
CAMERON PULSIFER*

Following the first entry of Canadian troops into battle at 2nd Ypres in April 1915, the machine gun for a time dominated public and political discussion in Canada. Both the Canadian public and the government determined that they needed to do all that they could to get as many of these weapons into the hands of Canadian troops as possible. An examination of this phenomenon reveals much about the mood of the Canadian public and the difficulties experienced by the government as both came to realize in a more urgent sense than ever before just would be involved in waging a war of a scale and intensity that few had conceived of.

Après l'envoi au front des premières troupes canadiennes en avril 1915 durant la Deuxième bataille d'Ypres, la mitrailleuse a monopolisé tous les débats publics et politiques au Canada pendant un certain temps. Le public et le gouvernement canadiens avaient décidé de part et d'autre qu'il fallait tout faire pour mettre autant de ces armes que possible dans les mains des troupes canadiennes. L'étude de ce phénomène en dit long sur l'humeur de la population canadienne et sur les difficultés qu'éprouvait le gouvernement canadien quand tous deux prirent plus vivement conscience que jamais des conséquences véritables de mener une guerre d'une ampleur et d'une intensité que peu avaient imaginées.

THE MACHINE GUN stands out as one of the iconic weapons of the First World War. Images of this grim, automatic weapon, in the shape of a sawed-off water

* Cameron Pulsifer holds a PhD in history from Queen’s University. He has worked as an historian with Parks Canada, the Canadian Museum of Civilization, and, from 1991 to 2007, with the Canadian War Museum (CWM), where he is currently a curator emeritus. He remains deeply indebted to a number of people who helped with this paper. Most notably these are: the brilliant and prolific scholar Dr. Tim Cook at the CWM, who was always an interested and supportive colleague; his inspiring and long-suffering thesis supervisor at Queen’s, Dr. D. M. Schurman; and his beloved wife and best friend, Diana Pepall. He is also grateful to two painstaking and anonymous readers of the manuscript. Their observations and critiques proved invaluable.
pipe, spewing hails of bullets and mowing down waves of advancing infantry, have, in many ways, come to dominate the popular imagery of the war. In fact, artillery killed more of the fighting troops than did machine guns. Also, by the last months of 1916, the fighting armies had developed tactics that helped to mitigate the machine gun’s impact, although to the end of the war it remained a significant threat to soldiers advancing in the open.¹ No army went to war in 1914 fully aware of the machine gun’s killing capacity, although the carnage that it wrought in any number of early engagements – at Neuve Chapelle in March 1915, for example, German machine guns cut down 1,000 British infantry in a single attack² – soon woke them up. As a result, the machine gun components of all combatant armies, including Canada’s, continued to grow until the end of the war, although scenarios of mass slaughter were most typical of the war’s first couple of years, when the weapon’s destructive power was still being realized and before essential countervailing tactics had been developed. During this period especially, machine guns seemed to rule the battlefield.

The troops of the Canadian Expeditionary Force entered battle for the first time in April 1915, in the Second Battle of Ypres, in Belgium.³ Although no single incident rivalled the damage inflicted on the British at Neuve Chapelle, Canadians found the fire of German machine guns to be ferocious and its effects tragic. As a veteran of the fighting expressed to an audience in Victoria, machine guns were “the most deadly weapon in modern war. At Langemarck [near Ypres] the woods were full of them and it was pitiful to see our men mowed down by the German machine gunners.”⁴ It was the devastating power of machine guns – interestingly enough, not the use by the Germans of poison gas – that dominated veterans’ accounts of battle and the nation’s press coverage. The result was a huge welling of concern among the Canadian public about the well-being of Canadian “boys” in the face of such death-dealing technology. At the same time, some members of the government engaged fervently in efforts to ensure that the demands of the public and the needs of the troops were met with a substantial increase in the number of machine guns being sent to the front.


⁴ Colonel Lorne Ross, quoted in The Daily Colonist (Victoria), July 16, 1915, p. 4.
This close look at the rise and fall of Canada’s machine gun mania provides fresh and revealing insights into the mood of the Canadian civilian population towards the war at this point and, in particular, its reaction to this specific exemplar of the war’s arsenal of killing. At the same time, it illuminates reactions within the government of Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden, casting light on its inner workings as members scrambled to come to grips with urgent demands, both from the front and from the public at home, for a great many more machine guns than had ever been thought necessary. Copious correspondence and official files among the militia department’s papers at the Library and Archives Canada, the personal papers of some of the key individuals involved, and the extensive coverage in the nation’s press have all been combed to elucidate this significant and fascinating episode in Canada’s First World War history. The contents of these various sources help us to appreciate more fully the reaction of the Canadian public, the press, and the military, political, and ministerial/bureaucratic worlds to the stresses engendered by the full and bloody immersion of Canadian troops in a war whose destructive nature few had conceived of before.

Historical accounts of the war’s early years highlight the somewhat calamity-prone efforts by Borden’s government to deal with the enormous and complex demands generated by the war effort. Most of the problems are seen as being directly traceable to the energetic but erratic and inefficient leadership of the minister of militia, Sam Hughes. These included, but are not limited to, poorly manufactured boots and unsuitable load-bearing equipment, incompetence and possible corruption in the ordering of shells, overly prolonged support for the problem-plagued Ross Rifle, and the maintenance of a frustratingly complex and inefficient system governing the administration of Canadian troops overseas.  

The machine gun issue, however, was mostly handled by some of Hughes’s leading critics within the government, who saw the minister’s absence on a trip to England as an opportunity to introduce some much-needed sense and rationality into the operation of the militia department. That their efforts came to hopeless grief, in the case of the machine gun issue at least, dramatically exposes the complexities facing the Borden government in placing military procurement on a sound and rational footing, even without the problematic Hughes at the heart of the matter. For the government, and particularly for Prime Minister Borden, it came to constitute a major problem in civil-military relations, necessitating difficult choices, both in handling a Canadian public seriously aroused over the issue and in determining the role that private versus public money should play in the prosecution of the war effort.

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5 Two standard accounts that address these issues are Nicholson, Canadian Expeditionary Force, pp. 201-212; and John Swettenham, To Seize the Victory: The Canadian Corps in World War I (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1965), pp. 56-60. The two leading accounts of Hughes are Tim Cook, The Madman and the Butcher: The Sensational Wars of Sam Hughes and General Arthur Currie (Toronto: Allen Lane Canada, 2010); Ronald G. Haycock, Sam Hughes: The Public Career of a Controversial Canadian (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1986). On the problems with the overseas ministry, see Desmond Morton, A Peculiar Kind of Politics: Canada’s Overseas Ministry in the First World War (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982).
Following the practice of the British Army, Canada was obliged to provide two machine guns for every battalion of infantry. At the war’s outbreak, however, the country possessed a grand total of only 43 of the weapons, all of an obsolete type. Nonetheless, this was a time of unusual preoccupation with the machine gun in Canada. The roots of this interest require more intensive investigation than can be undertaken here, but it does seem to have been associated, to no insignificant degree, with the enthusiasm of Sam Hughes. The minister saw himself as something of a visionary when it came to equipping the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF), and in this instance, at least, he veered onto the right track. Studies of the use of machine guns by both sides in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 inspired a sub-culture of military officers in Europe who were convinced that the weapon’s fire power was a key to success in modern battle. In Britain, a small group of enthusiasts preached the weapon’s virtues (in the face of official indifference) at the British Army’s School of Musketry at Hythe. A visitor there in 1912 was Sam Hughes, who came away impressed by the demonstrations of the weapon that he had witnessed.


