HARPER'S HISTORY

SCOTT STARING

Stephen Harper's fight to restore the past misunderstands tradition.

En s'acharnant à rétablir le passé, Stephen Harper se méprend sur la tradition canadienne.

Over the past couple of years, the Canadian public has been the target of a somewhat peculiar series of history lessons courtesy of the Harper government. If you've been to the movie theatre lately, you may have seen a short, prefeature educational ad put out by the Conservatives that recreates a dramatic scene from the War of 1812. It's entitled "The Fight for Canada," and features Sir Isaac Brock, Chief Tecumseh and Laura Secord, and concludes with a dramatic stand-off between American soldiers and the British Forces commanded by a powerful, confident Brock. In the ad's climactic moment, Brock shouts the thundering command to fire as the screen flashes to black.

"The Fight for Canada" is offered as a history lesson to Canadians, most of whom, polling research reveals, apparently knew Laura Secord better as a purveyor of shopping-mall-grade chocolates than as our version of Paul Revere. It was released as part of a government commitment to spend $28 million to commemorate the War of 1812, money that has helped to finance monuments, public enactments, a documentary film, and even a government Web site that offers educators advice and materials to help them teach students about the war. The site's homepage includes a statement from the Prime Minister celebrating the war as a "seminal event in the making of our great country," and enjoining "all Canadians to share in our history and commemorate our proud and brave ancestors who fought and won against enormous odds."

The 1812 ads testify to the Harper government's belief that the peaceable nation we live in today was once a fierce and courageous fighting nation. They also reflect a conviction that, given the right public relations budget, the government can transform Canada into a fighting nation once again. What presently stands in the way of this goal, Harper has argued, is the very unmilitary culture that several nearly ruinous decades of Liberal rule have left behind in Canada.

The figure who best personifies this dark Liberal period is Lester Pearson, who is seen by some Conservatives as having taken the first steps toward replacing Canada's military culture with a bloodless commitment to peacekeeping and other acts of international do-goodism. It was also Pearson who began steering our loyalty away from Britain and its traditions, and toward the United Nations, with what the Tories see as its morally relativistic doctrine of universal rights. In Harper's eyes, the chief legacy of Pearson and his successors in government is a nation that lacks the courage to stand and fight, precisely because it does not know what it stands for. The government's ongoing history lessons have been aimed at undoing this Liberal legacy, reintroducing Canadians to the conservative values and traditions of a proud soldiering past.

Yet behind this attempt to return to conservative military traditions there is very little that can be described as genuinely "conservative." The aim of the Harper government is not so much to *conserve* Canada's existing traditions, but to leapfrog backwards in time in hope of resurrecting long-vanished ones. From a genuinely conservative perspective there is always something dangerous about the desire to return to the past in this way. Such ventures are usually inspired by romantic ideals that are at best inchoate, and at worst tip over into a confused and destructive opposition to what exists. The Harper government's backward-looking foreign policy has not escaped these excesses. Guided by vague notions of a noble war-fighting past, the government is undoing decades of diplomatic tradition that have become part of the very fabric of Canada's identity.

The claim that Canada was formed in the crucible of war is one that has been repeated several times in public speeches by Harper and others in his cabinet. And it is not just the War of 1812 that has been memorialized as a founding moment for our nation; the tributes have also been extended, if less lavishly, to other key military events, like the battles at Vimy Ridge and Passchendaele.

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This veneration of Canada's war-fighting past has, unsurprisingly, won the Conservatives their share of detractors. Two recent books, Noah Richler's *What We Talk about When We Talk about War* (2012), and Jamie Swift and Ian Mackay's *Warrior Nation: Rebranding Canada in an Age of Anxiety* (2012), take aim at what they describe as a government effort (with the support of sympathetic figures in academia and the media) to undermine Canada's identity as a country devoted to peaceful international activity and "rebrand" it as a fighting nation. The authors detail how Canadian history has been rewritten in recent years to highlight the country's courageous involvement in war, while neglecting the suffering that was caused by that involvement and ignoring the voices of protest that were raised against it. They also note how this new historical narrative largely ignores the less combat-oriented foreign policy traditions, like peacekeeping, that the country pursued in the post-Second World War period. Together, these books shine an unforgiving light on how the Harper government is using (or abusing) Canadian history for political purposes, and the books deserve a wide audience.

