

Canada and the Korean War

Fifty Years On

Denis Stairs

In September 1998, the Canadian War Museum initiated a visiting speaker series to make available to the general public the latest research, debate and opinion on Canadian and international military history. Like the Museum's highly popular film series, the talks were usually held on week nights and carried no admission fee.

They have proven highly successful, both with Museum visitors and invited speakers. The latter have included eminent Canadian historians like Terry Copp, David Bercuson and Bill McAndrew, and international scholars like John Keegan, Paul Gough, and Christopher Pugsley. In the autumn of 2000, the Museum will welcome world-renowned First World War scholar Jay Winter and Pulitzer Prize winner James McPherson.

The Museum staged one of these events to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War. In addition to hosting several hundred Korean War veterans



during the anniversary weekend of June 24-25, updating its Korean War permanent gallery, and mounting a travelling exhibit of contemporary war photographs, the Museum invited Dalhousie University professor Denis Stairs to comment on Canada's diplomatic role in the crisis from the perspective of 50 years. This, in effect,

*amounted to a reconsideration of the arguments first presented in Professor Stairs' seminal work, *The Diplomacy of Constraint*, which, twenty-five years after its publication, remains the standard work in the field. Speaking on Sunday, 25 June 2000, fifty years to the day after North Korean forces first crossed the 38th parallel to invade the American-supported Republic of Korea in the south, the text of his address follows. Like the monograph on which it comments, the article constitutes a critical component of Canada's Korean War literature, a tour de force by one of Canada's most gifted scholars.*

On this very day 50 years, five hours and four minutes ago, Lester B. Pearson's personal secretary, Mary Macdonald, tuned her radio to the CBC. It was 2:00 pm — time to settle back in her cottage on Lac Gauvreau to listen, as was her custom, to the weekly news round-up, *Capital Report*. The announcer's lead was more dramatic than usual. Fighting, he said, had broken out on the Korean peninsula. The United Nations Security Council was at that very moment convening in emergency session to consider how to respond. Canada's acting permanent representative to the UN, John W. Holmes, had been despatched to observe its proceedings, even though Canada was not then one of the Council's members.

At this point the fighting in Korea had actually been underway for nearly 24 hours. But in the Ottawa of 1950 reactions came at a more leisurely pace than they do now. And on weekends, they came at a snail's pace. In their habitats of rest and recreation, even the most substantial of the notables of government lacked telephones. Mary Macdonald, attuned to this as to so much else, surmised that the Acting Under-Secretary, Escott Reid, might not have heard the news. Nor Mr. Pearson, either. Since Reid had a farm nearby on Lac Gauvreau, too, she decided to pop over to tell him the tale. As it happened, he was out rowing on the water with his son, who was celebrating his birthday. So she took possession of another boat and pursued the two

of them on this high sea of the Gatineau Hills — her arrival alongside not being regarded by the Acting Under-Secretary as a particularly welcome intrusion at a time of family conviviality. Having no telephone in his country home, and having no desire either to return to Ottawa before the evening, Reid brought the genius of the diplomat to the task of resolving the conflict between his duty to the state and his duty to his son. Macdonald, it was soon agreed, would drive the 16 miles it would take to get to the Pearson cottage, and inform the Minister. And so she did. Pearson having no telephone either, she transported him yet another two miles to the nearest public booth, in Larrimac, where he called the Department. In the light of the intelligence he then received, he put through a second call, this time to the Prime Minister, Louis St. Laurent, in St. Patrice. The two men agreed that the response to the invasion would depend entirely on the Americans, since in the western world of 1950 only the United States had significant military forces at its disposal. Certainly the UN itself had none to deploy. But in the unlikely event that a military response did ensue, they hoped it would be under United Nations auspices. Otherwise, there was a risk that a local conflict in Korea would turn into a

global conflagration between the communist and anti-communist powers. In the meantime, however, there was no need to hurry back to Ottawa, since there was nothing of substance that Canada at this point could do. The Department of External Affairs — or that very small part of it, at any rate, that was now alert to the action on the weekend cables — would keep abreast of developments well enough until Monday morning.

