CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In one of several public addresses on the appropriate prerequisites for deployment of American combat forces abroad, Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger in 1984 specified six requirements for any such U.S. military intervention. According to Weinberger, one of those preconditions was that “there must be some reasonable assurance that we will have the support of the American people” (Weinberger 1984, A5). His cabinet colleague, Secretary of State George Shultz, publicly disagreed with the “Weinberger Doctrine,” characterizing it both at that time and later in his memoirs as an unreasonably stringent set of preconditions that would rarely, if ever, be met. Consequently, Shultz argued, these restrictions effectively would serve as an excuse for inaction, even when vital American interests abroad were potentially threatened (Shultz 1993, 84, 103, 649–51). The public disagreement between Weinberger and Shultz may be seen as one of many arguments about the ends and means of foreign policy that have marked the decades since the American intervention in Vietnam ended in defeat. Varying interpretations of the Vietnam War, why it was lost, and the appropriate lessons to be drawn from that conflict, especially with respect to the deployment of troops abroad, have continued to generate heated debates more than three decades after the last Americans were evacuated from Saigon. Post–Cold War interventions in Somalia, Haiti, and parts of the former Yugoslavia have, if anything, sharpened rather than tempered debates about the use of American armed forces abroad. Even though Saddam Hussein was an enemy with few redeeming features, the decision to expel Iraqi troops from Kuwait in 1991 came within only a few votes in Congress from setting the stage for a potential constitutional crisis. It took the enormity of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York and Washington to create overwhelming support for sending U.S. troops to
Afghanistan to seek out the perpetrators of the attack and to overthrow the Taliban regime that had provided a haven for members of al Qaeda. The insurgency against American forces in Iraq has reignited debates about interventions abroad.

The differences between Weinberger and Shultz may be seen as part of the “Vietnam syndrome”—the propensity to perceive and assess international undertakings through the prism of the war in Southeast Asia. These differences also may be viewed as part of a more basic and venerable debate about some central issues regarding the theory and practice of democratic government: namely, what is the proper role of public opinion in the conduct of foreign affairs? Is public opinion an obstacle in the definition of vital national interests and in the implementation of appropriate foreign and defense policies to pursue those interests? Have publics in democratic countries hamstrung military operations by failing to exhibit sufficient patience to support important undertakings that fail to produce quick results or by insisting that such undertakings be conducted without casualties? Alternatively, does public opinion play an indispensable role in legitimating and sustaining long-term efforts to pursue and protect vital interests abroad? Can it serve as a valuable constraint against policies that have at best a tenuous relationship to such interests? Understandably, a great deal of research on public opinion and foreign policy has been driven by issues of the moment. Almost any dramatic international development will immediately give rise to surveys directed at discovering public attitudes and preferences for dealing with it. Indeed, major U.S. television networks conduct regular surveys in cooperation with national newspapers, and it is now even possible to report how the public is reacting to events as they unfold.¹ Air attacks against Iraq during the 1991 Gulf War could be viewed in real time, even as polling organizations were conducting surveys to assess, for example, the level of public support for the war effort. The terrorist attacks on New York and Washington stimulated a flood of surveys concerning questions ranging from the appropriate U.S. responses to the emotional impact of the events on respondents.

One of the themes to be developed in this and the following two chapters is that research and theory on public opinion and foreign policy have been heavily influenced by major international developments and by normative preferences for the ways the United States should deal with them. Despite the heavy emphasis in most surveys sponsored by the popular media on public reac-
tions to current issues—or perhaps because of this emphasis—there is value in linking the issue of public opinion and foreign policy to broader questions about the conduct of public affairs. This examination of the linkage between public opinion and foreign policy will begin with a review of historical controversies regarding the issue. A good starting point is the long-standing debate between proponents of two quite different philosophical approaches to international relations.

Public Opinion in the Realist-Liberal Debate

Although other major theoretical contenders have claimed to provide empirical and/or normative guides to international relations—for example, several variants of Marxist-Leninist dependency theories and, more recently, postmodern attacks on virtually every effort at systematic analysis—the rival assertions by proponents of realism and their liberal critics have tended to dominate debates among theorists, reformers, and policymakers.² Realists can properly claim the longest intellectual lineage, tracing their roots to Thucydides, if not earlier. Most liberal theories are of more recent vintage, dating to the seventeenth century and more or less coinciding with the creation of the modern state system with the 1648 Treaties of Westphalia. Although realist-liberal differences extend across virtually all central questions of foreign policy, international relations, and statecraft, the appropriate role for public opinion in the making of foreign policy is at the center of persisting debates between these two approaches to international affairs. Is public opinion a force for enlightenment—indeed, a necessary if not sufficient condition for sound foreign policy and thus a significant contributor to peaceful relations among nations—as celebrated by Woodrow Wilson and many other liberals? Alternatively, is the public more appropriately described as a source of emotional and shortsighted thinking that can only impede the effective pursuit and defense of vital national interests?

