

H-Diplo | ISSF

POLICY Roundtable 2-1 (2017):

Public Opinion and the Trump Administration's Foreign Policy

Published on **27 September 2017** | issforum.org

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H-Diplo/ISSF Web and Production Editor: **George Fujii**

Shortlink: <http://tiny.cc/PR-2-1>

Permalink: <http://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/2-1-public-opinion>

PDF URL: <http://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/Policy-Roundtable-2-1.pdf>

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Introduction by Sarah Kreps, Cornell University

During his campaign, Donald Trump made a number of bombastic assertions. For students of international law, the declaration that he would authorize the use of torture was among the more alarming, so there were signs of hope when he took office and appeared to backpedal. Soon after winning the election, President Trump sat down with the *New York Times* and implied that the winds of public opinion might cause him to shift his position on torture. While James Mattis, his Defense Secretary, had persuaded him that torture was not “useful,” Trump concluded that his decision would depend on whether “Americans feel strongly about bringing back waterboarding and other tactics,” and if so, “I would be guided by that.”¹

That public opinion in a democracy would influence foreign policy might seem intuitive since leaders have electoral incentives to heed public preferences. But scholars have long questioned whether the public is sufficiently aware of foreign policy to register consistent preferences, and even so, whether leaders actually tailor their policies accordingly. Foreign policy events such as the Vietnam War, in which mass protests contributed to the war’s end, have helped resolve questions of whether foreign policy is salient for the public and whether those attitudes influence foreign policy outcomes. Many key questions remain, however. Does the mass public matter, or are there key subsets of—or even particular individuals within—the public that act as ‘thought leaders’ who more directly influence policy? Through what actual mechanisms do public attitudes constrain leaders’ choices about foreign policy?

Bethany Albertson and Shana Kushner Gadarian, who have recently written a book about the way anxiety affects public life,² discuss the role of emotions in shaping foreign-policy views. As they observe, political scientists have historically believed that the public does not have coherent attitudes about foreign policy. In fact, recent evidence suggests that particular features of foreign policy, whether casualties or, as they show in their book, anxiety and anger, can produce a consistent set of attitudes about foreign policy. While this theoretical mechanism could predict increased support for Trump’s travel ban in the event of a terrorist attack, the authors remain sanguine that political polarization may actually create sufficient paralysis that prevents the types of civil-liberties restrictions that have happened in the wake of previous attacks when there was comparative political unity.

Bruce Jentleson, whose name is nearly synonymous with the phrase “public opinion and foreign policy,” offers what he calls a first cut at how the public has responded on Trump’s foreign policy.³ He sees evidence of continuity rather than change, and a public marked by its prudence. On the other hand, he observes a

¹ Matt Apuzzo and James Risen, “Donald Trump Faces Obstacles to Resuming Waterboarding,” *New York Times*, 28 November 2016.

² Bethany Albertson and Shana Kushner Gadarian, *Anxious Politics: Democratic Citizenship in a Threatening World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

³ Bruce Jentleson, “The Pretty Prudent Public: Post Post-Vietnam American Opinion on the Use of Military Force,” *International Studies Quarterly* 36:1 (March 1992): 49-74.

constituency which is supportive of Trump's America First policy, pointing to a less prudent disjuncture, one that will warrant more scholarly attention.

Daniel Drezner, author of the recent book *The Ideas Industry*, focuses his attention on a subset of the public: foreign policy elites, referred to as "the Blob" by Ben Rhodes of the Obama National Security Council.⁴ Campaign and governing rhetoric to the contrary, Drezner contends, Trump has actually hewed fairly closely to the preferences of "The Blob," although he has also shown a willingness to be the "loner-as-leader" who flouts elite influence.

Matthew Baum and Philip Potter, who have written extensively on the relationship between the media, parties, and leaders' conduct of wars, argue that public opinion constrains the options of leaders seeking to fly below the radar.⁵ This produces perverse incentives for policies that avoid the worst outcomes but cannot achieve the best ones.

Participants:

Sarah Kreps is Associate Professor of Government and Adjunct Professor of Law at Cornell University and Adjunct Scholar at the Modern War Institute (West Point). Her work has been published in outlets such as the *American Political Science Review*, *International Security*, the *Journal of Politics*, and *Foreign Affairs*. Her fourth book, *Taxing Wars: How the Financial Costs of War Affect Democratic Accountability* will be published by Oxford University Press in Spring 2018.

Bethany Albertson is Associate Professor of Government at the University of Texas, Austin. Her primary research interests are political psychology and experimental methods. She is co-author (with Shana Kushner Gadarian) of *Anxious Politics: Democratic Citizenship in a Threatening World* winner of the Robert E. Lane award for best book in political psychology. Her work has been published in *American Journal of Political Science*, *Political Analysis*, *Political Psychology*, *Political Behavior*, *American Politics Research*, and *Research & Politics*.

Matthew A. Baum (Ph.D., UC San Diego, 2000) is the Marvin Kalb Professor of Global Communications and Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government and Department of Government. His research focuses on delineating the effects of domestic politics on international conflict and cooperation in general and American foreign policy in particular, as well as on the role of the mass media and public opinion in contemporary American politics. His research has appeared in over a dozen leading scholarly journals, such as the *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, and the *Journal of Politics*. His books include *Soft News Goes to War: Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy in the New Media Age* (Princeton University Press: 2003), *War Stories: The Causes and Consequences of Public Views of War* (co-authored with Tim Groeling; Princeton University Press: 2009), and *War and Democratic Constraint: How the Public Influences Foreign Policy* (co-authored with Philip Potter;

⁴ David Samuels, "The Aspiring Novelist Who Became Obama's Foreign-Policy Guru," *New York Times*, 5 May 2016.