Such was the initial response of those in Ottawa's highest places to the outbreak of the war in Korea. Their reaction even then gave testimony to two enduring characteristics of Canada's diplomacy in the politico-security context — the first of them a manifestation of geopolitical reality, the second an expression of strategic practice. The geopolitical reality was that in the context of any truly significant security confrontation, the most central determinant of the *Canadian* response was the *American* response. The definition of the Canadian policy problem, in other words, was ultimately a function of how, in reacting to crisis, the Americans decided to behave. The expression of strategic practice was the desire to ensure that the substantive American reaction, if substantive reaction there was to be, would be conducted under multilateral auspices — auspices that would give other players (Canada among them) an entitlement to join in the policy-making game. Americans doing it with others were more likely to be sensible than Americans doing it alone.

Now, as you have heard, I indulged in a wee bit of ruminating on this subject a quarter-century ago, and Dean Oliver has asked me to revisit my arguments again tonight, and to report in particular on how I think they stand up in the light of subsequent scholarship and latter-day perspectives. A flattering request, I flatter myself to think! But also a dangerous one. Most average mortals, after all, do not take warmly to the thought of confessing their errors in public. And on matters that touch upon their vanity, academics are lesser mortals by far than even the average! That I had no access then, as scholars have enjoyed more recently, to the classified files of the Department of External

Lester B. Pearson was Minister of External Relations at the outbreak of the Korean War.



Affairs may provide a measure of defence, if defence is required, but only a modest one. A book, after all, was one of the vehicles through which my prejudices were conveyed to a small and unsuspecting public. Part of the cost of publication was met by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and hence ultimately by the taxpayer. That being so, I certainly had an obligation to get the basic story basically right!

In spite of the high risk of embarrassment, however, I will do my best, and I will begin with a brief outline of the central argument of my interpretation, so very long ago, of Canadian policy. I will then run quickly through the essentials of the diplomatic tale, from the Canadian point of view, as a means of drawing out the evidence that I thought served well enough to establish my case. That evidence centres on a sequence of issues, or decision-points, to which the Canadian foreign policy establishment had to respond as the diplomatic game unfolded in tandem with the war itself.

In the light of all this, I will then attempt to take fair note of new findings and countervailing interpretations. The latter, I think, have more to do with the expectations of the writers than with the facts of the case, and the former (I like to think) do not matter very much. But these are doubtless self-serving opinions, and I will therefore rely on the questioners at the end to bring my vanities to heel.

The Argument

My core argument went something like this: Canadian forces ostensibly fought in the Korean War under the auspices of the United Nations, and in fulfilment of the principle of collective security. After all, one state actor (North Korea), although not universally recognized as a legitimate sovereign power, had without warning launched a conventional military invasion of its neighbour. The neighbour being unable to mount a successful defence, the matter had been brought before the UN Security Council. The Council had immediately called for the restoration of peace and the withdrawal of the invading forces. When the invaders refused to comply, an international posse was called out, and the United States was asked to lead it.

Canada joined the posse. On the surface, and on this somewhat legalistic account, the UN was working in precise accord with both the purposes and procedures of Chapter VII of its Charter.

But the real politics of the enterprise, as opposed to its technical form, had a more ambiguous look. In particular, they seemed to have less to do with “collective security” than with “containment” — the doctrinal manifestation in the post-war period of the principle of countervailing power. More concretely, the North Korean attack was perceived in the west, and with special conviction in the United States, as an aggression authorized, if not actually initiated, by the Soviet Union, and the precedent that came immediately to President Truman’s mind as he assessed its implications was Hitler’s challenge to Neville Chamberlain at Munich.¹ Appeasement as a policy had not worked then. Hence it would not be tried again now. There would be no whetting of autocratic appetites. A military response would therefore be launched, and to legitimize it, the support of the Security Council would be pursued, and contributions from powers similarly opposed to acts of military aggression thereby obtained. But of course the “powers similarly opposed” were for the most part allies of the United States (the two “neutrals” among them — India and Sweden — ultimately confined themselves to the provision of medical units). Certainly they included no representative of the Sino-Soviet world. This was a cold war confrontation dressed up as a collective security police action.

