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“Lessons of History: Canada and the Cold War”

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I have always believed that there are no lessons of history except one: the only lesson is truly that there are no lessons. Each era is different, each crisis different, each of the personalities involved different—and those differences make applying “lessons” to a later crisis wrong and even dangerous. Talking with enemies is not always a “Munich” where appeasement inevitably leads to war. And Nasser, Ho Chi Minh and Saddam were not Hitler reincarnated—to cite only three mis-applications of historical lessons.

But still we look back and try to draw conclusions. I will, proving, I guess, that historians don't heed their own warnings. So, what is it we can say about Canada's role in the Cold War?

First, our major aim was to contain the Soviet Union. After 1945, the USSR was on the Elbe and its control over its conquered/liberated territories in Eastern Europe was being consolidated. That was bad enough but what worried Canadians most was that the USSR was putting pressure on the states that bordered it—ranging from Iran to Norway. At the same time Communist parties in France and Italy, flourishing because they had led resistance efforts against the Nazis, were threatening to win power by election. Given that 100,000 Canadians had died in freeing Western Europe in two great wars, given that a free Western Europe was a Canadian National Interest, this was not something we could accept.

At the same time, however, Canada had its own concerns. It worried about the United States and its role in North America. Canada worried about being pushed into expensive defence operations by a fearful US, and it worried about always being the smaller, younger brother in the bilateral relationship. A multilateral relationship that brought North America into alliance with the Western European democracies was Canada's goal, one that the North Atlantic Treaty achieved. NATO, we hoped—wrongly, as it turned out—would contain/restrain the US. This too was a Canadian National Interest.

At the same time, Ottawa was concerned that the US, espy the Republican-controlled Congress, was isolationist and might not be willing to do what was necessary to keep Western Europe free. This fear lived on into 1948, and it took the conversion of Senator Arthur Vandenburg, Michigan Republican, from isolationism to global involvement to ease those fears. In other words, Canada wanted to contain the US but simultaneously keep it involved.

Canada also had economic motives behind its actions. In the postwar years, the United States dollar determined all things. The greenback was the world's hard currency, and every nation's economy hinged on finding enough. This was true for Canada, a country that had traditionally balanced its books by paying off the trade deficit with the US by using its trade surplus with other states. But in 1947, Britain, for example, could not pay for goods from us, and moreover we had loaned the UK \$1.25 billion to try to keep our markets there. Simultaneously, after years of rationing, Candians wanted trips to the US and imported

goods—from oranges to jukeboxes. The deficit with the US ballooned and the uncollectable surplus with the UK was no use. The Marshall Plan that gave Europeans dollars and trade goods helped restore the balance, and Canadian diplomats, working hard, negotiated the right for Europeans to make “off-shore” purchases from Canada with Marshall funds. That saved Canada’s bacon—and its wheat exports.

But that seemed a one-off, and NATO provided an opportunity to put matters on a longer-term basis. Norman Robertson, the High Commissioner in London and the most far-sighted of officials, wrote in April 1948 that “A situation in which our special relationship with the United Kingdom can be identified with our special relationships with other countries in western Europe and in which the United States will be providing a firm basis, both economically and probably militarily, seems to me such a providential solution for so many of our problems that we should go to great lengths....to ensure our proper place in this new partnership.” Thus Canada was an enthusiast for the new alliance—for strategic reasons, to protect its National Interests, and because it was right.

It is worth noting that it was Prime Minister Louis St Laurent who took Canada into NATO and a year later into the Korean War. His government boosted defence spending and the size of the military dramatically—towards 120,000 regulars and above 7 percent of Gross Domestic Product. St Laurent was a francophone, and he was operating in the face of history and received opinion about the lessons of history—the conscription crisis of 1917 was only thirty years in the past and the crises of 1942 and 1944 had occurred just a moment before in historical time. No one believed that Quebec would tolerate a peacetime defence alliance or participation in Korea. Certainly, the opinion polls showed little support there for his defence actions after 1949, but St Laurent proceeded nonetheless. He went into his home province and spoke of Canadian National Interests and of the threat posed by Communist expansionism. And he paid no political price for his actions, winning the 1949, 1953, and 1957 elections in Quebec by huge majorities. St Laurent was a leader, a prime minister who understood where Canada’s interests lay, and he should rank high among our prime ministers.

