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Pearson and the myth of neutrality

How Canada's crucial role in the Suez Crisis had little to do with `peacemaking'

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The pragmatist at work: Pearson (sitting) confers with Canadian diplomat John Holmes (far left), New Zealand Permanent Representative Sir Leslie Munro (leaning forward) and Hans Engen, Permanent Representative of Norway, during the Suez Crisis in November 1956.

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When Prime Minister Stephen Harper supported Israel's invasion of Lebanon, some Canadians worried that Ottawa had sacrificed the country's historic role as a "neutral go-between."

But even at the very birth of peacekeeping, during the heat of the Suez Crisis 50 years ago this month, Canada was not just an objective, honest broker. Even our Nobel Prize-winning foreign minister, Lester Pearson, never acted like an impartial boy scout.

To recap: In July 1956, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal. Britain reacted as though its throat was about to be slit. For that generation of Britons, the Suez Canal was still the lifeline of Empire. Prime Minister Anthony Eden loathed Nasser as another Mussolini.

Backed by France, he ordered U.K. forces into the region to give Cairo a good bashing. But Eden needed an excuse to actually invade, so British and French officials sat down with their Israeli counterparts and cooked one up. Worried by the recent arms acquisitions in Egypt and harassed by cross-border raids, and also seeking to build up credit with the Great Powers, Israel agreed to act as an aggressor and invade Egypt. This would give Eden his precious pretext to land U.K.-French troops as "peacekeepers," separate the Israelis and Egyptian armies, and thereby retake the canal.

U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower was horrified by the lengthy British military build-up and urged Eden to avoid force. But Eden refused to back down. The Suez Crisis was arguably the worst break in U.S.-U.K. relations in the 20th century.

Canadians might like to imagine that Pearson simply stood back, politely waiting for the right moment to offer the idea of peacekeepers. But the diplomatic trail of telegrams, and Pearson's own memoirs, reveal clearly that the peacemaker was never neutral.

As war clouds darkened the skies from Cairo to London to Washington, Pearson watched with growing alarm.

"I could see trouble developing," he told the CBC 14 years later, in an interview that was never aired. "I wasn't thinking of trouble in terms of a war in Palestine. I was thinking of trouble in terms of a grave difference of opinion between London and Washington. That always gives a Canadian nightmares, of course."

The cable traffic between Ottawa and its outposts highlight Pearson's focus. In one telegram, he noted, "(U.S. Secretary of State John Foster) Dulles telephoned me from Washington in a state of emotion and depression greater than anything I have seen before in him. He said that for some days they had been cut off from all sources of information in London."

Canada's ambassador to the U.S., Arnold Heeney, confirmed the gloomy outlook in another cable: "It is our impression that the failure of the U.K. and French governments to consult or even to inform the U.S.A. Government in advance of their proposed course of action has been as severe a shock to the U.S.A. Government, from the President down to the most junior State Department officials, as the nature and circumstances of the Franco-British action itself. There is no doubt whatever that this is regarded here as a very serious blow to the Western alliance and to the cohesion of the free world."

That nightmarish discord between Canada's two closest allies framed the entire crisis for Pearson.

He didn't propose the first United Nations peacekeeping force to be nice or fair or impartial. The enlightened Cold Warrior unleashed his formidable diplomatic skills for one over-riding objective: to save the special relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom.

Pearson's objective might surprise many Canadians who see him almost as a pacifist. They don't realize how tough-minded he was in the international arena. His colleague, diplomat John Holmes, described him as possessing a ruthless pragmatism.

Nowhere is that more evident than in the remarkable cable Pearson sent two days after the canal's nationalization to the Canadian High Commissioner in London, Norman Robertson. By this point, Eden had made a public statement hinting at the use of force.

"I am deeply concerned at the implications of some parts of Eden's message; especially as I doubt very much whether he will receive strong support from Washington in the firm line which he proposes to follow. A talk which I have just had with the United States Ambassador here strengthens these doubts. Surely the U.K. Government will not do anything which would commit them to strong action against Egypt until they know that the U.S. will back them."

The last line is as illuminating as it is chilling. Pearson's complaint with the British does not invoke any kind of morality or international law. The professional diplomat is bewildered that London has not lined up its political marbles before embarking on a major foreign policy play. His anguish that London was going ahead without U.S. support leads one to conclude that, had Eden got U.S. backing for an invasion, Pearson quite possibly, as a good ally, would have supported the U.K.

"Pearson wasn't naïve," says Denis Stairs, professor emeritus in political science at Dalhousie University. "The conduct of foreign policy for him was a practical art. He understood that power is a fairly fundamental currency of international politics. His test, I think it's fair to say, in the conduct of foreign policy was not whether it's right in principle but whether it's effective."

And Pearson was appalled by how ineffective the British seemed throughout the crisis. They clearly hadn't thought through the long-term implications of using force.

