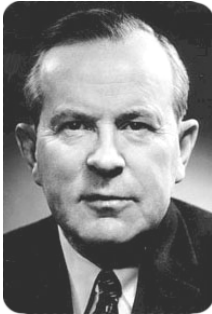


A Brief Historical Synopsis

Lester B. Pearson, the Suez Crisis & the Nobel Peace Prize



In late October 1956 an uneasy truce in the Middle East between the recently created state of Israel and Arab neighbours escalated into war. The British and French, both with financial interests in the Suez Canal, interposed themselves between Egypt and Israel, occupying key points along the canal in order to keep traffic moving. However, neither country had legal right to do so. International tensions around the quickly developed deadlock had major implications for world order.

The global threat was three-fold: 1) the possibility of dividing the Commonwealth due to differing positions regarding the UK's action; 2) a significant divergence of policy between the USA and the UK whose cooperation was the basis of the western alliance; and 3) a real potential for damage to the UN as two permanent members of the Security Council had unilaterally taken military action while the Council was still in the process of examining the original dispute.

Cease-fire resolutions proposed at the UN Security Council were swiftly vetoed by the UK and France, both permanent members of the Council. As a result, the USA took the issue to the UN General Assembly where the veto did not apply, and where other countries, such as Canada, were able to voice their own proposals and to vote on a global security issue. In light of the crisis, the UNGA called an emergency session on November 1, 1956.

When Pearson (head of the Canadian delegation to the UN) arrived at the UNGA session, members were debating a USA resolution calling for a cease-fire and withdrawal of all invading forces - ultimately adopted after a vote of 64 to 5, with 6 abstentions. Canada was one of the abstentions, and following the rules of procedure, Pearson was permitted to explain the reason for the abstention.

He stated that the USA resolution was "*a moderate proposal couched in reasonable and objective terms, without unfair or unbalanced condemnation*" but went on to say that he felt that it was inadequate and therefore Canada had abstained. "*... It does not provide for any steps to be taken by the United Nations for a peace settlement, without which a cease-fire will be of only temporary value at best... What then, six months from*

now? Are we to go through all this again? Are we to return to the status quo? Such a return would not be to a position of security, or even a tolerable position, but would be a return to terror, bloodshed, strife, incidents, charges and counter-charges..." He insisted that a mere cease-fire and withdrawal was not enough. And finally, he advanced the idea of an international police force as the solution.

While it was not a new or uniquely Canadian idea, the timing, the wording and Pearson's unique role at the UN laid the grounds for the establishment of a United Nations Emergency Force – in effect, the UN's first designated peacekeeping mission. Pearson was able to do it because he had been President of the UNGA (1952-53); he knew half of the Foreign Ministers by their first names; he had the support of the USA; he was well thought of by both the Israeli and Egyptian Ministers; and he had expert knowledge of UNGA procedures and politics.

After two days of skillful diplomatic back-corridor negotiations, and having received Canadian cabinet approval to table a specific resolution, Pearson presented the Canadian resolution to the emergency UNGA session on November 3 stating "*The time has come for the UN not only to bring about a cease-fire, but to move in and police the cease-fire and make arrangements for a political settlement.*"

Canada's resolution was passed 57 to 0, with 19 abstentions (including France, UK and USSR). In the days that followed, the UN Emergency Force commanded by Major-General E.L.M. "Tommy" Burns (Canada) was deployed; the UK and France ordered a cease-fire; Israeli forces withdrew; the canal reopened; and a temporary peace was established.

By not condemning, isolating or antagonizing the States involved, Pearson was able to end the crisis through the United Nations by the creation of an international police force which would separate the combatants; would end the immediate fighting; and would allow the UK and France to withdraw from the crisis with a minimum loss of face and before being formally condemned by the UN.

In 1957, Pearson's remarkable diplomatic achievements in peace-building, and in particular in resolving the crisis of Suez through the establishment of a UN Emergency Force, was recognized and honoured with the awarding of the **Nobel Peace Prize**.

This text is an excerpt from UNA-Canada's paper "*Lester Pearson's Role in the United Nations*", popular with educators and students, funded by Bell Canada, and available on-line at www.unac.org (under "Library" – "UNA-Canada Research Papers").