INTERNATIONAL POLICY REPORT

Something in the Air: "Isolationism," Defense Spending, and the US Public Mood

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SUMMARY

The report analyzes current and historical U.S. public opinion polls on global engagement, military intervention, and defense spending, finding significant fluctuation in public sentiments. The report assesses these in light of changes in policy, strategic conditions, and the economy.

A comprehensive review of opinion surveys shows a trend of growing public discontent with aspects of post-Cold War U.S. global policy. This has been misconstrued by some as evidence of "neo-isolationism." In fact, a solid majority of Americans continue to support an active U.S. role in the world. Public dissent focuses more narrowly on U.S. military activism and the idea that the United States should bear unique responsibility for the world's security. Official policy along these lines has weakened public support for global engagement generally, but the public does *not* prefer isolation.

On balance, Americans favor cooperative, diplomatic approaches to resolving conflict and they tend toward a "last resort" principle on going to war. Still, Americans will support forceful action against aggression when vital U.S. interests seem at risk. And, in prospect, they express a willingness to stem genocide.

The public's initial impetus to war may be strongly emotive, tied to a catalytic event. However, polls show that more pragmatic considerations soon come into play. Ongoing support requires that the costs of war match the perceived benefits. Domestic economic conditions are key in determining the perceived "opportunity cost" of war.

To gain and sustain support, military goals must be perceived as realistic, pragmatic, and cost-effective. Generally speaking, Americans do not favor involvement in most third-party interstate wars or in any civil wars. They also do not now support regime change efforts, armed nation-building, or persisting constabulary roles. On balance, the U.S. public lacks a "crusading spirit" with regard to the use of force abroad – whether the aim is posed in moral, humanitarian, political, or geopolitical terms.

The current spike in support for bombing ISIS is consistent with the limits and precepts outlined above. Support will waver if the mission grows or fails to show real progress.

Opinion surveys show a chronic gap between elite and public views on military intervention and America's global role. A preference for military activism and dominant global leadership finds greater representation among foreign policy elites than among the general public. Among the public, there is greater representation of selective engagement, cooperative security, and isolationist views (although the latter view is not predominant).

Elite-public differences may reflect differences in how costs and benefits are experienced. Singular events such as the 9/11 attacks can temporarily close the gap, but it re-emerges if and when the public begins to feel that the costs of military activism are exceeding its benefits.

One consequence of public displeasure with recent wars is reduced support for defense spending. Counter-balancing this is an enduring desire for superior defense capabilities – a preference that does not imply support for military activism. The public will support relatively high levels of defense spending as a deterrent and an insurance policy, while not intending to write a blank check for military activism.

Public perceptions of security threats and of the health of America's defenses are pivotal in determining sentiments about defense spending. They also are quite malleable. Partisan political dynamics are another factor significantly affecting public opinion on defense spending. Military spending is a perennial political football, and public preferences about spending are partly determined by partisan allegiances.

Today, opinion continues to favor reduced spending, although this may soon change. Looking back over a 40-year period, there have been several "pivot points" during which attitudes about spending rapidly changed from "spend less" to "spend more." Conditions characteristic of those pivot points are increasingly evident today.

With the advent of intensely polarized electoral campaigns, now and historically, the security policy debate shifts in a hawkish direction. Political actors desiring increased Pentagon spending and/or a more confrontational posture abroad have at their disposal several effective "issue framing" devices for biasing public debate and opinion.

One effective framing device is to pose the defense budget discussion in terms of the putative danger of a "hollow military." Another is to define current security challenges and choices using Second World War metaphors – such as references to Hitler, Munich, appeasement, and isolationism. Both devices are now fully deployed, making it likely that leading presidential nominees will advocate significant boosts in Pentagon spending in 2016.

Although public opinion may swing into support for higher spending levels as an acceptable assertion of national strength, historical precedent suggests that the public will not soon support a return to big protracted military operations abroad. Precedent also suggests that increased support for spending, should it emerge, will not last long if national leaders continue to over-reach internationally, as already seems likely.

1. Introduction: ISIS and Isolationism

Soon after the official departure of US combat troops from Iraq, some American political leaders and commentators began perceiving and decrying a "neo-isolationist" trend in US public opinion.[1] The evidence was polling data showing strong public reluctance to involve the nation in new conflicts abroad – specifically in Libya, Syria, Ukraine, and Iraq.[2] A related concern has been public opinion on defense spending, which is leaning toward spending less despite a 12% real reduction in the Pentagon's base budget between 2010 and 2014. This, some insist, is hobbling America's capacity to deal with global challenges.[3]

During the summer of 2014, however, public sentiment began to shift with regard to one issue at least: the depredations of the self-styled "Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham"(ISIS).[4] Today, large majorities of Americans have come to favor US air strikes on ISIS in both Iraq and Syria. In this light, defense leaders and lawmakers are arguing the case that effective action against ISIS may require boosting the Pentagon's budget above what current law allows.[5]

Does this mean that America's "neo-isolationist moment" has ended before even getting much of a start? Will public support for defense budget restraint soon dissipate as well?

A serious examination of public opinion data over the past decade (and more) shows that isolationism was never at the heart of Americans' reluctance to involve the United States in new conflicts abroad. The claims of isolationism had misconstrued a real and significant trend in public sentiment about US global policy since the Cold War's end: growing dissatisfaction with the official emphasis on unbounded military activism. Now, hawkish assessments of America's reaction to ISIS threaten to misread the public mood again. In fact, the current desire to strike hard at ISIS does not indicate the public's reconciliation with routine or unbounded interventionism.

What does recent polling on ISIS show? Opinion surveys by the *Washington Post* and *ABC* (*WP/ABC*) show public support for air strikes on ISIS rising from 45% in June to 54% in August to 71% in early September.[6] The August surge in opinion was propelled by attention to the humanitarian plight of Iraqi minorities fleeing ISIS, while the steep September spike was in response to the brutal execution of American journalist James Foley. The September *WP/ABC* poll also shows 59% of respondents thinking that ISIS constitutes a "very serious" threat to US vital interests. An early September poll by *CNN* essentially concurs, showing 76% support for air strikes and 45% of respondents believing that ISIS constitutes a very serious threat to the United States.[7]

The polling on ISIS reveals several fundamental aspects of public thinking about overseas US military action – none of them surprising or at odds with recent public dissents:

First, Americans will support limited pragmatic action to stem what they perceive as an impending mass slaughter of innocents abroad.

Second, Americans are ready and eager to respond with force to vicious assaults on Americans by foreign extremists.

Third, attacks on Americans that seem to be "identity-based" will be viewed as a threat to Americans everywhere – and therefore of vital concern.

The current limits to Americans' will to war are also clear. Majorities continue to oppose the re-commitment of ground troops to Iraq or Syria. Military aid to local actors remains controversial. And support for extending air strikes on ISIS to Syria is less strong than support for operations in Iraq. The public's concern is principally riveted on ISIS militants, wherever they roam – not on the fate of Iraq or Syria. And this support is tied to relatively low-cost standoff combat operations – air attack, not ground combat. Conversely, support remains weak for new or renewed involvement in interstate wars, civil wars, regime change efforts, nation-building, or persisting constabulary roles.

For a variety of reasons (explored below), the shift in opinion on ISIS will not alter the secular trend of the past decade, which generally favors less, not greater military involvement abroad. Over-reaching in Syria or Iraq, as seems likely, will only deepen this trend.

One change that does seem likely is increased public support for giving the Pentagon additional relief from budget sequestration. Although this is not essential to operations against ISIS, those operations add *prima facie* credibility to the Pentagon's ongoing campaign against budget restraint. American majorities express an invariant desire for robust defenses. A budget boost might find support as a palliative to mitigate fears stirred up by alarmist rhetoric on Russia, China, ISIS, and the purported "hollowing" of America's armed forces.

The trend in U.S. public opinion on military activism and defense spending neither begins nor ends with current concerns about ISIS. It has been rising in the background of recurrent crises beginning with the Battle of Mogadishu in 1993. Although it can be temporarily paused and regressed by partisan political dynamics or alarmism around the crisis *du jour,* it eventually reasserts itself. Derided and dismissed as "isolationism," it actually reflects a desire for security policy reform that neither Democratic nor Republican leadership seem ready to deliver. One factor for change that cannot be

spooked, however, is the evolving economic and fiscal condition of America, which argues for a more sustainable and cost-effective approach to securing the nation.

2. Targeting Neo-isolationism

The notion that the American public was sliding into isolationism found expression over the past two years among both liberal and conservative commentators. Two representative voices are William Galston (Brookings Institution) and Walter Russell Mead (*American Interest* magazine).[8] Both have argued the presence and danger of "neo-isolationism" while disagreeing about its source and character. For Galston, there was a structural source, economic in nature. For Mead, the problem corresponded to cycles in policy.

Writing in March 2014, Galston argued that "As long as the economy remains troubled," a preference for nation-building at home "will prevail against external challenges that seem less than existential."[9] He and others point to a variety of factors that reinforce a focus on the home front:[10]

- The anemic recovery from the 2007-2009 Great Recession,
- The real decline in median household income (which in early 2014 was lower than in 1998),
- Growing income inequality,
- Concern about public debt,
- The decline in American competitiveness, and
- The rise of new, competitive economic powerhouses abroad.

And, indeed, numerous public opinion surveys show that, since 2007, fiscal and economic concerns have displaced worries about foreign borne threats at the top of citizen national priority lists.[11]

Mead detected a different pattern: a cycle in U.S. global policy that involves alternating periods of engagement and disengagement. The cycle begins with the perception of a serious external danger which draws America deeply into world affairs and activism. What follows, however, is overconfidence or over-extension in the execution of American policy. This leads to costly mistakes and a period of contraction. But, he concludes, "when Americans got foreign policy wrong or ignored the outside world, the consequences were so severe that we were continually forced back into the game."[12] Defense Secretary Hagel adopted a similar argument in a May 2014 speech at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs warning that "turning inward…does not insulate us from the world's troubles. It only

forces us to be more engaged later – at a higher cost in blood and treasure, and often on the terms of others."[13]

Mead expected that recent Russian and Chinese assertiveness as well as overlapping crises in the Mideast and Southwest Asia would soon extinguish the latest bout of grassroots "neo-isolationism." And indeed, opinion surveys have indicated increased U.S. public concern about Russia, China, and ISIS.[14] This has been driven partly by leaders' muscular rhetoric and stern warnings about what the failure to intervene might incur.[15] Still, only recently and in the case of ISIS has this concern been matched by increased public willingness to ramp-up military intervention.

In the sections that follow we argue and show that:

- Mead and Galston are mistaken in ascribing the public's reluctance concerning military intervention to a generalized desire to disengage internationally. If there is a causal link, it runs in the other direction; Feckless and unbounded military intervention undermines internationalism.

- Galston is right to see that attention to economic realities plays a role in public sentiments about engagement, but it is not a matter of economic distress causing a withdrawal reflex. Instead, the public's experience of economic realities figure in how it weighs the costs and benefits of policy outcomes – a not unreasonable reaction. And it can pertain in times of both scarcity and plenty.

- Mead is correct in perceiving a cyclical pattern in public thinking about engagement. However, this is not a reaction to U.S. global policy cycling between "getting it right" and "getting it wrong." Instead, it reflects a process of the public becoming increasingly sensitive to the poor cost-to-benefit ratio of security policies that are unrealistic from inception.

3. Americans Rethink Global Engagement

Weighing war and economic distress

Can the public be walked toward a more assertive military stance abroad? Can it be swayed to accept a boost in defense spending as well? Much depends on the public's reading of security threats, of course, and its sense of the current health of America's armed forces.

