

what the public really wants

on America's Role in the World
by ruy teixeira

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The public has turned against the Iraq war with a vengeance, a development that has led many observers to fear that the public will therefore recoil against all international engagement and embrace isolationism as their preferred foreign policy. A careful review of the data, however, indicates that the public has indeed drawn some lessons from the Iraq debacle, but those lessons translate into support for a more multilateralist and diplomacy-oriented internationalism rather than an isolationist course.

The Public Is Not Becoming Isolationist

One question that has been asked since 1947 taps into whether Americans are basically internationalist or isolationist: "Do you think it will be best for the future of the country if we take an active part in world affairs or if we stay out of world affairs?" In the late 1940's, this question was asked three times by the National Opinion Research Center, with an average of 69 percent telling the NORC that the country should play an active part in world affairs.

In 2002, 2004, and 2006, this same question was asked by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations. The average proportion of respondents to these CCFR polls who said the U.S. should play an active role in the world was 69 percent.

So, no change whatsoever between these endpoints. Of course, there has been some fluctuation in these sentiments in between the endpoints. The internationalist view appears to have been somewhat stronger in the period from the mid-1950's to the mid-1960's. And there was a weakening of this view after the end of the Vietnam War, bottoming out in the early 1980's and then strengthening later in that decade and into the 1990's. And now, with the post-9/11/Iraq war measurements, we are back to where we started.

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Long-term stability in internationalist sentiment is also suggested by recent data from the Pew Research Center. Since 1987, Pew has been asking respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: “It’s best for the future of our country to be active in world affairs.” Eighty-seven percent agreed with that statement in 1987, including 32 percent who completely agreed. In 2007, 86 percent agreed with the statement, with an even higher percentage (42 percent) completely agreeing.

But that’s just a general internationalist view. What of commitment to international institutions such as the United Nations? Limited trend data suggest some diminution of pro-U.N. sentiment since the 1990’s, but recent polls consistently indicate that the public still wants the U.N. to play a leading role in global affairs.

The Role of the United Nations in Global Affairs

60 percent of the public agree that the U.S. should be willing to make decisions within the U.N., even if that means the U.S. may sometimes not be able to follow its first choice of course of action.

2006 CCFR Survey

In the 2006 CCFR survey, for example, the public, by a 60 percent-to-36 percent margin, agreed that the U.S. should be willing to make decisions within the U.N., even if that means that the U.S. may sometimes not be able to follow its first choice of course of action. Similarly, in an October, 2005 Pew Research Center/Council on Foreign Relations poll, the public endorsed, by 54 percent to 39 percent, the idea that the “the United States should cooperate fully with the United Nations.”

In addition, 75 percent in the CCFR poll favored giving the United Nations authority to go into countries in order to investigate violations of human rights. Seventy-five percent also favored creating an international marshals service that could arrest leaders responsible for genocide, 72 percent favored having a standing U.N. peacekeeping force selected, trained, and commanded by the United Nations, and 60 percent favored giving the United Nations the power to regulate the international arms trade. Finally, 79 percent, also in the CCFR poll, thought strengthening the U.N. was a very or somewhat important foreign policy goal.

Other questions from the CCFR survey show support for a wide range of international treaties and institutions beyond the United Nations. Among the responses: 89 percent for an inspections agreement under the biological weapons treaty; 86 percent for the nuclear test ban treaty; 71 percent for the International Criminal Court; and 70 percent for the Kyoto global warming accord.

What about support for multilateral action, more generally? In a 2003 Program on International Policy Attitudes, or PIPA poll, 76 percent thought the U.S. should try to solve international problems together with other countries rather than go it alone or ignore them. And in CCFR’s 2004 poll, 73 percent thought the most important lesson of the 9/11 attacks

was that the U.S. needed to work more closely with other countries to fight terrorism, not that the U.S. needed to act on its own more to fight terrorism.

In the 2005 CFR poll, 79 percent agreed with this multilateralist sentiment: “In deciding on its foreign policies, the U.S. should take into account the views of its major allies.” And in the same poll, just 32 percent agreed with the unilateralist sentiment: “Since the U.S. is the most powerful nation in the world, we should go our own way in international matters, not worrying too much about whether other countries agree with us or not.”

