Blood and Compromise: Pivot Points in Canadian-U.S. Border Resolution, 1783–1903

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The myths behind the “world’s longest unguarded international border” necessarily include one of the biggest fables of all in diplomatic history. Namely, that the border separating the kingdom of Canada from the republic of the United States of America was the final result of rational diplomacy, strong mutual respect, resolute friendship, and a determination on both sides to avoid war at all costs. In fact, the long and bumpy road determining border placement was littered by recurring games of reckless brinkmanship, irresolution and procrastination, outright duplicity, threats of war, and indeed, war itself. These actions were the result of that most enduring form of human avarice in matters of war and diplomacy: the further acquisition of national territory. Indeed, the road of travel was a long one in both earthly distance as well as in time, traversing more than 4500 miles and tentatively traced here and there on map after map for 120 years.

First of all, a close examination of “net gains” and “deplorable concessions” along the international borderland underscores both the sweet and bitter fruits of recurrent dissension that once plagued the two countries. From another perspective, border configuration may be said to be the indirect result of the “superpower politics” of that day—a time when Great Britain’s global security influenced the fortunes of its North American Empire. But most of all, it was the American concept of “manifest destiny,” variously interpreted by both citizen and politician, that had a lasting impact on the shaping of the border between the two countries. Even before newspaperman John L. O’Sullivan supposedly coined the term in 1845, U.S. settler migration westward and the formal purchase of Louisiana suggested providential intervention to the faithful. Problems with the annexation of Texas, according to O’Sullivan, were the result of foreign powers seeking to prevent “the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions” (Morris, 1953, p. 193).
My paper will attempt to demonstrate that although Canada usually found herself in a defensive military and diplomatic position vis-à-vis the "bullying" USA, Canadian interests were relatively well defended between the American Revolution and the presidential term of Theodore Roosevelt. It could be argued that Britain's "loss" of the Old Northwest Territory in 1783 was perhaps an unrealizable dream in the minds of Canadian critics, that settlement routes and future population growth in the region had never favored Upper Canadian penetration in the first place. Moreover, "American" colonial claims in the area surrounding the Great Lakes were periodically made known as far back as 1603.

In the stalemated War of 1812, sometimes called the "Second War of American Independence," Canada may be said to have accomplished an outright victory in her theater of conflict. In fact, Canadian success in dealing with the American invasion still remains an early touchstone of Canadian independence and cohesion. Americans, on the other hand, have at best only a dim memory of the conflict along their country's northern border, preferring the recollection of Andrew Jackson's victory at New Orleans instead.

In the case of Louisiana's territorial northern border, the British Convention of 1818 gave the USA a net territorial gain. But this was not exactly a "giveaway," based on the valid historical claims of the territory's previous owner, imperial France. In 1682, Louisiana's founder, Robert LaSalle, had specifically claimed the entire watershed basin of the Mississippi River for his king, Louis XIV. In doing so, LaSalle unknowingly established a northern watershed boundary that partially overran the forty-ninth parallel of latitude—the present-day international boundary.

Division of Oregon Country, much touted by Canadians as another territorial "giveaway," was in fact more the result of a "fifty-fifty" or "split-the-difference" compromise than unbridled land-grabbing with reason thrown to the wind.

In the case of northern New England's boundary, the ultimate seizure of much of Maine for Canadian absorption could be described as a British accomplishment in diplomatic stealth of the first order. Now that practically all is said and done, it appears that Britain actually won the famous "Battle of the Maps"—at least in the case of Maine's disputed frontier.

Even in the case of the Canadian-Alaskan border controversy, Canada could be said to have garnered a net territorial gain when, in a mood of vigilant nationalism, its political guardians resorted to inflating the country's land claims paralleling the Inside Passage. While the compromise actually benefited Canada, Canadians nevertheless expressed anger and disappointment. For Canadians, there has long been a perception that boundary resolution automatically translated to "territorial sell-out." Usually secure in a position of ultimate power, British negotiators, on the
other hand, sought to “split the difference” over disputed international territory, focusing, whenever possible, on evidence in their favor. While south of the Canadian border, an aggressive but not always successful Brother Jonathan combined the jingoism of “manifest destiny” with a poker player’s verve and a country lawyer’s nose for any shred of legal precedent—however doubtful, however tenuous.

