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Brian Mulroney, Ronald Reagan, and the Politics of Friendship

Donald E. Abelson

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Series Editors: Donald E. Abelson and
Adam Lajeunesse

Managing Editor: Anna Zuschlag

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4048A Mulroney Hall
St. Francis Xavier University
2333 Notre Dame Avenue
Antigonish, Nova Scotia
Canada
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Dr. Donald E. Abelson is Director, Brian Mulroney Institute of Government, Steven K. Hudson Chair in Canada-U.S. Relations, and Professor, Political Science, St. Francis Xavier University. Before joining StFX, Dr. Abelson served as Director, Canada-U.S. Institute, Director, Centre for American Studies, and Chair, Political Science, University of Western Ontario. He is also Adjunct Professor, Political Science, Dalhousie University and Adjunct Research Professor (Political Science), University of Western Ontario. Dr. Abelson received his MA and PhD (Political Studies) from Queen's University, an MA (Journalism) from the University of Western Ontario, and a BA Hons. (Political Science) from the University of Toronto. He teaches and conducts research in the fields of Comparative Politics (Canada and the United States) and International Relations.

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INTRODUCTION

On 21 June 1984, President Ronald Reagan welcomed Brian Mulroney, then Official Leader of the Opposition in the Canadian Parliament, to the White House. It was the first time the leaders met, and over the course of a 45-minute discussion in the Oval Office, they exchanged ideas on a range of important bilateral issues. Although it was not unprecedented for a US president to extend an invitation to the leader of the opposition, it signaled to even the most casual observer of Canada-US relations that Reagan was prepared, indeed, anxious, to do business with Mulroney (see Bothwell 2015; Hale 2013; Stewart 2017). The optics of the meeting, and the media attention it generated, could not have gone over well with John Turner, who, nine days later, would be sworn in as Canada's 17th prime minister (see Litt 2011). Clearly, Reagan had little confidence that Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's successor would hold onto the country's highest office after the Canadian federal election in the fall of 1984 (Mulroney 2007, 290–91).

It did not take long for Mulroney's charm and charisma to make an impression on Reagan, who five months later, would go on to win one of the greatest landslides in American history, securing all but 13 electoral votes. In a recent interview with L. Ian MacDonald, editor of *Policy Magazine*, a leading Canadian outlet on public policy, Mulroney recalled that, following the meeting, Reagan pulled him aside in the Rose Garden before their joint news conference and said, "Well, it certainly wouldn't hurt to have another Irishman, with the two of us running North America" (MacDonald 2021, 2). In his diary recalling the initial meeting with Mulroney, Reagan noted, "He's an Irishman thru & thru" (Brinkley 2007, 249).

In the federal election on 4 September 1984, Mulroney defied the prognostications of countless pundits by leading the Progressive Conservative Party to the largest electoral landslide in Canadian history, grabbing 211 seats in the House of Commons, an increase of 111 seats. The Liberals were left with only 40 seats, a dramatic fall from the 135 they held prior to the election. As the boy from Baie-Comeau, a small eastern Québec town located on the northern shore of the St. Lawrence River,

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celebrated this momentous victory (see MacDonald 1984; Murphy, Auf der Maur, and Chodos 1984; Sawatsky 1991), Reagan wasted little time extending his congratulations. “He’s just won a tremendous victory,” Reagan observed. “He’s a super fellow. We got along fine & will continue to do so” (Brinkley 2007, 269). After three years of trying to navigate the Canadian-American file with Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, whom Reagan “liked” (Brinkley 2007, 7) but at times considered rude, obnoxious, and arrogant (Brinkley 2007, 156), having Mulroney lead Canada as its 18th prime minister would have left a smile on the face of the 40th president of the United States.

For Reagan, Mulroney not only represented an ideological ally (though the two leaders would come to disagree on many policy files in the ensuing years) but also a kindred spirit who understood that the bilateral relationship with the US had to be treated as a priority, one that required careful and prudent management. In Mulroney, Reagan also saw a leader who appreciated the burden of responsibility the US had to bear on the world stage and a friend to whom he could turn for advice and support when he found himself embroiled in political battles both at home and abroad. Although Mulroney was a political neophyte when he became prime minister, he did not need to be reminded of how important a close relationship with the US was for Canada and the country’s efforts to establish a stronger voice internationally. He also understood that by building stronger and closer ties with the US, he would invariably contribute to heightened anti-American sentiments in Canada, but it was a price he was willing to pay. For Mulroney, Reagan represented a bold and visionary leader who would not capitulate to those intent on diminishing his authority. He was someone Mulroney could work with—a person he admired and a friend he would come to value (Larkin 2004). It did not take long for them to strike up a personal and political friendship, one that would lay the foundation for one of the most important periods in the history of bilateral relations between Canada and the US. Indeed, according to a panel of experts assembled by *Policy Magazine* (*Policy Magazine* 2021), the relationships forged by Brian Mulroney with President Reagan and President George H. W. Bush, explain why Mulroney is widely regarded as Canada’s greatest prime minister in overseeing the country’s long and enduring partnership with the US.

The friendship between Canada’s 18th prime minister and the 40th US president, which grew over hundreds of hours during the nearly five years they worked together (LAC MG 26 P18-4 Vol.19#45), would pave the way for bilateral cooperation on multiple fronts, most importantly, the passage of the 1988 Canada-US Free Trade Agreement. But the special relationship between them manifested itself in other ways not often discussed by scholars. For example, Reagan’s fondness and respect for Mulroney helps to explain why, when Mulroney was trailing in the polls in the lead up to the 1988 federal election, the president worked closely with his advisers to figure out what they could do to boost the prime minister’s popularity at home. As will be discussed, this was not the first time that Reagan would intervene to generate support for Mulroney and for Canada. And in many tangible ways, Mulroney would go to bat for Reagan. However, while the special ties between the two leaders facilitated cooperation and policy coordination on several issues affecting trade, defense cooperation, investment, and border security, their mutual respect also afforded them an opportunity to accommodate dissent by managing differences over many pressing concerns. These included, but were not limited to, the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), known as “Star Wars,” and other policies

with implications for the global arms race; Canada's insistence on the negotiation of an agreement to combat acid rain; and strategies for how best to navigate relations with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

With few exceptions, the academic literature on international diplomacy devotes only modest attention to the important role that friendship between world leaders can play both in advancing shared policy goals and in finding ways to express and contain disagreement, often publicly, when the costs of a political fallout may be profound. While scholars have written dozens of books and

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hundreds of articles detailing how policy advisers and others toiling in the inner circles of presidents and prime ministers have helped influence their thinking on key policy matters (Ginsberg 2021), far less consideration has been given to how leaders representing the sovereign interests of their respective states work with each other even when they find themselves at odds over the direction of various policy initiatives.

