

Canadian Institute of International Affairs

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**“Canada-U.S. Relations: Weeds in the Garden”**

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and

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My real motive for being here is, of course, to promote my book “Getting it Done” but I suspect you are particularly interested in what I might say about the current state of Canada-U.S. relations or hot topics of the day. I will get to that.

But first you have to indulge my pride in completing a memoir.

My thirty years in Canada’s foreign service began at one of our smallest outposts – Wellington, New Zealand and concluded (in 1993) at our most important – Washington but there were several stimulating assignments between the two.

While most of the time was spent in what was then called “External Affairs” – either at headquarters or abroad – I also had two memorable, perhaps I should now say colourful, years as Prime Minister Mulroney’s Chief of Staff – a job that was as exhilarating as it was demanding in every way. Certainly the most rigorous and in some ways “the most foreign” of all my assignments in government.

It gave me a catbird seat – where policies and politics converge in Ottawa – and where virtually every day brought an unexpected, unforeseen challenge. It drove home to me then the complexity and pressures of governing this country and the high wire act to which our Prime Ministers can be subjected.

The highlight for me personally and, I suspect, the cornerstone of Mr. Mulroney’s legacy was the negotiation of the Free Trade Agreement in 1987. As the book relates – but as many of you may not know – that was a ‘near run’ achievement on many occasions. I believe that its significance and its benefits have grown in time to the point where many of its harshest critics have become ardent supporters. There is some consolation in that, albeit belated. There is also understandable concern these days about the degree to which the obligations of the FTA and its sequel NAFTA are being respected by our major partner. I will say more about that in a moment.

The four years my wife, Joan and I spent in Washington (1989-93), when George Bush Sr. was President, was certainly the high point of government service. It is “the best job in the Canadian foreign service” and, those were for the most part and especially in retrospect probably among the best of times for the Canada-U.S. relationship.

This memoir was written in part, too, as a celebration of public service – to illustrate how government works, how the foreign service and our major Embassy work in managing what is our most crucial relationship. We don’t celebrate public service of any kind very much in Canada and, given recent events, it is not difficult to know why this is so. Too many reasons to be cynical. And yet ours is a country where a kid from a fairly small city in Northwestern Ontario was able to become Ambassador in Washington. That sort of thing doesn’t happen elsewhere where diplomats are, most often, drawn from a narrow elite or because of qualities that have little relationship to diplomacy.

My early career included a seven year stint in Japan, where I spent two years fulltime learning the Japanese language – an experience I describe as being one of “stamina over intelligence”. On occasion in Tokyo, I was called upon to be an interpreter and my first attempt was also the most stressful:

[Sharp anecdote from book. Page 22]

After Japan (and a period at headquarters dealing primarily with Personnel issues – absorbing lessons regarding management in general and people in particular) I had two rollicking years serving as the Senior Departmental Assistant and Official Spokesman for Don Jamieson, the then SSEA. How I got that job is a story in itself – you have to read the book! - but it was my baptism of sorts into the “political side” of government. As I quickly discovered, once addicted, politics can be hard to shake.

In May 1977, I accompanied Mr. J. to the G-7 Summit in London and had an unusual encounter with the newly-elected President of the United States – Jimmy Carter that I will relate from the book. [Excerpt Pages 41-2]

The heart of my memoir, however, is about the ten years spent dealing with the United States, first from Ottawa, beginning in 1983, and including my two years in the PMO, and then from Washington (1989 – 1993). During that time, I observed different approaches and different results. I came away with definite personal views on what works best for Canadian interests – and what does not. It is never easy to find consensus on what is actually best for Canada but recent events simply underscore lessons from my experience.

Canadians, as you know, can be a bit over-obsessed and occasionally somewhat smug about the United States whereas Americans are more or less unmindful, but can also at times be exasperating about Canada. These attitudes provide a lot of scope for mischief or miscommunication and even mistrust.

Canadians celebrate our “differences” almost as a litmus test or measure of our “distinctiveness” from Americans whereas Americans tend, when they think about us at all, to see our similarities. I tried to have some fun trying to explain our “differences” to Americans.

For example:

Americans are proud of what they are: Americans.

Canadians are proud of what they are not: Americans.

Americans believe anything worth doing must be worth overdoing.

Canadians believe anything worth doing must be worth a government grant.

And, it all comes together in a way with Robert Thompson’s famous utterance that “The Americans are our best friends whether we like it or not”.

My assignment in Washington coincided with a period of profound change in global affairs – the collapse of the Berlin Wall and unification of Germany, the implosion of the former Soviet Union and the first Gulf war. It was not dull but Canada was a player. And that made it stimulating virtually every day. In networking - what life in Washington is really all about – my

wife and I each had regular and extremely close personal contacts at the highest level and with all branches of the government.

My wife started at the very top. [Pages 144 – 145]

One of my direct encounters, however, was a bit more tense.

- Powell and Gulf War. [Excerpt Page 175]

### What are the lessons from my experience?

First of all, (and despite the adage of Lord Palmerston), personalities, especially leaders, can and do make a difference. Good personal relations at the top will never solve all the problems but they can help, certainly more so than poor relations. That is, after all, basic human nature.