8 An account of the visit to Hythe can be found in *Report of the Militia Council for the Dominion of Canada for the Fiscal Year Ending March 31 1913* (Ottawa: King’s Printer, 1914), pp. 132-133.
Soon after, under his auspices, the department of militia put in an order with the Vickers Company of Great Britain for 50 of its latest Mark I weapons. Adopted by the British Army in 1912, the Vickers would prove to be perhaps the most highly regarded weapon of its type in the war. Another indication of his special interest in machine guns at the start of the war was the support Hughes accorded on August 13 to the proposal of another, more substantial, machine gun enthusiast, Raymond Brutinel, to form a unit of machine-gun-equipped armoured vehicles. A former officer in the French Army, Brutinel had settled in the Canadian west in 1905, where he earned a fortune in minerals exploration. At the same time, he maintained an interest in military matters, particularly the machine gun, as discussed in the literature that was appearing about it in the wake of the Russo-Japanese War. Still later in 1914, Hughes lent equally enthusiastic support to the formation through private funding of two other motorized machine gun units plus another that used horses. The funders of these initiatives were all men of substantial means, including, besides Brutinel’s backer Sir Clifford Sifton, department store magnate J. C. Eaton, northern mining entrepreneur “Klondike” Joe Boyle, and a group of prominent Montreal businessmen. Still, the interest taken by Hughes, Brutinel, or any of the wealthy donors should not be assumed to indicate any widespread comprehension in the country as to the significance of machine guns. As the official history of the Canadian Machine Gun Corps put it, although members of the militia in the immediate prewar period had “heard of machine guns, they excited no great amount of curiosity.” The population at large remained profoundly (perhaps blissfully) ignorant of the devastation the weapon could wreak.

All the above initiatives depended upon donations of money by wealthy citizens. Donated money was used throughout the war to fund many undertakings. Usually, however, this was for charitable purposes, ranging from Belgian relief to buying tobacco and other amenities to send to the troops overseas. In addition, such major benevolent agencies as the Red Cross and the Canadian Patriotic Fund were dependent upon donated money, while donations were sometimes used to fund military hospitals and to acquire motor ambulances. Also, in these early years at least, private money was occasionally used to fund a number of specifically military initiatives, a notable example being Hamilton Gault’s personal contribution of $100,000 towards the formation of the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry.
Significantly, the instances cited above of wealthy donors funding the acquisition of machine guns were the only occasions of privately donated monies being used to finance the purchase of a weapon of war. Why the machine gun was thus singled out is not clear. It no doubt had something to do with Sam Hughes’s enthusiasm for the weapon and the highly personalized approach he took to equipping the CEF. It may also have had something to do with the weapon’s relative novelty. Hughes and other backers may well have concluded that, lacking the bona fides of such well-established items of the military arsenal as rifles, bayonets, and artillery, the weapon needed some external financial help to assert its importance. Indeed, Hughes might well have extended the practice of using donated monies to fund other specifically military initiatives, had it not been for the events that unfolded over machine guns.

Great Britain was the usual supplier of nearly all the military armaments acquired by Canada. It soon encountered problems with regard to machine guns, however. Vickers’ production was nowhere near the level required for Britain’s expanding war effort, and the British government soon determined that it required every gun that the company could manufacture for its own army. As a result, even the 50 guns that Canada already had on order were never delivered. With no home-based production capacity, the department of militia was forced to look elsewhere for the machine guns it needed and turned to the major North American manufacturer of machine guns, the Colt Patent Firearms Company of Hartford, Connecticut. Canadians had used an earlier model of the Colt Company’s machine gun in South Africa in 1899-1902 and found it highly satisfactory. On August 29, 1914, officials in the department contacted Colt and ordered 50 of its latest 1914-Model weapon. Two months later, with a 2nd Division being formed, they ordered another 250 of the Colt guns. In November, however, the British War Office doubled the number of machine guns required per battalion from two to four, and the commander of Canadian forces in England soon demanded additional supplies.

Although the 1914-Model Colt had the same rate of fire as the Vickers and was slightly less cumbersome, it was far from an ideal weapon. Its vast number of parts made it a “mechanic’s nightmare,” and numerous and costly alterations were required before the Canadians could take it to the front. Any machine gun was better than none, however, and the Colt was used by the CEF until, finally, in July 1916, enough Vickers became available to supply Canadian needs. By the time Canadian troops entered their first major battle of the war at the Second Battle of Ypres in April 1915, the militia department had obtained a total of 300 Colts. One hundred and fourteen of these were overseas, 84 with the 1st Division

at the front.\textsuperscript{16} Forty-eight would have been distributed among the division’s 12 fighting battalions, leaving 36 in reserve. By the standards of the British Army at the time, Canadian troops were well equipped with the weapon as they entered their first major encounter with the Germans. However, the carnage of battle would soon prove how quickly the guns could disappear.

First Division’s machine gunners played a prominent role in the fighting at Second Ypres, but casualties were high, and many of their guns were destroyed.\textsuperscript{17} On May 11, J. W. Carson, Sam Hughes’s special representative in London, summed up the situation in a telegram to his boss. His words were typical of the drumbeat of dire news Ottawa would increasingly hear that stressed the need for more machine guns. “Our last severe engagement in France has played havoc with our Colt guns,” wrote Carson.

At the present time we have only eighteen effective guns with our Division in France \textsuperscript{sic} and eight more are now being converted.... We not only want to have a full establishment of guns but also a surplus of 150\%, as while our troops are under shell fire as they were in the last engagement, and are shelled out of their trenches ... they are apt to lose their machine guns ... Colonel Meighen [commander of the 14th Battalion] for instance, told me that he did not have one gun


\textsuperscript{17} See “Colt and Lewis Machine Guns,” pp. 8-18. Also, Andrew Iarocchi, Shoestring Soldiers: The First Canadian Division at War, 1914-1918 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), p. 188.
left. He also told me that the German establishment was just double ours and that we should have at least eight guns per battalion. The matter is more than urgent. 18

The news coming from the front to Ottawa consistently stressed that the Germans were far better equipped with machine guns than were the Canadians. The obvious conclusion was that the Canadians desperately needed more guns to have any chance of confronting the enemy on equal terms, let alone defeat him. Typical was a message that the 1st Division’s machine gun officer, Major A. E. Swift, wrote on June 23 to Major General Sam Steele, commander of the 2nd Division, which had recently arrived in England. Swift, whose note would be forwarded to Hughes, urged that the requirement now was for 10 guns per battalion, “or 160 for a division,” as the Germans “had one [machine gun] for every 20 men, and I quite believe that they have that number, besides more in Reserve.” 19 Historians have subsequently shown that these claims of a huge German superiority in machine guns were vastly exaggerated and that, in fact, the numbers possessed by the combatant armies in 1914-1915 were about equal. The difference was that the German Army employed its machine guns in batteries of six rather than split up piecemeal among the battalions, as was the case among British and Canadian forces. The coordinated fire of these German guns created devastating fields of fire that proved far more deadly than the more dispersed fire emitted by the British and Canadian guns. Such findings do not, however, change the fact that at the time British-Canadian troops ardently believed that the Germans had far more machine guns than they did. 20

Meanwhile, at home, Canadian newspapers were filled with accounts of the battle. The picture conveyed by these reports of the war that Canadians had entered was a far cry from the romanticized version of conflict contained in popular prewar accounts of British imperial triumphs. Whether they were supporters of the Liberal or Conservative parties, most Canadian newspapers were ardent supporters of the war. They depicted the conflict as one of civilized, Christian values, as represented by the Allies, opposing the ruthless, “hunnish” aggression of the Central Powers. As historian Jeffery Keshen and others have noted, although strict official censorship was soon imposed by the government, the newspapers themselves exercised a kind of self-censorship in their reporting of the conflict, focusing on the Allied and, more specifically, Canadian triumphs as opposed to those of the enemy. They did, however, at least in the early years, print accounts that conveyed the war’s violence and brutality. These, in turn, served to emphasize the grim nature of the struggle in which Canadian troops were engaged and with which they would have to come to grips if they were to prevail. 21

20 See Cornish, Machine Guns and the Great War, pp. 35-37; Samuels, Command or Control?, pp. 76-86.
The portrait was of a battlefield dominated by overwhelming fire power, where little scope was left for human agency. The machine gun figured as a leading example of an arsenal of weapons that embodied all the latest advances of the industrial age. Success, these reports warned, would rest with the side that succeeded in bringing to bear the greatest quantities of such devastating materiel; at the moment, they emphasized, all the advantages lay with Germany. "'Munitions! Munitions! Munitions!', these were the chief requirement for success," Toronto’s Globe reported the British commander-in-chief, Sir John French, as exclaiming just before the onset of Second Ypres.22 The struggle had become "not one of men but of machinery," continued Sir John. E. W. B. Morrison, the prewar editor of the Ottawa Citizen, a veteran of the South African War, who was then serving in Flanders as a lieutenant colonel with the Royal Canadian Artillery (and would later become General Officer Commanding the CEF’s artillery) put it thus: “Human courage is of no avail against swarms of machine guns, an infinite number of hand bombs and high explosive shell of a power never experienced in warfare.”23

