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## The Canadian Armed Forces and a Second Decade of Darkness

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**The Canadian Armed Forces and a Second Decade of Darkness**

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# THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES AND A SECOND DECADE OF DARKNESS

## AIM

1. This paper seeks to apprise the Chief of Military Personnel of macroscopic trends in the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and Canadian society writ large as they pertain to the potential for a second “decade of darkness,” and what that could mean for the CAF’s readiness and effectiveness. It will do this in light of current societal and employment trends brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and provide broad recommendations on strategies in response.

## INTRODUCTION

2. If one were to examine a timeline of the history of the CAF, the 1990-2000 period would certainly qualify as a defining and low point. A confluence of factors internal and external to the CAF led to significant changes to the force, its relationship with the Canadian government and public, and damaged the morale of many serving members for years to follow. This period became known as the “decade of darkness” in the CAF, a term popularized by former Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) Gen Rick Hillier in 2007,<sup>12</sup> but coined by LGen (retired) Al DuQuetteville in 2003.<sup>3</sup> With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the Cold War-focused CAF and the Canadian government struggled to re-define the military’s role, and this newfound “peace dividend” led to budget cuts and personnel reductions as part of the Forces Reduction Plan (FRP). In this period, the CAF’s budget was reduced by approximately 23%,<sup>4</sup> by the end of the decade the size of the force was reduced by almost 30,000 people (from approximately 90,000 to 60,000 strength),<sup>5</sup> civilian staff was nearly halved, and promotions for many trades were effectively halted for several years.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, significantly more was being asked of the CAF: it deployed on significantly more missions over this short period than the entirety of the previous period going back to the end of World War II.<sup>6</sup> Concurrently, the Somalia affair in 1993 and the leadership and public confidence crisis that would follow through the remainder of the decade only compounded the public pressure on the CAF. It was not a happy time for many CAF members, and deleterious morale and manning effects were felt for many years to follow.

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<sup>1</sup> Gloria Galloway, "Hillier Decries Military's 'Decade of Darkness'," *The Globe and Mail* Feb 16,

<sup>2</sup> . <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/hillier-decries-militarys-decade-of-darkness/article20393158/> .

<sup>3</sup> Allan English, "From Combat Stress to Operational Stress: The CF’s Mental Health Lessons from the “decade of Darkness.”," *Canadian Military Journal* 12, no. 4 (2012), 9-17.

<sup>4</sup> Bernd Horn and Bill Bentley, "The Road to Transformation: Ascending from the Decade of Darkness," *Canadian Military History* 16, no. 4 (2007), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Department of National Defence, *Audit of Force Reduction Program* (Ottawa: Canada: Chief of Review Services, 1997). i/iv.

<sup>6</sup> Horn and Bentley, 37. <sup>6</sup>

*Ibid*

3. It was not until after 11 September 2001 that the CAF would retrieve its “mojo.” A large combat mission in Afghanistan, supportive governments that invested significant resources into the military, and an engaged Canadian public all contributed to a growing CAF with a renewed sense of purpose, expanding capabilities, and improved morale. However, the 2011-2021 period saw several trends that would reverse the CAF’s positive trajectory. These included the withdrawal from Afghanistan, fiscal pressures brought about by government deficit spending, stalled equipment re-capitalization efforts, a sexual misconduct crisis that came to the forefront in 2015 but accelerated in early 2021, and finally a senior leadership misconduct crisis in 2021 that remains ongoing. These factors led some to characterize a “second decade of darkness” as far back as 2016 (including by Gen Hillier)<sup>7,8</sup>. With the benefit of hindsight and taken in isolation these claims would seem prescient; however, this paper argues that it will in fact be the upcoming 2020-2030 period that will be more likely and deserving of the “second decade of darkness” label, due as much to the lingering trends mentioned above as to those brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. This will be done by examining the internal and external factors driving the current period, with a particular focus on the significant COVID-19 societal employment changes known as “The Great Resignation” and how they pose a particular threat to the CAF.