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Talking to the CBC in the same unaired interview, Pearson observed that, to make their invasion work, the British would have to take over more than just the canal zone. They would have to march into Cairo and, in effect, occupy all of Egypt.

"What was that going to do with their prestige and their position in the Arab world? And the Muslim world — the reaction of which had been immediate — and the Commonwealth Muslim world and Moscow? ... My reaction and that of my officials and certainly the reaction of the Prime Minister [Louis St. Laurent] was... we must do something at the United Nations to make it possible for the British and the French to withdraw from this ill-starred adventure."

Pearson's initial stab at peacemaking was too desperate to work. He couldn't stop the British and French from invading Egypt. Could he instead perform a diplomatic sleight of hand? His first idea was to simply

declare the invading British and French armies to be UN troops — to turn the invaders into protectors. Pearson knew this was a flimsy straw but he was still willing to grasp at it. He got the approval of cabinet and St. Laurent, and floated the idea in Washington.

Washington flat out rejected the proposal. Without superpower backing, Pearson knew he couldn't move another inch in this direction. He also became more aware of the outrage in the UN General Assembly. Only then did he turn his mind to creating a truly credible United Nations peacekeeping force.

Pearson had no illusions about what he was doing. Determined to save the British from themselves, he was crafting an exit route for their armies under UN cover. Senior British officials recognized what he was doing for them. A U.K. Foreign Office deputy minister wrote a memo stating, "Britain should urgently extract herself from her untenable position by grasping the lifeline offered by Lester Pearson."

Working with little sleep over a few days in November, Pearson persuaded the majority of the world community to accept his proposal. He was brilliant during those frantic days in late October and early November. And he was arguably the only diplomat at the UN with the necessary experience, connections, national standing, and ingenuity to make an old idea into a new reality. Against incredible odds, he pulled off a diplomatic miracle.

Still, the world may have agreed to create its first peacekeeping force, but the peacemaker hadn't actually made the peace. Britain and France were going to land their troops regardless.

As a middle power, Pearson could only propose, not enforce. Ultimately, the U.K. called off the war because Washington used economic blackmail to threaten the British economy. The U.K. government was willing to endure worldwide condemnation but not the destruction of their currency. Faced with financial ruin, London suddenly backed down. Only then could the real peacekeepers move into action.

Looking back, one might think that Pearson's remarkable diplomacy was hailed in his home and native land but, in fact, his actions infuriated some of his fellow citizens. Just like their government, Canadians were never neutral. A Gallup poll showed the populace was evenly split: Pearson was either a hero for salvaging peace from war or a traitor to the Mother Country.

The Conservative opposition mauled Pearson in the House of Commons. One MP declared that Pearson had "weakly followed the unrealistic policies of the United Nations" and had "placed Canada in the humiliating position of accepting dictation from President Nasser."

Future foreign minister Howard Green charged: "It is time Canada had a government which will not knife Canada's best friends in the back." He railed that Canada did not have the backbone to support Britain because "they were so busy currying favour with the United States."

A *Calgary Herald* editorial summed up Pearson's actions as "a face saver for the Soviet puppet dictator in Egypt... a rank disservice in the cause of peace."

The anger at Pearson and his Liberal colleagues lingered into the following year, when St. Laurent's government was thrown out of office. It was by no means the key issue in the election, but Pearson's apparent failure to fully support the U.K. cost him politically. During one Cabinet meeting at which Pearson raised the idea of peacekeeping, a senior minister worried it would cost the party 40 seats in Ontario.

In October of the following year, as he languished on the Opposition benches, Pearson received incredible news: He had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Canadians were justifiably proud of their former foreign minister. All the divisions and fury over his diplomacy faded into history. And, as Canada began to play a dominant role in so many peacekeeping missions, Canadians began to see themselves in a new light.

"Because Pearson won the Nobel Peace Prize, every Canadian came to believe that all we did was peacekeep," says author and historian Jack Granatstein. "`We don't fight wars. The Americans fight wars. We keep the peace. We're the world's pre-eminent middlemen. We're almost neutral.' Well, of course, this was nonsense."

As a historian, Granatstein remembers what most Canadians forget: "We were in both the First World War and the Second World War. We fought in Korea. We belonged to NATO from 1949, and we're really one of the three founding nations that created the alliance. We've participated in virtually every conflict of the 20th century that the West has been involved in. We don't do just peacekeeping."

But now it seems peacekeeping is how the majority of Canadians want to see our role in the world. We've even built a stunning peacekeeping memorial that rightly honours the dangerous sacrifices made by our blue-helmeted troops.

But the memorial in Ottawa casts a blinding haze over our history. This image of remote and benign impartiality has little to do with the reality of our foreign policy. Though cast in stone, these figures are really something of a mirage. Lester Pearson, the World War I veteran and architect of NATO, never believed the myth. Neither should we.

Antony Anderson is a Toronto filmmaker. He is producing a documentary with the Dominion Institute about Lester B. Pearson's role in the Suez Crisis.