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America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

Canada and Trump Revisited, Revisited

Essay by David G. Haglund, Queen's University

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I have to confess that when the editor asked me to provide my thoughts about the effect President Donald J. Trump has had upon Canadians and, by projection, upon the quality of the bilateral relationship between the United States and Canada, my memory flashed back to the early 1960s, when I first read Joseph Heller's incredible antiwar satire, *Catch-22*. There are two reasons for the flashback. First is the strikingly bizarre impact (satirical were it not so sad) that the Trump presidency appears to have had upon what is usually considered to be the world's platinum standard for sensible bilateral relationships. Just as Heller's characters managed to make such a hash of warfighting, so too has Donald Trump seemingly accomplished the impossible – to lead a goodly number of Canadians actually to think of the United States as an “enemy”! For sure, this enemy image is far from reflecting a *majoritarian* perspective among Canadians – we are not yet a country populated by Russians or Iranians – but the mere fact that some 10 percent of those surveyed recently could have such a dismal view of their American neighbor speaks volumes about the depths to which the affective quality of the bilateral relationship has plunged since Trump became president.¹

There is more to it than this, however. The second reason for the flashback is that I have found myself attracted to one of Heller's characters – an attraction I have sought to convey in this article's deliberately repetitive title. Readers of Heller's novel will recall the bumbling Major Major Major, who ultimately attained the rank of the same name (major) in the U.S. Army Air Force during the Second World War. For just as Major Major's father had saddled him with a first and middle name that replicated his surname, I find myself saddled by the editor with a replicative challenge of my own. Simply put, I have stood on this particular *H-Diplo* soapbox before, not once but twice, and this third attempt at trying to come to grips with Donald Trump's meaning for Canada will, I very much hope, be my last.

So as the Trump administration staggers to its litigious, embarrassing, and now violent conclusion, I will avail myself of the editor's invitation to expatiate, by revisiting what I had said on those two earlier occasions and trying to put them into contemporary context. The first occasion was in early 2017, around the time of the 45th president's inauguration.² The second arose less than two years later, as we were approaching the administration's midway point.³ Before I return to those two prior instances of punditry, it is important to establish an important analytical boundary condition. To this condition, I give the label, the “Joe Romero problématique.” Why this label?

In a *New York Times* report on the electoral preferences of voters in swing (or “battleground”) states published shortly before the November 2020 election, one Arizona interviewee who had just cast an early ballot for President Trump, insisted nevertheless that he did *not* vote for the down-ballot Republican senator who had been appointed to fill out John McCain's term, and who was also up for election. That was Martha McSally, who eventually went on to lose to Democrat Mark Kelly. Asked to explain why he voted for Trump

¹ Steven Chase, “More Canadians Hold an Unfavourable View of the U.S. than at Any Point since Sentiment Was First Tracked, Poll Indicates,” *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 15 October 2020, A4. The survey was sponsored by Focus Canada in collaboration with the Environics Institute, the University of Ottawa's Faculty of Social Sciences, and the Century Initiative. It polled some 2,000 Canadians during September 2020, and reported a sharp plummeting of favorable attitudes toward the United States in a variety of dimensions, during the Trump presidency.

² “Canada and the Election of Donald Trump,” *H-Diplo*/ISSF Policy Series, January 2017, <http://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5i-Trump-Canada>

³ “Canada and Donald Trump: A Midterm Reality Check,” *H-Diplo*/ISSF Policy Series, July 2018, <http://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5BGX-Canada>

but not McSally, Romero candidly remarked of the former that “[j]ust because he’s a deplorable human being doesn’t mean he can’t be a good president.”⁴ Although few who saw the accompanying photo of this voter, sporting a stars-and-stripes facemask beneath his cowboy hat and aviator sunglasses, would have been likely to confuse him with a typical Canadian, there was one part of Joe Romero’s comment that definitely *could* resonate with Canadians: very few of them would dispute his branding of the 45th president as “deplorable.”⁵ The question we must address in these pages, however, concerns the *other*, more interesting, aspect of Romero’s remark. Can Donald Trump be, in any meaningful way, regarded as having been an effective president insofar as concerns *Canadian* interests?

