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Friends Across the Border

Barnett J. Danson

To those who follow relations between the United States and Canada, the fact that we are one another's largest trading partners is "old news." Indeed, those of us close to the picture are well aware that ours is the largest bilateral economic relationship in the world, and the fastest growing -- over one hundred billion dollars annually, and over seven billion dollars with New England alone. This is double the United States trade with Japan and equal to that with all of Western Europe. Some two million U.S. jobs are dependent on exports to Canada. However, to the majority of Americans, and perhaps Canadians as well, these facts come as a surprise.

Virtually all know that we have the longest undefended border on earth and that we are the closest and friendliest of neighbors and allies. But with so much in common and with such a high level of interdependence, it should not be surprising that at any time we also have a number of problems that are inherent in such a close association. These are exacerbated in times of economic slow-down or stress. Nevertheless, we have managed to resolve these by careful negotiation and compromise over the years.

Institutional structures, such as the International Joint Commission, provide ongoing mechanisms for greater understanding and agreement on trans-border problems. Although sometimes painstaking, they are virtually always successful in the long run. Occasionally, on trade differences, we jointly seek mediation through multilateral structures such as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). In the case of the recent lack of agreement on fishing boundaries in the Gulf of Maine, we jointly sought the third party determination of the International Court at The Hague. In trade terms, we have the Canada-U.S. Automotive Trade Agreement which has successfully rationalized the production of motor vehicles between our countries. The Canada-U.S. Defense Sharing Agreement serves a somewhat similar role in defense production, so important to us as allies in NATO or NORAD. Most recently has been the appointment of two very distinguished Special Envoys to assist in resolving our



mutual concerns relating to acid rain.

The Canadian Prime Minister and the U.S. President meet at least annually on a formal basis, and have informal contacts. The U.S. Secretary of State and the Canadian Secretary for External Affairs meet quarterly, and here also there are continuing contacts. The New England Governors and Eastern Canadian Premiers have yearly meetings and maintain close cooperative contacts. These meetings are not ends in themselves, but serve to identify areas of mutual interest or concern which are then addressed by all levels of governments and, where appropriate, the private sector.

All of this activity is referred to as "managing the relationship." I prefer the term "nurturing the relationship" to describe its intent, but "managing" is what we must do to "nurture." We resolve difficulties, or downright disagreements, and we exploit joint opportunities. Some of these are economic, others diplomatic and a growing number are environmental. Our shared water systems and air, as we are now more aware of the impact of acid rain, and the fish in our oceans who are unaware of political boundaries, all require our joint attention.

We are, however, sovereign states with similar though not identical cultures. Canada has a greater land mass than the United States but only one-tenth the population. This requires a different range of

approaches to our economy, transportation, communications and culture in order to maintain our unity as a nation, and to make certain we possess the economic strength to compete in world markets which are essential to our prosperity. The U.S., with its large population and vast domestic market is far more self-sufficient. It is critical to Canadian economic well-being to have access to major markets. Growing calls for protectionism cause considerable unease in a situation where the leaders of both nations are actively seeking more open and enhanced trade.

In the Canadian parliamentary form of government, the Cabinet, representing the governing party, can make commitments which, with its parliamentary majority, it can be virtually certain of fulfilling. On the other hand, the U.S. congressional system, which is the essence of democracy, puts considerable restraints on the administration. Regional considerations play a major role for both governments, but under the parliamentary system these are largely resolved before the government commits itself. In the congressional system the administration is less able to deliver as it wishes, particularly when the majority in one of the Houses of Congress is from a party different than the administration. Each of our systems has its strengths and weaknesses. Neither is perfect, but both are very good and highly democratic. They also seem frustrating, until we hark back to Winston Churchill who said that our system of democratic government is the worst in the world -- except for all the others.

In this context, with all of our imperfections, we have the most difficult relationship in the world -- except for all the others. Recognizing our value to one another, understanding our differences, and with ongoing goodwill, we can continue to benefit by one another's proximity, resources, markets and supports, if not at all times on every issue, at least in the fundamental values we share and, certainly, when they are threatened by others.

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