

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

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# Mind the Gap

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Daniel W. Drezner

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WHEN IT comes to American foreign policy, U.S. policymakers and citizens from the rest of the world would not be expected to see eye to eye. They do, however, agree on one thing—they both mistrust how ordinary Americans think about international relations.<sup>1</sup>

Elite wariness of American attitudes towards foreign policy has been around since the days of Walter Lippmann. In *The Public Philosophy*, he warned, “The unhappy truth is that the prevailing public opinion has been destructively wrong at the critical junctures. The people have imposed a veto upon the judgments of informed and responsible officials. . . . Mass opinion has acquired mounting power in this country. It has shown itself to be a dangerous master of decisions when the stakes are life and death.” When American troops were deployed to Somalia, George Kennan lamented in *The New York Times* that American foreign policy was “controlled by popular emotional impulses, and particularly ones provoked by the commercial television industry.”

The rest of the world is equally wary of American public opinion. Resentment

of American power has been longstanding, but in this decade it has metastasized into something worse. Foreigners have seen President Bush articulate a doctrine of unilateral, preventive war in the name of democratic regime change, invade Iraq in support of that doctrine and get re-elected for his troubles. Since 2002, Pew polls in 16 countries spanning the globe show support for the United States declining in every country except Pakistan, Lebanon and India. To understand the depth of the problem, consider that in 2005 every country in Western Europe had a more favorable opinion of the People’s Republic of China than of the United States. This could be written off as hostility to the Bush Administration’s foreign policy, except for one problem—the same polls also show increased hostility to the American people.

There are two sources of concern about how ordinary Americans think about the world. First, Americans are believed to hold inconstant, inattentive, irrational and ill-considered opinions about how foreign policy should be conducted.

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<sup>1</sup>Andrew Kohut and Bruce Stokes, *America Against the World: How We Are Different and Why We Are Disliked* (New York: Times Books, 2006), 259 pp., \$25.00.

Benjamin I. Page and Marshall Bouton, *The Foreign Policy Disconnect: What Americans Want from Our Leaders but Don’t Get* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 356 pp., \$20.00.

Because Americans are so uninformed about foreign affairs, scholars and policymakers have historically argued that the public reacts to current events based on emotion rather than reason. This leads to a public with erratic mood swings about the foreign policy issues of the day. Policymakers in all countries fear the unpredictability of an electorate that can switch from “stay the course” to “cut and run” in response to a compelling news story. Ted Sorensen epitomized this belief when he said in 1963, “Public opinion is often erratic, inconsistent, arbitrary, and unreasonable—with a compulsion to make mistakes.” Discussions of the “CNN effect” are merely the most recent manifestation of this concern.

The second—and somewhat contradictory—source of concern is that Americans hold naive and idealistic convictions about how U.S. foreign policy should operate, and that those beliefs make many people uncomfortable. In *Politics Among Nations*, Hans Morgenthau fretted that, “The statesman must think in terms of the national interest, conceived as power among other powers. The popular mind, unaware of the fine distinctions of the statesman’s thinking, reasons more often than not in the simple moralistic and legalistic terms of absolute good and absolute evil.” Because Americans operate on a moralistic system of beliefs, they are judged to be incapable of grasping the concept of a dispassionate, hard-headed national interest.

This moralistic portrait of American beliefs fits with foreign concerns about the rampant religiosity of Americans. To put it bluntly, the growth of evangelical beliefs in America has put the fear of God into non-Americans. Foreigners are concerned that Americans share a proselytizing instinct to spread American values across the globe. George W. Bush’s phraseology in his second inaugural address, with its mix of righteous imagery and democratic idealism, epitomizes

these fears:

From the day of our Founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this earth has rights, and dignity, and matchless value, because they bear the image of the Maker of Heaven and earth. Across the generations we have proclaimed the imperative of self-government, because no one is fit to be a master, and no one deserves to be a slave. Advancing these ideals is the mission that created our Nation. . . .

Are these fears about the American public grounded in fact? That is the question that two recent books endeavor to answer, each in slightly different ways. In *America Against the World*, polling guru Andrew Kohut and *National Journal* columnist Bruce Stokes compare and contrast American attitudes with those of twenty other countries that have been polled in the Pew Global Attitudes Project. Their book is not only about questions of foreign policy—they want to know if Americans hold views on God and man that put them out of step with the rest of the world. In *The Foreign Policy Disconnect*, Northwestern professor Benjamin Page looks at whether Americans disagree with their political leaders about international relations. Page is assisted by Marshall Bouton, president of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, which has polled Americans about their foreign policy beliefs every four years for the past three decades.

