

1971

## Political Beliefs and Public Opinion

Lloyd A. Free

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Free, Lloyd A. (1971) "Political Beliefs and Public Opinion," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 24 : No. 3 , Article 3.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol24/iss3/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

*In dealing with the American public on important political issues, one must be conscious of a schizophrenic pattern that exists in public attitudes. On the domestic scene the majority of Americans are ideologically conservative, but, paradoxically, they are operationally liberal in that they support vast welfare programs. This pattern also exists in the public's attitude toward international affairs and military spending. In general the public supports a strong international posture but is less than enthusiastic in the commitment of forces over a prolonged period. Likewise, the majority of the public rates keeping our military posture strong high on its list of national priorities, but it also indicates that defense spending is too high.*

## POLITICAL BELIEFS AND PUBLIC OPINION

An address delivered at the Naval War College

by

Dr. Lloyd A. Free

I suppose most of you would agree that the climate of opinion in most societies, and especially democracies, imposes limits, sometimes very broad, sometimes very narrow, on the government's area of maneuver. In the extreme, certain things are virtually taboo; in other cases, they are merely impolitic; in many others, anything is possible, particularly where public opinion is either in agreement or is nonexistent, weak, or divided.

Let us assume that you have just been elected President of the United States. What are the basics that you ought to know about American political beliefs and public opinion; the factors that remain more or less constant; the elements you could enlist in support of your policies and programs, domestic and international, on the one hand, or that would inhibit the exercise of your powers as President and Commander in Chief, on the other?

In discussing the domestic side (before proceeding to international affairs), I will be using the terms "liberal" and "conservative" quite freely; so, in the best academic tradition, I had better define them. Probably the meaning of few words in English or any other language has come around full circle to the same extent as "liberal" and "liberalism." According to the older definition, "liberalism" had, of course, to do primarily with the protection of the individual against encroachment by the state; its essence was individualism. Self-reliance, individual initiative, and private enterprise were unqualifiedly good. Government was the enemy to be distrusted and held in check.

At the political level, the assumptions of old-style liberalism dictated a system of checks and balances and a division of power between the States and the Federal Government, with the latter having distinctly limited powers

and all matters closest to the lives of the citizens being reserved to the States. At the economic and social level, liberalism as then defined was closely linked to *laissez-faire*. Private property was sanctified. Private enterprise was looked upon not only as a direct expression of economic freedom, but as important also in facilitating political liberty.

Particularly after the Civil War, the prevailing theories of social Darwinism held that competition, unimpeded by Government, assured the survival of the fittest. Poverty was considered the result of inherent inferiorities. State intervention, by inhibiting the development of individual initiative and responsibility, was seen as stultifying the development of character and protecting the lazy, the inefficient, and the shiftless. These doctrines of liberalism (old style), widely propagated by the stories of Horatio Alger, are what we mean by the traditional American ideology.

From "Liberalism" to "Conservatism." The main point to be made here is that in the 17th and 18th centuries, when these doctrines of liberalism were first advanced, they were devised and resorted to by "liberals" in the sense of innovators: men like Locke, Montesquieu, and Adam Smith, who were attacking the *status quo*, and more particularly (1) the domination of government by the aristocratic class and (2) the "mercantile system" under which that government stifled the rising industrial class. Their philosophy was designed to rationalize change and hence was "liberal" in character.

By the middle of the 19th century, however, the doctrines of liberalism, as further developed by such men as Spencer and Sumner, were being used for exactly the opposite purpose: namely, by "conservatives" to defend the new *status quo*. By this time, particularly after the Civil War, the business class was in the saddle and was fearful that, with the extension of

suffrage, governments would prove too sensitive to the needs of the people and adopt "dangerous" working-class reforms.

Thus, while the doctrines of liberalism remained essentially the same, they were taken over from the liberals by the conservatives, and the term "liberalism" came to mean resistance to change and the rationalization of the *status quo*. For this reason, I refer to the traditional American ideology as "conservative" rather than "liberal," despite its origins.

