

Americans Continue to Support International Engagement Despite Frustration over the War in Iraq

October 11, 2006

Most Americans believe the war in Iraq has not reduced terrorism or helped spread democracy in the Middle East. Instead they say the war has hurt U.S. relations with the Muslim world and should make nations more cautious about using military force. Nonetheless, Americans are not turning against international engagement—strong majorities still want the United States to play an active role in world affairs.

The 2006 [Chicago Council on Global Affairs](#) survey found no evidence of declining support for U.S. engagement on a wide-range of international issues. Americans believe the United States is and should remain the most influential country in the world. But they do not want their government to take on the role of world policeman, preferring that it work with other countries to solve global problems through the United Nations and other international institutions.

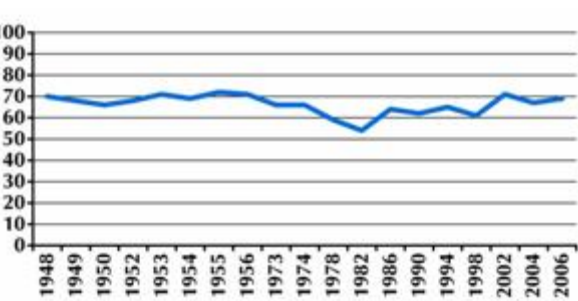
Most Americans respond negatively when asked about the impact of the war in Iraq. Two out of three (66%) say that the war has damaged U.S. relations with the Muslim world and believe that the U.S. experience in Iraq “should make nations more cautious about using military force to deal with rogue states.” Majorities disagree with those who argue that the war will help promote democracy in the Middle East (64%) and that it has reduced the threat of terrorism (61%).

Nonetheless, the Chicago Council survey finds that frustration with the war in Iraq has not affected Americans’ general attitudes about foreign policy. Since World War II, about two-thirds of the U.S. public has said that the United States should play an active role in world affairs, a proportion that fell significantly only during the period following the Vietnam War. Sixty-nine percent of Americans say in the 2006 poll that the United States should remain engaged in international affairs, statistically the same as in 2004 (67%).

An Active and Multilateral Foreign Policy

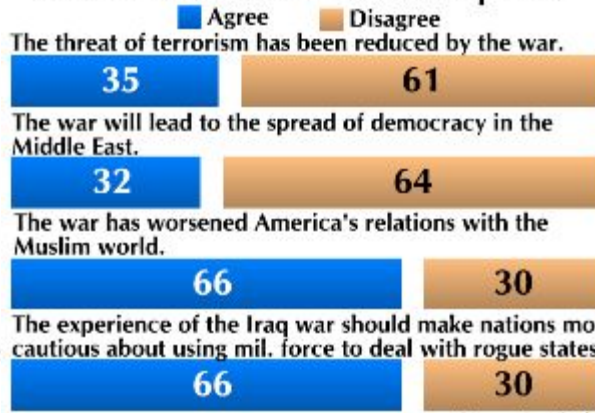
Asked what international role they would like the United States to play, Americans say they want their country to remain engaged overseas without trying to dominate world affairs. Only 12 percent say “the United States should withdraw from most efforts to solve international problems,” a proportion that has remained statistically unchanged since 2004 (10%). However, Americans do not want the United States to remain the dominant power and believe that it should try to refrain from unilateral efforts to police international conflicts. Only 10 percent say that “as the sole remaining superpower the United States should continue to be the preeminent leader in solving world problems.” Three-fourths (76%) say that the United States too often plays the role of world policeman.

Americans Who Think It Best That the U.S. Take an Active Part in World Affairs



Trend data from 1947 through 1973 comes from national surveys conducted by NORC in Chicago. The 1974 survey was conducted by Louis Harris and Associates, Inc. Data from 1947 to 1998 was collected using face-to-face surveys. 2002 data was collected using telephone surveys. 2004 and 2006 data was collected using Internet surveys.

American Views on the Iraq War



Chicago Council, 7/06

But Americans support U.S. participation in multilateral efforts. Seventy-five

percent say that the United States “should do its share in efforts to solve international problems together with other countries.” A substantial majority (60%) believe the United States should try to make decisions within the United Nations, even if this means making compromises. An even larger majority (73%) thinks the United States should generally comply with rulings by the World Trade Organization. Americans also support a wide range of international agreements and treaties, including those rejected by the U.S. government, such as the pact to create an International Criminal Court (71%) and the Kyoto agreement to reduce global warming (70%).

Support for Keeping a Strong Military

Although Americans do not want the United States to be the world’s policeman, a majority (55%) says that maintaining military superiority should be an important goal of U.S. foreign policy. About the same percentage (53%) thinks the United States should keep most of its long-term overseas bases.

Most Americans favor sending U.S. forces on humanitarian missions. Strong majorities say they support the use of U.S. troops to “stop a government from committing genocide” (71%), to deal with humanitarian crises (66%) and to join an international peacekeeping force to stop the killing in Darfur (65%).

Sending troops abroad to deal with more traditional security concerns receives less support. Asked whether the United States should send troops to defend Israel, a bare majority of 53 percent say yes. Majorities or pluralities are opposed to using U.S. troops to defend South Korea from a North Korean invasion, to ensure the supply of oil or to protect Taiwan from China. Two-thirds (66%) oppose using U.S. troops to install democratic governments.

But Americans support contributing troops to multilateral missions that they are unwilling to undertake unilaterally. Asked whether the United States should contribute troops “to a U.N.-sponsored effort” to reverse a North Korean invasion, a strong majority (65%) says it should. Previous surveys by the Chicago Council have found similar jumps in public support for troop use in missions that are described as multilateral rather than U.S.-led operations.

Foreign Policy Priorities

Americans show no sign of downgrading foreign policy goals in favor of purely domestic priorities. Higher percentages of Americans place great importance on ten of the twelve foreign policy goals included in the Council's 2004 survey. The proportion considering maintaining military power worldwide to be very important is up five percentage points (from 50% to 55%) as is combating world hunger (from 43% to 48%). Improving the global environment is up seven points (from 47% to 54%).

The U.S. public considers nuclear proliferation to be among the greatest threats now facing the international community. About three out of four Americans (74%) consider preventing the spread of nuclear weapons a very important goal of U.S. foreign policy, second only to protecting American jobs (76%). Most Americans (60%) say countries should have the right to use force to prevent potentially hostile governments from acquiring weapons of mass destruction. They also favor sweeping international authority to enforce nonproliferation. Sixty-two percent say that the U.N. Security Council should have the right to authorize the use of military force to prevent a country without nuclear weapons from acquiring them.

Americans are particularly worried about Iran's nuclear ambitions. Sixty-three percent say they would be very concerned if Iran developed nuclear weapons and 24 percent say they would be somewhat concerned. They are willing to consider using military force against Iran—but only if authorized by the United Nations. Only 18 percent say the United States should launch a military strike against Iran even if it has to act on its own. Fifty-eight percent say the United States should use military force only with U.N. approval. Twenty percent oppose any military strike against Iran.