

Conservative Opinions on U.S. Foreign Policy

by Michael P. Noonan

Since the end of the Cold War, American politics have hinged for the most part on domestic issues, while foreign and national security issues have been, at best, an occasional distraction. Even the recent war over Kosovo failed to electrify public opinion or elicit strong responses from Capitol Hill. What is more, the once familiar political coalitions that characterized the debate over American foreign and defense policies have all but dissolved, with the result that “strange bedfellows” find themselves in agreement on such issues as relations with China, NATO expansion, and how much the nation should spend on defense. So it is that conservative pundit and presidential hopeful Pat Buchanan and liberal House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.), for instance, both oppose the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), advocate tougher restrictions on immigration, and denounce the Clinton administration’s accommodation of Beijing. Such apparent paradoxes are not at all new in U.S. diplomatic history, however. President Reagan’s foreign policy itself brought together an odd coalition of supporters, composed of fiscal and cultural conservatives, neoconservatives, Kissingerian realists, and centrists of both parties. To be sure, the cresting Soviet power of the late 1970s was the driving catalyst for that alliance, while the lack of a hegemonic international threat today helps to explain the absence of a strong internationalist consensus. The result has been that a Democratic administration has escaped strong opposition at home despite apparent blunders and reversals of course in foreign policy, while Republicans have been incapable of rallying around alternative conceptions of America’s proper role in the world. In late 1996, for instance, *Foreign Affairs* published two competing “conservative” foreign and defense policy directions for the Republican Party.¹ The initial article by William Kristol

¹ William Kristol and Robert Kagan, “Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/Aug. 1996, pp. 18–32; and Kim R. Holmes and John Hillen, “Misreading Reagan’s Legacy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Sept./Oct. 1996, pp. 162–67.

Michael P. Noonan is an associate scholar of the Foreign Policy Research Institute and a Ph.D. student in political science at Loyola University, Chicago. He serves as the project coordinator for the Foreign Policy Research Institute program on American defense. The author would like to thank Professors John Allen (Jay) Williams and John Frensdreis for their assistance in conducting the survey necessary for this article.

and Robert Kagan, both neoconservatives, argued for an expansive vision of American foreign and defense policy, while the response by Kim Holmes and John Hillen, both conservatives, offered a more modest, yet assertive, position. Since these two articles appeared, the debate within conservative foreign and defense policy circles has, if anything, intensified.² The recent events in Kosovo only sharpened the rhetorical battle lines, as conservatives in support of armed intervention against Yugoslavia were either heralded as muscular humanitarians or derided as crusaders, and those opposed either lauded as wise men or ridiculed as isolationists.³ Can self-styled conservatives hammer out a coherent foreign policy platform in advance of the presidential election? If so, will it matter?

A Conservative Straw Poll

Two assumptions inspired a serious sounding of various “conservative” opinions on foreign policy. The first is that a significant, if not decisive, bloc of voters is concerned with the damage allegedly done to U.S. military preparedness, prestige, and national interest over the past seven years, and that foreign policy will therefore be an issue in the 2000 campaign. The second is that conservative opinions may have important ramifications for future U.S. foreign and defense policy should the Republicans win the White House. Thus, while many surveys measure elite opinion in general towards American foreign policy,⁴ what has been lacking is a statistical analysis designed to display just how fractured conservatives are on issues of America’s post–Cold War role in the world.

The data were collected via a questionnaire designed using the “non-probability sample” method, with the sample of conservative opinion leaders drawn from the Heritage Foundation’s *Guide to Public Policy Experts, 1997–1998*.⁵ Two areas of expertise specified in the guide are “National Security” and “Foreign Policy,” and under those rubrics fall 389 experts associated with a wide variety of institutions. While the list does not include every key conservative policy analyst and commentator, the members it does include are all significant

² See, for example, Walter A. McDougall, “Editor’s Column,” *Orbis*, Winter 1998, pp. 2–6; Lawrence F. Kaplan, “Leftism on the Right,” *The Weekly Standard*, Feb. 9, 1998, pp. 27–29; Harvey Sicherman, “Correspondence: On American Power,” *The Weekly Standard*, Feb. 16, 1998, p. 7; and Gary Bauer, “A Conservative View of American Foreign Policy,” Institute of Politics Forum, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., Apr. 13, 1998.

