

# THE PUBLIC AND FOREIGN POLICY

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In this country we are fond of polling the public to find out what it thinks about practically any given subject. We have thousands of polls about foreign policy, and the public is ever ready to express attitudes on any question, no matter how complex, about which it might be asked. It is even ready, apparently, to express its convictions on problems which do not exist. One pollster, for example, conducted a survey on the public attitude toward the "Metallic Metals Act." He found that a good sixty percent of the public had an opinion about this act and a majority of them were in favor of it—even though the "act" existed only in the pollster's imagination.

This example merely points up what should already be clear: that in being asked to judge foreign policy, most people are being asked to judge things of which they have no direct knowledge. They are being asked to judge behavior of countries where they have never been; to make policy decisions on matters which they have never faced in their personal lives. And it is not at all clear that this is a good way for democracy to work.

This question of the role of "the people" in formulating policy has been a matter of substantial dispute among political theorists for many centuries now. There is a school of political theory which regards public opinion as valid only if it operates in a vacuum. Specifically, Rousseau's condemnation was reserved for people who act politically out of self-interest. His argument was that the public should behave politically only with a view to the general will, the general will being not what a man thinks is best for him, but what he thinks the public as a whole would find best for the public as a whole. The attempt here is to abstract the processes of decision-making from any concern with personal experience and special interest.

The question for a democracy is whether this is, in fact, a valid view of the way a democracy ought to operate, or whether there is not a great deal to be said in favor of that kind of public opinion in which each group does represent a special part of a problem—those aspects of public policy in which

the group has direct, personal experience and corresponding special interests.

There is a strong tradition in many parts of the world that public opinion should have nothing to do with foreign policy, precisely because the general public has so little experience with the material of which foreign policy is made. This is not a view that is popular in the United States, but in Europe and many other parts of the world, a sharp distinction is generally made between domestic policy, which is viewed as a legitimate sphere for the operation of public opinion, and foreign policy, which is regarded as a special reserve for the experts. Many European writers, particularly, are convinced that foreign policy is something that the general public should not concern itself with.

This is a question that has profound implications for any organization concerned with the public and foreign policy. It raises the question of whether the generally accepted American objective of having one hundred percent of the population actively expressing themselves on matters of foreign affairs is really the most intelligent and desirable objective for such groups.

In the first place, one might raise the question of whether this is even a feasible objective. Is it possible, is it even conceivable, that the large majority of the population of any country will have an active and intelligent concern for foreign affairs? But this is clearly the objective that most American public affairs organizations set for themselves. And this objective may be most unrealistic. It may be a pursuit of the impossible.

At the present time, of course, it is very far from the case that most people are concerned. This fact is illustrated by a series of volumes recently published by the World Peace Foundation, under the editorship of Alfred Hero. The first one is *Americans in World Affairs*; the second is *The Influence of Non-Governmental Groups on Foreign Policy Making*; there is one on *Opinion Leaders in American Communities*, and another on *Mass Media*. These volumes survey and summarize the social science literature that exists at the present time about the public and foreign affairs.

The first volume, *Americans in World Affairs*, for example, attempts to discover just which groups in the population are actively concerned with foreign policy, not on the basis of any fresh research but on the basis of a very exhaustive survey of all the research that has been done. It does a brilliant job,

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but at the same time it somehow assumes that, in the best of all possible worlds, the entire American people would participate in foreign affairs activities; it deplores the facts as it now finds them, which are that something less than one percent of the American population conform to the ideal of what intelligent citizens ought to be, in terms of their knowledge of foreign affairs, their participation in foreign affairs activities, and their possession of intelligent foreign policy attitudes.

It is, actually, only a very small group of the public, about three percent, who join and participate in voluntary organizations activities at all, still less in voluntary organizations interested in questions of foreign policy. There exists a similar deplorable state of affairs in the reporting of foreign news. In terms of newspaper readership, foreign affairs stories have the lowest rating of all. A foreign affairs news story is likely to be read by about twelve percent of the people who read the newspaper. Some eighty-eight percent simply will not read a foreign news story.

