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## **POST COLD WAR ATTITUDES TOWARD THE USE OF FORCE**

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By the summer of 1941, the Germans had defeated the French, driven the British army into the sea and were attempting to bomb London into submission. The Gallup Poll took the extraordinary effort of conducting a poll in each of the then 48 states asking: “If you were asked to vote today on the question of the United States entering the war against Germany and Italy, how would you vote — to go into the war or to stay out of the war?” The war option was rejected in every state of the union. The most support for engagement was found in Florida and Arizona where the “going in” sentiment was as high as 35% and 33%, respectively. In the more isolationist upper Midwestern states of Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa as few as 15% favored war.

Clearly, America has a long history of wariness regarding the use of force. Despite conventional wisdom that it is more difficult today to obtain public support for committing troops to the field, our historical studies of opinion polling data show little change in the dynamics of public opinion over a very long time. However, changing public priorities and conceptions of the national interest in the post-Cold War era have created new considerations for policy makers attempting to galvanize support for military involvements.

### **Continuities In Public Opinion**

Before exploring what is different today, it is useful to examine what remains unchanged in the way Americans think about such things. A mid-1990s Pew Center analysis of public attitudes toward recent military interventions identified a number of discernible patterns in thinking that underpin a disposition to commit to or reject the use of force.<sup>1</sup> Three of the most important of these were as apparent in 1941 as they are today:

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this research were presented in earlier papers by Andrew Kohut and Robert C. Toth, including: “The People, the Press and the Use of Force,” prepared for the Aspen Strategy Group, August 1994; “Arms and the People,” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 1994, pp. 47 - 61; and “Managing Conflict in the Post-Cold War World: A Public Perspective,” prepared for the Aspen Institute Conference on Managing Conflict in the Post-Cold War World, August 1995.

\*\* Early on in a crisis, the public reveals a basic disposition to accept or reject the use of force based on whether significant U.S. national interests *seem* to be at stake, or based on feelings that the U.S. has a moral responsibility to act. This basic disposition or judgment colors response to specific proposals to use force.

\*\* Even when the public feels the U.S. has a responsibility to act, large percentages of Americans (sometimes majorities) will favor no action, unless the disposition to act is stimulated by presidential leadership.

\*\* Even when the public feels the U.S. has a responsibility to act, it will always gravitate to diplomatic or economic options over military force if these are in play as options.<sup>2</sup>

The pre-war public (1939-1941) recognized that its national interest was at stake and was inclined to act, if all other alternatives failed. But, it steadfastly held on to a "stay out" position as long as it seemed possible to do so. In the summer of 1941, for example, a majority of Americans (62%) believed that if Germany and Italy defeated Britain, Hitler would then attack the United States.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, majorities expressed opinions that indicated a clear recognition that it would probably be necessary to fight. As many as 62% of respondents in a May 1941 poll said they would rather have the U.S. go into the war than see Britain surrender to Germany. And two-thirds of the public said that if it "appeared certain" that the only way to beat the Axis was for the U.S. to become involved, they would favor joining in combat.

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<sup>2</sup> "The People, the Press and the Use of Force," 1994.

<sup>3</sup> All 1941 polling numbers are from the Gallup Poll.

Nonetheless throughout the first two years of WWII, Gallup never found significantly more than *one in five* Americans supporting U.S. entry into the war at any given point in time.

Roosevelt recognized the necessity to go slowly and prepare the American public for war. Gradual public acceptance of Lend Lease and other measures to aid Britain were testimony to his ability to sell involvement to a public that seemed to understand the risks of inaction but required dragging into harms way. In the end, Roosevelt did not have to overcome this American ambivalence, as the attack on Pearl Harbor immediately put an end to America's two-mindedness.

More recently, George Bush faced a comparably ambivalent state of public opinion. In the months leading up to the Persian Gulf War there was majority support for the *general* idea that the U.S. should take necessary steps to liberate Kuwait from the Iraqis, including even the use of force, as the public recognized that its vital interests were at stake. But substantial majorities opposed an assault in Kuwait throughout much of 1990.

**Some Opinions About War -- 1941\***

January: Which of these two things do you think it is more important for the United States to try to do — to keep out of the war ourselves, or to help England win, even at the risk of getting into the war?

Keep out	40%
Help England	60%

If you were asked to vote on the question of the United States entering the war against Germany and Italy, how would you vote — to go into the war, or to stay out of the war?

