
American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy 1995

Edited by

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[The following is a reprint of "The Findings in Summary" of the sixth quadrennial public opinion survey sponsored by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations and published in February 1995 under the above title. DISAM is grateful to the Council for its permission to reprint the summary. As noted in the report introduction, the field work for this public survey was conducted between 7 and 25 October 1994, "not quite two years after the inauguration of Governor Bill Clinton as president of the United States, and five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, which marked the beginning of the Cold War. This is the first Chicago Council survey since the Soviet Union collapsed at the end of 1991, and the second in which the U.S.-Soviet competition was not a dominant factor in shaping the attitudes of Americans." Copies of the complete 40-page survey report may be obtained from The Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 116 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60603; Telephone (312) 726-3860; Fax (312) 726-4491.]

THE FINDINGS IN SUMMARY

With the Cold War over and the Soviet Union neither a perceived superpower threat nor a unified nation-state, the international political landscape has changed drastically in only a few short years. Despite these dramatic changes in the external environment, American attitudes have remained remarkably stable on a number of important questions. Neither old-fashioned isolationism nor activist interventionism has captured public interest. Based on this study, the attitudes of Americans at both the public and leadership levels reflect a "pragmatic internationalism."

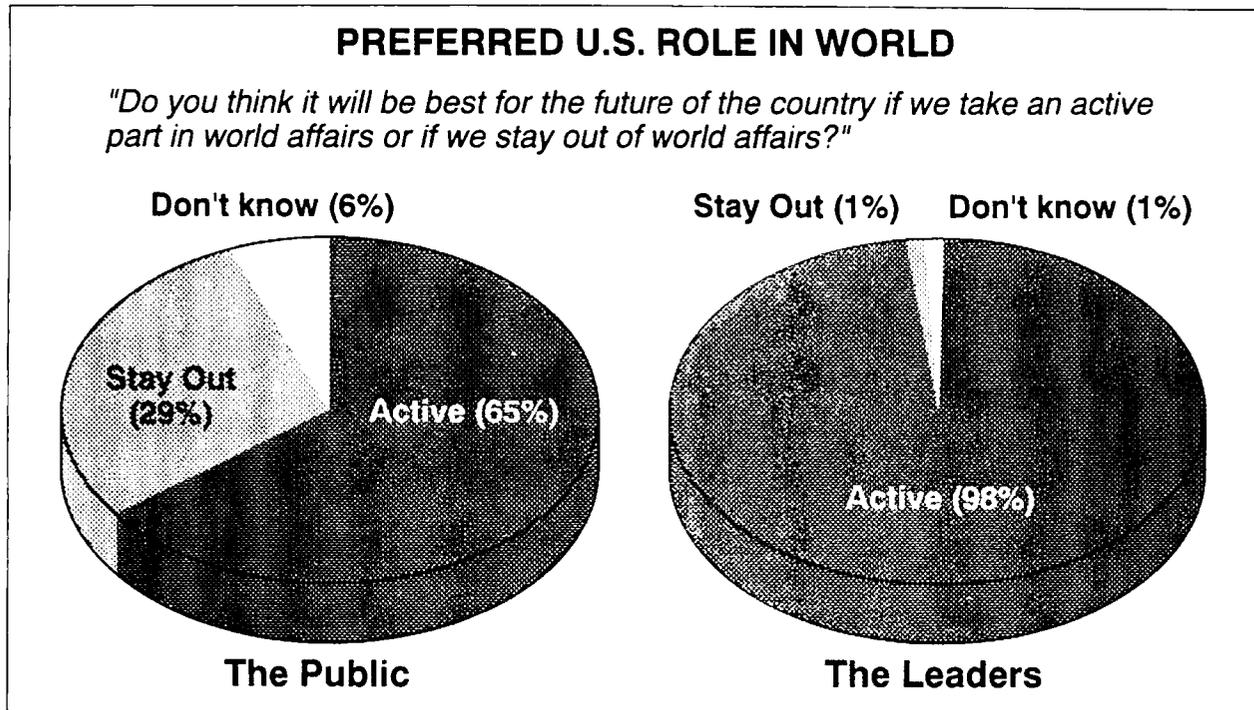
Pragmatic Internationalism

Americans are committed to an active role for the United States in the world, to working with other countries through the United Nations and the NATO alliance, and to freer trade. At the same time, Americans are reluctant to become entangled in the affairs of other nations and to use military force where interests are not vital. Indeed, they are selective in identifying international issues or parts of the world as vital to the country. They are aware of the impact the international system has on life at home, but their focus has shifted toward that home life and feelings of personal economic vulnerability. Crime and unemployment are considered the biggest problems facing the country by the public. Foreign policy-related problems now constitute the smallest number of overall problems since 1978 for the public and the smallest ever among leaders. The preferred goals of foreign policy address matters directly related to local concerns: controlling and reducing illegal immigration and stopping the flow of illegal drugs into the country. Interest in local and state news, but not foreign news, has expanded.

