EXECUTIVE MEMORANDUM

To:	Whom It May Concern
From:	Chris Anderson, Daron Shaw, Andrew Schwartz & Rob Moser
Date:	November 20, 2023
Subject:	Results from the 2023 Annual Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute National Defense Survey

Overview

From October 27-November 5, 2023, the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute (RRPFI) sponsored a national poll to assess the priorities and opinions of Americans across a wide array of defense, military, and foreign policy issues. The 2023 poll is RRPFI's sixth such survey since 2018. The impetus behind the poll is straightforward: to provide politicians, policymakers, and experts consistent and timely information about public opinion on these critical issues.

Over those 10 days, the bi-partisan team of Beacon Research (D) and Shaw & Company Research (R) interviewed more than 2,500 adult citizens from across the United States. The poll gauged opinions on a variety of issues ranging from trust and confidence in the U.S. military, to assessments of domestic and international threats, to the appetite for U.S. global leadership. The survey includes a particularly comprehensive exploration of American public opinion on key foreign policy issues such as the conflict between Israel and Palestinians in Gaza, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the U.S. relationship with China.

Concerns about American Security

This survey comes at a time when Americans are deeply and increasingly concerned about the direction of the country. From 2018-2021, our surveys showed a shade over half of Americans thought the country was headed in the wrong direction; today, that number is 70%. Since early 2021, that increase is driven by Democrats (25% wrong direction in 2021 versus 51% in 2023) and independents (59% in 2021 versus 68% today).

A wide variety of issues elicit significant concern from our respondents. At the head of the list, 87% say they are concerned about political divisions in the U.S. leading to violence (54% "extremely" concerned). The next most concerning issue is cyber-attacks (86% concerned, 51% "extremely" so), followed by terrorist attacks on the homeland (81% concerned, 47% extremely), rising authoritarianism around the world (80% concerned, 41% extremely), and war between the U.S. and China (75% concerned, 37% extremely). The next tier of concerns includes climate change

(66% concerned, 40% extremely), conventional military attacks (63% concerned, 24% extremely), and an attack on our space assets (61% concerned, 25% extremely).

For the most part, Democrats and Republicans share these concerns, although Republicans are more likely to be concerned about war with China (82% to 67% for Democrats) and Democrats are much more likely to be concerned about climate change (91% to 41% for Republicans).

Against this backdrop of concerns about national security, the American people exhibit robust support for military spending. Seventy-seven percent support increased military spending (46% strongly support). This view is both consistent (above the 70% threshold in every survey since 2018) and bipartisan (more than seven-in-ten Democrats, Republicans, and independents support increased military funding).

There is also high support for increased spending on border security (70% support) and promoting freedom abroad (57% support). Americans are mixed on increased spending on foreign aid (48% support, 48% oppose).

Perhaps most instructively for the current Congress, 67% say they are "concerned" that congressional budget cuts could harm the military's capabilities (32% are extremely concerned). This includes strong majorities on both sides of the aisle, with 61% of Democrats and 76% of Republicans concerned.

Confidence in the Military

Overall confidence in the military has been stable since 2021, with 78% expressing confidence (and 46% expressing a "great deal of confidence") in the military in our 2023 survey. This overall confidence number exceeds those associated with police and law enforcement (64% confident), the Supreme Court (46%), the presidency (36%), the news media (33%), and that perennial whipping boy, Congress (26%).

But it is worth observing that this stabilization of trust in the military follows a substantial decline from 2018 to 2021: the percent saying they have a great deal of confidence dropped from 70% in 2018 to 63% in 2019 to 56% in early 2021 to 45% in late 2021, where it has since plateaued.

Confidence in the military varies by race (with Black and Hispanic respondents less trusting than Whites), and very slightly by partisanship (with independents less trusting than Democrats or Republicans). Interestingly, the long-term decline in trust is greatest among Republicans, whose confidence has dropped 39 points, from 87% expressing a "great deal of confidence" in 2018 to 48% holding this opinion in 2023. This shift among Democrats is only 12 points, from 59% to 47%.

The real driver appears to be age: only 30% of those under 30 years of age have a great deal of confidence in the military whereas 60% of those 65 and over hold this view.

