

The American Public's Indifference to Foreign Affairs

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Last week, several events took place that were important to their respective regions and potentially to the world. Russian government officials suggested turning Ukraine into a federation, following weeks of renewed demonstrations in Kiev. The Venezuelan government was confronted with [violent and deadly protests](#). Kazakhstan experienced a financial crisis that could have destabilized the economies of Central Asia. [Russia and Egypt inked a significant arms deal](#). Right-wing groups in Europe [continued their political gains](#).

Any of these events had the potential to affect the United States. At different times, lesser events have transfixed Americans. This week, Americans seemed to be indifferent to all of them. This may be part of a cycle that shapes American interest in public affairs. The decision to raise the debt ceiling, which in the last cycle gripped public attention, seemed to elicit a shrug.

The Primacy of Private Affairs

The United States was founded as a place where private affairs were intended to supersede public life. Public service was intended less as a profession than as a burden to be assumed as a matter of duty -- hence the word "service." There is a feeling that Americans ought to be more involved in public affairs, and people in other countries are frequently shocked by how little Americans know about international affairs or even their own politics. In many European countries, the state is at the center of many of the activities that shape private life, but that is less true in the United States. The American public is often most active in public affairs when resisting the state's attempts to increase its presence, as we saw with health care reform. When such matters appear settled, Americans tend to focus their energy on their private lives, pleasures and pains.

Of course, there are times when Americans are aroused not only to public affairs but also to foreign affairs. That is shaped by the degree to which these events are seen as affecting Americans' own lives. There is nothing particularly American in this. People everywhere care more about things that affect them than things that don't. People in European or Middle Eastern countries, where another country is just a two-hour drive away, are going to be more aware of foreign affairs. Still, they will be most concerned about the things that affect them. The French or Israelis are aware of public and foreign affairs not because they are more sophisticated than Americans, but because the state is more important in their lives, and foreign countries are much nearer to their homes. If asked about events far away, I find they are as uninterested and uninformed as Americans.

The [United States' geography](#), obviously, shapes American thinking about the world. The European Peninsula is crowded with peoples and nation-states. In a matter of hours you can find yourself in a country with a different language and religion and a history of recent war with your own. Americans can travel thousands of miles using their own language, experiencing the same culture and rarely a memory of war. Northwestern Europe is packed with countries. The northeastern United States is packed with states. Passing from the Netherlands to Germany is a linguistic, cultural change with historical memories. Traveling from Connecticut to New York is not. When Europeans speak of their knowledge of international affairs, their definition of international is far more immediate than that of Americans.

American interest is cyclical, heavily influenced by whether they are affected by what goes on. After 9/11, what happened in the Islamic world mattered a great deal. But even then, it went in cycles. The degree to which Americans are interested in Afghanistan -- even if American soldiers are still in harm's way -- is limited. The war's outcome is fairly clear, the impact on America seems somewhat negligible and the issues are arcane.

It's not that Americans are disinterested in foreign affairs, it's that their interest is finely calibrated. The issues must matter to Americans, so most issues must carry with them a potential threat. The outcome must be uncertain, and the issues must have a sufficient degree of clarity so that they can be understood and dealt with. Americans may turn out to have been wrong about these things in the long run, but at the time, an issue must fit these criteria. Afghanistan was once seen as dangerous to the United States, its outcome uncertain, the issues clear. In truth, Afghanistan may not have fit any of these criteria, but Americans believed it did, so they focused their attention and energy on the country accordingly.

Context is everything. During times of oil shortage, events in Venezuela might well have interested Americans much more than they did last week. During the Cold War, the left-wing government in Venezuela might have concerned Americans. But advancements in technology have increased oil and natural gas production in the United States. A left-wing government in Venezuela is simply another odd Latin government, and the events of last week are not worth worrying about. The context renders Venezuela a Venezuelan problem.

It is not that Americans are disengaged from the world, but rather that the world appears disengaged from them. At the heart of the matter is geography. The Americans, like the British before them, use the term "overseas" to denote foreign affairs. The American reality is that most

important issues, aside from Canada and Mexico, take place across the ocean, and the ocean reasonably is seen as a barrier that renders these events part of a faraway realm. Terrorists can cross the oceans, as can nuclear weapons, and both can obliterate the barriers the oceans represent. But al Qaeda has not struck in a while, nuclear threats are not plausible at the moment, and things overseas simply don't seem to matter.

Bearing Some Burdens

During the Cold War, Americans had a different mindset. They saw themselves in an existential struggle for survival with the communists. It was a swirling global battle that lasted decades. Virtually every country in the world had a U.S. and Soviet embassy, which battled each other for dominance. An event in Thailand or Bolivia engaged both governments and thus both publics. The threat of nuclear war was real, and conventional wars such as those in Korea and Vietnam were personal to Americans. I remember in elementary school being taught of the importance of the battle against communism in the Congo.