The purpose of this paper is not to provide a definitive history of the personal and professional relationship forged by Brian Mulroney and Ronald Reagan. Such an inquiry would far exceed the scope of this undertaking. Rather, this paper reveals how their friendship created multiple opportunities to find common ground, even when their political and policy agendas did not necessarily align. Information about how Mulroney and Reagan were able to balance competing domestic and foreign political interests with the desire to strengthen

bilateral relations is becoming clearer with the release of documents previously closed to the public. Indeed, memos based on meetings, correspondence, and phone calls between the two leaders help to shed light on this critical aspect of bilateral diplomacy.

There is little doubt that the rules of diplomacy, combined with an abundance of mutual respect, decency, and integrity helped create a unique and enduring bond between Mulroney and Reagan. Unlike the propensity of many current and recent world leaders to take to Twitter and other social media to express their support or condemnation for others who occupy high office, Mulroney and Reagan placed a premium on maintaining an open and candid dialogue. Rather than trying to embarrass or humiliate the other by leaking sensitive information that might create an unfavorable impression, they had each other's back. And if it was not possible to support the other's political priorities because of competing national interests, they went out of their way to explain why they had to maintain their position. Put simply, both leaders recognized that together they could accomplish great things, and they rarely wavered from this commitment. Politics mattered, but in many ways, their friendship mattered more. Well after they left office and were no longer required to weigh in on various policy matters, Mulroney and Reagan remained close. What the two leaders accomplished in office will be recounted by historians and political scientists for decades, but it was their friendship that helped shape and solidify their legacy.

Much can be learned about Canada-US bilateral cooperation and international diplomacy by highlighting some of the critical interactions between Mulroney and Reagan. By examining how they sought to cooperate, even more can be learned about how leaders should govern themselves, especially when, due to circumstances and political differences beyond their control, there is a temptation to sacrifice friendship for more immediate political gains. This was not a path that either Mulroney or Reagan felt the need to take because they recognized that it was both possible and indeed necessary to rely on their friendship to achieve desirable political outcomes. This paper lays the foundation for a discussion about their backgrounds and personalities, what drew them together, and what ultimately allowed them to form a special bond. In the process, it offers important lessons on how leaders who have a strong foundation of friendship, can invariably influence the course of world history.

In the first section of the paper, I provide an overview of the respective backgrounds of Brian Mulroney and Ronald Reagan. This is done to identify how the core values and lived experiences of both leaders contributed to their rise to power and, ultimately, to the relationship they established. As will be discussed, although Mulroney and Reagan came of age decades apart, they shared much in common from their working-class roots and Irish ancestry, to their ambition to reach great heights. They arrived at their destinations by pursuing different careers, but in many ways, it is not surprising that they became close friends and allies. In the second section, attention will shift to the key issues that shaped the bilateral agenda when Mulroney and Reagan were in office and what steps they were prepared to take to ensure significant progress on the Canada-US file. Finally, some consideration will be given to the lengths Reagan was prepared to go to help his friend hold onto political power, even when he himself was preparing to leave the White House. Among his many motivations for helping Mulroney win a second election was to ensure that his successor, George H. W. Bush, could continue to manage the Canada-US relationship with a prime minister whom Reagan greatly respected and admired.

THE JOURNEY AND THE DESTINATION: MULRONEY, REAGAN, AND THE PATH TO POWER

Most leaders who reach the apex of political power do not follow a preordained path nor is their journey necessarily linear. As is often the case, a combination of factors and circumstances converge that propel them to public office. Such was the case for Brian Mulroney and Ronald Reagan, who together not only transformed the bilateral relationship between their two countries (Blake 2007; Clarkson 1982; Savoie 1994) but by virtue of their special and enduring friendship and mutual respect, were also able to leave an indelible mark on world affairs.

Born close to thirty years apart, Mulroney and Reagan came to appreciate the art and practice of politics, and the importance of effective leadership. As noted, they were also raised in working-class

families, and embraced a strong work ethic. Moreover, both had their early child experiences shaped by the towns in which they lived, attended small liberal arts universities, and ultimately embraced careers in politics after first exploring other avenues: Mulroney as a lawyer with one of the most prestigious law firms in North America, a member of a high-profile commission investigating corruption in the Québec construction industry, and president of Iron Ore Canada; Reagan as a Hollywood actor and president of the Screen Actors Guild, positions that afforded him great notoriety before serving as a two-term governor of California.

The Boy From Baie-Comeau

Martin Brian Mulroney was born on 20 March 1939 to Mary Irene O'Shea and Benedict Martin Mulroney. Raised Irish-Catholic in the predominantly French-speaking community of Baie-Comeau (founded in 1936 by Colonel Robert R. McCormick, owner and publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*), Brian Mulroney and his five siblings grew up in what the future prime minister regarded as an "idyllic" town (Mulroney 2007, 3). In the year he was born, Baie-Comeau had a population hovering around 1,500, and by 1942, it was home to approximately 2,000 inhabitants. Mulroney's father worked as an electrician in the Quebec North Shore Paper mill, established in 1938 by McCormick to supply newsprint for the *Chicago Tribune*. Benedict Mulroney would regularly take on other jobs in his spare time to supplement the family's income. Mulroney's mother would contribute in significant ways as well, often accepting boarders in their modest home. As with the majority of Irish-Catholics in Quebec at the time, both of Brian Mulroney's parents voted Liberal. However, when John Diefenbaker ran for the leadership of the Progressive Conservative Party in 1956, Benedict Mulroney changed his party allegiance and remained a loyal Conservative for the rest of his life.