Our 2022 survey explored the reasons for this increased disaffection with the U.S. military and found variation across the political spectrum. Specifically, conservatives were concerned about a "woke" military, while liberals cheered military efforts at inclusivity and were concerned about far-right extremism in the ranks. We leveraged these findings in our 2023 survey, asking whether the military has effectively balanced competing concerns:

- 23% say the military is too focused on social issues at the expense of warfighting.
- 24% say it is too focused on warfighting at the expense of social issues.
- 39% say it is appropriately balancing these.

This divide is driven by the expected partisan differences. Republicans think the military is too focused on wokeness by a 21-point margin (38% too focused on social issues, 17% too focused on warfighting), while Democrats think it is the other way around by an identical 21-point margin (9% too focused on social issues, 30% too focused on warfighting).

Once again, though, young people stand out from all other groups: 40% of those under 30 years of age say the military is too focused on warfighting compared to 16% who say it is too focused on social issues.
Black and Hispanic Americans think there is a focus on warfighting at the expense of social issues by 16 and 10 points, respectively. White Americans feel the reverse, by a narrow 3-point margin.

Thinking again about the current Congress, one thing that unites respondents is the notion that it is inappropriate to hold up nominees for senior military positions as a means of protesting Defense Department policies unrelated to warfighting. Almost two-thirds (63%) say this is inappropriate, including majorities of Democrats, independents, and Republicans. Only about one-in-five (22%) say it is appropriate.

Of course, a big-picture concern is that more critical views of the military might affect recruitment and personnel. We explore this potentiality by asking whether respondents would encourage a family member of friend to join the military. Half (51%) say they would, while 33% say they would not. As might be expected, those who express a great deal of confidence in the military are the most likely to encourage people around them to join (66%), while those with little or no confidence are the least likely (21%). Veteran households are relatively more likely to encourage service (56%), whereas younger people are relatively less likely (44%).

What are the top reasons for encouraging service? Patriotism and service to country top the list at 31%, followed by general support for the military (13%), the need for people in the military (12%), career opportunities and skills (11%), character building (10%), and positive personal connections with veterans (10%).

On the other side of the coin, the top reasons for discouraging service are that service is dangerous (21%), anti-war sentiment (20%), distrust of politicians and the current political climate (15%), the belief that it isn't worth it (13%), poor treatment of veterans (8%), and the belief that the military is too woke (8%).

All told, about one-in-ten Americans under the age of 30 are extremely or very willing to serve in the U.S. military.

U.S. Military Posture

In terms of overall posture, slightly more think we should be engaged in world events (42%) than think it's time to take a step back (32%)—but the margin has narrowed from 24 points in February 2021 to just 10 points now. Put more broadly, there is still an isolationist strand to American attitudes, but it is a minority opinion.

The "engaged" position on U.S. foreign policy is notably concentrated among the most educated (+32 more versus less engaged) and seniors (+31). Democrats and Biden supporters are relatively likely to see engagement as better, while Trump supporters are split.

The general question of engagement naturally leads to a more practical question: where should the U.S. concentrate its military resources? When faced with this task, respondents allocated resources roughly evenly over a wide range of regions, as if they were playing a high-stakes game of *Risk*. The average percentage of all forces allocated to different areas included 19% to the Middle East, 18% to East Asia, 17% to Europe, 13% to South Asia, 13% to Central America, and 10% each to South America and Africa. This preference holds across different partisan and demographic groups.

When forced to identify a single area of focus, the Middle East tops the list with 31%. East Asia is the runner-up at 25% followed by Europe with 19%; all other areas are at 3% or less. This represents a change from last year, when 31% chose East Asia, 18% chose Europe, 11% chose the Middle East, and 6% chose South Asia.

Tackling the question of engagement from a slightly different angle, 66% prefer the U.S. keep its foreign military bases rather than reducing our presence overseas, a number that has been remarkably stable over the past six years.

One attitudinal change to note is the decline in the percent saying that the U.S. would win a war against a nuclear power. This number was 65% in 2018; it is 44% today.

U.S. Military Industrial Base and High-Tech Capabilities

Americans think that the U.S. is *one of the best* at advanced technologies, but not *the best*. Only 28% say we are tops in satellites and rockets, while 20% call us the best in computer and cellular technologies, 16% say we're number 1 in AI, and 14% put us on top in robotics.

Furthermore, the U.S. public seems to appreciate the consequences of allowing our industrial and manufacturing capabilities to atrophy. For example:

- Fifty-five percent say that we are too reliant on non-allies for national security manufacturing,
- Sixty-nine percent say we need more capacity to produce the materials, equipment, and weapons needed for defense,
- Seventy percent say we need more capacity to ramp up quickly to meet our needs in a crisis.

