

Troubled by Loss of Standing in the World, Americans Support Major Foreign Policy Changes

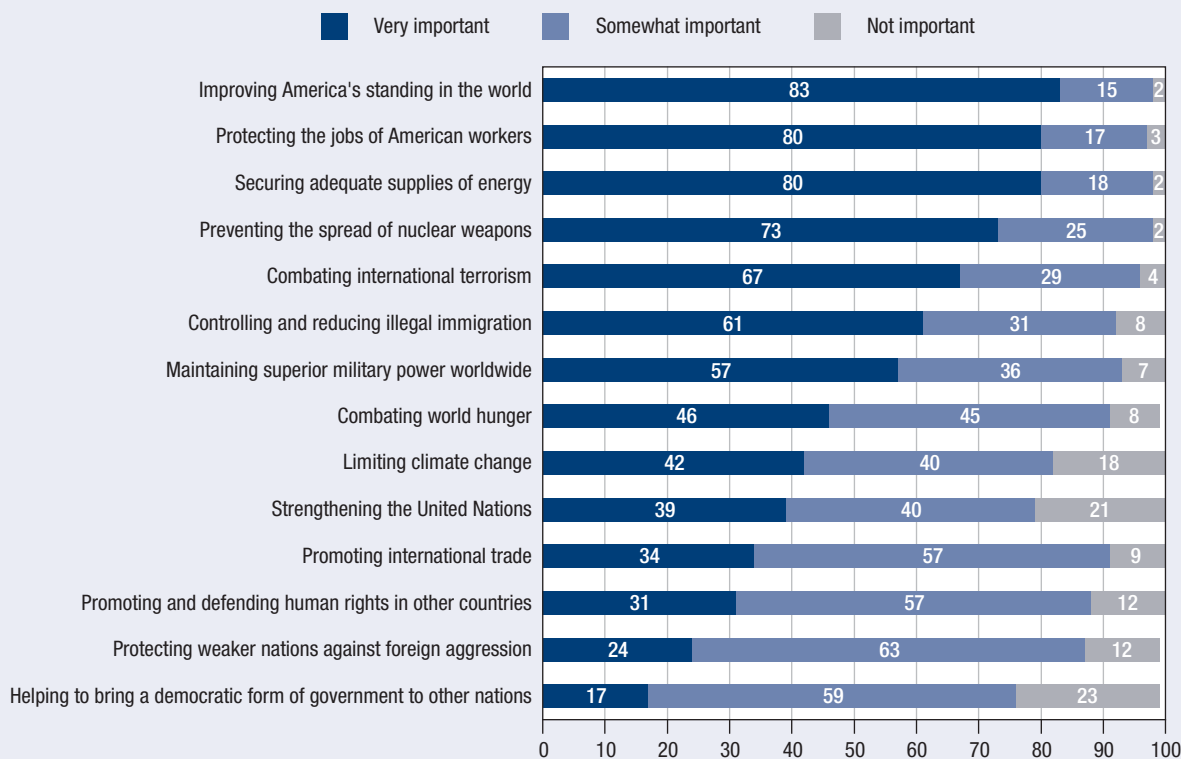
A new poll of the American public by The Chicago Council on Global Affairs shows overwhelming bipartisan concern about America's standing in the world and support for new policy directions, including talking to enemies, setting a timetable to withdraw from Iraq, making a deal with Iran, using force to strike leaders of terrorist groups

operating in Pakistan, working more through international institutions, and participating in a new climate-change treaty.

Overall, 83 percent of Americans—including 81 percent of Republicans and 88 percent of Democrats—think that improving America's standing in the world should be a “very impor-

Figure 1 – U.S. Foreign Policy Goals

Percentage who think the following should be very, somewhat, or not important foreign policy goals of the United States.



tant” foreign policy goal of the United States (see Figure 1). This places it first among fourteen goals presented, higher than protecting the jobs of American workers (80%), securing adequate supplies of energy (80%), preventing the spread of nuclear weapons (73%), and combating international terrorism (67%).

Americans also worry that the United States has recently lost leverage in the world. Asked whether over the last few years the ability of the United States to achieve its foreign policy goals has increased, decreased, or remained about the same, 53 percent say that it has decreased, while only 10 percent say it has increased. Thirty-six percent say it has stayed about the same. Republicans are more likely to believe it has stayed the same (46% same to 38% decreased) than Democrats (24% same to 69% decreased).

