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Organizing Against Independence: The 1995 Federal Strategy during the Quebec Referendum Campaign

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Abstract: In 1995, Canada came the closest it has ever been in its history to breaking apart. With Quebec nationalism on the rise after a failed decade of attempted constitutional reform in the 1980s, the sovereigntist Bloc Québécois and Parti Québécois political parties sought to take Quebec out of the Canadian federation by hosting a referendum asking the infamous question: “Do you agree that Quebec should become sovereign after having made a formal offer to Canada for a new economic and political partnership within the scope of the bill respecting the future of Quebec and of the agreement signed on June 12, 1995?” In response, the federal government of Canada organized against the nationalist Yes Campaign, hoping to prevent a Québécois bid for independence. This article outlines the four main strategies the federal government used to keep Quebec within the federation: delegitimizing the question posed by the Parti Québécois on the referendum, turning to the United States for support on Canadian unity, promising distinct society and constitutional reforms for Quebec, and hosting an energetic Unity Rally in Montreal. With these four strategies, the federal government of Canada would tried its best to organize against Quebec’s independence and keep Canada whole.

Keywords: Jean Chrétien, Quebec, referendum, independence, Canada

The federal government of Canada faced a dire situation in October 1995 – the prospect of the breakup of the Confederation with the withdrawal of the province of Quebec. For much of Quebec’s independence campaign, the federal government ignored the simmering danger of a victory for the Yes vote in the upcoming October 30, 1995 sovereignty referendum. Canadian federalists had won decisively in the 1980 referendum with a 19.12% lead, and polls were showing that federalists were once again in the lead during the beginning of the referendum campaign in 1995, polling ahead by seven to eight points in early September.¹ However, things soon took a turn for the worse for the No campaign when support for sovereignty surged in popularity after Lucien Bouchard, leader of the Bloc Québécois, became chief negotiator of the sovereignty movement in early October.² This

put federal government officials in a difficult situation, where they had to scramble to keep the Yes vote from winning in order to preserve the Confederation. In response to the rising support for sovereignty in Quebec, the Canadian government had to come up with various strategies in its attempt to organize against a Yes vote and deter Quebec independence. During the final stretches of the campaign, the federal government employed the following four strategies to win the vote: delegitimizing the referendum question and the mandate for independence; seeking support from the United States; recognizing Quebec as a distinct society and promising constitutional change; and holding a Unity Rally in Montreal. With these last-minute strategies employed, the federal government made its final bid to preserve Canada and keep Quebec within the Confederation.

When Jacques Parizeau, Premier of Quebec and leader of the separatist Parti Québécois, unveiled the referendum question to the public on September 7, 1995, the federal government was quick to delegitimize the referendum question in order to muddy the waters in its bid to prevent an outcome that would lead to Quebec independence. The referendum question that was posed by the Parti Québécois to the public read as follows: “Do you agree that Quebec should become sovereign after having made a formal offer to Canada for a new economic and political partnership within the scope of the bill respecting the future of Quebec and of the agreement signed on June 12, 1995?”³ This was met with significant backlash from the No campaign – and specifically from the federal government – because instead of a straightforward “yes or no” question, the federal government argued that Jacques Parizeau was making the question intentionally confusing in order to try to gain enough support for a Yes vote and drag Quebec out of the Confederation. Years later, in his memoir, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien remarked that the question Parizeau presented was “even trickier than the one Lévesque had presented in 1980.”⁴ Shortly after the question was revealed, Chrétien publicly railed against the referendum question, denouncing it in Parliament on September 18 as a “trick question” and that “If [Jacques Parizeau]... was truly intellectually honest, he would have asked Quebecers: Do you want to separate? And Quebecers would have answered: No, never.”⁵ Jean Chrétien certainly had polls to support him on this point: an Angus Reid Group Poll from mid-

October showed that a stunning 30% of Yes voters were only voting Yes in an attempt to strike a better deal for Quebec *within* Canada – as opposed to voting Yes in order to obtain independence.⁶

