

A. TREVOR THRALL AND ERIK GOEPNER



MILLENNIALS AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

The Next Generation's Attitudes toward
Foreign Policy and War (and Why They Matter)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Millennial Generation, those roughly 87 million adult men and women born between 1980 and 1997, now represent one-quarter of the U.S. population, outnumbering the Greatest Generation (1913–1924), the Silent Generation (1925–1945), the Baby Boomers (1946–1964), and Generation X (Gen Xers) (1965–1979). In addition to being far more likely to have posted a “selfie” on social media than other generations, the Millennials also have distinct attitudes toward a range of important foreign policy issues. With those on the leading edge of Millennials now hitting their mid-thirties, this cohort is becoming increasingly influential.

Just as the generations before them, the Millennials’ worldviews owe a great deal to early life experiences and the foreign policy issues that dominated their childhoods. The main drivers of Millennials’ foreign policy attitudes fall into two major categories. The first category comprises the trends and events that started or occurred before the Millennials came of age and provide their historical context. This includes the end of the Cold War and the evolution of the global distribution of power, the development of the Internet, and the acceleration of globalization. The second category includes major events that have occurred so far during the Millennials’ “critical period,” the period between the ages of roughly 14 to 24 when people are most susceptible to socialization effects.

Most obviously these include the attacks of 9/11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Together, these forces have led to three critical differences between Millennials’ foreign policy views and those of their elders. First, Millennials perceive the world as significantly less threatening than their elders do, and they view foreign policies to deal with potential threats with much less urgency. Second, Millennials are more supportive of international cooperation than prior generations. Millennials, for example, are far more likely to see China as a partner than a rival and to believe that cooperation, rather than confrontation, with China is the appropriate strategy for the United States. Finally, thanks in particular to the impact of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Millennials are also far less supportive of the use of military force and may have internalized a permanent case of “Iraq Aversion.”

The rise of the Millennial Generation portends significant changes in public expectations and increased support for a more restrained grand strategy. There is no reason, however, to expect that U.S. grand strategy will become particularly coherent under Millennial leadership. Millennials, like every generation, reflect significant partisan splits over core issues. In the absence of a unifying security threat, these partisan divides ensure that U.S. foreign policy will feature as much debate and dissensus in the future as it does today.

“Just as the generations before them, the Millennials’ worldviews owe a great deal to early life experiences and the foreign policy issues that dominated their childhoods.”

INTRODUCTION

In case you missed it, the Millennial Generation has arrived. Born between 1980 and 1997, the roughly 87 million Millennials now represent one-quarter of the adult U.S. population, outnumbering the Greatest Generation (1913–1924), the Silent Generation (1925–1945), the Baby Boomers (1946–1964), and Generation X (Gen Xers) (1965–1979).¹ In addition to being far more likely to have posted a “selfie” on social media than other generations, the Millennials also have distinct attitudes toward a range of important foreign policy issues. With those on the leading edge of Millennials now hitting their mid-thirties, this cohort is becoming increasingly influential. Just as the generations before them, the Millennials’ worldviews owe a great deal to early life experiences and the foreign policy issues that dominated their childhoods. If you ask college students to name their first important international affairs–related memory, chances are excellent that they will answer “9/11.” Most Millennials, in fact, have few, if any, adult memories of a time before 9/11 and the wars in the Middle East.

Vietnam, Korea, and the First and Second World Wars, of course, provided important early (and lasting) impressions to previous generations. However, unlike Generation X, their most recent predecessors, Millennials are reaching adulthood in a post–Cold War world in which there is less consensus about threats, about U.S. rights and responsibilities, and about, more generally, how deeply and to what ends to engage the rest of the world.² To understand future currents of U.S. public opinion, not to mention the actions of future foreign policy leaders, we need to understand the emerging and evolving foreign policy attitudes of the Millennial Generation.

In this report, we argue that the end of the Cold War, 9/11, and the wars in the Middle East have imprinted Millennials with a pattern of foreign policy attitudes that is distinct from that of their predecessors. Millennials perceive the world to be significantly less threatening than do their elders, are more

likely to support international cooperation than the unilateral use of military force, and may have a permanent case of what we call an “Iraq Aversion.” That said, Millennials also resemble their predecessors in many ways, including partisan differences of opinion over both threats and policy priorities.

The following section reviews the concept of generational cohorts and the utility of studying them. We then provide a brief profile of the Millennials before exploring their foreign policy attitudes in greater detail. Along the way we also provide input from Millennials in their own words, taken from a series of 47 short interviews and surveys conducted over the early part of 2015. We conclude with a discussion of the implications for U.S. foreign policy and some advice for presidential candidates seeking Millennial votes in the 2016 election.

COHORTS, COHORT EFFECTS, AND WHY THEY MATTER

An old Arab proverb claims, “Men resemble the times more than they do their fathers.” And indeed, social scientists have long studied generations (or cohorts, as most demographers prefer to call them) because they represent proxies for the impact of the common historical context and life experiences of large groups of people and, in turn, correlate with important differences in how people think and act. Sociologist Norman Ryder argued, “Conceptually the cohort resembles most closely the ethnic group: membership is determined at birth, and often has considerable capacity to explain variance, but need not imply that the category is an organized group.”³ Average citizens, of course, do not need sociologists to tell them that the younger generation differs in important ways from its predecessors. The important questions are why and how do the generations differ, and why does it matter?

Cohort Effects

At the risk of oversimplifying the substantial literature on intergenerational change, we

can identify two broad categories of factors that lead each successive cohort to hold different attitudes from the previous ones: (a) the unique historical context into which each cohort is born, and (b) the major events that they experience as young adults. As politics, economics, technology, and social dynamics evolve, so, too, does their impact on each successive cohort. Millennials, for example, did not experience the Cold War or the Reagan presidency as adults. Most cannot remember a time before cell phones, the Internet, and a wildly interconnected world. In their world, same-sex marriage and smoking marijuana are legal in a growing number of places, women regularly occupy high offices, and China has always been a major economic player on the global stage. With respect to major events, the 9/11 attacks, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Great Recession, and the election of the first African American president in U.S. history stand among the events most likely to produce lasting shifts in attitudes for Millennials.

Scholars have argued that these “cohort effects” are most powerful during what Karl Mannheim first called the “critical period” of young adulthood.⁴ Since then, the scholarly literature has provided a great deal of evidence about the long-lasting importance of cohort effects from youth.⁵ In a recent study of political socialization and presidential voting, for example, Yair Ghitza and Andrew Gelman argue that presidential voting preferences can be modeled as a weighted running tally of a person’s past exposure to all previous presidents—exposure to a successful Republican candidate, for example, will make people more likely to vote Republican in the future. Not all exposure, however, has the same impact. Looking at trends across more than 60 years, Ghitza and Gelman found that “the foundation of partisan presidential voting trends peaks around the ages of 14–24.”⁶ According to their model, events at age 18 have roughly three times the impact on partisan voting preferences as events that occur at age 40, and experiences past the age of 45 have no statistically significant impact at all.

Research shows that this critical period can have a marked effect, in particular, on each generation’s view of war and foreign policy.⁷ From the foreign policy professional’s perspective, as former U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski once summarized it:

There is a tendency in America to be traumatized by international difficulties. The generation of the nineteen-forties was always thinking about the failure of the League of Nations. I’m talking about leadership groups now. The leadership of the sixties was always thinking about Munich. Now there is a generation worried by Vietnam, with consequences of self-imposed paralysis, which is likely to be costlier in the long run.⁸

From the scholarly perspective, Howard Schuman and Amy Corning demonstrated that birth cohorts that had experienced a war during their critical periods were far more likely to mention it as an “especially important” event from the past.⁹ And, in a related study, Schuman and Cheryl Rieger found that the cohort that turned 17 in 1965 was twice as likely as older generations to prefer a Vietnam analogy to a Hitler analogy during the period leading up to the 1991 ground war in the Persian Gulf.¹⁰

As fruitful objects of study as they are, however, cohorts are tricky things to analyze. The first reason is methodological: it is difficult for observers to distinguish between cohort effects, aging effects, and period effects. As noted, cohort effects are situations in which a young generation is exposed during its impressionable years to a major event that produces a lasting set of attitudes common to that generation. Conversely, an aging effect denotes the effect that aging has on the opinions of a given generation. People tend to become more interested in public affairs as they grow older, for example, regardless of when they were born. Finally, period effects result when a major event causes a temporary effect across

“Millennials did not experience the Cold War or the Reagan presidency as adults. Most cannot remember a time before cell phones or the Internet, and China has always been a major economic player on the global stage.”

