
Forty Years of Citizen-to-Citizen Deliberation on National Security and America's Role in the World

"The citizen participants are providing something the nation sorely needs. . . . It is essential that people find ways to speak to officials not as representatives of special interest groups but of the people as a whole."

— President Gerald R. Ford

Introduction

In an unpredictable, interconnected, and sometimes dangerous world, US military leaders and elected officials must make countless decisions that have the potential to impinge on the safety and freedom of US citizens. At the same time, leaders are not the only ones with decisions to make, values to uphold, and sacrifices to endure. Everyday Americans must also consider similar questions. What does national security mean? What role should the US play in the world's affairs? What is the appropriate balance between freedom, safety, and protection of the world's most vulnerable people? These questions, faced by leaders and citizens alike, have been posed and answered for hundreds of years.

They are certainly not easy questions, and correct answers to them are elusive. However, circumstances dictate that we must decide amidst uncertainty, amidst disagreement, and amidst tensions among things we all hold dear to our hearts. Foreign policy is typically seen as the domain of experts and diplomats, but 40 years of history from the National Issues Forums suggests that ordinary citizens are up to the task of considering these weighty questions as well. Further, when decisions about national security have the potential to impinge on our safety, security, and freedom, it follows that those same citizens should be able to weigh in and consider

the risks and trade-offs of various courses of action. This report is a summary of insights drawn from hundreds of community forums convened over the course of almost four decades by the network of the National Issues Forums.

Hundreds of Local Forums on National Security

As leaders make foreign policy decisions, they are subject to a raft of information: conversations with world leaders; input from international organizations; communications from diplomats, ambassadors, and generals; confidential security briefings from top brass; and even letters from parents concerned about the safety of their children. By way of contrast, this report summarizes a kind of public thinking often missing from the national stage: what citizens think when they weigh different options and deliberate about them with others. Since 1982, a national network of community-based groups has convened forums to give people the chance to do just that. Using issue guides prepared by the Kettering Foundation for the nonpartisan National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI), ordinary people have gathered in libraries, colleges, senior centers, and dozens of other public spaces to weigh options for what should be done about topics of shared concern. These

NIF National Security Issue Guides

Year	Issue Guide Title
1983	Nuclear Arms and National Security
1985	The Soviets: What Is the Conflict About?
1987	The Superpowers: Nuclear Weapons and National Security
1991	America's Role in the World: New Risks, New Realities
1995	Mission Uncertain: Reassessing America's Global Role
2002	Terrorism: What Should We Do Now?
2003	A Relationship at the Crossroads: What Kind of Relationship Do We Want with Russia?
2005	Americans' Role in the World: Building a More Secure Future
2010	America's Role in the World: What Does National Security Mean in the 21st Century?
2019	Keeping America Safe: What Is Our Greatest Threat? How Should We Respond?

local convenors host conversations, or “forums,” that last between 90 minutes and 2 hours. In the midst of intense partisan polarization, these are remarkable occurrences in and of themselves. While the term “forum” may call to mind a panel of experts with lengthy presentations, NIF forums provide an opportunity for ordinary people to think through and discuss complicated issues and ideas with others. Participants work with nonpartisan issue guides presenting different options for what might be done to address an issue, along with the costs and trade-offs associated with each option. These materials are carefully tested and reviewed to ensure that they are unbiased, understandable by nonexperts, and representative of a wide spectrum of viewpoints.

Since 1982, the National Issues Forums have addressed national security and our role in the world 10 times. The most recent forums in this domain occurred in late 2019 and used an issue guide entitled “Keeping America Safe: What Is Our Greatest Threat? How Should We Respond?” Working with NIF, the Kettering Foundation has prepared reports summarizing forum deliberations by drawing on observations, transcripts, moderator reports, and questionnaires returned by many participants.

Although these reports capture the views of a diverse group of people who choose to participate in forums, they are not scientific surveys of the US public. Nonetheless, they offer indispensable insights into the ways in which citizens think about issues when they have an opportunity to weigh benefits and trade-offs and—perhaps most important—to hear and learn from others.

