

**FIFTEEN PROPOSITIONS  
ABOUT AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY AND PUBLIC OPINION  
IN AN  
ERA FREE OF COMPELLING THREATS**

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We have lived through a truly remarkable period of history. In an incredibly short time virtually all the major problems that tormented big-country (sometimes known as Great Power) international relations for nearly half a century were resolved: the unpopular and often brutal Soviet occupation of eastern Europe; the artificial and deeply troubling division of Germany; the expensive, crisis-prone, and apparently dangerous military contest between East and West; and the ideological struggle between authoritarian, violence-encouraging Communism and sometimes-panicky capitalist democracy.

As the world tries to sort itself out in the aftermath of this amazing transformation, we enter a new era, one that is most extraordinary: if we apply conventional standards, the leading countries are today presented at the international level with no major immediate problems or threats. From their perspective, there are minor, immediate problems and major long-range problems, but no major immediate ones.

Some international relations scholars have been trying, at times a bit desperately it seems, to refashion constructs and theories designed for an era with compelling threats to fit one without them.<sup>1</sup> However, among people who actually carry out international affairs in the leading countries, a rather coherent policy consensus seems to be emerging. It stresses as a primary goal economic enrichment through open markets and freer trade rather than empire or military prowess or triumph in war, it allows for the inclusion of those less developed countries which are able to get their act together, and it seeks cooperatively to alleviate troubles in other parts of the world if this can be done at low cost, particularly in lives, but to isolate and contain these troubles if they cannot be alleviated at low cost.<sup>2</sup>

As policy becomes reshaped in this new world dominated by unthreatened wealth-seekers, public opinion will also play its role--indeed, it has already shown itself to be an important impelling factor in some of the key policies that have emerged. Ole Holsti has suggested that "we may moving into a period in which the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy takes on added rather than diminished significance, but we should also be wary of assumptions that the theories, evidence, and linkages emerging from research during the Cold War era will necessarily travel intact into an era of strikingly different circumstances" (1992, 461; see also Wittkopf 1990, 237). This paper advances a set of propositions about American public opinion that seem to have implications for the practice of foreign policy in our new era.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Waltz 1993, Huntington 1993a, Huntington 1993b, Layne 1993, Mearsheimer 1990. For an effort at some corrective, suggesting that Germany's actual behavior fits this refashioning very poorly, see Pond 1994, Hellmann 1994.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion, see Mueller 1996a. See also Rosecrance 1986, Mueller 1989.

<sup>3</sup> This discussion focuses on American public opinion, but many of the propositions may hold as well for other countries, particularly developed ones.

**1. Two facts are centrally-determining: the public pays very little attention to international affairs, and nothing much can be done about this**

A useful way to assess the relative importance Americans place on foreign affairs is to consider the results generated by the frequently-asked poll question, "What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?" The question poses something of a contest: the hapless respondents are essentially asked to select the most notable irritant from the huge array of calamities arrayed daily in the news. Although they are allowed to give more than one response, the question does not encourage this, and at times, of course, the competition for the top spot can be quite severe.

It is probably worth noting that this question overstates concerns. A filter question asking the respondents whether they have given any attention to the country's problems would likely reduce the incidence of proffered problems greatly--probably by half (Sterngold et. al 1994). Moreover, the responses would be quite a bit different if the question were broader, like the one asked by Samuel Stouffer in a classic study (1955, ch. 3): "What kinds of things do you worry about most?" The "big, overwhelming response," Stouffer found, "was in terms of personal and family problems." Indeed, 80 percent "answered solely in these terms." Then, to a follow-up question, "Are there other problems you worry or are concerned about, especially political or world problems?" 52 percent responded they had nothing to add.

Results like these, suggesting that the public suffers from something of an attention deficit disorder toward political issues, frequently elicit disapproving tongue-clicking among social critics. It is not clear, however, why one should expect people to spend a lot of time worrying about national problems, particularly when democratic capitalism not only leaves them free to choose other ways to get their kicks but in its seemingly infinite quest for variety is constantly developing seductive distractions. Political theorists and idealists may be intensely interested in government and world affairs, but it verges on the arrogant to suggest that other people are somehow inadequate or derelict unless they share the same curious passion.

At any rate, it appears that the best way to look at how the American public relates to international affairs is to suggest that the mode tends to inattention: people principally focus on domestic matters, but from time to time their attention can be diverted by major threats or by explicit, specific, and dramatic dangers to American lives. Once these issues vanish from the scene, people return their attention to domestic concerns with considerable alacrity--rather like "the snapping back of a strained elastic," as Gabriel Almond once put it (1960, 76).

Figure 1 displays a lengthy array of data, covering 60 years, derived from results of the most important problem question. Throughout, it appears, a foreign concern must really be quite notable to divert Americans from domestic preoccupations.

Before World War II domestic concerns dominated even as war approached with such portentous and dangerous crises as Munich in 1938. Only when war actually began in Europe in September 1939, and only when war against Japan approached in the Pacific--from late 1939 through November 1941--did foreign affairs come to dominate the public's concerns.

War presumably became the chief concern when the country entered the war after the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor in December 1941. There are no exact data, but when the most important problem question was twice asked during the war, it was prefaced by the words, "Aside from winning the war..." (see Smith 1985; Niemi et al. 1989, 39-46), clearly suggesting the pollsters (reasonably) expected the war to be mentioned overwhelmingly.

Most interestingly, attention to international concerns dropped to almost nothing at the end of the war in 1945. It rose again only two years later as the Truman Doctrine was announced in March 1947 and especially after the Communists alarmingly took over Czechoslovakia in February 1948. There was some decline in interest thereafter, but attention escalated again during the Korean war from June 1950 to the summer of 1953.

From the end of the Korean War until 1963, foreign affairs generally commanded quite a bit of attention, especially during crises over the U-2 overflights in May 1960, over Berlin in the last half of 1961, and over missiles in Cuba in late 1962.

Then, what might be called the classic Cold War came to an end in mid-1963 with the Soviet-American detente surrounding the signing of the Partial Test Ban Treaty (Mueller 1989, 156-62). And, as had happened at the end of the hot war in the Europe and Asia in 1945, attention to foreign affairs again dropped substantially.<sup>4</sup>

Lyndon Johnson seems to have been able to center attention on foreign affairs again in the late

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of American expectations of war during the classic Cold War period, see Mueller 1979.

summer and fall of 1964. The Gulf of Tonkin crisis in August of that year was probably important in this, but mostly it seems unrelated to Vietnam (see Figure 2). This process probably helped him in his reelection campaign against the Republican's Barry Goldwater who Johnson wanted to brand as an irresponsible war hawk.

Vietnam came to dominate the public's attention by 1966, however, far outstripping all other foreign concerns (Figure 2). At the same time, of course, there were many domestic worries, particularly over the issues of civil rights and domestic disorder.

There was some decline in attention by the 1970s as U.S. casualty rates in Vietnam declined and as troops began to be withdrawn. For the American public the end of the Vietnam war came about in January 1973 with the agreement to halt direct American participation in the fighting and, in particular, with the release of American prisoners of war in Hanoi--even though the United States was still committed to the South Vietnamese there and even though the war continued for more than two years.

Since 1973, few events have been able to focus the public's attention on foreign affairs: indeed, at no time since the Tet offensive in the Vietnam War in early 1968 have foreign policy issues outweighed domestic ones in the public's concerns.

There may have been a rise in attention after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, and this heightened concern was then apparently embellished by the Iran hostage crisis that began in November 1979 and lasted until January 1981 (Figure 1). Even this rise is briefer and rather lower than might be expected, however. There is a spike of heightened interest in January 1980, but then a notable decline during the rest of that year.

Except for that, only two international concerns have notably intruded on the American public's perceptions since 1973, but neither ever outdistanced the totality of domestic concerns. One of these was the remarkably heightened concern about thermonuclear war that had such a rage in the early and mid 1980s and then withered with the rise of the disarmingly agreeable Mikhail Gorbachev in the USSR (see also Oreskes 1990). It may be difficult to recall, but as late as 1986 and 1987--only 10 years ago--over a fifth of the American public picked the fear of war as the country's greatest problem.<sup>5</sup>

The other arresting international concern was the Gulf crisis of 1990-91. As led by George Bush, the public became concerned about Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. Interest in world affairs faded some in the fall, was regenerated by Bush's drive toward war, escalated further when fighting actually took place, and then all but disappeared (rather unfortunately, as it turned out, for Bush's reelection prospects) as soon as it was over.

