NATIONALISM AND CIVIC DUTY IN WARTIME:

Comparing World Wars in Canada and America

ABSTRACT

The author considers what it meant to be Canadian or American during the First and Second World Wars. According to the former, "did citizenship mean loyalty to the Empire or to the new nation of Canada, itself barely 50 years old?" Anglophones and francophones felt differently about their allegiances to be sure, whereas wartime Americanization programs guaranteed that language and religion in the United States played little to no part. Dr. Jensen compares our political leadership from one Great War to the next and describes lessons learned on the homefront, showing that Mackenzie King and Roosevelt were determined not to repeat the mistakes of their predecessors.

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Wartime forces nations to make hard choices and to re-examine their basic political values. The war imposes an urgency of its own, heightened by the demands of battlefields commanders and frontline soldiers, and the urgent requests of allies. The window of opportunity for debating, negotiating and compromising is short; the demands of national pride, of national independence, even of national existence can overwhelm old partisan loyalties and cause the realignment of political forces. The people themselves discover that they have multiple loyalties – to their nation (as they see it) as well as to locality, ethnoreligious group, party, and to their ideal notions of the public good. These multiple loyalties can be reinforcing or they can be divisive. It is the business of politicians to help the people sort out and prioritize their loyalties. Two clusters of issues are of concern here. The first cluster relates to nationalism – what did it mean to be a Canadian or an American, what duties and responsibilities were involved in citizenship?[1] How did citizenship reinforce or conflict with ethnic/racial/religious/language loyalties? Secondly, how did warfare and death bring to the fore issues of sacrifice, equality, identification of the evils of the Enemy, and duty to nation (and Empire)? An advantage of the comparative approach is that historians can see more possibilities and limitations and perhaps be somewhat more objective when they are outsiders. Mackenzie King and Franklin Roosevelt knew full well what had happened in the First World War, and were determined they would not repeat the mistakes and misjudgments of Sir Robert Borden and Woodrow Wilson. It was easier for King because he had refused to support Borden in the first place. More intriguing is Roosevelt's case because he was a senior official in the Wilson regime and the Democratic party's vice presidential nominee in 1920, yet it seems he made the opposite decision from Wilson on many critical issues.

Citizenship in Wartime

In America, citizenship has always been defined in terms of civic duty. The United States comprises a voluntary community committed to the same ideals, which historians call republicanism. In the 19th century, however, nationalism was a powerful force that united people based on culture, especially language, religion and ethnicity. The nations of Italy and Germany were created in mid-century as the lands of the Italians and Germans. The Civil War proved the power of republicanism as the buttress of nationalism. In its aftermath there was a strong demand for a cultural component of citizenship that would build upon – but never replace – republicanism. The American nation had to comprise an American people.[2] From the time of the Revolution down to the 1880s much attention had been given to the very early origins of Britain and America. In terms of legal and constitutional history, the Ancient Constitution was seen by the Revolutionary generation as the bedrock of republicanism. Scholars argued that the genius of British and American democracy could be found in the folk practices of the Anglo-Saxons or even older Germanic tribes. Some Canadian scholars, searching for an ethnic basis of national unity, argued that genealogy demonstrated that French Canadians had originated in Normandy and Brittany, making them brothers, racially, to the English. The French would have none of that and emphasized their separate ethnic status.

A radical new viewpoint emerged in America in the early 1890s, developed by highly influential men of letters Theodore Roosevelt, Frederick Jackson Turner, and Woodrow Wilson. Their argument,

influenced by new theories of evolution, was that the American people had only recently emerged – in the last century or so.[3] Turner argued that the frontier process stripped away European institutions and characteristics because they did not function well in the raw new environment. The established church, the aristocracy, the standing army, and intrusive governmental control faltered and vanished. Free land created an independent yeomanry that contrasted sharply with the serfs or tenants bound to their landlords. To survive on the frontier called for initiative, energy, independence, and a refusal to bow to authority. The frontier brought to the fore democratic ideas and potentials that existed in Europe but were largely repressed by the standing order. Turner presented a dynamic model, in which each movement westward altered the character of the people, and each generation's successes in dealing with the environment were passed along, because the Americans were not bound by the hoary traditions that characterized Europe. The further west, the more American. Decade by decade a new culture and a new people had emerged. Overnight older interpretations of American history were swept away by the Turnerian model and it dominated American thought in the eras of the world wars.