Politicians have a cliché for this: They say that nobody ever lost an election on the basis of foreign policy. But this depends upon how one defines foreign policy. There are a whole series of issues which are a mixture of foreign and domestic questions over which many Congressmen have lost elections. A tariff, for example, is foreign affairs, but it is also domestic affairs, and "bringing the boys home from Korea" is another example. Nobody would deny that this slogan had a profound effect in the 1952 election. But politicians exclude issues like these from the category "foreign affairs." They tend to think of this category as something which does not affect people directly.

I want to set the cliché aside as unreal, but I would raise the question of how far it is possible to get any substantial part of the public to concern itself with those foreign questions which really are not part of the immediate experience of the people whom a politician addresses.

My answer is that one can never get, and can never expect to get, the majority of the public involved in such issues. In the first place, people have only a limited amount of time. There are just too many things that are worthwhile, important, desirable to do, for anybody to give his attention to all of them. A democracy necessarily consists of minorities, each of which has chosen to devote its attention to some topics of great importance to itself. It is unrealistic to expect that the majority, or the whole public, will devote itself to any foreign issue which is not of overriding significance in its life.

What, then, is the proper orientation for groups concerned with the public and foreign policy? It seems to me that the least important activity for such groups is one that is fairly popular in this country, that of trying to get large numbers of people to express a view which they would not ordinarily express and somehow accumulate statistics to prove that, say, eighty-six percent of the American public thinks thus and so. This is a futile pursuit. But it is equally true that there is a valid approach which seeks to give to a certain portion of the public—that portion which makes the choice to be interested—a more realistic experience and understanding of foreign affairs problems. If there is to be a fraction of the American public that expresses a public opinion on foreign policy, then there is a very important function to be served in reaching that fraction and giving it the kind of experience that will improve the bases for its conclusions.

This is sometimes described as an approach to public opinion and foreign policy through opinion leaders, through an "elite." The crucial point here is to deepen the experience of that *minority* of the public that wishes to and is able to express itself on foreign policy. Now, many things may deepen this experience. One of the most effective of them is international exchange, or foreign travel, and the result we can expect from this is not that people will forget their special interests but that they will come to see their special interests more realistically. The problem for the public in foreign policy is precisely to tap vested interests, not to deny them; it is not to get people to discuss foreign policy in an abstract way quite removed from their lives, but to tap those aspects of foreign policy which do affect in a vital way the vested interests of particular groups, and thus to give them the kind of experience of the policy-making process which is essential if they are to have any kind of constructive role in the making of public opinion.

There is, of course, a certain danger here. It is the danger that is often pointed out when people talk about lobbyists and pressure politics; it is the other side of the great historical debate begun by Rousseau. This seems to me, however, to be a danger that is inherent in the operation of a democracy. We cannot have effective public opinion about issues that do not affect people vitally. We must admit that the forces that propel people into a direct, active involvement with the public policy process are the ones that affect their lives. The educational

problem is thus one of taking people who have this kind of motivation and giving them sufficient experience and sufficient knowledge of the facts to make an informed judgment.

To do this, one has to make a great deal of information available to the public. But information alone is not enough. One must structure discussions of foreign affairs in such a way that people feel they are not merely engaged in a debating society but that what they are discussing has some impact, whether it be on the State Department, on Congress, or on the local press. Wherever it be, people must feel that they are talking to somebody who is listening and who cares.

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It is, of course, possible for even an informed minority to have all the facts in the world but not to know what to do with them. Here the question of leadership is vital.

For example, the Civil Defense Administration can put out facts forever and these facts will be filed by people in their wastebaskets because they

seem to bear no relationship to any meaningful action. But if Mr. Eisenhower and the members of his Cabinet suddenly started sleeping in bomb shelters every night, this one act would profoundly change the whole American attitude toward civil defense information. The sign that people who are in a position to know felt in danger, instead of feeling able to lead normal lives, would make everybody else feel endangered. Leadership is a crucial requirement for getting effective public interest in any subject and especially in a subject so "remote" as foreign affairs.

Without leadership from an informed minority, the majority of the citizens will have no general concern for foreign policy at all. I would therefore suggest that the non-glamorous, long-range objective of producing in minorities a substantial understanding of and commitment to foreign policy problems is a more realistic and important goal for the operation of a democracy than the goal of a "democratic" plebiscite in which everybody expresses an opinion on matters which are inevitably remote from the experience of most of the public.

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