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As Canada’s Conservative prime minister from 1984 to 1993, Brian Mulroney reversed a century of trade policy by signing a Free Trade Agreement with the United States.\(^1\) This would later become NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement. Mulroney has been both praised and vilified for that leap into continentalism. Master of Persuasion is about much more than free trade, but it is very much about praise for a much-criticized leader.

Mulroney “understood that one of the major sources of Canada’s global influence rested on building strong and durable ties” with its mightier neighbour, writes James A. Baker III in the foreword to this book. As White House chief of staff and then secretary of state and under presidents Reagan and Bush respectively, Baker knew Mulroney well enough to judge. He praises Mulroney for joining Reagan and Bush in “a compelling, new vision for North America [that] upheld the interests of Canada [and valued] mutual benefits that would enhance the prosperity and security of Northern America as a whole.” It led to “a compelling symbol to the rest of the world about how to conduct relations between neighbors (ix, xi).”

Fen Osler Hampson, a Canadian foreign policy specialist at Carleton University, writes with immense respect for Canada’s eighteenth prime minister. “Brian Mulroney was a transformative leader, and transformative leaders are invariably controversial,” he concludes (219). The assessment is not just that of conservative-leaning scholars. Robert Bothwell, who is perhaps the dean of Canada’s diplomatic historians, chose to end his magisterial survey of postwar Canadian foreign relations in 1984, the year Mulroney came to power.\(^2\)

Where for Bothwell the lurch into American arms was negative, for Hampson it is positive. Master of Persuasion opens with a chapter covering the “historic pivot on trade” and includes another on Canada-US environmental relations. These chapters on bilateral relations are the book’s best-informed and liveliest. Mulroney lamented that his predecessor, Pierre Elliot Trudeau, had bungled relations with Canada’s most important ally and partner. Trudeau’s most famous quotation on relations with Washington compared the United States to an elephant: “Living next to you is in some ways like sleeping with an elephant. No matter

\(^1\) This review was originally assigned to Professor Greg Donaghy, who passed away before it could be completed. The H-Diplo editors thank David Webster for kindly agreeing to write a review in Donaghy’s stead.

how friendly and even-tempered is the beast, if I can call it that, one is affected by every twitch and grunt.” Richard Nixon, for his part, called Trudeau a “pompous egghead.”

Mulroney’s first and most important task was to mend Canada’s broken relationship with the US, Hampson argues. For Mulroney, “cordial relations [had to be] be maintained at all times” to protect Canadian jobs (14). Here, he turned the traditional policy of Canadian conservativism on its head; historically, Conservatives favoured British ties, while Liberals were more pro-American and continentalist. Even Mulroney himself was cool to freer trade during the contest that made him party leader, before embracing it once in power. Hampson calls this “easily, the most significant element in the Mulroney government’s foreign policy legacy.” Most historians would agree. Not all would share his assessment that free trade was “the pinnacle of achievement in the bilateral relationship” (31). It remains controversial, though even Mulroney’s Liberal successor, Jean Chrétien, felt that he had no choice but to embrace the free trade deal that he had fought against from opposition.

Mulroney emerges almost as a saviour for recognizing that Canada could not escape the facts of geography. Instead of picking at the elephant, he “established a reputation for credible dialogue with U.S. leaders that continues to deliver dividends to this day” (5). The change was existential. For Hampson, Mulroney “put to bed that long-standing myth that Canada could not be a respected international player if the country was seen to have too close a relationship with the United States” (8). This can be debated, but it is without doubt a fault line in Canadian foreign policy. Conservatives, since Mulroney, have embraced close ties to Washington and called that an asset. Liberals, including Chrétien, despite his friendly relations with President Bill Clinton, have preferred cordial distance as more effective.

To make the case that Mulroney was effective in defending Canadian interests against the United States when necessary, Hampson devotes a chapter to the issue of acid rain, which was caused by factories on both sides of the Great Lakes emitting air pollution that damaged or destroyed life in Canadian lakes. Mulroney, he argued, first cleaned up Canada’s act and then, by dint of persistence, won the Reagan administration’s agreement to take action. This was a point of divergence. Mulroney made the environment a priority, drew up the country’s first “green plan” and has been named “Canada’s greenest prime minister.” A young environmentalist working in his government, Elizabeth May, is now a member of parliament who co-leads Canada’s Green Party.

By contrast, few have accused Ronald Reagan of environmentalism. Hampson argues that Mulroney’s success in convincing Reagan to act on acid rain marks another fundamental achievement. First, Mulroney arranged an annual leaders’ summit, famously launching into the song “When Irish Eyes are Smiling” at one of these get-togethers. (Reagan joined in with considerably less enthusiasm.) Mulroney fought hard on acid rain, making incremental progress until achieving a favorable deal with President George H. W. Bush. For Hampson, there are lessons here for the weaker partner in a bilateral relationship. Harnessing public opinion helped, as did lobbying by Ontario and Quebec of their neighboring states, but persistence was even more vital. The “primary takeaway is: never give up, keep your eye on the ball, and, above all, work on key relationships….In Canada-U.S. relations, negotiations are like attrition warfare. You must keep going back to the table and never take no for an answer” (142-144).

