



## ***EXECUTIVE MEMORANDUM***

To: Whom It May Concern

From: Chris Anderson & Daron Shaw

Date: November 30, 2018

Subject: Main Findings from the 2018 Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute National Defense Survey

---

### **Overview**

Politicians and policy-makers are accustomed to having timely, high quality data on public opinion at their finger-tips. However, there are a few policy domains where such data are relatively sparse, leaving key players to guess at what the public thinks about critical issues. It is regrettable but undeniable that this has been the case in recent years for politicians and professionals who are interested in national defense.

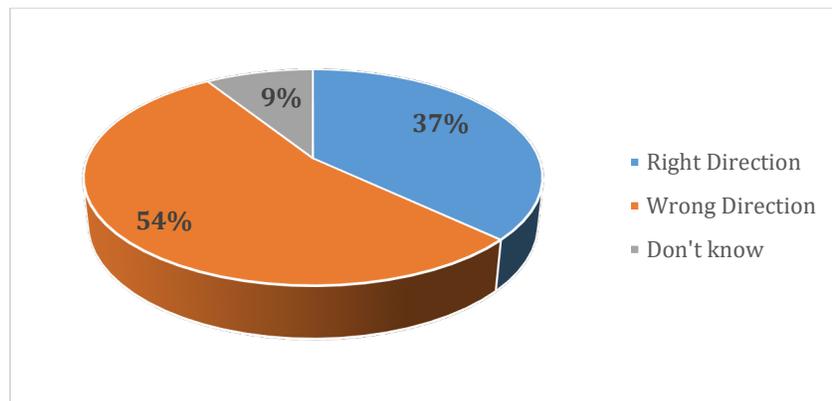
To address this gap, the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute commissioned a large-N, probability-based survey of Americans' attitudes on a wide array of national defense and foreign policy matters shortly after the 2018 elections. From November 11-14, the bi-partisan team of Anderson Robbins Research (D) and Shaw & Company Research (R) interviewed more than 1,200 adult citizens, asking their opinions on a variety of issues ranging from evaluations of the U.S. military and its constituent branches to assessments of threats to support for policy proposals such as building a wall on our southern border and developing a Space Force. The results indicate that the public has a high regard and respect for our military, and is willing to increase financial support for our troops. But this general consensus fails to prevent Americans from dividing on several high profile policy proposals. Moreover, the public is deeply concerned about new threats, and is skeptical about how defense dollars are spent and the efficacy of our two most recent wars. The poll also reveals several strong opinion differences with respect to age, education, and partisanship.

The following memorandum highlights the main findings of the poll, focusing on critical take-away points with respect to the nature and sources of defense opinions and attitudes.

## Mood of the Country

Unsurprisingly, Americans are divided on where the country is headed and the nature of our challenges. A majority (54%) think the country is headed in the wrong direction while 37% think we are moving in the right direction. Historically, the “direction” question tends to produce slightly negative assessments overall, and the distribution we see here is fairly normal. As might be expected, there is a striking partisan divide on this item: 83% of Democrats think the country is headed in the wrong direction whereas 69% of Republicans think we’re headed in the right direction.