Machine guns, for the time being, received the lion’s share of coverage for the damaging toll of Canadian lives. Until at least November of that year, the weapon’s killing power and the need to get many more of them to Canadian battalions overseas became a major preoccupation of press coverage of the war and a major source of war-related anxiety in Canada. “The hail of bullets from machine guns has been far more deadly than the shrapnel of the field artillery,” proclaimed the Globe on June 15, 1915. The Daily Colonist of Victoria went further in asserting that the “news from the front emphasizes the absolute necessity for equipping our men with as many machine guns as they can use. There is not the least possibility of too many guns being given.”24

Coming, as they did, from both harassed officers at the front and an alarmed press at home, these demands convinced the government that urgent steps were necessary. As a start, on May 14, 1915, it ordered a further 125 weapons from Colt.25 Over the next few months, however, a new and unexpected factor entered the government’s calculations. Increasingly, members of the public came forward with offers of help to obtain the much-needed weapons with cash supplied from their own pockets.

Press reports of the devastating impact of machine guns on Canadian troops at Second Ypres not only severely alarmed the Canadian public but spurred its interest in doing what it could to ensure that the troops overseas received more of the weapons. Understanding that the regulated number was not enough, many Canadians concluded that they must take up the task of ensuring, through contributions of their own funds, that Canadian troops received more of the powerful weapons. On May 5, with Second Ypres still raging, the staff of the Penitentiary

22 The Globe (Toronto), April 19, 1915, p. 6.
24 The Daily Colonist (Victoria), July 16, 1915, p. 4.
Services in Kingston, Ontario, announced the donation of two machine guns to that city’s 21st Battalion. This was followed on June 1 by two wealthy Montreal citizens, grain exporter and banker James Carruthers and the head of Redpath Sugar, Huntley R. Drummond (who had lost a brother at Second Ypres), declaring that they would donate $100,000 each to help the government buy additional machine guns. These offers, noted the *Globe*, were “gratefully accepted” by Sam Hughes. A month later, eight Vancouver residents proclaimed that they were giving $1,000 each to buy machine guns for the local 47th Battalion. The city’s *Province* newspaper anticipated the frenzy of giving that would develop later when it called for a “healthy rivalry” among Canadian cities over machine gun donations. Responding to the challenge, over the next few days the citizens of Vancouver provided a further $23,000 in contributions.

On June 9, the militia department approached the Colt Company about purchasing 110 more weapons, to be paid for with the $100,000 donated by Drummond (the offer made by Carruthers seems to have been dropped). Colt, however, was now besieged by war-related orders stemming from a number of Allied countries. Its response was that it was now so busy that it could not guarantee the guns requested until the next year. Unable to wait that long, the Canadians determined to look elsewhere. As it happened, the militia department already had another American arms manufacturer waiting in the wings. In mid-April 1915, it had been approached by the Savage Arms Company of Utica, New York, which held the patent in North America for the manufacture of another type of machine gun, the Lewis gun. The Savage firm expressed every confidence that it could produce all the weapons its northern neighbour desired, within the stated delivery schedules, at a cost of $1,000 per gun (compared to $750 for a Colt). In anticipation that it might be needed, the department had an example of the gun tested on June 2 and 3 by the military’s Small Arms Committee, whose job it was to provide its professional judgement on such proposed acquisitions. After testing this single gun, the committee gave its approval, pronouncing that it “seemed to be a simple and efficient gun.”

Smaller and lighter than the British Vickers and the Colt, the American-invented Lewis gun could not produce the same weight of fire and was more prone to jam. It was more easily handled, however, and, when carried on the battlefield as an infantry support weapon, could provide a welcome quantity of high-volume

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fire from its 47-round magazine. Indeed, under the designation of automatic rifle rather than machine gun, it eventually became a staple of British/Canadian infantry tactics. In the spring and summer of 1915, however, its particular strengths and weaknesses were not fully appreciated. It was just one of a number of weapons on the market bearing the designation of machine gun. Indeed, the British War Office had found it an acceptable stand-in for the Vickers, which was not yet being produced in sufficient numbers, with the Canadians following suit in adopting it as a replacement for the impossible to acquire Colts.

Meanwhile, Borden, in the process of learning what was required to run such a massive undertaking as the Canadian war effort, was becoming increasingly dissatisfied with a military procurement process that, under Hughes, was beset by persistent irregularities, rampant cronyism, and continuing inefficiency. By a Privy Council Order of May 14, he authorized the creation of a body called the War Purchasing Commission. Chaired by a trusted member of the government, Toronto businessman A. E. Kemp, its assignment was to take over the task of procuring war-related materials (except for shells for Britain, which were

33 The British, in fact, assured the Canadians that they could use the Lewis as a replacement for the Colt, as they were doing the same to “make up for the deficiency in their own” heavy machine guns. See “The Lewis Air Cooled Machine Gun,” p. 1, in “Colt and Lewis Machine Guns.”
handled by another agency). The prime minister intended that the commission would introduce the much-needed systemization, rationality, and sound management practices that had been so lacking under Hughes. One of the commission’s first major tasks was to handle the crisis in machine gun procurement generated by Colt’s inability to meet Canadian demands.

On June 18, Kemp contacted the chief of the general staff, Major General Willoughby Gwatkin, for his opinion of the Lewis guns on offer from the Savage Arms firm. Anxious to get moving on the matter, Gwatkin expressed strong support for the proposal, which had been in the hands of the militia department for a couple of months. The Savage Company could begin the delivery of 500 guns within four months, Gwatkin assured Kemp, “the entire quantity to be complete and delivered within six months.” Gwatkin contacted and received a final approval from the British War Office, and, with the Canadian Small Arms Committee having already given its endorsement, on June 28 the government placed an order for 100 Savage Lewis Guns, using the money donated by Drummond. Ten days later, it went further and approved the purchase of an additional 400 weapons of the same type, presumably the extras referred to by Gwatkin, which were to be paid for by the federal treasury.

Meanwhile, contributions of monies to help the government buy machine guns continued to come in, the largest single one from the province of Ontario. Under the premiership of the keen imperialist W. H Hearst, the province was resolute in its support of the war effort. Indeed, it had levied a small tax for the purpose and, by the conflict’s end in 1918, had contributed some $8.5 million to war-related causes. In late June 1915, two senior ministers from the provincial cabinet met with the newly promoted Major General Sam Hughes at Camp Valcartier to get his views on how their province could help his department prosecute the war effort. Hughes informed them of the plans to buy 500 machine guns and suggested that Ontario should agree to pay a portion or all of the costs. Hearst’s cabinet agreed to cover the full sum of $500,000, although the formal public announcement was not made until July 20, at a large recruiting rally held in Massey Hall in Toronto, in the presence of the then deputy prime minister, Sir George Foster.

The dynamics of machine gun procurement would soon alter once again, however, with new personalities temporarily taking charge of handling it on behalf

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34 Haycock, Sam Hughes, pp. 231-230; Report of the War Purchasing Commission, pp. 1-5.
of the government. On June 28, Prime Minister Borden left Ottawa for a trip to England on war-related business, from which he would not return until September 4. Then, on July 3, Sam Hughes also left for an extended stay in England, not to return until September 3. Borden’s designated replacement during his absence was the long-serving cabinet minister Sir George Foster. Standing in for Hughes in the role of acting minister of militia was Alberta senator James A. Lougheed, Conservative leader in the upper house since 1906. Born in Toronto, Lougheed became an ardent westerner after his move to Calgary in 1883, where he thrived in both the law and business. Described by a colleague as “a Conservative of Conservatives,” he was a firm believer in Western development, the Empire, and the benefits of business efficiency. Lougheed would take on the task of heading the Military Hospitals Commission, while retaining the post of acting minister of militia. His handling of machine gun procurement would not be one of his finer moments, however.