Singularities such as the 9/11 attack, Pearl Harbor, and the 1950 rout of the U.S. Eighth Army in Korea can suddenly and dramatically alter public priorities. However, Galston implies that a more nuanced and deliberate process pertains when considering non-existential challenges and non-critical vulnerabilities. He suggests that a sense of resource scarcity and competing ends plays a part. To this we can add greater public appreciation of the great cost and limited utility of military power when applied to certain ends – an appreciation distilled gradually from experience over time. What may make the current state of public opinion unique is the intersecting experiences of the Great Recession and 15 years of desultory war.

America's current economic and fiscal woes are unusually acute and they reflect global economic trends that suggest no early or easy respite.[16] The shift in global economic power that is now underway will produce a circumstance – a new global economic balance – unlike any America has experienced since the 19th century.[17] The effects of this, which Americans are already experiencing, cannot be simply talked away. Indeed, these circumstances have inspired speculation of a "New Normal" domestic economic condition characterized by slower growth, higher unemployment rates, and reduced government services.[18] In this light, the public's current "war-weariness" may prove especially tenacious. A "New Normal" in domestic economic affairs may compel a New Normal in international affairs as well.

Despite defense establishment complaints, the baseline Pentagon budget for 2015 still sits far above – 29% above – its level in 2000 in real terms. By comparison, U.S. Median Household Income (MHI) sits 6.5% *below* its 2000 level, also corrected for inflation. Of course, the public routinely affords defense spending a special status because national security is a paramount value.[19] This does not entirely exempt it from cost-benefit calculations, however – even if only impressionistic ones. The pivotal question is whether the public feels that the increased investment in military power and operations have yielded reliable gains in security.

Clearly, the aggregate increase in Pentagon spending over the past 14 years has been immense:

- Since 2001, total spending on Overseas Contingency Operations (that is, war spending) has exceeded $1.75 trillion (2015 USD).
- Baseline Pentagon spending (which does not include direct war costs) has exceeded the 2000 level by an aggregated total of $1.6 trillion over the past 14 years, adjusted for inflation.

Taken together these two sums significantly exceed the savings targets set in the 2011 Budget Control Act, which has gripped public consciousness for the past four years.[20] To

this fiscal burden we must add the human cost – for Americans: 6,800 service people killed and more than 50,000 injured by official count. (By some measures the number injured is more than ten times higher).[21]

In this light, how does the public assess America's major military involvements of the past 13 years?

- Today, the public views the use of force in Iraq to have been a wrong decision by a 50% to 38% margin.[22]
- The use of force in Afghanistan fares better with 51% to 41% of the public considering it the right decision.
- However, Americans also believe by a 52% to 38% margin that the U.S. effort in Afghanistan has been mostly a failure.

In a more sweeping assessment, none of the nine significant U.S. military interventions between 1992 and 2012 have led to a condition of self-sustaining peace, stability, and growth in the host nations.[23] Six of the conflicts remain largely unresolved or have morphed into something worse. Rather than advancing America's global status, they have bred enmity toward the United States, especially in the Mideast and North Africa.[24]

Despite the "war on terrorism," now in its thirteenth year, deaths due to terrorism are today much more numerous worldwide than in the first years of this century. And Americans' fear of terrorist attack remains high.[25] Rather than fueling support for military intervention abroad, however, this fear has served as another inhibiting factor. With regard to the Syrian conflict, for instance, 60% of Americans in September 2013 believed that direct U.S. involvement would increase the threat of terrorism.[26] Only 3% see intervention as likely to decrease the terrorist threat.

In sum, the cost of recent wars has been extraordinary and the results much less than anticipated. Charges of "neo-isolationism" notwithstanding, it is not myopic to assess war outcomes from a cost-benefit perspective. Nor is it reactionary to take scarcity into account when thinking about the use of national resources. Reviewing public sentiments on intervention in this broader context suggests that Americans have not grown "war weary" as much as *war wise*.

Gauging engagement

The charge of "isolationism" is an evocative one, calling to mind (as intended) the failure to stop the world's march toward war and holocaust during the 1920s and 1930s. But, if there is today new and greater dissent from some aspects of U.S. global policy, does it mean that the public is actually seeking U.S. global disengagement and isolation?

Examining the broader context of public opinion helps clarify its import, as shown above. War and the economy are part of the picture. Also essential is a broader assessment of the object of the public's concern: U.S. global engagement, its character and extent.

By various indices the United States today ranks as moderately-to-highly integrated globally.[27] Although not as integrated as some nations, the sheer size of America's economy sets it apart in absolute terms. Thus, for instance, the United States is:

- The world's largest importer of goods and services and the third largest exporter. In 1991 U.S. exports and imports were each equivalent to about 10% of U.S. GDP. Today these have grown to 14% and 18% of GDP respectively.[28]
- The largest provider of direct foreign investment and its largest recipient.[29]

Integration is not the same as "engagement," however. The former is an *outcome* of policy or a *condition*, while the latter describes a policy orientation, a choice. And as a matter of policy choice, America is intensively engaged in world affairs.[30]

In addition to being a permanent member of the UN security council and a leading member of the Group of Seven, the United States holds commanding positions within both the IMF and World Bank. It participates officially in more than five dozen other international organizations and forums.[31] It is signatory to thousands of international treaties and agreements.[32] And it is the world's top provider of foreign aid, surpassing the next three top providers combined (although nearly one-third of American aid is security assistance).[33]

In terms of global military engagement, America is in a class by itself with no near-competitor:

- The United States invests heavily in major military alliances or relationships with 47 nations as well as security assistance partnerships and programs involving more than 100 others.[34]
- At least 200,000 U.S. military personnel are routinely stationed or deployed abroad. In recent years, the total number of U.S. military personnel employed abroad has varied as high as 400,000. All other nations combined have less than 150,000 deployed or stationed outside their borders – 60% of these in UN peacekeeping operations.[35]
- America maintains a military presence in 175 foreign nations. In 15 of these, the U.S. military presence exceeds 1000 uniformed personnel.[36]
- Forty foreign countries and territories host U.S. military facilities comprising more than 50,000 structures (365 million sq. ft.) and covering more than 600,000 acres. Most of this infrastructure is concentrated in 14 countries and territories.[37]

- America's armed forces are today significantly involved in more than 15 conflicts worldwide (as well as several peace operations).[38]

There is strong evidence (reviewed below) that the U.S. public is indeed worried about the character and extent of U.S. global engagement. And Americans are preferring "less." However, America's current global posture is such that there is ample room for adjustment well short of disengagement.

Fears of incipient isolationism may be due in part to the types of questions put before the American public by polling organizations and by the failure of observers to carefully and comprehensively assess survey results. It may also be a more calculated effort to rebuild a consensus around energetic military activism by that sector of policy leaders who, unlike the public at large, believe its benefits are worth its costs.

What the polls say

Testing for "isolationist" sentiment

Periodic polls by the Pew Research Center and Chicago Council for Global Affairs give a longer, more detailed view of trends in opinion on global engagement.[39] At first glance, several seem to add credibility to concerns about "neo-isolationism." For instance, Pew has periodically asked respondents if the United States "should mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can on their own." Forty-three percent said yes in 1975, 41% in 1995, and 52% in 2013.[40] (Fig. 1.)

Gauged a different way, U.S. public "isolationist" sentiment seems even stronger. The Pew Center surveys also tested agreement with the statement: "We should not think so much in international terms but concentrate more on our own national problems and building up our own strengths."[41] (Fig. 2.)

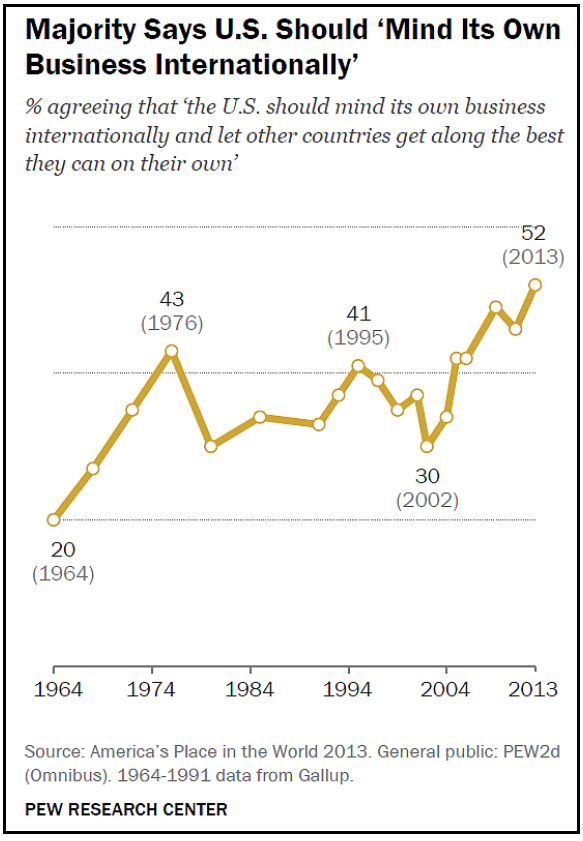

Figure 1

- 73% of respondents agreed in 1975
- 78% in 1995
- 80% in December 2013

To put these findings in perspective, the proportion of respondents agreeing with this second proposition has not fallen below 54% since 1964. In fact, the question differs importantly from the first and does not indicate a desire to withdraw from the world.

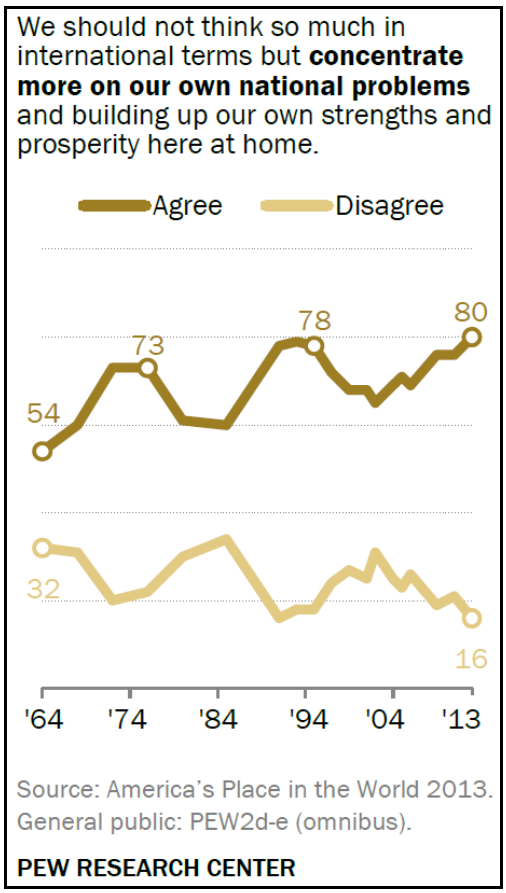

Figure 2

The first query by Pew poses an absolute choice: engagement, yes or no? The second is more relativistic, probing feelings about the balance between domestic and foreign policy. What it reveals is exceptionally strong current support for *rebalancing priorities*. Frustration of this desire may be pivotal in provoking more unequivocal attitudes on engagement, like those expressed in response to the first question. It is important to recognize that rebalancing in favor of domestic priorities does not imply withdrawal from global affairs.

An April 2014 *Wall Street Journal/NBC* News survey accords with the Pew results, although it too has been mistakenly interpreted as indicating an isolationist surge.[42] A serious look shows that the *WSJ/NBC* poll did not counterpose global "isolation" and "engagement" at all. It simply asked respondents if they preferred more, less, or no change in the current level of U.S. global activism. It found that 47% preferred less, 19% more, and 30% the current level. Again, the plurality preference for rebalancing toward "less" is not tantamount to seeking isolation, especially given the extent of current activism.