From an early age, Brian Mulroney internalized the sacrifices his parents made to raise their children and felt a deep-seated obligation to help his family. One Sunday evening after his father returned from work, Mulroney, 16 at the time and a graduate of St. Thomas High School (now St. Thomas University) in Chatham, New Brunswick, discussed with him the possibility of entering an apprenticeship program at the mill. He noted in his memoirs that,

I raised with my dad the thought that perhaps I would enter the excellent new apprentice program at the mill for a few years to assist the family financially. My father looked straight at me and said, 'I appreciate the offer, Brian, and we *do* need the help. But the only way out of a paper mill town is through a university door. That's what I want you to do' [*italics in original*]. (Mulroney 2007, 15)

This conversation, which the former prime minister has shared with multiple audiences over many years, transformed his life. He wanted to help his family financially, but his father, a man whom he greatly admired, loved, and respected, understood that for his son to have a better life, he had to take advantage of his sharp and keen intellect. It was because of his insistence that he pursue a higher education that, in September 1955, Brian Mulroney enrolled as a freshman at St. Francis Xavier University (StFX).

Nestled on a hill overlooking downtown Antigonish, a picturesque town in northeastern Nova Scotia, Mulroney embraced his new life at StFX. Surrounded by talented faculty and a little over 1,000 students drawn from across Canada, the US, and the globe, the university was an ideal environment for the young Mulroney to find his voice. Pursuing an honors degree in Political Science, which he would complete in 1959, Mulroney distinguished himself as a champion debater, and over time, he became increasingly immersed in the politics of the day. He followed and scrutinized the policies of Conservative Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, whom, as a student, he managed to reach by phone and eventually meet, and he paid close attention to the views of other leaders in provincial and federal politics. At StFX, he was also exposed to the teachings of Rev. Dr. Moses Coady, founder of the Coady Institute, who stressed the importance of promoting social justice, a lesson that would resonate with Mulroney throughout his political career as he sought to address injustices committed in Canada and abroad (Hampson 2018).

Mulroney never regretted his decision to attend StFX, and his steadfast commitment to his alma mater has remained intact for over 60 years. Most recently, Mulroney raised over \$105 million for the university to build Mulroney Hall, a state-of-the-art teaching and research complex housing the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government, the largest fundraising initiative undertaken in the school's history. When Mulroney was asked by senior administrators what quote he would like to adorn the Institute's Donors Wall, located in Mulroney Hall's foyer, he said, without hesitation, "Use the quote from my Dad. That's how I ended up here" (Mulroney 2019).

In 1961, Mulroney would take his love and thirst for politics to Laval University in Québec City where he would study law and closely follow debates in the province's National Assembly. Three years later, the young law school graduate, specializing in labor law, would join Howard, Cate, Ogilvy, et al., a prestigious Montréal law firm (which would later become Norton Rose Fulbright). It was at Norton Rose Fulbright, where Mulroney continues to practice, that he developed a reputation as a highly skilled labor negotiator representing major companies, such as Iron Ore Canada and Power Corporation of Canada. As his profile in Montréal's legal circles grew, he caught the attention of Québec Premier Robert Bourassa who, in 1974, established a Royal Commission to investigate corruption in the province's construction industry. Known as the Cliche Commission, Mulroney joined Robert Cliche, a former New Democratic Party leader and judge, and Guy Chevrette, leader of the province's teacher's union and a supporter of the Parti Québécois, in the three-member inquiry.

The exposure Mulroney generated in Québec and across Canada as he and his colleagues probed the corruptive practices in the province's construction industry helped showcase his vast talents. There was no doubt that he could ask difficult questions, and there was even less doubt that he would allow

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himself to be intimidated even when he and his family faced death threats. Mulroney and his colleagues were appointed to serve the public interest, and there was little anyone could do to distract them. With these kinds of leadership qualities on full display, it is not surprising that Mulroney, who had never run for public office, decided to throw his hat into the ring to become the next leader of the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada in 1976.

Finishing third in the leadership race behind Joe Clark and Claude Wagner, Mulroney's hopes to replace Robert Stanfield as party leader were temporarily dashed. Clark would go on to become prime minister in 1979, but Clark's tenure in office would be short-lived. Less than a year into his first and only term, he was defeated by Pierre Trudeau, who, in the aftermath of the 1980 election, formed a majority Liberal government. This would not be Clark's only major defeat. Concerned that he was leading a divided party, Clark made the fateful decision to call for a leadership convention in 1983 in the hope of bolstering his support which, at the time, stood at 66.9 percent. Clark opened the door for a leadership review, and Mulroney, who had been president of Iron Ore Canada since 1977, walked through it. On 11 June 1983, Mulroney leapfrogged Clark on the fourth ballot at the Progressive Conservative Party's leadership convention, capturing 54.4 percent of the vote. A little more than a year later, with a huge majority in the House of Commons, Mulroney would become Canada's 18th prime minister.

Eureka! The Rise of Ronald Reagan

Ronald Wilson Reagan took his first breath in a small apartment above the Pitney General Store in Tampico, Illinois, on 6 February 1911. The younger son of Jack and Nelle Reagan (nee Wilson), Reagan's path to the presidency, like so many of his predecessors, was filled with more twists and turns than Route 1 along the Pacific Coast Highway, a scenic route that he would one day travel regularly. Nicknamed "Dutch" by his father because of his Dutch Boy haircut and pudgy cheeks, Reagan's early years did not resemble a storybook life. His father was a salesman, mainly of shoes, and the family moved to several towns across Illinois before settling in Dixon in 1920. Jack was also an alcoholic (Reagan 1990).

