

Why Canada is not the United States A Historical Context of Contemporary Geopolitical Tensions

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Abstract:

This article explores the political culture of the 19th century in the British Empire in order to explain the historical reasons that informed the Canadian choice to reject the political model offered by the American republic, and which illuminate the Canadian resistance to recent suggestions to join the United States. As early as the nineteenth century, the two political communities in North America developed national narratives and competing national identities that were articulated in political and cultural terms, rather than ethnic or religious ones, and built their institutional arrangements around competing definitions of liberty.

Keywords: Canada, USA, national identity, imperialism

A 51st state?

Early in 2025, President Donald Trump started suggesting to various Canadian officials – first to the former Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, and after the Canadian elections, to his successor, Mark Carney, that Canada could become the 51st American state. First many Americans scoffed and laughed; soon others paused and asked, ‘seriously, why isn’t Canada part of the US anyway?’

In Canada, the suggestion, coupled with the stiff tariffs on Canadian products introduced in the first trimester of 2025, offended and alarmed Canadians, but also triggered a wave of nationalism with an uncertain outcome in a country whose economy and national defense have been profoundly entangled with those of the US since at least the 1990s. To understand why Canada never joined the United States, despite so many similarities that, to outsiders, the two may seem indistinguishable, we need to go back in time. The political culture of the 19th century in the British Empire provides contemporary observers the insight into the reasons that

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informed the Canadian choice to reject the political model offered by the American republic.

An imperial connection

The roots of today's modern Canada lay in the American Revolution. At that point in the eighteenth century, British North America included several colonies inhabited by anglophone, mostly Protestant settlers as well as a larger territory which was inhabited by French. In February 1763, The Treaty of Paris had ended the Seven Year's War in Europe and its colonial outshoot, the French and Indian War, waged in North America by the French and the British in alongside their respective Native allies. France ceded ownership of its territorial possessions in North America to Great Britain, so New France became another piece in the larger imperial puzzle controlled by London; incidentally, some of the arrangements that followed that territorial acquisition upset many of the fundamentalist Protestants in the New England colonies. Britain allowed the use of French civil law and granted generous cultural and religious rights to the French Catholic population in the region, which fueled dissent in the New England colonies "for abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province, establishing therein an Arbitrary government (1776)." This passage in the American Declaration of Independence refers specifically to the 1774 Quebec Act in which London guaranteed the freedom of worship to the Catholics in Quebec and restored French property rights in the province. While the decision pacified the French population, the Quebec Act was quickly considered one of the five "Intolerable Acts" by the disgruntled American colonies, and directly triggered the Revolution.

In 1776 when the thirteen New England colonies decided to separate from Britain country and declared their independence, not all Americans were enthused. While the ensuing conflict is commonly discussed using the term "revolution," a better description is that of a civil war, which tore communities asunder over the issue of loyalty, and continued with varying intensity for almost a decade, until 1783, when another Treaty of Paris gave independence to the new republic. Historians estimate that ten to fifteen per cent of the population of the thirteen colonies – some 250,000 people – opposed the American Revolution; some passively, others by speaking out,

spying, or fighting against the rebels. Sympathy for the Crown at that time was a dangerous sentiment; those who defied the Patriot forces could find themselves without civil rights. Because of their political convictions, these Loyalists (or Tories) who remained in the American Colonies during the revolutionary war were branded as traitors and hounded by their Patriot (rebel) neighbours. They were often subjected to mob violence or put in prison and loyalist property was vandalized and often confiscated.

As a result of these tensions, approximately 70,000 Loyalists fled the Thirteen Colonies during the years that followed the Declaration of Independence. Of these, roughly 50,000 packed their belongings and trekked north to the British North American Colonies of Quebec and Nova Scotia, which had not joined the American Revolution. Their arrival upended the ethnic balance in the eastern provinces of the former New France in favor of anglophone Protestants, and forced the Crown to reorganize the territory, partitioning it into the predominantly French-speaking Lower Canada (present-day Quebec) and the anglophone Upper Canada (present-day Ontario). Additionally, over the coming years, other Loyalists migrated into the Atlantic provinces, particularly to Nova Scotia; overall, by 1867, the year when Canada became a sovereign nation, two thirds of those living in the colonies were of British origins (Knowles, 49). The cultural influence of these loyalists was to shape Canada's evolution and the decision to stay in the Empire.