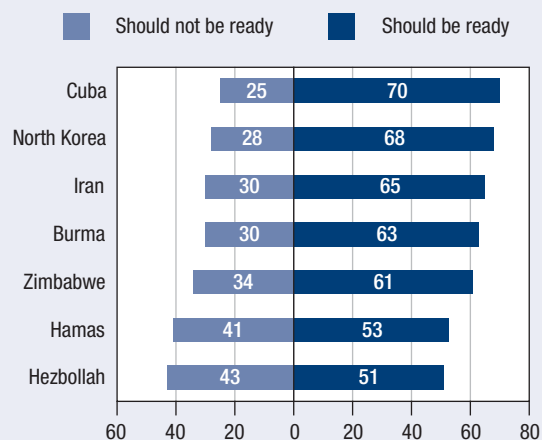
Despite these concerns, Americans’ international commitment remains strong. Solid majorities continue to support the United States taking an active part in world affairs and maintaining a global military presence, even though there appears to be a growing international fatigue among some Americans. Yet instead of turning inward, Americans overall show support for major, pragmatic changes in the course of U.S. foreign policy.

Talk with Unfriendly Governments and Groups

Americans demonstrate a substantial willingness to have the United States talk with leaders of unfriendly governments and groups. Reminded that there is currently a debate about whether U.S. government leaders should be ready to meet and talk with leaders of countries and groups with whom the United States has hostile or unfriendly relations, majorities of Americans overall—including majorities of both Republicans and Democrats—endorse talking with all countries asked about (see Figure 2), including Cuba (70%), North Korea (68%), Iran (65%), Burma (63%), and Zimbabwe (61%). Slight majorities of Americans also support talking with Hamas (53%) and Hezbollah (51%). While higher majorities of

Figure 2 – Support for Talks with Enemies

Percentage who say U.S. government leaders should or should not be ready to meet and talk with leaders of countries and groups with whom the U.S. has hostile or unfriendly relations.



Democrats support talks with these two groups, majorities of Republicans do not.

When it comes to Iran and the dispute over its nuclear program,¹ support for talks does not mean Americans want to back down. While support for a military strike authorized by the UN Security Council against Iran’s nuclear energy facilities if Iran continues to enrich uranium remains low (20%), 75 percent of Americans favor applying diplomatic or economic pressure, with support for economic sanctions up 7 points from the Chicago Council’s 2006 study to 48 percent.

At the same time, a bipartisan majority of Americans show a readiness to make a deal with Iran. If Iran were to allow United Nations inspectors permanent and full access throughout Iran to make sure it is not developing nuclear weapons, 56 percent say that Iran should be allowed to produce nuclear fuel for producing electricity.

This is consistent with a more general readiness to give the United Nations a stronger role in dealing with the potential for nuclear proliferation. Sixty-three percent of Americans favor having a UN agency control access to all nuclear fuel

1. A finding from the Chicago Council’s Global Views 2006 public opinion study indicated that 80 percent of the American public believes Iran is producing enriched uranium in an effort to produce nuclear weapons.

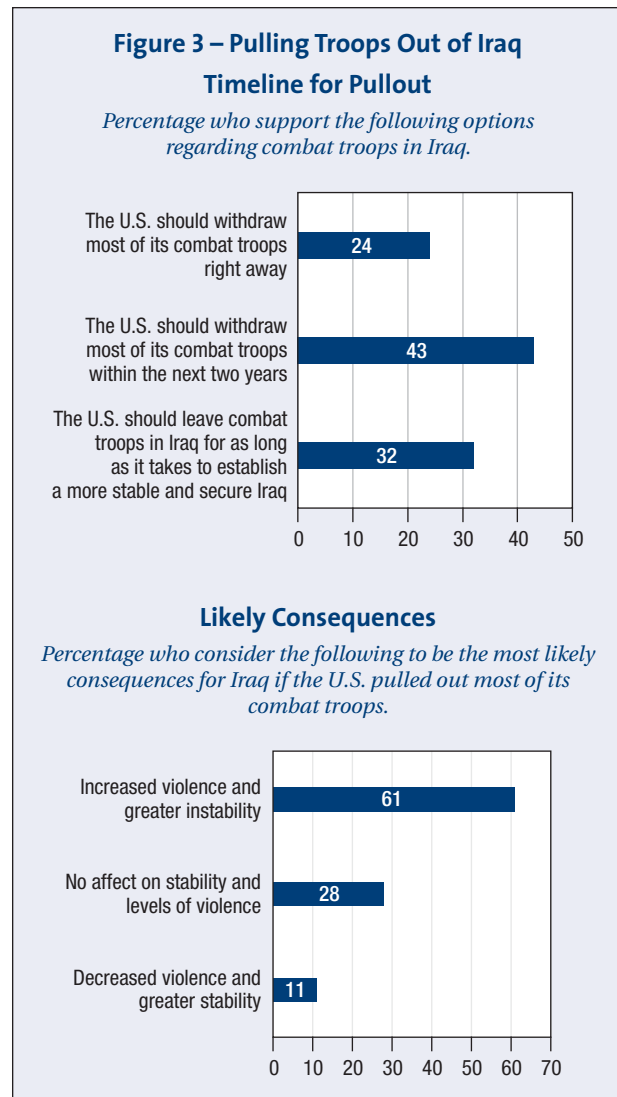
in the world to ensure that none is used for weapons production. Thirty-five percent oppose this.