1. The Old Northwest Territory (1782–1815)

It was not until after the War of 1812 that U.S. claims to the Old Northwest Territory were finally sanctioned by representatives of British North America. Although the Treaty of Paris in 1783 had earlier conceded this area and much of the remainder of the Trans-Appalachian West to the United States, British fortifications and military personnel remained in place for more than a decade afterward. British fur traders stayed even longer. The British refused to budge from such installations as Michilimackinac, located between Lakes Huron and Michigan; Detroit, guarding the entranceways to Lakes Huron and Erie; Forts Niagara and Oswego, bordering Lake Ontario; Oswegatchie on the American side of the St. Lawrence River; and Point du Fer and Dutchman’s Point on Lake Champlain.

The British claimed they could not leave so long as the fledgling USA refused to give financial compensation for property damages incurred during the Revolutionary War. Since payment had not been made in accordance with the formal treaty stipulations, British military presence within the borders of the United States was deemed necessary. Actually, the military occupation was perhaps more of a design to protect the economic interests of the lucrative Indian fur trade and to defend, if need be, the small but growing population of loyal subjects living in Upper Canada. Moreover, both of these British constituencies had been bitterly disappointed by the “territorial giveaway” south of the Great Lakes, and both believed that military protection against further American encroachment was more important than ever.

The strongest Canadian claim to the Old Northwest was rooted in the Quebec Act of 1774. Earlier, British conquests in upper Louisiana during the French and Indian War (1756–1763) had managed to secure this area and its small French-speaking population of farmers and trappers, along with its much larger Indian population. The Quebec Act created a new colony by joining this frontier region with the larger French-speaking population living along the St. Lawrence River. By rearranging North America’s political geography, the British hoped to standardize legal and religious institutions among her new French subjects, thereby assuring peace and harmony. (Alvord, 1987, pp. 303–304.)
Unfortunately, the Quebec Act had an opposite impact on American colonists centered east of the Appalachians. In their eyes, Britain had rewarded a former enemy with land that properly belonged to colonial subjects who had helped in the winning of the war and who expected Trans-Appalachian lands in repayment. Official recognition of the Custom of Paris and the hegemony of the Roman Catholic Church beyond the Appalachians alarmed Protestants from New England to Georgia. Furthermore, the Quebec Act automatically extinguished the territorial claims of British seaboard colonies in effect since 1609 (Atlas of United States History, 2001, p. U-8, U-9; Alvord, 1987, p. 302.) By favoring one set of colonial subjects at the expense of the other, Britain had unwittingly provided yet another irritant leading to the American Revolution.

Among diplomatic historians, there is the popular view that the military exploits of Revolutionary War hero George Rogers Clark forced the British to yield the Old Northwest while Spanish victories along the Gulf Coast helped to secure the remaining portions of Trans-Appalachia (Alvord, 1987, pp. 324–328, 332–335, 340, 343, 349, 354, 363). However, historian Samuel F. Bemis has challenged the belief that Clark's maneuvers had much influence on the fate of the Old Northwest. According to Bemis, Clark's ephemeral maneuvers in the Northwest's interior failed to have the long-lasting impact of the British military garrisons—many of which remained active well into the 1790s (Bemis, 1935, p. 219n; Bailey, 48.) The most likely factors behind British abandonment of the Old Northwest perhaps included a silent recognition of the artificiality of both the Proclamation of 1763 and the Quebec Act of 1774. Valid, individual claims in the area had been made much earlier by several seaboard colonies (Paullin, 1932, pp. 25–30. See especially Plate 42.) Moreover, British defense of the area in the future would have been prolonged and perhaps untenable in light of the fact that migrating frontiersmen gave no indication of retreating eastward to the Blue Ridge.

