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CONFEDERATION AT THE TIP OF A SWORD

How the Threat of American Aggression Created
the Dominion of Canada

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Throughout the nineteenth century American expansion was aggressive and unbridled, causing fear throughout the Western Hemisphere. This was especially true for British North America, which had a history of dealing with American antagonism and repelling American invasion.¹ By the time the American Civil War began in 1861, British North America had dealt with eighty-six years of American ill will. In the four years of the American Civil War, tensions between British North America and the United States increased to the point where the British colonists sought the reorganization of the provinces as a means of greater defense against aggression. In terms of how significantly the American threat affected British North American Confederation, as the historian Alfred Leroy Burt noted “it is more than doubtful...there could have been a Dominion of Canada then or for a long time afterward, if at all, without the Civil War.”²

The threat of American aggression not only significantly affected the overall Confederation process, but also impacted the debates convened for the explicit purpose of arguing for and against union. Within these debates, the supporters of union used the American threat as the foundation to launch an argument for an increased defense through union. More significantly, those who *opposed* union also made consistent references to the American threat, even while attempting to disprove any benefits of union. American aggression clearly impacted the creation of the Dominion of Canada because both proponents *and* opponents spoke of the very real

¹The nation now known as the Dominion of Canada was created in 1867. Prior to this date the entirety of what we now call Canada was known as British North America. As shown in Fig.1 British North America constituted several provinces situated in the northern region of the continent. In accordance with the plan for Confederation, the provinces were reorganized in 1867 as demonstrated in Fig. 2.

²Alfred Leroy Burt, *Short History of Canada for Americans*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1942), 173.

danger to British North America during the key debates within the Confederation process.

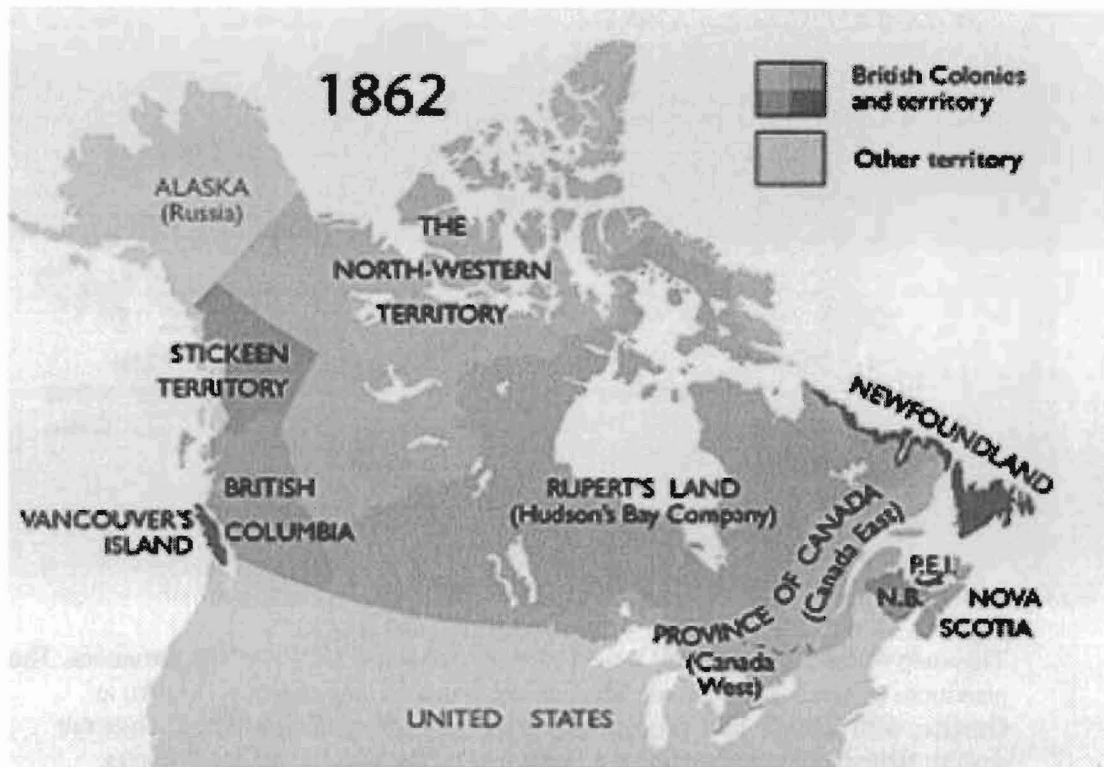


Fig. 1.³

This map of British North America in 1862 shows the separation of the British colonies and territories. In the east, the province of Canada was divided in two sections: Canada West (also known as Upper Canada) and Canada East (also known as Lower Canada). The provinces of New Brunswick (here stated as N.B.), Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island (here stated as P.E.I.) were collectively known as the Maritime Provinces. Other territory under the realm of Queen Victoria included British Columbia, Rupert's Land (owned by the Hudson's Bay Company), Stickeen Territory, and Vancouver's Island.

³Canadian Geographic, "Mapping Canada,"
<<http://www.canadiangeographic.ca/mapping/mappingcanada/main.htm>>, April 3, 2003

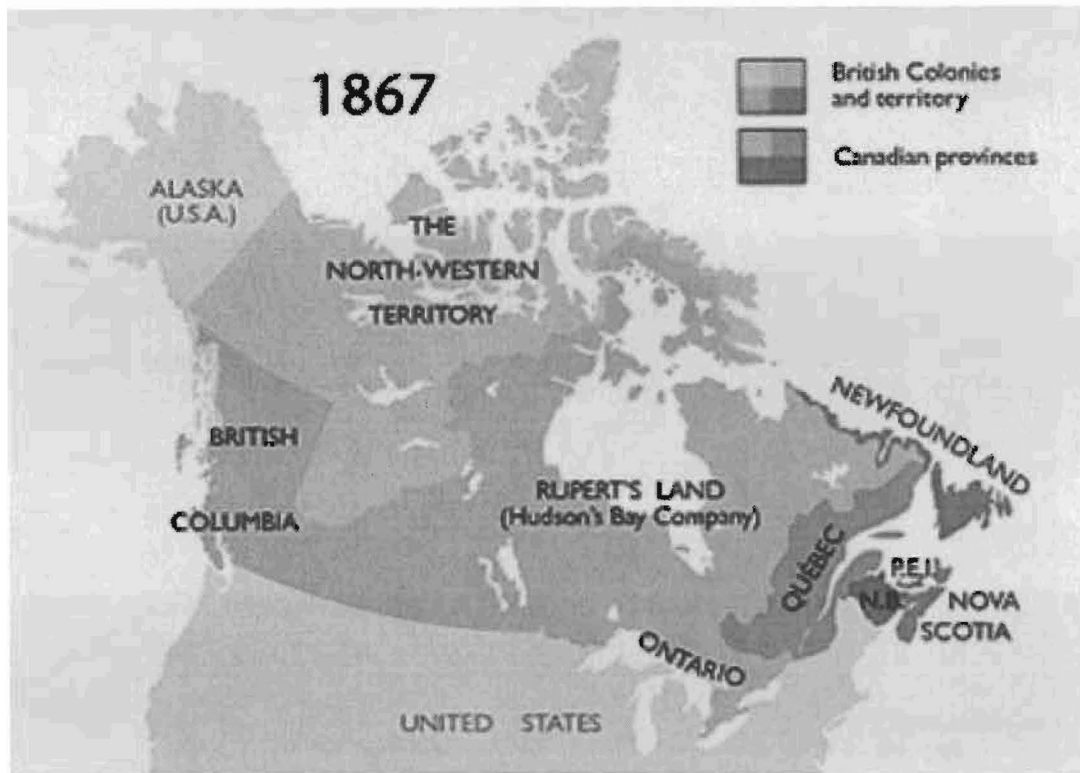


Fig.2⁴

This map of the Dominion of Canada reflects the name changes of the provinces. The provinces referred to as Canada West on the previous map, now was known as Ontario, with Canada East becoming Quebec. As the key demonstrates, while the eastern British colonies became the Dominion of Canada, the other territories remained under British rule. The Stickeen Territory and the province of Vancouver's Island were incorporated into the larger colony of British Columbia. British Columbia joined the Dominion of Canada in 1871. The North-western Territory and Rupert's Land remained unchanged after Confederation until 1869 when the Hudson's Bay Company sold Rupert's Land to the Canadian government. The following year, Great Britain transferred control of the North-western Territory to Canada. Three years after Confederation and its creation, the Dominion of Canada controlled the northern-most region of North America, with the exception of Alaska and the Arctic Islands.

On February 9, 1865, Thomas D'Arcy McGee, a great Canadian orator and statesman from Montreal West, Lower Canada, spoke to the Canadian provincial parliament and quoted what he claimed was the "usual and favorite motto" of the United States: "No pent up Utica contracts our powers, But the whole boundless

⁴Canadian Geographic, "Mapping Canada,"
<<http://www.canadiangeographic.ca/mapping/mappingcanada/main.htm>>, April 3, 2003

continent is ours.”⁵ Not only did this “motto” address the issue of American expansion, but the American desire to devour other countries that stood in its path, until the United States possessed sole control of the North American continent. By the time that McGee spoke in 1865, the United States had already invaded Canada twice,⁶ conquered Mexico during the Mexican American War, and proved the reality of manifest destiny to North American peoples. McGee described the American threat and its development throughout the nineteenth century:

There has always been a desire amongst them [Americans] for the acquisition of new territory...they coveted Florida, and seized it, they coveted Louisiana, and purchased it, they coveted Texas, and stole it, and they picked a quarrel with Mexico which ended by their getting California...The acquisition of Canada was the first ambition of the American confederacy, and never ceased to be so, when her troops were a handful and her navy scarce a squadron. Is it likely to be stopped now, when she counts her guns afloat by the thousands and her troops by hundreds of thousands?⁷

McGee demonstrated that American expansionist aims required immediate attention by the provinces, especially given the historical aggression toward Canada and the military strength of the United States increased during the war.