What made America a young nation was not the date that its Constitution was written, but how recently its inhabitants had evolved into a distinct people. Contrast this with Canada. Did citizenship mean loyalty to the Empire or to the new nation of Canada, itself barely 50 years old? For the Conservatives the war offered an opportunity to become more independent within the Empire – having a separate army on the Western Front would bring a separate seat at the treaty table, and control of Canada's destiny. The assumption of being and staying part of the British Empire was so powerful that no one in 1914 considered staying out of the war. Armed rebellion of the sort that occurred in South Africa in 1914 and Ireland in 1916 was inconceivable, as was the possibility Ottawa could have opened separate peace talks with Germany. Once committed to war, the Canadian Expeditionary Force was hostage to London if it remained in Europe, and could have threatened a coup if brought home in disgrace.

The Americans of course had secured independence by fighting against the British army, but Canadians who wanted independence never proposed a revolutionary war; they wanted London to grant it voluntarily.[4] Nominally that happened in 1931, and to prove it, King, in September 1939 did not allow London to declare war on Canada's behalf. By contrast in 1917 the United States refused to become an official member of the Allies. Wilson did not consult with London and Paris before entering the war. The US declared war for multiple reasons, both nationalistic and universalistic, but support for the British Empire was not on the list. Wilson operated as an independent political force and was remarkably successful, so that by late 1918, he controlled war and peace. Wilson's refusal to contemplate any sort of coalition government alienated the Republicans and guaranteed the Senate would never ratify the Versailles Treaty or join the League of Nations. Roosevelt saw the mistake and reversed Wilson's go-it-alone policy, bringing senior Republicans into his cabinet to head the War and Navy departments, and securing bipartisan support for a United Nations. FDR worked closely with his military allies and had all major military decisions made by a powerful British-American Joint Chiefs of Staff. Even though Canada was a major supporter of Britain after 1939, both militarily and economically, it was treated as a junior partner and was denied a seat at the highest levels.

For Canada's Francophones in the 1910s, the duty of citizenship meant loyalty not to the Empire but to Canada. By that they meant upholding the perpetual legitimacy of the two founding nations – to their own ancient constitution, so to speak. It was a defensive effort to reclaim the old guarantee of an equal share in all of Canada, as well as an appeal to historic tradition. Thus Henri Bourassa, in his famous reply to Captain Talbot Papineau, legitimized the Canadianness of the French Quebecers in terms of old historical roots, the "hereditary instincts, social and economic conditions, [and] a national tradition of three centuries." Bourassa and the nationalists in Quebec were willing to tolerate foreign war in 1914, when it seemed cheap and easy, but soon rejected it as basically unnecessary for the Canada they idealized. Their Canada ought not respond to appeals for solidarity with France (which was seen as anticlerical), nor to universalistic aspirations for peace on earth and an end to militarism as represented by Berlin. High enlistment rates, they argued, characterized recent arrivals from Britain who had not yet internalized Canadian values. Their own low enlistment rates, they explained, reflected a devotion to the "true" Canada. (Critics replied that it reflected a narrow-minded village-based traditionalism controlled by reactionary priests.)

