

*Politics by other means: Canadian "Strategy"
and the Italian Campaign, 1943*

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In 1939 Canada entered World War Two with a tiny military and obsolete kit. Four years later, Canada had raised a five division, two corps army that was defending the shores of Dover, although the immediate threat of German invasion had long since passed. Instead of joining the Allied war in North Africa the Canadian army remained, in the words of Army Commander Andrew McNaughton, the "dagger pointed at the heart of Berlin,"¹ ready and waiting to go ashore in North-West Europe whenever the long-awaited invasion finally came. This posture pleased the Canadian public, who well versed in the laurels won by Arthur Currie and the Canadian Corps in the Great War, anticipated a similar role for the entire Canadian army in the liberation of Europe. Plus, Canada's expected role in the main invasion would bolster its esteem among its more powerful allies, Britain and the United States. Although Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King was speaking about Canadian public opinion when he told one of his cabinet minister's that "he laughed best who laughed last,"² it surely also applied to Mackenzie King's view of what Canada's post-war role would be: one with a newly minted role for Canada as an independent ally, neither wholly British nor wholly American, standing independent and tall within the British Commonwealth and the United Nations.

¹ See http://ieeecanadianfoundation.org/EN/nyt_gen.php.

² Library and Archives Canada (LAC), MG 25-J13, The Diaries of William Lyon Mackenzie King, 10 July 1943.

Yet, during the summer months of 1943, the Canadian government changed course. Minister of National Defence J.L. Ralston and Chief of Staff Kenneth Stuart convinced Mackenzie King to split the Canadian Army and send the I Canadian Corps and 5th Canadian Armoured Division to fight under Eighth British Army up the Italian peninsula. Unbalanced and ineffectual, this decision left the fate of 1 Canadian Army headquarters hanging in the balance, and eventually led to the dismissal of McNaughton, who opposed the division of the Army on the grounds that doing so would sacrifice Canada's political aspirations and potentially damage the war effort. Ultimately, I Corps was sent to Italy, despite McNaughton's resistance, in an effort to gain much-needed battle experience for the Canadians and their commanders. At the same time, Ralston and Stuart hoped to re-invigorate the morale of the army, believed to be sagging after four dreary English winters. Although these reasons appeared valid in terms of the fighting power of the Canadian army, in the grand scheme of Canada's war policies the decision to split the army seemed short-sighted; a compromise that gave away the country's long-term objectives. In the words of Canada's official historian, C.P. Stacey; "If the Canadian government desired to have its forces respected as national entities, it should have kept them together, and thereby strengthened the arm of its field commander."³

Why the army was split has been an important question for Canadian historians. Accepting that the army needed experience and a morale boost, most have focused their attention on the "conspiracy" by Ralston and Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS) Field Marshall Alan Brooke to relieve McNaughton, whom they believed was unfit for field command.⁴ In doing so, historians have focused on the political and operational

³ C.P. Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments: The War Policies of Canada, 1939-1945* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1970), p. 197.

⁴ Historians have almost unanimously agreed that McNaughton was levered out of command on his perceived unwillingness to see the Canadian Army divided, and because Ralston and Brooke were concerned about his ability to command an army in the field. Only McNaughton's most recent biographer, John Rickard, dissents. He argues that McNaughton was a better field commander than previously given credit for, and also that McNaughton did in fact agree to send the corps to Italy as his government ordered. He was fired primarily because of personality clashes with Brooke and Ralston. See G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy: Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War, Volume II* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1956), pp. 340-344; J.L. Granatstein and Desmond Morton, *Canada and the Two World Wars* (Toronto: Key Porter, 2003 (original 1989); John Swettenham, *McNaughton, Volume 2* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1969); Paul Dixon, *A Thoroughly Canadian General: A Biography of General H.D.G.*

reasons for sending I Corps to Italy. Missing from this narrative, however, is an assessment of Canadian *strategy*-making at this critical juncture—if indeed there was any.

In order to assess Canadian strategy, it is necessary to look under the political sheets. Mackenzie King decided early in the war that Canada would relinquish all grand strategic decisions to the British and American Combined Chiefs of Staff. Not that the Combined Chiefs would have had it any other way, but Prime Minister Mackenzie King was unperturbed by this. This astute politician knew that to satisfy Canadians he needed only to appear to be in concert with Prime Minister Churchill and President Roosevelt, and to appease the warlords, he needed only to stay out of the way.⁵ King's policy was clear: neither Ottawa nor the Canadian Army would have a voice in Allied strategy during the Second World War. Less certain, however, was whether military strategy informed Canadian decisions during the war. Did the country's politicians and military officers understand military strategy and did it factor into their decisions regarding Canadian army operations? The critical decision to divide the Canadian Army dramatically changed the direction of Canada's war effort, and therefore provides a window into the nature of Canadian wartime strategic thinking, illuminating whether at this important moment Canadian decisions were even the product of strategic thinking.

An examination of the period between August and November of 1943 demonstrates that the strategy-making apparatus in Canada was very amateurish, so much so that luck and politics were often mistaken for strategy. This was complicated by the tug of war between the Minister of National Defence J.L. Ralston and Chief of Staff Ken Stuart, and Army Commander Andrew McNaughton, about what the best course of action ought to be for Canadian *political* interests (both internally and in relation to the country's allies), for the Canadian Army, and for the war more generally. Thus when reacting to the changing political climate in Canada and the evolution of greater Allied strategy—specifically the decision invade Italy after capturing Sicily—the Canadians' decision to send I Corps to Italy was based primarily on political

Crerar (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007); John Rickard, *The Politics of Command: Lieutenant-General A.G.L. McNaughton and the Canadian Army, 1939-1943* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).

