

Issues '96

A Guide to Public Deliberation

IN JANUARY, A FIRST-OF-A-KIND EVENT called the National Issues Convention will kick off the 1996 presidential campaign. The Issues Convention provides an occasion for a cross-section of the American public to grapple with key issues by engaging in serious dialogue with each other and with presidential candidates.

Think of it as a town meeting in which the entire country gathers in a single room to deliberate about pressing concerns and offer its considered judgments.

Thanks to the combined efforts of the University of Texas, the Public Broadcasting Service, and a dozen other organizations that have contributed their energy and resources to this nonpartisan event, 600 Americans will gather in Austin beginning on January 18. The individuals invited to this unique event are a representative sample of the American electorate, randomly chosen by the National Opinion Research Center. On January 20 and 21, delegates will be joined by presidential candidates, who will respond to questions from the delegates and talk about the

issues with them. The Public Broadcasting Service will cover the proceedings in a three-part special.

The purpose of organizing the National Issues Convention was to create a model that

others can replicate, an alternative to sound-bite democracy. When delegates are polled at the end of the convention, the results may suggest what the American electorate would think if most people were immersed in an intensive deliberative process.

Whether you are one of the citizen delegates at the national meeting in Austin or whether you take part in local forums convened as part of this nationwide event, this guide — prepared by Public Agenda, a nonpartisan organization devoted to research and public education — provides a place to start.

Democratic politics is supposed to be deliberative. It presumes that citizens think carefully about public problems. It also presumes a willingness to assess what the candidates are saying, to weigh different points of view, and think realistically about the costs and consequences of different courses of action. Ideally, voting is the result of such deliberation. Before stepping into voting booths in November, we need to come together to make up our minds about what kind of community and country we want.

Key Issues

During every presidential campaign, dozens of public problems clamor for top billing. As a practical matter, however, we need to focus on a few key issues.

Public Agenda began the process of identifying key issues by consulting recent studies of public sentiments about the nation's pressing problems. We consulted with hundreds of moderators and participants in the National Issues Forums, a nationwide nonpartisan network of locally-initiated forums. It was not simply a matter of choosing top-of-the-agenda concerns. We also tried to identify issues that citizens are having a

hard time sorting out for themselves, issues about which presidential candidates and the American public disagree, issues where leaders need a better sense of what course of action most Americans favor. Following this process, we chose the issues addressed in this guide.

The Quality of Public Conversation

Our main goal in preparing this guide was to stimulate fresh dialogue about the nation's problems. We need to

move beyond the partisan terms and shopworn phrases that so often characterize political discussion. This guide, which was reviewed by a distinguished bipartisan panel (see back page), frames discussion by presenting a map of each issue consisting of three directions for public action. Think of them as voices in a dialogue. None of the perspectives corresponds to a single legislative proposal or party platform. Each is a distinctive diagnosis that leads to a different set of prescriptions about what should be done.

After reflecting on these different perspectives, you may decide to combine elements of several of them. Still, since they lead to different courses of action, choices need to be made among them.

The kind of democracy we are able to maintain depends on the quality of the public conversation we sustain. This guide is an invitation to public deliberation, a framework for talking together about some of the nation's pressing problems.



Think of it as a town meeting where the entire country gathers to discuss pressing public concerns.

The National Issues Convention
The University of Texas at Austin
January 18-21, 1996

Prepared by
Public Agenda

for the **National Issues Convention**

Mission Uncertain

Reassessing America's Global Role

Suddenly, and to worldwide applause, the Berlin Wall collapsed in 1989 and the Soviets embraced democracy and capitalism. As the dust settled, the foundation for a half-century of U.S. foreign policy disappeared as well. During the Cold War, foreign policy focused its resources on containing communism and deterring nuclear war



with the Soviets – a mission that cost \$12.3 trillion (in today's dollars) and nearly 90,000 American lives on Korean and Vietnamese battlefields.

No longer a Cold Warrior, the United States does not have to worry about containing communism or a nuclear Armageddon with the Soviet Union. What does America

have to worry about now? What are our opportunities? And what goals should we pursue abroad?

There are many ideas, but no consensus among Americans or our leaders. Yet there is widespread agreement that it can be wasteful and dangerous to conduct foreign affairs without guidelines that have popular support. "The lack of a broad vision for American policy after the Cold War is a very serious problem," half of 350 leaders in business, politics, and community affairs told Public Agenda in a survey conducted in February and March, 1995.

Illustration: David Gotthard

Issue at a Glance

Why is this a key issue in 1996?

The role America plays in the world affects Americans in the most direct and significant ways. Different roles involve different levels of spending – and higher or lower taxes. Different roles affect U.S. businesses here and abroad – and healthy businesses provide jobs. And different roles involve different military strategies – and more or less risk for the lives of American soldiers.

As it is, the United States does not have a set of foreign policy goals that command widespread public support. Instead, the United States has to create a new role, and justifications for it, with every new international crisis. The result is global uncertainty – in how the U.S. will respond to crises and in how Americans will respond to government decisions. Today, many Americans wonder if U.S. policies are inconsistent or outdated. Why, for example, does the U.S. continue to ban American trade with communist Cuba while trading extensively with communist China? Why intervene in Bosnia's ethnic conflict, but not in Rwanda's? Why provide any foreign aid when almost one in four American children lives in poverty?

Where do we go from here?

Americans have the welcome opportunity to wipe the slate clean of Cold War priorities and draw up a new list. Americans differ on what the U.S. must do to protect and enhance our way of life. Americans also differ on the nature of our responsibilities to other nations. The nation's new role must also reflect core American values, which often conflict with one another. These values include self-reliance, democracy, human rights, charity at home and abroad, and loyalty to allies.



An era ends with the removal of Lenin's statue in East Berlin.

Patrick Piel/Gamma Liaison

What are some possible roles for the U.S.?



There is no consensus about what America's new role should be, and most political debates fail to address America's purpose abroad. This guide tries to advance the public discussion by defining three options based on public statements by experts and leaders as well as public concerns and core values.

One perspective says the Cold War is over and the nation can safely focus on domestic needs. This is not just an opportunity; it's a necessity because the nation's strength rests on its economic strength. The U.S. must remain militarily strong, but it does not have to play the role of global cop nor pay for the defense of our wealthy allies.

A second perspective sees the world as a dangerous place, ready to spin out of control. To guard against nuclear proliferation and to make sure that regional and civil wars do not engulf U.S. allies or interests abroad, the U.S. must remain active in global affairs and continue providing leadership. The U.S. is the reigning superpower, and no other nation has the moral authority or military might to do this job.

A third perspective asserts that the democratic principles that make the U.S. so special must also guide the nation's foreign policy. America's global role, according to this view, is to promote democracy and protect human rights. Idealism also pays important dividends: spreading democracy and capitalism opens new markets for U.S. products and, ultimately, spreads peace.

What are the underlying tensions?

Choosing a new role for the United States is difficult because our resources are limited. We must establish priorities and stick to them. The challenge is to find a role with the most opportunities and most acceptable costs and tradeoffs. If, for example, Americans decide that the United States should scale back its role abroad, then the U.S. would be less able to respond to humanitarian emergencies or to promote economic development in struggling democracies. Similarly, if the U.S. were to pursue a very active global agenda, there would be fewer resources available for domestic needs.

