

Survey of Americans

OVERVIEW

Part of the **Security Monitor 2005–6 Study**

Overview

A divided America looks inward

Our latest sounding of American outlook on security issues produces a disturbing profile of a harshly divided society questioning its fundamental direction and struggling with an impulse to withdraw from what is seen as an increasingly dangerous and hostile world. The ambitious internationalism and societal consensus evident in the aftermath of September 11th has been displaced by burgeoning doubts that American's foreign involvement may be exacerbating the very problem it was designed to ameliorate. This is coupled with a growing recognition that American esteem in world has declined precipitously, which has provoked a corresponding rise in American antipathy to other nations. Yet, in spite of these doubts and divisions, Americans continue to emphasize national security as the salient principle for federal direction.

This incendiary mixture of attitudes poses formidable challenges for Canada and North America. Over the past few years we have witnessed a significant erosion of the reciprocal outlooks of both Canada-U.S. and U.S.-Mexico. For Canada it is important to understand the true drivers of the deteriorating relationship. For example, are Americans less favourably disposed to Canada as a product of our dissenting positions on Iraq, the critical tone of Canadian commentators on the U.S. (evident in increasingly negative currents in Canadian public opinion), or is this just part of a generalized erosion of American outlook on the world? Is the recent decline in Canadian outlook a reflection of structural fault lines based on diverging values and interests or a more ephemeral bout of dissatisfaction based on policy disagreements; a new Ice Age or a cold snap? What is the capacity or interest to repair the relationship and how do outlooks on security and related issues articulate or clash in the current and future environment?

These questions are not arid academic curiosities. For Canadians, the economic and strategic issues at stake are enormous and the capacity for

missteps based on erroneous analysis dangerously high. Our iteration of American polling was designed to provide firmer answers to these difficult questions as Canada considers how to best position itself in this troubled period of American history.

Evolving internationalism or neo-isolationism?

In its annual update on U.S. outlook on the world and foreign countries, The Pew Research Center offered the empirically-based conjecture that Americans might well be entering a new period of isolationism tantamount to the national mood as Americans exited the Vietnam era.¹ More recently, thoughtful observers such as David Brooks² have argued that Americans are embracing a qualitatively different form of internationalism.

Last year Daniel Yankelovich cited three “break-out” areas of public opinion in the United States: Iraq, outsourcing, and immigration; all three of which are driven by a negative view of the world outside America’s borders. Our most recent testing points in the same direction: increased insularity and domestic focus. We offer the following selective examples as evidence.

It is astonishing to note that after over a century of pride in having the world’s largest unguarded border, nearly half of Americans support constructing barriers at the U.S.–Canada border (and over three in four support the barriers at the U.S.–Mexico border). Meanwhile Canada is moving to arm its border officers.

Perhaps more revealing, American opposition to immigration has risen progressively since 2001 from around 40 per cent “too many” to 60 per cent. Put another way, although U.S. immigration in relative terms is only a third the level of immigration into Canada, opposition to immigration is three times higher in the United States. This reverse trajectory may portend a

¹ “Opinion Leaders Turn Cautious, Public Looks Homeward: America’s Place in the World,” The Pew Research Center, November 2005.

² “It’s Not Isolationism, but It’s Not Attractive,” David Brooks, The New York Times, March 5, 2006.

potentially profound policy collision when scrutinized through the prism of the American focus on security.

We also find that, most Americans do not approve of the current balance between domestic and foreign focus: discontentment leans radically (by a margin of six to one) to a retrenchment of foreign effort. Moreover, the slight majority of Americans now believe that their foreign policy has made America less, not more safe. Finally, our recent updating of identification indicators shows a sharp decline in Americans' global identification and a corresponding sharp rise in their (already high) national affiliation (in Canada the pattern is one of high but declining national attachment).

As Canadians and Americans think less of each other, their attitudes converge

In the past few years, our research has shown a fairly steep decline in the reciprocal outlook of both Canada–U.S. and Mexico–U.S. Although initiated by deteriorating views from the smaller NAFTA partners, this has been followed by a fairly abrupt decline in American outlook on both Canada and Mexico. In the case of American outlook on Canada, it is not so much a matter of rising negatives as declining positives (with the rest moving to neutrality): from nearly 80 per cent favourable only three years ago to the current marks in the mid-50s.

In large measure, Canada is caught in the back draft of the generalized decline in U.S. foreign outlook, but there is also evidence that this has been exacerbated by more specific irritants and “tonal” disputes (e.g., the best predictor of negative American outlook is political–ideological affiliation). Ironically, favourability indicators have worsened as the two countries have moved closer together on key issues. For example, many more Americans now concur with Canadian disapproval of American foreign policy and the dominant ideology of conservatism is under pressure in the U.S. At the same time, Canadians have elected a conservative government and now show more positive attitudes to defence and peace-making activities than in the past.