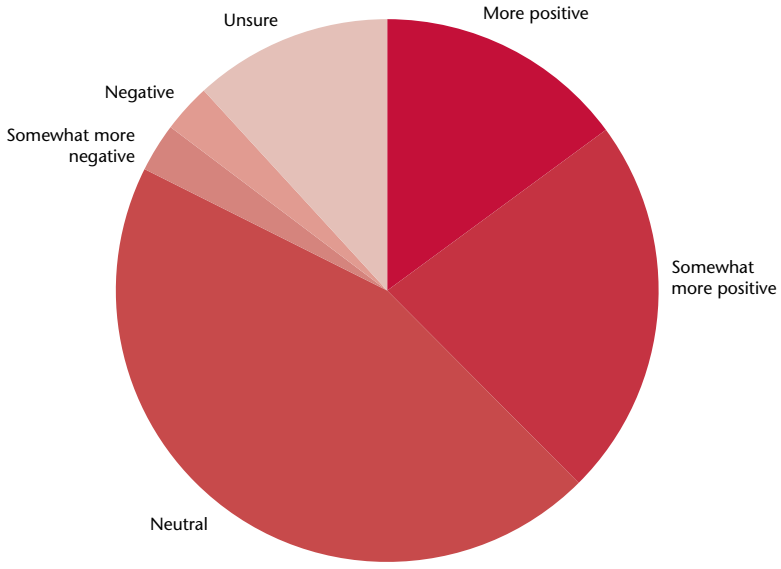
Yet there is a further consequence of the government's actions that as not fully illuminated by these books, which raises questions about the very coherence of the government's appeal to the past. Behind the Conservatives' desire to return to the traditions of a once-proud soldiering nation lies a contradictory hostility to the very idea of tradition. It is, after all, one thing to pay respect to living, breathing practices and beliefs; it is a very different thing to try to recover a "lost" sense of Canadian identity, to borrow the phrase of the parliamentary secretary, Dean Del Mastro. To seek to replace existing traditions with ones that are lost or that no longer exist is to flirt dangerously with replacing what is real with romantic vacuities.

The central casualty of the Conservatives' bid to return to an earlier foreign policy era is Canada's postwar peacekeeping tradition. For decades, Canadians have rightly or wrongly seen peacekeeping as an activity that provided their country with a defining role on the world stage, and the Harper government has been slowly, but determinedly, trying to cure Canadians of their fixation with blue helmets. This effort has been carried out as much through acts of historical omission as through acts of historical commission. References to peacekeeping on the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade Web site have disappeared, as have public references on the part of government to peacekeeping. But there has also been a scholarly effort, carried out by a group of historians sympathetic to the Conservative government, that aims to debunk Canada's peacekeeping "myth."

It is not entirely surprising that the Conservatives should want to obscure Canada's peacekeeping legacy. It is, after all, a legacy that is strongly associated with the Liberal Party, and more particularly with the foreign policy vision of Pearson, one of its most venerated leaders, who is widely credited with creating the concept of peacekeeping as a way of defusing the 1956 Suez Crisis. His leadership in that incident earned him a Nobel Peace Prize, an achievement that helped to cement his status among Canadians. When the CBC surveyed its audiences in 2004 to decide who would win the title of "the greatest Canadian," Pearson ranked sixth, ahead of that Tory icon Sir John A. Macdonald (as well as the Corporation's own bumptious ratings-machine, Don Cherry).

A second and related reason that the Conservatives view peacekeeping suspiciously is its association with a perceived Liberal anti-British sentiment. The Liberal Party had from the beginning embraced a Whiggish ideology that viewed history in terms of an evolution toward independence from Britain. It was the Liberals who pursued legal autonomy through the Statute of Westminster, the Liberals who replaced the Red Ensign with the Canadian flag, and the Liberals who repatriated the

FIGURE 1. Did the War of 1812 celebration make your sense of patriotism more positive or more negative?



Note: Random representative online survey of 1,000 Canadians aged 18 and over, conducted on January 18 and 19, 2013.
Source: Nanos Research.

British North America Act. The party's embrace of peacekeeping was consistent with this desire to assert Canada's place as an independent if midranking power. Peacekeeping offered a less paternalistic way of policing the international realm, and provided Canada with a specialized role in world affairs, beyond playing, in Pearson's words, "colonial choreboy" to Britain.