There is a long liberal tradition, dating back at least to Jeremy Bentham, that places public opinion at the center of legitimate and effective public policy. Bentham described public opinion, or the “Public-Opinion Tribunal,” as the “sole remedy” for many problems of government. His “Plan for an Universal and Perpetual Peace” also proposed removing the veil of secrecy from the conduct of foreign affairs: “That secrecy in the operation of the foreign department ought not to be endured in England, being
equally repugnant to the interests of liberty and those of peace” (1962, 8:561, 2:547). James Mill effectively summarized the liberal case for public opinion as a repository of wisdom:

Every man, possessed of reason, is accustomed to weigh evidence, and to be guided and determined by its preponderance. When various conclusions are, with their evidence, presented with equal care and with equal skill, there is a moral certainty, though some few may be misguided, that the greatest number will judge aright, and that the greatest force of evidence, wherever it is, will produce the greatest impression. . . . When all opinions, true and false, are equally declared, the assent of the greater number, when their interests are not opposed to them, may always be expected to be given to the true. These principles, the foundations of which appear to be impregnable, suffice for the speedy determination of every practical question. (1913, 16, 18)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant developed similar themes specifically with respect to foreign policy and war. Monarchs may engage in wars for reasons that have nothing to do with the interests of their subjects. In contrast, the foreign policies of republics are more peaceful, at least in part because the public can play a constructive role in constraining policymakers; accountability to the public can restrain any war-making proclivities of leaders. Kant based his argument on the constraints that republics and nonrepublics face when they contemplate engaging in war. The former are likely to be more peaceful because the public, which bears most of the costs, will be cautious about engaging in war: “If (as must inevitably be the case, given this form of constitution) the consent of the citizenry is required in order to determine whether or not there will be war, it is natural that they consider all its calamities before committing themselves to so risky a game” (Kant 1983, 113). The situation is quite different under nonrepublician constitutions, according to Kant, because the easiest thing in the world to do is to declare war. Here the ruler is not a fellow citizen, but the nation’s owner, and war does not affect his tables, his hunt, his places of pleasure, his court festivals, and so on. Thus, he can decide to go to war for the most meaningless of reasons, as if it were a kind of pleasure party, and he can blithely leave its justification
(which decency requires) to his diplomatic corps, who are always prepared for such exercises. (113)

Among nineteenth-century statesmen, William Gladstone most explicitly adhered to the liberal vision "which favors the pacific, not the bloody settlement of disputes, which aims at permanent and not temporary adjustments; above all, which recognizes as a tribunal of paramount authority, the general judgement of civilized mankind" (quoted in Kissinger 1994, 164). The essence of the liberal thesis is thus a distinction between the peaceful public and leaders who may, for a broad range of reasons, pursue policies that lead to war. British Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin succinctly summarized the Kantian case for public opinion as a barrier to war when he told Parliament in November 1945, "There has never been a war yet which, if the facts had been put calmly before ordinary folk, could not have been prevented. The common man is the greatest protection against war."3

Although the liberal position on the desirability of engaging the public in the conduct of foreign affairs boasts a distinguished lineage, an equally formidable array of theorists and statesmen in the realist tradition has taken a much more skeptical stance on the public's contribution to enlightened and effective diplomacy. In contrast to most liberal theories, realism has generally been grounded in a pessimistic theory of human nature, either theological (for example, St. Augustine and Reinhold Niebuhr) or secular (for example, Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, and Hans Morgenthau). Humans are by nature self-regarding and are largely motivated by such passions as greed and fear, qualities that are not lost when people are aggregated into political units such as nation-states.

Because realists are skeptical of institutional arrangements for promoting international cooperation in an anarchical system—to say nothing of philosophers' blueprints for regulating international relations or ensuring peace—they typically rely on balance-of-power strategies for defending national interests. Viscount Palmerston's widely quoted aphorism that Great Britain has no permanent friends or enemies, only permanent interests, summarizes a cardinal rule of realist statecraft. But the flexibility required effectively to pursue balance-of-power politics may run contrary to public sentiments. Because the public is likely to be interested in "nationality, justice, or traditional friendships and enmities," selling the proposition that yesterday's friend is today's
enemy, or vice versa, may not be easy (Wright 1965, 265). Realists have typically viewed both friends and enemies from an instrumental perspective: they are means to the common end of defending vital national interests. One of the realist rules of thumb is that “my enemy’s enemy is my friend,” though acting on that dictum may involve at least temporary alliances with unsavory regimes. On the eve of Nazi Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, Winston Churchill asserted, “I have only one purpose, the destruction of Hitler, and my life is simplified thereby. If Hitler invaded Hell, I would make at least a favourable reference to the Devil in the House of Commons” (1951, 370). In contrast, according to realist critics, the public is more likely to view relations with other countries as ends in themselves and to be more critical of alliances with brutal dictatorships. This is but one of the reasons why realists usually describe public opinion as a barrier to any thoughtful and coherent foreign policy, hindering efforts to promote national interests that may transcend the moods and passions of the moment.

The skepticism of the realists could also be found among the founding fathers who formulated and debated the U.S. Constitution. Alexander Hamilton and others expressed grave doubts about the wisdom of the general public. The authors of the Federalist Papers argued that the Senate (an appointed body until early in the twentieth century) was better suited than the directly elected House of Representatives to play a key role in the conduct of foreign affairs. Because a reliable and stable government is necessary to gain the “respect and confidence of other nations,” the Senate is to be preferred to the “numerous and changeable” House. “Without a select and stable member of the government, the esteem of foreign powers will . . . be forfeited by unenlightened and variable policy.” Moreover, to enact foreign policies that will be in the interest of the country as a whole, it is best to rely on a body of the legislature that is not as directly responsible to the public as is the House. In foreign policy matters, the Senate can serve as a “defence to the people against their own temporary errors and delusions.” Senators are also in a better position to gain the expertise and preserve the secrecy essential to the effective conduct of foreign policy. Finally, according to Hamilton, the fluctuating character of the House makes it the less suitable body for ratifying treaties: “Accurate and comprehensive knowledge of foreign politics; a steady and systematic adherence to the same views; a nice and uniform sensibility to national char-
acter; decision, secrecy, and dispatch, are incompatible with the genius of a body [the House of Representatives] so variable and so numerous.” Taken together, these arguments add up to a concise statement of the realist case for shielding the nation’s foreign and security policy from the assumed vagaries of the public and the institution, the House of Representatives, that most directly represented it (Hamilton, Jay, and Madison 1937, nos. 62–64, 75).

