



To: Whom It May Concern

From: Chris Anderson & Daron Shaw

Date: November 20, 2019

Subject: Results from the 2019 Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute National Defense Survey

Overview

For the second year in a row, 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. The impetus behind the poll is straightforward: politicians, policy-makers, and experts will benefit from consistent and timely information about public opinion on defense, foreign policy, and security issues.

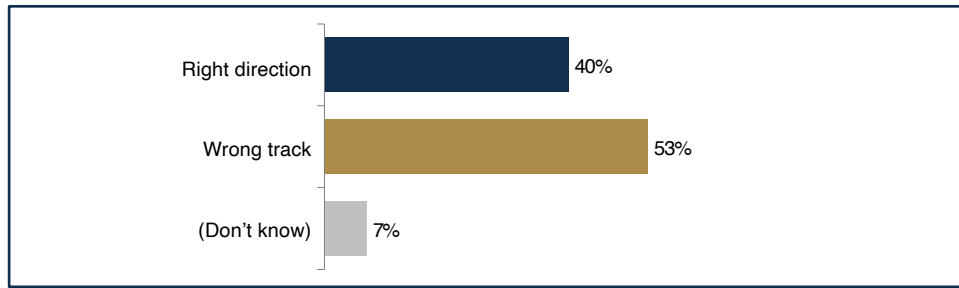
From October 24-30, the bi-partisan team of Beacon Research (D) and Shaw & Company Research (R) interviewed more than 1,000 adult citizens, asking their opinions on a variety of issues ranging from trust and confidence in the U.S. military to assessments of threats to support for policy proposals such as building a wall on our southern border and committing assets to defend Taiwan or Hong Kong. As we found in last year’s inaugural poll, the public has a high regard and respect for our military, and is willing to increase financial support for our troops. In addition, the public is concerned about new threats. 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

Given the current domestic political environment, it is unsurprising that Americans are divided on where the country is headed and the nature of our challenges. A majority (53%) think the country is headed in the wrong direction while 40% think we are moving in the right direction. The right direction number is actually slightly improved from last year’s (37%). 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: 80% of Democrats think the country is headed in the wrong direction whereas 68% 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, Americans say:

- Politics and partisanship (25%)
- Corruption and incompetent political leaders (14%)
- The economy and jobs (11%)
- Health care (8%)
- Immigration (8%)
- The environment/climate change (6%).

Put another way, about two of five Americans offered partisanship or poor political leadership as the most important problem facing the country today. Concern over partisanship and polarization is consistent across demographic and political sub-groups—no one is particularly happy with today’s politics. There is, however, more of a partisan divide when it comes to the specific issue of corruption and incompetent political leaders. Nineteen percent of Democrats cite this as the number one problem facing the country, compared to only 8% of Republicans.

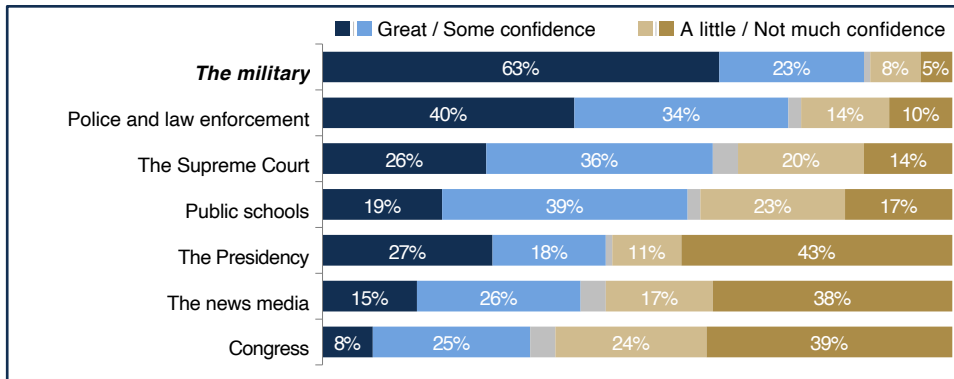
When it comes to specific policy arenas, the main partisan divide is that Republicans are much more likely to identify immigration (12%) or border security (5%) as the top issue (only 4% and 1% of Democrats cite immigration and border security, respectively). Democrats are much more likely to cite the economy and jobs (12%, compared to 9% for Republicans) and climate change (9% compared to 4% for Republicans). A roughly equal percentage of Democrats and Republicans say health care is the most important issue facing the country (about 9%).

