

## THE PRICE OF INDEPENDENCE

BY JOHN C. THOMPSON

At times in Canada's long-running Quebec crisis, several of the province's nationalist leaders have alluded to the possibility of making a unilateral declaration of independence. The issue of the legality of such a declaration is one thing; the consequences of making such a move are another. One nigh invariable consequence is lethal violence, if not outright warfare.

Generally, a secession can be assumed to be an appropriation or assumption of authority from a larger host entity. Since the Napoleonic Wars, the nationalist pursuit of self-authority has been endemic throughout much of the world—and caused no end of trouble. The rise of nation-states has meant that the highest aspiration of a self-aware people is a nation of their own. Currently, the relevance of the nation-state seems to be weakening. Yet the ambition still remains strong and the concept of national self-awareness is sometimes being taken to ever-narrowing identities, particularly by opportunistic leaders.

National aspirations have been a leading cause of conflict. War was midwife to the long birth of Italy and Germany. The collapse of empire after the Napoleonic and First World Wars engendered the violent creation of a number of new nations. The final retreat of the British and French empires was (and remains) attended by more bloodshed. While perhaps not seemingly as dramatic as open warfare, lesser forms of conflict such as terrorism and low-level insurgency also act as the instruments of nationalism. As a

font of organized violence, national aspirations should never be underrated.

If Quebec's nationalists ever do make a unilateral declaration of independence, they might forget that most such declarations eventually involve a degree of violence—sometimes hundreds of thousands can die in consequence. Of course, some declarations of independence or full autonomy are made during an ongoing insurrection, but the intent to become independent already existed.

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### SECESSION THROUGH HISTORY

Throughout history, a unilateral declaration of independence (or secession itself) was usually regarded as an act of rebellion and/or treason. Of 111 cases listed in the Table that follows, the secessionists were opposed with varying degrees of force by the host state in 96 of them. This, however, did not mean that no bloodshed occurred in the remaining 15 cases. Internal actors can initiate violence too—as any Bosnian can relate. Or else a nearby state can

prey on the struggling newborn, as Indonesia did to East Timor. Poland was also faced with several sharp battles in 1919-20 to secure its territory. Other declarations may be uncontested, because the parent state was occupied by another power, or had just been defeated in war.

Most of the uncontested cases occurred under the following three conditions:

1. The declaration attends the collapse of a larger political entity, in which case authority is either absent or too weak to prevent the secession. For example, Austria's collapse in the First World War allowed Hungary and Czechoslovakia to go free, while other minorities were rapidly ingested by the new or reborn nations of Yugoslavia and Poland. The collapse of the authority of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union had a similar effect. Violence can attend these circumstances, or may follow shortly afterwards.

2. The larger entity proved unworkable, and all of its components separated more or less simultaneously. While the sudden devolution of authority may seem peaceful, this sort of collapse leaves many unresolved issues in its wake. The collapse of the United Provinces (Costa Rica to Guatemala) was relatively peaceful, but a century of border wars followed. The collapse of the Mali Federation into Mali and Senegal was relatively peaceful, but relations between the two are often guarded.

3. The secessionist has a large friend hovering nearby. The United States Navy was a tremendous support to the nationalists who wrought Panama out of Colombia. The United States, of course, was interested in building the Panama Canal. The Axis pup-

pet states of the Second World War and the Soviet creation of North Korea were also uncontested, as the original parent states had been marginalized or knocked out of existence.

### UNCONTESTED DECLARATIONS

An entirely peaceful and uncontested unilateral declaration of independence is possible, but there are only four modern examples, including that of the Mali Federation in 1960. The Slovak declaration in 1992 was really a formality. The Czech and Slovak leadership had been debating a split since shortly after the collapse of Communism—despite the urge for union among the majority of both peoples. Macedonia's easy departure from the former Yugoslavia in 1991 was a combination of the heavy Serbian involvement in Croatia (and their preparations for Bosnia), and the rapid arrival of Canadian and American troops under a United Nations mandate. Even so, Macedonia was immediately hit with a devastating blockade by Serbia and Greece, and there has been some internal unrest arising out of the Albanian minority.

Norway is a unique case. When the Norwegians left Swedish rule in 1905, the latter seriously considered the use of military force but decided against it. The Norwegians, in exercising a unilateral declaration of independence, did not have any significant dissenting minorities who were prepared to exercise a similar right to remain with Sweden. Moreover, nineteenth-century Sweden was a union of two crowns and the entity of Norway had never really disappeared.

Some Quebec nationalists have cited the examples of

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*Table: Unilateral Secessionist Attempts Since 1815*

Note: This table records cases where the secessionist party made a unilateral declaration of independence or full autonomy. There have been many other insurgencies where secessionists are not known to have made a declaration of independence, but instead hoped to force the host state to negotiations. (The experience of the Algerian FLN is one example). Nor is mention made of the thousands of tribal revolts—from the Arakan rising against Burma in 1815 to the acts of rebellion against the Indonesian occupation of Irian Jaya in 1996. Nationalist-inspired terrorist groups, such as those in Corsica or the Basque ETA, are not mentioned either.