Public Thinking: Forums Versus Surveys

The contrast between what is gleaned from forums such as these and from surveys is instructive. Surveys ask questions of random or representative samples of the public, but in most cases, these individuals have not had an opportunity to discuss alternative solutions with others nor to assess the costs and benefits of various courses of action. Surveys typically ask the public to respond to top leadership’s ideas for change.

- Deliberative forums, on the other hand, can show:
- how typical Americans describe problems in their own words, using their own frames of reference;
 - what people say *after* looking at alternative solutions and weighing advantages and trade-offs with others;

- what questions people have and how they think about the tensions among various courses of action;
- what ideas they themselves propose; and
- what kinds of responsibilities they believe the public has.

Just as important, local deliberative forums can be engines for change. When people gather to talk about issues, they often agree to pursue the issue, taking action to improve their own communities. At a time when productive public dialogue is conspicuously missing and when serious deliberation is vanishingly rare, it is reassuring to know what NIF participants in national security forums say after the forums are over. While people in forums rarely change their minds completely, many report that they are “thinking differently” about an issue afterwards, often acknowledging that it is more complex and multifaceted than they had assumed.

Four Decades of Forums: Six Observations

This paper offers six observations, or broad take-aways, about what happens when ordinary people gather in deliberative forums to discuss foreign policy. These observations are drawn from forums conducted over nearly 40 years as well as from a series currently under way nationwide. The key observations are listed below and expounded upon throughout the paper:

1. Americans *are* interested in foreign policy.
2. Compared to experts, forum participants have a broader view of what national security means.
3. Forums unearth a strong desire for this nation to stand for something significant in the world and to practice at home what we preach abroad.
4. Forum participants are able to recognize and wrestle with key tensions underlying foreign policy decisions.
5. Through deliberation, forum participants add nuance and substance to initial top-of-the-head impressions.
6. Not content to watch from the bleachers, forum participants consider what roles they and their

communities can play in fostering a safe and orderly world.

Americans *Are* Interested in Foreign Policy

When it comes to public thinking on foreign policy, the conventional wisdom often holds that average citizens are not terribly interested, nor do they know much. Indeed, when asked to name the most important problem facing the country, matters of international relations routinely score well below domestic concerns¹—in general, the farther from our front doors, the farther from most minds. As Philip Powlick and Andrew Katz noted, “Normally, public opinion is latent on foreign policy issues with decision-makers only concerned about the potential activation of popular interest. In the absence of public activation, officials feel free to act.”² In a recent summary of the scholarship on public opinion and foreign policy, Joshua Kertzer and Thomas Zeitzoff³ found little confidence in the scholarly world that the average citizen has the ability, or the desire, to think hard and coherently about world affairs. Following the Second World War, scholarship coalesced around what was known as the “Almond-Lippmann” consensus, which Kertzer and Zeitzoff describe as “a pessimistic view that held that public opinion on foreign policy issues was ill informed and ill structured.” Moving forward, another school of thought finds that Americans’ views on foreign policy do have structure and coherence, but that structure and coherence is a product of taking cues from more knowledgeable foreign policy elites.

Building off their scan of past literature, Kertzer and Zeitzoff forward an argument that members of the public are far more capable of forming judgments on foreign policy matters than most assume. As they note, “Members of the public may often lack information, but

¹ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1675/most-important-problems.aspx>.

² Philip J. Powlick and Andrew Z. Katz, “Defining the American Public Opinion/Foreign Policy Nexus,” *Mershon International Studies Review* 42, no. 1 (1998): 29-61.

³ Joshua D. Kertzer and Thomas Zeitzoff, “A Bottom-up Theory of Public Opinion about Foreign Policy,” *American Journal of Political Science* 61, no. 3 (2017): 543-558.

they do not lack principles, and information need not cascade from the top down.” This view is in line with what has been found in nearly 40 years of NIF deliberations on matters of foreign policy. Foreign policy and security experts command a wealth of knowledge about nearly 200 nations and the international treaties, agreements, and organizations that tie them together or sometimes divide them. Most Americans do not share this knowledge. Many cannot tell you what the WTO is or locate Ukraine on a map. And because of this, leaders sometimes assume the public cannot understand the nation’s challenges and has little to contribute to defining our overall goals.

