Mr. O goes to Washington: The bigger-than-big agenda

MODERNITY’S FIRST WEB 2.0 PRESIDENT

Obama’s political capital is at its zenith and eventually the tide will turn; but for now, Leader Obama is unlike any other contemporary political figure. What sets him apart is a combination of his youth, his forceful ideas, the jaw-numbing crisis he faces, and the innovative way he constantly networks with his base, integrating it into the policy process. All of this has pushed him and us, Canada and Mexico, into uncharted waters because he is committed to changing the way politics is done and how the economy operates.

In office a month over 100 days, and Obama’s action agenda to rescue the American economy seems hesitant and in danger of being derailed. His message is that Americans both need and expect action: “Millions of jobs that Americans relied on just a year ago are gone; millions more of the nest eggs families worked so hard to build have vanished. People everywhere are worried about what tomorrow will bring. What Americans expect from Washington is action that matches the urgency they feel in their daily lives—action that’s swift, bold and wise enough for us to climb out of this crisis” (Washington Post, February 5, 2009).

The push back from the Republicans and neo-conservative movement is a major obstacle to a really strong stimulus package. At present, Obama’s bipartisan approach is not working. Skeptics don’t believe he will succeed, and pragmatists...
It began with the most.

CaNada WatCh  •  SPRiNg 2009 5

United States.

gone, they must be kept outside the
could not be deterred, the reasoning
altered it. Because suicide terrorists
did not abolish that paradigm, it certainly
ening massive retaliation. Although 9/11
capable of striking US territory by threat

deters, either fighting wars abroad or

In its modern history, America had
states, this was a radically new concept.

of plugging vulnerabilities. For the United

Department of Homeland Security

urging of congressional Democrats, the

Since its establishment in 2003 at the

HOMElaNd SECURitY

bours on its northern and southern

cated and difficult for America's neigh-
bors to use his power to frighten bankers,
business people, and investors into

The reaction to Speaker's sojourn was
a warning about what is still to come as
the mentality of “homeland security”
becomes ever more firmly entrenched
in Washington, despite the years that
have passed since the 9/11 attacks. The
administration of Barack Obama may
change the nuances and nudge the pri-
orities, but it is a world view that is shared
by Democrats and Republicans alike.
And it will make life still more compi-
cated and difficult for America's neigh-
bours on its northern and southern
borders.

HOMELAND SECURITY

Since its establishment in 2003 at the
urging of congressional Democrats, the
Department of Homeland Security
(DHS) has conceived its mission as one
of plugging vulnerabilities. For the United
States, this was a radically new concept.
In its modern history, America had
always defended itself far from its bor-
ders, either fighting wars abroad or
detering the handful of adversaries
capable of striking US territory by threat-
ening massive retaliation. Although 9/11
did not abolish that paradigm, it certainly
altered it. Because suicide terrorists
could not be deterred, the reasoning
went, they must be kept outside the
United States.

accepting that financial stability is
needed to calm the markets and to
return to a sense of proportion so as to
avoid any further catastrophic losses in
the financial markets. Narco-terrorism
in Mexico and a massive illegal traffic-
ing of handguns in both Canada and the
United States have begun to broaden the
debate over security. The situation on
both counts is likely to get worse before
it gets better.

It has been observed that when coun-
tries abandon old, orthodox assump-
tions about public policy, innovative
diplomacy is possible because it is in
everyone's self-interest. This insight
applies particularly to the future of North
America. NAFTA illustrates the clash
between liberal elements mixed with
dirigiste; power-based rules that have left
Canada and Mexico permanently off
balance. The collapse of the US housing
market, its troubled financial institutions,
and the sea of job loss have made huge
holes in the idea of North America as an
integrated set of markets.