All of these distinctions may seem artificial to some. Nevertheless, a line had to be drawn somewhere. For interest's sake, Canadian incidents are mentioned. No doubt there are other, equally minor, episodes elsewhere in the world that would escape

TIME	SECESSIONIST	GREATER ENTITY	RESULT OF THE REVOLT
1810-15	Mexico	Spanish Empire	Failed
1810-16	Argentina	Spanish Empire	Successful
1811-22	Gran Colombia	Spanish Empire	Successful—heavy fighting
1815	Serbs	Ottoman Empire	Failed
1817	Chile	Spanish Empire	Successful—mercenary intervention
1820	Peru	Spanish Empire	Successful—heavy fighting
1821	Mexico	Spanish Empire	Successful
1821	Greece	Ottoman Empire	Successful due to outside intervention
1822	Brazil	Portuguese Empire	Successful—mercenary intervention
1822	United Provinces (Central America)	Mexico	Successful due to Mexican instability
1825	Bolivia	Spanish Empire	Successful
1825	Uruguay	Brazil	Successful due to Argentinean aid
1830	Ecuador	Gran Colombia	Uncontested due to internal disintegration
1830	Venezuela	Gran Colombia	Uncontested due to internal disintegration
1830	Belgium	Netherlands	Successful due to outside intervention
1830	Poland	Russia	Failed—harsh repercussions
1831-34	Modena, Parma & Papal States	Austro-Hungary	Frequent failed revolts
1836	Texas	Mexico	Successful (Texas joined USA in 1845)
1839-40	Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras & Nicaragua	United Provinces	Uncontested due to internal disintegration
1839	Natal Boers	British Empire	Failed
1846	Santo Domingo	Haiti	Successful
1846	Kracow Poles	Austro-Hungary	Failed—partial autonomy lost
1848	Hungary	Austro-Hungary	Failed—harsh repercussions
1848	Northern Italy	Austro-Hungary	Failed
1849-51	Cubans (Lopez)	Spanish Empire	Failed despite private American aid
1857	Sepoys	British East India	Failed—mutineers did try to re-establish traditional leaders
1860-64	Poles	Russia	Failed—harsh repercussions
1861	Confederate States	USA	Failed—over 600,000 deaths
1866	Cretans	Ottoman Empire	Failed
1868-78	Cubans	Spanish Empire	Failed
1869	Métis	Canada	Failed
1875	Bulgarians	Ottoman Empire	Failed—but led to Treaty of Berlin
1875	Bosnian Serbs	Ottoman Empire	Failed
1880	Transvaal Boers	British Empire	Successful—retaken in 1900
1883	Mahdist Sudanese	Egypt	Successful—retaken in 1898
1885	Métis	Canada	Failed
1885	Rumelian Bulgars	Serbia	Successful revolt for Bulgarian unification

## SECESSION THROUGH HISTORY


1885-95	Vietnamese	French Empire	Failed
1895	Cuba	Spanish Empire	Failed—but US intervention succeeds
1896-1902	Philippines	Spain, then USA	Failed—heavy loss of Moro lives
1900	Sultanate of Aceh	Netherlands	Failed
1903	Panama	Colombia	Successful—with US intervention
1905	Norway	Sweden	Uncontested
1905	Tibet	China	Failed
1911	Mongolians	China & White Russians	Successful—with Russian & then Soviet aid
1911	Tannu Tuva	China	Successful—taken by USSR in 1944
1916	Hejaz Arabs	Ottoman Empire	Successful—with British aid; followed by civil war
1916	Irish	Great Britain	Successful
1917	Finland	Russia	Successful
1917	Estonia	Russia & Germany	Successful—reconquered in 1940
1918	Czechoslovakia	Austro-Hungary	Uncontested due to collapse of host state
1918	Hungary	Austro-Hungary	Uncontested due to collapse of host state
1918	Armenia	Russia	Successful—reconquered in 1920
1918	Azerbaijan	Russia	Successful—reconquered in 1920
1918	Georgia	Russia	Successful—reconquered in 1920
1918	Latvia	Russia & Germany	Successful—reconquered in 1940
1918	Lithuania	Russia & Poland	Successful—reconquered in 1940
1918	Poland	Germany	Uncontested due to German defeat in WWI
1918	Ukraine	Russia & Germany	Successful—reconquered in 1919
1918	Belarus	Russia & Germany	Successful—reconquered in 1919
1920	Iraqi Arabs	British Mandate	Failed
1922	Kurds	Faisal's Iraq & UK	Failed
1925	Kurds	Turkey	Failed
1925	Syrian Druze	French Mandate	Failed—extensive loss of life
1930	Kurds	Iraq & Persia	Failed—suppressed with British aid
1932	Manchuria	China	Uncontested—Japanese puppet state
1939	Slovakia	Czechoslovakia	Uncontested—German puppet state
1941	Croatia	Yugoslavia	Uncontested—German puppet state
1945	Vietnamese	France	Successful—severe fighting
1945	Indonesia	Netherlands	Successful—followed by instability
1947	Malagasy	France	Failed
1948	North Korea	UN Korea Mandate	Uncontested—Soviet puppet state
1948	Karens	Burma	Failed—guerrilla war until 1996
1951	South Moluccas	Indonesia	Failed
1954	Tibet	China	Failed—severe repercussions
1959	Six Nations Confederacy	Canada	Failed—suppressed with no loss of life
1959	Tibet	China	Failed—severe repercussions
1960	Senegal	Mali Federation	Uncontested due to internal disintegration
1960	Katanganese	Zaire	Failed—armed UN intervention
1961	Kurds	Iraq	Failed
1962	Borneo	Malaysia	Failed—instigated by Indonesia
1965	Rhodesia	British Empire	Failed after long embargo and internal war
1965	Eritrea	Ethiopia	Successful after long and severe war
1967	Anguilla	St. Kitts & Nevis	Failed—suppressed with no loss of life
1967	Ibos of Biafra	Nigeria	Failed—some 2 million dead
1968	Dhofaris	Oman	Failed
1970	Bangladeshis	Pakistan	Successful—with Indian aid and over 100,000 dead
1974	Kurds	Iraq	Failed
1975	East Timor	Portugal	Uncontested due to internal turmoil, but immediately occupied by Indonesia
1979	Kurds	Iraq	Unresolved—over 100,000 dead
1983	Turkish Cypriots	Republic of Cyprus	Uncontested due to presence of Turkish troops

