

Use of Force Internationally, Views on U.S.

The U.S. has lost much of its international prestige in the twenty-first century, mainly caused by the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the actions of the Bush administration, and the U.S. status as the last remaining military superpower.

Even the most powerful nation cannot base their foreign policy solely on the old maxim *oderint dum metuant*—let them hate us, as long as they fear us. Public support in other countries is indispensable for a nation's foreign policy to succeed. "To win the hearts and minds of other people" has therefore become a recognized goal of foreign policy and public diplomacy around the world. The United States, as a major world superpower, needs international cooperation to pursue its interests effectively and to address common issues. Studies of public opinion have shown, however, that the United States has suffered in recent years a loss of much of its international support and trust it enjoyed among other nations, allies in particular.

Sympathy for and trust of the United States were high at the time of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in the immediate aftermath, even still as the U.S. went to war against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan soon after. But since then U.S. foreign policy—particularly its decisions leading up to and throughout the Iraq War—have met with increasing criticism, both in Europe among its allies and in the world at large. Since that time, the United States has taken on an approach of unilateralism based on a fundamental distinction between "good and evil" on which to base its actions. In contrast, many countries around the world and particularly in Europe, support a multilateral approach to international affairs taking into account the complexity of global relations. The majority of Europeans agree that the United Nations, a multilateralist institution, has suffered as a result of the Iraq crisis. The U.S. use of military force in Iraq has raised the question in the minds of many of whether the United States is still qualified to be a global leader.

Iraq War (2003)

At the level of mass public opinion the war created deep divisions both within the United States and within the countries that were part of the U.S.-led international coalition. Outside of this coalition opposition to the war was the norm. In countries, such as Spain and Poland, who provided troops to fight with the Ameri-

cans, there were no clear majorities in support of the decision for war, with the exception of the United Kingdom and Australia. Public support for the war in the U.K. and Australia came only after the invasion of Iraq; however, this support soon started to wane, just as it did in the United States between 2003 and 2007. During this time the number of Americans still in favor of the war dropped by half.

The war has had deep and lasting consequences. According to one poll held in forty-four countries after the end of the initial fighting, majorities in only seven of these countries thought that the war against Iraq had been justified, even though it specifically stipulated "now that Saddam Hussein is removed from power." This feeling was echoed in many international polls that were held around the same time. Several reasons probably contribute to this sentiment. One was a perceived lack of overall progress in Iraq. Then there was the discovery about the absence of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), the presence of which was the initial justification for the invasion. And the questionable treatment and detention of Iraqi prisoners and suspected terrorists around the world continued to devastate U.S. international standing. In the context of the fight against terrorism, many around the world have taken the view that the war in Iraq has hurt, not helped this fight. And in general a variety of trend poll data suggest an overall decline in desire for U.S. world leadership.

By 2004 support for the United States had more or less evaporated in Europe, above all in western Europe and as of 2007 there are no signs of recovery. Also, in 2004 a plurality of 47 percent (in twenty-two countries worldwide) said they saw U.S. influence in the world as "mainly negative," while only 38 percent saw it as "mainly positive." In 2005, some recovery seemed on its way, but by the end of 2006 American prestige had further deteriorated (to 50 percent "mainly negative" versus 31 percent "mainly positive"). At that time, among the twenty-four countries included in the poll that year U.S. influence was seen as "mainly positive" only by majorities in Kenya, Nigeria, and the Philippines.

A severe decline of support for the United States occurred even in those countries that had supported President Bush's policy in the Iraq crisis or had been traditional allies. The most remarkable



change was in Germany, where 81 percent of citizens (as opposed to 55 percent in 2002) stated in 2003 that Europe was more important to their vital interests than the United States. Only 9 percent (as compared with 20 percent a year earlier) gave their preference to the United States in this respect. In 2006 only 13 percent of all Germans approved of Bush's international policies and 39 percent saw U.S. world leadership as desirable.

Structural or Personal Factors?

What has caused the decline of U.S. standing in international opinion? Some argue that it is the result of personal factors, that is, President George W. Bush, his personality, and the policies pursued by his administration. The coincidence in time as well as the results of some opinion polls suggest that the decline in U.S. standing in the world had less to do with a growing antipathy to the United States per se and more to do with the current administration. One opinion poll (2004) showed that among those people who said that their views of the United States had become less positive, many people in many countries replied specifically that this feeling was not because of the United States as such, but rather because of President Bush.

