



God Bless Americans

Here's looking at our neighbours to the south, in friendship and appreciation. They have their faults, as they are the first to recognize. But the benefits of living beside them far outweigh the disadvantages. Anyway, can a nation that invented baseball be all bad?

□ Canadians are well aware — or they ought to be — that they live in a great country. They are perhaps less conscious that they live on a great continent in more than the geographic sense. Being part of North America is a spiritual, as well as a physical, fact of life for all Canadians. And that is chiefly because of the style, customs and values of the 220 million people of the United States.

It is a running complaint among Canadians that Americans take them for granted. American ignorance of our country can be laughable: "When they said Canada, I thought it would be up in the mountains somewhere," said that dazzling product of American culture, Marilyn Monroe. On a more serious plane, nothing rankles Canadians more than the occasional suggestion from Washington that, because the United States is following a certain course of diplomatic action, Canada should automatically go along with it. But we too take for granted the benefits of having such great-hearted people living beside us. We tend to take their virtues as neighbours as our due, while making an unseemly fuss over their transgressions, failures and faults.

An ardent Canadian nationalist might argue that there are no such things as benefits in our proximity to the land of the CIA, the hamburger chain, and the multinational corporation. The overriding benefit under which all such argumentation takes place is so big and simple that it is

easy to ignore. This is that we have lived in peace with the United States for more than a century and a half, which must be close to a record for a relatively small nation bordering on a great power. For all that time, while much of the earth was being ripped apart at intervals by guns and bombs, Canadians have remained safe from the terrors of warfare on their own territory. Nor has that safety been bought at the price of subservience. Canadians have been able to live cheek by jowl with a mighty military nation in a degree of political independence, security and prosperity that would be envied in many parts of the world.

For all that, even non-nationalistic Canadians are inclined to view the United States with mixed feelings. The extent of U.S. ownership in the Canadian economy and the pervasiveness of American culture here have long been matters of political concern. Legislation to lessen American economic and cultural influence has received at least the tacit approval of the electorate. The desire among Canadians to maintain their differences from Americans should not be confused with anti-Americanism, although self-serving attempts to twist it into that shape are sometimes made.

In any case, it is the rare Canadian who has any kind of animosity towards individual Americans. Canadians in general have an affectionate regard for Americans, even though some might not approve of *the* Americans and the things they

do. *The Americans* are those rough and ready heavyweights of world affairs, with their almighty dollars, their ubiquitous brand names, their political machinations in foreign lands, their nuclear warheads. Americans are those persons you meet who speak English with a slightly different accent from yours, who say faucet instead of tap and frosting instead of icing, who don't put vinegar on their French fries, and who like their beer weak, their cigarettes strong and their tea ice-cold.

They are a gaudy bunch, much given to travel, colourful clothing, gadgets, hand-held foods, and striking metaphoric variations on the English language. They prefer first to second names, and, in conversation, they seem to use yours in every sentence or two. They play and watch a bewildering variety of games. They belong to clubs and lodges named after animals. They talk to strangers on street corners and at lunch counters. As they themselves would put it, they're friendly as hell.

These are generalizations, of course, for Americans come in all shapes, sizes, colours of skin and shades of opinion. Nevertheless, they do have some superficial characteristics in common, and some less superficial ones as well. By and large, they are people of abiding, if sometimes misguided, goodwill. They tend to be intelligent, industrious, and efficient. This does not stop them from being hospitable, informal and humorous. They do not take themselves too seriously. They have a great gift for laughing at their own national foibles, and, through their media, they do so more than any other people in the world.

To use a standard Canadianism, they are nice people — nice to meet, nice to talk to, nice to have around you. Canadians find them easy to relate to on a personal level, because the two nationalities share a familiarity unparalleled anywhere. They travel more in each other's country than any other national neighbours, and they do more business together. The two countries historically have exchanged large parcels of population, such as the Franco-Americans of New England and the descendants of the American sod-busters and cow-punchers who played a large part in opening up

the Canadian West. Until recently there was a free flow of immigration over the border in both directions. So there are innumerable ties of blood and personal acquaintanceship to add to the cultural, political and economic ties between the two vast lands.

