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THE GLOBE AND MAIL

FACTS & ARGUMENTS

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Tuesday, February 5, 1991

DARK DAYS / *The initial war fever in the United States was unsettling for one Canadian observer. The warrior culture was so quick to take hold, spurred on by a great weight of guilt and the inability of Americans to see themselves as they are*

An outsider in the country of the blind

BY LARRY O'CONNOR

MY U.S. in-laws were dining in an exclusive private club in Palm Beach, Fla., when the first warplanes began bombing military sites in Iraq. After the meal, a party host asked everyone to stand to observe a minute of silence for U.S. servicemen and women and their families. Then two television sets on elevated stands were wheeled out to either side of the hall for the President's message. The Ink Spots musical group had everyone rise and sing *God Bless America*. Their next number was *I Don't Want to Set the World on Fire*.

Those first heady hours of the Persian Gulf war were the most difficult for me. I have lived in the United States for two years; during the Vietnam War I was at home, in Owen Sound, Ont. Never had I been in a country that was in a state of war. If I'd thought about war at all, I did so in the abstract, like imagining *Top Gun* or my uncles' stories of the Second World War. It had — and continues to have — no personal meaning for me.

My wife and I were being served ice cream in South Florida when news of the first bombs was reported. A teen-aged boy, at most 16, smiled when he said *our* planes and some British ones were bombing Baghdad. A girl scooping the cones corrected him. "Key Wait," she said. "We're bombing hell out of Key Wait." She was smiling, too.

Some time later, a woman I've come to know in Brooklyn confessed that her first impulse upon hearing of the attack was to feel relief, and then for a moment, pride. She said she knew it was politically incorrect (a former protester against the Vietnam War, she calls yuppies scum, wears little makeup and sensible shoes) but she couldn't help herself. What she dreaded most of all was failure, that the United States would be seen as a joke. When that didn't happen, she said, she felt a subtle pride as one does for an old, dependable watch.

Such feelings have subsided for people like my woman friend, and have been replaced by an earnest plea for an early end to hostilities, while in places like Palm Beach, pride and resolve hold firm as people await the hour of Pax Americana. Meanwhile, I'm feeling increasingly isolated as a Canadian in wartime America.

The U.S. warrior culture swept away all other influences during the first few days of combat. For days, critical thinking was on hold as headlines blared "Time for talk over" and "Whack Iraq."



ANGELIKA ROTHER

I suffered the sneers of Americans for pointing out that in a recent poll a majority of Canadians preferred an increase in CBC financing over support for forces in the gulf. They said Canadians were destined to obscurity, could never be great. I said it still wasn't clear why the forces were there. They said it would be a short war, that *we* would be in and out.

The personal *we* referring to war felt like a slap in the face to me, something I couldn't reconcile myself to. I was reminded of an incident with Canadian friends among Americans several years ago in a doughnut shop in Ogdensburg, N.Y., during the time of the Hostage Crisis in Iran. The so-called Canadian Caper in which some U.S. hostages were hidden and then spirited out by the Canadian embassy had just occurred, and when patrons learned we were Canadian, we were treated to festive rounds of crullers and coffee. Strangers clapped me on the back, asked to exchange phone numbers, laughed at my pale jokes. Never had I felt so much

a part of the United States — and so awkward.

In the early days of the war with Iraq, soldiers themselves were exalted as never before. At the NHL all-star game in Chicago, people flashed signs, "The real superstars are American GIs." Flower shops gave away yellow ribbons in moral support. Small-town newspapers were filled with stories about families with young men and women in the gulf. Some people in the early moments of the war said they had never been so proud of their children. The United States was awash in adrenalin.

AN analogy has been made by peace groups that the United States is like the Big Bad Wolf in the fairy tale. Invasions in Grenada and Panama reflect the pigs who built their houses of straw and sticks. Now the Big Bad Wolf has found the pig in the brick house, Iraq, and . . .

I would alter this tale a little to reveal something of the United States in the early days of wartime. Americans seem

to me like lemmings, the main diet of the Big Bad Wolf, the warrior culture. It was Hugh MacLennan in the novel *The Precipice* who observed that Americans are like masses of animals marching to a precipice, each getting to the edge and then fighting like hell to stop from going over. To them, self-criticism does not come easily. Americans remain repressed under a great weight of guilt and an inability to see themselves as they truly are. Canadians, on the other hand, come by self-criticism naturally because they keep repression on the surface, MacLennan said.

The Precipice was written partly to reveal how it was that a people could use an atomic bomb on another people. In those first days of the Iraq war — before critical thinking resumed — I began to see, too, how it could happen.

Larry O'Connor is a Canadian freelance writer who lives in New York and is working on a book for a U.S. publisher about growing up in Canada.