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Donald Trump, Benjamin Franklin, and the History of Annexation Threats

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It's hard to keep track of the federal government's whirlwind international activities as it juggles with trade, defense, security and a host of other geopolitical issues, all of which are dominated by a difficult and unfriendly adversary in the White House, and a radically changed and volatile world generated by the Trump presidency.

It was good for the PM to make these points before and during the last election campaign, to wake Canadians up to the reality that we can no longer rely on a strong, productive and friendly relations with the US, the kind that President John Kennedy famously heralded in addressing Canada's Parliament back in 1961 with the words, "Geography has made us neighbours. History has made us friends. Economics has made us partners. And necessity has made us allies." As Mr. Carney has said, those days are over.

We are in a time of serious crisis as the historic Canada-US relationship has been shattered, placing huge — indeed unprecedented — challenges on Canada's political leadership, including the need for strong, strategically focused direction that allows Canada to navigate these turbulent waters.

While reports out of Washington these last days are that trade and related defence and security talks with the administration are proceeding without rancour – “constructive” is the word being used – it can’t be forgotten that, for the first time in history, the president himself has made bellicose, public statements about annexing Canada. These were astonishingly aggressive by any standard, leading to Mr. Carney’s statement after his election that Trump wanted to “break us so that America can own us”.

In fact, there is a long history of these kinds kind of American designs on annexing Canada. Per the publisher’s summary of a new book by Madelaine Drohan out this week, [*He Did Not Conquer: Benjamin Franklin’s Failure to Annex Canada*](#):

“Throughout his long and illustrious career, Benjamin Franklin nursed a not-so-secret desire to annex Canada and make it American. When he was not busy conducting scientific experiments or representing American interests at home and abroad, Benjamin Franklin hatched one plan after another to join Canada to the American colonies and then later to the United States. These were not solely intellectual efforts. He went to Montreal in 1776 to try to turn around the faltering occupation by American forces.

As lead American negotiator at the 1782 peace negotiations with Britain in Paris, he held the fate of Canada in his hands. Ill health and other American priorities then forced him to abandon his decades-long campaign to possess Canada. Franklin’s elevation to the status of an American icon has pushed this signal failure into the far reaches of collective memory in both Canada and the United States. Yet it shaped the future of North America and relations between the two neighbours over the next two and a half centuries.”

After Franklin, American designs on Canada continued periodically through the 19th century, including the Fenian raids in 1866-1871, part of the annexation fear being a major factor leading to Canadian Confederation in 1867. Even after Confederation, there was frequent expansionist rhetoric from US politicians, expressions of the Monroe Doctrine of American “manifest destiny”.

Canadian unease about American policies continued into the 20th century. In his book *The Good Allies*, about Canada-US collaboration in World War II, Tim Cook notes that, notwithstanding warm personal relations between MacKenize King and Franklin Roosevelt before and during the war, King was preoccupied about collaborative continental defence planning potentially leading to a US takeover under the guise of national security.

What's different now is that designs on Canadian sovereignty have been issued openly, and directly by the US president himself, placing things on a much higher, dangerous plane, more than the periodic rhetoric coming from lower-level American politicians. However "constructive" current talks in Washinton may be characterized, prior statements by Trump about Canada becoming the 51st state can't be disregarded. Even if open talk of annexation has temporarily faded, Canada faces an ongoing trade war with the US and this, plus Trump's open and repeated threats, have become indelible elements of our bilateral status quo.

The Prime Minister's recent European trip and his meetings with leaders in Ukraine, Poland, Germany and the Baltics have to be seen against this background. They also have to be seen in the context of global upheavals generated by Mr. Trump, by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and by China's commercial and political aggressiveness, where matters of defence, security, trade and commercial relations are now intertwined. This is what lies behind the PM's meetings; a change in direction in Canada's international posture, showing that we have a range of strategic interests as the country pivots from a broken Canada-US relationship.

When history is examined, it may be written that even in times of crisis, including the Fenian raids, claims of American manifest destiny, two World Wars, the 2008-2009 financial meltdown and the recent pandemic, Canada has never faced the external threats it faces today, on so many fronts. While the term "existential" is overly and inaccurately used, it is probably apposite in today's circumstances.

Putting all this together, adding in the internal challenges Canada faces in implementing critical infrastructure projects, dismantling internal trade barriers, improving economic productivity, it places enormous burdens on the shoulders of the Prime Minister, pressures that are unprecedented for any Canadian leader. To date, Mr. Carney seems to be handling these with cool determination and strategic vision, an adult in the room.

The future will test that determination, as well as Canada's ability in collectively coming together as a nation to meet and overcome these historic — indeed existential — challenges.

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