For present purposes, the most central conclusion from this survey of a lengthy poll trend remains that, even in an age in which international interdependence is supposedly increasing by the minute, Americans are not inclined to spend a great amount of time concerning themselves with foreign and international matters unless they espy the presence of what appears to be a clear and present threat--that is, they show little intrinsic interest in the subject. In the last 60 years the few events that have notably caused the public to divert its attention from domestic matters have been these:

1. World War II,
2. certain Cold War crises before 1963,
3. the Korea War,
4. the Vietnam War,
5. fleetingly, the Iran hostage crisis of 1979-80 perhaps embellished by concern over the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan,
6. the apparent prospect in the mid-1980s of nuclear war, and
7. the Gulf War.

Also of interest is the fact that, once these problems were resolved--particularly World War II, the classic Cold War, Vietnam, and the Gulf War--the public turned back to domestic matters with a virtuosity that is really quite remarkable. At present, for example, it could be argued that the direction that Russia and China take and the expansion of world trade are the concerns most likely to affect the fate of the world and of ordinary Americans in the years to come, but neither issue is likely to register on a poll, crowded out as they are by such parochial domestic concerns as government spending, crime, drugs,

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<sup>5</sup> For data, see Mueller 1994a, table 45. Of course, it could be argued that, objectively speaking, thermonuclear war was, and still is, the most important problem facing the country since that calamity could thoroughly devastate it. Clearly, however, the poll respondents are, not unreasonably, building an estimate of probability into their responses. For example, it appears that no one has ever offered the explosion of the sun--something even more consequential than thermonuclear war--as the most important problem.

and the condition of the economy.

**2. The public's agenda and attitude on foreign affairs are set much more by the objective content of the issue and by the position of major policy makers (including the political opposition) than by the media**

Within those attention parameters, the actions of the President and of major politicians and the more or less objective content of the events themselves seem to be far more important than media coverage in determining what arrests the public's attention.

Although the media are often given great credit for setting the political agenda (Behr and Iyengar 1985; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Iyengar 1993), this overview of the public's expressed interest in international affairs suggests a more limited role. It is difficult to give the media much independent credit for whipping up interest in most of the international concerns which have notably diverted the public's attention away from domestic matters over the last 60 years. Rather, the chief determinant has usually been the often-overwhelming weight and drama of the events themselves.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond this, the principal actor has usually been the President--who is, after all, explicitly elected in part to direct the country's foreign policy. Roosevelt was important in leading the nation toward World War II, though he hardly had to do much opinion leading after Pearl Harbor (Cantril 1944, 1967). Truman consciously led the country into the Cold War, a momentum that was continued by Eisenhower and Kennedy (Lovell 1985, 122-23). As part of this Truman clearly led the country into the Korean War, as did Johnson into the Vietnam War and Bush into the Gulf crisis and war. In all cases except for the Gulf War (as opposed to the Gulf crisis that led up to it), the president found that he enjoyed a wide degree of backing among the political elite. Or, to put it another way, the President would have been in substantial (though not always necessarily terminal) political trouble if he had not acted: that is, if the Japanese had gone unpursued after Pearl Harbor, if the Communists had taken Korea and Vietnam or kept missiles in Cuba, or if Saddam Hussein had kept Kuwait. Any notable independent impact by the media in these cases would be difficult to discern.

Much the same can be said for Carter and the Iran hostage crisis. The president took a clear leadership role and was acting with wide consensus, though it seems possible in this case that he could have used his leadership position to dampen somewhat the concern which was, it could be argued, over something of less than massive importance (see Mueller 1984b, 1987). Led by Carter--whose popularity ratings soared when the hostages were seized as the country rallied around the flag (Stanley and Niemi 1992, 280)--the media certainly hyped this issue, but they seemed to be mostly responding to the actions of the president and to the demands of their customers.

The final attention-arresting international issue was the fear of war during the 1980s. Although the media unquestionably played a role by transmitting information to the public and by servicing the public's desire for that information, they do not seem to have had an independent impact in this case either. After the end of the classic Cold War in 1963, fears of nuclear war subsided substantially: an article reflecting on this rather remarkable phenomenon was aptly entitled, "Forgetting About the Unthinkable" (Paarlberg 1973; see also Mueller 1977, 326-28). Renewed concern about nuclear war came almost out of the air: it was an (old) idea whose time had come again. Jonathan Schell's The Fate of the Earth (1982), a best-selling book reporting on the potential horrors of nuclear war in alarming detail, proved to be at the center of this renewed attention, but in fact Schell had written the work in part not to start a concern but because no one seemed at the time to be paying much attention to the issue. Insofar as the issue was consciously promoted, credit must be given to the anti-Conservative parties in Europe (see Joffe 1987) and to their counterparts in the United States who were looking for an issue to undermine support for their popular opponents--though this seems to have come after the issue became a popular one, not before. The noisy Cold War debate over missiles in Europe was also a central element in all this, it seems, as was Ronald Reagan's occasionally loose and casual verbiage about nuclear war (see Mueller 1989, 202-5).

The media might be seen in all this not so much as agenda-setters as purveyors or entrepreneurs of tantalizing information. They report on a wide variety of topics and they are constantly seeking to turn

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<sup>6</sup> Nor, it seems, has the speed with which the public receives notable news significantly increased in over a century. Once the telegraph was established in the nineteenth century, information, which previously might take days, weeks, or even months to travel, could be relayed almost instantly, reaching ordinary citizens within a very few hours as newspapers came out with special editions. With the arrival of radio and, much later, television, the information delay was further reduced--at least for those who happen to have their radio or television sets turned on at the time. But this is a comparatively minor improvement.

people on--and, accordingly, to boost sales and ratings. Like any other entrepreneur, the media are susceptible to the market. If they give an issue big play, it may arrest attention for a while, but this is no guarantee the issue will take. Like any business enterprise, they follow up on those proffered items (like the O.J. Simpson case) that stimulate their customers' interest. In that very important sense, the media does not set the agenda; ultimately the public does.

A useful case in point is the Ethiopian famine that received such big media attention and was so affecting in the mid-1980s. This is often taken to have been a media-generated issue since it was only after it received prominent play in the media that the issue entered the public's agenda. But Christopher Bosso's study (1989) of the phenomenon suggests a different interpretation. At first the media were reluctant to cover the issue because they saw African famine as a dog-bites-man story. Moreover, the story had received some play, and it had stirred little response, thus suggesting that the customers were not interested. However, going against the consensus, NBC television decided to do a three-day sequence on the story in October 1984. This inspired a huge public response whereupon NBC gave it extensive follow-up coverage while its television and print competitors scrambled to get on the bandwagon, deluging their customers with information that, to their surprise, was suddenly in demand. There is a sense, of course, in which it could be said that NBC put the issue on the public's agenda. But the network is constantly doing three-day stories, and this one just happened to catch on. It seems more accurate to say NBC put the issue on the shelf--alongside a great many others--and that it was the public that put it on the agenda.

Thus the media do not importantly manipulate or even lead public opinion. Instead, to mix a couple of metaphors, they variously put issues out on the shelf and, sometimes quite to their surprise (and delight), they occasionally manage to strike a responsive chord.

In some important respects, the Gulf War experience also calls into question, or at least delimits, the notion that the media has a great independent impact in agenda-setting in international affairs (for a fuller discussion, see Mueller 1994a, 129-36). The media, after all, lie between the events they report and the customers they serve. In a free, market-driven society, they must, of necessity, be sensitive to both, transmitting the actions of those who make the news while satisfying the demands of those who consume it. In the Gulf case, events, event-makers, and--particularly during and after the war itself--media consumers substantially called the shots (in all senses). The media, it seems, mostly followed, transmitting events more than shaping them.