Still, British acceptance of the American claim to the Old Northwest was not a foregone conclusion. There were those in London who could not agree to such a settlement, and even some members of the Continental Congress would have accepted the Appalachian watershed divide as a reasonable western boundary. Both France and Spain would have preferred the Appalachian boundary, believing that a British-Indian confederacy would be far less troublesome than coping with wave after wave of American settlers. However, it was the persistence of men such as the wily Benjamin Franklin, ever suspicious of European statecraft, who helped stretch the new country's territorial borders almost to the absolute limit. As to the more modest boundary proposal, Franklin somewhat dryly observed that Spain, in particular, wanted "to coop us up within the Alleghany [sic.] Mountains." He would have none of it. Indeed, the sage
of Philadelphia hankered after a western boundary along the Mississippi River and a northern territorial expanse that might include all of Canada (Bemis, 1935, pp. 219–220).

By the time the Treaty of 1783 was formally concluded, the British had made a preliminary agreement to accept a Great Lakes boundary scheme between the Connecticut River in the northeast and the vaguely defined Lake of the Woods in the northwest. Since an alternate boundary proposal much farther north had threatened the loss of the Ontario Peninsula, the British apparently saw the rivers-and-lakes boundary as a not too unreasonable compromise. It was, indeed, one of the more favorable boundaries desired by the Continental Congress. Historian Samuel Bemis suggests that negotiator John Jay may have convinced the British to accept the Congressional-backed boundary by assuring them that a thriving back country of American farmers would one day provide an unrivaled market for British manufactures. Collaterally, both the St. Lawrence and Mississippi valleys would become teeming corridors of commerce and finance in the interest of British ships, goods, and services (Bemis, 1965, pp. 57–62).

A decade later, British delegates sought to rectify the problem of the “Northwest Boundary Gap.” The area concerned an unexplored wedge of territory between the Lake of the Woods, the upper Mississippi, and the St. Croix River. The object of the British was the extension of a southward corridor to a navigable portion of the Mississippi. Such a connection would help to ensure greater trading possibilities, especially for Montreal. American diplomatists John Jay and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson stubbornly resisted the idea, thereby strengthening the claim to the Lake of the Woods and the forty-ninth parallel beyond. Years later, Professor Frederick Jackson Turner noted with some irony that Jay’s preoccupation with beaver pelts unwittingly secured for his country “the ownership of the richest and most extensive deposits of iron ore in America, the all-important source of a fundamental industry of the United States” (Bemis, 1922, 465–484; Turner, 1910, p. 226). It should also be pointed out that final resolution of the border between Lake Superior and the Lake of the Woods was not made until the signing of the Webster-Ashburton Treaty almost a half-century later. (Paullin, 57, pp. 60–61, 62. See also plates 91A, B, C and 93A, B, D.)

Actually, John Jay’s insistence upon the Lake of the Woods and the forty-ninth parallel was somewhat curious, since both locations remained largely unexplored and incorrectly mapped. Nevertheless, he supported an earlier Congressional claim rooted in legal precedent. As early as the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, France and Britain had tentatively determined that the divide between New France and lands belonging to the Hudson’s Bay Company lay somewhere in the vicinity of the forty-ninth parallel.
However, the Company’s effective occupation of the area was hardly in evidence. Indeed, French fur trappers had penetrated the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains ahead of the British. Moreover, the plausibility of an east-west international border located somewhere between forty-five and even fifty-one degrees north was based partly on the fact that Spain now held title to Louisiana’s Trans-Mississippi West, together with British recognition of eastern Louisiana’s previous extension as far north as the Great Lakes watershed. To some observers, the British claim to the forested and lake bespattered plain west of Lake Superior appeared arguable. (Bemis, 1965, p. 175; Bemis, 1922, pp. 479–480).

In the end, however, it was American survival in the War of 1812 that succeeded in removing the British military presence from the Old Northwest. Up until the “Second War for Independence,” the USA had not shown any clear military resolve to remove all elements of the thirty-year-old occupation. Even though Britain had largely succeeded in winning the war both on land and sea, American success in the climactic Battle at New Orleans seemed to assure that the young republic was here to stay. Both Britain and continental Europe began to look upon the USA as a sovereign nation. The subsequent Rush-Bagot Disarmament Agreement in 1817 set in motion a gradual demilitarization of naval and fortress installations along the international border during the next half-century (Bailey, 158–159).