Early attempts to absorb Canada

Thus, at the conclusion of the American Revolutionary War what we call today Canada, was merely the remnant of the First British Empire in North America. Not surprisingly, its existence was viewed by many in Washington as a threat to national security and interests, and led to several attempts to absorb it into the republic. The earliest came in the War of 1812, when Britain and the US went to war over maritime disputes linked to the ongoing Napoleonic wars in Europe. Some American politicians considered the conflict a golden opportunity to expand the boundaries of the young nation by absorbing the Canadian colonies. In fact, that same year Thomas Jefferson boasted to a Philadelphia newspaper that "the acquisition of Canada this year will be merely a matter of marching." Yet, to the American

surprise, Canadians preferred their membership in the British Empire, and, alongside British troops and the Native alliance led by Shawnee Chief Tecumseh, successfully repelled the American invasion along the battle lines of the Great Lakes. The war ended as a stalemate, with no changes to the borders between British North America and the United States, but with a renewed sense of national difference on both sides of these borders. The conflict cemented American self-definitions and the country's sense of a national destiny (Tausch, 2018). At the same time, it was clear that, just as Great Britain was not ready to concede the New World to the American republic just yet, the Canadians were not ready to become Americans. To this day American history textbooks and popular culture discuss it as a second war of independence between the US and Britain, while Canadians remember it as a national victory against an expansionist US coveting their territory.

The next brief conversation about Canada joining the US happened two decades later, on the background of anti-colonial frustration about the imperial management of the Canadian colonies. On a cold December day in 1837, on Navy Island in the Niagara River which separates the United States from Canada, a group of revolutionaries proclaimed the Republic of Canada. In a symbolic gesture, their leader, William Lyon Mackenzie (1795-1861), raised the flag of a new republic; it was a blue flag with two stars, one for Lower Canada (Quebec), the other for Upper Canada (Ontario). During the following months the two Canadas were shaken by guerilla attacks, particularly in the south. These strikes were organized on the Canadian side with the support of many American enthusiasts, who provided food and ammunition to the rebels.

Yet, once more the expected masses of Canadian colonists and immigrants failed to show up or fight for annexation to the United States. Instead, colonial volunteers rallied from all over the provinces, joined the British troops and crushed the two republican uprisings. Mackenzie's revolutionary movement was defeated. The leaders sought refuge in American border towns, where they met with local leaders and politicians; they also travelled to major cities such as Boston and Philadelphia seeking financial and military support, but the US Federal government was wary of

getting into a war with Britain again, and troops were sent to the border to ensure American neutrality.

In the forthcoming decades, the British North American colonies were to engage in intense debates regarding their political and institutional futures, their roles within the broader imperial framework, and the nature of their relationships with both Britain and the United States. These discussions led British North America toward the establishment of representative government; however, they did not fundamentally challenge the British institutional and cultural foundations. Rather, the resulting reform movement served to reinforce the British North American colonies as integral components of the imagined community of the Empire, while simultaneously solidifying the United States as a distinct ideological Other in relation to the British sphere.