Access is the lifeblood of diplomacy and the ‘tone at the top’ definitely affects both the level and the frequency of access for Ambassadors or other government representatives in Washington. Getting a meeting confirmed or a phone call answered won’t guarantee a positive result by any means but, when the chemistry is positive at the very top, access is direct and immediate and you can at least express your point of view. When the tone is cool or neutral, (as I expect it is now), access is by the book, nothing more, nothing less.

Remember too that, on any given day, Washington is a very busy place – a capital in which more than 150 Ambassadors are vying for attention to matters of concern for their country.

I can only say that Prime Minister Mulroney worked very hard on his Washington network and on Canada–U.S. relations. In my view – and I am admittedly biased – his persistence brought real dividends at the time for Canada as well as for me in my role, both as his Chief of Staff and as Ambassador. I know that it inspired a stronger effort by others in the Administration to settle, or at least contain, rather than complicate, disputes. We were consulted and involved on global issues. I also know that, when the chemistry is not positive, the opposite is also true.

In any event, given the magnitude and complexity of our relations, systematic engagement with the United States is, in my view, much better for Canada than spasmodic overtures. We have to work at it even if it is not ‘popular’ at home. The Americans do not and that is a hard reality; a fact of life. Complacency on Canada’s part can be very damaging to our own interests. Sloppy indulgences in anti-Americanism are even worse.

It is never easy to manage this relationship especially because so much of what Canada aspires to do – domestically or internationally – is hinged in some way to our proximity and extensive linkages to the U.S. on this shared continent....’whether we like it or not’. And the same is not the case for the U.S.

This doesn’t mean, by the way, that we have to agree or ‘go along in order to get along’. That is simplistic. I will say that frank, but private, expressions of differences are preferable to

public grandstanding - unless your motive is domestic gratification. George Shultz once observed to Joe Clark: "If you are going to kick us in the shins, do so in private. We get the message all the same".

Differences based on distinct national interests can be articulated and defended forcefully with Americans and that is Lesson #2. Prime Minister Mulroney had no problem presenting Canadian differences on Acid Rain, ANWR, Free Trade, Star Wars or on South Africa; nor did I. But, differences that have no particular relevance to Canadian interests can be damaging to the tone and the fabric of our relationship. More to the point, it is often the manner in which differences are communicated that can be more irritating than the substance. You can, as they say, "disagree without being disagreeable".

We seem to have been replaced these days in terms of influence and leverage in Washington by Australia. Our interests in the U.S. remain paramount they are not getting the attention they deserve either from Washington or Ottawa.

We appear to have less common ground on global priorities and even less desire to make our bilateral relationship work better. In fact, despite the genuine neighbourly response by many Canadians to Hurricane Katrina, the mood today is reminiscent to me of the fractious state of affairs during the early 1980s. At that time there were significant bilateral disputes over the NEP, Acid Rain and of course, softwood lumber. On the global stage, Mr. Trudeau's "peace initiative" did not sit well with the Reagan Administration any better than his personal dalliances with Fidel Castro. Many in Canada, meanwhile, worried about what the U.S. Administration would do with its massive military power.

Despite all the rhetoric about new "North American partnerships", the dialogue these days is erratic; calls are not immediately answered and attitudes on both sides of the border are diverging. The need and underlying relevance of each to the other is not what it once was.

Differences between us on global issues are profound – from Iraq to Kyoto and the World Court, among others. Canadians now worry about U.S. unilateralism and not just the military variety. Americans wonder about Canada's reliability and about our relevance on matters of greatest concern to them. The search for new forms of security to combat very new threats is more open-ended than assured.

On the bilateral side, Canada's abrupt decision to stand down on Ballistic Missile Defence aggravated already tender nerves in Washington about Canada's attitude on security more generally. Paul Cellucci said at the time that he was "puzzled" by this decision. His recent book provides a more graphic account of how he and undoubtedly some in Washington really felt. The decision was as poorly articulated to Canadians as it was communicated to Americans. It may have served an instant political purpose having to do with security of a different sort but it had neither strategic nor security merit.

The U.S. Administration's equally abrupt decision to reject the unanimous ruling by the Extraordinary Challenge Committee on softwood lumber represented, for Canadians, a serious breach of NAFTA obligations. Along with repeated delays and stalling tactics on the Dispute

Settlement panel process itself, the frequent recourse by the U.S. Administration to a provision that had been intended for genuinely extraordinary circumstances was already eroding the substance and spirit of what, for Canada, is a key element of NAFTA. But to repudiate the ruling of a Committee that the U.S. had insisted on creating was simply bizarre.

This rejection reinforces concern about the U.S. penchant to go its own way regardless and if left to fester under protracted wrangling will, I fear, damage more than trade in lumber. (After all, when the elephant runs loose in the jungle, more than trees can get trampled.)