Evaluations of U.S. Military

Confidence and Trust

In both relative and absolute terms, trust and confidence in the U.S. military remains high. Eighty-six percent of Americans say they have confidence in the U.S. military (63% say “a great deal of confidence”). This compares favorably to other well-regarded institutions (74% have confidence in law enforcement; 62% have confidence in the Supreme Court; 58% have confidence in the public schools) and easily exceeds favorable sentiment towards more contentious institutions (45% have confidence in the presidency; 41% have confidence in the news media; 33% have confidence in Congress).

Figure 2—Trust & Confidence in Institutions



This trust extends to individual representatives of the profession, as well. Eighty-six percent are trusting or confident in U.S. military leadership, compared to 87% for doctors, 82% for teachers, and 64% for clergy. As might be expected, confidence in military leaders greatly outstrips that expressed for some of the more controversial professions, such as news reporters (47% have confidence), members of Congress (37%), and Wall Street executives (31%).

Effectiveness

What is it that the U.S. military does well? Eighty-two percent rate our space technology as “the best” or “one of the best” in the world. Seventy-three 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-third (32%) see the U.S. as the outright best in space technology, and about two-in-ten feel similarly about U.S. capabilities in AI and cyber security.

Overall, 36% think the U.S. has the world’s best military capabilities, and another 52% think it ranks among the best.

Government Spending Priorities

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-six percent of Americans support increasing spending, with 46% strongly supporting. In fact, only education (84% support) and health care (79%) rival national defense as popular candidates for increased government spending.

Still, when asked about their *top* spending priority only 10% say the military (31% say health care and 30% say education). Another 24% rate the military as their second-highest spending priority.

Furthermore, 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, those with no religious affiliation, and Democrats are relatively less likely to support increased defense spending or to rate it as their top spending priority.

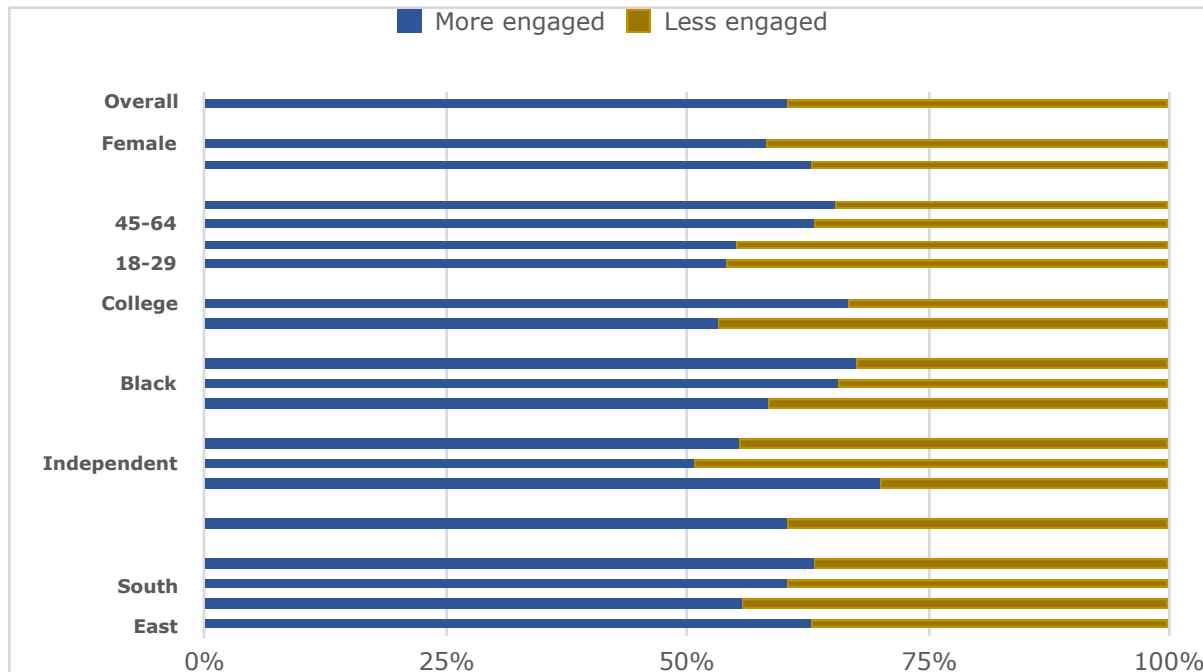
As suggested above, partisanship is especially relevant here. On the top spending priority question Democrats favor health care (44%) and education (37%) rather than border security (6%) or the military (6%). Republicans, on the other hand, are relatively more likely to favor spending on border security (37%), education (22%), and the military (17%).

