

America's Image in the World

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[House Foreign Affairs Committee Transcript](#)
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I would like to thank the chairman for inviting me speak today on world public opinion on the United States. For some years now, the Program on International Policy Attitudes has been studying world public opinion. We conduct focus groups and carry out large multi-country polls as well as in-depth polls in specific countries, especially Muslim countries.

As often happens in life I have some bad news and some good news. And as is often a good idea, I will start with the bad news.

You have probably heard that America's image in the world is not particularly good these days. The most recent evidence of this was a poll that we conducted for BBC World Service together with GlobeScan in 26 countries around the world. Polling was conducted last November through January. The question asked was whether the United States is having a positive or negative influence in the world.

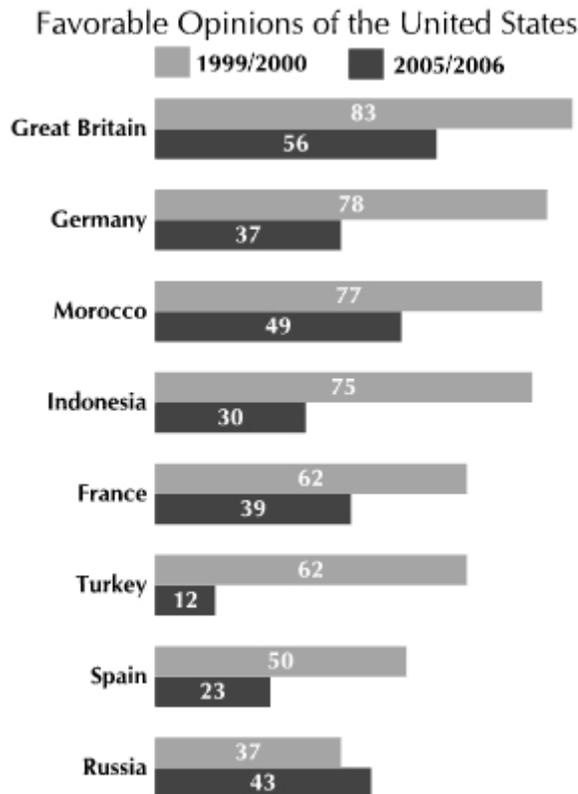
On average across the 26 countries polled, 30 percent say the US is having a mostly positive influence in the world while 51 percent say the US is having a mostly negative influence.

In 20 of the 26 countries polled, the most common view is that the US is having a mostly negative influence in the world. In four countries, the most common view is that the US is having a mostly positive influence and in two of them, views are evenly divided.

Views of US influence are consistently negative in Canada, Latin America and the Middle East. They are mostly negative in Europe, with the exception of Poland, which leans positive, and Hungary, which is divided. Africans in this poll and in others have the most consistently positive views of the US. Asian views are more mixed, but lean negative. Filipinos are very positive and Indians are divided, but all others are clearly negative.

It should be noted that this reaction cannot simply be dismissed as something necessarily engendered by a powerful and rich country. The numbers we are seeing today are the lowest numbers that have ever been recorded.

During the 1990s, views of the US were predominantly positive. Comparing 1999 State Department data and recent Pew data, favorable views of the United States have dropped in the UK from 83 percent to 56 percent, in Germany from 78 percent to 37 percent, in Morocco from 77 percent to 49 percent, in Indonesia from 75 to 30 percent, in France from 62 to 39 percent, from Turkey from 62 to 12 percent and in Spain from 50 to 23 percent. Only Russia has held steady.



1999/2000 data from Office of Research, U.S. Dept. of State
2005/2006 data from Pew Global Attitudes Project

These numbers are also not simply a reaction to the US decision to go to war in Iraq. Views of the US did go down sharply

after the beginning of the Iraq war in 2003. But now, nearly four years later, they continue to move downward.

As part of the BBC poll, we have asked the same question about US influence over the last three years to a set of 18 major countries and have found that evaluations continue to move downward. On average, across the 18 countries, positive views of the US have slipped from 40 percent in 2005 to 36 percent in 2006 to 29 percent in 2007. Negative views have risen from 46 percent in 2005 to 52 percent in 2007.

