

Lament for a Nation of Influence and a Wake-Up Call for Its Renewal

Andrew Cohen

In this excerpt from *While Canada Slept: How We Lost Our Place in the World*, award-winning writer Andrew Cohen, Professor of Journalism and International Affairs at Carleton University, laments Canada's shrinking role on the world stage. Once known as a pre-eminent middle power, synonymous with peacekeeping, and an important interlocutor between America and its other allies, Canada has lost much of its standing in the world and its influence in the United States. With inadequate defence and development dollars and an uncertain foreign policy in the face of unilateralism by the American hyperpower, Canada "has lost its way in the world," asserts Cohen, who says "it is time to seize the day." It is, he concludes, a matter of money. And will.

Dans ce passage du livre d'Andrew Cohen intitulé *While Canada Slept: How We Lost Our Place in the World*, l'auteur déplore l'amointrissement du rôle du Canada sur la scène internationale. Naguère puissance moyenne de premier plan, gardien de la paix reconnu et intermédiaire clé entre son allié américain et ses autres alliés, le Canada a perdu beaucoup de sa réputation dans le monde et de son influence auprès des États-Unis. Affaibli par des budgets insuffisants en matière de défense et de développement et par une politique étrangère mal définie face à l'unilatéralisme de l'hyperpuissance américaine, notre pays « a perdu sa voie dans le monde ». L'heure est venue pour lui de se ressaisir, affirme Andrew Cohen, selon qui c'est affaire d'argent mais aussi de volonté.

As Canada seeks its place in the sun, it moves in the shadow of America. It has always been thus. Over the generations, Canadians have learned to accommodate their interests to an indifferent colossus as it became a great power, a superpower, a hyperpower (as the French say), and today, the greatest empire since Ancient Rome. Now Canada scrambles to respond to the swaggering unilateralism of the United States. But how?

The right thinks Canada is too critical of the United States, fails to appreciate its importance to our prosperity, and embraces the idea of a Fortress North America. The left, for its part, thinks Canada is not critical enough of the United States. A continental defence, adventures in Kuwait, Kosovo, Afghanistan, or Iraq, National Missile Defense, the Free Trade

Agreement — all pose a threat to Canada's sovereignty.

The Liberals remain flummoxed by the United States. On September 11, 2001, the prime minister's extemporaneous remarks were tepid compared to those of British prime minister Tony Blair, who saw the calamity in stark moral terms. Chrétien, who isn't eloquent at the best of times, seemed to worry too much about being too pro-American; if he was shaken that day, he wasn't stirred. Canadians were less inhibited. They sympathized with the United States and didn't think they'd be less Canadian in saying so. Only later, when public opinion was running ahead of the government, did Chrétien act more warmly and openly. His government moved briskly to tighten the border, review refugee and immigration policy, send troops to Afghanistan, con-

sider new joint defensive arrangements, and sharply increase funding for intelligence-gathering.

The lesson here is that security and sovereignty are not incompatible. Surveys suggest that Canadians have greater self-confidence in themselves than their leaders think. According to Edward Greenspon, the co-author of *Searching for Certainty*, an analysis of contemporary Canadian attitudes based on public opinion surveys, Canadians don't care if they shop at Wal-Mart, eat at McDonald's, dress at the Gap, watch CNN, or read *USA Today*. They don't think these icons of America diminish who they are. They may have good reason not to eat hamburgers or wear khaki pants — but not because they're American. Greenspon thinks that Canadians are beyond that. They care most about their values. They aren't

what they eat, wear, or watch, but what they think. "The message, in essence, is this," writes Greenspon. "We're willing to grow closer economically if that's what it takes to ensure prosperity. But don't ask us to give up those things that truly give us meaning as a people. We want your best and our best."

"On issue after issue the vast majority of Canadians believe that how we organize ourselves as a society is preferable to how they do it in the United States," says Matthew Mendelsohn, a political scientist who has studied public attitudes. But there is still much they admire and respect about their neighbours, and while they are unwilling to surrender what makes them Canadian, they have come to realize they are North American, too. It may explain their support for free trade and, more tangibly, their solidarity on September 11.