But beyond the backlash against the Liberal hagiography surrounding Pearson and the perceived anti-British element in peacekeeping, there is a broader philosophical basis to the Conservative rejection of peacekeeping. Conservative critics believe that the Liberal Party's lip-service to peacekeeping reflects a cosmopolitan foreign policy that would rather settle for a watery consensus than stand on firm principle. Unable to take their own side in a fight, these Liberal cosmopolitans supposedly have put a commitment to international institutions and norms ahead of the national interest.

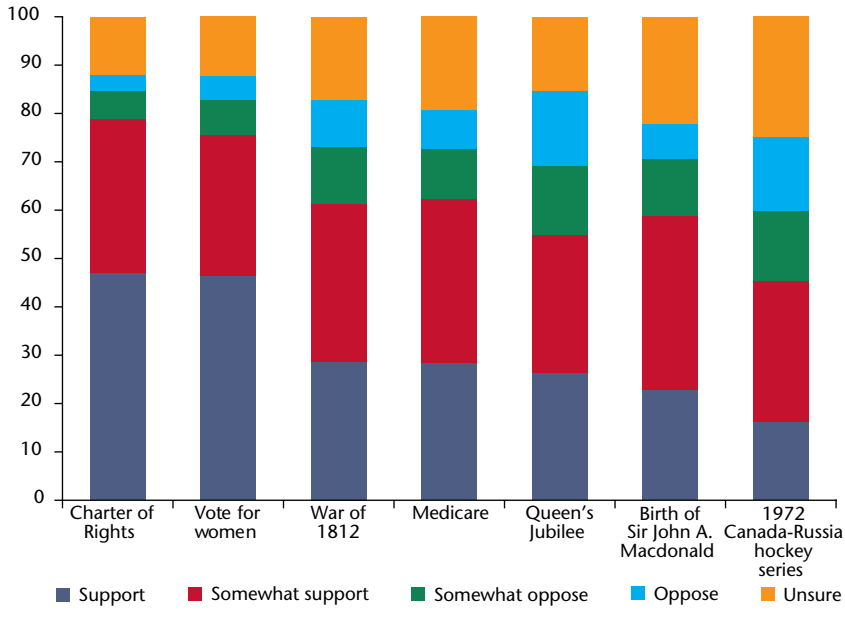
In its attempt to rebrand Canada as the warrior nation, the Conservative government has sought to redress all three of these ostensibly Liberal legacies of peacekeeping: the hagiography surrounding Pearson the peacemaker; the Liberal Party's attempts to undo Canada's historic ties with the British Empire; and the Liberal Party's pursuit of a more cosmopolitan agenda on the world-stage.

Attempts to redress the Pearson legacy have been very cautious, probably because it is a dangerous undertaking to attack the flesh-and-blood instantiation of an ideal or belief. Thus the operation has been carried out through pinpricks rather than hammer blows, sometimes involving actions so small as to border on the petty. Witness, for example, Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird's decision to order new business cards stripped of the name of the Pearson Building where his ministry is housed, or the decision to name a neighbouring building after Pearson's bitter foe, John Diefenbaker. The exhumation of Diefenbaker demonstrates another way that the Conservatives have attempted to take the spotlight off Pearson: by redirecting it onto one of their own party patriarchs. In addition to the aforementioned building, the government has also christened a coastguard icebreaker after the Chief, as well as the grandly named John Diefenbaker Defender of Human Rights and Freedom Award. It has also openly modelled its Arctic Defence Strategy on Diefenbaker's boldly nationalistic Northern Vision scheme.

More evidence of the Tory campaign to de-Pearson-ize Canadian politics can be found in Immigration Minister Jason Kenney's choice of Chris Champion to serve as his senior adviser and the co-author of a new citizenship guide (updated last year with more doting references to the monarchy and military). Champion's 2012 book charts what he describes as *The Strange Demise of British Canada*. He focuses much of his attention on Pearson's tenure as prime minister, during which the Liberals introduced a host of nationalist symbols that tended to paper over Canada's enduring British traditions. His book documents the creation of a nominally non-British, "Canadian" identity that would come to be strongly associated with the Liberal Party — a fact that helps to make sense of the Harper government's many recent moves to restore the Crown as a central symbol of Canadian nationalism.