“As the Millennial Generation ages and takes over leadership positions, its unique mix of attitudes and behaviors will increasingly influence policy debates, polling outcomes, and elections.”

all generations. The “Vietnam Syndrome” so often discussed in the late 1970s and 1980s is a classic example of a period effect—as was the increased concern about terrorism caused by the 9/11 attacks. The key here is that over time, as the event causing the period effect recedes into history, so does its impact. What makes the attitude formation process even more interesting and complex, however, is that one generation’s period effect can wind up being a younger generation’s cohort effect.

Cohort effects are also difficult to assess because they take time to emerge and may not be obvious except under specific circumstances. As Schuman and Rieger argued in their study of the use of historical analogies during war, the most likely time to witness powerful generational effects on attitudes is when a president calls on a major past event explicitly. They argued that President George H. W. Bush’s strategy of repeatedly comparing Saddam Hussein to Hitler during the 1990–91 Persian Gulf crisis provided a powerful reason for older Americans to compare the situation in Iraq to the situation before World War II.¹¹

Finally, as is the case with other social constructs such as class or race, there is typically more variation in attitudes within a given generation than between generations.¹² Indeed, the lessons that each generation learns from a major event or war during its critical period may, in fact, not be unidirectional. Although little research has focused directly on this question, work on public opinion and foreign policy suggests that liberal and conservative Millennials have likely learned different lessons from their critical periods.¹³ Given the many influences on public attitudes at any time, observers seeking to make claims about the causes and consequences of generational divides must exercise a good deal of analytic humility.

Why Cohorts Matter

To assert that the world is a completely different place thanks to each new generation is too much of a stretch. In fact, each generation adopts many of the views and habits of its pre-

decessors. Society’s norms and institutions are powerful forces for stability. Americans of all ages share a common geography. They tend to view foreign affairs from a great distance, separated from most of the world by two oceans and thousands of miles. Moreover, there is much about the rest of the world that has not changed and will not change: there are dangers in the world, and hostile nations will produce challenges to the global order.

And yet, despite this reality, each new generation raises the possibility of significant change. As Ryder noted, “A new cohort provides a market for radical ideas and a source of followers, and they are more likely than their elders to criticize the existing order.”¹⁴ Although we may not be able to predict exactly how each generation will reshape society, we can be sure that each will bring fresh eyes to old problems. As the Millennial Generation ages and takes over leadership positions, its unique mix of attitudes and behaviors will increasingly influence policy debates, polling outcomes, and elections.

WHO ARE THE MILLENNIALS?

To sum up an entire generation in a few words is unfair, but polling organizations have identified several demographic themes that distinguish Millennials from their elders. Compared to other cohorts, Millennials are more liberal, more ethnically and racially diverse, more technology centered, more supportive of government action to solve problems, and the best-educated generation in U.S. history.

As Table 1 illustrates, Millennials are more liberal than previous generations.¹⁵ This liberal shift is linked to more tolerant social attitudes in particular, with Millennials clearly more supportive of same-sex marriage, single motherhood, and nontraditional family structures than older generations.¹⁶ Much has been made of Millennials’ support for Barack Obama in the 2008 election and the subsequent decline in the Democratic Party’s advantage with Millennials since then.¹⁷ But although the voting patterns may shift as youthful exuberance

Table 1
Ideological Self-Identification by Generation, 2014 (percent)

Generation (birth years)	Conservative	Moderate	Liberal	Conservative-liberal gap
Millennials (1980–1996)	28	40	30	-2
Generation X (1965–1979)	35	39	23	12
Baby Boomers (1946–1964)	44	33	21	23
Traditionalists* (1900–1945)	48	33	17	31
All adults	38	36	24	14

Source: Gallup Poll Social Series, “U.S. Baby Boomers More Likely to Identify as Conservative.” (See Appendix.)

*“Traditionalists” is simply the label Gallup gave to all respondents born across the 1900–1945 period. Unlike the other three labels, “traditionalists” here does not refer to a specific generation.

Note: The percentages as reported on the Gallup site do not add up to 100 percent.

meets the reality of Washington politics, the history of polling on liberal and conservative ideology suggests that Millennials will remain a more liberal group over time. A recent report by Jeff Jones of Gallup, for example, concluded that Millennials will remain more liberal and that the overall American electorate will tilt more liberal as older and more conservative Americans begin to die.¹⁸

Following the work of Ghitza and Gelman, Millennials’ liberalness may stem in large part from their coming of age under Bill Clinton (a popular Democratic president) and George W. Bush (an unpopular Republican president).¹⁹ Another potential source of

Millennials’ liberal attitudes is the fact they are also the most ethnically and racially diverse generation in the United States: just 57 percent of the Millennial Generation are non-Hispanic whites, 4 percent fewer than Generation X and 15 percent fewer than the Baby Boomers. This diversity, in turn, is due in large part to recent immigration: 11 percent of Millennials were children of immigrants, up substantially from 7 percent for Gen Xers and 5 percent for Boomers.²⁰

Millennials are also the first “always connected” generation, spending roughly 18 hours a day consuming media across multiple platforms, very often from more than one platform at the same time.²¹ They readily admit the role technology plays in their lives, identifying it as the number-one factor that sets them apart from preceding generations. Whereas their elders (the authors included) need the how-to manuals, Millennials are naturals with new technologies. Moreover, this rapid proliferation

of technologies has elevated their level of connectedness and provided new opportunities for information and news consumption. One important consequence of their

tech savvy is that Millennials have set aside television and print media as news sources, increasingly looking to the Internet for their news. Yahoo, CNN, and Google serve as the primary news source for 48 percent of Millennials.²²

Finally, Millennials express less skepticism about government than do their elders, despite polling data that suggest they have a lower overall opinion of human nature than their elders do.²³ In that respect, they differ-

“Millennials’ liberalness may stem in large part from their coming of age under Bill Clinton (a popular Democratic president) and George W. Bush (an unpopular Republican president).”

In Their Own Words:

What we see online affects how we see the world, and much of it never makes it into the mainstream media.

—Jim, age 20

“Millennials are naturals with new technologies. One important consequence of their tech savvy is that Millennials have set aside television and print media as news sources, increasingly looking to the Internet for their news.”

IN THEIR OWN WORDS: ABOUT THE SURVEYS AND INTERVIEWS

To hear from Millennials, four members of our research team conducted 47 interviews and surveys (14 in-person interviews and 33 online surveys) of people between the ages of 18 and 33. The respondents represent a convenience sample, not a random one, and the findings should not be considered strictly representative of all American Millennials. Nonetheless, we believe that the answers provide insight into the way many Millennials process questions of foreign policy. The respondents hailed from Philadelphia and the Washington, D.C., metro area and included students and nonstudents, many of whom were working professionals. We asked the same set of questions in interviews and surveys:

1. Do you think people your age view foreign affairs differently from older people? How? Why?
2. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: The U.S. should mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can. Why?
3. What do you think was the most important lesson of 9/11 for the United States?
4. What do you think was the most important lesson of the war in Iraq for the United States?
5. Does it matter if the United States is the world's only superpower? Why?
6. If you could give President Obama one piece of foreign policy advice, what would it be?

When we use quotes from the interviews and surveys in the report, we have used the respondents' actual gender and age, but we have changed the names to ensure anonymity.

entiate themselves from previous generations in their desire for a more active government and greater confidence that government action can solve social problems.²⁴

MILLENNIAL FOREIGN POLICY VIEWS: LESS WORRIED, MORE RESTRAINED

If Mannheim's critical-period hypothesis is correct, the Millennial Generation will be most deeply affected by historical context and events between the mid-1990s, when the oldest Millennials started to reach young adulthood, and the early 2020s, when the youngest Millennials will reach their mid-twenties. It is obviously too early for a final assessment, and yet both previous research on cohort effects and available polling data suggest that we can safely identify the major driving forces

and events of at least the past 20 years that will play an important role in shaping how Millennials view foreign affairs.

As noted above, cohort effects fall into two main categories. The first category comprises the trends and events that started or occurred before the Millennials came of age and provide their historical context. This category includes the end of the Cold War and the evolution of the global distribution of power, the development of the Internet, and the acceleration of globalization. These changes have produced a "new normal" for Millennials that is very different from that of previous generations; one that we think has important consequences for foreign policy views. The second category includes major discrete events that have occurred so far during the Millennials' critical period—most obviously the attacks of 9/11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

But whereas historical context is largely invisible to most Millennials, thereby shaping perceptions subconsciously, 9/11 and the War on Terror are more salient to Millennials than to others and are very much at the center of how Millennials process issues of foreign affairs. Indeed, the unprecedented nature of 9/11 and the United States' response to it raise the prospect of a "9/11 Generation" that may view future national security and war very differently from the "Vietnam Generation" or its predecessor, the "Munich Generation."