In detailing the patterns and gaps between the American public and others, these books nicely complement and occasionally contradict each other. Both *The Foreign Policy Disconnect* and *America Against the World* will add grist to the mill for those who profess faith in the wisdom of crowds and doubts about the judgment of foreign policy experts. After cogitating on both books, it would be difficult for the informed reader to believe that Americans hold irrational or flighty views

about foreign policy. Most Americans, on most issues, articulate what George W. Bush characterized as a “humble” foreign policy during the 2000 campaign. They want a prudent foreign policy based on security against attacks and threats to domestic well-being—though American attitudes about multilateralism remain an open question. The gaps between American attitudes and the rest of the world are overstated; the gaps between Americans and their policymakers might be understated. The biggest question—which neither of these books answers satisfactorily—is to what extent these views, and gaps between views, matter.

### *Where Americans Agree*

**T**HERE ARE a number of areas where Page-Bouton and Kohut-Stokes find agreement. Perhaps the most important is that there is such a thing as an American public opinion. This is something of a surprise—the tendency in polling studies is to break down samples by various demographic factors such as race, education or income. In the process, it is often assumed that summary statistics about public opinion mask deep ideological, racial or socioeconomic splits among different sub-groups.

In contrast, both of these books conclude that what unites American attitudes is far stronger than what divides them. Demographics occasionally matter on the margins—Jews are more likely to support pro-Israeli policies, and highly-educated citizens are more likely to support aid to Africa, for example. In the main, however, Page and Bouton find that “on most issues, majorities of Americans of all sorts, from all walks of life, hold rather similar opinions.” In their analysis, demographic factors account for less than 5 percent of the variation in individual attitudes.

Similarly, Kohut and Stokes look to see if “blue staters” in the United States

have a greater ideological affinity with Europeans than red-state Americans. They do find a greater affinity between Democrats and Europeans on some national security issues—Democrats are closer to European attitudes about the United Nations, for example. However, Kohut and Stokes also find that the similarities outweigh the differences: “the data simply do not support the notion that members of the Democratic Party or residents of the coastal regions of the country would feel more at home on the other side of the Atlantic.”

If Americans speak with a single voice, what is that voice saying? For one thing, Americans are not nearly as enthusiastic about exporting American values abroad as many of their current leaders. Both studies, relying on different survey instruments, reveal that when Americans are asked to prioritize their foreign policy goals, issues like promoting human rights and democracy elsewhere rank near the bottom. Indeed, in 2004 only 14 percent of Americans said “bringing democratic government” to others should be a very important goal. (This is not to say that Americans do not want these things. Indeed, Kohut and Stokes find that 79 percent of Americans believe the spread of American ideas and customs to be a good thing—it is simply that Americans consider other foreign policy priorities to be more important.)

Page and Bouton do a particularly thorough job of emphasizing this point. They divide foreign policy goals into security against attack, security of domestic well-being and international justice. Security against attack includes preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction and combating international terrorism. Security of domestic well-being includes goals like securing adequate energy supplies and halting the flow of illegal drugs into the United States. These goal categories are the ones that generate the strongest support from Americans.

More than twice as many Americans rank combating terrorism or protecting the jobs of American workers as very important as compared to the promotion of human rights abroad. Regardless of race, color, creed or gender, both books find that Americans value their security over promoting American values abroad.

The rejection of the neoconservative foreign policy agenda highlights an emphasis on a foreign policy based on prudence rather than adventurism. One signal of Americans' prudence is their emphasis on economic strength over a muscular foreign policy. When asked, more than 65 percent of Americans agree that a robust economy is a more important determinant of a country's strength than military might. It is therefore not surprising when Page and Bouton find that even less than a year after the September 11 attacks, Americans wanted to expand government programs in health care, education and crime more than the defense, homeland security or intelligence budgets. In both books, Americans demonstrate a marked preference for the U.S. government to focus more on solving domestic concerns than foreign policy problems.