³ For a brief summary of this debate, see Fareed Zakaria, “Conservative Confusion on Kosovo,” *Wall Street Journal*, Apr. 14, 1999.

⁴ The premier example of this type of survey remains John E. Rielly, ed., *American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy 1999* (Chicago: Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 1999). The Chicago Council releases this survey every four years, and its findings include the opinions of both the public and elites.

⁵ Thomas C. Atwood, ed., *The Guide to Public Policy Experts, 1997–1998* (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 1997).

Table 1
Issue Importance As Measured against Political Self-Identification

	Social/Cultural	Fiscal/Economic	Foreign/Military	Percent of Sample
Conservative	34.5%	17.2%	48.3%	53.0
Neoconservative	46.9	9.4	43.8	19.5
Centrist	8.7	8.7	82.6	14.0
Libertarian	18.2	50.0	31.8	13.5
Average Overall	31.1	18.9	50.0	—

“players” in public debate and comprise a representative sample of conservative views.

Of the 380 experts polled, fully 164 returned completed questionnaires, for a response rate of 43.2 percent. (The typical response rate for a mail survey is between 20 and 40 percent.) Several facts became immediately clear: Conservative opinion *leaders* (as opposed to voters in general) are overwhelmingly well educated, male, and over the age of forty-six. Among them are also a disproportionate number of military veterans. Next, those defining themselves simply as conservative composed over half the sample (53 percent), while almost a fifth described themselves as neoconservatives (19.5 percent), followed by self-described centrists and classical liberals/libertarians, with 14 and 13.5 percent representation, respectively.

Asked to rank the issue area of most importance to them, exactly half responded that foreign affairs and defense issues mattered most. Social and cultural issues came in second with 31.1 percent of the sample, and only 18.9 percent responded that fiscal and economic issues were their highest priority. (See Table 1.)

Portrait of the Conservative Punditry

Almost half of the nation’s conservative foreign policy and defense analysts hold academic positions (45.1 percent). Constituting the second-largest occupation cohort among those surveyed were the independent policy analysts (16.5 percent), followed by business executives (14.6 percent), consultants (10.4 percent), journalists/editors (5.5 percent), and others, including retirees (7.9 percent). Over a third (37.2 percent) of respondents worked and resided in the greater Washington, D.C., area, but the remainder were surprisingly evenly distributed, with 22 percent based in the West, followed by the Northeast (17.1 percent), Midwest (12.2 percent), and South (11.6 percent). In terms of age, fully 34.8 percent were 65 or older, 23.2 percent between the ages of 56 and 65, 25 percent between 45 and 55, 11.6 percent between 36 and 45, and only 5.5 percent between 21 and 35. As stated above, the sample was overwhelmingly male. Of the 164 who filed the questionnaire only five (3.7 percent) were

women. In terms of education, the vast majority (90.9 percent) of the sample held postgraduate degrees, and over two-thirds had taken doctorates. Another 8.5 percent held professional degrees (M.D., J.D., M.B.A., and the like), and only two people in the entire sample lacked a bachelor's degree. Finally, over half of respondents (50.6 percent) had prior military service. Of these, 62.6 percent served in the army or army reserves, followed by the navy and naval reserves (18.1 percent), the air force and its reserves (16.8 percent), and the Marine Corps (2.4 percent). Of those with prior military service, 59 percent served as commissioned officers, including 8.4 percent who held general or flag rank (generals and admirals), and 18.1 percent who left the service at a field grade (colonels, majors, and navy captains and commanders).

In sum, the numbers glaringly demonstrate that conservative foreign policy and defense analysis is a highly unrepresentative profession in contemporary America, dominated as it still is by "old, white males" with military experience and high educational attainments. Such an elite could not make a more stark contrast with the personnel staffing the highest and, indeed, lower levels of the Clinton administration's foreign policy team.

Foreign Policy and American Leadership

How did this elite respond to the twenty-two questions relating to American foreign policy? Table 2 presents the aggregate results.

