

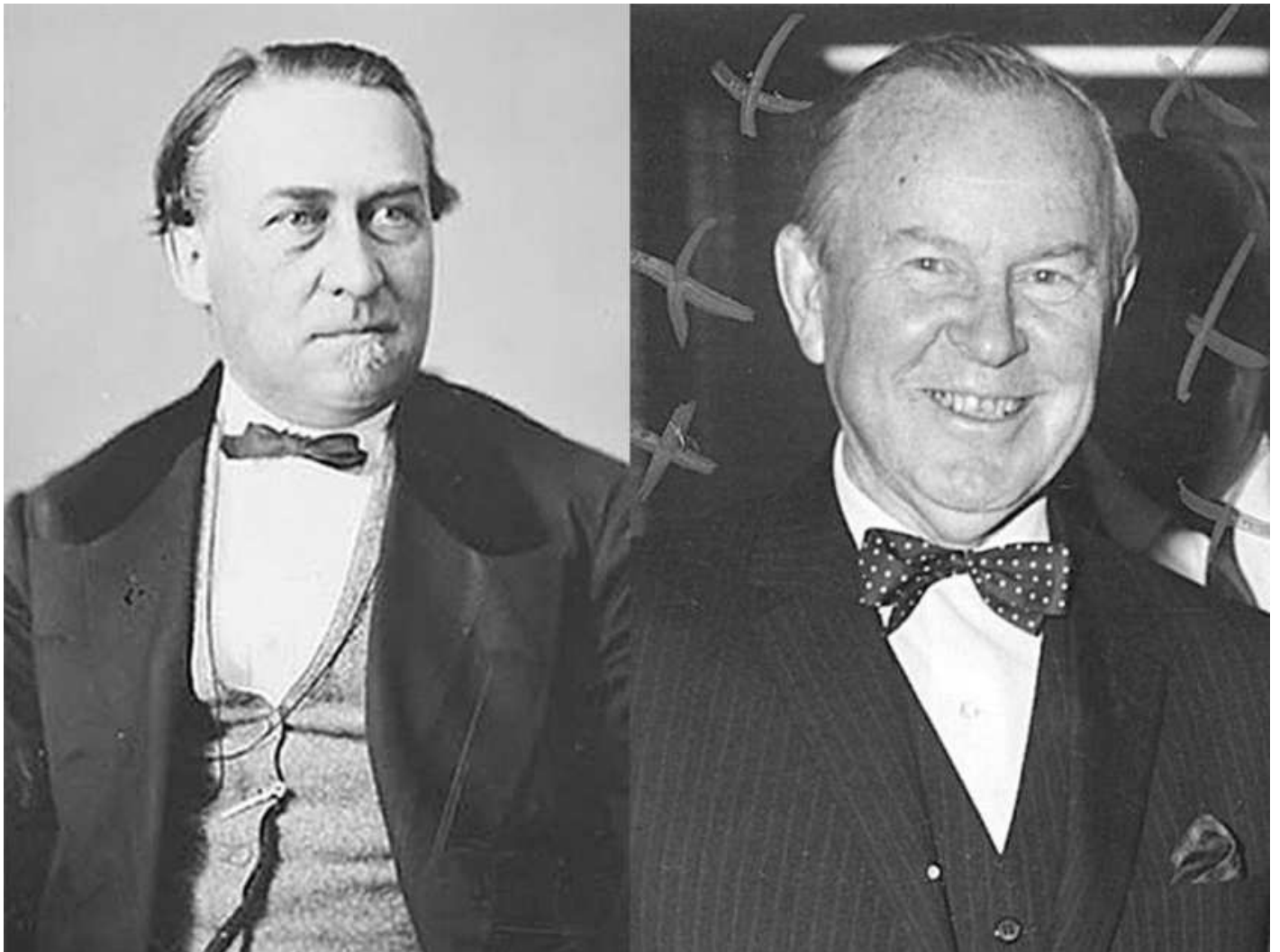
Maloney: So was Lester Pearson racist too?



SEAN M. MALONEY

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Hector Langevin (left) lost his name on the building that houses the PMO; now let's consider how Lester Pearson felt about racial issues.

On Wednesday, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced he was removing the name of Hector-

Louis Langevin from the prominent Ottawa building that houses the Prime Minister's Office. Many Canadians are unhappy about Langevin's involvement, as a minister in Sir John A. Macdonald's cabinet, with racially based assimilation policies. But the move raises disturbing questions about the potential double standard around naming government buildings and historic, racially based wrongs.

If we condemn Langevin, we must also condemn Lester B. Pearson for his racial policies. And we should therefore review the prominence of his name on Canadian buildings.