He and Foster prided themselves on their business acumen, and both were ardent critics of Hughes and what they perceived to be his maladministration of the militia department. Lougheed, in particular, saw his appointment as an opportunity to bring order to the prevailing chaos. Among their many concerns was what Foster, in his personal diary, referred to as the “lack of foresight and utter inefficiency” in acquiring the additional machine guns that were so desperately needed overseas. Indeed, the two seem to have taken on the cause of obtaining more of these urgently needed weapons as a major objective of their tenures as acting ministers, with Lougheed, in the militia portfolio, assuming the leading role. The order for the 400 additional guns mentioned by Gwatkin was approved during the first week that they occupied their temporary portfolios.

One cannot doubt the sense of urgency that Lougheed brought to his self-appointed mission, but he also brought to it an element of naiveté and carelessness about details, which were to mar his tenure as acting minister. No doubt affected by some of the more hysterical claims in the press and elsewhere about there being practically no limit to the number of weapons required, he seems to have seen his responsibility to be simply that of getting as many guns to the front as possible. This was to be achieved even if it meant adopting some unorthodox methods, hence the support he gave to the citizens’ machine gun movement. It also explained his apparent indifference to the concerns of his professional military advisors about how the guns were to be distributed among the battalions, specifically whether some should have more than others.

Whether wittingly or not, Lougheed touched off the citizen’s machine gun movement with a speech he made in Ottawa on July 8. Montreal’s leading English-language newspaper, the Conservative-supporting Daily Star, printed

41 LAC MG 27 D7, Sir George Foster Diaries, July 22, 1915.
an account of it on the front page of its next day’s edition, and from there the story was picked up by papers across the country. According to the Star, the acting minister had pronounced that “patriotic people of Canada & institutions, or others desirous of doing their bit, cannot do better than in giving machine guns.” 42 Stipulating that the money should be forwarded to the militia department, Lougheed assured donors that the weapons purchased would be in addition to the number supplied by the government. As well, the money could be earmarked towards purchasing machine guns for battalions raised in the donors’ own localities. “Machine guns and more machine guns is the cry of the Militia Department,” proclaimed the Daily Colonist of Victoria. 43 Canadians took Lougheed’s remarks as a cry from the government for help with purchasing the weapons.

Both Lougheed and Borden were later to insist that no one from the government had played any role in instigating this popular machine gun campaign. Lougheed claimed that he had been misquoted, insisting to the Toronto Star that he had “never made an appeal for machine guns either by speech or otherwise.” He was, he said, simply commenting favourably upon donations that had already been made; he was not attempting to “start an agitation.” Once the campaign of giving had begun, however, he concluded that he had no choice but to go along with it. The “people wanted the government to take the money for this purpose,” he insisted, “and it is natural that the government would carry out the people’s wishes.” 44 It may well be that, when he made his remarks, Lougheed was contemplating something much milder than the massive campaign that resulted. If, however, as he claimed, he was only accommodating himself to popular enthusiasm, his actions on its behalf can only be termed unduly avid.

On many public platforms and in numerous letters he sent out from the militia department, the acting minister consistently heaped praise upon the donors’ generosity and assured them that their wishes to assign their guns to a specific battalion would be met. At a public rally in Toronto on July 31, for example, he spoke warmly of the movement’s “princely generosity and magnificent patriotism.” 45 Typical of the assurances he made in official letters to donors is one he sent out on July 28. The militia department “would in every way endeavour,” he wrote, “to meet [donors’] wishes in assigning the gun they donate.” In what no doubt was a concession to resistance he was meeting from professional military members of the militia department, he did acknowledge that this guarantee would be “subject to military necessity.” But, he continued, “it is not anticipated there will be any difficulty in carrying out the wishes ... particularly if the ... battalion is overseas.” 46

44 The Toronto Daily Star, November 12, 1915, p. 5.
The Great Canadian Machine Gun Mania of 1915

The experience of the Montreal *Star* set a pattern for a number of newspapers across the country. Following its report on Lougheed’s speech, it was besieged by offers from Montrealers wishing to donate money to purchase machine guns for local battalions. Indeed, the paper soon found itself serving as a kind of central receiving house for donations. “I cannot go myself because I am too old,” declared one donor, “but they say a machine gun is as good as fifty men and I am sending that as a substitute.” Another wrote that “every story of the fighting emphasizes and underscores the need for more machine guns for Canadian infantry.... Those of us who cannot go to the front have open to us a very effective way of doing something at a time and in a way to help accomplish the result we all desire.”

By the end of July, newspaper reports reckoned that $1.5 million had been donated nationwide. These monies, which, upon receipt, the militia department forwarded to the receiver general, included the $500,000 contributed by the Ontario government. By the time the campaign ended in November, the total amount of money actually in government hands from the campaign was $1,265,752.92, again including the donation from Ontario. Many who had pledged money had not yet sent it in, however, with contemporary estimates putting the total amount pledged at $2 million.

Donations sufficient to acquire 20 guns came in from the citizens of Halifax, Nova Scotia. Contributions from Cape Breton Island would allow for the purchase of 30 guns; from the citizens of London, Ontario, 20; from the townspeople of Brantford, Ontario, 21; from Vancouver, 50; from a fund maintained by Quebec City’s major English-language paper, the *Chronicle*, 23; and from the “citizens and associations” of Montreal, 60. The single largest contribution, next to that of the Ontario government, came from Hamilton, Ontario, a city that was especially zealous in contributing to a host of wartime causes. The machine gun movement in that city had an energetic team of organizers and fundraisers, led by Lt. Col. R. H. Labatt, one of a number of over-age battalion commanders who had recently been repatriated from the front due to health and other problems. These returnees spoke whenever they could of the dire need to obtain more machine guns for Canadian troops. For his part, Labatt was sufficiently persuasive that, on July 30, he received approval from Lougheed for Hamilton’s particular contribution to be the formation of a battalion – the 86th – whose entire armament was

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48 Ibid., p. 2.
51 *Canadian Annual Review*, 1915, p. 211.
53 See *The Montreal Daily Star*, July 12, 1915, p. 17, for coverage of their arrival in that city from the front.
to consist of 125 machine guns. By September 23, it had enrolled some 998 recruits. 54 French Canada, on the other hand, remained largely unengaged in the fundraising, no doubt reflecting that community’s lack of enthusiasm for this “British” war. A survey of the French Canadian newspaper La Presse for the months of July to November 1915 shows that Quebec’s lieutenant governor, P. E. LeBlanc, contributed a machine gun to the 69th Battalion, and the town of Outremont and the société française et anglaise of Montreal donated one gun each. 55 By and large, however, reports of machine gun donations were few and far between in La Presse, which supported the war. 56 Reports were even rarer in the other major French-language newspaper sampled, Le Devoir, which vehemently opposed the war. 57 Probably equally revealing of this community’s lack of engagement with the machine gun campaign is the absence of letters from French-speaking correspondents among the substantial body of records relating to the machine gun movement in the militia department files housed at the Library and Archives Canada.

The enthusiasm for donating touched all regions of English Canada, however. Contributions came in from the citizens and corporations of all sizes of communities, from big cities to small towns. 58 Professional groups, church officials, women’s organizations, businesses, clubs, sporting societies, newspapers, and educational institutions across the land came forward with offers to buy machine guns. Enthusiasm extended to labour groups as well, with offers being made, for example, by the Joggins Coal Workers in Nova Scotia, the employees of the Angus Shops in Montreal, and the staff of the New England Fish Company in Vancouver. Some donors even offered to supply men to crew the weapons. If any part of society was under-represented it was probably agriculture, although some donations from smaller communities may have represented this sector. 59

For those who chose to contribute, the overriding motivation was the dire need, as publicized in newspaper reports and the accounts of veterans like Labatt, for getting as many machine guns as possible to troops who were either at or going to the front. The enemy, these reports stressed, possessed far greater numbers of the deadly weapons, the primary cause of the heavy casualties being sustained by Canadian troops. Their gifts, donors were convinced, would help bring this deadly disparity to an end. Allied artillery had also proved inadequate and needed drastic upgrading, as did the Canadian Ross Rifles, which had shown themselves so sadly deficient at Second Ypres. But, for a time at least, the machine gun, perhaps because until then its effects

55 La Presse (Montreal), July to November 1915, especially July 27, 1915, p. 7; July 29, p. 5; August 12, 1915, p. 7.
56 Le Devoir (Montreal), July to November 1915.
57 For the responses of French Canadian newspapers to the war, see Kesterton, A History of Journalism in Canada, p. 184.
58 On this, see Canadian Annual Review, 1915, p. 212.
59 Ibid. p. 212.
had been unappreciated, seems to have captured the lion’s share of the public’s attention.