The degree to which President Bush shaped views of the United States was evident in another international poll taken in July and August of 2004 in thirty-five countries. The poll showed that in thirty countries a majority or plurality (by an average 2-1 majority margin) preferred to see Senator John Kerry win the U.S. presidential election of 2004. Kerry was more popular in every region of the world and was especially popular among traditional U.S. allies. The poll also showed that in thirty countries, when people were asked how the foreign policy of President Bush had affected their feelings toward the United States, a majority or plurality (on average 53 percent) said that it made them feel "worse," whereas only in three countries more people said that it had made them feel "better." In twelve out of twenty-two countries pluralities or majorities said at the end of 2004 that the reelection of Bush had made them feel worse about "the Americans." For others Bush was less prominent in determining their opinions on the U.S.

Some people argue, however, that the decrease in the United States' approval ratings and the increase in criticism of its military role are not caused by the President Bush, but are the result of more general, structural factors like the fact that the United States is the only remaining military superpower, which creates fear and perhaps even hatred, as well as awe and envy, regardless of the party or leader in power. Other structural factors that could play a role include traditional U.S. foreign policies, economic power, and the global impact of the U.S. economic system.

Still others believe it is a combination of personal and structural factors. This is because views of the United States abroad were often better during Democratic presidencies (such as Kennedy, Carter, or Clinton) than during Republican presidencies (such as Nixon, Reagan, or George W. Bush). Moreover, dissension on certain issues—for instance, on the use of force—often occurs not between the U.S. and Europe, but within the United States itself, as Democrats and Europeans often share similar views of the world. The origin of the critical views of the United States would therefore be ideological rather than geopolitical.

Cycles of International Opinion

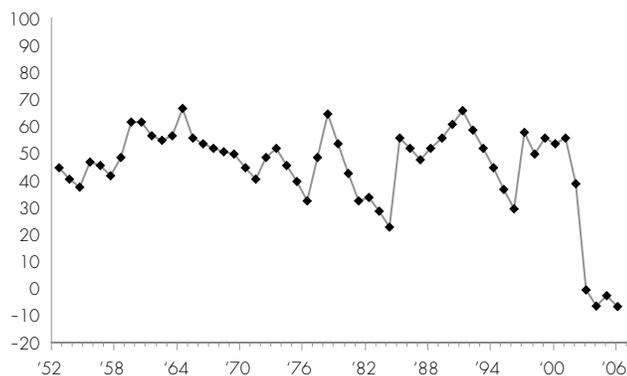
People have often argued that a deep and troublesome gap across the Atlantic has been developing since the end of the Cold War. In the past, whatever differences of view existed—and they were frequent and often intense—Europeans and Americans remained always convinced that they shared many values and interests, particularly an aversion to Soviet Communism. Since the end of the Cold War, however, Europeans and Americans no longer appear to share the same view of the world, particularly as far as fundamental ideas about the nature of international relations, the meaning of power, and the use of military force are concerned.

Some observers argue, however, that the decline in U.S. standing in the world, particularly in Europe, is only the most recent manifestation of earlier waves of criticism and part of a recurrent pattern of the ebb and flow in transatlantic relations, implying that the end of the Cold War was not a watershed and that U.S. standing will improve again after some time, as it has in the past.

Relations with Europe and views of the United States in mass public opinion were generally good in the 1950s and 1960s during the height of the Cold War. They turned sour during the Vietnam War, which not only divided U.S. society, but also was generally deeply unpopular in countries outside the United States. Mass public opinion was also negative during the late 1970s and 1980s, particularly during the Reagan administration, which was characterized by deep controversies over nuclear weapons and the policies toward the Soviet Union. However, even then relations recovered again, and it can be argued that the controversies were less serious than sometimes alleged. Analyses of the situation during the 1980s stressed an important continuity of past relations: stable and general support for the Atlantic alliance and the Western principles of defense.

The ebb and flow in the feelings toward the United States are shown in Figure 1, which displays the evolution of attitudes toward the United States in terms of "favorable" versus "unfavorable" for four European countries during a long period of time. The troughs

Figure 1. Favorability Ratings of the United States in percent of "Favorable Opinion"



Note: Combined net scores ("favorable" minus "unfavorable") are given for France, Germany, Italy, and United Kingdom. Averages have been calculated for years in which numerous poll results were available. Data for missing years have been interpolated. Polls were not always held in all countries, and the average figure presented in the graph may not always reflect important differences among the four countries.

Source: Collected by P. Isernia, University of Siena, using data from numerous sources including Eurobarometer, Pew Global Attitudes Project, and U.S. Information Agency.

in the graph coincide with periods of (hot and cold) war that divided people of the United States and Europe: Vietnam, the Cold War (a term which originated as a result of the confrontational stance taken by the Reagan administration), Bosnia, and Iraq. The figure also suggests that even though the United States' favorability ratings are at their lowest point in fifty years as of 2006, ratings are likely to go up again in the future.

