ASSOCIATION FOR CANADIAN STUDIES IN THE UNITED STATES

ACSUS

OCCASIONAL PAPERS ON PUBLIC POLICY SERIES

2008 ▪ Vol. 2 No. 1

Popular Attitudes Towards the United Nations in Canada and the United States: A Study in National Images

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In 1985, the United Nations Association (UNA) in Canada published a finding for which it had no comprehensive explanation:

Although Canada is frequently seen by other nations as a mirror image of the United States in terms of public opinion, in reality, Canadian public attitudes sometimes differ widely from that of the Americans on questions pertaining to the UN; while often the two are in agreement of their support of the UN, Canadian opinion tends to be less undulatory than that of its southern counterpart.[2]

Although it is rare to find specific data that compares the American and Canadian attitudes explicitly, piecing together the available evidence does appear to confirm the UNA's assumption. In 1946, for example, although the difference between Americans and Canadians who were satisfied with the UN was just 2% (37% versus 39%), the discrepancy between those who were disappointed was 10% (27% versus 37%).[3] In 1972, another poll found just a 3% differential between those whose respect for the UN was increasing (23% versus 20%), but an overwhelming difference between those who had lost faith (62% versus 25%).[4] Although the data for 1985 is not entirely comparable, that year 56% of Americans believed that their country should cooperate with the UN, while 58% of Canadians felt that making the UN a success was very important. In contrast, 35% of those polled in the US did not approve of full cooperation whereas just 7% of Canadians considered the organization's success unimportant.[5] Twenty years later, based on a poll commissioned by the BBC World Service, nearly twice as many

Americans as Canadians felt negatively about the UN (36% versus 20%).[6] Read in conjunction with the relevant data, the UNA's observation includes two notable points. First, in spite of sensational political rhetoric that can at times suggest otherwise, citizens of the United States do believe in the value of the world organization. Second, the real difference between the attitudes of an allegedly reluctant American public and the famously internationalist Canadians is consistency. Historically, frustration with the UN in the United States has resulted in significant disparities in the level of public support. In Canada, similar feelings of disappointment typically have not affected national loyalty in any notable manner.

Although there are now a number of credible histories of the US-Canada relationship, it is difficult to find literature that examines popular views of the UN from a specifically comparative perspective. The best American analysis is Edward Luck's *Mixed Messages: American Politics and International Organization*. From the Canadian side, Tom Keating's *Canada and World Order: The Multilateralist Tradition in Canadian Foreign Policy* considers the UN as one of many facets of the Canadian internationalist impulse.[7] Both texts propose a series of explanations for the attitudes that can be found in their respective states, from leadership, to political culture, to questions of power. Considering the countries comparatively confirms these differences, but it also illuminates a particular similarity that make the results and persistence of the UNA's findings so intriguing: when it comes to the formative experiences of the United States and Canada in the founding of the UN specifically, the history is more shared than separate.

US leadership in the drafting of the UN Charter marked, in the words of prominent analysts, the beginning of a "new era," in US foreign policy, a "dramatic turning away from the isolationist policies of the past," a "second chance" that could not be wasted.[8] Similarly, Canadians saw their participation in the creation of the world body as evidence of their accession to a greater role in the international community.[9] Certainly, there were differences in the experiences of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, in the approaches of their respective countries to policy planning, in the political structures in which they operated, and in the national interests of a great and a middle-sized power. But whether the disparities can fully account for a discrepancy that has persisted for over sixty years is unclear. Explanations of the consistent divergence of American and Canadian attitudes towards the United Nations should not ignore their national images. This often under-appreciated factor provides an additional layer of analytical rigor that is too appealing to ignore.

Although FDR is recalled as one of the founders of the United Nations and Mackenzie King once referred to its creation as "the consummation of a heart's desire and life effort to bring about peace between nations to the extent that it might be possible,"[10] neither leader was fully committed to its success. Roosevelt was an American before he was an internationalist; his primary objective as president was ensuring the security of the United States with himself at the helm. Forever conscious of how his Democratic predecessor, Woodrow Wilson, had not only failed to gain Congressional backing for US entry into the League of Nations but had also created an atmosphere that enabled a Republican election victory in 1920, he was at best a cautious advocate of collective security throughout the UN negotiations. In an appeal to his constituents' sense of exceptionalism, he envisaged a system dominated by and dependent upon the will of the great powers, his proverbial "Four Policemen."[11]

Mackenzie King was also a master politician and a firm believer that his state's interests were best served under his watch. Like his American counterpart, he knew better than to expect an international organization to alter human nature. In October 1945, with tensions between the East and West

increasing, King even wondered whether the organization had already become "worse than nothing."[12]