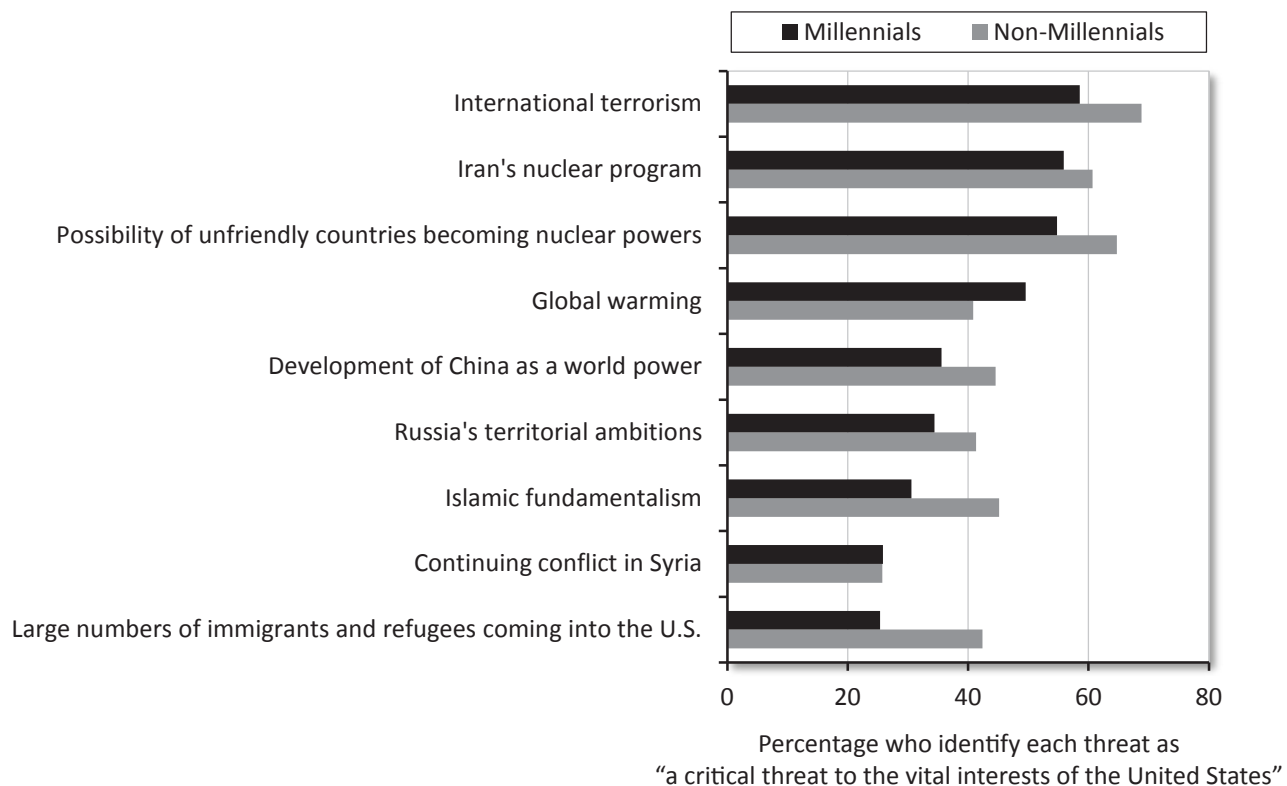
The End of the Cold War

Americans of all generations—except the Millennials—lived through some or all of the decades following World War II. The Cold War world was known for its high-stakes brinkmanship and increasing bipolarity, with the United States leading one side and the Soviet Union leading the other. Mutually assured destruction (and its apt acronym, MAD) re-

minded policymakers and citizens alike of just how dangerous the world had become. Thanks to a nuclear-armed superpower rival professing a hostile political ideology, plus a series of destructive proxy wars around the world, the Cold War led to heightened threat perceptions, a high level of military mobilization, and, until the end of the period, an unusual level of consensus about U.S. grand strategy and foreign policy. Since the end of the Cold War, however, threats are smaller, less urgent, and have come from an array of sources rather than a single rival. At the same time, bipolarity has given way to a more complex distribution of power; individuals, nonstate actors, and transnational networks now influence both U.S. national security and the foreign policy process in ways unimagined during the Cold War. In the face of these changes in the international environment, the United States now lacks an obvious North Star to guide debate and decisions, a fact that has exacerbated the foreign policy

“Since the end of the Cold War, threats are smaller, less urgent, and have come from an array of sources rather than a single rival.”

Figure 1
Threat Perceptions by Cohort, 2014



“Growing up in the wake of the Cold War, and in the absence of an existential threat, Millennials are simply less worried than their elders about national security.”

dissensus that emerged after Vietnam.²⁵

Available polling data suggest three implications of growing up in the wake of the Cold War. First, and perhaps most important, in the absence of an existential threat, Millennials are simply less worried than their elders about national security. As Figure 1 shows, Millennials are less likely than their elders to identify every threat as critical (aside from climate change). This finding is even true for international terrorism, the most visible threat of the Millennials' critical period.

Second, Millennials also appear to be more sanguine about the new distribution of power and the rise of China. For older Americans, China is not primarily an economic powerhouse but the nation of Mao, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and communism. For them, China's rise has been surprising and unsettling. Since 1979, China's gross domestic product has grown by an average of 10 percent annually. In 2010, China overtook Japan as

the world's second-largest economy, and International Monetary Fund data (based on purchasing power parity) indicate that China supplanted the United States as the largest economy in late 2014. Since 2001, China has increased defense spending by more than 10 percent a year.²⁶ Concurrent with its rise, China has become a more confident and aggressive player on the international stage. For Millennials, however, China has always been a linchpin of the global economy and an important player internationally; the dark days of U.S. conflict with “Communist China” are history.

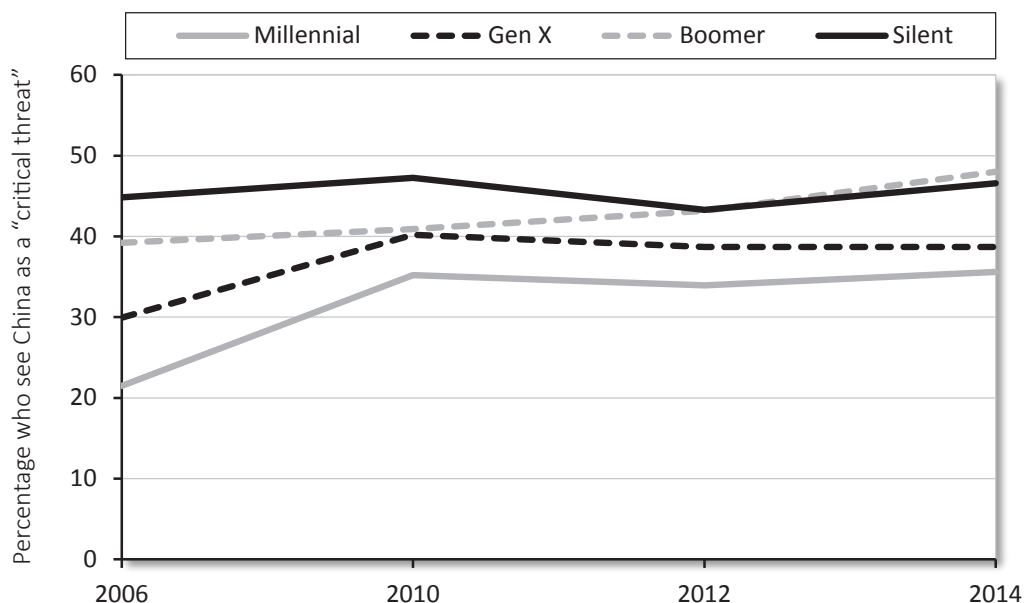
Thus, Millennials feel somewhat less threatened than their elders do by China, both militarily and economically. Only 36 percent of Millennials view China's growing power as a critical threat to the United States, compared to 45 percent for other generations (see Figure 2). For economic trade, just half of Millennials, versus more than two-thirds of their elders, assess China as engaging in “unfair” practices.²⁷

In Their Own Words:

A lot of the older generation is still stuck in the Cold War.

—Jenny, age 25

Figure 2
China as a Critical Threat, by Cohort



Source: Chicago Council on Global Affairs, “Foreign Policy in the New Millennium.” (See Appendix.)