Whether or not a Yes vote automatically meant a vote for independence was further put into question by the fact that the Yes camp itself had internal splits. While Jacques Parizeau favored a path to independence as fast as possible via a unilateral declaration of independence,⁷ the Bloc Québécois leader Lucien Bouchard preferred separation between Quebec and the rest of Canada to follow a more orderly negotiated process that would eventually result in a Quebec independent from Canada. Bouchard wanted to maintain a tight bond with the rest of Canada, envisioning a Quebec that would keep the Canadian dollar and maintain a customs union with its former country. This difference in intentions is the reason that the question was made longer and more convoluted to begin with.⁸ Meanwhile, Mario Dumont, leader of the new provincial party, Action Démocratique du Québec, did not advocate for independence right away. Rather, he joined the Yes coalition because he believed that voting Yes would give Quebec the bargaining chips needed to secure more provincial power.⁹

Alongside Jean Chrétien, several other ministers in the federal government also criticized the referendum question in an attempt to delegitimize it. Sheila Copps, Chrétien's Deputy Prime Minister, described the question 20 years later in an interview with Québécois journalist and political pundit Chantal Hébert as “not as clear as it could have been,”¹⁰ which was putting it mildly. Brian Tobin, federal Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, remarked in his memoir that the question had “unfair wording... [the question] was a convoluted structure that managed to avoid using the word ‘separate.’”¹¹ All of this anger about the clarity of the referendum question was key for the federal government in its effort to organize against independence. Because of the public outrage over the question, and the evidence that a sizeable portion of Quebecers planning to vote Yes did not even want independence, the federal government had reasonable justification not to recognize a slight majority Yes vote as a mandate for Quebec independence. *Montreal Gazette* journalist Irwin Block alluded to this possibility early in October, writing in an article published on the 3rd that “referendums do not automatically have the force of law on their side, and that a government can just

ignore the results if they so choose.”¹² It seems that the federal government left this strategy open as part of its effort to keep the country together should the worst-case scenario – a Yes victory – arise. Chrétien remarks in his memoir that “No matter what tricks Jacques Parizeau might have held up his sleeve, the reality was that the crooked question had not asked for a mandate to separate”¹³ and that it was “crazy to argue that one vote is enough to break up a nation.”¹⁴ Brian Tobin also weighed in on the credibility of the mandate given how confusing the question was, saying “If you ask a mandate for partnership and you do a [Unilateral Declaration of Independence], it’s a lie.”¹⁵ Chrétien’s foreign affairs minister, André Ouellet, mentioned that he believed that the federal government would host a second referendum with a clearer question in the event of a Yes victory.¹⁶ Even though Ouellet never proposed this idea to Chrétien, it was clearly on the federal minister’s mind and may have come into play in the event that the Yes side won on referendum night.

It is clear that part of the federal strategy to prevent Quebec’s independence was to delegitimize the question in order to prevent a potential Yes outcome. With such a confusing question, the federalists argued, how could anyone clearly say that Quebecers really voted for independence? Given the internal split in the Yes camp between Jacques Parizeau, Lucien Bouchard, and Mario Dumont over how to achieve independence, and whether independence or greater provincial power was the aim, the federal government was able to effectively exploit the confusing referendum question to argue that a 50+1 mandate was not enough for Quebec’s independence.

Receiving support from the United States was also critically important in the Canadian federal government’s war-gaming strategy against Quebec independence. As per Jacques Parizeau’s ‘great game,’ in order to achieve Quebec independence, Quebec would need the recognition of the United States as well as France. While the federal government had only so much it could do in regard to France, given that its president Jacques Chirac was sympathetic to the movement for sovereignty, there was a lot more help that could be obtained from President Bill Clinton in the United States, whose position was pro-federalist on the Canadian matter. After a surge in polls in favor of the sovereignty camp in mid-October,¹⁷ the federal government wasted no time in seeking American

support in order to quell the nationalist fervor in Quebec.