Merely to pose the question is to run the risk of eliciting guffaws on the part of readers who cannot imagine that there ever has been a more destructive – from the perspective of Canadian interests and the health of the Canada-U.S. relationship – occupant of the Oval Office than Donald Trump. Nor would it be easy for any sentient observer to deny the damage that Trump has visited upon America’s domestic politics – damage so disturbingly on display with his fomenting of the failed *putsch* of 6 January 2021, in which he was aided and abetted by some of his *günstlings* in the legislative branch, including and especially, in the upper chamber, Missouri’s Josh Hawley and Texas’ (Canadian-born) Ted Cruz, as well as in the lower chamber Illinois’ Mary Miller, who deemed the pre-riot Trump rally a propitious moment to lavish praise on Adolf Hitler, for knowing how to indoctrinate youth.⁶ But even well prior to this latest and most sordid evidence of presidential disgust with democracy, most Canadians were prepared to conclude not only that it would be impossible for any future chief executive to so harm the bilateral relationship as Trump has done, but also that no *prior* president had ever inflicted the kind of damage wrought by Trump upon the bilateral relationship.

If they made the latter claim, however, it would not be because they had readily available to them any useful source of information regarding how Donald Trump’s forty-three predecessors⁷ handled the task of relating to Canadians and their interests. Very much like Donald Trump himself, Canadians would be relying on their ‘gut’ in framing their assessment of the president’s ‘Canadian content.’ Intuitively, of course, Canadians sense that some presidents have been quite beneficial to their interests, while others have been less so, but there really is no sound empirical basis for thinking comparatively about the entire set of them from the perspective of their impact upon Canadian interests, starting with George Washington. It is only through ranking this entire set that one could form some reasonably coherent sense of where Donald Trump figures in this universe of chief executives, and why. To date, no one has tried to do this.

True, there have been selective studies of the impact of fairly recent American presidents upon Canada;⁸ but the further back in time one ventures, the dimmer become the historical memories that would be required to accompany and to give meaning to any such thorough rank-ordering of the presidents. Indeed, sometimes it is thought that because today’s Canadian federation only dates from July 1867, no president prior to the 17th, Andrew Johnson, could really be said to have had any impact *at all* on what might be deemed ‘Canadian interests.’ To think this way, however, is surely to take a blinkered view of the Canadian-American past as being a good deal more truncated than it really was. That past, it bears recalling, had already covered a span of nearly two centuries by the time American independence was wrested from Britain in 1783.

⁴ Hank Stephenson, “Arizona: Early Voting Begins, and McSally Is Struggling,” *New York Times*, 11 October 2020, 19.

⁵ Catherine Porter, “After Trump’s Tariffs and Insults, Canada Is Relieved at Biden’s Win,” *New York Times*, 10 November 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/10/world/americas/canada-relieved-trump-biden.html>.

⁶ Catie Edmondson, “Hawley Faces Blowback for Role in Challenging Election Results,” *New York Times*, 8 January 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/08/us/politics/josh-hawley-capitol-riot.html>; and Ben Sales, “Republican Congresswoman Apologizes for Saying ‘Hitler Was Right on One Thing,’” *Times of Israel* (Jerusalem), 9 January 2021; available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/republican-congresswoman-apologizes-for-saying-hitler-was-right-on-one-thing>.

⁷ Forty-three predecessors, because although Donald Trump was the 45th president, one of his antecedents, due to an idiosyncrasy in how administrations are tabulated, is recorded as being both the 22nd and the 24th president. That, of course, is Grover Cleveland, who is the only chief executive in American history to have served two non-consecutive terms. Should Donald Trump, improbable as it must seem after the *Putsch* attempt, run again for the presidency in 2024 and manage to get elected, he would become the 47th president, as well as having been the 45th one.

