

## The Boer War

On October 12, 1899, Laurier received a message from the Governor General. It was news that Laurier dreaded. Britain was at war in South Africa, one of its colonies. Before Britain had taken control, parts of South Africa had been occupied by Dutch settlers. The descendants of these settlers were known as Afrikaners or Boers. Although officially under British rule, the Boers had their own government in parts of the country. When gold and diamonds were found in Boer territories, the British tried to impose stronger control. The result was open conflict between the two sides.

Britain's minister in charge of colonies, Joseph Chamberlain, asked Laurier to send Canadian troops to help the British in South Africa. Laurier found himself caught between the two Canadian factions, English and French.

On the one hand, "empire fever" swept English-speaking Canada. Imperialists, especially in Ontario, argued that Canada should send soldiers immediately. It was their responsibility to support the Empire. In addition, they pointed out, Canada might soon need Britain's help in Alaska, in a dispute with the Americans over land. Besides, equipping and transporting troops would be good for the economy. They argued their case in newspapers and at public meetings. One Ontario imperialist, Sam Hughes, gathered 23 000 signatures of men willing to go to South Africa to fight.

On the other hand, French-Canadian nationalists opposed any form of participation in the Boer War. They were suspicious of Chamberlain, whose ambition was to make all of Africa part of the British Empire. As a people who had been conquered themselves, they sympathized with the Boers, who were trying to protect their land from a British takeover. Why, they argued, should Canada take part in a distant war that did not directly affect its interests? And Canada had not taken part in Britain's wars in the past, so why should it start now? Why should they fight for "British justice" when justice, as they saw it, had recently been denied them in the schools of Manitoba?

The passionate Henri Bourassa resigned from Parliament in protest over the war. He emerged as the leading spokesman for French Quebec:

British imperialism... is the lust for land-grabbing and military dominion. Born of the overgrowth of British power, bred by that stupid and blatant sense of pride known as jingoism, it delights in high-sounding formulas: "Britannia, rules the waves!... Britons never shall be slaves!" ...

Britain is in sore need of soldiers to prop up the fabric raised by her frantic ambition... so she turns in distress to her colonies.... They extort from us whatever they may get in the shape of human material for their army; even if they have to dangle before our eyes a few paltry advantages to be thrown as sop to us whenever we get tired of their deadly game.

Source: HENRI BOURASSA, *Great Britain and Canada* (Montreal, 1902), 4-5.

## Laurier's Response

After an intense two-day debate, Laurier's Cabinet decided on a compromise. Canada would not commit an official force to the war in South Africa. However, the government would pay for the equipment and passage of 1000 volunteers who wanted to join the British army in Africa. The decision to pay for volunteers was not to be taken "as a precedent for future action." In all, more than 7000 Canadian volunteers enlisted. War contracts earned Canadian businessmen 7.5 million dollars.

Laurier's compromise over the Boer War pleased neither English- nor French-Canadians. English-Canadians called him "Sir Won'tfrid" and Henri Bourassa, on the French-Canadian side, called him "Waffley Wilfy."

English imperialists argued that Laurier did not do enough. They assembled packages to be sent to the soldiers overseas. They held parades and rallies. Shocked by opposition to the war, they flocked to join organizations such as the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire, with the motto, "One Flag, One Throne, One Country." They condemned the French-Canadians

**Did You Know?**

Robert Baden-Powell, a British army officer who distinguished himself during the Boer War, later founded the Boy Scout and Girl Guide movements. By 1910 these movements had spread to Canada.

as traitors, and some newspapers even suggested sending troops into Quebec. A socialist in Winnipeg who dared to criticize the war was pelted with garbage and rotten eggs.

The French, on the other hand, believed that the government had given in to the English majority. They were offended that Parliament was not allowed to debate the issue and, in the process, hear their viewpoint. They were angry that the Conservative leader appeared to condemn the war when speaking in Quebec, but then condemned Quebec when he was speaking in Ontario. They were insulted when the editor of the English-language *Montreal Star* printed a highly exaggerated account of Boer atrocities against British women and children, and then condemned the unwillingness of French-Canadians to become involved. "Our Country

Must Remain British," his headline threatened.

The war of words in Canada erupted into violence for three days on the streets of Montreal. On March 5, 1900, students from English-speaking McGill University were celebrating a British victory over the Boers. They attacked two French-language newspapers in Montreal and went on to Laval University (now the University of Montreal), where they taunted French-speaking students. Laval students marched in protest the following day. On the evening of March 6, an English mob armed with clubs and frozen potatoes launched an attack on Laval University, which the police repelled with fire hoses. The militia was called out to restore order.