From the Canadian point of view, this might not have mattered very much. Happy, after all, is the country that can identify its security at home with a peaceful order in the world at large. Such a circumstance allows the cosmetic politics of form and the practical politics of action to be conveniently aligned. But in this particular case the alignment came with a cost and a risk. The cost was the obligation to contribute to the conduct of the hostilities — an obligation that Washington successfully triggered as soon as it went to the UN for support. The risk was that the Americans, as the leading champions of the western cause in the cold war context, would become excessively excited and overplay their hand. There was a need, therefore, to keep a

close eye on their behaviour, and where necessary to moderate it. This could only be done by acting together with other powers of like mind and similar purpose — a prospect that became somewhat more feasible as soon as the United Nations was invoked as the organization through which the western response would be processed and legitimized. Put in other terms, the *advantage* to the Americans of working through the UN was that it forced countries like Canada to put their resources where their mouths had been. The *disadvantage* to the Americans was that they would then have to grant their political and military supporters abroad at least some entitlement to meddle in decisions that Washington would really have preferred to make entirely on its own. (Indeed, for at least one experienced American observer and practitioner of foreign policy, George F. Kennan, this disadvantage outweighed the political return; he therefore would have preferred to ignore the UN entirely, and mount a purely unilateral response.²)

In this general context — or so my argument went then, and still, in essence, goes now — Canadian diplomacy during the Korean War can be interpreted very largely as a manifestation of the attempt to support the core, while simultaneously containing the extremities, of American policy, and to ensure that military forces operating under UN auspices, but delegated to US command, were prevented from being drawn into a larger Asian war. From Ottawa's point of view, after all, the European theatre, and the North Atlantic community more generally, seemed to matter a whole lot more. I emphasize here my use of the term "attempt." As I warned my readers long ago, the Canadians "met with only marginal success — they would say now that they did as well as conditions allowed, and that in any case a small advance is better than none at all." But successful or not, the effort itself was central to their diplomacy, and hence it became central also to my own thesis.³

Issues and Decision-Points

The specific items of evidence upon which I founded this somewhat sweeping, if happily economical, analysis can get a little tedious in the telling, so I am going to keep the telling brief.

My recitation will amount, in fact, to only a trifle more than a bare-bones list, and the list itself will be selective. This will be much kinder to you. (Critics, no doubt, will assert later that it has also been kinder to me, since they will assume I have selected the evidence that causes my argument the least inconvenience. Don't we all!)

I begin my list with a reminder of what I have told you already, which is that Pearson and St. Laurent agreed at the very outset that any substantive response to the North Korean attack should ideally be conducted through the United Nations. This may have been partly a reflection of their interest in sustaining the UN experiment itself, but by 1950 there were very few in External Affairs who still thought there might be some real stuffing in the collective security model. The more important consideration was that this was the most promising way of depositing Gulliver in Lilliput,⁴ and hence of giving the Lilliputians at least *some* opportunity to limit the damage his movements might otherwise cause. Ottawa was therefore happy to support the initial Security Council resolution, passed on that first Sunday afternoon in New York, calling on the invaders to withdraw.

Having said that, however, neither Pearson nor St. Laurent, nor for that matter their most influential foreign service advisers (among them, Hume Wrong in Washington and John Holmes in New York), thought it likely that the Americans would actually do anything that would really matter, and they were probably as surprised as the North Koreans and the Soviets when President Truman began to take military steps to intervene. As soon as he did so, Canadian preoccupations became at once very visible. More specifically, the President late on Monday, June 26, ordered General MacArthur in Tokyo to give combat air and naval support to the retreating South Koreans, and to move the Seventh Fleet into the Formosa Strait (the purpose of the latter being to prevent an outbreak of parallel hostilities between the Formosans and the mainland Chinese). The plan was to announce these initiatives in a presidential radio broadcast at 12:00 noon on Tuesday, and then to have them approved *post facto* in the Security Council at its next meeting, which was scheduled to begin two hours later, at 2:00 pm.



Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent (with hand on hat) preparing to leave on a US Army helicopter following a visit to the 25th Field Dressing Station in Korea.

Pearson was informed of all this by the American ambassador in Ottawa (Stanley Woodward) early on Tuesday morning, and after reflection he telephoned Hume Wrong in Washington to complain about the timing of the President's public announcement, arguing that it would be better if it came after, rather than before, the decision to intervene had received Security Council authorization. I was unaware when I did my original work, but have since learned from the External Affairs documents, that he was also concerned about some of the inflammatory rhetoric in the text of the President's address (it made reference, for example, to "Communist imperialism"), and about the decision to intervene in the Formosa Strait (which in his view had the effect of turning Formosa into a "U.S. protectorate," the implication presumably being that this would introduce dangerous and unnecessary complications to an already volatile situation).⁵ At any rate, the central preoccupation of senior Canadian policy-makers was already very clear. They wanted the Americans to stop acting — or at least to stop *appearing* to act — unilaterally, and they were also concerned not only to limit the scope of the conflict, but also to treat it as

sui generis, and therefore containable, rather than as generic to the cold war as a whole.