But NIF forums show that typical citizens can engage in thoughtful, nuanced deliberations on foreign policy and security challenges with just a few facts at hand. It is certainly true that these issues generally rank below domestic ones in the public’s mind according to most surveys. However, according to NIF forums over the years, typical Americans have gnawing concerns that churn just beneath the surface about our country’s global role. As participants exchange views in forums, they often struggle with the cost and implications of the US maintaining international leadership. At the same time, most see the world as too dangerous and unpredictable for us to step too far away. Behind people’s top-of-the-head responses in surveys lie deep-seated concerns and recognition of the difficult decisions ahead.

It is beyond the scope and charge of average citizens to define the intricate details of the nation’s foreign policy. As noted, they do not have a wealth of information in this field. In writing about NIF forums on foreign policy, Robert Kingston notes, “The name of the president came up scarcely at all and the name of the secretary of state—even the title—never!”⁴ However, this does not mean that citizens are fumbling around in the dark. They do have principles, and they do have values that guide their choices in all walks of life.⁵ Indeed, people

in forums tend to discuss foreign policy in terms of values and principles. They discuss the matter in broad terms based on the values they hold close to their hearts—values such as freedom, safety, fairness, and concern for the world’s most vulnerable people. Elected leaders and high-level officials do not need a blow-by-blow blueprint from the public on what should be done regarding foreign policy. And one will not find that level of detail emerging from deliberative forums. However, when everyday citizens talk together about these complicated issues, they begin to reveal what they can and cannot live with. When they do this, they sketch out the boundaries within which successful policy can be made.

A Broad View of What National Security Means

For many experts, US national security revolves around questions of military, nuclear, and cyber threats. For diplomats, foreign policy generally involves the state of US relations with other nations. But 40 years of deliberative forums suggest that most people have a much broader definition, one that includes the health and vitality of the American economy.⁶ In forum after forum, in all parts of the country, and over the course of decades, participants have reasoned that the United States cannot be strong internationally without a strong economy at home. Likewise, for people in forums, a chief goal of international relations is to protect and bolster prosperity and economic opportunity within our shores. This has been true in forums in both good economic times and bad. When leaders do not speak to this sustained and widespread concern about how to protect and enhance the US economy in a changing world, the risk of talking past each other is high.

At a forum in the early 1990s, a woman from Madison, Wisconsin, said, “We have to get back to basics and build this country from the bottom up again. The people are really hurting down here, and they really need it. So we have to help our own people. If we keep

⁴ Robert J. Kingston, *Voice and Judgment: The Practice of Public Politics* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2012).

⁵ Brian C. Rathbun et al., “Taking Foreign Policy Seriously: Personal Values and Foreign Policy Attitudes,” *International Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2016): 124-137.

⁶ Public Agenda, *Public Thinking About America’s Role in the World: What Does National Security Mean in the 21st Century?* (New York: Public Agenda, 2011).

helping everybody else, eventually, there's going to be nothing left to give. There comes a time when charity begins at home, when help begins right here and now." Later, in a 1995 forum, a woman from Ohio noted, "From World War II, we've helped every country that needed anything. We built Germany, rebuilt Japan. It's great, wonderful! It's wonderful to defend everyone, give people food, help them build up their economy. But if it puts us out to where we won't have enough for ourselves, then we're going to have to stop because our country comes first. I'm beginning to wonder if we're going overboard." In a 2010 forum in Coon Rapids, Iowa, a man said, "We always help other people. In Haiti, we were some of the first people going down there to help, . . . but we still have homeless people living on the streets here in America."

What these quotes from across forums and across decades illustrate is that most forum participants do not see domestic concerns as totally isolated from our foreign policy. Far from being beside the point, forum participants make the case that our ability to play a productive role in the world is closely linked to our ability to address domestic problems. In analyzing this sentiment from forums held in 1991, Daniel Yankelovich highlights the problem of the public and government officials talking past each other. "Now, the anomaly, as far as the relationship between the public and Washington is concerned, is that people feel that the threat to the United States of things not working, of race relations not working, of health care not working—that it's a real crisis. . . . So why don't the people in Washington take this as seriously as the threat from Iraq? The tradition in the country has always been that if there's a real threat from outside, we unite behind a nonpartisan approach. Now the logic of people's views is that there is such a threat; it's from the inside; it's even more serious—so why don't you get that kind of response?"⁷

⁷ National Issues Forum, *A Public Voice . . . '92: A Report from the National Issues Forums: Fall and Winter 1991-1992* (Dayton, OH: National Issues Forum, 1992).