Go in	12%
Stay out	88%

March: Would you approve or disapprove of the United States leasing about 40 additional destroyers to England?

Approve	52%
Disapprove	26%
No opinion	22%

May: If Germany and Italy should defeat Britain in the present war, do you think Germany and Italy would start a war against the United States within the next 10 years?

Yes	62%
No	29%
No opinion	9%

October: In general, do you approve or disapprove of having the United States navy shoot at German submarines or warships on sight?

Approve	62%
Disapprove	28%
No opinion	10%

November: It has been suggested that Congress pass a resolution declaring that a state of war exists between the United States and Germany. Would you favor or oppose such a resolution at this time?

Favor	26%
Oppose	63%
No opinion	11%

\* All items from the Gallup Poll.

The Bush administration skillfully gained public acceptance by taking a number of steps

that put public opinion on a war footing. First and foremost, it effectively communicated the American interest in the Gulf during the fall of 1990. In August, only half the public said that the President had explained clearly his decision to send troops to Saudi Arabia (NYT/CBS), but one month later 77% said they had a clear idea on the matter (WP/ABC).<sup>4</sup>

Multilateral participation in the form of a U.N. resolution and Congressional debate were also both crucial in convincing the American public of need for intervention, polls at the time found. Before those events, in mid-November 1990, only 37% of the public favored U.S. going to war to drive the Iraqis out of Kuwait, according to Gallup. By January 1991, a 55% majority favored taking such steps.

<b>Gallup Trend On Forces In Gulf</b>			
View Of U.S. Going To War With Iraq To Drive The Iraqis Out Of Kuwait			
	<u>Favor</u>	<u>Oppose</u>	<u>No Opinion</u>
1991 Jan. 11-13	55	38	7
1991 Jan. 3-6	52	39	9
<i>1991 Jan. 4</i>	<i>One day of Senate debate</i>		
1990 Dec. 13-16	48	43	9
1990 Dec. 6-9	53	40	7
1990 Nov. 29-Dec. 2	53	40	7
<i>1990 Nov. 29</i>	<i>U.N Security Council adopts resolution setting Jan. deadline</i>		
1990 Nov. 15-18	37	51	12

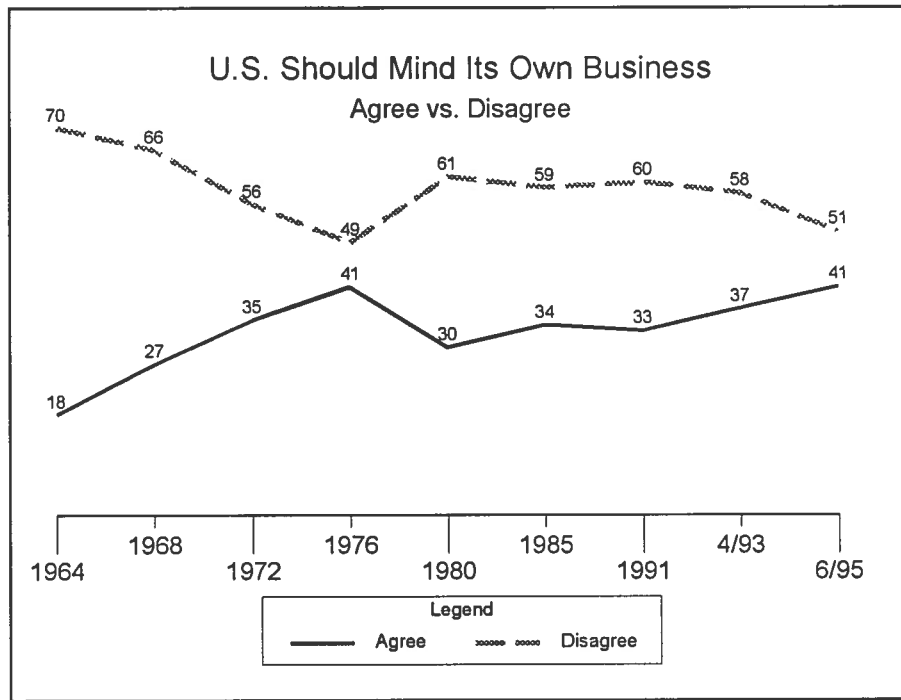
These data suggest that two conditions have not changed since the 1940s. First, the public is by instinct averse to the use of force. Second, it is necessary that the President sell war as the only alternative which can protect the national interest. But, the public's definition of the "national interest" in the post Cold War era and the role the modern media plays in shaping public response *have* changed substantially.

