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Canadian Interests and American Decline

I like to believe that I am a nationalist and a realist. By definition that makes me a believer that National Interests should shape the way ahead for this country. What are the most important things for us? What must Canadians understand as vital for our existence, and what must we be prepared to fight for at the negotiating table and, if necessary, on the battlefield?

Our interests are very easy to state, and I doubt anyone would quarrel with this list:

- We must protect our territory, the security of our people, and our unity;
- We must enhance our independence and sovereignty;
- We must promote economic growth to support the prosperity and welfare of our population;
- We must work with our friends and allies to protect, promote and enhance freedom around the world.

There can be subheadings, qualifiers, additions, and changes in wording, but everyone's list, I suggest, would include these National Interests. These are the essentials, the key factors, that determine our survival, success, and security.

What is immediately clear is that the United States figures deeply in all these interests. It is, for the moment, the only serious threat to our Arctic sovereignty, and at the very same time our defender of last resort. The Americans are the key to our economic prosperity even now when they are trapped in the slough of economic despond. The Governor of the Bank of Canada openly acknowledges that our recovery will proceed only if the U.S. bailout packages work. And for all its flaws and errors, the United States remains the best hope for encouraging democracy abroad. President Obama, we all must hope, will play this role much better than the previous incumbent.

But Canadians don't grasp this. To many, the United States is in permanent decline (a good thing for the critics, bad for everyone else), closing its borders to our trade (bad) and talking about not wanting our dirty oil (bad or good, depending on environmental positions), and boosting its forces in Afghanistan (good if Canada can withdraw, bad if one sees all American deployments as evil). It really is just as Dr Quackenbush, played by the great Groucho Marx in one of his 1930s movies, sang:

I don't know what they have to say,
It makes no difference anyway,
Whatever it is, I'm against it.
No matter what it is or who commenced it,
I'm against it.

What is striking, however, is that the public debate in the United States, viciously partisan as it always is, ordinarily seems to hinge around great issues, around National

Interests. Americans know their nation has interests, and they can and do discuss how best to achieve them.

That does not seem to be the case here. None of our five political parties talk of National Interests, not even the Bloc Québécois that purports to advance what it imagines to be Quebec's national interests. (We'll fight them on the Plains of Abraham or in the Elysée!) No political party even thinks of National Interests. Programs always take priority and special interests inevitably prevail. This is not healthy, and Canadians, and especially Canadian leaders, need to face up to the reality that Canada's most important long-term needs are not being considered seriously.

And those realities? We are not a great power and we will not become one. We cannot pretend any longer that we are even a moral superpower. We are a first world nation state that makes its living by trading with the United States. We truly cannot play any longer at petulant, childish anti-Americanism, something that seems even more foolish with President Obama in power. We are protected by the United States now and will be in the future (in the U.S. interest, not because we are such pleasant fellows), and we must stop our strong tendency to yearn for blue beret peacekeeping as the automatic and only role for our military. Simply because the U.S. goes to war does not mean the Americans are wrong. They sometimes are, but they might also be correct, and our government needs to shape our course carefully. Let us all remember that Jack Layton is frequently misguided.

Those who see only American decline may be right, but they are far more likely to be wrong. What needs to be said loudly and clearly is that if the United States falls into the pit, we will be one of the nations dragged down with it. It will take decades to diversify our trade, our economy and our security will be in serious jeopardy, and Canada will be forced to assume vast new financial burdens to re-establish its economic welfare and its military security. We had better pray for President Obama to get America's act together—in our own National Interests.

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