It is over this shifting psychological terrain that Canada maps its new relationship with the United States. A host of issues — securing the border, continental defence, commercial arrangements — shape the discussion. Some, like the border streamlining for commerce, seem obvious. A country that sends 87 per cent of its exports to the United States must keep its biggest customer happy. It has little choice. Short of reconfiguring its economy,

Questions such as joint defence will need close examination. If we don't participate in these ventures, it seems clear, the Americans will proceed without us and we will have no say at all. Canadians are naive to underestimate the trauma of September 11 on George Bush and his colleagues, whose foremost responsibility is the security of the republic.

Canada cannot do business if its trucks are lined up for miles at the border near Detroit and Buffalo. In the future, crossing the border is likely to get harder, especially after the next terrorist attack in the United States. Canadians of dark complexion may complain of harassment and humiliation, and they should, but the Empire will do whatever it wants to protect its homeland.

Other questions, such as joint defence, will need closer examination. If we don't participate in these ventures, it seems clear, the Americans will proceed without us and we will have no say at all. Canadians are naive to underestimate the trauma of September 11 on George Bush and his colleagues, whose foremost responsibility is the security of the republic. "It should surprise no one that security is the number one concern of American policy makers," says Thomas Axworthy. "The United States is a potential target for weapons of mass destruction. Canada can never, ever allow itself to be a security threat to the United States." While Canada should embrace the Northern Command, it should look more carefully at National Missile Defense, which seems impractical and unworkable. Contrary to what the defeatists say, Canada's sovereignty hasn't disappeared. There are still pressing issues of energy, the environment, and even water, as well as defence and the border. On every front, the key is to choose our fights carefully, acting out of strength, not weakness.

In the new world, Canadians will have to adjust to becoming less and less relevant to the United States despite its robust trade. By virtue of its staggering military, diplomatic, economic, scientific, and cultural power alone, everyone, including Canada, has become smaller. In the absence of

a rival, the United States acts arbitrarily with little patience or respect for the complaints of its neighbour to the north, much as Americans might like us personally. Moreover, for a clutch of domestic reasons — the shift in political power to the American Southwest, the growing electoral clout of Hispanic Americans, the growing economic might of Mexico, the personal inclina-



Ottawa Citizen

Andrew Cohen

tion of George Bush to the southern hemisphere, his affinity for Mexican president Vicente Fox — Canada has also lost stature in Washington.

Canadians haven't realized the new reality. They are as mistaken here as they are about their aid or their peacekeeping. "In some ways we are...collectively immature," says Mendelsohn. "We don't understand the realities of power or our place in the world or in the eyes of the United States." Canadians once had a special relationship with the United States (other nations have long made the same claim), but no longer. It may be true that the Americans are our best friends whether we like it or not. But it is even truer, as former diplomat Reid Morden quips, that they are our best friends whether they know it or not. And the Americans don't know it. According to a poll in 2002, only 18 per cent of Americans call Canada their best friend, while 56 per cent say it is Great Britain. (Sixty per cent of Canadians thought the United States was Canada's best friend.)

In revisiting our relations with the United States, we should also understand that even if we did all that the accommodationists think we should to placate the Americans, it still wouldn't put things right. Trade will remain imperfect; if it isn't softwood lumber, steel, or agricultural products, it will be something else. Our military will remain puny; by one estimate, Canada would have to spend 6 per cent of its GNP for years on defence, [rather than current levels of 1 per cent] to become a fighting force the Americans would respect, and even then they would probably still rather fight alone. But nor can we criticize the United States gratuitously, as some would suggest. In a sense, we will have to find our way in the world we have created for ourselves — protecting the bountiful trade which makes us wealthy while giving voice to the ambitions which make us independent. Indeed, as the US turns its back on multilateralism it will be more incumbent upon us than ever to try to interpret its motives and moderate its impulses, to be its best friend even if it doesn't know it. It is a balance that Lester Pearson instinctively understood when he had doubts about American power in Korea and Vietnam, and that we will have to learn anew.

