

Filling Michaëlle Jean's big boots



SCOTT TAYLOR
Inside Defence

Last Wednesday, as the howitzers fired a 12-gun salute on the Lebreton Flats near downtown Ottawa, Michaëlle Jean made her final appearance as Canada's governor general.

It was a heartfelt send-off from the massed ranks of soldiers on parade, and Chief of Defence Staff General Walter Natynczyk expressed the thoughts of many when he whispered to Jean in front of an open microphone: "You will always be in our hearts."

The decidedly martial flavour of the ceremony, combined with the outpouring of genuine emotion expressed by the assembled troops, had many members of the media wondering just when exactly the governor general had become so closely attached to the Canadian Forces.

Most Canadians recognize that the role of the governor general is that of the Queen's representative in Canada and, as such, he or she is the acting head of state. This includes

fulfilling the responsibility of Canada's commander-in-chief, which, unlike the authority figure embodied in that of US presidents, is primarily a figurehead position associated with royal pomp and ceremonies.

At the time of her appointment, Michaëlle Jean openly admitted she had some reservations about accepting the military obligations associated with the job.

Growing up in her native Haiti, Jean's father had been a political activist fighting against the dictatorial regime of the time. As such, her family had come to fear and loathe those who used the power of weapons and uniforms to terrorize a population into submission.

Overcoming those deeply rooted notions, formed at an impressionable age, was not an easy task. Added to that challenge was the fact that, at the very juncture when Jean assumed the post at Rideau Hall, the Canadian Forces were in the process of transforming their role in Afghanistan.

In the fall of 2005, the Canadian contingent began the move south from Kabul to the far more volatile province of Kandahar. The almost immediate spike in casualties catapulted the war in Afghanistan onto the front pages, and the steady stream of returning coffins thrust the newly-minted governor general into the public spotlight.

Jean was brought into unprecedented contact with the Canadian Forces during these emotionally charged repatriation ceremonies. Not trained as a grievance counsellor, she nevertheless suddenly found herself all too frequently in the position of consoling loved ones of the fallen soldiers on the CFB Trenton tarmac.

For the close-knit military family, Jean's presence at these events commanded instant respect. More importantly, her attendance removed all politics and controversy surrounding the Afghan mission from the funeral process.

Partisan politics play a part in shaping the debate over Canada's participation in foreign military ventures, but our soldiers do not fight for any distinct domestic political ideal: They serve the nation, and their oath of allegiance is to the Queen of England, not to an elected official.



New Governor General David Johnston certainly has some enormous military shoes to fill after the job his predecessor Michaëlle Jean did as Canada's commander-in-chief.

As such it is only fitting that the governor general would be the person on hand to repatriate the bodies of those killed in the service of Canada.

During her two trips to Afghanistan, Jean further developed an affinity for the professionalism and the dedication of the Canadian Forces. Increasingly, she began to reflect that pride in their accomplishments through the wearing of dress uniforms at public events.

While it has always been an entitlement for the governor general to wear the uniform of the Canadian Forces, in the past such occasions were so few and far between that many members of the public mistakenly questioned Jean's authority to appear so attired.

There was no such questioning from the rank and file of the military. Through her relentless commitment to her duties as commander-in-chief, she had more than earned the right to wear her uniforms—not to mention the fact that she looked terrific in them.

To be fair to Jean's predecessor, Adrienne

Clarkson was the first governor general in recent memory to endear herself to the military.

Although the Canadian Forces' exploits were far more low-key in terms of media exposure during her tenure, Clarkson nonetheless visited the troops in the Balkans and elsewhere as often as possible.

The bond Clarkson formed was formally recognized in 2007 when she was named as the colonel-in-chief of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, the foremost infantry regiment in the world.

Clarkson's overt display of compassion for the wounded soldiers certainly raised the level of expectation for Jean, and she did not disappoint.

As evidenced by last week's emotional sendoff, new Governor General David Johnston certainly has some enormous military shoes to fill.

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The difference between war and diplomacy

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In today's highly conflicted world, diplomacy matters more than ever. That said, the world's second-oldest profession is underperforming and faces a crisis of relevance and effectiveness.