What we don’t know is this: Will
Obama be solely responsible for setting
a coherent North American agenda?
What will be the role and responsibility
of Mexico and Canada? Will they be able
to renegotiate a comprehensive and
inclusionary social agenda? We are all wait-
ing to exhale.
The quest for the perfectly secure border

The biggest concern was Europe. Most Europeans can travel to the United States without first getting a visa. As the London and Madrid train bombings showed, Europe has a handful of radicalized Muslims prepared to attack civilians. So as the price for maintaining the visa waiver program, the United States forced European nations into a series of concessions. The Europeans agreed to hand over detailed advanced information on all passengers flying into the United States despite the problems this caused under Europe’s more stringent privacy rules; they would alert Washington when any blank passports were stolen, which had been an endemic problem in countries like Belgium; and they would share information on their own lists of terrorist suspects.

US-VISIT

Then in early 2004, the United States launched the fingerprinting scheme, or the United States Visitor and Immigration Status Indicator Technology program known as US-Visit. It was originally conceived in the 1990s as a way to stop visa overstayers, who are thought to make up as much as 40 percent of illegal immigrants living in America. But after 9/11 it was repackaged and sold on terrorism grounds. For most travellers to the United States, that now means getting fingerprinted twice—once when you get the visa, and again when you arrive in the United States. For most Europeans, Japanese, and citizens of other visa waiver countries, it just happens once.

Washington announced recently that the scheme would be expanded to include permanent residents or green card holders living in the country. Not surprisingly given its origins, the program has done nothing to identify terrorists, but the DHS points out that more than 4,000 criminals and immigration violators have been stopped. Not a threat on par with terrorism, to be sure, but who could object to keeping criminals and unauthorized migrants out of the country?

As each of these vulnerabilities was checked off the US to-do list after 9/11, the next item rose in priority. That has brought us to where we are today, with much of the focus on the northern and southern land borders. Due to the sheer volume of crossings, the land borders pose special, and possibly insurmountable, problems for an approach to homeland security premised on plugging vulnerabilities. Mexicans are already facing stricter identification requirements at the southern border, which has produced further delays in the already gridlocked ports of entry. Canadians, and Americans crossing the northern border, are set to face the same requirements as of June 2009 unless Congress pushes the deadline back again, which is unlikely.

Mexicans and Canadians, in most cases, are not routinely fingerprinted when they come to the United States. Yet under laws already passed by Congress, they are supposed to be, and the DHS is experimenting with ways to make that happen without stalling cross-border traffic entirely. And the entry fingerprint is only step one. Congress has also mandated that every visitor should “check out” of the country as well. For stopping terrorists, this has almost no value, but it would be helpful for immigration control. The DHS has recently proposed that airlines collect the fingerprints from departing airport passengers, which has the airline industry up in arms. No one has any good ideas about how to do this at the land borders, but it is inching up on the to-do list of vulnerabilities.

As the quest for the perfectly secure border continues from page 5

FORTIFYING THE BORDERS

Finally, if the legal ports of entry can be secured, the long undefended borders will then become the biggest threat. Ever more of the US–Mexican border has been fortified in the name of keeping out drugs and illegal migrants. About 500 miles of steel fence are already in place. President Obama’s new homeland security secretary Janet Napolitano—who knows that border well as a former Arizona governor—is a critic of the fence, but has been enthusiastic about a “virtual fence” composed of surveillance cameras, unmanned aerial drones, and heat-sensing technologies. So far the pilot projects have failed dismally, but once the kinks are worked out, the same schemes are likely to be rolled out along the US–Canadian border.

The question arises: could any of this have kept Typhoid Andy from returning home to Atlanta? Possibly, but not necessarily. US border inspectors had been warned to watch for him, but the inspector at Champlain ignored the warning and let him in anyway. And it turns out he wasn’t all that contagious after all, and does not appear to have infected anyone.

The problem with the perfect border is that we live in an imperfect world—a world of ill-defined threats and fallible people trying to respond to them. The United States needs some way to distinguish urgent and serious threats from minor ones, and to calculate the costs—to the economy, to relations with neighbours and allies, and to its tarnished image as an open and welcoming society—of trying to counter those threats. In other words, the United States needs a strategy, not just a series of reactions. That is the real border challenge for the Obama administration, but not one, sadly, that it is likely to embrace.