

THE DEFENSE PROBLEM AND CANADIAN CONFEDERATION*

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Both Canada and the United States of America, people —politicians and others— have long been fond of talking and Writing about the “three thousand miles of undefended border” that separate the two countries. Between the two World Wars, Canadian representatives at Geneva used to bore the League of Nations by preaching eternally on this theme and holding the Canadian-American example up as one suitable for emulation by the peoples of Europe.

The undefended, border actually exists today, but —contrary to a widespread opinion— it did not always exist. Even if we take no account of the colonial wars of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Britain and the American republic fought two, wars against each other along this border, in 1775-83 and 1812-14. And the peace that was made in 1814 did not end the danger of war or the preparations for it. Even the famous “Rush-Bagot Agreement” of 1817 did not demilitarize the border as is often said. It merely provided for dismantling the existing naval squadrons on the Great Lakes and limiting the naval forces maintained there to very small dimensions. Nothing was said about border fortifications, and in fact forts went on being built on both sides of the border until after the Treaty of Washington of 1871, which settled the nasty Anglo-American disputes resulting from the Civil War in the United States. Only after that date is it possible to speak with any conviction about an unfortified frontier between Canada and the United States.

The decade that began with the outbreak of the American Civil War in 1861 was one of the most dangerous periods in the long history of Anglo-American relations; it was, indeed, ten years of constant crisis. And in one sense the Dominion of Canada —the nation created in 1867 by confederat-

* Publicado en la *Revista de Historia de América*, números 65-66, año 1968.

ing the British colonies of Canada (the modern Quebec and Ontario), Nova Scotia and New Brunswick— was a by-product of this Anglo-American crisis; though, of course, other forces were working to create it besides the imminent danger of war between Britain and the United States,

Various people at different times had suggested that the British North American colonies should be united, but the idea had never seemed to represent practical politics; and when the war in the United States broke out in 1861 they were still separate entities, with separate governments, separate (and inefficient) militia systems, and—in spite of much talk that had been going on for a generation— no railway connecting Halifax and Quebec. The dangers of this situation were underlined as early as November 1861, when a United States cruiser stopped the British steamer *Trent* and took off her by force two diplomatic agents of the Southern Confederacy. This incident brought the two countries closer to war than they have ever been since 1814. A reinforcement of some 11,000 British troops was hastily ordered to the colonies. The winter ice closed the St. Lawrence River before they could reach Canada; and nearly 7,000 men had to be sent overland to Quebec in sleighs. The immediate crisis blew over, but it left much bitterness behind it.

The episode left the British government in a state of alarm concerning its military responsibilities in North America; and the alarm was increased in 1862 when the legislature of the Province of Canada refused to pass a bill intended to create a stronger militia force to cooperate with the British troops. The fact is that, though Canadians had shown themselves ready to fight in the 1861 crisis, they were not yet sufficiently alarmed to make the preparations which were necessary if they were to fight effectively. In particular, they were unwilling to face the fact that a force adequate to defend the country against the United States could not be provided without conscription. During the next few years the Canadian people became much more conscious of the danger confronting them; but they never reached the point where they were prepared to accept conscription in time of peace.

The summer of 1863 brought the turning-point of the war in the United States—the Southern defeats at Gettysburg and Vicksburg. It was pretty clear now that the North was going to win; clear, too, that the Northern States had become the greatest military power in the world, and that Northern feeling was becoming more and more violently anti-British. When the war was over, would the great Union armies be turned against Canada? In Britain and in British North America apprehension grew. By June of 1864 speakers in the Parliament at Westminster were talking of impending disaster; reports from military experts had indicated the extreme difficulty of

defending Canada; and Canadian politicians, with both the American guns and the blue-ruin talk from London sounding in their ears, were nerving themselves for a great new departure. The experiment, attempted since 1841, of running the French-speaking community of Lower Canada and the English-speaking community of Upper Canada in double harness, had broken down in total political deadlock. Now bitter political enemies —George Brown and John A. Macdonald— patriotically sank their differences and joined in a coalition government devoted to the policy of bringing the scattered colonies of British North America together in one great federal union under the Crown. It can hardly be doubted that the danger from the United States played a considerable part in bringing about this result.