Raised Catholic in the Disciples of Christ Church by parents loyal to the Democratic Party, Reagan observed his mother's lifelong commitment to others. Her compassion and generosity, according to veteran journalist and Reagan biographer Lou Cannon (n.d.), was not lost on him. As with many children growing up in small towns, Reagan found plenty of ways to be mischievous, but he also exhibited a talent for sports, particularly swimming, football, and basketball, that kept him busy during his high school and college years (Cannon n.d.). In high school, Reagan also became involved with the drama club and wrote for the school yearbook. These and other interests, including debating, would follow him to Eureka College, a small liberal arts university with less than 500 students where, in 1932, he graduated with a degree in economics.

Reagan's formal education ended at Eureka, but the skill set he acquired through acting and covering various sporting events at university served him well in the ensuing years. So too would his Hollywood

good looks, which caught the attention of the Warner Bros. film studio in 1937 when Reagan traveled to California to report on the Chicago Cubs in spring training (Cannon n.d.). His timing could not have been better. Warner Bros. was looking for a new actor to replace “a promising young star who had died in a car accident,” and Reagan, standing at six-feet, one-inch tall, “with wavy brown hair, blue eyes, and an inviting broadcaster’s voice,” fit the bill (Cannon n.d.). Following a screen test, the studio offered him a \$200 per week contract, the equivalent of almost \$4,000 today. Reagan would go on to appear in over 50 films. As a second lieutenant in the Army Air Corps First Motion Picture Unit during World War II, he would serve his country narrating training films for young recruits (Cannon n.d.; see also Vaughan, 1994).

By 1954, Reagan’s career as a Hollywood actor was coming to an end, but he managed to secure a contract with General Electric to narrate the *General Electric Theater*, a new Sunday night television program that would soon top the ratings chart. Eight years later, he would leave General Electric over a contract dispute, but with the help of his older brother Neil, would host a popular western series.

As Reagan’s profile in the entertainment industry was beginning to fade, he devoted more of his time and attention to representing and advocating for working actors, first as a member and then as president of the Screen Actors Guild, a position he held from 1947 to 1954. During the 1950s, Reagan, a lifelong Democrat, began to shift his political allegiance to the Republican Party. Although not a fan of Richard Nixon, his growing distrust of John F. Kennedy and the Democratic Party convinced him to change his registration to Republican. He supported Nixon in his narrow defeat to Kennedy and again lent him his support as the former vice president launched an unsuccessful bid to become governor of California in 1962.

Reagan’s growing concerns over the management of the largest state in the union convinced him to take a run for the California governorship in 1966, and to the dismay and surprise of many, he defeated two-term incumbent Edmund G. (“Pat”) Brown. Serving as governor from 1967 to 1975 (see Hayward 2009; Perlstein 2015; Spitz 2018) took Reagan’s national profile to new heights. Although he often generated controversy in his dealings with major California institutions, including the University of California, Berkeley, his positions on a range of state and national issues shaped his conservative persona. After leaving office, he wrote a regular column that appeared in 175 newspapers, provided on-air commentaries to more than 200 radio stations, and was a regular on the speech circuit (Cannon n.d.). Reagan, who as early as 1968 was widely considered a strong contender for the Republican presidential nomination, had an important decision to make: Should he try to unseat President Gerald Ford in the 1976 Republican presidential primaries? Despite running a strong campaign, Reagan finished second to Ford, but his political career was far from over. Four years later, he would become the 40th president of the United States, defeating Jimmy Carter with almost 51 percent of the popular vote and all but 49 electoral votes. His margin of victory in 1984 was even more impressive, winning close to 59 percent of the popular vote and over 97 percent of the electoral vote, leaving his opponent, Walter Mondale, with only his native Minnesota and its 13 electoral votes.

MULRONEY, REAGAN, AND THE BIRTH OF A HISTORIC FRIENDSHIP

Ronald Reagan and Brian Mulroney came of age during momentous periods in world history: Reagan during the Great Depression and Mulroney in the midst of the Cold War. Yet, despite growing up decades apart, and under very different circumstances, the two shared much in common. They grew up in small towns and attended small liberal arts universities where they pursued the social sciences, and both were drawn to politics and debating at an early age. They also supported the tenets of liberalism well before they identified as conservatives. As noted, Reagan was a registered Democrat before embracing the Republican Party, and Mulroney entered StFX “as a liberal and left as a conservative” (Mulroney 2017). Interestingly, they also suffered significant political setbacks in 1976, only to rebound years later with back-to-back victories.

In some ways, Mulroney and Reagan also shared similar personality traits. They were incredibly effective communicators, possessed great empathy, were charismatic, exuded confidence, and had the capacity and willingness to build and mend fences. They could, and often did, reveal their displeasure with political foes, yet their first instinct was not to raise the ire of adversaries but to facilitate political cooperation. If this proved impossible, both had the capacity and inclination to rely on hard and soft power strategies to achieve desirable political outcomes.

The hypocrisy of Kennedy’s remarks was not lost on those close to the president and to Prime Minister Diefenbaker who knew full well that the two leaders despised one another.

It became abundantly clear to those who observed them interact that it would not take long for the two to form a lasting and special friendship, one that would transcend politics. As will be discussed, although relations between Canada and the US are generally considered friendly, this does not mean that prime ministers and presidents will necessarily become friends (CBC Archives 2019; Gray 2017). But when this does happen, as in the case of Brian Mulroney’s close personal and professional ties to Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, their respective countries can benefit tremendously.

