CHAPTER 7

Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: Where Do We Go from Here?

A few days before President Bill Clinton ordered American troops to invade Haiti in September 1994, Jeff MacNelly of the Chicago Tribune published an editorial cartoon depicting a loaded military landing craft approaching the coast of Haiti. Among those on board was Clinton, who was depicted as saying, “Shouldn’t the pollsters go in first?” To be sure, in the case of Haiti, President Clinton took action in the face of substantial evidence of public and congressional opposition to any military intervention there. But the cartoon reflects the widely held belief that the Clinton administration’s frequent threats of strong action, followed by retreats over Somalia and most-favored-nation trade status for China were significantly influenced by public opinion and especially by widespread disquiet about any deployment of American troops abroad. Indeed, at about the same time, another cartoonist, Garry Trudeau, creator of the Doonesbury comic strip, began depicting President Clinton as a waffle.

It is not altogether clear that these cartoons accurately depicted the Clinton administration’s decision making on foreign affairs—Clinton ultimately sent armed forces into Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo in efforts to cope with egregious human rights violations despite the absence of powerful public sentiments that he do so—but there is a good deal of evidence that, for better or worse, public opinion had a substantial impact on the foreign policies of recent administrations. Some of this evidence was reviewed in chapter 3. This chapter will focus on two related points. First, I will develop the thesis that the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, notwithstanding, whatever may have been true in earlier periods, public opinion during the post—Cold War era is likely to become a more rather than less potent force in shaping American foreign relations. If the reverse were true, then
there would be scant reason for students of international relations and foreign policy to direct additional attention to public opinion.

Policymakers’ growing use of polling data testifies to the perceived importance of public opinion. We cannot, however, rule out the possibility that attention to the public can be motivated not only by a desire to bring policy into concordance with public sentiments but also by manipulative goals. An excellent recent study by Lawrence Jacobs and Robert Shapiro (2000), drawing on both archival evidence and interviews, provides a sobering reminder on this score. Focused on the health care policy of the Clinton administration and the Newt Gingrich–led “Republican revolution” of the mid-1990s, Jacobs and Shapiro’s study found ample evidence that polling data were used primarily as the means for crafting messages to manipulate the public. Furthermore, foreign affairs, especially in time of war or crisis, provide even greater opportunities in this respect, especially if officials succumb to the temptation to depict any questions about or challenges to administration policy as tantamount to giving aid and comfort to the enemy. President George W. Bush, Vice President Richard Cheney, and Attorney General John Ashcroft did so with respect to the war on terrorists, but in this they are only the latest in an unfortunately long list of American leaders, dating back to the late eighteenth century, who have attempted to demonize those with even modestly dissenting views about foreign affairs.

If the hypothesis about an increasing role for public opinion is valid, it leads to the second point to be considered in this chapter: what might be done to understand better the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy? The second section of the chapter will consider several approaches that might contribute to that goal, including case studies to assess causal relationships, cross-national comparative analyses, and standardized questions.

Public Opinion in the Post–Cold War Era

The realist thesis, some features of which were described in chapter 1, holds that public opinion can contribute very little to the effective conduct of foreign affairs. In some versions of the realist position, public opinion is depicted as an ill-informed, volatile, and mood-driven force that, if heeded, would often deflect leaders from the steady pursuit of the long-range interests and goals
that constitute the essence of the country's national interests. In other contexts, the realist position views public opinion as pushing the government into ill-considered undertakings that have little, if any, relationship to those national interests. One variant of this thesis points to the so-called CNN effect, wherein the media, especially television, play a critical role in arousing the public, which in turn pressures policymakers to act (Kennan 1993). However, a careful study of post–Cold War cases largely discounts this explanation for U.S. interventions. According to Warren Strobel,

Clinton's dispatch of troops to Bosnia, like his deployment of forces to Haiti the year before, is continuing testimony to the power of the chief executive to lead, at least in the short run, in ways that are not automatically in line with prevailing sentiment. The push in this case came not from the television-driven public opinion that so worries George Kennan and others, but from government leaders who chose to exercise that leadership at the expense of short-term popularity or political capital. (1997, 215)

Government officials may at times also exercise leadership as a way of enhancing popularity or political capital. This may be perceived as an attractive strategy if the adversary is an especially nasty and widely hated tyrant—for example, Manuel Noriega or Saddam Hussein—whose military forces seem incapable of putting up serious and protracted resistance. Other critiques agree that the public is poorly informed about international affairs but also focus on the alleged rigidity rather than volatility of public opinion. The public is described as so firmly set in its ways of thinking that serious attention to public preferences would make it impossible for policymakers to act with sufficient flexibility and dexterity to cope effectively with international opportunities and challenges (see, for example, Dallek 1983). In his classic Study of War (1942), first published when the Axis powers had reached the outer limits of their conquests in Europe and Asia, Quincy Wright wrote that democracies were hampered in their attempts to cope with the imperatives of an anarchical international environment:

Executive freedom of action has been hampered by an active and independent public opinion, by indirect checks on the control of appropriations, by certain direct checks, such as legislative participation in treaty-making and general
responsibility of the executive to parliament and the electorate. These limitations have seriously affected the capacity of the more democratic nations to conduct foreign policy efficiently when that policy must be conducted in a balance of power system. (1965, 265)

More specifically, the essence of the case against public opinion is that effective diplomacy requires three important features, none of which is enhanced by more active public participation: secrecy, speed, and flexibility. Moreover, policymakers must often rely on confidential information that cannot be shared with the public. Critics—not all of whom are realists—deem all of these requirements as essential to bargaining and negotiating effectively with other countries, meeting external challenges and taking advantage of opportunities as they arise, maneuvering adroitly in a rapidly changing global system, and, most importantly, avoiding war. Senator J. William Fulbright expressed some of these reservations: “Statesmen and scholars have long since discovered that the kind of thinking which makes for the successful conduct of foreign-policy is all too often diametrically opposed to prevailing public attitudes.” He went on to assert that the public prefers “a hero to a horsetrader and, knowing this, the diplomat is under the strongest pressure to strike postures rather than bargains” (Battle 1995).

The case for the importance of these features in the conduct of foreign affairs is most plausible in times of war, crisis, and confrontation. Without in any way suggesting that traditional security concerns have vanished with the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, it seems increasingly likely that the top echelons of the U.S. foreign policy agenda during the post–Cold War era will also encompass some issues on which it is difficult to make a compelling case for excluding the public and its representatives from involvement in the policy process. This agenda will probably include but not be limited to a number of issues on which the public is likely to have strong views and on which the thesis that the “president knows best” may appear less compelling than, for example, during World War II or the Cold War (Yankelovich 1978; Clough 1994). The long-term impact of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington is not yet wholly clear. The war on terrorists could create an extended crisis atmosphere reminiscent of the coldest days of the Cold War, with enhanced power for the executive branch and a concomitant constriction of the role of the public and those representing it. Al-
ternatively, although the war on terrorists is unlikely to result in a clearly defined victory in the near future, if ever, efforts to subordinate permanently all other issues to that undertaking may fail. Among the issues on which the case for executive dominance over other domestic political actors is not likely to be wholly compelling are trade, immigration, the environment, and intra-state conflicts abroad that may touch on the interests of various groups of hyphenated Americans.

Trade. As I noted in chapter 4, the general public has diverged sharply from the views of elites on questions of trade liberalization versus protectionism as well as on such specific trade agreements as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade/World Trade Organization (GATT/WTO) pact. Moreover, because such a varied array of opponents of trade liberalization, from H. Ross Perot, Patrick Buchanan, and Ralph Nader to Senators Ernest Hollings and Jesse Helms and Representative Dick Gephardt, have consistently argued that there is a direct negative relationship between trade liberalization and the number of good jobs in the United States, the issue is likely to continue to engage the interest of the public, especially when major trade agreements or other traderelated issues are being negotiated or are before Congress for ratification. Buchanan’s vehement attacks on free trade and his promise to cancel the NAFTA agreement if elected president contributed to his successes in the early 1996 Republican presidential primary elections. His dismal showing and the spoiler role played by Ralph Nader in the 2000 election probably ended their political careers, but the public protests against globalization at major trade meetings in Seattle, Washington; Davos, Switzerland; and elsewhere suggest that trade issues will not disappear. The Republican Congress denied President Clinton “fast track authority” to negotiate trade agreements that can be approved or rejected but not amended. Congress restored that power, renamed “trade promotion authority,” to President Bush in 2002 but did so only after adding some protectionist amendments to meet the demands of legislators from textile-producing states. The recession that began in March 2001 provided additional ammunition for those who assert that trade liberalization merely accelerates the loss of American jobs to low-wage areas. Measures to protect the steel, lumber, textile, and farm industries, described in the previous chapter, indicate that free trade principles and rhetoric will
continue to give way to interest-group pressures, at least on a selective basis. Moreover, trade is not an issue on which public apathy can be assumed. "Protecting the jobs of American workers" has consistently ranked among the public's top foreign policy goals (tables 3.3 and 6.6).