## DISCUSSION

### Darkness Rises

4. In order to qualify the CAF’s current period of challenges, it is necessary to define what makes a “decade of darkness.” While Gen Hillier spoke of the 1990-2000 period largely in terms of budget and equipment cuts, force size reductions, and outsized governmental operational demands,<sup>9</sup> academics Horn and Bentley also characterize it in 2007 in terms of the crisis of confidence in the Forces (and the officer corps in particular), while borrowing the turn of phrase from the CDS:

“[The officer corps] had lost the confidence and trust of the government and Canadian people they served. They were stripped of their ability to investigate themselves. Furthermore, they were not trusted to implement the recommended changes forced upon them by the government and an external committee was established as a watchdog. Whether the leadership wanted to admit it or not, and they vehemently denied it at the time, there existed some substantial and deep-rooted problems with DND, the CF and the officer corps. They were caught in a decade of darkness.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Shimooka, "Here Comes that 'decade of Darkness' Again," May 2, 2021, accessed Jan 20, 2022. <https://ipolitics.ca/2017/05/02/here-comes-that-decade-of-darkness-again/>.

<sup>8</sup> Lee Berthiaume, "Defence Cuts have Left Canadian Military in 'Fragile' Shape: Rick Hillier," *National Post*, Apr 13, 2016. <https://nationalpost.com/news/politics/canadian-military-could-be-on-verge-of-new-decade-of-darkness-rick-hillier>.

<sup>9</sup> Galloway, 2016

<sup>10</sup> Horn and Bentley, 33

5. These cause factors can be categorized as either internal or external to the CAF. Internal implies that they stem from actions or conditions within the CAF's control and responsibility, including internally driven policy or operational decisions, culture particularities, etc. External implies that they stem from either governmental driven decisions or priorities, or broader societal and economic trends. In the 1990-2000 period ("First Decade"), external factors were the post-Cold War FRP, budget cuts as part of governmental deficit reduction efforts, increased deployments in support United Nations (UN) peacekeeping and other post-Cold War stabilization efforts (notably in the former Yugoslavia), and increased governmental oversight and scrutiny as part of the Somalia Inquiry and subsequent Minister's Monitoring Committee.<sup>11</sup> Internal factors were those professional and disciplinary problems that led to Somalia misconduct, as well as senior leadership resistance to accountability post-Somalia.

6. The effects from these factors can be difficult to correlate, however they are manifested in several areas. The 23% reduction in the defence budget over this period, along with an approximate 33% reduction in total force size,<sup>12</sup> meant that significantly fewer resources were available to sustain an operational tempo that had never been higher. The 1989-2000 period saw 67 CAF deployments – a drastic increase compared to the 25 deployments spanning the period of 1948-1989. This undoubtedly would have had negative consequences on the morale, readiness, and quality of life (QoL) of remaining CAF members. Internally, the FRP's effects (which offered severance pay and early retirement packages to anyone interested) were most felt on the middle management cadre of officers and NCMs - those with 10 to 20 years of service (YOS) range and created a "missing middle" of experience for many trades. Coincidentally, current CDS Gen Wayne Eyre would use this same term to describe current demographic challenges amid the sexual misconduct crisis and COVID-19.<sup>13</sup> This demographic gap of junior leaders persisted many years later into the 2000s and resulted in numerous career management challenges with follow-on QoL effects. At the same time, national public opinion of the military and support for defence spending was at a low. Internationally, Canada's defence spending fell from 1.92% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 1990 to 1.12% in 2000, the lowest figure in NATO at the time apart from Luxembourg. While defence budget decreases were common at the time, Canada would do so at a rate greater than any of its NATO allies, thus complicating international relations and arguably reducing Canada's status as a middle power. Table 1 below shows this comparative data.

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<sup>11</sup> David J. Bercuson, "Up from the Ashes: The Re-Professionalization of the Canadian Forces After the Somalia Affair," *Canadian Military Journal* (2009). 35-36.

<sup>12</sup> Horn and Bentley, 37

<sup>13</sup> Murray Brewster, "Eyre Blames Sexual Misconduct Crisis, Pandemic for Shrinking Military," accessed Jan 19, 2022. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/wayne-eyre-armed-forces-sexual-misconductpandemic-1.6224791>.

