

Speech to Rotary on the 50th Anniversary of V - J Day

Delivered by: Dr. Franklin Foster, August 14, 1995

Your Honours; Members of the Royal Canadian Legion; President Greg, Fellow Rotarians, and guests of Rotarians, it is indeed an honour for me to be asked to speak on this historic occasion. Historic, not least because we have with us the Lieutenant-Governors of our two provinces. Lieutenant-Governors are like unicorns - seldom seen at all, and almost never seen in pairs. I would like to thank members of the organizing committee, inc. Rev. Chuck Mortimer, and especially Elmer Nykiforuk. The Community is well on the way to recognizing what we at Lakeland College know already, that if you want something done and done well - go ask Elmer.

I was asked to speak today in my capacity as an historian. There are two major historic memorials before us. The focus of today's events, including this luncheon, is to recognize the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II. We are also, though, only days away from marking the 90th anniversary of the creation of the Provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan. Lloydminster and District, is now only 7 ½ years from celebrating the centennial of its founding (1903 - 2003). Certainly within those 100 years there are few chapters more significant than the bi-provincial reality which was thrust upon us in 1905; and the impact on our community and society generally of World War II.

In reflecting on all of this I would like to use a term we historians are fond of and that term is "cultural baggage". Cultural baggage refers to the things which people carry with them which are not physical. For example, our pioneer founders brought with them trunk loads, and wagon loads of physical effects; but they also brought with them ideas, literature, arts, values, prejudices and paradigms. These were their cultural baggage and we all carry with us our own cultural baggage. One of the great ironies is that cultural baggage is difficult to see, and therefore easy to forget. Also; there is no cultural baggage more difficult for us to see than our own cultural baggage.

Most of you have seen the collections of reminiscences and recollections called "Local Histories". Typical of the genre is: "Grandpa was the first person to arrive in the Gopher coulee District. He travelled out by wagon in '03 until he found the survey stake that marked the south east corner of the quarter section that became his homestead. Then with his trusty oxen, Bob and Herb, he proceeded to plough 12 acres which he seeded to oats." Forgotten is Grandpa's cultural baggage. Where did all those survey stakes come from? What system of law allowed for the ownership of private property? What ideas did Grandpa think about while he ploughed those 12 acres? Why did he walk into town ten miles on the chance a 3 month old copy of a British newspaper might be in his mail? Why did people bring books, and silverware, and fine china and even pianos to the bald headed prairie? Why, even today, are we honoured by the presence of our lieutenant-governors? Why do some of us pronounce it "left tenant" instead of "lou - tenant" as on T.V.?

Another great fact of history, which is difficult to recognize is that what happened was not inevitably. Choices are made, and if those choices had been made differently that would have changed the course of history. We think, for example, that the present provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan just naturally emerged in their present form, splitting baby Lloydminster asunder. Forgotten is the fact that there was a strong push to create just one big province. This scheme was opposed ostensibly because it would dwarf poor little Manitoba (which did not reach its present size until 1912) but largely because Ontario, which originally had plans to expand itself to cover the north-west (plans which were thwarted in 1870 with the passage of the Manitoba Act) didn't want to be rivalled by a province its own size. Divide and colonize was the more favoured policy. Thus Alberta and Saskatchewan were grudgingly created and, to emphasize the point, created as second class provinces not having control of their own natural resources as did the other provinces. In addition to the One Big Province, there were advocates of a northern province and a southern province and even at the last minute there was debate about fixing the boundary, with Premier Haultain and others arguing for a boundary 60 miles east of the present one. If that scheme had been adopted, (which it might have been) think of how different our history would have been. Today, we would be honoured by only one lieutenant governor because we would be just another Alberta city a la Medicine Hat. Our cultural baggage would also be different, all because of choices made 90 years ago.

An even stronger example of choices being influenced by our cultural baggage and in turn shaping our future was the response to World War II. What cultural baggage motivated people to volunteer to serve in the armed forces? On this 50th anniversary of the end of the war we have to admit that our appreciation and understanding of that culture is growing dim. The people of 1945 were closer in time to 1905 than to 1995. Within the last few years, the historical cancer called revisionism has started to spread. We stand in real danger of forgetting, to our loss, the experiences and the lessons of W.W. II. If ever there was a war that had to be fought and had to be won, it was the Second World War. Had the Allies lost, as they nearly did, the world would have experienced an evil which the revisionists of our day imagine, naively, is impossible. Because the Allies won, we think it was inevitable that they won. The threat we faced is discounted while we obsess in re-evaluating our own performance against the arrogant standards of political correctness. We risk the danger, and it is a danger, of forgetting that while no nation can fight a war with clean hands, the alternative was indeed unthinkable.

