

DEALING WITH OBAMA OR McCAIN: THINK BIG AND KEEP IT SIMPLE

Colin Robertson

Place, standing and perspective, coupled with Canadian sensitivity and sensibility, mean that when Canadians are on our game, we have the privilege, observed John Holmes, “to tell our best friends when their breath is bad.” Both Barack Obama and John McCain are emphasizing the importance of friends and allies and this presents Canadian political leadership with opportunities to “think big” about the future of our most important relationship. It will require planning, a concerted “Team Canada Inc.” approach with synchronization amongst the various levels of government and a recognition that, for America, national security is its continuing preoccupation. Played effectively, our relationship with the United States advances our national interests and gives us a unique influence as interpreter of America to the world and to America of the world.

La situation du Canada ainsi que son statut et sa vision du monde font en sorte que lorsque nécessaire, a déclaré John Holmes, nous avons ce privilège, en tant que meilleurs amis, de pouvoir dire leurs quatre vérités aux Américains. Justement, voici que Barack Obama et John McCain insistent tous deux sur l'importance de leurs amis et alliés, ce qui offre aux dirigeants politiques canadiens l'opportunité d'envisager de grandes choses pour l'avenir de notre principale relation bilatérale. Il faudra évidemment planifier notre action et adopter une approche commerciale concertée, en impliquant tous les ordres de gouvernement écrit Colin Robertson. Il faudra également reconnaître que la sécurité nationale représente pour les États-Unis un enjeu permanent. Mais en manœuvrant bien, dit-il, cette relation peut faire progresser nos intérêts et nous assurer d'une influence unique en tant qu'interprète de l'Amérique aux yeux du monde, et inversement.



Next January 20 — it's a Tuesday — the Chief Justice of the United States, John Roberts, will administer the oath that will make either Barack Obama or John McCain the 44th president of the United States.

The last time there was an inauguration, in January 2005, I was standing on the roof of the Canadian Embassy watching the parade with John McCain. He was one of the many from Capitol Hill who came to take advantage of our location. He told me he'd marched in the 1957 Eisenhower inauguration as a midshipman at Annapolis and he has an extraordinary knowledge of marching bands. I used the occasion to lobby him on our “ask” of the day — beef and lumber.

Something he said to me stuck. He asked what was our “big picture perspective.” McCain wasn't the first: often in my over 300 calls on Capitol Hill I'd be asked to go beyond the issue du jour and talk about the “big picture” of Canada-US relations or where we stood on the big global issues.

McCain, like most Americans I met, likes to “think big” — words he also used in launching his presidential campaign. If there was a continuing complaint by those I met, it was that we engaged in “small ball,” to use a Bushism, when by our size and global diplomatic presence we should be bringing to the table more than just our “ask.”

The 2008 presidential election is about change rather than continuity, and the current focus on national security — whether you describe it as the “war in Iraq and Afghanistan” or the “war on terror” — has given foreign policy a prominence in American politics it hasn't enjoyed since the 1968 election on the war in Vietnam.

The good news for Canada and the global system is that both John McCain and Barack Obama are emphasizing the importance of friends and allies. And thus our opportunity to “think big” and go beyond the “transactional” list of irri-

tants when the prime minister sits down with the president next spring. In anticipation of that meeting here's a useful checklist that also has application for business as well as other public and private sector initiatives.

1. Think big: Understand the American agenda and the "burden of primacy." American leadership likes to talk "big picture" geopolitics and, when we apply ourselves, we have both capacity and capability to bring to the table.

2. Play smart: Playing smart means bringing the intelligence of our own global networks and the

seeking the advice and enlisting the support of the administration.

3. Keep it simple: Go first for that which is easy to achieve and which will visibly show a change for the better — faster passage at border points, for example. Change always exacerbates public anxiety, especially around health and safety standards and perceptions of sovereignty. As in a hockey game, you need rules and penalties but administered with a light touch. Canadians, like the rest of the world, should be mindful that the US occasionally will exercise its right to the trap door. One approach does not fit every situa-

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uniquely Canadian advantages created by migration (Asians making up half of our new immigrants) and commerce to the table. Sure we've got issues — usually inspired by sectional interests who've found the ear of Congress. But to demand the administration fix them betrays an ignorance of the American constitution and the relative power and responsibility of the legislative and executive branches. The temptation to put the "condominium" issues at the top of the Canadian agenda may satisfy the immediate appetites of the media entourage and certain domestic constituencies, but the effect of the laundry list on the administration is to make it wonder about our interest in the big picture and, by consequence, our capacity to play in the big league. A more effective approach is to offer constructive advice and solution-minded initiatives on those issues at the top of the American agenda and then to get to the "small ball" stuff. At the same time, the better approach to the condominium issues is to continue to improve our advocacy effort at the state level and with Congress, while

tion. History tells us that most enduring and successful arrangements are binational — NORAD is a good example — then bilateral, like the International Joint Commission.