The federal government naturally sought support from the highest place in the American administration, the President's office. According to James Blanchard, the U.S. Ambassador to Canada, "Clinton was well-liked and well-respected in Quebec, with a favorability rating much higher than Parizeau or Chrétien."¹⁸ Since Bill Clinton was such a popular figure in Quebec, input from him was deemed crucial for changing the minds of 'soft nationalists' who were not really sold on the idea of an independent Quebec, but could still plan to vote Yes in order to gain more provincial powers. But the path to receiving support from Bill Clinton came in gradual steps of cooperation with the Americans.

It is evident that Canada had federal agents working closely with the United States in order to establish ways in which the U.S. could help the federalist cause. With separatists taking the lead in the polls in mid-October, the federal government sought to work through Blanchard in order to convey a message of unity, as well as to create the conditions necessary for these topics to come up and for the two governments to work together. When Blanchard pitched the idea of making a public pro-unity statement to U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher on October 18, Blanchard said "Anything we say that's positive about Canada could help, because our polling shows that Quebeckers, including French-speaking Quebeckers, value highly what Americans think... I've talked to the prime minister's people, and they agree."¹⁹ One of these people was Eddie Goldenberg, a senior advisor to the Prime Minister, with whom James Blanchard talked on the phone on October 17 regarding the referendum issue. Thanks to this behind-the-scenes work, the Canadian government got its first victory when Secretary Christopher publicly stated at a press conference that the U.S. placed a high value "...on the relationships that we have with a strong and united Canada,"²⁰ after receiving a question from a reporter on the topic.

The federal government saw to it that the level of support from the U.S. ballooned in the days that followed. While attending the 50th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations at its Headquarters in New York City on October 21 and 22, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien and President Bill Clinton encountered one another, and from this meeting Chrétien was able to directly seek U.S.

assistance. In the 2005 CBC documentary film *Breaking Point*, it is mentioned that while at the United Nations, "...Blanchard [had] set things up so that Jean Chrétien [and] Bill Clinton [would] casually run into each other at the UN."²¹ It was important for the Canadian government that this meeting did not look like Chrétien was specifically meeting with Clinton in order to seek assistance, as that would backfire against the federalists. However, while speaking to Clinton privately at a reception, Chrétien explained the Quebec situation to the President. While Chrétien did not want to ask for help overtly, it is evident that a request for aid is what he was insinuating. From this conversation, in which Chrétien bemoaned the difficulties of the campaign, Chrétien successfully lured the President into offering assistance. According to Chrétien, the President said "You know what Jean... it would be a terrible tragedy for the world if a country like Canada were to disappear. Do you think it would help if I said something?"²²

With Clinton on board to help, the Canadian federal government merely needed a platform for Clinton and the U.S. administration to express their appeal for a united Canada. In order to give the U.S. administration such a platform, the federal government decided to plant sympathetic reporters at important U.S. press conferences. These reporters were to ask American officials questions regarding the referendum in order to encourage a reassuring response in favor of unity from the United States. On October 25, U.S. Press Secretary Mike McCurry gave a statement in support of Canadian unity in response to a "planted question about the referendum..."²³ as planned. The statement was very similar to that of Warren Christopher's, stressing that the question was for Quebecers to decide, however, the U.S. position was that a strong and united Canada was a great ally. Mike McCurry concluded by mentioning that Bill Clinton had a news conference later that day, alluding that he would be open to being asked.²⁴

Bill Clinton, of course, was completely prepared for the question. He had extended his hand to the Prime Minister at the United Nations, and now he was due to deliver. Jean Chrétien describes in his memoir that the question Bill Clinton answered about the referendum "had been planted with a Canadian reporter at a televised press conference in Washington."²⁵ As planned, the reporter asked