Other motivations also played a part, of course. Some donors seem to have seen the gift of a machine gun as the sort of patriotic act that would free them from a sense of guilt about not personally enlisting. On July 21, for example, Toronto’s Globe reported that a group of merchants from Bloor Street West met “to consider the purchasing of ten machine guns to be presented to the Canadian Expeditionary Forces in lieu of going themselves. Each machine gun is estimated to do the work of fifty men and it is proposed that business men on Bloor Street who cannot themselves go to fight shall send one machine gun to take their place in the ranks.” Although the Globe remarked only on the merchants’ patriotism, one might well assume that those involved in the national recruitment campaign would have had different views.

In Halifax, the situation became critical enough that the local head of recruiting was driven to pronounce: “We have offers of machine guns.... We can buy them, what we want is men, we cannot buy them.” Yet, four days later, the Morning Chronicle declared: “If you cannot enlist, you can help to purchase a machine gun,’ is a slogan heard all over the city.” Whether such initiatives had any impact upon recruiting is impossible to measure. Of course, many of those who contributed, such as women, senior citizens, children, and corporate bodies such as universities, would not have been expected to enlist in any event. Also, as noted, a number of the offers included the crews needed to man the weapons. Although these offers were never accepted by the government, they may serve to counterbalance somewhat the incidences of machine guns being donated as a substitute for military service.

Lougheed’s obsession with sheer numbers created considerable concern among the professional military members of the department. Specifically, this had to do with his insistence that there should be practically no limit to the number of machine guns that a single battalion could take into battle. To this end, the acting minister continued to assure donors that the weapons they purchased could be earmarked for a battalion of their choice, usually one from their home locality. This implied that some battalions could fare better than others, an impression compounded by the minister’s assurances that any number of guns could be donated to a single battalion. Standard military practice, of course, held that comparable units of an army should be equipped identically. Manpower resources, the availability of transport, the problem of maintaining ammunition supply, and basic fairness all made it essential that the number of weapons of a certain type possessed by individual units be consistent throughout an army. Lougheed seems to have been oblivious to such concerns.

The Ottawa Citizen, previously a Conservative paper, but now, due to disagreements with Borden, independent, was a fierce critic of Lougheed’s handling of

61 The Morning Chronicle (Halifax), July 24, 1915, p. 3.
the machine gun issue. On July 15 it introduced the following note of military realism into the debate. It was “not inspiring,” it declared, “to think of some being sent into action with only a few machine guns, others because of the generosity of one or two private citizens with a few more. This is a national duty; not a matter of chance or charity or passing around the hat.” Similarly concerned was the Master General of the Ordnance, Major General T. Benson, who wrote to Willoughby Gwatkin on July 13 that if “private parties wished to pay for machine guns there would appear to be no objection, but special regiments should not be favoured through having friends at court.” Gwatkin was concerned enough to refer the issue to the Militia Council. Its ruling of August 2 was that “a regiment or battalion will include not more than 12 machine guns with not more than 4 additional held in reserve.” This still meant a total of 16 per battalion, which was four times the number approved by British regulations (and would never have been permitted by authorities at the front). It was, however, at least for the time being, a step in the direction of consistency on this critical issue.

Despite the decision of the Militia Council, equivocal statements continued to appear in letters that the militia department sent to donors who wished the guns they purchased to go to a local battalion. Then, on October 27, the recently knighted Sir Sam Hughes threw the whole matter into the air once again when he peremptorily declared that the “wishes of subscribers who stipulated that their contributions are to go to a certain stipulated unit will be carried out as far as possible. There is no instance on record where any battalion has been refused the right to take over more guns than are provided for in regulations.”

Lougheed and his colleagues began the serious ordering of the guns in late July. Clearly their hands had been forced by the Savage Arms Company, which saw an opportunity that could not be missed of benefiting from the current Canadian obsession with the weapon. On July 22, Kemp received a letter from A. G. Barker, a representative of the firm, who had lately been spending a fair amount of time in Canada on company business. Well aware of the pressures being exerted by the machine gun movement, Barker reminded Kemp that there was a great world shortage of available machine guns at that time and emphasized that “no other Arms manufacturer of machine guns anywhere” could fill Canadian requirements within the stipulated time frame. There was a good chance, he warned, that American legal restrictions, which hitherto had limited the sale of Savage Lewis guns abroad, would soon be lifted. This would make it impossible for Canada to obtain the weapons “unless they are contracted for at this time.” The cabinet met to consider the issue later that day, and the arms dealer’s alarmist

64 *The Citizen* (Ottawa), July 15, 1915, p. 12.
69 Ibid.
message obviously had an impact. Foster’s diary entry for the day notes that the members “discussed the question of machine guns” and records that they “ordered a large number to fill our own requirements and provide for the donation of the same that are rapidly coming in.”

The result must have fulfilled Barker’s fondest hopes. On July 24 a Privy Council Order approved the purchase of 500 Savage Lewis guns, using the $500,000 contributed by Ontario. A week later the federal government placed another order with Savage for no fewer than 1,500 more Lewis guns, this time to be paid for entirely by the federal treasury. The intention, according to Foster’s diary, was to build up a sufficient stock to supply both the guns the government would provide using its own budget and those paid for by the machine gun movement. In total, the government had ordered 2,500 Lewis guns from the Savage Company, at a cost of $2.5 million.

As Canada at this time was prepared to maintain two divisions of 12 infantry battalions each at the front, this number of guns meant 104 for every battalion. By the standards of the time, this was an astounding number of machine guns. In comparison, British machine gun production at this time was sufficient to ensure that the 51 divisions of the British Army would have only nine per battalion. Of course, whatever Lougheed may have believed, not all of the guns would have been issued at once. British Army regulations, which applied to the CEF, then limited the number of machine guns per battalion at the front to a total of eight (at the time four heavy Colts or Vickers and four Lewises). This still meant a more than ample supply, even for the four division corps that Canada would maintain in the field from August 1916 on. The number of Lewis guns authorized per battalion did increase markedly in subsequent years, and a number of the guns issued would have been kept back for training purposes and thus would never have made it to the front. Nonetheless, by the standards of 1915, 2,500 Lewis guns would have meant a considerable machine gun bonanza for Canadians. It was, in reality, a far greater supply than Canadian battalions required and, in light of the acute need for other items of military equipment, a misallocation of resources.

By early August, probably because of the large number of weapons that had been ordered, support for the machine gun movement was beginning to cool within the department of militia. For example, in a reply of August 2 to a newspaper editor who had written to ask advice on whether his paper should become a collector of funds for the movement, the department’s long-serving secretary, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Winter, implied that the campaign had outlived its usefulness. Although he expressed gratefulness “for the many generous offers of assistance” that had come in, Winter wrote that, “in view of the orders already

70 Foster Diaries, July 22, 1915.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid., pp. 79-80, 140.
placed by the Department for guns, and the large number of donations already received it would be just as well if further donations were diverted into other channels of assistance of equal import and military value." Willoughby Gwatkin, who had always doubted the legitimacy of using private money to purchase weapons of war, was even more straightforward in a letter he sent to a prospective donor on August 4: "I will be quite frank with you; we need no more money for machine guns. We have already placed an order for ... 2500 guns of the Lewis type." Over the coming weeks refusals of a similar nature were sent to a number of prospective donors. However, consistency never being a hallmark of the department’s stance on the issue, on August 9, Winter wrote to the Ontario Agricultural College in Guelph declaring that the department would “very gratefully” accept from it a donation covering the cost of two machine guns.