⁵ Mackenzie King Diary, 4 August 1943.

expediency without considering military strategy, which ironically hurt Canada's political interests in the short-term and was inconsequential to the overall war effort.

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William Lyon Mackenzie King was unequivocal about his hatred of Adolf Hitler and everything he stood for. During his trip to Germany in 1938, he warned Hitler that in the event of war, Canada would fully support Britain. At the time, the British did not know this, and did not fully trust where Canada, which had gained formal independence in foreign policy in 1931, stood. By 1942, the British had a much better idea. In his February report to the British War Cabinet, High Commissioner Malcolm McDonald wrote of Mackenzie King, "The sincerity with which he holds his [religious] beliefs is the explanation why this man, who is often called by his critics a pacifist, is passionately determined that the war shall be waged mercilessly until Hitler and all his works have been wiped from the face of the earth. For Hitlerism is a denial of everything in his faith."⁶

While survival of the civilized world was the overriding Canadian goal, King also believed that the war should be fought in a manner that pursued Canada's national interests—a concept that had been foreign to Canadian prime ministers before 1917.⁷ The national interest could best be advanced by the manner in which it fought the war in relation to its more powerful allies, Britain and the United States. Indeed, the balance of power in the grand coalition was primarily "decided by the material means at the disposal" of its members,⁸ and Canada was a smaller fish in a big pond; it was especially important for the country to determine, assert, and protect its interests.

⁶ CAB/66/22/33, "Canada: Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs," 28 February 1942.

⁷ Canada entered the First World War with the sole objective of helping Britain, but the rising cost of war to the country of only 8 million people led Prime Minister Robert Borden to develop *Canadian* war aims. Borden believed that Canada's contribution to war had earned the country a voice in Imperial war policy. In the Spring of 1917 the Imperial War Council passed Resolution IX, which recognized the dominions "as autonomous nations of an imperial Commonwealth." Quoted in Corelli Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power* (Chatham: Mackays, 2002; first published 1972), p. 120.

⁸ Dominick Graham and Shelford Bidwell, *Some Aspects of Command in Two World Wars* (Riverside, NJ: Macmillan, 1993), p. 2.

In Mackenzie King's estimation, Canadian unity was the foremost national interest. During the First World War, the Canadian Expeditionary Force had been bled white in the mud of the Western Front, resulting in the 1917 conscription crisis that tore the country from stem to stern. Mackenzie King knew that it was in the country's best interest, not to mention that of his Liberal Party, to avoid a repeat. In the analysis of Mackenzie King and his Inter-War Under-Secretary of External Affairs O.D. Skelton, the root cause of the chasm was that Canada had been dragged into the First World War as colonial cannon fodder. Fighting for the British, and ultimately being conscripted for a British war had been unpopular among French-Canadians and other ethnic minorities. After 1918, "Canadians did not like to feel that they might be involved [in] European wars," Mackenzie King told Lord Curzon during the 1923 Imperial Conference, "and if a constitutional system developed which rendered them liable it would aggravate the problem which Canada was facing of keeping the people from emigrating to [the United] States..."⁹ The Statute of Westminster was signed in 1931, granting Canada control over its own foreign policy; one of the final steps in the path from colony to nation. When Canada did enter the war in 1939, it did so independently. Illustrating this change, Mackenzie King told his diary in April 1941 of a recent disagreement with Sir Frederick Phillips of the British Treasury over a financial matter: "Phillips had said to me that he would have to report the matter to Churchill. I had said I hoped he would. Not to think that Canada was a colony. That we were a nation administering our own affairs."¹⁰ Mackenzie King would spend the war asserting Canada's independence from Britain.

Yet, Canada remained a devoted member of the British Empire. There was little question that Canada would support Britain when war did come. On September 10, 1939, the House of Commons voted nearly unanimously to go to war. Most Canadians believed they were tied to Britain by sentiment and history, and that Canada's first line

⁹ It had not seemed to occur to Mackenzie King that the U.S. might also join in a war. From the diary of J.W. Dafoe, who was a member of the Canadian delegation at the 1923 Imperial conference, and published for the first time in an article by Ramsay Cook, "J.W. Dafoe at the Imperial Conference, 1923," *Canadian Historical Review* 41:1 (March 1960): p. 26.

¹⁰ Mackenzie King Diary, 17 April 1941.

of defence was, in fact, Britain.¹¹ When France fell in 1940, Canada became by default Britain's most powerful and highly industrialised ally, geared economically, socially, politically, and militarily towards fighting the war alongside Britain. Not all members of the government were entirely prepared for this reality. The suddenness of this change in Canada's role, from sidekick to saviour of democracy were sometimes slow to catch on, as an important example noted by the Prime Minister in 1941 indicates,

The impression is widely abroad that Skelton was anti-British which is not true. He was strongly pro-Canadian but there is no doubt that he got around him a group of men who have come to have a sort of anti-British point of view, a certain sympathy with the Irish point of view and with the Americans. Indeed, an attitude that is generally shared against Englishmen by others but which is a wrong one where fundamentals of character are concerned...All of this shows me the need of trusting my own judgment in these matters and not allowing it to be unduly influenced by the so-called intelligentsia.¹²

In Mackenzie King's view, protecting Canadian interests from British influence, on the one hand, and supporting Britain in war, on the other, were not mutually exclusive goals; in fact, the one could not exist without the other.

