

“An invaluable contribution” to the history of Canada-US relations

Allan Gotlieb, *The Washington Diaries, 1981-1989*.
Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2006.

Review by Michael Hart and Bill Dymond

The title of Ambassador conjures up a glamorous image of an elegantly dressed, be-medalled figure, inhabiting a large mansion, and chauffeured magisterially in a long car, “avec le flag sur le hood,” as Jean Chrétien famously observed. Effortlessly, the ambassador exchanges confidences with princes, presidents and prime ministers and graces gala balls and state dinners with an august and forbidding presence. Beyond the glitz and the glitter, another more prosaic image, closer to the truth, emerges: the ambassador as messenger, interpreter, lightning rod, object of envy and handy target for the carnivorous media. To both the home front and the government to which he is accredited, the ambassador’s daily duty is to prompt, nag, hassle and, when necessary, tell unwelcome truths. Allan Gotlieb performed all these roles with relish. His forthright style added light and colour to exciting times in the Canada-US relationship.

When Gotlieb arrived in Washington in 1981, the Reagan revolution was in full throttle, embracing tax cuts, deregulation and an assertive, uncompromising foreign policy. Pierre Trudeau was in his fourth term and Canada was stuck in a statist time warp, wallowing in inward-looking nationalism flavoured with large doses of anti-Americanism. Canada-US relations seemed to be in perpetual crisis as the Reagan administration moved US politics decidedly to the right while Trudeau and his ministers continued to look determinedly backward.

When Brian Mulroney and the Conservatives came to office in 1984 after the brief Turner interregnum, Gotlieb’s job changed from managing crisis to building the foundation of a new relationship. New challenges arose. The “screw you but give us an exemption” which, Gotlieb records, was often the Trudeau foreign policy toward the US (and became so again under Chrétien and Martin) seemed replaced by an equally problematic result where Canada’s readiness to work with the US brought only a meagre response from the Reaganites on key Canadian priorities from Arctic sovereignty to acid rain. The Mulroney government, for its part, frequently bewildered the Americans with its inconstancy and incoherence on matters critical to them. It abandoned the despised *Foreign Investment Review Act*, yet sought to require an American company to divest itself of a Canadian publisher. It ditched Trudeau’s simpering Cold War moral equivalence, but declined to participate in Reagan’s Star Wars Initiative.

Within this setting, Gotlieb reinvented Washington diplomatic practice. Prior to his arrival, ambassadors conducted their country’s relations with the State Department and, with State’s permission, other departments and agencies, but seldom with members of Congress. Times had changed. The days had long since passed when the State Department could be relied on to represent effectively the interests of the United States with other countries. The Vietnam war and Watergate scandal had produced pro-

found changes in US governance. The fabled “separation of powers” embedded in the US Constitution had given way to the subseparation of powers under which, as Gotlieb observes, a determined member of either House could effectively write the law of the land. As Washington power broker Robert Strauss told Gotlieb, the difference between the Congress of today (1980s) and the Congress of the past was the difference between chicken salad and chicken shit; they only look the same.

In Washington, access is not the only thing, it’s everything, including participating in the capital’s frenetic social life. Power attracts power and Gotlieb perfected the technique of using powerful Americans to attract others. Attending or hosting dinners and receptions almost every night and frequently on weekends, he plugged into the Washington power grid. Often he was able to obtain critical intelligence or pass vital messages at these events, making them, in his mind, equal to if not more important than his office work.

Gotlieb, like his successors in the new Washington-style diplomacy, had to navigate the embassy ship in perilous waters. A cardinal rule is that diplomats do not interfere in domestic politics. Yet he observes that “an ambassador is paid to intervene in the domestic affairs of the United States. If he does it badly, he gets into trouble; if he does it well, he can get into an equal amount of trouble.”

Often the most difficult issues in the relationship are byproducts of domestic

US politics rather than deliberate acts of foreign policy making. In these circumstances, Gotlieb's strenuous advocacy efforts often brought accusations of interference. Within the Reagan administration, some regulatory agency might implement a decision — for example on trucking, with devastating effects on Canadian truckers — without the knowledge of any other department or agency and without regard to larger US interests. Within Congress a key appropriation bill authorizing the purchase of Canadian-made equipment would be dropped without warning. Senate and House members supportive of Canada on one issue might be firm opponents on another. Finding the locus of a decision, identifying its supporters and opponents, and building a blocking coalition was a constant and major preoccupation. As Gotlieb ruefully notes, embassy life was often "one damn thing after another."

