

The Polls: U.S. Military Intervention

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IN LIGHT of recent events in Lebanon, El Salvador, and the Falklands, not to mention Poland, Afghanistan, and Iran, it seems appropriate to take a look at American attitudes toward military intervention. Senator John Tower, Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, remarked at the commencement exercises at the U.S. Military Academy last May that the American people are traditionally antimilitaristic (*New York Times*, May 27, 1981), yet the United States has been involved in a number of wars and other types of military interventions since World War II. A look at some long-term trends in attitudes toward the use of American troops should shed some light on this seeming ambiguity of American foreign relations.

It is clear that since World War II the American public has not been isolationist. When asked if it would be best for the country to take an active part in world affairs or to stay out, Americans have consistently favored taking an active part (Table 1). But in the minds of many Americans, taking an active part in world affairs does not necessarily mean using American troops abroad. In February 1979, CBS News/*New York Times* asked the question in general terms: "Aside from an attack on the United States, is there any other situation when you might approve sending American troops to fight overseas?" Of the respondents offering an opinion, 69 percent said there was no other such situation.

When asked about more specific hypothetical situations that might justify the use of American troops, the American public tends to reject such an option. The Roper Organization has asked a number of such hypothetical questions (Table 2) and in most instances respondents oppose the use of troops, the most prominent exceptions being if Soviet troops invaded Western Europe and if the Soviet Union attacked West Berlin.¹ Furthermore, even in

¹ Even in these cases, respondents did not always favor the use of troops. Respondents in February 1981 did favor the use of troops if another U.S. embassy were taken over, but the reaction to that hypothetical case was surely conditioned by the previous crisis in Iran.

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(Table 1) GALLUP, NORC, HARRIS: *Do you think it would be best for the future of this country if we take an active part in world affairs, or if we (stay/stayed) out of world affairs?*^a

	Active Part	Stay Out
October 1945	79%	21%
August 1947	71	29
January 1950	74	26
March 1955	77	23
June 1965	83	17
Spring 1973	68	32
Spring 1975	63	37
Spring 1976	66	34
Spring 1978	67	33
November 1980	66	34
Spring 1982	64	36

^a Surveys by the Gallup Organization, October 1945 and August 1947; National Opinion Research Center, January 1950 through June 1965; National Opinion Research Center, General Social Surveys, Spring 1973 through Spring 1978; Louis Harris and Associates, November 1980; National Opinion Research Center, General Social Surveys, Spring 1982.

(Table 2) ROPER: *There has been some discussion about the circumstances that might justify using U.S. troops in other parts of the world. I'd like to ask your opinion about several different situations . . .*^a

	Favor	Oppose	DK
If U.S. Embassy employees were taken hostage again in some other country			
February 1981	64%	24%	12%
If Soviet troops invaded Western Europe			
July 1978	43	43	14
February 1980	60	27	13
February 1981	51	35	14
If the Soviet Union invaded West Berlin			
July 1978	40	47	13
February 1980	54	31	15
February 1981	46	41	13
If the Arabs cut off oil shipments to the U.S. and we could obtain oil only by taking over Arab oil fields			
July 1978	30	54	16
February 1980	39	45	16
If Arab forces invaded Israel			
July 1978	21	65	15
February 1980	35	47	18
February 1981	26	58	16
If North Korea invaded South Korea			
July 1978	19	69	13
February 1981	20	63	17
If Soviet troops invaded Poland			
February 1981	23	58	19

^a Surveys by the Roper Organization (Roper Report 81-3), latest that of February 14-28, 1981.

some less hypothetical situations the public often opposes the use of American forces. In January 1980, when CBS News/*New York Times* asked what the United States should do about the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, only 17 percent of those offering opinions favored use of military force. When asked in March 1981 about what types of aid the United States should provide the government of El Salvador, only 3 percent of informed respondents in a Gallup survey responded "U.S. troops." In a recent example of public disapproval of the use of troops overseas, respondents to two Harris surveys of late June and July 1982 disapproved (57–43 percent and 58–42 percent) of sending U.S. Marines to Lebanon as part of the original three-nation peace-keeping force. Nor is the public's reluctance to commit troops abroad anything new. Well into the summer of 1941, Americans who were asked by Gallup how they would vote on the question of entering the war against Germany and Italy overwhelmingly opted to stay out, by 79 percent to 21 percent.

