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# What Americans outside the Beltway think about war with Iran

Posted By [Stephen M. Walt](#) ■ Tuesday, August 7, 2012 - 1:02 PM ■ [Share](#)



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“ The pessimist complains about the wind; the optimist expects it to change; the realist adjusts the sails. ”

— William Arthur Ward

I'm just back from a brief trip to Maine, to give a lecture at the [Mid-Coast Forum on Foreign Relations](#). As I have in a couple of other venues, [I spoke](#) on the similarities and differences between the earlier campaign for war with Iraq and the current debate over war with Iran. The main similarity, of course, is that the same groups and individuals who pushed hardest for war with Iraq are also in the vanguard of the groups pushing for war with Iran today. But there are also some critical differences, most notably the fact that the Obama administration isn't staffed by die-hard neoconservatives and Obama isn't as gullible as Bush and Cheney turned out to be. For those of us who believe that war with Iran is neither necessary nor wise, this is good news.

My hosts were exceptionally welcoming, and the attendees asked a lot of smart questions, so I had an excellent time. A fair number of the people I met have backgrounds in international affairs (in business, academia, government, intelligence, etc.), and all are obviously engaged by the subject. I

didn't hand out a questionnaire so I don't know what everyone in attendance thought, but I was struck by two themes in both the Q & A at my talk and in my private conversations with various members.

First, I detected no support for any sort of war with Iran. Zip. Zero. Zilch. Not by us, not by Israel, and not by anybody else. It's possible that some people in the audience would use force as a last resort, but no one in the audience or in private spoke in favor of that option or even asked a question that leaned in that direction. (One retired government official said he believed there would eventually be a war, but he made it clear that he thought that it was a terrible idea). Instead, they were mostly interested in what could be done to prevent a war, and several questions centered on what could be done to improve U.S.-Iranian relations over the longer term. That view, by the way, is more-or-less consistent with **recent surveys** showing relatively little support for the "military option." This result is especially telling given that Americans also seem to hold **quite alarmist views** about Iran's nuclear intentions, and given that the war party has been working overtime to hype the threat for years.

Second, I was also struck by the intelligent skepticism that several attendees expressed regarding America's global role. This was a sophisticated group, and most of the people with whom I spoke would be considered "internationalist" in orientation. Yet several also spoke against what they perceived as excessive U.S. interventionism, and one openly complained about the U.S. serving as the "world's policeman." Statements such as these reinforce my sense that a lot of well-informed Americans recognize that trying to run most of the world isn't in America's interest or the world's interest, and that a smarter and more selective approach to global engagement would be easy to sell.

In fact, because the United States is in reality **amazingly secure** (relative to most other nations) it takes a lot of effort to get us to shoulder all these international burdens. Our leaders and other interested parties have to do a lot of **threat-mongering**, usually by treating minor powers as if they were looming international dangers. And these minor powers can't be portrayed merely as regimes with whom we have differences; they have to be given scary labels like the "Axis of Evil" or demonized as the Greatest Threat to Human Decency since Hitler (or Stalin, or Saddam, or Genghis Khan or whomever). Advocates of endless intervention also rely on elaborate domino-theory scenarios whereby some obscure setback somewhere eventually leads to a snafu, which triggers a defeat, which in turn provokes a crisis, which then undermines our credibility, which leads allies to defect, and eventually leaves us isolated and vulnerable. Via this sort of logic, victory is necessary in Afghanistan or else someday **North Korea will invade** and conquer all of North America.

As I said, these impressions aren't based on a scientific survey, and the views expressed above are my own. But the whole trip made me wish that Barack Obama and Mitt Romney could spend less time with their advisors and less time cuddling up to **fat cat donors with bellicose agendas**, and more time talking about foreign policy with well-informed regular citizens. I'll bet they'd discover that what passes for unquestioned truth inside-the-Beltway is much less widely accepted in a lot of other places.

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