Apart from displaying a schoolboy enthusiasm over the 2012 visit of William and Kate, Harper has ordered portraits of the Queen to be displayed in all of Canada's embassies abroad and, more controversially, moved to restore the "royal" prefix to Canada's army and navy. And then there was the surprise announcement that Canada would be looking to close up shop in some of its embassies around the world in order to shack up with the British — a move that prompted British officials to make remarks about Canada once again as-

FIGURE 2. Do you support or oppose the Government of Canada encouraging celebrations of the following:



Note: Random representative online survey of 1,000 Canadians aged 18 and over, conducted on January 18 and 19, 2013.
Source: Nanos Research.

suming the position of a junior partner in the colonial relationship. This strange nostalgia for the British Empire has provoked military historian Jack Granatstein to ridicule the government, remarking to the *Globe and Mail* that "nobody was pushing for this. The idea of rolling back the national symbols to make them more British is just loony. Who does Harper think he's appealing to?"

There is reason to believe, however, that the government's royalism may be rooted in more than mere vote-seeking. Harper, who once took a cautious distance from all things royal, has expressed a change of heart in more recent years. In a 2006 speech to the Canada-United Kingdom Chamber of Commerce, Harper, drawing on the fusty language of Churchill, rhapsodized about the "golden circle of the Crown which links us all together with the majestic past," and "the political and legal traditions "the people of the British race shaped and forged to the joy, and peace, and glory of mankind." Harper went on to comment that, "Seriously and truthfully, much of what Canada is today we can trace to our origins as a colony of the British Empire," and ended by celebrating Canada and Britain as being "eternally bonded by language, culture, economics and values."

It would be easy to dismiss this talk of being "eternally bonded" to British tradition as little more than the overblown language of a political speechmaker. But Harper has provided indications that he sees an important, even a metaphysical, role for British traditions in his conservative vision of Canada. In a 2003 article entitled "Rediscovering the Right Agenda," published in the now-defunct conservative publication *Citizens' Centre Report,* Harper spoke urgently about a fight for the very soul of Canada. His central claim was that this struggle would be won not simply at the political level, but through the return to conservative "moral" principles. His actions in recent years have made it clear that he believes this morality to be deeply rooted in those British traditions that the Liberal Party has supposedly worked so hard to undermine.

"Rediscovering the Right Agenda" also laid part of the blame for Canada's waywardness on the inefficacy of the conservative movement. Harper argued that under the leadership of the Canadian Alliance Party, the right in Canada had become too fixated on the classical conservative agenda of free market economic conservatism. What conservatives had failed to recognize, he remarked, was that they could no longer win majorities on this signature conservative issue alone. The problem, ironically, stemmed from the perceived success of earlier fiscal conservatives in making the reverence for markets into cross-party political orthodoxy. The Reagan-Thatcher era had apparently convinced the world that more of the good things accrue to those who practice austerity and restraint (or at least in theory — Harper did not bother with the fact that Reagan had in fact run big budget deficits). This antitaxation, anti-big government ideology had been so successful that even the Liberal Party had been converted to its dictums.

The lesson Harper drew was that if the Conservatives wanted to distinguish themselves from the Liberals of the Jean Chrétien-Paul Martin era, they had to move beyond a purely economic agenda and embrace the idea that "politics is a moral affair."

The one figure that Harper came back to again and again in his 2003 article was the British political thinker, Edmund Burke. Harper emphasized repeatedly that "Canadian conservatives need to rediscover the virtues of Burkean conservatism," which he summed up by quoting the American conservative and Burke scholar, Russell Kirk, from his 2001 book:

> *[social conservatism rests on] the preservation of the ancient moral traditions of humanity. Conservatives respect the wisdom of their ancestors…they are dubious of wholesale alteration. They think society is a spiritual reality, possessing an eternal life but a delicate constitution: it cannot be scrapped and recast as if it were a machine.*

This quote captured, in capsule-form, the central theoretical presuppositions behind the program of social conservatism that Harper proceeded to lay out in his paper.

First, it emphasized that any genuine political morality had to be grounded in "ancient moral traditions." Second, it stressed that these traditions somehow imbued society with a "spiritual" or "eternal" characteristic. Finally, this "eternal" quality made it clear that tradition was not something manmade. It was dangerous, therefore, to think that we could impose on society our own vision of how the world should be as if we were building a soulless machine.