One thing that the end of the Cold War [and the subsequent 20 years](#) taught the United States was that the world mattered -- a mindset that was as habitual as it was reflective of new realities. If the world mattered, then something must be done when it became imperiled. The result was covert and overt action designed to shape events to suit American interests, perceived and real. Starting in the late 1980s, the United States sent troops to Panama, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo and Kuwait. The American public was engaged in all of these for a variety of reasons, some of them good, some bad. Whatever the reasoning, there was a sense of clarity that demanded that something be done. After 9/11, the conviction that something be done turned into an obsession. But over the past 10 years, Americans' sense of clarity has become much more murky, and their appetite for involvement has declined accordingly.

That decline occurred not only among the American public but also among [American policymakers](#). During the Cold War and jihadist wars, covert and overt intervention became a standard response. More recently, the standards for justifying either type of intervention have become more exacting to policymakers. Syria was not a matter of indifference, but the situation lacked the clarity that justified intervention. The United States seemed poised to intervene and then declined. The American public saw it as avoiding another overseas entanglement with an outcome that could not be shaped by American power.

We see the same thing in Ukraine. The United States cannot abide a single power like Russia dominating Eurasia. That would create a power that could challenge the United States. There were times that the Ukrainian crisis would have immediately piqued American interest. While some elements of the U.S. government, particularly in the State Department, did get deeply involved, the American public remained generally indifferent.

From a geopolitical point of view, the future of Ukraine as European or Russian helps shape the future of Eurasia. But from the standpoint of the American public, the future is far off and susceptible to interference. (Americans have heard of many things that could have become a major threat -- a few did, most didn't.) They were prepared to bet that Ukraine's future would not intersect with their lives. Ukraine matters more to Europeans than to Americans, and the United

States' ability to really shape events is limited. It is far from clear what the issues are from an American point of view.

This is disconcerting from the standpoint of those who live outside the United States. They experienced the United States through the Cold War, the Clinton years and the post-9/11 era. The United States was deeply involved in everything. The world got used to that. Today, government officials are setting much higher standards for involvement, though not as high as those set by the American public. The constant presence of American power shaping regions far away to prevent the emergence of a threat, whether communist or Islamist, is declining. I spoke to a foreign diplomat who insisted the United States was weakening. I tried to explain that it is not weakness that dictates disengagement but indifference. He couldn't accept the idea that the United States has entered a period in which it really doesn't care what happens to his country. I refined that by saying that there are those in Washington that do care, but that it is their profession to care. The rest of the country doesn't see that it matters to them. The diplomat had lived in a time when everything mattered and all problems required an American position. American indifference is the most startling thing in the world for him.

This was the position of American isolationists of the early 20th century. ("Isolationist" admittedly was an extremely bad term, just as the alternative "internationalist" was a misleading phrase). The isolationists opposed involvement in Europe during World War II for a number of reasons. They felt that the European problem was European and that the Anglo-French alliance could cope with Germany. They did not see how U.S. intervention would bring enough power to bear to make a significant difference. They observed that sending a million men to France in World War I did not produce a permanently satisfactory outcome. The isolationists were willing to be involved in Asia, as is normally forgotten, but not in Europe.

I would not have been an isolationist, yet it is hard to see how an early American intervention would have changed the shape of the European war. France did not collapse because it was outnumbered. After France's collapse, it was unclear how much more the United States could have done for Britain than it did. The kinds of massive intervention that would have been necessary to change the early course of the war were impossible. It would have taken years of full mobilization to be practical, and who expected France to collapse in six weeks? Stalin was certainly surprised.

The isolationist period was followed, of course, by the war and the willingness of the United States to "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty," in the words of John F. Kennedy. Until very recently, that sweeping statement was emblematic of U.S. foreign policy since 1941.

The current public indifference to foreign policy reflects that shift. But Washington's emerging foreign policy is not the systematic foreign policy of the pre-World War II period. It is an instrumental position, which can adapt to new circumstances and will likely be changed not over the course of decades but over the course of years or months. Nevertheless, at this moment, public indifference to foreign policy and even domestic events is strong. The sense that private life matters more than public is intense, and that means that Americans are concerned with things that are deemed frivolous by foreigners, academics and others who make their living in public

and foreign policy. They care about some things, but are not prepared to care about all things. Of course, this overthrows Kennedy's pledge in its grandiosity and extremity, but not in its essence. Some burdens will be borne, so long as they serve American interests and not simply the interests of its allies.

Whether this sentiment is good or bad is debatable. To me, it is simply becoming a fact to be borne in mind. I would argue that it is a luxury, albeit a temporary one, conferred on Americans by geography. Americans might not be interested in the world, but the world is interested in Americans. Until this luxury comes to an end, the United States has ample assistant secretaries to give the impression that it cares. The United States will adjust to this period more easily than other governments, which expect the United States to be committed to undertaking any burden. That may come in the future. It won't come now. But history and the world go on, even overseas.

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