In turn, Millennials are far more supportive of cooperation with China than their elders. The U.S. “pivot” to Asia and its emphasis on extending the U.S. military presence in the region raises the prospects for conflict, but most of the data indicate Millennials support a more cooperative approach. They recognize China’s increasing importance, with nearly 60 percent saying Asia is more important to the United States than Europe. That represents an almost complete reversal of their elders’ response, 54 percent of whom said Europe is more important.²⁸

As for pursuing the peaceful integration of China into the existing world order, Millennials appear ready to do just that. When asked, less than one-quarter of Millennials recommended getting “tough” with China on economic issues, versus 40 percent from the three other generations, who prefer a “tough” stance. Further indicative of their propensity for partnership, 63 percent of polled Millennials said pursuing free-trade agreements

with China was appropriate, as compared to 41–45 percent for the three older generations.²⁹

Finally, the absence of a unifying external threat may also help explain an additional characteristic of the Millennials: they represent the least patriotic cohort of Americans. In a 2011 Pew Research Center poll, just 32 percent of Millennials agreed with the statement “the U.S. is the greatest nation on earth.” And Millennials were also the least likely to agree that the phrase “patriotic person” applied to them. (See Table 2.) Relatedly, perhaps, Millen-

nials are also the least likely of all generations to have served in the military, thanks in large part to the reductions in military manpower brought about by the end of the Cold War. To date, just 2 percent of Millennials have served in the military.³⁰

The 9/11 Attacks

It is unnecessary to convince anyone that 9/11 has had, and will continue to have, a major influence on how Americans view the world and

think about national security. The unprecedented attacks shattered the notion that the U.S. homeland was safe from large-scale terrorism and drove American fears of terrorism to all-time highs. The attacks also spawned massive change in U.S. national security strategy. From the creation of the Department of Homeland Security to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, from the Patriot Act and National Security Agency wiretapping to indefinite detention and drone warfare, the changes in

U.S. foreign policy were sudden and severe, with wide-ranging consequences.

What is less clear, however, is what the long-term cohort effects of 9/11 will be. We know that 9/11 is more salient for Millennials than for previous generations. As Figure 3 shows, for example, Millennials are far more likely than others to provide a spontaneous mention of 9/11 as an important historical event, just as previous generations are more likely to mention “their war” as an important historical event.³¹

In Their Own Words:

Every generation sees foreign affairs through their own lens. For my parents’ generation, it’s Vietnam. For mine, it’s 9/11.

—John, age 23

I think 9/11 taught Americans how to be united. I think there are so many parts of our society that try to divide us (cultures, race, money, education, geographic location, etc.), and I think sometimes people forget that we are all Americans and sharing the same benefits of living in this country.

—Emily, age 19

The world is significantly more “gray” for Millennials—previous generations have a much more solid “good” and “bad” concept of foreign relations, which fails to account for the complexity of the post-Cold War world.

—Bill, age 25

“Only 36 percent of Millennials view China’s growing power as a critical threat to the United States, compared to 45 percent for other generations.”

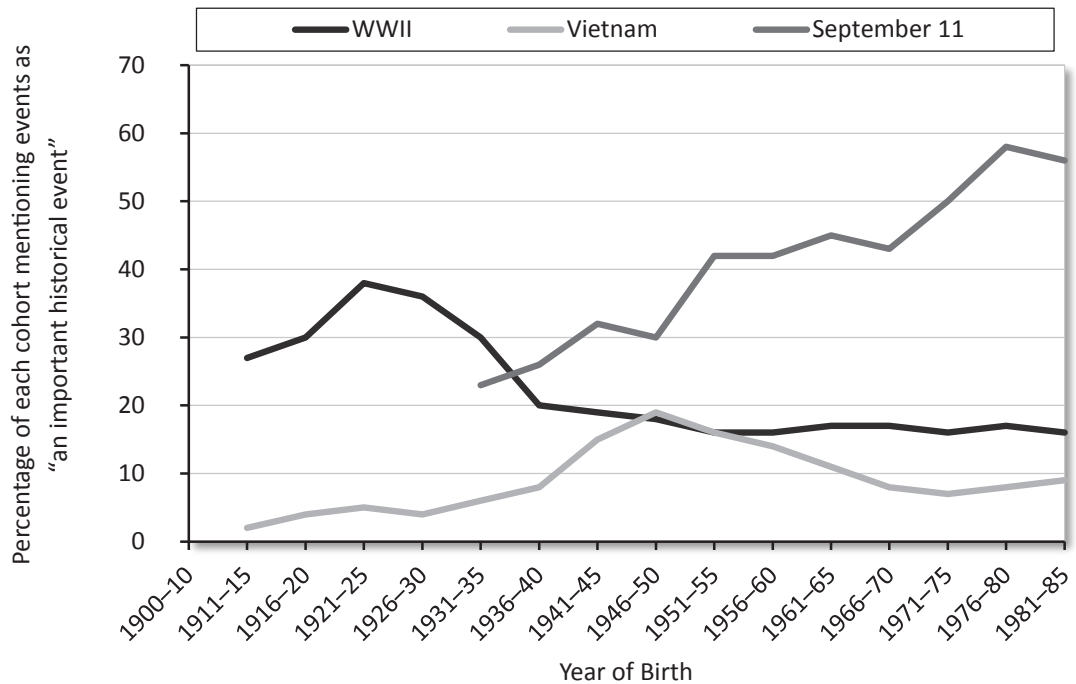
“Millennials are the generation least concerned about international terrorism and display lower levels of support for defense spending and fighting terrorism.”

Table 2
Patriotism, by Cohort

	Percentage saying they are “very patriotic”				Percentage saying the United States is “the greatest country in the world”
	2003	2007	2009	2011	2011
Millennial	80	76	77	70	32
Generation X	88	91	90	86	48
Baby Boomers	93	94	91	91	50
Silent Generation	94	93	91	90	64

Source: Pew Research Center, “The Generation Gap and the 2012 Election.” (See Appendix.)

Figure 3
Mentions of Important Historical Events, by Cohort



Source: Howard Schuman and Amy Corning, “Generational Memory and the Critical Period: Evidence for National and World Events,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (2012): 1-31.

Note: The lines represent the percentage of people in each cohort who answered WWII, Vietnam, or 9/11 in response to the following question:

“There have been a lot of national and world events and changes over the past 50 or so years—say, from about 1930 right up until today. Would you mention one or two such events or changes that seem to you to have been especially important?”

Beyond this response, we need to consider competing hypotheses about the impact of 9/11 on Millennials. One hypothesis suggests that the Millennial Generation will view 9/11 as evidence of the need to be more concerned with terrorism and that they will be more sup-

portive of aggressive homeland security and counterterrorism measures. The other hypothesis suggests, to the contrary, that 9/11 reflects global displeasure with various U.S. policies and that 9/11 should induce greater U.S. restraint.

At present, the weight of available polling data provides more support for the second hypothesis. A 2011 Pew Research Center study, for example, found that Millennials are considerably more likely than older generations to believe that the United States' own actions provoked the 9/11 attacks. In fact, they are the only generation where a majority, 53 percent, believes this is the case, compared to 47 percent of Gen Xers, 39 percent of Baby Boomers, and 30 percent for the Silent Generation.³²

Further, although it seems reasonable to suppose that Millennials, in their impressionable years, would respond to 9/11 by fearing terrorism and supporting aggressive homeland security and counterterrorism measures at greater rates than their elders, polling data provide no support for this view. In fact, as Figure 1 revealed, Millennials are the generation *least* concerned about international terrorism and display lower levels of support for defense spending and fighting terrorism.

Afghanistan, Iraq, and the War on Terror

In addition to the lessons they draw from the September 11 attacks, of course, Millenni-

als' foreign policy attitudes will also be heavily influenced by the defining wars of their young lives: Afghanistan and Iraq. Although time will tell us much more than we know now, we believe that we can already discern at least three important influences of these wars on Millennials' worldviews and foreign policy attitudes.

First, the wars have provided Millennials with the dominant historical analogy they will use for assessing future conflicts. For Millennials, the wars in Afghanistan, and especially Iraq, are the very definition of war, as were Vietnam, Korea, and World War II for generations before them. As such, it is safe to assume that Millennials will discuss future wars in terms of how similar they are to the war in Iraq.³³ By implication, future wars that are judged to be "like Iraq" are likely to suffer lower levels of support, given the general consensus among Millennials that Iraq represented a mistake and was not worth fighting.

Second, the wars since 9/11 have contributed significantly to Millennials' preference for restraint regarding the use of military force. To assess the size of this effect, we recreated

In Their Own Words:

There can be very strange effects from policies pursued long in the past that can have repercussions on the U.S. now. If we don't keep up with our policies they can come back and become problems for us later on.

—Hallie, age 24

In Their Own Words:

Don't try to engage in regime change.

—Nathaniel, age 24

I think the U.S. was forced to realize that the nature of war is changing, that terrorism might be more complex to handle than we thought it was.

