
On Second Thought

How a Deliberative Public Talks about America's Role in the World

A Report from the Kettering Foundation and the National Issues Forums Network

WHEN OUR NATION'S LEADERS shape our relationships with other countries, they must weigh the benefits, risks, and trade-offs of numerous approaches and make hundreds of decisions, some affecting life and death. Because the United States is a democracy, these decisions should, to the greatest degree possible, reflect the goals and aspirations of US citizens. Moreover, elected officials and high-level diplomatic, military, and trade professionals need public support and permission to sustain policies over time.

But the methods leaders use to understand public thinking on foreign policy and security issues aren't always helpful. Lobbyists and interest groups weigh in, but their aims are frequently narrow. Town-hall meetings attract proponents and opponents of specific policies but rarely provide reliable signals about public priorities and what people will support over the long term. Polling often captures top-of-the-head reactions to complex questions many people haven't thought much about.

- How can leaders help the public understand the stakes in foreign policy and security dilemmas?
- How can leaders gain a better understanding of the public's goals and expectations regarding the role of the United States in the world?

A unique insight into public thinking

For nearly four decades, the Kettering Foundation, a nonpartisan research institute, has collaborated with the network of the National Issues Forums (NIF) to capture a different kind of public thinking—what citizens say about complex policy problems when they weigh different approaches and exchange views about them with others.

NIF is a nationwide network of nonpartisan community-based groups that convene deliberative public forums with people from all walks of life. Forums are locally sponsored and meet in neighborhood settings, such as schools, colleges, libraries, community youth and senior centers, and places of faith. Increasingly, forums are held online.

Between 1984 and 2020, the NIF network has convened deliberative forums on US foreign policy and security issues such as nuclear weapons, terrorism, defining our global role, and strategies for keeping the country safe. These deliberations offer an unparalleled window into how typical Americans think and talk about these complex challenges and how they learn and deepen their thinking about them.

In this brief sketch, we recap what we have learned from deliberative forums on foreign policy and security issues over 40 years, focusing on what blocks and supports productive public deliberation.

What blocks productive public deliberation:

Assuming Americans don't care about foreign policy and security issues

Defining "national security" narrowly

Focusing on only specific countries and relationships

Putting facts and figures on a pedestal

What supports and enhances it:

Letting people grapple with problems and practice "choice work"

Recognizing that people's views can change when they deliberate

Valuing the public's ability to see tensions

Taking time to consider what the United States stands for

WHAT BLOCKS PRODUCTIVE PUBLIC DELIBERATION

1. Assuming Americans don't care about foreign policy and security issues

Except in times of crisis, public concerns about foreign policy and national security issues generally rank below anxieties about domestic issues, according to most surveys. But according to NIF forums over 40 years, typical Americans have gnawing fears, churning 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. The more people deliberate, the more they recognize the complex and difficult decisions the US faces now and in the future.

Polls on foreign policy and national security sometimes offer a piecemeal and short-lived view of citizens' thinking. For the public, crises often seem to come from nowhere, and people must begin an enormous learning curve. Polls may pick up early "rally round the flag" reactions in times of crisis only to see public support fade once people begin to absorb the complexities of the situation.

2. Defining "national security" narrowly

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 Americans have a much broader definition, one that includes the health and vitality of the US economy.¹ 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 don't speak to this sustained and widespread concern about how to protect and enhance the US economy in a changing world, many people will simply tune out.

¹ See for example, John Doble, Samantha DuPont, and Jon Rochkind. 2011. "Public Thinking About America's Role in the World. What Does National Security Mean in the 21st Century?" A Public Agenda Report prepared for the Kettering Foundation.

3. Focusing on only specific countries and relationships

The United States has faced—and continues to face—military and economic threats from specific countries, Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran chief among them. But NIF forums over the years suggest that citizens increasingly see a host of multinational threats that come not from a specific nation, but from multiple sources. Among these are terrorism, climate change, and economic competition.²

Leaders need to highlight and talk about the nation's important bilateral relations, but if they fail to speak to public concern about these more amorphous dangers, they will leave many people fearful and insecure. Similarly, if leaders do not help Americans think about multinational approaches to multinational dangers, they may not have public permission to act globally to address them.

4. Putting facts and figures on a pedestal

Foreign policy and security experts command a vast wealth of knowledge about nearly 200 nations and the international treaties, agreements, and organizations that tie countries together or sometimes divide them. Most citizens 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. Forum participants use short, user-friendly issue guides prepared by the Kettering Foundation that include a small number of carefully selected “strategic facts” chosen specifically to motivate deeper questions. They include at least one

key fact or statistic reflecting each of the differing ideological perspectives participants likely will bring to the table.

In a recent issue guide, “Keeping America Safe,” a graph highlights US spending on defense compared to that of other countries, while a chart enumerates the list of threats people see in today's world ranging from terrorism to cyberattacks to climate change to the power of adversaries such as Russia and China. The goal is not for participants to remember the details. It is to prompt them to consider the country's options and the tensions among them.

