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**Latest Reagan National Defense Survey Shows Declining Confidence in U.S. Military
But Broad Support for American Leadership in the World**
Concern About Threats from China on the Rise

SIMI VALLEY, California - The Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute today released the results of its third annual [National Defense Survey](#). It reveals that Americans still believe in President Reagan's vision of strong American leadership in the world, advancing the values of freedom and democracy abroad, and maintaining the peace through our strength.

With all that has happened in the last year, however, it is understandable that Americans are experiencing a sense of pessimism. This latest survey reflects a downturn in overall attitudes across nearly every category of question, most alarmingly with respect to trust and confidence in the military.

“This downward trend in trust of the military is a leading indicator of a diminishing national spirit and an affront to President Reagan’s legacy. As part of his broader goal of restoring national pride, one of our 40th President’s top priorities, upon taking office exactly 40 years ago, was to restore confidence in a military still struggling in the aftermath of Vietnam,” said Roger Zakheim, Director of the Reagan Institute. “He recognized that a trusted military not only strengthens deterrence; it strengthens the self-confidence of the American people. Therefore, President Reagan’s example provides an excellent guide for how we can overcome our current pessimism.”

The survey found the following key takeaways:

- **Rising Concern Over Domestic Division and Political Violence** – Almost all Americans (88%), and an equal percentage of Republicans and Democrats, are worried that political polarization will lead to violence. Since this is consistent with findings from our October 2019 survey, it is clear that recent political violence alone is not the source of this concern. When asked whether the greatest threats to the United States come from within or from outside the country, a majority of Americans (61%) report that threats emanating from within are either equal to (25%) or greater than (36%) those emanating from abroad (35%).
- **Diminishing Trust and Confidence in the U.S. Military Continues** – The number of Americans who say they have a great deal of trust and confidence in the military has fallen by 14 percentage points (from 70% to 56%) since 2018. In that time, the military declined in trust across all major demographic subgroups (including age, gender, and party affiliation) by double-digit percentage points. This diminished confidence is not due to the events of 2020 alone. While the military has suffered a seven-point drop in confidence since 2019, there was an equal seven-point decline between 2018 and 2019. However, the military remains the most trusted institution by a large margin. Overall, three-quarters of Americans are in favor increasing defense spending, including substantial majorities of both parties.
- **Strong Support for Global Leadership and Engagement** – Americans are not trending toward isolationism and do not want the United States to retreat from global leadership. Half of Americans think the United States should be more engaged and take the lead regarding international events, while only 27% believe the U.S. should be less engaged and merely react to events. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of Americans support maintaining

military bases around the world to deter attacks and respond quickly if needed, with over 60% of both Republicans and Democrats supporting maintaining bases. Americans continue to support alliances and allies around the world, from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to Indo-Pacific allies. Opinion is mixed on the Iran nuclear deal and the Paris Agreement on climate change, with extreme partisan polarization on both.

- **Increasing Awareness of the China Threat** – More than one-third of Americans (37%) say China is the country posing the greatest threat to the United States compared to 21% in 2018. This trend has been driven by Republicans and Independents, with 55% and 39% putting China at the top of the list, respectively. There has also been a significant shift in public opinion on the question of where the United States should focus its military forces. While more respondents chose the Middle East than Asia in 2018 and 2019, now more Americans (28%) say that the United States should focus its forces in Asia, with only 21% selecting the Middle East.
- **Promoting Freedom and Democracy Abroad** – Americans support efforts to promote freedom and democracy abroad. Human rights violations top the list of concerns among the American people about China, at 85%. Nearly three-quarters (72%) want the United States to support the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong, even if it angers China. When it comes to Russia, three in four Americans are concerned about the poisoning of opposition leaders and the suppression of dissent.
- **Catching Up on Technology and National Security** – A majority (55%) of Americans believe the United States is too reliant on non-allies for key national security materials. Small minorities believe that the U.S. is the “best in the world” with respect to 21st century technologies critical to national security. Americans are intensely worried about cyber-attacks on both personal computers and accounts (88%) as well as on government computers and the grid (88%).
- **President Reagan’s Legacy Lives On** – President Reagan continues to be viewed favorably among Americans, with 71% overall favorability. Notably, a majority of Americans of all political stripes view President Reagan favorably: 88% of Republicans, 76% of Independents, and 55% of Democrats.

This latest Reagan National Defense Survey was conducted between February 4 and February 14, 2021 by a bipartisan survey team at Beacon Research and Shaw & Company Research. It is based on the interviews of more than 2,500 U.S. adult citizens. Govini, a Decision Science company, collaborated with analysis.

For more information about the survey, including a summary and additional data, visit www.reaganfoundation.org/defensesurvey.

Media Contact: Claude Chafin (chafin@invariantgr.com) or Rachel Hoff (rhoff@reaganfoundation.org)

About the Reagan Foundation and Institute:

The Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute is the nonprofit organization created by President Reagan himself and specifically charged by him with continuing his legacy and sharing his principles - individual liberty, economic opportunity, global democracy and national pride. The Foundation is a non-partisan organization which sustains the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum in Simi Valley, CA, the Reagan Center for Public Affairs, the Presidential Learning Center, The Air Force One Pavilion and the award-winning Discovery Center, as well as the Reagan Institute, which carries out the Foundation’s work in Washington, D.C. The Reagan Library houses over 55 million pages of Gubernatorial, Presidential and personal papers and over 60,000 gifts and artifacts chronicling the lives of Ronald and Nancy Reagan. It also serves as the final resting place of America’s 40th President and his First Lady. www.reaganfoundation.org.

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