

First conducted in 1993, the Pew survey, undertaken in partnership with the Council on Foreign Relations, is among the most exhaustive studies of its kind. The results of the survey of 2,003 adults from the general public and 1,838 CFR members, conducted in October and November, are evolutionary in some respects; in others they are stunning. Since shortly after the attacks of September 11, 2001, when an immediate consensus emerged that the United States had no choice but to respond, the numbers of Americans saying the country should “mind its own business internationally” has climbed steadily, impelled by the discouraging wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The full toll of those wars, and of the public’s disillusionment with the projection of American power, is evident in this poll: Fifty-two percent say the United States “should mind its own business while 38 percent disagree. That is the most lopsidedly isolationist response since the Pew survey began asking the question in 1993, and before it, Gallup in 1964. In the 1960s, Americans were overwhelmingly convinced that the Cold War represented an existential contest with the Soviet Union, so just a fifth of the public was in a mood to turn its back on geopolitical affairs.

Today, however, more than half of Americans are wary of foreign entanglements—even in the face of turmoil in the Arab world, hostility from an increasingly aggressive Russia, the rising economic and military might of China, and threats from Iran, North Korea, and non-state antagonists elsewhere. Eighty-two percent of respondents say it is more important for President Barack Obama to focus on domestic policy; just 8 percent say foreign policy is more important. That is a striking shift from the months after the September 11 attacks, when barely half said domestic policy should be the priority for President George W. Bush, and a third said foreign policy. Andrew Kohut, founding director of the Pew Research Center, conceived the survey 20 years ago as a two-pronged study of public and expert opinion. By design, it has been conducted in the first year of each presidential term to

provide a benchmark of views about America's international role and standing. In the past several surveys, expert opinion has been gleaned by polling members of the Council on Foreign Relations, whose bipartisan membership represents a broad cross-section of foreign policy elites. The survey has attracted notice in the media at home and overseas, particularly in Western Europe and, more recently, China.

"Two things make the Pew Poll different," says Kohut. "First, we do it on a regular basis. Second, we do it with a great deal of thoroughness. There's a lot of charting of trends U.S. Views of global Power Americans' assessment of the U.S. role as a world leader, compared to the previous decade, is at a 40-year low.

The paradox is that even though most Americans see U.S. power and prestige on the wane—and the number of those who do has risen steadily since president Obama took office—they aren't happy about it, or even resigned to it. Fifty-three percent say the country is less important and powerful than it was a decade ago, a 40-year high for such a negative view of America's relative power.

In this most recent survey, Kohut says, he is struck by the levels of public support for disengaging with the world—levels matched only in the immediate aftermaths of the Vietnam War and the Cold War. "Americans today want to be the sole superpower in a military way so that our strength represents a deterrent, not an opportunity for engagement," he says. Council of Foreign Relations members prefer that America assume a far more forward-leaning and muscular international posture. While half the general public believes that the United States does too much problem-solving internationally, just a fifth of CFR members think so. Only 17 percent of the public says America does too little to solve the world's problems, compared with 41 percent of CFR members. More than 80 percent of the public says protecting the jobs of American workers should be a top priority of U.S. foreign

policy; less than a third of CFR members accorded that goal the same importance. If most Americans are suffering from intervention fatigue and are reluctant to flex their muscles abroad, the policy implications are significant—and not just in terms of discouraging U.S. leadership and participation in current and future wars.

Less than 25 percent of the poll's respondents cite promoting democracy and improving living standards abroad as central policy priorities for the United States. Just a third say defending human rights in other countries should be a top U.S. goal. And more than two years after the Arab spring, almost two-thirds of Americans feel that stability in that region is more important than the establishment of democratic governments. Only 37 percent believe that combating climate change should be among the nation's foremost concerns. Turn inward. But at the same time, they appear disinclined to scale back its military might or settle for diminished standing among nations. The age-old ambivalence in Americans' views of their own power in the world is undiminished—a quandary for president Obama and whoever succeeds him. Fifty-six percent of those questioned thought the United States should retain its status as the world's sole military superpower, though most were also content to have Washington work in concert with its allies and with the United Nations. Fifty-one percent of the public (and roughly the same portion of CFR members) said president Obama was not tough enough on foreign policy and national security, a jump from 38 percent who thought so in 2009. Just 28 percent thought that military spending should be reduced. In the view of Carroll Doherty, director of political research at the Pew Research Center, Americans still want and expect Washington to lead internationally, even as they express support for pulling back from intervention abroad. "As is often the case, public opinion can be conflicted at times and contradictory," Doherty says. "The public is saying that in a perfect world, the United States needs to be the sole superpower. But in effect they're questioning the price of that." The strongest support

for continued American international engagement is in the area of trade and economic relations, although respondents in the poll are much more eager for foreign companies to invest in the United States (62 percent say it would help the economy) than for U.S. companies to invest overseas (just 23 percent say it would help, apparently fearing that American jobs would be exported overseas).