Mackenzie King, throughout the remainder of the war, paradoxically needed to balance the tensions of loyalty to Britain and the desperation of the struggle on the one hand, while protecting Canadian unity from another Conscription Crisis, on the other. In many areas this was not difficult; King prioritized Canada's air and naval wars, both considered essential by Britain and neither expected to incur enough casualties to force conscription. Indeed, significant portions of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan were run in and paid for by Canada. In exchange, Canadian graduates were placed in fully Canadian overseas squadrons—a constant reminder to Canadians that their boys were making sure Canada was pulling its weight in the war.¹³ The Royal Canadian

¹¹ J.L. Granatstein, *The Generals: The Canadian Army's Senior Commanders in the Second World War* (Calgary: UofC Press, 2005), 95; W.G.D. Lund, "The Royal Canadian Navy's Quest for Autonomy in the North West Atlantic," in *RCN in Retrospect 1910-1968* ed. James Boutilier (Canada: Hignell, 1982), p. 139.

¹² Mackenzie King Diary, 5 April 1941.

¹³ "Canada is a Dominion and as such is no less entitled to a separate and autonomous Air Force than is the United Kingdom. This right she has temporarily surrendered in the interests of war efficiency,

Navy grew dramatically in size to protect North Atlantic convoys leaving from Halifax and St. John's. Elsewhere, Canadian industry re-tooled and expanded to produce war materiel, and the country shipped grain and other essentials to sustain Britain, but not at charity prices; the Canadian economy was humming. To top it all off, Canada gave Britain a well-publicised gift of one billion dollars to help prevent Britain from going bankrupt, and Britain spent much of that money in Canada.¹⁴ In all these ways, Canada asserted itself as an independent but committed ally in the struggle against Nazi Germany.

This left the question of what to do with the Canadian army. Clearly there had to be an overseas commitment of ground forces. Both the British government and Canadian populace wanted it as Canada's most important signal of commitment to the Allied cause. A British telegram to the Canadian government in September 1939 expressed the hope "that Canada would exert her full national effort as in the last war, even to the extent of the eventual despatch of an expeditionary force."¹⁵ Even before the Fall of France, Mackenzie King admitted that Canadians wanted a corps; "the pride of the nation would demand it."¹⁶ By 1943 the country had built an entire army.

To fulfill Mackenzie King's objectives, this army was to be Canadian and it had to *look* Canadian. The policy pursued by the Canadian government was one of "Canadianization" and national command. Under the terms of the Visiting Forces Act signed by Britain and her Commonwealth between the wars, Canada had the right to raise, train, equip and pay for a nationally recognizable Canadian force that would fight under British operational command.¹⁷ This meant that the Canadian Army was at all times responsible to two chains of command: an administrative branch that led to

accepting the fact that unity of organization and of operational command is essential in the prosecution of total war. The recognition by Canada of this need for unity has, however, placed upon us the responsibility of maintaining and encouraging the esprit de corps of that part of the R.C.A.F. which became part of the Imperial Air Forces in the United Kingdom." B.E. Sutton, Air Marshal, "Air Ministry Letter on 'Canadianization' of the R.C.A.F. Overseas, 19 Feb 1943." Stacey, *Arms, Men and Government*, Appendix K.

¹⁴ See http://canadachannel.ca/HCO/index.php/3_The_Home_Front_and_War_Production.

¹⁵ Ibid., Appendix C.

¹⁶ Mackenzie King Diary, 2 April 1940.

¹⁷ For more information on how the Visiting Forces Act was applied during the Second World War, see the Canadian External Affairs files from 1942-1943.

Ottawa, and an operational branch that led to the British Chiefs of Staff. The Canadian commander was recognized as a “national commander” – the representative of the Canadian government in the field.¹⁸ Within this system, Canada believed it could accomplish both its goals of protecting Canadian interests, while fighting as a loyal ally.

Ultimately, however, Canada’s objectives could be achieved only if two things happened: if the British believed that even with administrative and operational control over its forces Canada would not make waves within the alliance, but conversely did not simply treat the Canadians as part of a larger imperial army; and if the Canadian army did not incur enough casualties to force the country to implement conscription. As such, between 1939 and 1943, Canadian military policy was ambiguous, perhaps intentionally, but more likely the result of inexperience. Mackenzie King did “all in [his] power to interfere as little as possible and [allow] Churchill and the President complete leadership of the war.”¹⁹ According to the Cabinet War Committee, “Canadian forces would be made available to go wherever their services are most needed.”²⁰ But this official line was essentially hollow. Hume Wrong, Canada’s Assistant Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs, wrote to the Cabinet War Committee in January 1943 that,

To the statement that the Canadian Government had repeatedly assured the United Kingdom authorities that they desired the Canadian Army to be used wherever it could be

¹⁸ The Canadian system of National Command had developed during the Boer War and matured during the First World War. It was based on the principle that the highest ranking Canadian officer in the field was the representative of the Canadian government, as well as subject to the operational orders issued by the British army, under which the Canadians were fighting. This gave the commander the right of referral to the Canadian government in any situation deemed contrary to the interests of the Canadian government. Arthur Currie, commander of I Canadian Corps from June 1917-November 1918 exercised this right on a number of occasions, but perhaps most notably when he informed General Haig, GOC-in-C of the British Armies that he refused to fight the Battle of Passchendaele under the commander of General Gough, and that he wanted certain operational conditions met before the battle commenced – all in an effort to save Canadian lives from the slaughter of the Western Front.

¹⁹ Mackenzie King Diary, 4 August 43.