**Ideological Conservatism.** Despite all that has happened in this country during the 20th century—despite the New Deal, the Fair Deal, the New Frontier, and the Great Society—a majority of Americans continue to adhere to most of these doctrines of 19th century liberalism which in today's terminology is equivalent to conservatism; they remain what I shall call "ideological conservatives." This fact emerged very clearly from a large-scale public opinion study our institute carried out before the elections in 1964, which, along with more recent data, was published a couple of years ago in my book (with the late Hadley Cantril) *The Political Beliefs of Americans*.

Among other things, we asked a large national cross section of the American adult public whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements having to do with abstract ideas about the proper role and sphere of government, and of the Federal Government in particular. Here are examples of some of these statements and the reactions to them:

"*The Federal Government is interfering too much in state and local matters.*" Four out of 10 of our respondents agreed.

"*Social problems here in this country could be solved more effectively if the government would only keep its hands off and let people in local communities*

handle their own problems in their own ways." One-half agreed, with only 4 in 10 disagreeing (the rest having no opinion).

"The government has gone too far in regulating business and interfering with the free enterprise system." A plurality agreed.

"The government is interfering too much with property rights." Again, a plurality agreed.

"There is a definite trend toward socialism in this country." Close to one-half agreed, with only one-fifth disagreeing, the rest having no opinion.

"There is too much Communist and left-wing influence in our government these days." Almost one-half agreed, with only 3 in 10 disagreeing.

**Socioeconomic Concepts.** The abstract concepts Americans tend to hold about the nature and functioning of our socioeconomic system are even more pronouncedly conservative than their notions about the role and sphere of Government. Here is the way the people interviewed reacted to a series of statements along this line:

"Generally speaking, any able-bodied person who really wants to work in this country can find a job and earn a living." At the time these interviews were conducted, the unemployment rate was in excess of 5 percent (as it is today) and among blacks was considerably higher than 15 percent. Most of these people were able bodied, and most of them wanted to work. They could not find jobs because of economic conditions in general and lack of education, training, and skills in particular. Nevertheless, despite the statistical evidence to the contrary, more than three-quarters of our respondents subscribed to the myth that any able-bodied person who really wants to work can find a job.

With this assumption about the availability of job opportunities, it is little wonder that great skepticism was expressed about the unemployed and

their qualifications for government relief. Here, for example, are the reactions to a couple of other statements.

"The relief rolls are loaded with chiselers and people who just don't want to work." Two-thirds of our sample agreed.

"In your opinion, which is generally more often to blame if a person is poor—lack of effort on his part, or circumstances beyond his control?" Only one-quarter said circumstances beyond his control. Most of the rest, amounting in all to 72 percent pointed either to lack of effort, pure and simple, or to a combination of lack of effort and circumstances—which, of course, still leaves the stigma of blame resting on the poor for their own condition.

This no doubt reflects the Puritan ethic that, whereas virtue is rewarded in material ways, poverty is evidence of sin. As that great Christian leader, Henry Ward Beecher, once put it: "No man in this land suffers from poverty unless it be more than his fault—unless it be his sin." So greatly imbedded is their feeling of guilt that even a majority of the poor agreed that they were at least partially to blame for their own condition, either because of lack of effort or lack of effort plus circumstances.

The reactions of a huge majority to another of the statements are related to this dominant belief in the culpability of the poor:

"We should rely more on individual initiative and not so much on governmental welfare programs." Eight out of 10 of our respondents agreed.

In short, despite actual practices in recent decades at the operational level of Government, Americans at the ideological level continue to pay lipservice in amazing degree to stereotypes and shibboleths inherited from the last century. The abstract ideas they tend to hold about the nature and functioning of our socioeconomic system still seem to stem more from the underlying assumptions

of a *laissez-faire* philosophy than from the operating assumptions of the New Deal, the Fair Deal, the New Frontier, or the Great Society.

**The Ideological Spectrum.** In order to make general groupings based on these results, I devised what I call an Ideological Spectrum. This rated respondents according to their reactions to certain key statements, such as those given above, some having to do with ideological conceptions about the proper role and sphere of Government and some with abstract ideas about the nature and functioning of our socio-economic system. These provided a rough index of the degree to which respondents accepted or rejected the traditional American conservative ideology.