Refugees and immigration. Right-wing parties in Europe scored some stunning electoral victories in 2001 and 2002 by focusing on opposition to immigrants and by demanding tighter restrictions on those allowed to enter the country. Virtually all Americans are immigrants or descendants of immigrants, but sentiments against specific groups have periodically been aroused in the United States. Examples include the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798; the 1850s Know-Nothings movement, which targeted Catholics; various types of legislation in California and other states against Asians; and quota systems in the 1907, 1924, and 1952 immigration acts that were highly biased against Eastern Europeans and Asians. Although some of the most discriminatory acts have been mitigated, strong public sentiments on questions of refugees and immigration have not altogether disappeared, especially in states and regions that have been the more popular destinations of those entering the United States—the Southeast for those arriving from Haiti and Cuba and the Southwest for those arriving from Mexico and Central America. Several states have sued the federal government to recover the alleged costs of providing services to illegal immigrants, and immigration was probably the most potent issue in the 1994 California gubernatorial election. Even if the measure is ultimately declared unconstitutional, the overwhelming public support for California's Proposition 187, which would deny educational, medical, and social services to all persons who have entered the United States illegally, is not likely to be the last such effort to deal with the issue. The response to Proposition 187 encouraged California Governor Pete Wilson to make immigration control the centerpiece of his 1996 presidential campaign; Patrick Buchanan proposed even more restrictive measures—including erection of a high wall along the Mexican border—to stem the flow of immigrants into the United States. Although Wilson's presidential bid was aborted soon after its inception, the issue will almost surely survive for the foreseeable future. During the early months of 2001 it appeared that the United States would ease restrictions on immigration from Mexico as part of a Bush administration effort to increase the GOP's
appeal to Hispanic voters, but the terrorist attacks and subsequent revelations of laxity and incompetence in the Immigration and Naturalization Service are almost sure to strengthen the hands of those who favor more rather than less restrictive immigration policies, and the administration has placed on the back burner any efforts to negotiate a settlement with Mexico on the issue. Furthermore, the country’s refusal to back the Iraq war reduces the likelihood that Mexican concerns regarding immigration will receive a high priority in Washington in the near future.

Environmental issues. Environment-related issues, especially those that may involve further regulation of major industries or trigger NIMBY (not in my back yard) responses, are likely to remain controversial. Environmental and trade issues also have been linked, especially by opponents of the NAFTA in 1993 and the GATT/WTO agreement a year later. Many environmental groups and activists charged that these agreements would prevent the United States from enforcing environmental standards that are more stringent than those of its trade partners. The war on terrorists has heightened the intensity of debates about how best to reduce American dependence on oil from such major foreign suppliers as Saudi Arabia, home of fifteen of the nineteen 9/11 airline hijackers. Proponents of both conservation and expanded oil drilling in Alaska pointed to the events of September 11, 2001, as proving the superiority of their preferred policies. By mid-2003 it appeared that neither side could claim victory. Congress rejected efforts, led by Senator John McCain, to raise automobile fuel standards over the coming decade but also refused to authorize oil drilling in the Alaskan National Wildlife Reserve, one of the centerpiece of the Bush administration’s energy policy. California mandated that auto manufacturers must meet certain modest fleet fuel-efficiency standards by producing electric cars, but the success of these efforts is far from assured, as the Bush administration has joined the auto industry in opposing them.

Ethnic, racial, religious, and nationalist conflicts and civil wars. It is also clear, however, that post–Cold War foreign policy leaders will not have the luxury of focusing all of their energies on international economic, social, and environmental issues, if only because of the persistence of ethnic, racial, religious, nationalist, and tribal civil wars in many regions. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and its withdrawal from its Eastern European empire have
also opened up opportunities for sometimes ancient rivalries and hatreds to resurface as civil wars. Some, such as the conflicts in the Russian province of Chechnya or in the Uighur areas of western China, are unlikely to engage American interests, especially as they have been framed by Presidents Vladimir Putin and Jiang Zemin as part of the larger global war against terrorists, an assessment with which Washington has concurred. But at least some of these intrastate conflicts are also likely to stimulate political activity by ethnic and other interest groups in the United States, thereby magnifying the impact of at least parts of the public. Efforts of the American-Israeli Political Action Committee on behalf of Israel, of Greek-Americans following the Turkish invasion of Cyprus, of TransAfrica in connection with conflicts within South Africa and Haiti, of Irish-Americans with respect to Northern Ireland, and Polish-Americans in support of NATO expansion to include Poland illustrate forms of political activity that are likely to become more rather than less frequent. According to such realists as Kennan (1993), internal conflicts abroad are often precisely the types of issues on which the public, aroused by television images of unspeakable suffering at the hands of local tyrants or competing warlords, may push the United States and international organizations into well-intentioned but hopeless and probably dangerous undertakings—for example, nation building in Somalia or restoring democracy in Haiti.

Of course, the terrorist attacks also have affected the post–Cold War foreign policy agenda. During the 2000 presidential campaign, George W. Bush and members of his foreign policy team made it clear that nation building was a Clintonian snare and delusion that his administration would avoid. President Bush’s 2002 State of the Union address focused attention on a group of highly authoritarian states—Iran, Iraq, and North Korea—that he dubbed the “axis of evil” because of their efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction and because they had given aid and comfort to international terrorist groups. But the events of September 11 also highlight a competing or supplementary hypothesis: “failed states”—those that suffer not from excessively centralized political power but in fact lack any semblance of a legitimate and effective governing authority—may be especially attractive havens for international terrorist groups. Examples of such failed states include but are not limited to Afghanistan, Somalia, and Sudan. The war against the Osama bin Laden’s network and the
Taliban in Afghanistan has inevitably raised the question of what role the United States should play in that country during the post-Taliban era. Will the United States once again abandon Afghanistan, as it did under the elder President Bush's administration after the Soviet invaders had been driven out, leaving a power vacuum and civil war that led the Taliban to gain power in Kabul? Alternatively, will the United States make a long-term commitment of the financial and other resources—including peacekeeping forces—to give the post-Taliban government a decent chance of creating a viable state? That is, will the United States engage in nation building? In early 2002, two-thirds of the public favored keeping military forces in Afghanistan "to maintain civil order there," whereas only one-quarter opposed doing so (Pew 2002a, 20). There are nevertheless signs that the administration is not prepared to expend the personnel or material resources necessary to create a stable and secure Afghanistan, much less to establish a democratic country with a viable economy. Through the early summer of 2003 most Americans favored keeping U.S. forces in Iraq until a stable post-Saddam Hussein regime can be established in Baghdad (PIPA 2003c, 6; Washington Post-ABC News 2003, 5), but continued violence targeted at U.S. military personnel began to erode that support—even before the November 2 downing of a Chinook helicopter with the loss of sixteen lives (Gallup 2003, 1–3).

If we are indeed entering a period of fewer crises and confrontations among the major powers with greater attention paid to post–Cold War issues such as those listed here—and ample survey data demonstrate that much of the American public believed this was true even before the end of the Cold War (Americans Talk Security 1987–90)—it is also likely to be an era in which public opinion plays a more autonomous role. Even those who do not fully subscribe to the thesis that the public is merely the hapless object of elite manipulations would acknowledge that crises and confrontation abroad provide a setting in which opportunities and temptations for elite manipulation of the public are far greater than on nonsecurity issues. Such issues are typically resolved over a longer time period, thus providing greater opportunities for the public, interest groups, the media, Congress, and other domestic actors to play a significant role. Nonsecurity issues also tend to be more resistant to claims that the needs for secrecy, flexibility, and speed of action, as well as the president's constitutional role as commander-in-chief of the armed forces,
make it both necessary and legitimate for the executive to have a relatively free hand and to withhold vital information from Congress and the public. In short, despite the prospect of a protracted and possibly inconclusive war on terrorists and temptations to define all other issues, including those discussed earlier, as merely facets of that war, we may be moving into a period in which the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy takes on added rather than diminished significance.