American International Leadership. While much debate occurs in the pages of policy journals, magazines, and newspapers between advocates of a more or less assertive U.S. foreign policy posture, the sample showed a strong degree of support for continued American leadership abroad. When asked for their opinion on whether the United States should retain its primary leadership position in the international community after the Cold War, 85.4 percent either strongly agreed or agreed. The groups that showed the most support for this position were neoconservatives (93.8 percent) and conservatives (88.5 percent), followed by the centrists (78.2 percent) and libertarians (68.2 percent). Asked instead whether the end of the Cold War "now allows" the United States to disengage from its position as an international leader, 76.9 percent either disagreed or strongly disagreed, with neoconservatives and conservatives again leading the way. Clearly the charge that neo-isolationism is rife on the Right is a spurious one.

Another important area of debate is the degree to which the United States should act unilaterally or in concert with other nations to resolve international problems. Hence, respondents were asked whether "the United States should always seek to resolve international problems multilaterally." A majority (64.7 percent) either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the above statement. Conservatives showed the highest extent of disagreement (71.2 percent), followed by libertarians (63.6 percent) and neoconservatives (62.6 percent). Centrists were curiously divided over this issue, with 39.1 percent in agreement and 43.1 percent opposed. Likewise, when asked whether the United

Table 2: Foreign Policy Attitudes

	SA	A	N	D	SD
In the post-Cold War era the United States should retain its primary leadership position in the international community.	56.7%	28.7%	9.8%	4.3%	0.6%
The end of the Cold War now allows the United States to disengage from its position as an international leader.	3.7	7.9	11.6	35.4	41.5
The United States should always seek to resolve international problems multilaterally.	4.9	15.9	14.6	40.9	23.8
The United States should act unilaterally when necessary to resolve international problems.	33.5	34.8	16.5	13.4	1.8
The promotion of human rights abroad should be a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy.	7.9	34.1	29.3	23.2	5.5
Economic sanctions are an effective and useful tool of American diplomacy.	1.8	23.2	23.8	35.4	15.9
Promotion of free markets abroad should be a central feature of U.S. foreign policy.	38.4	47.0	10.4	3.7	0.6
Free trade agreements such as NAFTA and GATT have helped America's economic position in the world.	38.4	42.1	9.8	6.1	3.7
American markets are too open to competition from foreign goods and services.	3.7	13.4	12.8	42.7	27.4
The current round of NATO expansion will help to promote American and European security.	18.9	32.3	16.5	26.2	6.1
It is in the U.S. national interest for a friendly government to remain in power in Russia.	52.4	44.5	3.0	0.0	0.0
The United States should take all means necessary to ensure a friendly regime in Russia.	16.5	38.4	22.6	18.3	4.3
The current U.S. policy of dual containment towards Iran and Iraq has been largely ineffectual.	17.1	44.5	17.7	19.5	1.2
In the future, sub-Saharan Africa will remain a region of marginal importance to U.S. national interests.	14.0	53.7	14.0	15.9	2.4

SA=Strongly Agree A=Agree N=Neutral D=Disagree SD=Strongly Disagree

U.S. spending on foreign aid programs, currently about \$13 billion annually, is: *too little* 14.6 *about right* 37.2 *too much* 48.2
 The degree of focus that U.S. diplomacy places on the Middle East peace process is: *too little* 11.6 *about right* 43.9 *too much* 44.5
 U.S. efforts to "enlarge" democracies internationally have been: *successful* 29.3 *rarely successful* 43.3 *neutral* 19.5 *unsuccessful* 7.9
 The U.S. diplomatic position toward China should be one of: *containment* 28.0 *friendly cooperation* 9.1 *constructive engagement* 62.8
 The United States should promote its values abroad primarily through:
rhetoric and example 46.3 *sanctions and intervention* 4.3 *trade and finance* 30.5 *all three* 11.6

States “should act unilaterally when necessary to resolve international problems,” a considerable majority (68.3 percent) agreed or agreed strongly that the United States must maintain the freedom of action to act alone when necessary.

Values and Diplomacy. For what purposes should the United States act—and lead—internationally: in defense of clear national interests only, or in pursuit of “enlargement” of democracy, human rights, market economies, and other American values? Asked their opinions about U.S. efforts to promote democracy abroad, only 29.3 percent of the sample believed such endeavors had been successful. A plurality (43.3 percent) reported that such efforts have been rarely, if somewhat, successful, while the remainder believed that such efforts have had no particular impact (19.5 percent) or been positively unsuccessful (7.9 percent). As one would suspect, neoconservatives (46.9 percent) were more sanguine about the success of efforts to spread democracy than were conservatives (29.9 percent), centrists (17.4 percent), or libertarians (13.6 percent).

