

5

The Reasonable Public and the Polarized Policy Process

I. M. (Mac) Destler

We live in curious times. We seem to have a rational public and an ideological ruling class. Average Americans are basically centrist, prone to balance, compromise, fair shares, reasonable resolutions. Their Congress is polarized, hyperpartisan, responsive to “cause” activists of left and right. Washington regularly misreads the former and bemoans the latter.

Exhibit A was the impeachment of President William Jefferson Clinton. Showing astoundingly bad judgment and an excruciating lack of self-control, he indulged himself in an affair with a White House intern, then lied about it—in legal proceedings, and to the American public. He had also, by some combination of skill and luck, presided over a national prosperity—soaring income and productivity growth and low inflation complete with fiscal surplus—that virtually no one thought possible on January 20, 1993. And his empathy with Americans’ goals and needs was uncanny. The public’s conclusion? Bad man, good president. Censure him and move on. The congressional resolution? Haul out the heavy guns. A year of bitter wrangling, driven by activists on the Clinton-hating right, ending in a partisan House vote for his ouster and acquittal by the Senate (also along mainly partisan lines) and no censure resolution at all. Meanwhile, Washington vacillated between certainty that the latest juicy revelation would finally destroy Clinton’s public support and wishing that statesmen would emerge to lead us out of the mess.

We were taught in school that our founding fathers sought a republic, not a democracy, to provide buffers for extremes in public sentiment. But today’s America has turned James Madison on his head. It is the people that seem sensible and stable. The passions are in the men and women who purport to represent them, and in the activist minorities to whom these “representatives” respond. It is not just “a growing gap between the interests of political

elites and the preferences of average Americans,”¹ important though that be. It is that the politicians seem to be pulling apart even as the people, by and large, stay together. And there was no fundamental break from this pattern in the initial months of the George W. Bush administration.

* * *

The above seems a strange start to an essay on the politics of American opinion and American foreign policy. Unmentioned are the dilemmas that follow Cold War victory, the choices the nation faces in a twenty-first-century world. But there is an eerie connection—reflected, for example, in the Senate’s bitter partisan wrangle over, and rejection of, the comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty in October 1999. In matters international as well as domestic, our leaders are blessed with a “rational public”² that supports reasonable action, sensible governmental engagement, reflecting values as well as interests. Leaders are often blind to this blessing—in important part because their polarized, day-to-day Washington political environment reflects so little of it. But a steady, humane, constructive American foreign policy may depend on their discovering it, building on it, exploiting it.

WHAT AMERICANS THINK— AND WHAT WASHINGTON THINKS THEY THINK

Through most of the 1990s, it was conventional wisdom in Washington that Americans wished to pull back from global engagement. In semistructured interviews conducted with eighty-three policy practitioners in early 1996, part of a comprehensive research project carried out by the author and Steven Kull in 1995–1998, three-fourths of them expressed this view. Half of these same practitioners thought citizens to be negative toward the United Nations (just one-fourth believed them favorable). Two-thirds saw the public as opposed to foreign aid in principle. By contrast, over half believed the public wanted either to maintain or increase the level of spending for national defense. Belief in public neoisolationism was particularly strong on Capitol Hill, and among members of the media.³

The actual views of Americans were and are quite different—if public opinion surveys are to be believed. Sixty-plus percent consistently want the United States to “play an active part in the world,” unchanged since the Cold War.⁴ Overwhelming majorities support the United Nations, and majorities or pluralities consistently favor participation in U.N. peacekeeping and full U.S. payment of back dues. There is a strong preference for multilateral, as opposed to unilateral, U.S. international engagement. Americans do want to cut foreign aid, but this is apparently because they estimate U.S. spending at 15 to 30 times its actual amount; they support it overwhelmingly in principle, however, and favor at least current spending levels when informed what

they are.⁵ They also back, overwhelmingly, a robust defense, but when they learn how enormous U.S. defense spending remains compared to that of other nations, they tilt toward serious reductions.

When these results—drawing on all extant opinion surveys—were presented to sophisticated Washington practitioners, they expressed skepticism, and suggested that such public support is soft: a mile wide perhaps, but surely an inch deep. Asked to make their challenges concrete, they suggested multiple ways that Americans' responses to survey questions might be misleading. Asked to propose alternative questions that would uncover the isolationism they felt is present, they responded intelligently and creatively. But citizen responses to *their* questions did not change the fundamental picture.

