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The FLQ, a Canadian Insurgency

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I. Introduction

Twenty-five years ago the nation with which the United States shares the longest unpatroled border in the world was shaken by separatist violence. A group calling itself the *Front de Liberation du Québec*, or FLQ, was nearing the end of a nearly ten-year bombing and bank-robbing spree that was about to turn even more violent. In October 1970, a British diplomat and Québec government minister were kidnapped. The diplomat, British Trade Commissioner James Cross, was released unharmed 59 days later, and his captors were allowed to fly to Cuba. But the FLQ cell holding the minister, Pierre Laporte, strangled him to death October 17 with the religious chain he customarily wore. Ottawa meanwhile had invoked the rarely used War Measures Act to flood the province of Québec with troops and summarily arrest 497 people, the vast majority of whom were shown to have had nothing to do with the violence After considerable police bungling, the FLQ was finally broken up and its members imprisoned or exiled

More than two decades later, the "October Crisis" continues to provoke debate in Canada. A controversial 1994 movie called October re-examines the Laporte kidnapping from the point of view of the kidnappers, and has been attacked by some Canadian politicians for justifying Laporte's murder.[1] The invocation of the War Measures Act has been condemned with the benefit of hindsight as an excessive violation of civil rights.[2] An imminent referendum on whether the province of Québec should secede from the rest of the Canadian federation has brought the FLQ crisis back into focus, if only to serve as a contrast to more than 20 years of peaceful political movement since the FLQ's

reign of terror.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the FLQ using the O'Neill framework for evaluating insurgencies.[3] Questions to be addressed include what conditions allowed the FLQ to organize, how the government eventually defeated it, and why similar insurgencies have not sprung up to replace it given continued political instability in Québec. A central premise of this paper is that for reasons of history, proximity and economic and political interdependence, the potential for violence in Québec should be of central interest to U.S. policymakers. Indeed, the primary kidnapping targets of the FLQ in October 1970 were not Cross and Laporte, but U S diplomats resident in Montréal. Based on the evaluation of the FLQ experience, U.S. policy options regarding the possibility of separatist violence in Québec will be discussed

II. Nature of the FLQ Insurgency

Although some might argue the FLQ posed no more threat to Canadian national security than the Weathermen group did to U S security at about the same time, Canadian authorities themselves defined the FLQ's actions as an insurgency aimed at the violent overthrow of Québec's democratically elected government.[4] Of the various types of insurgencies described by O'Neill, the FLQ was clearly a secessionist movement whose goal as described in a communique after its first bomb attack on three Canadian army barracks in March 1963 was "political and economic independence for Québec "[5] The form of warfare it engaged in was terrorism, with bombings making up 48 percent of the 174 acts of FLQ

violence [6]

A brief history of the FLQ's actions after the army barracks bombing would including an April 20, 1963, bomb attack at an army recruiting center in which a watchman died, dozens of bank robberies and armed thefts, bomb attacks against symbols of former British rule in Québec such as the Queen Victoria monument and Wolfe Memorial in Québec City, and the Feb. 13, 1969, daytime bombing of the Montréal Stock Exchange in which 20 people were injured. Police managed to arrest various FLQ members during different stages of the violence, but new members continued the terror campaign. The kidnappings of Cross and Laporte in October 1970, and subsequent murder of Laporte, capped the gradually escalating violence. Under intense police pressure and with key members in jail or in exile, remaining FLQ cells mounted only sporadic bomb attacks following the kidnappings, and the last active FLQ groups were broken up by the end of 1972.[7]

The key distinguishing features of the FLQ phenomenon can be analyzed using the six O'Neill evaluative criteria.

The Environment

The physical field of action for the FLQ was the province of Québec, especially Montréal, where 75 percent of its violent acts took place. Québec is Canada's largest province, and outside of Montréal and Québec City the province is sparsely populated. This was important to providing rural safe havens in several instances to FLQ members Transportation and communications systems in Quebec were excellent, which facilitated police work against FLQ members,

especially since the FLQ concentrated its efforts in urban areas where police could monitor its movements with gradually increasing success.

On the human dimension, 80 percent of Québec's population was made up of French Canadians at the time of the FLQ insurgency. Most of them resided in rural areas. These French-speaking Canadians were the descendants of the Frenchmen who discovered and settled Canada before falling under British dominion after the British military victory over French forces in Québec City in 1759. The francophones were largely marginalized after this time, with Canadians of British descent steadily taking over the economic life of the province.