**Public Opinion in the Foreign Policy Process**

The argument that public opinion is likely to play a more potent role in the future than in the past, however plausible, is a hypothesis to be tested rather than a firmly established fact. This raises some questions about research strategies. Important elements of any effective strategy will include continuing performance of the tasks that have dominated public opinion research since the mid-1930s, including gathering and summarizing data about public attitudes, correlating them with important international events and foreign policy decisions, depicting major trends, describing the concepts around which attitudes are structured, identifying the demographic and other correlates of attitudes, and the like. No doubt there is room for important substantive and technical developments that will enable us to have more confidence in the validity and reliability of the resulting data—for example, devising survey methods that will provide a better sense of what the public is thinking (Fishkin 1991, 1992, 1994; Yankelovich 1991; Kay 1992a, b; Yankelovich and Destler 1994); dealing with the problem of nonresponses to surveys (Brehm 1993); improving the quality of longitudinal analyses (D. Taylor 1980; Stimson 1991); combining survey research with experimental designs (Sniderman 1993); identifying the sources of response variability (Alvarez and Brehm 2002); bringing new theoretical perspectives and concepts to the study of public opinion (Gaubatz 1995); and devising multipronged research designs to explore the relationship between public opinion and elite perceptions or misperceptions of public preferences (Kull and Destler 1999). As befits a vibrant field of inquiry, the past two decades have witnessed quite substantial progress in these respects.

However, as I noted in chapter 3, by far the least well developed of the areas of public opinion research has been the opinion-policy link. This is also arguably the most important aspect of
the topic. Some impressive correlational studies exist; in several cases, they span decades rather than just a few years and reveal that when public policies change, the shifts occur predominantly in the direction favored by the public. But these findings do not exhaust the relevant questions, which include but are not limited to the following:

Did policymakers rule out certain courses of action because of a belief that lack of public support would reduce or eliminate the prospects of success?

Did policymakers decide on certain foreign policy undertakings, even when the chances of success were deemed very slight, because of a belief that the public demanded some form of action? Because of a belief that they would benefit politically from a public tendency to “rally round the flag”? Because doing so was perceived as an effective strategy for deflecting public attention from such domestic problems as a flagging economy?

How, if at all, did expectations of future public reactions affect decision makers’ appraisal of policy options?

How, if at all, did calculations about the electoral consequences of certain decisions restrain or motivate policymakers?

On what indicators, if any, of public sentiments did leaders rely?

Were the timing of foreign policy decisions and the choice of means to carry out an undertaking influenced by beliefs about what the public would or would not accept, would or would not demand?

What strategies and tactics did leaders use to persuade the public to support their favored policies? What role did polling data play in such efforts?

Answers to these and related questions require more substantial evidence of a causal nature. Case studies employing archival research, interviews with policymakers, or both, are virtually indispensable for assessing the impact of public opinion. But as noted earlier, those employing interviews and archives must also be sensitive to possible validity problems.

Moreover, the brief review of some case studies in chapter 3 revealed quite mixed results; in some instances, the evidence indicated that public opinion had a negligible impact, whereas
other studies showed the public’s effects to be highly significant. These varied findings, while scarcely surprising, suggest the need for research strategies and designs that can capture adequately the variations that may be found across cases and that can help to explain the sources of those differences. The case studies also need to be designed in ways that will enhance cross-case comparisons by employing, for example, the method of “structured, focused comparison” (George 1979) or other research designs employing qualitative data (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994).

Case studies designed to assess the impact of public opinion on foreign policy are likely to be enhanced by sensitivity to certain distinctions in research designs, including not only the type of issue, as noted earlier, but also the stage of the policy process, the decision context, and policymakers’ beliefs about and sensitivity to public opinion. Although all post–World War II presidential administrations have had access to immense amounts of survey data about public attitudes, increasingly generated by and paid for by the administration, it should not be assumed that this information is taken uniformly into account in policy deliberations. Just as policymakers may vary substantially in their sensitivity to public opinion, they also may have quite different conceptions of the most relevant and useful indicators of public attitudes. Moreover, decision makers at varying levels of the government hierarchy may be sensitive to public opinion to different degrees. Political appointees are more likely than civil servants to pay attention to public sentiments, and elected officials are likely to be even more sensitive.

Stage in the policy process. Thomas Graham (1989, 1994) analyzed the impact of public opinion on four arms control issues spanning seven American administrations from Presidents Truman through Carter. The four cases—international control of atomic energy, the Limited Test Ban Treaty, the SALT I/ABM treaties, and SALT II—varied in outcomes, ranging from unsuccessful negotiations with the USSR to negotiated treaties that received approval from the U.S. Senate and went into effect. Graham distinguished between four stages in the policy process: getting the issue on the agenda, negotiating the issue, ratifying the treaty, and implementing the treaty. Although the evidence revealed that public opinion had an important impact in all of the cases, this impact varied according to the stage in the policy process. Public opinion had a direct impact on getting the issues on
the agenda and on ratification of agreements but only an indirect effect on negotiations and implementation.

Graham’s study focused on strategic nuclear arms control, but Douglas Foyle’s (1999) intensive analysis of four cases spanning a broader range of foreign and defense policy episodes during the Eisenhower administration provided further support for the proposition that a distinction between stages is important for understanding the ways in which public opinion may affect the policy process. In the four Eisenhower cases, public opinion had limited impact on problem representation but became a focus of policymakers’ concern during consideration of policy options.

**Decision context.** The cases in the Foyle study included four decision contexts: crisis (the 1954 Formosa Straits confrontation with China), reflexive (the 1954 Dien Bien Phu case in which Eisenhower decided against military intervention to assist France in the climactic battle of the war in French Indochina), innovative (the 1957–58 response to the successful Soviet launching of the Sputnik space satellite), and deliberative (the 1954 “New Look” defense policy by which the United States proposed emphasizing nuclear weapons and deemphasizing conventional military forces to contain the USSR and its allies). The impact of public opinion varied across the four cases. In the Formosa Straits crisis, for example, decision makers focused on fears about how the public eventually would react to developments in the episode rather than on specific indicators of current public views. During the deliberative case, in contrast, Eisenhower administration officials anticipated the need to confront the issue and, having a long time to cope with it, were more comfortable with attempting to generate public support for their preferred policy options.

**Beliefs about public opinion.** Even a cursory reading of memoirs, biographies, and accounts of many important decisions reveals that top-ranking American leaders have shown wide variations in their assessments of, sensitivity to, and strategies for dealing with public opinion. Moreover, although elected officials never can be utterly indifferent to public opinion, they may have quite different assessments of what constitute the most valid and politically significant indicators of those attitudes.

The latter point has become more relevant during recent years because the number of potential sources of information about the public has increased sharply. The menu of choices available in
earlier eras may have included little more than legislative sentiments, newspapers, conversations with influential citizens, mail, and some limited contacts with the general public. Policymakers have often regarded newspapers as the best indicator of public opinion. A former newspaper editor, Warren G. Harding, relied heavily on the press as a gauge of public sentiments, as did his key advisers. Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes asserted, "The sentiment of our people is expressed by our press, which gives the point of view of our composite population, the fidelity of the general picture making up for inaccuracies in the detail of the drawing" (E. Williams 1996). During the Washington Conference of 1921–22, the Harding administration established the Subcommittee on Public Opinion, which used newspaper editorials and letters from the public as sources of information. Some policymakers may still regard newspapers as important indicators of public sentiments, but the range of potential sources of public opinion data has expanded dramatically during the past seven decades. The most important innovation during that period clearly has been the advent of systematic polling, but the electronic age also has opened up new possibilities that have yet to be fully developed.

