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TIMES INTERNATIONAL

Washington

What Canada Taught Us About Priorities

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, April 9 — This country is learning the hard way not to take its neighbors for granted. It took a crisis over the expropriation of the oil fields in Mexico a generation ago to put U.S.-Mexican relations on a stable basis. It took a convulsion in Cuba to make us take that island seriously, and it has taken an ugly election in Canada to make us think hard about our closest friends.

The bad aspects of this are clear enough. It will be a long time before the cost of the Cuban mistakes is paid in full. The Canadian election too, has opened up old wounds and fears North of the border. But the good aspects of these things, while more subtle, are also significant.

Perhaps the most important of these is, that the events of the last few years in Canada and Cuba have made us think a little more about home. For good and urgent reasons, Uncle Sam has been acting as a fireman of the world for almost a whole generation.

He has been on the crisis-run in Korea, Taiwan, Quemoy and Matsu, South Vietnam and Indonesia, Berlin and Hungary, Suez and Lebanon and the Congo, and without him, the world would be a worse and different place.

But in the process, several odd things have happened here. Officials have become crisis-minded. They have got in the habit of thinking primarily about the people who are causing the most trouble, and so many people are causing trouble in so many places far away, that this has left little time for the problems and feelings of the nations close to home.

Travel Now—Pay Later

This generation of Americans who are in the decisive position at the top of the Kennedy Administration spent their energies in the battle against American isolation. They concentrated on the crises of Europe in the thirties and forties. They became increasingly conscious of the challenge of Asia and Africa in the fifties and early sixties.

If you could plot their travels during this period, for example, you would probably find that they had crossed the Atlantic more often than they had crossed the Alleghenies, or the Rio Grande, or northward beyond the Great Lakes. And they have been sliding down those fire-poles into Berlin and Saigon more than they have been going north to Ottawa.

All this is understandable, but in the process, without intent, not only neighbors but the home front have been neglected, and misjudgments have been made.

Washington misjudged Khrushchev's bold move into Cuba. It never thought he'd dare try to change the balance of world power in our own backyard with his offensive missiles. But he did. Washington also misjudged Diefenbaker. It never thought he would run for reelection on an anti-American campaign, or use mislaid American secret documents to gather votes, or misinterpret testimony of Defense Secretary McNamara in order to give the impression that the United States was engaged in a dishonorable exercise to use Canada as a "decoy" in the cold war.

Washington's Regrets

Yet these things have now happened, and the Kennedy Administration, startled out of its preoccupation with far-off places, is beginning to adjust to the realities nearer home.

It is beginning to realize, for example, that its prestige abroad will be no greater than its capacity to employ, educate, house, and transport its own people. And because of the recent events in Cuba and Canada, it is concentrating far more on the problems of the hemisphere.

Accordingly, there may now be a new chapter in U.S.-Canadian, if not U.S.-Cuban relations, in the offing. Washington has studied the election returns in Ottawa too carefully to make any comment on them now. Officials here concede that they have talked too much in the past, and made too many mistakes, mainly in Mr. Diefenbaker's favor, to talk more now until a final decision on the Canadian vote is reached.

But despite this official caution, Washington's hopes and fears are fairly clear. They like Mike Pearson, the Liberal leader, because he is one of the few diplomats here who have told them the blunt truth in the past and made them like it, even when they didn't agree. This happens all too seldom in this town.

Also, they don't like Diefenbaker, not primarily because he differed with them — Pearson has differed with them much more effectively — but because he tried to give the impression that Washington would use Canada as a "decoy" to avoid a Soviet attack on the United States.

Even in its present self-critical mood, Washington felt this was a low blow. This capital is saddened by its recent differences with Ottawa. It regrets its own sharp criticism of Diefenbaker, and it is grateful that the Canadian voters did not accept Diefenbaker's anti-American appeal. But it resents the suggestion that it might have acted toward Canada in a dishonorable way, and its main hope is that the difficulties of the last few months will now open up a new chapter in hemispheric relations.