Yet it is clear that general anti-interventionist sentiment as reflected in responses to hypothetical questions has not prevented the United States from intervening frequently in foreign crises. Part of the reason for this anomaly is that anti-interventionist sentiment is far from uniform among demographic groups. The lower the socioeconomic status of the respondent (best determined by income, education, and occupation) the less likely that person is to favor use of American troops abroad (Table 3). In addition, males are more likely than females and whites more likely than blacks to opt for the use of troops. These demographic differences may very well have a considerable influence on the direction of American policy if a hypothetical situation becomes a real crisis.

The makers of American foreign policy are not a cross-section of the public. The foreign policy establishment is overwhelmingly male, white, well-educated, executive-professional in occupation, and well above average in income. Each of these demographic groups is, on the average, more likely to favor military intervention in any hypothetical situation. Foreign policy influentials from outside the government (in business, in the media) also tend to come from these potentially pro-interventionist groups. Furthermore, people of lower socioeconomic status, as well as women and blacks, tend to be much less certain about their position, an uncertainty reflected in the higher numbers of "Don't know" responses. In any foreign policy crisis, therefore, groups that are potentially more favorable to intervention have considerably more influence over policy than those that are potentially less favorable.

This does not mean, however, that the makers of foreign policy are necessarily taking a great risk in public opinion by intervening militarily in a crisis. In fact, public response to active American military interventions has been initially supportive. After President Eisenhower sent the Marines into Lebanon in 1958, Gallup International Research Institutes asked respondents in several cities around the world if they approved or disapproved. Respondents in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco approved 59 percent to 27 percent. In a Gallup Poll taken shortly after President Johnson sent troops to the Dominican Republic in late April 1965, respondents approved of the decision 76 percent to 17 percent. Shortly after the major escalation of the Vietnam War in the summer of 1965, the Gallup Organization found that only 24 percent felt that the United States had made a mistake in sending troops to

(Table 3) ROPER: There has been some discussion about the circumstances that might justify using U.S. troops in other parts of the world. I'd like to ask your opinion about several different situations. . . .^a