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<sup>4</sup> For brevity, most polls in this paper will be identified by the initials of the polling organizations. Abbreviations include: WP/ABC for *The Washington Post/ABC*, NYT/CBS for *The New York Times/CBS*, TMC for the Times Mirror Center for The People & The Press, PRC for the Pew Research Center for The People & The Press, LAT for *Los Angeles Times*.

## A U.S. Centric Mood

While on balance the American public continues to be internationalist in outlook, an isolationist minority has grown substantially over the past 15 years. In 1980, only 30% of respondents polled by Gallup agreed that the “U.S. should mind its own business internationally, and let other countries get along as best as they can on their own”. By 1995, the percentage expressing this sentiment had increased to 41%. At the high point of internationalism in 1964, only 18% of Americans held this opinion.<sup>5</sup>



An isolationist drift is being accelerated by the increasingly partisan tone of foreign policy debate, particularly debate over the United States' role in the world. The election of 1992 highlighted the popularity of protectionist views across the political spectrum -- from Republican presidential candidate Pat Buchanan on the right to the labor movement on the left. More recently, the media has made much of the often bitter disputes between Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chair Jesse Helms and the Clinton Administration over foreign aid and financial

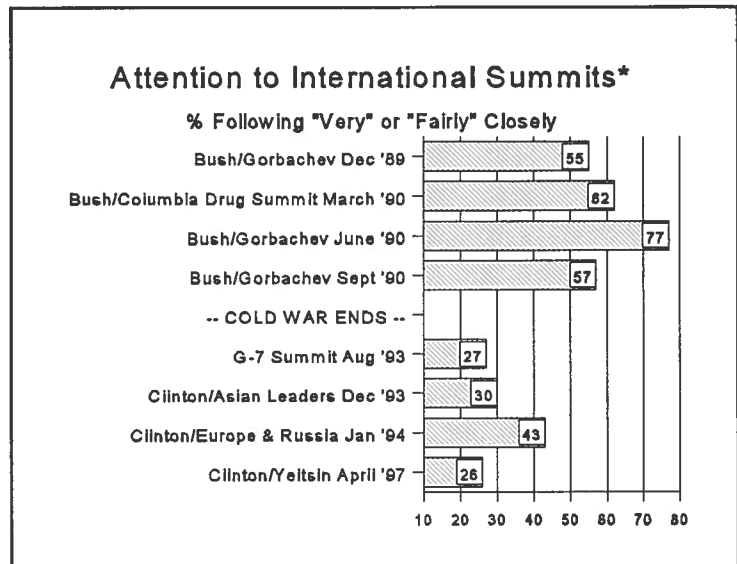
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<sup>5</sup> Trend data from 1964 to 1991 are from public opinion surveys conducted by Potomac Associates, The Gallup Organization and The Institute for International Social Research. 1993 and 1995 from TMC.

support of the U.N. And the xenophobia of the far right militia movement is an extreme indicator of a broader isolationist minority.

### Where's That?

The fact that the hearts and minds of the *majority* of the public are at home, not overseas, is even more important than the growth of the isolationist minority. With the end of the Cold War, American interest in news of international events has plummeted. A recent summit meeting drew an attentive news audience of 26% of the public — one half to one third the level of interest shown in Cold War



Summits (PRC). Despite having more years of education and more news media sources than citizens of most other nations, Americans know less about what's going on in the world. A multi-national study that included the major democracies of Western Europe and North America found that only the Spanish knew less than Americans about world events such as the latest news from the Mideast and problems with North Korea. <sup>6</sup>

What is true of Americans in general is even more true of younger Americans. Historical studies indicate that younger generations are paying much less attention to news about the larger world today, particularly when compared to prewar generations of younger people. An analysis of the Center's news interest index database shows that on average, 25% of those over age 50 pay very close attention to stories about international politics (already not an impressive number),

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<sup>6</sup> "Mixed Message about Press Freedom on Both Sides of the Atlantic," Times Mirror Center for The People & The Press, March 16, 1994, Washington, DC. Cooperating were El Pais in Spain, La Republica in Italy, Liberation in France, and El Norte in Mexico.