Roosevelt and King did more than just limit their personal support for the UN, they also restricted the effectiveness of their most idealistic world planners. The American president's actions were threefold. First, he never provided the clear direction necessary to pursue a coherent strategy for shaping the future world order.[13] Second, he deliberately created an atmosphere of conflict and tension among his leading officials. The early stages of the State Department's planning process were coordinated by the secretary of state, Cordell Hull, but were largely controlled by the under-secretary of state, Sumner Welles. The two differed fundamentally on their visions of the shape of the new world body, creating inefficiencies within the State Department. At one point, different elements of the bureaucracy even designed contradictory blueprints for the future order.[14] Finally, when Secretary of State Hull became too ill to manage the State Department in 1944, Roosevelt replaced him with Edward R. Stettinius Junior, a capable administrator with virtually no knowledge of the portfolio. Stettinius' ignorance allowed the president to maintain direct control of foreign policy and caused his vague musings on the future to exacerbate the State Department's confusion. Based on Roosevelt's conduct, it should come as no surprise that the American people were in the end less than fully committed to the UN.

The Canadian situation was remarkably similar. Mackenzie King, who served as his own secretary of state for external affairs, also kept his conception of the future world order largely to himself. Formal post-hostilities planning committees were not even established in Ottawa until both the Americans and the British had completed their first drafts of the UN Charter. King also refused to become aware of, let alone intervene in, the significant conflicts of personality and ideas within his Department of External Affairs in the early 1940s. By appointing a more junior civil servant, Norman Robertson, to the post of under-secretary ahead of the more senior Lester Pearson in 1941, he created tension among his diplomatic elite that persisted. The deep frustration felt by Robertson and his loyal associate, Hume Wrong, towards Pearson's chief assistant, Escott Reid, was also poorly managed and resulted in tangible policy failures in 1943 and 1944. Canadians too, then, had reasons to be less than fully loyal to the new organization.[15]

Both Roosevelt and King also created - or refused to counter - popular expectations of the UN that were entirely unrealistic. As the relationship among the great powers deteriorated towards the end of the war, the US president projected steadfast enthusiasm for what one scholar has called a "masquerade peace." As a high ranking member of the State Department explained in his summary of the campaign to ratify the UN Charter: "I did my duty faithfully and successfully but always believed that the Charter was impracticable. Moreover, its presentation to the American people as almost holy writ and with the evangelical enthusiasm of a major advertising campaign seemed to me to raise popular hopes which could only lead to bitter disappointment."[16] When the UN faltered, it is no surprise that Americans quickly lost faith.

It should follow that Canadians should have been equally disappointed, but they were not. Like Roosevelt, Mackenzie King never interfered with public efforts to popularize Canadian successes at the UN negotiations, nor did he speak out when members of his own Liberal Party patently exaggerated the extent of Canada's contribution to the conference during the parliamentary debate over charter ratification.[17] As Canadians watched the UN fail to deter Soviet aggression, they too were disappointed, but they did not allow their feelings to translate into disillusionment with the same intensity as their southern neighbours.

The differences are no better explained by the political processes beneath the executive level that helped create the

new world organization. In both countries, the experience began on two separate tracks - official and unofficial - that eventually merged. In the United States, Secretary of State Hull managed the process under a veil of secrecy. As one student of US public policy has explained, in the early years, Hull's team "gave little time to the question of public and congressional opinion."[18] One could infer that the American public might have been brought into the official process too late to allow it to develop the commitment to the world organization necessary to withstand difficult times. Again, however, the situation in Canada was hardly different. The first time that a request was made to integrate popular ideas into the planning process in the Department of External Affairs, Escott Reid wrote back, "We are not yet ready to contemplate [that] now... It might be better for people's minds to lie fallow for two years."[19] Moreover, even after a newly created Wartime Information Board argued forcefully that the Canadian public needed to know more about the national postwar planning strategy, it took close to two years for the government to respond meaningfully.

