

A Roper Center Data Review

An Internationalist State of Mind

When I was a child in the early 1960s, it was often mentioned as a point of pride that the United States was the only country in the world that defeated its enemies, and then turned around and helped them back onto their feet. The reference, of course, was to the Marshall Plan and the rebuilding of Germany and Japan in the aftermath of World War II. Never did Americans more keenly feel the importance of their nation in the world, or more clearly recognize the need for their involvement—and their leadership—in its affairs.

In those days, prior to the trauma of Vietnam, the deep, abiding image of America in the public mind was still one very much like that related by Clotaire Rapaille in his description of wartime France (page 42): “Big strong guys in a big strong tank,” handing out chocolate. We saw ourselves as a vision of strength and leadership in a broken world, imbued with the spirit of heroism and generosity.

Today that vision has faded somewhat, diminished by time and interceding events. Without a world war, a Cold War, or even a Persian Gulf War to lend a sense of urgency to international affairs, Americans have placed matters of foreign relations well down on their list of most important problems facing the country today.

Even so, it would be a mistake to think the public remains apathetic when a need for involvement arises, or that it lacks a firm understanding of the US’s role and responsibilities in the international arena. As Everett Ladd wrote in 1997, “A public’s job is to point the general direction it wants the country’s foreign policy to take, the broad goals to be pursued and the values to be affirmed.” And as the data in the following pages (26-33) show, the public continues to hold clear and consistent ideas as to what the direction should be; it is, as it was when Ladd wrote his essay, “broadly internationalist rather than isolationist.”

In response to the question, “Do you think the United States plays a more important and powerful role as a world leader today compared to 10 years ago?” the numbers show a steady rise since 1974. The increase is not matched point for point

by the percentages who believe “it would be best for the future of this country if we take an active part in world affairs,” but a sharp 1991 spike in the latter trend line—prompted by the Persian Gulf War—offers clear evidence of Americans’ willingness to rise to the occasion of an international emergency, even if more than a third are ambivalent about our engagement during more peaceful times.

One thing majorities of the public feel fairly strongly about is that the US should not be taking the role of “top dog” in the world today, despite our status as sole remaining superpower. Whether out of respect for our allies’ right to have a say, or because we simply don’t wish to be saddled with the entire burden of leadership, Americans consistently assert that we should act in concert with other countries, not just go our own way heedless of their wishes. Weary of being seen primarily as its “policeman,” we hope we will come to be regarded as more of a “good neighbor” by the rest of the world.

Despite this wish, though, Americans still hold to values that mandate taking the lead when the humanitarian stakes are high. We may think it’s inappropriate to impose our values on others most of the time; but we acknowledge not only a need but a moral responsibility to get involved in cases of genocide or widespread persecution.

Finally, the data show that, in general, Americans today see their world as a less frightening place than it used to be. Though apprehensive over the possibility of terrorism striking close to home, for the most part we no longer allow nuclear nightmares to disturb our sleep; and the list of nations we consider “friendly” is much longer than that of those from whom we feel estranged. And as the forces of globalization proceed to foster even more interconnection with the rest of the planet, most Americans look forward with optimism to this new brand of internationalism, and to embracing our role as good neighbor to the world.

—Lisa Ferraro Parmelee, Associate Editor

Data follow— pages 26-33