Whether this increasing scepticism within the militia department was picked up by the press is not clear, but at the same time the near universal support of Canadian newspapers for Ottawa’s handling of the machine gun movement began to fracture. While newspapers suppressed political allegiances at moments of crisis in the war effort, in between the partisan attacks continued. In the immediate wake of Second Ypres, even papers with pronounced Liberal leanings, such as Toronto’s Daily Star and Halifax’s Morning Chronicle, strongly supported the government in its crusade to acquire more machine guns. Now, however, the editorial stances of these papers shifted to renewed partisan attack, raising questions as to whether the government had ordered too many of the weapons and whether the donations had diverted money away from causes more needful of funds, most notably those of a charitable nature. Headlines in the Toronto Star of July 29 itemized its new position: “Time to Call a Halt in Providing Machine Guns; Direct Money to Other War Funds; More Money Pouring in for Weapons than can well be used.” Halifax’s Morning Chronicle reported on August 12 that the number of weapons obtained so far had “created not a little embarrassment in military circles where it is realized that the offers so far made have far exceeded the requirements of the situation or their effective use.”

Before long, even Lougheed had decided it was time to bring the campaign to a halt. An article in Toronto’s Globe of August 24 quoted him as declaring that “no more donations for machine guns can be usefully employed at present ... and therefore the suggestion seems timely that those who intended to give money for the purpose might usefully divert it to a ‘Disablement Fund.’ [sic]” The story was not universally picked up, however, and donations continued to flow in.

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77 LAC MG 30 E51, C. C. Creelman, President, Ontario Agricultural College to Militia Department, August 4, 1915; Lt. Col. C. Winter to Creelman, August 9, 1915.
79 The Morning Chronicle (Halifax), August 11, 1915, p. 3.
80 The Globe (Toronto), August 24, 1915, p. 4.
Moreover, starting on September 3, with the return of Hughes from his extended stay in Europe, the machine gun movement received a renewed breath of life.

Sir Sam always liked to claim, subsequent to Borden’s bringing it to an end on November 11, that he had had nothing to do with encouraging the machine gun movement. Rather, it had all been the work of his arch critic within the cabinet, Senator Lougheed. Yet the evidence indicates that Hughes was a strong supporter of the campaign. In August, a correspondent from the Montreal *Star*, who had accompanied the minister on a visit to the front, quoted him as declaring: “Everyone ... is interested and enthusiastic about the machine gun campaign in Canada.”981 Certainly, after he resumed his duties as minister he made strong statements of support, and under him the campaign not only continued, but regained momentum. The mixed messages that had begun to emanate from the department about whether or not the gifts would be welcome were replaced by uniformly positive ones.82

What finally killed the machine gun movement was the opposition of the prime minister. Doubtless a mix of factors convinced Borden that it had to be ended. He had returned from his recent visit to Europe unimpressed by the British war effort, considering it under-motivated and slack, and determined that Canada’s should be run better.83 The extemporized nature of the machine gun movement could hardly have seemed the most efficient method of undertaking such an important procurement programme. Also, the political optics of his government relying on money donated by private citizens to help arm Canadian forces did not look good. Earlier in the war Hughes could, with Borden’s support, solicit donations from a few wealthy Canadians for help in purchasing machine guns. Now, however, something about a massive nationwide fundraising campaign for the same purpose carried the stigma that the government was not doing its duty in supplying the necessary weapons.

Of particular concern to Borden were the claims being made in the press that the machine gun movement was diverting money away from worthy causes whose work was totally dependent upon private donations – most notably the Red Cross and the Canadian Patriotic Fund. One of the largest private charities, the Red Cross maintained a considerable network of medical and health-related services at home and overseas. Even larger than the Red Cross, however, and standing out among agencies dependent on private money, was the Canadian Patriotic Fund (CPF). With antecedents dating back to the War of 1812, the CPF’s mission was to provide monetary aid to the cash-strapped wives and mothers of soldiers serving overseas. The government had approved the reinstitution

of the fund in the first week of the war, with prominent Montreal businessman, social reformer, and Conservative member of Parliament Herbert B. Ames as its “honorary secretary” and de facto head. \(^{84}\)

As historian Desmond Morton points out, the fund was an integral component of the Canadian war effort. Separation payments given to soldiers’ families by the government and the sums they received from serving relatives’ pay all too often left these families in a state of abject penury. The CPF existed to provide further help in such circumstances. “Nothing could be more appropriate for a wartime charity than serving families deprived of a patriotic breadwinner,” writes Morton. For the government, he continues, it was certainly much preferable to the “obvious alternative,” which was “higher pay for all soldiers.” \(^{85}\) A special advantage of the CPF’s status as a charity and of its financial self-sufficiency was that it could make its awards based upon an assessment of a family’s need. Nationwide, teams of volunteers visited soldiers’ families and determined their requirements. National fundraising campaigns set targets across the country and did all they could to encourage a sense of obligation among those at home towards those serving at the front, summed up in the organization’s slogan, “Fight or Pay.”

By the end of the war the CPF had received a total of $47,153,819.35 in donations. It failed to meet its fundraising targets on only one notable occasion. During the months of June to October 1915, it dispensed $700,000 more than it took in. \(^{86}\) This shortfall is usually attributed to the needs created by Borden’s announcement, in July, of an increase in strength of the CEF from 56,144 to 158,859. Certainly by the end of the month the news that the fund was experiencing difficulties raising money had become a public issue. \(^{87}\) That the months in question were precisely the ones during which the popular movement to donate money to buy machine guns was at its height has been overlooked in previous accounts. Ames, Borden, and a number of newspapers concluded that the machine gun movement had absorbed monies which would ordinarily have gone to the CPF, thus contributing to its cash-flow problems. An urgent reconsideration of the role that donated money should play in funding specifically military initiatives emerged as a result.

The prime minister gave advance public notice of his intention to bring the machine gun movement to an end in a speech he delivered in Saint John, New Brunswick, on October 19. Here he enunciated the arguments to which he would, for the most part, adhere during the storm of protest that erupted over the following weeks. “The treasury of Canada ought properly to bear the cost of equipping and maintaining our forces in the field and that has been our policy,” he insisted. Probably demonstrating how fragile he felt the government’s position to be, however, on a couple of major points he took considerable liberty with the truth. The government had on order sufficient machine guns “to equip two full

\(^{84}\) Ibid., p. 54.
\(^{85}\) Ibid.
\(^{86}\) Ibid., p. 116.
\(^{87}\) Canadian Annual Review, 1915, p. 319.
army corps up to the highest standard of the enemy,” he declared. These weapons had been ordered “in the first twelve months of the war,” he insisted. This remark was literally true, but it evaded the fact that the order had been placed as recently as the previous July, largely in response to the pressures being exerted by the machine gun movement. In an even bolder deviation from what, judging from newspaper accounts and letters to the militia department, the Canadian public understood, Borden maintained that during his absence overseas his “colleagues had endeavoured to make it clear to the people that an ample supply of machine guns had been ordered and that these would be paid for out of the public treasury.” Such assertions would, of course, have flown in the face of what most who had donated money for machine guns believed and what had, in fact, happened: that the acting minister of militia, James Lougheed, had made a special appeal for contributions to help the government buy machine guns so Canadian troops could meet the German enemy on equal, or even superior, terms.

