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Friends in High Places: Brian Mulroney, George H.W. Bush, and the Creation of a New World Order

Donald E. Abelson

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Series Editors: Richard Isnor and Adam
Lajeunesse

Managing Editor: Anna Zuschlag

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4048A Mulroney Hall
St. Francis Xavier University
2330 Notre Dame Avenue
Antigonish, Nova Scotia
Canada
B2G 2W5

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The Mulroney Papers in Public Policy and Governance are published by the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government at St. Francis Xavier University. The purpose of this series is to provide a forum for emerging and established scholars and policy practitioners from various academic and professional backgrounds to weigh in on a range of domestic and foreign policy issues that focus on questions relating to leadership and governance.

Among the many questions that shape this series are how leaders at various levels of government immersed in different policy files have reacted to the challenges, pressures, and opportunities that come with elected office. What lessons can we learn from what went right, and at times, what went horribly wrong? This series aims to identify and illuminate what students of public policy and administration need to consider in evaluating the success or failure of various policy decisions.

Dr. Donald E. Abelson is Academic Director, Wilson College of Leadership and Civic Engagement, and Professor, Political Science, McMaster University. Before joining McMaster University, Dr. Abelson served as Director, Brian Mulroney Institute of Government, Steven K. Hudson Chair in Canada-US Relations, and Professor, Political Science, St. Francis Xavier University. 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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President Bush and Prime Minister Mulroney (Brian Mulroney Collection, Library Archives Canada).

INTRODUCTION: FRIENDSHIP IN TWILIGHT

One could hear a pin drop at Washington's National Cathedral on 5 December 2018 when Brian Mulroney, Canada's 18th prime minister, approached the podium to deliver a eulogy to America's 41st president, George H.W. Bush. This would be the second time Mulroney would be called upon to eulogize an American president; he eulogized Ronald Reagan on 11 June 2004 (and accepted the same honour at First Lady Nancy Reagan's funeral held at the Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California, on 11 March 2016).

In his remarks, Mulroney spoke glowingly of President Bush's leadership, his many accomplishments both at home and abroad, his uncanny ability to zero in on the most important points that needed to be considered in dissecting complex domestic and foreign policy issues, his dry wit and sense of humour, and his love of family. Mulroney also spoke of President Bush's character, his dignity, and, of course, his integrity. On this solemn occasion, Mulroney reminded the American people that they had lost one of their greatest presidents; on a more personal level, he had to come to terms with losing a close and dear friend.

Mulroney concluded his eulogy by reciting an old Irish proverb (Maloney, 2018):

There are wooden ships,
There are sailing ships,
There are ships that sail the sea,
But the most important ships are friendships,
And may they always be.

For some in attendance, Mulroney's final words may have seemed melodramatic and, perhaps, more suitable for a Hallmark card, but for those who understood the nature and depth of their relationship (see Cohen, 2018; McGrath & Milnes, 2009; McKercher, 2019), his remarks went a long way in explaining how the two leaders were able to both strengthen the Canada-US bilateral relationship and lay the foundation for a more stable world order. It was no accident that, together, Mulroney and Bush advanced major policy initiatives during the four years their terms in office overlapped. As several scholars of Canada-US relations have observed, Mulroney and Bush made great strides in protecting the environment from acid rain; created, along with Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, one of the most powerful trading blocs on the globe; and in many tangible ways, helped bring about a more secure international system in the post-Cold War era (Hampson, 2018). Much of this would not have been possible had they not developed and nurtured a strong friendship built on trust and mutual respect.

In an earlier paper, "Brian Mulroney, Ronald Reagan, and the Politics of Friendship" (Abelson, 2022), I argued that friendship between leaders can and often does play an important role both in facilitating cooperation and in managing dissent, especially when domestic politics may complicate their respective political agendas. In the case of Mulroney and Reagan, their friendship paved the way for a series of important policy initiatives, including the passage of the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement, and placing additional pressure on other world leaders to help end apartheid in South Africa. What also sealed this bond was that Mulroney and Reagan came from working-class backgrounds, took pride in their Irish ancestry, and shared a similar outlook on how strong conservative values could move their respective countries forward. More importantly, Reagan and Mulroney genuinely liked each other, and from the time they first met, they were able to strike up a strong and enduring friendship. In a similar vein, Mulroney and Bush's political and personal relationship grew over a long period of time, beginning with Bush's two terms as vice president and sole term as president. Although Bush considered Mulroney to be among his closest and most trusted advisers, it was Reagan, not Bush, who had far more in common with Mulroney. Unlike Mulroney, who grew up in a pulp and paper town on Quebec's North Shore where his family often struggled to make ends meet, Bush was born into one of America's most privileged families, attended several elite schools in the US, and spent much of his young life in upscale Greenwich, Connecticut (or on family properties in South Carolina and Kennebunkport, Maine). The Kennebunkport residence would later serve as Bush's "Summer White House."