If Washington waters are perilous, the seas around Ottawa are equally dangerous for the Canadian ambassador to Washington. Canadian governments, no less than others, suffer from the occupational hazard of assuming that other governments have the same *modus operandi* as their own. Gotlieb observes that there was "no understanding [in Ottawa] of how profoundly the workings of the political system have changed." The problem in Ottawa's view was the President was weak — Jimmy Carter, or dumb — Ronald Reagan. Give us a strong president and he will solve our problems. This fundamental misunderstanding was compounded by the expectation that ambassadors are supposed to follow instructions, not make them. They do not enjoy the sovereign's right to be consulted, informed or warned. Gotlieb changed the role of ambassador from the passive recipient of instructions to active participant in policy-making. On numerous occasions, he decisively intervened to avert catastrophic policy directions, for example, phoning Prime Minister John Turner to override departmental advice on an arms control issue or intervening directly with Mulroney to kill a film policy. If the ambassador enjoys the personal confidence of the prime minister, as

Gotlieb did with Trudeau, Turner and Mulroney, he can play in Ottawa policy-making, but it is not a formula for winning friends.

Gotlieb's signature moments as ambassador occurred during the negotiation of the Free Trade Agreement. The *Diaries* recount on almost a daily basis the denouement of the free trade negotiations as they hurtled toward impending failure in September 1987 and then to ultimate success in October. After Canada suspended the negotiations, when the US could not meet basic Canadian needs, Gotlieb seized upon a proposal from Sam Gibbons, a sympathetic member of Congress, to break the deadlock. He tirelessly promoted what became known as the Gotlieb-Gibbons formula in Ottawa, where it was initially dismissed, and marshalled support from key US senators to persuade the US negotiators to accept it.

Within the Canadian negotiating team, emotions ran high, fuelled by the atmosphere of perpetual crisis that prevailed in those September weeks. The Mulroney government had banked its first term on this agreement and failure would probably seal its fate at the next election. Failure would also vindicate the Canadian nationalists and professional anti-Americans. Gotlieb worried that without an agreement Canada would be left defenceless against a rising tide of US protectionism. While Canadian negotiators had bitterly concluded that US intransigence meant that the negotiations were over, Gotlieb worked tirelessly to urge a last effort. Not surprisingly, for such is the fate of all ambassadors who try to change their government's mind, he was accused of seeking an agreement at any cost. If success has many fathers, the Free Trade Agreement is amply endowed. Some will disagree with Gotlieb's account; others will say that he claims too much of the credit. None can deny, however, that his unparalleled access among top US decision-makers in the administration and the Congress played a vital role in persuading the US to adopt a position that Canada could accept.

Gotlieb was a controversial ambassador because he was so unlike the archetypal colonial Canadian. He mixed freely with Washington's mighty and powerful. He was outspoken equally in his defence of Canadian interests in Washington and in going to the mat with Canadian ministers and officials. Sondra Gotlieb was no less controversial because as an accomplished writer and humorist, she wrote weekly newspaper columns on Washington's social and diplomatic life, greatly discomfiting the colonial mindset of those in Ottawa for whom such things were not done. The Gotliebs became a Washington power couple, transforming the ambassador's residence into a Washington social hot spot featuring an endless stream of visiting ministers, provincial premiers and Canadian business leaders mingling with Washington power brokers.

The *Diaries* reflect the man and the turbulent times of the 1980s during which he was Canada's man in Washington. They embody the virtues and the vices of instant history, spontaneity and penetrating insights, wonderful vignettes and thumbnail sketches of the high and mighty — who can fail to agree with Lloyd Axworthy as the Rev. Obadiah Slope — untempered by mature reflection, no unifying narrative and preoccupation with ego: that of the author and the many large but overly sensitive personalities that dominate the world of politics and foreign policy. For all that, the *Diaries* are an invaluable contribution to the history of those times and should be read avidly by all those with an abiding interest in the conduct of Canada's most important foreign relationship.

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