Remarks by U.S. Ambassador David H. Wilkins

Canadian/American Border Trade Alliance

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Chateau Laurier, Ottawa - Thanks Jim Phillips for that introduction. It's great to be here with all of you again at the Canadian/American Border Trade Alliance.

It was a year ago almost to the day I spoke with you and I always appreciate the chance to visit with great friends. Jim, it's hard to believe we won't be doing this again next year! You'll be carrying on this wonderful tradition with a new ambassador and I know that he or she will be every bit as grateful for your warm and wonderful friendship as Susan and I have been.

Our time here in Canada has flown by. But as you know, I serve at the pleasure of my President and that means come early next year it will be time for us to move back to South Carolina.

So while I have this opportunity let me say thanks to you Jim for your leadership and to all the members of the Can/Am Border Trade Alliance for what you do to foster and build this relationship between our two dynamic democracies.

I know I've depended on you throughout the years and I know you've played a vital part in making a strong relationship even stronger. So thanks to you all. I salute you.

I appreciate the Members of Parliament here today. The Border Caucus is so vital to making sure Washington knows and appreciates Canada's perspective. And I also want to recognize our Embassy staff here today and thank them for their great work.

The last couple times I've spoken with you we've discussed: the general state of the relationship, the passport issue and our two countries' roles as NATO partners in Afghanistan. These issues are still important and I think worthy of revisiting.

In the year since we've discussed them a lot has happened as well. We have the hot glare of a U.S. presidential race that has focused very specifically on NAFTA and Canada.

I'm just back from the North American Leaders' Summit in New Orleans and I was deeply privileged to actually travel to Afghanistan just a few months ago to visit with Canadian Forces and I'd like to tell you a bit about what I saw and learned over there first hand.

And Jim, as always, I'll leave plenty of time to take your questions…

Are you all enjoying watching the primaries down south? For a political junkie like me these are the best of times in the United States!

Even after all this time, I'm still overwhelmed by how much Canadians understand and am engaged in the U.S. political process.

Right now in the heat of our Presidential election, candidates have to campaign on "change" – what'd they do better. So we hear a lot about what's wrong and what should be done differently…the whole glass-is-half-empty theory.

I suppose that's the nature of political campaigns – same in your country. But it is not what you will hear from me today.

I said from day one in this job I would accentuate the positive. I would talk UP this relationship and not talk it down because when you have the single best, most peaceful and productive relationship in the world you ought to be looking for ways to make it even stronger and to be contributing to its success and growth.

That certainly doesn't mean you ignore the few irritants we have or ignore very real issues we need to resolve. But it does mean that you look at examples like acid rain and mad cow and softwood lumber, issues that you and I have spent a lot of time talking about in years' past and know that getting things done is what defines our relationship and now our difference.

That's why I'm really concerned, along with a lot of you, and may other Canadian and American citizens, when I hear talk about withdrawing from our NAFTA obligations.

As President Bush has said: "The idea of just unilaterally withdrawing from a trade treaty is…not good policy on the merits and it's not good policy as a message to send to people who have in good faith signed a treaty and worked with us on a treaty."

NAFTA has put food on the table for North American families since its inception. It's created a massive amount of jobs over the past 14 years. It's strengthened the North America's manufacturing and exporting economy, making us far better able to cope with the rise of big emerging economies.

In my opinion, reopening NAFTA will only risk turning back the clock, making us less competitive against global forces and less able to defend the jobs and prosperity we have built in North America.

Our three way trade in North America has roughly tripled since NAFTA came into effect from $297 billion in 1993 to $930 billion in 2007.

President Bush knows this. He is and always has been a NAFTA supporter and free trader. As long as he's in the White House and I'm here in Canada, we will continue to talk about the importance of NAFTA and defend this very vital treaty that has been so very beneficial to both our countries.

We talked a lot about NAFTA and our trade relationship down in New Orleans last week when the three North American leaders met. As the President said, "Now is NOT the time to walk away from NAFTA."

This was President Bush's last meeting with PM Harper and Mexican President Calderon.

And while I'm on the subject of President Bush…let me make a few points here I think are too often overlooked. Just like you I read all the polls and the newspaper columns. I read what some Canadians tell pundits about my President, George W. Bush.

But the simple facts are President Bush has been really good for Canada and he cares deeply about what Canadians care about. And frankly I think he's under-appreciated.

As we know, President Bush is a vigorous supporter of NAFTA. He's also a staunch supporter of free trade around the world because he believes this is another way – a diplomatic way – to help developing countries help themselves.

Whether or not you agree or disagree with the policies of this President, he truly is committed to building democracies and he believes the roots of freedom begin in moving countries out of poverty. Free trade provides a critical tool.

No other president in the history of our country has invested more time or treasure into eradicating HIV/AIDS in Africa than George W. Bush. In fact, the Tanzanian President said while he was excited at the prospect of Barrack Obama being the next U.S. President, he told reporters in February and I quote: "let him be as good a friend to Africa as President Bush has been."

On the issue of BSE, President Bush stood with Canada urging the courts to quickly re-open the border to Canadian cattle.

On WHTI – the passport issue passed by Congress on recommendations of the 9-11 Commission– and NOT the Bush Administration -- it was the President, a former border governor, who's been urging smart, common sense security implementation at the border because he recognizes Canada's unique concerns and status.

