

A BORDER PEOPLE

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I was born in Niagara Falls, Ontario, within sight of Niagara Falls, New York. I've lived almost all my life a short distance from the United States, and my wife is American. In none of this am I an unusual Canadian. Seventy-five percent of Canada's population resides in a narrow 150-kilometre band pushing up against the U.S., with close ties south of the line. We are a border people. The border is our livelihood. The border is our identity.

The Canada-U.S. border is the longest international meeting of two countries, extending for 8,893 kilometres over land and water. It is frequently called the 49th parallel, but that degree of latitude accounts only for the plane from Vancouver to Lake of the Woods in Ontario. Near Windsor, Canada's southern extremity dips almost as low as the 42nd parallel, on a rough line with Boston and Chicago. In the north, the border rises to the Beaufort Sea at the end of the Alaska-Yukon frontier. More than 300,000 North Americans and well over a billion dollars in goods and services cross the boundary each day.

The "world's longest undefended border" is the most tenacious of the relationship's images. In 1914, marking the 100th anniversary of the end of the War of 1812 between the two countries, enthusiasts rejoiced in the unfortified frontier that separated but did not divide Canada and the U.S. The war that broke out in Europe

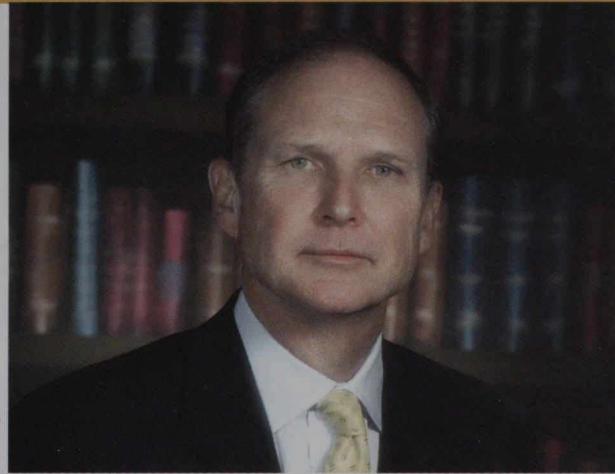


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Norman Hillmer: Canadians take the border seriously.



Border ties: Sergeant R. Cox, (left), representing Canada, and Lieutenant Oscar Haffa, representing the United States, clasp hands at the international border on the new Peace bridge between Fort Erie, Ontario and Buffalo, New York, in 1927.

that same year only reinforced the sense that the Old World was a violent place. North America was an oasis of calm and reason.

The truth was somewhat different. Less than 20 years earlier, Canada had prepared for war with the U.S. At the turn of the 20th century, the U.S. deployed armed warships on the Great

Lakes. During the dispute over access to the Yukon gold fields, President Theodore Roosevelt said he was going to "get ugly" with Canada and sent troops northward to demonstrate the intent. During the First World War, the Government of Canada heavily fortified the frontier to prevent raids by enemy sympathizers.

Canadians take the border seriously. From the country's beginnings, they emphasized the contrasts with their neighbours, and nation-built with a vengeance. That was the point of the Canadian Pacific Railway, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and the Canada Council. The boundary, writes journalist Peter Newman, "is the most important fact about this country. It defines not only our citizenship but how we behave collectively and what we think individually. It determines who we are." And what we are, many Canadians insist, is an un-America of the