In his oft-quoted address to the Canadian Parliament on 17 May 1961, President Kennedy proclaimed: “Geography has made us neighbors. History has made us friends. Economics has made us partners. And necessity has made us allies. Those whom nature hath so joined together, let no man put asunder. What unites us is far greater than what divides us” (Abelson and Lajeunesse 2020, 3). The hypocrisy of Kennedy’s remarks was not lost on those close to the president and to Prime Minister Diefenbaker who knew full well that the two leaders despised one another. Diefenbaker once described Kennedy as a “hothead” and a “fool-too young, too brash, too inexperienced, and a boastful son of a bitch!” (Abelson and Lajeunesse 2020, 3). Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson also enjoyed a less-than-cordial relationship with President Lyndon B. Johnson. In 1965, Pearson met with Johnson at Camp David after delivering an unwelcome speech about the Vietnam War. The president reportedly startled Pearson by shouting “you pissed on my rug!” (Abelson and Lajeunesse 2020, 3). Richard Nixon and

Pierre Trudeau were even more hostile. On his private tapes, Nixon was overheard calling Trudeau “an asshole,” “a son of a bitch,” and a “pompous egghead.” When the tapes became public, Trudeau’s response was simply, “I’ve been called worse things by better people” (Abelson and Lajeunesse 2020, 3). More recently, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Pierre Trudeau’s son, found himself on the receiving end of insults hurled at him by President Donald Trump following various bilateral and international meetings. This may in part explain why he welcomed a victory by Joe Biden, despite setbacks posed by some of his administration’s policies on Canada. Given the tensions that have surfaced between Canadian prime ministers and US presidents in the twentieth century, it is worth remembering how Mulroney and Reagan were able to make the Canada-US relationship envied around the globe. Before doing this, however, it is important to reflect on how the basis of their friendship was formed.

It is hardly a secret that Reagan often found his interactions with Pierre Trudeau challenging. In his autobiography, *Ronald Reagan: An American Life* (1990), Reagan barely mentions Trudeau and when he does, it is not flattering. Indeed, the president castigates Trudeau for being rude on various occasions to Margaret Thatcher, which created a toxic environment for high-level policy discussions (Reagan 1990, 353). However, in his diaries edited by historian Douglas Brinkley (2007), Reagan’s meetings with Trudeau take on a more positive tone. In his first official visit to Ottawa on 7 March 1981, Reagan wrote:

Off to Canada....It was a warm welcome with Canadians lining the streets cheering & clapping.....Went to Parliament (h)ill to meet P.M. Trudeau. Discovered I liked him. Our meetings were very successful. We have some problems to be worked out having to do with fishing, energy [and] environment but I believe we’ve convinced them we really want to find answers. (Brinkley 2007, 7)

In reflecting on his time with Trudeau, Reagan failed to acknowledge that there were also thousands of protesters condemning his handling of the acid rain file, but what is clear from later entries, is that his patience for the prime minister wore thin in the ensuing years. Released in 1993, three years after Reagan’s autobiography, Trudeau’s *Memoirs* seem to confirm why the president would have had reservations about the prime minister. Trudeau noted, “Later, in my final term, I even got along well with Ronald Reagan, even though we were about as far apart in outlook and personality as two people could be” (Trudeau 1993, 220). He added, “President Reagan was not a man for thoughtful policy discussions, but he was pleasant and congenial and my children found him entertaining” (Trudeau 1993, 301). As if these remarks were not disparaging enough, Trudeau further observed, “President Reagan was a great storyteller and a very sociable man. But his outlook was dominated by a deep faith in the free market system and by what I can only call an obsession with communism. His view of the world was largely anecdotal” (Trudeau 1993, 329).

When Brian Mulroney was preparing to assume office in the fall of 1984, Pierre Trudeau offered this advice about working with the United States: “(B)e friends with the United States – the Canadian people like the Americans – but don’t be subservient to the American government, because Canadians are very proud people” (Trudeau 1993, 358). It is unlikely that Mulroney required advice

on how best to strengthen Canada-US relations, especially from someone who was seen by the US president as condescending. He understood that Canadians thought highly of Americans, findings consistent with several years of polling conducted by Environics Research. He also understood that the Canadian government did not have to be subservient to the US to make its policy positions clear. After all, for Mulroney, Canada's relationship with the US was the most important one it had in the world, and it had to be carefully managed, monitored and nurtured. But unlike Trudeau, Mulroney appreciated the value of establishing and maintaining strong ties to the US president, a relationship that could bolster Canada's stature internationally. As Mulroney stated recently, "If it is widely known that you are on friendly terms with the president of the United States, and you have ready access to the Oval Office, this opens many doors elsewhere around the world. And the reverse is also true" (MacDonald 2021, 2). For Mulroney, who genuinely liked and admired Ronald Reagan, embracing him as a friend and confidant required little effort.

In reflecting on his first impressions of President Reagan, based on his initial meeting with him in June 1984, Mulroney stated,

What impressed me most was his good nature, good humour, and sense of serenity sitting in the Oval Office and surrounded by all the problems in the world. He was enthusiastic about meeting me. I don't know why. I felt the beginnings of a genuine friendship. Perhaps it was the Irish thing, and we were both conservative. He also had to deal with Pierre Trudeau and none of the G-7 leaders liked him... But most of all I was impressed with his capacity to articulate his positions and listen to me and my concerns about acid rain, tariffs on Canadian steel, fish and lumber and he paid a lot of attention to it and said Brian when you are prime minister I think we can do something about this. (Mulroney 2021; see also Mulroney 2007)

President Reagan was equally effusive in recalling the many times he spent with Prime Minister Mulroney and his family. In his autobiography, he noted, "Nancy and I travelled to many countries when I was president and among our most enjoyable trips were the short ones across our nation's northern border. Prime Minister Brian Mulroney of Canada was a valued ally and we became good friends with him and his lovely wife, Mila" (Reagan 1990, 388).

The president's entry on 18 March 1985 during the Shamrock Summit in Québec City was even more revealing. He wrote:

A morning of meetings and then a lunch where I made a speech on American-Canadian relationship – well received. On to the Citadel for the signing of several agreements, treaties, etc [and] to the airport & home. I have to believe U.S.-Canadian relations have never been better & certainly not at the leader level. Brian Mulroney & I have really established a warm personal friendship. He will be a welcome newcomer to the Bonn Summit. (Brinkley 2007, 309)

President Reagan's fondness for, and friendship with, Prime Minister Mulroney would, in many ways, prove invaluable to Canada during the remainder of his term in office. Although the US and Canada

would periodically disagree on the importance and substance of several high-profile policy files, including strategic defense, free trade, and acid rain, the foundation of friendship that had been created and nurtured between Mulroney and Reagan would pave the way for bilateral cooperation on multiple fronts. How the relationship between the two leaders played out when vital national interests were at stake will be the focus of the next section.