These attitudes hold across partisan and demographic groups.

Americans largely recognize the role immigrants with high-tech skills play in national defense. After hearing that experts in defense and national security think we need more immigrants with advanced degrees to fill national security jobs, just under two-thirds (62%) support increasing the number of highly skilled immigrants allowed into the U.S., while one-third oppose. Support is particularly high among those under 45 years of age (69%), college graduates (68%), and Democrats (77%).

Following the baseline question, we then evaluated three specific messages regarding increasing the number of legally admitted highly skilled immigrants. The best-testing message emphasized that increasing the number of skilled immigrants would give us an advantage over Russia and China (76% said this was a good reason to support such an increase). The two other messages also tested well: one emphasizing that these immigrants would be carefully vetted (73% good reason to increase skilled immigration) and another pointing out the long history of allowing foreign talent to come to the U.S. (73% good reason).

It is important to point out that these messages did not simply impress respondents who were already supportive of increasing the number of legally admitted highly skilled immigrants. They appear to have a persuasive impact. For example, among those initially opposed 55% said the "strategic advantage" argument offered a good reason to support a proposed increase, while 50% said the "careful vetting" and the "history of foreign talent in the U.S." arguments offered a good reason to support. Among Republicans, who were initially more skeptical about the proposed increase, 72% said the "strategic advantage" argument was a good reason to support it, 67% said the same about the "long history" argument and 66% said the same about the "careful vetting" argument.

Attitudes are more ambivalent when it comes to artificial intelligence. Just over half (52%) favor increased military spending on AI, which currently accounts for roughly 1% of the defense budget. Roughly one-third (32%) opposes this. This split persists when we provide additional pros and cons for each side.

Just under half (49%) of Americans say it is "too soon to say" whether we should integrate more AI into our defense systems. Twenty percent say it is "a good idea" and 27% say it is "a bad idea." Messaging does seem to have an impact here: the "good idea" percentage increases 9 points (to 29%) when we emphasize that this integration could give us an edge against China, and it increases by 8 points (to 28%) when we say that this integration would include safeguards and human oversight.

Allies and Enemies

We asked respondents to classify 13 different countries as an ally or an enemy of the United States. At the head of the list of allies are the United Kingdom (85% ally) and Australia (83% ally).

The near-unanimous sentiment that Great Britain and Australia are our allies is also seen in support for the AUKUS agreement. Although only 21% are aware of this agreement, approximately six in ten (58%) support the US loosening export restrictions to make it easier to work with the UK and Australia on advanced defense technologies like nuclear-powered submarines. Only 22% oppose making it easier to share these sensitive technologies.

The second tier of allies includes Finland (75% ally), Ukraine (74%), and Israel (71%). Then we see a third tier, encompassing Taiwan (64% ally), Mexico (63%), and India (63%).

Ukraine's profile is unique, in that it has shifted positively and dramatically over time. In February 2021, 49% of Americans saw Ukraine as an ally, while 26% saw it as an enemy. By 2023, the ally number increased by 25 points. Today, even those most skeptical about America's involvement in the Russia-Ukraine war see Ukraine as an ally—Republicans (70% ally, 21% enemy), Trump supporters (63% ally, 26% enemy), and those opposing aid to Ukraine (55% ally, 33% enemy).

In contrast, we see negative shifts in attitudes towards Israel and Mexico, although these trends are minor. The ally-to-enemy net rating of Israel has dropped from +67 in 2018 (80% ally, 13% enemy) to +53 in 2023 (71% ally, 18% enemy), although that is actually a modest improvement over November 2021. The real issue for U.S./Israeli relations is the prevalence of negative attitudes among the young. Among Americans under 30 years of age, 48% see Israel as an ally, while 35% see it as an enemy.

For Mexico, the ally-to-enemy rating has gone from +53 in 2018 to +39 in 2023. The erosion of support has been most acute among Republicans, 36% of whom see Mexico as an enemy. Relatedly, some 41% favor sending the U.S. military into Mexico to counter, and if necessary attack, drug cartels, with 46% opposed. Republicans (57% favor) are notably more supportive than independents (33%) or Democrats (29%).

Turkey stands on its own in some regard—a plurality sees it as an ally (46%), but 30% see it as an enemy. The flip-side of Turkey is Saudi Arabia—a plurality sees it as an enemy (46%), but 36% see it as an ally.