## The Naval Issue

The Boer War dragged on to 1901. By this time Britain was becoming anxious about the growing power of a much closer rival. Germany had the most modern and powerful army in Europe. Britain depended on the supremacy of its navy to keep its islands and overseas colonies safe



**Figure 4-5** Canadian nursing sister Minnie Affleck with wounded soldiers in South Africa

### Gathering information

What can you tell about people's attitudes and the conditions in South Africa from this photograph?

from invasion. As a result, the British watched warily when Germany began expanding its navy.

Britain responded in several ways. It decided to concentrate its far-flung naval fleet in fewer areas. It also strengthened its fleet with HMS *Dreadnought*, a new big-gun battleship with special armour. Suddenly all other ships seemed obsolete, and the naval race intensified.

By 1909, the British were alarmed at Germany's naval expansion. At a special Imperial Conference, they asked the dominions to contribute to the cost of new dreadnoughts. New Zealand agreed to contribute enough to build one. Surely Canada could do as much or more? Laurier refused direct cash contributions to the British navy, as he had done for the last decade. He proposed an alternative plan—a compromise.

Once again, his actions would deeply divide Canada.

In January 1910, Laurier introduced his government's **Naval Service Bill**. Canada would establish its own navy with five cruisers and six destroyers. This navy would be under Canadian command, but it could be put under British control during an emergency such as war.

When the bill passed into law later in the year, it created the Royal Canadian Navy. But because it caused a storm of controversy, the five cruisers and six destroyers were never built. Instead, two ancient British cruisers, the *Rainbow* and the *Niobe*, were transferred to Canada as training vessels. One was stationed on the west coast and one on the east.

**Figure 4-6** This poster of 1911 called for “strong, healthy and well educated men and boys” to serve with the new Canadian navy.

**Expressing Ideas** How did this poster aim to attract people? Support your view with references to the images as well as the words you can make out.



Canadian imperialists thought the Naval Service Bill did not go far enough. They scornfully called the small fleet the “tin-pot navy.” They were concerned that the navy would not automatically support Britain in time of war. The Conservatives, led by Robert Borden, argued that Canada should, in the long term, build its own navy, but should immediately contribute money to Britain.

On the other hand, Bourassa and his French-Canadian supporters thought the bill went too far. Bourassa had just founded a new nationalist daily newspaper, *Le Devoir*, which he used to denounce imperial policies. The new navy would, he argued, draw Canadians into foreign conflicts. They would waste their “gold and blood” on issues that had nothing to do with them. He also believed the presence of a Canadian navy would encourage Britain to declare war on Germany.

The naval question became a major issue in the 1911 federal election. To defeat Laurier and the Liberals, Bourassa and his supporters ran as independent candidates and the Conservative Party ran no candidates against them. Bourassa expected that the result would be a minority government, which would give the nationalists the balance of power. He could then insist that the government scrap the naval bill and deny aid to Britain. Instead, he so weakened Laurier in Quebec that the Tories swept the election. Bourassa got the opposite of what he wanted—a government even more committed to serving Britain.

Laurier was disillusioned. His attempts to create a “middle way” that would unite the country were misunderstood:

I am branded in Quebec as a traitor to the French, and in Ontario as a traitor to the English.... In Quebec I am attacked as an imperialist, and in Ontario as an anti-imperialist. I am neither. I am a Canadian. Canada has been the inspiration of my life. I have had before me as a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day a policy of true Canadianism, of moderation, of conciliation.

Source: O.D. Skelton, *The Life and Letters of Sir Wilfrid Laurier*, Volume 2 (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1921), 393.

### Understand and Organize

1. Briefly describe (a) the Boer War, (b) the naval crisis faced by Britain in 1909.
2. Explain Henri Bourassa's view of British imperialism.
3. Summarize the views of Canadian imperialists and nationalists on the Boer War.
4. In a chart, show Laurier's options, decisions, and consequences of those decisions for (a) the Boer War, (b) the naval crisis.

## Canada and the US: The Alaska Boundary Dispute

As part of Britain's plan to concentrate the Royal Navy closer to home, it withdrew in 1905 from its two naval bases in Canada, in Halifax and Esquimalt, BC. The British recognized that the only attack on Canada could come from the United States. In the unlikely event that such an attack should happen, the British would probably lose against the powerful Americans. The US had recently demonstrated its military might, annexing (taking over) Hawaii and defeating Spain to take control of the Philippines, Cuba, and Puerto Rico.