**Figure 1—Direction of Country**

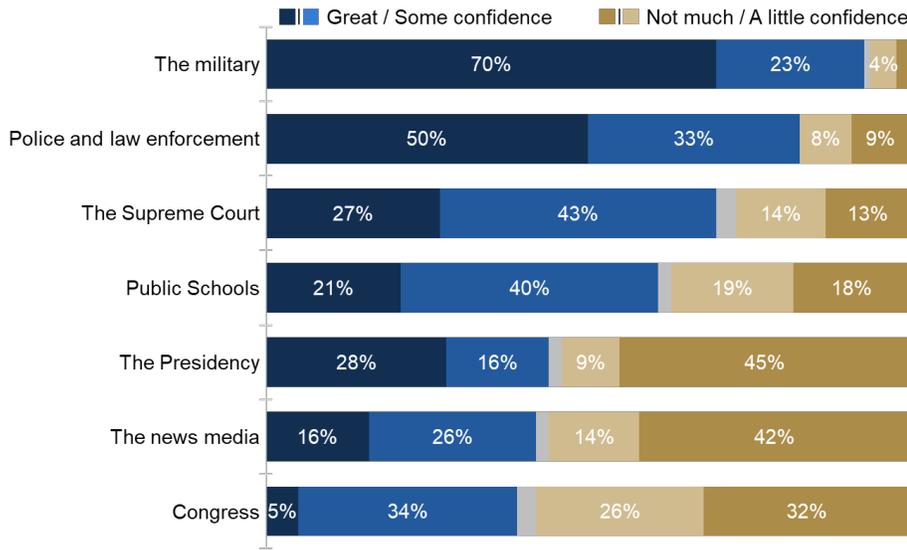


When asked about the most important issue facing the country, almost one-in-four (22%) say politics and partisanship, followed by immigration (12%), corruption and incompetent political leaders (10%), health care (9%), and the economy (8%). Put another way, about one-third of Americans offered partisanship or poor political leadership as the most important problem facing the country today. This sentiment is consistent across demographic and political sub-groups—no one is particularly happy with today’s politics. When it comes to substantive issues, the main partisan divide is that Democrats are much more likely to cite health care as the most important issue (12%) while Republicans are more likely to cite immigration (24%) and independents are more likely to cite the economy (14%).

## Confidence in Military Institutions and Professions

In both relative and absolute terms, trust and confidence in the U.S. military is high. Ninety-three percent of Americans say they have confidence in the U.S. military (70% say “a great deal of confidence”). This compares favorably to other well-regarded institutions (83% have confidence in law enforcement; 70% have confidence in the Supreme Court; 61% have confidence in the public schools) and blows away more contentious institutions (42% have confidence in the news media; 39% have confidence in Congress).

**Figure 2—Trust in Institutions**



This sentiment translates to positive assessments of individual representatives of the profession, as well. Ninety-one percent are trusting or confident in U.S. military personnel, compared to 90% for doctors and teachers, and 78% for clergy. As might be expected, confidence in our servicemen and servicewomen greatly outstrips that expressed for some of the more controversial professions, such as news reporters (51% have confidence), members of Congress (47%), and Wall Street executives (32%).

This confidence in the military, along with an appreciation for their purpose, is manifest in broad public support for increasing government spending on the military.

Seventy-five percent of Americans support increasing spending, with 48% strongly supporting. In fact, only education (87% support) and health care (76%) rival national defense as popular candidates for increased government spending.

But while support for increased defense spending is generally high, it varies across key demographic and political groups. Most notably, those under 30 years of age, those with a college degree, and Democrats are much less likely to support increased defense spending.

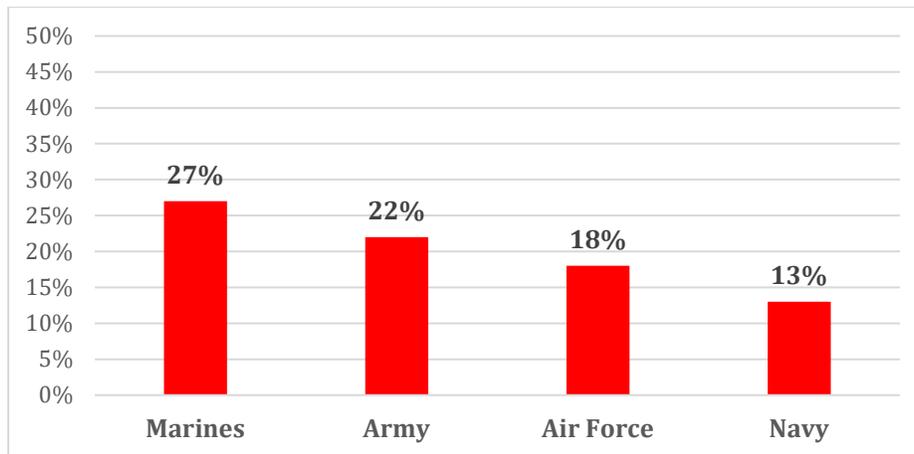
More broadly, Democrats favor spending on education and healthcare and deprioritize spending on border security. Republicans, on the other hand, favor spending on the military and border security (and, to a lesser degree, education) – while deprioritizing foreign aid.

### **Assessments of U.S. Military Effectiveness and Efficiency**

When asked to rate the different branches of the U.S. military, Americans award high marks to each. At the very top, 91% say the Marines are somewhat or extremely effective, while 90% say the same about the Army, Navy, and Air Force. When forced to choose the branch that is most effective for the American people, 27% choose the Marines compared to 22% for the Army, 18% for the Air Force, and 14% for the Navy. These differences are driven by small yet significant variation by partisanship. Republicans are more bullish on the Marines—32% of GOPers say Marines are the

most effective branch. Democrats, on the other hand, are more likely to rate the Army as the most effective branch (27%). This may be rooted in the reputations of these different branches: Marines have a reputation for being gung-ho and aggressive whereas the Army has a reputation for being more egalitarian and (relatively) democratic.

