

THE WORLD'S LONGEST DEFENDED BORDER: A Return to the Days of Militarisation

David Bercuson

INTRODUCTION

Yesterday [2 December 2001] was the first time in more than a century that the United States has felt sufficiently vulnerable along its northern frontier to station troops along the US-Canadian border. However, if National Guardsmen are deployed along the border, as planned, it would not be the largest conglomeration of troops ever dispatched to the border. In fact the numbers pale in comparison to the colonial era, when the world's longest undefended border was anything but undefended. But despite the assurances of John Ashcroft, the US Attorney-General, that he is not about to militarise the Canada-US border, militarised it will be if his plans go ahead.

While its members are part-time citizen soldiers, the National Guard is a military force, pure and simple. They are trained and equipped to fight wars and once deployed they are for all intents and purposes no different than other US troops. They operate under a chain of command, they are subject to a code of military justice, and they have had little or no training in the finer points of civilian policing. Unlike civilian police who are trained to resolve difficult situations with a minimum of force, military forces are trained and equipped to bring maximum force to bear. That could prove tragic, not to mention extremely harmful to Canada-US relations, in the event National Guard troops mistakenly fire at innocent Canadians who are unfortunate enough to lose their way and inadvertently cross the border.

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The notion of the "world's longest undefended border" emerged from a largely unwritten agreement between the two countries, after [US] Confederation in 1867, that each would do the utmost to maintain a peaceful border while solving all outstanding border disputes by peaceful means. Continual co-operation between both nations' police and border authorities has helped make the system work. Peace was the exception rather than the rule before that.

...the Rush-Bagot Agreement, the world's oldest arms limitation treaty.

From the early 1600s to the War of 1812, the French, British, Huron, Mohawk and Americans attacked across and along the boundary that lay roughly along the St. Lawrence River separating New France from the Dutch and British colonies – and later the United States – to the south. The height of the cross-border fighting was during the War of 1812, when thousands of US soldiers flooded across the border in several invasions of Upper and Lower Canada. American ambitions of conquering the British colonies were thwarted repeatedly, culminating in the Battle of Lundy's Lane in 1814, when 5,000 US, British and Canadian soldiers clashed in the bloodiest battle ever fought on Canadian soil. More than two centuries of drums along the border stopped in late April, 1817, when Britain and the United States signed the *Rush-Bagot Agreement*, the world's oldest arms limitation treaty. The treaty severely limited British and American naval forces on the Great Lakes and Lake Champlain and became the basis for all other peaceful resolutions of major boundary disputes between Britain (later Canada) and the United States. However, the treaty was not intended to completely de-militarise the border and, in fact, there were a number of occasions after 1817 when both sides deployed or stationed troops or naval forces along the boundary. Both Britain and the US built military outposts along the boundary for decades after the

treaty and both called out their troops during the rebellions of 1837 -38, the American Civil War and the Fenian raids of the 1860s.



After the Upper Canada rebellion ended in failure, William Lyon Mackenzie and a handful of supporters fled to the United States before seizing Navy Island, a small island in the Niagara River about three kilometres above the falls. With the help of some sympathetic Americans, Mackenzie declared himself “Chairman, pro tem of the Provisional Government of Upper Canada” and prepared to re-launch his rebellion. But a daring raid headed by Captain Andrew Drew of the Royal Navy seized the *Caroline*, a small steamer that was Mackenzie’s sole connection to the US mainland. They killed one American and burned the little vessel. The Americans protested but did nothing, and Navy Island was abandoned. For close to a year after the initial uprising, small bands of Mackenzie followers and American sympathizers made raids across the border. After the American Civil War, Irish-American patriots calling themselves Fenians mounted a number of raids into Canada. They aimed to draw British troops away from Ireland so their brothers-in-arms might succeed in overthrowing British rule there. The most serious of these raids, the Battle of Ridgeway, took place near Fort Erie, Ontario, in 1866, when a force of 800 Fenians crossed the Niagara River and occupied the southern corner of the Niagara Peninsula for a number of days. The Fenians soundly beat a force of Canadian militia sent to repel their invasion, and most later escaped back across the border into the US. The Americans also kept some troops along their side of the line during their wars against the Plains Indians from the 1870s to the 1890s and used naval bases on the Great Lakes to train sailors during the Second World War.

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Canada and the United States are now struggling to find ways to increase the effectiveness of detection, prevention and prosecution of terrorists while at the same time safeguarding our liberties. It isn’t easy, because terrorism exists in the netherworld between war and crime, and the criminal justice system may not equip us to deal with terrorism. One thing is certain, however, although the military forces of a democracy such as the United States are sworn to uphold democratic processes, they are at best blunt instruments for dealing with police-type situations.