Facts are important, and few would deny that increasing citizens' knowledge about the world is beneficial. But typical citizens should not be expected to become mini-diplomats or amateur security experts. NIF's experience shows that typical Americans can have subtle, reality-based deliberations without putting facts and figures on a pedestal.

WHAT SUPPORTS AND ENHANCES DELIBERATIVE PUBLIC THINKING

1. Letting people grapple with problems and practice “choice work”

One key difference between experts and policy-makers compared to people in communities is what might be called the “issue time lag.” In general, leaders spend years learning about emerging issues and considering options for tackling them. Leaders and experts have typically wrestled with various perspectives in the debate over what the country should do. They have had time to decide on the best approach.

But when an urgent issue enters the public arena—the emergence of a global pandemic, for example—very few Americans bring this background to the table. Suddenly inundating them with the names of agencies, treaties, and specific

² Doble et al. 2011.

legislative proposals will leave them confused and overwhelmed.

NIF forums give participants an opportunity to confront a problem and grapple with its dimensions. Participants exchange views on how it will affect them and others, now and in the future. Then, forums move on to what we call “choice work”—asking participants to weigh alternative approaches and consider their advantages and trade-offs. In NIF’s experience, choice work is one of the quickest and most effective ways for people to understand complex problems and deliberate on how to solve them.

Choice work consists of laying out three or four broad strategies, each reflecting different priorities, aspirations, and competing courses of action. These choice frameworks are not unlike the option papers the military prepares for the president in moments of national crisis. And like the president’s option papers, the choices must be clear and frank about risks and trade-offs.

NIF’s recent issue guide on “Keeping America Safe” offers three broad options: 1) making our country’s needs our top priority; 2) asserting our power worldwide; and 3) working with others to solve global problems. For participants, weighing the drawbacks as well as the advantages of these basic options prompted increased realism and a more nuanced grasp of the risks inherent in each approach. In these forums, as in others, participants tended to move away from simplistic prescriptions to a more subtle analysis of how best to protect our country and advance our values.

2. Recognizing that people’s views can change when they deliberate

When people deliberate in forums, they add nuance to their initial top-of-the-head 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.

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 adversaries and needs to be able to defend itself—and that the military offers an avenue to education and advancement in our own country. Likewise, participants who see foreign aid as wasteful may begin to consider its usefulness.

In forums on dangerous national security issues such as nuclear proliferation and terrorism, participants often start out immobilized by fear. As they deliberate, they see options for action that are imperfect, but nevertheless offer a path forward. A similar phenomenon can occur in deliberations about “enemy” nations. In these instances, forum participants begin to distinguish between governments and the population at large—people “who have children, too.” Many consider the possibility of working with adversaries on common problems, while, of course, keeping a close eye on them.

3. Valuing the public’s ability to see tensions

One key benefit of giving typical citizens 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 of 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 take care of “our own country”	VS	The recognition that isolationism is dangerous in today’s world
The desire to rein in military spending	VS	The recognition that Russia, China, and other countries pose dangerous military threats
The desire to make treaties and reduce the spread and use of arms	VS	The worry that other countries shouldn’t be trusted and may cheat if we are naive
The desire to have a peaceful and orderly world and “nip problems in the bud”	VS	Fears about being drawn into foreign conflicts that cost American lives and money
The desire to act with other nations to address the world’s hot spots and global challenges	VS	Doubts about the effectiveness of many international agencies and alliance
The benefits of free trade and a recognition of how we benefit from it	VS	Concerns about the decline in US manufacturing and loss of well-paying US jobs

When forum participants deliberate together, they begin to recognize these and other tensions and move away from simplistic, doctrinaire, and sometimes unworkable solutions.

4. Deliberating on what the United States stands for

Since the 1980s, in forums in every part of the country, participants have worried about the role and reputation of the US in the world. Participants often ask whether we have taken on superpower responsibilities that we cannot afford or sustain.³ They ask whether too many around the world have come to see the US as a bully or a meddler, pushing other countries to do what we want. One continuing theme in NIF forums for 40 years is that the US tries to do too much to fix and reshape the world.

³ Robert J. Kingston. 2012. *Voice and Judgment: The Practice of Public Politics*. Dayton: Kettering Foundation Press.

Yet side by side with concerns about the US being the world’s police officer is a desire for our country 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.

This goal is not merely fanciful or idealistic lip service. Forum participants often talk about the US leading by example and living up to our own ideals.⁴ Many question the notion of the US working with dictators and authoritarians for short-term and frequently illusory gains.⁵ Many endorse the need to work with other countries to maintain peace, advance human rights, and battle global threats.

⁴ Kingston, 2012

⁵ Kingston, 2012

Feeling endangered and unsure in today's world, citizens hope, most of all, that leaders will pursue policies that will keep them safe and secure. But if leaders fail to speak to a broad public desire for the United States to stand for important values and goals, they will be offering only half an answer.

A parting thought

In recent years, citizens themselves 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 citizens in the world over nearly four decades is that when typical citizens deliberate together, they tend to reach judgments that are reasonable, thoughtful, and possibly easier to act on than those that emerge from surveys and town-hall meetings.

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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.