**The charge
that
neo-isolationism
is rife on the
Right is a
spurious one.**

The promotion of human rights abroad, the effectiveness of economic sanctions, and U.S. spending on foreign aid are also hot topics today, and the data show a considerable difference of opinion between the neoconservatives and the other three groups of respondents. Asked whether the promotion of human rights abroad should be a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy, only 42 percent strongly agreed or agreed that it should, but 59.4 percent of neoconservatives held this position, compared to 40.9 percent of libertarians, 39.1 percent of centrists, and 37.9 percent of conservatives. On the issue of whether economic sanctions are an effective and useful tool of American diplomacy, 51.3 percent of the sample stated that they were not, but whereas majorities of libertarians (63.7 percent), centrists (60.8 percent), and conservatives (54 percent) were skeptical about sanctions, only a minority of neoconservatives (28.1 percent) were.

Economic Issues. The amount of money that the United States dispenses in foreign aid is an especially divisive issue today in American politics, and numerous surveys show that the public believes that the United States spends too much on foreign aid.⁶ The problem with such surveys, however, is that the public consistently overestimates the amount of aid given to other nations and, when asked for a number, seems willing to spend more on aid programs than is actually spent. In order to correct for this problem, the questionnaire provided respondents with the real dollar amount (approximately \$13 billion) that the United States spent last year on foreign aid programs. Armed with this information, 48.2 percent of them still felt that the United States spends too much on such programs, with libertarians (86.4 percent) and conservatives (51.7 percent) most opposed to foreign assistance, but most neoconservatives (59.4 percent) content with the current amount of funding.

Does skepticism about foreign aid suggest that many conservatives are tempted to adopt a more “isolationist” economic position? Not at all, it seems. When asked whether the promotion of free markets should be a central tenet

⁶ See, for example, Rielly, *American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy 1999*.

of American foreign policy, 85.4 percent of the sample answered yes. When asked whether free trade agreements such as NAFTA and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) had helped America's economic position in the world, 80.5 percent agreed that they had. Finally, when asked whether American markets were too open to foreign competition, 70.1 percent answered no. What is more, the responses of all four groups were similar in regard to these questions, with only the libertarians being even more in favor of free trade than the others.

Regional Issues. The last topic relating to foreign policy and American leadership concerned the importance of various regions to U.S. interests and security, including Europe, Russia, the Middle East, Africa, and China. First, the questionnaire asked for reactions to the statement that "the current round of NATO expansion will help to promote American and European security." Over half (51.2 percent) strongly agreed or agreed that NATO expansion would improve Western security, with fairly uniform support from all groups. Furthermore, of those who agreed that the current round of expansion promoted European and American security, almost two-thirds (65.5 percent) supported a second round of expansion.

Concerning U.S. relations with Russia, 96.9 percent agreed that it was in the national interest for a friendly regime to remain in power in Moscow. But when presented with the statement that "the United States should take all means necessary to ensure a friendly regime in Russia," only 54.9 percent of the sample agreed or strongly agreed, with no sharp divergence among the four groups. A large number of conservatives evidently believe either that it is not in the power of the Western states to "ensure" a pacific Russian evolution or that the cost would be exorbitant.

Regarding U.S. relations with the People's Republic of China, a majority of respondents affirmed "constructive engagement" (62.8 percent), with centrists (91.3 percent) most in favor of this option and conservatives (52.9 percent) least approving. The second most popular option was containment of the PRC (28 percent, including 35.6 percent of conservatives), followed by friendly cooperation (9.1 percent, including 18.2 percent of libertarians). For all their well-justified criticism of the Clinton administration's flip-flops on China, therefore, it would appear that conservatives would be hardly more able to construct a consensus on the subject. Nevertheless, the poll also showed that conservatives believe that China, and Asian issues in general, will only grow in importance for the United States, as indicated by their ranking of the regions they believe most important for American foreign policy today and in the year 2010. The respondents ranked East Asia, Western Europe, and Latin America as the first, second, and third most important regions of the world both in 1999 and in the year 2010. However, East Asia received a 13.4 percent increase in importance over that time. (See Table 3.)

Military Posture and the Use of Force

Respondents were asked twenty-three questions about national security policy, including strategy, use of force, military spending, force structure,

Table 3
Which region is, or will be, most important to American foreign policy?