Competing North American identities

The American Revolution marks a pivotal moment in the incorporation of political ideology into national identities. It contrasted the flexible concept of 'Britishness' with the emergence of a new American national identity rooted in republicanism and egalitarian principles, though the precise scope of who was considered "created equal" remained a matter of debate for many years. By the conclusion of the eighteenth century, the rhetoric of reform and democracy had been largely co-opted by the nascent American republic, while conservatism and loyalism became firmly entrenched in, and associated with, British conceptions of identity and belonging. As political philosopher Janet Ajzenstadt observed, Canadian history and politics has been characterized by an ongoing ideological struggle between two political movements. One is the Enlightenment liberalism of John Locke, which has been present in British North America since its earliest days and continues to influence Canadian institutions and culture. The other, which Ajzenstadt refers to as counter-Enlightenment Romanticism, advocated for a more direct and participatory form of democracy. Although both movements originated from shared liberal British intellectual traditions, they evolved into competing visions of freedom that shaped the respective British and American conceptualizations of social order and political organization in the nineteenth century. These contrasting

visions of liberty also dominated the political discourse of the Atlantic world during this period (Ajzenstadt, 2003:9).

By the 1840s-and 1850s, what we think of today as Canada consisted of Upper and Lower Canada (Ontario and Quebec, which were united in one province in 1840), Newfoundland, and the three Maritime Provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island. beyond them lay the vast unincorporated swaths of Rupert's Land and the Northwestern Territory extending West, to the Pacific Ocean. Each of these colonies had its own regional identity and distinct ethnic and religious makeup. They all shared in common their British heritage and imperial identity, and a sense that their societies, institutions, and cultural norms were different from the United States. In short, as Ajzenstadt noted, as a sense of national difference from the US emerged and was articulated in political conversations as well as in the literature of the time, this difference was articulated in political and cultural terms, rather than ethnic or religious ones (Godeanu-Kenworthy 2022:10). After all, the demographic makeup of the US and British North America was fairly similar. It was institutional differences, and the principles behind these institutional arrangements that served as the building blocks of national identity in Anglophone North America.

The American example: a complicated story

As the colonies of British North America deliberated their future in the 1840s and 1850s, the options available seemed straightforward: a form of self-government within the British Empire and subject to the king or queen of England – or independence, the latter possibly including absorption into the United States, if the example of Texas was anything to go by. Texas separated by revolution from Mexico in 1835 and was independent for about a decade before being absorbed in the United States. A similar scenario was not unconceivable for an independent Canada.

To many Canadians, the United States seemed to be a clear success story. In the 1830s and 1840s, United States was in the midst of the Jacksonian democracy which extended the vote to all white men, irrespective of whether they owned property or not; the country boasted a booming economy, vibrant cities, a successful Westward expansion and a

steadily growing population. Three decades after 1803, when President Jefferson effectively doubled the size of the country by buying the Louisiana Territory from France for \$15 million, the US was aggressively expanding across the continent. Between the 1830 and the 1840 census, the US population had increased by 32%, reaching over 17 million in 1840, and the Irish potato famine would bring further waves of immigration starting in the mid-1840s, further increasing the population of the Eastern Cities. When gold was discovered in California, a new tide of frantic migration Westwards started, as fortunes were made and lost in the mining towns of the far outback of the continent.

But to other Canadians, the United States provided a cautionary tale about weak central institutions which failed to handle effectively the unexpected complications of the same economic success of the young republic. The US was plagued by rampant economic inequality, endemic social violence, and deeply divided over race and slavery. All were related. The unprecedented wave of immigration which brought cheap labor to the industrial cities of the East Coast, also fomented social unrest. The newcomers were viewed with hostility by locals and their right to access the American Dream was challenged by nativists. Additionally, slavery was an increasingly thorny issue as the population increased and new territories were added to the Union. A temporary balance was found in a series of political compromises in the 1840s and 1850s meant to maintain the balance between slave states and free states, but it was clear that this was not to be a permanent solution. Over the more than three decades of debates, while acknowledging the overall economic success of the US, Canadians of all classes and religious persuasions watched with anxiety how the deepening societal divisions in the US spiraled toward civil war, and wondered about the applicability of the American institutional model to their communities.

Republicanism and popular democracy in the nineteenth century: two perspectives

The Canadian path to nationhood is therefore to be found in the colonial dialogue with the trajectory of their young southern neighbor. Not ethnic or religious differences, but rather ideological and institutional ones, separated Americans from Canadians. These differences were rooted in two

competing definitions of freedom which had the same intellectual roots, but which adopted different institutional approaches that promised to protect freedom in an age when ideas about expanding franchises made *democracy* a radical and still contested concept.