Set a Timetable to Withdraw from Iraq

A majority of Americans do not want to maintain an open-ended commitment to Iraq. Only 32 percent favor keeping combat troops in Iraq for as long as it takes to establish a more stable and secure Iraq (see Figure 3). Sixty-seven percent want to withdraw U.S. troops right away (24%) or within the next two years (43%). However, there is a huge divide on this question between Republicans and Democrats, with 58% of Republicans and only 9% of Democrats favoring an open-ended commitment. A still significant 42 percent of Republicans favor withdrawal, compared with an overwhelming 91 percent of Democrats. The poll was conducted before Washington announced on August 21 “aspirational timetables” for the withdrawal of troops from Iraq.

When asked about the likely consequences for Iraq of a pullout, 61 percent of Americans expect there would be increased violence and greater instability over the next several years if the United States pulled most of its combat troops from the country (see Figure 3). Twenty-eight percent believe pulling troops out would have no effect on stability and the levels of violence, with only 11 percent believing there would be decreased violence and increased stability.

Among Republicans and Democrats, views of the likely consequences appear to color views on pulling out. With 80 percent of Republicans convinced there will be increased violence and greater instability if most U.S. troops are withdrawn, a majority (58%) is in favor of staying as long as it takes. A majority of Democrats (53%), on the other hand—who overwhelmingly favor withdrawal within two years (91%)—believe there will either be no effect on the level of violence (37%) or decreased violence (16%). Forty-six percent of Democrats think there will be increased violence. These results also show, however, that there are



notable numbers in both parties who support withdrawal despite the expectation of increased violence in Iraq.

To be sure, Americans do not support a *total* withdrawal from Iraq, with 57 percent (8 points higher than in 2006) supporting long-term U.S. military bases there.

A bipartisan majority of Americans express regret about the Iraq war. Three-quarters (76%) agree that the war cost hundreds of billions of dollars that could have been spent on needs at home (54% among Republicans, 95% among Democrats). Fifty-nine percent overall say the threat of terrorism has not been reduced by the war, though 65 percent of Republicans think it has.

Pursue Terrorists Groups into Pakistan

While the intensity of fear about international terrorism has been slowly declining in Chicago Council surveys, it is still a great concern. Seventy percent of Americans still consider international terrorism a critical threat (down from 74% in 2006 and 75% in 2004), and 55 percent consider violent Islamist groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan as a critical threat.

Consistent with these concerns, Americans strongly favor going after terrorists in their Pakistani hideouts. Asked what the United States should do if it locates high-ranking members of terrorist groups operating in Pakistan that threaten the United States, 68 percent say the United States “should” take military action to capture or kill these terrorists even if the government of Pakistan does not give the United States permission to do so (29 percent say it “should not” do this).

On the other hand, there are limits to what Americans are willing to do unilaterally. Reminded that Pakistan possesses nuclear weapons and then asked what the United States should do if the government of Pakistan fell into the hands of Islamic extremists, only 36 percent say the United States should use military force to secure Pakistan’s nuclear weapons “even without UN approval.” Forty-three percent favor such military action “only with UN approval,” and 18 percent oppose the use of military force to secure Pakistan’s nuclear weapons. More Republicans

favor using force without UN approval (48%), while more Democrats favor using force only with UN approval (55%).

Sign Treaties on Nuclear Tests, Climate Change

Contrary to current U.S. policy and consistent with previous Chicago Council studies, an overwhelming majority of Americans (88%) favor signing a treaty that bans nuclear weapon test explosions worldwide (see Figure 4), and three in four are opposed to any possible first-use of nuclear weapons. This is consistent with a high level of concern over the potential for nuclear proliferation—67 percent say that the possibility of unfriendly countries becoming nuclear powers is a critical threat, and 73 percent say that preventing the spread of nuclear weapons is a very important foreign policy goal.