In the introduction to *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot*, Kirk spelled one of the most obvious political implications of Burkean doctrine. Burke, he wrote, "declared that men do not make laws; they merely ratify or distort the laws of God." Harper, too, in pointing to the importance of custom and tradition, singled out "religious traditions" as having a particularly important role to play. Indeed, he stressed that modern conservatism needed to embrace what he described as the "theo-con" movement. These comments offered a new context for understanding remarks made two years earlier, when, as a leadership candidate for the Canadian Alliance, Harper declared that his "political party stands for values that are eternal." Underscoring the stakes, he added ominously, "this country will either adopt our values or it will fail."

Harper's 2003 article returned again and again to the claim that Canadian society was becoming morally confused under the influence of those who would seek to replace a morality grounded in a religion-based tradition with vague conceptions of "individual freedom" or "group rights." The problem was, as Burke had argued, that without tradition to guide us, the quest for rights was inevitably taken over by individual desires. That those desires are essentially limitless and chaotic only leads to a broader moral incoherence.

Harper declaimed against the "moral relativism" and "moral neutrality" presently corrupting Canadian

Canadian soldiers carry the casket of Master-Corporal Byron Greff, Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan, October 31, 2011.
PHOTO: DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL DEFENCE

society. But he also warned of a more destructive consequence in the clash between abstract rights and tradition in Canada: left-leaning members of our society, he remarked, were no longer satisfied with the meaninglessness of pursuing an ever-expanding and increasingly "silly" list of rights and freedoms. The left in Canada needed a new target on which to fix their sights, a new crusade to reinvigorate their movement. What they fastened on was a project of pure negation, in Harper's words, "a rebellion against all forms of social norm and moral tradition in every aspect of life." Aided by overzealous human rights tribunals, the left would force conservatives to defend their values on a wide-range of fronts, including on questions of "foreign affairs and defence, criminal justice and corrections, family and child care, and healthcare and social services."

Harper repeatedly described this leftist attack on tradition as "nihilistic," an act of societal self-destruction. It is this sense of moral crisis that helps explain the Conservatives' preoccupation with the country's red-ensign draped, war-fighting past. The government's very visible and expensive celebration of this history is not aimed at winning short-term votes, but at creating a much broader base for conservatism by anchoring Canada in the metaphysical certainties of a more patriotic age when we fought for crown and country.

It is no accident that the government has focused its program of moral reform first and foremost on the realm of foreign affairs. As Harper emphasized in "Rediscovering the Right Agenda," nowhere was the threat of nihilism more evident, the need for action more pressing, than in this sphere, for in a world of conflicting moral commitments, it was apparently all too tempting to acquiesce to bland, unprincipled agreement rather than to fight for what was right.

In 2011, John Baird expressed this sentiment directly to the United Nations, when, in an apparent snub to the institution, he was sent as Harper's pinch-hitter to address the General Assembly. After warning of the UN's "slow decline," Baird quoted Margaret Thatcher's typically blunt-edged remark that "consensus seems to be the process of abandoning all beliefs, principles, values and policies. So it is something in which no-one believes."

Harper made a similar charge against the UN a year later while accepting his controversial "Statesman of the Year" award from an interfaith group in New York — a trip that could have but pointedly did not include an appearance at the General Assembly. In his acceptance speech, Harper took a poke at the UN as a place where moral principle often meekly surrenders to the principal of universality, noting that his own country's foreign policy vision did not amount to "trying to court every dictator with a vote at the United Nations, or just going along with every international consensus, no matter how self-evidently wrong-headed."

Or at least his country's foreign policy vision *no longer* amounted to this. Speaking to a sympathetic crowd in the wake of his 2011 election victory, Harper described the "the long Liberal era" as one governed by a willingness to "go along with everyone else's agenda," and to "please every dictator with a vote at the United Nations."

For Harper, the Liberal Party's long history of involvement with the UN was symptomatic of its attachment to a dissipated and feckless brand of cosmopolitanism. Nothing made this more shamefully clear for him than the Chrétien government's refusal to join or endorse the US-led 2003 invasion of Iraq. Harper mocked the Liberal position, whose "only explanation for not standing behind our allies is that they couldn't get the approval of the Security Council at the United Nations."

The appeal to a spurious ideal of universality, and the refusal to join our allies, in Harper's view, amounted to a refusal to defend our own traditions. And in refusing to defend these Canadian traditions, we were refusing to defend the very core of our society from attack.

