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WASHINGTON—It is a hallmark of cross-border diplomacy to keep all the bruises hidden, whenever and wherever possible. Or at the very least wait a generation before the fading scars are shown.

That's why today, nearly 40 years after the fact, we still know only fragments of what the famously pugnacious Richard Nixon had to say about that "clever son of a bitch," Pierre Elliott Trudeau.

Barely half of the 3,700 hours of Nixon tapes have been made public so far. The full heft of the former president's views on Canada may not be known for generations to come, if ever.

Contrast that with the almost nuclear silence in Ottawa, Washington and other world capitals Thursday, as tight-lipped officials brace for a vast weekend WikiLeaks dump of America's dirty diplomatic laundry.

These won't be stale Nixon-era rants. Rather, they are expected to be startlingly fresh dispatches from America's inner diplomatic ego — a mountain of classified U.S. State Department documents, some of which may cut to the heart of the here-and-now, from Guantanamo Bay to Afghanistan and beyond, with unkind words for close allies.

But precisely what? And precisely how damaging?

Canada's official lips were sealed tight on the matter, except to confirm dual overtures from Washington — David Jacobson, the U.S. ambassador to Ottawa, gave a head's up to Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon, while the Canadian embassy in D.C. is "currently engaging" with the State Department.

Sources in Ottawa acknowledged on background that even after the U.S. briefings the scope of what's coming remains unclear. "We are not privy to the full contents of documents which may be leaked," foreign affairs spokesperson Alain Cacchione said in an email to the *Star*.

U.S. officials, similarly, were ducking behind their turkeys on American Thanksgiving. Until the thing is out, nobody is saying.

But as a night-before-Christmas mood takes hold in some Canadian newsrooms in anticipation of unwrapping so many packages of rare inside chatter, some veteran diplomats caution not to overread the story. Because the words themselves may matter less than who is doing the talking.

"It is not at all uncommon for diplomats on the same team to share negative comments about allies," said former Canadian diplomat Paul Frazer, now a Washington consultant.

"But depending on what's there, I hope people don't get too twisted over it. When you report to trusted colleagues using private channels, people sometimes vent their frustrations. But often those exchanges aren't even shared with the upper levels. It might just be the view of a middling military commander, which in no way reflects the official stance of the government. Much depends not merely on what is said, but at what level are they saying it."

Amid the speculation, a side debate on the ethical merits of the potential leaks proceeded apace. It's one thing for WikiLeaks to crack open the vaults to military field reports in Afghanistan and Iraq, as it did in July and October. Is it something else to allow the world to peer this deep inside what global friends say about each other when their backs are turned?

Some diplomats point to lesser-known tension-points Canada-U.S. relations, wondering whether they may have played out different had Wikileaks then been a factor. A case in point: those fateful 17 months that began in May, 1986, when Canada's chief trade negotiator, Simon Reisman, hatched the original Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement.

"There were some very hot moments. At one point Simon Reisman, who was volatile but a very good negotiator, got up and walked out," said Frazer.

"When that happens, you use every possible back channel to cool tempers. A lot of conversation goes back and forth to avoid embarrassing either party. So you have to wonder what impact it would have made if all that were out in the open as it was happening."

Sources in Washington speculated that in the event that Afghanistan figures prominently in the Wikileaks dump, any undiplomatic mention of Canada is likely to pale against disclosures of U.S. views on various European NATO allies who have abstained from combat. But U.S. displeasure at the uneven workload in Afghanistan is hardly new; a rash of U.S. officials have said as much on the record, year after year.

Another D.C.-based source indicated the documents are expected to include inside U.S. diplomatic dialogue on child soldier Omar Khadr. Officials on both sides refused to discuss that possibility.

“Until there’s something to react to, don’t expect any reaction. Everyone is waiting to see what’s really there,” said one U.S. official.

With files from Michelle Shephard