

OCTOBER CRISIS HAUNTS 40 YEARS ON

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✘ The Toronto Star **Editorial**, 9 October 2010

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The separatist Front de libération du Québec triggered the October Crisis 40 years ago this month by kidnapping first British diplomat James Cross and then Quebec cabinet minister Pierre Laporte.

The political abductions rattled Ottawa and Quebec City and capped a bloody FLQ terror campaign that began in 1963 and saw 200 bombings, shootings and robberies that left five innocents dead. A nation was left searching its soul on how to cope with the onslaught.

It's easy today to write off the FLQ as hapless fanatics, nowhere near as dangerous as, say, Al Qaeda. But they seemed threatening enough then. Those were turbulent times, with the United States facing massive protests over the Vietnam War, Mideast hijackers hitting airlines, Che Guevara's revolutionary message resonating with millions, and France facing student riots.

Here, roughly eight in 10 Canadians agreed with prime minister Pierre Trudeau that a "grave crisis" threatened the nation.

The FLQ manifesto called for "total independence for Quebecers," railed against "Anglo-Saxon capitalists" and others, and urged Quebecers to rise up with "arms and dynamite."

The kidnapers demanded the release of 20 jailed FLQ members, \$500,000 in gold, a plane and publication of their manifesto.

They put the Canadian government's will to the test. Vowing "just watch me," Trudeau more than rose to the challenge.

At the request of Quebec premier Robert Bourassa, Trudeau declared the province to be in a state of "apprehended insurrection," invoked the War Measures Act to let the army bolster the police, outlawed membership in and support for the FLQ, and suspended civil rights. Some 500 mostly blameless activists, unionists and students were arrested, though few were charged and convicted. Tanks guarded Parliament Hill, and troops fanned out.

Ultimately Cross was freed but Laporte was murdered.

However by invoking the act Trudeau struck a devastating psychological blow, shattering the FLQ (though not the separatist movement which came to power under René Lévesque in 1976), making its supporters pariahs and preventing it from fomenting wider disorder.

To this day, Canadians debate whether Trudeau either misread or deliberately exaggerated the threat, then used a sledgehammer to kill a gnat. At the time, the Star agreed that "the FLQ has to be crushed." Yet this paper also argued "this could have been done without abrogating all of our civil liberties." And that Trudeau "ought to have consulted Parliament." All that seems prescient, now.

Years later, Ottawa would replace the War Measures Act with the less extreme Emergencies Act, which is subject to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and parliamentary oversight.

But Trudeau's unyielding message in that dark hour still resonates.

"The government . . . is acting to make clear to kidnappers and revolutionaries and assassins that in this country laws are made and changed by the elected representatives of all Canadians, not by a handful of self-selected dictators, those who gain power through terror, rule through terror.

"The government is acting . . . to protect your life and your liberty."