The Lone Superpower

Despite their personal insecurity, Americans are confident about the capacity of the nation to influence events in the world at large. Approximately one-half the public and leaders believe the United States plays a more important and powerful role in the world today than it did 10 years ago, the highest numbers recorded in these surveys. Many people also believe the United States

with be even more influential 10 years from now. These results contrast with feelings of national insecurity and weakness recorded in the late 1970s.



The public sees the United States, China, and Japan playing greater roles in 10 years, while the leaders envision a future world with China, Germany, and Japan increasing in relative influence. This may reflect the leaders' greater awareness of the international economic environment, but also acknowledges the strong role the United States already plays in the world.

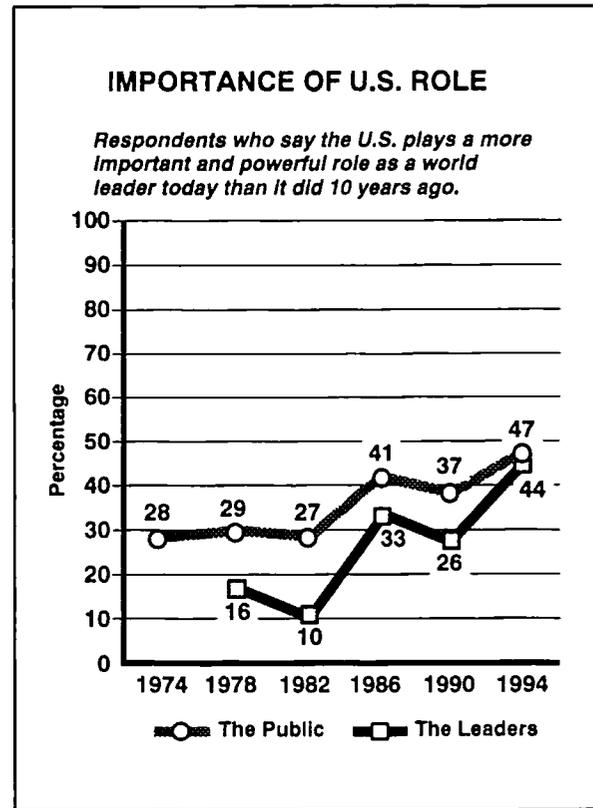
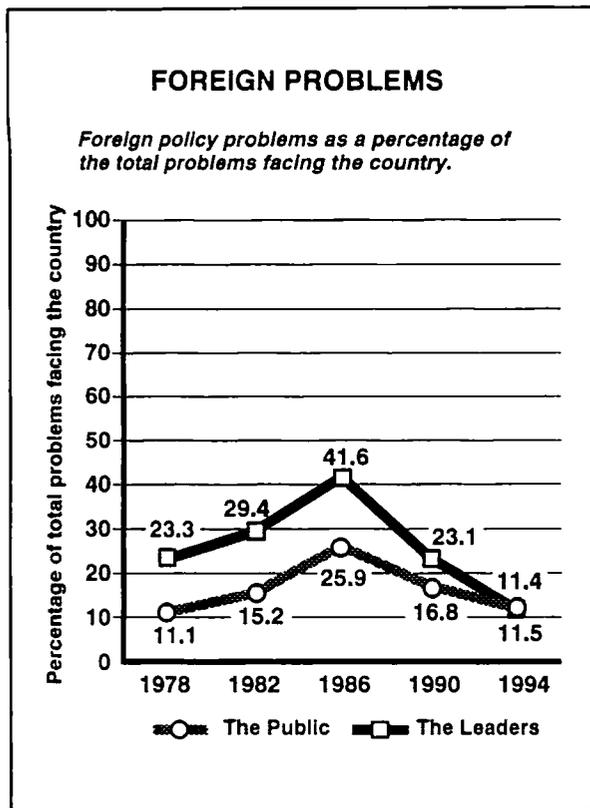
Regional Issues

The post Cold-War world is one of diverse regional concerns and some threats, but none comparable to that of the former Soviet Union. There is still a perceived nuclear threat, though its source is unclear. Preventing the spread of nuclear weapons is considered one of the most important foreign policy goals by both the public and the leaders.

Americans view Europe as more important to the United States than Asia, though by a narrow margin among the leaders. Economic unification of Europe is generally viewed as a good thing and concern about competition with Japan is still high among the public, and the concern about the power of China is still growing.