4. Remember former secretary of state Jim Baker's advice — "Prepare, prepare, prepare": This has particular relevance to Canadians when negotiating with Americans. The United States usually doesn't pay attention until the third period, when it puts its "A team" on the field and changes its play-book. That's when preparation pays off. We should plan for NAFTA being brought to the table with the next administration. With the challenge comes the opportunity for discussion of the energy security of Canadian oil sands development and increased supply and the related issues of continental carbon management and labour mobility.

5. Take a "Team Canada Inc." approach: recognizing that our relationship with the United States is neither classically international nor domestic but falls somewhere in between, "intermestic," for want of a better word. The strength lies in what I call our hidden wiring, that

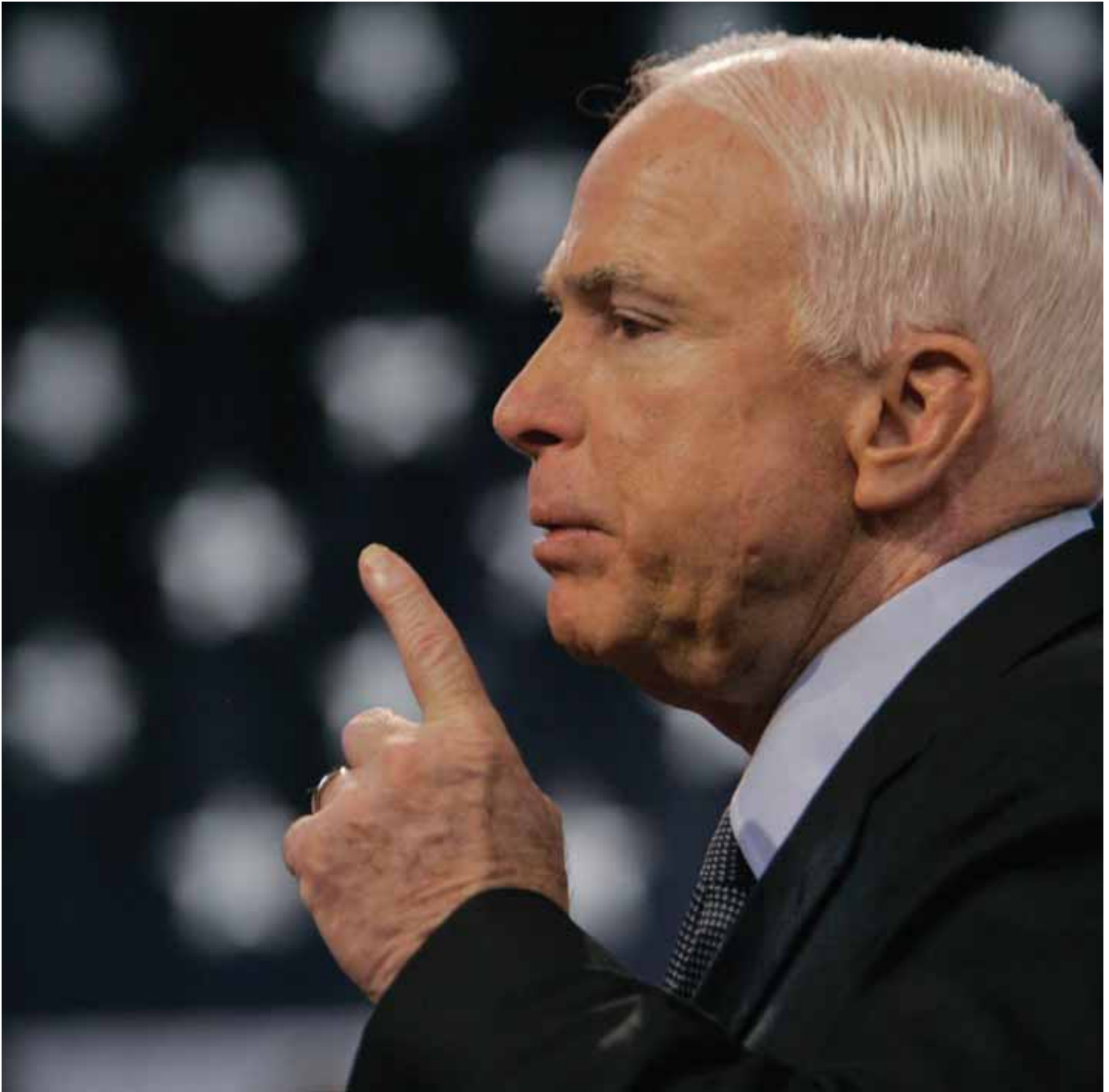
network of connections below the headlines — governors and premiers, mayors, legislators, business and labour associations, sports teams and the web of family. Mindful of the regional nature of North America, I argue for a series of annual "state of the relationship" conferences in partnership with business and labour.