Things were much the same at the non-governmental level. In the United States, the internationalist enthusiasm that eventually overtook the country developed initially among the intellectual elite. Individuals like Clarence Streit, James T. Shotwell, Henry Luce, and others used books, newsletters, magazines, and the popular press to promote the benefits of international organization to the future world order.[20] In Canada, the staff at the *Winnipeg Free Press*, activists within the Canadian Institute for International Affairs (CIIA), and members of the old League of Nations Society played leading roles in gradually changing national perceptions of the implications of greater engagement in world affairs.[21] In both countries, once the bureaucracy and the political establishment recognized that the public was not just accepting, but in fact demanding greater internationalism in governmental policy, the intellectual leaders were co-opted into the political process. In 1944, the State Department hired John Sloan Dickey, a public relations consultant, to help promote the UN. In the words of one analyst, Dickey used "NGOs as field battalions in a broad campaign to defeat isolationist opponents and their supporters in Congress."[22] The spectacular campaign (over two million pamphlets were distributed to the public over the next ten months) was deliberately elitist. "Clearly," scholar Wilbur Edel has explained, "the department was not attempting to reach the whole population directly. Rather, it was beaming its efforts to the leadership and special-interest groups, who in turn were expected to wield a powerful influence on whole communities and categories of people."[23] The problem with this approach, as studies would show, was that the propaganda never reached those who were the most disinclined towards American internationalism: the least educated members of society.[24]

This situation was hardly different from the state of affairs in Canada. By 1944, nearly all parliamentarians were taking the internationalists seriously. Government officials became contributors, instead of just observers, at CIIA conferences, and the National Film Board was even commissioned to produce a pair of films about the future world order. The entire elite establishment, including leading members of the national media, collectively heralded Canada's new role as a self-proclaimed middle power.[25] To their disappointment, great power dominance of the post-San Francisco international security discussions quickly demonstrated that middle powers would have no more influence than the lesser ones on the most significant international issues. Nevertheless, unlike the situation in the United States, Canadians' faith in the UN and what it represented was hardly deterred.

Differences in the American and Canadian political processes also cannot fully account for the discrepancy. Admittedly, the division of power between the domestically-oriented Congress and the globally responsible executive in the United States can create tension. It is equally

clear that Roosevelt's cautious approach to internationalism was meant to protect his office from the power of the isolationists in the legislature. Mackenzie King, however, faced similar constraints. Not only did he contend with lifelong imperialists who would have preferred to approach security within a Commonwealth construct instead of a global one, he also had to manage the isolationist forces in French Canada whose support he needed to sustain his parliamentary majority.

The most obvious difference between the United States and Canada that might be used to explain the situation outlined by the UN Association is the scope of their impact on the world stage. Typically, powerful states favour an anarchical global system to protect themselves against incursions on their sovereignty while smaller ones advocate strengthening multilateral institutions to restrict great power domination and allow them greater flexibility and opportunities for influence in world affairs. Among the less powerful, the Canadian state is particularly sympathetic to international organizations because of its disproportionate dependence on global peace and international prosperity for its export-reliant economy to flourish. It would follow, then, that Americans would be less inclined to support the concept of the United Nations, while the Canadians would be more willing to stand by the organization in spite of its imperfections.

This theory is intuitively appealing, and likely explains part of the long-standing Canadian-American differences, but it too is not wholly convincing. In the words of Sumner Welles, "the charter of the United Nations represents what was primarily an American conception."[26] At its core, it affirmed the supremacy of the Big Five on the global stage and gave the United States the freedom that it needed to pursue its interests without any real hindrances. The organization that emerged in 1945 should have satisfied stalwart US isolationists who sought to maintain American independence in world affairs, realists who cared most about the protection of the national interest, and even open-minded idealists who conceded that in matters of war and peace, great power leadership at the UN was essential.[27] As Edward Luck has explained, "a weakened UN means fewer options for U.S. foreign policy."[28] Regardless of whether the United States is capable of acting unilaterally in defence of its interests, Luck's notion should be ample incentive to maintain similar support for the organization among the US general public as it does in Canada.

Nevertheless, it was evident to experts as early as 1941 - before the United States had even joined the war - that ensuring American participation in a world body in perpetuity would not be easy. At a conference of experts in international relations held by the World Citizens Association in Illinois, a Canadian, Percy Corbett, warned that the American leadership could never relax in its effort "to educate public opinion."[29] Regrettably, what Corbett and subsequent analysts of world affairs failed to recognize was that no amount of education - a top-down method of persuasion - would likely ever be sufficient: an internationalist framework for popular thinking runs counter to the American national image.

As Kenneth Boulding has explained, it is the way that the nation sees itself on the world stage, regardless of the reality, that will largely determine its behaviour. That perception, he notes importantly, is "essentially a *historical* image," reaching back into a past that might be rightly or wrongly remembered: "The more conscious a people of its history, the stronger the national image is likely to be."That image, however, cannot be controlled by the elite. Rather, it "is essentially a mass image ... transmitted through the family ... both in the case of the powerful and in the case of ordinary persons." The more established the nation, the more difficult it is for the leadership to have an impact.[30]

