

René Lévesque, war correspondent with U.S. armed forces

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The world was in its fifth year of war. The great allied counter-attack to wrench back Western Europe from Nazi Germany neared the final stages of planning. D-Day, the storming of the beaches of Normandy, was less than four months away.

On February 12, 1944, a 21-year-old French Canadian from Quebec City filled out a four-page application form for employment by the U.S. federal government.¹ The form stated “First name;” the French Canadian wrote by pen, using block letters: “LEVESQUE.” The form stated: “Middle;” he left that blank. The form stated “Last;” he wrote: “René.” This wouldn’t be the last confusion over the name of the applicant, Quebec’s future premier, who was actually baptised as “Charles-René Lévesque.” Even to this day, the U.S. National Archives list their file on him under the title of “Rene Levasque.”

The application form requested that the applicant provide his educational record. Lévesque listed five years (1933-1938) at “Gaspé College” rather than Séminaire de Gaspé. Then, one and one-half years (1938-1940) at “Garnier College;” then one and one-half years (1940-1941) at “Quebec Seminary,” leading to a B.A. Finally, two years (1941-1943) at “Laval University” in law. Here he left blank the space for “Degrees conferred.” He had never completed his law studies.

The form asked for “REFERENCES” in these terms: “List five persons, who are not related to you by blood or marriage, who live in the United States, and who are or have been mainly responsible for close direction of your work, or who are in a position to judge your work critically in those occupations in which you regard yourself as best qualified.” That was a problem: no one in the United States knew the applicant. The form asked for “Full name,” “Address. Give complete address, including street and number,” and “Business or occupation,” for each name given. In response, Lévesque listed not a single name of a person, but only the following: “Can. Broadcast. Corp, Chateau Frontenac – Quebec, Canada – Radio”.

The form, under the title “EXPERIENCE,” requested: “In the space furnished below give a record of every employment, both public and private, which you have had since you first began to work. Start with your present position and work back to the first position you held, accounting for all periods of unemployment. Describe your field of work and position and except for employments held less than three months give your duties and responsibilities in such detail as to make your qualifications clear. Give name you used on pay roll if different from that given on this application.”

¹ This « APPLICATION FOR FEDERAL EMPLOYMENT » form that was filled out by René Lévesque, was one of nine photocopies of documents relating to Lévesque’s career with the U.S. armed forces supplied to me by the U.S National Archives at St. Louis, National Personnel Records Center, at 1 Archives Drive, St. Louis, Missouri. No biographer of the former premier has until now ever cited these documents.

Lévesque gave the following as his employer from July 1942 to February 1944: “Can. Broadcast Corp, Chateau Frontenac Quebec.” For the kind of business, he wrote: “Radio.” His title: “Announcer.” His starting salary: “\$ 25 per week.” His final salary: “\$ 40 per week.” His description of his duties and responsibilities: “Two coast-to-coast orchestra programmes (announcing and script-writing). Two radio columns a week (books, theatre, etc.). Routine work.”

He listed only one earlier employment, in the period from June 1941 to February 1942: “CKCV (Station), Capitol Bldg. – Quebec. Announcer. Announcing, producing, script-writing, practically everything, as in most local stations.” In reply to the question asking what was his salary, he gave no figure but merely wrote: “Not worth mentioning.”

He was asked: “What is the lowest entrance salary that you will accept?” That question came with a warning: “You will not be considered for positions paying less.” Lévesque replied: “\$ 50—60 per week.” He was also asked: “Would you accept appointment outside the United States? Give locations acceptable...” Lévesque wrote: “European theatre.”

One of the questions was about the consumption of alcohol: “Within the past 12 months, have you used intoxicating beverages? If so, specify: Occasionally... Habitually... To excess...” Lévesque made an X on Occasionally.