Immediately after Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, there was a certain wariness and confusion on the part of the public, but this quickly evaporated after Bush announced troops would be sent to Saudi Arabia on August 8: as Table 1 shows, the public followed his lead and the percentage with no opinion on the issue plunged. In this instance, it seems, the contest in the Gulf was put at the top of the agenda far more by the actions and statements of Bush and Hussein than by anything the media did. The media dutifully reported what was being said and done of course, and they commented extensively on it in columns and editorials, but it was the message that dominated the media, not the other way around. Moreover, when the attention of the public and the media was diverted in October 1990 to the budget fight between the (newsmaking) President and Congress, it was the President, not the media, who brought the Gulf crisis back onto the agenda in November by his actions in escalating the troop commitment threateningly (see Figure 1), and it was the ongoing debate between the President and his political opponents (and Hussein) that kept it there.

Once war began in January 1991, the media found that their consumers had a nearly insatiable appetite for news--especially for supportive news--and they serviced that demand assiduously. Then, after the war, they sensed correctly that their customers' interest had shifted--without being led or probed or manipulated by much of anyone, it seems. Accordingly, the media followed them onto other issues--particularly the troubling state of the economy. A few months after the war television network anchormen found themselves observing in a panel discussion on C-SPAN that, although they personally considered foreign affairs to be of major and increasing importance to the country, they were cutting their coverage of foreign events because their customers wanted them to concentrate on domestic issues. It was quite clear who was setting their news agenda.

While the Gulf events do seem to demonstrate in some important ways the President's ability to lead and to set the public agenda, the postwar experience suggests that even he is far from all-powerful in this respect. It was clearly to Bush's electoral advantage to keep the war and foreign policy as lively political issues during the campaign, and he certainly tried to do that. But despite the advantage of his enormous postwar popularity (see Page and Shapiro 1992, 348-50), he found himself unable to divert attention to topics more congenial to him. The public had shifted its agenda and wanted now to focus on the sagging economy--something very much to the advantage of his challenger, Bill Clinton.

In the case of the Gulf War, then, the agenda does seem to have been set far more by the public (and by the dramatic events themselves) than by the media. Journalists and editors reported what was going on, and they correctly doped out what their public wanted. So instructed, they supplied that need, but they did not invent it nor did they invent the issues that, for a while, so engrossed the public. Then, when the customers tired of the issue in the wake of the successful war, the media dutifully shifted their attention, despite the strenuous efforts of the previously-influential President to keep the war euphoria and glow alive. The message and the customer dominated, even intimidated, the medium.

### 3. The CNN effect does not exist

It is often argued that television pictures set the public's agenda and policy mood: the so-called "CNN effect." It is not entirely clear exactly what the CNN effect is supposed to do. Usually pictures of horrors are said to cause the public to want to do something to relieve the horror, but sometimes the pictures are said to cause the public to be repelled from the horror and to want to avoid intervention. Or we get the arguments on the one hand that violent pictures on television caused people to want to get out of Vietnam, and on the other that violent pictures on television inspire people to go out and commit violence themselves.

All this is to argue that people are so unimaginative that they only react when they see something visualized. Yet, Americans were outraged at and mobilized over the Pearl Harbor attack weeks--or even months--before they saw pictures of the event (see Mueller 1991/92, 186-91; 1995a, 97-101). Moreover, the Vietnam War was not noticeably more unpopular than the Korea War for the period in which the wars were comparable in American casualties, despite the fact that the later war is often seen to be a "television war" while the earlier was fought during the medium's infancy (Mueller 1973, 167; Mueller 1991; Mandelbaum 1981; Hallin 1986).

During World War II an experiment was made to determine whether "realistic" war pictures would hurt morale. It found that those who were exposed to such pictures were not any more or less likely to support the war than an unexposed control group. Those exposed, however, did become more favorable to showing people realistic war pictures (National Opinion Research Center 1944). Additionally, it was found that efforts of the military to use propaganda films to indoctrinate new draftees were ineffective (Kinder and Sears 1985, 706).

That the conventional wisdom about the "CNN effect" lingers is impressive after the events in Bosnia over the last few years: a triumph of myth over matter. For years now we have been deluged by pictures of horrors there and, while these may have influenced the opinion of some editorial writers and columnists, there has been remarkably little public demand to send American troops over to fix the problem. Nor did poignant and memorable pictures inspire a surging public demand to do much of anything about Haiti.

On those rare occasions when pictures have--or seem to have--an effect, as in Ethiopia in the mid-1980s, people espy the effect. When pictures fail to have any effect, they fail to notice--or come up with other tortured accountings. One explanation for the unwillingness of the American public to send troops to Bosnia is that the constant suffering shown on television did not "sensitize" the public to it, but rather "inured" it (Orwin 1996, 49). Thus, whether the public in its collective wisdom concludes that troops should be sent or should not be sent, television always remains the convenient cause.

This slippery process is nicely illustrated by the case of journalist Jack Germond. As the Haitian crisis was heating up in 1994, he observed, "I think an important change is the television coverage of the suffering in Haiti that we're seeing every night now. Or almost any night--when we can turn away from O.J. for five seconds. We're seeing the coverage of children starving and ill and so forth--the effects of the sanctions. Which means there is much more pressure on Clinton to do something different--radically different--than what he's been doing." When it was pointed out to him that "The best polls are saying that the consensus in the country--two thirds--don't want U.S. GI's in Haiti in combat because they don't see it as in the vital national interest of the United States," Germond responded, "The numbers might change if we keep getting all this film about the starving kids there" (McLaughlin Group, PBS, July 1, 1994). However, when they didn't change, he later mused, "It's interesting that three or four years ago in Somalia, for example, television film of starving children was enough to make the country act. Now, television film of starving children in Haiti and atrocities is not enough. It is not enough to get the country behind you." Groping for an explanation for this remarkable phenomenon, Germond philosophized, "No one wants to say so, but there's a race factor here. There's no question about that" (McLaughlin Group, PBS, September 16, 1994). That the starving children in Haiti happened to be of the same race as those in Somalia did not dampen his punditry in the slightest

**4. The public applies a fairly reasonable cost-benefit analysis when evaluating foreign affairs, but it vastly overvalues the lives of Americans and undervalues the lives of foreigners**

In general, the American public seems to apply a fairly reasonable, commonsensical standard of benefit and cost when evaluating foreign affairs (see also Key 1966; Page and Shapiro 1992; Nincic 1992; Holsti 1992; Jentleson 1992; Larson 1996). It appears that an assessment of probable and potential American casualties is particularly important in its evaluation (see also Wittkopf 1990, 229).

After Pearl Harbor, the public had no difficulty accepting the necessity, and the costs, of confronting the threats presented by Germany and Japan. And after the war, it came to accept international Communism as a similar source of threat and was willing to enter the wars in Korea and Vietnam as part of a seen necessity to confront that threat. However, as the Cold War's hot wars progressed, there was a continuing reevaluation, and misgivings mounted about the wisdom of the wars. This appears primarily to have been a function (a logarithmic one) of cumulating American casualties, not of television coverage (as noted above) or anti-war protest, because the decline of enthusiasm followed the same pattern in both wars even though neither public protest nor television coverage were common in the Korean case (see Mueller 1973, chs. 3-6).<sup>7</sup>

Policy in the Gulf War seems to have been subjected to a similar calculus. A fair number of Americans bought George Bush's notion that it was worth some American lives--perhaps one or two thousand, far lower than were suffered in Korea or Vietnam--to use war to turn back Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. But it is clear from poll data that, led by Democrats who had opposed the war in the first place, support for the effort would have eroded quickly (and in a logarithmic pattern) if significant casualties had been suffered (see Table 2).<sup>8</sup>

While the concern about American lives often seems nuanced when the public assesses foreign affairs, there are times when it becomes so obsessive that policy may suffer in consequence.

In the case of Vietnam, it could be maintained that the war was essentially supported until the prisoners of war held by Hanoi were returned. Although it may not make a great deal of sense to continue a war costing thousands of lives to gain the return of a few hundred prisoners, it would be difficult to exaggerate the political potency of this issue. In a May 1971 poll, 68 percent agreed that U.S. troops should be withdrawn from Vietnam by the end of the year. However, when asked if they would still favor withdrawal if that would mean a "communist takeover of South Vietnam," only 29 percent agreed. And when asked if they approved of withdrawal "even if it threatened [not cost] the lives or safety of United States POWs held by North Vietnam," support for withdrawal dropped to 11 percent (Mueller 1973, 97-98). The force of this attitude was clearly felt by diplomats and politicians: negotiator Henry Kissinger recalls that "unilateral withdrawal...would not do the trick; it would leave our prisoners in Hanoi's hands," and "Vietnamization pursued to the end would not return our prisoners" (1979, 1011, 1039). For domestic political reasons, the option of ending the war without the return of the prisoners was apparently not even a hypothetical consideration.