Eventually, though, we will also have to learn that our self-esteem need not turn on the US. Being ignored by Washington isn't so bad (especially if it ignores a balance of trade that is overwhelmingly in our favour). We must learn that true sovereignty comes from self-respect, and self-respect comes from self-confidence. It will matter less to us that the United States thinks ill of our commitment to the International Criminal Court or the Kyoto Treaty, for example, if we give ourselves the tools to return to the world as soldiers, donors, and diplomats.

To become a mature country, Canada must realize that sovereignty may mean saying yes to the Americans. Saying yes is an expression of self-confidence, a recognition of our geogra-

phy, our history, and our commerce with our great neighbour. At the same time, sovereignty may mean saying no to the Americans. Saying no means refusing to enter treaties or join alliances, not out of pique, pride, or pettiness, but as expression of our national interest and an affirmation of our independence as a separate, self-aware people. Whether yes or no, sovereignty means never having to say you're sorry.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Canada meant more aid, when our generosity reached its peak, and more foreign trade, when we worked to complete the multilateral system. "Between the United States and the Commonwealth, between the big and the little powers, and possessing a cool, dispassionate, reconciliatory and imaginative diplomacy, Canada became very largely the spokesman for

Canadians will have to adjust to becoming less and less relevant to the United States despite its robust trade. By virtue of its staggering military, diplomatic, economic, scientific, and cultural power alone, everyone, including Canada, has become smaller.

the middle powers — and often a guide for the larger powers as well," declared *The Times* of London in 1968.

The erosion of our international identity is not quantifiable, much as we can measure the withering of our internationalism. But it is really about opportunity cost, as the economists say. It is about what we might have done and the difference we might have made in the life of this world — the freedom we might have defended and the peace we might have kept; the hungry we might have fed and the ignorant we might have taught; the mediation we might have offered and the moderation we might have practised.

In the end, though, all we need do is look at what our retreat from the world has done to us, what we have missed in our flight from responsibility, how it has diminished us as a people. For what we accomplished abroad in the post-war era

and beyond was always for us, too — for our unity, our sense of self, our stake "in a wider, moral realm," as the governor general puts it. It was our unspoken *projet de société*, our purpose, to translate our language of accommodation for the rest of the world. "Looking back over the years during which the Department reached the peak of its influence," recalls Arthur Andrew, the former ambassador, "it seems as if Canada had a destiny to be in all things a Middle Power, an agent of influence for moderation in the geopolitical middle; a crossroads and *entrepôt*, politically, ideologically, culturally, commercially and spiritually."

Between then and now, we lost interest in the world. We fell into a deep sleep. At home we stopped talking about world affairs.

In light of all this, it is a wonder that Canada has never become isolationist, much as some predicted in the worst days of austerity in the mid-1990s. Our commitment to the world has been strong enough to endure the long winter of indifference which has chilled our internationalism. In a perverse way, it's too bad that what we still do as much as we do, in spite of gross underfunding, because what we do is just enough to throw up a Potemkin Canada and convince ourselves that the false facade is enough. If our military, aid, and diplomacy had collapsed overnight instead of fading slowly, we would have had to address our weaknesses long ago.

Now the facade is cracking. As John Manley warned, we have lived off our reputation, as donor, diplomat, and soldier, for years. No longer. The bill is coming due. Our development assistance, which should be giving us credibility in the Third World, as well as giving us standing in newly emerging nations, is too broad and too thin to yield real influence any more; our spending, as measured by our peers, is simply an embarrassment. Our armed forces cannot honour our commitments in war or peace. Canada is safe from getting into harm's way in Iraq, for example,

because it has little to send and no way to get there quickly. Our diplomacy, for its part, is too often reduced to special projects. On the larger questions, such as the environment or arms proliferation, or in brokering deals or moderating the behaviour of our willful neighbour, we remain on the margins.

And yet. If Canada has lost its way in the world, it can find it again. The world of a half-century ago cannot re-create itself, but Canada can. It is a matter of will. But it begins with fundamental, searching questions.