Earlier Chicago Council polls found that Americans favored U.S. participation in the Kyoto treaty on climate change. Next year in Copenhagen, negotiations will begin on a successor treaty. When asked whether the United States should participate in a new international treaty to address climate change by reducing green house gas emissions, 76 percent say that the United States should participate (see Figure 4). This is 6 percentage points higher than those who thought the country should participate in the Kyoto agreement in 2006 and includes majorities of both

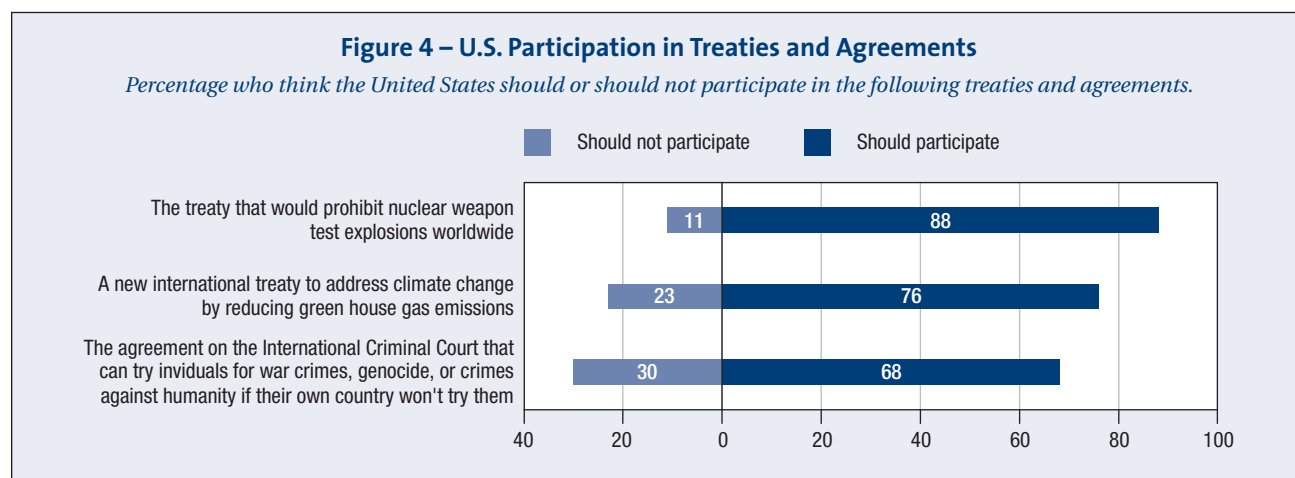
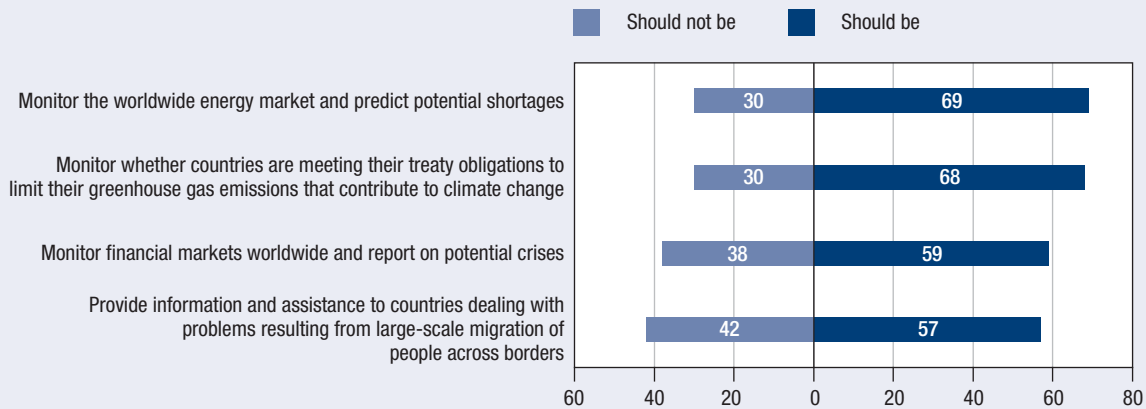


Figure 5 – Support for New International Institutions

Percentage who think there should or should not be new international institutions to do the following.



