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OPINION

A new nationalism is emerging in Canada

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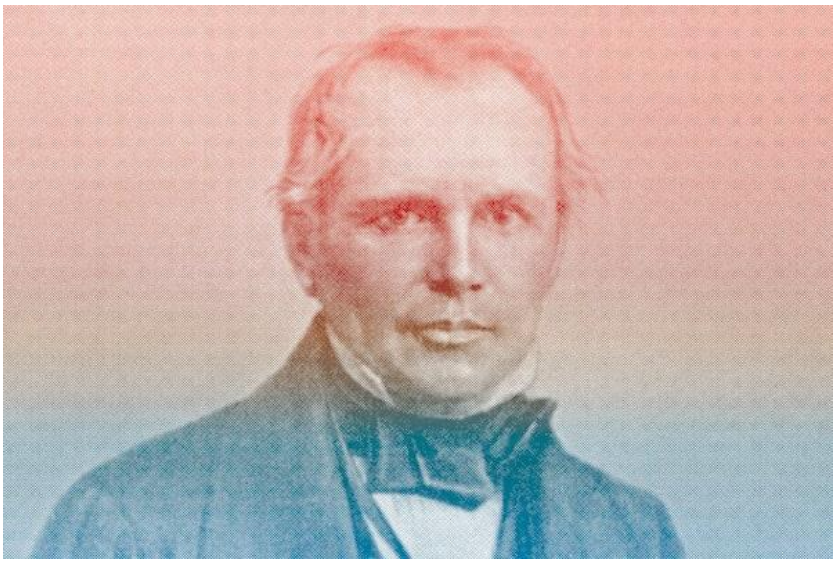

An address from Colonel Étienne-Paschal Taché to the Legislative Assembly of the United Province in April, 1846, called to action steadfast defenders of British sovereignty when confronted with U.S. aggression.

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In January, 1846, Lewis Cass of Michigan spoke on the floor of the U.S. Senate, giving a full-throated defence of American expansionism. “Oregon belongs to the United States by the right of destiny and the spirit of our institutions,” the senator thundered, his words carefully noted in Toronto’s newly established Globe newspaper.

Cass was no ordinary antagonist. He was an ex-military officer who had repeatedly confronted Anglo-Canadian forces as commander of the 3rd Ohio Volunteer Regiment in 1812, from Fort Malden onto the fateful Battle of the Thames (1813), where the legendary Indigenous military strategist and Canadian war hero Tecumseh was killed. As senator

after senator rose in the Republic's upper chamber in that winter of 1846 to dismiss British claims as illegitimate, they spoke with martial confidence of 100,000 volunteers ready to cross the Rocky Mountains at the first declaration of war to annex the British-held Oregon territory – a confrontation underscored by president James Polk's bellicose "Fifty-four Forty or Fight" stance. American expansionism, cloaked in the rhetoric of manifest destiny, appeared inexorable.

In the United Province of Canada, this provoked more than mere concern: militia bills were drafted with urgency.

As the crisis unfolded, another veteran of 1812 – Colonel Étienne-Paschal Taché, a warrior, physician, statesman and future premier of Canada – rose to address the Legislative Assembly of the United Province in April, 1846. The galleries were filled to capacity as members debated a new militia bill. In that charged atmosphere, Taché delivered words that would resonate down the decades: "Be satisfied we will never forget our allegiance till the last cannon which is shot on this continent in defence of Great Britain is fired by the hand of a French Canadian."

The assembly erupted in cheers at this extraordinary declaration. A mere nine years earlier, French Canadians had taken up arms against the Crown in the Rebellions of 1837-38. Now, confronted with American aggression, former rebels had transformed into steadfast defenders of British sovereignty. External threat had achieved what decades of internal politics could not: a fundamental realignment of loyalties.

More than 175 years later, another declaration has commanded similar attention. Addressing the Royal Canadian Geographical Society in Ottawa, Stephen Harper asserted he "would accept any level of damage to preserve the independence of the country." These words carried the same gravity as Taché's cannon shot, marking another pivotal shift in our national consciousness. After years of casual denigration of national symbols and identity, Canadians are rediscovering their patriotic resolve in the face of external pressure. The pattern endures: threat begets unity. The maple leaf, our emblem dear, previously disdained, now populates the social media bios of the reconverted.

The declarations of Taché and Mr. Harper naturally invite careful analysis. Making declarations is one matter; acting upon them when the moment of choice arrives is quite another. With Taché and Mr. Harper, separated by centuries but united in purpose, we see two figures who grasped the gravity of carrying the fire: the feu sacré.

The Canadiens of Taché's epoch stood resolutely with him; the question remains whether 21st-century Canadians will maintain the Harperian resolve beyond our current period of uncertainty.

The historian Jacques Monet demonstrated how French Canadians in the 1840s, facing existential pressure, chose cultural survival over economic integration. When their very identity was threatened, they transformed from an exuberant people of voyageurs into a close-knit nationality protecting their distinctive way of life. The parallel to our present moment is striking, though our destiny may chart a different course.

The contemporary press reflected this resolute spirit. "No circumstances can be conceived to induce the free people of Canada to link their fate with the unprincipled Republican despotism of the United States," The Globe declared in January, 1846. The Montreal Courier went further, condemning those who adopted pro-U.S. positions as displaying a "snivelling and Yankee tone," and suggesting that in the event of conflict with the United States, such individuals "must be sent out of the country." (The Globe disagreed.) Even then, Canadians demonstrated their willingness to debate principle and internal policy vigorously, while maintaining that "we throw all our humble means frankly, sincerely, devotedly, into our country's cause, when she may be about to meet a foreign enemy," The Globe wrote.

Today, Canada finds itself bound to the United States not by colonial rule but by economic gravity. American financial markets dominate our capital flows, while presidential threats of tariffs – and recurring annexationist warnings – underscore the fragility of our autonomy.

Mr. Harper's warning emerges from this complex reality. If the United States chooses to weaponize its economic leverage beyond its negotiating posture, how should Canada respond? His answer is unequivocal: Resist at all costs – even if it means profound economic disruption. This marks a fundamental shift in Canadian strategic thought. For decades, our leaders pursued deeper economic integration with the United States, viewing free trade as both inevitable and beneficial. Now, a former prime minister has suggested Canada must be prepared to accept economic severance – even impoverishment – to preserve sovereignty.

A new nationalism is emerging, often expressed obliquely through unexpected channels, but unmistakable in its intensity and expressed by left and right. Its success, however,

hinges on embracing Canada's energy-producing regions – those Western provinces whose proud Canadian identity encompasses a different vision of necessary sacrifices and national priorities. This unity across regional interests has proven elusive, fractured by short-term political calculations when it should have been nurtured as our most precious national asset.

We now contemplate sacrifices for independence. These burdens must be distributed fairly across our Confederation – our history warns against inequitable arrangements, a warning we ignore at our peril.

However, today, the nationalist impulses that once belonged solely to Quebec now permeate all of Canada. The last cannon shot has yet to be fired – not from a 32-pound smoothbore cannon Taché would have known, but in the form of a trade war, a collapsed supply chain or a crisis of economic dependency.

The question persists: Are we prepared, like earlier generations of Canadians, to choose principle over prosperity? History suggests that when truly pressed, Canadians find reserves of resolve. It's likely that senator Lewis Cass, with his firsthand experience fighting Anglo-Canadian forces, would grudgingly acknowledge that when threatened, the Canadian spirit proves more resilient than anticipated.