

Chicago Tribune

Many cautious of global role

Surveys show Americans deeply skeptical of foreign involvement

By Paul Richter – October 24th, 2012

President Barack Obama and Mitt Romney agreed strongly in their third and final debate that the United States needs to vigorously expand its leadership role in a dangerous world, pressing its economic interests, using its military when necessary and spreading its values.

But most Americans apparently don't agree.

Polls show that after a decade of two ground wars and a brutal recession, most Americans have grown deeply skeptical of the benefits of the global leadership role that the president and the Republican challenger, backed by the foreign policy establishment, insist is the nation's wisest course and destiny.

While few Americans want to turn their back on global crises, they are increasingly doubtful that an America that's always in the lead benefits them or the rest of the world, polls show.

"There's dramatically more isolationist sentiment than there's been for some time," said Andrew Kohut, president of the Pew Research Center, which conducts opinion polls.

Kohut compared the current mood with periods after World War I, the Vietnam conflict and the Cold War, when many Americans demanded sharp cuts in military spending and fewer foreign adventures. While Americans want the nation to lead the world, they're more focused on challenges on the home front.

Political leaders "are not nearly as cautious as people would like them to be on foreign involvements," said Christopher Preble, foreign policy director at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington that advocates a more limited U.S. role abroad. "The gap is considerable."

A majority of Americans have concluded that the Arab Spring revolutions aren't likely to benefit ordinary Arabs and that U.S. officials should align with friendly authoritarian leaders like former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak rather than try to spread democracy. During the debate Monday night, Romney said he agreed with Obama's decision to urge Mubarak to step down last year amid Egypt's widening pro-democracy demonstrations.

It has been an article of faith of Republican and Democratic administrations for five decades that America should be deeply involved in the Middle East to help protect Israel, to safeguard sources and shipments of oil and to maintain peace in a region beset by constant tumult.

But a Pew Research Center poll early this month found that 2 out of 3 Americans believe the United States should be less involved with leadership changes in the Middle East. Fewer than 1 in 4 said it should be more involved. Some 57 percent said it was more important to have stable governments in the region, even if that meant less democracy.

The poll, which surveyed 1,511 adults, found growing disillusionment with the Arab Spring revolts that have rocked much of the Middle East since late 2010. The survey found that 57 percent of respondents didn't believe the uprisings, which ousted autocratic leaders in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, and led to violence in Bahrain and a civil war in Syria, would produce lasting improvements for their populations.

Pew surveys show that the number of Americans who believe democracy promotion abroad is crucial -- never high -- has dropped sharply. In 2001, 29 percent believed America should put a high priority on it; now it's at 13 percent.

Americans also have grown more jaded about U.S. foreign aid and nation-building efforts after billions of dollars were spent in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan over the last decade.

Pew found that 64 percent of Americans believe that countries that receive U.S. aid "end up resenting us." Only 29 percent disagreed.

In their final debate, Obama and Romney showed a sensitivity to the changing American mood. Both said they wanted to limit or avoid U.S. military involvement in the Syrian civil war and promised to remove the last American combat forces from Afghanistan by 2014 -- though they agreed they might have to use military force against Iran if it does not end its disputed nuclear program.

But they also made clear they still view America as the "indispensable nation" for dealing with world conflicts.

To be sure, some Americans remain deeply committed to a fully engaged foreign policy -- the foreign policy elite in Washington, and advocates for improved trade, human rights, a strong defense and allies with strong ties to the United States, such as Israel. Their supporters lobby on Capitol Hill and provide important political and financial support to candidates.

But polls show the issue is not a high priority for most voters.

"Candidly ... foreign policy issues don't win elections," Preble said.