The emotional attachment to prisoners of war has often been a dominant theme in U.S. history. The issue was central to the lengthy and acrimonious peace talks in Korea, and outrage at the fate of American POWs on Bataan probably intensified hatred for the Japanese during World War II almost as much as the attack on Pearl Harbor (Falk 1962). And the fate of American prisoners and of those missing in action haunted postwar Vietnam discussions for decades. From the standpoint of influencing public opinion, Hussein's decision to parade captured American pilots on television early in the Gulf War ranks high among his many major blunders.

And there was, of course, the remarkable preoccupation by politicians and press with hostages held by Iran during the crisis of 1979-1981 to the virtual exclusion of issues and events likely to be of far greater importance historically. After that, the fate of a few hostages in Lebanon often seems to have held

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<sup>7</sup> This conclusion is principally derived from trend data on the percentage holding the wars to have been a mistake. Opinion data concerning policy options does not permit any sort of precise trend assessment about whether the public came to support withdrawal or escalation during the course of the wars because the polling agencies constantly changed the wording of the relevant questions in important ways--for example, on one question asked during the Korean War, 28 percent were said to favor withdrawal, while on another question asked at the same time 66 percent took that option (for an extensive display and analysis of such data, see Mueller 1973, ch. 4). For an analysis that seems to be insensitive to this issue, see Schwarz 1994; for a correction, see Larson 1996.

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, by some measures, there was a small, but perceptible, rise of misgivings during the war even with its amazingly light American casualties (Mueller 1994a, 77-78).

the Reagan administration hostage throughout the 1980s, and this obsession helped to generate the Iran-Contra scandal. And, until they were released, freeing the American hostages taken by Iraq after its invasion of Kuwait formed a major concern in the crisis for Americans (Tables 3 and 4).

Although Americans are extremely sensitive to American casualties, they seem to be remarkably inssensitive to casualties suffered by foreigners including essentially uninvolved--that is, innocent--civilians. It may not be surprising to discover that there was little sympathy with the Japanese civilian population during World War II--many, after all, saw Japanese civilization as one huge war machine targeted against the United States. Asked what should be done with the Japanese after the war, 10 to 15 percent of Americans in various polls conducted during the war volunteered the solution of extermination. After the war was over, 23 percent said they regretted that many more atomic bombs had not "quickly" been used on Japan before they "had a chance to surrender" (see Mueller 1973, 172-73; see also Dower 1986).

The Gulf War, however, was radically different in this respect, and it furnishes an illuminating extreme example. As Table 5 suggests, there was little animosity toward the Iraqi people: responding to an extremely worded question, 60 percent of the American public held the Iraqi people to be innocent of any blame for their leader's policies. However, this did not translate into a great deal of sympathy among the American public for civilian casualties caused by air attacks. During the Gulf War, one reporter observed that "You can be certain that if saturation bombing of the Iraqi capital becomes an American tactic, stomach-churning footage of bombed-out schools and hospitals will find their way on to American screens" (Taylor 1992, 11). But, as Table 6 indicates, the extensive pictures and publicity about the civilian casualties resulting from an attack on a Baghdad bomb shelter on February 13, 1991, had no impact on this attitude (see also Mueller 1994a, 79). Moreover, the immunity the American public showed to the images of the "highway of death" and to reports at the end of the war that 100,000 Iraqis had died in the war<sup>9</sup> scarcely dampened the enthusiasm of the various "victory" and "welcome home" parades and celebrations.

**5. The public has not become newly isolationist: it is about as accepting of involvement in foreign affairs as ever, but it does not have--and never has had--much stomach for losing American lives in ventures and arenas that are of little concern to it**

After the Cold War, some people have become worried that the American public has turned--or may turn--isolationist since it has been able notably to contain its enthusiasm for sending American troops to police such trouble spots as Bosnia and Haiti. But it seems more likely that there has been little essential change of standards.

Figure 3 displays the trend results for a set of questions designed to tap internationalism and isolationism. Clearly, it is not possible to say that the public is or is not isolationist at any point since the number garnered on polls varies (as usual) so much by question wording. However, the trend data find little in the way of increased isolationism in the wake of the Cold War. There was some rise after Vietnam in the mid-1970s, and perhaps it is now a bit higher than then. But, for the most part, any increases have been fairly modest (see also Kull 1995-96).

With respect to foreign interventions, the public seems to apply, as usual, a fairly reasonable cost-benefit calculus. A substantial loss of American lives may have been tolerable if the enemy was the bombers of Pearl Harbor or international Communism, but risking lives for a goal as ungraspable and vaporous as policing a small, distant, perennially-troubled, and unthreatening place has proved difficult to manage. Nor has it been possible to generate much support for the notion that American lives should be put at risk in order to encourage democracy.

For example, the international mission to Somalia in 1992-93 helped to bring a degree of order to a deadly situation that was causing a famine reportedly killing at its peak thousands of people per day. Never before perhaps has so much been done for so many at such little cost.<sup>10</sup> Yet, American policy there

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<sup>9</sup> This figure is almost certainly much too high, probably by a factor of more than 10: see Mueller 1995b.

<sup>10</sup> New York Times columnist William Safire has blandly observed of the venture that "the saving of hundreds of thousands of lives is no small thing" (1993). What, one might wonder, would he consider to be a large thing? According to American Secretary of State Warren Christopher, the lowest estimate of the number of lives saved is 110,000 (MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour, 2 March 1995). The economic cost of the international mission has been put at \$2 billion.



has been labelled a "failure" in large part because a few Americans were killed in the process.<sup>11</sup> In essence, when Americans asked themselves how many American lives peace in Somalia was worth, the answer came out rather close to zero (see Table 7; Dole 1995, 41). The general reluctance to become involved in the actual fighting in Bosnia (despite, as noted earlier, years of the supposed "CNN effect") suggests that Americans have reached a similar conclusion for that trouble spot—as have, it seems, Britons, Germans, Canadians, and others in their own terms. It seems clear that policing efforts will be tolerable only as long as the costs in lives for the policing forces remain extremely low.

This reluctance to intervene should not be seen as some sort of new isolationist impulse. Americans were willing, at least at the outset, to send troops to die in Korea and Vietnam, but that was because they subscribed to the containment notion holding Communism to be a genuine threat to the United States that needed to be stopped wherever it was advancing. Polls from the time make it clear they had little interest in losing American lives simply to help out the South Koreans or South Vietnamese (Mueller 1973, 44, 48-49, 58, 100-1). Similarly, as Figure 4 suggests, "protecting weaker nations against foreign aggression" (much less fighting to do so) has usually achieved comparatively low ratings among foreign policy goals (though it did rise notably during the Gulf crisis of 1990). Thus an unwillingness to send Americans to die for purposes that are essentially humanitarian is hardly new. As Michael Mandelbaum has suggested, "The American public had supported intervention in poor, distant reaches of the Third World during the Cold War, and would do so again, but only on behalf of traditional American national interests" (1996, 19).<sup>12</sup>

## **6. Foreign policy has become less important in judging the performance of the President and of presidential contenders**

During the Cold War, foreign policy was often important in presidential elections. The Berlin Blockade accompanied the 1948 election, Korea was important in 1952,<sup>13</sup> the Suez Crisis and Soviet intervention in Hungary were in the background of the 1956 election, Kennedy and Nixon battled it out over who could stand up best to Khrushchev and Castro in 1960,<sup>14</sup> Vietnam was a notable concern in the elections of 1964, 1968, and 1972.