In September of 1864 a delegation of English-Canadian and French-Canadian statesmen descended upon Charlottetown in Prince Edward Island, where representatives of the Maritime colonies (Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island) had met to discuss a more limited union of those three communities. The Canadians prevailed upon the Maritimers to join them in the larger and in October delegates from all the eastern British North American colonies met at Quebec to draft, in effect, a federal constitution. By this time the American situation had grown still more threatening. The Southern Confederacy was almost in its death-throes; and one of its last desperate expedients was to try to use Canada as a base of operations against the North. While the Quebec Conference was actually sitting, a group of Confederates from Canada raided the American town of St. Albans in Vermont. The Northern reaction, not surprisingly, was a mixture of panic fear and loud menaces directed against British North America. The last weeks of 1864, when Sherman's victorious Union army was marching through Georgia, were a grim period in Canadian history. Speeches made at Quebec, at the conference and the subsequent session of the Canadian legislature reflect the colonial politicians' recognition of the seriousness of the situation. It is also reflected in novel measures taken by the provincial government of Canada: the organization of an efficient force of detective police to watch the foreign agents who were at work in Canada, and the embodiment of 2000 of the colony's volunteer militia to help keep order on the frontier.

In spite of the legislature's adverse action in 1862, the Canadian militia had grown and had been steadily improved. The volunteer force, only some 5,000 strong in 1861, was up to about 22,000 three years later, and the province's annual expenditure on defense had risen to roughly \$500,000. There had been parallel developments in the Maritime Provinces. But it was clear that the main burden of British North American defense still

rested on Great Britain—in spite of the facts that the colonies had enjoyed very wide self-government for over fifteen years, that Britain had been trying for most of that time to reduce her military responsibilities in North America, and that important elements in British society and political circles at this period would have welcomed total separation from the colonies in North America and elsewhere.

Early in 1865 the cause of Confederation suffered a serious check. The voters of New Brunswick defeated in a general election their own government and the policy of union which it supported. At the same time the government in London was hanging back on making joint arrangements for British North American defense, and both in the House of Commons and the House of Lords speeches continued to be made concerning the impossibility of defending the colonies against the United States. And in the United States itself the Confederacy was collapsing in final defeat. In these discouraging circumstances the coalition government of the province of Canada refused to lose heart. It sent off to London its four leading ministers to seek more active British support for Confederation and for the colonies.

In England the Canadians grimly said that they felt “obliged to urge such measures as if war were immediate and certain”, and they talked in terms of spending enormous sums of money on defense. Even so, no detailed military agreement was achieved with the British government. But Canada and Britain exchanged formal reciprocal assurances: the colony declared itself ready to use every dollar and every man to maintain the connection with the mother country, while the metropolis acknowledged the obligation to defend “every portion of the Empire with all the resources at its command”. What is more, the British government, moved it is clear by the military advantages of the scheme, undertook to use all its powerful influence to prevail upon the Maritime Provinces to accept Confederation. In June 1865 the Colonial Secretary in London wrote to the governors of those provinces:

Looking to the determination which this country has ever exhibited to regard the defense of the Colonies as a matter of Imperial concern, the Colonies must recognize a right and even acknowledge an obligation incumbent upon the Home Government to urge with earnestness and just authority the measures which they consider to be most expedient on the part of the Colonies with a view to their own defence. Nor can it be doubtful that the Provinces of British North America are incapable, when separated and divided from each other, of making those just and sufficient preparations for national defence, which would be easily undertaken by a Province uniting in itself all the population and all the resources of the whole.

The end of the American Civil War in April 1865 was not followed by an attack upon Canada. On the contrary, the enormous Union armies were rapidly disbanded. The danger of war with the United States had not vanished, but it had clearly receded. Unfortunately, however, it was immediately replaced by another menace, much less serious but much more immediate. Militant Irishmen in the United States, organized in a society called the Fenian Brotherhood, conceived the idea of striking at Great Britain through Canada. Two factors made this movement formidable. First, many of the Fenians had fought in the Civil War and were experienced soldiers. Secondly, the United States government, conscious of the importance of the Irish vote and hostile to Britain on account of real or supposed British acts of sympathy with the South during the war, was prepared to tolerate the organization within very broad limits, even choosing to look the other way while it made open preparations for invading Canada. Few episodes have so infuriated Canadians against their neighbors. A leading Canadian politician, Thomas D'Arcy McGee, himself an Irishman, said in September 1866, "They keep a bulldog, and they like to show him and make him snarl, as much as to say 'how we could tear you to pieces, if we only let this ugly customer loose at you'".