²⁰ Cabinet War Committee, Minutes and Documents, Telegram 1630, High Commissioner in Great Britain to Secretary of State for External Affairs, 15 June 1942.

most usefully employed, either as one Army or in detachments, the answer was polite incredulity.²¹

Moreover, “the initiative will have to be taken by Canada if the Canadian forces are to be used otherwise than as a Canadian army.”²² McNaughton had made it apparent to his British counter-parts and superiors that he preferred the Canadian Army united under his command. “As regards the employment of Canadian Forces, the Secretary of State for War recalled that in early stages of the war General McNaughton had been most insistent that the Canadian Forces should be engaged as an army, and not as separate Divisions – with the result that it had not been possible to use them at all on active operations.”²³

By mid-1943 it appeared as though the stage was set for Canada to have its cake and eat it too: the Canadian army was intact and standing by for the attack on North West Europe. The Canadian public would soon get both the ground war that it demanded, while in the meantime preserving its manpower by not fighting in peripheral campaigns, thereby hopefully avoiding conscription. Plus, Canada’s role in the main invasion would finally prove in blood the country’s commitment to its allies while asserting the country’s independence from Britain.

During the summer of 1943, however, the government gradually changed course. In July, the 1st Canadian Infantry Division (CID) and 1st Independent Armoured Brigade were sent to fight with Eighth British Army in Sicily. Mackenzie King agreed to this decision for reasons of politics and national prestige, not military necessity—his insistence that Canadian troops be named independently in the Allied press release was proof of the point.²⁴ Canadian officials more generally saw the move as a way of getting

²¹ Ibid., DEA/41S Memorandum from Assistant Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs to Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs, 28 January 1943.

²² Ibid.

²³ CAB/66/22/33, W.M. (43) 117th Conclusions. Minute 2. Confidential Annex. (19th August, 1943 – 5.15p.m.)

²⁴ Brandey Barton has convincingly argued that Mackenzie King had less interest in the battle for Sicily and its strategic purpose than he did in the public reaction to Canadian participation. After the Allied landings, the Prime Minister pressured Churchill and Roosevelt to include Canada’s name independently in the press release, rather than simply including it as part of the British Empire. When Churchill seemed to drag his feet, Mackenzie King became irate, and even made angry remarks in the House of Commons.

necessary experience for the army, as 1 CID was slated to return to England once Sicily was captured. However, when the Combined Chiefs made the decision to continue to the Italian mainland, the Canadian government agreed to let 1 CID go with it.²⁵ Then in August, the Canadian government also requested that I Canadian Corps Headquarters and 5 Canadian Armoured Division be sent to the theatre, leaving First Army HQ unbalanced and its continued existence in question.

In July and early August, Mackenzie King had been steadfastly opposed to sending I Corps to Italy. On 10 July—the very day that the 1CID landed in Sicily—Stuart informed Mackenzie King that it was unlikely the invasion of North West Europe would happen before May 1944. In light of this, Ralston felt that it would be best to send more troops to the Mediterranean, as there might not be much fighting in the war and Canada's voice at the peace table would be hurt by it. Mackenzie King resisted what seemed to him a foolish canard, reporting that,

Public memory was short... [It was] sounder to keep the Army as intact as possible for the final blow, a very strong blow in the end. All armies are one in the life time of a war, the man that makes the strongest finish wins, where numbers are so difficult, a strong fresh small force highly organized, for the final round can destroy larger forces – forces many times their number, that is the only way this war can be won, this [and] bombing.²⁶

Although this sounded remarkably like a sound strategic view, by the time of the Quebec conference, Mackenzie King had flip-flopped. The Canadian official historian argues that his conversion happened for two reasons: first, it was mistakenly predicted

After a flurry of cables between Mackenzie King, Roosevelt and Churchill, the Canadian prime minister got what he wanted, and the Canadian public reacted as he predicted—with enthusiasm. Barton's thesis is supported by the Prime Minister's inaccurate understanding of the military operations in Sicily. Mackenzie King did not know the date of the invasion, and believed that the Canadians were to land after the British had secured the beaches. Brandey Barton, "Public Opinion and National Prestige: The Politics of Canadian Army Participation in the Invasion of Sicily, 1942-1943," *Canadian Military History* 15:2 (Spring 2006): pp. 23-34; Mackenzie King Diary, 3 July 1943.

²⁵ Mackenzie King Diary, 16 August 1943.

²⁶ Mackenzie King Diary, 10 July 1943.

at the time that the wastage rates in Italy would be far less than would later be incurred in North-West Europe, and so maybe Canada could avoid conscription; and second, that the participation of 1st Canadian Infantry Division in Sicily had been extremely popular, and in the summer of 1943 the Liberal Party lost a number of bi-elections.²⁷ “Ordinary Canadians felt that, without soldiers fighting, Canada was somehow out of the war. No number of bombers or corvettes could substitute for fighting divisions.”²⁸ Mackenzie King had begun to sense this, and knew the time to act was upon him.

Once Mackenzie King had decided to get the Canadians into action, the question of where they would fight was little matter, and the soundness of military strategy had little weight on the Prime Minister’s decision. Indeed, although Mackenzie King was kept abreast of the debate between Churchill and Roosevelt about whether to extend the Mediterranean mission and when to launch the cross-channel invasion, it is unclear as to whether the strategic issues really resonated with him. On 10 August 1943, while en route from Ottawa to Quebec City for the Quadrant Conference, Churchill subjected Mackenzie King to his view on the importance of continuing up the “soft underbelly” until the necessary preparations had been made for North-West Europe. Mackenzie King seems to have agreed without further comment.²⁹ Once again, when presented with the opportunity at key moments to voice opinions on military strategy, King opted for acquiescence. Whether this was indifference or ignorance matters less than the fact that he had no input at key moments. Either by choice or by nature Mackenzie King did not play a role in shaping military strategy, and he therefore let himself be convinced by Ralston to divide the army, with at most a passing interest in the military strategy behind the Canadian involvement in Italy, because to him the politics made sense. Unlike other Empire Prime Ministers such as Churchill, Jan Smuts, and even to some extent John Curtin, Mackenzie King was not a military strategist.

