



*Photo by Patrick Cavan Brown*

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## **Agents of Change:**

### **Bridge Builder**

*Former U.S. ambassador to Canada and state Speaker of the House David Wilkins created consensus throughout his decades-long political career*

**David Wilkins** Twenty-five years in the South Carolina legislature, eleven as Speaker of the House; U.S. ambassador to Canada (under President George Bush)

**Field of Impact** Lawmaker and politician

**Where You'll Find Him** [www.nelsonmullins.com/attorneys/david-wilkins](http://www.nelsonmullins.com/attorneys/david-wilkins)

David Wilkins admits to one shortcoming during his tenure as ambassador to Canada: never learning French in the bilingual country. “I never got past ‘Bon-joor y’all,’” he quips. “I did take French, but it didn’t take to me.”

That slight omission notwithstanding, Wilkins’s ambassadorship was widely hailed as a great success, characterized by the quality for which the Greenville native is perhaps best known locally and abroad: bringing people together. Notably, Wilkins, 63, helped resolve a contentious softwood lumber dispute by bringing then-president George W. Bush to the table with Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper. The complex issue involved tariffs and a wide range of other disagreements between the two nations, but Wilkins’s deft diplomacy helped heal two decades of wrangling.

He brought that same knack for consensus-building to numerous other U.S.-Canadian issues, ranging from energy and national security to travel and the environment. For Wilkins himself, meanwhile, being ambassador to Canada for three years and seven months was a dream job.

“I got up every day, looked in the mirror and said, ‘You get to represent the United States of America today,’” says Wilkins. “It was a real adrenaline rush.” A personal highlight for Wilkins was a trip to Afghanistan to visit with Canadian and American troops, including 1,800 South Carolina national guardsmen.

Wilkins’s overarching vision as ambassador was to “leave the relationship (between the two nations) stronger than we found it,” and by all accounts he achieved that goal. Wilkins’s stint as ambassador came on top of his twenty-five-year tenure in the S.C. legislature, with eleven of those as Speaker of the House.

Two of his proudest moments as Speaker include the legislature’s banning of video poker and its decision to remove the Confederate battle flag from atop the statehouse dome. Recalling the bitter divisiveness of the flag issue and how it had thrust the state into a harsh national spotlight, Wilkins says of the 2000 flag decision, “It was the right thing to do, and the right time to do it, and I’m glad we got it done.”

South Carolina historian Walter Edgar calls Wilkins’s leadership on the flag issue “a tremendous act of statesmanship.” Edgar, author of the definitive history of South Carolina, describes Wilkins as “a man who did a fabulous job in what is probably the most politically difficult job in the state.”

After completing his term as ambassador in January 2009, Wilkins was invited to join, as a partner, the law firm of Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough. He focuses primarily on international law. In the meantime, Wilkins remains in the public eye as chair of the Clemson University board of visitors.

But would he ever seek elective office again? “I have no plans to,” says Wilkins, adding: “But you know what they say: ‘Never say never.’”

—Paul Hyde