

# AMERICA IN THE WORLD

*By Richard J. Cattani*

When President Bush launched his reelection bid in New Hampshire, to a chilly reception, his longtime ace political hand James Baker, III, the secretary of state, was in even chillier Moscow trying to make sure that nuclear weapons did not lie scattered dangerously about after the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Given the 1992 party campaigns' focus on the domestic United States economy as distinct from foreign affairs, Mr. Baker was hardly in a position to help. Whether because of Baker's art or Bush's leadership or fortuitous events, America's role in the world was not directly in question, except as it touched on our own economy. And even there, as will be discussed below, Americans appear ready to give at the margin in trade relations and aid to see the world's economic pie expand.

A review of current public opinion on the US world role—military leadership, the Middle East, immigration, foreign aid, and trade—shows a relatively self-assured, activist citizenry. In this sense, Jim Baker is doing a lot for the Bush administration with his peregrinations. Insular America does not appear in sight.

At the same time, Americans show a familiar ambivalence over foreign entanglements. Domestic worries show through the public's four to one agreement that "we shouldn't think so much in international terms but concentrate more on our own national problems" (Gallup for CNN & USA Today, January 6-9, 1992). But by 5 to 4 the same group disagrees with the statement "the US should mind its own business...and let other countries get along as best they can."

The inconstancy of American altruism in world and domestic affairs can be anguishing. Not reviewed here are America's attitudes toward adventures like the Vietnam War, until losses were finally

seen as horrendous, or its attitude toward its current 1.1 million-person prison colony—a higher per capita imprisonment rate than that even of South Africa, against whom the US had imposed sanctions. Americans can show a high tolerance for cruelty, as well as idealism.

## Military Strength

What does come through the survey research on arms matters is the portrait of a rather sensible citizenry where world responsibilities are concerned. Americans do worry that the Soviet Union might lose control over its nuclear weapons; we support the US cut in short-range nuclear

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weapons in hopes the former Soviets will do the same, but we do not think they can be trusted to cut their arsenals back without a formal treaty (ABC News/Washington Post, October 16-21, 1991). While a modest majority of Americans think the Cold War has gone into eclipse, a clear majority think it important for the US to be on guard and continue to be strong militarily. An overwhelming 5 to 1 majority think it is still necessary to maintain a military alliance with Western Europe (CBS News/New York Times, October 5-7, 1991).

Does the US have a responsibility to intervene militarily in trouble spots? No, if acting alone; yes, when asked by allies (CBS News/New York Times, October 5-7, November 18-22, 1991).

Americans consider their country strong militarily and want it to stay that way. Ninety-one percent see America as *the* world military power; 67% think na-

tional defense levels are about right at present; and 80% say that, looking 25 years hence, building "the strongest military force in the world" will still be important. (Gallup, May 3-17, 23-26, October 3-6, 1991)

Coming out of last year's Gulf war, Americans largely agreed on elements attributed to the New World Order. An invasion of one country by another should be stopped by military force by the US and other countries, Americans thought; resisting aggression is even more attractive if the countries of the world act in concert. (Market Strategies for Americans Talk Security, March 19-24, and Market Strategies and Greenberg-Lake for the Americans Talk Issues Foundation, June 23-July 1, 1991)

Public ambivalence over short-term defense cuts may reflect views on the outlook for conflicts in the next five years.

A major confrontation like the Korean War is thought to be unlikely, but a short war like that with Iraq is considered likely, as is another short operation like the invasion of Grenada or Panama. (NBC News/Wall Street Journal, September 20-24, 1991)

Americans split evenly over whether the US can play the role of "world policeman," just as they do over the old nostrum that "the best way to ensure peace is through military strength" (Time/CNN/Yankelovich Clancy Shulman, March 7, 1991; Princeton Survey Research Associates for Times Mirror, January 3-7, 1992). We see joint US/European action as the most likely future free world leadership option, with the US acting alone the second option, and the US and Japan as equal partners a distant third (NBC News/Wall Street Journal, November 20-24, 1991).

What we see in these opinions is an America inclined to trust its recent allies, willing to see as "friendly" its former

Soviet antagonists, but cautious about prospects for regional or global peace. In this context, the case for or against defense spending can be made one way or the other, but there is hardly a whiff of isolationism.

### The Middle East

In the Middle East, peace as a successful initiative can be riskier than war. The American public can think of a long list of humiliations in the region. The Middle East is a part of the world the United States public does not readily understand. A modest majority (55%) think the US should be involved in the efforts to get Israel and the Arab nations to reach a peace agreement, while a substantial 40% would leave it up to the antagonists to work things out (NBC News/Wall Street Journal, December 6-9, 1991).

At the same time, Americans come down one-sidedly in approving the use last year of force against Iraq. Three-fourths say it was "no mistake" (CBS News/New York Times, October 5-7, 1991). A similar proportion would hit Iraq again if it failed to observe the UN resolution calling for the destruction of nuclear weapons capabilities (Gallup, September 26-29, 1991). If anything, Americans think the US ended the war with Iraq too soon (NBC News/Wall Street Journal, December 6-9, 1991).

Remember the sanctions and diplomacy vs. force debate? Interestingly, Americans come down on the side of sanctions and diplomacy if used more vigorously, but not if used more patiently; force should have been applied until Saddam Hussein was routed, and the threat in the Middle East is such as to merit keeping a military presence in the region on the order of those kept in Germany and Korea (Market Strategies and Greenberg-Lake for the Americans Talk Issues Foundation, November 25-December 2, 1991).