He usually doesn’t, however, because the costs of defence began to grate on those Cdns who wanted more social programmes. Others worried about the US and its increasing influence in Canada in the 1950s—its investments, its DEW line, its policies in the world—and believed that the Liberals were continentalist. Hadn’t L.B. Pearson, St Laurent’s foreign minister, sided with the US against the UK during the 1956 Suez Crisis—and won the Nobel Peace Prize for it? Anti-Americanism, always endemic in the body politic, propelled John Diefenbaker into power, and although Diefenbaker was a Cold Warrior who believed in NATO and the necessity to confront the USSR, he feared the US more.

The Chief had to face serious defence decisions and bungled most of them. He cancelled the Arrow which was right, but for which he suffered then and still; he took Bomarc missiles which were effective only with nuclear warheads (and nuclear Honest John missiles and nuclear-armed CF-104s in NATO) which were needed. But it was certainly wrong to balk at accepting the Bomarc warheads when the two installations were ready for action. And in the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962, acting out of pique at President John F. Kennedy and in response to growing anti-nuclear sentiment, he refused to put the military on alert during the most dangerous crisis of the Cold War. His Defence minister and his navy commanders acted on their own to go to alert status—but that did not help Diefenbaker with the

Americans who wanted him out of power and got their way when Diefenbaker lost a vote of confidence in Parliament.

In retrospect, we can see that the Diefenbaker regime marked the beginning of the end of Canadians' enthusiastic acceptance of their role in the Cold War. Never again would defence spending reach as great a share of the budget as in the mid-1950s. Never again would there be anything but reluctance in dealing with the US or NATO.

The new prime minister in 1963, Lester Pearson, accepted the Bomarc warheads, and everyone expected continental harmony to reign anew. But soon President Kennedy was dead, Lyndon Johnson was in office, and the Vietnam War began getting messier. Some of Pearson's ministers were every bit as anti-nuclear and anti-American as Diefenbaker, the Finance minister Walter Gordon in particular. Gordon wanted to cut the flow of American investment into Canada, but failed in his efforts when Canadian businessmen and the US government protested vigorously. Then he turned to the war. Pearson in fact had called on the US to halt the bombing of North Vietnam in a speech in Philadelphia in March 1965, a futile gesture that earned him Johnson's contempt. "Here are the loyal Germans, always with us when it matters," LBJ told a gathering of diplomats in Washington. "And then there are the Canadians."

In the decade after Pearson's Nobel Prize, as the Cold War continued and as the United States became ever more embroiled in Vietnam, the Canadian public began to believe as an article of faith that peacekeeping was their *métier*. We were the world's master peacekeepers, the indispensable United Nations player absolutely necessary for each and every mission, not least Cyprus in 1964. The Americans, always bumptious and too aggressive, fought wars, but Canadians, nature's neutral middlemen, kept the peace. This became a key Canadian value, a powerful idea that successive governments never challenged. War was becoming foreign to Canadian thinking, and peacekeeping was the natural role to play. For the public, peacekeeping was do-goodism writ large, proof that Canada really was a moral superpower loved by all. It was also a military role that differentiated Canada from the Americans' focus on nuclear deterrence. And if some worried that Canadians had begun not to pull their military weight in the Cold War, the easy answer was that the nation's peacekeeping was useful, and it did not require huge armies, large fleets, and vast air forces. Governments liked that low cost factor. Only a stockpile of blue berets and a few blue helmets were needed to do good and to make a contribution, or so it seemed. Being the globe's pre-eminent peacekeepers helped Canadian nationalism, peaking in a frenzy in the centennial year of 1967, and ironically the year that President Nasser tossed UN peacekeepers out of Egypt, much to Canadian chagrin, just prior to the Six Day War.

This nationalism would reach another peak when the charismatic, stylish 49-year-old bachelor Pierre Trudeau succeeded Pearson in the spring of 1968. Trudeau was sceptical of nationalism in all its forms. He was a new man, the fluently bilingual quintessential Canadian, or so many thought in 1968. What Trudeau was, in fact, was typically francophone in his attitude to the military, to NATO, and to the Cold War. He was no isolationist, but he was not one to believe in the military or one to want to take on the difficult global tasks that kept the peace. He became the key figure in weakening the country's support for the Cold War.

