAF. The CAF needs to do a thorough review of its own cultures and sub-cultures that allow RWE and hateful conduct to exist and grow. The CAF's action plan on Hateful Conduct talks about the administration and discipline of hateful conduct, a product of RWE. It makes no impactful mention of culture let alone sub-cultures and targeted recruitment diversity as an immunization against RWE. An analysis of the CAF's own unique culture and biases needs to be done in order to make sure that the CAF doesn't inadvertently facilitate the existence of such ideologies.

A Three Perspective Analysis of Military Culture

Military culture can be defined as “the deep structure rooted in the prevailing assumptions, norms, values, customs and traditions that collectively, over time, have created shared individual expectations among members”¹⁹. Any real or perceived cultural acceptance of RWE ideologies, especially over time, anywhere within the military organization presents both a challenge and security issue to the CAF. Anthropologist and associate professor, Donna Winslow has developed a three perspective model to analyze military culture²⁰. These three perspectives are Integration, Differentiation and Fragmentation. Military culture is too complex to be viewed from a single perspective. According to Winslow, the organization needs to be viewed from all three perspectives to gain a deeper understanding of the cultures that exist within – at all levels. The Integrated approach speaks to the overall cultural theme, the formal values of the organization and what one would expect to find advertised as the organization's core values. The Differentiated approach addresses the informal sub-cultures within the organization while the Fragmented approach is how individuals internalize ambiguous or conflicting fragments of the culture within the organization.

The integrationist perspective speaks directly to the overall organizational culture and can most directly be shaped by the organization's leadership. From a macro level, in accordance with *Duty with Honour: Profession of Arms in Canada*, the CAF ethos commits all soldiers to “respect the dignity of all persons, to serve Canada before self, and to obey and support lawful authority”²¹. From an integrationist perspective, this is the overall culture within the CAF and a unifying statement for all its members. When we speak of military culture, it is from this perspective. The overall communal culture is consistent regardless of component, branch, rank or location. Publically, the CAF holds fast to the idea that, as an organization, it does not tolerate a divergence from a professional, upstanding organization that respects the dignity of all persons. It is clear from an outward organizational standpoint that RWE does not fit into the ethos that defines the CAF as a whole. Hateful conduct is not consistent with the public culture of the institution. When communicating that the CAF is not a welcoming place to hateful conduct, the integrationist approach is normally taken with an attempt at a top down change that permeates through the ranks. This approach may initially seem to work however the below analysis of

¹⁹ Donna Winslow, “Military Organization and Culture from Three Perspectives: The case of army”, Taylor & Francis Group. (2006).

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Duty with Honour*

differentiation and fragmentation will prove that the CAF is not one single culture. Integration only scratches the surface of such a large organization. While the integrationist approach may not be the most effective however, as an organization, the CAF must be outwardly championing the best of societal norms. Winslow writes “from an integrationist perspective, armies have to ensure that they are responsive to the changing society that they defend, that pays for them, and without whose support they can do little”²². The CAF’s legitimacy depends on how the public perceives it.

Narrowing the scope, the differentiation approach looks at sub-cultures. We can draw a comparison to elements, commands, branches and units within the CAF that have their own unique culture. This is the culture that individual CAF members are immersed in on a daily basis and is born of both formal and informal socialization. It is a culture that has emerged from shared hardships, environment and patterns of interaction. Winslow argues that the CAF culture, as result of modern, politically correct societies, “seems to be under attack, threatened with extinction – thus it becomes something to be preserved”²³. If it is something to be preserved then it is not open to different cultures and ideas which is more in line with RWE ideologies. The preservationist mindset within the sub-cultures may afford RWE ideologies to exist and, indeed grow. Winslow acknowledges that “In Canada, regiments have at times formed subcultures within their own loyalties which can be at odds with loyalty to the Canadian Forces...highly intense unit cohesion can, at times, be divisive for the army”²⁴. Despite this, the differentiation approach isn’t necessarily a negative view but a unique perspective that can reveal the prominence of informal culture compared to the collective integration culture of the CAF. There are positive aspects of differentiation that can be linked to professional background, functional position, and esprit de corps. A study has shown that that there exists a distinct culture amongst military members who were “lifers” versus those who were enrolled for only a short period of time²⁵. It notes that the non-lifers conveyed clear antimilitary norms. Of key importance, Winslow surmises that informal leadership might actually be more influential than formal leadership in setting standards and encouraging the “unwritten rules”. Emergent leadership with a passion for RWE may be able to become more dominant than the formal leadership that is setting the tone for the integrationist perspective or even the positive differentiation approaches. This is why it is key to detect internal threats to the organization before they become an emergent leadership figure.