- One challenge reflected the view that *issues play differently in the heat of election campaigns*; in that context, it was said, voters opt for candidates who favor cutbacks, whatever they might state generally. We tested this view several different ways: the most vivid was in the form of “attack ads” denouncing a fictional incumbent for supporting foreign aid or payment of U.N. dues. Ads and incumbent “responses” were checked with campaign professionals for their plausibility, then read to poll respondents. But on foreign aid those polled backed the incumbent by 53 to 37 percent; on U.N. dues, the margin was 56 to 37 percent.
- A second line of skepticism saw *support for international engagement as soft*: critics held their views more intensely, it was argued, and were more likely to hold to them when challenged. But surveys showed that those who felt “strongly” were as likely to be positive as those who did not. To test for *resilience*, we presented three strong contrary arguments to supporters and opponents of foreign aid, and did the same for supporters and opponents of participation in U.N. peacekeeping. It turned out that the views of critics were a bit *less* resilient than those of supporters.
- A third plausible suggestion was that supporters were less attentive to the issues and less active politically. We tested this by comparing respondents according to their answers to questions about how closely they followed international issues, whether their votes were influenced by candidates' foreign policy stands, and whether they had contributed to a campaign or contacted Congress on an international issue. The attentive and active proved significantly *more* proengagement, though those who had contacted Congress were somewhat less positive toward the United Nations.
- It was argued further that the public would cut international programs if faced with the sort of trade-offs Congress must address. So we gave respondents the opportunity to reallocate the money that the average taxpayer provides for the discretionary federal budget. They made substantial changes. Spending for human capital (education, job training,

medical research) fared best, but international spending (State Department, United Nations, foreign aid) came in second, up no less than 77 percent. Defense was the big loser.

- Finally, it was argued that, since members of Congress should know their constituencies, we could assume that representatives with very strong antiengagement records represented voters who felt likewise. So we conducted separate polls in the districts of four members who had voted consistently against aid and the United Nations. But views in these districts were, for the most part, indistinguishable from those in the national sample.

Thus the challenges from practitioners were generally refuted: public support remained. So we shifted the focus of our analysis from the public to the Washington community. Our study found a number of plausible explanations why they might be misreading the public, all supported by evidence from interviews.

- Policy practitioners may misinterpret dissatisfaction with the United States playing a hegemonic (world policeman) role, and a consequent desire for more international burdensharing, as a public wish to disengage. (The public does tend to think the United States is doing too much, and doing it alone.)
- They may misread the vocal public—constituents who express discontent at district meetings—as the majority and fail to seek more comprehensive information about public opinion.
- They may assume that congressional action is a faithful reflection of citizens' preferences. (The press is particularly prone to do so, and Capitol Hill in turn often sees the public through media eyes, creating the possibility of a “closed loop.”)

We also developed a systematic political analysis of why this particular misreading of the public (the belief that it wants to pull back internationally) could arise and persist.⁶

- *Why did it get established in the first place?* From a Washington perspective, the belief that the American public wanted to disengage was *plausible*, consistent with major, visible recent developments abroad and at home. There was the sudden end to the Cold War, the ongoing driver of U.S. internationalism since 1947. This was followed by the unraveling of President George Bush's reelection campaign in 1992, as challenger Bill Clinton drew blood with the charge that he had spent too much time on foreign affairs. A more complicated contributor was the rise in American politics, over the past quarter-century, of forces la-

beled “conservative.” The most visible conservative platform of the nineties, the “Contract with America,” included attacks on U.S. involvement in U.N. peacekeeping. And voters gave its proponents a smashing electoral victory in 1994.

- *Once established, why did it persist?* Because the political market doesn’t provide a corrective. The American public doesn’t give priority to international issues when it goes to the polls. The executive branch doesn’t give priority to public opinion when it makes foreign policy. The legislative branch cares a great deal about public opinion, but not opinion on international matters and especially not as it is reflected in polls. Members of Congress have no overriding stake in getting that opinion right because they are unlikely to lose elections for getting it wrong. And executive and legislative branch officials don’t challenge the conventional belief in public neoisolationism because they fear they’ll be labeled unrealistic, even naive, undercutting their influence. For all these intertwined reasons, the belief that the public wants to withdraw has proved persistent, even *self-reinforcing*, once it is established.

Finally, once established, the belief that the public wants to disengage has been *convenient* for those whose priorities have been elsewhere. Clinton was elected on a primarily domestic agenda (“the economy, stupid!”) in 1992. Republicans stressed home issues two years later. With leaders in both White House and Congress inwardly focused, not wanting to give energy to campaigning for international engagement, the view of a negative public offered a nice rationalization, highlighted in the view repeatedly expressed to us by members of Congress: “We’d do more but the American people won’t let us.”