Two other unrelated answers on the application form would acquire a grim meaning years later. He was asked: “Have you any physical defect or disability whatsoever?” He replied: “Short-sighted (corrected by glasses).” He was also asked: “Do you have a license to operate an automobile?” His answer was “No.” Thirty-three years later, in 1977, just four months after winning the 1976 elections, Premier René Lévesque’s car would strike and kill a man stretched out on the pavement. Lévesque had not seen him in time. His driver’s licence required him to wear glasses while driving, but he did not even own a pair.

How did it come about that, in wartime, a 21-year-old French Canadian from Quebec was filling out a job application with the U.S. Civil Service Commission? In explaining this in his 1986 memoirs, Lévesque would invoke the dilemma that faced him. On the one hand, he maintained, he yearned to observe at close hand this momentous historic war that was the major event of his generation. But, on the other hand, he was repelled by the idea of killing people while wearing a Canadian army uniform and following orders barked at him in English.

“I had no inclination to fight and kill people, but I had an absolute craving for war, to see up close this war and to get to know exactly what it all meant,” he explained.² He presented

² “Aucune envie de me battre pour tuer des gens mais une véritable fringale de guerre, de la voir de près cette guerre, de savoir ce que c’était au juste. » René Lévesque, *Attendez que je me rappelle*, Montréal, Québec/Amérique, 1986, p.110.

himself as of two minds about joining the war effort, but, whatever the appeal of the battle field, his anti-English nationalism prevented him from accepting to serve overseas with the Canadians:

In endless debates, we weighed the pros and the cons of possibly joining up ourselves. But the cons carried the day each time thanks to this sledgehammer argument: “come to the rescue of the d..n *Anglais*? Not on your life. And if they (those in Ottawa) were to have the nerve to bring on conscription as in '17, we would take to the woods!

Now, conscription was precisely what was beginning to show up on the near horizon. [...] And, to say the least, the perspective of going to Valcartier where I'd be ordered in English to peel potatoes in the name of His Majesty did not have much appeal. On the other hand, with the Americans, there was no problem and, above all, no complexes. If I really wanted to take part before it was too late in this conflict that was the grand adventure of our generation, that was where I had to go.³

Lévesque used the strong words, *fringale de guerre*, which means, a *raging hunger for war*, for seeing the war up close. But if the yearning to witness the war was what truly motivated him, he had exhibited a strange way of showing it. As his biographer, Pierre Godin, documented, René actually moved heaven and earth to be dispensed from the Canadian draft.⁴ First, he got a friendly physician to write a note saying that he had examined Mr. Lévesque and found him in a bad state of health. Nice try, but it didn't work. He was summoned to be examined by military doctors and was found in fact to be in A-1 condition. He then urged his boss at the radio station to pressure executives at CBC headquarters in Montreal to write the draft board with the message that René Lévesque was indispensable because he was perfectly bilingual. This argument for remaining at work in Quebec didn't work either. René received a written notification that he was to report for military duty in January 1944. He then wrote the registrar of the draft board personally, begging for a delay, again to no avail. The order to report for duty was maintained. He then went back to the senior management at Radio-Canada begging for a job that would send him overseas as a war correspondent, wearing the uniform of the Canadian armed services. This was his last resort, but Radio-Canada turned him down.

Only then, after his every failed attempt to avoid conscription in the Canadian army and to avoid leaving Quebec, he was saved fortuitously from the draft by a *deus ex machina*: out of nowhere, in January 1944, at the very same time as he had been ordered to report for military duty, he received an invitation to be interviewed by Phil Robb, head of the Montreal office of the U.S. Office of War Information. In anticipation of the imminent allied D-Day invasion of Normandy, the American Psychological Warfare Department was looking for a bilingual radio announcer to be stationed in London at the American Broadcasting Station in Europe. Someone at Radio-Canada in Montreal had told Robb that a certain René Lévesque was bilingual and was

³ *Ibid.*, p. 110-111.

⁴ Pierre Godin, *René Lévesque. Un enfant du siècle (1922-1960)*, Montréal, Boréal, 1994, p.123-133. This is the first volume of a monumental four-volume biography of Lévesque.

looking for a posting overseas. Lévesque was interviewed in Montreal, then in New York, and he was then offered the job.