As might be expected, the clear "enemy" list includes China (77% enemy, 15% ally), Iran (76% enemy, 13% ally), and Russia (82% enemy, 9% ally).

China's rating among Americans has cratered over the past six years. In 2018, the net ally-to-enemy rating for China was -17 (38% ally, 55% enemy); not great but not disastrous. In 2023, it is -62 (15% ally, 77% enemy).

China-Taiwan

As noted above, the American public is increasingly prone to see China as an enemy and as a threat. We asked respondents to rate their level of concern towards a wide array of potential issues involving China. At the head of the list is Chinese espionage:

- Spying on the U.S. (57% extremely concerned)
- Military build-up (45%)
- Overtaking the U.S. as the world's number one superpower (42%)
- AI supremacy (41%)
- Surpassing the U.S. as the world's leading economy (37%)
- Increasing influence in Latin and South America (32%)
- Potentially invading Taiwan (31%).

When asked what concerns them *most* about China, Americans split between Chinese military build-up and human rights abuses (20% each). These are closely followed by the Chinese diplomatic offensive (17%, up from 11% in 2022), their economic practices (15%, down from 22% in 2022), and invading Taiwan (10%).

Despite these concerns—and contrary to the evaluations of many interested observers—Americans are largely confident in our military advantages over China. By wide margins, Americans think the U.S. has superiority in air, naval, space, and ground forces—and thus in overall military capabilities as well. Americans give the U.S. narrower advantages on diplomatic and economic power, but give China the edge on AI and cyber capabilities.

Still, respondents believe that China will continue to gain ground on the U.S. with respect to military power (53% gain power in next ten years, 26% lose power) and economic strength (53% gain, 29% lose), while battling the U.S. to a draw on diplomatic influence (40% gain, 39% lose).

Of course, the elephant in the room is Taiwan. U.S. support for Taiwan remains substantial. Sixty-five percent support U.S. defense assistance to Taiwan (23% oppose). All partisan groups are supportive, with Democrats being the most enthusiastic, followed by Republicans and then independents.

Moreover, there is significant support for policies designed to render assistance to Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion. Seventy-two percent favor recognizing Taiwan as an independent country; 69% would support economic sanctions against China; 58% would support moving military assets into the region; 56% would support sending military equipment to Taiwan; 53% would support establishing a "no-fly zone" over Taiwan; 46% would support sending U.S. ground troops in to assist Taiwan. Importantly, support for these policies transcends partisan politics, as the numbers are similar for Republicans and Democrats.

The poll assessed the impact of additional context on the public's willingness to defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion. When informed that Taiwan has a democratically elected government and is a major manufacturer of electronics and semi-conductors, 52% of respondents said this made them more likely to support sending U.S. troops to help Taiwan repel an invasion. The effect was apparent even among those initially opposed, with 38% saying this made them more likely to support committing U.S. troops. Roughly 55% of Republicans and Democrats offered that the context made them more likely to support sending American troops, with independents the most skeptical (40% more likely).

Policies designed to deter an invasion garner majority support. Sixty percent approve of increasing the U.S. military presence near Taiwan and 55% approve of increasing U.S. arms sales to the Taiwanese. Support for these measures is up 4 and 3 points, respectively, since our June 2023 survey.

Russia-Ukraine

As we approach the two-year anniversary of Russia's war against Ukraine, Americans are unsure who is winning but remain broadly supportive of Ukraine.

Currently, 34% believe Ukraine is winning the war, while 31% say Russia, 23% say neither, and 12% say they do not know. This difference of opinion about the status of the conflict does not obscure the fact that most people (76%) think Ukrainian victory is important to America. This number is unchanged from June 2023. Forty-eight percent say Ukrainian victory is "very" important for the U.S.

The perceived salience of the war undoubtedly drives support for continued U.S. aid to the Ukrainians. Fifty-nine percent of respondents support military aid to Ukraine (30% oppose), which is unchanged from June 2023. Support for military aid is highest among those over 65 years of age (70% support), the college-educated (66% support), and Biden supporters (79% support). Among Trump supporters, 44% support and 47% oppose.

In contrast to opinions regarding Taiwan, support for military aid to Ukraine is unaffected by context. Specifically, information regarding low U.S. spending on the conflict, Ukrainian success in retaining control of their territories, and the degradation of Russian assets and capabilities increases support for military aid by only a single percentage point (from 59% to 60% support).