Another mitigating fact is that the American public generally expresses greater concern with events at home than those abroad *when the choice is posed as a blunt choice or in sweeping terms*. However, when public priorities are disaggregated, concerns about security policy often rise to the top of the list, as was the case for the first five years following the 11 Sept 2001 attacks.[43]

The public's expressed priorities changed rather dramatically across many polls during the course of 2007 as concerns about jobs, the economy, the national debt, and health

care rose to the top.[44] Public concern about domestic issues – principally the economy – has dominated priorities lists ever since. This clearly indicates the impact of the nation's economic and fiscal woes on how the general public is weighing foreign policy concerns. But again, greater attention to economic health and power need not signal isolationism.

Reform or retreat?

A 2014 survey by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs asks a question that is subtly different from those posed by Pew: "Is it better for the future of the country if we take an active part in world affairs or if we stay out."[45] (Fig. 3.)

- In Sept 2014, 58% of Americans thought it best to take an active global role, while 41% stood opposed.
- The recent high point came in 2002 when 71% favored an active part and only 25% stood opposed.
- The balance of opinion today is roughly comparable to that in 1982.

The poll shows a distinct decline in pro-engagement sentiment since the start of the Iraq war. Indeed, the pro/con balance is among the least "activist" of the past 65 years. *However, the size of the majority still favoring an active role in world affairs suggests a resilient foundation for global engagement.*

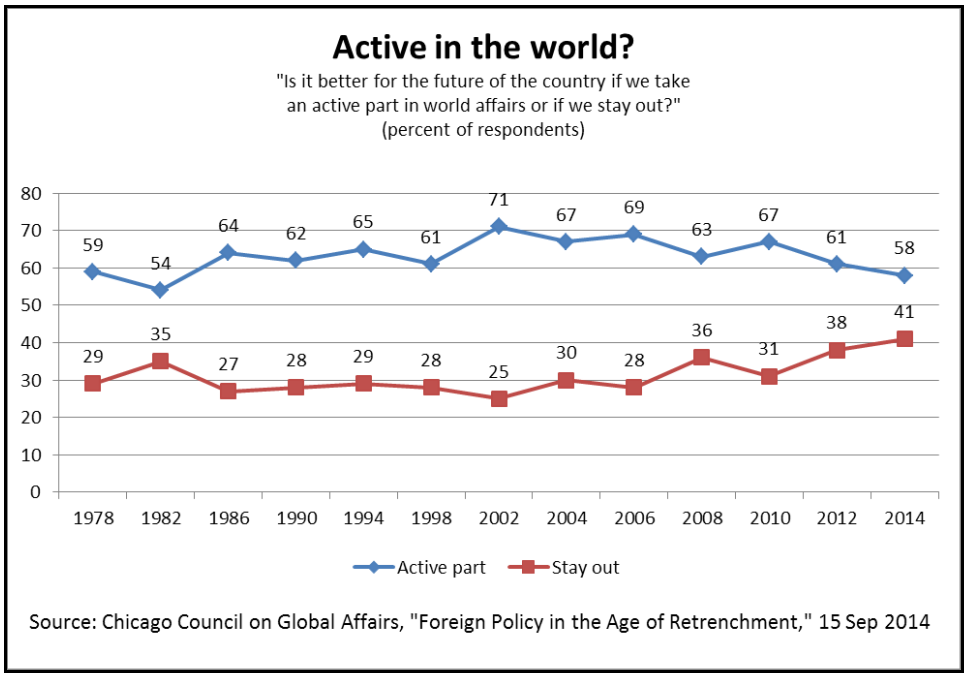

Figure 3

The difference between the Pew and Chicago Council polls provides insight into how the public approaches this issue. Notably, the Council's question does not juxtapose domestic and foreign goals. Nor does it imply being a global "busybody." It centers on the perceived value of being involved in the common affairs of nations. When engagement is viewed this way, significant majorities of Americans favor it.

The Council surveys found that the decline in activist sentiment since 2002 correlates with negative views of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Looking further back, similar shifts in opinion are evident during the periods 1964-1976 and 1992-1995. These periods encompassed years of troubled military operations abroad or followed the conclusion of major confrontations. The Council data also shows an especially sharp decline between 2006 and 2008, leading the authors to conclude that "the American people want to play an active part in world affairs but their internationalism is increasingly constrained by economic troubles at home."[46]

This closer look at a range of survey questions over time suggests that the experience of war and profound economic change have combined to elicit public expressions of restraint. But this does not imply a general retreat from world affairs.[47] On balance, the American public remains quite internationalist in its outlook.

Terms like "global engagement" and "isolationism" are simply too broad to usefully represent U.S. public opinion. Different forms and degrees of engagement need to be distinguished, for instance: cooperative approaches *versus* unilateral ones, and military *versus* nonmilitary engagement.

Balanced engagement, not "isolationism"

In the series of polls conducted by both the Pew Center and Chicago Council, significant majorities of Americans have consistently supported U.S. participation in international institutions as well as cooperative multinational approaches to addressing world problems – *as long as leadership, responsibility, and burdens are evenly shared*.[48] Americans also strongly support energetic participation in the world economy – as long as care is taken to protect American jobs.[49]

What attracts little public support is the role of the United States as global cop, hegemon, sole leader, or "most active" world leader. The 2012 Chicago Council survey found 78% of respondents agreeing that the United States was "playing the role of world policeman more than it should."[50] This may explain much of the "anti-engagement" sentiment apparent in some surveys.

A series of questions on current and potential conflicts by the Pew Center shows that "Americans are broadly supportive of nonmilitary forms of international engagement and problem solving, ranging from diplomacy, alliances, and international treaties to economic aid and decision making through the UN."[51] These routinely out-poll military options, although a "rally effect" typically occurs once wars begin.[52]

When asked about overseas military operations in categorical terms, majorities do support intervention to stop genocide, prevent humanitarian catastrophes, and secure the flow of oil – a mix of high-purpose and self-interest goals.[53] By contrast, the public routinely disfavors involvement in foreign civil conflicts and interstate wars, even those that figure centrally in the web of U.S. overseas commitments.[54] For instance, the 2012 Chicago Council survey found 56% of Americans opposed to using U.S. troops in the case of a new Korean war and 69% opposed in the case of China invading Taiwan.[55]

Public support for involving the United States in overseas conflicts declines when questions grow more specific about time and place or when the prospect of casualties is mentioned.[56] In other words, the war option is less popular when made to seem more real or when background information allows a fuller calculation of cost, benefit, and responsibility. Conversely, support is generally stronger when intervention is presented as a collective or UN-mandated effort. The virtue of collective action is that it lends a sense of legitimacy to the war option and implies that responsibility and burdens will be shared.

4. Leaders *versus* Led on Global Engagement

The elite-public divide

The alarmism about Americans' desire to reform U.S. global practice points to a chronic gap between policy leaders and the general public. This gap pertains especially to the character of U.S. global leadership and its means of expression.

In five polls conducted between 1993 and 2009, the Pew Research Center compared the views of the general public with those of members of the Council on Foreign Relations.[57] Across these years, a strong plurality of the general public (almost 50% on average) preferred that the United States play a global leadership role equal to that of other nations. By contrast, only 25% of CFR members chose equality. Instead, 70% of CFR members (on average) preferred that the United States play a dominant or "most assertive" role. Only a third of the public chose these strong leadership options.

Similarly, the Pew Center's 2013 survey found that 51% of the public thought that the United States "does too much in terms of helping solve world problems," while only 17%

thought it did too little. In stark contrast, only 21% of CFR members thought the nation was doing "too much" while 41% thought too little.[58] Accurately interpreting such broad-brush responses requires a more refined look at preferences, however. What is it that the public feels America is doing "too much" of overseas?

Certainly the general public is less inclined than the foreign policy elite to go to war.[59] This is evident in Pew polling mentioned above as well as polling by the Chicago Council. In one Chicago Council poll, the views of foreign policy elites on 11 conflict scenarios were directly compared with those of the general public.[60] The result showed the public less willing to justify the use of American force in eight of the scenarios. Only in one case did public and elite attitudes closely correspond: a bare majority (51%) of both signaled a willingness to help Pakistan in the case of an Islamic revolution. This outcome probably turned on the prospect of Pakistani nuclear weapons falling into extremist hands.

The two cases in which public support for using force exceeded the preferences of the expert sample were (i) protection of the Mideast oil flow and (ii) interdiction of drug lords in Colombia. In one other case, public support for forceful intervention trailed not far behind elite support: stopping genocide. These differences partly reflect the public's relatively greater emphasis on pragmatic ends and humanitarian ones. And they partly reflect the general public's reluctance to use force except in dire circumstances.

Generally speaking, the U.S. public favors a "last resort" approach to the use of force. In this, the public diverges from an axiom of post-Cold War U.S. security policy that was first enunciated by President George H.W. Bush. In his 1993 West Point valedictory address, Bush set aside the "last resort" principle, suggesting instead that force might be the preferred option when other approaches were not thought to be as likely to work or work as well.[61] This formulation makes light of the vicissitudes and chaotic outcomes of war, which urge that other options be attempted and exhausted, not simply contemplated. In so doing, it lowered the threshold on the use of force and helped rationalize "wars of choice." It has governed American security policy ever since.[62]

Explaining the gap

American public opinion regarding global engagement reflects citizen values, perceived interests, available information, and beliefs about how the world works.[63] The gap between leaders and led reflects differences with regard to some or all these variables.

Differential access to information can account for some of the gap between public and elite preferences. For instance, the public generally responds far less favorably to the provision of foreign aid than does the expert cohort.[64] However, the public also tends to

grossly over-estimate the amount of aid that the United States provides. When given a choice to set "appropriate" aid levels, *the public either maintains or increases foreign aid budgeting* – at least with regard to its non-military forms.[65]

Elite-public differences may also reflect the fact that elites occupy a social and demographic strata not representative of the general public, which can contribute to differences in the perception and weighting of policy costs and benefits. This seems evident in the different priority given by foreign policy leaders and the general public to the goal of "protecting American jobs." In the 2013 Pew Center poll 81% of the public, but only 29% of the leadership cohort, ranked this as a top foreign policy goal. Chicago Council polls also consistently find very substantial differences in how elites and the public rank this goal.

Differences in perspective and interest pertain not only on the individual level. Many members of the foreign policy elite represent institutional interests and perspectives. Military leaders and defense officials are an obvious and influential example. They are employed to exercise a particular perspective on security issues. They carry distinct institutional responsibilities and are responsive to bureaucratic imperatives that few on the "outside" would feel.

Fundamentally, the elite-public divide reflects a divergence in strategic assumptions and dispositions. Of course, the foreign policy elite itself divides into different strategic camps. MIT political scientist Barry Posen offered one possible typology of these strategic currents in a seminal 1997 analysis: neo-isolationist, selective engagement, collective security, and primacy.[66] Other typologies are possible, too.[67] And this variety of strategic inclinations finds analogs at the grassroots.[68]

The persistent elite-public opinion gap suggests that these strategic tendencies are proportioned differently among elite actors and the general public. Analogs of selective engagement, isolationism, and various forms of cooperative security seem to find greater representation at the grassroots than in the national security establishment, where Primacy prevails.

The allure of primacy

Since the mid-1990s, the "primacist" view has dominated official U.S. security policy, having both neoliberal and neoconservative forms.[69] It is distinguished by seeking to broadly exercise the "sole superpower" status that America won as a consequence of the Soviet Union's demise.[70] Characteristically, the primacist trend takes America to be the

world's "indispensable nation" (or some such).[71] And it sees U.S. global leadership and military predominance as necessary to both U.S. and global security.

The special role that Primacy affords to armed forces corresponds with the fact that it is only in the military dimension that the world is truly unipolar.[72] In this realm, America's competitive advantage is profound. Consistent with this, the primacist approach has sought to expand American-led military alliances and to use U.S. military power more proactively.[73] This reflects an increased faith in both the utility of war and the suasive power of military brinkmanship.