While Mulroney's interest in politics was heightened at St. Francis Xavier University (StFX), a small Catholic university in rural Nova Scotia, Bush's exposure to politics came much earlier. His father, Prescott Bush, a successful investment banker, served as a Republican senator from Connecticut (1953–62). Ironically, while the Mulroney–Reagan partnership is often regarded as one of the strongest between a Canadian prime minister and a US president, in many ways, the ties between Mulroney and Bush were far greater. As will be discussed in this

study, Mulroney and Bush came from two different worlds yet managed to forge one of the era's most important political and personal partnerships.

The importance of friendship among leaders engaged in diplomacy and international relations has been acknowledged by some scholars (Abelson, 2022) in the field, but a comprehensive understanding of what friendship entails, and how it affects interstate cooperation, requires far more analysis. At its most basic level, friendship is deeply rooted in the shared experiences among two or more people who, over time, develop a bond which in some cases can last a lifetime. Friends often disagree on many topics but what distinguishes their relationship from those of casual acquaintances is a long-standing commitment to support and advocate on behalf of the other's best interests. True friendship makes room for agreement and difference, which is particularly important in exploring the issue at hand.

Looking at the Mulroney–Bush relationship through the lens of friendship adds yet another dimension to what leaders can achieve if they possess political will and a desire to strengthen personal ties. For Mulroney and Bush, friendship was not confined to simply finding common ground or keeping their disagreements private; nor, for that matter, was it about creating the impression for onlookers that they were simply being polite and diplomatic. Rather, it was because they respected and trusted each other that they were able to advance policy initiatives that did not necessarily go over well at home. But, their friendship allowed them to do far more than participate in successful negotiations over free trade and the environment; their strong and enduring friendship afforded them the luxury to think more critically, methodically, and responsibly about the world beyond their shores. Unlike the four tumultuous years of the Trump presidency when Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was preoccupied dealing with a US president who had little interest in and placed little value on the Canada-US relationship, Mulroney did not have to waste countless hours struggling to keep Canada-US relations on track. As one of the top priorities for any Canadian prime minister, Mulroney knew that the Canada-US file was in good hands with George H.W. Bush as president, and Bush felt the same about Mulroney. Confident in the state of bilateral relations, the two could turn their attention to strategizing about how best to reshape the world order after the collapse of the Cold War, what needed to be done to build an international coalition to repel Iraqi aggression against Kuwait, and how they could effectively manage the threat posed by the emergence of non-state actors. Concerns about the threat posed by an emerging arms race also became a preoccupation.

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This paper is divided into three sections. The first explores how two leaders born under very different circumstances reached the apex of political power in their respective countries. While they may have been motivated to become leaders for different reasons, both Mulroney and Bush felt deeply about serving the public interest. Mulroney has often been criticized for

being overly ambitious and for feathering his own nest at the expense of Canada's needs, but even his harshest critics could not ignore what he achieved in office (see, Sawatsky, 1991). Similarly, Bush's loss to Arkansas's Bill Clinton in 1992 was seen at the time as a referendum on a failed presidency, but in the years that followed, Bush's reputation as a strong and vocal leader has been revered throughout key policy circles (Natsios, 2021; Renwick, 2023).

In the second section, attention will shift to a more detailed discussion about two key agreements that came to define the Mulroney–Bush years: the implementation of the US–Canada Air Quality Agreement, often referred to as the Acid Rain Agreement, adopted on 13 March 1991, and the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on 1 January 1994 (see, Cameron & Tomlin, 2001). Although Mulroney and Bush had left office before the official signing of NAFTA, along with Mexican President Carlos Salinas, the three leaders are recognized as the architects of this historic trade and investment deal.

Finally, the study will focus on what President Bush and Prime Minister Mulroney achieved beyond strengthening the Canada-US bilateral relationship. Although at times overlooked, the legacy of both leaders should include their contributions to shaping the dialogue around several historic developments in the post-Cold War era. Mulroney and Bush were not always in lockstep on every foreign and defence policy they confronted, but the resiliency of their relationship allowed them to look beyond their policy differences and remain focused on what needed to be done at the time to foster a more stable global order.

WORLDS APART: THE LIVES OF BRIAN MULRONEY AND GEORGE H.W. BUSH

Jon Meacham, the celebrated American historian and biographer who penned a best-selling book about George H.W. Bush (Meacham, 2015), and was the first to eulogize him, would have plenty of interesting material upon which to draw if he ever decided to compare Bush's life to the many world leaders with whom he interacted. It would not take long for the presidential scholar to discover that few world leaders at the time presented a starker contrast to Bush's life and upbringing than Brian Mulroney.