Today		2010	
East Asia	35.4%	East Asia	48.8%
Western Europe	25.0	Western Europe	14.6
Latin America	9.8	Latin America	10.4
North America	8.5	Eastern Europe/Central Asia	8.5
North Africa/Middle East	7.3	North America	7.9
Central Europe	6.1	North Africa/Middle East	4.3
Eastern Europe/Central Asia	6.1	South Asia	4.3
South Asia	1.8	Central Europe	1.2
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.0	Sub-Saharan Africa	0.0

technology and the future, the military and society, intelligence, and the threat environment. (See Table 4.) In this case, differences among the four conservative subgroups were considerable, but curiously, no significant differences of opinion existed between those who had served in the armed forces and those who had not.

Defense Strategy. First, exactly half of the respondents denied or strongly denied that the current “two major regional contingencies” (MRC) strategy was viable given current U.S. force structure and capabilities. Pressed further on this issue, the sample was asked whether or not the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) released by Defense Secretary William Cohen in 1997 was a forward-looking strategy insofar as it maintained the two MRC standard. A plurality (45.2 percent) disagreed or strongly disagreed with that statement, with conservatives most opposed (60.9 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed) and neoconservatives fairly evenly split (28.1 percent affirmed the QDR and 25 percent did not).

What, in the post–Cold War era, should be the major function of the armed forces: deterrence and warfighting, or peacemaking and peacekeeping missions? Asked whether deterrence and warfighting should remain the central missions of the U.S. military, fully 82.9 percent said that they should, with neoconservatives and conservatives in strong agreement (87.5 percent and 87.3 percent, respectively). Turning the issue around, the survey asked whether peacekeeping operations should be a central mission of the U.S. military after the Cold War. In response to that statement, 67.1 percent said that it should *not* be a central mission, with conservatives most fervently opposed (79.3 percent), followed by libertarians (68.1 percent), centrists (52.1 percent), and neoconservatives (43.8 percent).

The Use of Force. Debate over when, and what sort of force, ought to be used in pursuit of U.S. policy inevitably centers on the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine, which states that American forces should seek quick, decisive battlefield victories while minimizing the possibility of U.S. casualties. When asked whether this doctrine is a useful litmus test for deploying our armed forces, a slight plurality (40.9 percent) of respondents said that it is. But whereas 65.2 percent

Table 4: Defense Strategy and Posture

	SA	A	N	D	SD
The current U.S. defense strategy of fighting two near-simultaneous major regional contingencies is a credible defense policy.	7.3	26.8	15.9	39.0	11.0
Defense Secretary William Cohen's Quadrennial Defense Review is a forward-looking strategy for preparing America's military for the twenty-first century.	0.6	14.0	40.2	34.8	10.4
Deterrence and warfighting should be the central missions of the U.S. military after the Cold War.	40.2	42.7	7.9	6.7	2.4
Peacekeeping should be a central mission of the U.S. military after the Cold War.	0.0	15.9	17.1	43.9	23.2
Today the threat or use of American military power is more important than it was during the Cold War.	3.7	16.5	33.5	40.9	6.7
The Weinberger/Powell Doctrine is a useful litmus test for determining when the U.S. should use military force.	4.9	36.0	39.0	15.2	4.9
The use of air power should always be the first response when application of U.S. military power is necessary.	2.4	15.2	34.8	40.9	6.7
The probability of American casualties should always be a central consideration in any decision on the use of U.S. force.	4.9	33.5	17.1	37.8	6.7
The U.S. military should stay in Bosnia-Herzegovina for as long as necessary in order to maintain peace.	2.4	15.2	14.6	40.9	26.8
Currently, budgetary considerations unduly determine America's defense strategy.	19.5	42.1	22.6	13.4	2.4
In the future, technological innovation will allow the size of the U.S. armed forces to shrink without denigrating military capabilities.	4.9	32.9	22.0	35.4	4.9
The development of a national missile defense system will be vital for U.S. security in the 21st century.	54.3	29.3	7.3	7.9	1.2
The B-2 Stealth Bomber contributes significantly to U.S. military capabilities.	6.7	40.2	31.7	18.3	3.0
The Seawolf attack submarine contributes significantly to U.S. military capabilities.	4.9	42.1	39.6	11.0	2.4
Today America's uniformed military and its civilian leadership have a healthy relationship.	1.2	23.8	20.1	40.9	14.0
The American military must maintain a culture different from that of the society it protects.	24.4	39.6	15.2	18.9	1.8
The U.S. intelligence community should play an expanded role in American defense today and in the future.	23.8	47.0	15.9	11.6	1.8
Today, the U.S. places too much emphasis on technological rather than human intelligence gathering.	10.4	51.8	24.4	11.0	2.4