When asked whether the United States should be the “single world leader,” play a shared leadership role, or not play any leadership role, only 12 percent of the public thought we should be the single world leader, 74 percent thought leadership should be shared, and another 10 percent think we shouldn’t play any leadership role.

Public Support for International Treaties and Institutions

89 percent support an inspections agreement under the biological weapons treaty

86 percent support the nuclear test ban treaty

71 percent support for the International Criminal Court

70 percent support the Kyoto global warming accord

2006 CCFR Survey

Today’s Internationalism

We can safely reject the idea that the U.S. public is becoming isolationist. But it does seem plausible that the *character* of the public’s internationalism is shifting because of our troubles in Iraq. Indeed, the data just reviewed suggests that the public is moving away from the unilateralism promoted by the Bush administration—which had its attractions in the period right after the September 11, 2001 attacks—and swinging towards multilateralism and diplomacy.

Recent polls allow us to flesh out the picture of today’s internationalism. In the 2007 Pew Research poll, the public has moved sharply away from its strong support (62 percent) in 2002 for the idea that “the best way to ensure peace is through military strength” to an almost evenly-split (49 percent to 47 percent) view of this proposition.

Even more sharply, public support for the idea that “we should get even with any country that tries to take advantage of the U.S.” has reversed course. In 2002, the public supported that idea by a 61 percent-to-32 percent margin. Today, 54 percent are *against* that notion compared to 40 percent in favor.

In a February, 2007 Third Way/Penn, Schoen and Berland poll of voters, respondents agreed, by 58 percent to 39 percent, that “the U.S. should invade other countries only when we have the support of the U.N., NATO or both.” And by an 83 percent-to-15 percent margin, these voters thought that “the U.S. cannot impose democracy by force on another country.” By 70 percent to 27 percent, voters also agreed that “sometimes, it’s better to leave a dictator in charge of a hostile country if he is contained, rather than risk chaos that we can’t control if he is brought down.”

In the same poll, 76 percent thought that “we are stronger and more able to achieve our goals abroad when we work with alliances and international organizations” rather than “alliances and international organizations tie us down and prevent us from using our power effectively to achieve our goals” (18 percent). And, by 58 percent to 38 percent, voters agreed that “if negotiating with countries that support terrorism, like Iran and Syria, will help protect our security interests, the U.S. should consider negotiating with them.”

Similar evidence of the public’s views on international cooperation and diplomacy comes from a November 2006 PIPA survey. In that survey, the public, by 80 percent to 17 percent, overwhelmingly endorsed the idea that goodwill toward the U.S. was central to fostering international cooperation against security threats—rather than the idea that goodwill was not particularly important because the U.S. is so much stronger than other countries. And 72 percent deemed it a bad idea for the U.S. to pressure other countries to change by threatening to remove a country’s existing government.

In addition, when dealing with countries who oppose the United States, the public overwhelmingly thought that talking with such countries lessened their tendencies to take provocative action (82 percent) and made it

Working Together

76 percent say America is stronger and more able to achieve goals abroad when we work with alliances and international organizations.

18 percent say alliances and international organizations tie America down and prevent us from using our power effectively to achieve our goals.

*Third Way/Penn, Schoen and Berland poll/
February 2007*

The Impact of International Goodwill

80 percent endorse the idea that goodwill toward the U.S. is central to fostering international cooperation against security threats.

17 percent say goodwill is not particularly important because the US is so much stronger than other countries.

PIPA survey/ November 2006

more likely mutually agreeable solutions could be found (84 percent). Finally, in a September 2005 CCFR/PIPA poll, the public, by more than a three-to-one margin (66 percent-to-21 percent), believed that warning a government that the US might intervene militarily if it does not carry out some democratic reforms does more harm than good. Seventy-two percent also said the experience in Iraq has made them feel worse about the possibility of using military force to bring about democracy in the future.