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For Hampson, Mulroney was effective because he did not offer sanctimonious speeches to American interlocutors. Secretary of State Dean Acheson once called Canada “the stern daughter of the voice of God,” a reference to a Woodsworth poem. “Canada’s moral earnestness was too forced; its moral superiority insufferable,” wrote historian John English. Mulroney never lectured Americans. Instead, Hampson argues, he “encourage[d] them to see more clearly what was in their own, long-term national interest” (175). Most historians of Canadian foreign relations argue that is usually what Canadian diplomats and politicians have done. In the field, this is called “the diplomacy of constraint,” an effort to back the United States globally as a loyal ally, while also trying to restrain Washington from excesses such as threats to bomb North Korea or ill-advised invasions.

This review dwells on Canada-US relations because Mulroney did, and Hampson, rightly, follows suit. Yet there was much more to Mulroney’s foreign policy than a steady gaze southwards. One of Hampson’s central claims is that friendship with Washington made Mulroney’s government more, not less, effective globally. He makes this case in seven other chapters—two on Africa, one on Asia, one on la francophonie and the Americas, one on Europe and the Cold War’s end, and one which takes a closer look at military operations and environmental negotiations outside the US relationship.

Each chapter opens with an anecdote from recent years that demonstrates a relevant Mulroney legacy, discusses what happened, and ends with a section on lessons learned. This is a productive way to handle the content. Hampson writes clearly and fluidly, integrating interview-driven storytelling and research in 1980s–90s published material, with a neat trick of turning critics into grudging endorsers of Mulroney’s methods.

Thus, for instance, Canada’s prominent role in delivering famine relief to Ethiopia starting in 1984 saw Mulroney appoint opposition figures to some prominent roles, in a bid to harness public opinion behind a national effort that has become the touchstone for humanitarianism in Canada ever since. Some six million lives may have been saved. Despite troubles, “this is one crisis where Canada truly made a difference,” Hampson writes (55).

He makes the same case for the end of apartheid in 1994, shortly after Mulroney left office. Here he cites Linda Freeman, whose book Ambiguous Champion is highly critical of Mulroney’s stance on apartheid, characterizing it as strong words backed by weak action. Hampson notes that Freeman was critical of Trudeau but downplays her criticism of Mulroney (61). At points, in other words, the book moves from a positive assessment to a pro-Mulroney engagement with existing political science literature. Still, the case that Mulroney was willing to break with Reagan and British prime minister Margaret Thatcher over apartheid is unassailable. “At a minimum,” Hampson writes correctly, “it is hard to argue that Canada had not changed its tone” (64). The reality of Mulroney’s South Africa policy, archival records seem to show, is somewhere between Hampson’s glowing assessment and Freeman’s earlier harsh view. Mulroney later backed US and

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7 Nassisse Solomon, “Tears are Not Enough: Canadian Political and Social Mobilization for Famine Relief in Ethiopia, 1984-88,” in Greg Donaghy and David Webster, eds., *Samaritan State Revisited: Historical Perspectives on Canadian Foreign Aid* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2019).
British policy in the first Iraq war, in Bosnia, and in Somalia; future research may find a link between these actions and Mulroney’s policies on South Africa.

Mulroney’s efforts to balance values and interests shine through, also, in the chapter about Asia. Here, China was becoming what it unquestionably is today, Canada’s second-most important bilateral relationship. Mulroney imposed some sanctions on China after the Tiananmen Square killings of 1989, but was careful to protect trade ties and cordial relations. With Canada and China moving to a more adversarial relationship, the assessment of Mulroney written in 2018 book seems almost quaint: Hampson calls it “a pattern for effective diplomacy with China that resonates to this day” (88).

Canada’s voice, historians often argue, is magnified in multilateral forums, where it can use “middlepowermanship” to broker creative solutions to conflict and advance its own interests in the process.10 Master of Persuasion accepts this case in its discussion of la francophonie, Mulroney’s decision to join the Organization of American States, and the 1992 Earth Summit in Brazil. On environmental issues, Hampson builds a case that Mulroney, along with German and Italian leaders, was able to get the topic on the G7 agenda while 2,000 “peaceniks, environmentalists, Trotskyists, gays” and so on protested outside on the streets of Toronto (149).11 Mulroney leveraged North-South diplomacy to play a useful, traditional Canadian role in the background as a problem-solver. The brightest result, perhaps, was the 1987 Montreal Protocol on the ozone layer, “perhaps the single most successful international agreement to date.”12 Multilateralism with allies also informs the chapter on the end of the Cold War, where Canada’s role was not central, but proved at times to be helpful.

There are gaps in this account on topics that would not have supported the thesis, such as cuts to international development assistance and a shift away from the United Nations and towards NATO in military deployments. Balancing these gaps are accounts of lesser-known stories worth knowing, such as Canada’s role in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Hampson stresses, in addition to the traditional multilateralism, Mulroney’s boldness and inter-personal skills. He “showed leadership and decisiveness” (115) and was, in the book’s title, a master at persuading others. Mulroney himself noted that he “work[ed] hard to get noticed,” since “it is not because of membership in institutions but because of interpersonal relations. Without that, we just do not count” (194). Hampson endorses Mulroney’s view, centering his narrative on personality and inter-personal relations. Here, he argues, Mulroney was serving Canada’s interests in a highly effective manner, not his own interests. In this light, the election of 1993, which reduced Mulroney’s party to just two seats in parliament, was an error by Canadians.

The 1993 election, which took place after Mulroney’s retirement but is still seen as a judgment upon him, was especially ironic.13 All observers agree that Mulroney was desperately concerned with public opinion—

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11 To disclose my own bias, I was one of these protesters.
another theme that runs through Master of Persuasion. Commentators often paint Mulroney as a “vulgar blowhard”\textsuperscript{14} Hampson shows him in a brighter, and perhaps fairer, light.

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