CANADA'S JOURNEY FROM PROTECTIVE PARTNERSHIP ON THE 'AMERICAN ROAD' TO FEAR, CONTEMPT AND CHAOS IN THE AGE OF DONALD TRUMP

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Declining empires age badly. They fight wars they don't win. Erratic leaders promise to make the empire great again. They don't. Their neighbours suffer as they must.

As the United States ascended to astonishing economic prosperity and superpower dominance, Canada was a principal beneficiary. A British colony during Britain's imperial and economic heyday in the nineteenth century, Canada turned southwards in the 20th century. Although the first automobiles appeared in Europe, the workshops of Detroit produced the first affordable horseless buggies. Across the Detroit River in Walkerville – now a historic neighbourhood of Windsor, Ont. – Gordon McGregor realized that he could make a deal with Henry Ford and produce his cars for the Canadian market. Canada's 35-per-cent tariff stopped Ford from simply shipping cars made in Detroit across the river. A branch plant automobile industry was born. By 1923 Canada was the second largest producer of automobiles in the world.

As the American century unfolded, Canada integrated more tightly with its neighbour. It kept some British spellings, supported a government broadcaster, and subsidized Canadian content, but its people and its politics ever more reflected its integration into the American economy and popular culture. Mary Pickford, born on Toronto's University Avenue, became "America's Sweetheart" and the first Hollywood millionaire. Later Canadian icons – Neil Young, Joni Mitchell, and Céline Dion – proudly retained their Canadian citizenship but made their homes in the United States. So did its greatest hockey players, Bobby Orr and Wayne Gretzky. Both eventually became enthusiastic supporters of Donald Trump with Gretzky – a

Mar-A-Lago hanger-on – gaining Trump's nomination to be the first governor when Canada when it becomes America's 51st state.

Occasionally, the United States snarled, much like American rapper Kendrick Lamar towards Canadian rival Drake, asserting that Canada and Canadians were "not like us." Much earlier, in the first year of the Great Depression in 1930, the U.S. Congress enacted the Smoot-Hawley tariff, which effectively closed the American market to Canada, its greatest trading partner. Henry Ford denounced the tariff as "an economic stupidity," but populist and nationalist forces triumphed.

Despite propinquity and similarity, Canadian and American leaders rarely interacted before the Second World War. Franklin Roosevelt ended American hesitation and Canadian reserve. Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, a Harvard graduate like Roosevelt and John D. Rockefeller Jr.'s most treasured friend, brought out the best in the American patrician, who detested Hitler and valued democracy. Congress passed Neutrality Acts between 1935 and 1937, but Roosevelt ignored their existence in 1938 at Queen's University on Canadian soil. He assured Canadians that, "the Dominion of Canada is part of the sisterhood of the British Empire. I give to you assurance that the people of the United States will not stand idly by if domination of Canadian soil is threatened by any other Empire."[1] For Canadians, it was the best of both worlds.

Roosevelt kept his word. He and King signed a joint defence agreement at Ogdensburg, New York on August 17, 1940, shortly after the fall of France. If Britain fell, Canada would be on the front line, and the United States would be there. In those times, Robert Bothwell has written, "King moved easily in Roosevelt's shadow."[2] In Roosevelt's eyes, King was "just like us." Canada benefited greatly from the friendship, and the declaration King and Roosevelt made at Roosevelt's Hyde Park estate on April 20, 1941 essentially merged the two economies for wartime purposes, which meant nearly all purposes, until 1945. Bolstered by wartime expansion, Canada's Gross Domestic Product more than doubled between 1939 and 1945. Thanks to continental economic integration, Canadians gained unemployment insurance, family allowances and government-backed mortgages, while its soldiers received generous benefits when they returned.[3]

Canadians noticed that the closer relationship with the United States had coincided with the transformation of Canada from depression poverty to middle-class prosperity, and the traditional Canadian doubts about the closer relationship diminished. There were nationalist outbursts in 1956 over American financial interest in a pipeline and again in the late 1960s when the Vietnam

1 Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Address at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada, August 18, 1938." The American Presidency Project at www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-queens-university-kingston-ontario-canada.

2 Robert Bothwell, *Alliance and Illusion: Canada and the World, 1945–1984* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007), 13.

3 Statistics Canada, Gross Domestic Product, Income-based, 1029–1960 at www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3610027601&cubeTimeFrame.startYear=1939&cubeTimeFrame.endYear=1945&referencePeriods=19390101%2C19450101.

War caused many Canadians to echo the virulent American criticisms of the war. The energy and foreign policies of Pierre Trudeau's governments also attracted strong reaction from American Republicans. Then came Brian Mulroney in 1984 pledging to open Canada for business again, serenading President Ronald Reagan on Canadian soil, and successfully winning an election in 1988 on the issue of free trade with the United States. Canadian ties with the U.S. thickened, and Mulroney gave glowing eulogies at the funerals of the American presidents with whom he had worked closely, Reagan and George H.W. Bush.