Thereafter, as is also suggested in the most important problem data surveyed above, foreign policy declined in significance. It was of very little relevance in the 1976 between Carter and Ford. A Roper poll conducted in June of that year gave respondents a list of twenty-two issues and asked them to select the two or three that seemed most important to them. The international issue that did best ("The budget for national defense") came in tenth. Another poll of the time asked about thirty-one problem areas; the international issue of greatest concern ("Keeping our military and defenses strong") came in eleventh (Mueller 1977, 328). Foreign policy played more of a role in 1980 with the Iran hostage crisis and in 1984 and 1988 with concerns about nuclear war, arms control, and defense spending, but, overall, these were substantially dominated by domestic issues like inflation, unemployment, crime, government spending, and drugs (Aldrich et al. 1989)

In the wake of the Cold War, any tendencies of the American public to ignore foreign policy have

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<sup>11</sup> These were chiefly suffered in an incident that occurred in October 1993 involving American Rangers who had set out on a mission in which they got to do some Rambo-like antics like descending from helicopters by ropes. The mission generally began well but then went awry when one helicopter crashed. See Atkinson 1994, DeLong and Tuckey 1994. The popularly-accepted notion that the debacle in Somalis was importantly caused by the UN (Dole 1995, 37) is not only wrong, but grotesque; see Gordon and Friedman 1993.

<sup>12</sup> Data from surveys conducted by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations suggest that there may have been some decline in the percentage supporting the use of U.S. troops if Russia should invade Western Europe (though not down to levels attained in the mid-1970s), but some rise in the percentage supporting that use if North Korea were to invade South Korea.

<sup>13</sup> It does seem likely, however, that the Republican presidential campaign was able to raise the salience of the Korean War as a political issue: see Harris 1954, 25.

<sup>14</sup> The first of the Kennedy-Nixon debates in the campaign was supposed to be "restricted to internal or domestic American matters," according to the moderator, Howard K. Smith. Nevertheless, in the opening statement Kennedy proceeded to observe that, although "we tonight discuss domestic issues," there should not be "any implication to be given that this does not involve directly our struggle with Mr. Khrushchev for survival." Nixon, of course, replied in kind. Kraus 1962, 348-50.

surely been heightened. With his Gulf War success and with his opponent's complete lack of experience in foreign policy, George Bush tried very hard to make foreign affairs an important issue in the 1992 campaign, but failed (see Mueller 1994a, 103-7). As Figure 5 demonstrates, his ratings for handling the economy plummeted within days of the end of the war as the public quickly refocused its attention on domestic matters. And when Bill Clinton went out of his way to deliver a few serious foreign policy speeches, he found them generating little public or press attention. This phenomenon is likely to continue in the new era.

**7. The advantage to a President of a success in a foreign policy venture deemed of small importance is marginal**

If George Bush found little lasting electoral advantage in a large dramatic victory like the Gulf War (or, earlier, for the successful Panama intervention), lesser accomplishments seem likely to be even less rewarding in an era of great foreign policy inattention. Clinton's venture into Haiti has been a remarkable success by almost any standard: the military regime has been removed, the refugee exodus has been halted, a rather viable and friendly government has been established, coherent elections have been held, and a fair amount of economic and social stability has come into being--all this accomplished with an almost complete absence of American casualties. Yet, while surely a feather in his cap, the successful venture has garnered its author, Bill Clinton, remarkably little credit. The same can be said for another apparent foreign policy success: Northern Ireland.

**8. The disadvantage to a President of a failure in a foreign policy venture deemed of small importance is more than marginal, but far from devastating unless the failure becomes massively expensive; this means that the US can abruptly pull out of failed peace-keeping missions without having to worry too much about loss of face or effective political back-biting**

While Americans place a high, even sometimes grossly exaggerated, value on the lives of other Americans, their reaction when Americans are killed varies considerably. In some cases it leads to demands for revenge, in others for cutting losses and withdrawing. Which emotion prevails seems to depend on an evaluation of the larger stakes.

When Americans were killed at Pearl Harbor, the outraged call for revenge against the Japanese was overwhelming.<sup>15</sup> But Japan was also seen as a palpable threat to the United States itself--indeed, many expected there soon to be an attack on the U.S. mainland. Similarly, although American decision makers apparently thought differently at the time, it seems clear from poll results that if Iraq had attacked American troops in the Saudi desert where they were placed after its invasion of Kuwait, the Pearl Harbor syndrome would have been activated (Table 4) (on this issue, see Mueller 1994a, 123). Hussein would have been seen as an aggressor whose appetite knew no bounds and must be confronted immediately. Table 4 also shows that if Hussein had killed some of his American hostages, this would have formed a major reason to go to war.

At other times, however, the public has shown a willingness to leave an overextended or untenable position after American lives have been lost. This occurs when the value of the stakes does not seem to be worth additional American lives. Thus the public accepted, with little regret, the decision to withdraw its policing troops from Lebanon in 1983 after a terrorist bomb had killed 241 U.S. marines in the chaotic civil war there. Similarly, the deaths of 18 U.S. soldiers in Somalia in 1993 in its civil war helped lead, as noted above, to outraged demands for withdrawal, not for calls to revenge the humiliation. Unlike the problems with Japan in 1941 or Iraq in 1990, the situations in Lebanon and Somalia did not present much of a wider threat to American interests and the public was quite willing to support measures to cut losses and leave.<sup>16</sup>

These episodes thus demonstrate that when peace-keeping leads to unacceptable deaths, peace-keepers can be readily removed with little concern about saving face. As Table 8 suggests, after the fact Americans said that, although they considered Reagan's expedition to Lebanon to have been a failure, many, with reasonable nuance, felt it still to have been "a good idea at the time." The lessons of Korea

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<sup>15</sup> As Gordon Prange observes, "The American people reeled with a mind-staggering mixture of surprise, awe, mystification, grief, humiliation, and, above, all cataclysmic fury" (1981, 582; see also Lord 1957, 216).

<sup>16</sup> Most remarkably in this regard, the utter collapse of the American position in Vietnam in 1975 mainly inspired impotent handwringing at a distance and hasty evacuation on the scene. For years, the perceived foreign policy value of maintaining the American position in Vietnam had been declining (see Mueller 1989, 168-181) and, most importantly, America had gotten its prisoners of war back two years earlier. For this and other reasons, Americans accepted defeat with remarkable equanimity (see Mueller 1984a).

and Vietnam suggest that there can be electoral consequences if casualties are allowed to rise very substantially. But, if a venture is seen to be of little importance, a President can, precisely because of that, cut and run without fear of inordinate electoral costs--though it will hardly be something to brag about, of course.<sup>17</sup> As the Somalia episode suggests, by the time the next election rolls around, people will have substantially forgotten the whole thing. Thus, the situation does not have to become a quagmire.

**9. If they are not being killed, American troops can remain in peace-keeping ventures virtually indefinitely, and it is not important to have an "exit strategy," a "closed-end commitment," or "a time-certain for withdrawal" except for selling an interventionist policy in the first place**

Although there is an overwhelming political demand that casualties be extremely low, there seems to be little problem about keeping occupying forces in place in ventures deemed of little importance as long as they are not being killed. After the Somalia fiasco, the Americans stayed on for several months and, since none were being killed, little attention was paid or concern voiced.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, although there was little public or political support for sending U.S. troops to Haiti, there has been almost no protest about keeping them there since none have been killed--in fact, when the last of them were withdrawn in March 1996 the story was given eleven inches in a lower corner of page 14 of the New York Times (Mitchell 1996). And Americans tolerated--indeed, hardly noticed--the stationing of hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops in Europe, Japan, and South Korea for decades on end. If they are not being killed, it scarcely matters whether the troops are in Macedonia (where 500 remain after being placed there by the Bush administration) or in Kansas. On the other hand, if American troops start being killed, there will be demands to get them out whatever "time-certain" for withdrawal had previously been arranged.

Thus, despite calls for knowing in advance what the endgame will be (see Powell 1992/93, Sciolino 1993), the only "exit strategy" required is a tactical arrangement to yank the troops abruptly and painlessly from the scene if things go awry.

**10. A low-valued venture in a place like Bosnia is best sold not with cosmic internationalist hype, but rather as international social work that can be shrugged off if it begins to go awry**

Mandelbaum has suggested that the Clinton administration seems to have been trying "to turn American foreign policy into a branch of social work" (1996, 18). As it happens, most of the knotty international problems that occupy the headlines are of remarkably little concern to the United States if one applies commonly-accepted standards of what constitutes the national interest--and the public seems to be applying exactly those standards. The problems are, in fact, mainly humanitarian in nature.