⁸ Lawrence Martin, *The Presidents and the Prime Ministers: Washington and Ottawa Face to Face – The Myth of Bilateral Bliss, 1867-1982* (Markham, ONT: PaperJacks, 1983); Galen Roger Perras, *Franklin Roosevelt and the Origins of the Canadian-American Security Alliance, 1933-1945: Necessary but not Necessary Enough* (Westport: Praeger, 1999); and Stephen Clarkson, *Canada and the Reagan Challenge: Crisis and Adjustment, 1981-85* (Toronto: J. Lorimer, 1985).

Now, American historians and political scientists are hardly strangers to the game of playing “rate the presidents,” all the way back to George Washington’s time. But when they do engage in this sport, it is with the view, naturally enough, of measuring the effectiveness of presidents as defenders of *American* interests, however conceived.⁹ Sometimes, the interests of other states do get brought into the assessment, but only insofar as it might be argued that those foreign countries, if they are friendly and allied ones, can be adjudged as somehow constituting ‘force multipliers’ for America’s own projection of power and influence. On this logic, to ‘do good’ by those friendly states’ interests can be seen to be a part of ‘doing well’ for the defense of the American “national” interest itself.

But even when the preferences of others do get taken into serious consideration during the formation of an *American* judgment of *America’s* interests, it does not at all follow that it must be the executive branch that is most responsible for fashioning the country’s approach to other states. In the case of the particular “other” with which this article is concerned, Canada, it can often even appear as if America’s policy toward its northern neighbor is developed with minimal involvement on the part of whoever happens to be sitting in the Oval Office. This is another way of expressing the thought that when it comes to Canada-U.S. relations, the name of the game has been, and remains, ‘complex interdependence.’ This suggests that the bilateral relationship effectively gets safeguarded from grievous injury by an extraordinary web of interlocking and “cross-cutting” pressures and interests that transcend the territorial boundary between the two countries, and take the form, as often as not, of “transnational” as of “transgovernmental” linkages.¹⁰ In other words, there is thought to exist a benign Canada-U.S. ‘deep state’ on the North American continent. According to this manner of looking at things, the Canada-U.S. relationship is virtually ‘idiot proof,’ such that the damage capable of being done by even the most ill-intentioned, ill-informed, and ill-composed chief executive gets mitigated by the ‘continental shock absorbers’ that serve, at the bilateral level, as the effective equivalents of the institutional checks and balances that are built into each country’s national political structure.

What the Trump presidency has done is to cast doubt upon the efficacy of those continental shock absorbers. To the most alarmist among the students of the Trump presidency, it can seem as if *all* of the bilateral institutional structures have been called into question, not even excluding those at the top end of the pyramid, appertaining to security and defense cooperation. Less dramatically, at least from the perspective of “theorizing” the making of foreign policy, the Trump presidency has served as a useful reminder of the importance of individual “agency” not only in the study of American foreign policy writ large,¹¹ but also in the more bounded domain of Canadian-American relations.

For whatever else Donald Trump may have done, he has certainly reminded Canadians of the importance of bringing into the study of bilateral relations the level of analysis famously termed by Kenneth Waltz the “first image.”¹² Seen through this image, individuals really *do* matter. So in the remaining pages of this revisit of the Trump impact upon Canada, let us take a brief look at the empirical record, with a view to concluding on a judgmental note. To do this, I start by revisiting the first of my *H-Diplo* claims about the likely impact of Trump upon both Canada and the bilateral relationship. Those claims were made in January 2017, just as the Trump administration was settling into office.¹³

⁹ For two examples, see Brian Lamb and Susan Swain, *The Presidents: Noted Historians Rank America’s Best – and Worst – Chief Executives* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019); and Alvin Z. Felzenberg, *The Leaders We Deserved (and a Few We Didn’t): Rethinking the Presidential Rating Game* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

¹⁰ Examples of this kind of scholarly analysis would include Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977); Greg Anderson and Christopher Sands, eds., *Forgotten Partnership Redux: Canada-U.S. Relations in the 21st Century* (Amherst: Cambria, 2011); and Geoffrey Hale and Greg Anderson, eds., *Navigating a Changing World: Canada’s International Policies in an Age of Uncertainties* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, forthcoming in 2021). But for an argument that stresses collective identity as having been more relevant than interlocking interests in Canadian-American relations, cf. Brian Bow, *The Politics of Linkage: Power, Interdependence, and Ideas in Canada-US Relations* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009).

