KNOWING WAR:

Canadians Reflect on WWII and the Possibility of another Global Conflict

ABSTRACT

A series of surveys conducted by the firm Environics for the Association for Canadian Studies provide some valuable insight into how thinking about war has evolved amongst the Canadian population. Some 2 100 Canadians were polled between May 13th and May 15th and again between September 13th and 15th 2004 around what we know about the Second World War and the extent to which we fear that another such global conflict will emerge in the years ahead.

June 2004 marked the beginning of what will be a series of commemorative events coinciding with the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War II. On the sixth of the month, Canadians gathered in Normandy, France to pay tribute to veterans in conjunction with D-Day. These events and others highlighting the role that Canada played in the Second World War offer an opportunity to reflect on both the knowledge about the history of that period and the lessons that arise therefrom.

Knowledge about World War II

When asked in May 2004 whether they had learned about the Second World War while in school, some 30% of respondents said they learned a great deal, 38% some, 21% not very much and 7% nothing at all. Males were more inclined to learn a great deal (35%) than females (27%), as did more immigrants (44%) than non-immigrants (28%). On the basis of age, the 18-29 cohorts was more inclined to have learned a great deal about World War II than those between the ages of 30 and 59.

Thinking back to when you were young and in school, how much did you learn about the Second World War?

Table 1

	Age			
	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
A great deal	32	22	28	43
Some	39	45	43	24
Not very much	29	23	21	16
Nothing at all	4	9	8	8
DK/NA	–	1	–	9

There is evidence of a gap in the degree to which Canadians assess their knowledge of the Second World War and what their actual awareness is. If, however, 71% of Canadians between the ages of 18 and 29 believe that they learned a great deal or something about the Second World War when asked, only 30% were able to identify the Prime Minister of Canada during that time (Environics, September 2004).

Who was Prime Minister of Canada during the Second World War?

Table 2

	Age			
	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
Mackenzie King	30	25	40	55
Lester B. Pearson	23	35	20	16
Wilfrid Laurier	17	9	10	4
Louis St-Laurent	4	3	10	13
Other	–	1	–	–
DK/NA	26	26	20	12

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On the basis of gender 44% of men had the correct answer while 31% of women properly identified Mackenzie King. More women (26%) were inclined to admit that they did not know the answer than did men (16%). On a regional basis, residents of the Atlantic provinces (41%) gave the correct response more often than those surveyed in other regions, though the gap was not substantial as Quebec fared worst with 35% identifying King.

Back to the Future: Evaluating Our Role in the War today

During the WWII there was a substantial difference in opinion amongst English and French Canadians over whether the country should make military service obligatory. The issue of conscription had similarly divided Canada during the First World War. In the case of WWII, Prime Minister King held a referendum in order to release him from a pledge made not to force military conscription on the population. It gave rise to an outcome that profoundly divided Canadians along language lines with the overwhelming majority of Quebecers voting to have King respect his commitment and English Canadians to release him from it. When asked to look back on the issue, the majority of Canadians feel the approach that Canada took to the War was just right, including 58% of Quebecers. Still, one out of four Quebecers maintains that there was too much support for the war effort – a view shared by 7% of other Canadians.

During the first years of the Second World War, Canada had VOLUNTARY military service to support the Allies. Towards the end of the war, there was conscription and military service become MANDATORY. Overall, do you think that Canada's approach showed…

Table 3

	Region				
	Atlantic provinces	Québec	Ontario	Prairies	British Columbia
Too much support for the war effort	12	24	7	9	5
Just the right amount of support	72	58	80	79	85
Not enough support for the war effort	11	10	9	7	4
DK/NA	5	7	5	5	6

On the basis of age cohort the younger segment tends to think that Canada did too much, as compared to the older group. Such sentiment can be attributed to either lack of knowledge about the Second World War or a general aversion to participating in the War whatever the issues at stake.

Table 4

	Age			
	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
Too much support for the war effort	18	10	12	7
Just the right amount of support	68	76	72	82
Not enough support for the war effort	7	9	9	7
DK/NA	7	5	6	4

Conflict in our Future?

When asked by the polling firm Gallup, 73% of Americans maintain that war is sometimes necessary to settle differences between nations. It is a view that is not shared by Canadians as in May 2004 when some 57% said that war is an outdated way of settling differences between nations, versus 40% who believe it is sometimes necessary. Still there is a significant gap in opinion on the necessity of war between francophones and anglophones and by consequence between Quebecers and other Canadians. Amongst francophones, some 74% think that war is an outdated way of settling differences versus 52% of anglophone Canadians. Along regional lines it is in Alberta and Manitoba that more respondents thought war was sometimes necessary. For their part, a mere 24% of Quebecers believe that war is sometimes necessary. And whereas a slight majority of men believe that it is sometimes necessary, 67% of women believe that it is an outdated way of settling differences between nations.

