

Outgoing U. S. diplomat Canada's 'biggest fan'

'He has had a very fine political touch'

Julie Smyth, National Post Published: Monday, November 24, 2008



Jana Chytilova for National Post

When David Wilkins first arrived in Canada from South Carolina, the Ottawa establishment wasn't sure what to make of the new U. S. ambassador. He had Southern charm, a genteel accent and a gracious demeanour. Some remarked he had a bit of an "aw shucks" way about him -- as if he'd sooner invite you in for sweet tea and biscuits than debate world affairs.

He and his wife Susan settled into Ottawa and became known for their romantic gestures -- they've been married 36 years and still hold hands at diplomatic garden parties -- and for their deep roots in the Baptist Church. Mrs. Wilkins soon started a neighbourhood book club focused solely on faith-based literature.

Mr. Wilkins, who will leave when the presidential office changes hands in January, may be the charming picture of Southern gentility, but he is also a career politician who was a tenacious representative of his country and its policies.

During his term as ambassador, he had to navigate his way through some of the most complicated and contentious cross-border issues, from softwood lumber to NAFTA; he has rebuked a prime minister for criticizing the president to make political gains, and scolded a minister for making presumptuous remarks about U. S. policy on detaining suspected terrorists. His term has spanned the war in Afghanistan and elections in both countries.

Mr. Wilkins has travelled Canada extensively. He has visited every province and territory and went into small towns, setting him apart from recent U. S. diplomats. He has often said he is Canada's "biggest fan."

In his office, he has a map of Canada dotted with colourcoded pins to mark the places he has visited: Red is one trip, blue is five or more, green is two or more, white is 10 or more.

"I'm going to take that map with me," he said during an interview at the embassy in Ottawa.

He and his wife agreed to try every Canadian experience once. "I've eaten poutine and Beaver Tail, and I've been on the toboggan or luge or whatever in Quebec City. And I've skated on the Rideau Canal every year. I went out and bought snowshoes. I've been dogsledding."

He wanted to meet average Canadians. "I've been to Goose Bay, Gander, Chetwynd. You ever been to Chetwynd? It's a great town," he says of the British Columbian town where he travelled with Conservative MP Jay Hill.

"I've seen the big towns and the little towns, from Gander Bay to Dawson Creek, [from] one side of the country to the other and lots in between."

He is in the middle of revisiting the country as part of a farewell speaking tour from east to west. He is to speak today at the Economic Club of Toronto on the state of the U. S.-Canada relationship.

Allan Gotlieb, a former Canadian ambassador to the United States, said Mr. Wilkins has been an effective diplomat. "I think he has demonstrated

a sensitivity to the country and to Canadians and he has conveyed a sense of sincerity. From the beginning, he has had a very fine political touch."

Mr. Gotlieb said previous U. S. ambassadors have been perceived as interfering a lot or trying to sway opinion too much, but believes Mr. Wilkins has handled his role well.

When Mr. Wilkins has spoken out, it has been in the context of defending his country's record, Mr. Gotlieb says. "He doesn't engage in gratuitous criticism.... There is no bluster, no making a big deal of his opinions."

The ambassador's patriotic sense of protectionism has occasionally been controversial.

In December, 2005, just six months after arriving in Canada, Mr. Wilkins was accused of political interference when he rebuked then Liberal prime minister Paul Martin a month before a Canadian election. Mr. Wilkins, a loyal supporter and friend of President George W. Bush, suggested Mr. Martin was trying to score political points by criticizing the United States.

"The last time I looked, the United States was not on the ballot for the Jan. 23 election," Mr. Wilkins said in a speech. "What if one of your best friends criticized you directly and incorrectly almost relentlessly? ... It may be smart election-year politics to thump your chest and constantly criticize your friend and your No. 1 trading partner. But it is a slippery slope, and all of us should hope that it doesn't have a long-term impact on the relationship."

Looking back, Mr. Wilkins said: "Three years ago, I felt like we were being unjustly criticized and unjustly brought into an election and I made some comments about we need to stay out of the election and Canada certainly doesn't need to criticize us to build itself up ... but those moments when I've felt like I had to were few and far between."

The ambassador clashed with the Conservative government

over the Arar case. Last year, he scolded then public works minister Stockwell Day for insisting that Maher Arar be taken off a U. S. security watch list, adding to a rift between the two countries. Mr. Wilkins told reporters the government should mind its own business. "With all due respect to Minister Day, it's a little presumptuous for him to say who the U. S. can and cannot allow into our country. Canadian officials would rightly never tolerate any American official dictating to them who they may or may not allow into their country."

Before coming to Ottawa, Mr. Wilkins was a politician for 25 years. He was also in the U. S. Army and practised law for 30 years.

He ran for re-election 13 times and served in the South Carolina House of Representatives, rising to the role of Speaker. He worked for George W. Bush as state chair of the Bush-Cheney '04 campaign and as co-chair of the 2000 campaign.

He and his wife have two sons and twin five-month-old grandchildren who live in South Carolina. Mr. Wilkins expects to return to a law career in South Carolina, perhaps in government relations.

Omar Samad, Afghanistan's Ambassador to Canada, says Mr. Wilkins has been good at fostering friendships, regardless of political views. He and Mr. Wilkins have shared diplomatic discussions but also ended up in the same Saturday Pilates exercise class. "We sweat together," Mr. Samad said.

Mr. Wilkins, who started his first university degree on a tennis scholarship, is often seen playing tennis with other diplomats, and the couple's July 4 parties are legendary.

"He has served at an interesting time. He served effectively, with grace, openness and a unique sense of humour," Mr. Samad said. "I am glad he had an opportunity to visit my country."

The visit ranks among Mr. Wilkins' best memories from the job, which include seeing off sailors leaving Halifax to help Americans after Hurricane Katrina and what he calls the "trip of a lifetime" when he spent Christmas Eve with Canadian troops in Afghanistan.

"That was a special memory I'll always take with me," Mr. Wilkins said. "Being there and seeing those young men and women giving of their labour and time and love and, in a few sad cases, their life in the protection of us and in the protection of freedom."

Mr. Wilkins said he hopes the Canada-U. S. relationship remains strong after he and President Bush depart office and believes the ties between the two nations are critical for both countries but also for the rest of the world.

"I do think a couple of things. President Bush has been a friend," he said, mentioning that the President has been pro-NAFTA and advocated for a quick reopening of borders after mad cow

disease. "So he's been a friend, and we can all certainly hope that trend continues, and we have no reason to think it won't.

"When we partner together, we are a force for good in the world, whether it's Afghanistan or Haiti or Sudan or wherever. We do good things together."

Christy Cox
Senior Advisor to Ambassador David Wilkins
Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough
1320 Main Street
Columbia, SC 29201
803.255.9470
christy.cox@nelsonmullins.com