

Continental Divide

Can we sympathize with America's post-9/11 position without getting tangled in the country's paranoid militarism?

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LAST JANUARY, U.S. President George W. Bush and Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin apparently hit it off over a breakfast of sausages and eggs at the Summit of the Americas meeting in Monterrey, Mexico. The president is quoted as saying that Martin is “a straightforward fellow and easy to deal with.”

The prime minister, for his part, declared his wish to improve Canada-U.S. relations even before he was sworn in on December 12, 2003. But, as he moves toward improving those relations, Martin must reckon with the fact that his predecessor's arm's-length approach met with the approval of a substantial majority of the Canadian population. Martin, therefore, faces an impressive set of challenges on this front. How to signal sympathy for America's post-September 11 position without leaping on a bandwagon of militarism, unilateralism, and paranoid domestic security? How to cultivate the economic ties that sustain us while maintaining Canadian sovereignty? How to pursue an agenda, both domestic and international, that reflects Canadian values without affronting our powerful neighbour to the south? Moreover, Martin must juggle the fact that an American election has begun rolling out. Commitments to this president may prove premature should the U.S. administration change come November. Either way, the next six months will be no cakewalk for Martin.

Managing Canada's ties with the United States has always been a challenging part of the prime ministerial job description. And yet, as the Canadian comic Rick Mercer observed recently, living next to the United States right now is like “being in a pen with a wounded bull.” Part of what makes the beast thrash around has to do with what many critics of the American administration have called the “culture of fear.”

Although this culture has been most palpable during the past couple of years, it did not, in my view, emerge from the rubble of Ground Zero. In fact, my research shows that the roots of the present malaise long preceded September 11. America has demonstrated growing levels of technological anxiety, fear of complexity, fear of the “other” (in the form of sexism and xenophobia), and fear of violence, at least since the early nineties. In September, 2001, these fears took centre stage and were undoubtedly exacerbated, but they were hardly a new phenomenon.

In the years before the collapse of the Twin Towers, Canadians were measurably less anxious than Americans in many respects. Since then, our attitudes and policies have diverged from those of our neighbours even more sharply. That does not mean we are exempt from the pitfalls associated with a fearful and defensive world view. We have our own version of the American culture of fear. We obsess not over religious fundamentalists halfway around the world, but over America itself.

It has often been observed that the crudest form of Canadian nationalism is anti-Americanism. As he massages Canada-U.S. relations, Paul Martin will have to draw a clear line between conciliation and cowering, assuring Canadians and Americans alike that Canada's renewed friendship with the United States is rooted neither in fear, nor in a petty contrarianism born of fear. He will in fact have to put forward a new vision of partnership and in this, he may draw strength from the words of former U.S. president Richard M. Nixon. Speaking to the Canadian parliament in 1972, Nixon claimed that "mature partners must have autonomous independent policies; each nation must define the nature of its own interests... decide the requirements of its own security... the path of its own progress." "The soundest unity," Nixon went on to say, "is that which respects diversity, and the strongest cohesion is that which rejects coercion."

THERE ARE at least three domains in which Martin might find opportunities to advance the repositioning he seems eager to implement: the first is the personal relationship between himself and the president, a domain in which Martin has already had some success. The second is in the myriad agreements and interactions between the two countries which are not politically charged: the minutiae of the relationship that do not diminish Canadian sovereignty or threaten Canadian values. The third relates to policy issues intimately connected to deeply ingrained Canadian values. It is in this final area that Martin will have to walk the narrowest line.

Relationships between Canadian prime ministers and U.S. presidents have always been fascinating, unfolding as they do in tandem with historical events, yet consisting of many of the same idiosyncrasies that attend any interpersonal relationship. Canada has had prime ministers with cool, even hostile, relations with American presidents. In the early 1960s John Diefenbaker and John F. Kennedy could hardly stand each other. JFK's brother Bobby once complained of Ottawa's equivocation during the Cuban missile crisis, "In an emergency Canada will give you all aid short of help."

But there have also been times when Canadian prime ministers were very close to their U.S. counterparts: William Lyon Mackenzie King and Franklin D. Roosevelt were friendly in the 1940s, and Brian Mulroney was cozy to the point of controversy with both Ronald Reagan in the eighties and George H. W. Bush in the early nineties. Indeed, White House memos from the mid-eighties (released in the late nineties) reveal that American officials were instructed by advisers to make a few well-publicized concessions to Mulroney, in order to avoid having the Canadian P.M. look like a "lackey" in the eyes of his own citizens.

The most dramatic tête-à-tête between a U.S. president and a Canadian prime minister may have been a famous incident at Camp David in 1965. Lyndon Johnson, enraged by a speech Lester Pearson had just delivered at Temple University in which he criticized America's involvement in Vietnam, allegedly grabbed the Nobel Prize-winning Canadian by the lapels and, to the horror of nearby aides, bellowed: "You pissed on my rug."

Lawrence Martin, the journalist and author of *The Presidents and the Prime Ministers*, claims that, "If you have a high level of communication, that spirit gets channelled down through the system and [the countries] work in a more co-operative vein." This may have been truer when we were more deferential to our leaders; today there is a lot less latitude for prime ministers and

presidents to co-operate if it means ignoring or opposing the values and perspectives of the coalition of voters that put them in power. At any rate, Michael Kergin, the Canadian ambassador to the U.S., has recently stated that he does not believe that much will change whether Paul Martin succeeds at fostering a better relationship with George Bush or not. "The U.S.-Canadian relationship is too important to be affected by any one person," Kergin says.

Under Martin's watch, Ottawa-Washington relations already seem better lubricated: the U.S. administration says that Canadian firms can now bid on projects to rebuild Iraq, and has also agreed to consult Canadian officials when American authorities seek to deport a suspected terrorist with a Canadian passport to a third country.