Furthermore, the French Canadians argued, the Borden government was corrupt and operated the war for the benefit of the English-speaking bankers and industrialists who were selfish, unpatriotic, and committed to an alien (American) system of money-grubbing. The recent record of attacks on Francophone Catholic schools, especially in Manitoba two decades before and Ontario at the very moment, alarmed fears that Franco-Canadian culture was doomed outside Quebec. If so, then the Francophones would be degraded into a second-class citizenship and the Canadian constitution would be destroyed.[5] When conscription meant their young men would be taken from the farms and villages and socialized into an Anglophone army at gunpoint, then slaughtered in the trenches, duty became clear. The news that the Irish Catholics and the Orange Irish Protestants had joined together in unholy coalition to impose English-language schools further demonstrated the dangers; it was no help that both the British Privy Council and the Pope seemed to be against them too. If neither London nor Rome would protect them, they had to act alone. Rejecting the imperial theme of a world war for European civilization, they opposed a foreign war that strengthened their domestic enemy and threatened their own civilization.

Wilfrid Laurier, the aging Liberal leader, searched in vain for a compromise, promising on the one hand to protect Quebec's autonomy and block conscription, and on the other to fight the war with volunteers who, he

claimed, he could rally in sufficient numbers. Few people believed Laurier. Even Mackenzie King, who stayed loyal, privately thought conscription was necessary. In 1917, when Borden offered a plan for a coalition government based on conscription, most Liberals outside Quebec and practically all the newspaper editors, bolted the party.

In America there was no war over religion or language. The success in 1896-1900 of William McKinley's pluralistic policies meant that Catholic-Protestant differences were off-limits for politics. Indeed, with rare exceptions (like Tom Watson in Georgia) religion was not even mentioned in political discourse during the war, and it never became a component of Americanism. The question was open whether the English language was a component. German language schools had been a major issue in 1890, and had been saved by the Democrats; however, by 1917 few foreign language schools were left, and it was uncommon to find American-born youth who did not know English. Wartime Americanization programs strongly emphasized the importance of speaking English for more recent immigrants, and they proved popular and successful. Worried by the possibility of sedition, Washington forced foreign language newspapers to provide English translations. Many closed and others switched to English or went bilingual for the benefit of elderly subscribers. America enforced formal and informal bans on dissent. No speech or press against conscription or the war effort was tolerated. Vigilant citizens groups moved against suspected pro-German elements. A well-enforced Sedition Law shut down Socialist and IWW newspapers, broke up their local operations, arrested their speakers, and silenced the opposition.[6] In addition, the war bond campaigns in the cities were full-scale experiments in the invention and use of new advertising techniques to massively influence people. Posters were everywhere; Four-Minute-Men were scheduled for patriotic pep-talks at public meetings of all sorts. The war marked the coming of Age of Madison Avenue, and in this regard Canada was lagging.

Deeper forces than mere advertising tactics were at work in Canada. Supporters of the war portrayed combat as necessary to achieve an independent voice in world affairs and to rid the nation and the world of evil. Borden's success in obtaining a voice at Versailles validated the first point; woman suffrage, prohibition and the League of Nations helped validate the second. The sacrifices of the soldiers in the field became sacralizing events that purified and validated the emerging nation. Admitting there was far too much corruption at home, supporters held up the soldiers as exemplars of sacrifice, manhood, nationalism, and civic duty. The soldiers themselves strongly supported the war, as did their families. Borden recognized this in the Wartime Elections Act of 1917, which not only facilitated voting by the soldiers (and sent their ballots to ridings where they could be most decisive), but also enfranchised the soldiers' womenfolk too, for their giving a man represented the epitome of sacrifice, patriotism and citizenship. Afterwards the war memorials continued the quasi-religious theme, with statues resembling saints, solemn use of religious glass, and annual commemorations that approximated holy days. Exaltation of sacrifice on the battlefield became a powerful weapon that blackened antiwar rhetoric as sacrilege and treason. As Major John McCrae warned in 1915:

"If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep
Though poppies grow in Flanders fields"

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Anglophones experienced the emergence of a new Canadian race, its frontier on the Western Front, its baptism by fire at Vimy Ridge. They tried vehemently to cajole or shame or force the Francophones to join them, and recoiled in disgust at their refusal.