These innovations have, of course, also opened up vast new opportunities for official efforts to influence the public. Theodore Roosevelt's description of the White House as a "bully pulpit" (which could apply equally well to 10 Downing Street and many other official executive residences), does not fully capture the range of tools available to top leaders today. Roosevelt's distant cousin, Franklin, revealed an uncanny ability to deal with the public. FDR mastered the new technology of the day—the radio—but the means at his disposal were quite limited compared to those available to his successors. Ronald Reagan asserted that the most important lesson he learned as governor of California was the value of "making an end run around the legislature by going directly to the people" (1990, 234). According to two observers, the "Reagan entourage possessed an unprecedented sophistication in the technology of discerning what the public wanted and then giving it to them" (Weiler and Pearce 1992, 39). Assisted by pollster Richard Wirthlin, the Reagan presidency revealed that "influencing public opinion by broadly based appeals and image building has become not only a way of campaigning but a way of governing" (Weiler and Pearce 1992, 94). This assessment was validated by two White House insiders who wrote that "opinion polls are at the core of presidential de-
cision making” (Beal and Hinckley 1984, 74; for a contrasting view, see Fischer 1997).

Even the nature of polling has changed significantly since the pioneering surveys conducted by George Gallup, Archibald Crossley, and Elmo Roper in the mid-1930s. These developments include a vast increase in the number of polls and countries where they can be conducted, the ability to get almost instantaneous public reactions to developing situations, and, perhaps most important, the widespread publicity accorded poll results. As noted earlier, major newspapers and television networks are today among the major producers of information about public opinion (see Mann and Orren 1992, especially Ladd and Benson 1992). Consequently, news reports not only describe major events but also can insert data on public opinion directly into even the most rapidly breaking crises. CNN routinely asks its audiences to express their views on controversial current issues as they are being covered in telecasts; however, although the number of responses may be quite large, the results hardly represent a valid sample of the American public. Moreover, the extensive use of polls to assess presidential performance and popularity—rather than surveys that focus on specific issues—may add to the influence of public opinion. Even presidents who may be reluctant to place much weight on how the public feels about foreign policy issues are not likely to be indifferent to surveys that assess presidential performance. Thus, “impression management” is likely to remain an important aspect of day-to-day White House activities. Yet it would be a mistake to assume that technical improvements in polling have uniformly increased survey data’s impact on policymakers. An anecdotal examination of some evidence about the uses of information about public opinion by a few American presidents suggests the need for skepticism on that score.

Most accounts of Franklin Roosevelt’s administration depict the president as intensely interested in public opinion. He relied on multiple sources of information, including analyses of mail to the White House (Sussmann 1963), press opinion, and conversations with visitors. Roosevelt’s long tenure coincided with the advent of scientific polling, however, and he was the first president to make extensive use of the resulting information. Indeed, few of his successors appear to have matched FDR’s intense interest in public opinion surveys, although, as noted in chapter 1, he was quite skeptical about the impartiality of poll data provided by George Gallup (Casey 2001). This interest was especially manifest
in the areas of foreign and defense policy, including such issues as aid to Britain during the period between the outbreak of World War II and the attack on Pearl Harbor that brought the United States into the conflict. Roosevelt took a special interest in charts that plotted trends in public opinion.

FDR was not merely a consumer of data produced by Gallup and other surveys, however. To satisfy his desire for frequent information about public attitudes, he commissioned polling pioneer Hadley Cantril to conduct nationwide surveys. With all expenses covered by financial support from Gerald Lambert, a drug company heir, Cantril established a secret organization, Research Council Incorporated, to conduct surveys for the president. Cantril (1948) summarized some of the trend analyses available to the president based on data from multiple survey organizations. Both admirers and critics agree that FDR’s actions were strongly influenced by public opinion. A passionate critic, Representative Claire Boothe, contemptuously compared FDR to Churchill, asserting that whereas the latter’s symbol was two upheld fingers in the form of a V, Roosevelt’s was a wet finger held to the wind. But even a sympathetic biographer concluded that “Roosevelt would lead—but not by more than a step. He seemed beguiled by public opinion, by its strange combination of fickleness and rigidity, ignorance and comprehension, by rapidly shifting optimism and pessimism” (Burns 1970, 66; see also Casey 2001).

Roosevelt’s successor, Harry S. Truman, provides an interesting contrast to FDR. Both presidents were confronted with a predominantly Republican press that was less than supportive, especially on domestic issues, and thus the two men shared a somewhat skeptical view about newspapers as indicators of public attitudes. Truman also paid close attention to mail and telegrams after his speeches, but in contrast to FDR, Truman’s enthusiasm for polls was very limited. In one of his more colorful observations, he asserted,

Some people think that public relations should be based on polls. That is nonsense. I wonder how far Moses would have gone if he had taken a poll in Egypt? What would Jesus Christ have preached if he had taken a poll in the land of Israel? Where would the reformation have gone if Martin Luther had taken a poll? It isn’t polls or public opinion of the moment that counts. It is right and wrong, and leader-
ship—men with fortitude, honesty and a belief in the right that makes epochs in the history of the world. (Hechler 1982, 219–20)

In an assessment of the ten presidents between Roosevelt and George H. W. Bush, Graham gave Roosevelt an “extensive” rating on two criteria: levels of presidential understanding of public opinion and successful presidential use of public opinion. In contrast, Graham gave Truman a “poor” score on both counts (1994, 198). These ratings seem valid, but they may also underscore the limits of focusing on a single dimension of leadership. Truman’s modest public relations abilities notwithstanding, his administration achieved what has sometimes been called a revolution in American foreign policy, including such innovative undertakings as membership in the United Nations, the Marshall Plan, and the formation of NATO. Perhaps a president more cowed by the fear that the public would not tolerate broad international commitments—as predicted in Cantril’s 1945 report to Roosevelt—or by the 1946 congressional elections, which gave the Republicans control of both the House and Senate, might not have attempted such pathbreaking undertakings.

Although the differences between Roosevelt and Truman reflected their different leadership styles, their attitudes toward public opinion polls may also have been reinforced by their different experiences with election surveys. Gallup had established his reputation as a pollster by forecasting that Roosevelt would win his 1936 reelection bid with a landslide victory over Republican nominee Alf Landon. Gallup’s prediction was especially noteworthy because it flew in the face of a contrary forecast by the established and respected Literary Digest that Landon would be swept into the presidency by a large margin. In contrast to Roosevelt’s experience in 1936, Truman had seen Gallup and the other polls confidently confirm the widespread expectation that Thomas Dewey would ride a Republican tidal wave into the White House in the 1948 presidential election. Although Gallup’s forecast missed the size of the Democratic vote by a greater margin in 1936 (6.8 percent) than in 1948 (5.4 percent), is it any wonder that Truman never came to share his predecessor’s fascination with public opinion surveys?

Members of a single presidential administration may harbor quite different views about representations of public opinion. President Eisenhower relied on multiple indicators, including informal
dinner meetings with leaders from government, business, publishing, the professions, agriculture, the arts, labor, and education, "as a means of gaining information and intelligent opinion" (Eisenhower 1965, 265). He also relied on polls conducted by the U.S. Information Agency. In contrast, his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, felt that although "we can't get too far ahead of public opinion and we must do everything we can to bring it along with us," polls were of limited value. The State Department under Dulles discontinued the use of survey questions on foreign affairs; evidence about public opinion was derived from articles and editorials in one hundred daily newspapers, columnists, radio and television commentators, letters to the editor, materials from non-governmental organizations, and speeches in Congress (Berding 1965, 140). Our understanding of the various ways in which public opinion is measured and used by top officials has also been enhanced by archival research on the administrations of Presidents Herbert Hoover (Eisinger 2000), Richard Nixon (Katz 1997), and Jimmy Carter (Katz 2000).

