



Americans Are Tired of War: Could Ancient Warrior Joe Biden Inaugurate a New Age of Diplomacy?

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Americans are tired of war. They want the U.S. to be involved in the world. But they prefer to send diplomats rather than soldiers to solve problems. In short, Americans are over the Neocon moment when war was seen as the solution to most foreign problems. And Washington elites decided that "the price is worth it" the world over irrespective of how many people were killed along the way.

A recent survey by the Eurasia Group Foundation found that Americans are cautious internationalists. The US comes first, but most want to engage the world. The endless war lobby, ever willing to sacrifice other people's lives for dubious foreign crusades, are in a distinct minority.

Of course, the latter group enjoys disproportionate influence within the Capitol Beltway and Americans pay less attention to foreign than domestic affairs, making it easier for even unpopular elites to manipulate policy. However, America's burgeoning budget crisis – with the federal debt to GDP ratio currently approaching record levels and heading toward 200 percent by midcentury – will finally force policymakers to set priorities. Political necessity is likely to put military outlays for peripheral purposes on the chopping block.

When asked about the government's most important responsibility in last year's survey (the same figures were not included this year), 36 percent said to maintain constitutional rights and liberties, 19.6 percent responded to protect America from foreign threats, and 13.6 percent offered to promote American prosperity via global economic connections. These three objectives are consistent with one another. Maintaining the constitutional system requires guarding against foreign threats and is easier when increasing prosperity through trade. The outlier is promoting democracy, favored by 30.8 percent, which has proved to be always difficult and often deadly, for Americans and foreigners alike.

Where and how to protect human rights? This year 37.4 percent of Americans, a larger share than last year, believed that international organizations such as the United Nations should be in

the lead. Second place went to the 25.2 percent who believed that the US should address its own problems "before focusing on other countries," while 17.9 percent said the government should risk American lives only to protect national security.

Although these three are presented as alternatives, they complement each other. One can support human rights, simultaneously believing that this duty begins at home, international cooperation strengthens such efforts, and sending others to fight and die in even well-intentioned crusades is rarely justified. The real interventionist alternative came from the 17.9 percent, down from 2020, who believed that Washington should use military means to stop human rights abuses. The changing numbers reflect a fall in Democratic support for so-called "humanitarian intervention," like the Libya war. Those under 30 years-old, at 21 percent, were slightly more pro-military intervention; those over 60 years-old were markedly less so, at 13 percent.

Belief in American exceptionalism still ran strong in 2020, but in its more modest meaning. A narrow plurality, 40.9 percent, say the US is exceptional because of what it stands for while 38.4 percent argue that it acts in its own interest, as do other nations. Just 20.7 believe that the country is exceptional because what it has done for the world. Although six of ten Americans see the US as exceptional, two-thirds of them see that exceptionalism as represented by what the country is rather than what it does to others.

The surveys also asked Americans to what foreign policy tradition they identified. Most people don't naturally think in those terms or much about foreign policy. However, the responses were interesting. In the latest poll 47.9 percent, up from 38.7 percent last year, called themselves Jeffersonians, who care most about protecting democracy at home. Far fewer, 15.3 percent and 11.2 percent, respectively, saw themselves as Jacksonians who were ready to use the military to protect American security and Hamiltonians who wanted to promote commerce. These three schools consistently if sometimes uneasily co-exist – the US can focus on democracy promotion at home while promoting economic integration and wielding the military when necessary for security. The outsiders were the 25.6 percent, thankfully down 6.3 percent from last year, who identified as Wilsonians, ever ready to go to war for morals and values. President Woodrow Wilson, a remarkably arrogant, sanctimonious fool, gave the school its name after taking America into World War I, a misguided decision that a generation later yielded World War II as well.

The survey also queried respondents about how they would conduct foreign policy. For instance, in the latest poll 58.3 percent, up slightly from last year, wanted more peaceful engagement. Only about a fifth, 21.6 percent, desired less involvement, while 20.1 percent had no opinion. In figures that were little changed from 2020, a plurality of 42.3 percent wanted to reduce US troops levels overseas and shift responsibilities onto allies. Nearly a third, 32.2 percent, wanted to maintain or increase present deployments, apparently believing, against all evidence, that America's prosperous and populous allies required bountiful defense welfare. The rest, 25.5 percent, had no opinion.

The crosscurrents of views can be complex. For instance, in numbers little changed from last year, a solid majority, 56.8 percent, opposed military primacy, the attempt to run the world through force. Of them, 39.3 percent believed in other forms of global involvement, while 17.5

percent wanted less peaceful interaction as well. In contrast, 43.2 percent supported primacy, even after the last two decades of disastrous wars. They broke down similarly: 32.7 percent were internationalists and 10.5 percent were what the survey labeled isolationists. To the good, the overall plurality favored engagement in the world while emphasizing peaceful tools. Partisan differences increased over the year, with Republicans are more militarist and "isolationist."