Under this scheme, a person who agreed with all of the chosen propositions was rated "completely conservative," and one who disagreed "completely liberal." In between these two extremes the Ideological Spectrum provided categories for "predominantly conservative" (meaning the respondent agreed with most but not all); "predominantly liberal" (meaning he disagreed with most but not all); and "middle of the road" (meaning he agreed within about half and disagreed with about half). Grouped in this way, our sample divided as follows:

Completely liberal	4%
Predominantly liberal	12
Middle of the road	34
Predominantly conservative	20
Completely conservative	<u>30</u>
	100%

Thus one-half of the public proved to be ideological conservatives, either completely or predominantly, and one-third middle-of-the-roaders, with only 16 percent putting themselves in the liberal category. It thus became clear that full *ideological* conformity with the trend of

policies and programs represented by the New Deal to the Great Society was confined to the small minority of 16 percent who qualified as liberals on our Ideological Spectrum.

The generally conservative stance at the ideological level indicates, of course, that the liberal trend of policies and programs since the days of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal has little secure underlying foundation in any ideological consensus. For example, so long as three-fourths of the public believe that any able-bodied person can find a job and earn a living, it can hardly be argued that there is solid support in popular beliefs for large elements of any "war on poverty" or similar programs yet to come.

Then, how did it come about that New Deal-type programs have received widespread public backing, for there is no doubt that they have?

**New Style "Liberalism."** To answer this question, we must first go back a bit in American history. Against the background of 19th century liberalism old style, a new liberalism in the present-day sense of the term gradually emerged in some of the States early in the 20th century and was heralded at the Federal level by the progressive regimes of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson.

As a practical matter, the new style liberals increasingly recognized the need for governmental action to protect the underprivileged. They favored strengthening the powers of Government in the interests of public welfare, with particular attention to social amelioration. They supported compulsory education, unemployment and old-age insurance, minimum wages, and the like as enlargements of, not restrictions on individual liberty. Earlier, resort to Government was condoned to advance economic development; now, the idea was to use Government to promote social justice. This new liberalism accomplished an

enduring breakthrough during the regime of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

However, neither Roosevelt nor those who followed him ever evolved a coherent philosophy of liberalism (new style) to rationalize the programs they supported. The approach has tended to be based on "problem solving" in the light of social conscience, rather than on any ideological premises.

Yet, while the majority of Americans remain conservative at the ideological level, in the sense that they continue to accept the traditional American ideology which advocates the curbing of Federal power, at the practical level of governmental operations there has obviously been an apparently inexorable trend in liberal directions since the days of the New Deal. In fact, in 1966 President Johnson was quoted as saying that "the developments of 1965, coupled with the election of 1964, show that the old argument over the 'welfare state' has been resolved in favor of federal action." Whether or not the United States has already become a welfare state depends upon varying definitions; but that it has been moving in that direction, no one can deny.

How has this been possible in our democracy if a majority of the citizenry are ideological conservatives who, assumedly, should resent and oppose such tendencies?

**Attitudes toward Government Programs.** The answer lies in the fact that the political thinking of Americans—if it can be called thought—is very different at two distinct and conflicting levels. The reactions of the majority at the *ideological* level have already been described. But, if you question Americans about the *operational* level of Government programs, a completely different picture emerges. For example, in 1968 we asked a national cross section of adult Americans whether Government spending for certain types of programs should be increased, kept at the present

level, reduced, or ended altogether. Some of the results are given below.

First, let us take the Federal program to help build low-rent public housing. Among our respondents, 35 percent thought Federal spending for this purpose should be increased, and 43 percent that it should be maintained at the present level—making a total of almost 8 out of 10 who favored maintaining at least the current level of expenditures for this purpose.

Similar results emerged in connection with the Federal program to improve education: 36 percent said spending for this purpose should be increased; an equal proportion that the present level should be maintained—making a total of more than 7 out of 10 endorsing this Federal effort.

Even more—almost 9 out of 10—approved the Federal program to make a college education possible for young people who could not otherwise afford it.