6. To paraphrase James Carville, "It's security, stupid": When America is at war and fearful of things that go bang at 3 a.m., we need to remind Americans that we "have their back." In comparative terms, we pay relative-

ly little rent to defend ourselves in North America, thanks to NATO and NORAD and NORTHCOM. We have to take every occasion to point out explicitly the ongoing investments that we are making to

secure our perimeter, and especially in the North, where the Pentagon has geopolitical considerations. This is a currency that Americans understand. Arguably, the interoperability with American forces that characterizes our air and naval cooperation should be applied to our land forces as well, as we are doing in Afghanistan and through relief missions, as in East Timor. There is also a practical dimension. The Pentagon is also the source of significant contracting opportunities and Canada has long been the single largest foreign source of these contracts.

What Eisenhower described as the military-industrial complex of the United States includes players like the National Security Council, Congress and the Pentagon as well as the defence industries. In the long "twilight" war on terror campaign, the Pentagon trumps the State Department. And it has considerable weight in Congress — the largest committee membership in both House and Senate. And we should never forget that almost a quarter of those in Congress have experience in uniform. Don't make the mistake of assuming that because traditional diplomacy



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Colin Robertson writes that John McCain is interested in the “big picture” of Canada-US relations and other international files.

requires the State Department to be the primary interlocutor on foreign policy and relations with the administration it is, therefore, the principal player in the determination of American national security policy. Those who assume so fail to understand that making national security

policy is a bit like playing Star Trek chess — it occurs at various tables on different levels.

7. Being there: In the smorgasbord of American politics, you can always identify like-minded groups or individuals and develop allies, regardless of party. On almost any issue there will

be more Americans who think like Canadians than there are Canadians. But you have to be there. I recommend that we expand our presence to include every state of the union. Start by hiring expatriates working out of their homes with the mandate to market and promote Canada and, by tar-

getting legislators, to create a strong positive image of Canada as friend, ally and partner. It's diplomacy but done differently — using the Internet and telephone, drawing on local chambers of commerce.

In the American system, local and state governments play a critical role in the progress of legislators. Unlike Canadians, Americans seem to expect their leadership to do their apprentice-

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ship at the local/state level. Four of the last six presidents were governors, and Senator McCain chose the governor of a *Northern Exposure* state, Sarah Palin of Alaska, as his running mate. Ten former governors now sit in the Senate, McCain served in Congress before his election to the Senate and Obama served in the state legislature in Illinois.

8. Bring 'em up here: Inviting American legislators to visit Canada should be an ongoing project. And, as members of Congress often remarked when I was on the Hill, make time for building camaraderie on the golf course, or for what Americans particularly enjoy in Canada — fishing and hunting.

9. Enhance the “Canadian brand” in the United States: For a model, look to the “Upper North Side” campaign waged in New York City. A “think big” strategy is needed.

10. Political will: It starts at the top. Relationships matter but, as former secretary of state George Shultz would remind us, they are like gardens. They need constant cultivation. The asymmetry of the relationship means that prime ministers must prod presidents to achieve action and results. And initiative involves risk and challenge. In Parliament, there are those in each

party whose natural instinct is to oppose anything involving the United States. Parts of the cultural literati sound the alarm whenever they feel our sovereignty is at risk. The Afghan campaign, for example, is often interpreted by the Canadian left through the prism of Iraq; yet in the US the Democrats, beginning with Barack Obama, understand the difference between the two theatres.

The American Revolution, or War of Independence (perspective is everything), created two nations. For too long, selective interpretations of Canadian-American relations have portrayed Canada as unequal or subjugated. This mindset has held us back from engaging the Americans as partners and mutual beneficiaries in the bounty of our shared geography.

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Brian Mulroney's courage and boldness rewarded Canada with prosperity and security. Now we need to slay the insecurities around our identity by defining ourselves not by what we are not, but by what we are and what we have achieved. There is much to celebrate: a pluralism where diversity can flourish; accommodation, through innovation in transportation and communication, to a vast land and harsh climate; a flourishing cultural literacy and a sense of humour; and a record of standing up to be counted whether the threat

comes from fascism, Communism or terrorism, tempered by a commitment to diplomacy and building institutions that make for a better world.

“Place, standing and perspective,” coupled with Canadian sensitivity and sensibility, mean that when we're on game, we have the privilege, observed John Holmes, that most astute practitioner and observer of Canadian foreign policy, “to tell our best friends when their breath is bad.” Geographic propinquity gives us “place,” especially given the American preoccupation with national security. The diversity of our population and especially the networks that we gain through immigration give us “standing” and an ability to “think big” on the major developments of our time, like the rise of China and India and climate change. Our global diplomatic service also gives us a different perspective, especially on places like Cuba and in the quiet work we are doing on governance. Played effectively, our global relationships have immense value. And our relationship with the United States gives us a unique influence as interpreter of

America of the world and to America of the world.

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