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1988	Estonia	USSR	Claim suppressed by Soviets
1988	Rotuma Island	Fiji	Suppressed with no loss of life
1988	Nagorno-Karabakh	Azerbaijan	Successful due to Armenian aid
1990	Army Mutineers	Philippines	Failed
1990	Gagauz Turks	Moldovan SSR	Claim suppressed by Soviets
1990	South Ossetia	Georgian SSR	Successful due to Russian aid
1990	Lithuania	USSR	Claim suppressed by Soviets
1990	Latvia	USSR	Claim suppressed by Soviets
1990	Kosovo	Yugoslavia	Claim suppressed by Serbs
1990	Slovenia	Yugoslavia	Successful
1990	East Bank Slavs	Moldovan SSR	Successful, but status unresolved
1990	Abkhazian Muslims	Georgian SSR	Successful, with Russian aid
1991	Croatia	Yugoslavia	Successful—followed by civil war
1991	Macedonia	Yugoslavia	Uncontested due to rapid UN response
1992	Russians in Crimea	Ukraine	Status unresolved, no real violence so far
1992	Slovakia	Czechoslovakia	Uncontested
1992	British Somalia	Somalia	Successful—status unrecognized
1992	Bosnia	Yugoslavia	Uncontested—160,000 dead in civil war
1992	Chechnya	Russia	Unresolved—80,000 dead
1994	South Yemen	Yemen	Failed

Sources: The *London Times*, R.E. Dupuy & T.N. Dupuy, *The Harper Encyclopedia of Military History*, 4th ed. (Harper Collins, 1993); author's own files.

Norway and Slovakia. to imply that any possible Quebec secession could be entirely peaceful too. The argument is fatuous. A nationalist crisis is invariably charged with emotion, and violence does not need deliberate political instigation to appear. As hundreds of examples around the world illustrate, conflict can be readily initiated by non-state actors. Canadians like to believe (without real evidence) that they are a peaceful and rational people, but a unilateral declaration of independence in Quebec could very well shatter that belief. 

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## AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES ON QUEBEC INDEPENDENCE

IF QUEBEC BECOMES INDEPENDENT *from page 14*

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countries of the European Union to recognize the Quebec declaration.


The administration and Congress would have to determine the terms under which, from the American point of view, Quebec would be admitted to the NAFTA and other economic accords. Several matters would have to be negotiated with Quebec in such areas as agriculture, textiles, and cultural industries.

Quebec's departure from Canada would probably precipitate an overhaul of the institutions of Canada-United States defense cooperation, probably leading to less formal arrangements. It is espe-

cially doubtful that the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) would continue. The United States would want to lend its support to immediate Quebec membership in NATO, except in the unlikely event the issue became heavily entangled with that of NATO membership for Eastern European states.

Finally, it bears repeating that the most difficult issue for the United States, should Quebec become independent, could very well be deciding how much it should attempt to encourage Canada to enter into a close relationship with Quebec, especially into an economic relationship within

a broader framework of North American ties.

Some English Canadians hope today that, if all else fails, the United States might prevent the establishment of an independent Quebec state. Yet it may well be that the United States will decide to exert the bulk of its persuasiveness not on Quebec, but on Canada. 

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