Three-quarters supported the Federal program to rebuild rundown sections of our cities—that is, urban renewal: almost 4 out of 10 said that spending for this purpose should be increased and an equal proportion that it should be continued at the present level.

Nine out of 10 endorsed the Federal program to retrain poorly educated people so they could get jobs.

Almost 8 out of 10 supported the Medicaid program of the Federal Government to help pay the medical bills of low-income families.

Whatever the definitions of "liberal" and "conservative" from the historical point of view, it appears to me that, practically speaking, one of the best ways to differentiate liberals from conservatives in this country under present circumstances is to test attitudes toward uses of the power and resources of governments, and particularly the Federal Government, in order to accomplish domestic social objectives. The general disposition of the liberals is to

approve such uses, of the conservatives to disapprove. It is in this limited, primary sense that I shall use the words "liberal" and "conservative" in the rest of this article.

**The Operational Spectrum.** It is crystal clear from our data that, while a majority of Americans are *ideological* conservatives, at the same time a huge majority of these same people are *operational* liberals. To demonstrate this I devised an Operational Spectrum, similar to the Ideological Spectrum described above. Under this scheme a respondent was classified as "completely liberal" if he favored either increasing or maintaining the present level of Federal spending for such programs as those involving education, urban renewal, job retraining, and Medicaid, along with rent supplements for low-income families. He was rated "completely conservative" if he advocated either reducing or terminating Federal expenditures for such purposes. In between these two extremes, the Operational Spectrum, like the Ideological Spectrum, provided categories for "predominantly liberal," "predominantly conservative," and "middle of the road." On this basis, the members of our sample grouped themselves as follows:

Completely liberal	33%
Predominantly liberal	39
Middle of the road	21
Completely or predominantly conservative	7
	<hr/> 100%

Thus, while only 16 percent of the public were liberals in the ideological sense, it turned out that at the level of Government operations almost three-quarters were either completely or predominantly liberal in the sense of favoring key Federal programs designed to accomplish social objectives.

Not unexpectedly, the highest percentages of operational liberals were to

be found among those who needed help from the Government most: the lower socioeconomic groups in terms of education and income, and especially the Negroes (98 percent of whom were rated as liberals, with no less than three-quarters qualifying as "completely liberal" because they favored *all* of the key programs asked about). In a related vein, the proportion of liberals was greater than average among blue-collar workers; Democrats; the young (21-29 years of age); Catholics; Easterners; and residents of large cities.

Markedly less liberal than average were those 50 years of age and over; the college educated; people with incomes of \$10,000 a year and more; and the WASP's (white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants), especially those living in smaller places and rural areas.

**Ideological Conservatives-Operational Liberals.** The explanation for the discrepancy between the results on the Operational Spectrum, which revealed a consensus on the liberal side, and those on the Ideological Spectrum, which leaned toward the conservative side, lies in the fact that more than one-quarter of the American people are at one and the same time both ideological conservatives and operational liberals.

The ideological liberals proved to be highly consistent: 9 out of 10 of them qualified as liberals on the Operational Spectrum. However, among the ideological conservatives, almost one-half emerged as liberals at the operational level. Henry Steele Commager described these people to a tee in this statement about Americans in general: "They clung to the vocabulary of *laissez-faire*, yet faithfully supplied the money and the personnel for vastly expanded governmental activities."

This conflict between attitudes toward Government programs and ideological concepts tends to be resolved in typically pragmatic American fashion: the practical is given precedence over

the theoretical. At the operational level of government, the great majority are more concerned about practical problems than they are about abstract ideas. In short, they want government to *work*, and to hell with the theories.

This situation was revealed when we asked a national cross section in 1968 how worried or concerned they were about a list of 23 issues or problems. The impression derived from the results is that the American people are most concerned about a number of sweeping international issues; that, next, they are showing growing concern about certain substantive domestic problems; and that they are bothered least of all by ideological issues. Particularly noteworthy in this connection is the fact that concern about Government spending was a good halfway down the list, and concern about "the trend toward a more powerful Federal Government" was actually in next to the last place.

