

## Since World War II, Americans Have Persistently Looked Outward

By Everett Carl Ladd

It's a great misconception—though often encountered in political circles—that the public by and large isn't informed about foreign affairs and is little interested in it save in times of crisis. Granted, a great many people don't follow news of international developments at all closely—and thus are extraordinarily uninformed about them. A June 1997 survey, done on the eve of Great Britain's returning Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty, found a full 40 percent of respondents saying they had not “read or heard” about the development (p. 10). Examples of this kind abound. It's also the case that except when American lives are involved, or large economic interests threatened, foreign affairs typically ranks lower in the public's perspectives than pressing domestic issues.

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But a public's job is to point the general direction that it wants the country's foreign policy to take, the broad goals to be pursued and the values to be affirmed. This doesn't require that people follow foreign affairs news closely. Polling data show the US public repeatedly reaffirming basic goals and values with regard to the country's place in the world, and showing remarkable constancy as to the course it wants followed.

Americans grumble about the costs at times, but we remain broadly internationalist rather than isolationist. We want the US to play an activist role in world affairs (pp. 6-10). This general commitment gets expressed in a host of ways.

Every time, it has been asked, the public in large majorities has said the US is spending too much on foreign aid, rather than too little or about the right amount (p. 12). Nonetheless, Americans have often been quick to back foreign assistance—including some instances where they might be expected not to. Immediately after bearing huge costs in World War II, the public endorsed the Marshall plan, and aid in rebuilding Germany and Japan with whom we had just fought the bitter conflict (pp. 13-16).

There's a large military component to America's international involvement, of course, and we've spent heavily on defense since the post-World War II rearmament began. Such large, sustained outlays couldn't have occurred without broad public support—and they have had such support continuously over the last half century (pp. 18-19). Americans have also strongly backed US participation in military alliances, most notably NATO (p. 20).

As to the country's intervention in the wars it has fought in this century, the public has reached a variety of different conclusions depending on the war itself, of course, and as well on the time—during the war, immediately following it, long after it—when asked about it. In January 1937, those polled by Gallup said by a large majority that our World War I intervention had been in error. By the spring of 1941, however, with

Europe in flames, a large majority said our intervention in the last war had *not* been a mistake (p. 21). Vietnam is the most controversial of all the wars of this century. Majorities of the public supported the decision to send troops to fight in Vietnam by clear majorities in 1965 and 1966. As late as December 1967, the country was evenly divided on whether it had been a mistake to intervene. By 1968, however, clear majorities said it was a mistake, and the size of this majority has grown steadily since. In April 1995, 71 percent said sending troops to Vietnam was a mistake, only 23 percent that it was not (pp. 23-24).

Americans entertain sharply contrasting judgments about the various countries with whom we interact most consequentially—how “warm” or “cold” we feel toward them, whether we see them as allies, just friends, or as enemies (pp. 26-30). Canada and Britain have consistently topped the “friends” list. Not surprisingly, assessments of Russia have shifted more over the last decade than those of any other country.

The economic side of US engagement in the world is critically important. Americans are often told how much foreign companies and products have penetrated US markets and of the trade deficits that have resulted. But US companies have had great successes abroad, which have in turn generated resentments. Nowhere is this more evident than in the exporting of American popular culture—from fast-foods to TV programs and motion pictures (pp. 34-35).

While the public has had worries aplenty about threats to the jobs of American workers stemming from the successes of foreign manufacturers in our markets, majorities have continued to show strong underlying commitments to a free-trade position (pp. 36-37). In all key dimensions, then, the American people have been broadly internationalist.