Clinton, “Are you concerned about the possible break up of Canada, and the impact that could have on the North American economy and Canada-U.S. trade relations?” to which the President answered by stating:

This vote is a Canadian internal issue for the Canadian people to decide, and I would not presume to interfere with that. I can tell you that a strong and united Canada has been a wonderful partner for the United States and an incredibly important and constructive citizen throughout the entire world...I’ve seen how our partnership works, how the leadership of Canada in so many ways throughout the world works, and what it means to the rest of the world to think that there’s a country like Canada where things basically work.²⁶

A statement in support of Canada was exactly what the Canadian government wanted. The statement was diplomatically tactful; the U.S. President did not say he was against Quebec independence, rather, he merely stated that he appreciated a strong and united Canada. It is without a doubt that the Canadian government sought out a statement in favor of federalism from Bill Clinton because of his popularity in Quebec, and what that might mean for the swing vote. Raymond Chrétien, the Canadian ambassador to the United States (and nephew of Jean Chrétien), said in an interview with the prolific journalist Chantal Hébert that “Clinton was very popular in Quebec and some analysts credit his intervention for having moved a few percentage points of support back to the No camp.”²⁷

Whether or not Bill Clinton’s statement had the massive effect described by Raymond Chrétien cannot be determined for certain. In any case, the statement was at least effective in denying Jacques Parizeau his wish to see the U.S. recognize an independent Quebec. The statement was also helpful in allowing the United States to gently demonstrate its support for Canadian unity. Overall, through their intimate work with U.S. officials in order to craft statements in favor of Canadian unity, it is clear that the Canadian government saw gaining support from the United States as pivotal to its war-gaming strategy, especially since Bill Clinton was popular in Quebec, and many Quebecers cared

about what Americans thought about them and their situation.

In order to properly organize against independence, however, the federal government needed to do more than seek support from without – they also needed to seek support from within. Now, the federal war-gaming strategy turned toward appealing to the identity of Quebecers by recognizing Quebec as a distinct society and by promising constitutional change. This concession came at the last minute against the backdrop of surging support for the Yes campaign. As polls kept showing the federalists behind, it became clear to federal strategists that they had to change course if they wanted to keep the Confederation together.

Until this point, the federal government had distanced itself from embracing Quebec as a distinct society. This had potential to open a constitutional can of worms that Chrétien wanted to avoid. However, the government had to change course on October 21 after Daniel Johnson Jr., the provincial Quebec Liberal leader, publicly requested that Chrétien endorse Quebec's distinct society status, as well as promise constitutional reform. Chrétien, who was in New York at the time, rejected this proposal, saying "There is no desire at this time to debate the constitution. For the next eight days we're concentrating on the cause of keeping Canada together."²⁸ Soon afterward, Johnson rescinded his statement.²⁹ This gaffe was taken advantage of by the separatists, as Lucien Bouchard rushed to invite Johnson over to the Yes campaign, because the federal government said "no" to Johnson, just as it had always said "no" to Quebec in the past.³⁰

The federal government rapidly moved to turn this mistake around. On Sunday, October 22, the day after Chrétien's rash choice of words, Chrétien and Johnson issued a joint statement saying "We state without equivocation that Quebec is a distinct society... We note that both of us supported the inclusion of this principle in the Canadian Constitution every time Quebec asked for it."³¹ This marked the first time in the campaign when Chrétien explicitly came out in support of the notion of a distinct society. The following day, Chrétien came back to Canada from New York ready to fight in order to keep the country together at any cost. In his memoir, Chrétien states that "At last I was going to act on my basic instincts and plunge into the campaign... It was time to speak to the hearts of

Quebecers rather than to their wallets; time to make the 20 percent of soft federalists and undecideds wake up to the fact that Canada was at risk.”³² To push these swing voters into the federalist camp, however, the government had to work hard to drive home the point that they would support Quebec as a distinct society and promise constitutional reform.