2. The Convention of 1818

Shortly after the formal acquisition of the Territory of Louisiana, U.S. Ambassador to France Robert Livingston approached Foreign Affairs Minister Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord and expressed some puzzlement as to just where Louisiana’s boundaries actually lay. The French minister replied: “I can give you no direction. You have made a noble bargain for yourselves and I suppose you will make the most of it” (Brugger, Hackett, & Mattern, 1986, p. 5:19). As it turned out, the big decision on the location of Louisiana’s northern border was not made until the formal session of the “much underrated” Convention of 1818. (Bailey, 159) At their meeting in London, negotiators Albert Gallatin of the United States and Richard Rush, representing Great Britain, managed to resolve two major international controversies. First, they both formulated an agreement that in future American fishermen continue to enjoy fishing rights in specified Canadian waters in and around the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Secondly, the two men permanently fixed the U.S.-Canadian border along the forty-ninth parallel as it proceeded west from the Lake of the Woods to the “Stony” or Rocky Mountains (Van Zandt, 1966, 20–21; Bailey, 159–160).
Based on Robert LaSalle’s 1682 legal claim in which he defined “Louisiana” as occupying the entire watershed of the Mississippi River and its connecting streams, a portion of the French colony managed to spread beyond the forty-ninth parallel. Rather fortuitously, the USA was able to strengthen its land claim based on two legitimate French colonial precedents. One involved the westerly reaches of New France; the other rested on the formal claim of an early explorer largely ignorant of the size and shape of his newly claimed colonial holding farther south. In exchanging a watershed boundary for a simplified geometric line, i.e., the forty-ninth parallel, Canada gained a small area centered around the upper Milk River basin in present-day Alberta, but gave up the much larger upper Red River basin of northwestern Minnesota and eastern Dakota.

Thus far, the forty-ninth parallel as a guiding principle had worked well for the USA. The Red River Basin was perhaps four times the size of the Milk River region. But based on previous decisions, the Canadian loss could be understood by following a crucial pattern of events. Below the fiftieth parallel, French colonial claims had been stronger and vastly more extensive than those of the British-owned Hudson’s Bay Company. Later, British expropriation of New France and eastern Louisiana after the French and Indian War was followed by the loss of eastern Louisiana at the close of the American Revolution. U.S. enclosure of the Old Northwest, at one time an integral part of the Louisiana colony, eventually made possible what appeared to be an acceptable compromise at the forty-ninth parallel. But agreement on the forty-ninth ended when it reached the crest of the Rocky Mountains. Beyond that point, the Oregon Country stretched westward to the Pacific. It was agreed that any further extension of the border be decided after a ten-year moratorium. In the meantime, the two powers entered into a “joint occupation” of the area with either side giving the other a one-year’s notice should any change be made.

3. The Oregon Treaty of 1846

In its entirety, the Oregon Country covered a latitudinal spread from forty-two degrees northward to fifty-four degrees, forty minutes, and extended westward from the crest of the Rockies to the Pacific Ocean. The territory’s southern boundary was the result of negotiations in the aforementioned Adams-Onis Treaty of 1819, while its northern limit was set in 1824 when the USA signed a treaty with Russia dividing their spheres of influence at fifty-four degrees, forty minutes. One year later, Britain and Russia signed a separate treaty along similar lines (Brooks, 1939, pp. 158–165; Bemis, 1965, pp. 273–274; Bailey, pp. 172–175). While American claims to the area were strongest south of the Columbia River, U.S. merchant ships actively traded with coastal Indians, and a few
trappers and settlers had also moved into the area. While British explorers on land and sea, along with a small population of trappers and settlers, had established a stronger claim to the area north of the Columbia, the U.S. based its rival claims on a number of precedents (Bemis, 1965, p. 274; Bailey, p. 221).

To begin with, the USA legally inherited all Spanish claims to Oregon in signing the Adams-Onis Treaty. Spanish penetration of coastal waters had at one time extended at least as far north as Nootka Sound on Vancouver Island. In 1789, the Spanish became embroiled in the Nootka Sound affair when they dismantled a British fur trading post, captured three British vessels, and incarcerated the crews. In the end, the Spanish were forced to back down. But instead of wresting the area from Spain as a follow-up, the British merely announced that they were within their rights to enter and settle any of the unoccupied lands in the vicinity (Bemis, 1965, pp. 87–88; Bailey, pp. 67–68, 221). Thus began a tentative Anglo-Hispanic “joint title” arrangement, similar to the Anglo-American “joint occupation” fashioned almost thirty years later between Britain and the USA.