Some people feel that war is an outdated way of settling differences between nations. Others feel that war is sometimes necessary to settle differences. Which point of view is closer to your own?

Table 5

	Outdated way	Sometimes necessary	DK/NA
Atlantic	55	41	4
Québec	73	24	3
Ontario	54	44	2
Manitoba	48	49	4
Saskatchewan	56	43	1
Alberta	41	55	4
British Columbia	52	45	3

When asked in September 2004 whether they believe another World War will occur in the next ten years approximately 45% of Canadians indicated that it was either very or somewhat likely. Nearly half of Quebecers and residents of the Atlantic Provinces were likely to believe in the prospect of another World War over the next ten years, while British Columbians seem least inclined towards such an opinion.

How likely is it that another World War will occur within the next ten years?

Table 6

	Region				
	Atlantic provinces	Québec	Ontario	Prairies	British Columbia
Very likely	19	20	16	16	14
Somewhat likely	29	29	29	27	25
Not very likely	31	33	34	39	38
Not at all likely	19	17	18	16	21
DK/NA	1	1	2	2	2

On the basis of age, some 56% of those between 18 and 29 years believe that a World War is likely, while 41% of those over the age of 60 hold a similar view. Yet another significant difference in opinion on war is gender-based.

Causes of Future Conflicts

In the event of another World War, Quebecers were more likely to contend that American foreign policy would be the catalyst as opposed to the rest of Canada that would assign blame for such conflict to Middle Eastern terrorism. Underlying the difference between Quebec and the rest of Canada, however, are varying perspectives on the roots of global conflict that are reflected in views based on voter preference. As observed, British Columbians are more divided than other Canadians over whether US foreign policy or Middle East terrorism would be to blame for another World War.

In the event that another World War breaks out, which of the following do you believe will be the main cause?

Table 7

	Region				
	Atlantic provinces	Québec	Ontario	Prairies	British Columbia
Middle Eastern terrorism	50	36	44	48	40
American foreign policy	25	42	29	29	33
The growth of an Asian Superpower	14	10	13	12	17
Third World poverty	7	7	7	6	4
Combination of American foreign policy and Middle Eastern terrorism	–	1	1	1	1

The regional differences likely intersect with these electoral choices; as observed below those favoring the Bloc Québecois and the New Democratic Party are more likely to confer on responsibility for a future international conflict, while those favoring the Conservatives and the Liberals are far more inclined to see Middle Eastern terrorism as the chief protagonist.

In the event that another World War breaks out, which of the following do you believe will be the main cause?

Table 8

	Federal Vote				
	Liberal Party	Conservative Party	New Democratic Party	Bloc Québecois	Undecided
Middle Eastern terrorism	42	54	32	32	47
American foreign policy	32	19	44	47	26
The growth of an Asian Superpower	13	16	13	9	10
Third World poverty	6	5	7	7	7
Combination of American foreign policy and Middle Eastern terrorism	1	1	2	–	1

If persons of English and French linguistic backgrounds hold different views over who might be responsible for the outbreak of another World War, there are also somewhat similar divisions between immigrants of European and non-European backgrounds with the former more likely to attribute another such conflict to Middle Eastern terrorism and the latter to American foreign policy.

In the event that another World War breaks out, which of the following do you believe will be the main cause?

Table 9

	Language at home and Immigrant Origins			
	English	French	Immigrant Europe	Immigrant Other
Middle Eastern terrorism	45	37	42	32
American foreign policy	29	40	33	40
The growth of an Asian Superpower	14	10	11	10
Third World poverty	6	8	10	10
Combination of American foreign policy and Middle Eastern terrorism	1	1	1	1

On the basis of age the younger segment of the Canadian population is more likely to believe that the US would be responsible for another World War (44%) as opposed to Middle Eastern terrorism. This view reflects a definite generation gap as 46% of those between the age of 30 and 44 tend to believe that Middle Eastern Terrorism and not US foreign policy (33%) is more likely to be the culprit. In the case of respondents over the age of 60 some 23% believe that the United States would ultimately be to blame should another World War break out.

Finally, on the basis of gender, it is worth noting that women (46%) were more likely than men to assign responsibility for an eventual such outbreak to Middle Eastern terrorism (46%) than to American foreign policy (32%) while men were less likely to assign blame to Middle Eastern Terrorism (39%) and were slightly more concerned than females (10%) with the growth of an Asian Superpower (16%). For their part men tended to project the same rate of response as women over the predominant influence of US foreign policy in the event of such occurrence.