To be sure, Americans are comfortable with the idea of America as a superpower. This does *not* mean, however, that the public endorses unilateral American leadership. Kohut and Stokes point out that in every Pew survey since 1993, fewer than 15 percent of Americans endorsed the idea that America should be the "single world leader." Page and Bouton find a majority of Americans rejecting the idea that the United States should act as the world's policeman—instead, more than 70 percent of Americans support the United States "do[ing] its share in efforts to solve international problems." They conclude, "there is broad agreement among Americans in virtually all social groups: they favor prudent—but only prudent—uses of military force, with help from allies and international organizations." Americans

do not shrink from uses of force to advance security interests, but it is far from the first resort for the public. When acting abroad, polling demonstrates robust American support for acting in concert with allied countries and, to some extent, multilateral institutions.

### *Whither Multilateralism?*

THE "TO some extent" in the last paragraph highlights one area where the books disagree: Just how much do Americans embrace multilateralism? Both books show that, all else equal, Americans prefer to act multilaterally rather than unilaterally. The question is what happens when there are trade-offs between the two approaches.

*The Foreign Policy Disconnect* is emphatic in declaring that "most Americans prefer cooperative, multilateral, and diplomatic methods as the chief means to pursue their foreign policy goals." To support this argument, Page and Bouton show that pluralities of Americans support strengthening all international organizations they are asked about—including the United Nations. More than 70 percent of Americans supported American participation in the International Criminal Court and the Kyoto Protocol to protect global warming. Healthy majorities of Americans—including conservatives and Republicans—support giving up America's veto in the UN Security Council if it meant a more effective global body. Similar majorities endorse giving the UN limited powers of taxation to raise a standing multilateral force. In questions about going to war or deploying American forces as peacekeepers, public support appears to be highly contingent on whether there is multilateral support. Page and Bouton conclude from this that most Americans are "neoliberal institutionalists."

The analysis in *America Against the*

*World* adopts a somewhat different view: “If asked to choose, Americans prefer proactive, assertive unilateral action to multilateral efforts beset by delay and compromise.” Kohut and Stokes note that Americans still favor reserving the right to use pre-emptive military force to a much greater extent than Europeans. Although Americans wanted a UN imprimatur for Operation Iraqi Freedom, polls still demonstrated 75 percent support for a unilateral invasion by March 2003. And although there is support for the ICC in the abstract, Kohut and Stokes point out that that support is soft. A majority of Americans oppose allowing U.S. soldiers to be tried in The Hague. This is in sharp contrast to France, Germany and the UK, where majorities supported having their soldiers tried by the ICC. Kohut and Stokes conclude that, “In case after case, Americans are multilateralists in principle and unilateralists in practice.”

The data in these books, as well as other polling results, suggest that when Americans are enthusiastic about multilateralism, it is because they believe it can facilitate burden sharing. In both books, questions that suggest multilateral cooperation will translate into other countries doing their fair share generate strong support—similarly, questions that imply America will shoulder the burdens alone generate almost no support. On global warming, the support for Kyoto found in Page and Bouton should be tempered by Kohut and Stokes’ finding that a strong majority of Americans want poorer countries to bear as much of the burden in dealing with global warming as richer nations.

A recent Bertlesmann Foundation poll crystallizes how Americans think about international cooperation. When asked to choose between the best framework for ensuring peace and security, the populations of most major powers prefer “a system led by the United Nations” over either a balance of regional powers

or a unipolar world. The United States was the only country in the survey where a majority supported the balance of regional powers over the UN.

### *The Gaps*

**D**ESPITE DISAGREEMENTS over multilateralism, these books paint a rough consensus of how Americans think about the world. Do these views differ from the rest of the world? The biggest gaps in attitudes are primarily on questions that do not have much to do with international relations. *America Against the World* finds that Americans are far more individualistic and optimistic than most other populations. On the role in government in society, Americans were distinct among the advanced industrialized states in valuing personal freedom from government interference over the provision of social safety nets. One explanation for this distinction is the extent to which Americans believe themselves to be in control of their own destiny; 65 percent of Americans disagreed with the statement that “success in life is determined by forces outside our control”—roughly thirty percentage points higher than in Europe. Americans possess a uniquely sunny faith in the wonders of technological innovation.

