MEMORY, MYTH AND RHETORIC: THE WAR OF 1812 AND CANADA'S INTER-WAR DIPLOMACY (1919-1939)

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ABSTRACT

The centenary of the War of 1812 and its aftermath were not especially favourable times for Canada's relations with the United States. Even so, the inter-war period was dominated by rhetoric about "the longest undefended border in the world," "[more than a] century of peace in North America," and the contrast between the "New World" and the "Old World" in world affairs. No Canadian speech in an international forum was complete without these phrases and without an admonition to Europeans and other sinners to settle disputes by conciliation, negotiation and arbitration – rather than resort to war – as was the tradition in relations between Canada and the United States. This paper deals with the development, application and effect in the inter-war period of the lessons supposedly drawn from the experience and legacy of the War of 1812. It concludes with a cautionary note about understanding the past and its implications.

RÉSUMÉ

Le centenaire de la guerre de 1812 et ses conséquences n'ont pas été particulièrement favorables pour les relations du Canada avec les États-Unis. Même ainsi, la période de l'entre-deux-guerres a été dominée par la rhétorique de « la plus longue frontière non défendue au monde », de « plus d'un siècle de paix en Amérique du Nord », et du contraste entre le « Nouveau Monde » et le « Vieux monde » dans les affaires mondiales. Aucun discours canadien dans un forum international n'était complet sans ces phrases et sans une exhortation auprès des Européens et des autres pécheurs de régler leurs différends par la conciliation, la négociation et l'arbitrage – plutôt que de recourir à la guerre – comme c'était la tradition dans les relations entre le Canada et les États-Unis. Cet article traite de l'élaboration, l'application et l'effet, dans la période de l'entre-deux-guerres, des leçons prétendument tirées de l'expérience et de l'héritage de la Guerre de 1812. Il se termine par une mise en garde au sujet de la compréhension du passé et de ses implications.

PRESIDENTS AND PRIME MINISTERS AS HISTORIANS OF THE WAR OF 1812[1]

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has described the War of 1812 as "the fight for Canada" and a link to that message, other ministerial statements and background information about the conflict and its significance, is prominently placed on his website and that of the Government of Canada. Meanwhile, a search for "War of 1812" in the British government's website yields "no results," while an equivalent inquiry to USA.gov returns a few obscure but helpful links, but no official statement or reference to commemoration of the bicentennial. The British prime minister, David Cameron, and the American president, Barack Obama, have not completely ignored the events of two hundred years ago. However, in an official visit to Washington, the British visitor and his host traded quips about the burning of the White House and treated the clash as an unfortunate aberration in the bilateral relationship which each country sees as the cornerstone of its international policies. Neither as a battleground nor as a participant did Canada (or British North America, as it was then) merit a mention – not even York, whose prior burning prompted the British assault on the American capital.

Generally speaking, the relative attention paid to the War of 1812 two centuries later reflects a tendency over the years. From the perspectives of politicians and historians, that difference is understandable. After all, the war may have been a test for Britain and the United States, but it was a matter of survival for the British colonies in North America and it undoubtedly played a significant part in shaping the later development of Canada. Even so, the lessons learned from that conflict and its settlement have varied greatly over the years, usually reflecting the political and social circumstances at the time of commemoration or intervening national and international developments rather than contemporary assessments or the conclusions reached by historians. As the context has changed, so has the script for speeches and statements by American and Canadian leaders, which likewise reflect how later generations have interpreted the events and their importance.

In light of the fate of American presidents and Canadian prime ministers who were in power at previous major milestones, a less bold approach to marking the bicentennial would be understandable. Of the American presidents who were in office at the semi-centennial (1862), centennial (1912) and sesquicentennial (1962), two (Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy) were assassinated, while the third (William Howard Taft) was defeated later that year. As for the Canadian prime ministers, they kept their lives but often lost their offices. The United Province of Canada was led jointly by John A. Macdonald and George-Étienne Cartier at the beginning of 1862, but their ministry was defeated in May (their successors, John Sandfield Macdonald and Louis-Victor Sicotte, lasted only two years in the turbulent politics prior to Confederation). In 1912, Robert Borden, the political beneficiary of anti-American sentiment from the year before, was in his first full year as prime minister, an office he would hold until he retired in 1920 (the one Canadian prime minister not to have suffered from close association with a major anniversary of the War of 1812). In 1962, John George Diefenbaker barely won one election before losing in the following year, with the poor state of Canadian-American relations a factor in the outcome. In other words, whatever lessons may be drawn from subsequent analysis of the War of 1812, the political benefits of attention to the anniversaries may be questionable.