In addition to the influence of American republicanism, colonial perspectives on the relationship between republicanism and popular democracy were also shaped by political events in France. The nineteenth-century French experiment in self-governance proved even less reassuring than its American counterpart. The 1789 Revolution had devolved into Napoleon's bloody empire, and reinforced British views of French republicanism as a perilous, godless, and mob-driven system of government, prone to morph into a tyrannical "levelling" rule of the majority. The political instability in France throughout the nineteenth century, characterized by a tumult of revolutions, republics, monarchies, and empires, did little to challenge these initial negative perceptions. Moreover, the pronounced republican rhetoric of the anticolonial 1837-1838 Rebellions in Lower Canada, and the attempt to join the United States, further entrenched the association between the push for mass democracy and social disorder.

Canadian historical Michel Ducharme distinguishes between two forms of freedom that dominated political debates in the Anglophone world at this point in time: republican liberty and constitutional liberty (2010). The first, closest to Ajzenstadt's 'counter-Enlightenment Romanticism,' viewed freedom as the equal right of individuals to participate in the political life of their communities and viewed 'the people' as the only legitimate source of authority. US institutions were created with the understanding that individual freedoms should exist separate from interference from the state. The Declaration of Independence held that "Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, That, whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government." The second interpretation of the liberty, favored in the British Empire and in Canada, understood freedom as derived from the constitutional (and institutional) heritage of a community, rather than from the people's will expressed via direct involvement in the political arena.

This understanding of liberty was not predicated on direct political participation. As long as the basic rights of all individuals were protected by the state— safety, personal liberty and defense of private property—there was no reason to challenge the status quo. It even acknowledged hierarchies and inequalities, either social or imperial. Ultimately, it was a trade-off between unfettered individual freedom and social stability that Canadians (and Britons) seemed willing to accept.

This was also because, at the time, the ideas of popular democracy and universal male suffrage were still fairly radical concepts, which were strongly opposed ideologically, particularly in the British world where philosophers such as Edmund Burke feared their long-term consequences on the viability of the Empire and on social stability. The US often appeared as a negative example in these debates (Giles, 2005:33). French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville, visiting the US back in the 1830s, had already dubbed the potential of ‘the tyranny of the majority’ as the intrinsic weakness of the American system. Indeed, the examples of recurrent mob violence that punctuated the news from the United States, made nineteenth-century Canadians uneasy about mass democracy, particularly when combined with a very decentralized political system that placed authority solely in popular will, and which, in the US case, appeared to have had removed all restraints upon individuals. To colonial Canadians, without the proper institutional guardrails provided by the constitutional model, the American freedom to pursue one’s own happiness could and always did impinge upon someone else’s liberties.

Race relations were the perfect example, with slavery as the key American institution that epitomized the glaring inadequacy of the US system to protect freedom for *all* in the Union. Native policies were another such example. The collective pursuits of individual happiness of white European settlers led to the violent removal of Native populations from their ancestral lands, glamorized and naturalized in the ideology of Manifest Destiny. Indeed, the strong demand for land, due to migration, translated in equally strong popular support for the violence with which Indian removal from their land was codified into national policy in the United States in 1830 and beyond. By contrast, British North America had had a long history of cooperation and military alliances with the Natives going back

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, through the War of 1812. Due to the relatively low flow of immigration during these decades by comparison with the United States, there was no strong popular anti-Indian sentiment in Canada to condone a systematic program of violent removal of Native communities.