A Desire to Stand for Something and Practice What We Preach

Since the 1980s, in forums in every part of the US, participants have worried about our role and reputation in the world. Participants often ask whether we have taken on superpower responsibilities that we cannot afford or sustain.⁸ They ask whether too many around the world have come to see the United States as a bully or a meddler, pushing other countries to do what we want. One continuing theme expressed in NIF forums over the years is that the US tries to do too much to fix and reshape the world. A woman in a 1991 forum from Albany, Georgia, noted, "Going around, pretending that we are in charge of everything, that we take care of everything, and that we have the answers—we have a lot of hostility out there towards this country because of that role. There's a distaste and disdain for anybody who's out there, pretending they have all the answers."

Yet, side by side with concerns about being the world's police officer is a desire for this nation to stand for something important in the world. Forum participants have repeatedly expressed the hope that the US can help spread democratic values and respect for civil liberties, that we can stand with oppressed people and nations, and that we can advance our not yet achieved ideal that all human beings are created equal. In searching for this aspiration, a man in a 1991 forum in El Paso said, "My concern is that we've lost it! We're looking at old, dead photographs. We should be taking a look at moving videotape. There is a lack of direction or really a lack of leadership, a lack of sound moral purpose about where we're going. I don't think that we are a superpower."

This desire to "stand for something" in the world is not merely fanciful or idealistic lip service. Forum participants often talk about the United States leading by example and living up to our own ideals.⁹ Many question the notion of the US working with dictators and authoritarians for short-term and frequently illusory gains.¹⁰

⁸ Kingston, 2012.

⁹ Kingston, 2012.

¹⁰ Kingston, 2012.

Many endorse the need to work with other countries to maintain peace, advance human rights, and battle global threats. In past forums, participants distinguished between the US promoting democracy and protecting human rights. On the first front, participants are skeptical about the efficacy of promoting democracy around the world. Summarizing a 1995 forum, a moderator from Dayton, Ohio, said, "Democracy is not something we can promote; it doesn't work for every country. It is not compatible with the values of every society. The real issue is recognizing human dignity." At the same time though, participants worry whether the US practices what it preaches when it comes to human rights. Participants are quick to acknowledge the country's own shortcomings when it comes to human rights. In a 1995 forum in Panama City, Florida, one participant said, "The US should be a moral leader in the world, standing up for human rights. We say we promote human rights, but our actions don't follow. Look at China and its slave labor."

Many Americans feel unsettled in today's world, and most of all, they hope leaders will pursue policies that will keep them safe and secure. But leaders who fail to speak to the public's desire for the United States to stand for important values and goals will be offering the public only half an answer.

Recognition of Tensions

Leaders in the foreign policy domain are often faced with impossibly complicated choices rife with tensions and trade-offs. As noted above, conventional wisdom often holds that ordinary people just do not know enough to recognize how difficult these decisions are. What we find, after 40 years of NIF forums, however, is that after deliberating, participants do begin to see the very same tensions with which leaders grapple. In fact, one key benefit of giving typical Americans the chance to weigh choices is that they begin to see tensions. The end point of "choice work," as it is used in NIF forums, is not a facile decision on this or that specific policy. Rather, it is a recognition and respect for the inherent complexity and need for realism and balance in the foreign policy and security arenas.

In forums, participants wrestle with tensions such as these:

The desire to focus on domestic priorities and keep "our own house in order"



The recognition that isolationism is dangerous in today's world

The desire to rein in military spending



The recognition that real threats exist in the world and military spending creates good jobs and sustains communities

The desire to make treaties and productively collaborate with other nations



The worry that other countries can't be trusted and may cheat if we are naïve

The desire to have a peaceful, orderly world where the US stamps out humanitarian atrocities



Fears about being drawn into foreign conflicts that cost lives and money

Domestic Priorities vs. Dangers of Isolationism

In the last few years, we have heard a great deal about "America First." However, this line of thinking has been prominent in NIF forums for decades as participants balanced our active role in countries around the world against a fear that things might be deteriorating within our own borders. A participant in a 1995 forum in New Rochelle, New York, illustrated this tension nicely: "I can't stand the fact that we have kids starving in Appalachia while we're feeding people in China. But I also don't think we have to give up global leadership in order to put our domestic needs first." Similarly, a 1995 participant from Alameda, California, noted, "We send troops overseas but don't help the people in our cities."