Since neither power had established a clear legal title by the 1840s, historian Thomas Bailey has argued that each country’s claim essentially was offset by the other’s. While the USA emphasized its inheritance of Spanish claims, Britain pointed to the turnabout at Nootka Sound. (For a detailed description and map illustration of British and American claims in North America’s Pacific Northwest, see Paullin, 1932, pp. 36–37, Plate 49.) The exploits of American explorers such as Captain Robert Gray of the good ship Columbia along with overland travelers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark were countered by the treks of British explorers George Vancouver, James Cook, and Alexander Mackenzie. The establishment of an American fur trading post at Astoria was easily overshadowed by the sprawling monopoly of Hudson’s Bay Company (Meinig, 1993, pp. 59, 63, 65–69, 75–76, 104, 117, 198, 205–206; Bailey, pp. 221–222). Indeed, the Company’s dominance in the area immediately north of the Columbia River was the strongest factor behind British reluctance to abandon the lower Columbia River valley south of the forty-ninth parallel.

Ultimately, an impetuous American President played the leading role in establishing a permanent international boundary in 1846. In his campaign for the Presidency, James K. Polk had implied earlier that the border be located at fifty-four degrees, forty minutes, a latitude reminiscent of the U.S.-Russian treaty of 1824. Such a boundary claim may have left Polk’s supporters ecstatic, but it would have left Canada without a Pacific coastline—a situation hardly acceptable to the British. Amid all the bombast, the war-like cry of “fifty-four-forty or fight!” could be heard across the western frontier. After he was elected, however, Polk made repeated proposals to
the British that the forty-ninth parallel, instead, simply be extended westward to the Pacific. By offering the lower latitude, Polk hoped to project an air of statesmanship. Meanwhile, Britain's determination to keep its holdings immediately north of the Columbia River would appear to be unreasonably stubborn. Polk at first did not get the response he desired. But later on, when he finally demanded the surrender of all of Oregon, threatening war if the British refused the forty-ninth parallel as a compromise, he at last won the argument. Domestic pressures and a desire not to rupture its relations with the USA led Britain to gracefully reconsider its previous stand and to acquiesce (Reeves, 1967, pp. 249–264).

Britain's eventual consent was more the result of demography than of vested economic interests or legal entitlement. Early on, U.S. Secretary of State John C. Calhoun had been right in his insistence that the Oregon question be solved by "wise and masterly inactivity." By the mid-1840s thousands of Americans were living in the Willamette River valley alone while only a few hundred Canadians occupied the region across the Columbia River. The USA had only to wait patiently until an increased population among its settlers gave answer to the Oregon dispute (Bailey, pp. 224–225, 232–233). Borrowing the views of Albert Gallatin, Calhoun also formed a rationale concerning land entitlements. Calhoun considered Britain's comprehensive use of its Nootka Sound defense as dubious as his own country's Spanish claims defense north of the Columbia River. More central to the Oregon question was the fact that rival explorations had earlier secured the Columbia River basin for the USA, and the Fraser River valley for British Canada. By simply extending the forty-ninth parallel to the coast, the two powers would split the difference (Reeves, 1967, pp. 246–249).