THE POLARIZATION OF PARTY POLITICS

An important additional part of the story, however, is that American political leaders have been spending less and less of their time seeking viable consensus in the center, and more of their time fighting for partisan and ideological advantage. They have not been listening to the majority public because their minds and hearts have been elsewhere. In this context, their assertions about public opinion have tended to be opportunistic, weapons in a bipolar battle. Nowhere has this been more evident than in our political parties, our Congress, and the cause-based interest groups with which they interact.

Our political parties have become more ideological. Two decades ago, amidst bitter domestic conflict over U.S.-Soviet relations and arms control, Thomas L. Hughes pointed to the evisceration of the center and its destructive

impact on U.S. foreign relations.⁷ Things have gotten worse since. Drawing on the voluminous data compiled by the American National Election Studies at the University of Michigan, David C. King demonstrates how polarization has grown, especially since 1980. Americans have become somewhat more conservative and significantly more Republican, but they remain clustered near the political center.⁸ But “the parties are becoming more extreme . . . increasingly distant in their policies from what the average voter would like. . . . Strong Republicans have become more conservative, and . . . party activists are drawn almost entirely from their ranks. Likewise, strong Democrats have become more liberal, though the ideological shift has not been as steep.”⁹

Congress has reflected, indeed magnified, this trend. The percentage of centrists in Congress “declined from about 25 percent of all members in 1980 to 10 percent in 1996.”¹⁰ By 1999, this trend had reached its logical culmination, as reflected in the annual *National Journal* voting survey. “In the Senate, for the first time since *National Journal* began compiling vote ratings in 1981, every Democrat had an average score that was to the left of the most liberal Republican.” In the junior chamber, *NJ* found that “only two Republicans . . . were in that chamber’s more-liberal half on each of the three issue areas. . . . And only two Democrats . . . ranked in the more-conservative half.” (One of them left the Democratic Party in January 2000.) “The findings help explain why so little got done in Congress last year. . . . Votes were cast to highlight partisan political differences.”¹¹ And this conclusion from data-based journalism finds support in data-based political science: in a thoroughgoing analysis of the causes of policy gridlock in Washington, Sarah A. Binder writes:

The effect of party polarization is perhaps the most striking. Despite the faith of responsible party advocates in *cohesive* political parties, the results here suggest that policy change is *less* likely as the parties become more polarized and the percentage of moderate legislators shrinks.

Such results confirm the sentiments of the many members of Congress and observers who claim that partisan polarization limits the legislative capacity of Congress. The “incredibly shrinking middle”—as Senator John Breaux called it—seems to hamper substantially the ability of Congress and the president to reach agreement on the issues before them.¹²

Over the same period, *the public has become increasingly alienated from government and the political process.* In the 1964 University of Michigan survey 76 percent of Americans said they had confidence that the government would “do the right thing” always or most of the time. Thirty years later this number had dropped to 19 percent (Yankelovich Partners).¹³ And as summarized in a recent survey by Steven Kull’s Center on Policy Attitudes (COPA), “Confidence that the government serves the nation as a whole has plummeted over this same time period.”

In 1964, a strong 64% majority said that the government “is run for the benefit of all the people,” while only 29% said that “the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves.” In 1972, a majority (53%) said for the first time that “the government is pretty much run by a few big interests.” From 1990 through 1999 those saying “the government is pretty much run by a few big interests” were always 69% or more, while the percentage saying that the government is run for the benefit of all never went above 27%. National Election Studies (NES) found 31% in November 1998; COPA’s 19% result in January 1999 was back in line with most results through the 1990s.¹⁴

This decline of confidence in government has been accompanied by a growing sense of separation from that government. To quote COPA again:

In response to the statement, “Public officials don’t care much what people like me think,” in 1960 only 25% agreed. Agreement started an upward movement [thereafter], reaching a majority for the first time in 1976 and 63% in 1990 (58% in the current [1999] poll).

In response to the unequivocal statement, “People like me don’t have any say about what the government does,” only 27% agreed in 1960. The numbers rose thereafter, but not until 1990 did the number of those in agreement surpass the number of those disagreeing. The number agreeing in the current poll (56%) matches the previous high of 1994.¹⁵

The decline in public trust is clearly correlated with the rise of polarization, and the public perceives a connection: in the November 1998 survey by National Election Studies (NES), 73 percent said that the phrase “too involved in partisan politics” described Congress well. But is there in fact a direct link? King’s research suggests that there is. For he finds that the most alienated citizens are those farthest from the two extremes. “The more distant the parties are from [individual] respondents, the more likely [these] respondents are to say that they mistrust government.”¹⁶ Hence, “The growing gap between elites and the rest of us is being filled with cynicism, mistrust, and frustration that our leaders do not care about ‘our’ problems.”¹⁷ And to the degree that people in the center “drop out” by failing to vote, the extremes are reinforced.

