

**On Being an Ally: Why Virtue is not Reward Enough**

*An address to the IRPP conference on North American Integration  
Ottawa, April 1, 2004*

THOMAS S. AXWORTHY

The American moralist Ralph Waldo Emerson advised that, “Virtue is its own reward,” a sentiment heartily endorsed by many Canadians. At its best, Canadian moralizing reflects a generous value system of sharing, tolerance, civility and diversity that we enjoy at home and wish others to have abroad. At its worst, it is hectoring of others who believe in their own virtues and see no need to adopt ours. Dean Acheson, whose family came from Toronto and who worked summers in northern Ontario before becoming the greatest American secretary of state in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, gave vent to this feeling when he once admonished Canada as the “stern daughter of the Voice of God.”

My argument is that virtue is not reward enough. Feeling good about one’s self is less important than doing well and to do well in this difficult, complicated world you need capacity more than rhetoric. Canada has been under investing in the tools of international policy for a generation and we are now in danger of becoming the Uriah Heep of the international community, promising great things but delivering little. Lest you think I am being unduly harsh, last year the Centre for Global Development ranked the 21 richest nations on how their trade, aid, environmental and peacekeeping policies helped or hurt poor nations, and Canada was ranked 18<sup>th</sup>.

This self-delusion would not matter much except to our self respect, but it impinges greatly on the critical subject which is the focus of this conference – how best to deal with the United States. Canadians have had experience in dealing with Americans for over 400 years. For a time – between 1763 and 1776 – we were even loosely united with our American cousins in an early British Empire experiment of sovereignty-association. For proponents of sovereignty-association in general, or union with the United States in particular, this initial integration of North America may not be a happy precedent.

But from the first moments of Canadian history as the Huron Nation worried about the Iroquois moving north, or Champlain heard about Plymouth Rock, or a young John Macdonald joined the militia to repel agitators intoxicated with the American invention of mass democracy, to the present day topics of this conference – trade, migration and security – the United States has been a daily presence in the lives of Canadians. John Holmes, the Canadian diplomat and scholar who more than any other individual sparked my interest in foreign policy, put it best: “Coping with the fact of the USA,” he wrote, “is and always has been an essential ingredient of being Canadian. It has formed us just as being an island formed Britain.”

Therefore one of the pre-eminent questions of Canadian public policy has always been how to peacefully and usefully share North America with the dynamic colossus to the south. As the smaller, weaker power, however, our overwhelming preoccupation with the United States has rarely been reciprocated. Margaret Atwood developed a wonderful image to capture this phenomenon: the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel, she said, is like a long one way mirror with Canadians anxiously pressed to its face watching the frenzy below while Americans careen about endlessly fascinated with each other and unconcerned with the world around them. Less politically, the historian J. Bartlett Brebner made the same point when he wrote, “Americans are benevolently ignorant about Canada, while Canadians are malevolently well informed about the United States.”

As the smaller player, Canada has to be the proactive, informed, engaged partner in the relationship because it is simply a fact of life that while the United States is central to us, we have always been peripheral to them. This is not because Americans are insensitive – though Adlai Stevenson, twice a presidential candidate, once said the technology Americans most needed was a hearing aid – it is because the United States has been a great power since the 1860's, a superpower since 1945, and a hyperpower since 1990, and we have never been a threat, only occasionally an irritant.

In short, in Canada's international policy there is the United States and then everybody else. This is so because a well-managed American relationship is central to the achievements of our basic national interests. National interests, unlike management fads or popstars, rarely fade. In preparing these remarks I thought back to when I first came to Ottawa in the mid-1960's, as a very junior research assistant to Walter Gordon, a former finance minister and hero of the progressive wing of the Liberal Party. Writing a book, *A Choice for Canada*, soon after the Cuban Missile Crisis, Gordon outlined our basic national interests:

- An expanding economy to provide good jobs for the young people who will be looking for them;
- Contributing to security to avoid the threat of thermonuclear destruction;
- A fair division of incomes to lift the disadvantaged from poverty;
- To remain free and independent, economically and politically, "or as free as it is possible or desirable for any single nation to be in the shrinking and increasingly interdependent world in which we live."

Last year, J.L. Granatstein, one of Canada's most eminent historians, and definitely not a hero to the progressive wing of the Liberal Party, outlined four goals, remarkably similar to Gordon's:

1. Canada must protect its territory, the security of its people, and its unity.
2. It must strive to protect and enhance its independence
3. It must promote the economic growth of the nation to support the prosperity and welfare of its people.
4. It must work with like-minded states, in and outside international forums, for the protection and enhancement of democracy and freedom.

The critical point is that to secure the Gordon-Granatstein list of national objectives, the United States is central to every one of them. We need a constructive relationship with America, not to please them but to promote ourselves. And to have a constructive relationship with anyone, let alone the United States of America, you have to give as well as get. What exactly are we bringing to the party? To quote Mr. Gordon again: "Our influence depends primarily on the importance of our resources and power, both moral and material, and upon our willingness to contribute aid and peacekeeping assistance when called upon to do so." In other words, Canada needs capacity to contribute to the

common good. Being an ally means that one is neither a sycophant, nor a freeloader. You are, instead, a partner and partnership means sharing the load.