Chrétien and his team wasted no time preparing a more public platform to support their new vision. On October 23, the Prime Minister worked with his advisors Eddie Goldenberg and Patrick Parisot to draft the speech that Chrétien would give the next day at a rally in the Verdun Auditorium in suburban Montreal. In his speech to an audience of more than 12,000 supporters, Chrétien boldly proclaimed that “[Quebecers] want to see Quebec recognized as a distinct society within Canada by virtue of its language, culture and institutions. . . . I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: I agree. I have supported that position in the past, I support it today, and I will support it in the future, whatever the circumstances.” Chrétien also opened the door for constitutional reform, stating “We will be keeping open all the other paths for change, including the administrative and constitutional paths. Any changes in constitutional jurisdiction for Quebec will be made only with the consent of Quebecers.”³³

The climax of this appeal to the notion of Quebec as a distinct society and a promise for constitutional change came in the form of Chrétien’s first-ever televised address to the nation on October 25, just five days before the referendum. In this speech, broadcast in English and in French, Chrétien made it clear that “We must recognize that Quebec’s language, its culture and institutions make it a distinct society. And no constitutional change that affects the powers of Quebec should ever be made without the consent of Quebecers.” To cement his point, he added, “And that all governments – federal and provincial – must respond to the desire of Canadians – everywhere – for greater decentralization.”³⁴

After the patriation of the constitution in 1982, Quebec was set adrift from the rest of Canada, as the Quebec government never consented to the 1982 Constitution Act. Attempts to bring Quebec into the constitutional fold, such as the 1987 Meech Lake Accord and the 1992 Charlottetown Accord, all failed to deliver, and the failure of these accords meant the failure to recognize Quebec as a distinct

society. This was much to the chagrin of many Quebecers and Quebecer politicians, and had led many of them to break away and create the sovereigntist Bloc Québécois political party, a federal counterpart to the provincial Parti Québécois. Therefore, for the federal government in 1995, it became critical to appeal to Quebecers on this front, as the constitutional wars of the 1980s and their inability to satisfactorily address Quebec as a distinct society were what had led to the resurgence in Quebec nationalism and separatism.

The U-turn in policy mid-campaign to publicly acknowledge Quebec as a distinct society and promise constitutional change was part of federal strategy to appeal to soft nationalists in Quebec and other swing voters. Whether or not Chrétien meant what he said or even liked what he said did not matter for the federal strategy – all that mattered for the federal strategists was that they could gain more votes by promising that change would happen. Jean Charest, one of only two federal Conservatives from Quebec in Parliament at the time, said that “Everyone knew that it did not come from the heart, that it was a move dictated by the difficult circumstances of the campaign.”³⁵ Regardless, the federal government still employed this strategy as a last-ditch way to scrape together enough votes to succeed. After the referendum, Chrétien moved to have Parliament recognize Quebec as a distinct society, as well as give Quebec, among other provinces and regions, veto power over constitutional affairs.³⁶ This was to make good on his promises made during the referendum campaign. Although the plan mostly fizzled out in the end, the federal government had received what it wanted by then – a No vote guaranteeing that Quebec would remain within the Confederation. In December 1995, the federal government went on to half-heartedly stay true to its word by passing a House of Commons resolution that recognized Quebec as a distinct society.³⁷

In a final grand gesture to keep Quebec within the Confederation, the federal government organized against independence by arranging a rally in Montreal. This event, which would become known as the Unity Rally, was meant to make Canada highly visible within Quebec as well as to try to show Quebecers that people from the rest of Canada cared about the province and would be upset to see them go. It was hoped that this emotional plea from the rest of Canada would be enough to sway

some swing voters in the direction of federalism. Whether or not this worked, in order to preserve the country, the strategy of the federal government was to make Canada more visible within Quebec.

