

As the president-elect organizes his administration a full decade after the Cold War unexpectedly came to an end, his national security advisor should reflect on how the Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower administrations built a consensus behind United States defense and foreign policy. Those administrations invested modest resources in monitoring and analyzing on a regular basis attitudes of American citizens and voters on national security and foreign policy issues. These polling data helped senior advisors quietly design and implement an internationalist foreign policy that transcended partisan politics. The need for such a policy and polling synthesis is as great now as it was in the 1940s and 50s.

Today, when basic foreign and defense policies are being challenged both at home and abroad, and any president is constrained in the time he can devote to foreign affairs without risking his re-election, the country would be well served by a National Security

Council staff that knows *exactly* what the public thinks about defense and foreign affairs. It would be equally useful to know why the public has come to its current attitudes, and the specific conditions under which presidential opinion leadership will and will not work. Traditional national security experts might be surprised by the public's common sense, attention to detail, and willingness to support policies that pursue America's enlightened self-interest, up to a point.

In an extensive review of survey data that have included national security or foreign policy questions during the

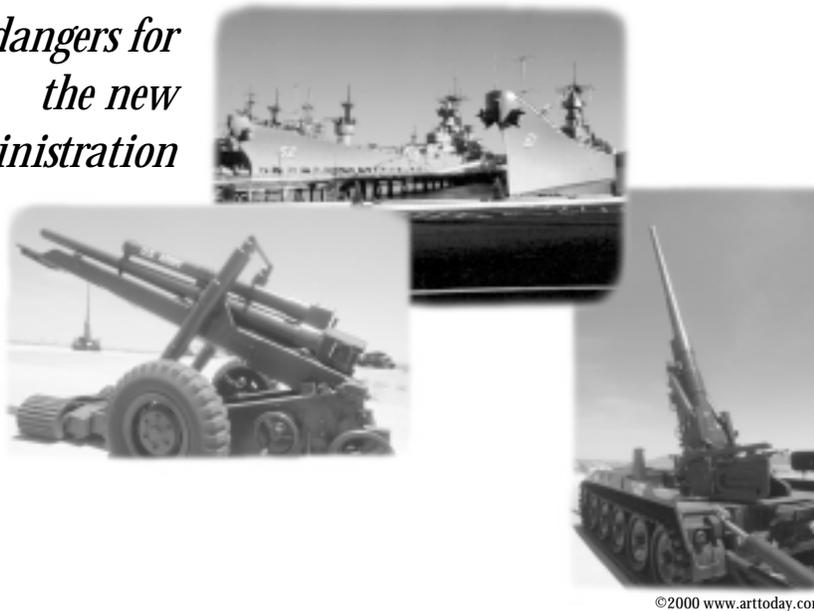
first post-Cold War decade—1990 to 2000—one finds both opportunities for presidential leadership and potential traps which could lead to policy failures.

Perhaps the most striking thing demonstrated by this review is the dearth of good polling data in the last decade on the subjects of foreign relations and defense. The questions are relatively limited in number and of uneven quality. Many gaps appear in key trend data, and there is a concentration of survey questions on short term, media-driven issues. Most of the surveys are inadequately designed.

These limitations make it impossible to tell if the US is becoming polarized on defense and foreign issues along old or new fault lines. Unless the White House steps in and stimulates or conducts regular polls of the highest professional quality on a bipartisan basis, the absence of a cogent body of survey data will make constructing a consensus

National Security

*Opportunities
and dangers for
the new
administration*



Thomas W. Graham is vice president, the Second Chance Foundation. For an annotated version, email thomasgraham@secondchancefdtn.org.

around 21st century US military and foreign policy even more difficult than it already is.

The second major insight afforded by the data is the exceptionally low importance assigned to all foreign and defense issues in our current era of globalization. Whether measured by “most important problem” data, attention devoted to leading news stories, or self-described levels of interest in foreign affairs, interest in all international issues is extremely low by historic standards, often registering in the single digits.