That is not to say that the War of 1812 has been ignored by politicians and statesmen, particularly in Canada. On the contrary, there was a conspicuous attempt to draw lessons from the experience (and especially from its aftermath) in the period between the two world wars. That was unquestionably the heyday of celebratory rhetoric.

Presumably Canadian speech-writers in the 1920s and 1930s were inspired in part by the celebration of the centenary of the War of 1812. Whether or not that presumption is valid, that anniversary, as noted earlier, had not come at an auspicious time for Canada's relations with the United States. In 1911, on the eve of the commemoration, a general election in Canada had been marked by pro-imperial and anti-American sentiment aroused by the tepid response of the government of Sir Wilfrid Laurier to the Anglo-German naval crisis and by a proposed deal for reciprocity in trade between Canada and the United States. Unwise remarks by American politicians about the implications of the pact for Canada's future had helped revive old fears of annexation and prompted effusions of pro-imperial "patriotic" sentiment in English Canada. Meanwhile, nationalists in Quebec opposed even the Liberal government's modest commitment to a Canadian navy as an unwelcome form of colonial tribute. This lethal combination of moods, as well as the political burden of fifteen years in office, led to the defeat of Laurier's government – among the ministerial casualties was William Lyon Mackenzie King, who would later have a greater part to play in this story.

Nor did the atmosphere necessarily improve a great deal after the party was over. At the outset of the Great War, American neutrality and rumours in Canada of sabotage by cross-border agents of German and Irish descent had worsened popular attitudes and complicated relations between the countries. American entry into the war, as well as subsequent close collaboration, eased

those tensions, but there were still disagreements over representation and influence at the Paris Peace Conference and membership (or not, in the case of the United States) in the League of Nations.

Against this unfavourable backdrop, it is truly remarkable to what extent the inter-war conduct of Canada and speeches by its representatives on international affairs were dominated by depictions of North American moral superiority and idyllic harmony between the neighbours. Past clashes or seminal differences were forgotten or overlooked in constructing and repeating a myth that served to justify inaction and the refusal of commitments in imperial and in world affairs. History was re-written – or simply misrepresented – to serve the current aims of the Canadian government and to excuse an inglorious retreat into a North American redoubt.

At the League of Nations and in other settings, including imperial conferences, Canadian representatives presumed to speak as well for the absent Americans. This stance transcended partisan divisions in Canada, though the governments of W. L. M. King were most closely identified with a distinctly North American viewpoint. Within the context of the British Empire and Commonwealth, this outlook reinforced the push for greater autonomy, constitutionally and diplomatically, for Canada and the other Dominions. When King first asserted Canada's separate diplomatic identity, he proposed renewing the Rush-Bagot Agreement of 1817, which limited naval armaments on the Great Lakes in the wake of the War of 1812, as its symbolic expression. When that initiative went nowhere, King shifted his attention to coastal fisheries accords.

In Geneva, this perspective – and the presumption to speak for both countries – provided a rationale for aloof or negative policies for Canada, particularly the determination of its delegates successively to delete, amend or "interpret" the commitment to collective security expressed in Article X of the Covenant of the League of Nations, so as to limit the obligations of Canada, which had less need of help from others. However, it was also articulated in other evasions of responsibility for the security of those nations less favourably located. Whether in London or in Geneva – or from the safe distance of the House of Commons in Ottawa – this unhelpful posture was not presented in negative terms but instead proclaimed as a worthy example for others to follow for the good of all.

Canadian political and diplomatic rhetoric between the Great War and the Second World War was dominated by a distinct blend of complacency and sanctimony which contrasted the peace and harmony on the west side of the Atlantic (and, less often, the east side of the Pacific) with the dreadful state of affairs on the eastern shore of the Atlantic and further inland. In effect, Canadian speakers and speech-writers developed a few nostrums about international relations, which were interwoven in texts and frequently repeated for the edification of their audiences.

Thus, the following elements were essential for speeches by Canadian representatives on world affairs. Perhaps the most notorious theme – and certainly the most durable – was the description of the Canadian-American frontier as "the longest undefended border in the world". Another hardy perennial, adjusted periodically to take account of the passage of time, was the reference to "[more than] a century of peace in North America". Associated with that notion was the depiction of the Rush-Bagot Agreement as the oldest and most successful disarmament treaty in the world. Apparently the most popular – and arguably primordial – leit-motif in the limited repertoire of Canadian orators, however, was the contrast in attitudes and conduct between the "New World" and the "Old World" in international relations. By implication – and sometimes more explicitly – this last characteristic was attributed to the moral superiority of North America.