Given what American involvement in the Russia-Ukraine conflict might mean for regional and global stability, we tested how concerned Americans are by various potential ramifications of the war. Topping the list, 74% said they were concerned about Russia using a nuclear weapon. Seventy percent said they were concerned about the war spreading to NATO members, with an identical percentage saying they were concerned Russian aggression might convince other authoritarian countries to invade their neighbors. Sixty-five percent said they were concerned the conflict would distract the U.S. from the threat posed by China, and 63% were concerned U.S. aid would deplete our weapons stockpile. While the concern numbers remain high, almost all have declined (by an average of about 4 points) since last year. Only concern regarding the depletion of U.S. weapons stockpiles has increased (by 4 points).

One interesting partisan difference across these numbers is that while Republicans are roughly equally concerned about each of these potentialities, Democrats are less concerned about two: losing sight of the threat from China and depleting the U.S. weapons stockpile.

The Middle East

In the aftermath of Hamas's horrific attacks on Israel, attention is once again focused on the greater Middle East.

In general, Americans think our country is not doing enough across a range of priorities in the region. When asked whether the U.S. is doing too much, too little, or the current level of activity is about right, we find significant disaffection on:

- Working to free hostages (47% doing too little, 7% doing too much)
- Disrupting Iran's nuclear program (47% too little, 8% too much)
- Working to calm tensions (43% too little, 10% too much)
- Countering Hezbollah (34% too little, 9% too much)
- Countering Hamas (39% too little, 11% too much).
- Countering Iran's influence (39% too little, 11% too much)

These opinions occur across all demographic and political groups.

Opinions are slightly less clear when it comes to Israel and the Palestinians. On the one hand, roughly one-third (34%) say we are doing too little regarding getting humanitarian support to Gaza compared to 14% who say too much, and about 30% say we are doing too little to support the Palestinians whereas 19% say too much. On the other hand, slightly more than one-quarter (26%) say we are doing too little to support Israel, while 20% say we are doing too much.

The mixed numbers on how the U.S. is treating the Palestinians and the Israelis are largely a function of partisan differences. Put simply, Republicans are very supportive of Israel (36% doing too little, 14% too much) while Democrats are somewhat divided (17% doing too little, 27% too much). The reverse is true when it comes to the Palestinians: Democrats are very supportive (40%

too little, 11% too much) and Republicans are somewhat divided (21% too little, 30% too much). There is also an age divide, although it is important to point out that those under 30 years of age are not appreciably less supportive of Israel—they are simply much more likely to say we are also doing too little for the Palestinians.

Voters also draw a distinction between Palestinians in general and Hamas in particular. Even the groups most likely to think the U.S. is doing too little to support the Palestinians—Democrats and those under age 30—think the U.S. should be doing more to counter Hamas by wide margins.

Despite this ambivalence, as noted earlier Israel is overwhelmingly seen as an ally of America. In addition, 71% support defense assistance to Israel (23% oppose). All partisan groups are supportive, with Republicans being the most supportive, followed by Democrats and then independents.

Evaluations of Presidents

When asked about their attitudes towards recent presidents (Jimmy Carter through Joe Biden), President Reagan is rated the most favorably. Sixty-five percent view our 40th president "somewhat" or "very" favorably. Thirty-six percent view Reagan "very favorably" and only 11% view him very unfavorably. Overall, Reagan's rating is a net +38 favorable.

Ranking just behind Reagan are Barack Obama (61% favorable) and George H.W. Bush (59% favorable), followed by Jimmy Carter (57% favorable), George W. Bush (55%), Bill Clinton (55%), Donald Trump (47%), and Joe Biden (38%).

Methodology

This survey was conducted from October 27-November 5, 2023. It features a mixed-mode design, with 945 responses collected by live telephone interviewers and another 1,561 responses gathered online. The telephone portion of the survey is a probability sample, relying on a multi-stage cluster design. Fifty-one percent of the calls were completed via landline and 49 percent were completed via cell phone. On average, the interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes. To ensure that results accurately reflect the demographics of the country, they were weighted by age/gender, race/region, and education targets drawn from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2021 American Community Survey. For the full sample of 2,506 respondents, the estimated margin of error is +/- 2.0 percentage points. Most questions were asked of half the respondents, with an associated margin of error of +/- 2.8 points. The margin of error for sub-groups is larger.