None of this had much practical effect. The President's broadcast went ahead as planned, and the collective security response was duly authorized (in the fortuitous absence of the Soviet Union from the Security Council) on Tuesday afternoon.

But there was soon to be another round. More specifically, as the hostilities escalated at the end of the week, and as it became clear that a major military campaign would have to be mounted, there was an urgent need to establish an official UN military command. In the absence of a working command structure within the UN organization itself, and in a context in which only the Americans were in a position to make a decisive military contribution, the obvious solution was to delegate the task to the United States. For this purpose, another Security Council resolution was required, and the drafting was led by the State Department. This immediately made it the target of allied remonstrations — Canadian remonstrations not least among them. The latter, indeed, were so



Photo by Bill Olson, NAC PA 116785

Private John Hoskins, 2nd Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, during an advance on Hill 419, Korea, 24 February 1951.

retaining his much larger role as commander of American forces in the entire Pacific area. At one point it was even suggested that the field of UN operations be defined in the proposed resolution by precise geographical coordinates, the principal purpose of which would be to establish very explicitly that military operations arising out of the China problem would not be a part of the UN mandate. On this one, Hume Wrong actually balked, believing the initiative would not fly, and thinking in any case that it was too intricate a proposal to be advanced at so late a stage in the game.

Once again, none of this had much practical effect, but the point of Canadian policy was clear enough, and in retrospect it could be argued that it was impressively far-sighted. But I will come back to that in a moment.

plentiful and so insistently repeated that they eventually exasperated even Hume Wrong, whose unenviable task it was to convey them to harried American officials. There were too many references in the proposed resolution, Ottawa thought, to the "United States" and too few to the "United Nations." Creeping unilateralism under multilateral cover was not what it had in mind. The geographic scope of the operation, moreover, was not sufficiently well-defined. This was because there was too much use of the phrase "in the area" — a phrase that had first cropped up in the resolution of June 27, and one that failed (among other things) to guarantee that the UN would not get caught up in a wider fracas involving the two Chinas. "Mission-creep" was not then, as it is now, a term that routinely surfaced in the vocabulary of diplomatic discourse; but Ottawa feared it nonetheless, not least because General MacArthur would become the working commander of UN forces while still

In the meantime, there was the question of what contribution Canada might usefully make to the conduct of the hostilities themselves. Then, as now, the easy stuff came easily enough. Three Canadian destroyers were despatched to the western Pacific on July 5 and were subsequently assigned to MacArthur's command. Airlift support was similarly provided by the RCAF, and later augmented by civilian charters from Canadian Pacific Airlines. But the real issues centered on ground forces. The government's first fear was that there would be an adverse reaction in Quebec, but that soon dissipated as it became clear that Quebecois in general (there were a few exceptions) were broadly supportive of the UN initiative. The more important problem, therefore, turned out to be a practical one. It resulted from the fact that the government had no combat-ready forces at its disposal to send — not, at least, forces that it was prepared to despatch to a theatre in Asia.

Ultimately it dealt with this problem by announcing on August 7 the recruitment of a Canadian Army Special Force for service overseas. That service might well be in Korea, but if the fighting was over by the time the Force was ready to go, the troops would be sent to Europe instead.

From the point of view of my own argument, the most interesting feature of all this was that the decision was taken somewhat reluctantly, and very largely under pressure from the UN Secretary-General, Trygve Lie, who in turn was reacting to the quite understandable American view that it was high time the allies started putting up. They were not, after all, shutting up! But in paying their dues, the Canadians once again sought to use the currency of their contribution as a source of diplomatic leverage. In particular, Pearson insisted, first, that Canadian troops not be committed to the front until their own officers thought them ready for combat, and second, that they would not in any circumstances be assigned to the defence of Formosa, an enterprise that was not part of the UN Command's mandate in the field. These guarantees were forthcoming, and the first of them eventually proved very useful to Canadian forces in Korea itself, when the orders reflecting them had to be used by the Canadian commander to fend off the blandishments of his American superiors, who wanted to deploy his troops to the front the moment they arrived in the theatre, and before their training was complete. The preoccupation with separating the Korean and Formosan issues was, of course, recurrent, although in the end it was to be overrun by other events.