Table 1: Defense expenditures of NATO countries (% of GDP) in the years 1993-2003

No.	Country	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
1.	Belgium	1,66	1,60	1,54	1,51	1,45	1,41	1,38	1,34	1,28	1,22	1,21
2.	Canada	1,78	1,66	1,52	1,37	1,22	1,23	1,21	1,12	1,14	1,12	1,12
3.	Denmark	1,87	1,74	1,69	1,64	1,62	1,61	1,56	1,46	1,53	1,51	1,47
4.	France	3,22	3,18	2,98	2,89	2,84	2,66	2,61	2,48	2,42	2,44	2,49
5.	Iceland	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00
6.	Italy	1,94	1,86	1,65	1,79	1,83	1,85	1,90	1,96	1,89	1,92	1,93
7.	Luxembourg	0,66	0,69	0,66	0,65	0,68	0,71	0,63	0,60	0,75	0,65	0,67
8.	Netherlands	2,02	1,91	1,79	1,76	1,66	1,58	1,59	1,45	1,45	1,45	1,46
9.	Norway	2,63	2,68	2,31	2,16	2,02	2,16	2,04	1,71	1,70	2,08	1,97
10.	Portugal	2,31	2,18	2,26	2,12	2,04	1,88	1,89	1,86	1,91	1,94	1,89
11.	United Kingdom	3,21	3,02	2,56	2,45	2,30	2,25	2,19	2,14	2,18	2,24	2,30
12.	United States	4,33	3,94	3,64	3,35	3,21	3,02	2,91	2,93	2,94	3,25	3,61
13.	Turkey	3,92	4,05	3,90	4,14	4,10	3,18	3,89	3,66	3,60	3,80	3,30
14.	Greece	3,09	3,08	3,05	3,16	3,19	3,34	3,36	3,47	3,25	3,08	2,49
15.	Germany	1,80	1,65	1,59	1,56	1,50	1,48	1,48	1,44	1,41	1,41	1,40
16.	Spain	1,92	1,91	1,87	1,76	1,68	1,67	1,76	1,73	1,63	1,46	1,42
17.	Czech Republic (since 1999)	2,01	1,97	1,78	1,68	1,60	1,75	1,86	1,88	1,75	1,82	1,89
18.	Hungary (since 1999)	1,83	1,75	1,32	1,25	1,47	1,27	1,43	1,51	1,57	1,59	1,64
19.	Poland (since 1999)	2,21	2,03	1,91	1,93	2,01	2,00	1,90	1,83	1,91	1,90	1,91
<b>NATO - 19</b>		<b>3,27</b>	<b>3,04</b>	<b>2,78</b>	<b>2,64</b>	<b>2,58</b>	<b>2,47</b>	<b>2,42</b>	<b>2,43</b>	<b>2,43</b>	<b>2,59</b>	<b>2,71</b>
World		2,73	2,56	2,37	2,30	2,29	2,24	2,19	2,17	2,22	2,32	2,38

Source: Jaroslaw Wołkonowski, "NATO Defense Expenditures in 1949-2017" In SHS Web of Conferences, vol. 57, p.01032. EDP Sciences, 2018.

### Afghanistan and CAF Transformation: The Cresting Wave

7. The 2000-2010 years saw improved civil-military relations in Canada, a renewed combat focus by the CAF with the ongoing Afghanistan mission with increased public support, a dramatic Transformation of CAF force structure by then-CDS Gen Hillier, the defence budget and force size was increased and several large equipment purchases were successful. Canada ceased combat operations in Afghanistan in 2011, and completed its withdrawal in 2014. By that time, public opinion on the combat mission as well as support for defence spending had significantly waned. One analysis of public opinion data found that public support for defence spending decreased from around 46% in 2004 (in the middle of the Afghanistan mission) to approximately 21% in 2011. In 2011 only 23% of the public felt that combat operations in Afghanistan were a good thing.<sup>14</sup> This combined with the Government of Canada's Deficit Reduction Action Plan (DRAP) in 2013 in response to economic pressures, and the explosion into the public eye in 2014 of the military sexual misconduct crisis,<sup>15</sup> the good times wave was cresting.

8. The 2017 introduction of Canada's defence policy *Strong, Secure, Engaged* offered a commitment to significantly grow the defence budget by up to 73% by fiscal year

<sup>14</sup> Scott Fitzsimmons, Allan Craigie and Marc André Bodet, "Canadian Public Opinion about the Military: Assessing the Influences on Attitudes Toward Defence Spending and Participation in Overseas Combat Operations," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 3 (2014), 503-518.