While it is true that for centuries nations have invaded their neighbours with cruelty and without provocation, behind Hitler's steel-helmeted armies came cadres of bureaucrats with plans to enslave all conquered people in the service of the Nazi elites. Among these bureaucrats were the Gestapo and the SS with orders to rid the world of those whom the Nazis had decreed to be undesirable: the Jews, the gypsies, the Slavs, homosexuals, the mental and physically disabled, enemies of the state, and on and on. And again, lest we think this was far away, German submarines had already reconnoitred Canadian harbours and beaches for landing sites; plans existed for setting up military rule in North America; lists of individual Canadians had been

prepared as targets for extermination. A few, even here in Western Canada, hinted to their neighbours that they would be far more powerful in their communities after the Germans won.

And we should know by now that these stories of horror were not just idle propaganda. There was a very real commitment of resources and expertise by the Third Reich to develop more and more efficient means of exterminating large numbers of people. With ample co-operation from medical doctors and engineers, the technologies of the death camps were developed and refined. The problems of how to easily collect gold fillings from calcified corpses and to keep the molten grease from the melting bodies from clogging the burners of the gas ovens had been solved.

Was this a regime to which Canadians should have shown tolerance? Should we have tried to peacefully co-exist? Or was peace possible with Imperial Japan. Japan quickly conquered every British, French, Dutch and American colony it attacked, but this was no war of liberation. Their prisoners, including 1,500 Canadians, died of starvation, beatings, slave labour and other abuse. Millions of Chinese, Filipinos and other Asians were slaughtered in a conquest as cruel and atrocious as any in recorded history. We need to remember this background, and the tens of thousands of Allied soldiers; sailors and air personnel who died in the counter attack against Japan, to capture some appreciation of the excitement that was felt 50 years ago today when the news swept the world that the Japanese government had announced it would surrender and called for an immediate cease fire. The news didn't reach Ottawa and Washington until about 7:00 PM so President Truman declared August 15, V - J Day, "Victory over Japan". The formal instruments of surrender were signed by representatives of all the Allied nations, including Canada, on board the U.S.S. Missouri on Sept. 2, 1945.

V - J Day was an especial relief for the 30,000 Canadian soldiers and 15,000 air personnel who, after service in Europe, had volunteered for action in the Pacific campaign. Many of those personnel were on training exercises at Fort Benning, Georgia preparing for what had been predicted to be another year of war with a further one to two million casualties. The sudden surprising ending of the war in the first days of August was met with an overwhelming sense of relief.

V - J Day marking the end of the War, also serves as a watershed between the old and the new Canada. The war had changed everything. A country of only 11.5 million people emerged from the war with the world's third largest navy, fourth largest air force and five army divisions and two armoured brigades in the field. This together with her immense agricultural and industrial resources had catapulted Canada into the status of a near Great Power. By the end of the war, for example, most of the British army moved in Canadian built vehicles. Such capacity could be quickly transformed to provide newly affluent Canadians with automobiles to expand their horizons to the suburbs, cottage country and beyond.

Seemingly the war had taught two main lessons: on the international stage: unpreparedness and weak resolve benefits no one but aggressor states and unprincipled dictators. So Canada

embarked on involvements in the United Nations, and NATO that would have been unthinkable 10 years earlier. On the home front, Canadians seemed to have learned that by working together with common resolve and dedication they could make the world; their world, a better place. After 1945, Canada became a land of opportunity and security. Rising economic output and productivity combined with government programs to protect against the catastrophes of poverty, unemployment and sickness; made Canadian policy more optimistic and compassionate than ever.

Such gains owed a lot to the cultural baggage of the war years. The lessons that Canadians seemed to have learned were underlined by the personal losses of loved ones who would never return. Yes, Canadians in World War II paid a price for a better Canada and a better world. We must always remember and honour that sacrifice. But it is not enough just to remember. Lessons are not truly learned unless they change behaviour. Each generation must fight its own war and pay its own price; and make its own choices. The lessons learned in W.W. II are in danger of slipping away. In some ways our own struggle is more difficult because each of us individually has to decide where to draw the line; what it is we want to defend; and what price we are prepared to pay? We have to make our choices as to what cultural baggage we will leave behind. Pray God it will be as useful, as important, and as inspiring as the cultural baggage left to us by the generation we salute today.