Several decades later, Alexis de Tocqueville, a sympathetic French analyst of American society and politics, questioned whether democracies could satisfy the requirements for the effective conduct of diplomatic affairs. After admitting that it is “very difficult to ascertain, at present, what degree of sagacity the American democracy will display in the conduct of . . . foreign policy,” he nevertheless expressed his own judgment in terms applicable not only to the United States but to all democracies: “As for myself, I do not hesitate to say that it is especially in the conduct of their foreign relations that democracies appear to be decidedly inferior to other governments.” His analysis went on to identify the “propensity that induces democracies to obey impulse rather than prudence, and to abandon a mature design for the gratification of a momentary passion” as the essential barrier to the effective making of foreign policy. In contrast to the aristocracy—“a firm and enlightened body”—the “mass of the people may be led astray by ignorance and passion” (Tocqueville 1958, 1:243–45). These putative qualities of the general public—ignorance and passion—lie at the heart of virtually all realist critiques of public opinion.

At this point it is appropriate to introduce a question that I will later revisit. Do domestic and foreign policy differ so sufficiently that they require separate normative and empirical theories? More specifically, do these differences extend to the role of public opinion in these two realms of policy? Realists and liberals often vary in their approaches to this question as well. Realists generally answer the question in the affirmative, asserting that foreign affairs are indeed sufficiently unlike domestic issues to require differences in the processes by which policy is formulated; even some liberals—for example, John Locke—would accept this distinction. According to realists, the public might be sufficiently informed and motivated to deal with schools, zoning, and other local issues that impinge on their daily lives, but foreign affairs are too far removed from the public’s experiences, and in any case, the masses have little time or inclination to become sufficiently
informed about such complex and remote issues. Moreover, realists may sometimes concede that the quality of domestic policy might be enhanced by public deliberations, but the benefits of public participation do not extend to foreign affairs. The effective conduct of diplomacy, these realists assert, must often be based on sensitive intelligence or other confidential information that cannot be shared with the public. Diplomacy usually requires secrecy, flexibility, speed of action, and other qualities that would be seriously jeopardized were the public to have a significant impact, and public passions would often make it impossible to conduct sensitive negotiations with either friends or adversaries abroad.

Thus, to permit the public a strong voice in policy would be to place democracies at a distinct disadvantage in their relations with other nations; doing so would perhaps even put the stability of the international system at risk. In this vein, Theodore Lowi (1967) has argued that democracies perform most effectively during crises, precisely the circumstances that reduce the impact of domestic “politics as usual.” Democracies perform less effectively in other circumstances; therefore, an important challenge is to “make democracy safe for the world.” Morgenthau summarized the case against an active role for public opinion in words that would gain the approval of most realists: “The rational requirements of good foreign policy cannot from the outset count upon the support of a public opinion whose preferences are emotional rather than rational” (1978, 558).

These differences between liberals and realists often have been intensified by wars and major conflicts. Historians of various perspectives still argue about many questions relating to the impact of public opinion. Did angry farmers drive the Madison administration into an unnecessary war with Great Britain in 1812? Did public opinion, aroused by William Randolph Hearst, Joseph Pulitzer, and other masters of “yellow journalism,” push the United States into war with Spain in 1898? Did the public, still scarred by the horrors of World War I, prevent Britain and France from realistically facing up to the threats posed by the expansionist dictatorships during the 1930s? Was Franklin Roosevelt forced to back off from his efforts to warn the world about the growing dangers of fascism—for example, by his “quarantine” speech in 1937—because of an outpouring of negative reaction from some prominent opinion leaders and several isolationist segments of the American public? Had the existence of public opinion polls “blocked the war with Hitler that it was crit-
ically important to win” while sanctioning “a war that the country could not afford against a great power [Japan] that it had no immediate need to fight?” (O’Neill 1993, 73). Was the Truman administration “compelled by stiffening American opinion—vo-
cally expressed in the Republican-controlled Eightieth Congress—
to adopt the containment strategy?” (Crabb 1976, 91). In his ef-
forts to gain public support for aid to Greece and Turkey in 1947 and other aspects of the containment policy, did Truman help to create a hypervigilant public mood that ultimately made him a captive of his own rhetoric? Did public aversion to casualties force the U.S. military to rely excessively on high-altitude bombing in the Kosovo war, even though the inevitable result was higher civil-
ian casualties? Was this aversion to casualties also a factor in the war in Afghanistan against the Taliban regime and members of al Qaeda, resulting in large numbers of civilian deaths?

World War I, which might be described as the first public relations war, was an especially significant event in the liberal-realist debate on the proper role of public opinion in diplomacy. From the war’s inception, the Allied and Central Powers tried to win over “world opinion” in various ways, including publication by many foreign offices of highly selective document collections—the “color books”—that were intended to absolve their authors from responsibility for the war while placing the entire blame on their adversaries. The propaganda war during the conflict was almost as intense as that on the battlefield. As the most powerful nonbelligerent, the United States was an especially important target of vigorous propaganda efforts by both sides until it en-
tered the war in April 1917.5