Do we want to remain a country that starves its military, rations its foreign aid, and dilutes its diplomacy? Do we want to remain in the councils of the world, refusing to pull our weight, content to recall our glory days as the world's helpful fixer? More broadly, do we want a foreign policy worthy of our land, our past, and our people? Do we not have an obligation to the world as an exemplar of tolerance and pluralism?

We can stay home. We can remain mediocre in the world. We can accept a half-life for ourselves, the equivocal existence of small steps and narrow minds that the culture of decline is forcing upon us. It isn't hard. We only have to do what we're doing now. We could make a choice not have a voice in the world. First, though, we owe it to ourselves and our forebears to have a national debate and weigh the costs our internationalism against the costs of our social and economic needs. If we find it too costly to go abroad, we can turn inward, raise the drawbridge, and retreat into "the fireproof house" of the 1930s' isolationists. At least we wouldn't have to pretend to be strong, generous, and engaged any more. Nor would we have to worry about what Thomas Axworthy calls the "credibility-capability gap."

Practically speaking, there would be advantages to this neo-isolationism. We could, for example, drop that pesky promise to spend .7 per cent of our GNP

on foreign aid, which returns with every government like a hungry orphan. We could then close embassies, quit international clubs, and contract out our diplomacy. We could abandon peacekeeping, outsource our defence to the Americans, and settle for a gendarmerie to keep order at home. And as long as we are untroubled by the short-

We can stay home. We can remain mediocre in the world. We can accept a half-life for ourselves, the equivocal existence of small steps and narrow minds that the culture of decline is forcing upon us. It isn't hard. We only have to do what we're doing now.

fall between resources and rhetoric, we could continue to pronounce on all kinds of evils. Why, instead of a middle power, Canada would become a moral power — less boy scout than scold. We may have no divisions, as a derisive Stalin once said of the pope, but we could always mobilize our heightened conscience and send it into battle.

It is time to awake from our long slumber. We can rebuild our military, replenish and streamline our aid, liberalize our trade, and renew our foreign service. It isn't magical; it is a matter of money. And while our ambitions abroad will always compete with our needs at home, as they should, our coffers are fuller today. A decade ago, cutting aid and arms was more defensible. It isn't any more. A thoughtful leadership will understand that. The need for vision is even greater in the age of terrorism, which demands all the muscle of our foreign policy. There will be new attacks on North America, and they will remind Canadians of their vulnerability, the smallness of the world and their place within it.

Modesty is no virtue for a country in search of influence, and excellence is no vice. We have to try harder and speak louder, even if it is only to ourselves about ourselves. The astute travel writer Jan Morris calls Canada "a frequently perverse nation" in its aggressive self-denial. "Presumptuously I feel myself to be on its side in its battle with destiny. I think it deserves better of itself — more recognition of its own

virtues, more readiness to blow its own trumpet, a little less becoming diffidence, a bit more vulgar swagger. Sometimes Canada's modesty touches me, but sometimes it makes me feel like giving it a kick in the seat of its ample pants, to get its adrenalin going."

At the end of the day, we can have the world's best small military, its most

efficient, generous aid program, and its most imaginative foreign service. We can reject mediocrity. For we can re-equip ourselves to assume meaningful roles — in mediation, peacekeeping, or reforming the United Nations; in alliances with like-minded Nordic countries on regional and environmental questions; in bringing ideas and innovation to international financial institutions, as we already have; in addressing the illicit diamond trade or the proliferation of small arms or the evil of child warriors.

What we do abroad will enrich us at home. For a country forever wondering if it has a future, indeed doubting if it has one, the new Canadian internationalism could become an instrument of pan-Canadian unity, taking us beyond the boundaries of language and race and region, drawing on all elements of a truly diverse society. Our diplomacy, our aid, and our military (the national institution which has most successfully accommodated language and culture) reflect a broader purpose. In time, with courage and will, the world will become our mission again, and it will give us pride and purpose, again.

For Canada, it is time to awake, and seize the day.

From While Canada Slept: How We Lost Our Place in the World, by Andrew Cohen. Published by McClelland & Stewart Ltd., the Canadian Publishers. Reprinted by permission of the publisher. www.mcclelland.com