The American ideal of freedom lives in a dishwashing machine

Americans are proud of what they call their "know how", which has sometimes been applied to the cause of destruction. Far more often, however, it has been directed towards improving people's lot in life. Canada has been the leading beneficiary of this mixture of superb technology and straightforward ways of getting things done properly. Our industries and professions employ American systems and techniques, and American-designed machinery, devices and electronic equipment can be found everywhere in Canada. American ingenuity, tied to a passion for convenience, has removed much of the routine drudgery from the lives of Canadians, particularly housewives. The American ideal of freedom lives in the vacuum cleaner and the dishwasher — in this case, freedom from unnecessary toil.

Along with the machinery, techniques and ideas Canada has imported from the States, it has also imported considerable human ability. It was a man from Illinois, W. C. Van Horne, who oversaw the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway to tie this scattered country together, and then went on to build it into an international transportation empire second to none. Half a century later, a Massachusetts-born Canadian cabinet minister named C. D. Howe led the way to the formation of a national airline, one of many national institutions he created. He hired a seasoned U.S. airline executive, Philip G. Johnson, to get the forerunner of Air Canada off the ground.

The above are merely random examples to illustrate the immense contributions individual Americans have made to Canada's progress and well-being. That many of them opted to become Canadian citizens is beside the point. The point is that, because of all their similarities, Americans

and Canadians have always been able to work together in an easy-going spirit of co-operation. That spirit turned to mutual dedication in World War II, when men of the two nations fought side by side in the defence of democracy. Common causes have run through most of the history of Canadian-American relations. Though they may differ on details of interpretation and implementation, Americans and Canadians still share the same fundamental ideals.

They share a great deal else besides. A Canadian and an American may work for the same company, belong to the same labour union, cheer for the same team, drive the same kind of car, watch the same television shows, and wear pretty much the same clothing. This is a cause of consternation among nationalistic Canadians, who apparently are unaware of places like Scotland, Austria, Belgium and Portugal, which are subject to similar conditions in relation to their kindred neighbours, but have no trouble in maintaining a cultural identity of their own. Neither do they seem to know much about the attractiveness and potency of American culture around the world; blue jeans are prized in Eastern European countries, and a Coca-Cola machine graces the hallway of the French foreign ministry on the Quai d'Orsay. Much of the resistance to American culture in Canada seems petty and lacking in perspective. Fortunately, it is likely to fade as Canadians increasingly gain confidence in their own abilities and their nation's place in the world.

Feeling no less Canadian for comic strips and pumpkin pie

In the meantime, the majority of Canadians will continue to enjoy the fruits of American culture without feeling any less Canadian for it. They will laugh at comic strips, sniffle at soap operas, chew gum and eat turkey and pumpkin pie at Thanksgiving, a feast which we celebrate in October instead of November in a typical variation on an American theme. They will use American slang and terminology, and read the books on the *New York Times* best-seller list.

Capable Canadian performers will persist in setting their sights on Broadway and Hollywood — as will English performers, French performers, Italian performers, and so on. They will do so not so much for the money as to test their talents against the best in the world. For if there is much that is shallow and shabby in American culture, there is much that is excellent. The United States may be the homeland of tuneless rock music, tasteless TV police dramas, and mindless situation comedies, but it is also the homeland of jazz, the Broadway musical, and seven Nobel prize winners for literature. The distinctively American art of George Gershwin, Duke Ellington, Andrew Wyeth, Mark Twain and Tennessee Williams, to name a few, is destined to last for all time.