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is also viewed as a good thing by the public and leaders. Mexico is rated highly on both the vital interest and thermometer rankings, although the recent currency crisis provoked a divided response in the U.S. Congress and among the public in early 1995.

In the Middle East, there is support for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, especially among the leaders. It is unclear whether these views will hold up given the latest rash of violence between Israel and the Palestinians. Islamic fundamentalism is a matter of strong and growing concern. Middle East policy is an area where the Clinton administration receives relatively high marks on its performance.



Vital Interests

As in the past, public and leaders see vital interests in various countries of the world, though in somewhat different orders of priority. The general public rates Japan, Saudi Arabia, and Russia most important, followed by Kuwait and Mexico (tied), and Canada. The top countries for the leaders are Mexico and Russia (tied for first), followed by Japan, China, Saudi Arabia, Canada, and Germany. Brazil, France, and Poland rank relatively low on this scale.

On a thermometer of “feelings” toward world leaders and nations, Americans show the warmest feelings for Pope John Paul II, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, tied with former President Jimmy Carter, former President George Bush, and South African President Nelson Mandela. Nations viewed most warmly are Canada, Great Britain, and Italy, followed by Germany and Mexico (tied). At the bottom of the scale are Haiti, Cuba, North Korea, Iran, and —last—Iraq.

Security Issues

Americans are not reacting to the end of the Cold War or the collapse of the Soviet Bloc with further calls for drastic defense cuts or withdrawal from alliances. There appears to be a solidification of support for current levels of defense after previous backing of cuts. Americans favor participation in the NATO alliance and in U.N. peacekeeping operations. The public is divided on whether to insist on a U.S. commander when troops are taking part in such operations.

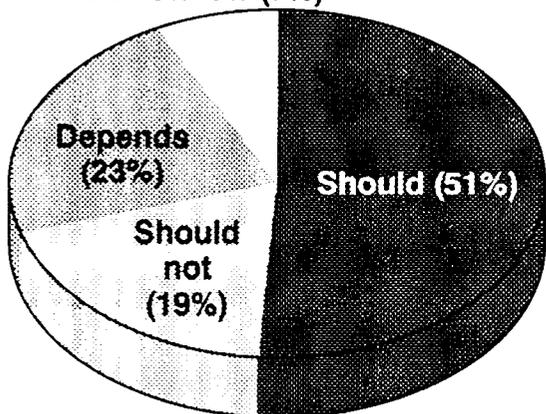
Germany and Japan are viewed favorably overall by the leaders. A solid majority of leaders would encourage both nations to play a more active military role in the world—though Canada receives much more encouragement for such action—and to hold seats on the U.N. Security Council.

General support remains for espionage by the CIA among the public. A plurality of the public, though only a minority of the leaders, believes the CIA should work inside other countries to weaken or overthrow governments unfriendly to the United States. There is majority support for spying on specific countries, including China, North Korea, Russia, and even Japan.

U.N. PEACEKEEPING

Should the U.S. be part of a U.N. peacekeeping force in a troubled part of the world when asked?

Don't know (7%)



The Public

Economic Issues

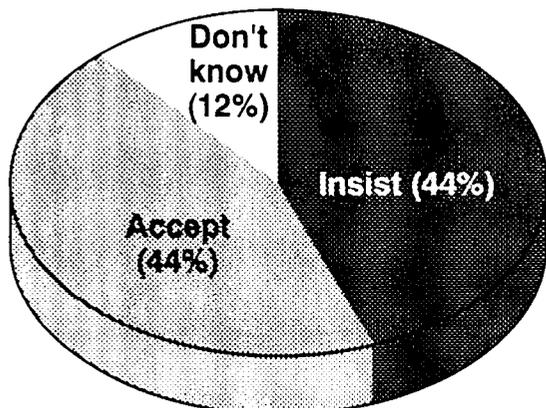
The public shows signs of economic concern, but no great sense of alarm. While the public is worried about Japan's trading practices and about unemployment, it has not turned protectionist. In fact, support for tariffs has gone down among the public and leaders to its lowest levels.

Economic aid, as in the past, is not popular with the public. The public prefers to decrease or stop aid altogether to Egypt, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Israel, Russia, and African countries. It would keep aid the same to the newly independent countries of Eastern Europe and to Latin American countries, and increase aid to no one. Among leaders, pluralities favor increases to Eastern Europe and the Palestinians.