Trudeau was a trickster, always looking to shock. As a young civil servant in the Privy Council Office, he opposed Canada's joining in the Korean War or sending troops to Europe. Then after leaving the public service, he had visited Moscow to attend an economics conference in 1952, telling everyone he was a Communist, something noted by US Embassy officials. He also, at age 41, had tried to paddle a canoe from Florida to Cuba in 1960. Just good fun, his official biographer said, as if the fellow-travelling Trudeau had been unaware of US hostility to the new Castro regime. Both of those actions suggested he knew little of the US, and perhaps that he was far from convinced that the USSR was a major threat to peace. He scorned Canada's "helpful fixer" approach to the world, and he claimed to want to shape Canadian policy from National Interests.

In fact, what Trudeau wanted was an end to Canada's nuclear role, to get Canadian troops out of Europe, and to focus the Canadian public and policymakers on domestic concerns such as Quebec. His efforts at reducing the NATO role came close to tearing his Cabinet apart in 1969. He and his ministers had examined all the options--among them, astonishingly and flying square in the face of geography and National Interests, joining the non-aligned group of nations. Finally, the government announced a re-ordering of defence priorities, with NATO ranked third behind the protection of national sovereignty, North American defence, and just ahead of peacekeeping. Canada subsequently cut in half its NATO forces in Europe and announced a phase-out of nuclear weapons. That was enough to gut the air force and to turn the brigade group, well capable of punching above its weight and a key part of the NATO line, into a weak reserve unit. A man who had little regard for the military in general, Trudeau also cut the Canadian Forces' strength by 20 percent to 80,000 and froze the defence budget.

Trudeau epitomized the growing feeling in Canada that the Cold War had lasted too long and had distorted priorities. For two decades, Trudeau said, "Canada's foreign policy was largely its policy in NATO, through NATO." That was no longer good enough. His government recognized China at last in 1970 and signed a Protocol on Consultations with Moscow, an agreement that Washington feared was a sign that Canada was sliding toward neutrality, a view shared by some in his cabinet which extraordinarily had not been consulted about the Protocol. As Trudeau put it in Moscow, "Canada has increasingly found it important to diversify its channels of communication because of the overpowering presence of the United States and that is reflected in a growing consciousness amongst Canadians of the danger to our national identity from a cultural, economic and perhaps even from a military point of view." In Moscow, such rhetoric sounded different than it might have in Moosonee, but nationalists, blinded by their anti-Americanism, loved it. So did the Russians.

Trudeau visited Havana in 1973 and shouted "Viva Castro" to end one speech, gratifying one despot. He toured Beijing in 1973 and expounded on the wonderful system Mao had given his people, pleasing another. It was little wonder that some in Washington wondered about Trudeau. Then in 1982 in speech at Notre Dame University, Trudeau suggested that Canada was edging toward equidistance between the two superpowers, an astonishing comment from the leader of a nation almost wholly dependent for its defence and prosperity on the United States. That was a mistake, Allan Gotlieb, the Ambassador to Washington who accompanied Trudeau to South Bend, wrote in his diary: "The Americans...don't like the notion that they and the Soviets are equally responsible for world tensions" and, Gotlieb

added, it offends the policymakers and the elites, “people we can’t allow ourselves to alienate.”

The period of détente and the cooling of hostility between the West and the Communist world that Trudeau perhaps had some small part in fostering came to its end with the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan, the West’s subsequent boycott of the Moscow Olympics in 1980, and the Soviets shooting down of a Korean airliner in 1983. Trudeau’s response, his time in power coming to a close, was to launch a quixotic peace mission that saw him travel the globe urging the nuclear weapons powers to reduce their arsenals. The Reagan administration distrusted Trudeau and his efforts, and one official at the embassy in Washington said the Americans “hated” Trudeau’s rhetoric that Canada was a good peacemaker, morally equidistant from the “naughty boys” with nuclear weapons. “A leftist high on pot,” one senior Administration official said undiplomatically after Trudeau’s visit to Washington on his quest. Gotlieb noted in his diary that Trudeau “is playing with other people’s marbles.”

