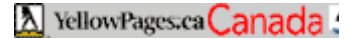




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Undermining allies a Canadian tradition

'Peacekeeping' as identity: Lessons for any war on Iraq can be found in Suez fiasco of 1956

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National Post

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At a conference at London's Chelsea and Kensington town hall in mid-July, the anniversary of the Iraqi revolution of 1958, the former Crown Prince of Jordan met with Iraqi opposition groups to discuss the future of Iraq after Saddam Hussein.

Prince Hassan is a member of the Hashemite family -- the same family that ruled Iraq prior to the 1958 overthrow and murder of King Feisal. The old Iraqi monarchy was accused (correctly) of being corrupt, oligarchic, out of touch and foreign influenced, but after a series of military dictatorships, followed by 30-odd years of Saddam and his Baath Party, the period of the monarchy in Iraq is starting to look like a golden age.

Whether the Hashemites -- who provided monarchs for various Arab countries in the past century -- will be able to provide some focus of loyalty for the divided Iraqi opposition is unclear, but there are a number of recent parallels: The Spanish monarchy, exiled in 1930, was brought back after the Franco dictatorship collapsed; and much more recently the former king of Afghanistan has found a unifying role in the always-fraught politics of that country.

The overthrow of the Iraqi monarchy was one consequence of the post-Second World War decline of British power in the Middle East. The British, attempting to stem that decline, launched a disastrous, armed intervention at Suez in late 1956. Their action divided the Western powers, with the Europeans generally in favour of intervention (for probably the last time) and the Americans opposed. The outcome led in short order to an effective British withdrawal from the region. Eighteen months later, the British and the Americans moved to shore up pro-Western regimes in Jordan and Lebanon, but they were impotent to reverse the coup in Iraq, formerly a British ally.



But the 1956 Suez crisis, to which the UN sent its first peacekeepers may teach that liberal policies can spawn dictatorships such as Iraq's.

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Differing national experiences have led to differing histories of the Suez affair. The Europeans see it as an episode in the decline of empire. The Americans are inclined to view Suez against the background of the Cold War, and see the brief war as a counterproductive allied distraction.

Canadians, however, have turned an allied disaster into a national triumph: In that variety of heritage-moment history that comes at us from movie screens, school textbooks and political platforms, we are told that during the Suez crisis Lester B. Pearson, who was secretary of state for External Affairs at the time, invented the idea of peacekeeping and was able, through UN diplomacy, to negotiate a ceasefire.

There is enough truth here to make a comforting national myth. The fact is Pearson negotiated an ignominious withdrawal by British and French forces -- and the affair then turned into an unabashed triumph for the radical Arab nationalist dictator of Egypt, Gamal Abdul Nasser, even though his forces had been defeated on the battlefield.

In Winston Churchill's phrase of another context, Pearson snatched defeat from the jaws of victory; his peace, in fact, turned an Anglo-French military victory into a political disaster for the West as a whole. We will have outgrown our long national adolescence when we can see our role in that crisis in its proper global context.

But we all need national myths. Canadians have built an identity around the idea that as a country, we are a good international citizen and a peacekeeper to humanity. As the historian J.L. Granatstein has pointed out, peacekeeping is something that we do and that the Americans do not. The Suez peacekeeping mission organized by Pearson was also the first time Canada disagreed with Britain on the international stage. It was, Granatstein writes, Canada's real declaration of independence.

Peacekeeping thus serves to emphasize our differences from the two countries most threatening to Canadian nationalists: Britain and the United States. It is for this reason that nationalist ideologues teach us to celebrate as a major national achievement the 1956 deployment of a small number of administrative troops on an unsuccessful peacekeeping mission.

And, of course, Canadians need national heroes, too: Pearson isn't much, but he'll have to do. He made a mediocre prime minister who is best remembered for the ill-fated unification of the Armed Forces, and the associated damage to military morale. He was not a bad guy: a competent bureaucrat, a smooth politician and a friendly diplomat. But no reader of his memoirs can come away with the idea that his was a great, let alone visionary, intellect. There is none of the deep literacy that characterizes the memoirs of Pearson's contemporary and sometime drinking buddy, U.S. secretary of state Dean Acheson, and certainly none of the profound historical knowledge of Henry Kissinger -- notwithstanding that Pearson's first job was as a lecturer in history at the University of Toronto.

Aside from the need to think on a level higher than that of a petty (if useful) national myth, there are lessons for current policy-makers in

the events of 50 years ago.

Diplomatic divisions among the Western powers were dangerous in the 1950s, and may become so again.

The economic weakness and domestic political divisions of Great Britain in particular undermined its ability to act independently.

