

Canadians will eventually warm up to Trump. Until then, stop treating him like a monster

by Conrad Black



An instant industry has developed in Canada about how to adjust to a Trump presidency, as if the nature of the United States has metamorphosed instantly and unrecognizably. Almost all of this concern is unnecessary. Donald Trump has never expressed any grievances against Canada, and his limited experiences here, from skiing in the Laurentians to putting his name on a few buildings for a good fee, (which some local idiots have threatened to take down and have made the subject of demonstrations), have been agreeable. Canada actually runs a modest trade deficit with the United States, and Trump has made it clear that his objections to North American Free Trade are to the large trade deficit with Mexico, not to the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement that preceded it by some years. Approximately nine million Americans are substantially

dependent on trade with Canada. This has been a constant of over two centuries – President Jefferson had to declare all New England in a state of insurrection when he embargoed trade with Britain and Canada. The president-elect does not construe the post he has won as a licence to inconvenience and financially imperil his countrymen, or to harass and irritate the country with which, on balance, the United States has been friendlier than any other, these 150 years.

The most vacuous of these confected states of agitation are those based on analysis of the personality of the president-elect, as if he were an extra-terrestrial monster whose conduct was unlikely to have any connection to the rational self-interest of the United States. Some of the explanation for this concern is fairly explicable: Trump is that type of American who puts his views forcefully and speaks plainly, though he is very courteous in person and almost never coarse. He has been elected by 65 million Americans who were disgusted at the inability of the outgoing president and his party's candidate this year to utter the words "Islamic terrorism" or "Islamic extremism," and the current president's reference to the massacre of innocents in San Bernardino, California by Jihadists as "workplace violence." His is essentially the charm of John Wayne, including the implicit possession of a hard power option for the resolution of disputes, made more worrisome to some because what we are about to watch in Washington is not a film. But nor will it be the frothings and thrashings about of a madman.

Many Canadians and some other foreigners, and many apprehensive Americans, have been startled by the stylistic contrast of Donald Trump with his predecessors as major party presidential candidates. In the United States and other sophisticated democracies, candidates for the highest office have either progressed through serious public offices or held a high military command and been recruited by the grandees of one of the major parties. (In the 21 U.S. presidential

elections from 1824 to 1904, distinguished military officers were presidential candidates in all except 1844, 1860, and 1884, and on four of those 21 occasions, both parties nominated military candidates. Most were citizen soldiers and the concept of patriotic service, proven leadership capacities and personal bravery are more esteemed than most political arts, though some of these officers were adept at those too.)

Donald Trump is the first person elected president of the United States who has never sought or held public office or military command (though he did graduate from a military academy). He is also the oldest and wealthiest person and the only business executive, and the only person to pay for his own campaign, to be elected president, and will be only the fourth not to collect the president's salary (after Washington, Hoover, and Kennedy). The reason he was able to be such an unusual candidate and employ such unusual, and to many, grating, tactics, was precisely because of the unprecedented circumstances in which the U.S. has found itself. The combination of the prolonged commitment of most of the country's conventional ground-force military capability in the Middle East, where the forces were victorious but the result was a strategic disaster, the disintegration of countries, empowerment of Iran, spread of international terrorism and an immense humanitarian crisis; the obscene housing debt bubble and Great Recession; the illegal entry of 12 million unskilled people into the country, the evaporation of 10 per cent of the American workforce, a 125 per cent increase in seven years of the national debt accumulated in the previous 233 years of American independence to produce one per cent economic growth; the mockery of the Obama Red Line in Syria, the nuclear and sanction giveaway to Iran, and the displacement of the U.S. by Russian influence in the Middle East with only 50 Russian warplanes and not a brigade of soldiers, has shocked and demoralized American opinion.