The notion of putting military primacy to use has held sway over post-Cold War security policy for several reasons. It resonated strongly with the sense of triumph, optimism, and opportunity that followed the Cold War's end and America's victory in the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf conflict. The end of the East-West divide inspired elite visions of global transformation that have aimed variously to enlarge the sphere of market democracy, exercise a "responsibility to protect" vulnerable populations everywhere, and even pursue an "An End to Evil."[74] The notion of leveraging U.S. military primacy spoke to all these visions and goals as an enabling strategy. It also could accommodate a Realist rationale that saw the provision of "security goods" to other nations as a way for the United States to gain *quid pro quo* benefits in policy areas where it did not enjoy a strong competitive advantage.[75] After 2001, assertive military activism became the measure of a president's willingness to cement U.S. global leadership and "win the peace."

Most important to the rise and resilience of the primacist approach has been the institutional momentum and political clout of the Pentagon. It is unlikely that the United States would have attempted a security strategy based on global military superiority and activism if not for the fact that America's immense defense establishment was already a "force in being" at the start of the new era. It was (and remains) a force not only in the military sense, but also the economic and political.

The Pentagon imperative

In 1992, defense industry analysts were anxiously predicting a 50% reduction in defense spending.[76] The strategy of proactive military primacy charted a different course. It promised to preserve, build on, transform, and use much of America's existing military structure in a bid to reshape the global strategic environment. Pentagon leaders, the Joint Staff, and the armed forces' policy centers and contracted think tanks (such as Rand Corporation) played a central role in developing both the strategy and related concepts (such as "full-spectrum dominance.")[77] And they produced the four *Quadrennial Defense Reviews* that helped guide implementation of these ideas.[78]

The Pentagon's role in this effort does not mean that military leaders became unequivocal advocates of military activism, however. In fact, they have often proved more cautious than civilian leaders about initiating military operations abroad and have frequently expressed reservations about the types and numbers of missions assigned them.[79] Despite such concerns, the preservation of a large military in the post-Soviet era comes with a "use it or lose it" rider. Static deterrence is no longer reason enough to stress the treasury. This was implicit in Madeline Albright's complaint to General Colin Powell when he resisted military intervention in the Balkans conflict: "What's the point of having this superb military…if we can't use it?"[80]

Albright's proposition implies a two-way bargain, of course. Military leaders are strongly motivated to procure the resources they think they need in order to confidently perform the missions assigned them. And a very active military can make more credible demands on resources. Putative shortfalls are likely to spur politically potent claims of declining military readiness due to high operational tempo.[81] This tango between civilian and military leaders puts persistent upward pressure on defense spending.

Simple institutional momentum and bureaucratic imperatives also compel military leaders to constantly bargain for bigger budgets. Large and growing budgets serve to reduce friction in the functioning of DoD's four independent services and hundreds of subordinate commands, agencies, and offices. The Pentagon's six geographic commands, in particular, constitute a strong constituency for retaining a large overseas military presence – war or no war. And regional commanders have grown more influential over time.[82] Finally, the prospect of actualizing "full spectrum dominance" has intrinsic appeal to both the defense industry and the armed services – even if never fully employed.

Easiest to understand is the defense industry's affinity for any strategy that entails exceptionally high levels of spending. Between 1985 and 1998, annual Pentagon spending on goods and services declined from $360 billion to $215 billion (2014 USD). It then grew dramatically after 1998, topping off at $545 billion annually in 2008. This is a margin of commercial activity worth fighting for. (Under sequestration, annual Pentagon purchases would surely fall back to below $350 billion.)[83]

Managing the gap

Although dominant among elites, the primacist view has been at odds with public preferences throughout most of the post-Cold War era. This is what time-series polling on global engagement indicates. The gap narrowed only in the years immediately following victory in the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf and the September 2001 terrorist attacks. Today, after a decade of energetic military activism, the gap is wider than ever.

If there is a message in the public's current mood it is that the type of engagement prevailing for the past two decades has not delivered on its promise – and certainly not at an acceptable cost. From a primacist perspective, however, the gap simply evinces popular myopia and a deficit of national will and leadership. This is the principal message of the recent commentary decrying "neo-isolationism," which aims to pinch the gap. And, in fact, the gap is tractable – at least temporarily.

Disparate strategic dispositions can converge for a time on discrete policy choices. This was the case during the Second World War after Pearl Harbor. It also holds true for the initial response to the 9/11 attacks. Moreover, the public's appreciation of policy issues and options can be influenced so as to *induce* accord, as was the case in the months leading up to the 2003 Iraq war.[84] The public's perception of international events and its appreciation of policy choices are quite susceptible to shaping by institutional leaders, policy experts, and the news media.[85] These may seek to influence opinion either by direct appeals based on social authority or by filtering, framing, or "spinning" the information they convey.[86]

In the security policy arena, Second World War metaphors are common and effective framing devices. These include allusions to Hitler, Munich, Pearl Harbor, appeasement, and isolationism.[87] Such are now fully in play with regard to the Ukraine and Syria crises.[88] Message frames are meant to evoke a desired response by associating one event or policy with another more evocative one. If successful, the association sets the terms of public discussion in ways that privilege one type of response over another. Metaphors that appeal to fear and uncertainty can be especially effective in disabling reasoned discourse.[89]

Second World War message frames, in particular, serve to center public discourse on the alarming prospect of a catastrophic "breakout" by an unrelenting and incomparably powerful foe. Of course, analogy is no substitute for analysis. Nonetheless, if sufficiently evocative, it can move the public to support overseas intervention. Once war begins, "tit-for-tat" and "rally 'round the flag" opinion dynamics come into play, and these may take years to run their course.

5. Defense Spending, Global Engagement, and Public Opinion

America's current national security strategy is nothing if not expensive. Since 1998, when post-Cold War retrenchment ended, the United States has allotted approximately $10 trillion (2014 USD) to the Department of Defense, including war funding. Today, America

devotes 4% of GDP to defense, which is about twice the country average for the rest of the world.[90]

At least 25% of the $10 trillion spent on defense is attributable to choosing a security strategy based on exercising global military predominance.[91] Near the opposite end of the spectrum, a quasi-isolationist "Fortress America" posture might have cost $4 trillion over the past 16 years.[92] And, of course, there are numerous options between the two.[93]

Energetic military activism requires large armed forces and exceptional levels of defense expenditure. And big spending requires a degree of public acquiescence, if not assent. The public can react to what it views as unwise activism by favoring budget restraint, as currently seems the case. But the public's qualms about military intervention do not imply a consistent lack of support for high levels of military spending. In fact, public sentiments about the Pentagon budget reflect a variety of inputs. A better understanding of these and how they interact is a prerequisite to understanding the current trend in opinion.

For most years since 1969 the Gallup organization has polled the U.S. public on defense spending, asking respondents if they think the nation is spending too little, too much, or about the right amount on defense.[94] This polling provides a basis for understanding how global activism, defense spending, and other factors influence public opinion.

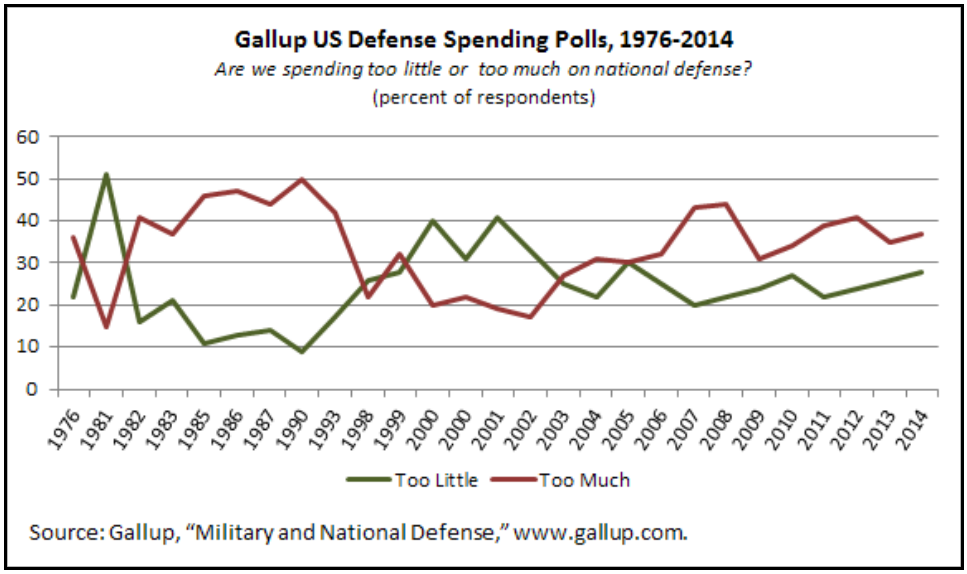

Figure 4

Recent Trends in Public Opinion

During the post-Cold War era U.S. public opinion on defense spending has moved from majority support for significant reductions to plurality support for increased spending back to plurality support for cuts. To summarize the findings of Gallup and other polls:[95]

1985-1995: A strong plurality of Americans support reductions in defense spending throughout this period. A clear majority support cuts in 1990.

1995-1998: A transition period during which preference for the "status quo" increases and is then supplanted by pluralities favoring increased spending.

1998-2003: Significant public support for increased spending is evident. (Interestingly, this support is especially strong in 2000 and 2001 *before* the 9/11 attacks.)

2003-2007: By early 2003, public opinion is shifting toward "spend less." This sentiment grows steadily between 2003 and 2006, along with concerns about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

2007-2008: "Spend less" sentiment surges further upward as the financial and economic crisis takes hold and Operation Iraqi Freedom seems to mire in civil war.

2009-2010: "Spend less" sentiment moderates somewhat as an untested Democrat takes the presidential helm.

2011-2012: "Spend less" rebounds as the nation focuses intently on reducing the federal debt and deficit.

Since 2012 Pentagon spending has declined in both real and nominal terms. With this, the public's sense that America is spending too much seems to have moderated somewhat, although in Gallup's early 2014 survey it still out-polls "spend more" by 37% to 28%.

Public Opinion In Context

Two background factors relevant to assessing changes in feelings about defense spending are (I) changes in the level of spending and (ii) changes in fiscal and economic conditions.

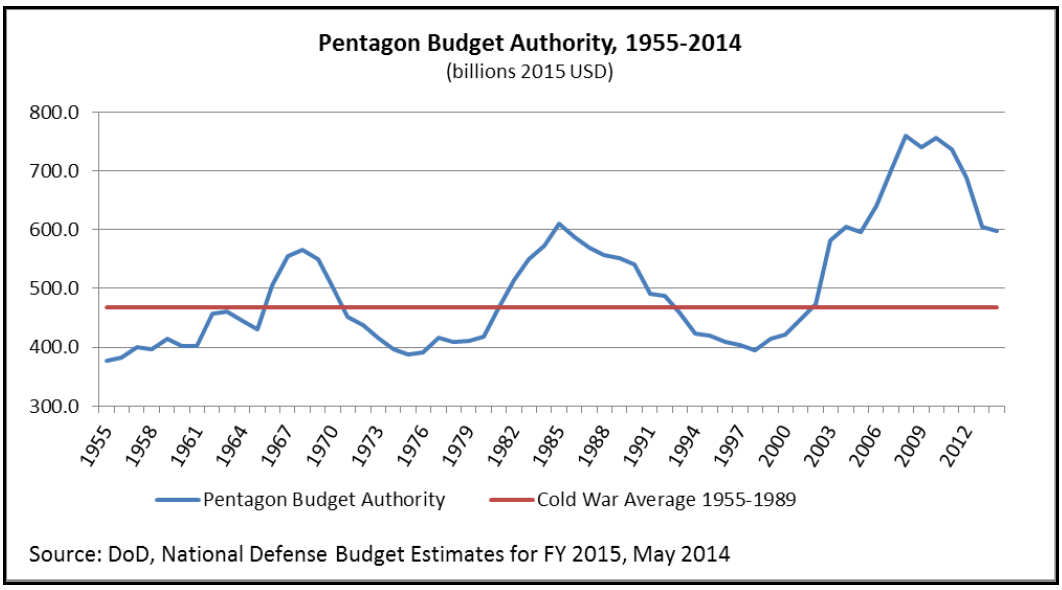

Figure 5

Six Decades of Pentagon Spending

How much the United States spends on its armed forces is one thing. What the general public knows and feels about defense spending quite another. Still, a review of actual spending levels can help assign meaning to public views. Looking at levels of Pentagon spending over the past 60 years, profound changes are evident. (Fig. 5.) Summarizing these changes for the most recent three decades:

1985 to 1998 Pentagon budget authority declines by 35% in real terms. This decline in spending is comparable to those following the Vietnam and Korean wars (although the end of East-West contention had much greater strategic import).