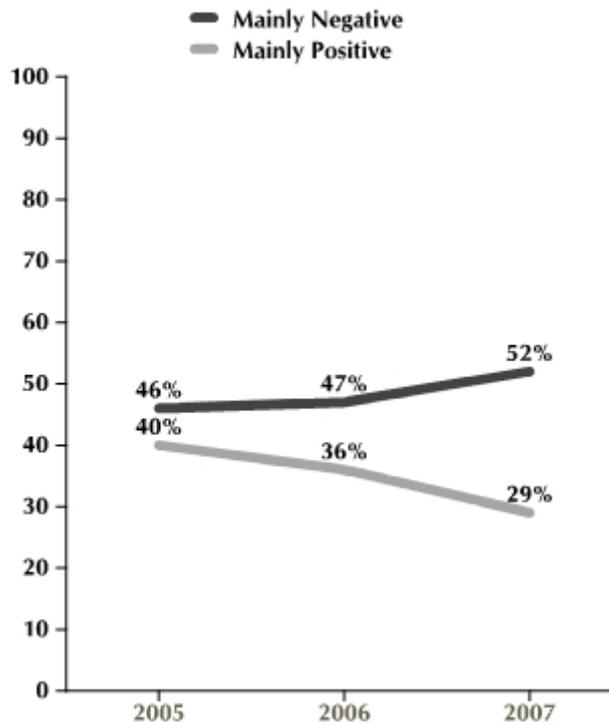
There are a few countries that get lower ratings than the US. In a BBC poll that we just released this morning, Israel, Iran, and by some measures, North Korea, received lower ratings. However the US is rated far lower than France, Japan, Canada, China, India and Russia.

Overall these findings are largely consistent with other polls that have asked different questions. Some polls suggest more positive attitudes toward the United States per se. Polls that have asked respondents to rate their feelings toward the US as warm or cold on a 0-100 thermometer-like scale, find relatively more positive ratings. For example, 62 percent of Australians say the US is having a negative influence in the world, but their average thermometer rating is a relatively warm 60 degrees.

Views of the American people are also somewhat more positive than for the country as a whole. Europeans, Russians, Indians and Japanese all express quite positive feelings toward the American people. Views in Muslim countries are mixed but still noticeably warmer toward the American people than toward the US itself.

Views of United States' Influence

Average of 18 Countries, 2005-2007



BBC 12/2006 American movies and television

programs get mixed reviews while American science and technology engender substantial respect around the world.

The aspect of US behavior that elicits the strongest negative feeling is how the US government deals with other countries. In a recent 14-country poll that we did with the Chicago Council, large majorities in 12 of them said that “the US is playing the role of world policeman more than it should be.” In a recent Pew poll of 16 countries, 12 said that the US does not take the interests of their country into account when making foreign policy decisions.

The BBC poll asked about six specific areas and found that majorities or pluralities in most countries disapprove of US foreign policy in all of them.

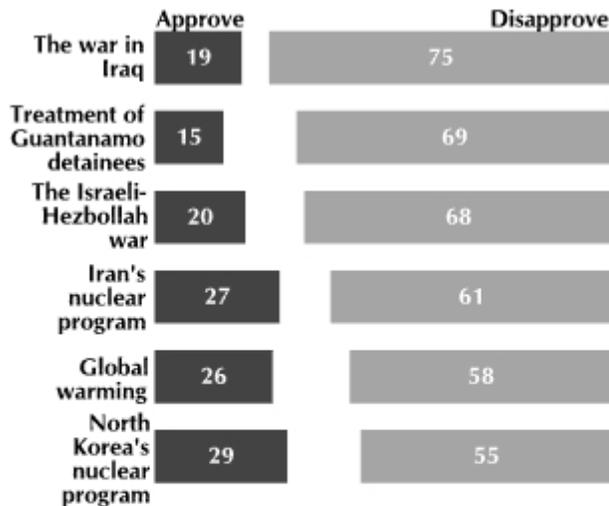
On average:

- 75% disapprove of the how the US is handling the Iraq war,
- 69% disapprove of US treatment of detainees in Guantanamo and other prisons,
- 68% disapprove of how the US handled the war between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon,
- 61% disapprove of US handling of Iran’s nuclear program,
- 58% disapprove of US handling of global warming or climate change
- 55% disapprove of US handling of North Korea’s nuclear program

The US military presence in the Middle East is exceedingly unpopular in virtually all countries. On average 69 percent believe the US military presence there “provokes more conflict than it prevents” while just 16 percent see it as a stabilizing force.

Opinions of the US Gov't's Handling of...

Average of 26 Countries



US Military Presence in the Middle East

Average of 26 Countries



BBC 12/2006 So what is the good news?