Evan Vucci / APFILE – In this Dec. 15, 2016, file photo, President-elect Donald Trump speaks during a rally in Hershey, Pa. Trump tweeted Wednesday, Jan. 4, 2017, that the album sales of teenage classical singer Jackie Evancho have “skyrocketed” since he announced she would perform at his Inauguration. While some of the credit may be due to Trump’s announcement, Evancho’s sales could simply be a result of the holidays: She released a new album, “Someday at Christmas,” on Oct. 28, and she has other holiday albums in her catalog. The singer’s album sales could have also seen a boost thanks to her performance on “America’s Got Talent: Holiday Spectacular,” which aired on NBC on Dec. 19. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci, File)

These things are hard to quantify, but the impression is that of the first period of relative and absolute decline in American history. Unlike the principal European and Asian nationalities, Americans are not accustomed to any such downward fluctuations in their place in the world, and do not assimilate such a turn of events equably. That is part of the strength of America. Because George Bush Sr. was next to President Reagan when his term limit came, Bush succeeded him, and because he allowed his party to fragment, Bill Clinton succeeded him. Because Bush was the only American president to have politically ambitious sons since Theodore Roosevelt, and Bill Clinton was the only president to have a wife with political aptitudes since Franklin D. Roosevelt, one member or other of these families was president, vice president, or secretary of state from 1981 to 2013, and both families sought their parties’ presidential nominations in 2016. The country took control of the Congress away from Bill Clinton in 1994, (and gave it to Newt Gingrich), from George W. Bush in 2006 (and gave it to Nancy Pelosi), and from Barack Obama in 2010 (and gave it to John Boehner). Nothing worked, and generally things got worse.

Because Barack Obama came in on a wave of goodwill and high

hopes, and seems congenial, and speaks incessantly of his "legacy," foreigners who don't watch closely don't see that his legacy is a disaster, including his health-care measure, which shattered relations many patients had with their doctors and led to astronomical premium increases (as was widely predicted). Foreigners like pliant and placid American presidents, except when they need American protection, as in the world wars and the worst moments of the Cold War. Otherwise, Obamas and Carters are popular (Pierre Trudeau told me he could not understand why Americans preferred Reagan to Carter; he certainly didn't.)

Since Trump was running against the Obamas, the Clintons, and the Bushes, both parties from Sanders on the Democratic left to Cruz on the far Republican right, and almost all the media, all of Hollywood, all the pollsters and virtually every person in Washington D.C., he had to hit hot-button issues with the accessible working and middle class, especially illegal immigration, trade, unjust taxes, and strategic waffling. He won a unique and an astounding victory and has a clear mandate to implement his plan and the congressional majorities to do it. Because there was no argument to re-elect the Democrats, their campaign was a smear job on him; and he was obliged to reply that the Clintons were sleazy pay-to-play crooks and that Bill was a rapist.

It's a tough country and a tough occupation. Trump is, in fact, a gentleman, though an egotist, and neither a sexist nor racist, (as is already becoming clear). He will lower the cost of energy, reduce taxes on small incomes and on corporate taxes, to entice businesses that have fled to return, and tax Wall Street – to which he owes nothing – more. He will establish a southern border and will expect countries that hope to benefit from the U.S. military guaranty of NATO to pull their weight in their own defence budgets (two per cent of GDP was promised, but only the Brits, Poles, and Latvians, as well as the U.S., are doing that – the rest of us are free-

loading). He will produce a comprehensive health-care plan that will work and that everyone in the debate has agreed will not commit the mistakes of Canadian medicare – especially its war on private medicine.

Canadians will like Trump's personality better when they see more of him, but he will end gridlock and generate strong economic growth, sensible domestic policy, and consistent leadership in the Western Alliance. Canada should welcome the chance to compete with the U.S. as a low-tax country and the opportunity to improve our overrated health-care system, and we should stop being militarily poverty-stricken. Trump is a tough man and most of his senior appointees are tough people, but Canada is one of the world's great countries, at a midpoint in G7 economic performance, and we can do better. With the U.S., we have to stop oscillating between social smugness and feeling cold terror that the Americans may not like us. We can take care of our interests too, and without being obnoxious about it.

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