1998 to 2009 Pentagon spending rebounds, growing 92%. This rebound in spending is unprecedented in size – a surge comparable to the Vietnam- and Reagan-era buildups *combined*. It produced five of the seven highest P entagon budgets since 1948. Notably, the 2010 budget is 24% higher in real terms than the budget in 1985 (for a military only 68% as large).

2009 to 2014 Pentagon budget authority (including war costs) recedes by about 21% (when adjusted for inflation). Nonetheless, the 2014 budget remains 51% above the 1998 level. In real terms, it is a level only slightly below the high-point of the Reagan era.

Fiscal and Economic Conditions

Fiscal and economic conditions may serve as a more salient reference point for the public's assessment of defense (and other) spending simply because they determine citizens' general sense of resource scarcity. There were three recessionary cycles during the 1985-2014 period as measured by changes in GDP: July 1990 to March 1991, March-November 2001, and Dec 2007 to June 2009. (Fig. 6.) Better measures of how most Americans experienced these economic fluctuations are the changes in unemployment rates and Median Household Income (MHI). Figure 6 summarizes key fiscal and economic data for several time periods between 1985 and 2014. It shows far more favorable conditions for non-controversial budget growth at the end of the 1990s, relative to the periods that preceded or followed.

Figure 6. Change in Fiscal and Economic Conditions 1985-2014

	Federal Deficit or Surplus as % GDP	Unemployment	Real Growth in Median Household Income	Real Growth in Per Capita GDP
1985-1993	Deficit 1985: 5% 1989: 2.7% 1992: 4.4%	1985: 7.4% 1989: 5% 1992: 7.8%	+1.7%	+14.7%
1993-2001	Surplus: 2000: 2.3%	2000: 3.9%	+14%	+23.3%
2001-2012	Deficit: 2009: 9.8% GDP 2012: 6.7% GDP	2009: 10% 2012: 7.9%	-9.3%	+10.7%
Current	Deficit: 3.5% GDP	6.1%	+2.5% since 2012	+3.9% since 2012
1985-2014			+8.8%	+60.6%

Sources: Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, "Real Median Household Income in the United States" and "Federal Surplus or Deficit as Percent of Gross Domestic Product"; U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, "Current-dollar and real GDP"; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey"; and, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, "Historical Gross Domestic Product Per Capita 1969-2014."

What Drives Public Opinion On Defense Spending?

Gallup polling over a 45-year period can give the impression that public support for defense spending varies inversely with movements in the Pentagon budget. As the budget declines, the sentiment that America is spending "too little" seems to gain adherents; As

spending rises, so does the feeling that the nation is spending "too much." This apparent "see-saw" pattern in opinion does not explain much about motive forces, however. It is an artifact of a process that has less to do with absolute levels of defense expenditure than with the gap between leaders and led over U.S. national security strategy and practice.

The American public will pay to ensure a resilient defense. And it is willing to go to war for a variety of reasons. What it lacks, on balance, is a "crusading spirit" with regard to the use of force abroad – whether the aim is posed in moral, humanitarian, political, or geopolitical terms. It also has low tolerance for military commitments and investments that it perceives as unnecessary, unrealistic, or inefficient.

At heart, the gap between primacy advocates and the general public resides in the fact that they differently experience and weigh costs and benefits. Activist strategies tend inherently to overestimate the utility of force while underestimating its costs and negative repercussions. Pentagon leaders, while not necessarily "activist" in their views, appreciate national interests from a Pentagon-centric perspective. Also, the Pentagon is far more forgiving of its inefficiencies than is the public.[96]

Singular events such as Pearl Harbor or the 9/11 attacks can produce elite-public convergence. Or convergence can be manufactured. But the national security establishment marches to the beat of its own drummers, leading soon to outcomes that exceed the limits of public tolerance. Public perceptions can be managed, but eventually the bill comes due – as it did in 2007 and 2008.[97] And this defines the changing arc of public opinion on defense spending.

The importance of being #1

Polling by Gallup over the past 20 years shows that majorities of Americans – 60% or more – consistently voice a preference for America being the world's top military power.[98] This result is confirmed by Pew Center polling.[99] A slightly smaller majority consistently asserts its confidence that the U.S. military is, in fact, unsurpassed.[100] Similar questioning by the Chicago Council confirm these findings:[101] Most Americans consistently believe in and value America's position as the world's top military power.[102]

That a majority of Americans value military superiority may seem at odds with the public's preference for diplomacy over war, its disapproval of unilateralism, and its apprehensions about military activism. However, these responses are easily reconciled if the preference for superiority is understood as reflecting a bedrock belief in the deterrent power of a strong military.

Military superiority is viewed at the grassroots as a means of dissuasion and as a form of "crisis insurance." This view need not (and, empirically, does not) entail support for routine large-scale overseas activism. Indeed, a preference for military superiority is consistent with a variety of postures, including an isolationist one. Still, the value afforded superiority does imply enduring support for substantial levels of military spending. And it entails acute sensitivity to issues of defense sufficiency – as a matter of homeland protection, if nothing else. These corollaries provide leverage to those who wish to build support for higher levels of spending, regardless of its purpose.

As the public sees it: How much is enough?

Most polling does not engage respondents in a deliberate process of closely examining and weighing defense budget realities and options. One exception is a 2012 poll conducted by the Program for Public Consultation (PPC)[103] It provided respondents with detailed background information and summary arguments for increasing and decreasing spending. The result was a majority opinion favoring an 11% reduction in the Pentagon base budget from the 2012 level which, in real terms, would be roughly equivalent to the effects of sequestration. This may be the best available indication of well-informed public opinion on the topic. But it is not indicative of how public opinion usually takes form. (And, not surprisingly, it is at odds with the findings of less intensive or refined polling, which in recent years shows plurality but not majority support for cuts).

Pivotal to understanding trends in opinion on defense budgeting is the fact that most U.S. citizens actually have little idea of how much the nation spends on its military – not in absolute terms, nor relative to other federal spending, nor relative to what other nations spend.[104] At best, national media may broadly convey a sense of whether the Pentagon budget is slated to grow or shrink in a particular year. And this is likely to be salient news only to the extent and in the way that interested parties make it one.

Who makes security policy?

The American electorate does not make national security policy, of course. Nor does it decide absolute levels of Pentagon spending, which instead reflect precedent and the interplay of institutional interests. At best, the electorate can only affirm or oppose aspects of security policy through intermittent political activity and expression. Elections and primaries offer periodic avenues for the expression of popular will, but voter choice is tightly constrained and the impact of that choice on specific foreign and security policy options is attenuated, indirect, and imprecise. Nonetheless, political leaders and parties suffer a general decrement in credibility and influence if seen to stand against strong majority opinion on salient policy issues.

There are numerous currents of institutional interest and authority that interact to shape American practice in the security realm.[105] Principal among the currents affecting defense spending in particular are:

- The efforts of national security managers to implement official security policy;
- The doctrinal preferences of the armed services;
- The contending bureaucratic interests of the State Department, Defense Department, individual armed services, and subordinate military commands, agencies, and offices;
- The constituency interests of influential members of Congress;
- The commercial interests of the defense industry; and,
- The partisan political interests of the White House and major political parties.

A particular leader or agency may be implicated in more than one of these currents, but each current has its own trajectory and momentum. And all strive to influence the electorate which has the power, over time, to bind security policy at the margins – as is the case today with regard to defense spending and new military commitments abroad.

Factors shaping public opinion

Intensive polling by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) has shown that the preferences expressed by a respondent pool will vary significantly depending on how questions about defense spending are framed.[106] Alternately mentioning the prospect of higher taxes, federal deficits, domestic needs, foreign threats, the putative need to maintain U.S. military superiority, or the opinions of U.S. political leaders can flip the balance between "spend more" and "spend less." Likewise, framing the question in different ways can swell or shrink the proportion of respondents expressing support for *status quo* spending trends.

The PIPA results highlight the fact that broader strategic, political, and economic considerations play a key part in shaping public sentiments about defense spending. These form the backdrop in everyday life and media representation to the public's thinking about how much emphasis to put on additional investments in military power. As suggested above, public responses to questions about Pentagon budgets have little to do with absolute levels of spending. What matters is how the perceived rise or fall in spending resonates with broader considerations. Thus, public responses to simple polling questions on defense spending are best understood as reflecting sentiments about a broader mix of issues.

Drawing on the PIPA and other survey results, the considerations that can significantly affect public opinion about defense spending include:[107]

- Perceived changes in defense spending,
- Perceptions of the strategic environment and threats to U.S. security,
- Perceptions of national strength and defense preparedness,
- New security policy initiatives (including war) and their outcomes,
- Economic and fiscal conditions, and
- Presumed trade-offs between defense and other government spending.

Some of these inputs are directly experienced by the public, for instance: personal economic circumstances. Much else is mediated (as noted previously) by opinion-leaders and thus subject to manipulation and framing.[108] In the case of defense preparedness, warnings of a "hollow military" set an especially effective message frame. They invoke uncertainty and speak to Americans' invariant desire for reliable protection. This works by centering discussion on the prospect of a sudden, unanticipated, and catastrophic collapse of defense capabilities.[109]

Citizens are only selectively receptive to opinion leaders, however; They tend to privilege those leaders whose general disposition echoes their own. This makes partisan and ideological allegiances important factors in opinion formation. It also means that any apparent consensus among Democratic and Republican leaders is especially powerful in shaping public opinion.[110]

Polling on Military Strength and Preparedness

Since 1983, Gallup has also periodically asked respondents whether they felt that U.S. defenses were "stronger now than needs to be, not strong enough, or about right."[111] (Fig. 7.) In all years but 2007 and 2008, pluralities felt U.S. military capability was "about right." Nonetheless, the feeling that America's defenses are "not strong enough" has always attracted a sizable minority – in most years ranging between 32% and 47% of respondents. In 2007 and 2008, this sentiment gained plurality assent.

