WAR ON THE ROCKS

The Clash of Generations and American Foreign Policy

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Does the rise of the Millennial Generation spell doom for America's global leadership? To listen to thosewho support America's continued deep engagement in the world the possibility is all too real. Recent polling from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs shows 47 percent of Millennials (those born between 1981 and 1996) think the United States should "stay out" of world affairs and only 51 percent think the country should "take an active part" in them. This is compared to well over 70 percent of the Baby Boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) and the Silent Generation (those born between 1928 and 1945), who favor an active role for the United States.

Today, with the midterms looming as a referendum on President Donald Trump, the nation's most powerful Baby Boomer, several commentators have noted that Millennial turnout could very well dictate the composition of the next Congress – and their electoral weight will only keep growing. In 2016, Baby Boomers made up 31 percent of voters compared to the Millennials' 27 percent. But with Boomer numbers declining and Millennials more likely to vote as they age, these young adults could overtake their elders at the ballot box in 2020.

For all the concerns about Millennials, however, the story behind America's attitude shifts on foreign policy is more mixed than many realize.

Though there are real signs of global leadership fatigue, younger Americans are not opposed to engagement with the world when it is mutually beneficial. In fact, younger Americans remain quite committed to international life in their own way. However, as our recent study published with the Chicago Council on Global Affairs reveals, the United States is experiencing an intergenerational shift in attitudes about the proper goals and tools of foreign policy. Relative to their elders, younger Americans are much less supportive of the use of military force abroad, but they are equally or more supportive of international trade, cooperation, and diplomacy.

For example, in our study, just 44 percent of Millennials and 54 percent of Generation Xers (those born between 1965 and 1980) believed that maintaining superior military power should be a very important foreign policy goal of the United States, compared to 64 percent of Baby Boomers and 70 percent of the Silent Generation. In that same survey Millennials were also the

least supportive of conducting airstrikes against Syria or the Islamic State, as well as coming to the aid of Asian allies like South Korea and Japan.

Why Millennials express different foreign policy preferences continues to be debated. Two of the more frequently advanced arguments focus on age and current events. As people age, the reasoning goes, they become more interested in foreign affairs, see value in American leadership abroad, and hold the power of military force in high regard. Since Millennials are the youngest generation, they are the least interested in military intervention as a way to solve problems. The reality, however, is that younger people have not always been less internationalist than their elders. In fact, public support for international engagement grew from the Lost Generation (those born between 1893 and 1908) to the Greatest Generation (those born between 1909 and 1927) and peaked with the Silent Generation. Each generation since the Silent Generation, however, has exhibited slightly lower support for international engagement at the same ages as the one before it. Simply put, though aging appears to have a moderate positive impact on people's preferences for international engagement, Americans will not age their way out of this trend.

The second argument emphasizes the power of current events, more formally referred to as "period effects," as the reason Millennials appear to have different preferences from other generations. According to this line of thinking, America's unsuccessful use of military force in the 17-year-old war on terror has dampened all Americans' support for militarism, not just that of the Millennials. Similarly, when a war starts, Americans rally around the flag and express high support for military intervention. No doubt there is some truth to this explanation. In 2002, as the war on terror had just gotten underway, a majority of all generations expressed support for an interventionist U.S. foreign policy, just as they did in early stages of the Vietnam War. Period effects, however, fail to explain why Millennials consistently express less support for military force than their elders even as their preferences shift in response to current events.

Instead, while acknowledging that both age and period effects do help explain some of the change in foreign policy preferences, our current research points to a third explanation: the enduring influence of events experienced during a person's formative years. At the heart of this argument is the "critical period," a concept first offered by the influential sociologist, Karl Mannheim, nearly 70 years ago. The hypothesis holds that the state of the world and transformative events that occur during young adulthood produce outsized and permanent effects on people's attitudes.

Since each American generation has come of age in a world that looks very different from the one their parents and grandparents confronted, the critical period experiences distinguish each generation's way of thinking about the world from that of its predecessors. This argument explains why the Lost Generation, which came of age during World War I and the Great Depression, had a more skeptical view of military force and U.S. adventures abroad as compared to members of the Silent Generation, whose critical period was influenced by the decisive victory of World War II and a time of unequaled U.S. economic and political hegemony. It also provides insight into why Millennials, who grew up during the Great Recession and unsuccessful war on terror, express preferences so similar to those of the Lost Generation.

Younger Americans have spent their formative years and early adulthood witnessing lengthy, unsuccessful wars and military intervention in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. They did not experience the heady aftermath of World War II when the United States enjoyed incredible economic and political dominance. And with the oldest of them born in 1981, Millennials weren't all that aware of the role military strength played in the successful containment strategy of the Cold War. If they were aware, they'd have also noticed that the United States rarely used military force after the Vietnam debacle and still won the Cold War in 1991. Simply put, to young Americans, war has looked like a poor strategy. As a result, they do not share their elders' confidence in America's ability to use military force to pursue national interests effectively.

Younger Americans also see the world as a less dangerous place than do older Americans. Millennials simply worry less about most potential threats, whether the issue is North Korean or Iranian nuclear weapons, international terrorism, or cyber conflict. This may follow from their lack of confidence in the utility of military force: If you don't trust the hammer, maybe nothing looks like a nail.

At a more fundamental level, younger Americans have also become increasingly less likely to express support for American exceptionalism. In our study, for example, just half of Millennials responded that the United States is the "greatest country in the world," compared to three-quarters of Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation. Four years ago, the American National Election Study similarly found that while 79 percent of the Silent Generation consider their American identity to be extremely important, only 45 percent of Millennials do. As a generation less wrapped up in the flag than their elders, Millennials are more likely to cast a jaundiced eye towards the United States flexing its military muscle across the globe.

However, even as they express greater skepticism about using military force, younger Americans remain committed to cooperative forms of international engagement. Millennials support international agreements such as the Iran nuclear deal at the same rate as older Americans and they are the most supportive of free trade agreements like NAFTA and the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Millennials are also the most likely to view globalization positively.

In short, since World War II successive generations of Americans have become less hawkish and want a more cooperative U.S. foreign policy. The result is a new generation of Americans ready for Washington to chart a new course in foreign affairs that shows greater realism about the challenges in using military power and more hope for mutually beneficial engagement like trade.

As 2020 presidential contenders begin mapping their potential paths to victory, they should target the under-40 electorate with proposals that will both garner votes and make for good policy. Ripe possibilities include bringing the troops home from America's 17-year war in Afghanistan, negotiating a way back into the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and finding a peaceful way to advance U.S. interests with adversaries like Iran, North Korea, and Russia.

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