Few now seem worried about America's capacity for independent action, but its burgeoning trade deficit and its need for imported oil could be future sources of weakness, and might lead to the kind of currency depreciation and internal political difficulties that hampered the British in the 1950s.

And, finally, too great an emphasis on the proprieties of the United Nations and the idols of "international law" in a fundamentally lawless region led to disaster in the 1950s, and may do so once again.

The UN system has natural, if self-interested, attractions for a minor power such as Canada. Our diplomats get to sit at the same table with those of major powers, and the sign that says "Canada" is the same size as the ones that say "United States" or "United Kingdom." There is little risk or cost involved: We are not going to be required to send large numbers of troops or spend lots of money to back up what we say. And, of course, there is that air of large-hearted humanitarianism that surrounds the UN in the popular mind, however ridiculous and corrupt that organization may be in practice.

Many advocates of Western subordination to the UN system are quite genuinely motivated by humanitarian concerns; they want a world of laws and rules in which war would be illegal. But the Middle East is not and has never been such a place; well-meaning internationalist policies lead to the rise and survival of such dictators as Saddam. To ask that the Western powers seek UN approval for their actions is in effect to ask that our foreign policy have the approval of the Russian oligarchy and of the mercantilist communists of mainland China. It is a recipe for paralysis; it is in effect to ask the West to be weak. This, of course, is exactly the result wanted by some among that large crowd -- especially in Europe -- that insist on UN approval for action against Saddam.

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The key issue in the Suez crisis was the Egyptian nationalization of the Suez Canal, which had been owned by the British and the French. The British and the French arranged for the Israelis to invade Egypt, and then pretended to intervene to protect the canal and to separate the combatants.

This was the kind of underhanded diplomatic trick that might have worked in the 19th century, but this time no one was fooled and it rapidly became apparent that even many Britons were offended by the disingenuous use of military force to protect an economic interest. Democracies are bad liars: A forthright declaration that "we are protecting our property" would probably have rallied a great part of the British public behind the invasion.

The U.S. administration of president Eisenhower was particularly

incensed by the Anglo-French action. This was in part because it was trying to convince Arab opinion that the United States was just as staunchly anti-colonialist as the Soviets and partly because it was simultaneously trying to rally world opinion against the Soviet invasion of Hungary. Finally, the United States was angry because America's allies had kept it in the dark about their plans and had the additional temerity to launch an invasion the weekend before the 1956 presidential election.

The Americans responded to the Suez invasion by organizing a run on the British pound and by co-operating with the Saudis in an anti-British oil embargo. This was the first oil embargo in history and it taught the Arabs a dangerous lesson: Oil can be a powerful weapon. The reasons that the British agreed to Pearson's peace plan had more to do with money and oil than with anything that Pearson did.

U.S. secretary of state John Foster Dulles later gave up in frustration his attempt to establish good relations with Nasser, and privately apologized to the British for undermining them in 1956. The Americans at least had the good grace not to build a national ideology on disagreements with their allies; Canadians, on the other hand, seem to have made inter-allied backstabbing something of a national tradition: Our politicians and diplomats are never quite convinced that they are acting independently unless they are undermining an ally.

If the Suez crisis saw the world's first oil embargo, it also marked the last time that the Western powers attempted to use force to protect their economic interests. Since that time there have been numerous nationalizations of Western property by Third World and other governments -- but the West has never responded with force, even when, as in the 1970s, it was held hostage by oil embargoes. Just as Middle Eastern oil became economically crucial in the post-war period, Western influence in the Arab world went into a precipitous decline, and British and other Western troops were withdrawn from the region.

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It is often said the United States and its allies (with Canada providing one squadron of planes and a field hospital that got there after the fighting was over) went to war with Saddam a decade ago in order to get cheap oil. But this is transparently wrong, because we do not in fact get cheap oil. The countries the United States protected from Saddam - chiefly Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States -- provide the West with expensive oil, and at monopolistically manipulated prices.

Left-wing critics would have it that Western (and especially American) foreign and military policies are driven by economic considerations. This is the classic Marxist interpretation of Western policy and it gets repeated in a vulgarized fashion on a thousand street corners and editorial pages. Unfortunately, it is untrue -- we have quite lost the habit of using power in self-interested ways.

Thus, if there is to be another war with Iraq, whether to put back the Hashemites, or simply to get rid of Saddam, there are a number of lessons to be learned from the Suez fiasco. The most obvious is the need for Western unity; in Ben Franklin's famous words, we all hang together, or we shall all hang separately.

But a larger lesson is that apparently liberal policies -- abjuring the use of force, kowtowing obediently to the UN, sending small forces of well-meaning but impotent peacekeepers, appealing to Arab public opinion -- have often produced the most illiberal of results. It is a lesson that would not have been lost on the murdered Hashemite king of Iraq.

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