Now being an ally or partner with the United States has its own special, high maintenance characteristics. The United States has high ideals, all of which Canada shares, but we often differ on how best to promote them. Differences in means should never obscure agreement about ends. The United States is also huge, and endlessly changing, and we have to understand her, not the other way around, so Canadians have to work harder. Then there is the Congress. Promoters of the democratic renewal of Parliament be forewarned: the Congress is the most independent and difficult legislature in the world.

We came from a Parliamentary system where the American ambassador has to get to know at most 10 or 20 decision-makers who count. The Canadian ambassador in Washington has to get to know all 535 members of the Congress because they all count. And each member of Congress has a score of assistants, and they all count too.

As an ally trying to influence these 50,000 Washington influentials, you must never threaten their definition of the national interest; you must have excellent intelligence to understand how an issue is developing before the decision gets; you can offer arguments or support for one side of the debate, if they are inclined to listen to you; and if quiet diplomacy fails, you can try to persuade the American public, which is the ultimate influence on the Congress and administration.

To influence, you must have an audience willing to listen. Willingness to listen depends on your goals, your capacity, and your manners. Do we share the same objective, can you contribute to achieving it, and do you have the appropriate style? Mr. Pearson, for example, usually practiced quiet diplomacy, he sometimes practiced public diplomacy, but he never practiced rude diplomacy.

My argument, therefore, is that Canada has basic national interests that have not changed much over time, that a constructive engagement with the United States is essential to achieving every one of them, and that the way to influence Washington is to have enough capacity or assets to make a meaningful contribution.

My final point is that we are not investing enough in the capacity needed to defend our national interests. Let me briefly refer to the 4 D's: defence, development, diplomacy and democracy.

The primary responsibility of the state is to defend its citizens from harm. The privatization of war through malignant individuals gaining access to powerful weapons, plus the failed states which give terror a place to breed, is an immediate threat to the security of Canadians. Yet, the Canadian Armed Forces have been so run down, that a report from Queen's University, *Canada Without Armed Forces*, forecasts that in 5-10 years, as trained personnel and technicians retire, Canada will be without effective military resources. If that occurs, the Government of Canada will be negligent in its first duty of protecting us from harm and we will be renegeing on the 1938 pledge of

Mackenzie King that, “we too have our obligations as a good friendly neighbour, and one of them is to see that...our country is made as immune from attack as possible...and that enemy forces should not be able to pursue their way, either by land, sea, or air to the United States.”

Canada does not devote enough resources either to development, trade access, or trade promotion. Aid is important, and here Canada’s giving has fallen in half from .54% of GNP in the 1970’s to .25% today. But the best way to reduce world poverty is to give developing countries access to developed markets. This would also give Canadian consumers a break. Yet, we are as restrictive as many and more restrictive than some. We should be a G-20 leader in unilaterally reducing protection against the most disadvantaged and in wiping out debt. In trade promotion, Mexico has just signed a trade pact with Japan, and we haven’t even signed a free trade agreement with Singapore that was all but ready months ago. Trade diplomacy diversifies risk and promotes growth. We should be the world’s greatest free traders.

In diplomacy, Mexico too has been a North American leader with 63 consulate offices in the United States and with close fraternal ties to the huge Hispanic population in south-western United States. Canada, too, has a large body of well-connected expatriates in the United States but this resource has never been organized. We need, as well, a people to people diplomacy linking school boards, cities, and states with their respective partners. Seasoned and numerous professionals should be the first line in our diplomatic efforts but right behind we should mobilize the power of shared understanding.

Since the time of Immanuel Kant we have known that the internal characteristics of a regime – authoritarian or democratic – have had an impact on peace and war. Many Canadians, in individual capacities, contributed to democracy abroad but until now we have had no organized Canadian structure to undertake the effort. We should create a Canadian Democratic Institute, reporting to Parliament, not the government, and using the talents of parliamentarians and retired politicians from all parties to work on democratic governance abroad. And in Afghanistan, where Canada today has both our largest aid commitment and our largest troop deployment, we should join our NATO partners by agreeing to stay in Afghanistan in a meaningful capacity by undertaking a commitment to staff a Provincial Reconstruction Team.

Talk is cheap. Capacity costs money. But the best way to enhance our partnership with the United States is to be seen making a real contribution to shared goals. And once this is recognized, temporary disagreements about means will be the normal disputes of diplomacy not national crises. The recent budget forecast surpluses in the order of \$4-5 billion for years to come with debt repayment being the goal. Instead, the budget should continue to be balanced but any surplus should be invested with a third applied to reducing the tax burden on Canadian business, a third to investing in domestic social and physical capital, and a third to reduce the capacity gap with the lion’s share going to national security needs. In particular, the Canadian Armed Forces need steady annual increases first to maintain existing capacity and then to expand it. Virtue, yes, but a new virtuous circle where capacity matches our goals and both are supported by the Canadian public.

Robert Kennedy once said sarcastically, “Canada has given us all support, short of help.” Our goal for the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be to ensure that no one can ever say that about us again.