Isolationism v. Engagement

Although pollsters have long noted the existence of isolationist sentiment in the U.S., the pervasiveness of this perspective is debatable. Here we find it to be very much in the minority. When asked about whether U.S. foreign policymakers should take leadership roles and be more engaged with world events—versus less engaged and more reactive—half of the public says more engaged. Only one in three choose the less engaged option.

Those most likely to prefer a more engaged posture include men (+22 more versus less engaged), those over age 45 (+25), college-educated Americans (+28), non-whites (+24), Democrats (+37), and those in active-duty service households (+24).

Figure 3—Should U.S. Foreign Policy be More/Less Engaged?



Similarly, when asked about the efficacy of maintaining U.S. military bases overseas compared to reducing our foreign presence, Americans opt for maintaining bases by a 65% to 28% margin. Opinions on base-maintenance varies by gender (men +44 maintain versus reduce, women +30), age (under 30 years of age +18, over 65 +44), education (non-college +28, college +43), and region (East +50, Mid-West +35, South +32). Perhaps surprisingly, veteran status has almost no effect on attitudes towards maintaining foreign bases. Race and ethnic differences also fail to predict these opinions.

This general support for engagement includes a willingness to use U.S. military forces, even when there is no direct threat to the U.S. By a 55-point margin—76% support, 22% do not support—Americans support using U.S. military forces to prevent human rights violations in other countries. By the same 55-point margin—again, 76% support, 22% do not support—they favor using U.S. military forces to defend freedom in other countries. If the U.S. is directly threatened, the percent supporting a possible military response goes even higher: by a 75-point margin—87% support, 11% do not support—Americans support using U.S. military forces to eliminate potential threats to the U.S. before they strike.

When it comes to these particular engagement questions, there are few significant sub-group differences. For example, 74% of men support using the U.S. military to prevent human rights violations; 78% of women feel likewise. Seventy-five percent of non-college people support, 77% of college grads support. Eighty percent of people in the East support, compared to 75% of people in the West. There is a partisan

difference, as 84% of Democrats support whereas only 68% of Republicans support. There is also a slight age difference: among those under 30, 77% support; among those over 65, 65% support. But these differences should not obscure the dominance of pro-engagement attitudes.

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

Enemies: Problems in the Middle East

When asked where the U.S. should concentrate its military forces, 37% said the Middle East – more than twice as many as would concentrate on east Asia (16%). No other region registers in double digits. This is a significant change from 2018, when roughly one-quarter of Americans selected the Middle East and another quarter chose East Asia, while 15% identified South Asia.

Like Americans broadly, the top area of focus for those in active-duty military households is the Middle East (37%). Active-duty households are also somewhat more likely to opt for a focus on East Asia (23%).

These views about regional threats are reinforced by assessments of specific countries. When asked whether a wide range of nations are more of an ally or an enemy, three Middle Eastern countries garnered the highest percentage of “enemy” responses: Iran (82% view as an enemy), Syria (72%), and Iraq (70%).

Oddly, Saudi Arabia’s image in the U.S. has improved in the past year, although Americans remain ambivalent about the kingdom, with 47% calling it an ally and 48% calling it an enemy.

Not so oddly, Turkey’s image in the U.S. has taken a beating. In 2018, Turkey was viewed as an ally by 50% of Americans, compared to 35% who viewed it as an enemy. In 2019, however, Americans are split, with 47% thinking of Turkey as an ally and 47% thinking of it as an enemy. This negative change from 2018 to 2019 is the largest shift in the survey.