At the same time, participants recognize that isolationism might be unwise in an interconnected world

and possibly immoral from a country that has so much to offer. A 1995 participant in Long Island, New York, noted, “If the US isn’t the world’s moral leader, who will be? If we hadn’t acted in South Africa and Somalia, who would have?” While isolationism is unappealing, so, too, is the idea of the US acting unilaterally. A consistent theme in the forums over the years has been that when the US does engage abroad (diplomatically, militarily, or with aid), people want other nations on board as partners sharing the load. Summarizing a forum in 2002 from Warrenton, Illinois, a moderator said, “Our group said it would be arrogant for the US to go at it alone and that we should always look to help from our allies.” That same year, another moderator from Texas said, “My group said acting alone is why people hate us.”

Rein in Military Spending vs. Defending against Threats

In forums on the role of the US in the world, the topic of American military spending invariably emerges. Sticker shock is a common reaction when participants find out how much the country spends on its military. As a participant from a 2019 forum in Alabama said following one of the forums, “I was not aware of just *how* much [the] US spent on military. It’s a lot.” This same forum in Alabama provides several examples of how participants often wrestle with their initial preference to drastically cut military spending. As one participant put it, “I was ready to side with drastic reduction of US military spending before the potential power vacuum was brought to light.” Wrestling with this tension goes back years, as evidenced by the 1987 forums on the superpower relationship in which only a quarter of participants favored scaling back US military spending and troop presence around the world for fear of what would happen if we did.

Collaboration vs. Fairness

In discussing our role in the world, forum participants often point to the idea that there are numerous challenges that know no borders. These problems threaten all of us and require collaboration. After the

2010 forums, over 8 in 10 participants agreed that global warming, environmental degradation, and pandemics pose an increasingly grave danger to the health and well-being of all humanity. Forums from the 1980s also reflect this desire for greater global collaboration on shared problems. In summarizing the 1987 forums on the relationship between superpowers, Public Agenda’s Keith Melville noted, “The superpower collaboration strategy appeared finally to command the most support only because of its pragmatism. It would enable the United States to maintain sufficient weapons to defend ourselves while allowing us to seek areas of common interest and possible collaboration while we have the chance.”¹¹ In forums from the 1980s, calls for greater collaboration with foreign adversaries were matched in the next breath with concerns about the trustworthiness of our possible collaborators. This tension between collaboration and suspicion was reflected in John Doble’s summary of the 2010 forums:

In many forums, people also took up the issue of global threats to humanity. Many were concerned about the environment, about climate change in particular, but also about air and water quality, and, to a lesser extent, about famine caused by war. Some talked about disease and pandemics, while others focused on nuclear proliferation, global peacekeeping, or overpopulation. But while there seemed to be general agreement that such problems can be addressed only through collaborative, international efforts, many voiced a pessimistic view about the likelihood of that happening. Some said our image in the world was so tarnished, in part by our “bullying,” that other nations are reluctant to trust or work with the United States; others raised doubts about the capability of the UN and other international organizations to work effectively to deal with such problems; some said that major players, China, in particular, would be unlikely to do their

¹¹ Public Agenda Foundation for the Domestic Policy Association, *A Report on the 1987-1988 Forums* (Dayton, OH: Public Agenda Foundation for the Domestic Policy Association, 1988).

part; and many said that in view of our economic hardship, we lack resources to devote to such problems.¹²