Lévesque would be hired by the U.S. Office of War Information as of May 1, 1944.⁵ His official title, according to the document confirming his employment, was “Associate Field Representative, Office of War Information, Overseas Operations Outpost Bureau.” He was to be headquartered in London, England.

On June 9, 1944, a letter was posted “VIA DIPLOMATIC AIR POUCH” to “Mr. William Webber, Office of War Information, c/o American Embassy, London.”⁶ The letter explained that a Canadian named René Lévesque would be joining OWI’s London office:

Dear Bill:

You have already received our cable advising you that effective May 1st you will start payrollling Rene Levesque in London at the rate of \$3200, plus overtime, plus living and quarters allowance in the amount of \$1411.20 per annum. No deductions are to be made for retirement.

Rene Levesque, who is a Canadian, is to be considered in the same category as an employee hired locally. Rene Levesque is one of two Canadians, the other being Wilber J. Woodill,⁷ whose services we were anxious to obtain, and whose transportation we wish to arrange without being compelled to go through all of the processing required of an alien employed directly in New York for assignment overseas.

To make a long story short, both individuals were hired as temporary employees for our Montreal office, and their shift to London represents nothing more or less than a change in official station.

⁵ The Office of War Information operated from June 1942 until September 1945. Through radio broadcasts, newspapers, posters, photographs, films and other forms of media, the OWI was the connection between the battlefield and civilian communities. The office also established several overseas branches, which launched a large-scale information and propaganda campaign abroad. Wikipedia, downloaded 140825

⁶ A copy of the letter was contained among the documents I received from the U.S National Archives at St. Louis, National Personnel Records Center, at 1 Archives Drive, St. Louis, Missouri.

⁷ Wilbur J. "Wilf" Woodill, (1909-1997) was already a pioneer of Canadian radio broadcasting in 1944 and he would go on to establish in 1953 the first Canadian private television station – CKSO in Sudbury. A summary of his career can be downloaded at <http://www.broadcasting-history.ca/index3.html?url=http%3A//www.broadcasting-history.ca/personalities/personalities.php%3Fid%3D31>

In connection with Wilber J. Woodill, we have cabled you to start payrolling him his overtime and post allowance of \$2016, effective as of the date of his arrival in London.

His base salary of \$3200 per annum will be paid to his Power of Attorney in Canada. As in the case of Levesque, no deductions will be made for retirement.

Sincerely yours,

GEORGE MC KIBBIN
Administrative Officer
Outpost Service Bureau

So Levesque was to be considered as “an employee hired locally” and a “temporary employee for our Montreal office,” transferred to London without a change of status. He was not considered a permanent employee of the U.S. government and his contract could be terminated at any time. He wore the uniform of a U.S. Army officer, but that was a convenient fiction. He was not, in fact, a member of the armed forces nor of the U.S. civil service, and he was not eligible for the rights and entitlements of a permanent employee. For instance, American soldiers had a deduction of 5 % on their salaries as payment for a future pension. But Lévesque was exempted from both deduction and future pension.

Incidentally, although Lévesque and Woodill were to receive the same basic salary of \$3,200 per annum, Woodill – older and more experienced with a career in radio broadcasting in Canada, would receive as “overtime, plus living and quarters allowance” the sum of \$2,016 while Lévesque received only \$1,411.20.

His official title would be “Associate Field Representative” of the Office of War Information.⁸ In other words, he would be an agent of French language propaganda, contributing to the American war effort. Most of his service abroad – about 16 months in total – was spent in London, England, operating in the premises of the Voice of America. There, his role was described in an official document as “Associate Script Writer.”