⁵ Matthew Baum and Philip BK Potter, *War and Democratic Constraint: How the Public Influences Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

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Princeton University Press: 2015). He has also contributed op-ed articles to a variety of newspapers, magazines, and blog sites in the United States and abroad. Before coming to Harvard, Baum was an associate professor of political science and communication studies at UCLA.

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Essay by Bethany Albertson, the University of Texas at Austin and Shana Kushner Gadarian, Syracuse University

Emotions and Foreign Policy in the Trump Age

If you ask the average American to find Qatar on the map, he or she would be unlikely to be able to do so¹. Nor would most Americans be able to explain the complicated diplomatic relationship between Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United States and the regional tensions that came to the fore this month when Saudi Arabia led a coalition of Arab states to economically isolate Qatar.² Foreign policy is complicated and tends to be overshadowed by domestic policies unless there is a brewing crisis that would involve U.S. interests. In truth, on average, Americans do not have deep political knowledge of domestic affairs³ either, but the issues in foreign policy, such as the right balance of trade, or when the U.S. should use force abroad, are arguably even more complex and often without easy heuristics.

Yet, recent polls of Americans show a public that does appear to have foreign policy attitudes. For example, the public is supportive of the Paris Climate Treaty⁴ and has overwhelmingly favorable attitudes toward NATO.⁵ So, how does the public take positions on issues as complex as whether the U.S. should leave NAFTA or which countries to support in the Middle East when it often lacks the most basic knowledge like where countries are located? More fundamentally, is public support of discrete policies politically meaningful?

Early theories of public opinion from Gabriel Almond⁶ and Walter Lippmann⁷ essentially concluded that Americans do not have stable opinions about foreign policy, but rather respond to events and moods. Without information, these scholars concluded, public opinion was unstable, unformed, and not particularly meaningful. A range of scholars have challenged this perspective, arguing that while Americans do not have specific facts to rely on, they do have broad principles (ex. anti-communism, internationalism, multilateralism)⁸ that help structure attitudes about war or trade. Some pieces of information, such as the

¹ Kevin Quealy, "If Americans Can Find North Korea on a Map, They're More Likely to Prefer Diplomacy," *The New York Times*, 14 May 2017.

² Patrick Kingsley, "Turkey Throws Support Behind Qatar in Rift Among Arab Nations," *The New York Times*, 7 June 2017.

³ Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

⁴ Jennifer Marlon, Eric Fine, and Anthony Leiserowitz, "A Majority of Americans in Every State Say the U.S. Should Participate in the Paris Climate Agreement," Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, 2017.

⁵ Pew Research Center, "NATO's Image Improves on Both Sides of Atlantic," May 2017.

⁶ Gabriel Abraham Almond, *The American People and Foreign Policy* (New York: Praeger, 1960).

⁷ Walter Lippmann, *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (Boston: Little Brown, 1943).

⁸ Ole R. Holsti, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009); Jon Hurwitz and Mark Peffley, "How are Foreign Policy Attitudes Structured? A Hierarchical Model," *American*

number of casualties in an ongoing war⁹ or the purpose of military engagements are easily understood and communicated¹⁰ through the mass media and can serve as a basis for support or opposition to war. In addition, citizens may not need deep information because they can rely on cues about what types of policies to support or oppose from favored partisan elites,¹¹ the mass media,¹² or fellow citizens.¹³

As we argue in our book *Anxious Politics*,¹⁴ emotions, such as anxiety and anger, involve the public enough to force it to pay attention even to complicated foreign policy issues. For emotions to matter in politics, though, citizens need to see events and policies as relevant to them, their community, their country, or another group that matters to them.

Not all foreign policy issues are equally likely to emotionally engage the public. On some foreign policy issues, political elites or journalists need to do very little work to explain their importance, engage people's emotions, and shape the types of policies they prefer. On other issues, elites must work much harder to frame issues to get the public emotionally invested. For instance, economic issues like trade disputes are usually less likely to generate anger, anxiety, or hatred in the same ways that humanitarian crises or interstate violence are.¹⁵ Most citizens learn about politics from the media, and dramatic and disturbing images of dying children, terrorism victims, or climate disasters are more likely to grab people's attention and subsequently influence their

Political Science Review 81:4 (1987): 1099-1120. Richard K. Herrmann, Philip E. Tetlock, and Penny S. Visser, "Mass Public Decisions on Go to War: A Cognitive-Interactionist Framework," *American Political Science Review* 93:3 (1999): 553-573.

⁹ John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1973).

¹⁰ Richard C. Eichenberg, "Victory has Many Friends: US Public Opinion and the Use of Military Force, 1981-2005," *International Security* 30:1 (2005): 140-177; Bruce W Jentleson, "The Pretty Prudent Public: Post post-Vietnam American Opinion on the Use of Military Force," *International Studies Quarterly* 36.1 (1992): 49-74.

¹¹ John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Adam J. Berinsky, *In Time of War: Understanding American Public Opinion from World War II to Iraq* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

¹² Matthew A. Baum and Tim J. Groeling, *War Stories: The Causes and Consequences of Public Views of War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

¹³ Joshua Kertzer and Thomas Zeitzoff, "A Bottom-Up Theory of Public Opinion about Foreign Policy." *American Journal of Political Science* 61:3 (2017), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12314>.

¹⁴ Bethany Albertson and Shana Kushner Gadarian, *Anxious Politics: Democratic Citizenship in a Threatening World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹⁵ Anna Getmansky and Thomas Zeitzoff, "Terrorism and Voting: The Effect of Rocket Threat on Voting in Israeli Elections," *American Political Science Review* 108:3 (2014): 588-604; Linda Skitka, [Christopher W. Bauman](#), [Nicholas P. Aramovich](#), and [G. Scott Morgan](#), "Confrontational and Preventative Policy Responses to Terrorism: Anger wants a Fight and Fear Wants "Them" to Go Away," *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 28:4 (2006): 375-384.

attitudes than less emotive images like maps or bill signings.¹⁶ Images from the mainstream media or social media can increase emotion about foreign policy with little framing by elites. Of course, even issues that are on their surface non-emotive, like the Trans-Pacific Partnership, can be framed to evoke strong feelings in voters.