Democrats and Republicans. There is also bipartisan support for the International Criminal Court (ICC), with 68 percent of Americans saying the United States should participate in an agreement on the ICC that can try individuals for war crimes, genocide, or crimes against humanity if their own country won't try them (see Figure 4).

Work through International Institutions

As Chicago Council polls have found in the past, Americans do not want to play the role of world policeman, with 77 percent believing the United States is playing this role more than it should be. This belief is accompanied by solid support for the work of international institutions. For example, there is bipartisan support for strengthening the United Nations in many areas. Majorities favor giving the United Nations the authority to go into countries to investigate violations of human rights (73%); creating an international marshals service that could arrest leaders responsible for genocide (71%); having a standing UN peacekeeping force selected, trained, and commanded by the United Nations (70%); and, as mentioned, having a UN agency control access to all nuclear fuel in the world to ensure that none is used for weapons production (63%). An overall majority of Americans (57%) also favor giving the United Nations the

power to regulate the international arms trade, though a majority of Republicans (54%) oppose this. A 67 percent majority of Americans think the UN Security Council has the responsibility to authorize the use of military force to protect people from severe human rights violations such as genocide, even against the will of their own government.

In addition, the public is not opposed to giving more countries a say at the United Nations. Americans support adding Japan (67%), Germany (66%), Brazil (53%), India (53%), and South Africa (47%) as permanent members of the UN Security Council. Strong majorities of both Republicans and Democrats favor the additions of Japan and Germany, two close allies of the United States, to the Security Council. There is a partisan split in the cases of India, Brazil, and South Africa—majorities of Democrats favor their inclusion, while majorities of Republicans oppose such action.

When it comes to decision making, a majority of Americans (52%) agree that the United States should be more willing to make decisions within the UN even if this means that the United States will sometimes have to go along with a policy that is not its first choice. There are, however, signs of frustration with this idea in the 10-point jump (from 36% to 46%) among those who believe the United States should not be more willing to make decisions within the UN, including 65 percent of Republicans.

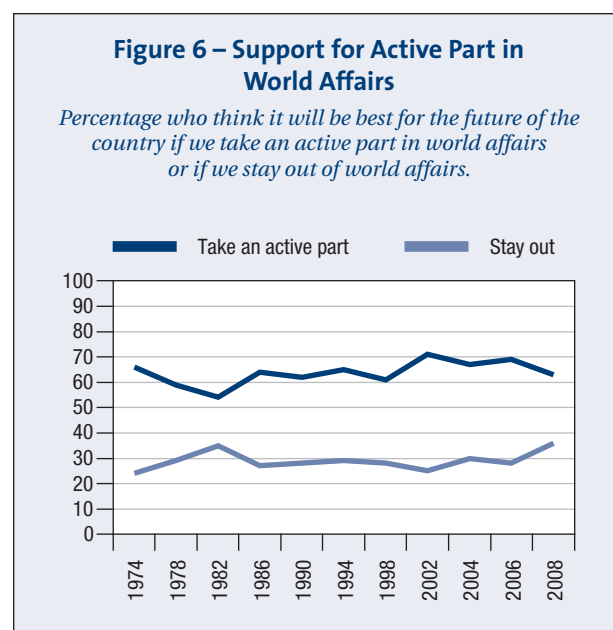
There is strong support for new international institutions to deal with new problems the world is facing (see Figure 5). Americans favor new institutions to monitor the worldwide energy market and predict shortages (69%), to monitor compliance with climate change treaties (68%), to monitor worldwide financial markets (59%), and to provide information and assistance to countries dealing with large-scale migration (57%). Republicans are divided in their support of institutions to monitor climate change compliance and financial markets and to provide assistance with migration.

Skepticism about Exporting Democracy

The U.S. public does not view helping to bring a democratic form of government to other nations as a high priority. This foreign policy goal is considered “very important” by only 17 percent of Americans, placing it at the bottom of the list. This goal has long been at or near the bottom of the list, but has been at historically low levels in the last three surveys since the Iraq war began. Further, a majority (54%) believes the United States should not support a country becoming a democracy if there is a high likelihood that the people will elect an Islamic fundamentalist leader.

The Bottom Line: A Change in Course, But Not in Commitment

While Americans support many changes in U.S. foreign policy, they also continue to show support for a robust U.S. presence in the world. Consistent with previous polls, the Chicago Council survey shows that a strong majority of Americans (63%) want the United States to play an active part in world affairs (see Figure 6). Yet perhaps reflecting economic anxieties and increased suspicion of globalization (see the Chicago Council’s Global Views 2008—Economic Policy Report) along with feelings about the war in Iraq, a record 36 percent think the United States should stay out of world affairs, up eight points since 2006 and the highest



percentage recorded since pollsters began asking this question in 1947.

