

Forum for Young Canadians

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Presented by

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What Are Friends For?

(Check against delivery)

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Thanks very much for your invitation to participate in this very interesting conference. I am not sure if you realize how very rare it is that Americans and Canadians come together to discuss relations between the two countries and their respective international preoccupations. The Americans deserve particular credit for being here because smaller countries need to be preoccupied with their bigger neighbours; it is less true the other way round.

I have been asked to speak about “security and intelligence affecting the Canada-US relationship”, which I will eventually get around to doing.

I grew up in southern Ontario, where the most popular TV stations were in Buffalo, where the Cleveland Indians were practically our local baseball team and the Browns our football team. (Most of us cheered for the Toronto Maple Leafs in hockey, but Cleveland didn't have a hockey team!) We studied American history, read American literature, watched American movies, played American music and, in a Canadian way, dreamed the American Dream or, more accurately, the Canadian version of our common dream of equal opportunity, equality before the law, and democracy. I think it is still true today that we Canadians feel a kinship with Americans that we feel with no one else. In some sense we are cousins, maybe not kissing cousins, but cousins nonetheless.

In my professional career, I have been Director of US “general relations” for four years in Canada’s Foreign Ministry. I have lived in the United States for two postings—eight years—four of them in our Embassy in Washington and nearly four years as Canada’s Ambassador to the UN. That background and mix of experience have given me a fairly rare perspective on the two countries, on their relations with each other and on their respective approaches to the world. So I hope you will take to heart what I have to say. I, also, hope you will take what I have to say in the constructive spirit in which I intend it.

I have two basic messages. To the Americans: do not confuse friendship and loyalty. Yours is an incomparably powerful country: many people will tell you what they think you want to hear. Your real friends will tell you, preferably politely and respectfully, which has not always been the case between the two of us, not what you want to hear but what you need to know. Disagreement with US policies is not necessarily anti-American.

To the Canadians, this message, from Shakespeare: *to thine own selves be true*. You have the sophistication and the values to make your own assessments of international affairs and to act, or not to act, on your own conclusions. Do not listen to people who tell you we have no choice. When we agree with American foreign policy, for example in Afghanistan or on the Korean peninsula, we should not shrink from saying so and cooperating. On Afghanistan, we do agree with American policy and in the autumn of 2001 we sent troops to Afghanistan to fight alongside Americans in combat. Our troops returned to Afghanistan last year and we now command NATO forces there. We also committed very large amounts of money to try to lift Afghanistan out of its failed state status, so that it would not again become a rear operating base for terrorists.

It is also important, however, that when we disagree with American foreign policy, for example on Cuba, we should not shrink from making that clear and standing apart. We will be a better friend to the Americans, and a more useful one, when Canada carries out its own, effective foreign policy, than when we “go along to get along”.

While I supported Washington’s decision to attack Afghanistan when it harboured the perpetrators of 9/11, I also believed the decision to declare war on terrorism a mistake. A war on terrorism, rather than, for example, on al Qaeda and related or discrete fundamentalist terrorist groups and networks, is a war on a tactic. In attacking Iraq and conflating all of the Middle East issues under one heading, terrorism, the United States has put itself in a no-win position.

The Iraq war has been one of those times when our respective governments have disagreed. A year ago, the Government of Canada decided to opt out of the war in Iraq. Seventy percent of Canadians continue to believe that it was the right decision. A year later, the stated casus belli has evaporated. No weapons of mass destruction have been found in Iraq. No connections to Al Qaeda have been established. And there seems to be no painless way out of the morass of Iraq for the United States.

Just over a year ago at the UN in New York, I led a Canadian effort to find compromise between Washington, which considered the need to attack Iraq urgent, ...and others, in fact the great majority of others, who were equally determined to give the U.N. weapons inspectors more time to do their jobs. The substance of the compromise consisted of setting a series of steps to test Iraqi cooperation, on a pass or fail basis, and a limited time-frame within which to assess Iraqi compliance. We knew the odds were long against selling the compromise but we believed the consequences of a war, including to the United States, made the effort mandatory. Bob Woodward's book, "Plan of Attack", reveals just how long those odds really were. Many, including members of the US coalition, even of the US delegation to the UN, encouraged us to persevere. At the same time, however, some senior Washington officials were warning the Canadian Government not to promote our compromise; they did not consider it a friendly act.