In East Asia, North Korea is clearly regarded as an enemy—83% classify it as an enemy, compared to only 14% who rate it as an ally. This sentiment appears to have clear (and assertive) policy implications. When asked what the U.S. should do if it learned that North Korea was planning to launch an attack against the U.S. and its allies, 84% expressed a preference for working with Japan and South Korea to prevent the attack, using military force if necessary, versus 11% who preferred waiting for the attack and then counter-attacking.

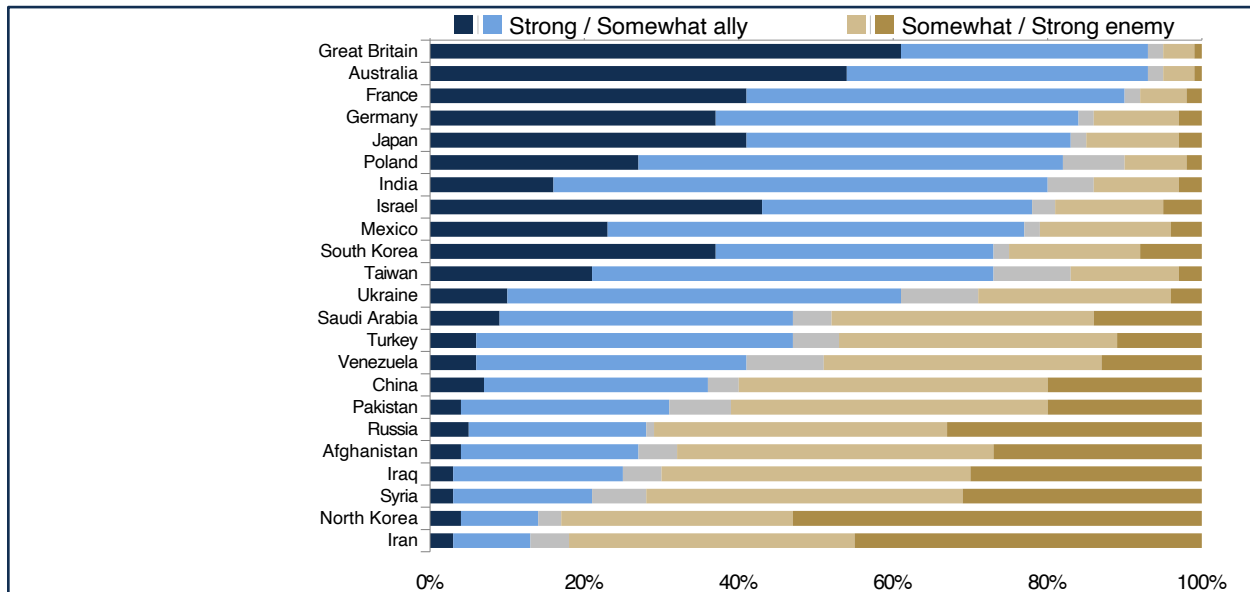
By a 60% to 36% margin, most Americans also consider China more of an enemy than an ally. This represents a slight tilt towards viewing China as an enemy (55% enemy to 38% ally in 2018), and is undoubtedly a reflection of the current “trade war” as well as a reaction to the showdown between Hong Kong dissidents and the Chinese government. We explore some of the nuances of the U.S.-China relationship later in this memo.

In South Asia, the perceived problem states include Afghanistan (68% enemy) and Pakistan (61% enemy). These results are largely unchanged from 2018.

In South America, the main trouble spot is Venezuela. Interestingly, perceptions of Venezuela have improved slightly over the past year. In 2018, Americans viewed the country as more of an enemy than an ally by 11 points. In 2019, the margin shrank to 8 points.

And then there is Russia. The percent saying that Russia is an enemy is largely unchanged from 2018 (71% in 2019 compared to 73% in 2018). But the percentage identifying Russia as an ally has increased from 19% to 28%. This improvement is predominantly driven by Republicans who have responded to positive cues from President Trump about Russia.

