

ERIC MARGOLIS



Backyard plots

Was Canada going to join France in offering to sweep Nicaragua's harbors of mines, asked the NDP's foreign affairs critic, Pauline Jewett, in Parliament last week.

No, replied Pierre Trudeau, Canada has a "clear practice of not sending ships" into war zones unless under UN mandate. External affairs was, however, "evaluating" the matter.

This little exchange had about it an Alice in Wonderland quality. In her haste to despatch a squadron of Canadian minesweepers — complete with natty sailors chorusing the *International* — Pauline Jewett forgot one minor detail. Canada has no minesweepers.

Why? Because the Liberals, with staunch NDP backing, have reduced our once-powerful navy into a little flotilla of broken-down, obsolete gunboats. Never mind Nicaragua, Canada could not sweep its own ports of mines.

If war does come, one of Russia's first acts would be to heavily mine Halifax, Saint John, the St. Lawrence and Vancouver. Unless the U.S. Navy comes to the rescue — and it will be busy trying to keep U.S. ports open — not one ship will leave Canadian harbors.

Canada's current minesweeping capability is best described by Lt.-Col. Brian MacDonald of the Institute for Strategic Studies: "We would send down one diver with a flashlight and a pair of wire cutters."

So, Pauline, we have no minesweepers to help make Central America safe for socialism and none are planned in our five-year naval budget. No Canadian battleship *Potempkin* will steam southward to succor the Sandinistas from the nasty imperialist Americans.

Intriguing response

While the reaction of Canada's socialists to the mining issue has been misinformed and fatuous — what we would normally expect — the response of France's socialist government has been intriguing.

Shortly after President Francois Mitterrand announced, in the course of an American tour, that he felt "completely at home in the U.S.," France came to the rescue of the beleaguered Marxist regime in Nicaragua by offering very real help in clearing its three mined ports.

The U.S. apparently called off its mining operations; had it not, we might have been confronted by the bizarre spectacle of a U.S.-built mine, laid by CIA-directed Cuban commandos, sinking a minesweeper of its close NATO ally, France. Why did the French, who now enjoy seemingly intimate relations with the U.S., make this offer?

First, for the obvious reason that Mitterrand is in serious political trouble with the French left, over his efforts to lay off workers and streamline France's overstuffed state-owned industries. The idea of Central American leftist guerrillas fighting against Yankee imperialism has long been a favorite romantic daydream of France's left-wing cafe intellectuals.

Besides currying favor with the French left, there is a second reason behind the French offer that gives us a tantalizing glimpse into what I believe are growing tensions between the two close allies. The real issue is not Central America but far-off West Africa.

Twenty-five years ago, France granted nominal independence to its former West African colonies. Though these states were ruled by black governments, real political, economic and military power over them has been maintained by Paris through thousands of French expatriate administrators, technicians and soldiers. France regards West Africa as its very own sphere of economic and political influence.

Lately, France's domination of the region has been challenged by military coups in the Central African Republic, Gabon, Upper Volta and the civil war in Chad. In the last three weeks the pro-French government of Cameroon was nearly overthrown; formerly socialist Guinea's new military rulers, reportedly with strong CIA backing have turned sharply to the right.

Disturbing development

Before the Reagan administration the U.S. left West Africa to the French. During the past three years the U.S. has become increasingly involved in the area, particularly Zaire, Chad and Liberia. Some senior French officials are said to be deeply disturbed at what they see as a U.S.-Zaire-South African-Libyan axis operating with growing Israeli military support that is designed to supplant French influence in West Africa.

French sources cite, as a recent example of this policy, successful U.S. efforts to block a settlement of the civil war in Chad. France had almost pressured its client, Hissene Habre, into a peace agreement with Libyan-backed forces when the U.S. reportedly convinced Habre, by large infusions of cash and arms, to keep fighting. The French are convinced that the U.S. means to expand both its influence and its anti-Libyan operations into Chad.

So Paris may well be sending a none-too-discreet message to Washington: Meddle in our backyard and we will do the same in yours. And, in many ways, the two backyards have strong similarities. Each contain small, weak states run by generally unpopular, repressive regimes; tribal and local conflicts abound. Cuba stirs up trouble in Central America; Libya does the same in West Africa. Most of these states are beholden to big brother in Paris or Washington.

Now that the mining of Nicaraguan ports appears to be ceasing, France will not have to take action, but it certainly has made its point in a dramatic and effective manner. By supporting Nicaragua and Cuba, Paris is reminding the U.S. not to trifles with French interests in Africa.

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