When foreign policy is threatening, such as in the wake of a terrorist attack, citizens pay closer attention to news and events in order to understand the nature of threats and to avoid future harm.¹⁷ While citizens seek information as a coping mechanism, their attention is largely drawn to threatening information, which may only serve to reinforce their anxiety. Media outlets are also much more likely to spend significant time on a foreign policy story when news is threatening than when it is more reassuring.¹⁸ This is likely one reason why Americans' concerns over a major terrorist attack have waned little in the 16 years since 9/11.¹⁹

Emotions can cause us to care about foreign policy, and they can also fundamentally shape the types of policies that citizens want. Emotions change our decision-making calculus. Front-page news stories might command our attention for a day, but whether stories have meaningful effects on ordinary citizens depends on the emotions they evoke. For example, anger encourages risk seeking, or risk acceptant attitudes and behavior.²⁰ Angry people seek punishment for those who have wronged them. In our research, we find that anxiety causes people to support protective policies, and what counts as protective is often framed by partisan politics.

Yet, even when emotions push people to become involved in a political issue, does this mean that these emotions are enough to change policy itself? Some international actions can cause outrage in the short term but do not cause enough engagement to actually make people put pressure on Congress and the president to act. Emotions such as anger, anxiety, and enthusiasm all motivate the public to act but sadness is not a motivating emotion, so foreign policy issues that create sadness are unlikely to cause people to call their members of Congress, join protests, or vote on those issues.

¹⁶ Shana Kushner Gadarian, "Scary Pictures: How Terrorism Imagery Affects Voter Evaluations," *Political Communication* 31.2 (2014): 282-302.

¹⁷ Leonie Huddy, Stanley Feldman, Charles Taber, and Gallya Lahav, "Threat, Anxiety, and Support of Antiterrorism Policies," *American Journal of Political Science* 49.3 (2005): 593-608; George E. Marcus, W. Russell Neuman, and Michael MacKuen, *Affective Intelligence and Political Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

¹⁸ Brigitte L Nacos, Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, and Robert Y. Shapiro, *Selling Fear: Counterterrorism, the Media, and Public Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

¹⁹ John E Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, *Chasing Ghosts: The Policing of Terrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

²⁰ Anna Getmansky and Thomas Zeitzoff, "Terrorism and Voting: The Effect of Rocket Threat on Voting in Israeli Elections," *American Political Science Review* 108:3 (2014): 588-604; Skitka, [Bauman](#), [Aramovich](#), and [Morgan](#), "Confrontational and Preventative Policy Responses to Terrorism," 375-384.

Given what we know about how Americans approach foreign policy, what do we expect in the Donald Trump presidency? First, we would caution that support or opposition for discrete policies is of limited value. For instance, Trump's decision to pull out of the Paris Agreement on climate change puts 59% of Americans at odds with him.²¹ Trump's proposed wall along the Mexican border is similarly unpopular, with only 35% support.²²

But, whether these policies are popular or not, we need to ask if they matter to ordinary Americans - from an emotional standpoint, do they cause people to feel anything? It can be challenging for climate change activists to get Americans excited (or anxious) about climate change, when its effects seem physically remote and temporally distant. A particularly severe hurricane season or record drought might change things. In this administration, it is also hard to imagine responsiveness to public demands on climate change or immigration without sustained political action that evokes emotions for a wide variety of constituents who become motivated enough to vote on those issues.

On the other hand, the specter of terrorist attacks inspires widespread anxiety, and traditionally this translates into public support for the president and greater latitude to pursue protective policies. In our own research, we find that when people become emotional over acts of terrorism, they are more likely to support hawkish military policy and more likely to disregard civil liberties. If we were to extend this finding to contemporary politics, we might suggest that a major terrorist attack could increase support for Trump's publicly and legally controversial Muslim ban.

But we are not in an era of politics as usual. With record disapproval, heightened partisan polarization, and an expanding investigation into the executive branch, it is hard to imagine the political parties coming together to support civil liberties restrictions under a Trump administration even after a major terror attack. So, while emotions may evoke public demands for the 'protection' of the country with civil liberties restrictions, polarization may ultimately preserve those liberties.

²¹ Scott Clement and Brady Dennis, "Post-ABC poll: Nearly 6 in 10 oppose Trump scrapping Paris agreement," *Washington Post*, 5 June 2017.

²² Bradley Jones, "In Republicans' view of a Border Wall, Proximity to Mexico Matters" *Pew Research Center Fact Tank*, 8 March 2017.

Essay by Matthew A. Baum, Harvard University and Philip B. K. Potter, University of Virginia

Democracy, Public Opinion, and Half Measures

U.S. foreign policy increasingly appears confined to the ‘twilight zone’ between victory and defeat, characterized by open-ended engagements and half measures. As the United States rounds out the second decade of conflict in Afghanistan, decisive victory seems to recede ever further into the distance. Early visions of a stable, unified, and democratic Iraq now seem laughably naive. North Korea continually escalates its provocations, seemingly without consequence. Syria is unsettlingly similar, with the U.S. consistently engaged at a low level, but with insufficient resources or commitment to plausibly drive the outcome and seemingly no strategic plan to do so.

How can the most powerful nation on the planet repeatedly fail to achieve its foreign-policy goals? While countries such as China have closed the gap, the U.S. remains the global hegemon, especially with respect to military power. The U.S. spends more than the next eight most-prolific military spenders in the world combined,¹ alone accounting for 37% of global military spending.² Clearly, the United States has the raw capability to assert its will by dominating lesser powers and determining outcomes in places like Iraq, Afghanistan, and even Syria, and yet it does not. Why?

