

## **Poll: Fewer Guns, More Talk**

**Miriam Pemberton | October 27, 2006**

Five years ago the Bush administration launched its war on terror without end. About 90% of Americans applauded. The administration has been ramping up the fear to win elections ever since. This strategy is no longer working. Soon the talk shows and editorial pages will be chewing over exit polling to opine about the impact of the war on the election. But it's already clear that decisive majorities of Americans have had enough of a militarized, unilateral foreign policy.

One polling organization has registered its verdict without waiting for the election. The Project on International Public Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland has just released its most recent survey, not of ticks up and down among candidates, but of the public's views on foreign policy. (Its margin of error varies between 3.1-3.6%, depending on the sample size for each question. FPIF was part of an advisory group for the design of the poll.) This poll makes clear that the new Congress, whatever its makeup, has a strong mandate to press for a major change in the way the United States relates to the rest of the world.

In 2000, the Gallup organization recorded a 65% majority among Republicans, Democrats, and Independents combined who were satisfied with the U.S. position in the world. In May of 2003—when the Iraq mission was being declared accomplished—that figure had risen to 67%. PIPA records that in 2006, that majority is registering *dissatisfaction* at 68%. In other words, the public's view has been completely reversed in a mere two-and-a-half years—a virtually unprecedented about-face. Sixty percent believe that the current approach has increased

the likelihood of terrorist attacks against the United States, and 78% believe this approach has diminished our post-9-11 reserves of global goodwill. Looking at the predominantly negative views of the United States in the Middle East, most Americans believe these are the result of our policies, rather than, as the administration would have it, our values.

### **What the Public Wants**

Seven in ten Americans said they would be more likely to vote for a candidate committed to pursuing a new approach to U.S. foreign policy. The poll sketches the broad outline of what a majority of voters would like this approach to be.

First, the majority would shift the emphasis from military force. Sixty-five percent say the United States has been “too quick to get American military forces involved” in international conflicts, and an even higher percentage wants the United States to put more emphasis on diplomatic and economic methods in combating terrorism. The poll offered respondents the chance to reallocate the federal foreign policy budget, an exercise that (I'm happy to report) reveals a set of priorities strongly



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supportive of what FPIF and the Center for Defense Information promote every year in our Unified Security Budget (USB).

When shown the current proportions of U.S. military spending vis-à-vis non-military security measures, in fact, a majority of respondents recommend much deeper cuts on the military side of the budget than what we have recommended in the USB. Offered a list of alternative security measures, they are most interested in having their legislators increase funding for: reducing U.S. dependence on oil; increasing port security; international police and intelligence cooperation to go after terrorist networks, working through the UN to strengthen international laws against terrorism and to ensure the cooperation of UN members in enforcing them; fighting the global spread of HIV/AIDS; and preventing the spread of nuclear weapons by securing nuclear materials in the former Soviet Union.

Supported at lower, but majority levels is increased spending on programs to promote dialogue and intercultural understanding between the United States and the Muslim world. Respondents are least supportive of building new nuclear weapons, helping dissident groups to try to overthrow the government of Iran, using severe interrogation methods to force terrorists to talk, and building new types of naval destroyers or a missile defense system.

The other major change in foreign policy endorsed by overwhelming majorities is another key FPIF priority: a cooperative and multilateral approach. Messrs. Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld have been trotting out this straw man lately: those opposed to their “get tough” posture with the rest of the world are wishfully

thinking that “if we leave them alone, they’ll leave us alone.” In fact this isolationist view, expressed in the poll as “The United States should withdraw from most efforts to solve international problems,” is favored by a scant 16% of respondents. The administration’s position—“As the sole remaining superpower, the United States should continue to be the preeminent world leader in solving international problems”—gets even less support: 9%. An overwhelming 72% believes that “The United States should do its share in efforts to solve international problems together with other countries.”