Congressional movement toward the extremes has been encouraged and reinforced by the rise of activist, “cause” groups on the left and right. In the words of Richard Neustadt (paraphrasing Hugh Hecllo), a growing political role has been played by “movements . . . imitative of the civil rights movement . . . environmentalists and feminists—then, in reaction, right-to-lifers.”¹⁸ The end result is “warfare among elites, waged since the 1960s in the name of causes, not compromises, fueled by technology, manned by consultants, rousing supporters by damning opponents, while serving the separate interests of particular candidates and groups at given times.”¹⁹ This pattern has been evident in such domestic issues as abortion, gun control, social security, and health care. And it has led, in the main, to policy stalemate.

POLARIZATION AND FOREIGN POLICY

In the past, foreign policy issues have been somewhat insulated from this pattern. To be sure, there has been polarization within the foreign policy elite—on arms control policy in particular. During the Carter administration, for example, left and right waged ideological warfare with the public in the middle: wanting a strong defense, being skeptical of the Russians, *and* supporting arms control if verification and compliance could be achieved. And partisan and cause-group conflict were prominent in controversies from the Panama Canal Treaties of 1977–1978 to selling AWACS to Saudi Arabia in 1981 to NAFTA in 1993 and the Chemical Weapons Convention in 1997. But as these also attest, presidents have generally prevailed on the most prominent issues through persuasion and bargaining with a swing group of senators or representatives. (And on some issues, like NATO expansion in 1998, division on partisan lines was largely avoided.)

But in Clinton's second term, several key issues suggested the emergence of a new pattern, where partisan conflict not only complicated but often overrode the quest for foreign policy consensus, even on first-order issues. The most prominent example was the Senate rejection of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in 1999. Also victims of the new polarization were legislation to authorize new trade negotiations and funding for U.S. dues to the United Nations and broader nondefense international operations.

Test Ban Fiasco

The CTBT was the international issue where partisan conflict surfaced in rawest form. Substantively, the treaty was a centerpiece in the administration's policy against proliferation of nuclear weapons, and the president personally signed it in 1996, making the United States the first country to do so. More than 150 other countries followed (though only about one-third had ratified it by fall 1999). It was sent to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1997, where Chairman Jesse Helms bottled it up, refusing to hold hearings until the administration submitted and the full Senate voted on (and presumably rejected) amendments to the ABM Treaty negotiated in 1997 and the Kyoto Protocol on climate change. The CTBT was also viewed with skepticism, however, by former officials in Republican administrations not associated with the far right—Brent Scowcroft and Henry Kissinger, for example.

The United States had not conducted nuclear tests since 1992, and in mid-1999 the administration was pressing India to sign and preparing for a special international conference on the treaty in early October. To the White House and the State Department, ratification was overwhelmingly in the U.S. interest. But Republicans controlled the Senate 55–45; to have any chance at all of winning the 67 votes required, Clinton would need the support of Re-

publican centrists like Armed Services Committee Chairman John Warner, senior Foreign Relations member Richard Lugar, and rising internationalist Chuck Hagel—and the cooperation, at the very least, of Majority Leader Trent Lott. Rather than undertake the hard, slogging work of building a bipartisan majority, however, the president worked with Senate Democrats in a public campaign to embarrass and put heat on the Senate Republicans, to make the issue a political winner if not a legislative winner. On July 20, Clinton called for Foreign Relations Committee hearings in a Rose Garden statement, while Senator Byron Dorgan (D-ND) released a letter on the same day urging such hearings signed by all forty-five Senate Democrats. Dorgan also released a poll, conducted jointly by a Democratic and a Republican polling firm, which found 82 percent of Americans (84 percent of Democrats, 80 percent of Republicans) believing that the United States should ratify the CTBT.²⁰

Senator Dorgan upped the ante on September 8, telling his colleagues that until Lott allowed consideration of the CTBT, “I intend to plant myself on the floor like a potted plant” and block any routine business. Other Democrats joined in, including ranking Foreign Relations Democrat Joseph Biden, and explained their strategy two weeks later to presidential national security adviser Samuel Berger. Unknown to them, however, hard-line Senate treaty opponent John Kyl had been working quietly with Helms for months to solidify Republican votes against the CTBT, and had commitments from well over the necessary thirty-four. Lott then called the Democrats’ bluff. He reversed himself on September 30 and offered to take up the treaty, with a vote in two weeks. Democrats, thinking they had a shot at persuading enough Republicans, quickly agreed.²¹ They learned within a week that they had no chance of winning, and suddenly became alarmed about the global impact of a Senate rejection. (The Senate had not voted down an important treaty since the Treaty of Versailles in 1920.)