We contend that public opinion and attentiveness, and the unusual way in which they interact with American political institutions, explain much of this puzzle. The public tends to know little and care even less about foreign policy, but when it does engage it tends to do so negatively, emphatically, and at great cost to elected officials.³ Public ambivalence gives presidents tremendous foreign-policy power. But they can only wield it without incurring a significant risk of punishment for failure when they keep engagements below the threshold at which voters begin to pay attention. Thus, when U.S. leaders engage in military action abroad, they have tremendous latitude if they tie one hand tied behind their back and tremendous power if they do not, but they have difficulty combining the two.

The notion of the United States as a constrained foreign-policy actor is, in some sense, both surprising and seemingly at odds with existing research. Most academic work suggests that U.S. presidents are relatively unconstrained in their exercise of power abroad.⁴ In American politics we talk about the “two presidencies”: a

¹ Peter G. Peterson Foundation, “U.S. Defense Spending Compared to Other Countries,” 1 June 2017, http://www.pgpf.org/chart-archive/0053_defense-comparison.

² National Priorities Project, “U.S. Military Spending vs. the World,” n.d., <https://www.nationalpriorities.org/campaigns/us-military-spending-vs-world>.

³ Matthew A. Baum and Philip B.K. Potter, “The relationships between mass media, public opinion, and foreign policy: Toward a theoretical synthesis,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008): 39-65. Positive “rally” effects do occur in response to conflict, but they tend to be short in duration and unpredictable in magnitude.

⁴ Scholars now take Congressional constraints more seriously, but they are debating constraints at the margins. Presidents continue to enjoy virtually autocratic power in foreign affairs, nearly all the time. Constraint emerges only sporadically and incompletely. See, for example, Douglas L. Kriner, *After the Rubicon: Congress, Presidents, and the Politics*

constrained one for domestic politics, but an unconstrained one abroad.⁵ In our book, *War and Democratic Constraint*, we explore institutional arrangements that lead to a lack of constraint cross-nationally—a low number of parties is one such institutional arrangement; a free press that routinely amplifies, rather than challenging, a president’s foreign-policy pronouncements is another.⁶ The United States is the archetypal low-party democracy, with just two. The American media, in turn, routinely indexes its coverage of foreign policy to the president and his representatives, thereby magnifying the administration’s positions.⁷

Yet, time and time again, these unconstrained presidents of the only global superpower seem unable to achieve their foreign policy goals. Donald Trump and Barack Obama have very little in common as presidents, either in style or in policy preference, but with respect to Syria they converge in their failure to achieve measurable progress, let alone resolve the conflict. When such divergent men reach convergent conclusions it seems wise to look for structural explanations for the issues they confront.

This structure can be found in U.S. institutions that systematically favor policies that avoid activating public opinion. Most of the time, this grants presidents the foreign-policy independence and flexibility that gives rise to the ‘two presidencies’ thesis. But this freedom is limited to engagements that stay under the public’s radar or can maintain long-term public support. The latter condition is exceedingly rare. The result is a proliferation of low-level engagements in which the U.S. employs insufficient military power to achieve decisive victory, instead deploying just enough to manage global hotspots as ‘chronic conditions.’

This dynamic is clearly playing out in Trump’s policy toward Syria, as it has since that conflict erupted in 2011 during the Obama administration. While the U.S. obviously could do much more, presidents are limited by their expectations regarding *ex post* public opinion if they do. The public clearly does not favor deep engagement in Syria after the traumas of Iraq and Afghanistan.⁸ The result is that while presidents have the power to wage all-out war in Syria at a moment’s notice, the political costs they would likely pay for doing so (absent an unlikely complete victory) constrain their choices.

The same dynamic helps to explain Trump’s devolution of decision-making in Iraq and Syria to the Pentagon.⁹ He has little incentive to incur the political costs of leadership in this domain, so he delegates the

of Waging War (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); William G. Howell and Jon C. Pevehouse, *While Dangers Gather: Congressional Checks on Presidential War Powers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

⁵ Aaron Wildavsky, “The Two Presidencies” *Trans-Action* 4:7-14 (1966).

⁶ Matthew A. Baum and Philip B.K. Potter, *War and democratic constraint: How the public influences foreign policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁷ W. Lance Bennett, “Toward a theory of press-state relations in the United States,” *Journal of communication* 40:2 (1990): 103-127; Matthew A. Baum and Tim Groeling, *War Stories: The Causes and Consequences of Citizen Views of War* (Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁸ Pew Research Center, “Little Support for U.S. Intervention in Syrian Conflict,” 15 March 2012, <http://www.people-press.org/2012/03/15/little-support-for-u-s-intervention-in-syrian-conflict/>.

⁹ Phil Stewart, “Trump gives Pentagon power to reset Iraq, Syria troop limits,” *Reuters*, 26 April 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-military-idUSKBN17T03O>.

decision-making and ultimate responsibility for outcomes. If Syrian President Bashar al-Assad or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) make gains, special operators are killed, or some other setback sparks elite discord or public attention, the President can deflect the blame. However, this insulation comes at tremendous cost to policy—the generals make tactical decisions while the presidents eschew strategic ones.

What is particularly worrisome is that this is a further evolution of the process that led Congress to delegate much of its foreign policy role to the president in the first place. When the public is largely detached from foreign policy, and primarily punishes rather than rewards when it does engage, elected officials have little incentive to incur the downside risk that comes with foreign-policy leadership. This leaves U.S. foreign policy in a difficult position.