—Sonia, age 19

Just because the U.S. has the largest military and it sees a problem, that doesn't mean that the solution is a military one, or that its military power will be able to solve that problem.

—Greg, age 20

“Future wars that are judged to be ‘like Iraq’ are likely to suffer lower levels of support, given the general consensus among Millennials that Iraq represented a mistake and was not worth fighting.”

“Polls show a Millennial reluctance to support the use of force, rather than a general decrease in their desire to engage the world.”

Table 3
The Four Faces of Internationalism, by Cohort, 2014 (percent)

Support index scores	Percentage of each cohort in each category			
	Millennials	Gen X	Baby Boomers	Silent Generation
Cooperation—high Use of force—high	29.5	30.2	32.4	32.6
Cooperation—high Use of force—low	24.4	24.2	23.0	19.3
Cooperation—low Use of force—high	16.4	25.3	22.6	28.8
Cooperation—low Use of force—low	29.7	20.3	22.0	19.3

Source: Chicago Council on Global Affairs, “Foreign Policy in the Age of Retrenchment.” (See Appendix.)

a version of Eugene Wittkopf’s “four faces of internationalism” framework. Wittkopf categorized people based on their willingness to engage in world affairs and their preferred approach to doing so, whether through cooperation or through military means, resulting in groups preferring cooperation, preferring military force, supporting both activities, or having low support for both activities. Wittkopf’s framework is useful because this basic orientation toward engaging the world provides a powerful predictor of foreign policy preferences across a wide range of issues. Over more than two decades of analyzing the trends in public attitudes, Wittkopf found that the distribution across the four categories was not only relatively even—with between 22 and 28 percent of the population in each—but also remained remarkably stable, with little evidence of major changes over time.³⁴

Thanks to their increased reluctance to support military intervention, however, Millennials represent a break from the pattern, as shown in Table 3. Using the 2014 Chicago Council on Global Affairs survey on public opinion of U.S. foreign policy, we categorized Americans using an updated version of Wittkopf’s framework, created from indexes of

support for 18 cooperative items (e.g., should the United States participate in free trade agreements and various treaties) and 15 military items (e.g., support for the use of force in a variety of scenarios). Although older generations follow patterns very similar to Wittkopf’s findings, Millennials do not. Again, because Millennials continue to support cooperative activities such as participating in international treaties and strengthening the United Nations, the generation gap shown in Table 3 should be read primarily as the result of the greater Millennial reluctance to support the use of force, rather than a general decrease in their desire to engage the world.

Although this generation gap is significant, it is unclear just how likely it is to persist. On the one hand, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs’ surveys show that all cohorts have become more likely to say the United States should mind its own business in the wake of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. As the most impressionable cohort, Millennials may just be enduring a more significant period effect than older generations. On the other hand, Millennials have always been the most likely generation to say that the United States should take a “stay out” of world affairs stance;

as Figure 4 illustrates, in 2014 almost 50 percent of Millennials responded that the United States should “stay out” of world affairs, the highest rate since the Chicago Council on Global Affairs began asking the question in 1974. We do not know how much of the generation gap is permanent, but the critical-period hypothesis—that hard lessons learned at an impressionable age can be powerful—suggests that the gap will likely persist in some form over time.

Many analysts have speculated that the negative reaction to the war in Iraq has produced an Iraq Syndrome akin to the Vietnam Syndrome: that is, a pervasive reluctance to support the use of force abroad.³⁵ If such a syndrome ex-

isted, one would imagine it would run deepest among Millennials, and in light of the preceding discussion such a hypothesis is entirely reasonable.

In Their Own Words:

We feel a responsibility to help others, fight terrorism, spread democracy, etc., but sometimes we rush in without fully understanding the situation. My major concern is where do we draw the line? If we help one country with one issue, how can we say no to another country? We can't be held responsible for solving everyone's issues.

—Spencer, age 22

I think the U.S. should stay out militarily in international situations. I do not want the U.S. to be everyone's fallback when they get in trouble.

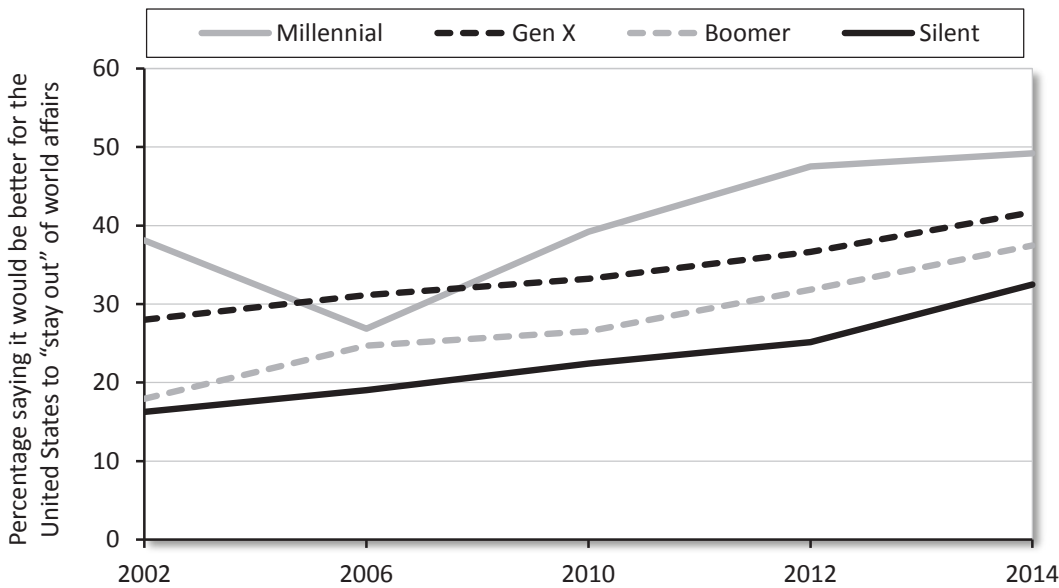
—Eliza, age 23

Our interpretation, however, is that despite their higher levels of skepticism, Millennials have developed an Iraq Aversion, rather than an Iraq Syndrome. That is, relative to older generations, Millennials share an enhanced skepticism about the future use of force in specific cases such as Iraq, rather than a more general rejection of all potential

uses of military force. On the one hand, it is true that Millennials are least likely to view military might as the right answer for solving international problems. Just 38 percent of Millenni-

“Relative to older generations, Millennials share an enhanced skepticism about the future use of force in specific cases such as Iraq.”

Figure 4
Support for Keeping Out of World Affairs, by Cohort



Source: Chicago Council on Foreign Relations/Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2006, 2010, 2012, and 2014. (See Appendix.)

“All Americans are wary of the use of force abroad when it means getting deeply involved in the politics of other nations. Millennials appear to have a somewhat more pronounced case of wariness than other generations.”

als say “the best way to ensure peace is through military strength.” And they are three times as likely to label President Obama’s approach to international affairs as too aggressive versus their elders. At the same time, Millennials also place a higher faith in diplomacy than any other generation.³⁶

On the other hand, Millennials are not the only group opposed to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—older generations oppose them at the same rates. Nor are the Millennials alone in their reluctance to support the use of force in many specific scenarios. As a substantial body of previous research has shown, all Americans are wary of the use of force abroad when, as in the case of Iraq, Afghanistan, or Syria’s civil war, it means getting deeply involved in the politics of other nations.³⁷ Millennials, thanks to exposure to these lessons at an impressionable age, appear to have a somewhat more pronounced case of wariness than other generations—thus our “Iraq Aversion” label.

Figure 5 reveals the nature and limits of the aversion; Millennials remain ready to support military intervention as long as it is for what they view as the right sort of cause. In fact, despite a recent dip, Millennials have been consistent supporters over the years of “liberal interventions” to prevent genocide or humanitarian crises, even as they have mostly opposed other potential uses of force. And, as noted, the Millennials’ resistance to military force is not a signal that they want to withdraw from the world. Not only is Millennial support on the cooperation index the same as for the other three generations,

but Millennials also exhibit a stronger preference for multilateral action than previous generations, continuing a trend of increased support for multilateral action by each cohort since the Silent Generation. Although most Americans prefer to address global challenges with allies, other things being equal, fewer are interested in working with other nations if it means compromising. Millennials overwhelmingly support the premise that the United States should consider the interests of allies even if it requires sacrifices to U.S. interests, with a 23-point spread between them and the Silent Generation.³⁸

Conversely, they are the least likely of the four generations to support going it alone when allies strongly disagree.³⁹

Two Millennial Generations?