By early October the White House and Minority Leader Tom Daschle had taken an 180-degree turn and were negotiating with Lott to *avoid* having a vote. Sixty-two senators, including twenty-four Republicans, signed a letter initiated by Warner and Democrat Pat Moynihan urging that the matter be put off until 2001, and the president formally requested to Lott that he “postpone consideration.” But this now required either unanimous consent in the Senate or an extraordinary procedural vote. Hard-line Republicans, wanting to sink the treaty once and for all, blocked the first way out. Lott was unwilling to call for, or acquiesce in, the second. So on October 13, the Senate voted 48–51 against ratifying the treaty, with only 4 Republicans in favor.²²

“Never before,” declared the president, “has a serious treaty involving nuclear weapons been handled in such a reckless and ultimately partisan way.” He did not state that his own party bore its full share of the blame.²³ Nor did his national security adviser help matters when he gave an impassioned

speech eight days later attacking “the isolationist right in the Congress” for the treaty’s defeat.²⁴

Trade Stalemate

More complicated was the conflict over trade legislation, where the division was not precisely along partisan lines. Since the completion of the Uruguay Round negotiations in 1994, Clinton had lacked the “fast track” authority granted all of his predecessors since Richard Nixon.²⁵ In principle, the president and Republican congressional leaders both supported such legislation. Arrayed against them were the majority of Democrats (reflecting virulent labor opposition) and a sizable minority of Republicans (reflecting Buchanan-style populism). But Clinton wanted to broaden trade negotiations to include labor and environmental standards; Republicans were overwhelmingly opposed to this. And it was this ideological/political division that would prove decisive.

Unwilling to reopen the political wounds with labor sustained in the NAFTA battle, Clinton and his highly political trade negotiator, Mickey Kantor, rebuffed Republican attempts to renew fast track in 1995. Then, with reelection safely behind him, the president took until September 1997 to present a specific proposal. This gave labor and environmental critics ample time to mobilize, while business held back until it knew the precise content of Clinton’s bill. By September, most Democrats were locked into opposition, and in quest of a heavily Republican House majority Clinton followed their wishes and largely excluded labor and environmental measures. In the end, vote-counts found a maximum of 21 percent of Democrats in favor (65 percent had backed the Uruguay Round/WTO bill three years earlier), and Speaker Newt Gingrich could not make up the difference.

Clinton first had the vote delayed, then asked that the bill be pulled in order to avoid what seemed certain defeat. Gingrich complied. But he then resurrected the bill over Clinton’s objections in September 1998, in a primarily partisan move designed to squeeze Democrats caught between labor and business constituencies. The vote was 243–180 against, with just 29 of 200 Democrats recorded in favor. Prominent among those working in opposition was Public Citizen, the “consumer” lobby, and it built on the momentum gained by these victories to disrupt the Seattle WTO Ministerial Conference in December 1999.

This again was an issue where the public was in the middle: favoring trade expansion and reciprocal reduction of trade barriers, but also supporting, by strong margins, the broadening of the agenda to include labor and the environment.²⁶ But on this issue, as on some others, the political extremes were less internationalist than the center, so their reinforcement posed a particularly severe challenge. In substance, compromise was clearly conceivable,

one that would both reflect public concerns and “advance the cause of global labor and environmental standards while authorizing the negotiation of new agreements to reduce barriers to trade.”²⁷ But polarization was too deep, and trust was largely absent.

Uncle Sam as Deadbeat

A third prominent victim of partisan polarization has been funding for U.S. international involvement, particularly the payment of U.S. back dues to the United Nations. Here the public has been consistently supportive, despite persistent myths to the contrary.²⁸ And presidents of both parties have pressed for funding, Bush at least as much as Clinton. But with resistance from Foreign Relations Chairman Helms in the Senate and right-to-life Republicans in the House, the going has been extraordinarily hard.

By U.N. calculation, U.S. arrears for regular dues and peacekeeping assessments rose from \$287 million at the end of 1992 to \$1.4 billion four years later. (The administration estimated the debt at \$1 billion.) This generated serious financial problems for the organization, and growing international criticism of the United States. In June 1997, the administration came to a complex agreement with Helms and ranking Foreign Relations Democrat Biden. This provided for payment of \$819 million over three years—\$200 million less than the administration had requested and another \$400 billion below the U.N.’s estimate—and only if administrative reforms were undertaken and the U.S. share of the total U.N. budget lowered from 25 to 20 percent.