When analysing Canada’s military strategy, or the influence of Allied military strategy on Canadian decisions, the emphasis must therefore lie on the interaction between Ralston, Stuart, and McNaughton, and with Brooke and Paget. General McNaughton had at least since 1942 been arguing for more involvement in Allied

²⁷ Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments*, 237.

²⁸ Granatstein and Morton, *The Two World Wars*, 259.

²⁹ Mackenzie King Diary, 10 August 1943.

strategy, and insisted that Allied military strategy should have an effect on Canadian decision making. According to McNaughton's most recent biographer, John Rickard, his devotion to protecting Canadian interests stemmed directly from his First World War experience as Brigadier General of the Canadian Artillery Corps in Arthur Currie's I Canadian Corps. "McNaughton came to identify with Currie's vision of a unified, semi-autonomous, and powerful Canadian Corps fighting for achievable objectives."³⁰ Although heavily criticized both during his inter-war tenure as Chief of the General Staff and during the Second World War as GOC First Army for being a "tinkerer"—a scientist focused on the minutiae of technological warfare—McNaughton did think about the big picture, about Canada's role in the Grand Alliance and about military strategy. Major Dan Spry, McNaughton's personal assistant, informed Ralston during his fall 1942 trip to England that,

General McNaughton pointed out that under the present system it was impossible for him to be kept fully informed of future operational plans and that present arrangements were that he should meet General Brooke every 2 or 3 weeks in order that he might be kept up to date and in the minds of the Chief of Staff. As a result of the present unsatisfactory position in which he found himself he stated that he was unable to adequately advise the Minister of National Defence.³¹

McNaughton's advice was simple: he "pointed out that the Canadian Army could bring the greatest effect against the enemy by operating as a self-contained force serving under their own officers and as a truly Canadian organization." Moreover, Canada's contribution to the war "in view of the large industrial production of Canada, and the large military, naval and air contribution" had earned it the right to have a voice in the direction and future planning of the war.³²

Unfortunately for McNaughton, he was alone among the Canadian leaders in his concern that Canada should have some say in the making of military strategy and its

³⁰ Rickard, *Politics of Command*, 20.

³¹ LAC MG 27 III B II Vol. 64, Ralston Fonds, DC.Spry, Major.P.A.to GOC-in-C First Cdn Army.

³² Ibid.

relation to Canada. Although it was the job of the Minister of National Defence, J. L. Ralston, to bridge the gap between McNaughton and Mackenzie King, Ralston seems to have had little interest in military strategy. He instead focused primarily on the operational cohesion and capability of the Canadian Army, showing, perhaps, a rather limited understanding of what his role as Minister of National Defence should or could have entailed.

Surprisingly little has been written about Ralston, considering his wartime importance. A lawyer and Member of Parliament at the outbreak of the First World War, Ralston enlisted as an officer in Nova Scotia. By 1918, he had risen to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel in command of the 85th Infantry Battalion, known for his stout courage and concern for his men.³³ He stayed in the military after the war rising to the rank of Colonel, joined the 1926 Mackenzie King government, and was given the position of Finance Minister in 1939 before taking over the Defence Department after the death of Norman Rogers in 1940. In his new post, Ralston would oversee the expansion of the Canadian Army. Although often painted a simple imperialistic conscriptionist, Ralston's feelings about the Anglo-Canadian relationship could be as complicated as any. Indeed, Ralston returned from the United Kingdom during the Blitz with a profound respect for the British people, and, as he told Mackenzie King, the "feeling that everything possible should be done to help win [the war]."³⁴ Yet in a 1944 letter to his son, Ralston wondered "how long before some Englishman will understand the implications of the statute of Westminster... In the words of Old Man River 'Ah gets weary and sick o'trying' to help demonstrate that colonial status is as outworn as diapers for a full-grown man."³⁵ What is certain, however, is that the pressures of the army expansion program, coupled with "the Colonel's" concern for the men already in service, meant that in 1942 Ralston was convinced that the country needed to implement conscription to keep the army at strength, resulting in a predictable split with the Prime Minister. Although Mackenzie King's political savvy safely navigated the country through its first of two wartime conscription crises, the pressures on the

³³ Patrick Brennan, "Good Men for a Hard Job: Infantry Battalion Commanders in the Canadian Expeditionary Force," *Canadian Army Journal* 9:1 (Spring 2006): pp. 22, 24.

³⁴ Quoted in John Robinson Campbell, *James Layton Ralston and Manpower for the Canadian Army* (MA Thesis, Wilfrid Laurier University: 1984), p. 70.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

army programme had not been alleviated. After visiting the Canadian Army overseas, and interviewing Canadian army officers, by 1943 Ralston believed that the army's problems could best be addressed by getting the Canadians into action: it would help boost enlistment at home, boost morale overseas, and ensure that the army had the fighting efficiency necessary to play a key role in the final invasion.³⁶

Considering the pressure of the 1942 conscription crisis, perhaps Ralston can be excused for losing sight of Mackenzie King's wartime policy of Canadian unity through Canadianization with his focus on manpower problems. What he missed, through all of this, was that he would have had a better chance of achieving Canada's political goals while doing what was best for the army if he kept a pulse on Allied military strategy. At no time throughout the summer and fall of 1943 did Ralston have a clear picture of what the Allied goals were in the Mediterranean, or the approximate timeline for the invasion of North-West Europe.³⁷ Of course both of these considerations were in flux, but that was all the more reason for Ralston to be involved and informed regularly. Instead, Canada's strategy was based on generalities formed from often obsolete information.