Complicating the discussion of the influence of 9/11 and the War on Terror is the fact that a simple look at the calendar tells us Millennials fall into at least two cohorts with respect to foreign policy attitudes: the “9/11

Generation” (born roughly between 1980–1987) that experienced 9/11, Afghanistan, and Iraq during their critical period; and the “War on Terror Generation” (born after 1988 or so), for whom 9/11, Afghanistan, and Iraq are primarily historical context and whose critical period events occurred (or will occur) after the major combat phase of the war in Iraq.

Thus, based on the critical-period hypothesis, only Millennials born between 1980 and 1987 were old enough for 9/11 to produce a significant cohort effect. For the younger Millennials, born in or after 1988, 9/11 is more likely

In Their Own Words:

I think the U.S. should mind its own business more often than it does, but shouldn't be isolationist. There are opportunities to do good, but heavy military involvement never goes well.

—Howard, age 21

The U.S. is the world's only superpower, but that's not as meaningful as when we were saying the U.S. and the Soviet Union were two competing superpowers. It's an outdated metric.

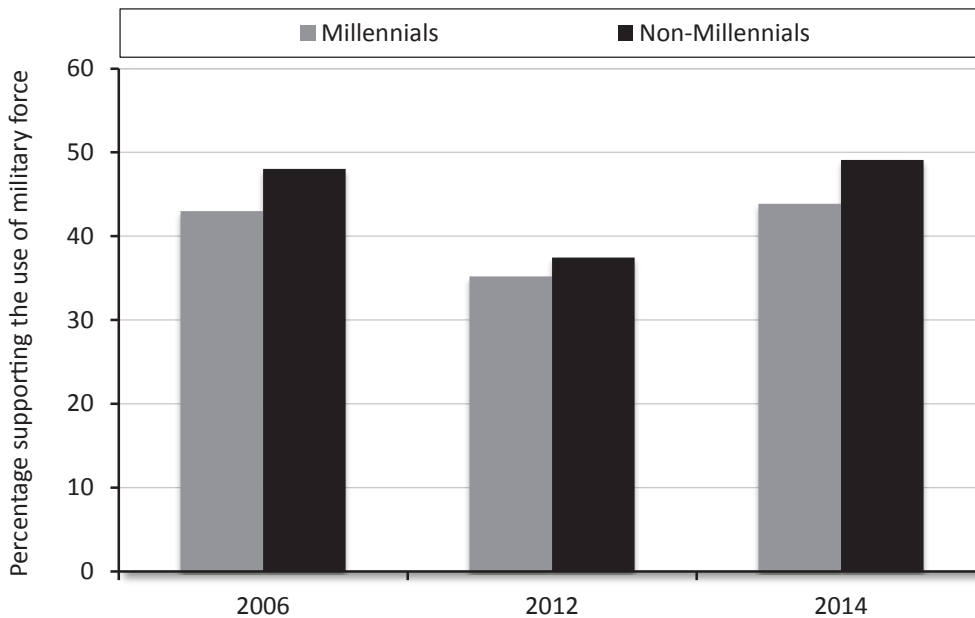
—Vincent, age 22

If the U.S. weren't the only superpower it is possible that more countries would become more active and accountable for facilitating peaceful international relations.

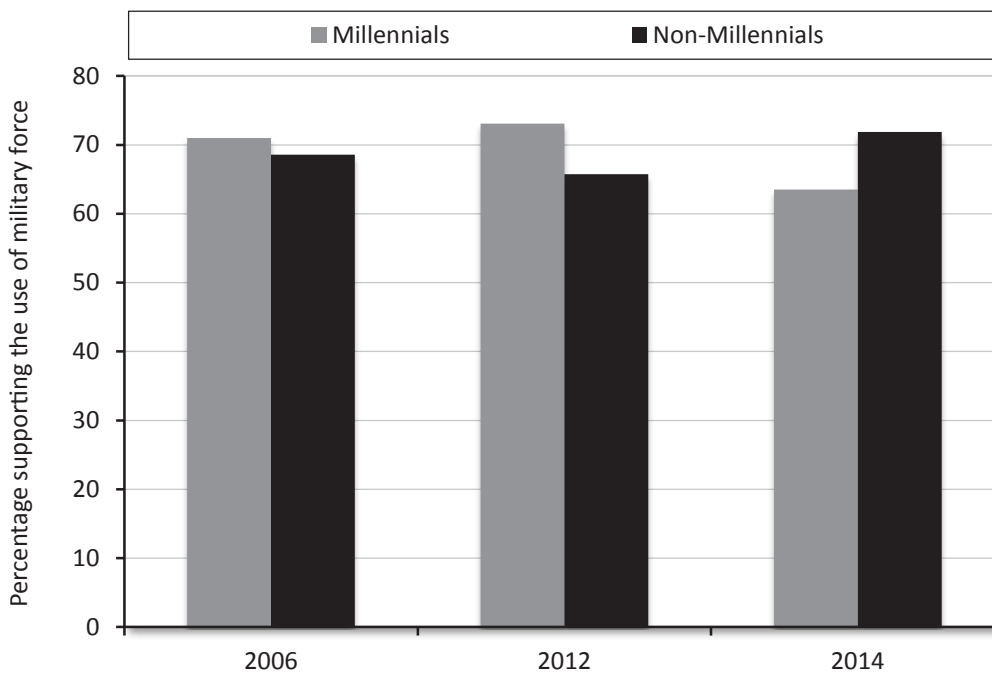
—Erica, age 18

Figure 5
Support for Military Intervention Types, by Cohort

A. Support for Balance of Power Scenarios



B. Support for Liberal Intervention Scenarios



Source: Chicago Council on Foreign Relations/Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2006, 2012, and 2014. (See Appendix.)

Note: The support index for the balance of power figure measures respondents' support for the use of U.S. troops to stop Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons and prevent China from invading Taiwan.

The index for liberal intervention measures the willingness to support the use of force to deal with a hypothetical humanitarian crisis or to stop a government from committing genocide.

“Millennials overwhelmingly support the premise that the United States should consider the interests of allies and are the least likely of the four generations to support going it alone when allies strongly disagree.”

“Millennials may be quite different in many ways from their parents and grandparents, but one way in which they are very similar is in their tendency to divide into competing Republican and Democratic camps.”

to be context, something their older siblings and parents talked a lot about, rather than a defining event on a personal level. A 2011 Pew Research Center poll provides one possible illustration of what this “two-headed cohort” means for Millennial attitudes. Asked how the attacks of 9/11 affected them emotionally, just 55 percent of Millennials in the survey (who were ages 4 to 21 as of September 11, 2001) said the 9/11 attacks affected them a “great deal,” compared to 81–84 percent of those from other generations. Our interpretation is that the younger Millennials in the survey were simply too young to be affected in the same way as those who were older, thus lowering the percentage of Millennials who responded that 9/11 had a deep emotional impact. Likewise, many of the younger Millennials were too young for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to have much impact. Only time and a good deal of future polling will help us determine the effect of events since the war in Iraq on Millennial attitudes, but it seems very likely that the two Millennial subcohorts will carry different lasting impressions from young adulthood throughout their lives.

The More Things Change . . . Millennials and the Persistence of Partisan Polarization

Millennials may be quite different in many ways from their parents and grandparents, but one way in which they are very similar is in their tendency to divide into competing Republican and Democratic camps over major questions of foreign policy priorities. Figure 6 shows the gap between the percentage of Republican and Democratic Millennials and non-Millennials who believe each of 16 foreign policies is a “very important” priority for the United States. Although the specific gaps by issue are different from one generation to the next, overall the pattern reveals the partisan nature of threat perception and preferred engagement with the world across the generations.

The partisan divide persists for Millennials despite the fact that both liberal and conser-

vative Millennials generally view the world as less threatening than do their elders. Across all issues, the average gap between Republicans and Democrats is 17 percentage points for Millennials and 16 points for non-Millennials, perhaps reflecting the somewhat more polarized nature of Washington politics today. One result of this polarization is that there are only four issues on which a majority of Millennials from both parties agrees that a policy is very important: (a) preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, (b) combating international terrorism, (c) protecting American jobs, and (d) limiting oil dependence. As much as Millennials may wind up changing the United States, they are unlikely to change the partisan nature of debate over foreign policy and U.S. grand strategy.