Two Fenian enterprises of 1866 had an important influence on events in Canada. In April a Fenian raid was threatened against Campobello Island, a border community in New Brunswick. It came to very little, but it forced the British and colonial authorities to make large defensive preparations and it caused great excitement in the province. What is most to the point, it clearly helped the party favouring Confederation to win the provincial general election which took place shortly afterwards, and which reversed the result of 1865. These Irish-American enemies of British America had unwittingly done the colonies a great service.

There was a more serious if not a more important incident in June. A Fenian force several hundred strong, under a competent commander, crossed the Niagara River, fought a fierce little battle with a detached column of Canadian volunteers (who came off second-best) and escaped to United States jurisdiction before larger Anglo-Canadian forces could bring them to action. Simultaneously, there were threats against other parts of the border. The result was an Outburst of patriotic (and anti-American) excitement and emotion in Canada. A further result was an immediate increase in the size of the Canadian volunteer force and the appropriations made by the provincial parliament to support it.

A still further one was the reluctant dispatch (at the urgent request of the Governor General) of a considerable reinforcement of regular troops from

England. This, it turned out, was the last such reinforcement, The Gladstone government which took office in Britain in 1868 was determined to get the British troops out of the interior of North America and transfer all defensive responsibilities there to the new Dominion of Canada, It persisted steadily with this policy, though it did allow a British force to take part in the expedition that established Canadian authority in the western province of Manitoba after its transfer from the Hudson's Bay Company in 1870. The Gladstonians finally achieved their goal with the evacuation of the fortress of Quebec in November 1871.

This policy of retreat was carried out in spite of Canadian protests, continued tension with the United States and continued Fenian threats. The events of 1866 were the high point of the Fenian troubles, but not the end of them. They went on for five years more. During this period Canadians were repeatedly thrown into what a contemporary called "fever fits of apprehension", and there were two actual raids, in 1870 and 1871.

All the evidence indicates that it was pure accident that the withdrawal of the British troops coincided with the settlement of the Anglo-American differences arising out of the Civil 'War (notably the question of the depredations of the British-built Confederate cruiser *Allabama*) by the Treaty of Washington of 1871. The British government was resolved to bring the troops home, and would have insisted on doing so in spite of any Anglo-American crisis short of actual war. But it was Canada's great good fortune that the evacuation did in fact coincide with the settlement and with a fundamental improvement in relations between the British Empire and the United States. As we have already indicated, the Washington treaty is the great "watershed" in Anglo-American affairs and the real beginning of the "unfortified frontier" between Canada and the United States.

The country the British retreated from in 1871 was somewhat better able to stand on its own feet than the colonies of 1864. The British North America Act of 1867 had created a new nation, if a small one. It had been extended from ocean to ocean by the acquisition of Manitoba and the Northwest Territories in 1870 and the accession of British Columbia in 1871 (Prince Edward Island finally joined in 1873). The political bonds of union were being strengthened by improved communications (the Inter-colonial Railway was being built to connect Halifax and Quebec, and British Columbia had been promised a transcontinental railway which would come into existence in due time). And the Dominion of Canada had acquired at least a rudimentary military system of its own.

These were the fruits of the atmosphere of crisis in which the Dominion of Canada came into existence in 1867, and in which it lived its first years.

It was dominated by fear and suspicion of the United States, by anxiety and uncertainty concerning the policy of the mother country, by alarms and bloodshed on the border, and by the stir of constant military preparation. These conditions produce in Canada a certain grim sense of isolation. They did their part to produce the political union of the provinces; but they also helped to produce the national spirit that gave a large degree of human reality —reality in the hearts of men— to the new territorial organization of British North America.

