V - BACKGROUND

Six years ago, the United States was incurring modest trade deficits which were offset by more than $140 billion (U.S.) in payments from abroad on U.S. foreign investments. The U.S. budget was usually in deficit, but this was again more than offset by domestic savings. The net effect was a positive current account balance.

As the U.S. economy picked up steam after the 1981-82 recession, demand rose faster than output. Imports increased drastically to fill the gap. By the end of 1983, the trade deficit had ballooned to nearly $69 billion (U.S.). These events continued into 1985, resulting in a trade deficit of $148 billion (U.S.). The federal budget deficit more than doubled as a share of GNP, and savings fell to record lows.

Under this pressure, the U.S. dollar began to lose value on the international exchange market. By the end of 1987, the U.S. dollar lost 48% of its value against the Japanese yen, 48% against the German mark, 44% against the Danish krona, 43% against the French franc and 39% against the Italian lira. In fact, the U.S. dollar had fallen against all major western industrialized countries except Canada. By the end of 1987, the trade deficit reached a record $171 billion (U.S.), as import prices rose faster than the fall in import volumes.

The 1988 first quarter figures continue to show the value of U.S. currency declining (but stabilizing) relative to most western industrialized countries. These currency adjustments are only beginning to translate into changes in trade patterns. Exporters to the United States who made large profits were able to pare their profits for many months before they were forced to raise prices. In many cases, however, the profits of leading Japanese and European exporting companies have plunged by 40% to 80%, and the companies have been forced to increase prices. No immediate changes were reflected in the trade figures, as the dollar volumes were maintained while the unit volumes dropped.

The December 1987 trade figures promise a change in direction of trade as the nominal monthly deficit dropped to $12.2 billion (U.S.), well below the $14.3 billion (U.S.) monthly average for the whole of 1987. Stubbornly high imports seem to be responding to the weaker U.S. dollar. These developments should help to stimulate two-way trade between Canada and the United States. Since the value of U.S. and Canadian currencies relative to one another has remained fairly