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Will Americans Ever Care About Foreign Policy?

By **Peter Goldmark** | Friday, July 16, 2004

In the United States, the foreign policy realm has long been the near-exclusive domain of policy elites. But as Peter Goldmark of the non-profit group Environmental Defense explains, U.S. citizens are taking a new interest in foreign affairs at a time when it is most needed. What has brought about this reversal?

Over the past few decades, Americans have lived with the idea that elections are won and lost on domestic issues and that the American public is not much engaged by — or interested in — international relations.

Interest in international affairs

But there's increasing evidence that now, post-9/11, American citizens are developing a better grasp on the new global realities and are reaching the conclusion that they must take an interest in them.

Seldom has foreign policy been subject to the kind of broad and brawling interplay of democratic debate and public pressures that surrounds domestic issues.

I first witnessed this shift at an event held in January 2003. A representative group of Americans — 343 of them from all parts of the country — gathered in Philadelphia to deliberate on the international situation and U.S. foreign policy. What happened at that gathering was riveting.

Historically, in the United States the formulation and conduct of foreign affairs is an area of public policy that has been the preserve of special interests and “insider” experts.

Special interest monopoly

Only occasionally has the making of U.S. foreign policy been subject to the kind of broad and brawling interplay of democratic debate and public pressures that surrounds domestic issues.

This condition is a legacy of several attitudes that course deep within the American tradition.

Inaccessibility of foreign affairs

Reasons for this include a skeptical aversion to foreign entanglements, a sense that unity in support of the executive branch is important and expected in the field of

foreign policy — and a recognition that foreign affairs are unusually complicated and not easily accessible to the average citizen.

The U.S. media, with its frequently frugal and occasionally blundering coverage of international issues, has both reflected and contributed to this inaccessibility.

The people who gathered in Philadelphia were participants in a program called 'By the People' and had been selected to constitute a statistically valid sample of the American electorate.

Insight on public opinion

This meant that their views — surveyed both before they arrived and after they had deliberated together — had great potential significance for public officials.

The conference afforded an imperfect, but nevertheless dramatic and valuable, insight into patterns of thinking about international affairs, one that was representative of the American people as a whole.

Unexpected interest in international affairs

What I find most promising is this: The delegates clearly grasped that they simply could not ignore foreign issues — that they had to be interested in international affairs as citizens, as parents, as human beings.

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They understood that they weren't experienced in the field and that there was much they didn't know.

However, they also expressed a strong measure of confidence in their ability to assess the broad outlines of situations and issues and to question intelligently and listen critically to experts — which they did.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, former national security adviser to President Carter and today professor of American foreign policy at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, participated in the assembly.

Wake up call for policy makers

He is not a man known for his desire to democratize the formulation of foreign policy.

However, he told the assembled group that he was stunned by the quality and common sense of their questions and comments — and that this experience would force him to reassess his views on whether the public could provide useful input in the making of

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foreign policy.

This sign of hope comes at a moment when the role of the United States in the world has never been more pivotal and when its preparation for exercising that role wisely and responsibly has rarely seemed more ragged.



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