What unfolded was a Canadian tragicomedy. Ralston decided shortly after the decision to send 1 CID to Italy that I Corps should be sent as well.³⁸ But Ralston was no dummy. He knew that deploying I Corps to Italy would leave the Canadian army wholly unbalanced. On 2 July 1943, he told the Canadian War Committee that he felt concerned that the "army has been expanded much beyond our commitment."³⁹ By 29 July, he was willing to accept the dissolution of the Canadian Army Headquarters in order to get into action in Italy, and resolved to ask the British Chiefs of Staff to accept I Corps into the order of battle for Italy.⁴⁰ This resolve was undoubtedly bolstered by his conversations the next day with Crerar and Price Montague, Senior Combatant Officer at Canadian Military Headquarters. While accompanying Ralston to visit 2nd Division and Corps Headquarters, Crerar reported he felt the continuance of the Mediterranean *operations* most logical, particularly so because the cross-channel invasion *should* await

³⁶ Ralston Fonds, Vol. 64. "English Trip Fall 1942: Canadian Army – General Notes on."

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ralston Fonds, Vol. 64, "Ralston/Crerar/Montague," 30 July 1943.

³⁹ Mackenzie King Diary, 2 July 1943.

⁴⁰ Ralston Fonds, Vol. 64, "Ralston/Stuart/McNaughton", 29 July 1943.

deterioration on the continent. In the meantime, the men were buoyed up by the hope of early action. Montague was also strongly in favour of action. Where the two men differed was on what should be done about the army headquarters; Crerar—already angling for the post of army commander—felt that the headquarters should be maintained “in case Mediterranean troops return.” Montague had “no definite ideas [regarding the] feasibility or advisability of maintaining army set-up.”⁴¹ Both agreed that getting army experience was of utmost importance for the operational effectiveness of the Canadian army.

On 2 August, Ralston met with Churchill and proposed the idea of sending I Corps to Italy. The language with which Ralston introduced his idea is notable for its similarity to that of Mackenzie King. Ralston said, “Put our position. Always ready to serve where could serve best in whole or in part but feel [we] have the right to make representations regarding considerations which might affect our usefulness.”⁴² Churchill, who never completely trusted Mackenzie King’s commitment to fight, had a track record of appeasing Canadian demands to ensure its continued commitment to the war effort, and this case appears to have been no different. Although Churchill knew that the United Kingdom had commitments to the United States and did not want to “appear to be forgetting them by sending troops out of the U.K. without consultation,” he was amenable to Ralston’s idea that a Canadian corps replace a British unit that needed rest or refit after spending over a year in North Africa.⁴³

The following day, Ralston met with Alan Brooke for what was arguably the most important meeting between the two men in this period. Ralston relayed his conversation with Churchill of days earlier, and Brooke agreed that it would be possible to send the Canadians if done as an exchange with a British unit. According to Ralston, Brooke went on to suggest that he felt that if a corps went, “it would be advisable to

⁴¹ LAC MG 27 III B II Vol. 64, Ralston Fonds, “Diaries and Notes for Overseas Trips 1943 (Mediterranean and U.K.), 1943 – Evolution of McNaughton Attitude re Participation on Corps Basis,” Friday, 30 July 1943.

⁴² Ibid., “Walk with Prime Minister,” Ralston and Winston Churchill, 1 August 1943.

⁴³ Ralston Fonds, Vol. 64, “Diaries and Notes for Overseas Trips 1943 (Mediterranean and U.K.), 1943 – Evolution of McNaughton Attitude re Participation on Corps Basis,” “Walk with Prime Minister,” 1 August, 1943.

abandon [the] idea of [the] Canadian Army.”⁴⁴ There was not much point in maintaining an army headquarters and staff to administer one corps, argued Brooke. From the British point of view, “it would of course be easier for him to have Canadians in [a] corps rather [than] one big group of one nationality.” More importantly, he “wouldn’t feel like putting a British Corps under [McNaughton]” in whom he had little faith.⁴⁵ At this point, discussions of Canadian operations were wholly framed by Canadian national politics and Anglo-Canadian relations; strategy would be decided at the Quebec conference without Canadian participation (except for a face saving photo-op by Mackenzie King).

In the meantime, Ralston had met with McNaughton, who perhaps had a difficult time candidly advising the minister without exceeding the confines of what he thought proper for a sub-ordinate addressing his political master. On 29 July, McNaughton admitted that “the cause [of getting into action] was bigger than the man.”⁴⁶ But on 2 August, he informed Ralston that he had become doubtful about Brooke’s enthusiasm for the Canadians, thinking Brooke was irritated because of constitutional limitations and preferred to split the Canadians up.⁴⁷

Three days later, Ralston and Stuart met with McNaughton who argued, in political terms, that it was “in [the] interests of Canada that we maintain [the] Canadian army.” For McNaughton, recorded Ralston, this was “even more important than battle experience. [He] [s]till adhered to that policy in the light of changed conditions.” McNaughton was willing to agree, however, that he did not “regard sending the Corps to Mediterranean as dispersion provided agreement is reached with U.K. that corps is to be returned to U.K. in time to take part in major operations based on U.K.”⁴⁸

By early August, then, the political situation was in disarray. Ralston and Brooke seemed to agree on sending I Corps and, if necessary, dissolving Canadian Army Headquarters. However, Ralston seems to have overlooked or ignored the fact that Brooke’s position was a direct threat to Canadian political interests; he preferred to deal

⁴⁴ Ibid., 3 August 1943.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., “Ralston/Stuart/McNaughton”, 29 July 1943.

⁴⁷ Ibid. “Ralston/McNaughton,” 2 August 1943.