**Figure 3—Most Effective Branch of U.S. Military**



What is it that the U.S. military does well? Eighty-four percent rate our space technology as “the best” or “one of the best” in the world. Seventy-four percent give the military these high marks for artificial intelligence, as do 67% for cyber-security. However, most citizens do not see the U.S. military as the unquestioned leader in these arenas: one-quarter (27%) see the U.S. as the outright best in space technology, and less than two-in-ten feel similarly about U.S. capabilities in AI and cyber security.

The sterling reputations of the existing branches do not necessarily mean the public favors the creation of a new branch. In fact, while 48% support the creation of a Space Force, 43% oppose the idea. Given the ties between the “Space Force” moniker and Donald Trump, it is unsurprising that views of the president drive views on creating a Space Force. Those with a favorable view of Trump overwhelmingly favor the idea (68% favor); those with an unfavorable view of Trump overwhelmingly oppose it (60% oppose). Support is also higher among groups that tend to have a more favorable view of Trump: men (54%), those without a college education (54%), and Republicans (66%).

Similarly, Americans do not necessarily think a bigger military is all that desirable. Only 28% think the U.S. military is “too small,” whereas 55% think its current size is “about right.” On the other hand, just 13% think the military is “too big”, with college-educated men (24%) and those under 30 say the most likely to think so.

The American public is also skeptical about the efficacy of government spending on the military. Seventy-eight percent (and 86% of veterans) think the defense budget has at least some waste and fraud (33% think there is a “great deal” of waste and fraud). And more than sixty percent say that the Congress does not provide enough oversight of defense spending. Still, this skepticism is clearly directed at money spent on administration and weapons programs rather than military personnel: 72% say military personnel are underpaid.

## Assessments of U.S. Enemies, Allies, and Threats

### Enemies: The Usual Suspects plus Some Surprises

Americans identify three “hot-spots” as the most pressing threats to American security: the Middle East (27%), East Asia (24%), and South Asia (15%). Those in active-duty households, however, emphasize East Asia (28%) and play down the threat from the Middle East (17%).

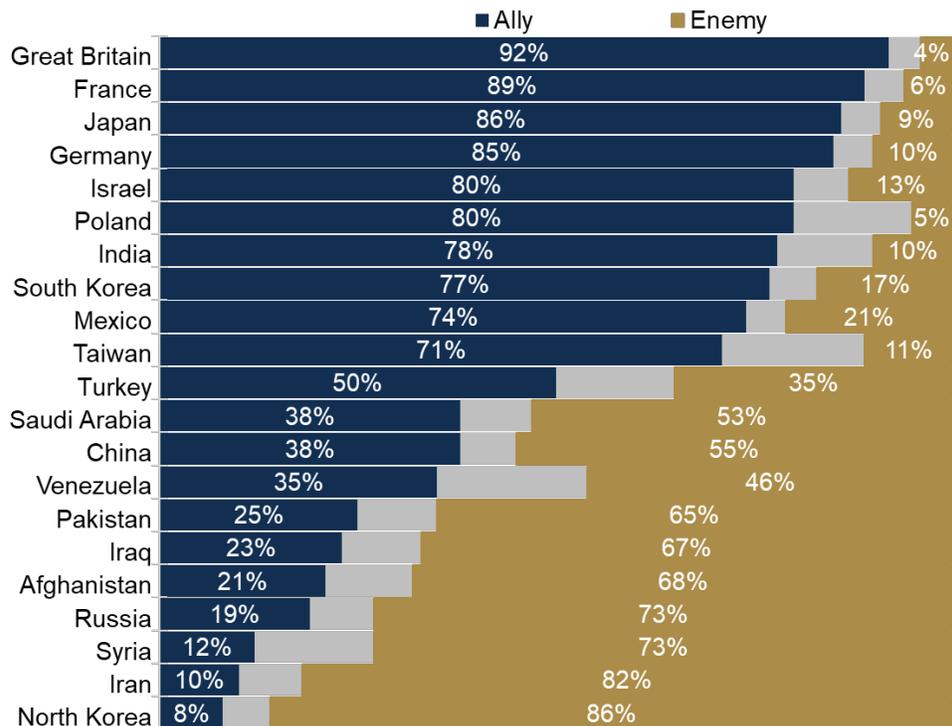
These views about regional threats are reinforced by assessments of whether specific countries are “allies” or “enemies.” North Korea (86%), Iran (82%), Syria (73%), Russia (73%), Afghanistan (68%), and Iraq (67%) are viewed by overwhelming majorities as “enemies.” Even here, however, there are notable disagreements. Republicans (65%) are less likely than Democrats (85%) to think of Russia as an enemy. Younger voters are also less likely to think of Russia as an enemy.