On May 2, 1944, Lévesque left Montreal for Halifax where he embarked on a cargo ship that set off across the Atlantic alone, without waiting for the usual convoy escorted by warships. He did not enjoy those days and nights at sea. “We were enclosed during 12 days in this solitary skiff whose slightest creak, especially at night, made you break out in a cold sweat. In daylight, it was

⁸ This information on Lévesque’s status is taken from a document dated May 26, 1944, with the letterhead: EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT, OFFICE FOR EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT, ADVICE OF PERSONNEL ACTION, Office of War Information. In that document, his name is given as “Levasque, Rene.”

worse. The ocean as far as you could see, the ocean day after day, with immense waves that rolled towards you with, in each and every trough, the possibility of a periscope.”⁹

He arrived in the United Kingdom on May 17, just 20 days before D-Day and its Operation Overlord. In London, Lévesque worked as a writer and announcer under the direction of Pierre Lazareff, who had been before 1940 one of France’s outstanding journalists as editor-in-chief of *Paris-Soir*, then the largest circulation newspaper in Europe. Lazareff, who was Jewish, fled to New York after the fall of France and joined the U.S. Office of War Information. He eventually went to London where he was in charge of American broadcasts to Nazi-occupied Europe and there he would be Lévesque’s new boss.

Lévesque appeared to be little inspired by his propaganda scripts and broadcasts. As he tells us, he spent much of his time playing cards. Of his work with the American Broadcasting System in Europe (ABSIE) he wrote this:

It was the head of the propaganda network that Uncle Sam had decided to set up so as to complete – and sometimes counter – the solemn BBC with its heavy Big Ben style of communication. In all the languages spoken in the immense Nazi occupied territory, ABSIE broadcast continuously news that had been carefully edited by the censors, commentaries of splendid meaninglessness, interviews pre-concocted with the Belgian minister-in-exile, the head of the Norwegian Party-in-exile, Yugoslavia’s little king in exile, and above all those incomprehensible messages: “A friend will arrive tonight... The carrots are cooked...” And yet, somehow, these last were the only communications that escaped being banal, as one imagined someone in the underground over there listening in an attic and decrypting those idiotic phrases that, day by day, seemed to become more insistent, especially in French.¹⁰

After nine months of this less than inspiring work in London, Lévesque’s luck changed. He was assigned as a journalist to accompany American troops on the continent during the final months of the European war. His change of status was announced by the Office of War Information on February 20, 1945¹¹. His official title went from “Associate Script Writer” to the more glamorous “Correspondent, (Special Assignment on Continent), American Broadcasting Station in Europe Unit.” His “Official Station,” though, remained London, England.

On May 15, 1945, a “Report of Efficiency Rating” on Lévesque was filed by Irving Berenson, the Chief of the Radio Section, Propaganda Warfare Correspondents, Paris. The form contained 31 different criteria for rating the subject’s efficiency. They included such items as “Accuracy of judgments or decision” (number 9), “Ability to organize his work” (number 14), Initiative (number 17), “Resourcefulness (number 18), “Dependability” (number 19), “ability to make

⁹ Lévesque, *Attendez... op. cit.* p. 112.

¹⁰ Lévesque, *Attendez...*, p. 113-114.

¹¹ His change of status was notified to him in a document addressed to him with the notation: “You are hereby notified of the following action concerning your employment in the Office of War Information.”

decisions” (number 30). Rather than tick off some or all of these criteria the Chief gave René Lévesque the rating of “Excellent: Plus marks on all the underlined elements, and no minus marks.” In other words, a perfect score.

Then, on June 30, 1945, “Levasque, Rene” (*sic*) received a document titled “Advice of Personnel Action...Salary Advancement Within Grade.” His basic salary increased, as of July 1, 1945, from \$3,200 to \$3,400 per annum. Perhaps more important for his *amour propre*, the document contained this: “Efficiency rating: Excellent.”

The final document in his file was dated December 29, 1945. It was again headed: “Office of War Information / ADVICE OF PERSONNEL ACTION.” It again referred to the subject of the document as “Levasque, Rene.” It listed the “Nature of Action: Separation (Involuntary).”