Almost from the start of the Civil War, the American conflict involved British North America. Prior to the shots at Fort Sumter, William H. Seward, the American Secretary of State, commented that internal conflict between the North and the South could be averted if “the Lord would only give the United States an excuse for a war

⁵Provincial Parliament of Canada, Assembly, Hon. Thomas D’Arcy McGee, Minister of Agriculture, *Parliament Debates on the Subject of the Confederation of the British North American Provinces*, 8th Provincial Parliament, 3rd sess. (9 February 1865): 143. From this point forward, the Canadian provincial parliament debates will be documented in the footnotes as “*Parliament Debates*” with the name of the speaker, the date, and the page number of the reference.

⁶American invasions of British North America occurred during the American Revolution in the winter of 1775-1776 and during the War of 1812.

⁷*Parliament Debates*, McGee, (9 February 1865): 132

with England...”⁸ With the onset of a foreign conflict, American public attention would be drawn away from a looming domestic conflict and united against a foreign opponent. While Great Britain remained officially neutral throughout the American struggle, it did not deny the existence of the Confederacy and actually received Southern emissaries, thereby infuriating the North.⁹ Those who supported the Union directed their animosity not only toward Great Britain, but at the British North American colonies as well. To avoid a sectional conflict between the North and the South, Seward desired inciting them “to abandon their dispute, and to combine their forces in a wholly unprovoked attack upon the British colony of Canada.”¹⁰ Prior to the start of hostilities in America, the threat of American aggression to avoid internal war intensified the colonial fear that the United States would invade its neighbor to the North for a third time.

Although Seward did not get his wish for an immediate foreign war to postpone domestic hostilities, lingering anxiety remained in the provinces over this real threat to their security.¹¹ A British diplomat stationed in Washington D.C. commented that conflict still remained a possibility because to Americans, British North America was the weak point in the British Empire and any loss of territory to the south due to the war could be compensated by northern expansion.¹² Throughout the British colonies, news of the American Civil War was widespread. According to historian Robin W. Winks,

⁸Robin Winks, *Canada and the United States: The Civil War Years* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1960), 34.

⁹Burt, *Short History of Canada*, 173.

¹⁰Norman B. Ferris, *The Trent Affair: A Diplomatic Crisis* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1977), 92.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 173.

¹²Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 35. and Ferris, *Trent Affair*, 96.

most provincial newspapers devoted at least a page of each issue to American news, and some had several pages devoted to battle reports, troop movements, and political speeches... The significant fact is not whether the news was correct or not, but that there was an overwhelming demand for it.¹³

With such an attention-grabbing situation brewing south of them, people in British North America contemplated whether a reorganization of the provinces would improve their defense against any foreign aggressor, specifically the United States.¹⁴

From 1861 to 1865 the American threat increased because of several events which had the potential of dragging both Great Britain and British North America into a conflict with the United States. Some of these events directly involved Great Britain and the United States, with the possibility of entangling British North America due to its colonial status within the British Empire. Other incidents primarily impacted British North America and the United States, with the likelihood of expanding to include Great Britain as the colonizing nation. In either case, these events severely complicated diplomacy between these nations, and increased the tension within British North America due to her close proximity to the United States.

Even the thought of the war's conclusion did not allay British North American fear regarding America. The historian D.G. Creighton stressed the British North American concern that "if the North won the war, it might, flushed with victory, turn upon British America and exact a terrible revenge. If it lost the war, it might 'seek on the St. Lawrence an indemnity for what it had lost on the Potomac'."¹⁵ Regardless of

¹³Ibid., 16.

¹⁴D.G Creighton, *The Road to Confederation: The Emergence of Canada: 1863-1867* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1965) 8.

¹⁵Ibid., 83. This opinion was also shared by D.P. Crook who wrote "Victory for either section [Union or the Confederacy] posed a perilous situation: Confederate independence would destroy the power equilibrium on the continent, and make Canada a tempting object of revanchist anger in the north. A union triumph might spur annexationist designs on the part of an overweening and ambitious

the conclusion of the war, the United States clearly threatened British North America during the 1860s. To some people, this threat remained long after the end of the Civil War. McGee claimed that Archbishop John Hughes of New York noted that Americans “will be eminently a military people. ...they will have the power to strike when they please...as long as they have the power they must go onward; for it is the very nature of power to grip whatever is within its reach...”¹⁶ British North America was definitely within the territorial reach of the United States and with the increased power of the American military during a period of hostilities, like the Civil War, this American threat created intense fear. This environment was the setting for the debates on British North American Confederation.

From this nature of Canadian-American relations, historian Alfred Leroy Burt noted that the Confederation of British North America “was born, as it was conceived, in fear”¹⁷ In 1864, the five eastern British North American provinces convened at two conferences in the cities of Charlottetown and Quebec to create a plan for union.¹⁸ Upon the conclusion of the Quebec conference, the representatives returned to their respective legislatures to debate and vote on the plan, known as the Quebec Resolutions. Once the provincial parliaments decided upon the Resolutions,¹⁹

neighbor. The war, in any case, was bringing about the creation of mighty armies in North America, a prospect feared by the militarily insecure Canadians for half a century.” D.P. Crook, *The North, the South, and the Powers: 1861-1865*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974): 68.

¹⁶ *Parliament Debates*, McGee, (9 February 1865): 145.

¹⁷ Burt, *Short History of Canada*, 173-4.

¹⁸ Canada, New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island.

¹⁹ The individual provincial parliaments would not have the ability to amend the Resolutions and instead would only be able to vote in support or in opposition on the entire Confederation scheme. This was decided because the resolutions were considered a treaty between the provinces and Great Britain, and therefore the provincial legislatures only had the authority to ratify the treaty as opposed to amend it.

each would commit representatives to carry the plan to the British Parliament for its debate and subsequent authorization.

Scholarship has been divided over the relationship between the American Civil War and British North American Confederation. One group of historians, including Ged Martin and D.G. Creighton, argued that Confederation was *not* created by the American Civil War. Martin stressed that Confederation was not created from the tension arising from the American Civil War, although the intensity of the Confederation process was affected.²⁰ Creighton agreed, believing that while the American Civil War did not cause Confederation, it increased the urgency to achieve the goals of union.²¹ Rather than stressing fear of American aggression as the determining factor in the Confederation process, these historians emphasized that Confederation solved deep political divides within the province of Canada, which had sectional conflicts between political parties as well as between French-Canadian and British-Canadian ethnic groups.

Similar to Alfred Leroy Burt's opinion, other historians such as John Bartlett Brebner and Chester Martin argued that Confederation was indeed caused by the fear which resulted from the Civil War. Brebner stressed that the principle cause of Confederation was fear of American aggression,²² and Martin claimed that without the American aggression, Confederation would not have been attained in the 1860s, *if at all*.²³ Two historians, G.P. Browne and Reginald Trotter specifically highlighted

²⁰Ged Martin, *Britain and the Origins of Canadian Confederation, 1837-1867* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1995), 12.

²¹Creighton, *Road to Confederation*, 222.

²²John Bartlett Brebner, *North Atlantic Triangle: The Interplay of Canada, the United States and Great Britain*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1945) 169.

²³Chester Martin, "The United States and Canadian Nationality," *The Canadian Historical Review* 18 (March 1937), 5.

the importance of the defense within the Confederation process. Browne contended that the critical force behind Confederation was the tension created through the American Civil War.²⁴ Trotter agreed, reasoning that defense against American aggression was the most influential of the motivations for union.²⁵

Despite the varied opinions regarding the degree of causality, historians agreed on the effectual relationship between the threat of American aggression created by the Civil War and the Confederation of British North America. However, historians have *not* specifically looked at the effect of American aggression on a specific portion of the Confederation process, namely the debates held in the provincial parliaments. Browne and Trotter, while emphasizing the importance of defense within the process, did *not* examine the role of American aggression in the rhetoric of Confederation debates. When examining both supporting and opposing arguments in the provincial parliament debates, the influence of American aggression on the debates, and in turn the overall movement, assumed new prominence providing strong support for the argument that fear of American invasion was at the heart of the decision by British North America to form a Confederation.

In February and March of 1865, the Canadian provincial parliament convened to debate the plan for Confederation, thereby being the first of the legislatures to do so formally. Due to its status as the first of the formal debates held by the provincial governments, this series of debates was the first true “test” of the plan. How the scheme fared during these debates impacted how the following provincial legislatures

²⁴G.P. Browne, *Documents on the Confederation of British North America*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1969) xviii.