In the case of the United States, efforts to convince the public that America would benefit by surrendering sovereignty to a world body will likely never be completely successful. Even if Washington's position of dominance on the global stage were to decline notably, it is quite

possible that the ideals of individual freedom and liberty - what Luck might refer to as elements of the political culture - are too strongly ingrained in the American national psyche to suppose that the benefits to be gained through adherence to the laws and principles of a global institution could justify compromising national sovereignty and independence.[31]

It is here where the Canadian situation is particularly different. Boulding notes that in newer nations, still attempting to define a place for themselves in the world, the public often lacks the strength or conviction to wrest the political agenda from its elite. In these situations, "the powerful are frequently inspired by a national image derived not from family tradition but from a desire to imitate other nations, and here they frequently try to impose their images on the mass of people."[32] The Mackenzie King government was able to propagate among the public an impression of Canada as an international nation because at the time, the national identity was still under construction. During the planning process that created the UN, Canadians were more amenable to public education campaigns, to overly laudatory speeches about their contributions to world peace, and to calls for their unwavering support for a new international security organization.

When the UN struggled in its early years, sceptics in the United States could seek solace in a national image that remained unchanged.[33] In contrast, one might argue that Canadians stayed loyal to the organization because they equated its survival with their own worldly success and prosperity. More than sixty years later, in spite of the UN's perpetual struggles, Canadians have never given up hope, while their American neighbours have been much less forgiving. In international relations, leadership certainly matters, as do politics, society, and culture. Without history, however, we will only ever have part of the explanation.

Endnotes

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2 Claire Delbridge, "Public Attitudes in Canada Towards the United Nations," *United Nations Association in Canada Briefing Paper* 19 (December 1985): 1-2.

3 *Public Opinion Quarterly* 10,2 (Summer 1946): 263.

4 Cited in Delbridge, "Public Attitudes," 4.

5 Edward Luck, *Mixed Messages: American Politics and International Organization* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), 262; and Don Munton, *Canada and the United Nations at 60+* (UNA in Canada, 2007) www.unac.org/en/library/unacresearch/2007/Muntonreport_e.pdf [22 August 2007].

6 World Public Opinion.org, "U.N. Continues to get Positive, though Lower, Ratings with World Public," (24 January 2006), accessed at http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/incl/printable_version.php?pnt=163 [20 September 2007].

7 Keating, *Canada and World Order: The Multilateralist Tradition in Canadian Foreign Policy*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2002).

8 Ruth B. Russell, *A History of the United Nations Charter: The Role of the United States, 1940-1945* (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1958), 1; Dorothy B. Robins, *Experiment in Democracy: The Story of U.S. Citizen Organizations in Forging the Charter of the United Nations* (New York: Parkside Press, 1971), 3; Robert A. Divine, *Second Chance: The Triumph of Internationalism in America During World War II* (New York: Antheneum, 1967), 4. See also Stephen C. Schlesinger, *Act of Creation: The Founding of the United Nations* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003), xvi; Lukas Haynes, "Mobilizing Public Support for the United Nations," Working Paper, Center for Public Leadership, Carr Center for Human Rights Policy (November 2001), 34. Accessed at www.ksg.harvard.edu/cchrp/Web%20Working%20Papers/CPLHaynes.pdf [28 August 2007]. Isolationism should be understood here as it was defined by the preeminent scholar of US isolationism, Wayne S. Cole: "American isolationists had faith in the power of example. They believed the United States could more effectively lead the world to the good life by building and sustaining democracy, freedom, and prosperity at home than it could through military involvement in foreign wars. They opposed any American efforts to police the world or rebuild the world in an American image. Many feared that involvement in foreign wars could destroy the very freedoms, democracy, and prosperity they were supposed to defend." Isolationists did not, it is worth noting, "oppose all American activity abroad, but they wanted to leave Americans free to determine for themselves when, where, how, and whether the United States should involve itself." Cole, *Roosevelt and the Isolationists* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1983) 7.

9 Adam Chapnick, *The Middle Power Project: Canada and the Founding of the United Nations* (Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 2005). 4

10 King, diary entry, 23 June 1945; see also Russell, *A History of the UN Charter*, 1.

11 An excellent summary of the historiography on this issue can be found in William C. Widenor, "American Planning for the United Nations: Have We Been Asking the Right Questions?" *Diplomatic History* 6,3 (Summer 1982): 245-62.

12 King, diary entry, 3 October 1945. See also the entries throughout the month of September and on the following day.

13 Lloyd C. Gardiner and Warren F. Kimball, "The United States: Democratic Democracy," in David Reynolds, Kimball, and A.O. Chubarian, eds., *Allies at War: The Soviet, American, and British Experience, 1939-1945* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 403. It is fitting in this context that the first official comment in favour of collective security released by the Roosevelt administration came from the mouth of the vice-president, Henry Wallace and not FDR himself.