The Rally, which took place three days before the referendum, on October 27, started out as the pet project of federal minister Brian Tobin, the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans. Fed up with attending typical government meetings with other ministers as the breakup of the country seemed imminent, Tobin changed the course of his meeting with other ministers on October 23 by deciding to scrap the typical agenda of working out policy issues in favor of trying to do something that could help preserve the country.³⁸ Turning to his deputy minister, Bill Rowat, and executive assistant, Gary Anstey, Tobin said of the situation: “Here we are facing the very least a possible constitutional crisis in a week’s time, and we’re behaving as though everything were normal. And it’s not.”³⁹ From this meeting, Tobin and his team decided to hijack another existing rally in Montreal – a rally originally organized by businessmen in the city set to take place on Friday October 27 at the Place du Canada – and build on that event by turning it into a rally for the cause of Canadian unity.⁴⁰

Tobin wanted to get as many people to the Unity Rally as possible in order to send a message loud and clear – that Canada loved Quebec and did not want separation. Tobin started small in his plans to increase attendance, but soon organized a federal effort through his contacts in order to get more people to the rally from all across Canada, as well as to have important federal and provincial figures attend the rally to further boost the visibility of Canada in Quebec. At first, Tobin gave his entire ministry the day off on October 27 so that they could attend the rally and ideally bring their families. Tobin soon got other ministers on board in shutting down their ministries for the day, so as to allow their employees to also attend the Unity Rally.⁴¹ Just including government employees was not enough to make attendance massive, however, so Tobin sought to bring average citizens from across Canada to Montreal in order to send a special message to Quebec. “Only one message, it seemed to me, could be effectively conveyed to Quebec by the rest of Canada in the time available,” Tobin stated in his memoir. “That message would be *we care*.”⁴²

With the rally only four days away from when Tobin began his planning, the federal minister

needed to find a way to make the rally attractive enough for people from the rest of the country to attend on such short notice. Tobin therefore worked with his various connections in order to make it happen. Tobin's solution was simple: lower the price of transportation to Montreal to get as many people to attend as possible. He began by calling Premier Frank McKenna of New Brunswick in an attempt to enlist him in this project. McKenna agreed to the scheme, saying to Tobin, "Tell me when and where, and I'll bring as many New Brunswickers as I can."⁴³ Tobin then turned his attention to the federal minister of employment and immigration, Lloyd Axworthy, to see if he could bring people from Manitoba to Montreal by plane, and he called officials in Vancouver asking the same thing, to which they all agreed. Tobin spent the entirety of October 23 working non-stop in order to arrange the transportation needed to get as many people to Montreal as possible, saying "I repeated the process all across Canada. I called senators, cabinet ministers, MPs, premiers, anyone I know who shared my concerns about who would agree to take action."⁴⁴ Tobin's requests for help were not entirely limited to the governmental sphere, however. In order to ensure the Unity Rally would have a high attendance, Tobin also turned to the private sphere. After reaching out to Air Canada and Canadian Airlines, the companies agreed to provide the planes necessary to transport people from all across Canada to Montreal in order to make it to the Unity Rally. Canadian Airlines even announced a "unity rate" which slashed the price of tickets to Montreal on October 27 up to 90% in order to entice people to attend.⁴⁵

One problem with this scheme was that it had not yet gained official assent – Chrétien knew nothing of the project until the next day on October 24. However, when the plan was brought up to Chrétien that day, he soon approved of it, and Tobin and other federal ministers worked tirelessly to organize the transportation necessary to build up the rally's attendance.⁴⁶ The Unity Rally was now properly in the federal war-gaming strategy camp, with Jean Chrétien himself planning to be there to intensify the visibility and presence of Canada within Quebec and contribute to the statement that the rest of the country cared about the province. With increasing federal influence, more companies lined up to join the scheme to get as many Canadians as possible to Montreal on October 27. This is