²⁵Reginald Trotter, “Some American Influences Upon the Canadian Federation Movement.” *The Canadian Historical Review* 10 (September 1924), 224.

addressed the issues, and therefore the arguments for and against it were intrinsically important to Confederation's final outcome.²⁶

Given the significance of these debates on the entire process, what role did the threatening situation brewing with America have on the arguments? With a similar opinion as that of Martin and Creighton, historian Arthur Hugh Urquhart Colquhoun noted that

The situation which arose out of the Civil War in the United States neither created nor carried Confederation, but it resulted, through a sense of common danger, in bringing the British provinces together and in giving full play to all the forces that were making for their union.²⁷

As Colquhoun stressed, the threat posed by the United States was a large component of the arguments in favor of union. However, more surprisingly, American aggression also played a role in the arguments *against* Confederation. Throughout the debates of February and March of 1865, the American threat was apparent 1) because supporters directly linked several areas strengthened by Confederation to the defense of the new nation, and more importantly 2) because *opponents* consistently referred to the American threat even while attempting to disprove the benefits of union.²⁸ The fact that the American threat was central to the arguments both for and against confederation disproves Colquhoun's statement regarding causality. By affecting both the arguments for and against Confederation, the threat of American aggression carried Confederation and the subsequent creation of the Dominion of Canada.

²⁶The debates that occurred in the Canadian Provincial Parliament during February and March of 1865 are reported in a 1032 page record entitled *The Parliamentary Debates on the Subject of the Confederation of the British North American Provinces*.

²⁷Landon, *American Civil War*, 55.

²⁸All of the supporters and opponents to Confederation quoted in this analysis were members of the Canadian provincial parliament.

Colquhoun did state accurately that the Canadian-American hostility that increased throughout the American Civil War clearly affected the Confederation process; however, the decades preceding this conflict demonstrated long-standing American desire for Canada. Only through examination of the historical ill will between the United States and British North America prior to and during the Civil War, can the full magnitude of the American threat be recognized. Furthermore, the substantial increase of American military power during the Civil War brought about a frightening realism to the success of future American aggression. Once this threat is established, the role of intense American aggression can be analyzed within the arguments supporting and opposing Confederation in the Canadian provincial parliament debates.

1775-1865: Years of Animosity and Ill Will

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Great Britain and France established rival colonies on the territory now known as the United States and Canada. Territorial disputes arose between the two colonial powers, ultimately resulting in the French and Indian War. After its victory over the French, Great Britain expanded its control throughout the eastern half of North America. According to historian Samuel Flagg Bemis, this British victory formed “the immediate setting... which brought forth the independence of the United States,”²⁹ American independence in turn created the environment for a rivalry between the remaining British colonies and the United States.

²⁹Samuel Flagg Bemis, *The Diplomacy of the American Revolution*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1935), 6.

Beginning with an American invasion in 1775 and increasing towards a potential invasion by the American military juggernaut during Civil War, the American resolve to obtain Canada and the American disregard for Canadian territorial integrity steadily increased over time. During the American Revolution, thirteen British colonies rebelled against Great Britain and united to fight for their collective independence as the United States of America. With the British siege of Boston under way in the fall of 1775, over a thousand American soldiers marched north with the goal of adding “the Fourteenth colony,” the province of Lower Canada, to the rebellion.³⁰ Historian Donald F. Warner noted the significance of the military campaign because the siege of Boston required immediate attention and in spite of this, American troops invaded Canada.³¹ After marching through Lower Canada, the American siege of Quebec city began in December 1775. Despite an attempt to overrun the city, the American forces suffered losses due to the fighting, as well as many cases of smallpox, and eventually retreated from Lower Canada in May 1776.³²

Following the addition of France in the Revolutionary War, in the fall of 1778, the Continental Congress created a plan for a joint French and American invasion of Canada scheduled for the following spring. Before any invasion preparations, General Washington condemned the plan doubting that French troops would surrender Canada after invasion.³³ Towards the end of the war, General Washington reversed his opinion regarding Canadian invasion and created new plans for attack in 1780 and 1781. This time the French military rejected invasion citing

³⁰Donald F. Warner, *The Idea of Continental Union*. (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1960), 1.

³¹Warner, *Idea of Continental Union*, 1.

³²Burt, *Short History of Canada*, 78.

³³*Ibid.*, 82-3.

that its army should focus on taking the British headquarters and securing American independence rather than a conquest of Canada.³⁴

With the end of the American Revolution, the United States continued to seek the annexation of Canada; during peace negotiations after the war, Benjamin Franklin requested that England should “for the sake of reconciliation and her future interest...give up every part of Canada.”³⁵ Although Franklin failed, the new American government incorporated political efforts to obtain Canada within its Articles of Confederation. Article XI specifically addressed British North America:

Canada acceding to this confederation, and adjoining in the measures of the United States, shall be admitted into, and entitled to all the advantages of the Union; but no other colony shall be admitted into the same, unless such admission be agreed to by nine states.³⁶

Article XI demonstrated the American obsession with Canada: any other colony desirous of admission needed approval of a majority of the states, whereas Canada needed no such approval and would be immediately welcomed. Throughout the eighteenth century, during its fight for independence and the subsequent establishment of its government, the United States clearly focused on obtaining Canada either through military, diplomatic, or political means.

In 1812, the United States waged another war with Great Britain. While the conflict did not directly involve the British North American colonies, President James Madison considered British North America to be so leveraged that when endangered

³⁴Bemis, *Diplomacy*, 200.

³⁵Bemis, *Diplomacy*, 207-8.

³⁶The United States Constitution Online, “Articles of Confederation”
<<http://www.usconstitution.net/articles.html#Article11>>, April 12, 2003.

would force Great Britain to eliminate its “offending” policies.³⁷ Believing that Upper Canadians would support them, Americans altered their invasion to begin with a three-pronged attack in Upper Canada heading towards the cities of Montréal and Quebec; this change contributed to the invasion’s failure, since the Upper Canadians did not support the American invasion and actually fought to repel those American attacks.³⁸ While this second American invasion of Canada failed, it left its mark on British North America and its people: according to Alfred Leroy Burt in his *Short History of Canada for Americans*, “Canadians have never been able to forget the fight to save their country from being conquered by the United States.”³⁹

After the War of 1812, British North America and the United States remained on relatively peaceful terms until 1837. In that year a Canadian named William Lyon Mackenzie attempted to overthrow the British provincial government in Upper Canada in favor of a republic.⁴⁰ After the failure of his rebellion, Mackenzie fled to the United States, where news of his failed rebellion succeeded in sparking a patriotic American reaction. Many Americans saw the democratic goals of Mackenzie’s rebellion as very similar to those of the American Revolution,⁴¹ and began to channel their sympathy for the rebels into direct action.

In December 1837, Mackenzie returned to Canada with the aid of American followers and occupied Navy Island in the Niagara River, setting up a provisional government. An American sympathizer, who owned a ship named the *Caroline*, used

³⁷Reginald C. Stuart “Canada, Indians, and Defensive Expansionism,” in *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations*, ed. Dennis Merrill and Thomas G. Paterson, Vol. 1, 5th ed. 158-163. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 115.

³⁸Warner, *Idea of Continental Union*, 3.

³⁹Burt, *Short History of Canada*, 107.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 153-5.

⁴¹Albert Bickmore Corey, *The Crisis of 1830-1842 in Canadian American Relations*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941), ix.

his ship to transport food and supplies from the United States to the rebels on Navy Island. In response to this direct American support for rebellion against British rule, Canadian and British troops destroyed the ship while she sat in New York waters, killing an American in the process. The populations of British North America and the United States became enraged over the situation, and called up their respective militias for the defense of their borders. As historian Albert Bickmore Corey noted, “The attack upon this ship was chiefly responsible for the widespread spirit of retaliation in the United States,”⁴² which, when combined with the historical American obsession with obtaining Canada, only increased tensions between the two nations later on in the mid-nineteenth century.

With the start of the American Civil War, the power of the American military substantially increased in comparison to that of military during the American Revolution and the War of 1812. For instance, the size of the American military during the American Revolution and the War of 1812 was 217,000 and 286,730 men, respectively. The total amount of servicemen who fought in the American Civil War was 2,213,363, a significantly larger force than those of the two previous wars in which America invaded Canada.⁴³ British North America repelled two American invasions, but the size of an American invasion either during or following the Civil War would have been astronomical in comparison, and therefore much more difficult to repel. It was this increased military power that provided the realistic basis behind the increased threat of American aggression. Not only did the Americans “bang the drums of war” in the general direction of British North American during the Civil

⁴²Ibid., 61,

⁴³Department of Veterans Affairs, “America’s Wars,”
<<http://www.va.gov/pressrel/amwars.htm>> April 22, 2003

War, but they had the military manpower and tools of war to back up their warmongering.

With the considerable size of the American military looming in the background, three key events of the American Civil War (the *Trent* Affair, the *Chesapeake* Incident, and the St. Albans Raid) created more heightened anxiety in Canadian-American relations. Historian D.P. Crook noted “rumor, suspicion, and mutual ill-will had poisoned the atmosphere,”⁴⁴ even before November 1861, when the newly formed Confederate States of America sent two emissaries, James Mason and John Slidell, to Europe via the neutral port of Havana. James Mason was to be the Confederate diplomat in London, while John Slidell traveled to Paris. Upon leaving Havana on a British mail ship, the *Trent*, an American naval vessel stopped the *Trent*, arrested the two Confederates and returned them to the North where the two men were imprisoned.