To understand why, let's go back to the period just after the Second World War. Canada-U.S. defence planning, established in the forge of that conflict, drew closer during the Cold War years. And so the U.S. Air Force Strategic Air Command (SAC), led by Gen. Curtis LeMay, requested that air bases in Canada be enhanced to take bomber aircraft in the event of war.

The U.S Air Force was a new institution, born in 1947, right before the Truman administration ordered the American armed services to desegregate. Led by Gen. Hoyt Vandenberg, the USAF embraced desegregation and by 1949 was well on its way to integration between black and whites. This was not always an easy process: Over at SAC, LeMay had to shame one of his more reluctant subordinates into ensuring that racial integration goals were met on time, and on target.

Not all of SAC's construction units had been integrated during this transitional era, and the Canadian government informed the US Air Force that it was concerned about the use of "coloured troops" in Canada, an activity it said required "ministerial approval." It was okay to deploy blacks to remote Frobisher Bay, but not to Chimo, Que., where they might come into contact with the general population. The US Air Force was told the following in a document then classified "Secret":

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“There is a reluctance here to see coloured troops used in Canada. (Secretary of State for External Affairs) Pearson is particularly reluctant to give his approval to their despatch to Chimo because it might be misconstrued in Quebec and further afield for that matter. Presumably the US Authorities can readily appreciate the importance of a matter of this kind....(Mr Pearson) feels that if the Chimo work is important, the US Forces must surely have 140 white troops of some kind for it.”

Pearson used the RCAF Chief of the Air Staff, Air Marshal Wilf Curtis, to convey this message to the USAF, which gave in because of the vital nature of the construction work to the SAC emergency war plan.

At the same time, SAC's point man in the United Kingdom breathlessly informed LeMay and his deputy, Gen. Thomas Power, that the U.K. Air Ministry also objected to the deployment of an integrated USAF unit and explained that the “coloured” personnel were not welcome. Again, because of the exigencies of the Cold War and need for bases in the U.K., SAC's leadership reluctantly backed off. A rather frustrated Power wrote back to his man in the U.K. : “Considerable progress has been made relative to the integration of colored personnel ... since announcement of the USAF policy ... eventually there are bound to be more colored combat crew members and technicians regularly assigned to units. Ultimately, it will be an irregular procedure to leave these people at home.”

Was Pearson racist for his intervention here? If so, should we consider renaming the airport outside of Toronto or countless schools across the country? Perhaps we should also rename the Global Affairs Canada building. Pearson was aided and abetted by A.D.P. Heeney, undersecretary of state for External Affairs, and by Hume Wrong, Canadian ambassador to Washington.

We might also consider returning Pearson's Nobel Peace Prize. The juxtaposition of having the men who incinerated Tokyo and planned nuclear war showing more progressive views on race than the Nobel Peace Prize-winning Pearson may cause some people discomfort, but the hunt for more targets will continue until our past is so completely compromised that it is unteachable. Rather than punitively renaming buildings, we as a people might want to consider granting our historical figures amnesty and accept that we have a complex history.

Sean M. Maloney, PhD, is a professor of history at the Royal Military College of Canada.

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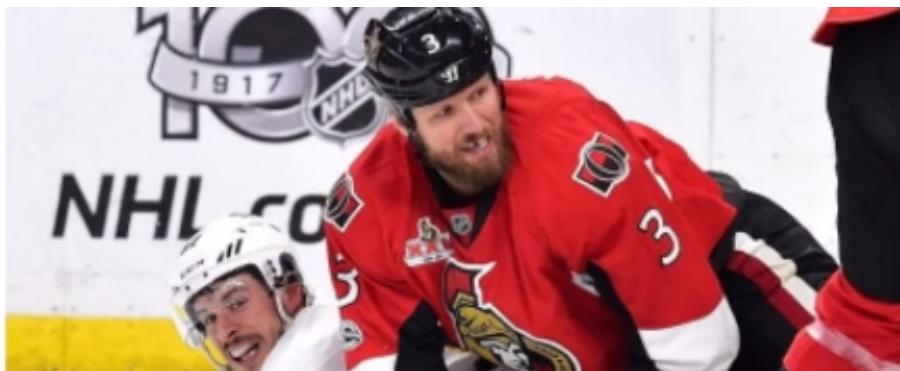
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However well-intentioned this article might be (and that's debatable), you've set in motion the annihilation of Pearson from our history. Perhaps it's time to start digging up dirt on the "great" aboriginal leaders of yesteryear. Level this ugly playing field as it were.

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