Brian Mulroney and His Rise to Power

Born on 20 March 1939 to Irene O'Shea and Benedict Mulroney in Baie-Comeau, Québec, Martin Brian Mulroney described his upbringing in the quaint town of 2,000 inhabitants as "idyllic" (Mulroney, 2007, p. 3). The largest employer in Baie-Comeau, the Quebec North Shore Paper Mill, was owned and operated by Colonel Robert R. McCormick, president of the Chicago Tribune Inc., who, for over 30 years, served as the paper's editor and publisher. Among the employees who

worked at the mill was Mulroney's father, an electrician who often accepted odd jobs to make ends meet.

As an impressionable young boy, Mulroney looked forward to McCormick's visits. McCormick exemplified success: He was wealthy, highly educated, and had the spirit of a true entrepreneur who relied on his vision and instincts to build an empire. The American mogul may have been perceived by some in the small Québec town as a typical capitalist who wouldn't hesitate to put corporate interests over those of his employees, but for Mulroney, he was in many ways a hero, someone to be admired and emulated.

When McCormick arrived in Baie-Comeau, Mulroney could often be found by his side singing songs that would entertain the media magnate and others in attendance. For his efforts, McCormick would give him \$50, a tidy sum that would put a smile on Mulroney's face. In later years, Mulroney, who fashioned himself a crooner, could be enticed to sing songs performed by Frank Sinatra and other members of the Rat Pack at private parties and in more public venues.

There is little doubt that McCormick's presence in Baie-Comeau left an impression on Mulroney. Although his life would take a different turn than McCormick's, it was the pursuit of the American Dream and all it entailed that loomed prominently throughout Mulroney's life. From an early age, Canada's future prime minister understood that to truly make it in the world, he had to establish a strong and visible foothold in the United States. What better way for a Canadian with political ambitions to do that than to rise to Canada's highest political office (see, Sawatsky, 1991). If he could, the doors to the Oval Office would be well within his grasp.

Mulroney's political journey began when he enrolled as a 16-year-old at StFX, a Catholic university located in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, a small, picturesque rural town in the northeastern section of the province. 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 honours 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 fundraised over CAD\$125 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.

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 labour 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 labour 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 Chevette, leader of the province's teacher's union and a supporter of the Parti Québécois, in the three-member inquiry.

Mulroney and his colleagues were appointed to serve the public interest, and there was little anyone could do to distract them.

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 highlight his vast talents. There was no doubt that he could ask tough questions, and there was even less doubt that he would allow 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 his tenure in office would be short-lived. Less than a year into his first and only term, Clark 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, and what Mulroney believes was a foolhardy decision, to call for a leadership convention in 1983. Committed to bolstering support from his party (which then stood at 66.9 percent), Clark quickly found himself staring into the abyss. The door for a leadership review had opened, 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, he would win the greatest electoral landslide in Canadian history to become Canada's 18th prime minister. In the 1988 Canadian federal election, Mulroney would go on to win

again, albeit with a reduced number of seats in the House of Commons, to become the first Conservative prime minister to win back-to-back majorities since Sir John A. Macdonald.

Mulroney's consecutive victories had secured his place in Canadian history, but the boy from Baie-Comeau understood that "it was only in the fullness of time" that a prime minister's record in office could be rigorously evaluated by historians and other scholars. When it came to his legacy, Mulroney did not want to leave anything to chance. On the domestic policy front, he had clearly made his mark. He introduced the Goods and Services Tax, which generated billions of dollars each year in federal revenue; supported French language minority rights in Manitoba; strengthened his ties to Canada's Jewish community by taking tangible steps to combat antisemitism; and invested considerable political capital in what was a failed attempt to reform Canada's constitution.

With a growing list of impressive policy successes under his belt, Mulroney had already distinguished himself as a formidable leader, but he wanted more. It was not enough for him to be the prime minister of a leading Commonwealth country; he wanted to be recognized as a global leader. This could not happen, Mulroney realized, without fostering close ties to successive American presidents. He appreciated better than most on Parliament Hill that an enduring partnership with Washington could elevate both his status and Canada's position and influence on the world stage. Mulroney once remarked that when a Canadian prime minister has a strong personal relationship with a US president, "good things can happen" (Paas-Lang, 2023). He echoed these sentiments recently when he appeared as a guest on CBC Radio's *The House* to discuss the importance of Canada standing by the US and Israel following the horrific and barbaric attacks against Israelis on 7 October 2023 (Paas-Lang, 2023). Fortunately for Mulroney, who followed his own advice, he found willing and able partners in Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, which, as this paper will show, paid handsome dividends.

