

## 'Personal relationships do matter'

**Leaders' chemistry can be difference between solving complex files or letting them drag on**

January 17, 2009

**TONDA MACCHARLES**  
OTTAWA BUREAU

OTTAWA—U.S. Ambassador David Wilkins is packing up.

The day President George W. Bush walks out of the Oval Office is the day his envoy from South Carolina has always said he would leave, too.

Leaving Canadian friends, Wilkins says, is "bittersweet," but Bush's loyal ambassador departs convinced relations between the two countries are warmer because of the tone set at the top. He has a simple parting message.

"Personal relationships do matter. Personal relationships do make a difference."

Will Prime Minister Stephen Harper and President-elect Barack Obama establish a personal chemistry?

More importantly, does it matter? The ties between Canada and the United States go well beyond who runs the joint. We are military, security and intelligence allies, each other's



FRED CHARTRAND FOR THE TORONTO STAR  
Outgoing U.S. Ambassador David Wilkins and his wife Susan carry boxes as they prepare to move from the embassy residence in Ottawa Jan. 16, 2009.

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most important trading partners, neighbours and, in many cases, family.

Still, almost anyone on the staff, diplomatic or political side of the equation will tell you absolutely, it matters if the bosses get along. It means people get down to work on the important files.

"The personal connections at the staff and officials' level work better if everybody gets the signal there is commitment for doing this at the top," says a close Harper confidante.

Some Conservatives have suggested in private that Harper, who does not suffer fools gladly, was far from the admirer of George W. Bush that his critics make him out to be.

Not so, according to one who saw the two interact up close.

"There's no question that he (Harper) liked Bush, because Bush is a hard guy not to like. He has easy relationships with people. He is a relatively informal guy, and Stephen Harper, despite his tight-scriptedness in public, is a pretty informal guy," says the insider.

"Bush ... is fairly inarticulate, and so as a result is pretty blunt, and Stephen does pretty well in private with people who are pretty blunt. Now, Stephen is, I think, more articulate than Bush but there's a similar kind of, 'Let's cut through the s--- here and get down to brass tacks,' which was good."

Wilkins chalks up the settlement of disputes over softwood lumber and Canadian beef exports, and the delay of tougher U.S. border passport requirements, to Bush and Harper's determination to get along.

At the North American leaders summit in Cancun, Mexico, in March 2006, Harper and Bush established what Wilkins calls a "cordial, respectful" tone, and agreed to tackle the festering softwood lumber dispute.

After a helicopter ride together, the men met privately before a bilateral meeting officially began.

on Obama's ability to improve conditions south of the border and his response to rising American protectionism.

### **Today: Cross-border relations**

Canada-U.S. ties go beyond those between prime minister and the president, but that relationship will set the tone for many others in the future.

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What Obama's pledge to invigorate the mission could mean for Canada's troops on the ground and the length of their stay.

Bush emerged, said Wilkins, and "I could just see the wheels turning and he said, 'I want the U.S. trade representative (Susan Schwab) in my office next week.' And he was engaging in it. Three months later, it was resolved."

"It took two leaders to exert political capital to push people toward the middle ... it's just the willpower to say we want you to sit down and make every effort to get it done ... as opposed to, 'Do what you can, but it's okay if you don't.'"

On Harper's side, officials – not surprisingly – agree.

They've made a similar effort with the Obama team. The Canadian embassy in Washington made connections with all the presidential contenders well before last year's U.S. race narrowed to Obama and Republican John McCain.

But while it was clear Harper was watching the primary and presidential races closely, it was also clear he did not personally know Obama, nor what to make of him.

Harper was mildly amused by Obama's slip in a 2007 debate that he would call on the "president of Canada" to amend NAFTA. Early on, Harper was betting against Obama, and thought as many observers did that it was Hillary Clinton's race to lose.

Then came the leak of a Canadian diplomatic note outlining the comments of an Obama campaign official that the candidate's talk of reopening NAFTA was just campaign rhetoric – an unhelpful if not politically damaging leak to Obama during the tight Ohio primary, for which Harper phoned Obama to apologize personally.

When Obama won his historic victory on Nov. 4, Harper telephoned him two days later to congratulate him and reiterated an invitation to come to Canada.

When Obama agreed to come to Canada, a visit that could come within a few weeks of his inauguration, it was a welcome sign.

In many ways, the two leaders appear very different.

Harper's a conservative, introverted man who before he came to office barely travelled outside Canada. Middle-class, Toronto-born, he has made his home in Calgary and shows little intellectual curiosity about the countries to which he now travels. He never takes time to soak up the culture of a foreign land. The world is a workplace to him.

Obama is a liberal extrovert, the product of two American cultures – black and white – whose roots trace to Kansas, Kenya, Hawaii, Indonesia and urban America. He wants America to re-engage the world and travelled to Berlin and Paris to promise that as president, he would.

But those who know Harper believe they have much in common. Similar in age, Harper, 49, and Obama, 47, each have two children of similar ages.

"The one's trained as a lawyer (Obama) who then quickly got into politics and then worked his way up the system through some pretty ballsy bets and payoffs. The other is an economist who did the same thing, basically," said a Harper insider.

From the perspective of Harper's people, Obama in his campaign and transition looks like a "careful, systematic, disciplined planner and thinker ... so they have a similar approach on that front," said the source.