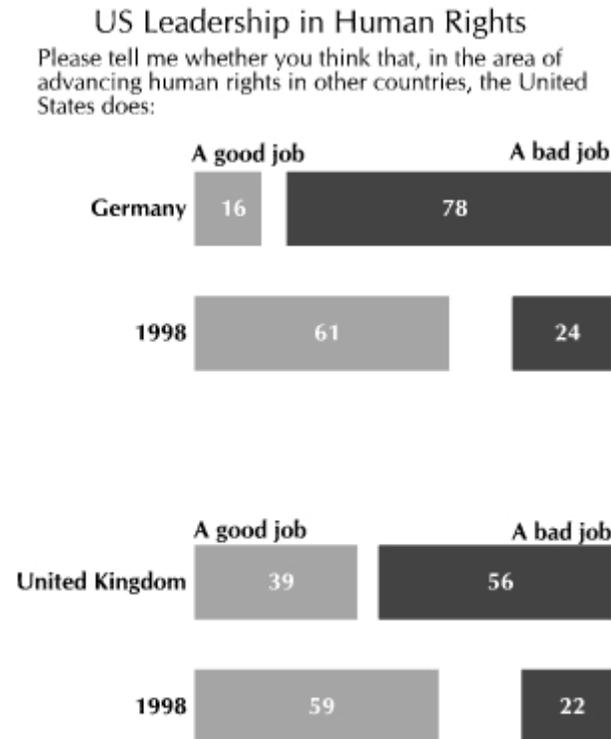
The good news is that there is an abundance of evidence that the unhappiness with the US is not a rejection of US values. People around the world say that the problems they have with the US concern its policies, not its values.

Large majorities of Muslims also say this in polls that we conducted for the University of Maryland’s START center. Most Muslims reject the idea that there is a fundamental clash of civilizations between Islam and the West. Values such as democracy and international law are more popular than the ideas of al Qaeda.

In focus groups that I have conducted throughout the world, the most common complaint I hear is not about American values but that the US is being hypocritical; that it is not living up to its values. Complaining that the US is hypocritical is a backhanded compliment. The implicit statement is that if the US were to live up to its values this would be something positive.

This support for American values has deep roots that go back to the period immediately after World War II. At that time US was so overwhelmingly powerful relative to the rest of the world that it would have been able to impose an American empire.

But it did not do that. Instead the US championed a world order based on international law and said that it too would be constrained by this system. It endorsed a system built around the United Nations that prohibited the unilateral use of force except in self defense, and respected national sovereignty. It promoted democracy. It promoted respect for human rights within countries and in dealings between countries. It promoted an equitable and open system of trade and free enterprise that did not favor the strong over the weak. And through its aid programs it sought to integrate poor countries into the international economy.



WPO/KN 6/06

There is substantial evidence that the values and the ideas for world order that the US promoted have become widely accepted. In 66 out of 67 countries polled for the World Values Survey, most agreed that “Democracy may have its problems but it is still better than any other form of government.” In 30 out of 32 countries polled for BBC, most people said that the UN is having a positive influence in the world. In 19 out of 20 countries polled by GlobeScan, a majority agreed that “the free enterprise system and free market economy is the best system on which to base the future of the world.” And there is no significant indication that support for these principles is in decline.

The problem is that of late there has been a growing perception that the US is not living up to its principles. In a recent poll we conducted we found widespread perceptions that the US is violating international law in its treatment of detainees at Guantanamo.

The US image as a promoter of human rights has diminished. In 1998, USIA found that 59 percent of the British and 61 percent of Germans said the United States was doing a good job promoting human rights. Today, 56 percent of the British and 78 percent of Germans say the US is doing a bad job.

Contrary to the United States' history of largesse, a Pew poll found that in 38 out of 43 countries most felt that US policies were worsening the gap between rich and poor, .

But perhaps the most fundamental issue is whether the US is constrained in its use of force. This is why there is so much concern about the US invasion of Iraq.

The complaint about Iraq is not so much that US forces removed Saddam Hussein. Rather it is that the US did so without getting UN approval; that it did not follow the international rules that the US is perceived as originally promoting.

Support for US-Promoted Principles

-By number of countries-

Democracy may have problems but it's better than any other form of government



World Values Survey

Is the United Nations having a mainly positive or mainly negative influence in the world?



BBC/GlobeScan/PIPA

The free enterprise system and free market economy is the best system on which to base the future of the world.



GlobeScan

This has left many countries uneasy about whether the potential use of US military power is constrained by the international system. While it may sound strange to Americans, in many countries around the world people express strong fears that the US will use military force against them. In virtually every country asked about this in polls done by Pew in 2003 and 2005, majorities perceived the US as a military threat to their country. This was even true of Turkey—our NATO ally—and Kuwait—a country the US has defended. It may be hard for us to understand how overwhelming US military power appears to other countries and how easily they worry that the US might use it.

So in summary, the challenge we face in dealing with the recent upsurge in negative feelings about US foreign policy, is not that we need to convince people of the value of the principles the US has tried to promote in the world. The world is already pretty much convinced. This is a tremendous asset for the US.

What the world is looking for is reassurance that the US is constrained by the rules that the US itself has promoted; that it is still committed to the rule of international law, to limits on the use of military force, to respect for human rights, and to fairness in the world economic system.

Were people around the world to gain more confidence in US intentions and perceive the US as having a renewed commitment to the values we have successfully cultivated in the world, there are strong reasons to believe that attitudes toward the US could shift rather quickly in a positive direction.

Thank you very much for your attention.