Despite a history of Native displacement and acculturation by European immigrants which Canada shares with other settler-colonial nations, there was no Wild West in Canada. In 1830, Great Britain transferred jurisdiction over Indian affairs in the colonies from military officers to civilian administrators, which coincided (and contrasted) with the United States' decision to place Indian affairs under the War Department's authority. Simultaneously, the growing anti-slavery movement in Britain brought racial issues to the forefront of public discourse, which in turn politicized the status of Indigenous populations across the empire. The Crown remained the exclusive intermediary between Native and settler land interests in Canada, which meant in practice that the law preceded settlement, and the Canadian frontier was an organized space. Additionally, racial tolerance became a litmus test for British civility. Britons everywhere liked to believe that the Natives in the Canadian colonies enjoyed a far superior fate to those in the United States, and used the example of brutal American Native policies to demonstrate the advantages of British institutional combination of liberty and order which avoided the abuse of vulnerable minorities at the hand of the majority (Godeanu-Kenworthy, 2018: 100).

The violence that Canadians saw in the US was not only directed at minorities, but also at one another and represented a constant threat to social stability. Many people in the US believed then – and now – that violent action is a legitimate form of political expression, a demonstration of popular opinion, or the revolutionary means to achieve a democratic end. Big cities, like New York or Philadelphia, were periodically the stage of street riots, some persisting for days, damaging property, and involving hundreds of people. To Canadians, American institutions appeared unable to protect individual liberties in the face of populism or demagogues. For instance, whenever the voting rights of particular groups were expanded or debated, what followed was political instability, civil unrest and violence.

One such example were the 1844 Philadelphia riots, when Irish immigrants and American nativists clashed violently over an entire summer. For months, nativists had spread rumors that the Catholics in Philadelphia were trying to have the Bible removed from schools. An anti-immigration rally in Kensington erupted in violence on May 6 and started a deadly riot that would result in the destruction of two Catholic churches and numerous other buildings, followed by other outbursts of street violence later in July. The fierce fighting between the nativists and the soldiers sent to protect the church, resulted in deaths and injuries, and the story was widely reported in the Canadian press.

Ten years later, the 1854 Bloody Monday rioting in Louisville, Kentucky followed the same pattern.

On Election Day, Protestant mobs attacked German and Irish neighborhoods, prevented immigrants from voting and set fire to property throughout the city. A congressman was beaten by the crowds. Twenty-two people died and many others were injured. Mob violence also surrounded the debates around slavery, including armed attacks such as John Brown's 1859 attack on Harper's Ferry, when a small group of abolitionists tried to initiate a slave revolt in Southern states by taking over the United States arsenal at Harpers Ferry. Brown's attempt was considered a dress rehearsal for the brutal violence of the American Civil War which eventually started in 1861 and ravaged the country until 1865.

Canada's institutional choice: Confederation

The key institutional vulnerability in the U.S., as 19th-century Canadians saw it, was its decentralization and the constant deferral of authority and law to the popular will at a local level. Colonial elites and ordinary citizens alike were worried about the stability of a political system whose policies and laws could be overthrown by angry masses at any moment. A coalition between Reformers and Conservatives in Upper and Lower Canada united the two groups in the cause of constitutional reform, and was signed in July 1864. Other colonies were soon to join, always with an eye to the US, still in the thralls of its Civil War. The same year, Thomas Heath Haviland, a politician from Prince Edward Island, lamented this state of affairs in the United States: "The despotism now prevailing over our

border was greater than even that of Russia. ... Liberty in the States was altogether a delusion, a mockery and a snare. No man there could express an opinion unless he agreed with the opinion of the majority.”²

The American example was used throughout the process as a cautionary tale. George-Etienne Cartier, one of the Founding Fathers of the Confederation reflected upon the historical significance of creating a Canadian confederation at a time when “the great Federation of the United States of America was broken up and divided against itself.” “They [the Americans] had founded a federation for the purpose of carrying out and perpetuating democracy on this continent but we, who had the benefit of being able to contemplate republicanism in action during a period of eighty years, saw its defects, and felt convinced that purely democratic institutions would not be conducive to the peace and prosperity of nations (1988).”

