



## The enduring mythology of Vimy

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**MICHAEL D. WALLACE**

The Harper government and its amen chorus in the media seem intent on perpetuating the mythology of the Battle of Vimy Ridge (more properly, the battle for Arras) as the "birth of the Canadian nation."

The presence of the Queen and the last-minute concession allowing opposition members to attend the ceremonies may remove the partisan sting, but rest assured Prime Minister Stephen Harper will use the occasion to resurrect the myth that our country was born on the points of Canadian bayonets at Vimy.

And, sure as God made little green apples, there will be a segue somewhere in the speech linking Vimy to the "heroism" of our forces in Afghanistan, implying that opposition to "the mission" somehow betrays the patriotism of our national creation myth.

Let's go back and unpack this. To begin with, Canadians did not fight in "the Great War" for anyone's "freedom." We fought because we were part of the British Empire, wherein only the white, English-speaking minority was free.

The war began because of the unravelling of the complex web of alliances among the European powers designed to maintain the status quo in Europe while setting the rules for European colonial domination over Africa and Asia. The end of hostilities did not bring an end to colonialism, only a change of masters for a few, even though Asian and African units often fought beside the Canadians and other allied troops in the trenches with no less bravery.

Now to the battle itself. The 35,000 Canadians who took Vimy Ridge were no more valiant than the 150,000 French who bled to destruction in the unsuccessful offensive of 1915, two years earlier.

In April 1917, the Canadian troops were attacking a much weakened position with the advantage of surprise. The French were diverting much of the German strength at the Chemin des Dames and being slaughtered to the point of near mutiny in the process.

And after the massacre of the British at the Somme in July 1916, the Imperial staff came to realize the need for more sophisticated tactics: Indiscriminate artillery bombardment gave way to the "creeping barrage" and the infantry were given specific objectives and maps, rather than the simple order to march directly into machine-gun fire.

None of this detracts from the bravery of the soldiers who fought at Vimy. But victory

would not have been achieved without the lessons learned from 2 1/2 years of futile slaughter, during which millions died to change the minds of the pig-headed allied generals.

Now and forever, battlefield myth is reinvented for cynical political reasons. Stalingrad for the Russians, Gettysburg for the Americans, Trafalgar for the British, Masada for the Israelis, Orleans for the French, Actium for the Romans, Thermopylae for the Greeks, and so it goes, as author Kurt Vonnegut likes to say.

But battles are merely historical markers. A nation's true place in history is not achieved on the field of battle. History is not a catalogue of wars but a catalogue of human progress.

I could make the case for any nation, but ask yourself this: Is Canada not better defined by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms than by any clash of arms? We have ancient tanks but the most up-to-date liberties. Who would choose the opposite?

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**Michael D. Wallace** is a professor of political science at the University of British Columbia, member of Canadian Pugwash, and senior adviser to the Rideau Institute on International Affairs.