Democracy is protesting the judgments of the umpire

To see Americans at their hereditary best, one need look no further than their national pastime, the placid and poetic sport of baseball. It is a game that owes as much to brains as brawn, governed by a set of rules that could have been written by a Philadelphia lawyer. In the long stretches of seeming inactivity between the bursts of action, a fascinating war of strategy is being waged in every ball thrown and every move a player makes.

Baseball brings out a number of basic American characteristics. It is a game of individualism within the context of team-work. It is a democratic sport, in which the fans, managers and players deem it their right to loudly protest the judgments of that definitive figure of authority, the umpire. It is an enterprise that calls for hard work and dedication.

The game carries in it what might be called the American deception: it has a loping, casual, lazy air which masks a thoughtfulness and seriousness of purpose. This apparent laxity has often deluded enemies of the United States: "I don't see much future for the Americans," Adolph Hitler once said. Even American political leaders have been fooled by their compatriots' apparent apathy and malleability. In the early 1950s, it looked as if Senator Joseph McCarthy had entirely consolidated his grip on the national psyche by creating

hysteria over the "Communist menace". But he underestimated the willingness of the American people to change course abruptly once they have realized they are going the wrong way.

McCarthy's pernicious power was destroyed by the final arbiter of U.S. political affairs, public opinion. Ralph Waldo Emerson likened America's libertarian system to a raft which will never sink, but on which one's feet are always uncomfortably wet. Abraham Lincoln wrote: "Public opinion, though often formed upon the wrong basis, yet generally has a strong underlying sense of justice." And so it has proved in the long run in the United States.

A more human dimension to the 'American dream'

Not surprisingly, the sharpest critics of the American *vox populi* have themselves been Americans. The magnificent journalist H. L. Mencken coined the phrase "*Boobus Americanus*", dismissing the mass of his countrymen as a vulgar, avaricious, unenlightened rabble following third-rate leaders in a war against unconventional ideas. But that was in the complacent days of the 1920s, when Mencken was able to remark: "The American Republic, as nations go, has led a safe and easy life, with no serious enemies, either within or without, and no grim struggle with want."

That same palmy decade gave rise to Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*, the back-slapping conformist from Gopher Prairie who was to become an American stereotype. The brash, crass Babbitts of this world believed implicitly in an ill-defined something called "the American dream." It was, as Lewis's contemporary, Eugene O'Neill, pointed out, mainly a dream of materialism. O'Neill lamented: "I sometimes think that the United States for this reason is the greatest failure the world has ever seen."

Much has happened since then to remove the bumptiousness from the American dream and to give it a more human dimension. The stock market crash and the Great Depression grimly demonstrated that the United States was not necessarily the Promise Land. The war with Japan and Germany taught that war was not something to look forward to. The Cold War that ensued with the Soviet Union gave the nation a taste of the loneliness of command in world affairs.

In the past few years Americans have had to come face to face with their own shortcomings. The disgraceful treatment of black Americans could no longer be overlooked as blacks and their white allies stood up for their civil rights. The questionable U.S. involvement in Viet Nam, combined with the disenchantment of large sections of American youth, aroused mass dissent and disorder. The Watergate scandal brought home the message that an obsession with winning by any means can ultimately result in defeat.

Through it all, American public opinion has been divided. In a highly emancipated society made up of millions of opinions, a consensus is never easy to achieve. But in the final analysis there have always been *enough* Americans who truly believe in the humanitarian ideals enshrined in their Constitution to set their nation on the course of justice and honour. Ponderously, belatedly, and often to the accompaniment of the cat-calls of the rest of the world, Americans have been at work righting their national wrongs.

"*Boobus Americanus*" and Babbitt have died a natural death in the mature and concerned society that has grown up since their heyday. Even the frighteningly well-intentioned Quiet American of Graham Greene's novel of Indo-China in the 1950s appears to be breathing his last. In their place have emerged people who are coping with the rebuffs of history with all the resilience and determination that made them a great nation in the first place. They won the lasting friendship of Canadians long ago; in their recent adversity, they have won our lasting respect.