No Canadian speech in an international forum was complete without these themes and without an admonition to Europeans and other sinners to settle disputes by conciliation, negotiation and arbitration – rather than resort to war – as exemplified by Canada and the United States. Consistently, the experience of the War of 1812 and the settlement of that conflict, as interpreted more than a century later, shaped the definition of North American distinctiveness in this period. Indeed, academic surveys of the history of Canadian-American relations published between the wars also tended to stress how peaceful conduct and an unguarded frontier differentiated North America from the rest of the world. The emphasis on the undefended border was revived after the Second World War – it survived the cold war, but not 911.

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On this 200th anniversary of the War of 1812, as Canadians are again awash in depictions of the conflict and its consequences, it may be worth recalling the verdicts of two presidents who were known for plain speaking. Theodore Roosevelt, who studied the naval warfare in that clash, observed that the war "left matters in almost precisely the state" as when it began and that "the contest took the form of a succession of petty actions in which the glory acquired by the victor seldom eclipsed the disgrace incurred by the vanquished".[2] More succinctly, Harry Truman called the War of 1812, "the silliest damn war we ever had". Two presidents who commanded American forces in the war, Andrew Jackson and William Henry Harrison, undoubtedly saw

it as a more significant conflict – not least for its personal political benefits. However, the general verdict about the War of 1812 south of the border has been a collective yawn, with some accounts simply mentioning that it was a test for the new nation that was passed.

North of the border, the recollections have been more vivid, with the war treated as a vital defence of British North America against American invasion and territorial ambitions, not an indecisive Anglo-American confrontation about maritime rights. Hence the description of it as "the fight for Canada". Thus, the war becomes part of a different narrative of nation-building and survival of a separate country, with a different outlook, in North America. Over the years, various interpretations and some nationalistic myths have been woven into the historical narrative. Among these emphases have been the following: highlighting the role of colonial militia (volunteers of Loyalist stock) in the outcome; downplaying the role of British regulars, other than the essential martyr, General Isaac Brock, and usually ignoring the role of the Royal Navy, except to the extent it facilitated the aforementioned burning of the White House; varying stress over the years (much more prominent lately) on the critical role of warriors from First Nations, notably the other great martyr, Tecumseh; similar variations on the attention paid to the contribution of French-Canadian militia to the defeat of American forces and the implications of that role; amusement at the American claim to have won the war because of victory in the Battle of New Orleans which, after all, took place after the war was over (so that, in Canadian reckoning, it does not count); passing mention (again, more notice lately) of the contribution of black soldiers to victory; and, finally, uneven attention to the actual military and naval engagements, most often depending on the circumstances (notably the temper of relations between Canada and the United States) at the time of writing or speaking about the past.

The speeches of the inter-war period focussed not on the war itself but on the peace that followed, with a devotion to mythology, not history. Nearly sixty years ago, the great Canadian military historian, C. P. Stacey, debunked the "Myth of the Undefended Border," noting persistent tensions along the border, most obviously during the Civil War and afterward, when the Fenian Brotherhood attempted to conquer Canada, but also intermittently when boundaries were uncertain or ill-defined, when control of resources on land or at sea was subject to dispute, or when British and American interests and perspectives clashed on the wider world stage with local repercussions. Even so, the inter-war speeches had demonstrated that mythology usually trumped history!

Similarly, in terms of popular culture, one could observe, perhaps impertinently, that there have been two major legacies, one American and one Canadian, of the War of 1812. The United States was left with an inspirational and rather bellicose anthem that has proven difficult for singers and musicians of diverse talents and styles ever since. The modern tendency to treat sports events as patriotic festivals has led to some musical travesties [as an aside, Canada has kept its relatively singable tune but insists on changing the English lyrics from time to time so that crowds often stumble over unfamiliar words]. The best-known Canadian reminder of the war is more calorific: Canada was left with a confectionary brand, Laura Secord, named for a heroine of the conflict whose brave deed apparently blended espionage with a lengthy trek through enemy lines, with or without a cow. Though her statue is included in a valorous group near the War Memorial in Ottawa, more Canadians are familiar with Laura Secord's name and attractive cameo portrait as a result of purchasing candy or ice cream than through reading history. Indeed, the Government of Canada, in its "interesting facts about the War of 1812," had to remind Canadians that "Laura Secord never made chocolate". On that sobering note about the relative sway of history, myth, song and sweets on popular understanding of the past, let us conclude.

NOTES

[1] The views expressed in this article are those of the author, not the Government of Canada.

[2] Quoted in Lawrence Martin, "Where's Teddy when you need him?" Globe and Mail, 1 May 2012.