FRIENDSHIP, POLITICS, AND CANADA-US RELATIONS

When asked recently about the importance of his friendship with President Reagan in facilitating bilateral cooperation and managing policy disagreements with the US, Prime Minister Mulroney simply stated, “It was indispensable” (Mulroney 2021). Mulroney recalled when, in the lead up to the 1986 G7 Summit in Tokyo, he was informed that Japan, along with the US, the Federal Republic of Germany, Britain, and France, had established a separate G5 meeting to discuss international monetary policy and that Canada and Italy had been excluded. Trudeau was aware that this group had been created, but according to Mulroney, did little to voice Canada’s opposition (Mulroney 2021). However, unlike Trudeau, Mulroney was not prepared to remain silent. At the G7 summit, he went to great lengths to condemn Canada’s exclusion from this body. Feeling dispirited by the lack of support he received from the European powers, Mulroney stated, President Reagan stood up, slammed his leather notebook shut and said, “If this is a club that won’t have Brian as a member, I don’t want to be part of it either. That’s how Canada got into the G5.” Mulroney added, “Reagan felt great loyalty to Canada and loyalty and friendship to me” (Mulroney 2021).

This would not be the last time Reagan would stand up for Mulroney, and no one understood or appreciated his support more than the prime minister: “If you are a close friend of the President of the United States, everyone knows it. It gives you extra prestige and advantages around the world. Access to the president, his time, is the most precious thing you can have, and I could walk into the Oval Office anytime I wanted” (Mulroney 2021). As friends and partners in one of the world’s most important bilateral relationships, Reagan and Mulroney acknowledged that it was unlikely they would agree on the content and management of every policy initiative. After all, they represented sovereign powers and were elected to advance the core interests of their respective countries. They also knew that despite their strong personal connection, the goals of the US and Canada would not always align. Fortunately, because of the goodwill—and political will—they had created, taking a strong stand against policies with which they disagreed could be accommodated. Without this foundation in place, many of the policy initiatives outlined below could have easily derailed.

Being Strategic About the Strategic Defense Initiative

Despite growing protests across Canada about the testing of unarmed cruise missiles over Cold Lake, Alberta, the Canadian government agreed to a five-year agreement with the US on 16 July 1983. This announcement came close to four months after President Reagan unveiled SDI, dubbed “Star Wars,”

in a nationally televised address in which he called upon the scientific community to render nuclear weapons impotent and obsolete. The goal of SDI, as outlined at the time, was to deploy a ground and space-based system that would permit the US to track, intercept, and destroy incoming ballistic missiles. If successful, Reagan believed SDI could provide the US with an alternative to the nuclear doctrine of mutual assured destruction by affording the country with both a first- and second-strike capability. Looking for support from their allies, Caspar Weinberger, then US secretary of defense, reached out to Canada to participate in SDI research. When Prime Minister Mulroney was sworn into office, it did not take long for SDI to make its way onto the bilateral agenda.

Committed to establishing a strong relationship with the Reagan administration, though concerned that Canada's endorsement of this initiative could not only trigger another costly arms race but also generate considerable political fallout at home, Mulroney (2007) "found the thought of the weaponization of space extremely disconcerting" (349). After proposing the creation of a parliamentary committee to assess the reaction of parliamentarians to Canada's potential involvement in SDI research and after extensive consultations with several high-level advisers, including the late Allan Gotlieb, then Canadian ambassador to the US (Gotlieb 2006), Mulroney made a decision. In a phone call to President Reagan on 7 September 1985, Mulroney stated that, although he felt that SDI was consistent with the terms of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (a treaty that the US would terminate during the administration of George W. Bush), and that it was "a prudent action on the part of the US in view of Soviet initiatives of a similar kind, there would be no participation on a government-to-government basis in SDI research, but that private industry and universities were free to participate as they wished" (Mulroney 2007, 352).

According to his diary, Reagan was satisfied with Mulroney's response. Following his discussion with Mulroney, Reagan noted:

Late in the day had a call from P.M. of Canada Brian Mulroney. Brian wanted me to know that the Canadian government was voting not to join us in SDI research but that he was voicing his approval of our doing it & that any private researchers, businesses & institutions in Canada were free to join us. All in all I think there is no problem. (Brinkley 2007, 351)

Mulroney's skillful handling of what turned out to be a very delicate political issue, combined with Reagan's faith and trust in a close friend and ally, afforded both leaders an opportunity to effectively manage an important issue at home while moving the bilateral relationship forward. Had this issue found its way into the hands of other prime ministers and presidents, the result could, and likely would, have been very different. History is filled with examples, as already noted, of US presidents and Canadian prime ministers exchanging insults over how each approached various regional conflicts, including the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War, and the Iraq War.

As their relationship became stronger, Prime Minister Mulroney did not hesitate to reach out to President Reagan when the US was considering implementing programs or initiatives that could have harmed Canadian interests. For example, on 1 August 1986, Mulroney contacted Reagan from

Harrington Lake, the country residence of Canadian prime ministers, while the president was staying at Camp David. In their 15-minute phone conversation, Mulroney spoke to Reagan about how the US Export Enhancement Program would impact Canadian wheat exports. Mulroney stated,

The Soviet Union and China take over one half of all Canadian wheat exports and these proposals could reduce our markets by as much as 30 per cent or result in revenue losses of over \$500 million. I know the pressures you're under with the protectionists in the Congress and the delicate situation you sometimes find yourself. I would appreciate anything you can do to find an alternative and less damaging way of alleviating problems faced by your own farmers. (LAC MG 26P18-4 Vol. 19#45; see also Martin 1986)

Reagan's response was swift and direct: "Let me assure you that the US will not increase its market share as a result of this. We will allow grain sales at current market prices" (LAC MG 26P18-4 Vol.19#45). Despite the president's assurances, and Mulroney's ongoing protestations, the Export Enhancement Program was signed into law. But once again, what this exchange revealed was the willingness of both leaders to engage constructively on important matters, even when political interests in their respective countries made it all but impossible to reach an agreement. In fact, their willingness to go the extra mile to assuage each other's concerns can be credited with the successful negotiation and passage of the historic Canada-US Free Trade Agreement.