evidenced by VIA Rail, as well as multiple bus companies, which also began offering reduced rates to Montreal like their airline counterparts.⁴⁷ With the intense support received from the Canadian business world, the federal government was able to orchestrate a huge success in getting people to attend the rally. The *Ottawa Citizen* noted on October 27 that “By noon, almost all 1,000 seats for the 6:55 and 10 a.m. VIA rail trains to Montreal had been sold. A 60-per-cent discount on the tickets helped the seats sell quickly.”⁴⁸ In the end, the federal government was able to come up with enough support to turn what Brian Tobin initially thought would be a rally attended by only a few thousand people into a rally, as some estimates had it, was attended by more than 100,000 people.⁴⁹ Waving Canadian and Quebec flags, holding posters to demonstrate their love for Quebec, and attending political speeches from important federal ministers,⁵⁰ Canadian citizens swarmed Montreal to show their love for Canada and plead for Quebec to remain within the Confederation – just as the federal government wanted. Case in point: one joyful Canadian citizen on the streets of Montreal that day enthusiastically said to a reporter “I just love Quebec! We spent a lot of time during the first couple of years that we were here and we just love the people, we love the *joie de vivre*...and I’d really want to maintain that French without [being] outside of Canada.”⁵¹ Another citizen, when asked if they thought that rally would make any difference on the outcome of referendum, responded “I would certainly hope that it would make a difference...it’s certainly very important to everyone in the rest of the country and I’m sure glad to see everyone here.”⁵²

Important federal personnel also took the rally as an opportunity to score some points with Quebec voters while they were there. Jean Chrétien, in a speech to federalist supporters at the Place du Canada, declared that “We will do what is needed, we will make the changes that are needed...so that at the beginning of the next century Canada will move in the 21st century united from sea to sea proud of its two official languages!”⁵³ This, of course, was to appeal to the earlier concession which had promised Quebec the status of a distinct society as well as constitutional reform. The message that the federal government orchestrated was loud and clear: “Canadians love Quebec, and they don’t want to see Quebec leave – please stay. We will do anything to keep you in the Confederation.”

Whether or not the Unity Rally was actually effective is another matter – there is great debate about that to this day, and even the people involved in orchestrating it have their doubts. “...[A]t the very least,” Tobin believed, “[the rally] heartened those who were fighting for the federalist side within Quebec and assured them that Canadians outside Quebec were not indifferent to their fate.”⁵⁴ Chrétien, meanwhile, believed that the rally gave Quebecers the “opportunity to take a moment to reflect about the possibility of losing Canada.”⁵⁵ Regardless of effectiveness, the federal government organized the Unity Rally because they believed it would be strategically useful in “war-gaming” against Quebec independence. The rally brought energy, hope, and pleas for a united Canada, and the federal government hoped it would be enough to keep the country together.

The federal effort to organize against independence died down after the emotional climax of the Unity Rally. The end result was a vote to remain within the Confederation – the No vote barely beat the Yes vote by 50.58% to 49.42%, a difference of about 54,000 votes out of over 4.7 million total ballots cast.⁵⁶ The effectiveness of any given strategy that the federal government employed is debatable. However, it is clear that the federal government had certain strategies in place to organize against Quebec independence and keep the country from fracturing into two. By delegitimizing the question that the Parti Québécois posed to the voters of Quebec, the federal government was able to delegitimize the mandate required for secession, which would give it room to maneuver in the event of a slim Yes victory. The federal government was also able to turn to its ally – the United States – to gain support for the cause of unity, as well as deny Jacques Parizeau his goal of having the U.S. recognize an independent Quebec. In an appeal to Quebecers themselves, the federal government promised the province its desired status as a distinct society, and also promised constitutional reform in favor of Quebec so as to make up for past grievances. And in one final push towards victory for the No campaign, the federal government organized and held an energetic rally for unity in Montreal in order to appeal to the sympathies of Quebecers and demonstrate nationwide support for the province remaining a part of Canada. The Canadian federal government employed these

four strategies in combination to fight against the independence of Quebec and preserve the unity of the Canadian federation.



Juan Morales is a senior at Bridgewater State University, and takes interest in events in world history.

Notes

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