SA = Strongly Agree A = Agree N = Neutral D = Disagree SD = Strongly Disagree (percentage of respondents)

	Too Little	About the Right Amount	Too Much
Since the end of the Cold War the U.S. military has shrunk _____.	10.4	27.4	62.2
Today, the United States spends _____ on national defense.	64.6	26.2	9.1

of centrists and 43.6 percent of conservatives agreed with this proposition, only 18.8 percent of neoconservatives did so.

Follow-on questions asked about the application of air power and Americans' willingness to accept casualties. When presented with the statement that "the use of air power should always be the first response when the application of U.S. military power is necessary," a strong plurality (47.6 percent) either disagreed or strongly disagreed, with the distribution fairly steady across all four groups. Asked whether the probability of American casualties should always be a central consideration in any decision to deploy, only 44.5 percent said that the fear of casualties should *not* drive decisions to intervene, including 62.5 percent of neoconservatives. By contrast, 62.5 percent of libertarians felt casualties *should* be a central consideration.

When asked whether U.S. forces should remain in Bosnia for as long as necessary to maintain peace in the region, a majority (67.7 percent) said no. But once again, conservatives (74.7 percent), libertarians (72.7 percent), and centrists (65.2 percent) were united in their opposition, whereas only 46.9 percent of neoconservatives opposed open-ended commitments to the Balkans.

Military Spending and Force Structure. In the post-Cold War era, much debate surrounds the size of the armed forces and defense budget. Asked whether the United States spends "too little," "about the right amount," or "too much" on national defense, 64.6 percent of respondents answered that current defense spending is inadequate, but opinion varied widely among conservatives (81.6 percent), neoconservatives (56.3 percent), and centrists (43.5 percent), while a plurality of libertarians (36.4 percent) felt that *too much* is spent on defense. Of those who favor an increased defense budget, 50.8 percent called for an annual budget in the range of \$251–275 billion, 26.2 percent for \$276–300 billion, and 23 percent for a budget in excess of \$300 billion.

Another question asked whether "budgetary considerations unduly determine America's defense strategy." More than three of five respondents (61.6 percent) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, and only 15.8 percent disagreed. When asked whether the U.S. force structure had shrunk "too little," "about the right amount," or "too much" since the end of the Cold War, 62.2 percent of those surveyed believe the military has shrunk too much, led by conservatives (77 percent) and neoconservatives (59.4 percent), with many libertarians again believing that America's forces have not shrunk enough.

Technology and the Future. What role should technology play on the future battlefield and in the defense of the United States? When presented with the statement that "in the future technological innovation will allow the size of the U.S. armed forces to shrink without denigrating military capabilities," a slight plurality (40.3 percent) either disagreed or strongly disagreed. But whereas 49.4 percent of conservatives disagreed with the statement, most libertarians (63.7 percent) and many centrists (47.8 percent) and neoconservatives (40.6 percent) believe that technological innovation will increase battlefield capability and allow for smaller forces. It would seem contradictory, therefore, that the most ardent defenders of the B-2 bomber and Seawolf attack submarine were the conservatives, with 57.4 and 56.3 percent in support, respectively.

When asked whether ballistic missile defense will be vital for American security in the twenty-first century, 83.5 percent of those surveyed either agreed or strongly agreed, including 90.8 percent of conservatives, 87.6 percent of neoconservatives, and even 81.9 percent of libertarians. Only the centrists were divided on the issue (52.1 percent in favor, 34.7 percent opposed).