Support for maintaining superior military power worldwide is holding steady, with 57 percent saying it is a very important foreign policy goal. Only 28 percent of Americans favor cutting defense spending, with 40 percent in favor of keeping it the same and 31 percent favoring an increase. Public support for maintaining military bases around the world remains strong, and in some cases such as Iraq and Afghanistan, support has increased. As mentioned, a majority of 57 percent (8 points higher than in 2006) believes that the United States should have long-term military bases in Iraq. The same percentage agrees that the United States should have a base in Afghanistan (5 points higher than in 2006).

Americans also support the use of U.S. troops for a variety of international peacekeeping and humanitarian operations. Large majorities (69% and 62%, respectively) favor using U.S. troops to stop a government from committing genocide and killing large numbers of its own people and to be a part of an international peacekeeping force to stop the killing in Darfur. A smaller majority of 52 percent supports using troops to keep a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.

A Pragmatic New Direction in Foreign Policy

Overall, the Chicago Council survey reveals an American public concerned about U.S. standing in the world and supportive of a series of targeted changes in foreign policy to address perceived problems. While the changes appear more pragmatic than ideological, they add up to a strong shift in direction, with an emphasis on using talks and multilateral institutions to tackle problems, even while keeping the military strong.

Methodology

The survey of the United States was conducted by Knowledge Networks (KN), a polling, social science, and market research firm in Menlo Park, California. The survey was conducted between July 3 and July 15, 2008, with a total sample of 1,505 American adults who had been randomly selected from KN's respondent panel and answered questions on screens in their own homes. Some questions were given to the entire sample population and others were given to a random two-thirds. The margin of sampling error is between plus or minus 3.7 percentage points and plus or minus 2.5 percentage points.

The survey was fielded using a randomly selected sample of KN's large-scale, nationwide research panel. This panel is itself randomly selected from the national population of households with telephones. These households are subsequently provided Internet access for the completion of surveys (and thus the sample is not limited to those in the population who already have Internet access). The distribution of the sample in the Web-enabled panel closely tracks the distribution of United States Census counts for the U.S. population eighteen years of age or older on age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, geographical region, employment status, income, education, etc. To reduce the effects of any nonresponse and noncoverage bias in panel estimates, a post-stratification raking adjustment is applied using demographic distributions from the most recent

data from the Current Population Survey (CPS). The post-stratification variables include age, race, gender, Hispanic ethnicity and education. This weighting adjustment is applied prior to the selection of any client sample from KnowledgePanelSM. These weights constitute the starting weights for any client survey selected from the panel.

Once the study data are returned from the field, the final qualified respondent data are subjected to an additional poststratification process to adjust for any nonresponse and noncoverage as a result of the study-specific sample design. The primary purpose of this poststratification adjustment is to reduce the sampling variance for any characteristics highly correlated with the representative study population's demographic and geographic totals (these are referred to as the population benchmarks). This adjustment also helps reduce bias due to survey nonresponse.

The panel is recruited using stratified random digit dialing (RDD) telephone sampling. RDD provides a nonzero probability of selection for every U.S. household with a telephone. Households that agree to participate in the panel are provided with free Web access and an Internet appliance (if necessary), which uses a telephone line to connect to the Internet and uses the television as a monitor. For more information concerning the methodology of the U.S. sample, please visit the KN Web site at www.knowledgenetworks.com.

Acknowledgments

The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, founded in 1922, is a prominent, independent, and nonpartisan organization committed to influencing the discourse on global issues through contributions to opinion and policy formation, leadership dialogue, and public learning. The Chicago Council has been conducting nationwide public opinion surveys on American views on foreign policy since 1974. These surveys provide insights into the current and long-term foreign policy attitudes of the American public on a wide range of global topics.

Christopher Whitney, now former executive director for studies at The Chicago Council, and

Gregory Holyk, project consultant for the 2008 public opinion study, served as project directors. Silvia Veltcheva, program officer at The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, managed all aspects of the project. Other contributors included Marshall M. Bouton, Rachel Bronson, Catherine Hug, Steven Kull, Benjamin I. Page, and Andrew Sherry.

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The Chicago Council will also release in fall 2008 a longer report that more fully examines the survey results. Both reports will be available on the Internet at www.thechicagocouncil.org.