A related question polled by Gallup since 2001 has asked if respondents feel satisfied or dissatisfied with America's military strength and preparedness.[112] Significant majorities have expressed satisfaction in all years polled, although the size of these majorities has ranged from 61% to 83%.[113] The variation in "defense satisfaction" roughly accords with

Figure 7. Gallup Polling on Military Spending, Strength, and Preparedness

	DoD Budget % Change*	Level of Pentagon Spending % respondents			Strength of National Defenses % respondents			Military Strength and Preparedness % respondents	
		Too Much	About Right	Too Little	Excess Strength	About Right	Not Enough	Satisfied	Not Satisfied
2014	+0.3	**37****	32	28				72	22
2013	-11	35	**36**	26				74	21
2012	-5	**41**	32	24	13	**54**	32	71	23
2011	-1	**39**	35	22	11	**50**	37		
2010	+5	34	**36**	27	7	**46**	45		
2009	-1.5	31	**41**	24	6	**54**	37		
2008	+12	**44**	30	22	10	41	**47**	66	30
2007	+12	**43**	35	20	8	43	**46**	62	32
2006	+11	32	**40**	25	7	**47**	43	67	28
2005	+3	30	**38**	30	9	**49**	40	66	31
2004	+8	31	**45**	22	10	**54**	34	81	17
2003	+27	27	**44**	25	13	**52**	34	83	14
2002	+8	17	**48**	33	6	**50**	43	79	19
2001	+10	19	38	**41**	7	**48**	44	61	32
2000 Aug	n.a.	20	34	**40**					
2000 May	+4	22	**44**	**31**	6	**55**	38		
1999	+8	32	**35**	28	7	**48**	42		
1998	-3	22	**45**	26					
1993	-8	**42**	38	17	16	**64**	17		
1990	+5	**50**	36	9					

* Percentage reflects budget change in current dollar amounts
** Majority/plurality position appears in bold

Sources: Gallup, Military and National Defense, www.gallup.com; DoD, "National Defense Budget Estimates for FY2015," May 2014, http://comptroller.defense.gov

changes in feelings about defense strength, as might be expected. More surprising is how both these measures have related to sentiments about military spending.

Changes in public sentiments about U.S. defense strength and preparedness do not correlate uniformly with public opinion on defense spending. Specifically, increased expressions of dissatisfaction with defense do not necessarily imply public support for increased spending. A closer look suggests that these questions access something more than the public's assessment of how well U.S. defenses match up with perceived threats. Minimally, they also reflect the public's judgment on the *use of defense resources*. Is it wise, appropriate, necessary, and efficient? When the answer to any of these is "no," there is little reason to spend more. Thus, in some circumstances, responses that show increased public concern about national defense correlate with greater support for spending *less*.

Changes in public "defense satisfaction"

Sentiment regarding defense strength and preparedness underwent several swings during the post-Cold War period. First, it changed dramatically between 1990 and early 2001, as the public's desire for a post-Cold War "peace dividend" seemed to evaporate. The percentage of Americans feeling that the nation was not "as strong as it needed to be" rose from 17% in 1990 to 44% in early 2001. Much of this change occurred after 1998 in response to intense public controversy over military readiness.

Opinion on defense spending underwent a parallel change during these years. In 1993, a plurality of Americans had favored defense cuts – 42% vs. 17%. By February 2001, this had transformed into a plurality favoring *increases* – 41% vs. 19%.[114] This reflected "hollow force" concerns, which a significant rise in spending between 1998 and 2001 had done little to retire.

Public opinion again fluctuated dramatically during the 2001-2008 period – in two steps. First, between 2001 and 2004, satisfaction with U.S. defense preparedness rebounded and the proportion of Americans feeling that the nation was not strong enough declined. This change seemingly occurred in response to initial progress in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. As the wars dragged on after 2004, however, "defense satisfaction" eroded.

By 2007 and 2008, a plurality of respondents chose the Gallup option "not strong enough" when queried about U.S. defenses. This time, however, the segment of the public feeling that the nation was spending "too much" on defense *rose* from 19% to 44% – a strong plurality sentiment. And the proportion feeling that the United States was spending too little plunged from 41% to 22%. *During 2007 and 2008, at least one-third*

of Americans favored cutting the defense budget while simultaneously feeling that U.S. defense strength was either "about right" or "not enough." These seemingly contradictory sentiments can be reconciled when understood against the backdrop of economic crisis and growing disillusionment with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

By mid-2005, absolute majorities of Americans were seeing the Iraq war as a costly mistake. By 2008, more than 60% shared this view. The Gallup results on defense satisfaction and spending suggest that, after 2004, the public became increasingly sensitive to the limits of America's "top military power" status and increasingly attentive to the balance of costs and benefits associated with war. This gave greater traction to the distinction between necessary and unnecessary military action – a distinction that the primacy strategy typically obfuscates. The pivotal question became, Which military goals are realistic and necessary – and which are not?

The public grows war wise

The experience of war and recession help explain why the public's expressed dissatisfaction with American defenses meant and implied different things in 2000 and 2008.

In 2008, public opinion had been conditioned by years of costly and indecisive war. Among other effects, this fractured leadership consensus. By contrast, the turn of opinion in 1998-2000 occurred in the context of intense controversy over a purported decline in military readiness and apparent bipartisan accord on the need to increase defense spending. The startling success of the 1991 Gulf War continued to govern sentiments about the utility of force.

The difference in economic conditions is also important. Beginning in 2007, economic and fiscal crises led the public to set a tougher standard when judging the worthiness of war efforts. By contrast, the economy was booming during the mid- to late 1990s.

Between 1993 and 2000, median household income had grown 14.5% in real terms and the federal budget had moved into surplus. Stock market values grew more than 200%, reflecting an economic sensibility that Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan called "irrational exuberance."[115] In this context, defense policy makers and analysts could assume a "money to burn" attitude with relative impunity. As one analyst opined: "A nation with a projected $1.9 trillion budget surplus can afford consistently to allocate a minimum of 4 percent of its GDP to ensure its security."[116] Some argue similarly today but with much less credibility. Why? Because between 2000 and 2011, MHI *dropped* 9% and federal deficits ballooned past $1.3 trillion.

A pending shift in opinion on defense spending?

Since 2011 public satisfaction with military preparedness has increased and clear majorities once again feel that U.S. defense strength is "about right." This is concurrent with Pentagon spending cuts and plurality support for additional cuts. It also is coinciding with public opposition to substantial new military initiatives.

The public's current reluctance to open new war fronts does not mean that it will continue to favor defense budget restraint, however. Several of the variables that affect public attitudes are changing – notably, economic and fiscal conditions. And several are especially susceptible to leadership influence. Principal among these are assessments of the threat environment and the health of America's armed forces. Finally, domestic political developments favor change. Relevant in the political sphere is the onset of a period of intense election campaigning. This is already influencing how political leaders are framing global issues and policy choices, including defense spending.

Twice in the past 40 years public opinion on defense spending shifted swiftly and dramatically from favoring reduced spending to favoring more. Both periods of change pivoted on bitter election campaigns. The first period was 1978-1982. The second was 1998-2001, as mentioned above. Comparing these pivot points with current conditions suggests that the public may soon be amenable to a rebound in defense spending – not in order to enable increased military activism but, paradoxically, *as an alternative to it*.

6. Pentagon Budget Pivot Points: 1978 and 1998

The impact of domestic politics on how the public views defense spending is evident in several periods of budget change – 1978-1981 and 1998-2000. Both share distinctive characteristics, some of which are also evident today. And in both cases, post-war declines in military spending ended and the Pentagon budget began to rebound.

The first period covers most of the Carter administration years. President Carter took office at the end of the post-Vietnam war drawdown in military personnel and budgets. Between 1968 and 1977, the Pentagon budget had declined by 30% in real terms, while the pool of active-component military personnel contracted by 38.5%. In early 1976 Gallup polling suggested that the public was supportive of this trend with 36% of respondents saying that America still spent "too much" on defense and only 22% saying it spent "too little." Soon after, however, public sentiment began to move in the opposite direction as did Carter's defense budgets.

The last Carter defense budget was 12.5% higher in real terms than the last Ford defense budget. This did not alter the trend in public sentiment, however. Gallup polling shows that "spend more" sentiment continued to increase, rising from 22% of respondents in 1976 to 51% in 1981 – a rare instance of absolute majority support for budget change.

The second period corresponds with President Clinton's second term, which marked the end of the post-Cold War drawdown. Between 1985 and 1997, the Pentagon budget had declined 35.6% in real terms, while active military personnel declined in number by 32%. The Clinton administration began to reverse the downward spending trend in early 1998 with its submission of the Fiscal Year 1999 budget. Between 1998 and 2001, the defense budget rose by almost 11% in real terms (not counting supplemental funding added by the Bush administration). Again, the rise in spending did not ease public sentiment for increased spending. Between 1998 and early 2001, the percentage of the public who thought we were spending too little on defense actually rose from 26% to 41%.

Five factors played a role in effecting a shift in public opinion during both periods:

First, the standing president seemed weakened politically by domestic developments – Carter, by persistent stagflation and the energy crisis; Clinton, by the Lewinsky scandal and his subsequent impeachment (Dec 1998).

Second, there were hotly contested and fiercely polarized election campaigns during which Democrats felt pressed to protect their right flank.

Third, partisan politics deeply inflected public debate of new security challenges abroad.

Fourth, military leaders began to warn insistently of a putative "hollowing" of the armed forces – meaning a sharp decline in combat readiness. Allegations of a weakened military and reports of trouble abroad served as reciprocal "frames," each reinforcing the other.

Fifth, there was the appearance of a bipartisan consensus taking form among policy leaders in support of higher levels of defense spending, or greater assertiveness abroad, or both.

Bipartisan consensus or its appearance can have a powerful effect on public opinion, as trusted leaders on all sides seem to point in the same direction.[117] Military leaders in particular have unique sway.[118] During both periods of transition, public opinion seemed to follow the trend of a new defense budget consensus. However, as budgets rose and the

presidency changed hands, the appearance of elite consensus evaporated and public opinion shifted back toward a "spend less" preference.[119]

Trouble at home, trouble abroad, trouble ahead

Especially prominent during the Carter years was the Iranian U.S. hostage-taking crisis (November 1979) and the failed "Eagle Claw" hostage rescue operation. Also relevant were the Nicaraguan revolution (1977-1979), the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (December 1979), and ongoing Soviet-Cuban intervention in Angola and the Ethiopia-Somalia war. As putative challenges to U.S. or allied interests, none of these were as significant as the Vietnam and Korean wars, the Cuban missile crisis, or earlier Soviet interventions in Eastern Europe. Nonetheless, they did accentuate Soviet-Cuban military activism and U.S. military failure in the face of a new regional adversary, Iran.

Clinton's second term saw no foreign policy debacles comparable to the lingering Iranian hostage crisis of the Carter years. However, there were growing concerns among experts and the public that the United States was facing new security challenges, notably: Al Qaeda and China.[120] There were three serious terrorist attacks on U.S. personnel and assets abroad between 1996 and 2000, and at least two of these were the work of bin Laden.[121] Concerns also focused on Chinese military developments after the 1995-1996 Taiwan Straits crisis. By 1998, U.S. policymakers and analysts were routinely treating China as a potential regional competitor to the United States.[122] A final irritant throughout Clinton's second term was Saddam Hussein who, despite a short intense U.S. bombing campaign in 1998, seemed to be effectively resisting arms control efforts while the international coalition supporting sanctions slowly frayed.

Challenged from the right, Democratic administrations took a hawkish turn during both periods. Few Republicans were as hawkish as Carter's national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, especially after 1978 as he pushed for activation of the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (1980) and formulated the "Carter Doctrine" (which designated the Persian Gulf as an area of vital interest to be protected "by any means necessary").[123] The Carter Administration also took the controversial step of shifting America's nuclear posture further along to a warfighting stance.[124]

The Clinton administration took a bellicose turn in 1998-1999, conducting three significant combat operations over an eight month period beginning in August 1998: Operations Infinite Reach (Sudan and Afghanistan), Desert Fox (Iraq), and Allied Force (former Yugoslavia). (August 1998 through February 1999 also was a pivotal period in the Lewinsky scandal, encompassing Clinton's grand jury testimony and impeachment.)