President Wilson’s hopes for a new postwar world order de-
pended significantly on democratizing foreign affairs and diplo-
macy. In his April 2, 1917, war message, he declared, “A steadfast
concert for peace can never be maintained except by partnership
of democratic nations. No autocratic government could be trusted
to keep faith within it or observe its covenants. It must be a league
of honor, a partnership of opinion. . . . Only free people can hold
their purpose and their honor steady to a common end and prefer
the interests of mankind to any narrow interest of their own”
(1917, 1). “Open covenants openly arrived at,” an important fea-
ture of Bentham’s blueprint for perpetual peace, was the first of
Wilson’s Fourteen Points and among his most important proce-
dural prescriptions for reforming an international order in which
secret diplomacy allegedly had dragged nation after nation into
the catastrophic war against the will and interests of its ordinary citizens. The last of the Fourteen Points, the creation of a general international organization, had a similar goal of bringing diplomacy within the purview of world public opinion. During the war Wilson had stated,

The counsels of plain men have become on all hands more simple and straightforward and more unified than the counsels of sophisticated men of affairs, who still retain the impression that they are playing a game of power and are playing for high stakes. That is why I have said that this is a people’s war, not a statesman’s. Statesmen must follow the clarified common thought or be broken. 6

Wilson’s faith in the public was not limited to abstract political theory. Throughout his career he had looked to the public as the court of final appeal for his most important projects. When faced with Senate opposition to the Treaty of Versailles, within which the League of Nations Covenant was embedded, he believed that direct appeals to the public would force the Senate to accept the treaty without the modifications proposed by Senator Henry Cabot Lodge and many other Republicans.

In September 1919, the president undertook a nationwide speaking tour, intending to go over the heads of the Senate by taking his case for the League of Nations directly to the people. 7 However, three weeks after leaving Washington, after a well-received speech in Pueblo, Colorado, Wilson suffered a serious stroke. His illness ended the tour and reduced his effectiveness for the remainder of his presidency. The Senate initially defeated the treaty by a vote of thirty-nine to fifty-five, as forty-two Democrats loyally followed Wilson’s request to reject it because of the Lodge reservations. In a later Senate vote, the Versailles Treaty was approved by a margin (forty-nine to thirty-five) that fell short of meeting the constitutional requirement of a two-thirds favorable majority, again in large part because of the president’s unwillingness to accept the Lodge package of reservations on the league covenant.

Yet Wilson optimistically staked his hopes for a reversal of that verdict by relying once again on the public. The 1920 presidential election would serve, he hoped, as “a great and solemn referendum” on the League of Nations. In fact, the campaign predictably revolved around a wide variety of issues, ranging from
prohibition to independence for Ireland. The 1920 Democratic platform and presidential candidate, James M. Cox, supported the league, but the Republican platform was sufficiently ambiguous such that both the league’s supporters and its opponents could believe that the party followed their preferences. The resulting landslide victory for the Republican ticket headed by Warren G. Harding effectively ended the debate on American participation in the League of Nations.

Although Wilson’s faith in the wisdom and power of public opinion did not save the Treaty of Versailles, his hopes for the beneficial effects of democratizing the making of foreign policy were not merely the lonely, utopian longings of a former college professor. Elihu Root, arguably the most distinguished Republican foreign policy leader of the time—he was a former secretary of war, secretary of state, and U.S. senator as well as the winner of the 1912 Nobel Peace Prize—effectively summarized the reasoning of those who welcomed an increasing public role in the conduct of foreign affairs. In the lead article of the initial issue of *Foreign Affairs*, published by the Council on Foreign Relations, Root (1922, 5) eloquently expressed the case for democratizing foreign policy.

When foreign affairs were ruled by autocracies or oligarchies the danger of war was in sinister purpose. When foreign affairs are ruled by democracies the danger of war will be in mistaken beliefs. The world will be the gainer by the change, for, while there is no human way to prevent a king from having a bad heart, there is a human way to prevent a people from having an erroneous opinion.

By more effective international education, “the people themselves will have the means to test misinformation and appeals to prejudice and passion based on error.” Root was not alone among notable conservatives in emphasizing public opinion as a force for peace. Frank Kellogg and Henry Stimson, Republican secretaries of state, counted on public opinion as a pillar of support for the Kellogg-Briand Pact (also known as the Pact of Paris).

But not all observers of postwar world affairs joined Wilson and Root in applauding the prospect of popular diplomacy. A young journalist, Walter Lippmann, was among the leading skeptics. Lippmann had accepted appointments in the Wilson administration during World War I—first as an assistant to Secretary of
War Newton D. Baker and later on a secret committee to plan for the postwar world—that gave him insight into the uses and effects on public opinion of wartime propaganda. Disillusioned by the compromises that President Wilson made at the Paris Peace Conference, Lippmann and his colleagues at the New Republic unanimously opposed the Versailles Treaty on grounds quite similar to those of the most irreconcilable isolationists in the Senate: “Americans would be fools if they permitted themselves now to be embroiled in a system of European alliances” (Steel 1980, 159).

During the next few years, Lippmann undertook a full-scale attack on the liberal case for public opinion. In two book-length treatises (1922, 1925) that adopted a sociopsychological perspective on politics, he challenged the core premises of classical liberal democratic philosophy. Liberal theory assumed that, if given the facts, the public could and would make reasonable decisions. In contrast, Lippmann emphatically questioned whether the average citizen could make any constructive contribution to world affairs: “He lives in a world which he cannot see, does not understand, and is unable to direct” (1925, 14).

