

FRIENDZ N THE HOOD

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When Americans think of Canada, which is infrequently, we think of very nice people and a very nice place. When Americans think of Mexico, we think "immigrants" and "poor." We might do well to put some shadings on those simplistic portraits.

President Bush has begun his term well and wisely on the domestic front by "securing his base." He is wise to start out his foreign policy in the same manner. Mexico and Canada are America's "base," and vice versa. It's fine to be a master of the universe, but our safe spot on the North American continent is at the root of American global security and stability. Bush's first official foreign visitor was Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien. His first foreign trip (Friday, Feb. 16) is to Mexico to visit with newly elected President Vicente Fox.

Canada is, by far, our largest trading partner, with more than \$1 billion per day crossing across the longest peaceful border in the world. That's almost all to the good.

The "almost" concerns terrorism. Beneath the headlines, and mostly beneath the radar, Canada has become a haven and a jumping-off point for terrorists with America in their bomb sights. After the United States, Canada is home to the most terrorist cells in the world. In December 1999, Ahmed Rassam, an Algerian national, was apprehended crossing into the United States at Port Angeles, in the state of Washington. He was carrying 100 pounds of powerful explosives, bent on taking down the Seattle celebration of the millenium, which was subsequently canceled because of the threat, of which Rassam was only a part. Investigators later

linked this case to a larger plot with ties to Saudi exile Osama bin Laden.

The threat is real. Although we haven't been hit with a "big one" yet, we've come pretty damn close. In February 1993, a 1,200-pound nitrate car bomb killed six Americans and injured more than 1,000 at the World Trade Center. Had the circumstances played out differently, the loss of life could have been enormous. Richard A. Clarke, the White House terrorism czar, has said there is a 100-percent certainty of a weapon of mass destruction being used for terrorism in the United States within the next 10 years.

Canadians do not have a handle on dealing with terrorists. Canadian security authorities are the first to admit that their asylum laws are extremely lax, something like: "Admit first; ask questions later." Yes, Canadians are very nice people. But everything is not fine.

If Canada poses more problems to the United States than you might think, perhaps Mexico poses fewer. Immigration is the big bogeyman, but it is clearly destined to shrink. Why? Mexico will run out of potential emigrants. How so? Mexico is becoming a modern country. And modern countries have low birth rates.

Consider the Mexican Total Fertility Rate (TFR), that is, the average number of children born to women during the course of their child-bearing years. Back in the 1965-70 time frame, that figure was 6.82 children per woman. According to United Nations "medium variant" estimates, the 2000-2005 Mexican rate is 2.49 children per woman, and the low variant, which may be closer to the actual rate, is 2.27, slated to shrink still further to 2.02 in 2005-2010. A Total Fertility Rate of 2.1 children per woman is the "replacement level," which,

over time, keeps a population stable, absent immigration.

From 6.8 children per woman to 2.3 in just 35 years! In short, a Mexican birth dearth, going on right before our eyes, all while environmentalists and nativists are slapping their tambourines, scaring us about an ongoing flood of illegal immigrants. Ain't goin' to happen. (Actually, these days, many U.S. citizens are settling in Mexico!)

Moreover, Mexico is climbing the economic ladder. According to the U.N., Mexico's per capita Gross National Product in 1999 was \$7,719. That's a long way from the U.S. figure of \$30,600 or Canada's \$23,725. But it's right in league with Chile (\$8,370), Malaysia (\$7,953) and Turkey (\$6,126) -- that is, in the upper third of global income rankings, with Sierra Leone bringing up the rear at \$414. And growing smartly. In 2000, Mexico showed a robust growth rate of 7 percent.

Vicente Fox, the man who broke the 70-year run of the statist PRI party, has pledged to turn the Mexican economy toward free-market principles and away from the endemic corruption that has plagued Mexico. There is no reason to think it won't happen, although surely not by tomorrow morning. It's a long, hard path awinding. But Mexico made real progress even with retrograde policies in a corrupt environment. They're nice people, too. We are lucky to live in a swell neighborhood, and smart to do everything to make it better.

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