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Think About U.S. Foreign Policy

Daniel Yankelovich

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SURVEYING THE LAND

AMERICANS ARE at least as polarized on issues of foreign affairs as they are on domestic politics. They seem to have left behind, at least for the time being, the unity over foreign policy that characterized the World War II era and much of the Cold War period. As might be expected, Americans today are split most sharply along partisan lines on many (though not all) aspects of U.S. foreign policy, and especially on the Bush administration's conduct of the war on terrorism and the reconstruction of Iraq. More surprising, perhaps, this polarization seems to track the public's religiosity: the more often Americans attend religious services, the more likely they are to be content with current U.S. foreign policy.

These are some of the conclusions drawn from a new kind of opinion poll that monitors changing levels of American public confidence in a wide range of foreign policy issues. Public Agenda, a nonprofit research organization that former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and I founded 30 years ago, is creating the new Confidence in U.S. Foreign Policy Index (CFPI), with major support from the Ford Foundation. Every six months, Public Agenda will interview a random sample of American adults to follow shifts in the public's comfort level with U.S. foreign policy—

DANIEL YANKELOVICH is Chairman and Co-founder of the organizations Public Agenda, DYG, and Viewpoint Learning.

identifying which policies bring Americans pride and which bring them shame.

The first poll, conducted by phone among a nationwide sample of 1,004 Americans between June 1 and June 13, reveals that the public's response to U.S. foreign policy is not uniform. Although Americans are sharply divided on some questions, other issues garner powerful majorities either in favor of or opposed to the government's policies. The effects of outsourcing on the U.S. job market are causing widespread concern, for example, even if they have not yet galvanized the public into demanding significant policy changes. Illegal immigration, U.S. relations with the Muslim world, and the war in Iraq are also becoming hot-button topics. American opinion is coalescing around them, concern is spreading and deepening, and the public's desire to hold the government accountable is mounting. We believe these issues are reaching a "tipping point": the moment at which large swaths of the public begin to demand that the government address their concerns. Pundits and policymakers would do well to start listening to the grumbling.

ON COMMON GROUND

ACCORDING TO the poll, a majority of Americans take considerable pride in a few features of U.S. foreign policy. Most remarkable, they take great satisfaction in "helping other countries when natural disasters strike": an impressive 83 percent of respondents give the government high marks—an A or a B—for putting into practice the American ideal of helping those in need. (Some partisan differences are embedded in these results—72 percent of Republicans think the government has earned an A, compared with 40 percent of Democrats; most Democrats think it deserves only a B—but these are small nuances.) Substantial majorities also agree that improving U.S. intelligence operations (62 percent) and exercising tighter controls on immigration to the United States (58 percent) would improve U.S. security "a great deal." About 67 percent award the government a B or better for "making sure the United States has a strong, well-supplied military"; 58 percent give it a similar grade

How Americans Grade U.S. Foreign Policies

QUESTION: “What grade would you give the U.S. when it comes to achieving the following goals? Please give an A, B, C, D, or F (for fail). If you don’t know, just say so.”

GOAL:

| | Percentage awarding an A or B | Percentage awarding a C, D, or F |
|--|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Helping other countries when natural disasters strike | 83 | 15 |
| Making sure the U.S. has a strong, well-supplied military | 67 | 32 |
| Giving the war on terrorism all of the attention it deserves | 58 | 39 |
| Hunting down anti-American terrorists | 54 | 42 |
| Helping create democracy in the rest of the world | 50 | 46 |
| Doing its best to promote peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians | 45 | 48 |
| Having good working relations with other countries | 45 | 52 |
| Living up to American ideals on human rights and justice in the way U.S. foreign policy is conducted | 44 | 52 |
| Helping improve the lives of people living in poor countries | 42 | 53 |
| Making the changes needed to improve U.S. intelligence and spying | 41 | 44 |

for the attention it has paid to the war on terrorism. A 54 percent majority approves of Washington’s level of success in “hunting down anti-American terrorists.”