Military and Society. Two much-debated topics in defense policy relate to American civil-military relations and the culture(s) of our armed forces. When asked whether the uniformed military had a healthy relationship with their civilian leadership, 54.9 percent said that this was not the case, although conservatives (68.9 percent) and libertarians (54.6 percent) may hold that opinion for opposite reasons. Of neoconservatives, 40.6 percent said that healthy relations do exist. Similarly, when presented with the statement that “the American military must maintain a culture that is different from that of the society which it protects,” 64 percent of those surveyed either agreed or strongly agreed. Unlike the issue of civil-military relations, however, majorities of conservatives (73.5 percent), neoconservatives (59.4 percent), and libertarians (54.6 percent), and a plurality of centrists (43.4 percent) felt that a distinct military culture was necessary. These findings are interesting because they show that, while a majority of the survey members believe that civil-military relations in the United States are currently unhealthy, they also see the military as an institution that needs to preserve a distinctive ethos.

The Intelligence Community. Another contentious issue is the role of the intelligence community, especially given its recent failure to detect India’s and Pakistan’s nuclear tests, its errors in the Yugoslav war, and the Chinese espionage scandal. When presented with the statement that “the U.S. intelligence community should play an expanded role in American defense today and in the future,” a full 70.8 percent of the sample agreed or strongly agreed. This time, neoconservatives (81.2 percent) showed the greatest support, followed by conservatives (74.7 percent), centrists (60.9 percent), and libertarians (50 percent). Asked whether the United States places too much emphasis on technological gathering of intelligence as opposed to human agency, a majority (62.2 percent) felt that such an overemphasis does exist, with conservatives (72.4 percent) most fervent in this opinion, followed by centrists (56.5 percent), neoconservatives (53.2 percent), and libertarians (40.9 percent).

International Threat Environment. Given a selection of fourteen possible choices, respondents were asked to rank the five biggest threats to contemporary and future American security.⁷ (See Table 5.) As the numbers show, the spread of weapons of mass destruction is the issue that most concerns the sample both today and in the future, with the potential increase in Chinese power showing the largest rate of change over time.

⁷For these questions the author weight-measured the responses so that they yielded a weighted percentage of what individuals felt were the greatest threats. For each threat that was assessed as a “1” a numerical value of 5 was assigned, for a “2” 4 points, for a “3” 3 points, for a “4” 2 points, and for a “5” 1 point. The cumulative totals for each threat were then tallied and divided by 2460 (the total possible number of points).

Table 5
Level of Concern for Threats to Current and Future American Security

Today		2010	
Proliferation of weapons of mass destruction	18.6%	Proliferation of weapons of mass destruction	16.3%
Rogue states	12.8	Hegemonic China	14.1
International terrorism	11.3	Rogue states	10.6
Hegemonic China	9.7	International terrorism	10.0
American disengagement from international leadership	9.5	American disengagement from international leadership	9.0
International economic issues	7.7	International economic issues	8.9
Fundamentalist Islam	6.4	Resurgent Russia	7.0
Resurgent Russia	6.4	Fundamentalist Islam	6.3
Drug trafficking	5.7	Drug trafficking	4.6
Failing states/ethnic conflict	3.8	Failing states/ethnic conflict	3.7
Transnational organized crime	3.4	Transnational organized crime	3.4
Information warfare	1.7	Information warfare	2.5
Environmental degradation	1.6	Environmental degradation	2.0
Other	1.4	Other	1.6

A “Conservative” Foreign Policy for the Next Millennium?

The poll data demonstrate that lines of consensus and dissensus exist among the factions that compose the conservative foreign policy elite. But the four factions are of various importance, with self-styled conservatives and neoconservatives far more numerous (and more influential) on foreign and defense issues than the amorphous centrists and economics-minded libertarians. What is more, conservatives and neoconservatives display a clear divergence regarding the issues that have defined the post-Cold War era: the promotion of values rather than interests, and the promiscuous use of American force overseas. That said, the data also reveal strong majorities in all four groups that may well comprise a consensus around seven salient issues, any or all of which might resonate with conservative-minded voters in the year 2000. Those seven points of consensus are that the United States must: (1) remain an international leader; (2) act unilaterally when necessary; (3) promote free trade and free markets; (4) spend marginally more on defense; (5) maintain a warfighting ethos in its armed forces; (6) develop a national ballistic missile defense; and (7) increase the capabilities of its intelligence community.

Depending on contingencies abroad, foreign policy may or may not emerge as a “wedge” in the 2000 campaign. But insofar as conservatives of all persuasions desire to present a united front and a coherent alternative to the Clinton legacy, the issues above would seem to offer the best raw material.