¹¹ See Robert Jervis, “Do Leaders Matter and How Would We Know?” *Security Studies* 22 (April 2013): 153-79; and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Do Morals Matter? Presidents and Foreign Policy from FDR to Trump* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

¹² Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954); and Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, “Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In,” *International Security* 25 (Spring 2001): 107-46.

¹³ See footnote 2, above.

Although a re-reading of my article convinces me that I was not being alarmist about the impact of a Trump presidency upon Canadian interests, I certainly was not erring in the other direction, either, of excessive optimism. Canadians, at the best of times, tend to prefer their American presidents to be Democrats, and certainly any Republican was going to have a hard job capturing Canadians' affections the way that President Barack Obama had succeeded in doing just a few years earlier. But it is not simply, or always, a matter of political party: Hillary Clinton would also have found Obama to be a tough act to follow among Canadians, had she won the presidency in 2016.

Still, there is a difference between emotions and interests, and I did venture, in that early 2017 article, to suggest some likely Trump initiatives that would be potentially beneficial to Canadian interests. One such interest, at least as reflected in policy positions of the federal and Albertan governments, was to get the Keystone XL pipeline completed, so that it could move a daily load of 830,000 barrels of Alberta crude down to Nebraska. This project had been stalled in the United States as a result of both court decisions and the opposition of the Obama administration to its construction. Trump promised to remove the roadblocks to its construction. Four years later, it is still uncertain whether Keystone XL will proceed, given that President Joseph Biden cannot be regarded as the friend of the hydrocarbon sector that a President Trump had been, and even the latter could not bring the project to fruition.¹⁴

It must be said that although the Trudeau government has been supporting the Keystone XL construction (however half-heartedly), a far more important national interest for it has been the preservation of the continental free (or at least, freer) trade regime in place since the end of the 1980s, and then expanded in 1993 with the addition of Mexico. On this crucial front, there is a sense in Canada that the country has dodged a bullet, with the impression being that the elimination of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and its replacement by the new, largely similar United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), has not done much if any damage either to the Canadian economy or to the bilateral relationship.

Finally, in that early 2017 overview I flagged two more issue-areas in which it might be imagined that Trump's presidency need not pose unqualified menace to Canadian interests. One was the border, which back then, in the 'before time' preceding the current pandemic, was thought to be troubled by two unrelated prospects: obsolescing transportation infrastructure and the possibility of jihadist cross-border infiltration. I was reasonably confident that the latter problem was well on the way to successful management even before Trump, while the former (infrastructural renewal) might be addressed through the new president's well-known proclivities to build things. The pandemic has so radically restructured how one thinks about the Canada-U.S. border (now more or less 'closed') as to make those earlier concerns mere wistful recollections of a happier time. To the extent that Trump has single-handedly 'caused' the pandemic to wreak such havoc in the U.S. as to lead Canada to reverse earlier positions on the merits of a more open and "seamless" border, then of course this current dilemma can also be tallied as a negative aspect of the Trump legacy for Canada and for bilateral relations, as the coronavirus managed to accomplish what not even the attacks of 11 September 2001 could do – close the Canada-U.S. border. But, realistically, to claim that Trump has mishandled, as he has, the pandemic file is not the same as demonstrating that someone else would have done a far better job (otherwise it would be difficult to explain why some advanced European countries – Belgium, Spain, Britain, and Italy for instance – have fared even worse than the U.S. when it comes to per capita deaths attributed to the pandemic, as have a half-dozen Latin American countries).¹⁵