Clear-cut majorities of Americans also disapprove of the way the government is managing certain matters. Substantial majorities give the government a mediocre or failing grade for its inability to keep



| | Percentage awarding an A or B | Percentage awarding a C, D, or F |
|--|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Stopping countries or groups from getting nuclear weapons | 40 | 52 |
| Succeeding in meeting U.S. objectives in Afghanistan | 40 | 51 |
| Succeeding in meeting U.S. objectives in Iraq | 39 | 56 |
| Working with other countries to protect the global environment | 37 | 56 |
| Making international trade agreements that benefit the U.S. | 37 | 53 |
| Protecting people or nations that are threatened with genocide or ethnic cleansing | 36 | 54 |
| Having good relations and a good reputation with Muslim countries | 28 | 65 |
| Protecting U.S. borders from illegal immigration | 25 | 74 |
| Stopping illegal drugs from coming into the U.S. | 23 | 74 |
| Protecting U.S. jobs from moving overseas | 18 | 78 |

American jobs from moving overseas (78 percent), stop illegal drugs from coming into the country and protect U.S. borders from illegal immigrants (74 percent), develop good relations with Muslim countries (65 percent), meet U.S. objectives in Iraq (56 percent), or work with other countries to protect the global environment (56 percent).

Overall, however, on a spectrum ranging from “exuberant triumphalism” to “dark despair,” Americans tend to position their feelings about U.S. foreign policy just off-center, toward the negative pole. Although they express confidence in certain aspects of U.S. foreign policy, their worries, concerns, and fears are more prevalent. A large minority of Americans (40 percent) feel that the United States is “generally doing the right thing with plenty to be proud of” in its foreign policy, but a less sanguine majority (51 percent) think “there are too many things about our relations with the rest of the world that are worrying and disappointing.”

PARTY LINES

ON A BROAD array of foreign policy issues, there is no majority stance. Instead, polarized groups of Americans glare at each other across deep chasms. Plenty of demographic differences appear in the survey’s findings—women are more concerned than men about the war in Iraq, senior citizens worry more than young Americans about the country’s debt burden—but they do not account for the biggest splits. More than anything, it is party affiliation or political partisanship that explains the starkest polarizations. The percentages of Republicans and Democrats who worry about mounting casualties in Iraq are separated by a huge 44-point gap (77 percent of Democrats worry, compared with 33 percent of Republicans), and a 43-point gap divides the percentage of Republicans from the percentage of Democrats who think the United States is “generally doing the right thing with plenty to be proud of” in its relations with the rest of the world (64 percent of Republicans think so, compared with 21 percent of Democrats).

The survey shows that by and large, Republicans are highly supportive of the Bush administration’s policies in Iraq and Afghanistan, its involvement in the Arab-Israeli peace process, and its conduct of the war on terrorism. They believe that U.S. relations with other nations are sound and well conducted, they have great confidence in Washington’s ability to export democracy, and they think that the United States is improving the lives of people in poor countries and fully living up to its ideal of justice.

Democrats seem to hold virtually the opposite set of beliefs. According to the poll, they think the United States is not achieving its goals in Afghanistan and worry a lot about the casualties and other costs of the U.S. presence in Iraq. They are deeply concerned about anti-Americanism in Muslim countries and fear that Washington is losing the trust of other governments. They do not believe that the United States can export democracy or that U.S. relations with other nations are being conducted skillfully; they think Washington has been too quick to resort to war and too slow to rely on diplomatic and economic solutions. Democrats also fear that the United States is not living up to its ideals and are quite worried that domestic security policies threaten civil liberties.

THE DIVINE DIVIDE

MORE INTRIGUING, perhaps, is the extent to which religious differences track these political splits: public attitudes on foreign affairs in the United States today fall along two related fault lines, party affiliation and frequency of attendance at religious services. In fact, the views of Americans who frequently attend religious services and the views of Americans who do not mirror those of Republicans and Democrats, respectively. (By “religious services,” we mean services of any kind—in churches, synagogues, mosques, or elsewhere; our study drew no distinctions on the basis of respondents’ denomination.) Although the split between Republicans and Democrats is deeper than the religious divide, together the two indicate a huge cleavage in the electorate.