⁴⁸ Ibid. “McNaughton/Stuart/Ralston,” 5 August 1943.

with the Canadians as a corps, rather than “one big nationality” – the situation originally devised to help Canada pursue its independent political interests vis-à-vis Britain. In the meantime, McNaughton appeared to be making a political argument for Canadianization that over-stepped his role as army commander. At this point, McNaughton’s tenure as army commander was all but over.

Exacerbating the challenges to Canadian decision-making in this period was that neither Ralston nor McNaughton had a clear take on Allied military strategy. In their 2 August meeting, McNaughton reported that he was unsure about the Mediterranean strategy, feeling sure that Canada would be committing itself to what may turn out to be garrison duty. Ralston replied that “strategy was the very thing that was to be the subject of [the Quebec] conference and our whole reason for discussing the matter was that troops might have battle experience.”⁴⁹ Garrison duty would not be in Canadian interests. McNaughton reiterated his argument that Canada must desire to know whether the project was a reasonable operation of war. To this, Ralston’s response was ambiguous: he “said that [he] found it difficult to understand one of [McNaughton’s] wires which looked as though we should accept the British Chiefs of Staff’s judgement. [McNaughton] said he only meant that to apply to strategy and not to the tactical soundness of a particular plan.”⁵⁰ Again, on 7 August, Ralston and McNaughton spoke of the matter. McNaughton was, according to Ralston, in a much better frame of mind; a result of his recent discussion with Sir John Dill, Chief of the British Joint Staff Mission in Washington. Dill, in what was a correct prediction but incorrect analysis of what would happen in the Mediterranean, informed McNaughton that the Germans might put 40 divisions in Northern Italy if the Russians released pressure on the Eastern Front. These divisions would “suck in and destroy” any Allied force. Consequently, he believed the Allies would decide to discontinue operations in the Mediterranean. Neither McNaughton nor Ralston were well positioned enough to know where Dill ranked in the British inner-circle—although they might have inferred it from his demotion from CIGS and exile to the US—but their reaction to this news highlights their respective misunderstanding of military strategy. McNaughton’s “attitude was one of satisfaction” that the army might remain intact but, Ralston noted, he “did not

⁴⁹ Ibid. “Ralston/McNaughton,” 2 August 1943.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

mention again the effect on morale of a winter of idleness.”⁵¹ Neither McNaughton nor Ralston asserted a clear understanding of military strategy or, more importantly, of how it related to Canada.

By the time of the Quebec conference between Churchill and Roosevelt and the Combined Chiefs, a line had been drawn in the sand. McNaughton preferred the Canadian Army be kept intact, doubtful of the Mediterranean strategy, but willing to consent so long as the corps could be brought back in time to fight in North West Europe. Ralston, conversely, believed that for the purposes of Canadian military effectiveness, the corps required battle experience, even at the expense of the army headquarters, which Brooke had said would not be used even if kept together. As King recorded in his diary, “At one stage, near the end, McNaughton had said: ‘The die is cast’ to Ralston, and said: it is clear from the conversations you have been having, you do not care about the Canadian army. Ralston pointed to his having pressed for the army; having the forces we had; of his defence of it in Parliament, etc. Said he could not understand McNaughton speaking that way. McNaughton thought that the conversations Ralston was having with others seemed to indicate his feeling.”⁵² Neither was wrong, but Ralston’s position was bolstered by his, and Brooke’s and Paget’s, lack of confidence in McNaughton’s ability to command the army.

Everything hinged on the strategic discussions that took place at Quebec. There, the decision of the Combined Chiefs was to continue from Sicily to the Italian mainland. According to Mackenzie King, it was made clear to him and Ralston that, “Brooke was inflexible in not attempting any crossing of the Channel this year or before the autumn of the next year. He was anxious to press on to Italy.”⁵³ Thereafter, the Canadian government requested that the British formally ask that I Canadian Corps and 5th Canadian Armoured Division be dispatched to Italy.

What seems apparent, however, is that after the Quebec Conference, there was very little change in Canadian “strategy,” even in reaction to the information gained about Allied strategy. On 14 September, contrary to his previous support for the deployment of I Corps, Brooke informed McNaughton that there was now no likelihood

⁵¹ Ibid., “With Stuart at Army HQ”, 7 August 1943.

⁵² Mackenzie King Diary, 10 August 1943.

⁵³ Ibid., 14 August 1943.

of an additional Canadian division or corps headquarters being sent to the Mediterranean, as the target date of May 1944 was set for the attack on North West Europe and all shipping would need to be allocated to the build-up. If, however, the date for the cross-channel invasion was delayed, and if the situation in the Mediterranean permitted, 1st Division would be brought home.⁵⁴ Rather than, at this point, realising that when the attack on North-West Europe was launched Italy would become a secondary priority, and rather than re-allocating to prepare the Canadians for the invasion of North West Europe, Ralston continued to press his point. He pleaded with Churchill through the Cabinet War Committee to reconsider. On 7 October, Brooke, after being prodded by Churchill, suggested that it might be possible to swap I Canadian Corps for 30 Corps in Italy, and on 12 October Mackenzie King received a note from Churchill requesting the deployment of I Canadian Corps.⁵⁵

This chain of events encapsulates Canada's leaders' seemingly confused and often contradictory thinking. In his zeal to battle-harden a corps *somewhere* Ralston was willing to sacrifice one of the key tenets of Canada's nearly four year old wartime policy—a separate, national army headquarters. But leaping at the opportunity to go to Italy without first understanding Britain's changing wartime strategy left to Ralston only a reactive and ill-informed role. As a peculiar result, Ralston had decided to split the Canadian Army and send a corps to Italy before the British had even made up their minds to go to the Italian mainland. Meanwhile, General McNaughton consistently opposed any Canadian involvement in the Mediterranean, maintaining constant support for Canada's original policy. As a result he alienated both Ralston and Alan Brooke, and lost the fight; McNaughton's days were numbered. What the internal Canadian policy struggle never considered was strategy, Canada's or the Allies. As such, when the Allied Combined Chiefs decided to go to Italy, Canada was already first in line pressing for involvement, and by November the corps was en route to the Mediterranean, its army split, its headquarters in jeopardy, its leader a lame duck, and with no promise that the corps would be returned to England in time for the invasion of Normandy.

