

## Americans Believe U.S. International Strategy Has Backfired

December 6, 2006

### Majorities See World More Fearful of U.S. Military Force, Making Governments More Likely to Pursue WMD

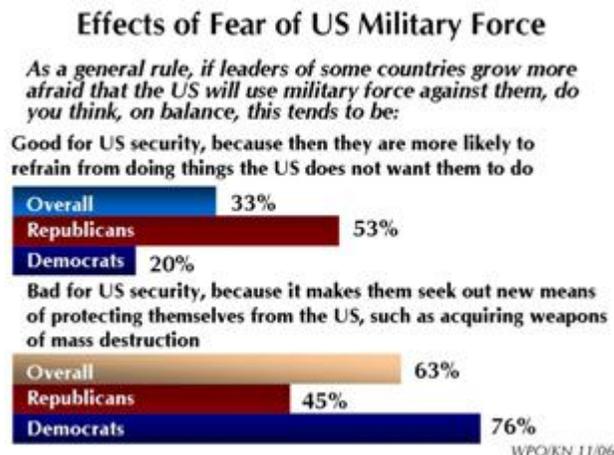
### Public Opposes Setting Goal of Regime Change in Problem Countries

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A majority of Americans believe that the way the United States has been using the threat of military force has diminished U.S. security.

Two out of three believe that countries around the world have grown more afraid that the United States will use force against them and the same number thinks this is bad for U.S. security, according to a WorldPublicOpinion.org poll. The public believes overwhelmingly that fear of the United States has increased “the likelihood that countries will try to acquire weapons of mass destruction.”



Large majorities also reject the idea that the United States' military strength means it need not be concerned about international goodwill and they do not think that the U.S. government should announce that it seeks regime change in problem countries.

The poll included interviews with a nationwide sample of 1,326 Americans conducted Nov. 21-29. It was designed by the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland in conjunction with the conference, “Leveraging U.S. Strength in an Uncertain World,” held Dec. 7 by the [Stanley Foundation](#). It was fielded by Knowledge Networks.

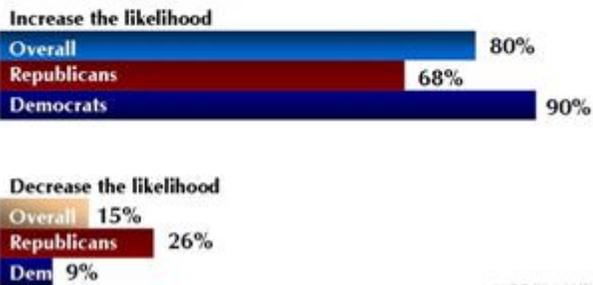
Steven Kull, editor of WorldPublicOpinion.org., said Americans believed current policies had provoked fear abroad causing countries to react in ways that make the United States less secure. “Most Americans now believe that the recent thrust of U.S. foreign policy has backfired,” Kull said.

### Fear of US Military Force and Acquiring WMD

### Fear of U.S. Military Force

*As a general rule, if leaders of some countries grow more afraid that the US will use military force against them, do you think, on balance, this tends to increase or decrease the likelihood that countries will try to acquire weapons of mass destruction?*

Asked whether countries around the world have grown more afraid in recent years that the United States might use force against them, a majority of respondents (63%) say yes. The poll then asks respondents whether, if the leaders of some countries grow more afraid of the United States, this is good for U.S. security, because it makes foreign governments “more likely to refrain from doing things the U.S. does not want them to do,” or bad because it makes them “seek out new means of protecting themselves.”



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By a two-to-one margin (63% to 33%), respondents say rising fear that the United States might use military force is bad because countries may do things that undermine U.S. security. Republicans differ on this issue, however, with 53 percent saying such fear is good and 45 percent saying it is bad. Most Democrats (76%) endorse the view that growing fears of the United States are harmful to U.S. security.

The poll also asks respondents whether, “if leaders of some countries grow more afraid” of an attack by the United States, this will tend to increase or decrease the likelihood that they will “try to acquire weapons of mass destruction.” A very large majority (80%) say that countries will become more likely to seek WMD.

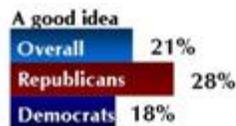
American perceptions that some countries view the United States as a potential military threat appear to be correct, according to polls by the [Pew Research Center](#). Publics in nine countries, seven of them predominantly Muslim, were asked how worried they were that the United States “could become a military threat to [their] own country someday.” In all cases except one, a majority said that they were very or somewhat worried, indicating that this was not simply a passing anxiety in response to the Iraq war.