**State and Local vs. Federal Action.** It is true that, in conformity with traditional American political ideology, the majority of the public favors State and local over Federal action in such fields as the problems of the poor and education. Correspondingly, they approve the idea of the Federal Government making more money available to State and local governments for such purposes. On the other hand, they have more confidence in the Federal Government to get things done in combating air and water pollution, apparently realizing that this problem often involves interstate aspects and probably cannot be tackled successfully without Federal standards.

Nevertheless, the fundamental point is that, despite their ideological beliefs, a large majority favors the use of governmental power and resources, including those of the Federal Government, to solve current problems and accomplish social purposes.

The moral of this story as a whole is, of course, that you, as incoming Presi-

dent, should talk like an ideological conservative but act like an operational liberal. However, you should not do the first without also doing the second. Witness, for example, candidate Barry Goldwater in 1964. He rode high, wide, and handsome so long as he was able to confine himself to talking conservative ideology. But the moment he was forced to discuss issues and Government programs, he was a dead duck. The crux of the matter was that the American people were not about to elect an *operational* conservative to the Presidency.

And, in my opinion, this is still true despite the alleged current trend toward conservatism. Obviously, the public is exhibiting some tendencies of what has come to be called conservatism in such matters as student unrest, law and order, and civil rights. But there is absolutely no data of which I am aware showing any falling away from the basic tendency toward operational liberalism that I have been describing.

In fact, quite the contrary. The public is becoming increasingly concerned about a number of problems it was not too aware of in former years—such as air and water pollution—and, as we have seen above, is looking to the Federal Government to solve them. Thus, as to the future, I can only envision a general trend toward further extensions of Federal power and programs, solidly backed by majority public opinion.

**International Attitudes.** Now let us turn to what you, as a newly elected President, ought to know about the international attitudes of Americans. The first thing that needs to be pointed out is that, despite their high degree of concern about foreign policy problems, a surprising number of our citizens are abysmally ignorant of the specifics of international affairs, even at the most elementary level.

To illustrate, the study our institute



conducted in 1964 showed that more than one-fourth of the American people (28 percent) had never heard or read of NATO. Only 58 percent knew that the United States is a member of NATO, and only 38 percent were aware that the Soviet Union is *not* a member—facts which obviously go to the very nature and fundamental purpose of America's most important alliance. Equally shockingly, one-quarter of the public did not even know that the government of mainland China is Communist! All in all, two-fifths of the American public are far too ignorant to play a role as intelligent citizens of a country which is the world's leader. Only about one-fourth are really adequately informed.

Nevertheless, ignorant or not, the great majority have opinions on international matters. In this connection, perhaps most fundamental of all at this time is the public's orientation on the spectrum stretching from isolationism to internationalism. To get at this, I used a series of statements in surveys conducted both in 1964 and 1968, with respondents being asked whether they agreed or disagreed with each. Here are some of the 1968 results:

*"The U.S. should cooperate fully with the United Nations."* More than 7 out of 10 agreed, with only one-fifth disagreeing.

*"In deciding on its foreign policies, the U.S. should take into account the views of its allies in order to keep our alliances strong."* No less than 84 percent agreed, with only 9 percent disagreeing (the rest having no opinion).

*"Since the U.S. is the most powerful nation in the world, we should go our own way in international matters, not worrying too much about whether other countries agree with us or not."* In this case, more than 7 out of 10 disagreed, with less than one-quarter agreeing.

*"The U.S. should mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along as best they can on their own."* Two-Thirds disagreed, with only

a little over one-fourth indicating agreement.

*"We shouldn't think so much in international terms but concentrate more on our own national problems and building up our strength and prosperity here at home."* In this case, 60 percent agreed, with only 31 percent expressing dissent.

**Isolationism vs. Internationalism.** In order to test internationalist-isolationist orientations on a generalized basis, I worked a series of these statements into a system of International Patterns. To qualify as "completely internationalist" under this scheme, a respondent had, for example, to agree that the United States should cooperate with the United Nations and should take into account the views of our allies, while disagreeing with the statements that the United States should go its own way, mind its own business, and concentrate more on national problems. To be "completely isolationist," a respondent had to give the opposite answers. Categories were also provided for "predominantly internationalist" and "predominantly isolationist," with a middle category labeled "mixed" (meaning, of course, a mixture of internationalist and isolationist patterns). The 1968 results deriving from this scheme looked like this:

Completely internationalist	25%
Predominantly internationalist	34
Mixed	32
Predominantly isolationist	6
Completely isolationist	<u>3</u>
	100%

Thus, as of 1968, the isolationists numbered less than 1 in 10 members of our adult population. The majority—almost 6 out of 10—were internationalists, either complete or predominant, with about one-third in the "mixed" category.