The Clinton administration faced incessant complaints about overusing and misusing the armed forces abroad. Although Clinton did conduct significant contingency operations in eight countries during his two terms, the overall number of troop/days that military personnel spent deployed in such operations was less than 15% the average during the subsequent Bush administration.[125] More to the point was the character of some of the Clinton initiatives; They were peace and humanitarian operations, which some military and congressional leaders thought impaired military readiness and distracted the armed forces from their principal role.[126] Some Senators and Congress members (mostly Republicans) also complained that these operations suffered from poorly defined or implausible objectives and did not clearly serve the national interest. This was part of a more general conservative opposition to the administration's multilateralism and institutionalism. Neoliberal and neoconservative interventionists responded by playing the "isolationism" card, helping to establish a consensus that equated restraint with isolationism.[127]

There were some indications during Clinton's second term that America's armed forces were not yet well-adapted to the new challenges facing America. Attempts to interdict Al Qaeda leadership with cruise missile attacks in 1998 failed. And Operation Allied Force (1999), which aimed to compel Yugoslav withdrawal from Kosovo province, took longer than expected. Although the operation achieved its goals, the U.S. military effort was deemed "disjointed." The U.S. Army in particular had a hard time playing a timely, meaningful role.[128] None of these shortfalls implied the need for a dramatic increase in defense spending.[129] Nonetheless, they were worthy of concern, received a great deal of media attention, and provided grist for partisan mills.

Mollifying the Chiefs and biasing public debate

Military leaders enjoy unique political leverage in the United States in large part due to the status of the institutions they lead. The U.S. armed forces routinely register as the most trusted of American institutions, out-polling even religious institutions.[130] Although military leaders employ this leverage gingerly, the domestic problems faced by both the Carter and Clinton administrations gave military leaders greater latitude to resist administration narratives. Indeed, during Clinton administration's final years the Joint Chiefs were in virtual revolt.[131]

The centerpiece of Pentagon dissatisfaction during both periods of transition was the putative "hollowing" of the armed forces, presumably due to budget reductions.[132] In congressional testimony, the Joint Chiefs' support for administration budgets became faint and *pro forma,* while they instead emphasized increased risk and the prospective

erosion of military capabilities over time. The effect of their congressional testimony was to inflame the issue.

In retrospect, readiness problems were not nearly as serious as military leaders claimed – and certainly not during the Clinton years.[133] Nor were they principally the consequence of budget reductions. While gross levels of Pentagon spending had declined in the decade before readiness issues became news, military expenditures per active-duty person in uniform actually grew in real terms over previous years during both the Carter and Clinton administrations.[134] This was partly because reductions in gross spending were matched by reductions in force size. For instance, operations and maintenance spending per active-duty troop in 1998 was 30% higher than in 1985, corrected for inflation. Still, the allegations, buttressed by authoritative military officials, were politically potent.

During both transition periods, Democratic and Republican leaders responded to Pentagon assertiveness by enacting or proposing hikes in spending (while disagreeing about the appropriate amount). Thus, both the Reagan- and G.W. Bush-era military buildups actually began during the previous administrations – three or four years before the presidency changed hands. Democrats may have hoped to quell Pentagon protests and protect their right flank, but accommodation also served to validate "hollow force" claims and contribute to upward pressure on the budget.

The 2000 election campaign featured Democratic and Republican candidates in a bidding war over boosting defense spending, which by June 2000 had already grown nearly 13% above its 1997 low point in real terms.[135] Neither linked the prospect of increased defense spending to an increase in overseas activism, however. Indeed, they matched their spending competition with dueling rhetoric about the need for America to practice humility abroad.[136] This accorded with public sentiment favoring a strong but reserved America, and it played on the prospect of increasing defense spending as an alternative to activism, rather than an enabler of it.

Second thoughts on defense spending

As noted above, the surge in support for defense spending was short-lived during both periods:

- By late 1982 public sentiment had returned to Vietnam syndrome levels with 16% of the population saying America was spending "too little" and 41% saying that it was spending too much.
- Between February 2001 and February 2004, the proportion of Gallup respondents wanting increased spending dropped from 41% to 22%, while the proportion wanting less increased from 19% to 31%.

These were not simply judgments against the rise in spending levels. Both periods of remission were marked by rising deficits and economic troubles.[137] The change in public mood also involved emerging dissatisfaction with changes in U.S. military posture. In the case of the Reagan administration, the change was especially rapid.

Reagan took office in 1981 with the public worried about American weakness abroad and expressing 51% support for increased Pentagon spending. Only 15% thought the nation was already spending too much. Two years later, the defense budget had grown by 30%. However, the economy had entered a recessionary cycle and public concern grew about what seemed a rash and bellicose (or "war seeking") turn in U.S. policy.[138] As a result, public sentiment about defense spending flipped, Reagan's popularity rating dropped from 51% to 43%, and Republicans lost 26 House seats in the 1982 mid-term election.

7. The Obama Years: A Captive Presidency

Pentagon spending: Going along to get along

President Obama has avoided the type of difficulties described above – at least until recently. Unlike Carter, he did not begin his presidency at the end of a period of reductions in the military's size and budget – quite the opposite. And, unlike Clinton, he did not himself implement reductions during his first years in office. Despite the nation's economic and fiscal crisis, Obama's first four Pentagon budgets (adjusted for inflation) provided total funding equal to that provided in Bush's last four – approximately $2.8 trillion in each case.[139]

While both the Carter and Clinton administrations found themselves at logger-heads with the Pentagon brass over a variety of issues, President Obama has proved more accommodating – for instance, by acceding to the Afghanistan troop surge.[140] More significant was his response to the service chiefs' dissatisfaction with his first ten-year spending plan (offered early in 2009). His next year's plan (Fiscal Year 2011) boosted the ten-year Pentagon base budget by five percent. It is against this boosted level that subsequent DoD savings plans were measured.

Although contention over budgeting grew intense beginning in 2011, this was part of the larger struggle to reduce federal debt, deficits, and spending. In practical terms, defense spending decisions were bound by the bipartisan Budget Control Act of 2011, which dictated a rollback. In this context, the Obama administration proffered plans that would bring the Pentagon budget more in line with BCA discretionary spending caps, while also arguing strenuously against deeper "sequestration" cuts. The administration successfully cast the prospect of such cuts as a problem whose source was Congressional gridlock.[141]

Obama's secretaries of defense, chairmen of the JCS, and service chiefs were free to pressure Congress to avert sequestration and lift the caps on discretionary spending – a goal shared by the President. Pentagon leaders spared no hyperbole in opposing measures that would reduce the peacetime defense budget much below $520 billion.[142] To mitigate DoD's concerns, the administration allowed the migration of costs from the base DoD budget to the Overseas Contingency account, which was not capped by the BCA. And, in 2014, the President proposed an "Opportunity, Growth and Security Initiative" that, if offset by tax increases and mandatory spending cuts, would give the Pentagon an additional $26 billion for the year.[143]

In sum, from the beginning of his administration, President Obama took an accommodating stance on Pentagon funding – one that his Democratic predecessors had been grudgingly compelled to assume. In this way, he averted an openly contentious relationship with America's most prestigious institution.

The new look in military activism: lighter and wider

Over the course of his presidency, President Obama has restored and renovated the neoliberal version of the Primacy strategy.[144] This puts greater emphasis on multilateral cooperation and diplomacy than does the neoconservative variety.[145] Hawkish voices (including some in the Pentagon) derided Obama's withdrawal from Iraq, but it had been decided by Iraq's failure to renew the US-Iraq Status of Forces Agreement. And, like the drawdown in Afghanistan, it accorded with public opinion.

In some ways, Obama has charted a course part way between those of the Clinton and Bush administrations. In others, he has exceeded both. The so-called "long war against violent extremism" proceeds apace, now as a war that dare not speak its name. However, the administration has stepped away from large-scale protracted military deployments and instead put emphasis on lower-visibility operations and supporting roles for U.S. forces. These include drone and combat aircraft strikes – over 400 drone strikes since Obama took office – covert operations, arms transfers, logistical and intelligence support, training, and other forms of security assistance. Borrowing on the concept of the "non-integrating gap" developed by Thomas Barnett, the Obama strategy is best described as involving a protracted, global, low-intensity campaign against militant or violent non-integrating regimes, movements, and organizations.[146]

U.S. military activism is less intensive and focused today than during the Bush years but more expansive, including new or increased attention to Libya, Syria, Yemen, Pakistan, Somali, and several other African nations. The deployment of special operations forces – now active in more than 100 nations – has expanded significantly as have the number of

security cooperation arrangements, which now involve more than 150 nations.[147] The administration's "Asia pivot" (better described as part of an Asia-Africa "spread") signals a more consistent and energetic effort to counter-balance and contain Chinese power. Something similar now seems on the agenda for Russia.

The growing scope of U.S. military activism clearly runs counter to the secular trend in public opinion. However, the lower-visibility, light-footprint methods favored by the Obama administration mitigates the tension between public preference and government practice. For instance, when U.S. polls describe overseas drone strikes as attacks on suspected foreign terrorists, between 50% and 80% of respondents typically voice approval.[148] This may all seem too diffuse and deliberate from a neoconservative perspective, but it could offer the best hope of sustaining a proactive military strategy given fiscal austerity and the public mood.

8. Transition Point 2016?

Since 2012, the factors associated with past rebounds in support for bigger defense budgets have again become prominent, beginning with a distinct decline in the President's popularity.[149] The United States is entering a period of intense electoral campaigning that will span 2014-2016. Both the Senate and the Presidency are up for grabs. This favors partisan pyrotechnics. Democratic candidates will focus on protecting their right flanks, per usual. And media and expert discourse will move in a more hawkish direction. Already the leading Democratic contender for the presidency is positioning herself to the right of the Obama administration on recent foreign policy issues.[150]

Thinking inside the box

In several ways, the policy compromises of the Obama administration delimit the current debate, curtailing the prospects for reform. First, the President's accommodation with the Pentagon on spending has created the appearance of bipartisan leadership accord on the need for baseline spending to significantly exceed one-half trillion dollars annually. For more than three years civilian and military leaders at the Pentagon have been adamant in warning that dipping below this amount by even as little as 5% might have catastrophic consequences. This has primed policy discourse to respond to "hollow force" claims, which are now fully deployed.[151] And it has virtually ensured that Democratic and Republican candidates in 2016 will vie in bidding up Pentagon spending (as was the case in 2000).

Judging from recent White House and Republican proposals for Pentagon spending, Presidential candidates in 2016 will probably advocate future baseline Pentagon budgets

exceeding $600 billion (then-year dollars). This assumes modest GDP growth, lower federal deficits, and modification of the BCA – all of which are likely. Adjusted for inflation, this would represent a greater than 12% increase over current levels and a budget 50% larger than in 2000-2001.

Obama's perpetuation of the primacy strategy also has locked policy discourse in a neoliberal versus neoconservative box. The primacy approach overvalues and overplays America's "sole military superpower" status, seeing security problems everywhere as a challenge to U.S. leadership. It privileges military responses of one sort or the other and focuses debate on the calibration of military action: What type? How much? How long? Discounted by primacists is the possibility that some problems admit only cooperative solutions and that the utility of military or confrontational approaches is limited. Thus, faced with difficult challenges – as in Iraq, Syria, and Ukraine – the primacy approach typically favors escalation. And it legitimates charges of "weakness" should policymakers or the public seek more deliberate or restrained approaches. So it is not surprising that Second World War issue frames are now fully in play – casting Assad and Putin as Hitler, warning against a replay of Munich-like appeasement, and tarring non-interventionary sentiment as isolationist.[152] "Hollow force" claims are also being linked by military leaders to instability abroad.[153]

Will fear compel increased public support for deeper, more energetic intervention, as Walter Russell Meads predicts? Will it compel a rebound in support for defense spending? Despite the hawkish turn in policy discourse, the American public has mostly resisted a rebound in activism and spending.[154] As argued in the introduction, popular opinion on striking ISIS may seem a reversion to interventionism, but it is not.