In British North America, Robin W. Winks claimed, this action was an “affront to Britishers (*sic*) everywhere. It was chiefly an imperial affair, they admitted, but one in which the provinces as a potential battlefield, were vitally interested.”⁴⁵ As a “potential battlefield,” British North America prepared for the worst. The urgent situation motivated the Governor-General of British North America, Charles Stanley Monck, to strengthen the provincial defenses immediately. Word from London eventually arrived in the British colonies in the form 10,000 reinforcements,⁴⁶ increased fortifications of Canadian cities Quebec and Montreal,

⁴⁴Crook, *North*, 120.

⁴⁵Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 101.

⁴⁶Crook, *North*, 143.

and the dispatch of a fleet of naval vessels to the Great Lakes.⁴⁷ Monck also pushed through a new Militia Act for the provinces, which allowed him to order men to defend the border against any military attack, either war or insurrection. To many people, it seemed that Secretary of State Seward created the *Trent* Affair to provoke a war which would lead to an invasion of Canada.⁴⁸

The second event of the American Civil War that contributed to tense relations between British North America and the United States was the *Chesapeake* Incident of December 1863. A group of Confederate sympathizers, including both Americans and Canadians, plotted to seize the American ship, the *Chesapeake*, and convert her into a Confederate privateer to prey on Northern shipping. Eventually two American warships, the *Ella* and the *Anne* caught the hijacked *Chesapeake* and arrested the conspirators following their attempts to sell the *Chesapeake*'s cargo in a Nova Scotia port.

By seizing the *Chesapeake* in British North American waters, the American warships had clearly violated international law and demonstrated disregard for British North American territorial integrity. American officials such as the Secretary of War, Gideon Wells, and Secretary of State Seward attempted to reduce the growing tension over the issue by ordering the prisoners to be turned over to British North American authorities. Despite these attempts to defuse the situation, America and British North America reacted in similar manners to this event: both nations improved their

⁴⁷Ferris, *Trent Affair*, 65.

⁴⁸Winks, *Canada and the United States*, 71-9. D.P. Crook also noted that "Anger blossomed under the assumptions that the act had been deliberately planned by Washington..." Crook, *North*, 121. Historian Norman Ferris cited Lord Palmertson, the Prime Minister of Great Britain, "there was no doubt that Seward is actuated in his Conduct towards us by the Belief that Canada is insufficiently defended." Ferris, *Trent Affair*, 44.

defensive capabilities in the face of growing tension.⁴⁹ British North America strongly requested the presence of a British warship in the port of Halifax to deter belligerents. Passengers traveling on Northern vessels needed special passports to board the ships, and Union warships patrolled New England harbors prior to vessels' departures.

In October 1864, a group of pro-Confederate raiders crossed the Canadian border and seized the town of St. Albans, Vermont in the name of the Confederate States of America. After robbing the three banks in St. Albans and terrorizing its people, the raiders attempted to set the town on fire and then fled into neutral Canada. Regardless of Canadian jurisdiction, a posse of Americans crossed the border, captured and severely beat several raiders who had incorrectly assumed they were protected once they entered neutral British North America. In addition to the civilian posse formed to capture the raiders, American General John A. Dix ordered "troops to St. Albans, to find the raiders, and to 'pursue them into Canada if necessary and destroy them.'"⁵⁰ As word of the raid spread, Dix's order was condemned in British North America because it defied British North American neutrality and authorized American disregard of Canadian territorial integrity.

Similar to his reaction to the *Trent* Affair, after the St. Albans Raid, Governor-General Monck immediately ordered the local militia to defend the borders and to capture the remaining raiders. The Governor of Vermont, assuming that there would be additional raids, ordered the frontier to be guarded by the state militia.⁵¹ Many Northerners considered the attack to be solely Canadian upon the North, and therefore

⁴⁹Ibid., 246-61.

⁵⁰Ibid., 295-302.

⁵¹Ibid., 300-2.

urged retaliation of some sort⁵² As was the case with the *Trent* Affair and the *Chesapeake* Incident, the St. Albans Raid increased Canadian-American tensions, intensifying Northern animosity toward the neighbors to the north, and further reinforcing British North American fear of American aggression.

With the *Chesapeake* Incident and the St. Albans Raid, the United States military did not invade British North America, as it had done in the American Revolution and the War of 1812. However, these events increased the threat of potential invasion, one that was far more menacing due to the size of the American military during the Civil War. The provinces could not afford to ignore this threat of American aggression, a threat that was far more perilous during the American Civil War than it had been in the preceding crises. It was within this context that in October 1864, representatives from five British North American provinces met in the city of Quebec to plan for Confederation. At the Quebec Conference, the provinces created a plan for union; less than five months after the St. Albans Raid, the Canadian provincial parliament debated this scheme. In the preceding four years, British North America had witnessed an openly hostile United States that defied international law and the British North American boundary to obtain its goals.

This threat to British North America was the setting in which the members of the Canadian provincial parliament debated Confederation, and they in turn emphasized the threat of American aggression in both the arguments supporting and opposing union.

⁵²Ibid., 334.

ARGUMENTS FOR CONFEDERATION

In the Canadian provincial parliament, the supporters of Confederation demonstrated that British North America would benefit in multiple ways from a union of the provinces. The advantages of Confederation included five themes: internal growth, maritime addition, British connection, economic autonomy, and national strength. Those members of parliament in favor of Confederation linked the different advantages to the need for a strengthened defense, thereby using the American threat to accentuate the overall necessity for Confederation.

Internal Growth

Advocates believed that the Confederation of British North America would bring about substantial internal growth. In four specific areas of expansion (population, immigration, territory, and interprovincial transportation and communication) supporters drew forth examples which clearly linked the post-Confederation internal growth to increased defensive strength.

In terms of population, advocates of Confederation argued that through union a great deal of manpower would be created to constitute a considerable and more effective defensive force than provided by the smaller provincial militias. John H. Cameron, a representative from Peel in Upper Canada, addressed the importance of population when he said "...the course most likely to save us from attack is that we should... put ourselves – a people of four millions as we will be when united together, - in a position to defend our liberties from whatever quarter they may be

attacked.”⁵³ A member of parliament from Cataraqui, Upper Canada, Alexander Campbell emphasized this importance of a united population specifically with regards to the American threat: “If we could say to the United States that we had the control of four millions of people to guard our frontier and repel attack, would not that form a strong barrier of defence?”⁵⁴ It was apparent that by combining the populace from each province, British North America would have a significant force of fighting men to defend its borders and increase its defensive strength. Furthermore, supporters recognized that not only would union provide an immediate increase of population, but also growth over time through a rise in immigration. Of course, proponents of union demonstrated that this increase in immigration would also improve defense for the new nation.

In making his initial speech in support of Confederation, the representative from South Oxford, Upper Canada, George Brown, spoke about immigration: “I go for a union of the provinces because it will give a new start to immigration into our country. It will...bring to our shores a stream of immigration greater...than we ever had before.”⁵⁵ The influence of the current relations between the United States and British North America was obvious when Brown later stressed the link between immigration and the defense of British North America: “in this question of immigration is found the only true solution to the problem of defence. Fill up our vacant lands, double our population and we will at once be in a position to meet promptly and effectually any invader who may put his foot with hostile intent upon

⁵³*Parliament Debates*, Hon. John H. Cameron, (13 March 1865): 964-5.

⁵⁴*Parliament Debates*, Hon. Alexander Campbell, (17 February 1865): 294.

⁵⁵*Parliament Debates*, Assembly, Hon. George Brown, (8 February 1865): 102.

our soil.”⁵⁶ The unification of the colonies created a great population and strengthened the means of defense even without an increase in immigration. However after Confederation, supporters believed that immigrants would be desirous of making a fresh start in the new country, would resettle in British North America as well as pick up arms to defend it. In order to accommodate this influx of immigrants, supporters of Confederation emphasized an increase in another internal area: territory.

The Confederation plan allowed for the possibility of future territorial expansion.⁵⁷ The great expanse known as the North-western Territory primarily included land known as Rupert’s Land. In 1857, the British government commissioned an investigation into the land holdings of the British development company called the Hudson’s Bay Company, which owned Rupert’s Land. This inquiry found that Rupert’s Land was appropriate for settlement, and should be sold to Great Britain and incorporated into British North America.⁵⁸ Supporters of union saw the potential of substantial territorial increase and the many advantages that it brought to the new nation. Alexander Mackenzie, representing Lampton Upper Canada, duly noted this importance:

And when we look to the vast territory we have in the North-West; when we know that the great rivers which flow through that territory, flow through immense beds of coal, and that the whole country is rich in mineral deposits of all kinds – petroleum, copper, gold, and iron; that the land is teeming with resources of wealth calculated to build up an extensive and valuable commerce, and support a powerful nation...I think we can look forward with hope to a prodigious

⁵⁶Ibid., 103.

⁵⁷Resolution number 10 of the Quebec Resolutions stated that “The North-West Territory, British Columbia and Vancouver shall be admitted into the Union on such terms and conditions as the Parliament of the Federated Provinces shall deem equitable...” *Parliament Debates*, Quebec Resolutions, (13 March 1865): 1027.