Perhaps even more important in this security focussed age, we find that Canadians and Americans share a similar commitment to security. Last fall we co-authored an issue of the Woodrow Wilson publication, *One Issue, Two Voices* on comparative threat perceptions in the United States and Canada.³

³ “Threat Perceptions in the United States and Canada: Assessing the public’s attitudes toward security and risk in North America,” *One Issue, Two Voices* (Issue Four), The Canada Institute, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, October 2005.

Not unlike the current *Security Monitor* findings, the essays in this publication showed surprising levels of agreement across the two national publics on the importance and resolve associated with security risks, despite some expected differences (e.g., a one-dimensional focus on terror in the United States, compared to a more multidimensional notion of threat in Canada).

Prospects for repairing the relationship

So is this an ephemeral tremor or an expression of tectonic continental drift? The evidence squarely points to the former and it is important to disentangle Canadians' narcissistic desire to magnify differences from the exigencies of interdependent values, interests and geography.

Precisely the same level (95 per cent) of Canadians and Americans feel it is at least somewhat important to strengthen the relationship. Canadians overwhelmingly cite the U.S. as their "best friend", and on a range of different tests in the United States, Canada consistently emerges as the most benign foreign country. In some respects, Canada is not even seen as a "real" foreign country by Americans, but as a colder extension of the United States. Although this is a proposition that is met with mixed feelings amongst the Canadian public, it may not be a bad brand during this difficult period.

There are further reasons to think that there is greater propensity for improving this relationship than might be evident on first glance. Our research on value differences between Americans and Canadians shows the differences to be relatively modest and moving to shorter-term convergence rather than divergence. The resonance of the divergence view lies mostly in three factors:

- i. Canadians believe decisively that we have become more like the United States, but at the same time, they clearly would prefer that this was not the case.

- ii. There are vivid differences in the distribution of the same values throughout the two societies. In other words, there is more consensus about values in Canada than in the United States.
- iii. Differences in political systems (and media reporting of American politics in Canada) emphasize ideology and value of the successful party (i.e. Republicans lately). Canadians familiar with the more consensual parliamentary system in Canada may interpret these polar oscillations as more reflective of mainstream American values that they really are.

Final thoughts: strategic considerations

This analysis points to a number of clear conclusions and a couple of broad strategic choices. First of all, there are formidable challenges for Canada in managing the strained relationship against the currently homeward-focused American mood. There are, however, sizable areas of advantage for Canada and a shared consensus in both countries that whatever the current status of the relationship, strengthening it is a priority. There is also considerable agreement across Americans and Canadians on the salience of security and the need to manage security cooperatively (e.g., citizens of both countries favour a North American perimeter). Further, Canada is seen as *relatively* harmless in an increasingly hostile world and Americans express confidence that they can count on Canada for assistance in times of need.

We can apply this analysis to the current controversy over the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI). While Americans are, relatively speaking, less concerned about the threat of the Canadian border they are extremely concerned with shoring up all perceived threats security. Moreover, while favourably disposed to Canada, balancing border security against the possibility of offending Canada is really not a contest. Our testing shows that security considerations eclipse all other factors (e.g., commercial advantage, freedom of movement) by a huge margin for Americans.

Most Canadians are aware of the proposed initiative and most say they will continue to travel to the U.S. with a passport (which they will obtain if they don't already possess one). A more serious problem is for Americans who are less aware of the initiative and less likely to currently hold a valid passport. They too, however, say that the requirements under the WHTI will only have a modest impact on their travel intentions. Canadian efforts to minimize disruption and link this requirement to broader efforts to cooperatively secure the border (while maintaining the free flow of legitimate goods and people) are much more likely to be successful than challenging the initiative outright. Technological innovations and information sharing might be a more productive strategy than trying to stop this initiative. The American security train has already left the station and Canadians would prefer to be on rather than off that train.

At a more general level, there are serious questions about the most effective Canadian strategy for advocacy and communications in this troubled time for the U.S. Although American outlook on Canada leans mostly to indifferent-favourable, this is based on extremely low levels of fluency on Canada. For example, only about 1 in 10 Americans claim to be clearly aware that Canada is fighting alongside the U.S. in Afghanistan. While half say they would feel better about Canada if they knew this, large numbers of Americans also have no idea that Canada abstained from participating in the war in Iraq (a fact that reduces positive attitudes). The prospects of selectively "educating" Americans are dubious at best and may have mixed results. Efforts focussed on raising awareness of Canadian positions amongst influentials, media, and decision-makers are much more prone to success than trying to move an already largely favourable and inert public image. Perhaps Canada is better served by exploiting its largely favourable yet vague public image as a benign northern extension of the United States.

The current mood in the United States is neither stable nor particularly hospitable to the national concerns of either NAFTA partners. We need to actively consider and plan for the scenario of a fortress North America -

particularly if another serious security shock is experienced. Canadians may lean to globalization and a North American mosaic, but they also do not want to be on the other side of any future drawbridge.