By 1961, after a particularly grim period from the 1930s to 1950s as a backwater in which the Catholic Church dominated education and English speakers dominated commerce, French Canadians controlled less than 20 percent of Québec's economy, had average incomes 35 percent lower than the English-speaking population, and sent fewer than 2 percent of their university-aged youths to post-secondary institutions They were, as one academic put it, "undereducated, underpaid and overexploited."[8] Although cultural and language differences between francophone Quebecers and the rest of anglophone Canada certainly contributed to tensions and came to be identified with the Québec problem, it appears economic disparities were the main engine powering the subsequent insurgency [9]

In 1960 a period called "the quiet revolution" began under Québec Premier Jean Lesage which rapidly altered Quebec's course, transforming the sleepily rural

French Canadian society into an active urban one, supplanting the Church in education, nationalizing private utilities, and creating a middle class willing to assert itself in matters of commerce and language.[10] But improvements were not evenly distributed, and with expectations now raised, some newly nationalistic elements believed change was neither radical nor rapid enough [11]

On the political side, a political party advocating independence for Québec from Canada, the *Parti Québécois* (PQ), was founded in 1968 and won 24 percent of the vote in the 1970 provincial parliamentary elections But this surprisingly strong showing yielded only seven seats in the 108-seat provincial assembly, leaving many separatists feeling betrayed by the electoral process.[12]

Popular Support

The FLQ never had a large number of active participants Although the government claimed at one point that the FLQ included 120 members and 2,000 active sympathizers, the active participants after the massive government crackdown in 1971 were found to number only 35. These active participants were primarily young, unskilled workers or students, the average age of those arrested in the early bombing campaigns was 19, while those involved in the later kidnappings averaged 24 Membership varied as participants drifted in and out or were arrested and imprisoned, with some drawn from legal separatist and left-wing political groups [13] No FLQ members appear to have attained charismatic status as described by O'Neill, although some, such as FLQ publicist Pierre Vallières and FLQ mediator Robert Lemieux, attained a certain fame

Nonetheless, the FLQ enjoyed considerable, if passive, popular support in Québec until the kidnappings of Cross and Laporte. Its members were seen as Robin Hood-type adventurers whose manifestos, which echoed the grievances of many working-class Quebecers against the economic system and the government, struck a responsive chord. In the midst of the 1970 kidnapping crisis, for example, students at the University of Québec in Montréal boycotted classes in support of the FLQ, and 1,500-3,000 Montrealers demonstrated the evening of Oct. 15 in favor of FLQ demands [14]

The FLQ employed Marxist rhetoric to attack the capitalist nature of the ruling English-speaking elite and American cultural and economic imperialism. But it was the group's exoteric appeals regarding basic economic disparities facing French-speaking Quebecers that seemed to win it the most support The group's terrorist attacks, especially those against targets viewed as symbols of Quebec's subjugation such as army barracks and financial institutions, succeeded in drawing attention to these appeals. In particular, the FLQ used the kidnapping crisis skillfully to propagate its leftist, populist message, with various media outlets competing to publish the latest FLQ communique. The exhaustive media coverage helped the FLQ create a climate of fear and crisis, which in turn led the provincial government to urge the federal government to take a more accommodating stance in negotiations.

Public support for the FLQ evaporated almost instantly, however, when it executed Laporte Québec opinion swung behind the government even among

those committed to separatism such as the leaders of PQ, and the FLQ found itself isolated. As one study put it, "The people of Québec were willing to tolerate terrorism as long as no one was hurt."[15] A former government official put it slightly differently: "There were many people who were ready to sympathize at a distance, but at the moment they assassinated Laporte, all sympathy dissipated."[16]

Organization and Cohesion

The FLQ was an amateurish and disorderly operation whose paramount moment of apparent organization came when eight original members met in 1963 to establish a central committee for overall command This structure, eroded by early arrests and a lack of group cohesion, did not last Secretive cells which later organized for protection from authorities lacked central coordination or authority. Cells unconnected to the original group sprung up spontaneously with little or no inter-communication. Even during the kidnapping crisis the FLQ lacked central leadership or coordination Given the increasingly effective police penetration of the group by 1970, this loose and largely undifferentiated structure may have insured the group's survival [17] But it limited the scope of the FLQ, which does not appear to have ever organized mass support or public services in a systematic way, nor launched military or paramilitary operations.

Perhaps not surprisingly given its amorphous structure, internal divisions existed within the FLQ, and became evident during the kidnapping crisis when one cell effectively undercut another. The first cell, led by Paul Rose, believed in long-term planning and action to achieve the group's goals Another cell, led by

Jacques Lanctot, was impatient with endless planning and opted for the dramatic -- a political kidnapping After abortive attempts to kidnap the Israeli and U S consuls in Montréal, the Lanctot group planned to kidnap a second U S. diplomat. But the Rose group disagreed with this strategy, to the point that its members left Canada for the U.S.