Liberal theory was, according to Lippmann, wrong on several counts. In his view, common people are too fully involved in the requirements of earning a living and in otherwise attending to their most immediate needs to have the time or inclination to satisfy the heroic but clearly unrealistic assumptions about the informed and engaged citizen celebrated in classical democratic theory. The chasm between theory and reality is especially wide in the realm of foreign affairs, which are typically far removed from the direct experiences of the general public. Because the “pictures in the head” of the average citizen are unlikely to have much correspondence to the real world of international affairs, according to Lippmann, even if the public were inclined to take an active part in foreign affairs, it could scarcely make an informed and constructive contribution. In fact, these “pictures” are likely to be little more than stereotypes that color the manner in which reality is perceived. Thus, average citizens are not unlike those portrayed in Plato’s allegory of the cave; instead of directly observing reality, they can see only indirect and inadequate representations of it. Lippmann’s remedy was also not unlike Plato’s: the salvation of the democratic polity requires greater reliance on experts.

Finally, journalist Lippmann was not notably sanguine when he contemplated the role that his profession could play in bridg-
ing the gap between the real world and the average citizen's stereotypes. In a short book published in 1920, he had outlined the inadequacies of the press and questioned "whether government by consent can survive in a time when the manufacture of consent is an unregulated private enterprise. For in an exact sense the present crisis of western civilization is a crisis of journalism" (1920, 5). He also presented some proposals for improving the performance of the media.

With his New Republic colleague Charles Merz, Lippmann also undertook an empirical analysis of the press, focusing on the Russian Revolution as depicted on the pages of America's "newspaper of record," the New York Times, during 1917–20. As a standard against which to measure the performance of the Times, Lippmann and Merz's assessment included only events that unquestionably had occurred: the failure of the July 1917 Russian offensive in Galicia; the Bolshevik overthrow of the Kerensky provisional government in November 1917; the Russian-German peace treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918; the failure of the White generals' campaign against the Bolsheviks; and the Bolshevist maintenance of power through March 1920. The study did little to assuage Lippmann's pessimism about the media's ability to serve as a source of valid information about the world for the public. Lippmann and Merz concluded that coverage of these events was inadequate and misleading: "In the large, the news about Russia is a case of seeing not what was, but what men wished to see. . . . From the point of view of professional journalism the reporting of the Russian Revolution is nothing short of a disaster. On the essential questions the net effect was almost always misleading, and misleading news is worse than none at all. . . . The Russian policy of the editors of the Times profoundly and crassly influenced their news columns" (1920, 2, 3, 42).

Although Lippmann's books were written long before public opinion polling had become a "science" and a pervasive feature of American society—and before he had achieved the status of a widely read, frequently quoted, and immensely influential syndicated columnist—they have had an extraordinary and continuing impact on students of public opinion and the role of the media. As one reviewer put it, "Lippmann's theories are the diving board from which scholars in these two disciplines take their plunge" (Isaacs 1994, 2–3).

As has often been the case, the ebb and flow of the liberal-
realist debate depended at least as much on the course of contemporary world events as on the eloquence and logic of supporters and critics of one side or the other. The events leading up to the outbreak of World War II, which seemed to raise serious questions about the optimistic Wilsonian premises while apparently providing compelling empirical confirmation for the realist approach to international politics, further tipped the balance in the debate on public opinion and foreign policy in favor of the skeptics. Hitler’s ability to arouse public support for breaking out of the international order established at the Versailles Peace Conference as well as for more aggressive subsequent steps; the tepid response of the British and French publics to Japanese, German, and Italian expansion during the 1930s; and American isolationism in the face of mounting evidence that the post–World War I international order was collapsing were among the developments realists cited to sustain their doubts about the general publics’ ability to contribute constructively to foreign policy.

A realist British diplomat and historian, Edward Hallett Carr, wrote perhaps the most savage attack on Wilsonian liberalism and its nineteenth-century intellectual foundations, with a special emphasis on what Carr called the liberal “doctrine of salvation by public opinion” (1946, 33). While his polemics were aimed at a wide array of liberal targets, including those who supported the League of Nations or who asserted that world public opinion would provide an effective sanction against aggression, Carr’s most powerful attacks were directed at the Wilsonians and their faith in public opinion.

Woodrow Wilson’s “plain men throughout the world,” the spokesmen of “the common purpose of enlightened mankind,” had somehow transformed themselves into a disorderly mob emitting incoherent and unhelpful noises. It seemed undeniable that, in international affairs, public opinion was almost as often wrong-headed as it was impotent. . . . Governments of many countries acted in a sense precisely contrary to this [expert] advice [on how to conduct foreign policy], and received the endorsement of public opinion at the polls. . . . The breakdown of the post-War utopia is too overwhelming to be explained merely in terms of individual action or inaction. Its downfall involves the bankruptcy of the postulates [about public opinion] on which it is based. (1946, 50–53)
The Inception of "Scientific" Opinion Polling

The period encompassing World War II and its immediate aftermath coincided with the inception of "scientific" public opinion polling. The 1936 presidential election provided something of an unplanned critical experiment on two approaches to polling. The * Literary Digest* used a method that had enabled it correctly to predict the winner in several previous presidential elections, including Franklin Roosevelt's victory over Herbert Hoover in 1932. In the 1936 Roosevelt-Landon election, the magazine sent out ten million ballots, describing its poll as the "most extensive straw ballot in the field—the most experienced in view of its twenty-five years of perfecting—the most unbiased in view of its prestige—a Poll that has always been correct." From its returns of more than two million ballots, it confidently forecast a Landon victory of landslide proportions: the Kansas governor was predicted to win 57 percent of the popular vote and 370 votes in the electoral college (*Literary Digest* 1936, 5–6). In fact, Landon carried only Maine and Vermont, and the *Literary Digest* folded before it could try to salvage its reputation in the 1940 presidential election.10