However, between 1964 and 1968 there had been a drop amounting to 5

percentage points in the "completely internationalist" ranks, with a corresponding increase of 6 percentage points in the "mixed" category, that is, of people halfway toward isolationism.

The drift away from the internationalist pole in our system of International Patterns resulted because higher percentages than in 1964 went along with two of the interrelated statements mentioned above. In the first place, more agreed with the minority view that "the U.S. should mind its own business and let other countries get along as best they can on their own"—the percentages rising from 18 percent in 1964 to 27 percent in 1968. Secondly, undoubtedly underlying the feeling that we should mind our own business internationally, there was increased majority sentiment in favor of the proposition that "we shouldn't think so much in international terms but concentrate more on our own national problems" here at home. Agreement with this statement rose from 55 percent in 1964 to 60 percent in 1968, assumedly fed by increasing concern about domestic problems the public felt were being neglected because of the war in Vietnam.

**Qualifiers of Internationalism.** Obviously, this feeling of the majority that we should turn inward toward our domestic problems is an important qualifier of the predominant internationalism of Americans. As in 1964, another qualifier that emerged in 1968 was allergic attitudes toward foreign aid. Six out of 10 advocated reducing such aid, if not terminating it entirely.

A further element that must be taken into account in characterizing the international outlooks of Americans is a certain nationalistic power-mindedness. Senator Fulbright (if I dare mention his name in this journal) might well consider the majority's reaction to the following statement as evidence of "the arrogance of power": "*The U.S. should maintain its dominant position as the*

*world's most powerful nation at all cost, even going to the very brink of war if necessary.*" One-half of our sample agreed, with 4 in 10 disagreeing (the remaining 10 percent having no opinion).

This feeling that the United States should maintain its position in the world is obviously one of the important motivations behind support for our internationalist posture. In this connection, it is significant that agreement with this statement dropped from 56 percent in 1964 to 50 percent in 1968, with disagreement rising from 31 percent to 40 percent. The guess might be ventured that one of the factors at work was disillusionment with the practical effects of the application of America's power in Vietnam.

With fear of the Soviet Union and China in the background, another of the strongest motivations of the American people when it comes to the U.S. role in world affairs is unquestionably anti-communism. This is reflected in reactions to the following statement: "*The U.S. should take all necessary steps, including the use of military force as we are now doing in Vietnam, to prevent the spread of communism to any other parts of the free world, no matter where.*" No less than 57 percent endorsed this statement in 1968, with an additional 19 percent saying we should defend some, if not all, areas or countries.

In short, on the surface at least, it would appear that almost 6 out of 10 Americans believe we should even go to war, if necessary, to prevent the spread of communism anywhere. Clearly, the doctrine of containment appears to be deeply implanted in the public's psychology.

**Theory vs. Practice.** Before we accept these results at face value, however, let me propound a hypothesis I developed recently which may have a bearing on the matter. You will remember that on

domestic issues we got widely divergent results with respect to conservatism and liberalism, depending upon whether we asked questions at the level of theory or at the level of practice. Something like this may be applicable in the case of international attitudes. I suspect, in short, that if you put a series of general principles, propositions, or slogans to the public, you will get one set of results, roughly corresponding to the ideological level. But if you confront people with a number of specific situations (particularly conflict situations), you will get a different set of results, corresponding to the operational level. I hope to chart this out systematically before long, but in the meantime let me illustrate what I have in mind.

In 1965 Lou Harris found that almost 8 out of 10 Americans thought it was right for the United States to use military power to keep communism out of North and South America. Yet in the wake of the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion, Gallup reported that two-thirds of the public were *against* sending our Armed Forces to help overthrow Castro; and opinion was even about equally divided on aiding the anti-Castro forces with money and war materials.