Such political obfuscation was, and is, not rare, but the prime minister’s statements were plainly at odds with what newspapers were reporting and what Lougheed had been assuring donors for months. Borden was fortunate that Parliament was not sitting during these months, as it almost certainly would have become a venue of attack. Still, if anyone who knew the facts of the matter had decided to own up publicly about these decidedly exaggerated claims, enormous difficulties, perhaps even a scandal, could have resulted. Doubtless Borden’s major aim was to convey the message that critical weapons of war like the machine gun should be paid for by the government through taxation, not by enthusiastic, but occasional, voluntary donations. Maintaining that the donations had been unsolicited would have excused the government of breaking such an important principle. It would also have made it easier to return the monies or to recommend to donors that they be used for other purposes. Borden does seem to have been conflicted over this issue, however, for he went on to state that the monies would “of course be devoted to the purpose for which they were made,” which meant the purchase of machine guns. However, he followed this with the statement that in “dealing with other needs which will certainly arise the Government will not fail to remember that these generous and free-will contributions have been made.” This implied that the government might, in compensation, contribute funds to agencies such as the Red Cross and the CPF, which, in Borden’s view and that of an increasing number of newspapers, had been deprived of money that had gone into machine guns. But Borden did not spell it out in detail.

Much of the press and many subscribers reacted to Borden’s Saint John announcement with shock. The Montreal Star, whose coverage had done more than any other paper to get the machine gun movement started, insisted that it and other newspapers had taken up the cause in good conscience, but “it now turns out that this was a delusion.” “Somebody has blundered,” the Star protested, in announcing that it was considering returning the monies that it had collected. In
Halifax, the *Morning Chronicle* accused the government of accepting “between one and a half and two million dollars for the purpose of purchasing machine guns which had already been ordered.” Taking up the suggestion that Borden had made in his speech, the *Chronicle* made a case for a theme that was gaining increasing attention in the press and elsewhere: that the federal government should “replenish the coffers of the Patriotic Fund,” deprived, as it was, of monies that had gone into machine guns.90

Ames was not slow in taking advantage of the opening that Borden had provided. He began contacting people whom he knew to have been considering donating towards machine guns, urging them, instead, to give their money to his own, much more deserving organization. Oddly enough for a Conservative member of Parliament, Ames’s critiques were as severe in tone as any carried by the more critical newspapers. He too emphasized that the donated money was not really going to be used to purchase extra machine guns. Rather, as he put it to the Toronto *Star* on October 28, the “government already had more machine guns on order than they can possibly need.” This meant that the donated money would simply go to pay for guns that had already been acquired “and thus save the taxpayers’ money.”91 Although such critiques came close to accusing the government of fraud, they do not seem to have jeopardized the standing of Ames or his agency with Borden, who continued to do all he could to help the CPF. Indeed, Borden began to refer even more frequently to the possibility of the federal treasury providing the CPF with a sum equal to that given for machine guns. This shows the extent to which the prime minister saw the well-being of the CPF as critical to the success of the war effort, while the machine gun movement constituted a distraction, if not a nuisance.

Borden officially announced the termination of the machine gun movement in Ottawa on November 11.92 Press reaction to this final decision was even more rancorous than it had been following the announcement made in Saint John. Toronto’s *Globe*, until then a moderate supporter of the government’s handling of the machine gun issue, termed the whole thing a “fiasco.” No doubt to Borden’s relief, however, it laid the blame entirely on Foster and Lougheed. A word from Foster at the large rally in Toronto on July 20, where the Ontario government’s contribution of half a million dollars had been announced, could have “ended the machine gun movement then and there, but no such word was spoken and the whole country took up the work of providing complementary machine guns.” For his part, Lougheed had “accepted the subscriptions sent to the Militia Department without

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90 *The Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), October 30, 1915, p. 6.
92 A copy of the announcement can be found in the Borden Papers, 31047. See “Memorandum” [unsigned but by Borden], Ottawa, November 11, 1915. Full texts can also be found in, for example, *The Ottawa Citizen*, November 12, 1915, p. 2; *The Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), November 12, p. 1; *The Montreal Daily Star*, November 12, 1915, p. 3.
suggesting that they were not wanted” and, indeed, commended “the patriotism of the subscribers.”  

Borden’s Ottawa announcement repeated most of the points he had made in Saint John. Conspicuously absent, however, was any mention that donations already received would be used to buy machine guns. Instead, he now emphasized that this cost would be borne entirely by the federal treasury. As for citizens’ fundraising committees, he expressed hope that in the future all their energies would be devoted to raising funds for charitable agencies, “rather than contributions for machine guns, which have been amply provided by the Federal Government.”  

He was, in fact, now declaring that no donated monies would be used to pay for machine guns, but he left open the question of what the government intended to do with the monies already received. It seems likely that Borden hoped the donors would agree to hand them over to the charitable causes that he had mentioned. His failure to be clear on the point resulted in further difficulties with sections of the press and some donors, however. It also left him vulnerable to the machinations of Hughes, who definitely favoured the donated monies being used to buy machine guns.  

Despite the disapproval that Borden had expressed in Saint John, Sir Sam had continued to assure those who wished to donate money for machine guns that their gifts would be welcome. To the Middlesex Patriotic Society of London, Ontario, he wrote on October 27, for example, that there “would be no broken faith in reference to machine guns at all.”  

He made no further similar assurances following the prime minister’s Ottawa announcement, but, when queried by journalists about what should be done with the donated money already received, he expressed the belief that it “should be held in trust to be expended on machine guns or otherwise as the donors might desire.”  

Not surprisingly the public was confused. As expressed by the Toronto Star: “Just what will be done with the money already subscribed and already placed to the credit of the Receiver General, nobody seems to know.” Victoria’s Daily Colonist speculated that “the contributors may be asked to let their gifts go into the Canadian Patriotic Fund” or some other benevolent agency, which, by then, was probably what most assumed would happen. The Montreal Star, however, had had enough of the government’s dithering on the issue. It pronounced that the funds it had collected on behalf of the machine gun movement would be returned to the donors. A Mrs. Charles Castle of Victoria was provoked enough to write to Borden declaring that she had “personally sent the money to kill Germans. If not to be used for this purpose, kindly order the return of the money.” 

94 Text of Borden’s Ottawa announcement, Borden Papers, 31047.  
96 See, for example, The Ottawa Citizen, November 12, 1915, p. 2; The Toronto Daily Star, November 12, 1915, p. 3.  
97 The Daily Colonist (Victoria), November 12, 1915, p. 2.  
99 Borden Papers, 31066, Mrs. Charles Castle to Sir R. Borden, n.d. [November 1915].
Borden’s difficulties played directly into the hands of Hughes. A perceptive and remarkably candid note from Willoughby Gwatkin to the prime minister’s legal advisor, Loring Christie, of November 19 amply conveys the CGS’s view of where the minister’s loyalties truly lay. “Sir Sam is enjoying the situation,” wrote Gwatkin.

He puts the blame on Senator Lougheed, quite wrongfully, and is rubbing it in. Moreover, he suspects Sir Herbert Ames of trying to grab superfluous subscriptions. He told me yesterday that it was not his intention to return or divert to other purposes money subscribed for the purpose of machine guns. But he was a little incoherent; and I am sure it would be best for Sir Robert to come to an understanding with him on the subject. 100

In fact, Borden had already ceded the ground to Hughes. The previous evening, with the prime minister having departed Ottawa to attend the funeral of Sir Charles Tupper in Halifax, Hughes made the official announcement that the government would indeed use the donations it had already received to purchase machine guns.

The minister repeated Borden’s earlier statements that no more donations would be accepted from the public for this purpose. However, he went on to make the somewhat fabricated point that 1,000 of the weapons had already been ordered on the strength of the contributions already made. These guns were due to arrive at any moment, Hughes announced, and hence the monies now in the government’s hands would be retained to pay for them. This, he emphasized, had been the prime minister’s view all along, presumably referring to Borden’s statements made in Saint John. Clearly the two men had reached a compromise on the issue, however, for Hughes ended his remarks with an announcement that reflected the views of both Borden and a growing number of newspapers that the government would consider paying a like amount of money to agencies such as the Red Cross and the Patriotic Fund as compensation for losses they might have suffered. 101

Reactions to this latest volte face on the part of the government were initially as strained as previously. The Conservative, but fiercely anti-Hughes, Toronto Telegram, which had opposed the machine gun campaign on principle from the start, deplored the “discreditable vacillation shown in the solicitation of funds for machine guns by one member of the government, their rejection by another and their final acceptance by a third.” 102 This proved to be the government’s final position on the issue, however, and by the end of the month tempers had cooled considerably.