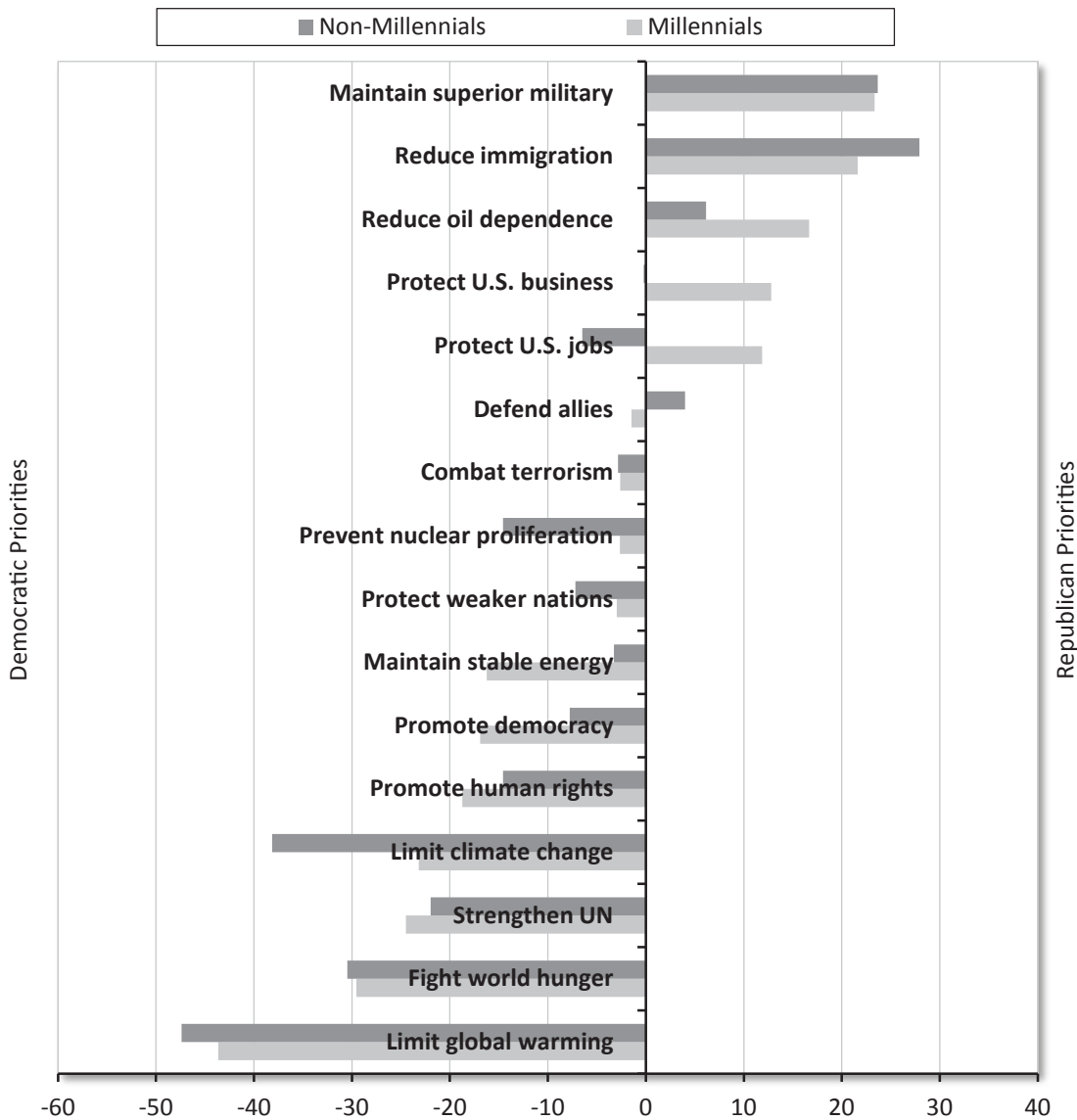
FOREIGN POLICY IN THE MILLENNIAL AGE

With a final acknowledgement of the need for humility with respect to making predictions this early in the game, we conclude by asking how Millennials’ attitudes may affect the grand strategy debate and U.S. foreign policy and then offer some advice for potential presidential candidates who are hoping to win their votes in 2016.

Having assessed Millennials’ foreign policy attitudes across the entire spectrum of specific issues, now we consider the more general question: what do the data tell us about Millennials’ attitudes toward the grand strategy debate at the heart of U.S. foreign and national security policy? Should the United States “lean in” or “pull back?”⁴⁰ Should the United States intervene aggressively or adopt a more restrained approach to crises in the Middle East and elsewhere? Taken as a whole, to the extent that U.S. foreign policy winds up reflecting Millennials’ attitudes as they currently stand (e.g., Table 3), the United States will migrate toward a more restrained grand strategy that is less reliant on unilateral military force and more engaged in cooperative ventures with allies.

On the military side, the Millennials’ Iraq Aversion combined with their relative disin-

Figure 6
Partisan Divides on Policy Priorities, by Cohort, 2014



Source: Chicago Council on Global Affairs, "Foreign Policy in the Age of Retrenchment." (See Appendix.)

Note: Bars represent percentage of Republicans who believe the proposed policy is a "very important" foreign policy goal minus the percentage of Democrats who believe the policy is a very important goal.

terest in the threat of terrorism will strengthen the hand of those arguing for restraint in U.S. foreign policy. Polling data on hypothetical scenarios (as indicated in Figure 5) as well as a concrete dislike for both the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq suggest that Millennials are unlikely to support direct intervention in cases involving primarily balance of power or realist calculations. This inclination will make it more difficult for threat inflationary and in-

terventionist rhetoric to find a foothold and, in turn, less likely that the United States will get bogged down in a ground battle with the Islamic State—also known as ISIS or ISIL—or others in the Middle East.

However, Millennials' warm feelings toward liberal interventionism will also make it relatively easier for future leaders to garner support for the use of force abroad under the guise of humanitarian causes. Millennials, as we have

“To the extent that U.S. foreign policy winds up reflecting Millennials’ attitudes as they currently stand, the United States will migrate toward a more restrained grand strategy that is less reliant on unilateral military force and more engaged in cooperative ventures with allies.”

“Millennials’ views about China may be critical to the vigorous debate between foreign policy scholars and practitioners over the question of whether China’s rise will be a peaceful one or not.”

seen, have so far been about as supportive of using force to prevent genocide and humanitarian crises as their elders, if not more so. Thus, it seems a safe bet that future presidents will continue to face a permissive environment for such operations. Given how many times the United States intervened in such cases even before Millennials came of age, we can likely expect an extended period of increased temptation in this direction. Considering the track record with respect to such interventions, we think this relatively more permissive environment is not good news for U.S. foreign policy.⁴¹

The key question with respect to Millennial support for future interventions, then, is how are such conflicts framed. Opponents of intervention can win Millennial support by recalling the debacle in Iraq and focusing on the inefficacy of using military force to solve other nations’ political problems. Conversely, proponents of intervention can garner Millennials’ support insofar as they can frame the U.S. involvement in humanitarian terms and invoke the Responsibility to Protect ethos. A president seeking support for intervention will also clearly benefit from being able to claim that the United States is working in a multilateral fashion with allies or through the United Nations. Unfortunately, as history shows, having the United Nations and allies engaged does not mean the intervention is in the national interests of the United States.

On the economic and more general international cooperation side, Millennials will continue to encourage the United States to lean in, supporting increased engagement with international institutions on environmental and economic issues, particularly in Asia. Millennials clearly view Asia, not Europe, as the most important region of the world for the 21st century. Such a view suggests that, as Millennials take the reins, China considerations will have a larger impact on the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. One simple sign of this new focus is the growing popularity of Chinese language courses in middle and high school. A 2010 *New York Times* article noted, for example, that the Advanced Placement test in Chinese, offered for

the first time in 2007, had overtaken German as the third most popular exam, behind Spanish and French.⁴²

Millennials’ views about China may be critical to the vigorous debate between foreign policy scholars and practitioners over the question of whether China’s rise will be a peaceful one or not.⁴³ To the extent that U.S. perceptions of China matter for making foreign policy, Millennials’ perceptions might push U.S. foreign policy in a less adversarial direction. This shift could play out well if the Chinese are similarly inclined, but it could portend a darker future if the U.S. public misperceives Chinese intentions.

In conclusion, although Millennials’ attitudes certainly predispose them to support a different flavor of grand strategy from their elders, there is no reason to expect that U.S. grand strategy will become particularly coherent under Millennial leadership. As we have discussed, Millennials, like every generation, reflect significant partisan splits over these core issues. Taken in conjunction with the lack of a unifying security threat, these partisan divides ensure that U.S. foreign policy will feature as much debate and dissensus in the future as it does today.

ADVICE TO THE NEXT PRESIDENT

In light of our analysis, we offer three suggestions to those candidates seeking Millennial votes in their bid to win the White House in 2016. First, feel free to criticize President Obama’s foreign policy all you like. Obama’s foreign policy approval ratings have not broken 50 percent during his second term and have hovered between 35 and 40 percent since February 2014, according to NBC News and *Wall Street Journal* polling data.⁴⁴ Even Millennials, generally the strongest of Obama’s supporters, have lost confidence that he has a clear plan for dealing with the myriad foreign crises facing the United States. Only 39 percent of Millennials approve of Obama’s handling of foreign policy, as compared with 50 percent who disapprove.⁴⁵ That said, the manner and focus of the criticism will matter with

respect to building Millennial support, which leads to our second piece of advice.