The mood is not healthy. Instead of benign neglect from Washington, we are seeing casual indifference to sensitive treaty obligations. Instead of the perennial desire of Canadians to be seen as distinct, we are seeing frustration, skepticism and a growing sense of how different we really are. Instead of mutual respect, we are seeing symptoms of mutual wariness.

Even a relatively isolated environmental issue affecting our shared border – the Devil’s Lake diversion – seems too difficult to contain, let alone resolve, raising doubts as well about the continuing efficacy of the venerable IJC.

In the mid-1980s, there was eventually a sea-change in the relationship when our respective political leaders initiated a bold plan to refurbish relations. Their personal commitments (and conviction) led to the FTA and subsequently NAFTA and a substantive agreement on Acid Rain. We also worked constructively together on global issues and, when we had disagreements, as we did, we expressed them in a civil fashion, reflecting the significance and the underlying civility of the broader relationship.

It would be simplistic to suggest that what we need today is a similar injection of leadership and realism to get matters back on track. Logical perhaps but extremely difficult because the politics in each country seem to counter the perceived need.

Canada is hobbled to a degree by a precarious domestic political situation and a looming election in which any bold new vision for North America or even talk of more constructive engagement with the United States offers little by way of popular reward. For its part, the United States has many priorities these days other than attention to affairs with its northern neighbour. Canada has become peripheral despite its proximity and no-one in Washington (or Ottawa really) seems to care.

Some Canadians believe that creating differences with the United States underlines our “independence”. In fact, it does the opposite. When you cannot manage relations with your neighbour and dominant trade partner with whom can you? This point applies with equal force to the United States. When the U.S. allows relations with its neighbour and largest export market to deteriorate, with whom can it really do business?

It is a constant struggle for any Canadian leader to try to reconcile, on the one hand, the need for persistent engagement with Washington to articulate, promote and defend our substantial security, commercial and environmental interests, while also responding to legitimate aspirations in Canada that we act or be seen acting as a distinct entity in our own right in North

America. (The Canadian Conundrum). It can be a difficult balancing act, especially when these two objectives seem to be in conflict or are perceived to be contradictory.

The fact is that we can and should do both. And, as my book contends, if we get the first part right, if we are perceived as having a constructive relationship with the U.S. – asserting and defending key elements of our most vital relationship in a mature, focused manner – we can also strengthen our ability to pursue other global objectives. When that balance is out of kilter, we can get the worst of both worlds.

We can, of course, wait until something serious happens before we seek to engage – as happened when our border closed after 9/11. But the reality of our interdependence should never be taken for granted. Canada should always be taking the lead trying to identify ways to establish better rules, better disciplines and stronger institutions to help manage this lop-sided relationship and to give greater certainty to our common security and our prosperity objectives in North America.

We should not rely exclusively on the goodwill of individual leaders anymore than we should allow our attitudes and our interests to be distracted by negative views about individual leaders at any given time. (That is, perhaps, the most important lesson.)

We do have a choice but we need at least to get the basics right, acknowledging confidently who we are, where we are and how our interests are best served, particularly with the United States.

We could use more creative thinking and more consistent political leadership – a real sense of purpose from the top and actions reflecting conviction, not wariness.

We should, for instance, get our act together urgently here in Canada on lumber and seek to negotiate a permanent settlement, one that respects existing obligations and strengthens our capability to work together with the U.S. on global trade issues, e.g. on the Doha Round and on challenges posed by China to the global trading system.

We should guard prudently and plan more creatively against any lapse or breach of security along our shared border. That is the single, biggest threat to Canada's well-being today and should be a top priority for our government.

There is a pressing need to rejuvenate existing bilateral institutions: NAFTA, as I have said, is under heavy strain; NORAD risks becoming a shell with a severely constrained role; even the IJC is faltering. There would be merit too in exploring the need for new institutions to deflect some of the political heat and bring the fundamentals into a more positive focus.

None of these would “compromise” our sovereignty. Instead, they would help both countries meet the challenges of globalization and the pressures from competitors, several of whom have stronger convictions and expanding capabilities. Actions of this kind are also the best way to help temper the power imbalance that otherwise bedevils the relationship. But is

there the will? Unfortunately, there is little to suggest that either government is prepared to make the necessary investment.

George Shultz once observed that good relations between Canada and the U.S. were like “good gardening”. You had to attend regularly to the weeds and it needed more than one hand on the hoe. His view is even more valid today than it was then because the weeds seem to be flourishing in our North American garden. If our governments remain oblivious some may prove to be poisonous and, unless the “gardeners in Chief” are prepared to take a more firm turn on the hoe, the short term harvest is likely to be skimpy.

Let me conclude by saying that Joan and I had the distinct advantage of serving Canada and Canada–U.S. relations at a time when Canada was relevant and engaged on both bilateral and global issues. It wasn’t always easy but it was stimulating and Things Got Done! There is no nirvana in foreign or domestic policy but there are lessons from history on both, some of which I hope come through in my memoir.

“Getting it Done: A Memoir” by Derek H. Burney is available for purchase online at [http://www.chapters.indigo.ca/burney/Getting It Done](http://www.chapters.indigo.ca/burney/Getting%20It%20Done)