Final negotiations awarded all of Vancouver Island to Canada, forcing a radical detour of the international boundary southward through the main channels of the Strait of Georgia, Haro Strait, and then westward again through the Strait of Juan de Fuca. American willingness to give up the southernmost portion of the large island was at least partly based on the successful acquisition of Puget Sound, thereby assuring excellent coastal harborage. Moreover, both powers came to recognize that a fair treaty must surely include joint navigational use of the strategic Strait of Juan de Fuca. The arrangement created a foundation for one of those untidy anomalies in the annals of political geography. Strictly adhering to the forty-ninth parallel en route to the main channel of the Gulf of Georgia, the continental boundary dissected a tiny peninsula whose southern point became U.S. territory. When traveling overland, the local inhabitants of today's town of Point Roberts, Washington must journey through Canada in order to reach the U.S. mainland. Some neighboring Canadians, in the meantime, continue to be mystified by such unyielding commitment to a geometric line (Bemis, 1965, pp. 281–283; Paullin, 1932, 71–72; Plate 96C).
Four years before the Oregon settlement, the British succeeded in getting the better of the USA in resolving a dispute over Maine's northeastern boundary in the Webster-Ashburton Treaty. This was not the first time that the British had experienced success along the northeast border. At the end of the American Revolution more than a half-century earlier, the British had successfully nullified a 1779 American claim to the area well east of the St. John River, or roughly the western half of New Brunswick (Carnes, 2003, p. 97; Hutson, 1980, p. 124; Bemis, 1965, p. 175, 234).

Ever since the Treaty of Paris of 1783, both countries had failed to agree on the location of Maine's border with New Brunswick and Quebec. U.S. unhappiness was apparent when the country refused to accept an 1831 border arbitration by the King of the Netherlands, a vaunted neutral party. The King's territorial allotment to the USA was regarded as stingy indeed. Previous reports that the Dutch monarch was another one of Britain's puppets must certainly be true, after all. Actually, a good opportunity was missed. If only the USA had accepted the royal arbitration, more territory would have been gained than would be forthcoming eleven years later in the final settlement. Not long after the Dutch debacle, the British renewed talks following the failed Uprising of 1837 and the apparent need for a strategic military road connecting Quebec and the ice-free ports of St. John and Halifax. Growing tension culminated in the so-called "Aroostook War" of 1839, when Canadian and U.S. lumbermen engaged in a bloodless skirmish over border territory. To make matters even worse, another border incident had occurred on the Niagara River involving the burning of the American steamer Caroline along with the death of a passenger. The vessel had been engaged in decidedly unneutral arms distribution subsequent to the Canadian insurgent rebellion in 1837. Culminating in violent newspaper attacks and a U.S. courtroom drama known as the "McLeod Affair," the international legal squabble ended anticlimactically, but it at least managed to inspire another round of negotiations (Reeves, 1967, pp. 9–11; Bailey, pp. 199–202, 207–210).

While the American claim spread as far northward as the forty-eighth parallel, the British countered with a claim closer to the forty-sixth parallel. During negotiations, U.S. Secretary of State Daniel Webster came into possession of two maps he interpreted as authentic references to a tentative boundary drawn in 1782 by none other than Benjamin Franklin. Each map indicated a hand-drawn boundary that favored the current British claim. In order to salvage as much of the American claim as possible, Webster urged a hurried compliance among foot-dragging convention delegates from Maine and neighboring Massachusetts, which still had substantial property rights in the area. He sweetened the deal by...
awarding Maine and Massachusetts $150,000 each from the U.S. Treasury. Unbeknownst to Webster, British Minister Ashburton had been prepared to pay the amount with his own country’s funds, but the American delegate was in a hurry (Van Zandt, 1966, pp. 23, 25–28; Bailey, pp. 212–213; Bernis, 1965, pp. 253–256).

Ironically, subsequent map findings in the British Foreign Office and as late as 1933 in Madrid have proved the earlier map discoveries to be spurious. These latter-day maps also supported the American territorial claim almost to the acre. Webster, in his haste to close the deal, gave away 5,000 square miles of pine-forested wilderness (Bailey, pp. 212–214).

Nevertheless, historian Thomas Bailey attempts to redeem Webster by pointing to two minor and one major boundary gain: Webster managed to win two hundred square miles surrounding the headwaters of the nearby Connecticut River. Farther west, he succeeded in obtaining a narrow strip of territory along the northern edge of Vermont and New York. Ashburton generously conceded the one-mile or so strip after it was discovered that an American fort had been mistakenly constructed inside Canada on the shore of Lake Champlain. Known as Fort Montgomery, the installation soon acquired the second name of “Fort Blunder.” And finally, Lord Ashburton lavished on the USA 6,500 square miles of territory in the Lake Superior-Lake of the Woods borderland. As mentioned earlier, Webster managed to fulfill John Jay’s earlier designs on the reticent moose and the industrious beaver—little realizing that tons of iron ore lay underneath a trackless forest. (Bailey, pp. 207–208, 212–214; see also Paullin, 1932, Plate 91B, 93A, D.)