When the Rose group later heard about the kidnapping of Cross, however, they had a sudden change of heart. They returned to Canada and kidnapped Laporte without reference to or communication with the Lanctot cell, which was taken completely by surprise.[18] The two cells further disagreed on the fate of their respective hostages. The Lanctot group decided it would spare Cross' life even if all its demands were not met, while the Rose cell refused to rule out death for Laporte When the Rose group carried out its execution, it effectively squandered the propaganda and public sympathy that had been gained largely by the Lanctot group This difference in tactics eventually proved fatal to the entire movement [19]

External Support

The FLQ did not receive political or material support from external sources, nor did it benefit from foreign sanctuaries It did, however, receive a kind of moral support from France and Cuba.

French President Charles de Gaulle electrified Québec separatists when he visited Montréal in 1967 and spoke his now famous phrase, *"Vive le Québec libre!"* While this was far from endorsing terrorist activities, the FLQ bombing campaign was already in its fourth year and FLQ members undoubtedly considered the

remarks encouraging In addition, when Lanctot and two other members of his group entered France in 1974 after they had released Cross and spent several years in Cuba, French authorities indicated they would not extradite them to Canada because the French did not extradite people wanted in political cases.[20]

As for Cuba, the Lanctot group conditioned its release of Cross on the safe passage of its members to Cuba. The Canadian government honored this demand, and Cuban authorities facilitated it, although Cuban officials said they did so only at the request of the Canadian government.[21]

It should also be noted that many FLQ members were influenced by violent revolutionary movements active elsewhere in the world during the 1960s, especially the FLN in Algeria and Fidel Castro in Cuba [22]

Government Response

In evaluating the government response to the FLQ insurgency, distinctions must be made between various levels of government action. At the operational level, the police and military units assigned to combat the FLQ seriously overestimated its size and committed an almost comical series of investigative errors. Tips were not followed up promptly The pictures of known FLQ members were not circulated; when a picture of Rose was finally printed in the media the day after Laporte's murder, one of his neighbors immediately identified him. On several occasions, FLQ members escaped arrest by hiding in hidden compartments in their apartments or houses. As one author noted, police amateurism was at times "almost unbelievable "[23]

At a broader level, considerable criticism has been leveled at Ottawa's use of the War Measures Act and the military to combat the FLQ. Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau gave what became a famous response to such criticism when answering a reporter's question in the midst of the kidnapping crisis. "There are a lot of bleeding hearts around who can't stand the sight of people with helmets and guns," Trudeau said. "All I can say is: Go on and bleed." The massive deployment of some 8,000 troops and additional members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police resulted in the arrests of 497 people, only 30 of whom eventually went to trial

At a minimum, the Act was a blunt instrument. At the worst, it was a gross and unnecessary violation of civil rights which some believed was as much directed at the legitimate PQ as the illegitimate FLQ [24] While successful in restoring order in Québec, it helped perpetuate the mythology of Ottawa bashing Québec [25]

At the broadest level, however, one could argue that the government effectively undermined the FLQ insurgency by addressing its root causes. Trudeau's government took steps to eliminate perceived and real discrimination against French speakers through passage of the Official Languages Act in 1969, which made Canada officially bilingual. Trudeau himself was a Quebecer, thus proving Quebecers could reach the top in national politics, and during the 1970s his federal government poured significant development funding into the province The existence of the PQ and its winning of 24 percent of the Québec vote in 1970

showed that an alternate path to terrorism was available to those favoring change. These steps gradually mitigated the factors that had led to insurgency.

III. Future Implications

The FLQ insurgency died rapidly following the murder of Laporte and the roundup of the FLQ's limited circle of active members. But the issue of Québec separatism has only gained strength in the intervening years. In 1976, the PQ won provincial elections and put an ardent separatist, René Lévesque, in office as premier. In 1993 a party called the *Bloc Québécois*, which advocates sovereignty for Quebec, won 54 of the 295 seats in the national House of Commons and became the principal opposition group. The PQ, after being defeated in 1985 following a 1980 referendum that saw 60 percent of Quebecers vote against separation, returned to power in Québec in September 1994 with the independence plank a key part of its platform The newly elected premier, Jacques Parizeau, pledged to hold a referendum on sovereignty within a year. Quebecers thus have come close to achieving through peaceful means much of what the FLQ had sought to achieve through violence.