Interestingly, although China is often regarded as an enemy (55%), a sizable minority considers the Asian colossus an ally (38%). Americans also hold mixed views on Venezuela, which has been a thorn in the side of the U.S. government for years (35% ally, 46% enemy).

Perhaps even more surprising are the negative views many Americans hold towards some traditional U.S. allies. For example:

- Turkey: 50% ally, 35% enemy;
- Saudi Arabia: 38% ally, 53% enemy; and
- Pakistan: 25% ally, 65% enemy.

**Figure 4—Assessments of Other Countries**



When asked which country poses the greatest threat to the U.S., a plurality select Russia (30%), followed by China (21%), and North Korea (18%). No other country garners more than 7% (Iran). While Democrats and Republicans tend to agree on the threat posed by North Korea, Democrats are more likely to see Russia as the greatest threat (46%), while Republicans eye China suspiciously (30%).

What are the biggest concerns Americans have about Russia? Thirty percent say it is aiding Iran and other rogue regimes. Americans are also concerned about cyber-attacks (24%) and interference in our elections (16%). In what can only be seen as a sign of the times, only 12% fear a Russian thermo-nuclear attack and a mere 11% are worried about the Russians invading one of the former Soviet republics.

When asked about their biggest concerns about China, 36% choose the Chinese government holding \$1.2 trillion in U.S. debt. The next greatest concerns are China becoming the world's number one super-power (17%), unfair trade practices (15%), and technology theft (14%).

The U.S. public is generally wary about dealing with regimes such as these, and sentiment is squarely against allowing non-democratic regimes to gain access to our military's weaponry. Eighty-seven percent oppose selling arms to authoritarian regimes who are not strong allies of the U.S.

#### Allies: Hail, Britannia! (But NATO Needs to Pay its Bills)

On the "friend" side of the ledger, the "special relationship" between the U.S. and Great Britain is more than just a phrase for Americans—92% rate the Brits as an ally. France, Japan, Germany, Israel, Poland, India, South Korea, Mexico, and Taiwan also qualify as allies, according to the U.S. public.

Attitudes towards our main alliance are positive, though not entirely sanguine. Fifty-nine percent, for example, are favorable towards NATO. But 24% are unfavorable. Furthermore, 61% say our NATO allies should do more, compared to 26% who say they are doing enough.

#### Threats: Nuclear, Conventional, and Cyber Warfare

In addition to seeing countries as friends or foes, Americans have a variety of intriguing opinions on specific threats and potentially prophylactic policies.

As seen in its opinions about the Russian threat, the public is substantially more concerned about cyber-attacks on the government grid and on personal accounts and information (92% each) than nuclear war (60%) or conventional military attacks (50%). Indeed, attitudes on the threat of thermo-nuclear war are notably optimistic:

- Eighty-five percent think we would be able to shoot down ICBMs fired from another country.
- Sixty-five percent think we would win a war with a nuclear power.
- Fifty-one percent think they would survive a nuclear attack.

However, this general tendency towards unconcern has the potential to obscure several important differences between and amongst groups. First, women are significantly more concerned about nuclear and conventional war than are men. Second, Democrats and college-educated citizens are more concerned about cyber-attacks and nuclear war, while Republicans and those without a college degree are more concerned about terrorist attacks on the homeland.

In addition to these notable sub-groups differences, opinion is also more nuanced on some specific policy queries. For example, Americans are sharply divided about how to handle a possible missile attack from North Korea: 44% favor launching a pre-emptive strike while 44% favor waiting until the attack is actually launched and then counter-striking. The age divide here is striking: those under 30 prefer waiting by a net of 23 points (59% wait, 36% pre-emptive strike), while those over 30 prefer a pre-emptive strike by 5 points. Race also matters, but in a curious way: African-Americans prefer a pre-emptive strike by 9 points, while Latinos prefer to wait by 18 points. Party's effect is perhaps more predictable: Democrats and independents prefer to wait by 6 points, while Republicans prefer a pre-emptive strike by 24 points. Veterans and those in active-duty households favor preemptive action.