During the 2000 presidential campaign, pre-election polling questions about the most important problem facing the country found international issues hovering around 6%. Closer evaluation reveals this is not a new phenomenon. The break from exceptional Cold War-era levels of interest, when 40 to 60% believed that an international issue was the most important problem, occurred in 1976, well before the Berlin Wall was torn down. After reaching a low of 5% in 1976, this figure increased to the 20% range during the Reagan administration; but it has declined to the current low levels in every presidential election year since 1988.

Despite this apparent drop in interest, it would be a mistake to conclude that foreign and military issues are unimportant to voters or to key voting blocks. The Voter News Service 2000 exit poll found 62% of voters asserting that issues in general were more important than candidate qualities in making their voting decision. World affairs ranked in the *middle*, not the bottom, of seven issues mentioned, with 12% selecting it as the issue which mattered most. While below the rankings from 1976 to 1988, this level of interest is up from 1992 and 1996. It is possible that we have seen the end of the post-Cold War international attention deficit.

As one looks at a broad range of attitudes on national security issues, it is clear that the public is “functionally literate” and capable of making sense of the complex world in order to make reasonable judgments on national security and foreign policies. This is particularly evident in the area of national defense.

Examination of trend data on military spending suggests that the public was in an extremely dovish mood *prior* to the end of the Cold War in 1989, and up through 1993. However, support for increasing military spending doubled to approximately 20% in 1994 to 1997 and increased again to approximately 30 to 35% in 1999 to 2000. Today, support for a “peace dividend” has vanished; and when the issue of *cutting* military spending was put to the test in the Iowa primaries, it failed.

The public believes that to remain a superpower, the US must be strong both in military and economic terms. Gone are the immediate post-Cold War days when economic strength was considered an equal or superior component of national power. The public believed that military spending was a “fair” issue during the 2000 campaign, and there is preliminary evidence that the relatively high profile given to “low salience” defense issues by George Bush and Richard Cheney, especially when millions of voters were watching the conventions and debates, helped the Republican Party mobilize its base without triggering a counter-mobilization for the Democrats.

The public’s continuing support for relatively robust military spending seems to derive from perceptions that the end of the Cold War has not reduced the chances of a world war to impossibly low levels. From the 1991 Gulf War through 1998, the National Opinion Research Center has found an average of 44% of the public expecting the US to fight in

a world war within the next 10 years. One survey conducted in 1996 found that 23% of the public believed the chance of a major war had *increased* compared with 10 years before, when the Soviet threat still existed.

Why in our era of relative peace might these attitudes have developed? A preliminary answer seems to relate to the public’s perception of threats, which began changing well before the end of the Cold War. It is true that, while still viewed as a military threat in the mid-1980s at the beginning of the Gorbachev revolution, the Soviet Union was no longer seen as an acute danger. In place of our apprehensions about the Soviets, however, four threats have emerged as major national security concerns: biological weapons and chemical weapons, nuclear proliferation, terrorism, and drugs.

The Gulf War seems to have had a powerful impact on perceptions of the contemporary biological weapon and chemical weapon threat. In 1991, 75 to 82% believed Iraq would use biological or chemical weapons against the US. Five years later, 72 to 75% believed there was a chance that a terrorist group would use biological, chemical or nuclear weapons against a US city. Over a third of the public (36%) believes there is a greater chance of a biological, chemical or nuclear attack on the US now than 10 years ago, when the Cold War was still going on.

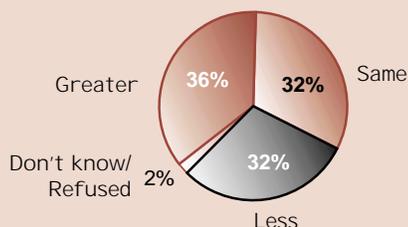
Longstanding fears that China would become more of a threat to the US than Russia—evident as far back as 1963—have also been brought to the surface by press reporting on both manufactured and real events, such as the Cox Commission, Rumsfeld Commission, and Los Alamos nuclear spying scandals. Pakistan is perceived as a nuclear threat only somewhat behind Russia, and the “threat list” of nuclear or potential nuclear weapons states also includes Israel, India and Taiwan.

