

## Paul Martin's Suez Moment?

By Nic Boisvert

The story must be familiar to all readers of this space – how Lester Pearson won a Nobel Peace Prize by brokering a solution to the Suez Crisis of 1956. We choose to remember the United Nations Emergency Force for separating the warring Egyptians and Israelis, but at the time Pearson was far more concerned to extricate the British and French forces that had intervened to secure the Canal in a last imperial fling – to the fury of the Americans. The NATO alliance stood in danger of splintering, and stood back ineffectually as the Soviets seized the opportunity to invade Hungary. UNEF saved the day (except for the Hungarians) by allowing a face-saving Anglo-French withdrawal. President Eisenhower was eternally grateful, and Canada became wedded to the idea of peacekeeping.

Pearson repeated the feat in 1964, by responding to an urgent request from President Johnson to keep NATO allies Greece and Turkey from going to war on behalf of their ethnic communities on the island of Cyprus. Again, the rapid dispatch of Canadian forces to lead the separation saved the day. Despite Pearson's "pissing on Johnson's carpet" the following year with his differing view on the Vietnam War, historians credit the Cyprus intervention as leading to the Auto Pact that powered Ontario's economy for the next generation.

Those were the high points in Canada's much-vaunted United Nations diplomacy, and they are noteworthy in several respects. The circumstances were that we acted upon requests from our neighbour and closest ally, on matters of great geostrategic significance, in its hours of greatest need. And the diplomacy was successful in large part because it was backed by our swift and effective military action.

Canada has dined out on its diplomatic reputation ever since, even as the capacity of the Canadian Forces was increasingly diminished. Try as succeeding foreign and prime ministers might to grasp the Nobel grail, the only one to make a similarly useful initiative was Brian Mulroney, in the days after Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in the summer of 1990. It was not exactly a moment of dire US need, but he did use Canada's temporary seat on the Security Council to help assemble a coalition that was unprecedented for being practically unanimous across the world community.

Now Paul Martin is the latest Canadian Prime Minister to be presented the opportunity for a "Suez Moment". The US mission to Iraq is in peril, with the security situation deteriorating as the scheduled June 30 turnover to Iraqi control approaches, and major NATO partners France and Germany are standing aside, if not occasionally taking actions inimical to American success. The US needs something significant done to close the Atlantic divide, and quickly. On Martin's recent visit to Washington, leaders of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee requested he use Canada's influence with Europe to get NATO to come to America's aid in Iraq. Can he do it?

The Prime Minister's instincts are sound. Even though he responded that Canada "is prepared to do something significant on Iraq", he quickly added the caveat "as circumstances permit." He recognizes that, whatever our reasons for staying away from Iraq initially, something needs to be done. Equally, he recognizes the limitations of the UN debating society to muster an effective response, proposing instead to assemble the G-20. But how that club would be any different from the one it seeks to replace is not immediately clear. Besides, what can he hope to achieve? The Europeans, with all of their combined hundreds of thousands of troops, are dragging their feet in finding NATO replacements for Canada this summer in the smaller and far less controversial mission to Kabul.

The more brutal fact is that, under whatever multilateral umbrella he tries to fit it, Canada's powers of suasion just don't count for much on the world stage anymore. In both Suez and Cyprus, we were able to lead the charge by providing the bulk of the initial troops. Although Paul Martin has promised to do something "significant" in Iraq, one questions what it might be militarily. Certainly, the CF has pulled a couple of bunnies out of the hat for him recently, in finding additional troops to remain in Kabul and Bosnia, and a modest new force for Haiti. All these have magically appeared even though Army commanders have claimed there were none to go. But it begs credulity that a "significant" force could be cobbled together at this time or in quick order for an entirely new mission.

Fundamentally, the Canadian Forces have no rapid reaction capability. In 1956 and even still in 1964, Canada's disposable troops numbered in the tens of thousands, and we had an aircraft carrier to transport them to the scene and to serve as the afloat headquarters until something could be established ashore. Today the deployable Army realistically numbers under 10,000, most of that already is abroad, and it will be the better part of a decade before the recently announced Joint Support Ships are fully operational.

Whatever one might feel about how the US came to be in Iraq, the West cannot afford to let them fail there. For our generation, this is the hour of America's greatest need. A true friend would do something significantly helpful. Prime Minister Martin has stated his intention to do so. We must take him at his word.

It is more likely, however, that it will be some time well into the future before a Canadian prime minister will be able to come to the aid of the Americans in a meaningful way. Paul Martin's attention is about to be diverted to the more mundane matter of getting re-elected. Looks like his Suez Moment is going to take a pass.

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