Figure 3—Assessments of Other Countries



When asked which country poses the greatest threat to the U.S., a plurality select China (28%), followed by Russia (25%), and North Korea (14%). No other country garners more than 9% (Iran). A year ago, Russia topped the list of threats at 30%, followed by China at 21%.

There is a considerable gender gap when it comes to the threat posed by China: 35% of men see China as the greatest threat to the U.S. compared to only 21% of women. Young women, in particular, are more sanguine towards China, as only 19% of this cohort identifies China as the greatest threat. By contrast, 40% of college educated men see China as the greatest threat.

Perceptions of threat also differ appreciably by party. Forty-one percent of Republicans identify China as the greatest threat to the U.S., whereas only 15% of Democrats see things similarly. Thirty-eight percent of Democrats see Russia as the greatest threat, whereas only 15% of Republicans see things similarly. Independents see China as slightly more of a threat than Russia, by a 24% to 20% count.

Given the menacing (at least to some) specter of the bear, what are the biggest concerns Americans have about Russia? Roughly one-quarter say it is sponsoring cyber-attacks on the U.S. (24%), while 21% say it is aiding Iran and other rogue regimes, and 20% say it is interference in our elections. Bringing up the rear, only 16% fear a Russian thermo-nuclear attack and a mere 11% are worried about the Russians invading one of the former Soviet republics.

Allies: What’s the Old Saying about Loaning Money to Friends?

On the ally side of the ledger, Americans love our friends across the pond and from down under. Ninety-three percent consider Great Britain and Australia allies, topping the “friends” list. France (90%), Germany (84%), Japan (83%), Poland (82%), India (80%), Israel (78%), Mexico (77%), Taiwan (73%), South Korea (73%), and Ukraine (61%) also qualify as allies, according to the U.S. public.

As we saw in our inaugural poll, attitudes towards our main alliance are positive, though not entirely sanguine. Sixty-two percent, for example, are favorable towards NATO but 22% are unfavorable. Furthermore, 58% say our NATO allies should do more, compared to 27% 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 the data on the Russian threat, the public is substantially more concerned about cyber-attacks on government computers and the grid and on personal computers and accounts (89% and 87%, respectively) than nuclear war (58%), conventional military attacks (56%), or an attack on our space assets, such as satellites (62%). Americans are also relatively concerned about a terrorist attack on the homeland and political divisions in the U.S. leading to violence (84% each).

In a mark of how far we have come from “mutually assured destruction” doctrine of the Cold War, 57% now believe the U.S. would “win” a war with a nuclear power.

However, this general tendency towards unconcern has the potential to obscure several interesting differences between and amongst groups.

- First, women are significantly more concerned about nuclear (64% concerned) and conventional war (59% concerned) than are men (52% and 51% concerned, respectively).
- Second, the percentage of “extremely concerned” responses shows some divergence with respect to the salience of threats. On the one hand, 60% of Democrats and 62% of college graduates are “extremely concerned” about cyber-attacks on government computers and the grid. On the other hand, 46% of Republicans and 45% of those without a college degree are “extremely concerned” about a terrorist attack on the homeland.
- Third, non-whites are relatively more likely to say they are “extremely concerned” about political divisions in the U.S. leading to violence—57% of Blacks and 53% of Hispanics hold this view, compared to 49% of whites.

National Security Flashpoints

China

As noted earlier, the American public views China as the greatest potential threat to the U.S. Given a list of potential concerns specifically associated with China, holding \$1.2 trillion in U.S. government debt tops the list (33% choose it as their greatest concern). This is followed by over-taking the U.S. as the world’s number one super power (17%), technology theft (14%), unfair trade practices (13%), the Chinese military build-up (10%), and the isolation of Taiwan (3%).

As suggested by responses to the item on specific threats, Americans see China as an economic (64%) rather than a military threat (15%). Accordingly, they are split on the merits of the trade war with China. Forty-nine percent support it, compared to 46% who oppose it. Even those who support the trade war are concerned about its long-term implications. Seventy-two percent of Americans are concerned that a trade war will de-stabilize relations between the countries and increase the chances of conflict.

Of course, economic issues have geo-political (and perhaps even military) implications. More than eight in ten Americans express concern that China has built a series of naval and military bases in the region of the South China Sea in order to bolster its claims on territory and natural resources.