In another piece of good news for FPIF and the Global Good Neighbor campaign, an even larger majority, 79%, approves of the term “good neighbor” itself to characterize the way the United States ought to relate to other countries. In this view, the national interest and the global interest need to be seen as linked. Soundly rejected was the view that the United States needs to concentrate on looking out for its own interests in a dangerous world.

A large 69% majority supports working through multilateral institutions. A slightly smaller but surprisingly robust majority, 61%, believes that “the United States should be more willing to make decisions within the United Nations, *even if this means that the United States will sometimes have to go along with a policy that is not its first choice.*” (John Bolton, call your office.)

American voters, then, want their country to steer a new path of global engagement that rejects both isolationism and unilateralism. They are more in touch with developments in the world than the administration would like them to be.

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## Global Confirmation

Fortunately, the world is offering up a panoply of options for where non-military engagement can start. Precedence should go to damage repair for failed policies in Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, North Korea, Israel/ Palestine, and Darfur, among others. But here is just a handful of positive developments in recent months that beckon us to engage peacefully beyond our borders.

- First, the UN will likely adopt a resolution clearing the way for a landmark arms trade treaty. It will set common international standards on the import, export, and transfer of conventional arms including not only small arms, but heavy weapons such as tanks. A UN-appointed panel of experts will determine the details of the legally-binding treaty that will be put to a vote in 2008. The United States, Russia, and China—the world’s leading arms exporters—all oppose the treaty. When the vote recently took place in the UN General Assembly, several countries abstained but only one voted no: the United States. U.S. opposition is hard to square with its professed concern about terrorism and failed states, since arms proliferation in the hands of non-state actors is a primary facilitator of both. A policy change on behalf of this new treaty would be an excellent first step toward reengagement with the long list of existing treaties the Bush administration has rejected since taking office.
- On September 8, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan signed the Central Asian Nuclear Weapon Free Zone agreement.

With this action they joined four other zones in Latin America and the Caribbean, the South Pacific, Southeast Asia, and Africa. This zone is, significantly, the first among countries that had previously held nuclear weapons, and still host U.S. and Russian bases, and the first in a region surrounded by nuclear states (Russia, China, Pakistan, India, and Israel). In addition these five states become the first in the world to accept the legally binding enhanced International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards (called the “additional protocol”) on their civilian nuclear assets. Remarkably, the United States opposes the agreement. This is hard to square with 1) U.S. willingness to go to war with other nations in the region over their nuclear arsenals, 2) U.S. commitment to nuclear disarmament as a signatory to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, and 3) U.S. concern to prevent the acquisition of nuclear materials by terrorist groups.

- Third, the awarding of this year’s Nobel Peace Prize to Muhammad Yunus, the Bangladeshi pioneer of microcredit, usefully calls attention to the essential link between peace and poverty alleviation. Microfinancing has created a new model of sustainable economic development based on local economies reaching around and under corrupt governments and the geo-political arrangements of international financial institutions. The U.S. claim to a place in the world as a global good neighbor will depend in part not only on new commitments of resources to foreign aid but also a

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willingness to radically rethink how foreign aid should be done.

Finally, it is right to pay tribute to Congress for getting one thing right. While failing nearly universally in its oversight responsibilities on our foreign policy, it did vote this summer to bar the United States from establishing permanent bases in Iraq. (The administration has presumably stashed a “signing statement” in the back of a drawer somewhere to the effect that, Congress notwithstanding, Iraqi bases remain a live option.) Among the lessons that Iraq must teach us is that the expansion of the U.S. military footprint across the globe ultimately makes us less safe.

By large margins, American voters prefer Congress to support a less militarized and more multilateral foreign policy. The foreign policy disasters of recent years have at least brought us clarity on that. The administration and Congress are out of touch with what Americans and the rest of the world think. Barring the triumph of big money and

electoral fraud, the election may force them to listen.

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*Miriam Pemberton is the Foreign Policy In Focus (online at [www.fpif.org](http://www.fpif.org)) peace and security editor at the Institute for Policy Studies (online at [www.ips-dc.org](http://www.ips-dc.org)) in Washington, DC.*

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