Managing Peace in the World vs. Fear of Being Drawn into Foreign Conflict

Lastly, forum participants over 40 years have wrestled with the tension between the US playing an active role in promoting a safe, orderly world and fears of getting drawn into foreign conflicts that are costly on a number of levels. Forum participants dislike the idea of oppressive regimes and cozy relationships with dictators. Nevertheless, a common theme throughout the years has been a call for cautious but businesslike relationships with even our biggest adversaries, China and Russia. Through deliberation, forum participants tend to arrive at this desire for improved relations not because they are supportive of oppressive regimes, but because major world problems (for example, climate change, disease, and famine) demand a collaborative approach. On the whole, while participants are skeptical of exporting democracy around the world, they clearly favor supporting human rights and taking steps to curtail abuses. They see it as unwise to attempt to remake other nations in our image. The sweet spot for participants, it would seem, is to find a way to show the US commitment to the world community without being obligated to intervene in every instance. Overall, the approach sketched out by participants is cautious and pragmatic. They want their country to be prepared for any contingency and prepared to shoulder a burden commensurate with being a superpower but only after intense and thoughtful study and consideration.

Adding Nuance

When people deliberate in forums, they add nuance to their initial responses, even on complex foreign policy and national security issues. People may temper their views, become more open-minded, and seek out areas of common ground. Forums over 40 years provide

multiple examples of the public's ability to have second thoughts and see shades of gray when they deliberate with others.

Hawks and Doves

For example, very few NIF participants leave forums as outright "hawks" or "doves." Hard-liners may come to acknowledge the dangers of uncontrolled weapons growth and too much reliance on force. Participants who start out believing we should slash military spending may also acknowledge that the US has serious adversaries and needs to be able to defend itself. As a moderator from Birmingham put it after a forum in 1985, "In the end, even the hard-liners in our group agreed that we have enough weapons. And those who began the process as peace activists acknowledged that our countries have real differences." Others, while expressing concern about the size and scope of our military, come to acknowledge how the military offers an avenue to education and advancement in our own country. A young participant in a 2019 forum in Tuscaloosa noted, "I hadn't considered the ways enlisting in the military provides for academic opportunities and sustains families." Across forums over several decades, it becomes clear that dividing the world into hawks and doves is not very helpful or accurate. The overriding sentiment coming from forum participants in this arena is one of caution and pragmatism. This sense of caution is tied to comments from participants indicating their awareness of how much hangs in the balance when it comes to foreign policy. They recognize the issue's magnitude and proceed with caution—Have we exhausted all diplomatic options? Do we have allies who can help? Are we sure this is a good use of time, treasure, and lives?

From Fear to Consideration

In forums on dangerous national security issues such as nuclear proliferation and terrorism, participants often start from a place of fear—fear of nuclear catastrophe, fear of lost lives in foreign conflicts, and fear for our safety here at home. In a 2010 forum on the role of the US in the world, a man from Panama City said, "I have

¹² Public Agenda, 2011.

a daughter in New York City, and I fear for her safety every day because of the threat of terrorism. . . . I don't think anyone can feel safe given the number of people who are willing to attempt to create harm in the United States." In the course of the deliberation in many forums though, this initial focus on safety gradually morphs into a discussion about how US safety is linked to our ability or inability to keep our own house in order. More pointedly, speaking after a 2010 forum, a woman from Virginia Beach said, "If you're broke, you can't do anything—you can't fight wars, you can't solve global warming—nothing." Similarly, a man from Kentucky said, "Our forum led me to the conclusion that unless we get our economic house in order, we can not continue to afford the costs of manufacturing a strong defense."

A prime example of deliberative forums prompting a shift from fear to consideration comes from the 1983 forums on nuclear weapons and national security. As it happened, many of them coincided on the calendar with the airing of the popular television movie *The Day After*. This popular program, viewed by over 100 million people in nearly 39 million households, told the frightening tale of what would happen if nuclear blasts occurred on US soil. In reflecting on this juxtaposition, a moderator and high school teacher from Long Island worked with his students to hold community forums on national security. He noted that the forums "helped the students overcome the drama of *The Day After*, which had only dramatized the horrors of nuclear war." At the same time in 1983, there were a number of forums taking place in Saginaw, Michigan, which led to this endorsement from John Puravs, who was the editorial page editor at the *Saginaw News*: "Sunday night, millions of viewers nationwide and thousands of viewers in Saginaw Valley will be tuning in ABC-TV's ultimate disaster movie, *The Day After*. Thursday night probably only a few dozen area residents will gather at a National Issues Forums in Saginaw entitled 'Nuclear Arms and National Security.' That's unfortunate because persons genuinely concerned about the conflicting values surrounding the nuclear arms race will be better served by the forum than by the movie."

