

THE U.S. IN CANADA

Cold weather, warm relationship top U.S. ambassador's memories of Canada

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David Wilkins, the outgoing U.S. ambassador to Canada, singled out former defence chief Rick Hillier as an "unstoppable" force of leadership and acknowledged his own naivete towards the Canadian media as he gave the final speech of his three-year run as Washington's top diplomat in this country.

Praising Hillier as a man who "never wasted a day blaming anyone for anything" as he led Canada's military mission in Afghanistan, Wilkins took a parting shot at other unnamed Canadian political leaders who "waste time criticizing and pointing fingers at others" and "are most often part of the problem and never part of the solution."



CREDIT: Don Healy
wilkins-david-USambas.jpg

The speech, delivered earlier this week in Wilkins's home state of South Carolina, was peppered with references to his missteps with the Canadian media as well as fond remarks about how he and his wife, Susan, are now "proud survivors of 3 1/2 Canadian winters" - including one eventful skate on the Rideau Canal in 2006 that forced Wilkins to undergo knee surgery.

"There was nothing easy or smooth about the first few months on the new job . . . and the Canadian media captured it all," Wilkins added, noting in particular one June 2005 headline "that Susan and I still love: 'God told Wilkins to go to Canada'."

The story was prompted by a speech Wilkins gave - just after his appointment to Canada by U.S. President George W. Bush - in which the longtime South Carolina politician recalled that an inspiring prayer spoken in the state legislature the day of Bush's initial offer of the Ottawa post convinced Wilkins that God had "sent me the sign I needed right when I needed it."

This week Wilkins recalled "how tense the relationship seemed to be between the U.S. and Canada" upon his arrival in Ottawa.

"The truth was the U.S. and Canada agreed on about 95 per cent of all our bilateral issues. But folks on both sides of the border focused almost exclusively on the five per cent of the issues in which we differed," Wilkins stated in his speech, given at a Furman University awards dinner in Columbia, S.C. "As I like to say, we were flat-out irritated by our irritants and this negative energy was having a dramatic and, in my opinion, very harmful impact on what is the world's best, most peaceful and productive trade

relationship."

Wilkins cited the softwood lumber agreement and U.S.-Canada co-operation on battling terrorism as notable achievements during his time as ambassador.

"I give much credit to Prime Minister Harper and President Bush, who set a positive tone at the top from the very beginning and demanded that we fix the problems instead of the blame."

In the end, Wilkins said, he feels Canadians "became used to the idea of a southerner and a Republican" representing U.S. interests in Ottawa - despite the "novelty of my southern accent, affinity for boiled peanuts (and) unfamiliarity with the long Canadian winters."

He said the most poignant moments of his time in Canada were the prayers offered during anniversary ceremonies in Ottawa marking the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and "the countless Canadians who touched us and blessed our country in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina."

Wilkins also noted that among the souvenirs he'll be taking home to South Carolina from his Canadian posting is one angry letter he received in which a critic threatened to "drag me back across the border by my hair."

It was, the all-but-bald envoy said, "a pretty frivolous threat. He obviously didn't know me that well."

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