The special relationship Mulroney established and maintained with Ronald Reagan has been well documented (Abelson, 2022). Together, they negotiated the passage of the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement, avoided a clash over Reagan's desire to pursue the Strategic Defense Initiative (dubbed Star Wars) and made progress toward bringing additional pressure on the South African regime to end apartheid. Much of what they achieved could be attributed to the many things they shared but as the next section will illustrate, Mulroney's success collaborating with American presidents did not end with Reagan. Indeed, despite having little in common with Reagan's successor, George H.W. Bush, Mulroney's efforts to strengthen the Canada-US relationship reached even greater heights during Bush's presidency.

A Life of Service: George H.W. Bush in Politics

George Herbert Walker Bush was born with a silver spoon, not a silver tongue, but what he lacked in eloquence, he more than compensated for in his unwavering commitment to protect and defend the wide-ranging interests of the United States. Born on 12 June 1924 to Prescott and Dorothy Walker Bush, George Bush grew up in a life of privilege in Greenwich, Connecticut. He attended the

Greenwich Country Day School (1929–37) and then enrolled in Phillips Academy, where he graduated in 1942. Following the devastating attack at Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, Bush could not wait until he graduated from Phillips so he could enlist in the US Navy as a naval aviator (see, Meacham, 2015). After a year of training, Bush was commissioned as an ensign at Naval Station Corpus Christi, Texas, on 9 June 1943, making him the youngest pilot in the Navy. In 1944, Bush was assigned to the USS *San Jacinto* as part of the Air Group 51, and on 2 September 1944, his life would forever change during an attack over Japanese-held Wake Island.

As Meacham recalls in his eulogy, on this fateful day, the young pilot and two of his crew members were shot down by enemy fire after they had successfully bombed a Japanese installation in Chichijima. The crew members lost their lives, but Bush survived and was eventually rescued by a US submarine. After he was able to process what had happened, Bush began to question why his life was spared. Did God have a plan for me, he wondered? He couldn't breathe life into his fallen mates, but, in time, he came to the realization that, like his father, a US senator, he could help protect his country in other ways. During his impressive career, the Yale graduate and recipient of

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the Distinguished Flying Cross served his country with distinction in several capacities: representing Texas in the US House of Representatives, as US Ambassador to the United Nations (UN), as director of the Central Intelligence Agency, serving two terms as vice president, and as president of the United States.

Bush, like Mulroney, entered political life after a successful career in business, but it was the desire to leave an imprint on the fabric of the nation that propelled both leaders to jump into the political arena. By the time Ronald Reagan had selected George Bush as his running mate in the 1980 presidential election, Bush had already established himself as a key figure in Washington politics. For many onlookers, Bush was, in some ways, an unlikely choice to fill the vice-president spot. After all, Bush had supported Richard Nixon, not Reagan, in the 1968 Republican presidential primaries. He had run against the two-term California governor in the 1980 presidential primaries, and he relied on a series of attack ads against Reagan during the primaries that did not go unnoticed by the Gipper and his close friends and allies. Indeed, it was Bush who coined the phrase "voodoo economics" in response to Reagan's economic plan to restore financial stability after America's dismal economic performance during the Carter years. However, when Gerald Ford turned down Reagan's offer to run on the bottom half of the presidential ticket, Bush got the nod, largely because Reagan felt that he would appeal to more moderate conservatives.

The Reagan-Bush ticket proved to be a winning combination in 1980 as the unlikely pair handily defeated Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale capturing 489 of 538 electoral votes. Four years later, the Mondale-Geraldine Ferraro ticket would face an even greater defeat at the hands of Reagan-

Bush when they secured 525 electoral votes and 58.8 percent of the popular vote, one of the greatest political landslides in American history.

As a businessman in New York and later in Texas, George Bush often thought that he was living under the shadow of his “Wall Street” father and grandfather, two highly successful members of the financial community. As vice president for two terms under Ronald Reagan, Bush likely felt that, once again, he would be forced to live in the shadows, but this time it would be under those cast by the 40th president of the United States. As British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli observed, “everything comes if a man will only wait,” so Bush remained patient as Reagan’s years in office came to an end.

Riding the wave of outgoing support for Reagan and the promise that he would continue in his footsteps, Bush and his running mate, Dan Quayle, had little difficulty defeating former Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis and Texas Senator Lloyd Bentsen in the 1998 presidential election. Although the 426 electoral votes they captured may not have been as impressive as the results of the 1980 and 1984 elections, Bush’s win was decisive and gave him the mandate he required to implement his domestic and foreign policy agenda.