⁵⁸Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, “A Brief History of the Hudson’s Bay Company” <http://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/archives/hbca/about/the-bay.html>, April 10, 2003.

increase in our population and an immense development of strength and power.⁵⁹

By increasing its strength and power through Confederation, British North America's new position as a unified nation would change the nature of its diplomacy; other foreign nations (i.e. the United States) would contend with a strong British North America, more impressive than its former existence as separate provinces.⁶⁰

Furthermore, expansion into the North-western Territory increased defense for British North America by blocking expansionistic America from moving northward.

Alexander Morris, a supporter of union from South Lanark, Upper Canada, focused on this important addition to British North American security:

If Canadians are to stand still and allow American energy and enterprise to press on as it is doing towards that country, the inevitable result must be that that great section of territory will be taken possession of by the citizens of the neighboring states... I think it was a wise foresight on the part of the gentleman who prepared this plan now before us...that they regarded the development of the North-West as necessary for the security and the promotion of the best interests of British North America.⁶¹

Therefore the territorial expansion brought on by the Confederation of British North America not only provided the new nation with a great expanse of land, but as Morris demonstrated, it also allowed the new nation to unify its position on the continent and reduce the opportunity for the United States to expand.

With the future annexation of the North-western Territory, the new nation would span the width of the continent. In order for such a nation to exist and thrive, a new means of communication and transportation was necessary. Within the plan of Confederation, an Intercolonial Railway would unite the main provinces of the east

⁵⁹ *Parliament Debates*, Mr. Alexander MacKenzie, (23 February 1865): 436.

⁶⁰ *Parliament Debates*, Mr. William McGiverin, (24 February 1865): 469.

⁶¹ *Parliament Debates*, Mr. Alexander Morris, (23 February 1865): 443-4.

and then expand in proportion to the territorial expansion of the country. An additional strong point in favor of the Intercolonial Railway was that it would greatly increase the defense of the provinces. Supporters of Confederation cited the American Civil War as evidence for the usefulness of railroads during hostilities. The representative from Victoria, Upper Canada, Thomas Ryan, noted that

in the war which is now going on in the United States...it has been proved that railways can be easily broken up, it has also been proved that they can easily be relaid, and the value set upon them by military men is clearly exemplified by the struggles they make to gain or to retain possession of them.⁶²

In the case of attack, the Intercolonial Railway could be used to shift the British North American army and its supplies throughout the provinces even during the harsh Northern winters, and ensured fast communication for key information throughout the provinces.

During the winter months, frozen waterways and harsh winter conditions left the inland province of Canada isolated not only from the Maritime Provinces but also from Great Britain and the international community via Atlantic ports. With the St. Lawrence River closed to navigation and temperatures making cross country travel unbearable, anything bound for Great Britain or other foreign nations was forced to travel through American territory in order to reach coastal ports. With the advent of the American Civil War and the rise of tension between British North America and the United States, the province of Canada focused on relieving this dependence on America. Brown noted that “it is not to be denied that the position of Canada, shut off as she is from the sea-board during the winter months, is far from satisfactory...”⁶³

⁶²*Parliament Debates*, Hon. Thomas Ross, (20 February 1865): 337.

⁶³*Parliament Debates*, Brown (8 February 1865): 107.

The remedy to this problem, an Intercolonial Railway, improved transportation and communication within the provinces by allowing movement during the most extreme winter conditions.

The Intercolonial Railway provided not only an increased means of transportation and communication throughout the provinces during peacetime, but its usefulness dramatically reduced the vulnerability of British North America during the winter. As George Etienne Cartier, a union advocate from Montreal East, Lower Canada, stated, “At present...this system was insufficient, and for winter communication with the sea-board we were left to the caprice of our American neighbors, through whose territory we must pass.”⁶⁴ After Confederation and the creation of the Intercolonial Railway, British North America would no longer rely upon America for vital transportation and communication. No longer would the provinces have separate militias unable to move to other colonies if needed. No longer would the winter weather hinder or completely halt the vital transportation of troops and information. Supporters argued that in order to mount an effective defense, British North America needed the Intercolonial Railway provided through Confederation.

In all, the proponents of Confederation predicted that the new nation could grow in regards to population, immigration, territory, and interprovincial communication and transportation. While this internal growth carried various advantages, advocates of union demonstrated that it also significantly affected British North American capabilities for self-defense and its ability to thwart any American attempt at Northward expansion.

⁶⁴*Parliament Debates*, Hon. George Etienne Cartier, (7 February 1865): 55.

Maritime Annexation

After Confederation, the inland province of Canada would join the Maritime Provinces to create a nation with a long Atlantic coast and a large amount of inland territory. Supporters argued that the annexation of the Maritime Provinces was vital to the independence of the new nation because it would reduce British North American susceptibility to both land and naval attacks.

Confederation supporters recognized the strategic importance of uniting the province of Canada and the Maritime Provinces. Between the four Maritime Provinces there was a multitude of coastal cities and open harbors, which could not only support a navy (should the need for one arise) but also could defend the new nation from a naval attack by a foreign aggressor. This importance was noted in several speeches which also included thinly veiled references to the possibility of an American attack. Etienne Pascal Taché, a member of parliament from Montmagny, Lower Canada, spoke of the port of Halifax, Nova Scotia:

The entrance to this magnificent inner harbour was rendered inaccessible to any foe by the fortifications erected at the mouth, and the entrance could, moreover, be so barred that no hostile fleet could ever get through. He did not suppose the fleets of England would ever need to take refuge there...although it had been loudly alleged that they could be blown out of the water in an incredibly short space of time...but it might afford shelter to isolated vessels, in case they were hard pushed by superior numbers.⁶⁵

Given the state of affairs in 1865, the potential foe of which he spoke was most likely the United States. If America was threatening, then it would be wise to have the

⁶⁵*Parliament Debates*, Hon. Col. Sir Etienne Pascal Taché, (3 February 1865): 8.

harbor fortifications of the Maritime Provinces in place to defend all of British North America.

Not only would the addition of the Maritime Provinces increase defense from a naval attack, but it would also aid in the protection from a land attack. Another pro-Confederation member of parliament, Joseph H. Bellerose, representing Laval, Lower Canada, stressed the territorial significance of the Maritime Provinces:

Suppose that peace were established amongst our neighbors, and that the government of the United States decided to effect the conquest of the British colonies...would it not be difficult for the armies of the great republic to enter the Province of New Brunswick and conquer it, and to continue their triumphal march through Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland?...To defend the Maritime Provinces, therefore, is to defend Canada; to protect them against invasion is, therefore, to protect Canada, to increase our own power and strength, and to augment our means of defence...⁶⁶

Bellerose recognized the vulnerability of the Maritime Provinces to land invasion, which would in turn increase the vulnerability of all of British North America to attack. At another point in the debates, McGee stressed the American danger while reinforcing the strategic importance of the Maritime Provinces:

I will suppose a hostile American army...finding it easier and cheaper to seize the lower colonies by land than by sea, by a march... through Lower Canada, into the upper part of New Brunswick, and so downward to the sea – a march like Sherman's march from Knoxville to Savannah.⁶⁷

Similar to the reduction in harbor vulnerability, supporters claimed that Confederation also reduced the susceptibility of British North America to land attack.

British Connection

⁶⁶*Parliament Debates*, Mr. Joseph H. Bellerose, (24 February 1865): 479.

⁶⁷*Parliament Debates*, McGee, (9 February 1865): 142.

A major motivation for Confederation was that it would strengthen the relationship with Great Britain. Supporters emphasized this reasoning in spite of their acknowledgement that the elimination of the provinces' status as British colonies was in the best interests of Great Britain because it was likely that any war between Great Britain and the United States would originate in the colonies. Since British North America was a colony of Great Britain, any attack on the colonies would require the full retaliation of the British Empire. Great Britain recognized the danger of being dragged into a Canadian-American crisis, and therefore looked for a solution. Supporters argued that British North America and England would have a stronger bond as allies because Great Britain would be less obligated to defend her ally than she would defend her colony; an independent British North America would be responsible for her own defense and therefore eliminate a weak point from the British Empire. In this sense, Confederation would strengthen the relationship between Great Britain and British North America by eliminating the colonial ties in place of an alliance. While desirous of Confederation and then independence as a new nation, supporters realized that the ties with Great Britain could not be completely severed, especially in regards to impending American aggression.

If British North America fought against the United States after the end of the Civil War and at the height of the American military power during the nineteenth century, there would be no question as to which nation would be victorious. Although the colonies stood a better chance of survival when united, as opposed to separated provinces, they still would not be able to withstand an American onslaught without aid

from their ally, Great Britain. This vulnerability was something that was very apparent in the Canadian parliament. McGee said,

We are not able to go alone, and if we attempted it we would almost certainly go to our own destruction – so that as we cannot go alone, and as we do not desire union with the United States, it is the duty of every man to do all in his power to strengthen the connection with Great Britain.⁶⁸

McGee emphasized that British North America still needed some support from the British Empire as an ally during war; therefore actions should be taken to strengthen the relationship through Confederation.

