

CANADA'S WARS HAVE NEVER been wildly popular affairs. Duty has called, but more clearly in some cases, such as World War II, than in others. In the present Gulf War the call is less clear than perhaps ever before.

The British Empire war in South Africa against the Boers, from 1899 to 1902, divided francophones and anglophones deeply and bitterly. Historian C.P. Stacey describes English Canadians as "for practical political purposes ... a bloc in favour of the war." But there were, he notes, significant pockets of resistance outside Quebec at a time when imperial sentiment was perhaps at its peak.

As the 1914 European crisis deepened, the cabinet of Conservative prime minister Robert Borden assured London that "if unhappily war should ensue the Canadian people will be united in a common resolve." When war came, the prime minister recorded in his diary that there was "great excitement in all Canadian cities. Crowds on streets cheered me." There was surely some enthusiasm and excitement, but there was not unity of resolve.

Enlistment figures show the war was much more popular in English Ontario and in British Columbia than in relatively non-British Saskatchewan or in francophone Quebec. Veterans and others now recall more a sense of duty than of enthusiasm. Their country and the Empire needed them; thus many went. But from Quebec and many rural areas of Canada, many did not. Conscription, protests and a crisis election followed.

There was perhaps less debate about fighting Hitler. The most astonishing fact about the public opinion studies which were born during World War II is that none apparently asked Canadians whether they supported it. Whether such questions were not permitted or were deemed inappropriate, one did not talk about them. The Canadian Gallup organization, established in 1941, polled throughout the rest of the war but never once reported on support for it.

THE PUBLIC WAS ASKED, FOR EXAMPLE, WHETHER they thought Canada was "doing all it could to help win the war" (most did, throughout), whether they personally "could be of more use to [the] country" if they did some other work (more did than not), and if Germany's civilian population should be bombed (most approved). Perhaps the closest to a measure of support is found in a 1942 poll when 86 percent of Canadians rejected the idea of negotiating a status quo peace with Hitler.

The pattern suggests consistent and strong support, but not unanimity, especially from Quebec. The fears were clear although some-



FROM PAARDEBERG TO THE PERSIAN GULF

Canadians' Opinions About Canada's Wars

times exaggerated. In July 1945, three months after Hitler had in fact committed suicide, Gallup asked if Canadians thought he was dead; almost 60 percent did not.

The closest historical parallel for Canada's Gulf War involvement is undoubtedly the Korean War. An act of aggression was followed by an American-led response with political support marshalled through the United Nations. When Canadians were polled just after the war broke out in June 1950, only 13 percent opposed US action. On the other hand, 23 percent opposed Canada sending equipment, and an additional 16 percent disapproved of sending troops – a total of almost 40 percent at a time when few did not believe in stopping communism.

A year or so after the Korean War had stalemated around the old boundary line, 40 percent agreed it had become an "utterly useless war" and about 30 percent thought Canada's involvement had been a mistake. One in every two said it had not been. Presumably some thought worthwhile the original objective of resisting aggression against South Korea but looked on the current fighting as pointless.

The current war against Iraq has profoundly divided Canadians. Not only are opponents more numerous, they are also more vociferous. Most Canadians support sending forces to the Persian Gulf, according to an Angus Reid poll series. The level of support has varied, however, from 69 percent in September, soon after Ottawa's decision, down to 60 percent in December as the UN-imposed 15 January deadline approached, and then up to 75 percent after the US-led coalition air attacks began. Some observers credited this post-outbreak rise to skilful war news management by a special government task force; it is more likely a reflection of a modest-sized and natural

"rally-round-the-troops-and-flag" feeling.

Two points bear emphasis. First, support for Canadian involvement in the Gulf is, in fact, higher than these figures imply. When the Reid poll differentiated between Canadian forces actively fighting against Iraq, taking a solely defensive role, and being withdrawn, less than 10 percent opted for withdrawal. Clearly, half or more of those opposed to the August decision to send Canadian forces do not now want that decision reversed.

Second, many Canadians are clearly saying that UN sanctions enforcement was one thing, going to war against Iraq is another. Polls consistently show only about a third support Canadian troops going into battle. As the government was cautiously, but steadily

scaling up the Canadian forces' fighting role through December and January, there was no evident increase in public support for going into combat. In contrast, American public support for carrying the fighting to Saddam Hussein has jumped in recent months.

At the same time, most Canadians (73%) in January supported President Bush's decision to use force to get Iraq out of Kuwait. This level of approval is, of course, partly support for a war, but is also a reflection of unusually high Canadian trust in the president (shown in CIIPS polls) and a traditional deference toward our neighbour and ally.

WARS DO NOT GAIN IN POPULARITY WITH TIME. If the ground struggle in the desert becomes a stalemated carnage, the present level of support for the fighting, by American or Canadian forces, is almost certain to decline. Fighting on and on without prospect would only confirm the strong belief of most Canadians (reflected in CIIPS polls) that military force rarely achieves political solutions.

Duty still calls, but is this Canada's war? Just as opponents of earlier conflicts saw them as British wars, opponents already see the Gulf War not as Canada's or the UN's, but as America's. And the more American generals go on TV and the less one hears of the United Nations, the more this will become, in the minds of more Canadians, America's war. The Gulf conflict might have been not only a test case of the UN, but also the first test case of Canadians' new sense of a duty, of a willingness to support true collective security and forge a new world order. Instead, and unfortunately, it is becoming yet another test of familiar sense of duty, of Canadians' willingness to support old friends, right or wrong. □

– DON MUNTON