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Escott Reid, Couchiching, and the Birth of NATO

By

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1999 marked the 50th anniversary of NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Canadians could take particular pride in the celebrations, because although it's almost entirely forgotten now, it was a speech by a Canadian civil servant on the banks of Ontario's Lake Couchiching in the summer of 1947 that was NATO's inspiration. NATO, the most powerful and successful alliance in history, was essentially a Canadian idea.

The years immediately following the Second World War have been called Canada's golden years of influence and diplomacy, largely thanks to three men: Secretary of State for External Affairs Louis St Laurent (the minister), Under-Secretary Lester B. Pearson (deputy minister), and Deputy Under-Secretary Escott Reid. Despite the unreliability of an increasingly erratic Prime Minister Mackenzie King, the three in 1947 were able to position Canada as an interlocutor between the United States with its isolationist Congress, and a shattered Europe, fearful of the Soviets, and seeking American security guarantees.

Canada was especially keen to take an Atlantic approach to security as a necessary counterweight to suggestions that it would operate as a junior partner to either the United States or Britain. Possessed of the fourth largest navy in the world at the war's end, Canada was a confident middle power in its own right, and had a skilled and assertive diplomatic service.



Doubts about the UN

The 1947 Couchiching Conference came close on the heels of rapidly growing – but still essentially secret – official disquiet with the effectiveness of the UN and its Security Council to deal with the Soviet sabre-rattling. One sign of doubt was the announcement of the Truman Doctrine in March 1947, committing the US to protect peoples threatened by totalitarian aggression.

Canada's Escott Reid was one of a select handful of Canadians who had become dismayed and skeptical about the UN's paralysis on security issues. The problem was the Soviet veto at the Security Council.

Lester Pearson expressed unhappiness with the UN in a speech at the Univ. of Rochester on June 16, 1947, and Louis St. Laurent mused before the House of Commons on July 4, 1947 that the UN charter didn't rule out other kinds of associations between states. But Reid wanted his upcoming address at Couchiching to go farther in its analysis, and offer what he hoped might be a solution to the UN problem.

Couchiching presented itself as an opportunity to make a first public airing of the views that had circulated exclusively among External Affairs' most senior officials. Why Couchiching? According to University of Toronto historian and Atlantic Council President Robert Spencer, Couchiching offered "a largely academic and professional audience from which a critical assessment of foreign policy could be expected."

Escott Reid's Vision

According to Department of Foreign Affairs historian John Hilliker, it was in

that same month of August 1947 that Escott Reid completed a visionary memorandum circulated within the upper reaches of the department, called "The United States and the Soviet Union." In it, Reid "recommended that the countries of the North Atlantic band together, under the leadership of the United States, to form 'a new regional security organization' to deter Soviet expansion."

That view was widely opposed within External, says Hilliker, but was shared by the officials whose views really counted: St. Laurent and Pearson. With their approval, and even prior to the circulation of the memo, Reid presented what the Foreign Affairs official history calls "the first public reference to the concept" to the Canadian Institute of Public Affairs at Lake Couchiching.

Reid told his Couchiching audience on the morning of August 13, 1947 that the UN needed "radical amendments," impossible because of the Soviet veto. This frustration with the Security Council might lead the United States to abandon the UN, Reid warned. Reid's saving compromise was the idea to try another tack on security, one still consistent with the UN charter. Reid envisioned an alternative security organization, one in which the Soviets wouldn't have a veto:

The states of the Western world are not...debarred by the Charter of the United Nations of by Soviet membership in the United Nations from creating new international political institutions to maintain peace. Nothing in the Charter precludes the existence of regional political arrangements or agencies provided that they are consistent with the Purposes and Principles of the United Nations, and these re-



gional agencies are entitled to take measures of collective self-defence against armed attack until the Security Council has acted.

As Reid later wrote, he outlined to the Couchiching audience “a regional security organization to which any state willing to accept the obligations of membership could belong. In such an organization each member state could accept a binding obligation to pool the whole of its economic and military resources with those of the other members if *any* [Reid’s emphasis] power should be found to have committed aggression against any one of the members.”

The NATO established 20 months later mirrors Reid’s vision. The North Atlantic Treaty is written to be consistent with the UN Charter, no member has a veto, and even today, in the former Yugoslavia, NATO forces operate under explicit UN request.