Easy solutions to Syria presently are not on the table and they seem unlikely to emerge with time. Generating durable support from the American public is limited by the complex realities on the ground that defy easy framing and the reality that the United States' own interests in the conflict are dwarfed by those in the region—Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Russia. As a result, we are likely stuck with what we have: policies that are good enough to avoid very bad outcomes but insufficient to generate outcomes that are actually good.

Essay by Daniel W. Drezner, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University

“Donald Trump vs. the Blob”¹

In the age of Trump, the relationship between the mass public and elite public on foreign policy issues could best be described as ‘complicated.’ On the one hand, most scholars of American foreign policy—and American politics—posit that mass public opinion is less influential than elite public opinion when it comes to U.S. foreign affairs. On the other hand, shifts in public attitudes have secondary effects on how elites influence foreign policy. The erosion of trust in authority and the rise in political polarization have made it easier for unconventional and marginalized individuals to exercise their voice in foreign policy debates.² Those political leaders whose intellectual style matches Isaiah Berlin’s “hedgehogs”—knowing one big thing—are more likely to thrive than Berlin’s “foxes”—who know a little about many things.³

To better understand this phenomenon, consider the relationship between the last two presidents and foreign policy elites. It would be safe to say that Barack Obama and Donald Trump treat ideas and intellectuals *very* differently. What is interesting is how the marketplace of ideas has treated both of them.

When Obama was elected, he was heralded as the rare politician who was also a true intellectual.⁴ He called for “a new vision of leadership” in foreign affairs, “a vision that draws from the past but is not bound by outdated thinking.”⁵ As an incoming president, Obama wanted to engage with the marketplace of foreign policy ideas. He made a concerted effort to reach out to opinion columnists and foreign policy experts—and not only those who were ideological allies.⁶

During his time in office, however, both the president and his staff grew increasingly frustrated with his attempts to affect the dominant foreign policy narrative. Obama’s Deputy National Security Advisor and foreign policy amanuensis, Ben Rhodes, vented that, “The discourse in Washington just becomes like a self-

¹ This essay was written in early July 2017.

² Daniel W. Drezner, *The Ideas Industry: How Pessimists, Partisans, and Plutocrats have Transformed the Marketplace of Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

³ See Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy’s View of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

⁴ James Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope, and the American Political Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

⁵ Barack Obama, “Renewing American Leadership,” *Foreign Affairs* 86 (July/August 2007), 3.

⁶ Sam Stein, “Obama And Conservatives Break Bread At George Will’s House,” *Huffington Post*, 13 February 2009; Michael Calderone, “How Obama Plays the Pundits,” *Politico*, 8 March 2009; Paul Starobin, “All the President’s Pundits,” *Columbia Journalism Review* (September/October 2011); Dylan Byers, “President Obama, off the record,” *Politico*, 1 November 2013.

licking ice cream cone of maximalist foreign policy.... That's what gets your think-tank paper read."⁷ In another interview, Rhodes referred derisively to the DC foreign-policy community as "The Blob."⁸ By the end of his term, Obama was complaining about the "playbook that comes out of the foreign-policy establishment" and how "you get judged harshly if you don't follow the playbook, even if there are good reasons why it does not apply."⁹ What is interesting is Obama's acknowledgement that his defiance of foreign policy intellectuals cost him politically. This would also explain why as president, Obama followed the playbook more often than not.¹⁰

Donald J. Trump seemed less constrained by the Blob during the 2016 campaign. Trump reveled in running one of the most heterodox foreign policy campaigns in the last half-century. While he lacked command of foreign policy detail, Trump forged a consistent zero-sum worldview on how foreign policy worked.¹¹ He adopted a slogan of "America First" to explain his foreign policy beliefs, despite its association with pre-1945 isolationism. Trump disparaged numerous U.S.-created multilateral regimes as antithetical to the national interest.¹² He argued that America's allies needed to pay the United States more for security provision. And he suggested that the liberal international economic order needed to be radically revised in America's favor.¹³

Trump's foreign policy platform engendered considerable blowback from foreign-policy elites. Foreign-policy analysts spanning the ideological spectrum panned his foreign-policy pronouncements.¹⁴ Liberals were unanimous in their condemnation of Trump's rhetoric, but many conservative intellectuals were equally

⁷ Rhodes quoted in Robert Draper, "Between Iraq and a Hawk Base," *New York Times Magazine*, 1 September 2015.

⁸ Rhodes quoted in David Samuels, "The Aspiring Novelist Who Became Obama's Foreign-Policy Guru," *New York Times Magazine*, 5 May 2016.

⁹ Quoted in Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic* (April 2016).

¹⁰ See, for example, Mark Landler, "For President, Two Full Terms of Fighting Wars," *New York Times*, 15 May 2016; Daniel W. Drezner, "Does Obama Have a Grand Strategy?" *Foreign Affairs* 90 (July/August 2011): 57-68.

¹¹ Tom Wright, "Donald Trump's 19th Century Foreign Policy," *Politico*, 20 January 2016; Jeet Heer, "Donald Trump's Foreign Policy Revolution," *The New Republic*, 26 March 2016.

¹² Ashley Parker, "Donald Trump Says NATO is 'Obsolete,' UN is 'Political Game'," *New York Times*, 2 April 2016.

¹³ Binyamin Appelbaum, "On Trade, Donald Trump Breaks with 200 Years of Economic Orthodoxy," *New York Times*, 10 March 2016.