In the United States casualty rates were far lower; death on Civil War battlefields had already been used as a healing device to reunite North and South, and was not needed again. Nevertheless, the war helped realize purification in terms of woman suffrage and prohibition, in the suppression of un-American dissent and the German language, and in the successful Americanization of recent immigrants, who whole-heartedly did their civic duty.

In the Second World War, both nations avoided serious debates or attacks on national war policy. In the United States the fierce debates of 1940-41 suddenly ceased after Pearl Harbor. Although sorely tempted by the *Chicago Tribune,* Roosevelt did not try to censor the press. Early on, before the military reverses of summer 1940, King and his Liberals isolated and defeated the antiwar Quebec premier Maurice Duplessis on his home ground. Francophone Canada continued to see conscription as primarily a weapon against their culture, but King assuaged their fears. He instituted conscription, but kept the conscripts at home, sending only volunteers to Europe. In 1941 he won a nationwide referendum that allowed using the conscripts overseas, but he did not send them until very late in the war. He successfully relied on volunteers, most motivated by a strengthened Canadian patriotism, and made more available by the large pool of unemployed in 1939. The anger of 1917 was not repeated – but it was not forgotten, either.

Ethnicity and Citizenship

The Turnerian model of an American race solved the problem of how civic culture and ethnic nationalism could be combined.[7] The synthesis of civic virtue and

American nationalism solved the problem of handling massive emigration. The economic benefits of immigration were obvious, as millions settled onto western farms and even larger numbers moved to mining camps, mill towns and industrial cities, making possible remarkably high levels of economic growth.[8] New arrivals were of two types. So-called "birds of passage" worked temporarily in America with the explicit intention of returning to Europe.[9] The fact that they stayed away when times were hard meant that they could be tolerated when times were good and companies were hiring. The second group comprised permanent settlers who did not plan to return or move on, and who systematically brought over their extended families. The expectation was that they would become full-fledged citizens. Unlike America, the status of being part of a huge Empire made for free movement to and from Canada with Britain, Australia and many other outposts, without need to declare a new political loyalty. The fact that these imperial migrants were much more likely to volunteer for military service buttressed the argument that this war was for the benefit of the Empire, not Canada. Indeed, the same phenomenon was visible in America, with prominent rich immigrants such as Samuel Insull leading the fight for intervention and supporting recruitment and bond sales by Britain and Canada.[10] The Borden government, projecting the duty-to-empire theme they believed in themselves to enemy aliens, decided that recent immigrants from Germany and even the Austro-Hungarian Empire were a threat. Most of the suspects were Ukrainians; many were rounded up, and all were deprived of the vote and kept out of the army.

The ethnocultural-ethnoreligious situation in America was much more complex than in Canada. A massive Americanization program proved highly successful, as all the recent immigrants shifted toward use of English and showed every sign of patriotism from buying war bonds to enlistment in the army. It was not just a show; the recent immigrants gave up plans to return home, settled down, kept their savings in America, and built up labor force skills that would be valuable in an industrial economy. When Europe reopened again after the war they did not return to their old villages, but stayed in their adopted nation as proud new Americans. Politically the most interesting groups were the Irish Catholics and the German Lutherans and Catholics. They did not favor Germany but they wanted the US to stay neutral. The Irish hated the British Empire, but they had full control of the Catholic Church and were gaining control of the Democratic Party in major cities. They wanted to support the Democratic president, Wilson, and also support independence for Ireland. Wilson, who had long feuded with Irish bosses seemingly offered a deal: support this war and he would force the British to grant independence. The Irish Americans came around and were dumbfounded when Wilson made no effort to delivery on his promise at Versailles. All the Irish Democratic leaders broke with Wilson over this betrayal, leaving his party in utter disarray in the cities as the Republicans swept to a massive landslide in 1920.