The speech may have been a historic moment, but as an occasion, it flopped. Conference delegates and reporters listened without either reaction or apparent comprehension of the speech’s significance. The speech didn’t become front page news, because on Pearson’s advice the crux of the speech – the key paragraphs describing the blueprint for what would become NATO – were deliberately omitted from the printed copies circulated on the day, only to be included when the speech was reprinted by External Affairs the following month. The reporters may not have been listening closely, preferring to rely on the printed texts, as reporters often do. Without the key section of text, they missed the story.

Following Couchiching, in mid-September 1947, Louis St. Laurent gave the UN General Assembly much the same

message. He said that the way around the Security Council veto problem was to “seek greater safety in an association of democratic and peace-loving states willing to accept more specific international obligations in return for a greater measure of national security.” St. Laurent said that the “veto privilege...if it continued to be abused, may well destroy the United Nations because it will destroy confidence in the ability of the Security Council to act internationally, to act effectively, and to act in time...” It was Reid’s Couchiching message all over again, but this time to the world.

In November 1947, American, British, and Canadian politicians and civil servants began informal and confidential discussions in Washington and New York about collective self-defence. In January 1948, British Prime Minister Attlee sent a top-secret telegram to Mackenzie King outlining the necessity to halt further Soviet encroachment in Europe.

Reid called the telegram “the opening gun of the successful British campaign, led by Mr. Attlee and Ernest Bevin which...sparked the discussions which resulted in the North Atlantic Treaty of April 4, 1949.”

A Forgotten Contribution

Why have we forgotten about Reid and his contribution to NATO’s creation, which includes his key address to Couchiching? The answer could be a combination of contemporary Canadian disbelief that we were once international movers and shakers, and simple personal antipathy to Reid himself.

Reid’s thesis was controversial at the time within External, shared only by Pearson, St. Laurent, and a few others. Apart from the radical message, Reid’s



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prickly personality made him an unpopular messenger. Historian Jack Granatstein, who profiled Reid in *The Ottawa Men, The Civil Service Mandarins 1935-1957*, said his foreign service colleagues found him "openly ambitious, jealous of his place, and quick to take offence or stand on his dignity." Another officer junior to Reid remembers him as "the worst Son of a Bitch I ever worked for."

To be sure, Reid was unloved. As early as 1936 Brooke Claxton, later Minister of National Defence under King, said that Reid was "obdurate, obstinate and obtuse. As he is also a fanatic and completely spoiled and undisciplined, it makes ordinary human relations...rather difficult."

Historian Jack Granatstein, who profiled Reid in *The Ottawa Men, The Civil Service Mandarins 1935-1957*, said his foreign service colleagues found him "openly ambitious, jealous of his place, and quick to take offence or stand on his dignity." One colleague said that Reid's career advanced as far as it did could only have been because of merit. Another officer junior to Reid remembers him as "the worst Son of a Bitch I ever worked for."

Memories are short and people often tend to look at the past through the sometimes distorting prism of the present. The Canada of today – while successful and prosperous, is neither as influential nor as confident as the Canada of the immediate post war period, prior to NATO's official beginning. It is simpler to believe that Canada merely followed the lead of other more mature powers, the United States, or perhaps Britain. It's also wrong. Canada led the pack, and worked hard to convince the reluctant Americans to commit to the NATO idea.

Thanks to Escott Reid and a handful of others, Canadians were far from by-

standers at NATO's creation. They helped conceptualize it, they pushed for it, they helped shape it, and as NATO today prepares to accept Eastern European members, Canada leads the drive for new members and continued reform.

Granatstein is unequivocal that Couchiching was "the first public utterance anywhere to the idea that led to the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization." Canada's role in NATO's conception is one all Canadians can celebrate with considerable pride at NATO's 50th Anniversary begins in 1999.

One of the select members of the Order of Canada's highest rank, that of Companion, Escott Reid, who died in 1999, lived in quiet retirement in Ottawa, his contributions largely unknown outside Canada's tiny foreign policy community. Canadians today tend to love the UN, but are mostly lukewarm about NATO. But without NATO, the UN might not have survived at all. In 1967, Reid wrote that the ideas of the summer of 1947 which led to the creation of the Atlantic Alliance equally arose from:

...a desire to head off a campaign which was gathering strength in the US, Britain, Canada and other countries for amending the UN Charter to exclude the great power veto over sanctions and other matters even though this would mean driving the Soviet Union and the Eastern European states out of the United Nations.

And so, not only did Canada's initiative lead to NATO's creation, but it may also have saved the UN itself, established with such high hopes at the end of World War Two.