Before then, however, there were to be other diplomatic engagements of relevance to my interpretation of the tale. These came in September-October 1950, when there was heavy American pressure on the UN to expand the scope of the Korean operation. This pressure came not from military failure, but from military success. South Korean and American forces had managed during the summer, and at great cost, to bring the North Korean advance to a halt at a defensive perimeter around the port of Pusan. This stabilization of the front was a crucial development, because it gave General MacArthur the time he needed to marshal the supplies and reinforcements that an effective counter-offensive

would require. When he was ready, he launched a two-pronged assault against his North Korean adversaries — breaking directly through the Pusan perimeter in the southeast, while simultaneously launching an amphibious attack behind enemy lines at the port of Inchon in the northwest. This manoeuvre — a classic of its kind — was an astounding success, and in 11 days it led to the destruction and capture of the bulk of the North Korean army. The capital city, Seoul, was in the hands of UN forces by the end of September, and very shortly thereafter the remnants of the North Korean army — less than 10 percent of the original total — were driven back across the 38th parallel (which had been the dividing line between the two Koreas in the first place).

This military victory was the immediate source of a policy problem. On a strict interpretation of the original intent, and consistent with a minimalist view of the collective security principle, it could be argued that the UN's mission had been successfully completed. The aggression had been repelled, the victim liberated, and the *status quo ante bellum* restored. But if the appetites of the aggressors had been dulled, the appetites of the defenders — American and South Korean alike — had been sharpened. The UN had been on record for some time as favouring the peaceful reunification of Korea under democratic auspices. The military capacity of the North was now in disarray. The South Koreans and the UN Command were in the ascendant, or could easily become so. In such circumstances, it was hardly surprising that Syngman Rhee and General MacArthur (the latter with support from Washington) were united in wanting to drive the victory home by taking their forces across the 38th parallel. This would allow them to complete the task of unification while their own iron was hot, and while their enemy's was cold.

At first, there was some suggestion in Washington that the phraseology of the June 27 and July 5 resolutions of the Security Council was sufficiently loose to warrant their proceeding in this way without further authority. North Korea, after all, could be said to be "in the area" (although Pearson's own view had been that "the area" in question should be taken to end at the 40th parallel — that is, no more than 120 nautical miles north of the pre-hostilities

border). Other members of the UN, however, Canada included, took the view that crossing the parallel in order to unify Korea by forces of arms would amount to a considerable escalation of purpose, and could lead to a dangerous response from the Soviet Union, and perhaps also from China. This was precisely the sort of development that the Canadians had feared from the very beginning, and some of Pearson's colleagues urged him to oppose it. But the Americans were successful in persuading the British and others to support their position, and this made continued opposition both difficult and pointless. Pearson did suggest that an attempt be made before the resolution was actually put to a vote to open up negotiations with the North Korean regime, since it was conceivable that Pyongyang would accept the defeat and reconcile itself to a peaceful resolution of the underlying political problem. But the idea fell on deaf ears. Various other diplomatic initiatives were similarly attempted — some of them aimed at reducing the freedom of manoeuvre that India, in particular, feared the Americans were giving to their irrepressible theatre commander. The Lilliputians, in short, were still working hard to contain their Gulliver.

Eventually, however, Pearson himself gave way, although only after securing what he took to be an informal American commitment not to allow UN troops to advance beyond the narrow waist of the Korean peninsula, about half-way between the 38th parallel and the Yalu River. The upshot was that yet another resolution (this one in the General Assembly, since the Soviet Union had returned in August to the Security Council and had ground its business to a halt) was passed with Canada's reluctant support on October 7. In effect, it authorized a UN Command advance into North Korea as a prelude to the establishment of a unified and democratically elected government throughout the peninsula.

The American undertaking not to advance beyond the peninsula's narrow waist — an undertaking rendered by the Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, at a time when he was unaware of certain contrary developments in Washington — was only partly at odds with President Truman's actual instructions to MacArthur, which enjoined him not to allow UN forces to penetrate Korea's northernmost provinces. But

it was completely at odds with the General's own intent, as his subsequent advance to the Yalu River and the border with China readily demonstrated.

