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Let's Ask ... David Wilkins

Gaining a new perspective about the U.S.

After serving 3½ years as the U.S. ambassador to Canada, David Wilkins is back home.

But the former S.C. House Speaker intends to keep close ties to the United States' northern neighbor. Last month, Wilkins, 62, joined the state's largest law firm, Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough of Columbia, and chairs its public policy and international law group. The group, based in Wilkins' hometown of Greenville, represents businesses on both sides of the U.S.-Canada border.

Have you gotten used to not riding around town around in a chauffeured limousine?



Former House speaker and Canadian ambassador David Wilkins joined the Columbia-based law firm Nelson Mullins last month.

"For 3½ years I didn't have to drive. So I didn't have to worry about the parking, the directions and all that. It didn't take long to get back in the groove."

What did you miss most about South Carolina?

“First of all, being ambassador to Canada is an incredible experience, and we were blessed to get that opportunity. But we obviously missed our friends. And I’d have to admit that sometimes in January and February we missed the warmer weather.” (During January in Ottawa, Canada’s capital, the average temperature is 13 degrees.)

What did you learn about the United States from the outside?

“I think we also learned a lot about our own country from seeing it through the eyes of others — other ambassadors, Canadians, and other people we came in contact with, hearing their opinion about us, seeing their news about us.

“We are a leader. The world expects us to lead and we should lead.”

As U.S. ambassador, you received extensive coverage from the Canadian media.

Did that surprise you?

“The United States is so hugely important to Canada. We’re their largest trading partner. Over 80 percent of all their goods that they export come to the United States. ... Many of their jobs depend on our economy, our trade with them. So, the United States is hugely important — more important to them than other countries.”

Will your new job involve export-import businesses in South Carolina?

“It certainly could. Trade with Canada supports an estimated 95,000 jobs in South Carolina today. If we can enhance trade with Canada, we can increase jobs and increase opportunities for South Carolinians.”

Some say adopting trade barriers would help the U.S. economy. What do Canadian leaders think about that? And, what do you think?

“(Canadian leaders) are very, very concerned that it’s a violation of trade agreements and a breach of faith.

“I think it would be a huge mistake if the United States retreated at this time behind protectionist walls. Now, is the time to be working with our largest trading partners.”

Doesn't coming to Nelson Mullins bring another reunion of sorts?

In the 1940s, the fathers of Wilkins and his partner, former S.C. governor and Education Secretary Dick Riley, shared an office in Greenville. The office was so cramped that when a client visited a curtain was pulled across the room for privacy, Wilkins said.

Any plans to run for office?

Though he has been on the ballot 13 times and served in the House of Representatives for 25 years, Wilkins said he has no plans to run for office.

“Susan (his wife) and I will stay involved in the community,” said Wilkins, a key state GOP leader who was appointed ambassador in 2005 by President Bush. “We’ll serve on boards, we’ll do volunteer work. We want to stay active and we feel like we’ll have opportunities to do that.”

You went to Afghanistan in 2007. What was so memorable about it?

During Christmas week in 2007, Wilkins went with Canadian defense leaders to Kandahar Airfield to visit their troops. Wilkins also met one of his political opponents, state Rep. James Smith, D-Richland, who was in Afghanistan with the S.C. National Guard’s 218th Brigade Combat Team. During a rocket attack on Christmas night, Wilkins and Smith wound up in the same bunker.

“We really bonded,” Wilkins said. “He was the minority leader when I was speaker and we used to have some really spirited floor fights.”

“But there was James Smith and David Wilkins, side by side in a bunker in Kandahar. We looked at each other not as Republican, not as Democrat, but two Americans a long way

from home, proud of our country and proud of what the other one was doing for our country.”

(Smith confirms the story, adding: “We were just grateful to be alive and be together. Being away from home and in a war zone can make Christmas miserable. He showed his appreciation for what we were doing. He made my Christmas.”)

— Chuck Crumbo