Free Trade and the 1988 Canadian Federal Election

In the lead up to the Shamrock Summit, held in Québec City on St. Patrick's Day, 17 March 1985 (a day fitting for two leaders with deep Irish roots), Mulroney penned a letter to Reagan. On 19 December 1984, he wrote:

The site of Quebec City represents an historical antecedent of interest. In 1943 and 1944, our respective predecessors, President Roosevelt and Prime Minister King, met there with Prime Minister Churchill to plan the course of war and the peace they were working together to restore. My hope is that our Governments can accomplish together something of lasting significance. (LAC MG 26 P8 Vol.26#19)

Before Mulroney, Reagan, and their wives, Mila and Nancy, joined Canadian opera singer Maureen Forrester in a rendition of "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" during a gala evening celebrating the historic summit, the two leaders had much to talk about including how to combat acid rain, the trials and tribulations surrounding US foreign policy in Central America, managing relations with Soviet leader Gorbachev, and the importance of reducing and preferably eliminating barriers to trade. While progress was made in the ensuing months on a number of these fronts, the issue Mulroney believed was of "lasting importance," and the one that would come to dominate bilateral relations, revolved around free trade.

In his personal journal, Mulroney recorded his thoughts about the importance of the Shamrock Summit. On 6 April 1985, he noted:

We talked about trade, our upcoming agenda, and I received a commitment from Reagan that he would 'go to bat for Canada,' guaranteeing us secure access to the American market. This is absolutely vital as far as we're concerned. Unless I am totally wrong I think we're going to need it, because the American Congress will soon be working itself into a giant lather about Japan, and I don't want us to get hurt in the process. (Mulroney 2007, 229)

For Mulroney, the future of Canada's prosperity depended heavily on greater access to US markets. He understood that, despite efforts of previous Canadian prime ministers to consider other paths to reduce Canadian dependency on its southern neighbor, the best option for Canada was to negotiate a trade agreement that would benefit Canadian consumers and manufacturers. Negotiating a free trade agreement with the US would require considerable tenacity, sensitivity, and an acute understanding of how to address a range of concerns in both countries. It was just the fight for which Mulroney was built. With the business acumen of a seasoned executive, the experience and confidence of a skilled negotiator, and the insight of a visionary statesman capable of navigating the political waters on both sides of the border, Mulroney was well-positioned—and equipped—to transform the bilateral policy landscape.

The academic literature on the benefits and pitfalls of the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement is extensive and need not be summarized here (see Gotlieb 2006; Hart, Dymond, and Robertson 1994). Suffice it to say, while there were large swaths of Canadians who came to terms with how a free trade agreement could benefit the country, others feared that if implemented, thousands of jobs would be lost, the manufacturing sector would be decimated, and our sovereignty would be further eroded. There was no shortage of anger, vitriol, and contempt directed at Mulroney and his government as they sought to negotiate this historic agreement. Undeterred by those who shouted, "Free Canada, Trade Mulroney," Mulroney remained committed to finalizing the terms of the treaty.

Following months of negotiations, the issue that would make or break the agreement boiled down to Mulroney's insistence that the treaty include a binding dispute settlement mechanism that would ensure that as a much smaller power in an asymmetrical relationship, Canada would have ample safeguards in place to initiate and respond to perceived violations of the free trade agreement. While Canada faced considerable resistance from US negotiators regarding this demand, Mulroney didn't flinch. In fact, as members of Reagan's team remained unwilling to make this concession in the final hours leading to the conclusion of the negotiations, Mulroney persisted. No binding dispute settlement mechanism, no agreement. In the end, it was Mulroney's friendship with Reagan that ultimately led to a deal (Gotlieb 2006; Hart, Dymond, and Robertson 1994). As Mulroney observed (2007), when he met with Reagan at the G7 Summit in Venice in June 1987 to discuss the progress of the free trade negotiations, he "didn't waste time with opening pleasantries" (501).

Mulroney wrote:

I had told Ron many times that a binding dispute settlement resolution system was key to Canada's demands. In repeating this in Venice, I bluntly warned him that Canada needed to know if he couldn't deliver, as we'd then prepare to leave the negotiating table. 'If you can't deal with your largest trading partner and best friend, who can you negotiate with?' I asked. (Mulroney 2007, 501)

There is no doubt that Mulroney's friendship with, and access to, Reagan ultimately led to a successful negotiation of the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement which the two leaders signed on 3 January 1988 (Hart, Dymond, and Robertson 1994). However, it was not until a year later after the implementing legislation was approved by both governments that the agreement was enacted into law. In the interim, Mulroney had to return to the campaign trail to secure a second term in office. While there were several matters he had to address in the 1988 Canadian federal election, the main issue was whether free trade with the US was good for Canada.

In the last two weeks before the 21 November election, a Gallup poll reported that "43 per cent of decided voters favoured the Liberals, 31 per cent chose the Conservatives and 22 per cent supported the New Democratic Party" (Janigan 1988). News of the poll made its way to the White House. On 10 November, President Reagan noted, "Canada's presenting a problem. P.M.'s opponent Turner looks like he's going to be the winner" (Brinkley 2007, 665). Margaret Thatcher shared Reagan's concerns and appreciated what was at stake if Mulroney's successor decided to nullify the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement. In a phone call to Mulroney following the election, Thatcher said, "If ever a Canadian prime minister repudiates an international treaty, it would be the end of any influence for Canadians in the international sphere" (Mulroney 2007, 634).