¹⁴ Fareed Zakaria, "Trump's head-spinning and secret plans for foreign policy," *Washington Post*, 28 April 2016; Fred Kaplan, "A Mess of Contradictions," *Slate*, 27 April 2016; Julia Ioffe, "On Trump, Gefilte Fish, and World Order," *Foreign Policy*, 27 April 2016; Charles Krauthammer, "The World According to Trump," *Washington Post*, 28 April 2016; Joseph Nye, "How Trump Would Weaken America," Project Syndicate, 10 May 2016; Stephen Walt, "Donald Trump: Keep Your Hands Off the Foreign-Policy Ideas I Believe In," *Foreign Policy*, 8 August 2016; Ryan Cooper, "Donald Trump's Deranged Foreign Policy," *The Week*, 17 August 2016.

vehement in their critiques.¹⁵ In March 2016 more than 120 GOP foreign-policy professionals signed an open letter declaring unequivocally that they would not support Trump in the general election.¹⁶ Similar GOP petitions followed during the general election.¹⁷

If America's foreign policy community judged Trump harshly, he judged them right back. Trump explicitly disavowed the value of existing foreign-policy expertise. In an April 2016 foreign-policy speech, he argued that, "It's time to shake the rust off America's foreign policy. It's time to invite new voices and new visions into the fold." He went on to state that his foreign-policy advisors would not be, "those who have perfect résumés but very little to brag about except responsibility for a long history of failed policies and continued losses at war."¹⁸ In making these arguments, Trump openly questioned mainstream narratives about American foreign policy—with at least some measure of success.¹⁹ Trump was able to exploit the distrust of authority and expertise to defuse elite criticism.²⁰ He took advantage of increasing political polarization to shift GOP mass public attitudes on immigration, free trade, and Russia.²¹

It would seem that in the age of Trump, the influence of foreign policy elites like "The Blob" has been on the wane. President Trump's decisions to withdraw from the Trans Pacific Partnership and Paris climate change accord would certainly fit that pattern. Those actions aside, however, Trump as president has not been quite as transgressive as his campaign rhetoric suggested. He has reaffirmed U.S. alliances with NATO, South Korea, Japan, and key Middle East allies. He has not withdrawn from NAFTA. His more populist foreign policy advisers—Peter Navarro and Sebastian Gorka, for example—have found themselves on the margins. On a whole host of foreign-policy issues, President Trump has reversed Candidate Trump: on the Export-Import Bank, China's status as a currency manipulator, sanctions against Russia, and the utility of the

¹⁵ Tevi Troy, "How GOP Intellectuals' Feud with the Base Is Remaking U.S. Politics," *Politico*, 19 April 2016; Michael Crowley and Alex Isenstadt, "GOP foreign policy elites flock to Clinton," *Politico*, 6 July 2016.

¹⁶ The letter can be accessed at <http://warontherocks.com/2016/03/open-letter-on-donald-trump-from-gop-national-security-leaders/>. I was one of the signatories.

¹⁷ David Sanger, "50 G.O.P. Officials Warn Donald Trump Would Put Nation's Security 'at Risk'," *New York Times*, 8 August 2016.

¹⁸ The full text can be accessed at <https://www.donaldjtrump.com/press-releases/donald-j.-trump-foreign-policy-speech>.

¹⁹ Jacob Heilbrunn, "The GOP's New Foreign-Policy Populism," *The National Interest*, 17 February 2016; John Allen Gay, "Trump vs. Conservative Intellectuals," *The National Interest*, 7 June 2016.

²⁰ Drezner, *The Ideas Industry*; Tom Nichols, *The Death of Expertise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

²¹ On trade and immigration, see Dina Smeltz et al, "The Foreign Policy Establishment or Donald Trump: Which Better Reflects American Opinion?" Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 20 April 2017. On Russia, see Art Swift, "Putin's Image Rises in US, Mostly Among Republicans," Gallup, 17 February 2017.

European Union.²² After a bilateral meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Trump bragged on Twitter about the creation of a joint “impenetrable Cyber Security unit.” After a deluge of criticism over the next twelve hours, Trump then tweeted that it would not happen.²³

A world in which trust in authority has eroded and partisans do not trust the other side is a fertile environment for ‘thought leaders’ like Trump. Once in power, however, the quality of the thought leader matters—and, to be blunt, Trump is no Ronald Reagan. As Stephen Skowronek notes, Trump more closely mirrors John Quincy Adams and Jimmy Carter, the “loner-as-leader.” Skowronek concludes, “Once in office, they appear incompetent and in over their heads. Their disruptions characteristically drive the implosion. Reconstruction follows, but under other auspices.”²⁴

In challenging the orthodoxy of liberal internationalism, Trump’s Electoral College victory gave America’s foreign policy community an opportunity to engage in some introspection. And after 16 years of war in Afghanistan, 14 years of war in Iraq, policy fiascoes in Yemen, Syria and Libya, and a global financial crisis, perhaps some reflection was in order. In challenging long-held norms and principles behind U.S. foreign policy, however, Trump has for the first time in decades roused foreign-policy elites into articulating vigorous defenses for the liberal international order. These defenses may not convince Trump, but neither can Trump convince America’s foreign-policy community of his “America First” doctrine. In such a deadlock, presidents lose the ability to construct a powerful foreign-policy narrative.²⁵ Indeed, on bilateral relations with Russia—the issue in which Trump has been most out of step with The Blob – the President has encountered his tightest constraints.²⁶ Over time, the Trump administration’s performance to date could cause the mass public to recognize that, for all the sins of the foreign policy elite, the alternatives are far worse.

²² Daniel W. Drezner, “Trump fought the Blob and the Blob won. Why?” *Washington Post*, 13 April 2017.

²³ See <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/884016887692234753> and <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/884211874518192128>.

²⁴ Stephen Skowronek, “Is Donald Trump the Great Disrupter? Probably Not.” *Washington Post*, 24 April 2017.

²⁵ Rob Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

²⁶ Amanda Becker and Patricia Zengerle, “House seen passing Russia sanctions bill limiting Trump’s power,” Reuters, 25 July 2017.