In most scholarly treatments of President George H.W. Bush’s legacy, the bulk of attention not surprisingly is devoted to his long list of achievements in foreign policy (see, Meacham, 2015). On his watch, he used military force to restore democracy in Panama, a country that had long suffered under the often brutal regime of Manuel Noriega, helped navigate the reunification of Germany and its admission to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); oversaw the collapse of the Soviet Union with skill and acumen; pieced together, with the help of several countries, a coalition to oppose Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait; applied additional pressure on South Africa to bring an end to apartheid; and undertook several measures to promote peace in the Middle East. But as John Sununu, Bush’s former White House chief of staff, points out in assessing the 41st president’s record (Sununu, 2018), there also needs to be significant consideration of his domestic policy victories. Not one for taking credit for any successes, Bush’s accomplishments in domestic policy are formidable. They included the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990); the Clean Air Act (1990); the Food, Agriculture, Conservation, and Trade Act (1990); the negotiation of NAFTA (1991–93); and the Canada-US Air Quality Agreement (1991), along with important legislation on crime.

Yet, despite an enviable record on multiple policy fronts, Bush could not hold off Bill Clinton during the 1992 presidential election. Focused like a laser beam on the economy, the charismatic, articulate, and flashy governor from Arkansas was able to convince the electorate that if a stronger and more resilient economy was their primary concern, he was the one best able to deliver it. Bush’s defeat at the hands of Clinton stung for years, but what the elder Bush could justifiably take credit for in office continues to be explored and revered in policy and academic circles. Of his many successes, two that have stood the test of time are the Canada-US Air Quality Agreement and NAFTA, both negotiated by President Bush and his steadfast and reliable partner, Brian Mulroney.

SKIN AND BONES: ADDING MEAT TO THE CANADA-US RELATIONSHIP

Nicknamed “Skin” for his tall lanky frame, it was only a matter of time before Bush would meet a fellow leader whose slender physique in his teens earned him the name “Bones.” Together, Skin and Bones would forever change the Canada-US landscape with their efforts to improve the environment and to create one of the largest trading blocs in the world.

Negotiating an Agreement in a Less Toxic Environment

Despite Mulroney’s close and special relationship with Ronald Reagan, he could not convince the 40th US president to sign on to the Canada-US Air Quality Agreement. Although Reagan had a willing spirit, several of his advisers had convinced him that it was Canada, not the US, that was primarily responsible for the bulk of sulphur dioxide emissions causing acid rain and killing forests, lakes, and rivers on both sides of the border, a claim denied consistently by Canadian officials.

Although Mulroney was not prepared to sacrifice the goodwill he had built up with President Reagan, he also wasn’t prepared to give up on a cause he felt passionate about (Mulroney, 2022). For Mulroney, it wasn’t about whether an important environmental agreement between the two countries could be reached; it was only about when. This was a message he conveyed to Reagan in April 1988 and to Vice President Bush during a breakfast meeting at which he reminded the vice president that, as a self-proclaimed environmentalist, he expected him, if elected president, to support an air quality agreement (Mulroney, 2007, pp. 599–600). To Mulroney’s delight, it didn’t take long for his concerns about acid rain to return to the bilateral political agenda. On 10 February 1989, three weeks after President Bush was sworn in, he made his first foreign trip, a six-hour visit to Ottawa, to discuss a host of key bilateral and international issues. Among them was the importance of reducing emissions from US power plants burning coal, a topic the two leaders discussed at length in the months following Bush’s visit to Ottawa.

In the nation’s capital, Bush made it clear that his trip “symbolizes the importance we place on the relationship with Canada” (Mulroney, 2007, pp. 599–600). Aware that the previous administration in which he served was heavily criticized by Canadian officials for dragging its feet on acid rain, Bush insisted that protecting the environment would be a priority, and he made good on his promise. On 15 November 1990, Bush enacted amendments to the Clean Air Act which reduced emissions from US plants. Less than four months later, Canada and the US successfully negotiated and ratified the Canada-US Air Quality Agreement, known as the Acid Rain Agreement.

During Mulroney’s eulogy to George Bush, he applauded his commitment to protecting the environment and why this would always be a strong part of his legacy. According to Mulroney,

President Bush's decision to go forward with strong environmental legislation, including the Clean Air Act that resulted in an Acid Rain Accord with Canada, is a splendid gift to future generations of Americans and Canadians to savour in the air they breathe, the water they drink, the forests they enjoy, and the lakes, rivers and streams they cherish," Mulroney noted. He added, 'There is a word for this: it is called "leadership"—and let me tell you that when George Bush was president of the United States of America, every single head of government in the world knew they were dealing with a true gentleman, a genuine leader—one who was distinguished, resolute and brave. (Maloney, 2018)

Mulroney, who has acknowledged publicly that among his many attributes, modesty isn't one, neglected to add that his efforts to negotiate the Acid Rain Agreement earned him the title of Canada's greenest prime minister, an accolade he often shares with audiences around the world. It is an honour of which he is deeply proud.