More sinister still, he felt, was the nihilistic attitude of those Canadians who almost seemed to welcome — or were prepared to explain away — Al-Qaeda's attack. Those who refused to defend themselves were like weary patients waiting for the end: unable to summon the will to live, they could at least exercise some small control over their fate by agreeing to die. In his 2003 essay, Harper went so far as to suggest that he detected this nihilistic attitude in Jean Chrétien, who was amongst those offering "dark suggestions," or at least hinting, "that 'we deserved it.'"

The existential threat to Canada, then, came not just from an external enemy, but from an enemy within, and the response, logically enough, needed to address both of these enemies. What was required was a bold moral renewal within the country that would vanquish Liberals and terrorists alike. Here again, Harper's 2003 essay affirmed that the way forward would only be found through the "rediscover[y] of Burkean conservatism" and by reawakening "conservative insights on preserving historic values and moral insights on right and wrong."

Yet these invocations of Burke had a manifestly un-Burkean ring to them. One inescapable feature of Burke's writing is its unwavering confidence when the subject matter turns to Britain's political and legal institutions. These institutions work because they are anchored in British moral and religious customs, and these customs, in turn, find a very secure footing in the thoughts and actions of ordinary British citizens. Burke shares none of Harper's shrill anxieties about the collapse of morality within his society.

"...a bitter mix of nostalgia and partisanship..."

This difference is important to note, because Burke has nothing to offer as a practical guide for politics other than the model of his own eminently stable and morally unified society. His famous writing *On the Revolution in France* is one extended tribute to the stability and sanity of British political traditions, which are so firmly planted in the breast of most Englishmen that it is unthinkable that they should abandon them to pursue the radical innovations that have been introduced into revolutionary France. The abstract imposition of a code of "natural rights" does not tempt Burke's society at all. The British shuddered at the notion that their law, grounded in their own religious customs and social hierarchies, should be altered in the name of a radically ungrounded, foreign conception of freedom. Unlike Harper, for Burke the enemy lies not within, but almost wholly without — in blood-soaked France. He seems to recognize that there's not too much that he can do for France, since it has uprooted the very traditions that might provide it with a sane political order.

Harper's conviction that the country is in a state of moral crisis means that he must look elsewhere to find the principles for his program of moral reform. He must look *beyond* the actual practices and beliefs of the country the Liberals left behind, to a past with which we have lost touch and that no longer reflects the substance of our lives. The problem is that even Harper has found it difficult to see these earlier traditions clearly through

