

The US and Us

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Power and ideas rule the world. Ignore either one and you are in trouble. But Canadians remain Victorians—if we think something is improper to discuss, we ignore it. Once we did not talk about sex, now we pretend power doesn't exist, all that has changed is the kind of trouble we get into. Today, our problem is a failure to understand how changes in American power and policy affect our position in the world. The public debate on the topic is dominated by knee-jerk reflexes—neo-conservatives convinced whatever suits the United States must be good for Canada, left-wingers that George W. Bush is out to pollute our precious bodily fluids. Canadians face a fundamental challenge to our position in the world; we are ignoring it. What could be more Canadian?

Lucien Bouchard said Canada was not a real country. When it comes to foreign policy, he was almost right: Canada is not a normal country. We do not need to defend our most vital interests through power, nor could we. We are protected from external danger by our neighbour, which is our guardian and therefore our greatest threat. Americans would not pose such a threat in a military form and we could not withstand it if they tried, but our foreign policy balances on this fulcrum of power. We cannot let ourselves become a security threat to the United States, nor let it think it can disregard our interests. In order to manage this bilateral relationship, Canadian governments have turned to multilateralism. They favour arrangements, like NATO and the UN, more than any other state on earth. They look for forums where we can stand apart from the US and find a counter-balance to it, and support the international order and ensure it reflected our values. If the international order remains stable, we will be secure.

Canada approached these issues in a unique manner, combining liberal internationalism and a colonial mentality carried over to the UN and the US from our experiences with the British Commonwealth. Thus, there is a Canadian way of war. Rather than use our power to pursue our interests, we loan our forces to external authorities so they can preserve international order. So too, in foreign policy, we define our interests as being those of the world community; we aim to be an honest broker instead of a player.

This approach met our needs. In fact, the postwar order suited us admirably, because for the only time in our history, between 1945 and 1956 Canadian governments effectively used our power to serve our interests, and those of the world. They made the international order safe for Canada. This happened in so indirect a way, however, that we often forgot what we were doing and why, or even that we had power and interests. Because we did not think in these terms, we let our foreign and military policies drift apart. When it comes to thinking about power, interests and strategy, and linking their components, Canada has a comparative disadvantage compared virtually to any other advanced state. We came to think power is bad or else that it does not exist, that we are nice, and therefore, so must the world. We came to treat multilateralism not as a means but an end. Groucho Marx said he wouldn't belong to any club that would have him as a member. Canadians want to join every club that will. We liked the UN because it was a forum where we could pretend to be equal to the US but better, and differ with Washington over trivial issues of process while supporting it in substance. We adopted a pose of moral superiority toward the United States on issues of power and interest. We pretended our attitudes represent world opinion, but they do not. Other countries favour compromise less than we do when their interests are at stake. In attitudes toward international relations, Canadians are the odd men out and the United States is normal.

There is, however, one difference between it and other countries; power. The United States is far stronger than any other country in history ever has been, and it has no rivals. Once there were small powers, medium and large ones. Now there is one great power and the rest. As in the old fable, how do the mice bell the cat? The United States also has declared itself an imperial power, though it doesn't entirely know what that idea means, and even if it did, it might change its mind or have its mind changed

for it. Consistency is not always a characteristic of American policy.

Since 1989, United States administrations have found external relations problematical and partisan issues. When the cold war ended, they preferred to work multilaterally, leading the world to a new order through old institutions. The results in Bosnia and Kosovo disillusioned even the Clinton administration. NATO and the UN provided coalitions of the unwilling, offering little but words, and as much obstruction as support. Unless the United States acted on an issue, no one would. Friends followed the US simply to prevent it from leading. Then, on 9/11 Al Quaida roused a tiger. Americans faced threats and enemies. They found they were powerful and friends not always necessary. Some months ago, these tensions came to a head, as the United States chose to destroy a threat while members of the Security Council behaved like a bunch of mice pretending they were a cat.

The Americans were right to destroy Saddam's regime, but that is history. The real question is, what next? The crisis will have consequences more significant than the event itself. The world's leading multilateral institutions have been shaken. The UN and many states tried to restrain the US, and failed. No Republican administration will ever treat the UN seriously again, and probably no Democratic one. NATO has been damaged as have American attitudes toward some old friends. Nor is the strain one sided. The world's only great power acted unilaterally on a major issue, against the will of most of the world's governments, through a means we all find hard to swallow, preemptive attack. This raises questions about the nature of American leadership, or its ambitions, of its power and willingness to use it. That is doubly so because American military policy aims to make the US absolutely secure, which will make everyone else subordinate, if Washington wishes. Much of the opposition to American actions over Iraq stemmed from fear the United States had declared itself king of the world. Even those who are willing to accept the idea of American hegemony want to know it will be a constitutional monarch: that there will be limits on its actions, and that it will treat their countries with respect and fairness. American power has risen while that of other states and old multilateral organisations has fallen; no one knows what the rules of international relations and the game of power will be. How does one put Humpty-Dumpty together again?

There is no order without power, but some orders are better than others, especially for mice. Multilateral arrangements, whether "concerts of the powers" or the UN, never have been a replacement for power, just a reflection of it. They work only by harnessing the support of the great powers to transnational interests, by committing them to fixed arrangements and rules and limits. Multilateral organisations need the United States more than it needs them. Without its active support, no form of international order can function. Yet the Americans also need multilateral organisations. They lack the power, and the will, and the talent, to be king of the world. Americans want partners; without them, they cannot do many of the things they need. They want friendship and support—they love to be loved.

American authorities do not seriously believe they can intervene everywhere or get their own way on everything. In fact, as powers go, the record of the United States has been decent; no worse than anyone else in the "third world" and quite good with other western states, especially Canada. Though the United States regularly seeks to bully us on minor issues, it has been fair on major ones. It has been an elephant to us, not a cat. Probably, this leader will be willing to accept limits to its behaviour; and probably the rest of us can shape its actions so they suit our interests. So we must hope.

This matter affects no one in the world than us. We are uniquely exposed to a people of unparalleled power, which is absolutely determined to protect their interests. American interests are not identical to ours own. Their power can be a problem for us. Things will not change simply because George Bush invites Paul Martine for a sleepover. The problem is more than a conflict of personalities; it is one of interests. It is less one of intention than of effect. The United States probably will not want to threaten our vital interests but its actions will challenge them. Life is hard.

How can we use our power and ideas to solve the problem? Much is obvious. If security trumps trade every time, we must learn how to win without trumps, or else get some. We should invest in areas of power and influence where we have a comparative advantage. We need increased spending on defence and international aid, we should strive to reform multilateral organisations and keep the United States

engaged with them. A world run by “coalitions of the willing” maximizes the American bargaining position against everyone, foes or friends, and reduces everyone else’s chances for influence. Far better are fixed arrangements with rules which bind both sides, which limit the leader and commit the followers. The problem to overcome is not just an American preference for unilateral action, but also the unwillingness of other powers to follow or to act, and the decline in power of the multilateral structures which shaped the cold war. If we want a good leader, we have to be good followers. But more important than actions, we should understand our illusions. We are mice who pretend that there are no cats, or else they are all belled. We think nice is enough. We forget we have interests and that no one cares about them but us. We pretend we care about foreign affairs when, for thirty years, we have let our power and influence wither. We pretend we support multilateral organisations, when we have nothing to offer, except our moral superiority. We think power is a four letter word. It has five. We should try to remember what the word means.