	If Soviets Invaded W. Berlin		If Arabs Invaded Israel		If Soviets Invaded W. Europe		If Soviets Invaded Poland		If N. Korea Invaded S. Korea		If Cubans Involved in Communist Takeover of Central Amer. Country		If U.S. Embassy Employees Taken Hostage Again in Country	
	Fav.	DK/ Opp. NA	Fav.	DK/ Opp. NA	Fav.	DK/ Opp. NA	Fav.	DK/ Opp. NA	Fav.	DK/ Opp. NA	Fav.	DK/ Opp. NA	Fav.	DK/ Opp. NA
Sex	55	36 9	30	57 12	61	30 9	25	59 16	28	60 13	50	38 12	71	20 9
Female	38	45 16	22	59 19	42	40 18	22	57 22	13	67 20	34	46 20	57	28 15
Household income	35	49 16	20	60 19	36	44 21	17	60 23	15	65 20	34	48 19	52	33 15
Under \$10,000	44	42 14	26	57 17	50	34 16	22	57 21	21	62 17	41	43 16	63	22 15
\$10,000–under \$20,000	52	37 11	28	57 16	57	33 10	26	57 17	24	61 16	46	40 15	69	21 10
\$20,000–under \$30,000	58	34 8	31	60 9	64	29 7	29	59 12	21	68 12	47	38 15	72	21 7
\$30,000 and over														
Race	51	37 12	28	56 16	36	31 13	26	55 19	22	62 17	44	40 16	66	22 12
White	15	69 16	12	73 15	17	67 16	8	75 17	10	74 16	23	60 18	44	37 19
Black	36	48 15	12	16 20	36	45 19	19	59 22	18	63 20	35	47 18	55	31 15
Education	45	42 14	57	60 58	48	38 14	27	55 18	18	65 17	44	40 15	66	21 13
Non HS grad	54	36 10	30	24 22	64	26 10	23	59 18	23	62 14	44	41 16	67	22 11
HS grad	30	41 9	29	57 15	54	35 11	28	55 17	24	61 16	50	38 12	68	22 10
College	49	37 14	26	60 14	36	32 12	24	60 16	20	66 13	37	46 17	62	27 11
Occupation	58	33 8	35	56 9	69	24 7	28	58 13	26	62 12	47	39 14	76	16 8
Blue collar	42	46 12	25	62 13	45	40 15	22	60 18	19	66 15	38	47 16	60	27 13
White collar	56	34 10	29	53 18	62	28 10	27	57 16	24	59 16	51	35 15	71	20 10
Exec., prof.	45	40 15	25	57 18	50	35 15	22	56 22	18	63 18	41	41 17	66	22 12
Political affiliation	53	35 12	28	56 16	57	30 13	26	57 17	25	60 15	49	37 15	68	22 11
Democrat	44	42 14	25	58 17	49	36 15	22	56 22	16	65 19	40	42 18	63	23 14
Republican	42	49 9	25	63 12	48	41 11	23	63 15	17	70 13	35	53 13	61	29 10
Independent	43	46 12	29	55 16	53	35 11	25	58 17	21	65 14	42	44 14	68	23 9
Political philosophy	51	36 13	27	59 14	54	31 14	26	53 19	22	60 18	43	41 16	69	20 12
Conservative	49	41 10	23	61 14	51	36 12	23	61 17	20	66 14	43	41 16	63	26 12
Moderate	42	40 18	21	58 20	44	38 19	19	57 24	17	61 22	38	43 20	52	29 19
Liberal														
Age	43	46 12	29	55 16	53	35 11	25	58 17	21	65 14	42	44 14	68	23 9
18–29	51	36 13	27	59 14	54	31 14	26	53 19	22	60 18	43	41 16	69	20 12
30–44	49	41 10	23	61 14	51	36 12	23	61 17	20	66 14	43	41 16	63	26 12
45–59	42	40 18	21	58 20	44	38 19	19	57 24	17	61 22	38	43 20	52	29 19
60+														

^a Survey by The Roper Organization (Roper Report 81-3), February 14–28, 1981.

Vietnam, while 61 percent said it was not a mistake. And when *Time*/Yankelovich, Skelly, and White asked if charges that President Ford overreacted to the seizure of the *Mayaguez* in order to re-establish American prestige were fair or unfair, 87 percent of respondents who offered an opinion said the charges were unfair.

Not only have military interventions generally been initially popular with the American public, but presidents have benefited from the interventions politically: President Roosevelt's popularity rating jumped 12 percent in the wake of his declaration of war on Japan following Pearl Harbor; President Kennedy's ratings also jumped 12 percent after the Cuban missile blockade; President Johnson's rating went up 8 percent after the bombing of Hanoi in 1967; and President Ford's rating climbed 11 percent after the *Mayaguez* incident.² However, when the Iranians first took American Embassy personnel hostage, President Carter's rating as measured by the Gallup Organization jumped 13 percent, even though the United States did not intervene militarily at that time. The rise in presidential ratings, therefore, seems to reflect a rallying around the leader during a crisis rather than an approval of a specific policy (cf. John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion*, N.Y.: Wiley, 1973, pp. 208–13).

The jump in presidential approval in times of crisis takes place across all demographic groups, with the rise somewhat more pronounced in the higher socioeconomic groups than in the lower.³ In any crisis that is not resolved quickly and successfully by military intervention, however, pro-intervention and anti-intervention groups tend to react differently from each other. In December 1979, three weeks after the Iranians had taken the U.S. embassy in Tehran, the Roper Organization asked whether the Shah (who had been admitted to the U.S. for medical treatment) should be returned as the Iranians demanded (Table 4). The lowest socioeconomic groups and blacks gave their approval to this option considerably more often than the higher socioeconomic groups and whites. The anti-intervention groups, however, were also slightly more likely to favor another extreme position, namely, bombing Iran. (See Mueller, pp. 122–36, on similar patterns in response to the Korean and Vietnam wars.) Again, men favor the more militaristic positions more often than women.