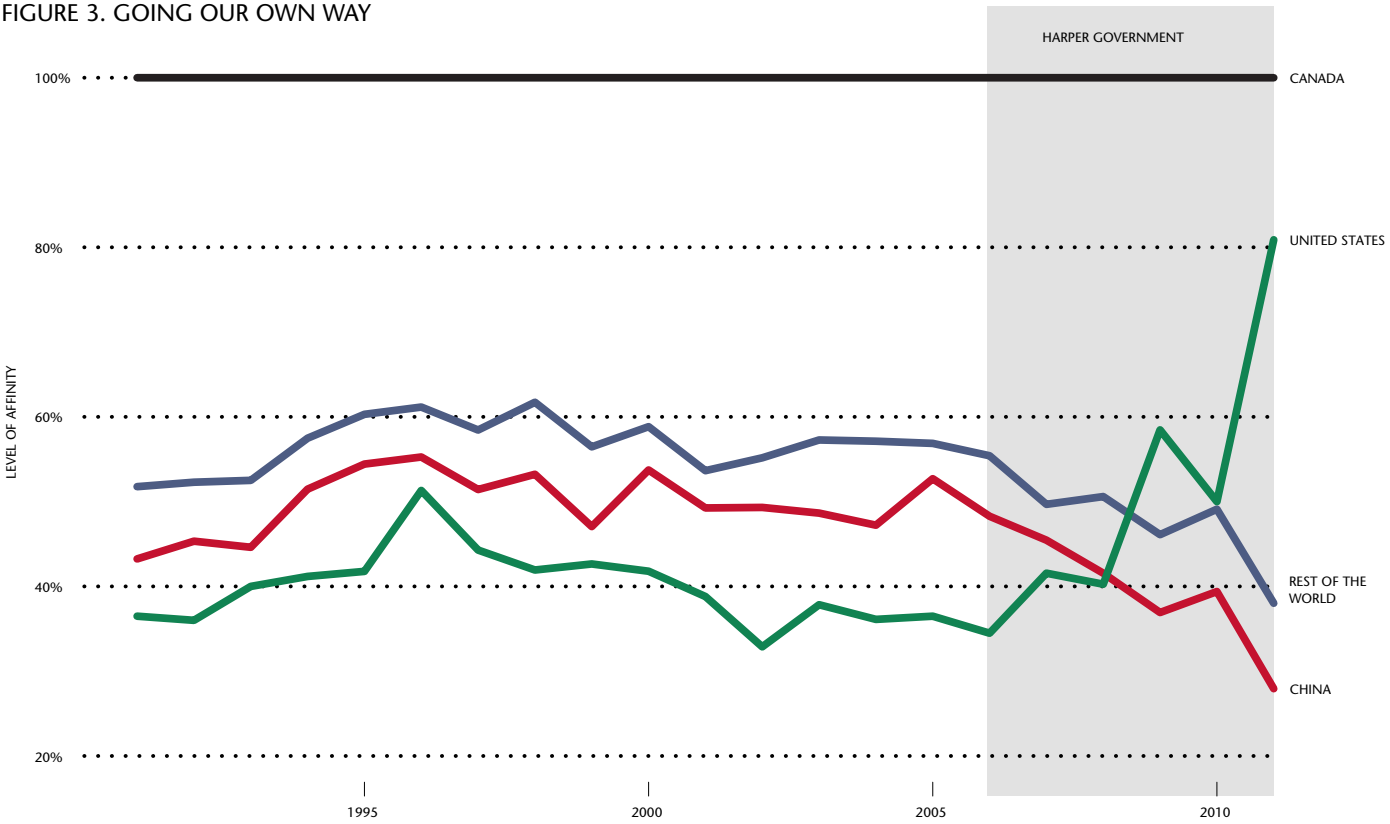
the obscuring mists of time. Indeed, Harper appears to have a firmer grasp of the traditions that he wants to reject than he does of the time-shrouded ones he is intent on rediscovering. This problem is most pronounced in the realm of foreign policy, where the Conservatives have drawn a sharp and focused bead on the Pearsonian principles they wish to do away with, but have been much less clear in defining alternative goals or principles.

Although the Conservatives have demonstrated a great enthusiasm for the military, this has not been matched by a clear understanding of what purposes the military should serve. Enormous commitments to fighter jets and forward bases around the world leave experts bewildered, and wondering what Canada will do with all of this expensive kit.

In the absence of a well-defined vision of what our Armed Forces should be fighting for, Harper has at times come close to praising the military, and its primary means, violence, almost as an end in themselves. In a 2006 interview, the prime minister celebrated the fighting spirit elicited by the war, noting that it had "certainly engaged our military. It's, I think, made them a better military notwithstanding — and maybe in some way because of — the casualties." Such statements express a justifiable pride in Canada's fighting men and women. But they also reveal a tendency to celebrate soldiers for their courage alone, their willingness to face a deadly enemy, rather than the concrete goals they achieve on the ground. As Harper noted on the CBC's *The House* that same year, "The fact of the matter is we are fighting a war in Afghanistan." Canada's military hadn't travelled halfway across the world to build schools for girls, but to "beat the Taliban on the battlefield." The comment offered a less crass reprise of then chief of defence staff Rick Hillier's statement a year earlier that the Canadian Forces are "not the public service of Canada…our job is to be able to kill people," namely the "detestable murderers and scumbags" filling the ranks of the enemy.

Now that the din of battle has faded, it is easier to reflect calmly on what this bitter mix of nostalgia and partisanship has brought to our foreign policy. One lesson we may take from our experience is that when our dealings with others are pursued in the name of courage, and courage alone, rather than clear, substantive goals, the results will be destructive to their society as well as our own. The barren ideal of a new moral identity begets barrenness. Such a foreign policy can hardly be called a triumph over the spectre of nihilism, nor can it be called "conservative" in any coherent sense of the word. ■

FIGURE 3. GOING OUR OWN WAY



Source: 37e AVENUE.
Note: Under Stephen Harper, Canada's voting record at the United Nations has diverged from those of much of the rest of the world, while growing closer to the positions of the United States. The graphic shows the "level of affinity" between Canada's votes and those of other countries on the hundreds of UN resolutions passed since 1991.