In some ways, then, Americans *are* exceptional. However, Kohut and Stokes point out two ways in which this exceptionalism is overstated. First, the differences in base attitudes do not translate into differences on foreign policy issues. For example, even though Americans are far more religious than Europeans, there is no evidence that this religiosity factors into American attitudes about foreign policy. This is true at both the collective and individual levels.

The surprise in *America Against the World* is that Europeans and not Americans are the truly exceptional public in

the world. In contrast to the rest of the world, Europeans are the outliers when it comes to attitudes about nationalism and religion—they're turned off by both kinds of creeds. American levels of patriotism and devotion to God look perfectly normal when compared to the non-European parts of the globe. Kohut and Stokes conclude, "This pattern recurs time and again: Americans are different from Europeans, especially Western Europeans, but they are closer to people in developing countries on many key attitudes and values."

The gap between American and foreign attitudes may not be as great as commonly perceived, but Page and Bouton argue that the gap between mass and elite attitudes about foreign policy has been vastly underestimated. To support this contention, they analyze the differences between public and policymaker attitudes about foreign policy. On economic, defense and diplomatic policy questions, they found a 10 percent gap between policymakers and the public more than 70 percent of the time. One could argue that a policy that receives 80 percent support from policymakers and only 65 percent support the public is not a big deal. However there are *opposing majorities* of the public and policymakers on more than a quarter of the issues. The degree of difference persists regardless of changes in party control over the legislative and executive branches.

Foreign economic policy is where the most prominent gap between elite and mass public opinion exists. According to Page and Bouton, in 1994 there was a public-policymaker gap on 95 percent of the economic questions. Policymakers have consistently favored freer trade, been less exercised about the trade deficit, and cared less about protecting jobs than the American public. There is a significant gap on the question of legal immigration—policymakers want more and Americans want less. Policy elites

typically prefer spending larger amounts of foreign aid than ordinary Americans. On the whole, Americans are far more protectionist than their policymakers.

### *Does the public matter?*

CLEARLY, THERE are gaps between American public opinion, world public opinion and actual foreign policy. Does this matter, however? There are few calls for public opinion to have a larger input on either the Federal Reserve or the Supreme Court—why should foreign policy be any different?

Page and Bouton counter by suggesting that expertise is not important for foreign policy. *The Foreign Policy Disconnect* supports this contention by showing that higher education and information about the world have little correlation to individual attitudes about foreign policy. This is a thin reed of argumentation, however. Foreign policy expertise is more than just a better general education—it entails more specialized training. It should not be surprising that Page and Bouton found the greatest gap on defense issues came in 1990, when policymakers concluded that the Cold War was over before the public did. Similarly, the American people exaggerated the economic threat posed by Japan and Europe in the early 1990s. This is not to say that experts are always right and the public is always wrong—but perhaps American foreign policy does not need to perfectly mirror public opinion (Page and Bouton do not help their argument when they use their polling results to sell a social democratic agenda that goes way beyond their foreign policy remit).

Page and Bouton also argue that, "When officials adopt policies opposed by the public, they place American foreign policy on a weak foundation." This argument does not seem terribly persuasive, however, in light of Page and Bou-

ton's evidence. It is difficult to argue that U.S. foreign policy is fragile if foreign policy has been consistently implemented despite three decades of disagreements between policymakers and the public at large. Americans might have different views on world politics than their elites—but these gaps are not significant, because Americans usually do not vote their foreign policy preferences.

The persistence of the foreign policy disconnect is also problematic when thinking about the gaps between American and non-American views. Kohut and Stokes suggest that this gap has been overstated. The question, however, is whether these misperceptions can and will be corrected. Psychologists talk about the problem of “pluralistic ignorance”, in which large numbers of people hold similar misperceptions about what other people believe. People tend to assume

that if the government pursues a particular policy, it will garner majority support. At this point, global public opinion equates the policies of George W. Bush with the policy preferences of the American people.

The 2006 midterm elections do suggest that policymakers cannot stray *too* far from public preferences. Clearly, frustration over Iraq played a role in voters kicking out Republican majorities. This does not mean, however, that voters will be any more enamored of the Democrats (see: immigration, illegal). In the end, the relationship between Americans and their policymakers on foreign policy can best be summed up by paraphrasing of Abraham Lincoln. Politicians can ignore the foreign policy views of some Americans all of the time, and some of their views all of the time; they can't, however, ignore all of their views all of the time. □

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