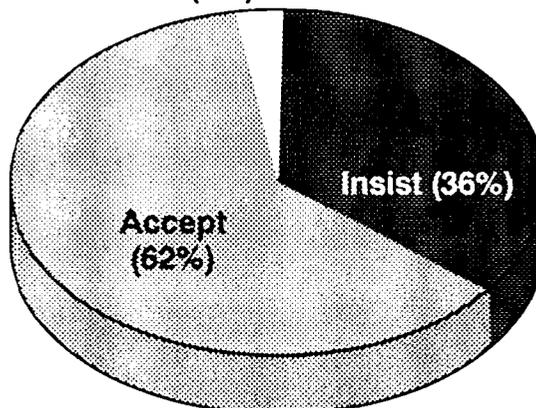
COMMANDER FOR PEACEKEEPING

Should the U.S. insist a U.S. commander be in charge of a U.N. force when U.S. troops take part, or should we accept a commander appointed by the United Nations?

Don't know (2%)



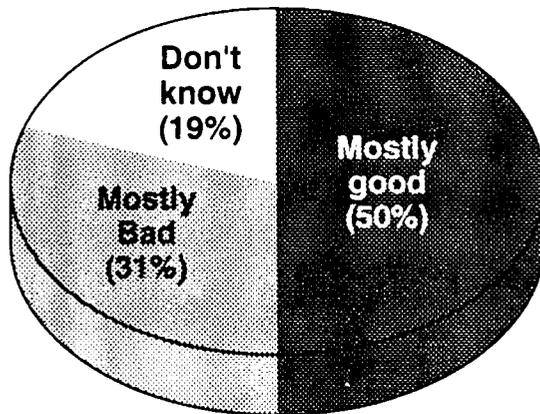
The Public



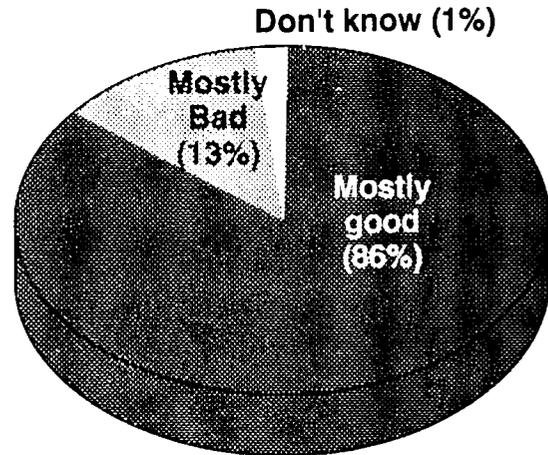
The Leaders

NAFTA

Is NAFTA mostly good for the U.S. economy or mostly bad?



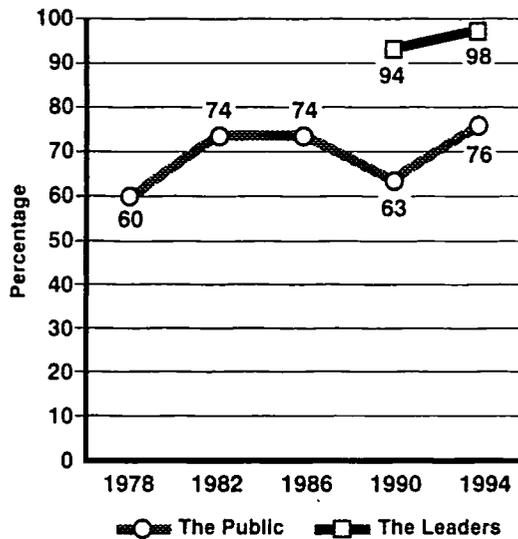
The Public



The Leaders

MEXICO

Vital Interest In Mexico.



Concern over the federal budget deficit has declined from four years ago. While Americans are aware of the impact of U.S. foreign policy on such matters as our overall economy, the value of the dollar, the price of gasoline and unemployment, the numbers have gone down from four years ago. This may reflect a waning of concern about the state of the national economy that was evident four years ago.

Leadership

At a time when Americans perceive the greatest importance of the U.S. role as a world leader, many are disappointed in the performance of their president in foreign policy. The relative unhappiness is reflected in the list of problems facing the country. Weak leadership is cited as a major problem by notable numbers of the public and even more of the leaders. President Clinton receives some of the lowest ratings in these surveys for his handling of overall foreign

policy. The leaders give the Clinton administration high marks for accomplishments in the Middle East and in international trade. The leaders give a divided response on handling of the North Korean nuclear threat.

The president is also ranked alongside nine other post-World War II presidents on his success in foreign policy. By almost every measure, he is ranked among the worst three. By one measure, George Bush, John F. Kennedy, and Ronald Reagan, respectively, are at the top of the list of presidents considered either "very" or "somewhat" successful in the conduct of foreign policy, with Kennedy first when just the "very" successful category is considered.

Criticism of the administration does not translate into support for an activist Congress. There is a slight increase in the number who feel the role of Congress in foreign policy has become too strong.