compared to only 15% among GenX'ers.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the 1960s, however, young Americans were as interested as their parents in the major news stories of the day.<sup>8</sup> A similar gap currently exists in *knowledge* about international events (on average, 40% of those over 50 answered the Center's international news quiz questions correctly compared to 28% of those under 30).<sup>9</sup>

Poll after poll find Americans saying loud and clear they want a foreign policy that serves the domestic agenda. In both 1993 and 1995, the public's top foreign policy priority was to stop international drug trafficking (PRC). Improving the U.S.'s economic competitiveness and stopping illegal immigration also ranked near the top. Traditional geopolitical objectives, such as ending warfare in Bosnia and insuring the success of democracy in Russia, received the lowest ratings.

In such an environment there is little consensus as to the nature of the national interest in matters of *international* affairs. A major 1993 study of policy elites and the general public found that only two interests were shared by both groups: protecting U.S. oil supplies and preventing the spread of nuclear weapons.<sup>10</sup> The Gulf War was a clear instance of intervention in support of the former. Polls in 1993 showing majority support for using force to prevent or eliminate North Korea's nuclear capabilities reflect the latter (Gallup, LAT).

If there are few issues which Americans see as affecting their vital interests, there are even

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<sup>7</sup> "Ten Years of the Pew News Interest Index," by Kimberly Parker and Claudia Deane, The Pew Research Center for The People & The Press, prepared for the 1997 meeting of the American Association for Public Opinion Research. The Center's News Interest Index periodically asks the public how closely it follows major news stories current at the time of the poll. Responses are: very closely, fairly closely, not too closely, not at all closely, and don't know/refused. Only "very closely" responses are tabulated in the Index, whose data extends back to 1986.

<sup>8</sup> "The Age of Indifference: A Study of Young Americans and How They View the News," Times Mirror Center for The People & The Press," June 28, 1990, Washington, DC.

<sup>9</sup> "Ten Years of the Pew News Interest Index," 1997.

<sup>10</sup> "America's Place in the World," Times Mirror Center for The People & The Press," November 1993, Washington, DC.



fewer situations where the public is disposed to act in what Joseph Nye has termed “interventions on behalf of important but not vital interests and interventions on behalf of humanitarian or moral causes.”<sup>11</sup>

The response to American interventions in Haiti and Bosnia reflects this climate of opinion. In both instances, Americans uncharacteristically failed to support a presidential decision even when troops took to the field. Approval of the policies was not achieved, despite apparent success and extremely low casualties.

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<sup>11</sup> Quote from presentation at Aspen Institute Conference, August 1995.

## Hesitant about Haiti

The decision to send American troops to Haiti was met with the lowest degree of support of any U.S. military intervention since the 1950s. In September 1994, only 41% of Americans had a positive response to intervention, compared to 74% for intervention in Somalia in December 1992, and equivalent percentages at the start of the Gulf War conflict. Early in the crisis, a majority of the public (63%) approved of the oil embargo of Haiti, but support for sending troops varied depending on the scope of their stated mission (WP/ABC). Fully 77% of the public favored the use of force to evacuate U.S. citizens (NYT/CBS), and slightly fewer to prevent illegal immigration (69%, WP/ABC). But majorities almost as large opposed the use of U.S. troops to restore President Aristide to power (69% in October 1993 [WP/ABC], 68% in May 1994 [Time/CNN]).

In the eyes of most foreign policy analysts, the international intervention in Haiti was a success. Yet neither during the actual operation, nor in retrospect, did a strong majority of the American public approve of Clinton's handling of the situation. In September, the month troops began shipping into Haiti, the public was evenly split in its approval of Clinton's actions: 46% approved, 47% disapproved (Newsweek). This approval rating moved up to a 54% to 39% margin in October (PRC). But by February and June of 1995, with the advantage of hindsight, the public was again evenly divided

### First Responses To Decision To Send Troops

	Positive Response*	Negative Response	Don't Know
<b>Korea</b>			
Aug. 1950	65	20	15
<b>Vietnam</b>			
Jan. 1965	50	28	22
May 1965	52	26	22
Nov. 1965	64	21	15
<b>Grenada</b>			
Nov. 1983	63	29	8
<b>Panama</b>			
Jan. 1990	72	18	10
<b>Iraq/Kuwait</b>			
Aug. 1990	75	17	8
Jan. 1991	77	15	8
<b>Somalia</b>			
Dec. 1992	74	21	5
<b>Haiti</b>			
Sept. 1994	41	52	7
<b>Bosnia</b>			
Jan. 1996	48	49	3