<sup>15</sup> Noemi Mercier and Alec Castonguay, "Our Military's Disgrace," *Maclean's*, May 16, 2014.

2026/27, as well as increase the size of the CAF by up to 3,500 Regular Force personnel.<sup>16</sup><sup>17</sup> While this plan for increased defence spending sets the current period apart from the First Decade, a number of ongoing capital equipment procurement delays on key capability reinvestments (including the Future Fighter Capability, Canadian Surface Combatant, Fixed Wing Search and Rescue Aircraft, and Joint Support Ship) threaten to undo progress on this front. On the operational front, the CAF has numerous deployments that while aggregately smaller than the Afghanistan years, their varied and low-intensity nature (i.e., Operations IMPACT, PRESENCE, UNIFIER, and REASSURANCE) threatens to put greater strain on CAF force generators and thus disproportionately affect the QoL of its members.

9. Since early 2020, a perfect storm of additional internal and external factors has the potential to make the 2020-2030 timeframe even more challenging than the previous decade for the CAF, and is more likely to be remembered as the “second decade of darkness” (“Second Decade”). Three main factors will mark this decade – two external, and one internal to the CAF. These are the continuing “peace dividend” post-Afghanistan as described above, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on CAF manning and broader society attitudes towards work, and lastly the ongoing culture change efforts brought about by the sexual misconduct and senior leadership crises which represent “existential threats” according to official CAF communications.<sup>18</sup>

10. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 had immediate and significant effects on the CAF. While not the only cause, the series of training and recruiting pauses and slowdowns varying with the numerous COVID waves, combined with historically steady or increasing attrition, has resulted in almost 12,000 vacant Regular and Reserve Force positions as of Jan 2022. This is a significant increase from approximately 7,000 vacancies published as of the end of 2020 – several months already into the pandemic, and reflects an obvious recruitment/attrition imbalance.<sup>19</sup> While 2021 CAF attrition data has not been publicly released yet, and 2020 rates were relatively steady compared to the previous five years,<sup>20</sup> the growing North American employment trend known as “The Great Resignation” should be cause for significant CAF concern in relation to efforts to address manning shortages.

## **The CAF and The Great Resignation**

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<sup>16</sup> Department of National Defence, *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy*, 2017.

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<sup>18</sup> Canadian Armed Forces, Twitter post, 14 August 2021, 9:47 a.m., accessed 21 January 2022, <https://twitter.com/canadianforces/status/1426540997706723335>

<sup>19</sup> "Military Dealing with More than 10,000 Unfilled Positions Amid Growing Pressures." *National Post* Jan 18, 2022. <https://nationalpost.com/pmnn/news-pmnn/canada-news-pmnn/military-dealing-with-more-than-10000-unfilled-positions-amid-growing-pressures>.

<sup>20</sup> "Canadian Armed Forces Regular Force Attrition by Officers and Non-Commissioned Members," , accessed Jan 21, 2022, <https://open.canada.ca/data/en/dataset/c48a7ca3-8d53-470b-90c987decc3801c1>.

11. Texas A&M University professor of management, Anthony M. Klotz coined the term “great resignation” in May 2021 to describe the widespread trend of employees resigning from their jobs during COVID-19, frequently due to dissatisfaction with workplace conditions and a newfound sense of labor power belonging to employees.<sup>21</sup> This has led to widespread reports of labour shortages across North America, and combined with pandemic-related illness absences has forced many businesses to temporarily or permanently close.<sup>21,22</sup> In the United States, resignation rates have increased almost 50% from pre-pandemic levels, with many employees attributing this to reasons such as early retirement, lack of child care, pandemic complications, and a simple desire not to work.<sup>23</sup> While Canada has largely not seen resignation rates as high as the U.S., Canada should not expect to remain insulated from U.S. labour trends. With reports of more than half of Canadian businesses not being able to hire enough staff, this will lead to increased employer competition and compensation that will have a direct effect on the CAF’s ability to attract people.<sup>24</sup>

12. Businesses, and the CAF, have underestimated the degree to which people’s attitudes towards work have changed during COVID-19. The unprecedented (if not forced) shift to remote work for many people has created new expectations among workers, particularly younger ones, of much greater flexibility for living, working, and family situations. While DND and the CAF achieved some success early in the pandemic in this area (drastically increasing IT infrastructure and work from home arrangements), this has created two informal classes of CAF workers – those who can have a flexible life and work from home (office workers, clerical staff, etc.), and those who must be on-site by the nature of their jobs (maintenance, ship/aircrew, those involved with classified material, etc.). This will create morale, fairness, and satisfaction problems that CAF leadership will need to address, possibly through various incentive policies.

