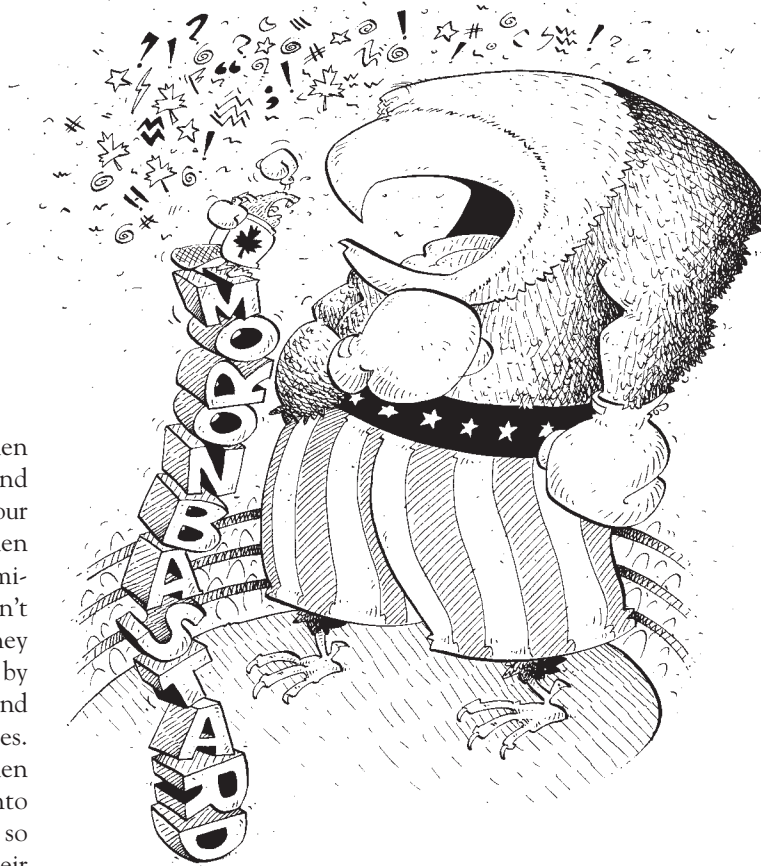


Insult Parity with the U.S.A.

by Fred Stenson



They loved us when we let them land their planes in our airports on 9/11, and when we sent money to the families of the lost. They didn't like us when we said they caused their own trouble by propping up dictators and profiting from arms sales. They liked us again when we followed them into Afghanistan, but less so when we objected to their fighter jets bombing our soldiers at night. They liked us even less when we wanted their pilots court-martialled and those higher up to admit their share of blame. They really hated us when we balked at marching into Iraq, when we thought we should have our own opinion on the matter.

Then there's the case of the American moviemaker. American film producers, motivated by the Canadian Econo-Loon, come to Canada to shoot movies. American states and cities that have lost their movie revenue are angry. But amazingly, instead of blaming the film producers and actors who deserted their nation, they blame us! Those damn Canadians, swaying their pasty hips,

singing their Siren call, luring our poor American filmmakers north. They should be ashamed.

Liked on Monday, disliked by Tuesday, hated by Thursday—is it any wonder that resentment has built up? Enough, finally, that a Canadian bureaucrat called George W. Bush a moron and an MP described some less well defined group of Americans as bastards?

I'm not sure if Americans were shocked by these pronouncements, but I know many Canadians were. When it comes to Ottawa and the United States we are much more accustomed to this type of serenade:

"O great hub of world commerce, O wielder of military might unimag-

inable, O Dirty Harry of the free world, O keeper of the Covenant of unfettered demand and supply, delivering up the lowest competitor consumer price..."

IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING the Moron and Bastard exclamations came public acts of contrition, the two speakers trying to explain how something had come out their mouths that had never been in their minds. We heard it over and over.

While it may not be the best political strategy to call the leader of your largest trading partner a moron, or to address that country's citizenry haphazardly as bastards, I find that I object to this business of apologizing. Should we really have to apologize to the Americans—given that they insult us freely and frequently and never apologize at all?

For example, let us consider Pat Buchanan (who nowadays is called "talk-show host Pat Buchanan" to differentiate him from his former self, "Republican presidential hopeful Pat Buchanan"). In the wake of 9/11—November 2002, to be exact—Mr. Buchanan said on American TV that

Canadians are “whiners and freeloaders.” He made the interesting statement that “We exercise the right to criticize Canada, and what I hear from up in Canada is some juvenile whining.” I think that means that he reserves the right to criticize Canada, but when Canada criticizes the U.S., it is juvenile whining. Then, the pièce de résistance: Mr. Buchanan called Canada “Soviet Canuckistan.” This was the rarely executed “double insult”—he insulted not one but two U.S. allies at once, in one fell phrase. Canada is such a bad ally it is as bad as our other ally, Russia.

One heard various things in the aftermath of these statements, but what no one heard, as far as I know, was Pat Buchanan apologizing. Nor do I remember anyone asking him to.

So what is my point? Am I suggesting that Pat Buchanan should apologize? Certainly not. In truth, I find the direct insult rare and refreshing. It is as if the general overcast of diplomatic fuzz had parted and a truly held opinion was for an instant visible. Pat Buchanan does not like Canada. He thinks Canadians are whiners, freeloaders and pinkos. Never again must I wonder what Pat Buchanan thinks of me. I know. To apologize after such an insult would ruin it. I sincerely hope he never does.

But, alas, whereas we achieved a little equality in the matter of insults on Moron Day and Bastards Day, the national cumulus spinners were instructed to spin faster, until the opaque dishonesty was again restored. The speakers of the insults were knuckled on the head and threatened with their jobs until they had apologized profusely to every American public official, citizen, house pet and stone.

Why can't the Canadian government understand that this policy creates an imbalance, an apology deficit, a lack of parity with the Americans that leaves both sides dissatisfied? We cannot change the Americans or their traditions, nor should we. We should respect them and leave them alone. But we certainly can change our own ways so that parity can exist between

the two nations. That is, we should take Pat Buchanan's advice and “reserve the right to criticize” one another. After that, we should reserve the right not to apologize, and the system will stand in balance.

AS FOR THE QUESTION OF WHY the United States is so changeable in its opinion of Canada, I have decided—and I have gone to the desert and pondered this at length—it is because the two countries have a different time frame when they consider concepts like international community and the assessment of allegiance. If I can presume to speak for all Canadians, I believe we have a fairly long-term idea in our heads when we think of these things. An ally is something you re-evaluate after major world changes, like world wars, like the fall of the Iron Curtain. And even then you would only consider a change of alliance if an ally had repeatedly provoked you, had given you a great deal of just cause.

The United States, on the other hand, appears to re-evaluate its allies on more of an hourly basis. This entirely explains why they can be applauding our loyalty with little jewel-like tears in their eyes at 8 p.m. on Monday, only to be reviewing all bilateral relations between our two countries by 8 a.m. on Tuesday. It's not fickleness, as you might think, not madness. The Americans are simply speedier than we are.

Wouldn't you know it? They're ahead of us again.



Fred Stenson's new novel, *Lightning*, will be published in the fall.