In [April-May 2005](#), these included the NATO ally Turkey (65%) as well as Morocco (96%), Indonesia (80%), Pakistan (71%), Jordan (67%) and Lebanon (59%). In [May 2003](#), Russia (71%), and Nigeria (72%) also had majorities that were worried the United States could become a threat, as did Kuwait (53%), a country the United States defended after it was invaded by Iraq in 1990. In Morocco, only 46 percent had such fears in 2003, which jumped 50 points to 96 percent in 2005.

In the WPO survey, respondents overwhelmingly reject the idea that “goodwill is not really critical” for the United States because it is “so much stronger than all other countries” and because “trying to be popular can tie” the United States’ hands. Eight in ten (80%) disagree with this and instead endorsed the view that goodwill toward the

## Announcing Goal of Regime Change

Do you think announcing that the US has the goal of removing an existing government that it sees as a problem, is:



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to U.S. security” and hostility could “lead people work” against U.S. interests.

### Dealing with Problem

A large majority does not think the United States should announce it is pursuing regime change in problem countries, such as Iran.

Only 21 percent endorse the argument that the U.S. government should announce this goal “because it creates moral clarity and strengthens opposition to the government both inside and outside that country.” Seventy-two percent agree instead with the view that this is “a bad idea because it violates the principle of national sovereignty, and when countries feel threatened they are less cooperative and more likely to use dangerous means to protect themselves.” This includes eight in ten Democrats (78%) and seven in ten Republicans (67%).

Eight in ten also reject the policy of isolating, rather than talking to, problem countries. Only 16 percent endorse the view that it is better to “isolate them so as to pressure them to change their behavior” and only 13 percent back the argument that “talking to them gives them recognition and effectively rewards their bad behavior.”

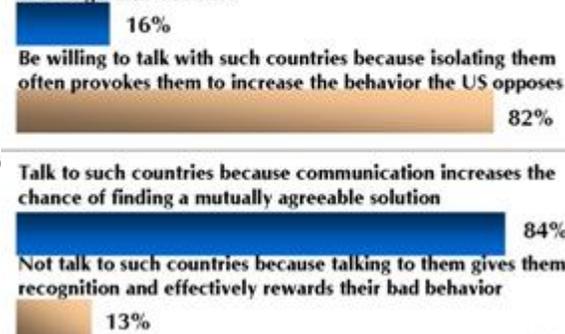
Majorities instead agree with arguments in favor of talking to problem countries “because isolating them often provokes them to increase the behavior the US opposes” (82%) and “because communication increases the chance of finding a mutually agreeable solution” (84%).

Americans are divided about whether the United States should promise not to use force against problem countries such as Iran without some quid pro quo. Forty-five percent of respondents endorse the argument that the United States should be willing to make a commitment not to use force because refusing to do so increases the fear of a U.S. attack which often leads countries “to do things that are negative for U.S. security.” Forty-eight percent favor the view that the United States should keep open the threat of attack so as to “put pressure on these countries to change their behavior.”

### Dealing with Terrorism

#### Talking with Problem Countries

When countries are doing things the US opposes, the US should:



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United States was “important in order to obtain cooperation in dealing with threats because to actively

Countries

A large majority disagrees that terrorist groups should be dealt with solely through military action. Only 35 percent accept the argument that “the only way to counter the threat of terrorism is to find and destroy terrorists. It is naïve and pointless to try to understand their intentions or imagine that we can address any of their concerns.”

Sixty-one percent favor the alternative view that trying to destroy terrorists may not work because “if we are too heavy-handed, it just breeds more hostility and more terrorists. It is necessary to address the sources of the hostility in the larger societies that the terrorists come from.” But Republicans disagree with the majority on this issue: 55 percent favor the position that destroying terrorists is the only way to deal with them while 41 percent feel that such a policy may breed more terrorists. Most Democrats (76%) endorse the second view.

Seven in ten (71%) respondents agree with the argument that combating terrorism, though important, is not the only threat the United States faces and should not “overwhelm all other priorities.” Less than a third (27%) support the alternative position that the “threat of terrorism is the most important issue of our time, and we should be willing to do whatever it takes to fight it.”