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THE CANADA-UNITED STATES PERMANENT JOINT BOARD ON DEFENCE

After 1871, when the Treaty of Washington had settled most of the points of disagreement between Canada and the United States, relations between the two countries rapidly improved. Similar political philosophies, mutual trade, the interchange of population, the settlement of the Canadian West, and the habit of resolving outstanding problems by negotiation steadily reduced the causes of friction. This, in turn, ensured that old animosities and suspicions were soon largely forgotten.

Nevertheless, between 1871 and 1940 Canadian-American relations, though friendly, were somewhat aloof. Canada's position as a part of the British Empire and later as a member of the evolving Commonwealth, and Canadian consciousness of the disparity in population and wealth between the two countries, prevented any political alliance and confined co-operation almost entirely to the economic sphere. In the 1930s, the rise of aggressive totalitarian states in Europe and the Far East did, indeed, awaken a common sense of danger, but the anxiety of both nations to avoid international commitments hindered the coordination of plans for the defence of North America.

Far-sighted men on both sides of the border realized the dangers inherent in this situation and, in spite of difficulties, some tentative contacts were made during the late 1930s. However, it was not until the calamitous spring and summer of 1940, with Hitler's armies everywhere victorious in Europe and the British Isles facing the prospect of invasion, that Canada and the United States began seriously to concern themselves with problems of mutual defence. Late in May, Prime Minister King, feeling increasing concern for the security of Newfoundland and the defence of the Atlantic coast, suggested to President Roosevelt the need for further staff conversations. These conversations, which were held in Washington on July 11 and 12, were chiefly concerned with Canadian requests for military equipment from the United States and with the extent of United States military assistance that would be required to defend Canada from direct attack. In August, Canada posted military and naval attachés to Washington to join the single air attaché who had been serving there since the previous February. However, no provision had as yet been made for permanent and continuous high-level consultations between the two countries on military matters.