\*Positive response refers to "should be involved," "not a mistake," "a good idea," "approve" and "right decision;" negative response refers to the opposite. Polls: through 1983 and Aug. 1990 (Gallup); Panama and Somalia (NBC/WSJ); Jan. 1991 poll on Iraq (TMC); Haiti (NYT); and Bosnia (PRC).

on Clinton’s decision to use force (PRC). Given the low level of support when confronted with a *successful* operation, it is clear that Haiti could have been a political disaster for Bill Clinton if it had resulted in a significant loss of American lives.

**Not Our War**

Since the first years of the recent war in Bosnia, there have been two consistencies in American opinion toward the conflict: never has a majority thought the U.S. had a responsibility to do something about the fighting and never has there been significant interest in the tragic events of this Balkan state.

Throughout the conflict, even when reports of “ethnic cleansing” were receiving significant attention in the media, American attention to Bosnia has been low. At the start of the country’s break up in 1991, fewer than one in ten said they were paying “very close” attention to news of Yugoslavia. Indifference remained high and steady over the next four years, with the percent paying very close attention topping 20% only twice: once in May 1993 (23%) when U.S. military action appeared possible, and once again in June 1995 (22%), with the coverage of downed Capt. Scott O’Grady and the taking of U.N. peacekeepers as hostages. It took the January 1996 deployment of 20,000 U.S. troops to Bosnia for the public to become attentive to news from that part of the world.

<u>Date</u>	<i>---% Following Stories:---</i>		
	<i>Very Closely</i>	<i>Fairly Closely</i>	<i>Not too/ Not at all Closely/DK</i>
July 1996	16	37	47 = 100
March 1996	18	43	39
<b>Jan. 1996</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>18</b>
August 1995	16	36	48
June 1995	22	42	36
March 1995	11	27	62
Dec. 1994	13	37	50
Sept. 1994	9	29	62
May 1994	18	37	45
Jan. 1994	15	38	47
Oct. 1993	16	36	48
Sept. 1993	17	38	45
May 1993	23	34	43
Jan. 1993	15	33	52
Sept. 1992	10	27	63
Dec. 1991	5	21	74

\* PRC News Interest Index. Question wording varied.

Americans have been remarkably consistent in declaring that Bosnia is not our war. In January 1993, when U.S. airdrops of food were just beginning, fully 67% of the public said that

the U.S. did not have a responsibility to “do something about the fighting between Serbs and Bosnians,” with only 24% seeing an American role. Though the percentage acknowledging a U.S. role has gone up and down slightly over the past four years, it never exceeded 41%, a high reached in April of 1994. One year later, in June of 1995, by a two to one margin Americans once again said the U.S. did not have a responsibility to get involved.<sup>12</sup>

<b>Responsibility In Bosnia</b>			
	<u>U.S. Has Responsibility</u>	<u>U. S. Doesn't Have Responsibility</u>	<u>Don't Know</u>
	%	%	%
June 1995	30	64	6
April 1994	41	49	10
February 1994	36	53	11
December 1993	26	65	9
June 1993	37	51	12
May 1993	37	52	11
January 1993	24	67	9

Question: Do you think the U.S. has a responsibility to do something about fighting between Serbs and Bosnians in what used to be Yugoslavia, or doesn't the United States have this responsibility?

Absent a sense of responsibility, it is not surprising that polls have shown consistent opposition to the involvement of U.S. forces in the area. In January 1993, 55% of the public said they opposed the *idea* of using U.S. military forces in Bosnia to help end the fighting there (TMC). In January of 1996, when the forces were first sent to the former Yugoslavia, the public was divided about this decision, 48% approved and 49% disapproved (PRC). Four months later, the margin had shifted to opposition (43% in favor, 52% opposed) (PRC). As was true in Haiti, even in the face of seeming success -- a peace achieved and held-- the American public today continues to oppose the use of troops in Bosnia.

