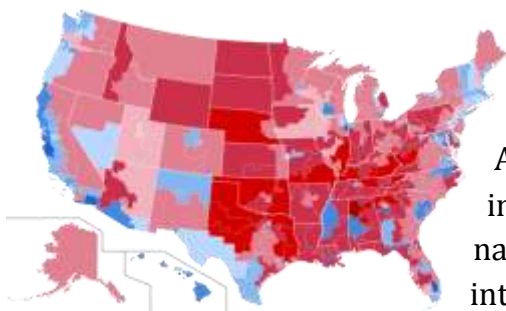


# Misconnecting with the U.S. Public: Narrative Collapse and U.S. Foreign Policy

*Interim Report of the project on U.S. Global Engagement, Winter 2018-19*

## SUMMARY OF THE PROJECT

For the last thirty years, since the end of the Cold War, American politicians and strategists have assumed that the general public is in agreement with the broad parameters of what is often termed the “the bipartisan consensus” for U.S. foreign policy: that the sustained deployment of U.S. power around the world is indispensable for managing an international system which promotes peace and stability through greater integration and interconnection and creates conditions for the spread of liberal values. While there have been major policy disagreements about how to execute such a strategy, with different parties and presidential administrations preferring different approaches, the assumption was that this post-Cold War bipartisan consensus for U.S. foreign policy was fixed and enduring and was unassailable.



2016 election results by congressional district [\(CC\)](#)

The 2016 primaries and the general election revealed a major blind spot in how changes in the U.S. domestic political and economic systems have altered how Americans perceive and conceptualize U.S. national interests abroad. It exposed the extent to which the narrative that sustains the variants of “pragmatic internationalism” espoused by both Democratic and Republican administrations has collapsed altogether for a portion of the American electorate, and with many Americans questioning at least some of its basic tenets.

For the past year, the U.S. Global Engagement program at Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs has focused its attention on the continuing strengths and weaknesses of the narratives that can be used to support an active U.S. role within the global system.

These questions have been discussed both within the work of a small study group as well as through a series of focus meetings around the country. This effort has not been designed to lay out a specific policy agenda but instead to address the sources of public discontent with U.S. foreign policy and how new, more sustainable narratives might be crafted.

## INITIAL CONCLUSIONS

The following represent some of the initial conclusions from the work done by the project in 2018. They are summarized by Carnegie Council Senior Fellow Nikolas K. Gvosdev, who has been supervising the project.

There has never been an expectation that the “average” U.S. citizen would be an expert on matters of foreign policy or be conversant with the details of specific situations or events. The challenge has always been to connect U.S. grand strategy and foreign policy to an overarching narrative that speaks to the voters by providing the broad outlines of how the U.S. role in the world is connected to the interests and values of the general public. At the end



U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev (CC)

of the Cold War, there was no clear successor to the earlier narrative about the long twilight struggle against a Soviet Union that posed an existential threat to the American way of life. The post-Cold War narrative that emerged posited that U.S. peace and prosperity at home required active American engagement to extend a zone of free-market democracies abroad and to stop overseas problems in their tracks before they could metastasize into major threats to the U.S. homeland. At the same time, however, efforts were made to assure the public that this role could be done without requiring the level of sacrifice that had characterized earlier major struggles such as the Second World War and the Cold War. In 2018, this narrative appears to be losing its coherence, for the following reasons:

- U.S. political leaders and the expert community use catch-phrases such as “American global leadership” or the “importance of a liberal, rules-based international order” that have become disconnected from people’s experiences and are losing both their relevance and their resonance, in part from repetitious, almost ritualistic invocation.
- There has been a generational shift; most Americans now live in an environment where the benefits of globalization are taken for granted while the fragility of the

overall system is not appreciated. This generational shift is also leading to changes in defining what constitutes American values and interests.

