

# World Views

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The last time *Public Perspective* covered the subject of world affairs was a little over two years ago, when we produced an issue called “Global Concerns.” On the cover was a rendering of a thoughtful Uncle Sam, contemplating the globe he held before him. “Americans today,” I wrote in my very first introduction to a data essay, “see their world as a less frightening place than it used to be... and most look forward with optimism... to embracing our role as good neighbor to the world.”

Although those words were an accurate reflection of the attitudes held by the public at that time, in view of everything that has happened since then they now seem to me a bit ingenuous in their cheery buoyancy, a bit naive.

The tone of this data essay, “Eyes Outward,” is, in many respects, much darker than the last. International terrorism has shot to the top of almost every list of problems, threats, and goals regarding foreign affairs. Chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons, the use of American troops, and unrest in the Middle East figure prominently among our concerns. And despite a lack of hard evidence, it seems not unreasonable to assume that thoughts of terrorism and impending war form the backdrop to opinions even on questions that do not directly mention them.

Yet even though the underpinnings have changed significantly in the past few years, American views on fundamental questions about our place in the world for the most part have not. Yes, the importance the public places on our involvement and leadership role has grown, but it should be noted that this is nothing new; it represents the continuation

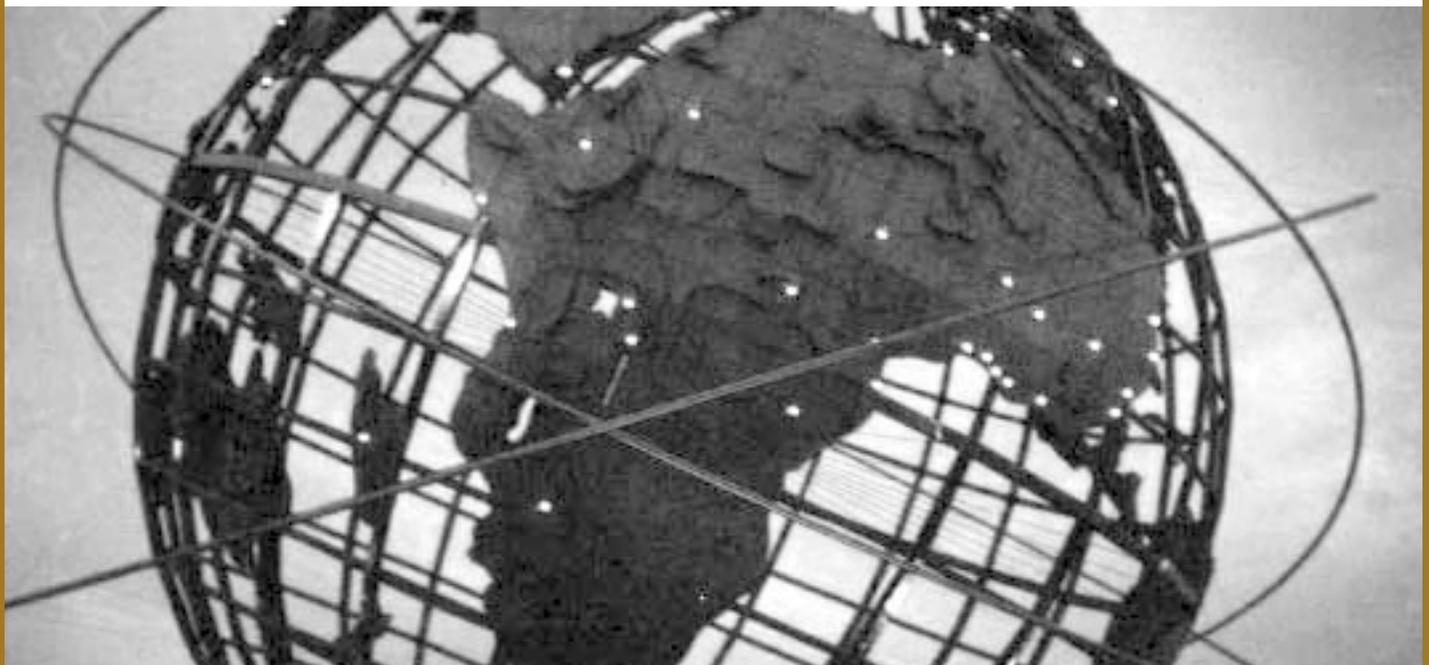
of trends that date back to the mid-1990s. Yes, we are more inclined to say we have vital interests in other parts of the world, but the countries we say we’re vitally interested in are not very different than those we cited in 1998.

Large majorities remain disinclined to bear the burden of leadership alone; we still don’t want to be the “world policeman;” and we continue to insist that we take our allies’ views into account when it comes to foreign policy in general. Indeed, nearly two-thirds of Americans said in the summer of 2002 that the most important lesson of September 11 was that the US needs to work more closely with other countries to fight terrorism, not to work more on its own.

Of course, most of the data herein were gathered in mid-2002, and with the international situation in such rapid flux these days, they might already be outdated. Indeed, we have avoided presenting survey findings on what is arguably the most critical foreign policy problem facing the US as we go to press—the matter of Iraq—because we might very well be at war by the time the magazine reaches our readers and those data rendered irrelevant.

Still, Americans seem not easily swayed in their most essential views regarding international concerns, even by unthinkable catastrophe or the apprehension of it. Although the post-9/11 world is once again a frightening place, the picture painted by the data in these pages might be the one that continues to inform our foreign relations, and we may yet find cause to look forward with optimism.

—Lisa Ferraro Parmelee, Editor



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