**The Korean War.** More broadly, let us again take the statement, endorsed by a majority of Americans, to the effect that the United States should take all necessary steps, including the use of military force, to prevent the spread of communism. How durable did this sentiment prove in the case of the war in Korea? In October 1950—before the Chinese came into the war—when respondents were asked whether the United States had made a mistake in deciding to defend Korea, two-thirds said no, that we had not made a mistake, with only 20 percent feeling that we had. At the same time, almost two-thirds felt that we should *not* stop the fighting when we had pushed the North Koreans back over the line where

they started, but should continue to fight in their territory until they surrendered.

Then the Chinese came in, and within 2 months public opinion had completely reversed itself:

One-half (which proportion rose to two-thirds by March 1951) felt we *had* made a mistake in getting involved in the first place;

—Almost two-thirds were of the opinion that we *should* stop fighting when we reached the dividing line between North and South Korea;

—Two-thirds said we ought to pull our troops out of Korea as fast as possible.

Obviously, such a change in opinion hardly squares with the belligerent stance assumed by the public on the general proposition of stopping the spread of communism. Clearly, what happened was that, with the Chinese coming into the war, the public concluded that, as a practical matter, the added cost in American lives and dollars just was not worth it. As I wrote in 1957, this abrupt turnabout was possible because "Americans were never really clear in their own minds what they were fighting for, what they were trying to accomplish, or what vital interests or purposes of theirs were involved."

**The War in Vietnam.** And now, of course, we have an essentially similar situation in the case of Vietnam, a situation I expected to develop even sooner than it did. To prove what a valid prophet I can be on occasion (I like, of course, to forget about those instances where my judgment proved faulty), let me quote from a lecture I delivered before the Naval War College just 1 year ago, when the trends of American opinion about the war in Vietnam were still somewhat obscure:

Our own Government will undoubtedly now have to face up to

the fact that the American people are becoming sick and tired of the war . . . It is my considered judgment as a so-called expert that we are in the early stages of an inexorable tide in favor of pulling out of Vietnam. There may be riptides from time to time which will temporarily obscure the direction of the current; but it is my belief that, however you and I may feel about the matter, the movement down below will continue ever more strongly in favor of disengagement.

As usual, when I stick my neck out this far, I did have some data up my sleeve to rely on. Studies our Institute conducted in this country showed that immediately after the Tet offensive, in mid-February 1968, the majority of Americans remained even more "hawkish" than they had been before. One-quarter advocated gradual escalation of the war, and no less than 28 percent opted for "an all-out crash effort in the hope of winning the war quickly, even at the risk of China or Russia entering the war."

However, in a report I wrote at that time, I pointed out that, in view of the then existing mood of intense frustration, a drastic change in the public opinion picture was a distinct possibility; and, in fact, a major shift was not long in coming. By June of 1968, 4 months later, one-half of the public had moved over to the "dove" side, with 7 percent favoring a cutback in the American military effort, and no less than 42 percent wanting us to discontinue the struggle and start pulling out of Vietnam (this latter figure being almost double what it had been in mid-February).

By June of this year (1970), Gallup found that the proportion thinking we had "made a mistake in sending troops to fight in Vietnam" had risen from 25 percent in March 1966 to 56 percent 4

years later. Correspondingly, by the latter date (that is June of 1970) about one-half favored withdrawal, either immediately or at least by July of 1971. And so it has gone.

Thus in regard to Vietnam we get much the same conflicting, almost schizoid patterning that we did on the liberal-conservative spectrum at the ideological and operational levels, respectively. A majority of the public says we ought to take all necessary steps, including the use of military force, to prevent the spread of communism anywhere in the world. But, when confronted with an actual conflict situation, a majority favors our withdrawing from Vietnam. After all, the last thing any realist—and particularly you as an incoming President of the United States—ought to expect from the greater public is local consistency!

