



## BILLET

## Engagement, not Irrelevance

Our neighbour, principal ally and predominant trade partner is at war against what it perceives as a direct threat to US security. Canada cannot be oblivious to this concern. We did not have to volunteer to fight in order to be supportive. We already have more troops providing indirect support in the region than many in the coalition. With a little dexterity, some internal discipline and an expression of moral support for the stated ends of American policy — the establishment of a democratic, disarmed Iraq and a democratic, independent Palestine at peace with a secure Israel — we could have avoided both the indignity of ambassadorial chastisement (more worthy of a *banana republic*) and collateral damage to our national interest. Instead, we chose to oppose action by our closest friends and in a way that undermined their positions at a delicate time.

As the only hyper-power, the US is all-powerful. But it is also somewhat lonely, increasingly frustrated and very determined. Since September 11, 2001, it has seen itself very much at war against terrorists poised to strike again at random and tyrants who have weapons of mass destruction and are ready to use them. We may have doubts about the American approach on Iraq, but we should not doubt their resolve.

There is an aversion to war that is palpable in all countries. The preference for military action sanctioned by a “united” United Nations is also obvious. After all, pre-emptive military action is fraught with uncertainty and the battle itself may in fact be less difficult than the consequences flowing from it for the region and the world.

The basic objective of Canadian foreign policy since the end of the

Second World War has been to “play our cards right” in and with Washington in order to exert a level of influence in global affairs out of proportion to our relative power. By earning and maintaining the trust and respect of the world’s greatest power, we have been able to assert and protect our own vital national interests in American domestic affairs, while enhancing our effectiveness in the resolution and advancement of multilateral matters.

Such hard-earned trust, once lost, is not easily regained. It will not be business as usual for Canada, both literally and figuratively. We now find ourselves with diminished capacity to defend key national interests and to influence world events.

In my view, Canada’s relationship with the United States is too important for vacillation and too vital for detachment. I believe the true Canadian spirit was evident in the welcome and the hospitality extended on both coasts to Americans whose travel plans were diverted to Canada immediately after September 11. And from the hundred thousand who stood respectfully on the lawn of Parliament to mourn the victims of September 11.

This is a time when the Americans could benefit from advice and support from friends and neighbours they trust. We had that position of trust and influence in the past.

I would have preferred, frankly, to see Canada among the “coalition of the willing,” standing with the US, the UK and Australia. I believe that would have been consistent with our traditions, and our interests, including our interest in having the UN perform more than a declaratory role in responding to global crises. We quietly

accept US security without being prepared to pay much of a price ourselves.

If we genuinely expect to exercise any influence on the US at times like this, we need to be more concerned about what is right than what seems popular at the moment. We need either to support our convictions with tangible commitments or offer alternatives that are credible.

We tried valiantly to find a middle ground and the basis for consensus at the UN, but the gap proved unbridgeable. Having chosen to refrain from direct combat, we should now concentrate on the best role Canada can play in obtaining some semblance of stability in the aftermath of war. I believe we also need to intensify efforts to thwart indiscriminate terrorist attacks against North America. We may not see ourselves as a target, but surely we have an obligation to help the neighbour we know is the target. In my opinion, it is not only the right thing for us to do, it is also the best way to preserve vital Canadian interests.

We have been least effective in foreign affairs when we have tried to separate ourselves from the challenge of this primordial relationship in the name of “sovereignty,” “counterweights” or “soft power,” dalliances which have often proved as content-free as the rhetoric supporting them. Distance, differentiation and detachment are never substitutes for engagement. They risk making Canada irrelevant. Leadership, commitment and perseverance have paid dividends for Canada and the United States in the past. That is what is most needed today.

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