Finally, back in 2017, I thought that the implications of Trump for Canada-U.S. security relations were likely to be mixed. To the extent that the incoming president gave the appearance of being willing to dismantle an alliance he used to like to disparage as 'obsolete,' Canadians were naturally perplexed and concerned. The multilateral North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has long been a centerpiece of Canadian defense and security policy, and of late there has been an even greater willingness of Canadians to wish to work more closely – in an era when America worries them and China bullies them – with the core NATO allies, especially Britain, France, and Germany. Toward the second half of his term, however, Trump let up on the disparagement, and even began to declare victory in having coaxed many of the allies – Canada among them – into upping their contributions to the collective defense. His claim was that he had returned NATO to health. This can be taken as representing a beneficial outcome for Canada of the Trump experience. Moreover, barring any last-minute *Götterdämmerung* on the part of the outgoing Trump team, Canadians have had no major reason to complain

¹⁴ John Ibbitson, "What a Biden Presidency Would Mean for the U.S.-Canada Relationship," *Globe and Mail*, 7 November 2020, p. O3.

¹⁵ As of 19 November 2020, the "top ten" countries as gauged by the number of coronavirus deaths per 100 thousand, were Belgium (129.8 per 100k), Peru (107.1), Spain (89.9), Argentina (80.4), Brazil (78.8), Britain (78.5), Italy (78.1), Chile (77.9), Mexico (77.2), Bolivia (76.0), and the US (75.7), *The Economist*, 21 November 2020, 6.

about the administration's apparent willingness to end the "forever wars" that seem to have become such a feature of American foreign policy ever since the ending of the Cold War.¹⁶

On balance, then, the punditry in which I engaged the first time invited to do so by *H-Diplo* stands relatively unobjectionable, even at the remove of four years. If we strip away the element of personality, it might even be remarked that Donald Trump's presidency did not turn into the demolition project for the bilateral relationship anticipated by some at that time. Yet, the feeling is strong in Canada that this president has been, by far, *the* worst president that Canada and the Canada-U.S. relationship have ever experienced. To account for this, I turn briefly to the second occasion upon which I took to the soapbox.

That occasion occurred during the summer of 2018, a season when it finally became impossible for many Canadians to imagine the ability of anyone to put a positive spin on the Trump presidency's approach to Canada. By this time, damage had been done in two important ways. The first (think: Joe Romero) was the president's unerring tendency to demonstrate just how "deplorable" a human being he could be. He accomplished this feat by his well-publicized temper tantrum at the June 2018 G-7 summit in Charlevoix, Quebec, from which Trump departed in high dudgeon while aiming a tweet-storm of ad hominem shafts at his host, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, whom the president famously if imprudently labelled "very dishonest and weak," apparently for presuming to say that Canada was prepared to defend its economic interests.¹⁷

Those interests seemed to have been imperilled as a result of the Trump administration's earlier decision to slap tariffs, respectively of 10 and 25 percent, on imports of aluminum and steel from Canada along with several other countries, including some in Europe. It was galling enough to find protectionism, not for the first time, cropping up to mar the promise of continental 'free' trade – a promise that had, in both Canada and the U.S., more than once been honored in the breach. Far worse, though, was the insult conveyed through the mechanism the Trump administration chose. It based those tariffs on grounds of "national security," citing Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act of 1962 (as amended by section 127 of the Trade Act of 1974 and the Reorganization Plan of 1979).¹⁸

Although the tariffs were eventually lifted, the Trump image never could or did recover among Canadians. This accounts for the near-universal sigh of relief accorded to the news that Joseph Biden had won the November 2020 election, as well as for the general nervousness among Canadians that Trump and some of his more unhinged supporters, not only the legislative allies mentioned above, but such so-called legal experts as Rudy Giuliani and Sidney Powell, might have succeeded in their madcap schemes to undo the decision of the electorate.¹⁹ While it would be idle to imagine that all disputes between Canada and the U.S. will become a thing of the past once Biden becomes the 46th president at noon on 20 January 2021, there is every expectation that bilateral ties will be well on the way to being mended.