But, international social work is not necessarily therefore a non-starter. There is, after all, adequate support for domestic social work. If the town drunk seems to want to reform, most people from humanitarian concerns alone would be willing to have the society spend time and some of their tax or charity money--though certainly not any lives--to help him along. If, despite society's best efforts, the drunk again succumbs to the bottle, the venture will be seen as a waste, perhaps, but still as a worthy effort, a good try. International social work might best be sold in the same manner. The pitch might run as follows:

Look, the folks in Yugoslavia, under the influence of a bunch of murderous drunken thugs and bone-headed politicians, have gotten themselves into a mess they can't get out of and a lot of innocent people are being killed and brutalized in the process.<sup>19</sup> They

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<sup>17</sup> However, if the President who gets the country out of a mess is different from the one who got the country into it, there may be some gain. In particular, Eisenhower gained considerably in seeming to end the Korean war, a phenomenon discussed under proposition 14 below. Somewhat relatedly, the debacle in Indochina in 1975 was actually used by the man who presided over it, Gerald Ford, as a point in his favor in his reelection campaign of 1976. When he came into office, he observed, "we were still deeply involved in the problems of Vietnam;" but now "we are at peace. Not a single young American is fighting or dying on any foreign soil" (Kraus 1979, 538-39). His challenger, Jimmy Carter, seems to have concluded that it was politically disadvantageous to point out the essential absurdity of Ford's remarkable argument.

<sup>18</sup> Somewhat similarly, protests against U.S. policy in Vietnam died down after 1968 when tactics were changed to minimize American casualties--though protest was re-invigorated in 1970 by the invasion of Cambodia which, judging from Nixon's rhetoric of the time, seemed to promise a re-escalation of the conflict.

<sup>19</sup> Much--perhaps most--of the dynamic of the wars in Croatia and Bosnia has, in fact, been the doing of bands of often-drunken thugs. See Woodward 1995, 246; Rieff 1995; Vulliamy 1994. Eventually disgust with this even reached even some of the chief proponents of the wars: by 1995 Mira Markovič, the influential wife of Serbian

seem now finally to be exhausted and looking for a way out of their self-dug pit. It looks like we can help with some support and police work--something that will cost a manageable amount of money and, we anticipate, few, if any, lives. If, despite our best efforts, it turns out that the Yugoslavs still really do want to run around murdering each other, then we're out of there. It will have been a good try, but we are not miracle workers and there are a lot of other matters to attend to.

Although the humanitarian issue is stressed as well, justifications for the recent Bosnia intervention have been heavily overlaid with a lot of cosmic internationalist hype that has often been unconvincing, desperate, incoherent, and just plain foolish. For example, Clinton (1995) argued that "If war reignites in Bosnia, it could spark a much wider conflagration. In 1914, a gunshot in Sarajevo launched the first of two world wars"--a historical parallel that is wildly overdrawn as numerous commentators have pointed out (for example, Mandelbaum 1996, 25). Moreover, despite Clinton's claim that peace would "prevent the war from spreading," the conflagration in Bosnia seems, if anything, to have been rather successfully contained and to be far less likely than earlier to inspire imitations elsewhere in the area--assuming Americans, preoccupied with domestic issues, could find neighboring areas of any greater concern to the U.S. than Bosnia is. And it is hardly likely that the whole future of Europe ("Europe will not come together with a brutal conflict raging at its heart") is in jeopardy--for most Europeans, the war is largely a tragic sideshow. Nor is NATO or American world leadership at stake ("We would also weaken NATO...and jeopardize U.S. leadership in Europe") any more than they were in Somalia or Lebanon--or even in Vietnam for that matter.

Similarly, Clinton's echoing in 1994 of Bush's earlier amazing hyperbole about the anti-democratic coup in Haiti--that it posed "an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy and economy of the United States"--seems to have had no resonance with the American public which may very well see such hyperbole as nonsense and an insult to its intelligence.<sup>20</sup>

Fortunately, the public often seems more sensible than its leaders. When he sent the Marines to help police Lebanon, Ronald Reagan declared that "in an age of nuclear challenge and economic interdependence, such conflicts are a threat to all the people of the world, not just to the Middle East itself" (1983, 1096). Despite such an overblown sales pitch, however, the public had no difficulty accepting Reagan's later decision to have the Marines "redeployed to the sea" after 241 of them had been killed by a terrorist bomb.

**11. However, a danger in peace-keeping missions is that Americans might be taken hostage, something that can suddenly and disproportionately magnify the perceived stakes**

Because of the previously-discussed overriding importance Americans put on American lives, policy remains vulnerable in low-valued ventures to hostage-taking. I have argued that peace-keeping ventures need not become quagmires because a President, despite any high-blown rhetoric, can still abruptly withdraw troops from an overextended position with little long-lasting political cost. However, this can be dramatically reversed if even a small number of American troops are taken hostage.

This is illustrated best by some evidence from the Somalia episode. After the debacle of October 1993, a Somalia group captured one American soldier. The public's determination to remain until the prisoner was recovered (and then to withdraw) is clear from Tables 9, 10, and 11.<sup>21</sup>

**12. Even while they are dwindling in number and relevance, nuclear weapons remain a potentially, if episodically, potent attention-arresting concern**

In our era free of compelling threats, few concerns can turn the public's attention to foreign affairs. However, nuclear weapons do seem to retain some of their legendary attention-arresting aura.

In the runup to the Gulf War, George Bush was looking for issues which would support his case.

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President Slobodan Milošević, was publicly calling the Bosnia Serbs "a bunch of louts addicted to the bottle preaching a crude nationalism" (Hartmann 1995).

<sup>20</sup> The Director of the U.S. Agency for International Development, J. Brian Atwood, has described autocratic rule in Haiti as "an assault on the progress toward democracy that has been made throughout the hemisphere," an argument Mandelbaum finds "ludicrous" in its suggestion that "the fate of a small, impoverished half of a Caribbean island would affect Mexico, Argentina, or Brazil" (1996, 22).

<sup>21</sup> Much of the reticence about bombing in Bosnia stemmed from fear that West European peace-keepers might be caught in the crossfire or taken hostage. Extensive bombing was begun in 1995 only after they had been quietly removed from vulnerable areas. See Owen 1996.

His pollster, Robert Teeter, using results like those in Tables 122, 131, 133, and 134 in Mueller 1994a, urged that Hussein's nuclear potential could be a real "hot button" issue with the public. So alerted, the administration responded and was soon arguing that, contrary to earlier reports that the Iraqis were 5 to 10 years away from a nuclear bomb, they might be able to build one within a year (US News 1992, 179; Albright and Hibbs 1991; Sciolino 1991, 235). Although the effort does not appear to have decisively shifted opinion in Bush's favor, the nuclear argument may have been an important consideration for a number of waverers on the war (see Mueller 1994a, 118).

Similarly, although it is not at all clear what a country like North Korea or Iran or Iraq would actually do with a nuclear weapon or two--confronted as they are by countries that have thousands of them--alarm over such a possibility does seem from time to time to rise to notable levels (see, for example, Will 1994). And in 1994 82 percent of the public (up from 58 percent four years earlier) chose preventing the spread of nuclear weapons as a very important foreign policy goal, emerging only narrowly behind the leaders in the poll's 16-item list: stopping the flow of illegal drugs into the U.S. and protecting the jobs of American workers (see Figure 4 and Rielly 1991, 15; Rielly 1995, 15). It also selected "the possibility of unfriendly countries becoming nuclear powers" as its top "critical threat" to the United States (Rielly 1995, 21).<sup>22</sup>

### 13. The same can often be said about international terrorism

As Figure 6 suggests, international terrorism kills far fewer Americans than lightning. However, even though terrorism is wildly unimportant in an objective sense--it kills very few people--it generates fear and concern far out of proportion to its objective importance and was almost as popular a "critical threat" as nuclear proliferation in the 1994 poll.