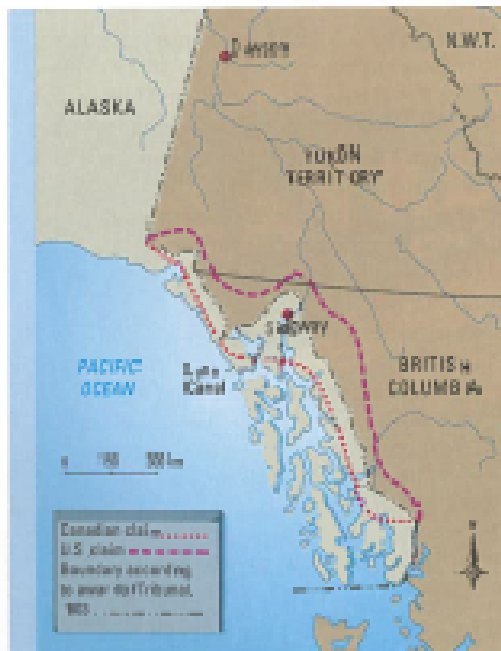
Canadians, for their part, were wary of the US belief in manifest destiny. The American goal of controlling the continent became very clear in 1898 when a dispute arose between the US and Canada over the Alaskan Panhandle. Through the dispute Britain, as the parent country, negotiated on Canada's behalf.

### The Border Dispute

In 1867, as part of their expansion, the United States had bought Alaska from Russia. The purchase included the “panhandle” strip running down the Pacific Coast and bordering on the colony of British Columbia. Many years before,

in 1825, the British and the Russians had come to an agreement as to where the border lay, with a vague reference to the coastal mountains. How far inland the Panhandle extended, however, was not clear. When British Columbia joined Canada it asked Britain to clarify the border, but at the time Britain did not consider the request important. In 1897, with the discovery of massive gold deposits in the Klondike region, the border issue became crucial.

The Klondike gold was clearly in Canada, in the northern Yukon. Hordes of Canadian and American miners travelled by boat up the Pacific Coast from Vancouver, Seattle, or San Francisco. They entered a fiord called the Lynn Canal, which ended in the boom town of Skagway. From that point they had a choice of two treacherous over-mountain passes to take them to Dawson City in the Yukon.



**Figure 4-7** The Alaska Boundary Dispute

**Using evidence** From the map, explain how the Canadian claim would have allowed easier access to Dawson City.

**Did You Know?**

Martha Black, who was among Klondike gold-seekers, became a Federal Member of Parliament for Yukon in the 1930s. She was the second woman elected to Canada's Parliament.

What was unclear was whether the Lynn Canal and Skagway were in Canada or in Alaska. The US flew its flag over Skagway. As a result, Canadian merchants who took food and other supplies to the miners had to pay American duties for taking their goods through US territory. Similarly, Canadian prospectors taking gold out of the Klondike had to pay American duties on their way home. The Canadians complained that the border claimed by the US ran too far inland. They insisted that the head of the Lynn Canal was theirs. Which country would collect duties on goods and supplies? Which country's system of law and order would prevail—the rough-and-ready style of the American frontier or the orderly control of the North-West Mounted police?

Even though the Alaskan gold rush was over by late 1898, mines were still being mechanized and railways were still being built in the area. The question of who owned the access route had to be resolved. Canada and the United States continued to wrangle over the boundary until a new American president, Theodore Roosevelt, was elected in 1901. Roosevelt was ready to use force for America's benefit. His motto was "Speak softly and carry a big stick; you will go far."

**The Settlement**

Finally, in 1903, the United States and Britain agreed to set up a tribunal, or special panel, to make a decision on the boundary. The tribunal consisted of six officials, three appointed by the US and three by Britain. Roosevelt picked three men known to oppose any compromise with Canada. He informed the British that, if he did not receive the verdict he wanted, he would send American troops to the Panhandle. Britain appointed two Canadians and a British judge, Lord Alverstone. Alverstone, therefore, had the crucial determining vote.

Alverstone suggested bringing the boundary a little closer to the coastline. Canada would gain some territory, but not enough to gain control of the head of the Lynn Canal. The Americans had won. Canadians were furious with the decision, but their anger was largely aimed at the British. A crowd in Vancouver jeered when *God Save the King* was played in a theatre. Canadians believed that Britain had sold out Canada's interest in order to keep peace with the US. Britain needed the US as an ally in its growing rivalry with Germany. It also needed access to the Panama Canal, which the US was building in Central America.

The Alaska Boundary Dispute convinced Laurier that Canada would be better off playing a more active role in its own foreign affairs. Indeed, by the end of the decade, there were signs that Canada was slowly becoming more independent. In 1908, the first coin was struck at Ottawa's new Royal Canadian Mint. Canada no longer had to import its currency from England. A year later, Canada established its own Department of External Affairs. This was a tiny department which had only limited duties at first, such as issuing passports. Nevertheless, it was a step towards greater independence. Just a few years later, a proposed trade deal with the United States would show Laurier the perils of dealing directly with Canada's southerly neighbour.