Like most Republicans, people who regularly attend religious services are confident about the success of U.S. policies in Iraq and express low levels of worry about casualties or costs, they are optimistic about Washington’s commitment to helping other nations democratize, they are comfortable with the United States’ diplomatic relations, they are satisfied that the United States is fully living up to its moral ideals and is conducting its foreign policy in a humanitarian spirit, and they are largely unconcerned about threats to their civil liberties. The convergence of opinions is so clear, in fact, that on some issues,

Opinions on Polarizing Issues, According to Party Affiliation

| STATEMENT: | Republicans who agree | Democrats who agree | Opinion gap |
|--|--------------------------|------------------------|-------------|
| “Worry a lot” that the war in Iraq is leading to too many casualties | 33% | 77% | 44 |
| Believe the U.S. is “generally doing the right thing with plenty to be proud of” in its relations with the rest of the world | 64% | 21% | 43 |
| Give a high grade to the U.S. on meeting its objectives in Iraq | 61% | 19% | 42 |
| “Worry a lot” that the war in Iraq is requiring too much money and attention | 25% | 62% | 37 |
| Believe criticism of the U.S. as “too quick to resort to war” is “totally justified” | 16% | 53% | 37 |
| Give a high grade to the U.S. on living up to American ideals of human rights and justice in its foreign policy | 63% | 27% | 36 |

frequent attendance at religious services has become a proxy for support of U.S. foreign policy.

The question is, why? One reason the opinions of actively religious Americans match those of Republicans is that many actually are Republicans. According to our survey, almost two-thirds (63 percent) of voters who regularly attend religious services voted for President Bush. To some extent, this convergence is the result of a relatively recent phenomenon: the clustering of white religious Protestants into the Republican Party. (The Gallup Organization estimates that 42 percent of all Republicans are white evangelical Protestants, whereas only 26 percent of all Americans are.) This trend developed in the 1960s, when President Lyndon Johnson decided to promote civil



| | <i>Republicans who agree</i> | <i>Democrats who agree</i> | <i>Opinion gap</i> |
|---|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------|
| “Worry a lot” that the U.S. may be losing the trust and friendship of people in other countries | 22% | 57% | 35 |
| Give a high grade to the U.S. on helping to create democracy in the rest of the world | 70% | 36% | 34 |
| Give a high grade to the U.S. on meeting its objectives in Afghanistan | 56% | 24% | 32 |
| Agree that the U.S. can help other countries become democracies | 55% | 26% | 29 |
| “Worry a lot” that concern with security can lead to violating the rights of U.S. citizens | 22% | 50% | 28 |
| Give a high grade to the U.S. on giving the war on terror all the attention it deserves | 74% | 46% | 28 |
| Give a high grade to the U.S. on hunting down anti-American terrorists | 70% | 42% | 28 |

rights legislation even if it meant that the Democratic Party would lose the support of the southern states. Until then, both the Republican and Democratic parties had favored a “big tent” approach, trying to attract a broad cross-section of the population, and actively religious people had been fairly evenly divided between the two. But as Johnson moved ahead with his civil rights agenda, the Democratic South morphed into the Republican South and the religious balance between the two parties shifted radically. Today, churchgoing white evangelical Protestants—who make up 38 percent of the South’s total population—vote Republican and hold Republican ideals by a margin of two to one.

Thus, the widening spread of opinion on key foreign policy issues may be more a measure of the fact that like-minded southern evangelical Protestants have changed their party affiliation than a sign that Americans are growing more polarized along religious lines. Still, this development has important implications for a long-standing problem in U.S. foreign policy: how to achieve the right balance between pragmatism and moral idealism. Currently, the scales are heavily tipped toward the moral component. The actively religious U.S. public tends to see the world in terms of good and evil, hold its own values in the highest moral esteem, and feel ready to make whatever sacrifices are required to combat what they perceive as evil.

In my view, the striking affinity between the opinions of people who attend services frequently and the foreign policy positions of the Bush administration reflects the special relationship that the president has established with this important segment of the electorate in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks. After George W. Bush characterized the perpetrators as evil, his leadership began to look like a moral mission. His response resonated with the public at large, but particularly with its most religious segments. Since then, President Bush has established a powerful dialogue with white evangelical Protestants.

This relationship is less a matter of policy than of character and language. In the minds of white evangelical Protestants, the nation is faced with an apocalyptic threat. This constituency sees the president as a man of strong character: honest, simple, straight-talking, determined, no-nonsense, God-fearing. He is the kind of leader religious folk would hope to have under the circumstances: he inoculates them against weakness, faltering, and realpolitik. They can take what he says at face value and accept his sincerity and clarity of moral purpose. He is on the side of good, and therefore what he does is right. The religiously committed will make whatever sacrifices he says are needed to protect the nation. Their sentiments echo the traditional theme of American exceptionalism: Americans are a people chosen for a special mission in the world and especially blessed by God.