In contrast, the recently established American Institute of Public Opinion, more popularly known as the Gallup poll, used a sampling design that yielded far fewer respondents but a more representative sample. Gallup correctly predicted the outcome, but even his poll underestimated the magnitude of the Roosevelt electoral avalanche. Nevertheless, we can date the beginning of the era of scientific surveys from the establishment of the Gallup poll in 1935 or of the *Public Opinion Quarterly* three years later.11

Polling also became a part of the policy process. In an effort to influence public attitudes on foreign policy, the State Department had established a Division of Information before World War I. The State Department later undertook its own polling to assess public attitudes (see Elder 1957; White 1959; Chittick 1970; Foster 1983). Despite his avid interest in polling and Gallup's correct call in the 1936 election, President Roosevelt nevertheless entertained doubts about the nonpartisanship of the Gallup organization. In a meeting with Democratic congressional leaders a month before the 1940 election, FDR asserted,

You watch these polls, you watch the Republican timing of the campaign. . . . They're going to show Willkie—ah—in
pretty good shape the first part of August. Then they’re going to put him through a bad slump, bad slump, so that I’ll be well out ahead on the first of October. And my judgment is that they are going to start Willkie—pickin’ up! pickin’ up! pickin’ up!—from the first of October. . . . In the Gallup poll, we’ll have a great many—too many—votes handed to us.  

Consequently, Roosevelt also turned to other sources. He was a pioneer in the use of a professional public opinion consultant—Hadley Cantril, one of the founding fathers of the new science—for guidance on policy on both domestic and foreign policy. Roosevelt had an extraordinary interest in public opinion, and there is ample evidence that his foreign policy actions were significantly shaped and constrained by his sense of what was politically feasible given the climate of domestic opinion (Dallek 1979; Casey 2001). Virtually all presidents since Roosevelt—even those who have expressed disdain for “policy by polls”—have engaged the services of public opinion specialists. Cantril not only advised FDR in this capacity but went on to serve as a consultant to the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations.

Theory and research on international relations have almost always been shaped by contemporary events in the real world. It is impossible to understand the agenda that dominated research and writing on public opinion and foreign policy during the first quarter century after the inception of scientific polling without reference to the central policy question of the period: namely, what role would the United States play in the postwar international system? Members of the Roosevelt administration and many others who felt that an irresponsible American isolationism after 1919 had contributed to the breakdown of the Versailles world order and the consequent outbreak of war feared that after World War II, the public mood might trace out a pattern resembling the experience of the earlier conflict: that is, wartime idealism and internationalism, followed soon thereafter by cynicism and disenchchantment with active American leadership in efforts to create a new and more stable international order, and concluding ultimately with withdrawal.

During the decade before Pearl Harbor, the essential lessons of World War I for many Americans could be summarized by two words: never again! When war broke out in Europe in 1939, an overwhelming proportion of the public favored the Western allies over Germany—even a Soviet victory was seen as preferable
to a German one—but sentiments for staying out of the war were even stronger.\textsuperscript{13} Isolationists, Anglophobes, revisionist historians, and the congressional hearings conducted by Senator Gerald Nye had persuaded many Americans that the nation's entry into World War I—a "war to end all wars"—had more to do with the machinations of American munitions makers, bankers, and other wealthy holders of British bonds than with the prudent pursuit of national interests. Consequently, many Americans came to hold highly skeptical views of the nation's participation in that conflict and a resulting determination never again to become embroiled in war for reasons short of a direct attack on the United States. Indeed, in a 1937 Gallup poll, 70 percent of the respondents answered in the affirmative when asked, "Do you think it was a mistake for the United States to enter the World War?" That opinion remained virtually unchanged as late as a month after the German invasion of Poland in 1939, when 68 percent of respondents stated that entering World War I had been a mistake.

Perhaps of even greater importance, much of the public looked to the experience of World War I as a rich source of "lessons" to guide U.S. foreign policy. During the 1930s, Congress had regularly passed neutrality legislation aimed at preventing a recurrence of the policies and actions that, according to many isolationists, had led the United States into war in 1917. The Ludlow Amendment to the Constitution, which required a national referendum before any declaration of war unless it was in response to an invasion of the United States, failed in the House of Representatives by only a handful of votes despite diligent lobbying against it by the president and Secretary of State Cordell Hull. A series of Gallup surveys conducted between 1935 and 1939 revealed consistently strong support for several key propositions that, according to isolationists, would prevent the nation from being unwisely dragged into war, as had been the case in 1917.\textsuperscript{14} These were, specifically:

\textit{Restraints on the executive}

To declare war, the Congress should be required to obtain approval of the people in a national referendum. Seventy-five percent of respondents to a September 1935 Gallup survey agreed with this proposition, and it gained the approval of 71 and 73 percent of those taking part in surveys during the next two years. By February 1939, after the Ludlow Amendment had been defeated in the House of Representatives and
seven months before World War II began in Europe, this proposal still had the support of almost 60 percent of the public.

In March 1939, 61 percent of respondents supported a constitutional amendment to require a national vote before Congress could draft men to fight overseas. Support for such an amendment declined to 51 percent six months later.

According to more than two-thirds of those taking part in a 1937 survey, Congress was more to be trusted than the president to keep the United States out of war.

Restraints on Americans abroad

Americans should not be permitted to engage in certain types of risky behavior because doing so might drag the United States into war. For example, only 18 percent agreed in September 1939 that American citizens should be allowed to travel on ships of warring countries. The same survey revealed that even fewer respondents (16 percent) agreed that American ships should be allowed to carry goods anywhere rather than be kept out of war zones.

American citizens in China should be warned to leave, and the troops protecting them should be withdrawn, according to 54 percent of respondents in August 1937. A similar proposal garnered even higher support (70 percent) four months later.