As of today, there is no evidence that the FLQ or a successor insurgency of dissatisfied French-speaking Canadians is active in Québec.[26] While a large number of Quebecers may still feel dissatisfied with their place within the Canadian federation, despite marked economic gains in recent years, the majority apparently continues to believe sufficient nonviolent channels exist within which to effect change, even if that means separation from the Canadian federation

Thus it appears that the environment which spawned the growth of the FLQ insurgency has changed sufficiently that a new insurgency is unlikely in the immediate future.[27]

IV. U.S. Policy Options

U.S policy regarding the possibility that Quebec might break away from Canada through a referendum process is to note our long and profitable relationship with a *united* (emphasis added) Canada, but to add that it is for the Canadians themselves to decide the political future of their nation. Since conditions seem unlikely to support a separatist insurgency in the foreseeable future, the current policy would seem well advised. Canadians are notoriously sensitive about perceived U.S. cultural and economic domination, a fact which the FLQ capitalized on in its manifestos condemning conditions in Quebec in the 1960s Any U S. intervention in a nonviolent Quebec problem might well mobilize opinion against the U S. and even strengthen the separatist movement.

Nonetheless, should separatist violence again flare in Quebec, the U S. might have to become more assertive, a step that would be harder to take because it hasn't been given serious thought in nearly 200 years. The economies of the U.S. and Canada are more tightly bound through the North America Free Trade Agreement than at any other time in history. As the recent Chiapas insurgency in Mexico has shown, political instability can led to economic crises that go beyond borders Thus even if violence was limited to Quebec, as it was in the FLQ case, a serious breakdown in order might well require a strong U S statement against the

use of violence, and possible U S. military or police assistance in resolving such a crisis peacefully This would be especially true if U.S. interests or nationals in Quebec were targeted again.

1. Johnson, Brian D., "Killing for *le* Québec libre," MacLean's, Oct. 17, 1994, pp. 54-55.

2. Bain, George, "'Trust us. We know.': Ottawa's rationale 'made little sense,'" MacLean's, Oct. 15, 1990, pp. 24-25.

3. O'Neill, Bard, Analyzing Insurgency: An Overview, condensed from Insurgency and Revolution, (New York: Brassey's, 1990) pp. 1-32

4. See the formal October 15, 1970, request from Québec provincial authorities to Ottawa for assistance, which stated in part, "We are faced with a concerted effort to intimidate and overthrow the government and the democratic institutions of this province by the planned and systematic commission of illegal acts, including insurrection." Cited in Terrorism and Democracy: Some Contemporary Cases, Janke, Peter, Editor; (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992) pp. 55

5. Ibid, pp. 37

6. Ibid, pp. 40

7. Ibid, pp. 61

8. Ibid., pp. 34, and Came, Barry, "The FLQ Crisis: Québec and Canada 20 years later," MacLean's, Oct. 15, 1990, pp. 18.

9. The FLQ's first communique, for example, targets "factories that discriminate against French-speaking workers." Cited in Fournier, Louis, FLQ: Histoire d'un Mouvement Clandestin, (Montreal: Quebec/Amerique, 1982) pp. 14. An FLQ character in the movie October curses cruel factory bosses and starvation wages. Cited in Johnson, pp. 54-55.

10. Lamont, Lansing, Breakup: The Coming End of Canada and the Stakes for America, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1994) pp. 67-68

11. Terrorism and Democracy, pp. 37

12. Ibid. pp. 41

13. Ibid. pp. 40

14. Ibid, pp. 54-55

15. Ibid., pp. 58

16. Corelli, Rae, "Troops in the Streets," Maclean's, Oct 15, 1990, pp. 66

17. Terrorism and Democracy, pp. 38

18. Ibid, pp. 51

19. Ibid, pp. 62

20. Political Terrorism, Sobel, Lester A., ed., (New York; Facts on File, Inc., 1975) pp. 207

21. Ibid., pp. 207

22. Fournier, pp. 24-25

23. Terrorism and Democracy, pp. 66

24. Bain, pp. 24

25. Nick Auf der Maur, one of those arrested, quoted in "The End of Innocence," Maclean's, Oct. 15, 1990, pp. 26

26. Author interviews with State Department and Canadian Embassy officials.

27. Although not the focus of this paper, native Indian tribes like the Mohawks or Crees have many of the same complaints about the French-speaking rulers of Quebec that they had against the English-speaking Canadians. These complaints led to a violent standoff in the town of Oka, Quebec, in 1990. Violent attempts by such groups to assert their rights cannot be ruled out, although their numbers are so small widespread upheaval seems unlikely. See Lamont, pp. 183