Perhaps it is the salience of a perceived threat in the Middle East that has encouraged the Bush administration to press for an accord between Israel and its

Arab neighbors. If there is an injustice in Israel's treatment of the Palestinians in the West Bank, the building of new Israeli settlements in the disputed territory has only accentuated it. Other factors include the collapse of Soviet pretensions in the region, a general world climate of change, and a return to favor of multilateral action.

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Still, it cannot be said that the Bush peace initiative originated from a strong public opinion mandate. The policy calculation may be that, as the superpowers withdraw their nuclear talons, it would be better to reduce the area's animosity toward Israel, even as religious fundamentalism gnaws at the region's stability. An accord might make possible an economic condominium in the region, a prerequisite for long-term stability.

### Immigration

Americans' views of whom they allow to join them say something about how we see ourselves in the world. An easy snapshot on immigration, during this political season, is how a presidential candidate's position on "tougher laws to limit immigration into the US" would affect a vote. By 3 to 1, voters say they would favor such a candidate (Gallup/CNN/USA Today, January 6-9, 1992).

But views on immigration are more complex than this. Americans appreciate diversity. Nearly 70% agree that "immigrants help improve our country with their different cultures and talents," even as they tend to think immigrants take the jobs of US workers and consume more

through social services and unemployment than they contribute through taxes and productivity. (Gallup/Newsweek, August 23-24, 1990)

Americans show impatience with efforts at immigration reform. We would allow more immigrants, but not too many more; we want a specific quota total, but not too high a quota. We favor immigration with controls; illegal immigration's disturbing them. (Roper Organization for the Federation for American Immigration Reform, April 20-May 2, 1990)

### Foreign Aid

Patrick Buchanan took up an easy line when he said he would cancel foreign aid and spend the money on needed programs at home. Americans generally disapprove of foreign aid for reasons not that different from their attitudes toward welfare. A majority say they would "decrease" such aid (CBS News/New York Times, October 5-7, 1991). From 1973 to 1991, between 65% and 76% of Americans have thought the US was spending too much on foreign aid, according to the National Opinion Research Center's General Social Survey. So, what's new?

But, attitudes shift fascinatingly with circumstances. Americans say they wouldn't help the former Soviet Union buy American grain; at the same time, they say it is important for the US to play a role inside that country. A majority of Americans would give economic aid to the Soviets to help reform the Soviet economy, and definitely to avoid famine (CBS News/New York Times, October 5-7, 1991). Americans would send food supplies to the Soviets, but they balk at direct financial aid; they would offer technical assistance, but they would not buy Soviet nuclear weapons (Time/CNN/Yankelovich Clancy Shulman, January 16, 1992).

### Trade

Opinions on trade are tricky. Japan is seen as the biggest trade offender. For

example, Americans think Japan is driving one way on what should be a two-way trade street; Washington is doing too little to protect US jobs from unfair foreign competition; and America is losing high-paying jobs in fields like electronics while the Japanese gain (Peter Hart & Associates for the Council on Competitiveness, September 1991). And yet, a weakened Japanese economy is perceived by Americans as hurting the US economy (Louis Harris & Associates, June 7-11, 1991).

These are other contradictions: The US public concedes that "Americans are too inclined to blame Japan for problems of our own making." But this does not keep it from wanting "more restrictions on the sale of Japanese products here." Americans say "the US must protect American jobs, even if it means closing some of our markets to foreign companies." But most of the 29% of Americans who buy Japanese or other foreign cars say they don't feel guilty for doing so. (Marttila & Kiley for the Detroit Free Press, January 19-20, 1992)

"Having productive workers" better describes Japan, Americans say, while "being devoted to free trade" better describes the US (Peter Hart & Associates for NBC News and Nippon Television, November 20-21, 1991). Japan makes better cars, many Americans say, and they find US auto executives more at fault for the US industry's problems than they do

Japanese trade practices; still, they would require Japan to reduce its trade deficit with the US over the next five years, even if the price of Japanese cars sold here would rise. (NBC News/Wall Street Journal, January 17-21, 1992)

Granted, problems inflate and shrink in the public's mind according to how much is heard about them. But when Americans are asked what is the most important problem facing the country today, they list first matters economic, then social ills like homelessness and, way back, the trade deficit/trade relations

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(Princeton Survey Research Associates for Times Mirror, January 3-7, 1992). Thus "trade" is greatly discounted in the larger opinion context on the economy.

Again, an irony: A two-thirds majority of Americans see Japanese investment in the US as "a bad thing" and would support restrictions on such investment here; but almost as many Americans would not hesitate to work for a Japanese-owned company in the US. (ABC News, November 5-10, 1991; and CBS News/New York Times, November 18-22, 1991)

What do Americans think of a less-talked-about but important trade issue—the hemispheric free trade zone among Canada, the US, and Mexico? After all, Canada is America's biggest trading partner, and the domestic implications of a free trade zone with Mexico are at least as significant.

Well, Americans haven't heard too much about it. They think it would be "mostly good" for the US, although they assume that Mexico would benefit the most. (Gallup, March 14-17, 1991)

This is awfully thin ice for sustaining trade policy, though Americans' instinct seems in the right direction. The argument in favor of free trade on the North American continent, or to and from it, has more to do with where economic trends are heading. The modern electronics jet stream,

the winds of environmental degradation, the common interest in universal economic growth, would carry Americans into greater involvement in the world at large.

Since the nation's founding, Americans have disputed whether their interests lie in the world outside or in the world within its borders. It would be surprising if the evidence did not show this debate carrying forward.

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