The ISIS digression

The coverage, debate, and policy regarding ISIS has been driven substantially by domestic partisan politics and by news frenzy. The impact of these illustrates the susceptibility of public opinion to shaping by media and political dynamics. The polling blip on ISIS also shows how "mission creep" and "opinion creep" go hand-in-hand, each pushing the other forward. In the ISIS case, limited U.S. combat action based on a popular humanitarian goal – rescuing the entrapped Yazidi minority – prompted ISIS retaliation on hostage Americans. This dramatically altered U.S. popular assessments of the situation, feeding the partisan mill and creating pressure for both vertical and horizontal escalation. As the administration escalated its response, its domestic political opponents simply revised their criteria of adequacy upward. For President Obama, political credit and gain depends on achieving escalation dominance – not over ISIS (that already exists) but over his domestic opponents. This is a partisan dynamic that can lead the nation deep into costly,

unproductive choices.[155] These eventually sober public opinion, but not necessarily before the next election.

Still, historical precedent suggests that the U.S. public will not soon support a return to big protracted military operations abroad – and certainly not the commitment of ground troops. It is worth recalling that Americans' reluctance to take on major new contingency operations after Vietnam was not truly tested and resolved until the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf War – 15 years after the United States exited Vietnam.

Defending with dollars

Public support for a big rebound in Pentagon spending is a more complicated issue. A boost in spending could find support as an acceptable assertion of strength – *one that does not necessarily entail increased military activism abroad.* Formally, it is consistent with either a "Fortress America" or "Arsenal of Democracy" vision of security. This outcome would accord with the historical precedents set in 1978-1981 and 1998-2000, when Americans favored increased spending but not with a view toward military adventurism.

Weighing against public acceptance of higher defense spending is America's "new normal" economic circumstance. Although U.S. GDP is slowly recovering, the improvement in the economic circumstances of most Americans has lagged behind:[156]

- U.S. GDP has grown 5% in real terms since 2011. By contrast, median household income grew only about 2.5% during the same period. It remains a good 5% below the pre-recession level, which itself is lower than the level in 2000.
- Unemployment was 6.6% in January 2014. This is much better than the recession high-point of 10%, but significantly short of the pre-recession level of 4.6%.

Still, median household income may reach its pre-recession levels by 2017, making a rise in defense spending more saleable. Much depends on the degree of uniformity among opinion leaders in espousing hawkish and alarmist views on international events and U.S. national defenses.[157]

9. Conclusion

This much is certain: A flexing of the Pentagon's budget muscles will not redress the problems that vex U.S. security policy. Nor will it heal the recurring gap between official policy and majority opinion. Contrary to public preferences, increased Pentagon spending

will enable increased military activism. It also will reduce the pressure on the Pentagon to reform how it uses its prodigious resources. For these reasons, any increase in public support for a rebound in the defense budget will probably be short-lived, as was the case 10- and 30-years ago.

The current trend in official policy represents a missed opportunity. Economic and strategic realities both argue for a thorough reset of U.S. security policy. Recent polling suggests that the American public is ready to consider change. And policy alternatives are available for consideration.[158] What is lacking is positive leadership. An optimistic sign is the emergence since 2011 of bipartisan Congressional and NGO cooperation to restrain defense spending, based mostly on fiscal concerns.[159] This may provide the soil in which a concerted effort to reset security policy can germinate.

A more fundamental concern is the challenge to democratic governance implied by the gap between official security policy and the strategic preferences of most Americans. It is not surprising that there are knowledge gaps between the general public and those who focus professionally on security issues and instruments. Such gaps can be mended through openness and critical public discourse. More intractable are gaps due to the subsumption of public policy by institutional, commercial, and political interests. Again, critical public discourse can serve as a corrective. But special interests work to distort discourse as surely as they distort policy.

The integrity of public debate on security issues minimally requires that opinion leaders put down those tropes, metaphors, and framing devices that appeal to public fear and uncertainty. This includes facile allusions to the threats and failures of the 1930s and 1940s: Hitler, Munich, Pearl Harbor, and isolationism.[160] Such allusions should uniformly face a long hard climb to credibility. The same holds true for most "hollow force" claims made on behalf of America's half-trillion dollar military. If the Pentagon cannot deliver reasonable levels of military security while absorbing more money than the Cold War average then we should look first to failures of defense stewardship or strategy – or both.

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Across an entire population, individuals' perspectives on policy issues tend to cluster into a limited number of distinct opinion cohorts – population subgroups whose members share a common disposition. This clustering is evident in close analysis of extensive recursive opinion polls like those conducted by the Pew Center and Chicago Council. The various opinion clusters represented in a population may correspond roughly to the more formal strategic theories or perspectives debated by policy analysts and leaders.

The different opinion groups can be distinguished from each other in terms of how they differently mix a set of basic policy dispositions, such as: isolationism vs. engagement, unilateralism vs. multilateralism, altruism vs. narrow national interest, and preference for military vs. non-military forms of engagement. One analyst (Wittkopf, 1986) has identified four opinion cohorts among the American public – isolationists, internationalists, hardliners, and accommodationists – although there are other and more complex typologies as well.

Different opinion cohorts sometimes agree in their assessments of a specific event or policy option. Also, individuals can migrate from one cohort to another over time, and new generations of Americans distribute differently among cohorts. These variations mean that the relative size of cohorts can change. Dramatic changes in the strategic environment can accelerate such realignments.

The division of populations into opinion cohorts applies to both the general public and to elites. How elites and the general public proportion themselves among opinion cohorts may differ markedly, however. And this is one way to represent the elite-public gap on foreign policy.

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- A distinct margin of superiority over adversaries across the spectrum of conflict, including an incomparable edge in military technology,
- A defense establishment comprising more than 3.5 million active, reserve, civilian, and contract personnel with an annual baseline budget exceeding $500 billion (USD 2014),
- A routine overseas presence of 200,000 military personnel and a robust commitment to core military alliances (now including 40 nations) as well as security assistance partnerships with numerous other nations (now including more than 100),
- Capacities to simultaneously conduct many smaller-scale contingency operations worldwide as well as to surge hundreds of thousands of troops for two larger-scale campaigns (of limited duration) when needed.

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The real conceit of U.S. post-Cold War security strategy has been to use dominant military power to transform the strategic environment in ways that preclude the emergence of significant challenges to the United States, its allies, and its vision of world order. This entails using American military capacity to constrain the policy choices of emerging powers, patrol the global commons, and rectify non-complying states. These goals significantly exceed the traditional ones of simple defense, deterrence, and crisis response. Relative to earlier practice, the scope of military activism has widened while the threshold for using force has come down.

In a sense the Primacy strategy arrogates for the United States the role of global security manager. This accords with a leadership style that is hegemonic or, at times, unilateralist. As a strategy, it is relatively insensitive to cost, having been formulated during a time of financial exuberance and surplus budgets. It also is relatively insensitive to the prospect of "blowback" from military activism – the negative, inadvertent consequences of forceful action.

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91. This estimate is based on the cost of transitioning from the U.S. armed forces posture circa 1998 to the one outlined in "Reasonable Defense: A Sustainable Approach to Securing the Nation," which envisions a force comprising 1.15 million active-component personnel and permanent peacetime overseas deployments of no more than 115,000 personnel. The estimate also excludes the costs of the Iraq war and assumes a more focused approach to defeating the Bin Laden terrorist organization following the 11 Sep 2001 attacks. Total Pentagon base budget spending for 1998-2014 is assumed to be $7.1 trillion. Total Overseas Contingency Operations cost is assumed to be $400 billion. See: Carl Conetta, "Reasonable Defense: A Sustainable Approach to Securing the Nation," PDA Briefing Report #21, 14 Nov 2012, available at http://comw.org/pda/reasonable-defense-a-sustainable-approach-to-securing-the-nation/

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100. A variety of perceptions may figure in the public's belief that America is the world's top military power. A 2010 Rasmussen Poll found that 58% of likely voters recognized that the United States spends more on defense than any other nation (although a 2012 poll by the University of Maryland's Program for Public Consultation found that 56% underestimated the extent of America's spending margin.) Also, since 1989, conventional military contests between the United States and other nations have uniformly resulted in relatively quick U.S. victory with relatively few U.S. casualties.

Media depictions of the contemporary U.S. military tend to show it as incomparably well-trained and well-equipped (even if not especially successful in unconventional and complex operations). And no other nation's military is depicted in the news media as being nearly as active globally as the U.S. military. This conclusion is based on a Lexis-Nexis search of mostly U.S. print media and broadcast transcripts covering eight randomly-chosen periods of three days each spread across the past 20 years. Military identifier phrases were matched with foreign deployment phrases and with country identifying phrases such as "U.S. Army" or "British troops." Fifty-six percent of the more than 6000 media references mentioned the U.S. armed forces. The next most frequently mentioned armed forces were the British at 19%. Other members of the control group (France, India, Israel, and Russia) were mentioned less frequently.

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102. "Military superiority" is hard to usefully define and its import is unclear. There are various ways to measure military power – analytical and impressionistic, quantitative and qualitative, static and dynamic. All aim to give or convey some assurance about the outcome of hypothetical future contests or endeavors. This points to what should be the central concern in assessing the adequacy of armed forces: "mission" or "objective." What is the military goal in question? Is it global transformation? Nation building? Or defense of a more finite sort? An unrealistic mission can undo any military force.

103. Program for Public Consultation, "Majority of Americans Willing to Make Defense Cuts," 10 May 2012, available at http://www.public-consultation.org/studies/defensebudget_may12.html

104. Program for Public Consultation, "Majority of Americans Willing to Make Defense Cuts," ibid.

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108. See footnotes 85, 86, and 89.

109. "Hollow force" properly refers to a condition in which a military is substantially less capable than its apparent size and equipment level suggests. This is a condition worthy of grave concern. It is a precursor to military disaster, possibly with strategic consequences – as the Iraqi military has recently illustrated. Of course, armed forces routinely suffer less serious deficits in readiness and sustainability. There is a great and consequential difference between "hollow" and "less than perfect" or "less than desired" – a difference obscured by facile references to "hollow forces." For a critical examination of the "hollow force" issue see footnote 133.

110. Adam J. Berinsky, "Assuming the Costs of War: Events, Elites, and American Public Support for Military Conflict," Journal of Politics, Nov 2007, available at http://web.mit.edu/berinsky/www/acw.pdf

111. Gallup, "Military and National Defense" polls, ibid. See polling results for "Do you, yourself feel that our national defense is stronger now than it needs to be, not strong enough, or about right at the present time?"

112. Gallup, "Military and National Defense" polls, ibid. See polling results for "Next we'd like to know how you feel about the state of the nation in each of the following areas. For each one, please say whether you are very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied. If you don't have enough information about a particular subject to rate it, just say so. How about the nation's military strength and preparedness?"

113. The high baseline level of positive responses probably indicates that the question is partially accessing the public's fundamental respect for the U.S. military as an institution. Clearly, the question carries a compound meaning.

114. Interestingly, defense budget authority for fiscal years 1993 and 2001 was almost identical in constant 2015 dollars – $459 billion versus $449 billion – although it was viewed as too high in the first case, too low in the second.

115. Federal Reserve Board, "The Challenge of Central Banking in a Democratic Society," Remarks by Chairman Alan Greenspan at the Francis Boyer Lecture of the American Enterprise Institute, Washington DC, 5 Dec 1996, available at http://www.federalreserve.gov/board docs/speeches/1996/19961205.htm

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118. Golby, et. al., "Listening to the Generals," op. cit.

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120. Robert Kagan, "World of Problems," Washington Post, 10 Apr 2000, available at http:// carnegieendowment.org/2000/04/10/world-of-problems/4w1q?reloadFlag=1

121. These were the 25 June 1996 truck bomb attack on the Khobar Towers in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia; The 7 Aug 1998 truck bombing of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania; and, The 12 Oct 2000 attack on U.S. Navy destroyer USS Cole in Yemen.

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