

America's New Internationalist Point of View

In association with the Council on Foreign Relations; including commentary by Kenneth M. Pollack

Introduction and Summary

The terrorist attacks and the war in Afghanistan have created a new internationalist sentiment among the public. There is much more support for a multilateral foreign policy than before Sept.11, with roughly six-in-ten (59%) now saying that the interests of allies should be taken into account by U.S. policymakers. By about a two-to-one margin (61%-32%) the public thinks that taking an active role in the world, rather than becoming less involved, will be a more effective way of avoiding problems like terrorism in the future. And support for assertive U.S. leadership also has grown, with as many as 45% saying that the United States should either be the single world leader or at least be the most active of leading nations.

However, this new internationalism, driven by a nearly universal imperative for defeating the terrorist threat, may have taken some of the steam out of what had been growing public support for solving non-geopolitical global problems. The current survey finds the public giving somewhat lower priority to solving a range of global problems, including: drug trafficking, hunger, global warming and the spread of AIDS and other infectious diseases. While public concern for these problems is still present, less urgency is associated with each in the current environment.

These are the principal findings of a national survey that re-interviewed 1,281 respondents who originally had been questioned about international issues Aug. 21 to Sept. 5. The new poll shows that public opinion on the Middle East has changed little as a result of the attacks. If anything, there is now more sympathy for Israel in its conflict with the Palestinians than in the first round of interviewing. While 19% believe that the United States should side less with Israel in the future, these people were already the most sympathetic to the Palestinians prior to Sept. 11.

At the same time, only a minority of Americans subscribe to the view that the war against terrorism portends a broader cultural clash pitting the West against Islam. Nearly two-thirds (63%) see this as a struggle against a small group of radical terrorists, while 28% foresee a major conflict between people in United States and Europe, on one side, and the people of Islam, on the other.

The follow-up survey reveals that the war on terrorism is dramatically affecting opinions about security issues. Support for increased military spending now stands at 50%, which far surpasses levels dating back a quarter-century. There also is a collateral increase in support for a missile defense system. Nearly two-thirds (64%) favor the development of a missile shield and a growing number say we need such a system right now.

The survey finds views about U.S. anti-terrorism efforts are largely unchanged compared with opinions obtained earlier this month. Most Americans have a positive view of the way the war effort is going (83%) and the job being done to build homeland defenses (69%). But since mid-October, there has been a decline in the number who rate the military campaign as going very well (from 45% to 38%).

Despite the anthrax attacks, worries about another terrorist attack did not increase over the period of the re-interviews (Oct. 15-21). It should be noted that while the public is not more rattled than it has been, it also has not made much progress in getting back to normal. Just 41% said that life had returned to normal – about the same percentage giving that response in a Newsweek poll conducted in late September.

“The View Before 9/11: America’s Place in the World,” a companion survey by the Pew Research Center and the Council on Foreign Relations, is also available. Click here (<http://www.people-press.org/files/2001/10/oct24companion.pdf>), or contact the Center at 202-293-3126. This quadrennial survey of American Opinion Leaders and the general public provides a detailed look at attitudes toward international issues before the Sept. 11 attacks.

Pre- Post-9/11 Attitudes		
	Then	Now
Formulate foreign policy based on ...	%	%
Mostly U.S. interests	38	30
Interests of allies	48	59
Neither/Both	8	7
Don't know/Refused	6	4
	100	100
U.S. leadership role should be ...		
Single leader or first among equals	38	45
Just one of leading nations	50	46
No leadership role	8	3
Don't know/Refused	4	6
	100	100
To prevent future terrorism, U.S. should...		
Be active in world affairs	n/a	61
Not get too involved	n/a	32
Don't know/Refused	n/a	7
		100
National defense spending should be ...		
Increased	32	50
Keep the same	44	41
Cut back	20	7
Don't know/Refused	4	2
	100	100