At the time, critics and supporters of the new trade agreement with the United States recognized the historic significance of the moment. Apart from King, Canadian prime ministers had avoided the warm embrace of the United States. However, King, unlike Mulroney, privately and publicly maintained a distance from the United States and rejected a possible free trade pact in 1948. At the last minute before the deal was announced, King recoiled and told senior official and future prime minister Lester Pearson, who was persistent in his arguments for an agreement, that "he would never cease to be a Liberal or a British citizen and if I thought there was a danger of Canada being placed at the mercy of powerful financial interests in the United States, and if that was being done by my own party, I would get out and oppose them openly." [4] The agreement died.

History provides context, but each moment is unique. The second administration of Donald Trump is unlike any other for Canadians. Although Theodore Roosevelt and President William Howard Taft privately expressed the hope that Canada would join the United States in 1911, no American president has ever publicly declared that Canada is not a real country and should become the 51st state. Canada, Trump argues, should never have existed. He clearly believes that Canadians are "just like us" and prepared to welcome the enormous benefits becoming American would bestow, a belief confirmed by his contact with Canadians like businessman and television personality Kevin O'Leary, a Mar-A-Lago regular and former candidate for the Canadian Conservative Party leadership, and Conrad Black, Trump's admiring biographer. And around Mar-A-Lago, where Brian Mulroney serenaded Trump in 2017 with *When Irish Eyes are Smiling*, as he had Reagan in 1985, there are four million Canadians vacationing each winter, with some having bumper stickers proclaiming "My Canada Includes Florida." Familiarity bred confusion during Trump's first term. In his second term, it became contempt.

In 1985, when Mulroney sang to Reagan, 78 per cent of Canadians said they were "very proud to be Canadian," but when Justin Trudeau met Trump at Mar-A-Lago after his November 2024 election victory, only 34 per cent did.[5] The Conservatives then had a 20-point lead in the polls campaigning on the slogan that "Canda is broken." Trump, the Bronx

4 J.W.Pickersgill and Donald Forster, eds., *The Mackenzie King Record, 1948–1948*. Volume IV ˆ Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), 367–8.

5 Jeremy Warren, "Fewer Canadians Feel Pride to be Canadian, poll suggests." January 8, 2025, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/angus-reid-poll-canadian-pride-1.7425408.

bully and wrestling fan, spots weakness quickly. Soon after his inauguration, he struck.

Trudeau was a tempting target when he and Trump met at Mar-A-Lago. Trump taunted him at the dinner table, calling him Governor Trudeau and astonishing his guests by asserting that Canada should become "the 51st state." Hovering nearby was Elon Musk, a Canadian citizen and the major architect of Trump's victory through his funding and social media dominance. His disinterest in Canada had become disdain. On X, formerly Twitter before he purchased it, Musk declared "Canada is not a real country." It was time for Canadians to accept their Manifest Destiny.

The "American road" that began with Roosevelt's commitment to protection of Canada in 1938 had come to an end. There had been bumps along the way, but a menacing Donald Trump tore up the pavement. Roosevelt had been generous, despising Hitler and treasuring democracy. Trump was wantonly cruel, admiring Putin and threatening democratic values. Canada became America's Ukraine, doomed to form part of the greater empire. As David French reported in *The New York Times*, "While talking to the press in the Oval Office, [Trump] once again called for Canada to become the 51st state and then compared Canada's bargaining position to Ukraine's. 'The expression I use is, 'Some people don't have the cards… I used the expression about a week and a half ago" – referring to his infamous exchange[6] with Ukraine's president[7], Volodymyr Zelenskyy, when he told Zelenskyy: "You're not in a good position. You don't have the cards right now." [8]

Canadians have reacted to Trump's actions with a new nationalism and, according to several polls, with a new pride in their country.[9] There will be no Anschluss with Canadians cheering as the troops march in. But there is sadness mingled with fear. The romance that bloomed on a summer day in Kingston when a great American president declared his affection and commitment to Canada had many memorable and even inspiring moments. And then came Donald Trump.

Canadian balladeer Gordon Lightfoot, whose songs celebrated Canadian deeds and places and probed the depths of broken hearts, said it well in his biggest hit, *If You Could Read My Mind*:

And I've got to say that I just don't get it
I don't know where we went wrong
But the feeling's gone, and I just can't get it back

6 www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/what-trump-and-zelenskyy-said-during-their-heated-argument-in-the-oval-office

7 www.youtube.com/watch?v=bCFMEoRCmEY

8 David French, "Canada, May I Introduce You to Ukraine", *The New York Times*, March 23, 2025.

9 Michael Sabe, "Canadian pride is on the rise in the wake of Trump's tariffs threat," February 6, 2025. www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canadian-pride-is-on-the-rise-trump-tariff-threat-1.7451987.