In retrospect, and as we believed at the time, there is little doubt that it would have been in everyone's interests, especially in the US's interests, to have accepted the compromise. We led the horses to water but, in the end, they would not drink. And the war proceeded, with consequences we are all still trying to calculate.

In December 2003, the U.S. Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World, headed by former U.S. Ambassador to Israel and to Syria Edward Djerejian, reported that "the bottom has indeed fallen out of support for the United States". According to a poll released very recently by the American Pew Research Centre, international discontent with the United States and its foreign policy has intensified rather than diminished since last year. In some Muslim countries, support for the U.S. is in the single digits.

With respect to Europe, the Transatlantic drift has become the Transatlantic rift. In Britain, support for the war has plummeted from 61 percent a year ago to 43 percent in March; given the intervening events, support would doubtless be lower today. Attitudes in continental Europe are even more critical. Nor are all the critics foreign. In fact some of the strongest critics are American, including some who worked at very senior levels in the US administration, including former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill and former White House terrorism "czar" Richard Clark. Clark, who actually directed the US reaction on 9/11 to the al Qaeda attack, called the Iraq war the wrong war. According to Clark, attacking Iraq diverted attention from Afghanistan and allowed al Qaeda the time to regroup and metastacise into more groups; it also attracted new recruits.

A report of the U.S. Army War College called the war a strategic error, a distraction from the war on terrorism. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace found that Weapons of Mass Destruction were not an immediate threat, inspections were working, the terrorism connection was missing and war was not the best or only option.

It is not yet clear that the conflict in Iraq is morphing into a new security paradigm, the West against Islam and its 1.2 billion Moslems. What is clear is that this is a very dangerous situation. In an age of asymmetrical warfare, a religious war would spare no one.

In the meantime, Canada, like others, will have to perform a delicate balancing act. We will need to cooperate fully with Washington, and others, to share intelligence to prevent terrorist actions, and to defeat terrorist organizations. At the same time, we will need to maintain independent decision-making and take care not, ourselves, to feed the growing impression in the Moslem world of a nascent West-versus-Islam conflict.

Happily, some welcome course correction appears to be underway in Washington insofar as Iraq is concerned. The UN is once again playing a central role in the search for a political process to lead to stable, Iraqi self-government. Some in the US would like the UN to play an even larger role. But it is not clear that the UN is up to the job. For one thing, the context for multilateral cooperation has rarely been as unfavourable as it has been in the past year. I doubt that there is more than a minimal common understanding of an international threat and I am sure there is no consensus on how to respond. For another thing, the UN may just not have the resources to cope with this problem. And it has its own problems that predate the Iraq war. The UN Charter was written in a different age, for a different age. The problems the world body faces now were literally unimagined fifty years ago. And the UN suffers from excessive prudence and a certain diplomatic sclerosis. The fundamental political and legal challenge facing the UN is to determine when and under what conditions the international community is justified in intervening in the internal affairs of member states.

The grounds on which reform is needed include humanitarian crises, the illegal development or acquisition of weapons of mass destruction, the provision of safe haven for terrorists and the overthrow of democratic governments.

Canada can help the UN work through these issues. We have a long tradition of bridge-building among different international constituencies, as UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan reminded Canadians when he addressed the Canadian Parliament in March of this year. Perhaps the most important role we have is to help the world and the US reconcile their very considerable differences. This means taking the initiative to impart to others the particular insights into what is motivating the United States that we gain from geographic proximity and from political and cultural propinquity. It also means “speaking truth to power” in Washington.

Which brings us full circle today. The relationship between Canada and the United States is big enough and resilient enough to withstand major political shocks. Relations between our respective leaders have been chilly as often as they have been warm. Through the ups and downs, we remain neighbours and in important respects we are kin. If we have the confidence in each other to speak frankly when we disagree, and the wisdom to hear each other out, we can truly meet the fundamental test of friendship.