Nonetheless, Trudeau’s pitch to Reagan was not ineffective. “You are a man of peace,” he told the President in the Oval Office, “but your peace signals are not getting through.” Yes, Reagan said, “The press has distorted my image...” There were some signs that presidential rhetoric cooled after Trudeau’s visit, though no American officials believed Trudeau had anything to do with this. Overall, certainly, the peace mission had little effect. When asked about his impact some years later, however, Trudeau said with a characteristic shrug “Well, there was no war.” That at least was so.

The Cold War was not yet finished, however, but Trudeau was. He departed in 1984, the Canadian public cheering him to the echo for his still-born peace mission. There was not much reason to cheer, either for the short-term results or the long term effects Trudeau had had. Arguably, his prime ministership had almost put paid to Canada’s American alliance. His quasi-neutralist attitudes had led the US to all but write off Canada. The formal alliance ties remained intact and the efforts by the Canadian Forces, its equipment increasingly obsolescent, to increase interoperability with their American counterparts did not cease. But the sense that there had been a community of interests, that both nations shared a similar sense of the world and its dangers, was gone. To the US, to Britain, and to NATO, Trudeau’s Canada had seemed to be heading towards neutralism.

Matters could still change, however. Soon in charge was Brian Mulroney, smooth, charming, unabashedly pro-American, and desirous of “good relations, super relations” with Washington. Mulroney negotiated a Free Trade Agreement with the US and won an election on the issue in 1988. He had also promised to restore the Canadian Forces, and there were pledges aplenty made to the public and to the Reagan Administration. But huge budget deficits constrained government actions, and there were initially cuts instead of increases for the military. Soon, however, the Berlin Wall came down and the long Cold War drew to its end. So too did Canada’s commitment to the defence of Western Europe. Without consulting their allies, the Conservatives in 1992 announced a total withdrawal of the Canadian Forces from Europe, a process completed in July 1993. Canada was now committed but scarcely present, insofar as NATO was concerned.

Three streams of opinion shaped Canada’s Cold War: internationalism, nationalism, and continentalism. The diplomats and some of the politicians who took Canada into the

Western alliance were internationalists who believed this was the way to foster a sane nationalism, and they believed they could bring French Canada with them. St Laurent showed they were right. They were aware, however, that Canada's economic prosperity and its defence ultimately depended on the United States, and this drove Canada southward. So too did Canadian business' desire for rich, easy-to-serve markets and a shared North American view of the world. All these players were acting on their understanding of global and Canadian history since 1914.

Canadian nationalism, exemplified by John Diefenbaker and especially Pierre Trudeau, however, looked on the costs of defence with a jaundiced eye and resented the United States for the way it sometimes bullied Canada. Diefenbaker fought with President Kennedy and fell. Trudeau wanted a foreign policy that served National Interests and peace, but he never appeared to understand the basic National Interest that Canada was attached physically, economically, and militarily to the US and could not act as if it were an island if it hoped to survive and prosper.

All Canadian leaders from Louis St Laurent on focused on peacekeeping which sometimes served the interests of the Western alliance. But peacekeeping, because it alone was popular with the public and came to form a key component of Canadian nationalism, ultimately put paid to the nation's psychological participation in the Cold War, long before its end in Soviet collapse. Its adoption as part of the Canadian psyche led to the undoing of the Canadian Forces.

Inevitably, perhaps, it was continentalism that achieved dominance among the competing ideologies. By the end of the Cold War, free trade with the United States was in place, a huge and ever-increasing proportion of Canadian trade went south, and US corporations operated everywhere in Canada. That anti-Americanism was the key component of nationalism could not hide the reality of almost complete integration. Nor could internationalism, strong among youth and NGOs, dispel the fact that Canada for the last quarter-century of the Cold War received scant regard from its friends abroad and none from its enemies. Canadians had forgotten that reliability in foreign policy and the ability to deploy force when necessary both mattered. They had even forgotten that the ability to defend their own people and territory is the essential National Interest for every nation-state. National Interests had always mattered in the past, and they still do. The lessons of history, if there are any, were not learned by Canadians.