⁵⁴Ralston Fonds, Vol 58, "Employment of Canadian Army in the Mediterranean," 14 September 1943.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 7 October 1943.

Unfortunately, for all this sacrifice, Ralston's objectives went unfulfilled. The decision to swap a Canadian for a British corps without confirming whether enough quality equipment was available in theatre meant that it took until January 1944 for the Canadian corps and its commander to be ready to get the battle experience they so badly needed. Poor weather then conspired to ensure that General Harry Crerar was forced to return to England to take over from McNaughton at army headquarters before he had commanded his corps in action. Most importantly, the British commanders in the field had little use for an armoured division, or the bureaucracy of another corps headquarters, causing tension between the British and Canadian High Command—something that the Canadians had originally yearned to avoid.

All told, then, the Canadians' inability or unwillingness to think strategically led them to make a short sighted decision that achieved little. In what may be the most embarrassing of all Canada's wartime decisions, on 6 November, just as the I Corps was arriving in Italy, Ralston asked Brooke when it could be returned to England to join 1st Army.⁵⁶

Ironically, however, November's changes in Allied strategy, coupled with Britain's lucid assessment of Canada's political objectives in the end saved the day. Even as the Canadian Corps was en route to the Mediterranean, the 15th Army Group was altering its Mediterranean strategy. The original objective of the Allied Armies in Italy was to push the Germans north as quickly as possible so that Italy could be used as another launching pad into France and central Europe. By November, the Allies realised that the Germans intended to hold Italy at all costs, making a stand south of Rome around Monte Cassino. Brooke, Alexander, et al. decided that, although the Mediterranean had become a secondary priority for men and matériel, it nonetheless remained important as a front to hold down and chew-up the Germans, thereby drawing their valuable resources from other theatres—potentially softening the North West Europe front and certainly helping the Russians.⁵⁷ The political decision to send the Canadians began to look like good military strategy.

⁵⁶ Ralston Fonds, Vol. 64, 6 November 1943.

⁵⁷ Alanbrooke. *War Diaries, 1939-1945*. Ed. Alex Danchev and Daniel Todman. "Tehran-28 November 1943," Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001.

The outcome of this now changed military strategy—which the Canadians appeared to be unaware of—was three-fold. First, on 6 November, Brooke implied to Ralston that it might be impossible to get I Corps to England before the invasion of North-West Europe, regardless of Ralston's hope that this could happen. Ralston, trying to be the good ally, responded that a corps in Italy and another in an army on the Western front identified as a Canadian army "struck [him] as a good idea."⁵⁸ Secondly, Brooke validated the Mediterranean theatre by asking whether the Canadians would be amenable to sending another division—most likely an outcome of the revised British Mediterranean strategy;⁵⁹ and lastly Brooke's talk of disbanding the Canadian Army ceased altogether. In the remaining weeks of November, Ralston, Stuart and Paget worked out terms whereby the I Canadian Army would command two corps in Europe, II Canadian and I British, so long as McNaughton was removed.⁶⁰ At no point in the files of Ralston, King or Stuart, does it appear to occur to them that the strategy in the Mediterranean had changed, and that there had been a tangible effect on Canada. Ultimately, though, it did not matter. In line with the original Canadian policy, First Canadian Army fought in Normandy. While it would take until February 1945 to fully "Canadianize" the army, with both Canadian corps under its command, its performance won it the long sought political currency in Canada, and legitimacy among its allies.

The question posed here is one of military strategy by a junior partner in alliance warfare. In 1943, Canada, a country that forwent any chance to participate in strategy, made an operational decision based primarily on political motives. Indeed, the events of 1943 demonstrate that Canadian decision makers had very little understanding of military strategy and what it meant for Canada. They tried to chart out a course for the army, dealing with McNaughton's goal of a united army, with King's disinterest in strategy and Ralston's objective of seeing the army gain experience, with only partial and haphazard information about Allied military strategy. Consequently, they made decisions that in the short term hurt the interests of the country. This is curious, considering the weight that both Canadians and their allies placed on having ground

⁵⁸ Ralston Fonds, Vol. 64, 6 November 1943.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 8 November 1943.

troops in the front lines as a most important signal of Canada's commitment to the war effort. In other areas of the war Canada did a better job; the Royal Canadian Navy managed to secure operational command of the North-Atlantic Theatre based out of Newfoundland—strategic control of a critical theatre earned on merit. At the same time, Canada was by far the most important economic contributor within the empire, which earned it a seat on the Combined Foods Board. The confusion in 1943 can only be a consequence of Canadian immaturity. Mackenzie King and Canadian leadership recognized the importance of an army presence in Europe. They knew the visibility of troops on the ground was critical to earning Canada recognition as a full contributor to the Allied effort. As such, it is all the more surprising in 1943 that there was no clear "Canadian strategy" or understanding of Allied strategy, and even Canadian policy seemed indecisive—and was certainly inconsistent.

Ultimately the decision by the Canadian government to send I Corps to Italy in 1943 was a reflection of its inability to consider Allied strategy in its calculations about how to proceed with the Canadian Army. In the end, the British, their strategic assessment of Canadian interests, and changing Allied military strategy allowed Canada to stagger into the fulfillment of its original objectives. It was certainly politics by other means.