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Canada's cold front

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Where does the sovereignty of one country end and another's begin in the remote north, where few people settle and even great powers struggle to establish their control? This question perplexed Russia, Britain, the United States, and Canada for nearly a century as they disputed the boundary between Alaska and Canada. Today, the same question echoes over the high Arctic as competing claims over the Beaufort Sea, Hans Island, the waters of the Northwest Passage, and other parts of the region are advanced by Russia, Norway, Denmark, Canada, and the United States—with Japan and China increasingly active in exploration activity as well.

Many Canadians have a vague idea of the Alaska boundary dispute from high school history classes. The high point of the popular Canadian narrative is that the United States, particularly under President Theodore Roosevelt's leadership, acted like a bully to get its way, and in the end Britain sold out Canadian interests to keep the peace with Washington. If only Canada had been able to determine its own foreign policy in 1903, Sir Wilfrid Laurier

surely would have stood up to the Americans, regardless of the reaction of his British counterpart, Lord Salisbury.

Looking at the Alaska boundary dispute through the correspondence of US and British officials over several years of negotiations, the story is

of the Alaska territory. Russia offered to sell Alaska to the United States in 1859, and the sale was completed in 1867.

Following the confederation of most of the British North American colonies in 1867, the government of the Dominion of Canada sought to establish its claim over former Hudson's Bay Company territories. The Northwest Mounted Police, later renamed the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), was sent into the north to manifest Canadian authority.

The region's first gold was discovered in 1872 in the Stikine River (British Columbia), prompting an influx of settlers and prospectors to the territory. In 1877, the Rutherford B. Hayes administration in Washington protested to Great Britain when it learned that the RCMP had transferred a convicted criminal across land claimed by the United States en route to incarceration without notification or permission of US authorities. Officials in Washington and London discussed establishing clearer boundary markers to prevent further problems, but the uncertain limits of US and

and Skagway, located on a fjord called the Lynn Canal, which opened to the Pacific. The United States claimed Dyea and Skagway, the Lynn Canal, and Pyramid Bay according to its interpretation of the 1867 treaty.

Reports that the Dominion of Canada had established posts and RCMP patrols on territory claimed by the United States led the Cleveland administration to return to congress for funds for a boundary survey and provisional demarcation in 1896, and this time congress granted the request. A new Anglo-American convention for a joint survey of the disputed boundary between Alaska and Canada was signed in 1897.

ENTER WILFRID LAURIER

The new government headed by Wilfrid Laurier came to office in 1896 determined to pursue territorial claims with vigour, in part due to the perception of weak government by a series of brief, caretaker prime ministers who followed Sir John A. Macdonald. Laurier authorized an effort to establish authority over Dyea and Skagway unilaterally, claiming justification with a new interpretation of the 1825 Anglo-Russian convention.

The Canadian initiative halted momentum toward a settlement. The US administration of William McKinley and the British government of Salisbury had hoped for a quick resolution based on the findings of the joint survey. Canada's new position required all parties to revisit the boundary issues in dispute, and so the US and Britain established an international commission in 1898 that would meet in Québec City to settle the disputed border. Three US commissioners met with three counterparts, one named by the parliament at Westminster and two named by the parliament in Ottawa.

The initial US position in the 1898 commission was to urge a return to a more conventional reading of the 1825 Anglo-Russian convention, supported by the 1827 Russian map that had not been contested by either the British or Canadian governments previously. Canadian commission members, led by Laurier, insisted on their more aggressive claim. The US commissioners considered possible compromises, but governors and senators from the Pacific coast states of California, Oregon, and Washington lobbied McKinley not to make concessions. The Québec City talks adjourned without a settlement in 1899. US Secretary of State John Hay sent Ambassador Joseph H. Choate to meet with Salisbury, the British prime minister, to attempt to settle the boundary between the United States and the United Kingdom without involving the intransigent Canadians. Choate wrote to Hay afterward