Furthermore, a prolonged crisis or war can change the initial strong approval of intervention into disapproval, as the cases of Korea and Vietnam demonstrate. For instance, the percentage of respondents in Gallup surveys to the question of whether or not the U.S. made a mistake in sending troops to Vietnam went up from 24 percent in August 1965 to 53 percent in August 1968 to 61 percent in May 1971.

The question of whether the American public is anti-militaristic is therefore difficult to resolve. Even though public opinion since World War II has not been isolationist, the polls show that when hypothetical situations are proposed, people are reluctant to intervene militarily. When an actual crisis occurs, the public tends to rally around the president in the short run but becomes less supportive if a crisis or war drags on with no resolution in sight. There are also demographic differences in the response to both hypothetical and actual crises.

² *Gallup Opinion Index*, Nov. 1978, page 3.

³ The approval rating among men changes more than among women. Men seem consistently to favor more militaristic solutions to problems than women.

(Table 4) ROPER: *Now that the Shah is here in this country, the Ayatollah Khomeini says we must return him to Iran for trial or else they will not return our hostages. Some people say we should return the Shah to Iran for trial in order to save the American hostages; others say we cannot yield to such a demand, even if it risks the hostages' lives. Do you think we should, or should not return the Shah to Iran?*

*Various people have proposed a number of different approaches to dealing with the hostage situation in Iran. Bearing in mind the effect each of them might have on the hostages, on the reactions of other Arab countries, on possible responses by the Russians and on world reaction in general, would you tell me for each one whether we should or should not do it?**

	Return Shah				Bomb Iran		
	Should 23%	Should Not 56%	Send Out but Not to Iran 13%	DK 7%	Should 9%	Should Not 86%	DK 5%
Sex							
Male	20	63	12	5	12	84	5
Female	26	51	13	10	7	88	6
Household income							
Under \$10,000	32	42	13	14	10	81	9
\$10,000-\$19,999	27	51	13	9	10	86	5
\$20,000-\$29,999	20	61	13	5	8	88	5
\$30,000 and over	16	70	11	4	8	88	4
Race							
White	21	60	13	7	9	86	6
Black	42	12	12	13	11	85	4
Education							
Non HS grad	36	39	14	11	11	81	8
HS Grad	23	58	12	7	10	86	4
College	14	69	12	6	6	89	5
Occupation							
Blue collar	30	49	14	7	11	85	4
White collar	20	65	10	6	9	85	6
Exec., Prof.	11	70	11	7	7	92	2
Party							
Democrat	26	53	12	9	10	83	6
Republican	18	67	10	5	7	90	3
Independent	20	57	16	7	9	86	5
Political philosophy							
Conservative	23	59	11	7	10	86	4
Moderate	22	56	15	7	8	86	6
Liberal	26	55	13	7	9	87	5
Age							
18-29	28	56	9	7	11	83	6
30-44	21	59	14	6	9	86	5
45-59	21	59	13	7	8	89	3
60+	23	51	15	11	7	86	7

* Survey by the Roper Organization (Roper Report 80-1), December 1-8, 1979.

Responses to questions by NORC concerning military spending perhaps sum up the American attitude on intervention (Table 5). Since the end of the Vietnam war, with only one exception, a plurality of Americans has felt that military spending is about right. In the immediate aftermath of the unsuc-

(Table 5) NORC: *We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I'm going to name some of these problems, and for each one I'd like you to tell me whether you think we're spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount . . . Military, armaments, defense.*^a

	<i>Too Little</i>	<i>About Right</i>	<i>Too much</i>
1973	12%	48%	40%
1974	18	49	33
1975	18	49	33
1976	26	45	29
1977	26	49	25
1978	29	47	24
1980	60	28	12
1982	31	38	32

NOTE: 1980 Survey conducted in midst of Iranian crisis.

^a Surveys by the National Opinion Research Center, General Social Surveys, latest that of February–April, 1982.

cessful Vietnam war, many more people felt that the U.S. was spending too much than thought we were spending too little on the military. The only exception to this apparent anti-military or moderate pattern occurred in 1980, when the NORC survey was conducted in the midst of the Iranian crisis.