

Keynote address proposal to the 9th Congress of the Polish Association for Canadian Studies (PACS) | 21-23 September 2022 at the University of Białystok, Poland

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An Awkward Place: The Military and Contemporary Canadian Political Culture

At the conclusion of his 1959 classic study of civil-military relations, *The Soldier and the State*, Samuel P. Huntington described the gap between the United States military and the broader American society and political culture. As exemplified by the contrast between West Point and the town of Highland Falls just outside its gates, the American military was “A gray island in a many colored sea, a bit of Sparta in the midst of Babylon” where “the virtues of West Point have been America’s vices, and the vices of the military, America’s virtues.”

For Huntington not only was this a desirable situation, but a necessary one. If the United States (U.S.) military is to defend the nation, it had to remain true to its distinct values even if they were at odds with those of the citizens it protected. Indeed, he argued that American political culture would do well to learn from and emulate military culture.

Notwithstanding Huntington’s description of the profoundly differing values between the military and American political culture, from the earliest days of the revolution into the 21st century, the United States military as an honoured and highly valued national institution has been firmly embedded into that political culture. There have been times, such as at the end and immediately after the Vietnam War, that the American military did not appear to fit easily into the broader political culture of time. However, this a temporary condition. In the years that followed, not only did the U.S. military’s standing and public esteem greatly increase, but some scholars, such as Andrew Bacevich, have argued that American political culture has become overly militarized to the detriment of American foreign policy and the military itself.

Canada faces no such situation. After forty years of Cold War and three decades of sustained active involvement abroad, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) continue to occupy an awkward place in Canada’s political culture.

There are four, broad inter-related reasons for this. First, the very physical symbols and names associated with the CAF, with their linkages to Canada’s Anglo-British, Royal heritage, seem to be anachronistic in Canada’s multicultural society. Second, while there was some nationalistic support for the CAF’s peacekeeping activities, its domestic roles, and a period of pride during the Afghanistan operations, the fact that the Canadian military operates abroad in coalition with allies, especially the United States, means that there is little distinctively Canadian in the CAF’s war fighting roles. A third fact is that notwithstanding the successes the Canadian military has achieved in its operations and demonstrated high level of professionalism, a handful of embarrassing incidents have profoundly marred the Canadian public’s esteem for its military. These would include the Somalia incident of the early 1990s, and the continuing reports of sexual

misconduct and the military's reluctance to deal with the problem, including by the most senior officers, some of whom have themselves been engaged in and or covered-up unacceptable activities. Finally, and partly as a result of these factors, the Canadian military lacks a solid and significantly influential constituency amongst both the public and the political leadership of the country. Awkwardly placed within the broader political culture, the CAF has few empathetic supporters prepared to step forward to defend it and speak out on its behalf in the political and public arena.