So René Lévesque’s employment with the Office of War Information was terminated, against his will. The document then states: “Returned to United States from London, England 9-28-45. To be paid through 4 hours November 15, 1945. Completion of assignment.”

So what did Levesque do during the almost seven months he was a radio correspondent on the continent? In his article on René Lévesque published in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, his biographer Pierre Godin offered this summary:

His wartime odyssey did not really begin until February 1945. Holding the rank of junior lieutenant¹², he joined General Omar Nelson Bradley’s army, which had liberated part of France and then stopped in Paris. Next came the march to the German border with General George Smith Patton and General Alexander McCarrell Patch, the crossing of the Rhine, and the discovery of a shattered Germany with its great cities, such as Nuremberg, Stuttgart, and Munich, devastated. Finally, there was the horror of the Holocaust, which turned his stomach when he entered the concentration camp at Dachau with the first group of American journalists.¹³

In the first volume of his four-volume biography of René Lévesque,¹⁴ Pierre Godin provides a much lengthier retelling of Lévesque’s actions and adventures as a correspondent on the continent. His account begins on page 156 and ends on page 182. But, in all those pages, Godin seems to rely on almost a single source of information: René Lévesque himself. Godin did not invoke official documents or independent information to test the veracity of Lévesque’s dramatic accounts and anecdotes about himself while on the continent of Europe. True, on pages 181 and 182 of Volume I, Godin does finally evoke two instances where Lévesque initially provided misinformation, and these two falsehoods were exposed publicly by others at the time his memoirs were published. But Godin dismissed these two misrepresentations as simply

¹² Lévesque did not really hold the rank of junior lieutenant. His uniform was a convenient fiction.

¹³ Pierre Godin, “LÉVESQUE, RENÉ,” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 21, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–, accessed March 18, 2016, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/levesque_rene_21E.html.

¹⁴ Pierre Godin, *René Lévesque. Un enfant du siècle (1922-1960)*, Montréal, Boréal, 1994.

a case of a great man suffering from a faulty memory: “Mais tout spéciaux qu’ils sont parfois, les grands hommes ont souvent une mémoire défaillante .»¹⁵ Special as they might be, great men often have a faulty memory. It never occurred to Godin that Lévesque was a constant liar when his subject was himself.

Lévesque spoke and wrote at length at different times and on many occasions about his experiences on the continent during the final months of the war. In his memoirs published in 1986, his account goes from pages 121 to 139.¹⁶ In the next chapter I shall examine the major wartime stories in which Lévesque claimed to have been a witness. His account of his adventures in Europe in those months tells more about the man’s character and his vision than perhaps anything else in his life.

What is certain is that Lévesque’s experience wearing the uniform of an American officer and accompanying the liberating American forces as one of them was a marking experience for his sense of identity and his view of the world. The United States was then at the unparalleled height of its power and its prestige. It had rescued a humiliated and crushed Europe from Nazi occupation. It had invented the atomic bomb, which gave it an unrivalled military might. It had emerged from the Depression to produce an industrial power that had never been known before. It was helping the devastated European countries to rebuild their ruined cities and economies while protecting Europe from the threat of Soviet Russia.

René Lévesque would always thereafter see the United States as a part of his own identity. Most French-Canadian intellectuals would look to France as an inspiration. Not René Lévesque. He had seen the France that had been unable to prepare for the war against Germany, that had quickly surrendered and then become pro-Nazi during the Vichy regime. Lévesque would see himself, clad in the uniform of an American officer, as someone who participated in the liberation and resurrection of Europe. By contrast, he considered Canada as an undistinguished lower echelon country, one that humiliated him by claiming him as its citizen because he saw so little to admire in comparison with the glorious United States.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 181. The two instances of faulty memory concerned Lévesque’s claim to have seen the hanging corpse of Benito Mussolini and of having returned from France on the Normandie. Both will be discussed in the next chapter.

¹⁶ Lévesque, *Attendez que je me rappelle*, *op. cit.*