Leaders also may have quite varied reasons for being interested in evidence about public opinion, not the least of which may be to develop more effective strategies for manipulating domestic audiences on behalf of preferred policies and strategies (Jacobs and Shapiro 1995–96, 2000). In other cases, public opinion may be used as a lever for dealing with governments abroad. Midway through the crisis precipitated by Egyptian nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956, President Eisenhower attempted to head off the use of force by the British. In a letter to Prime Minister Anthony Eden, Eisenhower wrote,

I regard it as indispensable that if we are to proceed to the solution of this problem, public opinion in our several countries must be overwhelmingly in its support. I must tell you frankly that American public opinion flatly rejects the thought of using force. . . . I must say frankly that there is as yet no public opinion in this country which is prepared to support such a move, and the most significant public opinion that there is seems to think that the United Nations was formed to prevent this very thing. (Eisenhower 1965, 667–70)

Similarly, Paul Warnke reported that he used survey data as a bargaining instrument in arms control negotiations with his coun-
terpart from the Soviet Union: Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir S. Semenov

would always take the position that we were asking too much in the way of verification, and I would continually point out that as indicated by the polls and not necessarily reflecting my own feeling, there still was a wide distrust within the American public; therefore, verification and their acceptance of our verification position was a *sine qua non* to getting a SALT Treaty approved. (quoted in A. Cantril 1980, 143)

In other cases, public opinion may tip the balance in favor of one policy option or rule out another that seems destined to arouse strong public disapproval. Despite John Kennedy’s doubts about the realism of U.S. policy toward China, according to Dean Rusk, “fearing the issue might divide Congress and the American people, [Kennedy] decided that potential benefits of a more realistic China policy didn’t warrant risking a severe political confrontation” (1990, 283). The anticipation of public responses also appears to have played a role in President George H. W. Bush’s decision to use military force to drive Iraq out of Kuwait because he feared that the public would be unwilling to accept the deployment of American forces in Saudi Arabia for a sufficient time to ensure the success of economic sanctions, and American military strategy in the Kosovo war in 1999 and during the anti-terrorist campaign in Afghanistan appears to have been driven at least in part by the anticipation that casualties would severely erode public support.

In still other cases, policymakers may undertake visible efforts to seek guidance from the public on decisions that, in fact, were already made for reasons that had little if anything to do with public preferences. According to one of his biographers, a “favorite technique” of Richard Nixon’s was “pretending to canvass public opinion on a decision on which he had already made up his mind” (Ambrose 1989, 258). A variant of that technique is to use public opinion data for guidance on the best ways to depict the rationale for decisions that have been arrived at for reasons that do not necessarily reflect public sentiments. The surveys conducted during the period immediately following Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait helped the administration to identify the public’s strongest concern about Iraq—its nuclear weapons program—but appear to
have had limited impact on the decision to launch a war against the Baghdad regime when it failed to comply with an ultimatum to withdraw its forces from Kuwait.

This brief survey is by no means a comprehensive analysis of the role that public opinion may play in the foreign policy process. This section may, however, illustrate the important general point that the public opinion–policy relationship is usually complex, variable, and interactive rather than simple, constant, and unidirectional. Research designs that fail to take into account the possible impacts of issue, decision context, stage of the policy process, and policymakers' beliefs about public opinion and the uses to which it may be put are thus likely to overlook important aspects of the relationship.

**Cross-National Research**

Because of the focus of this book, the theories and findings discussed here are almost wholly confined to the United States. But many of the questions addressed here are obviously of much broader concern. Debates between supporters and critics of the Tocqueville thesis that democracies are at an inherent disadvantage in the conduct of foreign policy often revolve around competing conceptions of the contribution of public opinion to the quality of foreign policy; these debates clearly have implications for countries other than the United States, especially in an era of expanding democracy.

Another issue also points to the need for public opinion research in which evidence about the United States is placed in a broader comparative context. The role of public opinion in foreign policy is often a central aspect of the contemporary debates about the “democratic peace”—the finding that liberal democracies rarely if ever go to war against each other (Doyle 1986). The vast literature on that important question is too extensive to review here. Suffice it to say that a vigorous debate revolves around two questions. First, does the democratic peace actually exist, or are the studies purporting to have uncovered it definitionally or methodologically unsound? Second, what institutions, processes, or norms may have rendered democracies unlikely to go to war with each other?

A related question centers not on the propensity of democracies to avoid war but on their high success rate once they initiate a conflict. According to a recent study that draws heavily on the
American experience, “For better or worse, democratic foreign policy is driven by public desires rather than by fundamental pacifism” (Reiter and Stam 2002, 145). Public opinion, or what the authors call the “contemporary consent model,” is at the heart of the analysis. Democratic leaders, fearful of the domestic consequences of losing a conflict, initiate only winnable wars, and, aware that public support is likely to erode over time, they seek quick victories. Further, because covert actions by democracies are undertaken outside the “bright light of public scrutiny,” thus resembling wars initiated by nondemocracies, such actions are less likely to be successful. The analysis is strengthened by demonstrating empirically the flaws in alternative explanations for victory—for example, that democracies have larger economies or that they are able to mobilize larger percentages of their populations into their armed forces. Whether these hypotheses will be sustained by analysis of a wider range of cases, including non-American ones, remains to be demonstrated; for purposes of the present discussion, they present an interesting alternative to many realist theories, including those reviewed in chapters 1 and 2, that emphasize the negative consequences of engaging the public in foreign affairs.

It is at least a plausible working hypothesis that the nature of public opinion, the channels through which it enters the policy process, and its impact may vary across countries and political systems. A good many other issues that have been discussed in the preceding chapters, including questions about how foreign policy attitudes are structured, would benefit from comparative research designed to identify common elements and differences.

Examples of innovative comparative research on public opinion include studies by Martin Abravanel and Barry Hughes (1973); Richard C. Eichenberg (1989, 2000); Don Munton (1989, 1991, 1992); Robert Mandel (1991); Thomas Risse-Kappen (1991); Lawrence R. Jacobs (1992); Jon Hurwitz, Mark Peffley, and Mitchell Seligson (1993); Hans Rattinger and Don Munton (1991); Lisa Catherine Olga Brandes (1994); Ronald D. Asmus (1995); Philip Everts (2000); Natalie La Balme (2000); Richard Sobel (2000); and Pierangelo Isernia, Zoltan Juhasz, and Hans Rattinger (2002); and Sobel and Eric Shiraev (2003). Risse-Kappen found that although public opinion was important in each of the four countries he studied—France, Japan, West Germany, and the United States—its impact was significantly affected by domestic institutions and coalition-building processes among elites.
Contrasting findings emerged from Richard C. Eichenberg and Richard Stoll’s (2003) five-nation study of post–Cold War defense budgets. The study tested James A. Stimson’s (1999) hypothesis that because public opinion is free of institutions, results from one country should transfer across national boundaries. Eichenberg and Stoll also drew on Christopher Wlezien’s (1995, 1996) metaphor that public reactions to spending resemble a thermostat. Although the United States, Great Britain, France, Germany, and Sweden have quite different institutional structures, Eichenberg and Stoll found that in four of the five countries (Sweden was the exception), “public support at some prior moment is the most consistent predictor of change in defense spending across countries” (2003, 415). A single study of five countries on one issue cannot foreclose the possibility that institutional structures elsewhere, on other issues, may influence whether and how public opinion influences policy outcomes, but studies of this kind clearly take us a substantial distance toward a fuller and finer-grained understanding of opinion-policy linkages. Dramatic political changes, notably in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, open up possibilities for a range of comparative analyses that would have been quite unthinkable as recently as the late 1980s (A. Miller, Reisinger, and Hesli 1993; Gibson 1994; A. Miller, Hesli, and Reisinger 1995). Studies by William Zimmerman (2002) and his colleagues in Russia, in some cases posing questions identical to those used in American studies, exemplify some of the interesting possibilities.

Jacobs and Shapiro (1994b) have provided a useful framework for comparative research, both across countries and across issues or administrations within a single country, based on the divergent ways in which opinion and leadership responsiveness can be combined. Responsive leadership is characterized by strong impact of opinions on leaders and of leaders on opinion. Bureaucratic rule takes place when opinion provides low direction and there is a low leadership response. When leaders defer to strong, sustained public preferences, the result is democratic responsiveness. The fourth combination, when leaders pursue their own convictions and the role of the public is restricted, is described as charismatic direction.

**Standard Questions**

Ample evidence shows that the wording of questions and the context in which they are posed can significantly affect responses. An
example of the importance of wording emerges from two questions that were frequently asked during the 1990–91 crisis arising from Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. One question, “All in all, is the current situation in the Mideast worth going to war over, or not?” yielded an almost even division between positive and negative answers in each of nine Gallup surveys during the five months preceding the start of Operation Desert Storm. Another survey organization posed a slightly different question: “Do you agree or disagree that the United States should take all action necessary, including the use of military force, to make sure that Iraq withdraws its forces from Kuwait?” Responses to the latter question in sixteen ABC/Washington Post surveys resulted in majorities ranging between two to one and more than three to one in favor of the use of force (Mueller 1994, 208, 217).