Fragmented sub-cultures within the CAF need to be analyzed to narrow down the target areas in order to determine which one of the sub-cultures most exudes a conflict of interest between the integrationist perspective of respecting the dignity of all persons and the extremist ideologies of RWE. Regular Forces versus Reserve Forces, Officer versus non-commissioned officers versus junior-ranks, Army versus Navy or Air Force, Combat Arms versus Support, Eastern military bases vs Western military bases. Is there perhaps a culture that is the more

²² Donna Winslow, “Canadian Society and Its Army.” *Canadian Military Journal*, (Winter 2003-2004): 16.

²³ *Ibid.* 18.

²⁴ Donna Winslow, “Military Organization and Culture from Three Perspectives: The case of army”, Taylor & Francis Group. (2006): 8.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 9.

protectionist amongst themselves and who view protecting its own a greater importance than insulating society from harmful conduct? A fragmented sub-culture who has a culture of non-reporting is harmful to the institution and the personnel who serve it. If a comparison between RWE and the CAF's attempt at Op HONOUR can be drawn, it is here. The CAF has struggled with the reluctance of reporting against harmful and inappropriate sexual behavior. Some of this reluctance is as result of the chain of command not fully supporting the victim or even flat out protecting the aggressor. It stands to reason that CAF members would also be reluctant to report one of their colleagues for harmful conduct.

At the micro-level the fragmented approach is more difficult to define. It takes into account many opinions, attitudes and experiences. Winslow writes that this approach can be most associated with a postmodern approach. It acknowledges "many voices and many meanings whose understandings overlap, collide, enhance and silence one another"²⁶. The fragmented approach seemingly clashes directly with the integrationist perspective that is communicated at the institutional level. It can also collide with the differentiation approach which is not as plural as the postmodern approach would seem to be. Winslow's article goes on further to note that "any attempt to create a cohesive culture is doomed to fail since diversity, ambiguity and fluidity are the characteristics of modern organizational culture"²⁷. To be clear, the traditional cohesive military culture that defines the integrationist perspective is at direct odds with a modern organizational culture that embraces diversity, ambiguity and fluidity. *Strong Secured Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy* (SSE) clearly states that the CAF needs to be diverse as the country it serves: "We need a military that looks like Canada"²⁸ yet it doesn't explain why beyond outward appearance. The CAF needs diversity as potentially the best way to inoculate against RWE ideology and needs to find a way to redefine itself within the fragmented postmodern organizational culture.

Winslow's three perspective model shows us that the CAF culture is multi-faceted. With such a complex culture, the CAF cannot simply adopt an administrative top down method of ensuring that CAF members do not become complacent to hateful speech and RWE sympathies. Printable posters and hateful conduct tools are not the solution. A formal cultural analysis with a view of RWE needs to be conducted in order to develop a targeted inoculation to extreme right wing attitudes but also to determine how CAF culture can evolve into a postmodern organization.

Conclusion

RWE attitudes and organizations are increasing in Canada. Canada's military needs to get ahead of the trend to ensure that these harmful beliefs are not existing undetected within the ranks. The CAF has made it clear that institutionally, it is a welcoming workplace that values diversity and fully embraces a culture that respects the dignity of all persons. This mindset is entrenched in the *Duty with Honour* publication and *Strong Secured Engaged: Canada's*

²⁶ *Ibid.* 11.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 14.

²⁸ Canada. Department of National Defence. *Strong Secured Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy*. (Ottawa: DND Canada, 2017), 20.

Defence Policy. It is insufficient alone to drive change from the top down. The change must come from identifying issues at the ground level. To embody a culture that does not tolerate or shelter extremist ideology. Change is much more powerful if it comes from within. This needs an open dialogue as well as trust up, down and across the chain of command. Colleagues within the Defence Team must be open to informing and reporting internal threats from subordinates, peers and superiors regardless of rank or position. Using the Winslow three perspective analysis it is clear that sub-culturally there may be areas that present challenges to identifying and eradicating RWE behavior. It is recommended that the CAF independently study the cultures and sub-cultures from the integrationist, differentiation and fragmented perspectives to identify blind spots within the institution. Studying CAF culture from the different perspectives will provide a more targeted approach to deterring RWE attitudes within the institution and provide a more holistic solution to the current top down administrative approach.

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