In the nine years he held office, and in the decades since he made his mark on Parliament Hill and internationally, Mulroney never forgot Bush's willingness to invest political capital to negotiate an environmental accord with Canada, an agreement made possible not only because of the president's concern over acid rain but also because of his fondness for Canada's 18th prime minister. From the time Mulroney, as Leader of the Official Opposition, first met Ronald Reagan and George Bush in the White House in June 1984, he realized that, if elected prime minister, he could make great things happen with this formidable team. As noted, Mulroney understood all too well that the key to elevating Canada's status on the world stage would be forever linked to the strength of the relationship prime ministers enjoyed with American presidents. This was a lesson never lost on the boy from Baie-Comeau who, throughout his life, has placed enormous value on the many friendships he has formed and nurtured over the years. Being friends with US presidents certainly couldn't hurt, and Mulroney made sure that these relationships would receive special attention and consideration. Negotiating an important environmental agreement was not the first, nor would it be the last time Mulroney's friendship with President Bush would pay off.

The Uninvited Guest: Brian Mulroney and NAFTA

In Yiddish, when someone demonstrates, through their actions and/or deeds, "extreme self-consciousness, gaul or audacity," it is called *chutzpah*. What it really means is nerve. To say that it was chutzpah for Mulroney to demand of Bush that he include Canada in the NAFTA negotiations is an understatement. When Mulroney got wind that President Bush and Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari had agreed in June 1990 to begin negotiations to construct a bilateral free trade agreement, Mulroney was apoplectic. Concerned that a US-Mexico deal could erode some of the many gains Canada had secured through the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement, Mulroney wasted little time explaining to President Bush why Canada had to be at the table.

A talented and masterful negotiator, Mulroney relied on several arguments to convince Bush that it was in America's interest to create a trilateral agreement, not the least of which was that with the combined resources of Canada, Mexico, and the United States, they could build one of the largest and most lucrative trading blocs in the world, possibly rivalling or surpassing the revenue generated by the European Union.

The uninvited guest had found his way to the NAFTA head table and negotiations for drafting the agreement began in earnest in the fall of 1991. Had Mulroney not enjoyed a close personal relationship with President Bush, the outcome could and likely would have been much different. Canada and the US had already signed a free trade agreement with President Reagan, and as a sovereign country, the US certainly didn't require Canada's permission to enter into other bilateral

The uninvited guest had found his way to the NAFTA head table, and negotiations for drafting the agreement began in earnest in the fall of 1991.

trade agreements. What right did a Canadian prime minister have to thwart the plans of an American president? None. The difference was that Prime Minister Mulroney had an ace up his sleeve: a valued friend who occupied the most important office in the world, a friend who trusted his judgement, appreciated his intellect, and often sought his advice. President Bush also knew that it was hard to say no to Mulroney.

Mulroney had made his way into the negotiations, but there were many roadblocks that had to be navigated before the NAFTA could be signed and ratified, including addressing the concerns expressed by environmental groups and labour unions in Canada and the US. Among other things, they felt that a free trade agreement involving Mexico could and likely would result in the lowering of environmental and labour standards. These concerns could not be easily dismissed or ignored requiring the negotiating teams representing the three countries to determine how best to address them. In the end, President Clinton insisted that parallel or side agreements be negotiated before he would submit the NAFTA and implementing legislation to Congress for ratification.

Despite reservations in Canada that the side agreements did not go far enough (Cameron & Tomlin, 2001), there was sufficient support from Washington's two partners to move forward. The side agreements were negotiated, President Clinton devoted countless hours to lobbying members of Congress to support the NAFTA, and the many months Mulroney, Bush, and Salinas invested in this agreement paid off. Although Mulroney and Bush were no longer in power when the NAFTA was signed on 1 January 1994, the two, along with President Salinas, relished this accomplishment. Since the NAFTA came into effect, there have been ongoing assessments of the extent to which each country has benefitted from the accord, but this historic pact has largely remained intact, despite the changes made in the United States-Mexico-Canada-Agreement, negotiated and signed during the Trump administration.