Ultimately the Canadian choice of their form of government and of their independence from the United States was rooted in these larger debates over the legitimate source of power in a community: the continuity with a tradition and a constitution, or pure, undiluted popular will. The US is a presidential democracy. In this system, the president is simultaneously head of state and head of the government, and is constitutionally independent from the legislative body. The original federal model left all residual powers to the states, which still have substantial authority; although in the twentieth century the role of the federal government has expanded considerably, constitutional battles over the limits of federal power still invoke the original arrangement. Afraid of a loose and decentralized federal model at the whim of popular will, the Canadian provinces chose to remain a monarchy; They formed a strong federal union under the British Crown, and Canada became a parliamentary liberal democracy. The 1867 British North America Act – since renamed the Constitution Act – created the Canadian Confederation, stating that the goal of modern Canada was to pursue “Peace, Order, and good Government,” in a nod to the American Declaration of Independence. The head of the Canadian state remained the monarch, and the head of government is the Prime Minister, answerable to Parliament. The intent of the Canadian arrangement was to give the federal

² *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Volume XII (1891-1900).

government more power over the provinces, while in the US the original intent was to give the states more power and keep the federal government weaker. Although gradually the two federal models have gravitated away from their intention over time, the cultural underpinnings remain clear. As can be seen in the differences between popular attitudes around issues such as healthcare and gun rights, the legitimacy of the government involvement in protecting rights and delivering services to Canadian citizens continues to remain strong, while in the US, any perceived government encroachment upon private rights continues to be challenged from both the right and the left.

American responses to the Canadian Confederation

In 1866, an Annexation Bill was introduced in the US House of Representatives. It called for the admission of the colonies, if their governments wanted to join the United States. While the bill did not make it out of committee, it reflected the enduring American appetite for northern expansion which, at the time, also involved forays into annexing Greenland and Alaska. In fact, the Secretary of State William Seward (1801-1872) soon started negotiations with Russia, which ended with the purchase of Alaska in 1867.

After the Confederation was created, the US government did not immediately recognize Canada as an independent nation. After the Civil War, the Secretary of State William Seward (1801-1872) and Senator Charles Sumner (1811-1874) claimed hundreds of millions of dollars in compensation for British support to the South during the Civil War, and asked for British North America (aka Canada) in repayment, and the issue remained unsettled. In 1869, the American President Ulysses Grant (1822-1885) even suggested that Canada hold a referendum on independence from Great Britain, as a first step towards joining the United States. If nothing came of this suggestion it was mostly due to the negotiating talents of the Canadian Prime Minister John MacDonald (1815-1891) who was fiercely debating with his British and American counterparts the conditions of recognition of Canada. The resulting Treaty of Washington was signed in 1871; it settled the various disputes between Britain and the US, including the one about the Civil War and, crucially, it recognized the Canadian

Dominion as a sovereign and legitimate political entity after Britain paid 15 million in damages for supporting Southern secessionist efforts.

Conclusions

As early as the end of the American Revolution Canadians have cultivated a sense of national identity which was not built on ethnic or religious elements, but rather on the institutional and philosophical differences which distinguish them from their southern neighbors. Following the creation of two distinct Anglo-Saxon political communities after 1783 – one republican and the other monarchical – the remaining British colonies on the continent remained deeply intertwined in ideological and institutional arrangements that connected them both politically and culturally to Britain and the United States. Nevertheless, the Canadian Confederation was the result of a political choice to remain in the imperial sphere and to create a country that was to remain separate from the United States. The resulting competing Anglo-Exceptionalisms in North America were driven by two competing visions of liberty, which shaped the original colonial debates on reform during the 1830s and 1840s and which persist into the twenty-first century, albeit overshadowed by the prevailing neoliberal framework.

During the 20th century, as Canada gradually eliminated its remaining legislative ties with Britain and finally repatriated its Constitution in 1982, the relationship between it and the US remained harmonious, up until the most recent 2025 tensions. The imbalance in size and power between the two countries however, was best captured by a quip by former Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, during a visit to Washington to meet with President Richard Nixon: “Living next to you is in some ways like sleeping next to an elephant. No matter how friendly and even-tempered is the beast, if I can call it that, one is affected by every twitch and grunt.”³

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