Moving Past Sharp Differences to Find Possibilities for Collaboration

Over the decades, many forum participants start out thinking that our differences with other nations, especially longtime adversaries, are so great that we cannot even comprehend working together. As they deliberate though, many begin to see options for action that are imperfect but nevertheless offer a path forward. As participants deliberate, many come to the conclusion that a number of these problems know no boundaries and require collaboration. At the same time, participants tend to be realistic. They know that we likely will not become best friends with some nations, but they yearn for "businesslike" or working relationships. For example, after attending a 2019 forum, a participant from Ohio felt "more favorable to trade with North Korea and Cuba." Following a two-part forum in 1987, a woman from Denver said, "In our first session, I very much disbelieved that we could trust the Soviets, that we could work cooperatively with them. I thought that our only hope was to say we are not your friends, you are not our friends, but let's get rid of these nuclear weapons, and then go on. I did change my mind last week; maybe now we have a window of opportunity." Also, after a 1987 forum, a woman from New York said, "We should try to reach a point where we can respect and associate with the Soviets, instead of living in constant fear of each other." As previously noted, however, while forum participants do seem to desire working relationships with foreign adversaries, they are clear-eyed about the risk of these adversaries failing to hold up their end of the bargain and wary about their taking advantage of the US. This was nicely summed up by a participant in Nashville after a 2003 forum on US-Russia relations, "Obviously, it does both countries good to work together. But I'm wary. I think we can say we're aiming toward being friends, but I'm not going to trust because that is our history."

Sticker Shock on Spending and Warming up to Foreign Aid

Similarly, forum participants add nuance to their initial positions on military spending and foreign aid.

Upon learning how much money the US spends on its military, participants are astounded. At the same time, many initially worry that the US gives more than its share in foreign aid and, furthermore, that the aid might not reach the people who really need it. As participants deliberate though, their sense of sticker shock subsides a bit as they worry about the economic fallout of base closures and also fear what would happen if the US stood on the sidelines of world affairs. Doble et al., reporting on the 1995 forums, noted that foreign aid was initially very unpopular. As a participant from Ohio said in 1995, “You hear about it all the time, such-and-such dictator is a multimillionaire with a Swiss bank account. And the people in his country are just as poor as they’ve ever been.” However, as participants talked more about foreign aid, they came to see it in a more positive light—they just want to ensure that the US isn’t the only country providing it and that the aid gets in the hands of those who most need it.

Considering Their Own Responsibilities

Aside from direct service in the military or in the Peace Corps, foreign policy does not instantly lend itself to an active role for most individuals. As a participant from Alabama said after a 2019 forum, “National security is a difficult area for local communities to be involved in.” On issues such as crime, health care, and the education of children, forum-goers have no difficulty thinking of myriad ways they and their communities can be active in addressing the problem at hand. In spite of this challenge, evidence from many years of national security forums suggests that citizens are similarly eager to be helpful and engaged when it comes to national security. Beyond just following the news and being supportive, forum-goers are eager to find ways to constructively work together on issues related to national security.

Willingness to Sacrifice and Endure Inconvenience in the Name of Safety

In literal terms, foreign affairs may be far from most of our front doors, but Americans have historically been willing to sacrifice, scrimp, and save in order to serve

larger national interests. Our history books tell us about the purchase of war bonds or women stepping up to helm factories during WWII. Far from distant memories, this spirit appears to live on in modern times.

This sentiment was especially pronounced in the 2001-2002 forums on terrorism. In those forums, which took place after 9/11, numerous participants noted that citizens were ready to make sacrifices in the national interest. Similarly today, although not the explicit subject of forums, we see instances of people stepping up to help with the global COVID-19 crisis. However, an important caveat to this willingness arises out of the forums. Namely, forum participants are more than willing to be of service and sacrifice in the name of national security but often are not sure how. Describing their forums after 9/11, the moderators succinctly summarized that tension. A moderator from Austin, Texas, noted, “People here said we’re not being asked to do anything.” Similarly, a moderator from Long Island, New York, noted, “In our forum, people said they had been willing to make sacrifices after September 11 but did not know what to do.”