In part, it seems, this is because it is at once deliberate and random. Essentially, there is nothing one can do to reduce the chances one will be killed by a terrorist, while one may feel one can reduce one's chances of accidental death by being careful and one can feel one can reduce one's chances of being deliberately murdered by shunning bad and dangerous situations. This fear often seems to dominate the objective fact that the chances of dying at the hands of a terrorist are microscopic while the chances of dying in an automobile accident, for example, are vastly higher:

Deaths in US by intent and randomness				
Intent and randomness	Example	Deaths per year	Ability to reduce chances	Fear
unintentional and random	auto accidents	92,000	high	low
deliberate and purposeful	murder of drug rival	25,000	high	medium
deliberate and random	Colin Ferguson on LIRR	exceedingly few	low	high

<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, Senator Richard Lugar's rather bizarre effort to use the dangers of nuclear weapons proliferation in his campaign for the Republican nomination for President in 1996 does not seem to have been of much value to him. Nuclear weapons do seem to have a kind of "naughty child" effect: nuclear behavior can attract notice. Thus North Korea can get people to pay more attention to it if it seeks to develop a bomb than if it doesn't, and Russia's nuclear arsenal perhaps causes people to be concerned about its destiny more than they would if it had no bombs. But this phenomenon hardly generates real status or respect, and it is nothing compared to the kind of respect either country would attract if it were, like Japan or South Korea, to become an important economic player on the world scene. Thomas McNaugher has observed that, since missiles are expensive and vastly inferior to aircraft for delivering ordnance, it may be wiser and safer to encourage countries to waste their money on missiles rather than on cheaper and more effective airplanes (1990, 32-33). It seems conceivable that a similar argument could be made about nuclear weapons. If a potentially-dangerous country foolishly expends scarce resources on expensive nuclear weapons, it won't have nearly as much money to spend on conventional ones. It would now have the capacity satisfyingly to scare the easily-traumatized major countries (whose fondest desire, of course, is to continue to waste their resources on these weapons monopolistically), but it would be less able to cause actual trouble. Thus, if Saddam Hussein had been allowed happily to fritter away his oil money on nuclear weapons in 1979, he would have been less able to attack Iran. As a consequence, there might today be hundreds of thousands of non-dead Iraqis and Iranians walking around, although they would be sadly unaware of their nuclear blessings. In fact, Hussein's nuclear weapons program may have helped to divert his military from purchasing the Global Positioning System, a device that would have been of great benefit to it during the Gulf War (see Mueller 1995b, 100).

**14. The degree to which notable international events linger in the public mind after they are over varies rather curiously and does not appear to depend on their inherent historical importance**

As is clear from the analysis above, few international events and issues have managed substantially to arrest the public's attention. The degree to which these notable and noted events have had a longer range impact varies in a sometimes rather puzzling manner. Some linger on more or less continuously in the public consciousness, some vanish quickly and never revive, some linger for a while and then suddenly vanish, and some vanish for a while but then become revived in memory. Neither the scope of the event itself nor its objective historical importance seem precisely to determine its long range impact on opinion.

Events that linger. The best example of an international event that continued uninterruptedly to live in memory long after it was over is undoubtedly World War II. It was, of course, a massive affair, affecting all strata of society, and it continued, and continues, to affect popular perceptions. On the domestic side, something somewhat comparable could probably be said for the Great Depression--an unpleasant event that had a long, lingering impact.

Events that vanish. The Gulf War seems prototypical of international events that fit in the category of vanishing events. At the time, the Gulf crisis often seemed all-consumingly important--on the eve of the war half of the American people said they thought about the crisis at least once an hour (Mueller 1994a, 214). But when it was over, it quickly, and apparently permanently, vanished from sight and recall as its author, George Bush, ruefully found out in his unsuccessful reelection campaign a year later.<sup>23</sup>

In this, public opinion may appropriately be reflecting historical reality: it is difficult to escape the conclusion that from the standpoint of world history the war was really quite a minor event. It happened in a corner of the world far removed from the perspectives of most Americans, and it dealt with a second rate dictator whose impact was not remotely comparable to that of Adolf Hitler, the figure he was often preposterously compared with. Moreover, however devastating the war and its aftermath may have been to Iraq, its costs in American lives made it comparable to the invasions of Panama and Grenada, and it seems so far to have had a somewhat similar impact on the American consciousness.

However, the Cold War and the concomitant nuclear fears that were so manifest in the mid-1980s and at other times cannot so easily be dismissed as historical sideshows. Yet the Cold War seems already to be picking up a patina of quaintness as it recedes from memory, and, although there are still about as many nuclear weapons around as ever (see Norris and Arkan 1994), few seem anymore to be able to recall that the weapons once were held to be desperately fearsome as they were brandished by glowering contestants in the Cold War.<sup>24</sup>

It seems possible that World War I affected American (if not European) opinion similarly. The war was intensely important to Americans at the time, and it has been, of course, of seismic importance to world history (see Mueller 1995a, 133-34). Yet, in the United States there was great disillusionment with it shortly after it was over--in major part because of the unpleasant sensation that the country had been "taken" by British propaganda and that the war had really changed rather little. And, in consequence, the war, it seems, substantially fell from memorabile recall there.

Events that linger, then vanish. Major international events can have a lingering impact in their immediate aftermath, but then fade from view.

The Korean War may well have been the most important event since World War II. It was the most costly war in the period (Small and Singer 1982), and it essentially crystallized the Cold War (see Gaddis 1974; Jervis 1980; May 1984; Mueller 1989, ch. 6). Moreover, its impact lingered: there is quite a bit of evidence to suggest it was a major factor affecting public perceptions throughout the 1950s (see Mueller 1979, 314-15). As part of this, Eisenhower's achievement in apparently bringing an end to the

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<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, the war does seem to have boosted the political stock of Colin Powell, who, while opposing a war in some respects, did seem to run an effective one when called upon to do so. However, Powell would probably have been a notable personality and leadership contender even without the war.

<sup>24</sup> In 1945, the Western victors of the war faced two major international problems: what to do with about the defeated countries, Germany and Japan, and what to do about the emerging conflict with the USSR. Since it involved a lot of interesting conflict, the latter problem has inspired a much greater literature. But it seems quite possible that in time the Cold War will be remembered as something of a historical curiosity. By contrast, the successful solution of the Japan-Germany problem--making them over into moderate and prosperous allies and peaceful competitors whose view of the world is much like that of the Western victors--will have a much greater long-range historical impact.

war may well have been the most significant achievement turned in by any postwar president. It was still remembered as a great accomplishment seven years after it was over when Eisenhower was leaving office, and in the 1968 election, a full 15 years after the event, the Republicans found it useful to remind voters of the achievement to entice them to vote for their candidate who had been Vice President under Eisenhower and who was promising to do something similar with the then-current, and most painful, war in Vietnam.

Similarly, the War of 1812 also lingered for quite a while and influenced several elections. The war actually ended inconclusively, even pathetically, with an agreement to return to the territorial status quo ante bellum and with few notable concessions by either side. But in the war the young country had stood up to the mighty British (who, however, were largely preoccupied at the time with a far more important war in Europe with Napoleon), and the Americans had pulled off several notable victories. From such material, the Republican party, which had begun the war, was able to fashion a helpful and appealing myth. As Donald Hickey concludes, "As the years slipped by, most people forgot the causes of the war. They forgot the defeats on land and sea and lost sight of how close the nation had come to military and financial collapse. According to the emerging myth, the United States had won the war as well as the peace. Thus the War of 1812 passed into history not as a futile and costly struggle in which the United States had barely escaped dismemberment and disunion, but as a glorious triumph in which the nation had single-handedly defeated the conqueror of Napoleon and the Mistress of the Seas" (1989, 309). The Federalist Party, which had opposed the war, became the scapegoat for this new myth, and it was often successfully stigmatized as a hotbed of unpatriotic--even treasonous--obstructionists who had prolonged the war and undercut the gallant American fighting forces (Hickey 1989, 308). Accordingly, countless offices were won over the years by people who had participated in the misrepresented and misremembered war, including James Monroe, John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson, and William Henry Harrison, all of whom ascended to the presidency.<sup>25</sup>

But despite their contemporary importance and their resonance in the immediate postwar period, both of these wars eventually sagged from the public consciousness, and both, interestingly enough, have inspired books with titles proclaiming them to be "forgotten" conflicts: Hickey 1989, Blair 1987.