Supporters argued that when the new nation provided for her own defense, its self-reliance also strengthened her relationship with Great Britain by eliminating the colonial ties in favor of an alliance. Cartier addressed this concern: “In order to secure the exercise of her power in our defence we must help her ourselves...When we had organized our good defensive force, and united for mutual protection, England would send freely here both men and treasure for our defence.”⁶⁹ Similar to Cartier, George W. Allan, an union advocate from York, Upper Canada, remarked about the relationship between Great Britain and British North America:

it was neither reasonable nor just that we should expect that Great Britain would continue to give us the protection of her fleets and armies, unless we showed that we were willing to bear our share of the burden, and were ready to contribute our quota of men and means towards the defence of our own hearths and homes....⁷⁰

According to supporters, the correlation between a strengthened association with Great Britain and the defense of the new nation was simple: the provinces simply needed to take up the expenses for defense.

⁶⁸*Parliament Debates*, McGee, (9 February 1865): 134.

⁶⁹*Parliament Debates*, Cartier, (7 February 1865): 55.

⁷⁰*Parliament Debates*, Hon. George W. Allan, (9 February 1865): 117.

A strengthened, albeit distanced relationship was very advantageous to both British North America and Great Britain. British North America would have its independence as well as a very powerful, and grateful, ally to assist in her defense. Great Britain would benefit by removing herself from colonial entanglements and further distancing herself from a situation with the potential for dragging the Empire into war with the United States. All that was necessary to create this amiable alliance between Great Britain and her former colonies was the Confederation of British North America.

Economic Autonomy

Those members of the Canadian provincial parliament who supported Confederation argued that British North America would profit economically from union. Advocates of Confederation stressed that it would reduce dependency on the United States, a reliance which had the potential for drawing British North America too close to the aggressive, expansionistic nation. With the current aggressive nature of the United States, it was entirely possible for America to try to bring the provinces farther under American control through economic means. The representative from Dundas, Upper Canada, John S. Ross, said:

I firmly believe it to be the policy of the United States to introduce coercive measures, with the view of making us feel that our commercial interests are identified with them [*sic*], and I believe they will continue that course of policy towards us, not perhaps to the extent of immediate invasion and attempted subjugation, but I fear that their policy will be one of a restrictive kind, so as to make us feel...our awkward position of dependence.⁷¹

⁷¹*Parliament Debates*, Mr. John S. Ross, (8 March 1865): 802.

It was apparent to Ross that American economic actions were no longer mutually beneficial to both nations; American actions profited only American trade. James Ferrier, representing Montreal, Lower Canada, noticed this:

Under the Reciprocity Treaty and the bonding system, in about the period of fifteen years, the trade between ourselves and the United States has increased from \$9,000,000 to \$37,000,000 – being four hundred per cent. In 1862, the Canadian imports passing through the United States in bond amounted to \$6,000,000. And, unless we are careful in looking into the progress of trade here as well as in the United States, we may lose what is absolutely necessary for the prosperity of our country. It requires men to be wide-awake in these days of rapid progress to keep pace with the march of events.⁷²

Therefore, in order for British North America to remain independent, economic sovereignty must be established and maintained through the most immediate means available: Confederation. Brown emphatically advocated economic autonomy, thereby meeting “fire with fire”⁷³ He clearly demonstrated the antagonistic nature of the United State as well as the Canadian resolve to thwart American economic aggression. Brown’s forceful tone, as well as the tone of the other union supporters, clearly reflected the urgent nature of the current situation and the fact that British North America needed to be economically self sufficient by the most immediate means available.

By February and March of 1865 when the Canadian provincial parliament met to debate Confederation, the Reciprocity Treaty was in the process of review with a likelihood of abrogation; moreover, British colonists required passport documentation to enter the United States, and trade was hindered further when the United States repealed the bonding system. Supporters charged that solutions to these economic

⁷²*Parliament Debates*, Hon. James Ferrier, (15 February 1865): 197.

⁷³*Parliament Debates*, Brown, (8 February 1865): 106.

problems were encompassed in the Confederation scheme, and not only would the new nation be freed of economic dependence on the United States, but supporters believed that economic autonomy would help distance the new nation from her neighbor. The importance of this independence was evident in the speech of union advocate, William McGiverin, from Lincoln, Upper Canada:

Situated as we are...being crippled by every step the Americans may take with the view of forcing us into closer political relations with them, it is our duty for purposes of self-defence, and...placing ourselves in an independent position...fairly, properly and honestly to carry out this scheme...⁷⁴

According to McGiverin, the economic actions of the United States required an immediate response by British North America to preserve her economic integrity and in turn her defense against American aggression. It was obvious that British North America desired to remain separate from the United States, and to those members of the Canadian provincial parliament who favored union, to be economically dependent on the United States was to open the door to further American encroachment and aggression.

National Strength

To its supporters, Confederation would improve the national strength of British North America; specifically, it would create a new nationality as well as solve the growing problems of an ethnically divided society. Those who supported Confederation believed that British North America lacked a unifying nationalism which existed in other countries. British North America needed a union of the hearts of the people in order to create a defense significant enough to restrain an aggressor

⁷⁴*Parliament Debates*, McGiverin, (24 February 1865): 469.

such as the United States. Colonel Frederick Haultain, from Peterborough, Upper Canada, stressed this requirement: “We need to feel that there is a nationality on this continent to which we are attached...We are likely to view a country such as the Confederation would include, as something worth struggling for and defending.”⁷⁵ While supporters argued that it was necessary to unite the people behind a nationality, it would be highly difficult to unify a population divided between two ethnic groups. Therefore Confederation also might heal the rift existing between the British Canadians and the French Canadians, and to create a new nation in which both ethnic groups could co-exist and unite to defend their country. Ultimately supporters believed that Confederation would increase the national strength of British North America which would put it in a better place to defend its independence against an American aggressor.

Within British North America, the province of Canada was ethnically unique. Prior to 1840, two ethnic groups represented the majorities in the former provinces of Upper and Lower Canada. The Union Act of 1858 joined together those former provinces, thereby uniting the British Canadian and French Canadian populations under one central provincial government. The new united province of Canada governed the people under the system of equal representation which reduced the tension between the ethnic groups over which constituted the majority in the Canadian provincial government. However, by 1865 Upper Canada had experienced a higher rate of population increase than French-speaking Lower Canada, and the people of Upper Canada were desirous of a change in representation. Citizens of Upper Canada, mostly British Canadians, wanted to change the government from

⁷⁵*Parliament Debates*, Colonel Frederick Haultain, (3 March 1865): 638.

equal representation to proportional representation, by reducing the French Canadians status in the Canadian provincial government. This debate over types of representation greatly increased the amount of societal and political tension in Canada.

Under the plan for Confederation, the proposed federal government would have a bicameral legislature, much like the American Congress, which allowed for Upper and Lower Canada to be represented equally in one house and represented according to their respective populations in the other. This governmental compromise settled the political tension between Upper and Lower Canada, as well as the ethnic tensions since both ethnic groups would be spoken for in the federal government according to both types of representation. If the ethnic groups did not feel threatened politically, then they would not fear governmental repression leading to a loss of cultural freedom within their respective provinces. By neutralizing the hostility of the ethnic groups, supporters of Confederation believed the national identity of the new nation would be strengthened. H.L. Langevin, a pro-Confederation representative from Dorchester, Lower Canada, believed that through Confederation,

we have taken care to protect these different interests, and to preserve the rights of this population, by uniting them in the Confederation to a people numbering a million souls of the same origin as themselves...what we desire and wish, is to defend the general interests of a great country and of a powerful nation, by means of a central power...we do not wish to do away with our different customs, manners and laws; on the contrary, those are precisely what we are desirous of protecting in the most complete manner by means of Confederation.⁷⁶

To state it another way, by neutralizing the ethnic problems created through the Union Act of 1858, the population of British North America, including the French

⁷⁶*Parliament Debates*, Hon. H.L. Langevin, (21 February 1865): 372-3.

Canadian populace, would perhaps be more willing to unite with British Canadians in defense of the new nation. Therefore, union advocates argued that Confederation would create a more harmonious population as well as a new nationality that when combined would definitely increase the defense of the nation.

Summary

Throughout the Canadian provincial parliament debates, Confederation was linked to defensive improvement via other areas of advantage. Several of the areas of advantage such as internal growth, economic autonomy, and national strength each were beneficial to the new nation in their own right, without their direct link to increased defense. Regardless of their individual benefit, the supporters of Confederation established and then reinforced that connection to defense, thereby demonstrating the role that American aggression played in the Canadian provincial parliament debates of 1865. However, the threat of American aggression would play an even more surprising role in the opposition's case against Confederation, as will be demonstrated in the following section of analysis.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST CONFEDERATION

The American threat played a very apparent role in the arguments supporting Confederation. Even more remarkable an issue that clearly played to the advantage of union proponents was also used by Confederation *opponents*. Those members of the Canadian provincial parliament consistently referred to the threat of impending

American aggression even as they attempted to disprove all benefits of Confederation.

Confederation weaknesses

Anti-union members of the Canadian provincial parliament argued that the scheme would not strengthen the defense of British North America but would instead lessen it. Opponents, such as James G. Currie from Niagara, Upper Canada, questioned the effectiveness of Confederation as a means for defense. Currie doubted that the unification of the provinces would provide any defensive advantage against an aggressor as strong as the United States.⁷⁷ Opponents emphasized three main sources of weakness citing that there would be a greater increase of territory than increase in manpower, that there would be sectional difficulties preventing the true unification of the provinces, and that the scheme would not strengthen the relationship with Great Britain. Due to these three weaknesses, Confederation would not increase the defensive strength of the provinces against an overpowering foreign aggressor, such as the United States.

