

INFORMATION BULLETIN

DATE: August 7, 2009

SUBJECT: Border Security

SOURCE: Montreal Gazette

In this sad "security trumps trade" era of United States border protection, we in this corner have more than once used the word "paranoid" about certain government policies of our friends to the south. But the latest news from the frontier makes us seek even stronger language: "surreal" perhaps.

The New York Times reported last week that at the striking new border post at Massena N.Y. - just across from Cornwall, Ont. - workmen were removing from the exterior of the building the glossy, bright yellow, 6.4-metre-high letters that spell out "United States." This identification of the country you're entering is apparently a security risk.

The Times quotes a spokesperson for the U.S. Customs and Border Protection Agency: "There were security concerns. The sign could be a huge target and attract undue attention. Anything that would place our officers at risk we need to avoid." Courageously, however, the post will continue to fly the U.S. flag.

Few Canadians will be surprised to learn that the border agency is part of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, whose leader, Secretary Janet Napolitano, thought the Sept. 11 terrorists had come through Canada. Now she seems determined to enroll her whole country in a witless protection program.

Well, everybody wants to be secure. But we doubt that anyone coming off the Seaway Bridge will be fooled. "Gee, this used to say 'United States' but now there's no sign! Maybe it's Germany now! Defuse the bomb!"

In fairness, the move turns out to be slightly less bizarre than it first seems. The real concern, CBPA spokesman Lloyd Easterling told us in a telephone interview, is that somebody could

want to use the sign "as a point of symbolism ... we want to mitigate, where we can, anything that could be a danger."

Maybe. But it's all starting to seem more than a little obsessive. When ambassador-designate David Jacobson gets U.S. Senate confirmation and takes up his post in Ottawa, he will no doubt repeat his predecessors' mantra: Security trumps trade.

But as the U.S. carries this to ever-sillier extremes, Canadians are growing more uneasy. Do the Americans really believe they'll be safer as the United States of Anonymity?

This sign-dismantling is a laughable symptom of the malady gripping U.S. policy-makers. But other symptoms are more ominous. The security-driven "thickening" of the border is, we fear, already damaging the \$1.6 billion in daily - daily! - cross-border trade, and also straining the whole long-matured web of beneficial social and tourism ties between Canada and the U.S.

And for what? The border obsession seems doubly ridiculous when U.S. Attorney-General Eric Holder says, as he did last week, that he's increasingly worried about home-grown terrorism, "this whole notion of radicalization of Americans." Even perfect border security wouldn't solve that. Really, he should talk to Napolitano.

Business groups are growing seriously concerned. The Canadian Chamber of Commerce, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and almost 50 private-sector trade groups recently deplored this damaging trend. Their paper (www.chamber.ca) said "thickening the border" means "new or increasing fees and inspections, uncertainly over onerous wait times, layers of rules and regulations ... more stringent requirements once compliance is achieved, and infrastructure impediments."

The Conference Board of Canada, meanwhile, offers an example of how U.S. security protectionism is eroding the structural advantages of free trade: Manufacturers who once relied on "just in time" parts deliveries must now stockpile, a costly step, because speedy cross-border delivery is no longer reliable.

The Chambers have some short-term proposals - to improve "trusted shipper" and pre-clearance programs, for example - all couched in diplomatic language.

But common sense about this or that little detail will not overcome the border paranoia that grips our big neighbour. The foolishness about the Massena sign reveals just how frantically Uncle Sam now pursues the dream of security.