Allan Gregg, president of Toronto-based Decima Research Inc. and a Conservative pollster, was right; Gallup was wrong. When the Gallup poll was released, Gregg "personally reassured Prime Minister Mulroney that his soundings were far more favourable" (Janigan 1988). Mulroney, Reagan, and Thatcher were relieved, as were the millions of Canadians whose confidence in Mulroney's leadership resulted in a second majority government. With 43 percent of the popular vote, Mulroney had the mandate he required to pursue his agenda—one that included the ratification of the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement, which was brought into force on 1 January 1989.

Don't Rain on Me! The Acid Rain Agreement

Reagan's concerns about Mulroney's re-election efforts were not new. As early as March 1987, he recognized that his friend was having challenges and that his administration had to do something to help. During a meeting of the National Security Council on 3 March 1987 "in preparation for my summit in Canada with P.M. Mulroney," Reagan wrote, "He's [Mulroney] in big political trouble & part of it is based on political attacks that's he's beholden to me and the U.S. We're trying to find some things to bolster him. One possibility (if we can do it) some pick up in the acid rain situation" (Brinkley 2007, 480).

President Reagan's willingness to consider how to help Mulroney is notable, and his kindness was not lost on the prime minister. Mulroney was acutely aware that his efforts to fortify Canada's ties with the US would be welcomed by some Canadians and repudiated by others. Indeed, despite years of polling that confirmed Canadians thought highly of the US, a strong wave of anti-Americanism continued to flow across Canada, and Mulroney's desire to strengthen ties to the US made him a favorite target. One way that Mulroney tried to keep rising anti-American sentiments at bay was to strike an agreement with the US to combat acid rain, a serious issue on both sides of the border requiring a coordinated policy response.

From the time Mulroney and Reagan first met, the prime minister remained steadfast in his commitment to significantly curtail and eventually prevent sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides being emitted into the air by Canadian and US factories. When these compounds are released, they can cause a chemical reaction known as acid rain that is largely responsible for killing trees and poisoning rivers, estuaries, and lakes. Reagan was sensitive to Mulroney's concerns but, for a time, was under the impression that it was Canada, not the US, that was largely responsible for this problem, a claim that was quickly disputed as evidence revealed that 50-to-70 percent of acid rain came from the US and as little as 2-to-10 percent came from Canada.

In principle, drafting an agreement that would combat acid rain and the damage it was causing in the US and in Canada made perfect sense. It would certainly have gone a long way in mollifying the concerns of environmentalists. But politics isn't necessarily about what makes sense, rather it is often more about what is expedient. Reagan's willingness to listen to Mulroney's concerns and to engage him on this matter helped increase the profile of this important issue, but relative to other domestic and foreign policy challenges the president was confronting at the time, including the Iran-Contra Affair, negotiating nuclear arms agreements with the Soviets, and building a stronger US economy, this file was often relegated to the sidelines. Although Mulroney would have liked nothing more than to sign an agreement on acid rain with Reagan, the political stars did not align when the president was in office. Mulroney would have to wait until Reagan's successor, George H. W. Bush, assumed the presidency before an agreement on acid rain could be reached. Canada ratified the Canada-US Air Quality Agreement on 13 March 1991. This achievement, along with several other initiatives Mulroney undertook to protect the environment explains why, in April 2006, he was recognized by a panel of experts as Canada's greenest prime minister.

CONCLUSION: POLITICS MATTER, BUT FRIENDSHIP MATTERS MORE

In reflecting on his nine years in office, Prime Minister Mulroney has often said that, in the heat of political battles, it is important not to lose sight of the many friendships, forged with people from all political stripes, that were formed along the way. As this paper has shown, Mulroney and Reagan did not necessarily agree on how best to move certain policy files forward. Theirs was a special relationship, one that would create critical opportunities to both promote cooperation and manage dissent. They had a chemistry that, unlike acid rain, was anything but toxic. Representing sovereign

countries with distinct national interests and identities, and firmly immersed in an asymmetrical power relationship, they found creative and innovative ways to find common ground, even when politics at home could easily have driven a wedge between them.

As with most political relationships, Mulroney and Reagan did not achieve everything they hoped to, and at times, there was obvious friction. There is no doubt that Mulroney would have liked the president to take a stronger stand against apartheid and to embrace a more comprehensive approach to managing relations with Gorbachev. And, in a similar vein, Mulroney's insistence on having a dispute settlement mechanism in place before a free trade agreement could move forward and his decision not to provide a formal endorsement from the Canadian government for SDI likely created some tense and difficult moments in the Reagan White House. But despite some policy differences, in the history of Canada-US relations, rarely have a Canadian prime minister and a US president demonstrated more effective and competent leadership.

A more exhaustive analysis of the Mulroney-Reagan years, including a gendered-based perspective, would reveal far more than has been discussed in this paper. However, at the very least, this study has shown how two leaders, willing to become more than allies, can change the course of history. The relationship established and nurtured by Mulroney and Reagan unfolded over hundreds of hours and many years, not through dozens of tweets. In an age when leaders are more consumed by what is said on social media than what they accomplish in their personal interactions with their colleagues, they would be well-served by reflecting on what two small-town Irish kids from modest backgrounds were able to accomplish.

Brian Mulroney and Ronald Reagan remained close friends well after the president left office. As Alzheimer's continued to rob the president of his memory, Mulroney never lost sight of what this special man meant to him and to Canada. When President Reagan passed away in June 2004, Brian Mulroney was among a small group of people asked to eulogize him. He was the first Canadian prime minister in US history to speak at a president's funeral. Mulroney would later eulogize First Lady Nancy Reagan in March 2016 and President George H. W. Bush in December 2018.

The close and enduring bond between Brian Mulroney and Ronald Reagan offers more than a snapshot in history. It showcases how leaders should lead, how policy differences can be resolved through perseverance and mutual respect, and how the interests of nations can be advanced when there is an abundance of political will. It reminds us of what can be achieved when leaders are prepared to exchange more handshakes than insults.

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