Essay by Bruce W. Jentleson, Duke University

*Public Opinion and Donald Trump's Foreign Policy: Initial Assessment*¹

When President Ronald Reagan donned his “I’m a contra too” T-Shirt back in the 1980s and dubbed the Nicaraguan anti-communist guerrillas “the moral equal of our Founding Fathers,” he and his advisors were convinced the American public would now support their effort to overthrow the Sandinista regime.² They were wrong. They overestimated how malleable public opinion was even in the hands of the Great Communicator. Polls only shifted marginally. Reagan had to limit his policy to aid and covert operations, not more direct military action.

When in August-September 2013 President Barack Obama backed off his threat to retaliate against Syria if it used chemical weapons, claiming that even though the Bashar Assad regime had crossed that redline the American public would not support such action, he overestimated the public opinion constraints. Polls right after the revelations of chemical weapons use showed 50% willing to support limited military action.³ And this was without the rally effect that initially comes when a president puts himself behind a policy, since at that point Obama was only intimating that he might use force. It was only when Obama showed his own ambivalence, saying he had to go to Congress first, that public support fell off. When President Donald Trump retaliated for Assad’s April 2017 chemical weapons attacks with limited airstrikes, he received 57% support.⁴

This gets at the basic constraints-malleability dynamic in which, as Bruce Russett characterized it, presidents cannot “persuade the populace to support whatever the leaders wish to do,” yet nor are they necessarily so constrained as to have to “obey [its] dictates.”⁵ How has this mix been playing out with public opinion and Trump’s foreign policy? I start with some specific issues and then look at broader ones (all as an early cut).

On NATO, China, and Israel, public opinion has been exerting a ‘centripetal pull,’ moderating the extreme positions Trump took during the election campaign. This is similar to the pattern Miroslav Nincic identified with the Carter and Reagan Soviet policies. Concerned about whether President Jimmy Carter was “tough” enough, the public expressed low levels of approval for his Soviet policy in its conciliatory phases (1977-1978, most of 1979), and higher levels of support when Carter got hawkish (1980). Reagan’s foreign policy

¹ This essay was written in early July 2017.

² Gerald M. Boyd, “Reagan Terms Nicaraguan Rebels ‘Moral Equal of Our Founding Fathers,’” *New York Times*, 2 March 1985, <http://www.nytimes.com/1985/03/02/politics/02REAG.html?mcubz=0>.

³ NBC-Hart Research Associates Survey, 28-29 August 2014, http://msnbcmedia.msn.com/i/MSNBC/Sections/A_Politics/Today_Stories_Teases/13336_NBC_Syria_Poll.pdf.

⁴ Voice of America, “US Polls: Americans Supports Missile Attack on Syria, But Not Further Military Action,” 10 April 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-polls-show-americans-support-missile-attack-on-syria-but-not-further-military-action/3804268.html>.

⁵ Bruce M. Russett, *Controlling the Sword* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), chap. 4.

reputation was plenty tough but raised concerns as to whether it was reckless and risked war. Thus, public approval of Reagan's Soviet policy was low when it was most strident and confrontational (1981-1983), and then increased once Reagan became more open to cooperation, peaking at 65 percent following his first summit with the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in November 1985.⁶

On use of force issues, support for Trump's policy seems to be consistent with the "pretty prudent public" pattern based on a greater disposition to be supportive when the principal policy objective is perceived as anti-aggression foreign policy restraint than for remaking governments and other internal political changes.⁷ The support for the air strike retaliating against Syrian use of chemical weapons fit the anti-aggression foreign policy restraint objective. So does the high levels of support for anti-Islamic State (ISIS) military action: 72% for the use of airstrikes and 57% for special operations, prudence kicking in for only 42% for combat troops. But when it comes to the Syrian civil war, an internal political change objective, even just providing arms and supplies to anti-government forces gets only 26% support.⁸

The deliberations on Afghanistan war troop levels, ongoing as of this writing, appear to be holding to the same pattern. By 2014 more Americans deemed the Afghanistan war as a mistake than did not. What had originally been seen in the wake of 9/11 as anti-aggression had come to be seen as largely about remaking a government. The public agreed with Obama's troop withdrawal by a ratio of 4 to 1. Even though the rise of ISIS along with Taliban gains led Obama to delay the troop drawdown, Trump's re-opening of the question as to whether to further increase troop levels has not been gaining public support: a June 2017 poll posing a 4000-troop increase got 25% support, 45% opposition.⁹

A more meta-issue on which the dynamics are quite different from the past is Trump getting away with challenging the cherished notion of American exceptionalism. Obama was attacked when early in his presidency rather than the usual 'City on a Hill' invocation, he made the more qualified statement that "I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism." In his rational-analytic manner he elaborated: "The fact that I am very proud of my country and I think that we've got a whole lot to offer the world does not lessen my interest in recognizing the value and wonderful qualities of other countries, or recognizing that we're not always going

⁶ Miroslav Nincic, "The United States, the Soviet Union and the Politics of Opposites," *World Politics* 40:4 (July 1988): 452-475.

⁷ Bruce W. Jentleson, "The Pretty Prudent Public: Post Post-Vietnam American Opinion on the Use of Military Force," *International Studies Quarterly* 36:1 (March 1992), and Jentleson and Rebecca L. Britton, "Still Pretty Prudent: Post-Cold War American Public Opinion on the Use of Military Force," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42:4 (August 1998): 395-417.

⁸ Chicago Council on Global Affairs, "Americans Support Limited Military Action in Syria Against ISIS," 15 August 2016, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/americans-support-limited-military-action-syria-against-isis>.