Public opinion presents several opportunities for presidential leadership in foreign relations, especially in defense. The public is willing to sustain military spending at levels that mainstream experts believe can provide the US with a robust defense capability. The public also con-

policy, strategy, and operations, if they believe the military leadership does not need or want today's large nuclear forces.

The incoming NSC staff should also be aware of two pitfalls that lie in contemporary attitudes of voters and taxpayers.

Question: Do you think the danger of attack on the United States with a nuclear, biological, or chemical weapon is greater now than it was 10 years ago, less now than it was 10 years ago, or is it about the same?



Source: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates for the Pew Research Center, September 4-11, 1997.

tinues to place the military at the top of the list in terms of its confidence in various institutions. However, this credibility is not an asset to be taken for granted. Harris data showed a 6% drop in confidence from 1999 to 2000 at a time when most other institutions recorded modest gains or were stable. Fox News data show that military officers rank well behind scientists, teachers and five other occupations in terms of public perceptions of their honesty and ethical standards.

Moreover, unlike during the Cold War, the public does not seem to have bought into an exaggerated characterization of current national security threats to the US. The possession of nuclear weapons by various countries is perceived more as a threat to world peace than as an acute threat to US national security. While worried about weapons of mass destruction, the public perceives that the chance terrorists will attack the US using nuclear, biological or chemical weapons is not high. Americans are willing to support drastic negotiated cuts in nuclear weapons, and perhaps even fundamental changes in nuclear

First, the issue of ballistic missile defense is one where policy discussions in Washington seem to be divorced from the reality of American public opinion. Contrary to current conventional wisdom, public support for deployment of a national ballistic missile defense system is neither broad nor deep. Unlike elites, the public has held complex views which are highly differentiated according to what attitude dimension of the missile defense issue is being tested. Although large majorities have supported the abstract idea of a perfect or highly effective defense against all nuclear weapons and missiles, even this generic support has dropped approximately 20% over the past two decades. And when public opinion questions place the missile defense issue in a more real world context of costs, tradeoffs, risks and benefits, and partial effectiveness, public support becomes decidedly mixed.

All these data suggest that serious errors in judgment are being made if decision makers think that the public is pressing for missile defenses. Americans are aware that the most likely

nuclear, biological, or chemical attack scenarios on the US would be unaffected even if a 60 billion dollar ballistic missile defense system were deployed. If such deployment triggers a new nuclear arms race, creates serious tensions with our allies, or brings the US into confrontation with China, decision makers could find the American public ready to inflict punishment on those few who have made deployment their life's dream.

Second, decision makers need to be aware that excessive public concern about American casualties in foreign interventions is not borne out by a comprehensive review of polling results. The expectation among both military and civilian decision makers that the public is subject to such fears obscures the precise steps an administration can take to obtain and maintain public support for forceful action overseas. These steps include strong backing for diplomatic pressure, followed by collective action with clear allied support, tough sanctions that are enforced, and then limited use of military power such as bombing. If these actions do not solve the problem, the public will support full use of military power as a last resort under specified conditions. They also will follow a president's lead, in part because they believe it is his job to make these tough decisions even in the face of some domestic opposition. This public support has its limits, though, and knowing them in exact detail is essential for a president and his staff to understand.

Given the diversity and complexity of American attitudes about the world, it is essential that the regular polling on defense and foreign policy, which was conducted by the White House and State Department from World War II through the late 1950s, be resumed. Otherwise, decision makers are flying blind both with US security and the trust of the people who vote for them, pay their bills, and give them latitude up to a point.