And you all know because I've told you many times that I witnessed first hand the President and Prime Minister Harper personally engage on the softwood lumber issue in Cancun Mexico in 2006. Within months of that face-to-face meeting the issue was resolved.

This post 9-11 world has been a difficult one for all of us. But George W. Bush made a promise to the American people he would devote his presidency to the rooting out of terrorism and keeping the homeland safe. He has been true to his word.

And in the years since 9-11, our borders have been open and safe. That means no interruptions to Canada's productivity. North America has been kept secure.

So for all of that and many other reasons, I have been, and will continue to be a proud representative of this Administration in this country.

I believe history will be very kind to George W. Bush. But as I've said before…the great thing about our relationship is no matter who sits in that White House, ultimately he or she will always be a friend of Canada.

The relationship is just too strong, close and vibrant to jeopardize.

That's why when it comes to NAFTA, I think our next president will weigh the overwhelming evidence and conclude that ENHANCING trade and productivity with our best friend and ally Canada is the answer and we'll work it all out. Because like I said…that's what we do, we work things out.

And after all these years – we're still working out that passport issue!

I won't spend a lot of time on WHTI because we've talked about it so many times before and I know you have a presentation tomorrow on enhanced driver's licenses.

The air requirement went into effect back in January and by all accounts has gone very smoothly.

We have listened to Canadian concerns:

- The implementation date has been delayed until June 1, 2009 at land and sea ports.
- Minors under 16 are exempted from the requirement.
- Passport cards for Americans are being issued this summer.
- Enhanced drivers licenses are authorized for some states and provinces.

I still say respectfully the best thing to do is get a passport. Americans are getting the message. Close to 100 million now have passports. It is estimated that 25 million Americans will get passports this year.

Security doesn't trump trade and travel. In this post 9-11 world both are important and they are not mutually exclusive.

We can't turn back the clock. But we can work together to make our borders smart, secure and efficient.

I'd like to wrap up my talk by telling you just a little bit about my trip to Afghanistan over Christmas with Minister MacKay and General Hillier.

It was the most exciting, humbling and awe-inspiring experience of my life. It was a real eye-opener for me, very educational. It had a profound impact on me.

Makes you appreciate what we have in North America. We are so blessed and have so much to be thankful for. Wish everyone could experience what I did. I had the privilege of seeing for myself the progress that is being made.

I went over simply to say thanks to Canadian Forces on behalf of my country for their service and sacrifice.

It convinced me beyond a shadow of a doubt that we cannot leave. What we have accomplished so far is great but the work left to do is greater still. We arrived in Kandahar on Christmas Eve. We went from there to a Forward Operating Base and visited 100 Canadians from the Van Doos Regiment.

They are staying in very sparse living conditions. It's dry and dusty. They live in an old school house with no running water and no central heat. These are tough living conditions.

When you see the conditions these soldiers are living under, your heart goes out to them. Yet their spirit was strong and morale high.

We spent Christmas Even there. At midnight, I walked around to the guard posts and wished them all a Joyeux Noel vs. Merry Christmas.

It was dusty and flat. With the full moon you could see forever. This must be what it's like to walk on the moon. The perimeter was heavily fortified.

The next morning we flew to another Forward Operating Base and served Christmas breakfast.

Then to another camp that housed lots of civilians involved in the provincial reconstructions programs.

We stayed at the Kandahar Air Base that night, along with more than 1,000 Canadian soldiers.

We went to Kabul the next day and visited our Task Force Phoenix – primarily National Guardsman – 1,800 from South Carolina. They are part of the 218th Infantry Brigade, tasked to train Afghan Army and Police. They are in more than 300 different locations throughout Afghanistan imbedded with the Afghan Army.

They are making incredible progress and doing some heavy lifting.

The highlight of the trip was meeting Guardsmen from South Carolina and spending a lot of time on Christmas Day with our own South Carolina legislator, U.S. Army Captain James Smith.

We had a missile attack on Kandahar Air Base Christmas night so we spent some time in a bunker. Standing in that bunker that Christmas night, we really bonded. We were neither Republican nor Democrat. We were just two Americans and long way from home and very proud of our country.

It would be a mistake of epic proportions for members of the NATO mission to leave Afghanistan before its army and police are better prepared to defend the Afghan people against the vicious forces that seek to destroy them and all liberty-loving nations.

In my opinion it would be wrong for those of us who enjoy the blessings of freedom to now abandon Afghanistan's 31 M people to the likes of the Taliban and al-Qaeda. We will only find ourselves in the position of once again having to save a failed state from the clutches of terror using it as a base of operations.

The race to secure Afghanistan is a marathon, not a sprint. But it is a race we must win.

Having said that, I fully understand and appreciate that it is up to Canadians and their elected officials to decide the extent and length of their involvement in Afghanistan. I commend and congratulate Parliament for its March 13 vote to extend mission through 2011 based on certain conditions. Based on the very successful NATO meeting in Bucharest a few weeks ago it appears that those conditions of additional troops and helicopter capabilities are being met.

And so I'll leave you with this: We should all be so thankful for everything we have in the U.S. and Canada. We should never complain!

Our troops understand what they're doing is vitally important. They believe in their mission. Their morale is high. Even with everything going on in the world, all the set-backs, they believe that freedom finds a way and will take root in Afghanistan.

Their hope is contagious. Their cause just. They truly make all of us proud.

Thank you again for allowing me to share this time with you. I'd be happy to take your questions.

May God bless Canada and God bless America.