

# Candid diplomat resigns

**D**iplomacy," said the cynic Ambrose Bierce, "is the art of lying for one's country." When talking to the press, however, most diplomats don't even bother to lie. They just say nothing, repeatedly, until pesky journalists are driven away by sheer boredom.

With such sombre thoughts in mind, I went off to interview U.S. Ambassador Paul Robinson, curious to meet the man who had incited some of our media to spasms of nastiness and rage. Fresh in mind, for example, were claims by *Maclean's* magazine that Robinson was somehow unserious and "insensitive"; or last Friday's spiteful digs by Allan Fotheringham.

Robinson turned out, to my surprise, to be neither a capitalist bull in our tidy socialist china shop nor the crude party fundraiser, rewarded, as the press has claimed, by a posting to Canada. Quite to the contrary, the ambassador shows an acuity of mind, depth of knowledge and agility of wit that in no way resembles the portraits painted of him by our media. To boot, Robinson knows more about Canada than many Canadians.

His sin, of course, has been to tell the truth or at least speak his mind. Robinson's remarks that Canada was spending too little on defence or hurting its economy through socialist programs provoked furious reactions from the media. How dare the U.S. ambassador say such things? No one stopped, mind you, to ask if they were true. Ambassadors have to be diplomatic — seen but not heard.

Robinson, a big, bluff man, is no frock-coated diplomat, the kind of careerist-bureaucrat who tends to make diplomacy such a boring vocation. But who needs such a silk-hatted diplomat in Ottawa to represent the U.S.? Formal diplomacy may be appropriate for our dealings with Turkey or

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Peru, but do we really need such creaky mechanisms for dealing with our neighbors?

Exchanging diplomatic notes and initiating demarches between Washington and Ottawa strikes me as being about as sensible as using a lawyer to talk to your cousin. Traditional diplomacy serves as a medium that allows for hostile nations to speak in civil terms. The U.S. and Canada, best of friends and neighbors, don't need such formality. If you have a problem, just pick up the phone and call. Besides, as Robinson pointed out, the U.S. does more trade with Ontario than with Japan; this kind of relationship calls for the attention of worldly businessmen, not polite diplomats.

And why should not the U.S. ambassador speak out and tell Canadians what the U.S. government thinks? Is it better that we garner such important information from TV newscasts? In our passion for blandness, we ignore the fact that ambassadors are sent to represent and to influence. Nor should we forget that our own Canadian diplomats in Washington and the UN have not been exactly silent over such matters as trade or acid rain. They complain and Americans listen. When the Americans complain, we get incensed and claim "interference."

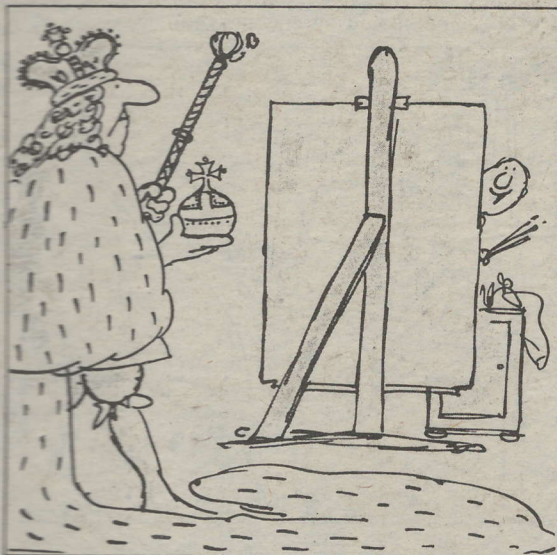
Criticism notwithstanding, Robinson has turned out to be quite a good ambassador. A large measure of the current warm, fruitful relations between Ottawa and Washington is due to Robinson who has frequently championed Canada's cause in Washington. The ambassador also played an influential if little-known role in damping down Washington's anger at some of the more provocative actions of the Trudeau cabinet.

What many people here failed to realize — many of our anti-American journalists among them — is that people in Washington listened when the big, tough U.S. ambassador to Ottawa spoke of Canada. Before Robinson, Canada was, to most Americans and congressmen, a sort of vague extension north of Buffalo and Duluth. Now, at least some people in Washington are listening: Loud voices carry just as far in Washington as in Ottawa.

Says Robinson, who has just announced his resignation, "I came at the worst of times and I am leaving at the best of times." True, and a typically brash summation of Robinson's achievements. He will be replaced by Thomas Niles, a professional diplomat of the old, taciturn school. Robinson will return to Chicago and perhaps, being well-versed in naval matters, to the Pentagon where his talents should prove useful.

I will miss Paul Robinson and so should Ottawa, a town where straight talk is as rare as truffles in Alberta and blandness a rising tide. Perhaps we should start thinking about sending Conrad Black to Washington.

## Punch



"What'll it be, your Maj, just a head shot or the works?"