5. The Alaska Boundary Controversy (1903)

Uncharacteristically, Canada’s determination to gobble up much of Alaska’s Panhandle region some time after U.S. purchase of Alaska in 1867 eventually led to the Convention of 1903 during the presidential administration of Theodore Roosevelt. At the time, Canadian expansionists held a particularly strong animus against the USA due in part to a perception of past wrongs, a growing nationalism occasionally frustrated by British authority, and the hope of securing better access to the Klondike gold fields. The legal basis for moving the panhandle border away from the upper slopes of the coast range and downward to the indented shoreline was Canada’s new interpretive reading of the 1825 Anglo-Russian Treaty. The new Canadian demand was widely perceived as virtually groundless. Nonetheless, an irritated President Roosevelt proposed a six-member arbitration panel so long as three of the members were American and the other three were Canadian or British. A majority decision in the matter would require one person from either side to join the
opposition. This is exactly what happened (Bemis, 1965, pp. 423–427; Bailey, pp. 507–510).

The sole British jurist, Lord Alverstone, abandoned his two Canadian colleagues and joined the Americans in a majority decision that largely preserved the established Alaskan boundary. Many Canadians were deeply angered. It appeared that once again the mother country had sacrificed Canadian territorial integrity and even the country's destiny for the good of Anglo-American relations. Few believed Alverstone when he defended his decision as fair and impartial; it was learned later that he had been sympathetic to the American view almost from the beginning. However, His Majesty's representative had played a crucial role in extinguishing the competing American claim, which was located deeper in the Canadian interior. Alverstone's collusion with the Americans on giving up any of the Canadian territory would have been a serious blow. He firmly held his ground against mounting American pressure and preserved the status quo, thereby sparing Canada from further harm in a situation of Canada's own making (Bemis, 1965, pp. 427–428; Bailey, p. 510. See Paullin, 1932, pp. 69–71; Plate 96.)

6. The Political Dynamic

In evaluating each of the major pivot points connected to the formation of the U.S.-Canadian border between the close of the Revolution and the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt, it must be noted that war or the threat of war had a close bearing on diplomatic decision-making. The American colonies' success in their war for independence against Great Britain led to generous territorial concessions but a residual occupation of the new country's northern borderlands due to doubt and uncertainty on both sides. It took another war thirty years later to help resolve the treaty agreements made after the first war.

Following ratification of the Treaty of Ghent in 1815 and the Convention of 1818, the USA, Canada, and Britain came to accept each other's geographic permanence in North America. Later on, border agreements over Maine, Oregon, and Alaska were finally settled as a result of the threat of war. In the case of Maine, border skirmishes warned of more serious action to come. The Oregon question was finally resolved after a bellicose president, James K. Polk, threatened to fight a war over an entire territory, then ratcheted his demand downward, settling for the proverbial half-loaf. Most likely, it had all been a colossal bluff. Polk, it was found out later, had never made the slightest military preparation in the matter. On the other hand, Canada's inflated claims over Alaska's boundary brought down the wrath of another president who seriously intended to move military troops into the Panhandle region if an arbitrated settlement was not to his liking.
In addition to these piece-meal strategies, the diplomatic historian must also be concerned with the motives and the missions of not just two but three political powers. During the late 18th century and throughout the next, Britain at almost every turn was preoccupied with conflicts in Europe and elsewhere that normally warranted greater attention than North American boundary squabbles. It gradually became apparent that maintaining a friendly relationship with the USA helped to ease the burden of imperial rule and ensured fewer conflicts in the Western Hemisphere. Reasonable minds in the USA, in turn, could reflect on how far the republic could go in testing John Bull’s resolve after having confronted Britain in two major wars. No country in the world did more to set limits on American notions of “manifest destiny” than did Great Britain—a country that became more than a lukewarm ally in the decades following the American Civil War. Likewise, no country on earth did more than the USA to spur Canadian nationalism and the desire that the Canadian frontier expand ever westward along the forty-ninth parallel, finally spreading from sea to sea.

References


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