13. It is possible that the CAF could recover its manning levels if the only macro issues facing it were the recruiting and retention challenges brought about by the post-Afghanistan and misconduct periods and their associated effects on the public perceptions and desirability of the military as an employer, particularly if the CAF’s culture change initiatives prove successful. However, with the pandemic’s additional pressures on all aspects of work and home life, operations, training, finances, and health, absent significant investments in the full personnel generation enterprise and QoL initiatives the CAF should

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<sup>21</sup> Dave Jorgenson, "The Great Resignation with Molly M. Anderson, Anthony C. Klotz, PhD & Elaine Welteroth," *Washington Post*, Sept 24, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/washington-postlive/2021/09/24/transcript-great-resignation-with-molly-m-anderson-anthony-c-klotz-phd-elaine-welteroth/>. <sup>21</sup> "From Airlines and Restaurants to Slaughterhouses, Canada's Worker Shortage is Spreading Rapidly," accessed Jan 18, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/labour-omicron-workers-staffing1.6305189>.

<sup>22</sup> Alyssa Fowers and Andrew Van Dam, "The most Unusual Job Market in Modern American History, Explained," *Washington Post*, Dec 29, 2021.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>24</sup> David Lao, "Canadian Small Businesses Face Labour Shortage Despite Wage Hike, Report Finds," accessed Jan 20, 2022, <https://globalnews.ca/news/8434654/canada-small-businesses-labor-report/>.



be prepared to reduce operational and readiness levels beyond current reconstitution efforts, simply due to an unsustainable lack of people.

## **CONCLUSION**

14. The CAF's first "decade of darkness" was a time marked by great change, harsh lessons in accountability, and lingering "anti-nostalgia" by the military class. The post9/11 and Afghanistan years provided recovery in terms of morale, purpose, capability, and government and public support; however, negative effects would remain with military members for years. What is old is new again though for the CAF post-Afghanistan with increased operational tempo, lowering public support, dwindling CAF manning, incredibly stressful times with a misconduct and leadership crisis while a global pandemic enters its third year.

15. While no one yearns for the CAF to be in a "second decade of darkness," whether the current period qualifies for the moniker is a secondary concern to the effects such a period would have on its ability to achieve its core mandate: to defend Canada and serve Canadians' interests at home and abroad. Did this core mandate suffer in the wake of the First Decade, despite all the negative effects it had on CAF members themselves, many of whom are still serving? This is debatable, and perhaps a question better left to historians. To the extent that such a designation is generally a bad thing for a country's armed forces and serves as a defining moment in history, the confluence of the continuing post-Afghanistan peace dividend, the sexual misconduct and leadership crisis, combined with the COVID-19 realignment of Canadian life will indeed mark the 2020-2030 decade. However, Canadians and the CAF have also been incredibly resilient throughout history, and in the hopeful words of Abraham Lincoln, this too shall pass.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

16. It is recommended that the Director General Military Personnel Research and Analysis, or possibly a consulting contractor, be commissioned to study published and peer-reviewed research, to including Canadian public polling data, to determine the degree to which the current misconduct crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic are affecting public perceptions of the CAF's mission and as an employer of choice. Additionally, correlations between pandemic-driven work-life balance attitudes and CAF employment should also be explored, as this could affect both retention of serving members as well as recruiting.

17. While larger geo-political considerations related to the nature of CAF missions as well as future COVID trends are outside of the CAF's control, it is very probable that the severity and length of this Second Decade will largely rest on the CAF's ability to recover through its current culture change initiatives. It goes without saying that continued focus

and success in this area is paramount for the CAF's future and ability to attract talent, and is truly the "existential threat" as described by the CDS.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Senate of Canada. Standing Senate Committee on National Security and Defence, Transcript of Proceedings and Evidence, 43<sup>rd</sup> Parliament, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session. Monday, 19 April 2021.

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