But House Republicans were pressing another agenda. They attached to the legislation a rider that denied U.S. funding to U.N. population programs, because some organizations that were instruments of these programs were involved in the provision of abortions. (U.S. policy has long barred use of U.S. aid funds for this purpose.) President Clinton, under pressure from pro-choice groups and because he thought it bad policy, refused to accept this proviso in 1997, and again in 1998. Finally, in the fall of 1999 compromise abortion language was negotiated and the funds were appropriated. In the meantime, the United States twice narrowly avoided losing its vote in the General Assembly because of its arrearages. (Helms did make a peace offering of sorts, visiting the U.N. headquarters himself and inviting officials down for a hearing in early 2000.) The record was no better on the broader funding of U.S. international engagement.²⁹

On all three issues (CTBT the most, trade the least), the public supported constructive U.S. international action and favored compromise that balanced competing values. On all three, Congresses of prior decades would surely have found a way forward, or at minimum, a way to avoid the United States humiliating itself internationally on a matter of high national security concern. But Washington political actors—particularly members of

Congress—saw the issues through partisan and ideological lenses and failed to display the readiness, or maintain the communication, that was necessary for compromise to come about.

THE SPLINTERING OF LIBERAL INTERNATIONALISM

But there remains one final question. Why, on issues where the public is clearly with them, don't the liberal internationalists do better on Capitol Hill? Why didn't the consistent majority favoring payment of U.S. dues carry more weight politically? Why does Congress consistently cut spending for "Function 150" (the budget category for State, USAID, the United Nations, and multilateral programs) and provide unsought money to the Pentagon?

The answer does not lie in the general structure of public—or leadership—opinion.³⁰ In his comprehensive analysis of the results of the quadrennial Chicago Council on Foreign Relations survey, Eugene R. Wittkopf found nonisolationist opinion in the United States divided three ways in the post-Vietnam era. *Hardliners* favored military toughness but were skeptical about cooperative measures—aid, arms control negotiations, and so forth; *accommodationists* took the opposite stand; *internationalists* back both the "hard" and the "soft" instruments of global engagement. But the balance was not tilted toward the hardliners: they were generally fewer in number than accommodationists among both the mass public and the leaders, and they never reached 25 percent of the population.³¹

Nor, aside from the issue of abortion, do we find activist groups of the right exercising disproportionate sway. U.S. legislative processes on the United Nations, or U.N. peacekeeping, or foreign aid do *not* feature prominent, let alone dominant, lobbying groups pressing Washington to cut or eliminate public funding.

But neither do they feature strong organized groups in support. The United Nations Association, for example, may have 180 chapters and 30,000 members, but it lacks the cutting-edge energy that it (and predecessor movements) possessed half a century ago. Today the forces of cooperative internationalism are fragmented—the main energy goes not into supporting a broad liberal international agenda for the United States, but into specific causes: the environment and human rights in particular. These cause groups target other internationalist forces, business in particular. They also target government. In their campaigns to increase membership, raise funds, and mobilize support, they are prone to trash, even demonize, the policies and structures that others have built to enhance global welfare. The Public Citizen campaign against "GATTzilla" and its WTO successor is a particularly egregious example. But more generally, such groups play upon, and enhance, the skeptical, can't-trust-government mood that is so pervasive in today's America.

WHAT MIGHT BE DONE?

For supporters of U.S. international engagement who believe in cooperative, multilateral approaches to world problems, the good news is that the American people are with them. The public is willing to support reasonable efforts and proportionate expenditures. It is ready to be led if leaders evoke widely shared values: doing our fair share, helping people in need, pursuing programs that work. And this readiness to go along extends to putting American troops in harm's way, if the ends are just and the means seem workable. Washington was surprised when (in an atmosphere of bitter partisan discord over the issue) public opinion surveys showed majority support for the NATO campaign to save Kosovo.³² Those who had studied previous polls on Somalia, or Haiti, or Bosnia, or U.N. peacekeeping, or humanitarian intervention in general, were not surprised. People favor U.S. participation in multilateral action to right grievous wrongs if it offers reasonable prospects for success.

The bad news is that general public support isn't enough. On international engagement, Americans are permissive, not demanding. And their politicians are as far away from them than they have been in this author's lifetime, driven by ideological views and pressures and partisan animosities that the public, by and large, does not share.