⁹ Kathy Frankovic, "The Commander-in-Chief After Five Months: Ready or Not," YouGov.com, 21 June 2017, <https://today.yougov.com/news/2017/06/21/commander-chief-after-five-monthsready-or-not/>.

to be right, or that other people may have good ideas.”¹⁰ Republicans quickly and loudly attacked him for being un-American. ‘The Blob,’ too, as Obama memorably derogated the bipartisan foreign policy establishment, criticized him for violating its creed cum conventional wisdom. Yet when Trump was asked by Bill O’Reilly on Fox News how he could be so favorably disposed to a killer like Russian President Vladimir Putin, he responded, “We’ve got a lot of killers, too. What do you think? Our country’s so innocent?”¹¹ While this moral equivalence with the Soviets-Russians goes way too far, Trump is right that the reality of U.S. foreign policy historically as well as contemporaneously has fallen well short of the exceptionalist myth. Perhaps lessening the distorting effects of this myth could be one of the few helpful legacies of Trump’s foreign policy.

What are we to make of Trump’s overall ‘America First’ quasi-ideology? On the one hand the standard ‘stay out/take an active part’ poll question when re-fielded in June 2016 found 70% of Democrats and 64% of Republicans to be on the active part-internationalist side.¹² On the other hand, America First was a big part of Trump’s appeal. It evokes less the traditional isolationism of pulling up the drawbridges and coming home than an assertive nationalism that imposes the costs and burdens of American hegemony and protection on others. It reflects the belief that the world owes America more than America owes the world, and that the United States will use its power at times and places and in manners of its own choosing.¹³ It is politically potent because it taps into three underlying trends.

First, it fits and exploits Republican-Democrat and intra-Republican divisions. On immigration only 27% of Democrats see it as a critical threat while 67% of Republicans and 80% of core Trump supporters do. On whether Islamic fundamentalism is a critical threat: 75% of Republicans agreed but only 49% of Democrats. On whether globalization is a good thing: 74% of Democrats agreed but only 59% of Republicans and 49% of core Trump supporters did.¹⁴ Trump’s scorching of the field in the Republican primaries showed how out of synch John McCain-type hawkism and Dick Cheney-type neo-conservatism had become. His general election defeat of Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton showed the limited appeal of liberal internationalism and its more consensual but still globally committed effort to run the world.

¹⁰ Robert Farley, “Obama and American Exceptionalism,” FactCheck.org, 12 February 2015, <http://www.factcheck.org/2015/02/obama-and-american-exceptionalism/> (quote is from an April 2009 press conference).

¹¹ Sophie Tatum, “Trump Defends Putin: ‘You Think Our Country Is So Innocent?’” CNN.com, 6 February 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/02/04/politics/donald-trump-vladimir-putin/index.html>.

¹² Chicago Council on Global Affairs, “America in the Age of Uncertainty: American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy,” 2016 Survey, https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/sites/default/files/ccgasurvey2016_america_age_uncertainty.pdf.

¹³ For another aspect of this see my article, “Global Governance, the United Nations and the Challenge of Trumping Trump,” *Global Governance* 23:2 (April-June 2017): 143-149.

¹⁴ Chicago Council, “America in the Age of Uncertainty,” <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/america-age-uncertainty>.

Second, America First taps sources of political discontent that run deeper than just a particular individual, issue, or election cycle. Indeed, notwithstanding differences in personalities and other particulars, there is a strikingly similar pattern in the United States and virtually all of Western Europe of three disruptive societal forces—economic discontent based on widening income inequality and narrowing economic opportunity, cultural anxiety caused by immigration and long-festering racial and ethnic tensions, and personal insecurity because of recurring terrorism at home—mixing together in a potent ‘witches’ brew’ posing profound challenges to world democracies.¹⁵

Third, from an historical perspective the United States is at a crux. For much of its history the U.S. kept itself largely apart from the world. While not as isolationist as it is often depicted, insulated by the oceans and blessed by a bountiful land, it was able to selectively engage with the outside world when and where it chose. During the Cold War and its immediate aftermath, the U.S. sat atop the world. Militarily, economically, technologically, diplomatically, politically, ideologically—it was dominant by most every measure; indeed, with the fall of the Soviet Union it was the sole surviving superpower. Today, though, with insulation stripped away amidst globalization and dominance chipped away as other countries assert themselves, Americans find themselves neither apart nor atop but rather *amidst* the world, both shaping and being shaped by global events and forces. As formidable as are the policy challenges thus posed, even more fundamental is the shock to its very sense of self as a nation. It is in this context that Trump’s mix of reverting to being apart and re-asserting to be atop has been having its appeal to the national psyche.¹⁶

In sum, while on some issues Trump has been moderating, I wonder whether that will continue. One gets the sense that he really does not much like Europeans, and is not convinced of NATO’s value, intentionally omitting affirmation of the Article V collective security commitment key advisors put in his June Brussels speech and then stating it in his July Poland speech but with a because-you-made-me sense. For all his ‘I like [Chinese President] Xi Jinping’ claims, it is not hard to see a shift back to China-bashing. His moderation on Israel may only be temporary, and based upon tactical calculations. If he does revert to more extreme positions on such issues, it will be a test for just how constraining public opinion is. (Other factors of course also enter in, and I am not claiming full causality one way or the other for public opinion).

But the most interesting issue is the overall America First one. The President is actually correct that the post-World War II/Cold War model—which, whatever their other differences, American hegemony, liberal internationalism, and neo-conservatism all embrace—no longer fits the twenty-first century world. The ‘grand strategy’ challenge is to come up with an alternative that is both substantively sound and can resonate with the American public.

¹⁵ Bruce W. Jentleson, “Western Democracies’ “Witches’ Brew,” *TheHill.com*, 6 April 2016, <http://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/international/275306-western-democracies-witches-brew>.

¹⁶ For more on this see Bruce W. Jentleson, “Apart, Atop, Amidst: America in the World,” *War On the Rocks*, 12 January 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/01/apart-atop-amidst-america-in-the-world/>.