Restraints on arms and arms makers

The manufacture and sale of war munitions for private profit should be prohibited, according to 82 percent of those to whom the question was posed in January 1936.

In surveys conducted in 1937 and 1938, two-thirds of the public favored a world disarmament conference.

Almost two-thirds of the public opposed arms shipments to China in February 1938. Five months earlier, an overwhelming 95 percent had opposed any bank loans to China or Japan.

By early 1939, a very small majority (52 percent) agreed that the United States should sell arms to Britain and France. However, after war had broken out in Europe in September 1939, 90 percent of respondents wanted Great Britain and France to pay cash for American goods rather than allowing those countries to buy on credit. An even
greater proportion (94 percent) agreed that Britain and France should be required to carry the goods away on their own ships.

Internationalists regarded the outbreak of World War II as the direct result of a shortsighted and futile isolationist agenda. Even some devout isolationists experienced a conversion. For example, Senator Arthur Vandenberg, a leading isolationist and Republican presidential hopeful, began his diary on December 7, 1941, with the observation, "In my own mind, my convictions regarding international cooperation and collective security for peace took form on the afternoon of the Pearl Harbor attack. That day ended isolationism for any realist" (1952, 1). But there could be no assurance that others would read the lessons of the interwar period in the same manner. Because the Senate's rejection of the Treaty of Versailles symbolized for many internationalists the abdication of a responsible U.S. role in the postwar international order, a central question was whether the United States would join or again turn its back on membership in a general international organization after World War II.

Interest in the postwar state of American public opinion was reflected in the frequency with which the Gallup and other polling organizations asked respondents general questions about the United States taking an active role in or staying out of world affairs and more specific queries about support for or opposition to American membership in a general international organization. These surveys seemed to indicate that substantial majorities among the general public in fact rejected a return to isolationism after the war. A January 1942 Office of Public Opinion Research survey revealed that, by a margin of 71 to 24 percent, Americans preferred taking "an active role" rather than "staying out" of postwar international affairs. The same question was posed nine additional times between February 1942 and November 1946, a period that included the Normandy invasion, the defeat of Nazi Germany, the atomic bomb attacks on Japan, the end of World War II, and the first signs that wartime cooperation among the victorious Allies would not extend into the postwar period. Responses to each of those surveys indicated, by margins ranging between three and four to one, that the public rejected an American retreat from an active international role. Further evidence that the public might reject isolationism emerged from a question posed just as the guns were being stilled in Europe. A strong majority of
Americans supported the reciprocal trade agreement program as well as its use for further reductions of tariffs in the United States and abroad (Gallup 1972, 505).

Public sentiments on another key issue should also have provided some comfort for internationalists, as Gallup surveys revealed comparably strong support for U.S. membership in some kind of general international organization. As early as July 1941, several months before the attack on Pearl Harbor brought the United States into the war, almost three-fourths of the general public favored American entry into such an organization. Although the name and nature of the organization and the specific obligations of membership could not have been known at that time, these results appear to have reflected a rather sharp shift in public sentiment since the mid-1930s. Interestingly, only a month later, a survey of leaders drawn from Who's Who in America revealed that elite support for U.S. participation in an international organization fell somewhat short of that among the general public.

A June 1944 Gallup poll also suggested that President Roosevelt's efforts to avoid some of Woodrow Wilson's mistakes in dealing with the League of Nations issue were bearing fruit: 72 percent of the respondents favored American membership in a successor to the League of Nations, and differences between Democrats and Republicans were negligible (Gallup 1972, 451–52). Wilson had broken a tacit wartime agreement to mute partisanship by asking the electorate to support him with Democratic House and Senate majorities in midterm elections held just as peace was settling over Europe in 1918; he failed to include any prominent Republicans in the American delegation to the Versailles Peace Conference; he allowed his deep personal animosity toward Republican Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee after the 1918 elections gave the Republicans majorities in both the House and Senate, to color the administration's strategy for guiding the Versailles Treaty through the Senate; and, finally, Wilson rejected even moderate compromises on the treaty in the hopes of ultimately winning on all its features. As he put it, "I would rather be defeated in a cause that will ultimately triumph, than to win in a cause that will ultimately be defeated" (quoted in Kegley 1993, 131).

Unlike Wilson, Roosevelt had engaged such leading Republicans as John Foster Dulles in planning for a postwar international organization and had avoided casting the issue in partisan terms. Indeed, the agreement between Secretary of State Hull and
Dulles, the foreign policy adviser to Republican candidate Thomas Dewey, to keep the United Nations issue out of the 1944 presidential campaign is often cited as the genesis of bipartisanship in foreign policy. The June 1944 Gallup survey revealed Republicans were scarcely less inclined than Democrats to support American membership in the United Nations. Even respondents from the Midwest, often considered the most congenial region for isolationism, did not in fact differ on this issue from those living in other sections of the country.

This reassuring survey evidence notwithstanding, fears of a postwar return to isolationism persisted. Roosevelt’s concerns in this respect were amplified by a memorandum that Cantril gave the president just before he left for the Yalta Conference with Churchill and Stalin early in 1945. According to Cantril,

Although the overwhelming majority of the American people now favor a strong international organization necessarily dominated by the big powers, it is unrealistic to assume that Americans are international-minded. Their policy is rather one of expediency, which, at the moment, takes the form of internationalism. The present internationalism rests on a rather unstable foundation: it is recent, it is not rooted in any broad or long-range conception of self-interest, it has little intellectual basis. (1967, 76)

This advice reinforced Roosevelt’s judgment. He said privately, “Anybody who thinks that isolationism is dead in this country is crazy. As soon as this war is over, it may well be stronger than ever” (quoted in A. Schlesinger 1995, 4). Roosevelt also told his allies that public opinion would not permit American occupation troops to remain in Europe for more than two years after the end of the war.