14 It was only in 1943 when Hull would no

longer tolerate the president's waffling that FDR became complicit in Welles' forced resignation. Some of the best primary evidence on the extent of the conflict can be found in "Note on a Talk with the Secretary," 19 April 1943, in Library of Congress, Leo Pasvolsky Papers, Box 7, Subject File, Postwar Planning; and Arthur Krock, Private Memorandum, 21 December 1943 [pp.142-44], in Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Arthur Krock Papers, Box 1, Works: Memoranda, Book 1.

15 The tension in the US is described in most histories of the period. See, for example, Divine, *Second Chance*, 42. For Canada, see Chapnick, *The Middle Power Project*, 12-13, as well as Jack Hickerson, Memorandum, 14 September 1944, in National Archives and Records Administration, RG59, Records of the Department of State, Microfilm Publication M1244, Matthews-Hickerson File, Roll 12, Subject File: British Commonwealth; and the follow up letter of 3 October. See also Robertson to Pearson, 24 October 1944, in Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Lester B. Pearson Papers, MG26 N1, vol. 13, Robertson, N.A., 1942-26.

16 Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969), 111. On the masquerade peace, see Thomas M. Campbell, *Masquerade Peace: America's UN Policy, 1944-1945* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1973).

17 King did not even introduce the motion to ratify the charter, having left that honour to his more internationalist-minded minister of justice, Louis St. Laurent. On the ratification debate, see Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 1st session, 10th Parliament, vol. 246, specifically the debates from 16-19 October 1945, 1185-1280.

18 Wilbur Edel, *The State Department, the Public, and the United Nations* (New York: Vantage Press, 84). See also Harley Notter, *Postwar Foreign Policy Preparation 1939-1945* (Washington: Department of State, 1949). For a sense of public opinion at the time, see Raoul de Roussy de Sales, diary entries, 4 and 6 September and 14 October 1939, all in his *The Making of Yesterday: The Diaries of Raoul de Roussy de Sales* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947), 60, 63, 73; and American Institute of Public Opinion, 4 March 1941, in *Public Opinion Quarterly* 5,2 (July 1941): 319-20.

19 Reid to Glazebrook, 16 March 1942, in LAC, Escott Reid Papers, MG31 E46, vol. 6, file 1 [10]. See also R.B. Hanson, 25 March 1942, in Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 3rd session, 19th Parliament, vol. 230, 1625.

20 As early as 1941, Shotwell's Commission to Study the Organization of Peace had distributed over 100,000 copies of its first report to clubs, churches, and other interested groups across the country. For an example of the literature of the time, see Clarence K. Streit, *Union Now: A Proposal for a Federal Union of the Democracies of the North Atlantic* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1939).

21 Chapnick, *The Middle Power Project*, 36-40.

22 Haynes, "Mobilizing Public Support," 12.

23 Edel, *The State Department, the Public, and the United Nations*, 179.

24 A most revealing study on this idea can be found in Elmo Roper et al., "American Attitudes on World Organization," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 17,4 (Winter 1953-54), 405-42, and particularly the table on page 410.

25 See, among others, Minutes of the 17th Annual Meeting of the [CIIA] National Council, 16 December 1944, in LAC, CIIA Papers, MG28 I250, Reel M-4619, vol. 6, Minutes, 1943-44; Brooke Claxton, "The Place of Canada in Post-War Organization," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 10,4 (November 1944): 409-21; Canadian Council for Education in Citizenship, Secretary's Report to the Fourth Annual Council Meeting, October 1945, in LAC, Canadian Citizenship Council Papers, MG28 I85, vol. 45, 1944-40; and "The World in Action: Now the Peace," in LAC, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Fonds, Film, [VI 7901-0013].

26 Sumner Welles, *Where are We Heading?* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1946), 345.

27 Cole, *Roosevelt and the Isolationists*, 7; Walter Lippmann, *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1943); and James T. Shotwell, *The Great Decision* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), specifically 49.

28 Luck, *Mixed Messages*, 4.

29 Cited in World Citizens Association, *The World's Destiny and the United States: A Conference of Experts in International Relations* (Chicago: R.R. Donnelly & Sons, 1941), 85.

30 Kenneth E. Boulding, "National Images and International Systems," in *International Politics and Foreign Policy*, ed. James M. Roseneau (New York: The Free Press, 1969), 424.

31 For a similar, but more hopeful interpretation, see Luck, *Mixed Messages*, chs. 2-4.

32 *Ibid*.

33 For the reasons for popular US objections to the charter in 1945, see Edel, *The State Department, the Public and the United Nations*, 258.

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