A New and Different Situation?

Statistical evidence, like that shown in Figure 1, leads some observers to conclude that in spite of historical precedents the present U.S. standing in international opinion is different from earlier ones because the recognition of common values and interests between Europe and the United States, which has constituted "a reservoir of goodwill" in the past, now may not be sufficient to overcome fundamental disagreements that cover a range of international issues, particularly the international use of force.

Still, others argue that the "reservoir of goodwill" cannot be dismissed so easily because critical opinions of U.S. foreign and military policies continue to coexist with strong feelings of friendship, a recognition of shared values, and considerable sympathies with many other aspects of U.S. society. Thus, despite reports of

rising anti-U.S. sentiment in Europe, annual polls in *Transatlantic Trends* of the German Marshall Fund of the United States (2002–2006) indicated that Europeans continued to like Americans as much as—if not even more than—they like each other when asked to rate their feelings in general toward various countries on a "thermometer" scale from 0 to 100. Public opinion in the six European countries and in the United States shows remarkable similarity and warmth. Americans, on their side, largely reciprocate these warm feelings for the European countries.

Anti-U.S. Sentiment

This diversity also makes it hard to accept the concept of "anti-Americanism" as a deep-seated, prejudice-like set of attitudes, which is sometimes presented as an explanation of the present wave of negative feelings. It is used often to describe a set of attitudes characterized by a general and often emotional, visceral, and wholesale rejection of anything having to do with the United States. This concept continues to enjoy popularity as an analytical term in spite of its inherent ambiguity, compounded by frequent use as a polemical tool. Anti-Americanism can be found on the left, where opposition focuses on the alleged destructive nature of U.S. capitalism and the imperialist nature of its traditional foreign policies, as well as on the right, where it centers on the alleged lack of culture and the negative sides of U.S. mass culture. Proponents argue that the phenomenon has longstanding historical roots and is related to traditional global perceptions of the United States as either a bad and corrupt society or a state bent on conquest of the world. As such the phenomenon can be traced back to the eighteenth century. In considering the roots of anti-Americanist sentiment, a dislike of U.S. policies has often been set off against a disdain for U.S. values. Some would consider President George W. Bush to be the realization of a two-century-long nightmare of anti-Americanism because he fits both elements of the longstanding anti-American stereotype—a simpleminded cowboy, religious, conservative, and unintellectual who also has set forth many controversial U.S. policies.

However, problems exist with this kind of explanation too. What is sometimes passionately rejected or criticized about the United States is sometimes a result of distorted or selective images and stereotypes. For example, many developed countries over the last century have participated in a process of modernization, but since the United States is commonly considered a major symbol of modernity, it is also gets singled out in criticisms of modernity. Whatever people do not like about the way the world is heading—urbanization, secularism, mass culture, and so on—is then portrayed as a specifically U.S. characteristic.



The line is often hard to draw, moreover, between strong criticism of particular policies and the attribution of evil motives or even outright hatred. In foreign policy the question is whether actions are viewed as ill-conceived and mistakes or as crimes proving the evil nature of the United States as imperialistic and aggressive.

Although we generally account for the roots of “anti-American” feelings, they offer no explanation for the ebb and flow of these feelings. In particular the anti-Americanism-as-a-prejudice theory does not seem able to account for the past periods of rapid recovery of pro-American feelings. Moreover, it overlooks the specific conditions of the present period of post-Cold War adaptation, new international threats and continuous and legitimate differences of opinion on how to handle these threats.

Future Trends and Perspectives

There is little room for doubt that the worsening image of the United States has been enhanced by the personality and policies of the Bush administration (2001–present). However, focusing exclusively on this presidency tends to make one forget that this is not the first period of a “transatlantic gap,” and that there is more to consider than the idiosyncrasies of an individual president of the United States. Therefore, a second perspective which stresses the ebb and flow of international relations, which are strongly related to controversies that come and go, may be a better lens for examining world opinion of the United States. Without this second perspective, it is hard to explain the periods of often sudden decline or increase in anti-U.S. attitudes. One may question, however, whether the development of the international relations will continue to follow the traditional pattern of peaks and troughs and particularly, whether the alleged “reservoir of goodwill and common values” among U.S. allies will be large enough to sustain relations through the uncertainties of these first decades of the twenty-first century, which have so far been characterized by greatly diverging perspectives in terms of international policies, particularly the international use of force.

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See also Foreign Policy after September 11, 2001, U.S.; Iraq Wars; Perspectives on the United States, Theory of

Further Reading

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