And in the most well-known dispute involving economic development and Chinese sovereignty, Americans are supportive of pro-democracy forces in Hong Kong. Sixty-eight percent say we should support the pro-democracy movement while only 14% say we should back the Chinese government. This support extends to potentially imposing economic sanctions on China (69% support) and sending U.S. security assistance or aid to Hong Kong (59% support).

With respect to Taiwan, American support for diplomatic and economic aid is solid. Military support, however, splits the country. If China were to invade Taiwan—pressing its claim that the island is part of mainland China’s territory—three-in-four Americans would support recognizing Taiwan as an independent country, and 64% would support economic sanctions against China. A majority (55%) would support sending U.S. military assets, such as aircraft carriers, into the region. Opinion is split on dramatically increasing arm sales to Taiwan (44% support, 37% oppose), establishing a “no-fly zone” over the area (42% support, 42% oppose), or sending in U.S. ground troops (39% support, 45% oppose).

Syria and Turkey

A narrow 51% majority supports the troop withdrawal from Syria while 40% oppose it. Opposition to the withdrawal does appear to be a reflection of reticence to subject our Kurdish allies in Syria to Turkish aggression. Seventy-two percent of Americans favor imposing economic sanctions on Turkey, and 60% favor sending U.S. military support to the Kurds.

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 Americans disagree about the efficacy of a border wall in addressing the issue. One-third think building a wall will have a substantial positive effect on U.S. security, and another 23% say it will have a minor positive impact. Conversely, just under one-in-five (19%) think a wall would make the U.S. *less* safe.

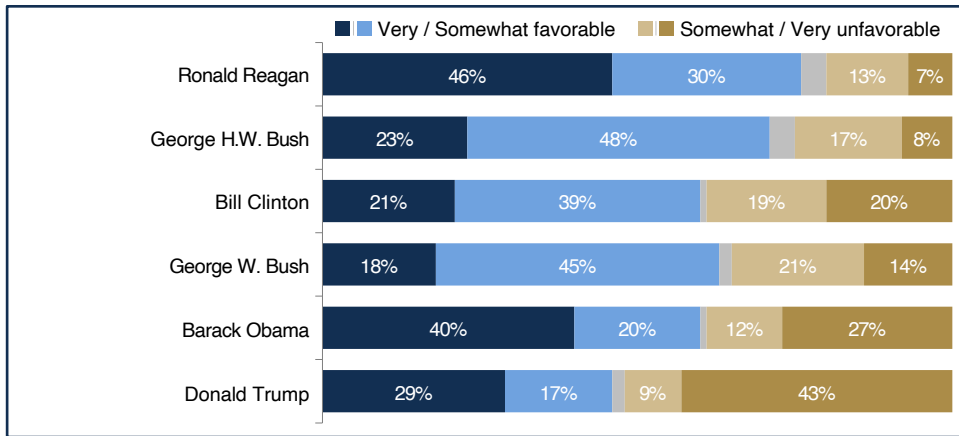
Support for the wall is up from last year. In 2018, 49% said the wall would have a positive effect on U.S. security; that number climbs to 56% in 2019.

Evaluations of Presidents

When asked about their attitudes towards recent presidents (Ronald Reagan through Donald Trump), President Reagan is rated the most favorably. Seventy-six percent view the Gipper somewhat or very favorably. Reagan also has the highest percent viewing him very favorably (46%) and the lowest percentage viewing him very unfavorably (7%). Overall, Reagan’s rating is a net +56 favorable.

Ranking just behind Reagan is George H.W. Bush (71% favorable, up 6 points from 2018), followed by George W. Bush (63%, up 6 points from 2018), Barack Obama (60%), Bill Clinton (60%), and Donald Trump (46%).

Figure 4—Evaluations of Recent Presidents



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 somewhat by 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 13,500 records were drawn to generate 1,003 completed interviews. The survey was conducted via telephone calls from live interviewers from October 24-30, 2019. Fifty percent of the calls were completed via landline and 50 percent were completed via cell phone. On average, the interviews lasted approximately 23 minutes. The margin of error for the poll is +/- 3.1 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.