Bipartisan Support for Today's Internationalism

A remarkable January 2007 PIPA study documents a little-appreciated fact about the public's multilateralist and diplomacy-oriented internationalist views: there is substantial support across party lines for this kind of foreign policy. These include, but are not limited to, bipartisan support for the following positions.

- Sixty-six percent of Republicans and 85 percent of Democrats agree that the U.S. is playing the role of world policeman more than it should be.
- Seventy-two percent of Republicans and 77 percent of Democrats think that congressional candidates should advocate that the U.S. do its share in efforts to solve international problems with other countries, rather than be the preeminent world leader in solving international problems due to its superpower status.
- Sixty-two percent of Republicans and 81 percent of Democrats disagree that the U.S. is so powerful it should go its own way in international matters, not worrying too much about whether other countries agree with us or not.
- Fifty-two percent of Republicans and 77 percent of Democrats call for putting more emphasis on diplomatic and economic methods, rather than military might, to combat terrorism.

Should the U.S. Go Its Own Way?

62 percent of Republicans and **81 percent** of Democrats disagree that the U.S. is so powerful it should go its own way in international matters, whether or not other countries agree with us.

WorldPublicOpinion.org poll/October 2006

- When dealing with countries that oppose the United States, Republicans and Democrats alike overwhelmingly thought that talking with such countries lessened their tendencies to take provocative action (71 percent and 89 percent, respectively) and made it

more likely mutually agreeable solutions could be found (79 percent and 91 percent, respectively).

- Seventy percent of Republicans and 79 percent of Democrats think that the more important lesson of 9/11 is that the U.S. needs to work more closely with other countries to fight terrorism, rather than that the U.S. needs to act on its own more to fight terrorism.
- Eighty-two percent of Republicans and 90 percent of Democrats think it is very or somewhat important to our national security that the rest of the world sees the United States positively.
- Sixty-seven percent of Republicans and 78 percent of Democrats believe it is a bad idea for the U.S. to pressure other countries to change by threatening to remove a country's existing government.
- Seventy-five percent of Republicans and 84 percent of Democrats want the United States to coordinate its power together with other countries according to shared ideas of what is best for the world as a whole, rather than use its power to make the world the way that best serves U.S. interest and values.

Are the Politicians Listening?

Unfortunately, while the public's views—including the bipartisan consensus documented above—seem eminently sensible, these views are clearly not being implemented by today's politicians. There are a number of possible explanations for this disconnect between U.S. public opinion and U.S. foreign policy.

Lessons of 9/11

70 percent of Republicans and **79 percent** of Democrats think that the more important lesson of 9/11 is that the US needs to work closely with other countries to fight terrorism, rather than that the US needs to act on its own more to fight terrorism.

WorldPublicOpinion.org poll/ October 2006

One was provided in a 2005 *American Political Science Review* article by Lawrence Jacobs and Benjamin Page, who examined data from CCFR surveys of the public and of policymakers, labor leaders, business leaders and foreign policy experts between 1974 and 2002. The co-authors found that it is primarily business leaders and, secondarily, experts that exert influence over the preferences of policymakers, not the public.

The analysis by Jacobs and Page is hardly definitive. It covers a limited period and leaves open the possibility that public sentiment may set the overall agenda for foreign policy within which business and experts exert the most direct influence. But it is a disquieting finding nonetheless.

This is especially so when combined with findings from a 2004 CCFR/PIPA study comparing the views of the public and political elites. Among other things, the study found that:

- The public often tends to assume that Congress has voted in accord with their views on foreign policy when, in fact, that has not happened
- Constituents of members of Congress also tend to assume erroneously that their representative has voted in accord with their wishes on these issues
- Staffers for members of Congress whose views diverged from those of district constituents tended to assume that the constituents actually agreed with them
- Staffers whose views did agree with constituents' tended to assume that constituents *disagreed* with them.

This is not a pretty picture. Given the recent dire consequences of ignoring the public's wishes in foreign policy, policymakers should seek to rectify this disconnect as quickly as possible. The public's embrace today of internationalism provides a fine starting place for building a more cooperative and peaceful international order. But first, policymakers must try to listen—really listen—to what the public is saying.