

Right saw the Vietnam War as a just cause that was consistent with American innocence, benevolence, and exceptionalism—its failure was explained by the lack of will among the liberal establishment. Liberals and the political Left believed that the Vietnam War was an example of the lack of sufficient innocence and benevolence in U.S. foreign policy and that the United States should not and could not impose its will on other people. The mass public emphasized more pragmatic lessons: American troops should be used only for the most vital of interests and for a good cause where the war would be swift and involve minimal loss of American lives. Overall, the Vietnam War challenged the cultural assumptions that Americans held about themselves and their place in the world as no event had done before.

The rise of the so-called “Vietnam syndrome,” and the negative images associated in the minds of many Americans with the failure of the Vietnam War, were reinforced by the events of the 1980s. American exceptionalism in particular was open to question and doubt given the sense of humiliation Americans felt concerning the 444-day Iran-hostage crisis during the Carter presidency and the killing of 256 American marines in Lebanon under President Reagan, forcing their withdrawal from the region. This mass feeling of national impotence on a world stage helps to explain why Americans seemed to express such jubilation with the “great victory” involving the invasion of Grenada in 1983, for it followed immediately on the footsteps of the Lebanon fiasco and represented the first American military success abroad since Vietnam (even though the American military performance on the ground was abysmal; see essay 5.4 in chapter 5). This was then followed by the successful invasion of Panama in 1989. But it was the Persian Gulf War that really was instrumental in renewing American faith in its cultural assumptions and national style. Although many questioned the vital interests at stake, most Americans saw the U.S. role in the Persian Gulf crisis as a just cause. Most importantly, Americans were able to restore their inherent faith in their exceptionalism with the triumphant and unexpected military rout of Iraq in the war, accounting for the sense of celebration that Americans felt toward the troops who returned from the Persian Gulf and President Bush’s historically high public approval ratings following the war.

The Persian Gulf War, although it has helped to restore many of America’s cultural assumptions, has not eliminated the memories and shadows of other crucial historical events that have deeply affected the minds of Americans, such as World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. Although Americans continue to believe in their innocence, benevolence, and exceptionalism, it is colored by their understanding of the past and their hopes for the future. Conservatives and liberals possess strong nationalist sentiments and continue to believe in America, but in different ways. Conservatives, and the Right, believe that American innocence, benevolence, and exceptionalism have prevailed throughout American history; in contrast, liberals, and the Left, are more prone to see the good, the bad, and the ugly in American history, while still believing in the possibility of building an America where innocence, benevolence, and exceptionalism reign supreme. Most members of the mass public, being more pragmatic and centrist, probably entertain both sets of feelings at different times—what they

manifest depends upon the salience of the issues and how they are played out politically at the time. A kind of dualism, in other words, operates among members of the mass public, since they share a certain cynicism about American politics while still maintaining an optimistic image of American innocence, benevolence, and exceptionalism. This helps to explain how both liberal and conservative views, as embodied, for example, in President Carter's human rights policies and President Reagan's anticommunism, were initially attractive to most members of the public. It also explains why America's culture and national style will remain an integral part of the complex politics of U.S. foreign policy.

PATTERNS IN BELIEFS AND MAKING FOREIGN POLICY

In summary, the public's role in U.S. foreign policymaking depends on the different types of publics, beliefs, and influence exercised. American political culture and national style set the broad context within which the politics of U.S. foreign policy transpire. Then, the ideological and foreign policy beliefs of Americans further narrow what is possible and probable within domestic politics and the policymaking process. Finally, public opinion affects the foreign policy process as it fluctuates within the confines of American political culture and ideology. Together, the three sets of public beliefs are related and impact on one another, accounting for continuity and change in U.S. foreign policy since World War II.

The rise of a strong sense of American optimism and nationalism, of a foreign policy and ideological consensus, and of a responsive public opinion during the cold war led to increasing presidential power in foreign policy, an expanding national security bureaucracy, the development of a national security and free market ethos, and an acquiescent Congress and domestic environment. In this environment, the president and the executive branch dominated the making of U.S. foreign policy, while the demands of national security took precedence over the demands of democracy. The challenges of Vietnam and the 1960s led Americans to question the assumptions of American innocence, benevolence, and exceptionalism; produced greater ideological and foreign policy diversity; and contributed to public opinion volatility. These developments led to a reassertive Congress and changes in the domestic environment, such as more diverse electoral politics, new and varied interest groups and social movements, and a more critical media—the topics of the next three chapters. Thus, presidents entering office now face a paradox of presidential power, making it very difficult to successfully govern contemporary foreign policy. Changes in political culture, political ideology, and public opinion since the height of the cold war have meant that the era of extraordinary presidential power in foreign policy has passed and tensions between national security and democracy have increased.

Presidents are still powerful, but they no longer automatically govern and dominate the making of U.S. foreign policy. Since Vietnam, presidents have been unable to promote or take advantage of a majoritarian coalition throughout society in support of their foreign policy because of the diversity of thought and the domestic political competition it has generated. Johnson declined to run for reelection in 1968 over the Vietnam War once he lost the support of the American