While the advocates argued that the future annexation of the Northwest Territory and the subsequent growth in population and territory would strengthen defense, opponents to Confederation argued that the addition of huge quantities of territory would surpass any increase in manpower.⁷⁸ This disproportionate increase hindered any attempt at defense of the new nation. Those opposed to Confederation questioned that if the amount of men gained through annexation of the Maritime

⁷⁷*Parliament Debates*, Hon. James G. Currie, (7 February 1865): 46.

⁷⁸*Parliament Debates*, Hon. Philip H. Moore, (16 February 1865): 229.

Provinces was not enough to guard the new nation *prior* to territorial increase, then how would that force be capable of defending the nation *after* it expanded into the Northwest Territory? Another opponent to union, Christopher Dunkin from Brome, Lower Canada, echoed this sentiment in regards to disproportionate increase. Dunkin made the analogy to defending a “long thin red line” as opposed to a “solid square”.⁷⁹

He commented that

I wish to Heaven we were four millions of people...but in a country smaller than England...New England alone has more population...than the Lower Provinces and Lower Canada together; and with her compactness...she could alone...beat both... Too much of exposed frontier does not increase our strength but lessens it.

The increase of territory would not be an advantage at all unless British North America had the manpower to protect it, and opponents of Confederation argued that the British North American defense force was barely enough to defend the provinces as they were. To expect that this wealth of new territory would be just as secure as the original provinces was to ignore the increased, not reduced, vulnerability of British North America.

Those members of parliament against Confederation stressed another source of defensive weakness within Confederation: the incompatibility of the provinces. As Henri Gustave Joly, an anti-union representative from Lotbiniere, Lower Canada declared:

when the different provinces shall meet together...they have... the habit of contending with each other...and when, from repetition of this undying strife, jealousy and inevitable hatred shall have resulted, our sentiments towards the other provinces will be no longer the same...should any great danger, in which our safety would depend

⁷⁹*Parliament Debates*, Mr. Christopher Dunkin, (28 February 1865): 529.

upon our united condition, arise, it would...be found that our federal union had been the signal for our disunion.⁸⁰

Joly continued to warn that the United States has “looked on our provinces with a covetous eye” and would seize any opportunity of disunion within the new nation. Opponents to Confederation not only emphasized that lack of compatibility of the provinces, but that when the time came to defend the new nation the provinces might be more concerned about their own interests than the good of the whole. For instance, John S. Sanborn, representing Wellington, Upper Canada, mentioned that “Lower Canada would continue to be assailable from Maine and Vermont, and Upper Canada from the state of New York. Under these circumstances, each section of the Confederation would have enough to do to attend to its own affairs.”⁸¹ Opponents believed that Confederation would not create unity among the provinces and therefore defense would not be any more strengthened under Confederation than it would be under the current situation.

Supporters of Confederation believed that union would strengthen the ties to Great Britain, which would in turn increase the means for defense. The opposition did not see this as realistically possible. If anything, those against Confederation believed that relinquishing the colonial relationship with Great Britain would make British North America all the more vulnerable. John Simpson, a member opposed to Confederation from Queen’s, Upper Canada, foresaw the relationship with Great Britain weakened due to Confederation, comparing Great Britain to the “man on the moon.” This analogy captured the notion that it was about as possible for the provinces to obtain the help from Great Britain as it was for them to be assisted by the

⁸⁰*Parliament Debates*, Mr. Henri Gustave Joly, (20 February 1865): 352.

⁸¹*Parliament Debates*, Hon. John S. Sanborn, (9 February 1865): 124.

man on the moon.⁸² Opponents recognized Great Britain's open desire to relinquish the vulnerable provinces and therefore they did not believe that the Empire would come to the aid after cutting those colonial ties.

If Great Britain would not come to the aid of the provinces after Confederation, then British North America would lose a significant factor in its plan for defense, and Confederation would only open up the new nation to invasion or annexation by the United States. Dunkin noticed that potential danger: "...I look upon the early cutting of that tie [with Great Britain] as a certain result of this measure; and ...I hold the inevitable result to be our early absorption into the republic south of us..."⁸³ Those who opposed Confederation emphasized the importance of retaining a strong British relationship and brought to light the awkward position of the provinces. Dunkin commented that

a very different future is before us, and that in all sorts of ways, by vexations of all kinds...we shall be exposed to dangers of the most serious kind. And, therefore, so far from seeing in our relations toward the United States, any reason why we should assume a position of semi-independence, an attitude of seeming defiance towards them, I find in them the strongest reason why...we should endeavor to make all the world see that we are trying to strengthen our union with the Mother Country – that we care far less about a mere union with neighboring provinces, which will frighten no one in the least, but that we are determined to maintain at all hazards and draw closer, that connection with the Mother Country which alone, so long as it lasts, can and will protect us from all serious aggression.⁸⁴

Those opposed to Confederation believed that the plan would cut the ties to Great Britain and therefore retaining the relationship with the Mother Country would accomplish more to strengthen defense than the union of the provinces.

⁸²*Parliament Debates*, Hon. John Simpson, (16 February 1865): 234.

⁸³*Parliament Debates*, Dunkin, (28 February 1865): 532.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*

Opponents to Confederation argued that union was not necessary. It would not increase British North American means of self-defense in proportion to its territorial gains, it would not increase the harmony between the provinces when they would unite in defense, and it would not increase the chances of aid from Great Britain after British North American severed her ties.

Cost-Ineffectiveness

Opponents to Confederation also strongly emphasized its expensive price tag. The plan would not benefit the new nation, but instead would plunge it into debt and economic insecurity. The main source of financial frustration for those who opposed the scheme was the Intercolonial Railway and opponents consistently cited it as evidence to demonstrate Confederation's costliness.

Currie, a staunch opponent, referred to a memorandum from 1862, a time of heightened tension as a result of the *Trent* Affair. A key portion of that memorandum stated that the government was "...not prepared to enter upon a lavish expenditure to build up a military system distasteful to the Canadian people, disproportionate to Canadian resources and not called for by any circumstance of which they at present have cognizance."⁸⁵ From the memorandum, it was clear that the provincial government of Canada was not so concerned with the American threat that they needed an Intercolonial Railway to strengthen defense; on the contrary, they felt that the project could be postponed. This piece of evidence fit well into the opposition's

⁸⁵*Parliament Debates*, Currie, (17 February 1865); 273.

argument that Confederation was too costly to implement, especially when considering the Intercolonial Railway.

Despite the memorandum of October 1862, by 1865 the Canadian provincial parliament debated the issue of union as a solution to the problem of defense. Those opposed to the plan struck out at its expensive nature, specifically money spent for defense, which was not strictly budgeted at that time. Luther Holton stressed that the Intercolonial Railway: "... will certainly cost us \$20,000,000 and, for aught we know, may cost us \$40,000,000...in connection with this union, we are to have entailed upon us untold expenditures for the defence of this country."⁸⁶ The opposition hesitated giving the new government a *carte blanche*, especially since there was not a budgeted amount of money to spend on expensive defensive purposes, such as the Intercolonial Railway.

Opponents also focused on the fact that Confederation would not necessarily guarantee a stronger defense, and therefore the possibility existed that money would be spent without any positive result. As Sanborn noted "we were not told what appropriations were to be made for defence. Indeed pains had been taken to conceal that...."⁸⁷ With the open-ended appropriation of money for defense, those opposed to union struck out and suggested that the new nation would not be prepared to pay for all of the defensive work needed.⁸⁸

A significant part of the defense of British North America was a fighting force able to hold its own against an aggressor, most likely the United States. The cost of raising an army with those capabilities was high and the representative from

⁸⁶*Parliament Debates*, Hon. Luther Holton, (9 February 1865): 148.

⁸⁷*Parliament Debates*, Sanborn, (9 February 1865): 124.

⁸⁸*Parliament Debates*, Hon. Robert Read, (20 February 1865): 327.

Chateauguay, Lower Canada, Luther Holton recognized that “if we create a standing army and a standing navy...not only will all of this bring financial ruin but also create dissatisfaction among the people and depopulate the country.”⁸⁹ Holton drew attention to a similar issue: with the flow of money, resources, and manpower heading towards defense, the industry of the nation would most certainly be negatively affected. John A. Macdonald, representing Kingston, Upper Canada, commented on the industrial decline due to war: “To organize a large force in connection with the outlay for fortifications, would require a large number of men, who would be withdrawn from the industry of the country...”⁹⁰ Opponents stressed that the Confederation hindered economic success in the new nation specifically in regards to the expenses incurred due to defense and the consequences of creating a military force through depleting the new nation’s workforce.

Those members against union also lambasted the plan for an Intercolonial Railway. Billa Flint, an opponent to union from Trent, Upper Canada, used the American Civil War to cite the weaknesses of railroads during wartime:

see what has taken place during the war in the State of Virginia...you will find that they have been cut in almost every direction, and the facilities they were supposed to possess for transportation have been proved to be well nigh worthless for any practical purpose...That road [the Intercolonial Railway] is intended to run...near the boundary of the State of Maine, over which troops could be distributed...to break up the Intercolonial Railway in every direction and to prevent the transportation of troops and munitions of war during winter.⁹¹

Flint not only addressed the military vulnerability of the railroad but the potential for capture by the United States in the case of invasion. Other opposing members such as

⁸⁹*Parliament Debates*, Holton, (7 March 1865): 708.