**Military Spending.** In conclusion, much the same kind of inconsistency pertains in the case of a subject near and dear to your hearts: namely, attitudes toward the Defense Establishment and military spending. When we last asked a national cross section of Americans how worried or concerned they were about a list of over 20 issues and problems, the item "keeping our military defenses strong" was tied for second place. The only thing people were more concerned about was the problem of Vietnam.

Yet when last August, Gallup asked whether the Government was spending too little, too much, or about the right amount on national defense and military purposes, a clear majority of the public (52 percent) said too much, with only 8 percent saying too little, and 31 percent the right amount (the remaining 9 percent had no opinion). So, here again, the American people are concerned about keeping our military defenses strong and favor doing everything possible, including the use of military force, to prevent the spread of communism. But at one and the same time, a

majority wants to cut defense spending.

Certainly there is a logical inconsistency apparent here; but at the same time the public's mood is understandable. In the first place, there is frustration over the war in Vietnam which has rubbed off onto the military—unjustifiably, perhaps, but inevitably. Secondly, as our data show, since 1964 concern about several domestic problems has increased to a point where they now appear in the upper bracket of our list of worries and concerns: first, several interrelated items having to do with maintaining law and order (e.g., crime and juvenile delinquency, rioting in our cities, narcotics and drug addiction); air and water pollution; and, in general, the problems of our cities. Also, concern about inflation and the cost of living, not to mention high taxes, has gone up.

As people look around for resources with which to combat these problems their eye tends to light first on Vietnam. But even ending our participation there is not going to save enough to have much consequence. So where is the fattest looking source for more money to spend on domestic needs? Why the Defense Establishment, of course. Everybody knows how wasteful the military is. Naturally, they can manage to maintain our defenses with less money. Surely our boys can figure out some way to give us a bigger bang for less bucks.

Now this may, indeed will, seem ridiculous to most of you. But let me say in all frankness that the Defense Establishment has left itself wide open for this line of thinking. Just remember the stories that have appeared time after time in recent years: about gigantic cost overruns; about weapons and weapons systems on which billions have been spent, only to be abandoned or found faulty; about thousands of tanks "lost" or forgotten in Western Europe; et cetera.

If you ask me what can be done

about the public's current allergy toward defense spending, I would say very little for the time being. We students of public opinion have found through the years that it is usually events rather than persuasion or propaganda which trigger major changes in popular attitudes. However, this does not necessarily mean you must despair.

For one thing, when it finally eventuates, an end to our military participation in Vietnam will help remove the current bad taste in the public's mouth insofar as the Defense Establishment is concerned. More crucially, any further revival of Soviet and/or Chinese threats in contexts which clearly threaten our national security will give the public pause when it comes to crippling cuts in defense layouts.

More particularly, with the Russians probing as they now are to test U.S.

---

### BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Dr. Lloyd A. Free is the president of The Institute for International Social Research. His educational experience includes Princeton University, Stanford University Law School, Yenching University, and The George Washington University. Early in his career he practiced law, was a Fellow with the Rockefeller Foundation, and then affiliated with Princeton University as a lecturer in the School of Public and International Affairs and later served as Associate Director, Princeton Public Opinion Project. Dr. Free joined the Government in 1941 as the first Director of the Foreign Broadcast Intelligence Service. He subsequently served Government in numerous senior positions, some of which were Acting Director, Office of International Information of the State Department; Counselor of Embassy for Public Affairs in Rome; Consultant to President Eisenhower on psychological aspects of American foreign policy; and Cochairman, Task Force on USIA to advise President Kennedy.

---

weaknesses vis-a-vis the Middle East, Berlin, and Cuba, for example, it is more than likely that before long our illogical public will develop an enhanced awareness and appreciation of the dangers involved if the Soviet Union ever gains superiority over the United States. And, when that happens, the probability is that popular attitudes toward

the operational question of defense spending will, once again, come back into line with the essentially ideological beliefs of the majority of Americans that the United States should maintain its dominant position in the world at all costs and take all necessary steps to prevent the further spread of communism.



Military philosophies, bred and crystallized in the crucible of war against the elements and other adversaries, may not convincingly register on mentalities trained and experienced in totally different circumstances.

*Admiral R.B. Carney, USN: Address  
to the Naval War College, 31 May 1963*