1 Quoted in James Morton Callahan, [illegible]
(New York: Macmillan, 1937), 474.

> interests against Yankee encroachments than it would be to have the job of justifying a reasonable treaty.[3]

The governments of the United States and Britain sought to break the deadlock. In response to an appeal from London, Washington abandoned a plan to establish a military base at Pyramid Harbor. Britain proposed an arbitration of the dispute by an umpire, in a manner similar to that used to resolve the boundary between Venezuela and British Guyana. Choate wrote to Hay on 16 June 1899 following a conversation with Salisbury:

> [Salisbury gave] the strong impression that the British Government do not have much faith in the Canadian claim, and think that we should be so safe under any form of arbitration that they rather wonder at our being unwilling to accept the Venezuelan form.[4]

Hay relented and proposed that the arbitration only address claims made before 1898, to expressly exclude the expansive Canadian territorial claims that had caused the talks to break down, and also suggested a South American be chosen as the umpire. Laurier rejected the idea of a South American umpire, preferring a European, and this disagreement scuttled the British initiative.

In 1901, Laurier pressed Salisbury to offer a concession in negotiations with the United States over territory in the Isthmus of Panama that would

3 Quoted in Charles Callan Tansill, [illegible] (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943), 194.

4 Quoted in ibid., 195.

his ambassador in Great Britain. In January 1902, Roosevelt made clear to both Hay and Choate that he wanted to resolve the dispute and was willing to revive plans to station US troops at Pyramid Bay or Skagway itself to halt Canadian encroachments and indicate the seriousness of the US claim.

5 Quoted in Callahan, , 480.

> The only question is whether Lord Alverstone will go with us on the main points.... Very likely he will, but England is in such mortal terror of Canada that I feel more than doubtful in regard to it.... The fact is that Canada is in the worst of all possible positions of possessing power [to block a settlement] unaccompanied by any responsibility.[6]

The Laurier government sought to recess the commission in the hope of using the delay to secure the support of Alverstone. After receiving a letter from Clifford Sifton, Canada's agent at the British embassy in Washington, Hay wrote to former Secretary of State John W. Foster that

> The fact is they are beaten and they know it—and they think we are 'hard on them' because we do not allow them all the pettifogging delays they ask for. We must of course be excessively courteous and indulgent with them so as not to make it too difficult for them to agree.[7]

At the same time, Canadian officials engaged in a campaign of leaks to a newspaper in London suggesting dire consequences for England if the commission found in favour of the US claim. Lodge wrote to Roosevelt on 13 September 1903:

> The Canadians have been filling the newspapers with articles of the most violent kind, threatening England with all sorts of things if the decision should go against Canada. They are all aimed, I suppose, at Lord Alverstone.[8]

If anything, the campaign seemed to reinforce Alverstone's resolve to find a settlement on the basis of a careful and legally defensible reading of the 1825 Anglo-Russian convention, the 1827 Russian map that had remained uncontested by all parties, and the 1867 Alaska purchase agreement between Russia and the United States. The US side offered to concede a claim on two small islands north of the 54' 40" north latitude line that guarded the

6 Quoted in ibid., 484.

7 Quoted in ibid.

8 Quoted in ibid., 486.

approach to the port at Prince Rupert as a concession to the Canadians, and Alverstone joined the Americans in a majority settlement that confirmed a boundary that recognized the US possession of Dyea, Skagway, the Lynn

impact on public spending projects. In 2009, Harper travelled with his cabinet to the Arctic and pledged a scaled-back effort to develop the northern operational capabilities of the Canadian forces and a new initiative to provide for the economic and social welfare of the Inuit inhabitants of the Arctic, whose presence is meant to substantiate Canadian claims.

Canada's perspective on the Arctic is still largely domestic. Internationally, Ottawa is relatively isolated; few countries recognize the full extent of Canadian boundary claims, and Canada's domestically oriented maximalist