⁹⁰*Parliament Debates*, Hon. John A. Macdonald, (7 March 1865): 735.

⁹¹*Parliament Debates*, Hon. Billa Flint, (20 February 1865): 321.

Sanborn noted that the Intercolonial Railway would not only be a military risk during hostilities,⁹² but it would also be too expensive to ship goods from inland British North America to the coast.⁹³ William McMaster, representing Midland, Upper Canada, also commented that “however it may be urged as a necessity in order to furnish easy and convenient intercourse between the provinces in the event of their being united, I hold that as a commercial speculation it will prove an entire failure...”⁹⁴ McMaster’s opinion was consistent with the overall voice of the opposition. Those men against union strongly believed that Confederation’s costs clearly outweighed any supposed benefits.

Increased American Aggravation

Those opposed to Confederation argued that union would incite the already antagonistic Americans into a jealous rivalry which would ultimately spark the expected war against British North America. In addition, opponents believed that Confederation was pointless since the provinces of British North America could not possibly compete with the America juggernaut and therefore it would be in the best interests of the provinces to remain as they were.

Dunkin strongly emphasized the danger of Confederation. He believed that the Americans would react violently to the creation of a new rival on the continent: “...I must and do protest against the notion...that ...it is going to increase our power, as to make us a formidable neighbor of the United States. The danger is, of its making

⁹²*Parliament Debates*, Sanborn, (9 February 1865): 124.

⁹³*Parliament Debates*, Hon. William McMaster, (16 February 1865): 230.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*

that people more jealous of us and more hostile towards us than before.”⁹⁵ Anti-union members of parliament charged that British North America would only create more American animosity after union, regardless of the defensive strength the supporters claimed Confederation created:

we are told that...for very fear of the United States- for fear of their [*sic*] power – for fear of their hostility, we must not any longer stay disunited...Just as if either their power or their hostility towards us...would be lessened by our doing so.⁹⁶

As explained by Confederation proponents, there was nothing within the plan for union that was offensive to America; the basis for Confederation was an increase in defensive strength. However, L.A. Olivier, a representative from De Lanaudiere, Lower Canada, brought up a salient point in regards to the provoking of American anger. According to Olivier, through union British North America blatantly disregarded the Monroe Doctrine, which in turn would be the perfect excuse for Americans to create a war:

if their Government should think it to their interest to declare war against England, the best pretext which they could bring forward to excite the American people against us would certainly be this pretended counterpoise which it is sought to establish. It is well known that the Monroe Doctrine is a principle to which all the people of the United States are attached, and, should we give them an opportunity, they would avail themselves of it to put that doctrine into practice. Since Confederation does not in reality increase the strength of the colonies, why should we give umbrage to the Government of the United States and provide them [*sic*] with the means of animating their people against us in case of the breaking out of hostilities.⁹⁷

Whether or not the creation of a British North American union would actually cause the United States to enforce the Monroe Doctrine was debatable, but according to

⁹⁵*Parliament Debates*, Dunkin, (28 February 1865): 530.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 528.

⁹⁷*Parliament Debates*, Olivier, (13 February 1865): 180.

those opposed to union, it was a viable possibility which carried a disastrous outcome. Opponents emphatically stressed that Confederation was a slap in the face of Americans, a move that would ensure heightened danger, not heightened security.

With opponents strongly believing that Confederation would incite the Americans into aggressive action, they also focused on their belief that British North American could not compete with its neighbor to the south. One anti-union member of parliament from North Ontario, Upper Canada, John H. Cameron, expressed disbelief that

we, with a population of two millions and a half, can create a sufficient armament and raise a sufficient number of men to repel the millions of the United States should they choose to attack us...we can form no armament that could repel them from every portion of our territory, and spending millions now in that direction is but crippling our resources and weakening us for the time of need...I do say that it would be quite impossible by fortifications to make the country so defensible that we could resist aggression on the part of the United States at every point. To endeavor to make it so would be waste of money.⁹⁸

Cameron and other anti-union members believed that it was not worth spending resources, manpower, and money for an unattainable goal; there would be no chance of success in a war against America. Confederation opponents such as Antoine Aime Dorion saw the final result of union to be ruin at the hands of America, an “invasion which we could not repel.”⁹⁹ To the members of the Canadian provincial parliament who did not support Confederation, the best action to defend the nation was to not act, to remain small rather than to compete with an overpowering neighbor.¹⁰⁰ As J.B.E. Dorion, an anti-union representative from Drummond and Arthabaska, Lower

⁹⁸*Parliament Debates*, John H. Cameron, (24 February 1865): 455-6.

⁹⁹*Parliament Debates*, Hon. Antoine Aime Dorion, (16 February 1865): 257.

¹⁰⁰*Parliament Debates*, Mr. J.B.E. Dorion, (9 March 1865): 868.

Canada, stated “The best thing that Canada can do is to keep quiet, and...give no cause for war.”¹⁰¹ Ultimately, the opposition equated Confederation with a war against a foreign aggressor, specifically America, and by emphasizing the strength of the American aggression.

Summary

Whether members of the opposition argued against the high cost of the plan or the disproportional increase of territory to manpower, the incompatibility of the provinces to unity or the lack of a strengthened relationship to Great Britain, they consistently referred to the possibility of American aggression or to the American situation in the Civil War. They attempted to disprove the benefits of union, specifically any increased defensive strength; however, they also emphasized the situation that created the need for such defensive strength in the first place. In addition, the American threat existed within significant portions of their argument; opponents actually emphasized American aggression to demonstrate that British North America had no realistic chance of successfully defending itself against the United States, and that any attempt at strengthening union would only incur greater American wrath. Opponents used American aggression to deny the need for Confederation at all.

CONCLUSION

¹⁰¹*Parliament Debates*, J.B.E. Dorion, (16 February 1865): 257.

The debates held within the Canadian provincial parliament were the first formal debates convened specifically to discuss Confederation. Subsequently, as the first “test” of the plan for union, the outcome of these debates would determine the final success of Confederation. The Maritime Provinces, where opposition had strong support, scheduled their parliamentary debates following the Canadian debates. If the Canadian provincial parliament rejected the plan, that negative result would have severely affected the debates in the Maritime Provinces; however, if the plan survived the Canadian parliament test, the plan might have been enhanced upon entering the parliaments in the Maritime Provinces. The success of Confederation relied upon a positive outcome from the series of debates, and therefore all arguments within these debates ultimately decided the future of Confederation.

The environment in which an action occurs greatly impacts that action. The setting for this important series of debates held in the province of Canada was an increase in Canadian-American tension created by American aggression during the Civil War and substantiated with the substantial growth of American military power. Regarding the Canadian provincial parliament debates, the realistic threat of additional American aggression significantly impacted both the arguments in favor of and those opposed to Confederation.

Arthur Hugh Urquhart Colquhoun was correct when he said that the American aggression gave “full play” to all the forces in support of the plan; each advantage emphasized by proponents was linked back to the need for defense against America. Many of the advantages of Confederation helped the new nation in their own right, without any link to defense. Nevertheless, aggressive actions during the American

Civil War intensified the perception of the American threat, and in reaction those in favor of union repeatedly connected all advantages to an increase in defense strength. Supporters had nearly a century of American aggression to propel their argument. Especially in the aftermath of the events of the Civil War, proponents had new evidence to argue the need for increased defense against another outbreak of American attacks. However, not only did the supporters of Confederation make use of the threat of American aggression to further their argument; even the members against union emphasized the dangerous situation.

The threat of American aggression also was deeply imbedded within the opposing argument, an argument that did not necessarily benefit from repeated references to such a threatening situation. As previously noted, Colquhoun stressed how the American threat gave “full play” to the forces supporting the plan, and ultimately the reverse could be applied to the opposition; opposing members’ references to American aggressive actions took away the force of their argument. While opponents argued that defense would not be increased, they could not disprove the American threat - a situation that clearly called for strengthened defense. The opponents argued that remaining in British North America’s isolated, separated state was better than to seek active change. Unfortunately for those who argued against union, as historian Ged Martin recognized, Confederation “was a step in some direction, even if an unknown one,” and despite the unknown, British North America preferred action rather than inaction in the face of intense American aggression.¹⁰²

¹⁰²Ged Martin, *Britain*, 12

Subsequently, because opponents consistently referred to the American threat even while they argued in favor of inaction, the opposition hurt its own case.

While Colquhoun emphasized that the tension created during the American Civil War impacted the arguments in favor of union, he stressed that the American Civil War did not necessarily create the desire for union or carry the plan through to its successful outcome. This analysis of the Canadian provincial parliament debates disproved his theory. The significant role of the American threat on the supporting and opposing arguments within the debates, which ultimately determined the outcome of Confederation, proved that the threat of American aggression *did* indeed create and carry the successful outcome of Confederation. Not only did the proponents of union use aggression to support their case, but the *opponents* relied upon the American threat in their arguments as well. Due to the fact that both supporters and opponents of the plan emphasized American aggression in the debates, and that this series of debates was the determining factor in the overall Confederation process, the vital importance of American antagonism in Confederation was evident: *the threat of American aggression carried the scheme to its successful result thereby creating the Dominion of Canada.*

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