In the 2021 survey more Americans, 38.6 percent, want to cut than, 16.4 percent, increase the military budget. A slight plurality, 40.3 percent, would preserve present levels. The numbers found significant generational differences. More than half of 18-to-29-year-olds and a plurality of 30-to-44-year-olds wanted to reduce the Pentagon's outlays. The older generations would maintain current expenditures.

There was, however, strong support for use of drones. In the latest poll 38.2 percent of people opined drones are effective and 29.5 percent said these weapons are less costly than deploying troops. On the other side, 23.7 percent warned that they were not always precise and cost the lives of civilians and 8.6 percent believed they hurt America's reputation and created enemies. These numbers were 41.4 percent and 16 percent, respectively, for 18-to-29-year-olds.

Greater agreement occurred on who gets to decide on war. More than three-quarters, 76 percent, up a bit from last year, of Americans believed congressional approval is necessary. Only 24 percent opined that the Constitutional Convention made the president a de facto king. Slightly more Republicans than Democrats took the royalist position, 30 percent compared to 24.2 percent, but opposition to unilateral executive war-making remained overwhelming. The generational differences were greater – only 19.7 percent of 18-to-29-year-olds believed the president could legally start a war, compared to 27.3 percent of those over 60.

In the latest poll, a plurality of Americans, 46 percent, believed economic sanctions were effective, despite significant evidence to the contrary. Almost as many, 40.3 percent, were unsure. Just 13.7 percent gave a firm no. However, the generational difference was substantial, with the numbers who believed sanctions were effective ranging from 34.7 percent for 18-to-29-year-olds to 57 percent of over 60-year-olds.

Still, negotiation remained the favored international tactic. Last year the survey found that most Americans favored specific diplomatic engagements: 65.6 percent backed the nuclear accord with Iran, 70.9 percent supported the Paris Agreement on climate change, and 71.1 percent wanted the US in the World Health Organization.

This year a solid majority, 62.6 percent, continued to support negotiations with Iran. As for negotiating with adversaries, 62.9 percent said yes and 37.1 percent said no, a slight increase over 2020. The partisan differences were substantial, and, as one would expect, Trump voters were more hostile to diplomacy.

Iran occasioned much disagreement. Last year 41.2 percent believed that Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign had failed and 13.7 percent that it had made no difference; only 27.7 percent thought it made them safer, while 20.4 percent weren't sure. (Despite the evidence to the contrary, a majority of Republicans, 51.3 percent, supported maximum pressure. An even larger

share of Democrats, 61.5 percent, recognized that this policy had made them less safe.) If Tehran acquired a nuclear weapon, 38.8 percent of Americans advocated responding with diplomacy, 34.9 percent urged reliance on economic pressure, and 13.9 percent supported accepting Iran as a nuclear state. Only 12.4 percent would launch a military strike, with what consequences one can only imagine.

The 2020 survey found that the vast majority of Americans supported the Afghanistan withdrawal accord with the Taliban: 23.8 percent strongly supported it and 37.8 percent somewhat supported it. Neutral were 30.2 percent, somewhat opposed were 5.4 percent, and strongly opposed were 2.8 percent. This year the survey asked the most important lesson from Afghanistan: 32.6 percent said that the US should not engage in nation-building and 29.2 percent believed that the mission was completed by degrading al-Qaeda and killing Osama bin Laden. On the other side, 19.6 opined that the withdrawal hurt America's reputation and 18.6 percent complained that Washington abandoned a country it was defending. Curiously, a notably larger share of young respondents, 26.9 percent, believed that the US should have defended Afghanistan as long as necessary. No word on how many of them signed up with the military to do so.

What of the potential for a big war? When asked this year if the US should use military force to liberate a Baltic country occupied by Russia, a bare majority, 51.6 percent, supported going to war, compared to 48.4 percent who said no. That was a notable drop from 2020 in those (57.7 percent) ready to protect a NATO ally. What of Taiwan? The recent poll found that 42.2 percent would defend Taiwan from China, 41.6 percent were not sure, and 16.2 percent opposed intervening. Republicans were markedly readier, at 50.6 percent, for war.

Finally, what to do about China? Increase troops – which means allies don't have to work as hard to protect themselves – won support from 50.9 percent, up from 50 percent last year. Advocating a decrease in US forces and shift toward allies taking on greater responsibilities was 49.1 percent, down from 50 percent last year. Among those under 30, 62.8 percent would shift the defense burden and only 37.2 percent would, bizarrely, increase defense welfare for wealthy friends. Over 60-year-olds were almost a mirror image of those numbers.

The Eurasia Group Foundation observed: "The administration will continue to develop its national security priorities as it pledges to pursue a 'foreign policy for the middle class.' This commitment recognizes how recent foreign policy activities of the United States have become un-tethered to the interests of ordinary Americans."

That has been a constant problem in Washington. The Blob, as Ben Rhodes called the permanent foreign policy establishment, prefers to make policy in its own image, while forcing everyone else to implement it, while bearing the bulk of the cost, both human and financial.

However, as is evident from the latest Foundation survey, Americans want a different strategy, one centered on their needs. No more endless wars for no good purpose. America should take a new path. One based on peace.

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