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The German Americans were political novices; in stark contrast with the Irish they had few office holders and hardly any voice in politics, despite their status as the largest ethnic group in America. By 1916 they had been totally isolated; no one listened to their pleas for neutrality in 1917, and many suspected their loyalty to Germanic customs – especially language and beer – indicated they had not been fully Americanized. Overnight the German American community switched to English in its churches and parochial schools. The older folks were bitter, and showed it in their votes for Harding in 1920 and LaFollette in 1924, but there was no turning back. The younger generation had in fact been thoroughly Americanized; they bought war bonds, waved red-white-and-blue flags, and served in large numbers in the army. In the 1940 presidential election Germania was again an issue. The Republicans nominated Wendell Willkie, the son of German immigrants, and Roosevelt supporters warned darkly that the isolationism so popular in the Midwest was a cover for secret support for Hitler. After Pearl Harbor Roosevelt reassured the German-Americans that there would be no repeat of the anti-Hun hysteria of the Wilson years, and indeed there was scant popular or official demand for reprisals against immigrants from Germany and Italy the way there was against the Japanese.[11] Roosevelt collaborated in highly visible fashion with Willkie and selected German Americans as the top commanders of the army and navy (Dwight Eisenhower and Chester Nimitz).[12]

In conclusion, we can see the leaders of World War Two systematically avoid the domestic confrontations of World War One, while making new mistakes of their own like the handling of Japanese immigrants. After another generation of development, Canada was much more confident of its sovereign status, and old loyalties to the Empire had weakened. The view from south of the 49th might be that the northern neighbors certainly succeeded in being orderly and non-violent. The "racial" divide had not been resolved, however, and the Second War had not healed Canada's internal rift. Inside America the many European ethnic groups had finally been assimilated and united, but as the war years started to reveal (Myrdal, 1944), an even more serious crisis of racial integration was at hand.

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Endnotes

[1] In the 21st century we focus more on rights than responsibilities; the reverse was true in the World Wars in both countries.

[2] The usual terminology at the time was "race" – as in the French race or the American race. The word has so changed meaning in the 20th century that historians prefer terms like "ethnic," "ethnocultural," or, for this essay, just "people."

[3] A comparable Lamarckian-evolutionary model of a newly emerging "Canadian race" was explored in discussions of the Northern character of Canada, but it never caught on.

[4] Likewise Australia and New Zealand, which felt the need for the Royal Navy to protect them from invasion.

[5] The argument resembled that of the Southern states in 1860: they had "States Rights," which meant a Constitutional right to take their peculiar institution (slavery) into the western territories. Yankee efforts to deny that right were grounds for secession and creation of a separate nation.

[6] The Wilson administration dared not shut down Theodore Roosevelt's attacks on the war effort as ineffective, but they did suppress Tom Watson's diatribes.

[7] In the 1880-1890 period the citizenship status of four controversial groups was more-or-less settled. The Chinese were excluded from citizenship (except by birth). African-Americans were segregated into a restricted second-class status. The Mormons gave up repugnant practices and were integrated. Most important, the white South was fully accepted again. After 1898 the status of residents of outlying possessions became an issue. Full citizenship went to Hawaiians in 1898 and Puerto Ricans in 1917, but the decision was made that the Philippines would become an independent country with its own citizenship

[8] Old stock Americans were reluctant to enter factory work and mining. They did dominate all white collar jobs, such as clerks, businessmen and professionals.

[9] In 1900-1914 some 30-60 percent of some groups were transients, including Italians, Greeks, and Poles. Other groups, such as Jews, Irish and Scandinavians, had much lower return rates.

[10] An even more curious case is J. P. Morgan, Jr., whose bank was critical to financing the Allies. The Morgans had a dual base in London and New York.

[11] Before Pearl Harbor the FBI had closely monitored the Japanese communities and immediately arrested thousands of leaders known to by sympathetic to Tokyo. That was not enough to assuage popular fears of a Fifth Column, however. Those fears forced both nations into removing the Japanese from the west coast war zones. That was impossible in Hawaii, so it was put under martial law, with only the Japanese leadership kept in protective custody, without trial.

[12] Curiously Roosevelt had more trouble keeping the Irish Catholics in line, even though the status of Eire was no longer under debate.