Taking an Active Role

Regardless of the specific issue at hand, participants in NIF forums on national security consistently expressed concern that those in foreign nations have a skewed understanding of what Americans are really like. They worried that residents of other nations would project the personalities of US leaders onto the populace as a whole. Similarly, forum participants were concerned that residents of other nations would simply assume that all Americans were like the ones they saw in sensational movies or on television. At the same time, forum participants were quick to note that it would serve us well to have a better understanding of different countries and cultures around the world. Coming out of the forums across the years was a real desire to foster better people-to-people relationships around the world as a means of enhancing mutual understanding.

Describing their group’s sentiments after a 1985 forum, a Saginaw, Michigan, moderator said, “We felt only good could come from increased people-to-people contact.” Also in 1985, a high school teacher and a

moderator from St. Louis noted about their students, “They have learned a lot from exchange students and see it as a positive thing.” A moderator from New York described a 1985 forum as follows: “People felt that our country and the Soviets will not become friends, but they reached agreement that we need more understanding.” Picking up on this strong sentiment coming out of the forums was the late Senator Alan Cranston of California, who participated in an event in which forum results were shared. Cranston stated, “Both sides have a perception gap. That’s why people-to-people contact is so important.” Better relationships and greater understanding were often seen as keys that could help to unlock the mysteries and tragedies of foreign affairs. As a woman from Philadelphia said in a post-9/11 forum, “We need to understand where they’re coming from.” On a more basic level, participants see a role for themselves in listening and interacting with people from across the globe. A woman from Columbus, Ohio, said after a 2003 forum, “Nothing will ever take the place of people talking to each other.” Upon being asked what they and their community might do to address national security, a 2019 participant from Dayton simply said, “Listen to each other, truly listen.”

Conclusion: Then and Now

In recent years, Americans have expressed despair over the deeply polarizing turn in national politics. Yet, even in this context, recent deliberative forums on foreign policy and national security questions show people listening to each other carefully. Most seem open-minded. Many leave the forums reconsidering or adding nuance to their initial views.

Perhaps the principal takeaway from the NIF forums on the role of the US in the world over nearly four decades is that when typical Americans deliberate together, they tend to reach judgments that are reasonable, thoughtful, and possibly easier to act on than what emerges from surveys and town-hall meetings.

Over the four-decade period of NIF forums on foreign policy and national security issues, a great number of monumental world events have occurred. The early forums occurred under the specter of the Cold War and fear of nuclear catastrophe. History moved forward and forums held during peacetime considered what our role should be in a world no longer chiefly concerned with a battle for ideological supremacy. Later forums took place in the shadow of the September 11th attacks, when a rattled nation wondered how to move forward and foster safety. More recently, forums took place amid extended conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Today, forums occur while once dormant tensions with China and Russia reemerge. In this analysis, the aim was not to explore how citizens responded to each and every major world event that has occurred over the last four decades. Nor was its purpose to highlight changes in public thinking between yesterday and today. Rather, the goal here was to highlight recurring themes in public thinking on world affairs—ideas and sentiments that emerged time and time again—regardless of the year and regardless of the latest world headlines. Further, we aimed to highlight how public deliberation influenced public thinking on national security and foreign policy, often gently altering views from off-the-top-of-the-head reactions to more considered, nuanced views. We found notable elements of stability in how US citizens think about world affairs after deliberating with others. As always, change and flux are the order of the day in world affairs. The world is at a different point today from where it was during any of the previous points cited in this report. Future NIF forums will take place amid a global pandemic, simmering tensions among superpowers, and as yet unknown developments about which one can only speculate. As always, the National Issues Forums and the Kettering Foundation will be ready to report on public thinking and develop materials aimed at fostering public judgment on these always difficult questions of foreign policy and national security.

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The National Issues Forums (NIF) is a network of organizations that brings together citizens around the nation to talk about pressing social and political issues of the day. Thousands of community organizations, including schools, libraries, churches, civic groups, and others, have sponsored forums designed to give people a public voice in the affairs of their communities and their nation.