As we all know, this last offensive — the so-called "Home by Christmas" offensive — was to be rudely interrupted by the Chinese, who had shown up in the theatre here and there as early as the end of October, but who now intervened in massive numbers at the end of November. This made it all too evident that uniting Korea under western auspices was not an objective that could be reconciled with Peking's view of what China's security required — as the Chinese and the Indians had tried repeatedly to make clear over the preceding months, and as the Canadians, among others, had half-suspected from the beginning. As a Canadian historian observed some 53 years ago, China was "as unwilling to admit such a plan for Korea as the United States might have been if United Nations forces, mostly Chinese, had been about to arrange for a people's democracy of Mexico."⁶

The Canadian and American responses to the Chinese intervention were starkly at odds. For the Americans — still bruised by the success of Mao's revolution, deeply influenced by the sway of the China Lobby, convinced in any case that communism was both a monolithic and a darkly menacing threat to their security and their civilization, and now suffering significant casualties at the hands of a Red Army — there was only one possibility. An illicit and oppressive Chinese regime had come to the aid of an equally illicit and oppressive aggressor in the community of nations. That made the government in Peking an aggressor, too, and it left no room for accommodation. It had to be labelled for what it was, and subjected to a hard military lesson. No weakness could be shown. Certainly no reward could be given. A tough line was required.

For the Canadians, by contrast, there was a natural tendency to conclude that the course of events had proven their hesitations right all along. Expanding the objectives of the UN Command to include the forcible unification of Korea had been a mistake. The Chinese might be misbehaving, but their misbehaviour, in the circumstances, was easily understood. The need now was to limit the damage — in effect, to contain the hostilities by de-escalating them.



Photo by Paul E.
Tomelin, NAC PA
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*Sherman tanks of "B" Squadron, Lord Strathcona's Horse,
completing a tour of front-line duty in Korea, 16 July 1952.*

In varying degrees, the Canadian view was widely shared among other UN powers — allies and neutrals alike. The result was a complex series of informal exchanges in New York and elsewhere focussing on the question of whether diplomatic overtures ought to be made directly to the Peking government. The United States clung to the view that any such initiative would be ill-advised until such time as UN forces had regained the upper hand at the front, but in the end they reluctantly agreed to a limited run at the target, on the understanding that an aggressor resolution would be brought before the General Assembly if the attempt were to fail (as they were convinced it would). In the meantime, the diplomatic initiative was to be led

by a Cease-Fire Group composed of Nasrollah Entezam of Iran, Sir Benegal Rau of India, and Lester Pearson of Canada.

The details of what followed are too intricate to warrant dissection here. Suffice it to say that some of the resulting exchanges with the Chinese appeared promising, but the talks ultimately foundered on the question of whether the Peking regime would be granted international recognition as the sole government of all of China — an issue that would affect among other things the matter of who in future would occupy the "China" seat at the UN — in advance of any substantive discussion of a cease-fire in Korea. The Americans were adamantly opposed to

making any such concession. Some of the players involved, including the Canadians, thought there was still room for manoeuvre, but in the end the United States insisted on bringing forward its condemning resolution. The Canadians, fearing that continued opposition would alienate the Americans entirely while disrupting the all-important unity of the western alliance, at that point threw in the towel. While describing the resolution as “premature and unwise,” they nonetheless voted in its favour, and the resolution was passed on February 1, 1951. It brought to an end any immediate prospect of a negotiated cessation of hostilities.

There were other diplomatic engagements of a similar sort, some of the more important of them centring on a controversy over the repatriation of Chinese and North Korean POWs in the final phases of the war. But the general pattern by then had been firmly established. The Canadians were certainly supportive of the western cause, and were determined to nurture the unity of the western players. At the same time, they worked quite hard to constrain the behaviour of American policy-makers, which they regarded as occasionally given to counterproductive extremes. Their strategy was to act as much as possible in diplomatic coalition with other members of the United Nations, a strategy that ultimately depended on the willingness of the American authorities to operate under UN auspices. Ultimately, of course, Canada’s diplomatic capabilities, like those of the other contributors to the war, were limited by at least one underlying reality. The Americans were paying most of the piper’s bill. It followed that they were calling most of the piper’s tunes. To switch the metaphor, Canada could nibble at the margins of American policy, but not at the core.