On several occasions during the 2016 Republican presidential primaries, Donald Trump proclaimed that “NAFTA was the worst trade deal ever” (Kirby, 2020), and that if elected president, he would abolish it. Trump’s promise to abolish the agreement sent shock waves throughout official Ottawa, leaving Prime Minister Trudeau scrambling to deal with a recalcitrant and acerbic president determined to destroy the most important agreement involving Canada and the US (Abelson & Brooks, forthcoming). Unlike Brian Mulroney’s relationship with Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, Justin Trudeau rarely saw Trump as an ally. When it appeared that the negotiations for a new NAFTA were on the verge of unravelling, Trudeau enlisted Mulroney’s help to go to Washington and make Canada’s case before Congress to preserve the bulk of the agreement. Mulroney’s efforts were rewarded, once again confirming the importance of maintaining strong ties to key powerbrokers in the US.

A World Beyond Our Shores: Mulroney, Bush, and the New World Order

From the time Brian Mulroney entered office in 1984, the Canada-US relationship was on strong footing. Despite occasional policy differences and disagreements between Mulroney and Presidents Reagan and Bush, few could overlook how “special” the ties between the two countries had become. It was a time that scholars often look back on with nostalgia. But what made the relationship special were the strong connections between its leaders.

James A. Baker, III, former White House chief of staff under Presidents Reagan and Bush, and US secretary of state under the latter, opined over how Reagan and Bush’s interactions with Mulroney helped advance their respective political goals and objectives. It is worth quoting Baker at length:

Mulroney’s friendships with Reagan and Bush were clearly based on warm personal relations, mutual respect, an unwavering commitment to shared political values, and a bedrock of trust. Mulroney was seen by both Presidents as a valuable interlocutor and trusted counsel, often on issues that went well beyond the narrow scope of Canada-US relations. This was especially true in the run up to the first Gulf War when President Bush built a global coalition with Mulroney’s help to expel Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein’s forces out of Kuwait... Mulroney’s counsel was also helpful as the Berlin Wall came tumbling down and Western allies found themselves divided on the thorny issue of German reunification, which Bush and Mulroney strongly supported. Mulroney had an uncanny grasp of American politics and American politicians which is why his counsel was unfailingly pertinent. He was instrumental in bolstering the trust of other allies on these critical issues. (as quoted in Hampson, 2018, pp. x–xi)

Despite his vast knowledge of the inner workings of American politics and his extensive contacts in the executive branch and on Capitol Hill, Mulroney was still seen by many inside the “beltway” as an outsider, someone who could not possibly compete with Washington power brokers for the president’s attention. Nothing could be further from the truth. From the time Mulroney became prime minister, he enjoyed unfettered access to the Oval Office, a luxury not lost on other foreign leaders who often requested of Mulroney that he speak to Reagan and Bush on their behalf. With plenty of elbow room to play with, Mulroney made his presence felt. Reagan and Bush trusted his counsel because, unlike those surrounding them who went to great lengths to advance their own political agendas, and those of the departments and agencies they represented (Allison, 1971), Mulroney could provide a fresh set of eyes to help both presidents focus on the key issues at hand. Of course, this did not preclude differences of opinion arising between Mulroney, Reagan, and Bush, but rather helped maintain open lines of communication that could facilitate a proper and candid assessment of the options before them.

Mulroney recognized early on in his tenure how important it was to be candid with the American presidents with whom he interacted. He stated,

While working with President Reagan and other allies across the globe, I learned that true friends must look their counterparts in the eye and feel no hesitation in offering up the unvarnished truth. To tweak the American eagle just for the sake of doing so- to earn nothing but easy and cheap applause from Canada’s anti-American lobby-is an abdication of leadership and a dereliction of Canada’s duty as a trusted friend and ally. The president of the United States (like any leader) has many friends, advisors, and others to tell him what they think he wants to hear... [They] didn’t want friends like that. They wanted openness and honesty, and they always responded in kind. (Mulroney, 2007, pp. 353–54)

In reflecting on the relationship between politics and friendships, Mulroney has often noted that politics stops at the water’s edge, but friendships can take you to new horizons. This is exactly what he experienced with Ronald Reagan and George Bush. While several of the prime minister’s critics lambasted him for cozying up to the US, Mulroney failed to be distracted, electing instead to strengthen his ties to two transformational presidents, and in the process elevating Canada’s global standing to new heights.

As Mulroney and Bush became more confident in the vitality of the Canada-US relationship, they could afford to devote more time to addressing some of the historic changes taking place around them. President Bush was acutely aware of America’s military and economic prowess and with the responsibility that came with being the world’s remaining hegemon. Mulroney was also aware that, as a middle power, there was only so much influence Canada could wield on the world stage, so rather than seek refuge in America’s shadow, he worked closely with Bush to advance key foreign policy initiatives.