Yet the ideological gap that separates ardently religious Americans from less religious ones may not be permanent. It hinges on the

Opinions on Polarizing Issues, According to Religious Attendance

Percentage who agree, among people who attend religious services:

| STATEMENT: | Never | Occasionally | Regularly | Frequently |
|--|-------|--------------|-----------|------------|
| Believe the U.S. is “generally doing the right thing with plenty to be proud of” in its relations with the rest of the world | 28 | 33 | 49 | 52 |
| “Worry a lot” that the U.S. may be losing the trust and friendship of people in other countries | 47 | 46 | 34 | 24 |
| “Worry a lot” that the war in Iraq is leading to too many casualties | 63 | 60 | 50 | 45 |
| Agree that the U.S. can help other countries become democracies | 31 | 35 | 43 | 48 |
| “Worry a lot” that the war in Iraq is requiring too much money and attention | 49 | 48 | 38 | 32 |
| Give a high grade to the U.S. on giving the war on terror all the attention it deserves | 48 | 56 | 64 | 64 |
| Give a high grade to the U.S. on meeting its objectives in Iraq | 30 | 37 | 43 | 46 |
| “Worry a lot” that concern with security can lead to violating the rights of U.S. citizens | 44 | 42 | 32 | 28 |
| Give a high grade to the U.S. on living up to American ideals of human rights and justice in its foreign policy | 35 | 42 | 47 | 50 |

NOTE: 16 percent of respondents said they “never” attend services, 39 percent said they attend services anywhere from “a few times a year” to “about once a month” (“occasionally”), 35 percent said they attend services “nearly every week” or “every week” (“regularly”), and 10 percent said they attend services “more than once a week” (“frequently”).

personal bond between President Bush and his religious constituency—a bond so personal it may not be transferable to another president. The connection is also susceptible to the results of U.S. foreign policy. If the Bush administration succeeds in bringing peace and democracy to the Middle East, the White House's moral authority might grow stronger in the eyes of Bush's religious supporters. But if its policies prove ineffective, Washington might return to a traditional "realist" outlook that is less moralistic and absolute—and less attractive to the religious set.

THE TIPPING POINT

THE QUESTION of how much influence public opinion has on foreign policy has long been a matter of controversy. Two pieces of empirical data seem to point in opposite directions. On the one hand, political scientists have found that Americans let the executive branch conduct the country's foreign business generally unconstrained, allowing the White House far more latitude on foreign policy than on domestic matters. This is partly because they regard foreign policy as an area of special expertise. On the other hand, secretaries of state such as Henry Kissinger and Cyrus Vance have testified that it is not possible to conduct successful foreign policy without the support of American public opinion.

On closer inspection, however, this apparent inconsistency disappears. Both pieces of data prove valid in light of the principle of a tipping point. Until the public's opinion on an important foreign policy issue reaches such a point, it does not really influence the formulation of policy in Washington. Most of the time, the public's views do not count, either as a boost or as a constraint, and policy wonks can and do ignore them with impunity.

At other times, however, as during the Vietnam War, public opinion gathers enough momentum to start exerting a decisive influence on policymaking. How can we tell that a tipping point is looming? The combination of three factors, all measurable through surveys such as the CFPI, can help determine whether matters are likely to come to a head: the size of the public majority in favor of or opposed to a particular policy, the intensity and

urgency of its opinions, and whether it believes that the government is responsible for addressing them. Public opinion reaches the tipping point when a significant majority of the population feels strongly that the government can and should do something about a given issue.

Unless all three conditions have been met, the tipping point has not been reached and public opinion will not have much impact on policy. Consider issues that greatly concern experts and elites but still leave the public unfazed. Americans do not seem to worry much, for example, about the United States' extravagant foreign debt (32 percent of those surveyed said they do), even though it may prove hazardous to the nation's future. Nor do they worry a lot about the possibility that contagious diseases could spread to the United States (23 percent), that China's growing power could threaten the U.S. economy (29 percent), or that allegations of detainee torture have damaged the United States' reputation (29 percent). On these issues, public opinion remains far from a tipping point. Advocates who care about them will have to either continue fighting their battles largely unnoticed or work harder to raise public consciousness.

Other issues attract more popular attention, but either they have not yet become pressing or the American public does not hold the government responsible for them. Take, for instance, the question of intelligence reform. Some 65 percent of Americans polled believe that reforming the intelligence services is the best way to strengthen U.S. security significantly. Yet in their eyes the matter seems to lack urgency, because they believe that the government has begun to take remedial action: a significant minority of Americans (41 percent) give the government an A or a B for already "making the changes needed to improve U.S. intelligence and spying."