Events that vanish, then revive. The Vietnam War, as noted above, was the great nonissue of the election campaign that was conducted a year after it was over. Indeed, the war was neglected not only in the 1976 elections, but in most memory for several years (see Lovell 1992, 389-91). Americans, it seemed, didn't want to think about a costly and unpleasant failure like Vietnam--in part, perhaps, because they didn't want to have to consider doing something about the Khmer Rouge genocide then going on in Cambodia, a catastrophe that garnered a total of less than 29 minutes of coverage on all three networks at the time (see Adams and Joblove 1982). Yet by the 1980s Vietnam had become a fabled and memorable event, even a haunting one, in the American consciousness, and it seems likely to remain one for a long time.

Something similar happened with the Civil War--probably the most important event in American history. For years after that conflict, there was a considerable desire to forget it. But after some twenty years the building of myths--and of memorials and monuments--began (see Linderman 1987). And the war has no doubt become the most popularly memorable event in American history.

### **15. Ennui über alles or vive l'Weltschmerz: nothing ever gets better**

In the end, misanthropes and curmudgeons are the only truly happy people: no matter how much improvement takes place, there will always be plenty to complain and worry about. If life expectancy increases, we can always worry about the huge budget deficit caused by the fact that people are now living so long and health care has gotten so good. After years of almost unrelievedly good economic news, Patrick Buchanan (and then other politicians) have recently discovered a politically-exploitable sense of malaise and unease in the public over the fact that, even though unemployment is remarkably low and employment levels are remarkably high, many Americans have gotten it into their heads that they are about to be downsized out of a job. "Status quo," as Ronald Reagan reportedly liked to put it, is Latin for "the mess we're in." Indeed, there seems to be an impressive amount of denial on some issues, borne

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<sup>25</sup> After the Vietnam War, the portion of the public holding the war to have been a mistake climbed until it nearly reached the 80 percentage mark in 1990 (Stanley and Niemi 1992, 352) and in polls in the 1980s from 66 to 72 percent agreed with the remarkably extreme observation that the war was "more than a mistake, it was fundamentally wrong and immoral" (Wittkopf 1990, 312). Accordingly, in this case it might have been natural to find great virtue in those who had opposed it--like the Democrat's 1992 nominee for president, Bill Clinton. Yet, while the war's acknowledged failure didn't hurt the political fortunes of war opponents (as the putative success of the War of 1812 had hurt its opponents), it didn't help them much either: that is, few gave them credit for having been right.

perhaps simply out of ignorance: most Americans say they think air pollution and the number of elderly living in poverty have increased over the last twenty years when the reverse is decidedly the case.<sup>26</sup>

This phenomenon carries over to international affairs as well. Even in a state of considerable peace the catastrophe quota will always remain comfortably full. The International Studies Association seems to be trying to put in its oar on this: next year's conference in Toronto will be dedicated to worrying about the deadly horror of (gasp) insecurity. Observing that "there is more clarity in the identification of threats than of specific enemies" the conference will seek to explore "the pervasive insecurities of a world of rapid change in which progress competes with retrogression" (ISA Newsletter, March/April 1996). Even though the chances of a global thermonuclear catastrophe have diminished to the point where remarkably few remember the terror it once inspired, one can concentrate on more vaporous enemies like insecurity, trouble, chaos, uncertainty, unpredictability, instability, and what one European foreign minister has called "unspecified risks and dangers." These are enemies that will always reassuringly be with us.<sup>27</sup>

However, there may be no a cure for the attention deficit disorder that currently afflicts foreign affairs. Since the public prefers to pay attention to domestic issues, in an era free of compelling threats it is likely to continue happily to focus its ennui and its Weltschmerz on parochial matters, not foreign ones.

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<sup>26</sup> The Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University Survey Project, 1996.

<sup>27</sup> On these issues, see Mueller 1994b, 1995a.



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Table 1

Do you approve or disapprove or the way George Bush is handling this current situation in the Middle East involving Iraq and Kuwait? (Gallup)

	Approve Bush on Middle East	Disapprove	Don't know	
1990 Aug 3-4	52	16	32	810
1990 Aug 9-12	80	12	8	1227
1990 Aug 16-19	79	14	7	1241

Table 2

Assuming Iraq leaves Kuwait, would you consider the war with Iraq a success if 500 American troops died, or not? (IF YES) Would you consider it a success if 1,000 American troops died, or not? (IF YES) Would you consider the war with Iraq a success if 5,000 American troops died, or not? (IF YES) And would you consider the war with Iraq a success if 10,000 American troops died, or not? (IF YES) And would you consider the war with Iraq a success if 20,000 American troops died, or not? (ACCEPT 'CONSIDERS NO AMERICAN TROOPS DIED AS A SUCCESS' AS A VOLUNTEERED RESPONSE) (Los Angeles Times)

1991 Jan17-18	Consider war with Iraq a success if Iraq leaves Kuwait and		
	no American troops die	80%	
	500 American troops die	50%	
	1,000 American troops die	37%	
	5,000 American troops die	27%	
	10,000 American troops die	20%	
	20,000 American troops die	16%	
	Don't know	13%	
	Refused	7%	

Table 3

Which of the following should be among the goals for U.S. forces (in the Middle East crisis) and which should not?... (Gallup)

...Rescuing as many hostages as possible

	Should be a US goal	Should not	Don't know	
1990 Aug 23-24	92	7	1	767

...Forcing Iraq to leave Kuwait

	Should be a US goal	Should not	Don't know	
1990 Aug 23-24	84	10	6	767

...Restoring the former government of Kuwait

	Should be a US goal	Should not	Don't know	
1990 Aug 23-24	70	20	10	767

...Destroying Iraq's nuclear and chemical weapons and military capabilities

	Should be a US goal	Should not	Don't know	
1990 Aug 23-24	78	17	5	767

...Removing Saddam Hussein's government from power in Iraq

	Should be a US goal	Should not	Don't know	
1990 Aug 23-24	73	19	8	767

Table 4

Now that the U.S. (United States) forces have been sent to Saudi Arabia and other areas of the Middle East, do you think they should engage in combat if Iraq... (Gallup)

A ...invades Saudi Arabia?

	Engage in combat	Do not engage in combat	Don't know	
1990 Aug 9-10	67	23	10	770
1990 Oct 18-19 *	68	19	13	755

B ...refuses to leave Kuwait and restore its former government?

	Engage in combat	Do not engage in combat	Don't know	
1990 Aug 9-10	42	40	18	770
1990 Oct 18-19 *	45	37	18	755
1990 Nov 15-16 *	46	40	14	754

C ...continues to hold U.S. civilians hostage?

	Engage in combat	Do not engage in combat	Don't know	
1990 Aug 9-10 **	61	30	9	770
1990 Oct 18-19 *	57	32	11	755
1990 Nov 15-16 *	55	34	11	754

\*\* holds American civilians hostage?

D ...kills American civilians in Kuwait and Iraq?

	Engage in combat	Do not engage in combat	Don't know	
1990 Aug 9-10	79	14	7	770

E ...begins to control or cut off oil?

	Engage in combat	Do not engage in combat	Don't know	
1990 Aug 9-10	58	31	11	770

F ...attacks U.S. forces?

	Engage in combat	Do not engage in combat	Don't know	
1990 Aug 9-10	94	4	2	770
1990 Oct 18-19 *	93	3	4	755
1990 Nov 15-16 *	91	6	3	754

\* response items rotated

Table 5

Do you think the people of Iraq must share the blame for Saddam

Hussein's policies in the Middle East or are they innocent of any blame for Hussein's policies? (Los Angeles Times)

	People of Iraq must share blame for Hussein's policies	People of Iraq are innocent of any blame for Hussein's policies	Don't know	
1991 Feb 15-17	32	60	8	1822

Table 6

Which of these three statements comes closer to your own view? (Washington Post, ABC/Washington Post)

	The United States should be making a greater effort to avoid bombing civilian areas in Iraq	The United States is making enough of an effort to avoid bombing civilian areas in Iraq	The United States is making too much of an effort to avoid bombing civilian areas in Iraq	Don't know	
1991 Feb 8-12	13	60	22	4	1011
1991 Feb 13	Bombing of shelter in Baghdad				
1991 Feb 14	13	67	18	2	722

**NOTE: THE FIGURES AND THE REST OF THE TABLES ARE AVAILABLE ON REQUEST AT [bbbb@troi.cc.rochester.edu](mailto:bbbb@troi.cc.rochester.edu)**