Even the order in which questions are posed may affect the results. Consider a simple example of two hypothetical questions: “How great is the threat posed by Saddam Hussein’s efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction?” and “Should the United States take military action to remove Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq?” If posed in that order, the first question may prime the respondent to think of the second question from a particular perspective. In this hypothetical case, it seems that this sequence is likely to produce higher support for military action against Iraq than if the questions are asked in the reverse order (see also Bartels 2002; Moore 2002).

Moreover, the suspicion that pollsters can craft questions to elicit whatever results their clients prefer is not wholly unfounded (Moore 1992). Indeed, rare is the voter who has not at some time received a “questionnaire” or telephone call at dinner time asking such challenging questions as “Do you believe that the administration should squander your hard-earned tax dollars for wasteful programs that have never worked?” or “Do you believe that the government should restrict the right of law-abiding citizens to protect themselves so that only the criminals will be able to get guns?”—along with a request for a contribution to pay for “tabulating the results.” More seriously, one might question the disinterestedness of Louis Harris, a prominent pollster who has been closely associated with Democratic candidates and who is reported to have boasted, “I elected one President, one prime minister, about 28 governors and maybe close to 60 U.S. Senators” (Moore 1992, 78). These are, of course, extreme examples, but they underscore the point that surveys may be used
to generate data in support of virtually any predetermined position. The issue of bias in constructing survey instruments may not be limited to commercial firms. The questions raised by Philip Tetlock (1994b) in a broader context—"political psychology or politicized psychology?"—are not irrelevant to survey research (see also the further discussion in Kroeger and Sapiro 1994; Sears 1994; Sniderman 1994; Tetlock 1994a). Aside from the issue of bias, a skeptical position on survey data validity has been summarized by John Mueller’s observation that "the poll interview is a rather primitive stimulus-response social situation in which poorly—thought out responses are casually fitted to questions that are overly ingenuous" (1973, 265; see also Zaller 1992, 76–96; Mueller 1994, 1–11).

Even if this warning may be somewhat overstated with respect to the best surveys, it appropriately reminds us to be cautious about drawing conclusions from any single datum on public opinion. It is permissible to be more venturesome in making inferences about trends on specific issues, but doing so assumes that the questions from which the trends are adduced have remained constant, providing control over at least one potential threat to valid results. Gallup and other major polling organizations have asked certain standard political questions at quite regular intervals—for example, items asking respondents to assess presidential performance. However, as noted in chapter 3, even slight variations in the wording of this question brought forth consistently different results in Gallup and Harris surveys about President Reagan’s performance in dealing with the Soviet Union.

Questions focusing on foreign or defense policy issues have not been posed with comparable regularity. During and immediately after World War II, the public was regularly asked about the desirability of an active U.S. role in the world, but interest in that issue appears to have waned by the mid-1950s, perhaps because by then the United States seemed to be firmly committed to a broadly internationalist foreign policy; the question was asked only once during the 1960s (see fig. 3.1). The question was revived in the wake of the war in Vietnam, when U.S. global activism once again became controversial; since 1973, it has been posed quite regularly except for a four-year gap between 1978 and 1982.

Many other important foreign and defense policy issues that might well have been the subject of surveys at regular intervals were in fact ignored for long periods. For example, the Gallup poll asked the public to assess the appropriate level of defense spend-
ing in 1950 and 1953. During the next sixteen years, the question was asked only once, in 1960, when presidential candidate John F. Kennedy criticized the Eisenhower administration for allegedly having neglected defense needs and for being dangerously complacent about the development of a “missile gap” that supposedly favored the Soviet Union. Since 1969 the question has been asked quite regularly, with a frequency largely determined by the extent to which the defense budget has been controversial. For example, Gallup asked questions about the Pentagon budget five times in 1982–83, when public support for the massive Reagan administration defense buildup was waning. In still other cases, promising time series data have been rendered suspect by wording changes. In 1956, the Gallup survey made a “minor” alteration to its standard item asking about support for U.S. foreign aid programs by adding the phrase “to prevent [the recipients of aid] from going communist” at the end of the question, giving it a quite different tenor than it previously had.

Among the many useful features of the eight quadrennial Chicago Council on Foreign Relations (CCFR) studies (Rielly 1975–99; Bouton and Page 2002) has been a carryover of certain questions from survey to survey. The cluster of items asking respondents to rate the importance of a series of possible U.S. foreign policy goals has been especially useful for analysts with an interest in tracing trends in public opinion (tables 3.3a, 3.3b, and 6.6). Responses to these questions have played a central role in several secondary analyses of the CCFR data (for example, Wittkopf 1990). Many of the goals items have also been picked up by several other surveys, including those of the Foreign Policy Leadership Project, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, and the Gallup Organization, thereby greatly enhancing the questions’ value.

With a few exceptions, however, the independent surveys that have been undertaken recently appear to have taken relatively little note of questions in other studies that might provide the basis for comparative analyses. In one sense this is understandable: an important rationale for independent surveys is to undertake probes that have been overlooked by others. But it is also regrettable that there appears to have been rather limited communication at the planning stage among people designing surveys. The development of even a handful of standard foreign and defense policy questions that would be included in all such surveys would be highly desirable.
Richard Sobel (1996) has made a useful contribution toward this end with a proposed list of thirty standard questions for polling on foreign policy crises. The questions are clustered into nine groups that deal with respondents’ opinions on the importance of the issue, attention to the issue, U.S. interests at stake, presidential approval on dealing with the issue, responsibility for coping with the crisis, policy options, likely outcomes, the impact of costs and casualties, and retrospective appraisals. The focus on crises makes these questions more appropriate for commercial or news organizations that are capable of conducting surveys with little advance notice. Surveys that are undertaken at regular and more distant intervals—for example, the American National Election Study, the General Social Survey, or the CCFR studies—are less suited to dealing with crises. It would be useful for them to use a somewhat different set of standard questions that might, for example, focus on:

- foreign policy goals (the CCFR cluster of goal items, mentioned several times previously, is a good starting point);
- U.S. interests in various areas and countries;
- threats to vital interests and security (the questions should include a broader list than traditional military threats by including terrorism, trade, immigration, the environment, drug trafficking, epidemics such as AIDS, SARS, and so on);
- assessment of institutions such as the United Nations, the World Health Organization, the WTO, NATO, the World Bank, and others;
- proper allocation of resources for recurring lines in the budget, including the Defense Department, foreign aid, intelligence gathering, international peacekeeping, and the like;
- questions that pose trade-offs (for example, reducing the budget deficit versus the budget allocations for a broad range of foreign, defense, and domestic programs versus tax cuts).

Widespread use of such questions, using standard wording, would go a long way toward improving a less than outstanding record of cumulative findings.

In summary, although recent decades have witnessed a remarkable and productive renaissance of interest in public opin-
ion, a number of steps could further enhance our understanding of the topic, especially on the most important and least well developed areas of systematic knowledge. As noted several times, many of these questions center on the impact of public opinion on foreign policy.

Public Opinion and Foreign Policy after the Cold War

Not only has most of the evidence cited here come from the United States, but a substantial part of it also emerged from a period dominated first by World War II and soon thereafter by the Cold War. One can plausibly argue that this period is sufficiently atypical to raise questions about at least some generalizations relating to public opinion. Ronald Hinckley has argued persuasively that some discussions about the post-Vietnam breakdown of a foreign policy consensus are misdirected if they assume that broad disagreement about international affairs is an abnormal state of affairs in American politics. As he put it, “What has appeared since Vietnam is not dissensus but the reemergence of the basic and fundamentally different attitudinal beliefs that Americans have held and debated for some time” (1992, 10; see also Schneider 1992).

More generally, we need to address questions about whether and how the end of the Cold War may have affected or even rendered obsolete much of what we have learned about public opinion and foreign policy. At the most obvious level, there has been a sea change in public attitudes toward many of the issues and some of the key actors that dominated the Cold War era. Indeed, in many respects, changing public attitudes may have preceded rather than followed those at the pinnacles of government on such issues as the appropriate level of defense spending, the primary threats to American national security, assessments of Mikhail Gorbachev’s goals, and the motivations underlying Soviet foreign policy (Americans Talk Security 1987–90; Holsti 1991). Well before the demolition of the Berlin Wall or the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the public ranked the danger to American national security from the USSR in seventh place, tied with the greenhouse effect (Americans Talk Security 1988, 51–54).