So, how to conclude this short (final) review of the Trump experience as it has affected Canadians and the Canada-U.S. relationship? As always, historical contextualization can help us situate our thinking. Recall the abovementioned presidential ratings contests that have so regularly featured among American observers of their chief executives. Generally, those (and there are many) who do the ranking tend to have some obvious 'consensus-repeaters' among those presidents adjudged to be top tier. While the scholars can and do differ on the details, they usually concede that the very best presidents include the likes of Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, and the two Roosevelts (Franklin and Theodore). Similarly, they tend to agree that among the 'bottom feeders' can be found the likes of James Buchanan, Andrew Johnson, and Warren G. Harding. While it is highly doubtful that Donald Trump will be assessed by future historians and political scientists as having been a top-tier president, he would still have his work cut out for him to nudge Buchanan from his current position as the worst of them all; this is the verdict history passes on someone who proves incapable of preventing the breakup of a country. On the other hand, he probably will supplant Andrew Johnson as the second-worst president ever. But Buchanan seems out

¹⁶ For a critique of those wars, see Andrew J. Bacevich, *The Age of Illusions: How America Squandered Its Cold War Victory* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2020).

¹⁷ Quoted in Robert Fife, "As Trade War Looms, G7 Leaders, Canadian, U.S. Politicians Rally Around Trudeau," *Globe and Mail*, 11 June 2018, A1, A6.

¹⁸ U. S. Congress, House Committee on Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Trade. *Overview of Current Provisions of U.S. Trade Law* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), 89.

¹⁹ Jeremy W. Peters and Alan Feuer, "What We Know About Sidney Powell, the Lawyer Behind Wild Voting Conspiracy Theories," *New York Times*, 23 November 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/who-is-sidney-powell.html>.

of reach, even for Trump, for whatever else the damage he has inflicted on the American constitutional order and the country's international reputation, America has not fractured – at least, not yet.

When it comes to the Trump record insofar as *Canada* is concerned, to repeat a claim made at the start of this article, the 45th president really has cut quite a figure for himself. It takes a great deal of work to convince Canadians to think as poorly of Americans as so many of them today confess to doing. If there is a silver lining in this dark bilateral cloud, it is that Canadians regard China's leader, Xi Jinping, with an even much more jaundiced eye. Still, just as Trump would have to go some distance to displace James Buchanan from his spot at the bottom of any list of presidents judged according to their impact on *American* interests, so too would he have difficulty evicting another president named James from his standing at the very bottom of a list predicated upon *Canadian* interests. That president was America's fourth, James Madison, who was in office the last time that Americans and Canadians fought each other, during the War of 1812. Whatever else has been the Trump legacy for Canada-U.S. relations, no serious student of the bilateral relationship has imagined that the continental security community, or "zone of peace," was ever imperilled.²⁰

Maybe the best way, then, to sum up the impact of Donald Trump upon Canada and the Canadian-American relationship is simply to shrug and say, it could have been worse – not 'pas pire' in the French colloquial sense of signifying 'not bad,' but rather in its literal (if ungrammatical) sense of meaning "not worse"?

David G. Haglund is a Professor of Political Studies at Queen's University (Kingston, Ontario). His research focuses on transatlantic security, and on Canadian and American international security policy. Among his books are *Latin America and the Transformation of U.S. Strategic Thought, 1936-1940* (University of New Mexico Press, 1984); *Alliance within the Alliance? Franco-German Military Cooperation and the European Pillar of Defense* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991); *Will NATO Go East? The Debate Over Enlarging the Atlantic Alliance* (Queen's University Centre for International Relations, 1996); *The North Atlantic Triangle Revisited: Canadian Grand Strategy at Century's End* (CIIA/Irwin, 2000); *Ethnic Diasporas and the Canada-United States Security Community: From the Civil War to Today* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2015); and *The US "Culture Wars" and the Anglo-American Special Relationship* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). His current research project focuses on strategic culture and the France-U.S. security and defense relationship.

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²⁰ See my "Origins and Evolution of the North American Stable Peace," in T.V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, Harold A. Trinkunas, Anders Wivel, and Ralf Emmers, *Oxford Handbook of Peaceful Change in International Relations* (online publication November 2020).