Countervailing Views

Such was the essence of my argument more than a quarter-century ago, and self-serving though you may think me for saying so, it seems to me to be hanging in there reasonably well even today. So shameless am I, in fact, that I cannot resist quoting from what is probably the most complete and scholarly account of the international history of the Korean War to date. Written by the American historian, William

Stueck, on the basis of his analysis of the pertinent diplomatic files in a wide array of national archives, and published in 1995 by Princeton University Press, it offers in its introduction the following observation:

A second theme [of this book] centers on the role of the United Nations, which other scholars have written off as little more than an instrument of U.S. policy. To be sure, the international organization often played that role, but just as often it provided the setting for allied and neutral pressure on the United States, an institutional framework within which weaker nations could coordinate their efforts to influence the world’s greatest power. Such efforts frequently succeeded, in part because many of those nations had contributed forces to Korea. The UN role in the Korean War merits attention not only as an agency of collective security against “aggression,” but as a channel of restraint on a superpower that occasionally flirted with excessively risky endeavors.⁷

I could hardly have said it better myself!

But of course I cannot get away so lightly as all that, and at the most general level it is not difficult to mount a counter-interpretation, much less flattering (some might feel) to the Canadian position. For a start, it is absolutely clear that all the major decisions on the “UN” side in the Korean War were ultimately made by, and dependent upon, the United States. Even where the Americans were actively opposed by their allies, they almost always won the day in the end. Canada had no influence over the June 25 decision calling on the North Koreans to withdraw. Nor did it have any significant impact on either the timing or the substance of the resolution of June 27, which invoked the collective security principle. The American decision to intervene with naval and air forces was made in Washington and put into practical effect on a unilateral basis. The United States, moreover, was in complete control of UN military operations, and for some of the most important phases of the war (including most particularly the advance into North Korea), “American control” did not mean control by the President and Joint Chiefs of Staff, but by the increasingly uncontrollable theatre commander, General MacArthur. When the Americans decided that they should seize the opportunity to unify Korea by force of arms, they certainly ran into opposition. But then they ran over it. Canada and some of the other powers were successful

in delaying the condemnation of the Peking regime following the Chinese intervention, but only for a relatively short time. Here, too, the Americans had their way in the end, and Ottawa at that point supported them, even if it did so while publicly holding its nose. All this being so, it is not impossible to make the case that Canada was acting as a loyal, and clearly subordinate, member of an American-dominated coalition. To deny this, it could be said, is to deny the essence. Everything else — minor, and usually futile, displays of tactical disagreement with Washington included — is simply clutter.

This kind of interpretation — although more frequently mounted later in relation to the war in Vietnam than to the war in Korea — was certainly at the root of much of the criticism of Canadian foreign policy on the political “left” (as well as in nationalist circles more generally) during the 1960s and into the early 1970s. On such a view, Canada was not a truly autonomous power at all, but an American satellite — and the ginger approach that Ottawa took in calculating how much resistance to American preferences it could display without running the risk of being counterproductive told the whole story.

On some accounts, too, the implications of this sensitivity to the imbalance in the distribution of power between Canada and the United States were compounded further by a fundamental similarity between Canadian and American views of the cold war itself. Canada had been one of the diplomatic architects of the North Atlantic Alliance, and there was nothing in Canadian liberalism that would generate sympathy for the Soviet experiment. If there were genuine differences with the United States, these had more to do with strategies and tactics than with basic purposes. Canadians knew very well which side they were on. In seeking to qualify the argument I had made, therefore, Robert S. Prince wrote as follows in an article published in the winter of 1992-93:

...To be sure, Canada wanted to restrain the United States; at times, Canadian diplomats believed that they had to carp at the flaws in US policy in order to preserve world peace. But Canada was itself constrained by the costs of opposition — the risk of causing a dangerous split in the Western alliance that might permanently sour Canadian-American relations

— and also by the basic similarity of Canadian and American perceptions of the Cold War. Despite the real and considerable strain that the Korean War placed on Canadian-American diplomacy, there were such tight limits on Canada’s ability and inclination to restrain the US that at times during the early war period the similarity of Canadian and American approaches to Korea outshone the differences.⁸