By a margin of more than 2 to 1, Americans across the political spectrum say they support deepening U.S. involvement in the global economy. And by more than 4 to 1, they think increasing trade and business ties with other countries is a good thing for the United States. Taken together, the respondents' views, shaped partly by frustration with inconclusive wars that for more information and to read the full report, the economic downturn, especially in divided the American public.

Council on Foreign Relations members cited the following reasons why they believe Americans are less supportive of an active role in the world. War fatigue, involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq U.S. economy. Lack of U.S. political leadership People don't understand importance of taking an active role Concentration on domestic priorities in the face of widespread anxiety and hardship—even after they have rebounded strongly.

Public opinion remains deeply divided over the value of immigration and immigrants, a split reflected in what remains an acrimonious debate in Congress about overhauling the nation's immigration system. Americans are almost evenly split over whether the economy would be helped or hurt if more immigrants entered the country to fill high-skilled jobs. By a margin of 5 to 4, they say the economy would suffer with the arrival of more low-skilled immigrants. still, about half believe that immigrants generally strengthen the country with their drive and talents. As in Congress, public opinion toward illegal immigration breaks sharply along partisan lines: Three-fifths of Republicans believe

that reducing illegal immigration should be a top foreign policy goal; less than two-fifths of Democrats agree.

For President Obama, the Pew Survey contains little good news. A large majority of Americans and CFR members believe the United States has played a less powerful role as a world leader on his watch than it did 10 years ago and that it has lost respect internationally. Although Republicans are much harsher in their assessment of the president than Democrats, the overall percentage of Americans who say they believe the country has lost respect—70 percent—is roughly equal to that in 2008, President Bush's final year in office. President Obama's job ratings on foreign policy are negative on issues such as Russia, Iran, Afghanistan, China, Syria, climate change, and international trade. And most Americans are not persuaded by his effort to realign U.S. interests with a "pivot" to Asia. Fifty percent think Europe is more important, but just 35 percent believe Asia is. (CFR members rate his performance on foreign policy similarly. Forty-four percent say he has done a worse job than they expected; just 16 percent say he has done better than they expected.)

The one area of foreign policy on which the public gives the president good, though not especially high, marks is also the one that Americans regard as the most critical challenge: the threat of terrorism. Specifically, half the poll's respondents say the United States has been made safer by the use of military drones, which President Obama has deployed more frequently than President Bush did and to lethal effect, particularly against Islamist militants in Pakistan. Still, less than a third say they think terrorists are less able to strike the country than at the time of the Sept. 11 attacks. And 3 in 5 respondents believe the war in Afghanistan, where President Obama fulfilled a campaign promise by "surging" U.S. troops (before drawing them down), has either made little difference in protecting the nation from terrorist attack or has made it less safe. Nor are most Americans convinced that the

government's telephone and internet surveillance programs have enhanced national security. Amid Edward Snowden's revelations about electronic spying by the National Security Agency—which most respondents say has hurt the public interest—about 2 in 5 of those surveyed say the programs have made Americans safer; a slight majority say the programs have made no difference or actually detracted from security. If Americans are generally satisfied with President Obama's performance on fighting terrorism, this belief may stem less from their confidence in his policies than from their relief that foreign terrorists have not managed to carry out a major attack here. (The Boston Marathon bombing was the work of brothers who had grown up in the United States, though they were apparently influenced by militants overseas.) As Pew's Alan Murray says, "it's not an 'everything is terrible' poll." Although some respondents cited China and Iran as serious problems or adversaries, no one country seems to inspire deep fears among Americans; 16 percent cite each of those countries as representing "the greatest danger to the United States." (And CFR members say they expect both of those countries to become more democratic over the next decade.) Nine percent of respondents say the gravest threat faced by the United States is itself—it ranks third behind China and Iran as a peril, another of the poll's indications that whatever their anxieties about world events, Americans have shifted their gaze inward. Until their attention is seized by some jarring or violent event, or the emergence of a clear new threat from overseas, Americans are likely to worry mainly about the homefront for the foreseeable future.