The end of the Cold War also raises some questions about the structuring of foreign policy attitudes. Substantial evidence indicates that assessments of the Soviet Union have played a key role in foreign policy belief structures: for example, they are a central
element in the hierarchical model developed by Hurwitz and Peffley (1990) as well as in Eugene R. Wittkopf’s (1986, 1990) militant internationalism dimension. Some interesting questions arise from the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dramatic change in relations between Washington and Moscow. Will these events result for many in a loss of structure and a consequent disorientation about foreign affairs? Are the structures of foreign policy beliefs likely to differ among the many democracies that joined forces to contain the USSR? Will there be a search for a replacement of the Soviets by another adversary such as China or the “axis of evil” countries—Iran, Iraq, and North Korea—featured in President George W. Bush’s 2002 State of the Union address? Are there segments of the public or leadership groups who, if deprived of one enemy, will seek to find another? Alternatively, are the key concepts that structured beliefs about foreign affairs during the Cold War era sufficiently generic and robust that they will survive the dramatic international changes of the past decade? Will they be adequate for an expanded agenda of post–Cold War issues? For conflict with adversaries, notably terrorist organizations, that are strikingly different from traditional territorial nation-states?

Some evidence indicates that such dimensions as militant internationalism, cooperative internationalism, and unilateralism/multilateralism may continue to structure foreign policy attitudes, but the changes we have witnessed since the late 1980s are of such unprecedented magnitude that this must be treated as a hypothesis that requires systematic testing. In short, we may be entering into a period in which the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy takes on added significance, but we should also be wary of assumptions that the theories, evidence, and linkages that emerged from research during the World War II and Cold War eras are sufficiently robust to be transported intact into a period of strikingly different circumstances. Some years will need to pass before it will be possible to undertake archival research on the impact of public opinion during the post–Cold War era, but judicious use of open sources, memoirs, and interviews should make it possible at least to explore the hypothesis that public sentiments are playing a greater or at least different role than they did during the half century between Pearl Harbor and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. President Bush’s November 2001 executive order to overturn legislation requiring most presidential papers to be opened after twelve years will ob-
viously complicate such research, as will his administration’s expansive definition of what information may be withheld on the grounds of protecting the confidentiality of advice to the president.

Some Concluding Thoughts

Chapters 1 and 2 summarized very briefly the competing positions in the venerable and persisting differences between realists and liberals on the proper role of public opinion in international affairs. It was noted that critical events, including two world wars and the long, controversial conflict in Vietnam, have often played an important role in igniting debates and framing the terms of the discourse between these schools of thought. The end of the Cold War has been no less significant in stimulating interest in and arousing controversies about the topic. The debate about the “democratic peace” is but one such example. These are not merely continuations of prior disputes in the memoirs of retired Cold War policymakers—for example, between George Shultz (1993) and Caspar Weinberger (1990)—or esoteric debates carried on between the covers of obscure academic journals. The democratic peace issue has found its way into the press (“Democracies and War” 1995) as well as into official foreign policy blueprints (U.S. President 1994). Such post–Cold War events as conflicts in Bosnia, Somalia, Haiti, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq have also brought forth a flurry of op-ed articles and rejoinders in mass circulation newspapers, lamenting or defending the public’s role in shaping foreign policy (see, for example, Kennan 1993; Koppel 1994; Wines 1994; and the rejoinders to them in “letters to the editor” sections).

This conclusion is not intended to bring definitive evidence to bear on these issues, nor would it be possible to do so within the confines of a few pages, but a few general observations are appropriate. First, debates about the proper role of public opinion on foreign policy ought not be framed in terms that posit, on the one hand, a bottom-up, direct democracy model in which public officials are merely the agents for carrying out whatever public preferences emerge from the latest Gallup poll and, on the other hand, a vision of skilled and knowledgeable elites, shielded from the television-aroused passions of an ill-informed public, carefully deliberating the great international issues of the day. Unfortunately, even such thoughtful observers of international affairs as George Kennan (1993) sometimes slip into this style of discourse.
Framing the alternatives in such a dichotomous fashion trivializes an important issue in democratic theory, precluding the considered discussion that the topic deserves.

Second, the cursory—and admittedly selective—sample of foreign and defense policy episodes that follows suggests that the realist thesis against public participation in international affairs may be somewhat less persuasive than some of its staunchest advocates would have us believe—or at least it is not so compelling that the case should be considered closed. A list of the more successful American international undertakings since World War II might arguably include the Marshall Plan (1947), the formation of NATO (1949), and the Limited Test Ban Treaty (1963). In each instance, the administration made a forceful case for the policies in question but did so without resorting to gross distortions or suppression of vital information, tactics that are unfortunately not unknown in such cases. Before approving these undertakings, Congress engaged in extensive debates, and substantial majorities of the public ultimately were persuaded that the policies were in the national interest. Whether public opinion played a significant role in these undertakings is certainly open to discussion, but the outcomes hardly square with Walter Lippmann’s charges, leveled soon after the Marshall Plan and NATO debates and a few years before the test ban treaty, that the proper balance between the executive and the legislature in Washington had been destroyed and that the public “has shown itself to be a dangerous master of decision when the issues are life and death” (1955, 20).

Conversely, a list of the foreign policy disasters of the Cold War period would almost surely include the Vietnam War and the Iran-contra episode. In the former case, evidence that the Johnson and Nixon administrations were less than forthright with the public—or even with the Congress—is not hard to find. Nor did prescient warnings about public opinion have an impact. Clark Clifford recounts one such episode during the summer of 1965, as the Johnson administration was moving toward fateful decisions regarding Vietnam.

When I entered, George Ball was speaking. “We can’t win,” he said, his deep voice dominating the Cabinet Room. “The war will be long and protracted, with heavy casualties. The most we can hope for is a messy conclusion. We must measure the long-term price against the short-term loss that will result from withdrawal.” Producing a chart that correlated
public opinion with American casualties in Korea, Ball predicted that the American public would not support a long and inconclusive war. (1991, 412)

Ball’s warnings were dismissed, perhaps because they were viewed as the predictable gloomy diagnoses of the house devil’s advocate.

The central figures in the Iran-contra affair, notably Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, repeatedly engaged in secret and patent illegal maneuverings, often with shady intermediaries and arms brokers who enriched themselves without advancing any U.S. interests in the area. Not only did North and his collaborators fail to achieve any of their stated goals with respect to establishing links with “moderates” in Iran or in freeing the American hostages who were believed to be held by groups under control of the Tehran government, but when the facts of the arms deliveries to Iran became known, they resulted in a powerful public backlash against the Reagan administration, reflected most dramatically in a record decline in the president’s performance ratings. As Reagan had pledged during his campaign for the presidency in 1980 that he would never negotiate with terrorists, the revelations were especially damaging to his reputation. Even a heavy-handed public relations campaign by the president to gain support for assistance to the contras in Nicaragua—at one point the rebel group was described as the “moral equal of the [U.S.] Founding Fathers” (Sobel 1993, 35)—failed to arouse substantial public enthusiasm (Sobel 2001). Would a more realistic appreciation of the public’s disapproval of shipping arms to Iran or negotiating with terrorists have averted a policy disaster? It is, of course, impossible to answer this question definitively or, more broadly, to establish beyond reasonable doubt a causal link between inattention to or contempt for public opinion and policy decisions and outcomes.

Such a highly selective group of cases, focusing on a small sample of successes and failures, does not constitute an adequate discussion of the public’s role in foreign policy. Nor does it address at least one other aspect of the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy that merits some discussion. Deliberate efforts by public officials to manipulate the public have been mentioned earlier. One variant of that strategy warrants attention because many public officials, even those who have generally leveled with the public, have succumbed at one time or another to a temptation to engage in “oversell” with a view to gaining public support, be it for an election or a specific policy objective.
Leaders who ascribe the most importance to public opinion and are most sensitive to public preferences may also be the most likely to engage in oversell. The temptation may appear all the more attractive if the costs of hyperbolic or misleading rhetoric are not adequately appreciated at the time or if it is believed that these costs will not have to be paid until much later—perhaps even by another administration. Examples from several episodes involving relations with the Soviet Union can be used to illustrate a problem, although it is not confined to the three administrations in question.