It is difficult to respond very vigorously to this sort of challenge; however, because I agree with it entirely. If there is a difference between us, it is not a difference over the facts, but over which of the facts are interesting. The question, in other words, has to do with which facts are worthy of emphasis, and which of them can be taken (more or less) as self-evident. Writing from the vantage point of the late 1960s and early 1970s, it hardly seemed necessary to argue that the western powers, Canada and the United States included, were fundamentally agreed in thinking that the Sino-Soviet world represented a bit of a threat to the liberal West. Nor did it seem necessary, either, to emphasize that the Americans had the biggest battalions and hence were bound to have the largest say. What seemed much more surprising was that anyone else in the western camp had presumed to have any say at all. Hence I made a great deal of the fact that the Canadians, among others, had said quite a lot. Robert Prince, by contrast, made a great deal of the fact that they had failed to say more, and that they had had relatively little impact in saying what they did say. This is a difference that probably says something respectively about D. Stairs and R. Prince, but it is not in itself a difference in our accounts of Canada’s diplomacy in the context of the Korean War.

Having said all that, I must concede as well that the opening up of the External Affairs department’s records for the period has brought to light many new details of which I was previously unaware. I have not been through the files myself, but the work of those who have, along with the selections that have been made available through the Department’s *Documents on Canadian External Relations* series (especially Vols. 16-19) have together filled in the gaps. Greg Donaghy, for example, has shown that there was very extensive discussion over the summer of 1950 of the possibility of exploiting the opportunity created by the Korean War to establish a standing United Nations international

force that would continue long after the matter in Korea had been resolved.⁹ Of this, I was completely unaware. Similarly, it appears from his account, as well as from that of Robert Prince, that winning Cabinet approval for the recruitment of the Canadian Army Special Force was a far more difficult challenge than I had previously understood it to be. Again, Steven Hugh Lee has demonstrated that the tensions that developed with the Americans over the resolution of the POW repatriation issue in the final months of the war were far more volatile and complex than I was able in 1974 to report.¹⁰ Chester Ronning had alluded briefly in a 1966 article to Canada's having played an important role in cajoling the Americans into accepting a proposal that led to the final settlement of this issue,¹¹ but I was unable then to obtain additional information.

It goes without saying that the historical record is much improved as a result of important studies of this kind, and certainly those who wish to assess the roles played respectively by particular individuals in the political leadership, as well as in the foreign service, cannot perform their tasks effectively without them.

But at a more general level of analysis, I still think Canadian policy-makers had a reasonable run at tying Gulliver down. The fact that he eventually broke free, and did a lot of unnecessary damage in spite of us, simply spoke then, as it still speaks now, to the fact that he was, and is, a trifle bigger than all the other inhabitants of Lilliput.

Notes

1. See Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs. II: Years of Trial and Hope* (New York: Signet Books, 1965), pp.378-379.
2. George F. Kennan, *Memoirs, 1925-1950* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), p.490.
3. Denis Stairs, *The Diplomacy of Constraint: Canada, the Korean War, and the United States* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), p.xi.
4. American analysts, too, have occasionally thought of their country as a Gulliver constrained by Lilliputian threads. See, for example, Stanley Hoffmann, *Gulliver's Troubles, Or the Setting of American Foreign Policy* (New York: McGraw-Hill for The Council on Foreign Relations, 1968).

5. Greg Donaghy, ed., *Documents on Canadian External Relations: Volume 16 - 1950* (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada for the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, 1996), pp.22-23.
6. W.E.C. Harrison, *Canada in World Affairs, 1949-1950* (Toronto: Oxford University Press for the Canadian Institute of International Affairs, 1957), p.293.
7. William Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p.4.
8. Robert S. Prince, "The Limits of Constraint: Canadian-American Relations and the Korean War," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Winter 1992-93), p.130.
9. See Greg Donaghy, "The Road to Constraint: Canada and the Korean War, June-December 1950," in John Hilliker and May Halloran, eds., *Diplomatic Documents and Their Users* (Ottawa: Historical Section, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, 1995), pp.189-212.
10. Steven Hugh Lee, "A Special Relationship? Canada-U.S. Relations and the Korean Armistice Negotiations, January-July 1953," *Ibid.*, pp.213-228.
11. Chester A. Ronning, "Canada and the United Nations," in J. King Gordon, ed., *Canada's Role as a Middle Power* (Toronto: Canadian Institute of International Affairs, 1966), pp.37-50. See especially pp.41-2.

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