Diplomatic institutions and practices have not adapted well to the challenges of globalization, and diplomacy's image is too often negative.

For these reasons and more, diplomacy has been largely ignored, and not infrequently ridiculed by journalists, think tanks and international relations scholars.

Perhaps most surprisingly, even governments—if expenditure priorities are any indication—have chosen to invest elsewhere.

That neglect, I believe, has proven costly as foreign policy has become increasingly militarized and states have continued to rely on armed force as the instrument of choice.

The results have been calamitous, not only in themselves, but because the more profound threats and challenges facing the world—most rooted in science, driven by technology and having little to do with political violence or religious extremism—have not received the attention they deserve.

Diplomacy's problems can be remedied, but the necessary transformation will require a fundamental rethinking of some key elements of international relations, "security" and "development" foremost amongst them.

Most of all, the entire "diplomatic ecosystem," consisting of the foreign ministry, foreign service and the diplomatic business model, will have to be reconstructed from the ground up.

But don't hold your breath. Fixing diplomacy and getting from fighting to talking, from diktat to dialogue and from coercion and compulsion to compromise and negotiation is going to be one tough slog.

Looking back, it has been at least 100 years since diplomacy began its drift from the mainstream to the margins of international policy. In that respect, except for maybe a moment or two around Remembrance Day, few people think much about the First World War. That's unfortunate because there is much to be learned from that turbulent period.

Although civilians were not targeted and casualties among non-combatants were comparatively low, the mass use of the most technologically sophisticated and lethal armaments that the world had ever produced brought death and destruction to a new level.

The onset of industrial-scale war ensured that the military toll, at over three million, was staggering. Yet when it was all over and a peace deal finally struck at Versailles, the War to End All Wars resolved little, and, over the longer term, achieved less.

I have always been fascinated by the last century's first great conflagration, and have made several trips to the principal battlefields along the former Western Front in France and Belgium.

Of particular interest have been the places where Canadians fought: Vimy Ridge, Beaumont-Hamel and Courcellette, near Arras; Passchendaele, Hill 62 and particularly St. Julien around Ypres, site of the first large-scale gas attack.

There are now many interpretive centres and museums, brimming with photos, artifacts and maps that assist the visitor in coming to terms with the magnitude of the carnage.

To my mind, however, the human costs are expressed most forcefully in the endless rows of white stone tablets that populate the countless cemeteries maintained impeccably by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

For Canadians, the emotional experience of confronting this physical testimony to the waste of so many young lives is magnified by the embossed presence, at the top of each headstone, of a single, stylized maple leaf.

The burial grounds and monuments are certainly powerful; the solitary "brooding Canadian" at St. Julien stands in striking contrast to the soaring, sorrowful statuary at Vimy.

But there is no substitute for visiting the battle sites to appreciate the almost unimaginable dimensions of the violence. Two hundred thousand French dead at Verdun. Fifty-eight thousand British casualties on July 1, 1916, the first day of battle on the Somme and the worst day ever in the history of the British army.

Were it not for all of the memorials, and all of the dead, the casual passerby would not guess what happened there. The former front lines are eerily peaceful and mainly pastoral now. Years of tillage have restored the once

mangled landscape. The orderly patterns of established agriculture have a calming effect.

Ragged shell holes and huge mine craters have mostly been smoothed away, like so much else of what we would rather forget, and their shapes now melt seamlessly into the flowing rural contours. The trees, reduced by artillery to pulp and matchsticks ninety years ago, have re-grown.

The atmosphere is pacific and prosperous, very much the new Europe.

These images evoke reflection on the big questions that haunt us still. Why, for instance, did the political leadership choose war over peace, fighting over talking? When it became clear so early on that stalemate would be the main result of frustrated attempts to outflank each other in Western Europe, why did both sides opt to continue the slaughter for another three and a half years?

Could diplomacy have resolved outstanding differences and accommodated the rise of new powers by offering plausible alternatives to violence?

Almost certainly. But to address this century's complex suite of threats and challenges, there is much to be done.

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