## **National Security Flashpoints: Wars and Immigration**

### Iraq and Afghanistan

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, a number of divisive security issues arose. None were more controversial than the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Judgments about these actions remain mixed, although more see these efforts negatively than positively. About half (51%) rate the war in Iraq as a failure, while 40% say it was mostly a success. Similarly, 49% say the war in Afghanistan is a failure compared to 38% who call it a success. Moreover, there is little stomach for ramping up our efforts in Afghanistan—45% want to keep troop levels in Afghanistan the same, while 35% want to decrease troop levels. Attitudes on Iraq and Afghanistan are clearly affected by party identification—Republicans, in particular, are much more likely to see these efforts as successful than others. The effects of other political and demographic variables are dwarfed by those we see for partisanship.

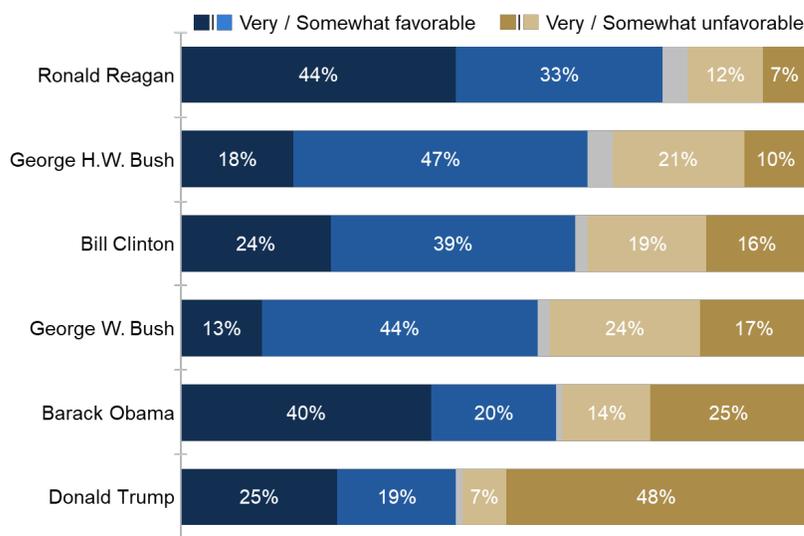
### Immigration

In recent years, as these foreign wars have wound down, security threats have often been framed in terms of protecting our borders rather than attacking terrorism abroad. This perspective resonates with a sizable minority of the American public. About four in ten see illegal immigration as a major security threat – yet there is little agreement about the efficacy of a border wall in addressing the issue. Slightly less than three-in-ten (28%) think building a wall will have a substantial positive effect on U.S. security, while almost as many (23%) think a wall would make the U.S. *less* safe. Most of those who think illegal immigration is a major threat think the wall would have a substantial positive effect (63%).

## Evaluations of Presidents

When asked about their attitudes towards recent presidents (Ronald Reagan through Donald Trump), President Reagan is rated the most favorably. Seventy-seven percent view the Gipper somewhat or very favorably. Just behind Reagan is George H.W. Bush (65% favorable), Bill Clinton (63%), Barack Obama (60%), George W. Bush (57%), and Donald Trump (44%).

**Figure 5—Evaluations of Recent Presidents**



Q80 – Q85: Thinking now about recent presidents, please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable opinion of each one I mention.

## Conclusion

While we know a great deal about domestic policy attitudes, we know much less about foreign policy attitudes. Moreover, what we do know is that political context and the preferences of office-holders and other political elites have a significant impact on public opinion. Our data appear to show that post-Cold War attitudes are in transition; from a world where conventional military threats dominated our consciousness to a world where cyber-security and artificial intelligence threats are upper-most in our minds. This new world is defined by fluidity—threats can come from anywhere and old definitions of friend and foe are (with a few notable exceptions) subject to constant reinterpretation.

General assessments and specific opinions vary by somewhat several demographic and political characteristics, most notably age, education, and party identification. For example, Americans who are younger, more educated, and more Democratic are more likely to emphasize threats related to technology. These individuals, however, are just as likely as their older, less well-educated, and more Republican counter-parts to express confidence that the U.S. military is up to the task of defending us in this new world.

## **Methodology**

The sample universe was identified as adult U.S. citizens. A probability sample was then drawn using multi-stage clustering techniques. Roughly 15,000 records were drawn to generate 1,202 completed interviews. The survey was conducted via telephone calls from live interviewers from November 11-14, 2018. Fifty percent of the calls were completed via landline and 50 percent were completed via cell phone. On average, the interviews lasted approximately 18 minutes. The margin of error for the poll is +/- 2.8 percent for the entire sample. The margin of error for sub-groups is larger. The results were weighted by age/gender, race/region, and education targets drawn from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2017 American Community Survey to ensure they accurately reflect the demographics of the country.