Haiti, Bosnia and Somalia give clear indication that the American public rejects a sheriff of

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<sup>12</sup> Trend data from 1993 and 1994 are from NYT/CBS and CBS News. 1995 data is from TMC. In contrast to the public's feelings about the U.S. role in Bosnia, a majority of Americans (58%) feel that the *U.N.* *does* have a responsibility to take action to end the Balkan fighting (CBS News, June 1995).

the planet role for the United States. There is very little support for police keeping or nation-building, even in this hemisphere. Public opinion about U.S. participation in *peacekeeping* operations is less clear cut. Most believe that the U.S. has a responsibility along with other leading nations to help maintain world order. But the public rejects assertive multilateralism or a first among equals leadership role, because it believes it will result in the U.S. bearing a disproportionate share of the costs and the burden.

### **The News Media Prism**

The news media plays an important role in the public's willingness to support military interventions in the post-Vietnam, real time news era. But, its power is overstated and the nature of its influence misunderstood. In each of these post-Cold War interventions that we studied, media coverage *modulated* the climate of opinion rather than *dictated* it.

Dramatic, real-time coverage of events in the Gulf connected the public to a crisis already believed to involve a national interest. In Bosnia, on the other hand, equally graphic images have not convinced an inward-looking public that America has a responsibility to intervene. In fact, the public's lack of emotional involvement with Bosnia is a clear example of the limited power of news coverage to influence public opinion. No matter how many minutes of coverage or inches of copy, no matter how graphic the pictures or gripping the stories, the percent of Americans following the war in Bosnia has never risen above 20%.

In Somalia, media coverage shone brightly on initial hunger relief missions and then brought graphic illustrations of the human costs of peacekeeping missions directly into American homes. Public opinion did dovetail with the coverage, but the pictures merely played to pre-existing American opinion --- from the outset, the public supported a limited humanitarian role for the U.S. but did not want to risk American lives.

Clearly, the media's ability to show us instant, graphic images of American casualties does have an effect the public's opinion on the use of force. Some suggest that this CNN effect is at the

root of the public's low tolerance for casualties. The truth is that none of the recent interventions neither Somalia, nor the Gulf, nor Haiti, nor Bosnia provide final proof of this proposition. A true test case of television's power would necessarily involve factors which do not coincide in any of the above-mentioned crises: a strong sentiment that America has a responsibility or a national interest in the conflict; combined with heavy, persisting American casualties.

The media is often given credit for shifts in public opinion which actually stem from Americans' personal judgments about responsibilities and risks. Edward Luttwak points out that although residents of the former Soviet Union did not see American-style television coverage of war in Afghanistan, "the reaction of Soviet society to the casualties of the Afghan war was essentially identical to the American reaction to the Vietnam War."<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, building a case with the public for humanitarian interventions or peacekeeping is further hampered by dwindling media coverage of international events. A recent study by the Center for Media and Public Affairs shows that international news represents a declining share of what the public sees on the three major network news shows. In 1990, international coverage made up nearly a third (32%) of the news agenda; in 1996, that proportion had dropped to 20%.<sup>14</sup>

### Concluding Observations

Clearly America's national interest will evolve as we move into the next century. The end of ideology as an organizing element in public thinking about foreign affairs, and declining public concerns about and interest in traditional geo-political issues, may mean that global issues such as the environment, population control, crime and trade increase in importance. Public wariness about the use of force in peacekeeping operations is likely to continue in this scenario. However

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<sup>13</sup> Edward N. Luttwak, "Where Are the Great Powers? At Home with the Kids," in Foreign Affairs, Vol. 73, No. 4, p. 25 (July/August 1994).

<sup>14</sup> "Media Monitor", July/August 1997, Center for Media and Public Affairs, Washington, DC. 1990 figure does not include news about the Persian Gulf.

support for the use of force to deal with international crime and drugs or to better control U.S. borders may grow. Interestingly, a mid-1993 Roper poll found high approval ratings for military interventions related to top priority domestic issues -- 82% favored force to stop the flow of illegal drugs into the country; 70% to police the flow of illegal immigration. While at the bottom end of the scale, fewer than half favored using force to overthrow a foreign government that practices genocide; to stop an invasion of one foreign country by another; or to intervene in a civil war to protect innocent lives.

More immediately, the continued presence of U.S. troops in Bosnia might well test the public's equivocal views about participation in peacekeeping. Our analysis suggest that Americans have almost zero tolerance for casualties there. If NATO forces increasingly become objects of Serb frustration, or a terrorist attack is carried out comparable to the bombing of the U.S. base in Saudi Arabia, calls for U.S. disengagement may soon follow.