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EDITORIAL

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.

BY DANIEL DRACHE AND JOSÉ LUIS VALDÉS-UGALDE

Daniel Drache is associate director of the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies, York University. José Luis Valdés-Ugalde is director of the Centre for Research on North America at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

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

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SECURITY AND IMMIGRATION POST-BUSH

The quest for the perfectly secure border

THE THREAT OF POROUS BORDERS

Andrew Speaker had at least this in common with a terrorist: he was determined not to be caught. Speaker, a US citizen, had been warned by American health authorities in May 2007 to stay at home in Atlanta after he contracted a highly infectious, drug-resistant strain of tuberculosis. But he had plans to be married in Europe, so he ignored the warning and flew to Paris. Two weeks later, after US officials had tracked him down in Rome, he promised to get treatment there and refrain from travelling. Yet the

BY EDWARD ALDEN

Edward Alden is the Bernard L. Schwartz Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, Washington, DC, and the author of *The Closing of the American Border: Terrorism, Immigration, and Security Since 9/11*, published by HarperCollins.

next day he broke his word and boarded a flight from Prague to Montreal, where he rented a car and drove across the US border at Champlain, New York. When the news broke, it became Exhibit A for those who think that porous borders remain the biggest threat to US security. Congress immediately convened hearings to vent its outrage at the Department of Homeland Security. If a known TB carrier could be waved into the country across the northern border, they argued, how much harder could it be for one of bin Laden's operatives?

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into the pages of history. The current fiscal collapse looks particularly frightening because all three North American economies are moving into recession or are already there. The near collapse of the banking sector and the imminent bankruptcy of GM, Chrysler, and possibly Ford signal that the worst is far from over. In fairness to Obama, it needs to be said that he has not yet given a lot of thought to the architecture of deep integration post-Bush.

It is unlikely that he will use his Washington office to discredit the policies of his predecessor; but it would be better to use his power to frighten bankers, business people, and investors into 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 trafficking 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 countries abandon old, orthodox assumptions 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 inclusive social agenda? We are all waiting to exhale.

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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 priorities, but it is a world view that is shared by Democrats and Republicans alike. And it will make life still more complicated and difficult for America's neighbours on its northern and southern borders.

That launched the quest for the perfectly secure border, and it has brought a gradually escalating effort to deploy people, technologies, and old-fashioned barriers to keep the "bad guys" out of the United States.

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 borders, either fighting wars abroad or deterring the handful of adversaries capable of striking US territory by threatening 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.

That launched the quest for the perfectly secure border, and it has brought a gradually escalating effort to deploy people, technologies, and old-fashioned barriers to keep the "bad guys" out of the United States. It began with the most obvious threats revealed by the 9/11 attacks, but has since fanned out to ever more ambitious efforts to protect against ever smaller threats—not just terrorism but drug runners, illegal migrants, and careless travellers with communicable diseases. It is an approach that has its own expansive logic: once you plug one gap in the border defences, the next one on the list looms that much larger.

The US list began, quite reasonably, with the hijackers themselves. All 19 had come from Middle Eastern countries on validly issued visas, so the first step was to tighten visa procedures, especially from countries known to have an al-Qaeda presence. All had flown to the United States, so Washington forced airlines to turn over their passenger lists for all future incoming flights. At least two of the hijackers, and possibly more, should have been on US terrorist watch lists, so Washington broke down internal barriers to information sharing and added hundreds of thousands of names.

Those measures—more careful visa scrutiny, advanced information on incoming passengers, and a robust, if not terribly discriminating, terrorist watch list—probably went 90 percent of the way to keeping out al-Qaeda operatives. But that's where it started to get complicated. As terrorism experts point out, al-Qaeda is an adaptable adversary, so once the obvious routes to the United States were blocked, they could be expected to look for others.

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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?

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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.

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.