- At the same time, the costs of maintaining U.S. engagement in the world and the benefits that have accrued from the international system that the U.S. played the leading role in designing and sustaining have not been spread equally across the population. There are clear “winners” and “losers.” Moreover, the general response to criticism of American global engagement has been to point to the aggregate benefits to the country as a whole rather than to appreciate how costs and setbacks have affected specific communities within the country. This problem has been exacerbated by the belief that the costs of U.S. engagement are paid by the “heartland” of the country while the benefits are disproportionately reaped by elites.
- The apparent inability of much of the political leadership as well as the foreign policy “pundit” community to take responsibility for apparent major failures in U.S. foreign policy has been an important source of narrative collapse. While the 2003 Iraq War looms most prominently in popular consciousness, the perception of the 2011 Libya operation, originally celebrated as a success, as turning into failure, and the ongoing lack of apparent progress in Afghanistan, are eroding confidence in the current course and direction of U.S. policy.
- There is an interesting but important convergence from both left and right sides of the U.S. political spectrum, both centering on the question of efficacy. The narrative around U.S. engagement has eroded because of the apparent inability of the United States to achieve its objectives or promote its values—that interventions made in the name of safeguarding human rights, for instance, seem to worsen rather than improve the situation, while measures such as enlarging alliances and trade pacts which promise to lower costs and burdens for the United States seem to do the opposite. This contributes to a growing skepticism about the competence of the U.S. and a loss of confidence in an American ability to achieve positive change.



United States commanders observe a HIMARS strike near Haditha, Iraq (CC)

- American allies and partners around the world, despite earlier warnings, did not take seriously the prospect that the American public might come to question the oversized role in the international system, and thus did not, through concrete action, address the growing counter-narrative in U.S. politics about other countries “free-riding” from U.S. spending, defense commitments and trade concessions.

Political leaders, the expert community, and the media have also not been proactive in addressing the sources of this narrative collapse:

- Political campaigns of the last twenty-five years have generally focused on the costs of U.S. engagement and not made the positive case for American involvement.
- Political leaders have not always been willing to articulate why the U.S. has taken gambles and that gambles are not always successful.



Philippine children greet U.S. sailors assisting in relief efforts in response to the aftermath of Super Typhoon Haiyan/Yolanda [\(CC\)](#)

- Politicians are reluctant to clearly articulate the benefits that average Americans enjoy because of the U.S. role in the world—linking American engagement abroad to lower interest rates at home, job creation from trade, lower costs of living, and the ability to receive a much wider range of goods and services.
- The tendency in American politics to resort to the *reduction ad Hitlerum*—to pitch every crisis as a repeat of World War II—while at the same time promising a low-cost/no-casualty outcome—erodes trust in assessments of when, where, and under what circumstances American power needs to be deployed around the world.
- The apparent reluctance of the U.S. national security apparatus to recognize limits, set achievable objectives, and, most critically, cut losses when a particularly policy does not appear to be working are all contributing to this lack of confidence.

At the same time, American society is also undergoing major changes—in terms of the sources of economic growth and dynamism, the demographic composition of the citizenry, and shifts in values and norms. Weakness in the narrative about U.S. involvement in world affairs is directly connected to overall uncertainty about American identity and the

American social contract. However, even with these changes, polling data indicates that only a small fraction of Americans support isolationism or a retreat into autarky. What this suggests is the following:

- Americans want to amend, not end, their involvement in global affairs.
- They want to renegotiate some of the terms of American involvement in terms of costs and burden-sharing.
- They want to revisit the question of how costs and benefits of U.S. engagement will be distributed among the population.
- They want a balanced approach that navigates between the extremes of isolationism and declaring that 160+ countries in the world are equally vital to U.S. national interests.
- They want to see a national security community that has the ability to set limits and to say no and to be able to cut losses and move on.



Protesters gather in Minneapolis to condemn missile strikes on Shayrat Airbase, Syria [\(CC\)](#)

What all of this points to is that a narrative that acknowledges the recent mistakes that have led to skepticism on the part of the U.S. public towards American global engagement, but still sees benefits to reforming the system rather than withdrawing from it, and could resonate with voters. This narrative would also need to provide a compelling assessment of what U.S. economic and security interests are as the United States prepares to enter the mid-twenty-first century.

Moving forward, there is a clear need for a renewed public dialogue about the role and purpose of U.S. foreign policy. Here, the operative word is dialogue. This places a different emphasis on the role of the expert community to shift from providing top-down proposals and solutions to instead facilitate conversations. It is absolutely vital for subject matter experts to ensure that the public as well as politicians are given the necessary foundation to understand the issues, the risks, the costs, and the benefits of proposed policy options. But having done so, the expert community needs to engage the larger polity in a more interactive way in which the positive and negative consequences of different policy choices, as well as the trade-offs in interests and values (both in the short- and long-terms) are highlighted.

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## MEMBERS OF THE U.S. GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT STUDY GROUP, 2018

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**Membership does not imply endorsement of every conclusion drawn in the report.  
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