Thus, while building a political base for U.S. international engagement can and should begin with responsiveness to *real* public attitudes and concerns, it cannot end there. It must also seek ways to both bridge and mute the partisan divide. The president must make this a high priority—for reasons extending beyond the international realm.

One strategy George W. Bush might pursue is to cite, repeatedly and explicitly, poll evidence in support of U.S. international engagement.³³ In seeking decent funding for the Function 150 account (as Clinton never seriously did), President Bush should stress that strong majorities of Americans are in favor. In arguing for troop deployments in future Kosovos, the president should stress that Americans *want* to do their share in international peacekeeping, particularly in cases of egregious ethnic cleansing. He should not allow Jesse Helms to dominate the media with assertions that Americans view the United Nations "with disdain,"³⁴ when every survey shows majority support for the organization and most Americans want the United Nations to be stronger.

Reference to public opinion needs to be artful. If the president sounds like he is taking actions *only* because of the polling numbers, he will bring down an avalanche of criticism on his head. References to public opinion need to be blended with, and often subordinated to, arguments that a line of policy is right in substantive terms. But with this caveat, it can only strengthen the case for a policy if it can be shown to be consistent with what Americans want to have happen in the world.

In this spirit, the president and his senior aides should place particular stress on the *values* that Americans hold. In pressing for trade compromise, for example, they should note that the public backs open competition *and* help for trade-displaced workers *and* the enhancement of labor and environmental standards worldwide.³⁵ On issues like global warming, they should stress that citizens are strong supporters of measures to protect the earth, but do not share the antigrowth perspective of some in the environmental community.³⁶ Such arguments will not, by themselves, win policy battles. But they will help to frame the debate, invite competing interests to join and bargain, and encourage individual members of Congress to move toward the center on specific issues—as some would indeed like to do.

Of course, this sort of public presentation strategy will have, at best, only modest impact on the ideological divide itself. Its roots run deeper, and are not to be found primarily in the foreign policy sphere. So constructive U.S. government action on international issues will require heavy doses of old-fashioned politics: compromise, logrolling, deal making, giving something to both sides, all of the above. And it will require old-fashioned comity—a word and a condition not very visible in today's Washington. The president must/should reach out to leaders of the other party, as Bush has done to some degree. Recognizing that they will not be with him on most issues, he needs to build a basis for ongoing communication so they can help him, and he them, on some crucial issues. And by meeting regularly with Senate and House majority and minority leaders together, he might help them improve their bilateral relationships, particularly in the venomous lower chamber.

For a range of reasons, restoration of personal trust has become impossible for Bill Clinton. But his successor, George W. Bush, entered office with a “new shave,” as *Washington Post* cartoonist Herblock gave even Richard Nixon in 1969. Hopefully, he will make the most of it.

I am grateful to Josh Pollack for research assistance on the Test Ban Fiasco section.

NOTES

1. David C. King, “The Polarization of American Parties and Distrust of Government,” in Joseph S. Nye Jr., Philip D. Zelikow, and David C. King, eds., *Why People Don't Trust Government* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 178.

2. Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

3. The data from this study is presented in full detail in Steven Kull, I. M. Destler, and Clay Ramsey, *The Foreign Policy Gap: How Policymakers Misread the Public* (College Park, Md.: Center for International and Security Studies, University of Maryland,

October 1997); and more concisely in Kull and Destler, *Misreading the Public: The Myth of a New Isolationism* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999).

4. John E. Reilly, ed., *American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy 1999* (Chicago: Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 1999), 12.

5. *Misreading the Public*, chapter 5. The survey by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations (*Ibid.*) is less positive, finding Americans “split [47–45%] on the overall idea of giving economic aid to other nations.” (*American Public Opinion 1999*, p. 21.) But Pew, *The Washington Post*, and PIPA find 76–87 percent wanting to provide at least some foreign aid. (*Misreading*, pp. 117–118.)

6. For the full-blown analysis, see *Misreading the Public*, chapter 11, from which this summary language is drawn.

7. Thomas L. Hughes, “The Crack-Up,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 40 (fall 1980, pp. 33–60). See also I. M. Destler, Leslie H. Gelb, and Anthony Lake, “From Establishment to Professional Elite,” in *Our Own Worst Enemy: The Unmaking of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

8. When asked to identify themselves on the political spectrum, an average of 77 percent of voters in the 1972–1976 period labeled themselves middle of the road, slightly liberal, or slightly conservative, or said they didn’t know or hadn’t thought about it. In 1990–1994, the average was 75 percent. Comparing the same two periods, the margin of Democrats over Republicans fell from 20 percentage points to 11. (Calculated from tables in King, “The Polarization of American Parties,” pp. 158 and 163.)