100 Borden Papers, 31087, W. Gwatkin to L. Christie, November 19, 1915.
101 The Toronto Daily Star, November 18, 1915, p. 1; The Evening Telegram (Toronto), November 18, 1915, p. 9; The Morning Chronicle (Halifax), November 18, 1915, p. 4, and November 19, 1915, p. 6.
102 The Evening Telegram (Toronto), November 22, 1915, quoted in The Citizen (Ottawa), November 23, 1915, p. 10.
The citizens of Hamilton were at first outraged that their efforts in raising $217,000 to purchase machine guns had been wasted. As they realized that the government would now assume the task of supplying the necessary weapons, concern abated. At a meeting on November 22, the city’s fundraising committee decided to return all the money it had collected to the subscribers, as none of it had yet been forwarded to Ottawa. The committee did agree to urge subscribers to turn their money over to the Patriotic Fund, however.103 Such moves marked the end of the machine gun movement as a major issue in the nation’s politics, and apparently also among most donors.

The compromise reached between Hughes and Borden allowed the government to extract itself from the political difficulties generated by the cancellation of the machine gun movement. In this Hughes was more politically shrewd than Borden, in realizing that declaring that the money would indeed be used to buy machine guns was the best way of quelling the issue. In the end, however, this proved to be the only purpose the announcement fulfilled. The donations did not, as Hughes intended, help to buy machine guns. The only donated monies ever used to this end were the sums given by Drummond and by the Ontario government. Not a penny of the $661,273 that other donors contributed was ever spent. Investigations into the matter made by the historical section of the general staff in the 1930s revealed that the unspent donated money continued to sit in an account with the receiver general to the end of the war and beyond. In the late 1920s, officials from that department held discussions with the department of justice about returning the sums to the donors. With justice recommending against this move, however, all the monies were quietly rolled into the treasury’s consolidated fund.104 Nor has any evidence been found that the government ever transferred an equivalent sum of money to the Patriotic Fund or any other benevolent agency. All in all, it was an inglorious fate for funds that had, for the most part, been given out of a genuine desire to help Canadian troops survive and wage war on the Western Front.

At least, one might conclude, a large quantity of machine guns had been purchased, which would supply the needs of Canadian troops for years to come. But developments at the front meant that this situation was not as straightforward as it might initially appear. At the time that Lougheed placed his order it might have been still possible for authorities at the Canadian militia department to assume that the Savage Lewis gun could perform the same role as the Colt, for which it had been ordered as a replacement. However, at the front the Lewis gun was increasingly taking on the role for which it was, in reality, most suited: that of a light, infantry platoon-based weapon. The more powerful, but heavier and more awkward to move, Colts and Vickers, on the other hand, were increasingly being assigned to stationary positions behind the trenches. Here, brigaded together, they could emit a more concentrated fire, which soon evolved into the use for which these weapons became most

noted on the Western Front, the emission of barrages of indirect fire over the heads of friendly infantry, in the manner of small-scale artillery. Indeed, in October, in the British Army, these trends were awarded doctrinal approval when Vickers guns were removed from the control of infantry battalions and, formed into companies of 16 guns each, placed under the authority of the brigades. The Canadian Corps created its own brigade machine gun companies in January 1916, which was when shipments of Savage Lewis guns began arriving overseas, intended to fill a role for which they were entirely unsuited. Whether one can hold authorities at the Canadian militia department at fault for not anticipating this shift must remain a moot point, but it did mean that Canadian troops were left short of heavy machine guns, at least until sufficient numbers of British-made Vickers at last began to become available in July 1916.

Nor did Canadian troops receive an ample supply of the much-valued Lewis gun. None of the guns purchased actually made it to the front. Here Canadian militia authorities, particularly the Small Arms Committee (whose missteps would require another full paper to recount fully) can definitely be held at fault. In all, 1,812 Savage Lewis guns were shipped to Britain during the first four months of 1916. As with all such undertakings, they first had to be tested and approved by authorities from the British Army. When officers from the British Machine Gun Inspection Department examined the Savage Lewises, however, they found them not only to be shoddily manufactured, but to contain many parts that were not compatible with the British-manufactured Lewis Guns used by their own army. Insistent that these weapons be at all times interchangeable between British and Canadian forces, the War Office rejected the Savage Lewises for active service. Canadian officials were aghast and protested, but in the end conceded that they had no choice but to go along with the British ruling.

A workshop was set up in east London where a staff of 60, supervised by a skilled gunsmith, undertook the costly and laborious task of attempting to render serviceable as many of the Savage Lewises as possible. In the end they succeeded in making 800 functional enough that the Royal Navy found a use for them, while 128 were deemed suitable for training purposes. What became of the remainder is not known, but it is certain that none made it into service with Canadian troops in the trenches. In their place, the British government supplied the Canadians with British-manufactured Lewises, as a *quid pro quo* for the reconditioned Savage guns sent to the Royal Navy. However, Canadian battalions remained short of Lewis guns for some time to come. Indeed, although the arrival of the Vickers guns in July allowed Canadians to dispense with using the Colt as a heavy machine gun, they had to continue to employ a number as very

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inadequate stand-ins for the Lewis until at least November 1916. Ultimately, increasing British production meant that all Lewis guns used by Canadian troops thereafter would come from British manufacturers. Canada’s experiment in acquiring machine guns on its own could come to an end.

The widespread public and governmental anxiety in Canada about the machine gun and about the deadly toll that it took on Canadian troops in their first battles of the war has not previously received historical attention. Elucidating this phenomenon provides significant new insight into the state of mind of the public as well as into the inner workings of the government with regard to the war and war effort at this time, when serious Canadian engagement in active operations was just beginning. We see that the anxiety was sufficient to provoke the emergence of a national citizens’ movement that sought to help the government, through money that its members donated, to purchase additional supplies of the much needed “wonder” weapon. We see the emergence within the government of a similarly alarmed group, led by the interim prime minister Sir George Foster and, especially, James Lougheed, acting as minister of militia, who took upon themselves the task of acquiring as many machine guns as alarmist reports in the press and elsewhere were proclaiming to be necessary.

We see this enthusiastic duo taking on their self-designated task with great earnestness, but at the same time pursuing courses that were fraught with hazard. However laudatory the resolve of Lougheed in particular may have been, his handling of the matter suggests someone out of his depth and tending towards the same intransigence and erratic judgement that beset the much-reviled Hughes. To get what he wanted, Lougheed, like Hughes, proved willing to work at cross purposes with the views of military professionals in the militia department. The machine gun movement was clearly not needed, yet he pressed ahead with his support, despite the fact that it was increasingly causing problems for the government. It led to charges that the government was shirking its own duty to supply machine guns and making claims upon the generosity of private donors at a time when the needs of charitable organizations, such as the Red Cross and the Patriotic Fund, were growing apace.

The task of sorting out these various issues and assessing their ramifications for the totality of the Canadian War effort fell to a much-harassed Prime Minster Borden. In an instance of public (and ministerial) enthusiasm meeting governing reality, he soon decided that the machine gun movement should be ended. Indeed, Borden felt strongly enough about the issue that he was prepared to spend a fair amount of his own political capital in doing so, not least in continuing to maintain the barely credible stance that no one in the government had played any part in bringing the campaign into existence. In the end, missteps threw him into the hands of those like Sam Hughes, who saw nothing wrong with

the public helping the government buy machine guns. It was probably no accident that none of this money was ever spent, however, and the lasting outcome of the “great Canadian machine gun mania of 1915” was finally to establish the principle that the federal treasury, not a citizens’ fundraising campaign, should be responsible for acquiring weapons of war.

This was an important lesson, no doubt, but in the end the problem of both heavy and light machine gun procurement for Canadian forces in the First World War was only solved when adequate numbers of British-manufactured weapons became available. Whether it was principally due to the machine gun movement exerting pressures that caused the government to move too quickly, to the determined, but misguided, efforts of government ministers overeager to see results, to the vicissitudes of the international arms market, or to incompetence of the Canadian approving authorities, the procurement of machine guns must be added to a long list of equipment failures that plagued Canadian troops as they struggled to adapt to the brutalized conditions that typified the first of the 20th century's total wars.