Although attended only by the soon-to-be victorious Allies, the 1945 San Francisco conference from which the United Nations Charter emerged was marked by disagreement on a number of issues. American participation in the United Nations nevertheless won overwhelming support in the Senate, with only two dissenting votes cast. Thus, the United States joined the United Nations when that organization came into existence in October 1945. Despite success in the campaign to bring the United States into the United Nations, proponents of an active American role in postwar international affairs continued to worry that there might soon be
a reversion to withdrawal, and they usually focused their attention on public opinion as the most likely driving force behind any return to isolationism. Consequently, research on the relationship of public opinion to foreign policy emerged as a growth industry during the period immediately following World War II. Much of the analysis and writing on the question was marked by two features: an empirical approach that relied heavily on the growing body of polling data, and a normative concern that mood swings among the public might lead the United States to repeat the failed isolationist policies of the interwar years. Both these features may be found in three of the pioneering works on public opinion and foreign policy: Thomas A. Bailey’s *The Man in the Street* (1948), Lester Markel’s *Public Opinion and Foreign Policy* (1949), and Gabriel Almond’s *The American People and Foreign Policy* (1950). Each of these works examined the growing body of evidence produced by the Gallup Poll, the Office of Public Opinion Research at Princeton, the National Opinion Research Center, and other major survey organizations. These authors found very little in the data to assuage their concerns and came to share a distinctly skeptical view of average people and their potential contributions to the conduct of postwar American foreign policy. Fears that an ill-informed and emotion-driven American public would force the country back into an irresponsible isolationism generated a substantial postwar research effort.

**An Overview**

The consensus that emerged from much of this research during the two decades following the end of World War II, which I will review in chapter 2, painted an unflattering portrait of the general public. Public opinion was described not only as ignorant about international realities but also as volatile, reflecting unstable moods of the moment rather than an understanding of international realities as well as lacking in any structure or coherence. Although some observers feared that a feckless public would severely damage the prospects for a coherent foreign policy, other commentators assured these critics that public opinion seldom if ever has a significant impact on actual policy decisions.

Just as the two world wars stimulated interest in the public’s impact on foreign policy, the Vietnam War served as a catalyst for serious reexamination of the post–World War II consensus on the nature and effects of public opinion. Although these more recent
studies continued to show that the public is often poorly informed about international affairs, the evidence nevertheless challenged the theses that public opinion on foreign policy issues is volatile, structureless, and without significant impact on policy-making. Following a summary of these research efforts, chapter 3 then turns to some further evidence about the nature of public opinion by examining survey data on attitudes toward several of the most important clusters of issues of the Cold War and post–Cold War eras: namely, the nature of the Soviet Union (Russia after 1991) and China and their foreign policy goals; prospects for conflict or cooperation between Washington and Moscow and the United States and China; and appropriate U.S. foreign policy goals.

Chapter 4 compares the general public and opinion leaders—the relatively small stratum of the public that is most likely to be interested in, informed about, and influential in the way in which the United States copes with international challenges and opportunities. The chapter first examines data on the content of opinions about several international issues, including the appropriate U.S. role in the world, trade and protectionism, economic and technical assistance, military assistance, deployment of U.S. troops abroad, and foreign policy goals. The analysis then turns to the structure of foreign policy beliefs, presenting evidence about appraisals of the international system, future threats to U.S. national security, the Persian Gulf War, and the sources of change in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The chapter concludes with an examination of the relationship between opinion leaders’ domestic and foreign policy beliefs.

Chapter 5 focuses on the sources of foreign policy beliefs among both the general public and opinion leaders. The chapter examines in some detail the hypothesis that partisan and ideological differences have, since the Vietnam War, increasingly become the driving forces behind debates on the conduct of American foreign policy. The chapter also presents evidence about other background factors that are often identified as important sources of foreign policy attitudes, including generation, gender, education, occupation, region, and race.

According to some observers, the end of the Cold War marked the end of public support for the internationalist and multilateralist impulses that had dominated U.S. foreign policy for more than a half century after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. For some analysts, that change is a source of great concern, whereas
for others it is a long overdue retrenchment made possible by the
disintegration of the Soviet Union at the end of 1989. Chapter 6
addresses the validity of the thesis that such a transformation of
public preferences has occurred, either before or after the 2001
terrorist attacks. It is no doubt too early to assess the long-term
impact of the September 11 attacks and the 2003 invasion of Iraq,
but it is possible to undertake at least an interim analysis that fo-
cuses on continuities and changes in public opinion.

Chapter 7 addresses the question “Where do we go from here?” It develops the thesis that public opinion is likely to play a
more rather than less potent role during the post–Cold War era,
at least in part because the “new” issues that are likely to gain
prominence on foreign policy agendas—including but not limited
to trade, immigration, the environment, and civil wars arising from
nationalism, religion, and ethnicity—are more likely to be resis-
tant to executive arguments that the requirements of secrecy,
speed, and flexibility justify excluding the public and its repre-
sentatives from the policy process. The chapter then turns to some of
the ways in which our understanding of public opinion and its im-
port might be strengthened. The conclusion adduces some anec-
dotal evidence to suggest that although there is compelling evi-
dence that the public is often ill informed about specific aspects of
world affairs, there is nevertheless more to fear from processes
and policies that blatantly disregard public sentiments than from
those that make a serious effort to engage the public in discus-
sions of such central questions as the scope and nature of Ameri-
can interests in developing situations.