Candidates should resist the temptation to offer U.S.-centric solutions to the growing number of crises around the world. To woo Millennials, soft pedaling the need for U.S.-led military action to the world's problems, including the Islamic State and international terrorism, will be more effective. Yes, a majority of Millennials, like other Americans, view the Islamic State as a threat and support taking certain actions to "degrade and destroy" the group. And certainly no viable presidential candidate could argue that the United States should stand by idly while the Islamic State and other fundamentalist groups terrorize the Middle East. Nonetheless, Millennials put a much lower emphasis on the importance of fighting international terrorism than do older generations. Candidates who stake out a hawkish position need to be careful not to sound the Millennials' alarm bells. Rhetoric that smacks too clearly of the need for a long, direct engagement between U.S. forces and the Islamic State is likely to find few followers among Millennials. And if the United States does launch another major ground war and things go poorly, Millennials are likely to be the first group to start comparing the conflict to the failed Iraq war of 2003–2011, given how large Iraq looms in their worldview.

Finally, in our interviews with and surveys of Millennials, a constant theme arose: stop talking about the Cold War! Yes, the Cold War was really important, and it is a shame that young people do not appreciate how dangerous the world was or how many of today's problems have their roots in decisions made and actions taken long ago. Nonetheless, every time you mention the Cold War or use Cold War-era language, Millennials only hear "stuck in the past." Presidential hopefuls should not waste time trying to convince Millennials that Russia's behavior spells the start of a new Cold War or that China's rising power signals the need for massive increases in the defense budget.⁴⁶ Nor should candidates try to convince Millennials that U.S. grand strategy must revolve around a

sacred duty to eradicate international terrorism. Rather than bemoan the new generation's lack of historical context, a clever candidate would articulate a foreign policy that was not rooted in Cold War logic and, instead, would talk about how the United States could play a constructive role in helping address a range of global issues through international collaboration rather than through unilateral military action.

APPENDIX: SURVEYS USED IN THIS REPORT

Chicago Council on Foreign Relations/ Chicago Council on Global Affairs (CCFR/CCGA)

Dina Smeltz, Ivo H. Daalder, and Craig Kafura, "Foreign Policy in the Age of Retrenchment," CCGA, September 15, 2014, <http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/foreign-policy-age-retrenchment-0>.

Dina Smeltz, "Foreign Policy in the New Millennium," CCGA, September 10, 2012, <http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/foreign-policy-new-millennium>.

CCGA, "Constrained Internationalism: Adapting to New Realities," September 16, 2010, <http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/constrained-internationalism-adapting-new-realities>.

CCGA, "Anxious Americans Seek a New Direction in United States Foreign Policy," November 1, 2008, <http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/anxious-americans-seek-new-direction-united-states-foreign-policy>.

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Marshall Bouton and Benjamin Page, "Worldviews 2002: American Public Opinion and Foreign Policy," CCFR (available through the Roper Center).

Gallup Poll Social Series

Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Baby Boomers More Likely to Identify as Conservative," Gallup.

“If the United States does launch another major ground war and things go poorly, Millennials are likely to be the first group to start comparing the conflict to the failed Iraq war of 2003–2011, given how large Iraq looms in their worldview.”

com, January 29, 2015, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/181325/baby-boomers-likely-identify-conservative.aspx>.

Pew Research Center

Paul Taylor and Scott Keeter, “The Millennials: Confident. Connected. Open to Change,” Pew Internet and American Life Project, February 24, 2010, <http://www.pewresearch.org/millennials/>.

Pew Research Center, “The Generation Gap and the 2012 Election,” November 3, 2011, <http://www.people-press.org/2011/11/03/the-generation-gap-and-the-2012-election-3/>.

NOTES

The authors would like to thank Erinn Dye, Kelly Evans, Greg Mercer, and Calvin Thrall for their invaluable assistance collecting Millennial interviews and surveys.

1. Throughout this report, we rely on names and dates for the generations used by both the Pew Research Center and the Gallup Organization. As with any attempt to characterize a large group of people with a single label, none of the generational nicknames captures the nuance or everything important about the people born in each period. Also note that the precise end date for the Millennial Generation is a matter of debate. Some argue it should run through 1999. On the numbers, see Laura Norén, “Who Is the Millennial Generation?” *Graphic Sociology* (blog), October 11, 2004, <http://thesocietypages.org/graphic sociology/2011/10/04/who-is-the-millennial-generation-pew-research/>; Peter W. Singer, Heather Messera, and Brendan Orino, “D.C.’s New Guard: What Does the Next Generation of American Leaders Think?” Brookings Institution Research Report, February 2011, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2011/02/young-leaders-singer>; Jeanne C. Meister and Karie Willyerd, “Mentoring Millennials,” *Harvard Business Review*, May 2010, <https://hbr.org/2010/05/mentoring-millennials>.

2. We should note at the outset that generations, like race, class, and other social constructs, are

slippery creatures. The youngest members of Generation X, for example, likely have more in common with the oldest Millennials than they do with the oldest Gen Xers. In this light, our discussion should be seen as an attempt to paint with broad strokes rather than in fine detail.

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11. *Ibid.*, pp. 325–26.
12. On this point, see Holsti and Rosenau, “Does Where You Stand Depend on When You Were Born?” pp. 1–22.
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17. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
18. Jones, “U.S. Baby Boomers More Likely to Identify as Conservative.”
19. Ghitza and Gelman, “The Great Society, Reagan’s Revolution, and Generations of Presidential Voting,” p. 3.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
21. Taylor and Keeter, *Millennials: A Portrait of Generation Next*, p. 1.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
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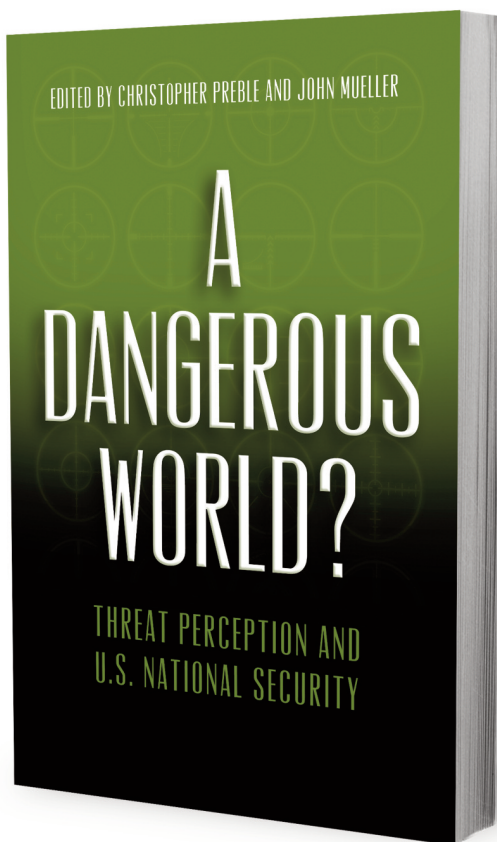
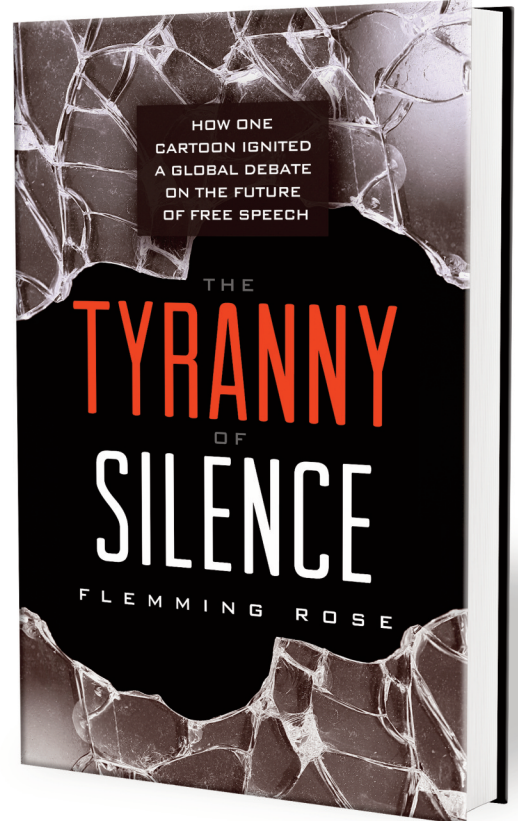
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