Outsourcing (the foreign policy issue that most upsets Americans) has not yet reached the tipping point either. The issue distresses most Americans, but by and large the public does not hold the government directly accountable for losing jobs to lower-wage countries. Although 78 percent of Americans feel strongly that the government is failing to prevent American jobs from moving

overseas, they also believe it is unrealistic to think that “U.S. companies will keep jobs in the United States when labor is cheaper elsewhere.” Outsourcing, in other words, has an air of inevitability, and Americans will not pin responsibility for it on the president or Congress. There may, of course, be proposals for protectionist legislation in the future. But for the moment, no swelling constituency is clamoring for them. And if policymakers can figure out ways to offset the effects of outsourcing by, say, offering American workers special training in engineering and technical skills, they could score big points with the public.

THE CLOSEST CALLS

THE WAR in Iraq is the foreign policy issue that most clearly appears to have reached a tipping point. According to the CFPI, this is the only one of 15 foreign policy issues that seriously worries a majority of the public. Almost six out of ten Americans are concerned that Washington may not be meeting its objectives in Iraq. Their concern runs deep: 56 percent of them “worry a lot” that the war in Iraq is causing too many casualties. And they have no doubts about who is accountable: the conduct of the Iraq war is the direct responsibility of the Bush administration; Washington will get credit if it prevails and blame if it fails.

Of course, the fact that public sentiment has reached the tipping point on this issue does not indicate what course of action the public wants to see followed; it simply means that the public’s impatience is mounting and that policymakers should take heed. Americans are deeply divided over whether the war in Iraq is worth the sacrifice and over how to safeguard U.S. national security. Events in Iraq will probably be decisive. If the insurgency grows more violent and as a result U.S. public opinion sours further, Washington might be forced to take actions it would prefer to avoid, such as withdrawing troops earlier than the U.S. military leadership recommends. But barring an unexpectedly huge spike in insurgency violence, in my judgment the Bush administration has about a year before the public’s impatience will force it to change course.

Another issue that deserves careful monitoring is illegal immigration to the United States. A solid majority of Americans (58 percent) believe that tighter controls on immigration to the United States will strengthen national security “a great deal,” and an even larger majority (74 percent) think that the government could do a better job of “protecting our borders from illegal immigration.” Part of people’s fear stems from a related worry that “terrorists may obtain biological, chemical, or nuclear weapons to attack the United States”; an overwhelming 88 percent of the population is afraid this could happen. The attacks of September 11, 2001, proved that such a sense of insecurity is not irrational. Americans know how easy it would be for a small number of terrorists to get access to mass transportation networks, water supplies, or other strategic assets, despite ritualistic security screenings at airports and recent bureaucratic shuffling at the relevant agencies.

A third near-tipping-point issue is less tangible but just as important to the public: Americans feel uneasy about U.S. relations with other states, especially with Muslim countries. No single statistic can adequately convey this sentiment, but an examination of several

findings clearly suggests that Americans worry that something in U.S. diplomatic relations has gone awry. Almost half of the public (49 percent) is dissatisfied with the country's external relations and believes that "showing more respect for other countries" would greatly enhance U.S. security. Almost two-thirds (64 percent) believe that Washington should be emphasizing diplomacy more than military action. Some 40 percent of Americans are especially worried about the growing hatred of Americans in Muslim states. And whereas a solid majority of Americans (59 percent) believe that improved dialogue with the Muslim world would reduce the level of hatred there, even more (64 percent) feel that Washington is not doing a good job of maintaining amicable relations with Muslim countries.

Together, these findings suggest considerable unease. If the war in Iraq lingers, the standoff with Tehran lasts, and relations with Lebanon, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Syria remain troubled, the next reading of the CFPI could well reveal that the vague apprehension the American public now feels has crystallized into a demand for changes in U.S. foreign policy.

In my view, these results suggest that the American public is beginning to feel that Washington has put too much emphasis on military responses to the foreign policy challenges it faces and that the diplomatic, economic, political, and intelligence capabilities of the United States have neither received the attention they deserve nor been deployed skillfully. Unless Washington makes tangible progress on these fronts, we should expect the next few readings of the CFPI to show mounting public demand for change in U.S. foreign policies. 🌐