Throughout much of World War II, Franklin Roosevelt was often less than frank with the American public in describing the nature of the Soviet regime or in acknowledging divergent American and Soviet interests on such issues as the postwar status of Poland. For example, after the Nazi invasion of its erstwhile Soviet ally in 1941 but before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor had brought the United States into World War II, Roosevelt depicted the Stalin regime’s policy toward religion in glowing but quite inaccurate terms as a means of defusing arguments used by opponents of American aid to Moscow. At a press conference on September 30, 1941, the president asserted that the USSR’s constitution guaranteed freedom of conscience: “Freedom equally to use propaganda against religion, which is essentially what is the rule in this country, only we don’t put it quite the same way” (Dallek 1979, 297). Roosevelt’s optimistic public expressions with respect to the Soviet Union no doubt contributed to maintenance of the Allied coalition against Hitler—they may even have been necessary to prevent the coalition from fracturing before the defeat of the Third Reich—but they also may have poorly prepared the public to face realistically the policy differences between Washington and Moscow that would almost inevitably emerge when the guns had stopped firing.

Two years after the defeat of Germany, the Truman administration faced an urgent request to provide assistance to beleaguered Greek and Turkish governments in the wake of a British decision to reduce its traditional commitments in that area. When Senator Arthur Vandenberg told Truman that it would be necessary to “scare the hell” out of Congress to assure appropriation of the funds for Greece and Turkey, the president did so in his March 12, 1947 “Truman Doctrine” address to that body. Congress quickly approved the four hundred million dollar aid package, and Gallup polls revealed that a majority of both Republi-
cans and Democrats supported the program. Nevertheless, the open-ended commitments implied by Truman's rhetoric may have served longer-term national interests less well.

Finally, as part of a broad effort to restructure American foreign policy, the Nixon administration pursued a policy of détente with the Soviet Union under which carrots would supplement sticks as strategies aimed at stabilizing relations between the superpowers and creating incentives for the Soviet Union to contain itself. President Nixon and national security adviser Henry Kissinger succumbed to the temptation to oversell détente during the 1972 presidential campaign with such declarations as "The Cold War is over." While this may have proved an effective short-run strategy for Nixon's successful reelection campaign, it also set the stage for a public backlash against détente when subsequent events, including the 1973 Yom Kippur War, revealed that Washington and Moscow held quite different conceptions of the meaning of détente, especially in connection with rivalries in the Third World. According to the author of the most comprehensive study of American-Soviet relations during the period in question,

One reason for the disintegration of consensus in favor of détente in the United States was the failure of leadership to explain its limitations as well as its promises to the public. . . . When the expectations of the public, aroused by the hyperbole about the benefits of peace and détente, were not met, disillusion set in—and so did the natural temptation to blame the other side. (Garthoff 1985, 1088; see also Homet 1990)

A few anecdotes do not constitute definitive analyses or give rise to timeless prescriptions about such complex and enduring issues as the proper role of public opinion in the formulation and implementation of American foreign policy. Nevertheless, if we are indeed entering into a period in which the public will be increasingly vocal in expressing its policy preferences, especially on a growing agenda of issues that fall at the intersection of domestic and foreign affairs, perhaps it is worth contemplating whether there is less to be gained by tactics for bypassing, manipulating, or misleading the public to ease the short-term tasks of policymakers than by frank efforts to engage the public in constructive debates about the proper American role in the world, definitions of the national interest, and the appropriate strategies (if not necessarily
the tactics) for pursuing them. Is such a suggestion evidence of terminal woolly headed idealism or of a realistic appraisal of the necessary conditions for the effective pursuit of long-range interests? Opponents and skeptics will no doubt play their strongest card against such proposals by pointing to the indisputable fact that the American public is poorly informed on even some of the most basic facts about the world and international affairs. In fairness, however, it should be pointed out that some of these critics also take a very broad view of what information it is permissible to withhold from the public because of "national security concerns."

Can efforts to provide the public with better international education improve what Daniel Yankelovich (1991) calls "public judgment"? If international education consists primarily of providing more factual information of the kind that might improve students’ performances on a television game show, then one might well share Alan F. Kay's pessimistic conclusion that "efforts to remedy this situation by educational programs of any kind clearly seem headed for failure" (1992b, 14). It is not clear that knowing the name of the foreign minister of Israel, the countries added to NATO since the end of the Cold War, or the nations that have held democratic elections in Africa since 2000 will add substantially to the public's ability to render more informed judgments on major international issues.

The general public today is less frequently described in the frightening terms that dominated thinking during the 1950s. One of the classic studies of recent years is entitled "The Rational Public," and another has coined the phrase low information rationality to describe the manner in which the public deals with a complex world (Page and Shapiro 1992; Popkin 1991). Moreover, opportunities for gaining information about the world have never been greater. Cheap international travel, dramatically rising graduation rates from secondary schools and universities, and new information technologies that even dedicated science fiction fans of the 1950s could hardly have imagined have contributed to these opportunities. Indeed, James N. Rosenau (1990), a distinguished political scientist, a former president of the International Studies Association, and onetime skeptic about the role that the public could play in foreign affairs, has written that the electronic-information revolution has provided general publics with the information and analytical skills necessary to become vital players in global affairs.

Nevertheless, there are also reasons for disquiet. The possibility
that increasing survey data will merely be used by leaders to manipulate the public has already been mentioned. A closely related concern is the persistent poverty of international knowledge. Many studies reveal that levels of information about foreign affairs among publics in the industrial world remain abysmally low, most notably in the United States (Dimock and Popkin 1996). One disturbing example illustrates the point. Gallup surveys commissioned by the National Geographic Society in 1948 and 1988 revealed that basic geographic knowledge—for example, identification of the largest country in the world or location of Great Britain on a map—declined during the forty-year interval between surveys (National Geographic Society 1988). Yet this was a period of dramatic increases in the level of educational attainment, whether measured by the percentage of high school diplomas, college graduates, or graduate and professional degrees earned by Americans. Considering that geography has virtually dropped out of school curricula and that many universities no longer house geography departments, perhaps those troubling results are not especially surprising. Only 10 percent of Americans could identify any of the nations involved in the first round of post–Cold War expansion of NATO (Pew 1997, 98), and no doubt even some of those would have been unable to locate Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic on a map. In those circumstances, could a principled debate have occurred in the United States on adding new members to NATO? There are many reasons to applaud the more benign and realistic view of the general public that has emerged from several decades of research, but it is hardly a time for complacency. At what point does low information rationality become no information irrationality?

But even if we acknowledge that the public is not well informed, is it fruitless to engage the public with a view to a better understanding of at least some aspects of foreign policy? Foreign aid, an issue discussed at some length in earlier chapters, may provide a case in point. Two facts—foreign aid accounts for less than 1 percent of the federal budget (it is not the largest item in the budget, as many people in several recent polls believed), and most of the foreign assistance funds are spent in the United States—may be relevant. But these facts alone may not be sufficient to engage the public on the issue or to raise the discussion above the “foreign aid is money down the rat hole” thesis propounded by former Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chair Jesse Helms. When respondents receive additional information about foreign
aid outlays, attitudes toward assistance programs become substantially more favorable (Kull 1995a; Kull and Destler 1999; PIPA 2001a). Moreover, when discussions of foreign aid are linked to other vital concerns of the American public—for example, immigration, jobs supported by foreign purchases in the United States, stability in the Middle East, dismantling of nuclear weapons in parts of the former Soviet Union, and efforts to combat international terrorism—the discourse may take a different tone. Intense skepticism about some forms of foreign assistance no doubt would still exist, especially with regard to regimes that exhibit a callous disregard for the most basic human rights, but such distinctions do not seem beyond the capabilities of the public.

Perhaps it is appropriate to give the final word on this point not to ivory tower idealists but to Elihu Root, a hardheaded conservative whose career was spent in the rough-and-tumble arenas of a Wall Street law firm, the War Department, the State Department, and the U.S. Senate.

That way [to prevent a people from having an erroneous opinion] is to furnish the whole people, as a part of their ordinary education, with correct information about their relations to other peoples, about the limitations upon their own rights, about their duties to respect the rights of others, about what has happened and is happening in international affairs, and about the effects upon national life of the things that are done or refused as between nations; so that the people themselves will have the means to test misinformation and appeals to prejudice and passion based upon error. (1922, 5)