The bipolar international system Mulroney and Bush came to know as young men bore little resemblance to the one, they inhabited as leaders of their respective countries. Following the collapse of the Berlin Wall, a new world awaited, one in which non-state actors could conceivably challenge and at times erode the ability of sovereign liberal democratic states to maintain order. They also faced a world where dictators were running amok in Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, and a communist system in the former Soviet Union that was on the verge of collapse. Along with these historic changes, they had concerns about an escalating arms race; how to bring about an end to apartheid in South Africa; and what, if anything could be done to bring peace to the Middle East, a dream that appears beyond reach in the aftermath of Hamas's brutal killings of over 1,200 innocent Israeli, women, children, and men, and the kidnapping of approximately 200 Israelis, Americans, and other foreign nationals on 7 October 2023.

In each situation that required President Bush, as commander-in-chief, to make a decision that could affect the future of the international community, he turned to Brian Mulroney for advice and wise counsel. This proved enormously helpful to Bush, particularly when he was building an international coalition to repel Iraqi forces from Kuwait in Operation Desert Storm. It was Mulroney who advised Bush to seek the approval of the UN before engaging in conflict, and it was Mulroney, along with other advisers, who cautioned the president not to invade Baghdad.

This was not the first time, nor would it be the last that Bush and Mulroney would strategize about how to manage an existing conflict or ward off pending ones. Navigating the West's relationship with Mikhail Gorbachev as he sought to introduce significant economic and political reforms in a country where such changes were foreign required great sensitivity, as did the question of German reunification and NATO enlargement. Bringing world pressure to bear on South Africa to free Nelson Mandela after decades of confinement also depended on leaders like Bush and Mulroney who weren't afraid to think outside the box.

As noted, the chemistry Mulroney shared with Reagan was special; the one he had with George Bush was exceptional. It was exceptional because their interactions drew on their unique strengths, which, in the end, proved to be formidable. Bush, the consummate gentleman who could remain calm under fire, complemented Mulroney's ability to dissect any situation with surgical precision and to command the respect of those around him. Together, Skin and Bones changed the political landscape in their countries and made incredible contributions to shaping a New World Order. The challenges they confronted while in power have not disappeared. If anything, some have become even more pronounced. But it was their ability to tackle some of the globe's most pressing problems head on that defined their legacy.

CONCLUSION: THERE ARE NO SHIPS LIKE FRIENDSHIPS

This paper began by quoting an old Irish proverb Brian Mulroney recited in his eulogy to George H.W. Bush. It concludes with a letter President Bush penned to Mulroney shortly before he left office in 1993 following a visit with Mulroney at Camp David, the last time the president hosted any guests at the historic retreat.

In his letter, Bush writes, in part:

I think it is fitting that you were my last guest as my presidency is drawing to a close. As you recall, my first presidential trip was to Ottawa in February 1989. I remember the contrast between the bitter cold outside, and the warm friendship we kindled in our conversation that day. Through good times and bad, I have been comforted by the fact you have been a wise counsel a strong supporter, and a true friend...Your counsel in handling the transformation in the Soviet Union- to managing delicate relations between Ukraine and Russia- has been invaluable... I could go on and on-Bosnia, Haiti, the Middle East.

It's a record that should make every Canadian proud. It's a record that brings to life the true meaning of partnership between our two countries... Brian, you are a true friend. It will ever be thus far as I'm concerned. (Mulroney, 2007, p. 968)

President Bush's sincere and heartfelt letter to Prime Minister Mulroney should serve as a reminder to students of Canada-US relations and diplomatic history that true friendship between political leaders' matter. It matters not only because friendship can go a long way in promoting cooperation and managing dissent, but it can, as was the case with Bush and Mulroney, create a strong foundation for both engaging other world leaders and dealing with a host of international issues.

In the eight years Bush interacted with Mulroney, four as vice president and four as president, they struck a strong personal and professional relationship that afforded them multiple opportunities to strengthen the ties between Canada and the United States and to address and resolve several sensitive and complex policy problems.

In an era when social media can destroy people with one click, it is comforting to know that some world leaders have the capacity and inclination to invest the time and effort to build relationships that will truly advance the public interest. What Bush and Mulroney were able to accomplish over a brief period was nothing short of remarkable. Together, they passed critically important agreements to protect the environment and the North American economy and undertook countless measures to bring more predictability and stability to a world undergoing historic changes. At a time when the global community desperately needed strong leadership, they answered the call.



These two leaders came from very different backgrounds and life experiences, but it was their deep friendship based on mutual respect and trust that enabled them to do great things. In the fullness of time, as Mulroney likes to say, history will record what leaders achieved. Those who take pride in what President Bush and Prime Minister Mulroney did for their respective countries—and for the world—will not be disappointed with how they are remembered.

And may it ever be thus.

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