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 165, 172.

10. Calculated by Sarah Binder, reported *ibid.*, pp. 166, 168.

11. Richard E. Cohen, “Going to Extremes: Our Annual Vote Ratings,” A Special Supplement to *National Journal*, February 26, 2000, p. 4.

12. “The Dynamics of Legislative Gridlock, 1947–96,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 93, No. 3 (September 1999): 527–528. The causes of this polarization are beyond the scope of this chapter. One is surely the decennial congressional redistricting process, dominated by the drive for safe seats for incumbents and ethnic groups. To the degree this is successful—and it has been very successful—it makes *intraparty* politics the primary influence on who is elected, reinforcing the impact of party activists with polar views. Other plausible forces include the rise of television, which may reward confrontational approaches, and the impact of activist “cause” groups, treated later in this analysis.

13. There have been fluctuations within the period. As measured by a “Trust in Government Index” calculated from responses to the question posed biennially by the University of Michigan’s National Election Studies—“How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?”—confidence plummeted from a high of 61% in 1966 to 29% in 1974 and 27% in 1980, rose to 47% in 1986, and then plunged to a record low of 26% in 1994. It has rebounded slightly since. A convenient source of data and analysis is Joseph S. Nye Jr. et al., eds., *Why People Don’t Trust Government* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997). The numbers here are from Table 4–3 on page 129. Because it gives different weights to strong and moderate responses (“all of the time” vs. “most of the time,” for example) the numbers differ from those in our text, but the trend is the same.

14. Center on Policy Attitudes, *Expecting More Say: The American Public on its Role in Government Decisionmaking* (Washington, D.C.: Center on Policy Analysis, May 1999), section 1.
15. Ibid.
16. King, "The Polarization of American Parties," p. 176.
17. Ibid., p. 178.
18. Richard Neustadt, "The Politics of Mistrust," in Nye et al., *Why People Don't Trust Government*, p. 185.
19. Ibid., p. 187.
20. Craig Cerniello, "White House, Key Senators Intensify Push for CTBT," *Arms Control Today*, July–August 1999.
21. John M. Broder, "The Tactics: Quietly, Dextrously, Senate Republicans Set a Trap," *New York Times*, October 14, 1999.
22. Eric Schmitt, "Senate Kills Test Ban Treaty in Crushing Loss for Clinton," *New York Times*, October 14, 1999.
23. Dave Boyer, "Senate Rejects Treaty on Nuke Testing," *The Washington Times*, October 14, 1999.
24. Samuel R. Berger, "American Power: Hegemony, Isolationism, or Engagement," Address to Council on Foreign Relations, October 21, 1999 (available on White House website). The assistant also attacked the "new isolationists" for "devastating cuts to our foreign affairs budget."
25. I. M. Destler, *Renewing Fast-Track Legislation*, Institute for International Economics, Policy Analysis No. 50, September 1997, esp. part I.
26. Steven Kull, *Americans on Globalization: A Study of U.S. Public Attitudes*, Program on International Policy Attitudes, Center for International and Security Studies at the University of Maryland, Washington, D.C., March 28, 2000.
27. I. M. Destler and Peter J. Balint, *The New Politics of American Trade: Trade, Labor, and the Environment*, Institute for International Economics, Policy Analysis No. 58, p. 65.
28. Kull and Destler, *Misreading the Public*, chapters 3–5, 7–8.
29. See Robert C. Kaiser, "Foreign Disservice," *Washington Post*, April 16, 2000, p. B1.
30. The CCFR results suggest that American leaders generally are not polarized to anywhere near the extent that political party leaders and activists are.
31. Eugene R. Wittkopf, *Faces of Internationalism: Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990), pp. 26, 116. His analysis draws on the CCFR surveys of 1984 through 1996.
32. Steven Kull, *Americans on Kosovo: A Study of U.S. Policy Attitudes*, Program on International Policy Attitudes, Center for International and Security Studies at the University of Maryland, Washington, D.C., June 1999.
33. This should not be done simply to score political points, as the release of new CTBT poll numbers in August 1999 most have seemed to Republicans, but in parallel with serious administration efforts to work the issue with opponents and fence-sitters to win a constructive resolution.
34. *Washington Post*, October 8, 1997.
35. Kull, *Americans on Globalization*, pp. 5–25.
36. Richard J. Ellis and Fred Thompson, "Culture and the Environment in the Pacific Northwest," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91 (December 1997): 885–897.