



Opinion: Helping Citizens Better Grasp The Warfighter Experience

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At a small theater in Los Angeles Westside in December, the Atlantic Council is presenting the workshop production of a new stage play it has been incubating, *War Words*, by the award-winning playwright Michelle Kholos Brooks. Based on Brooks' interviews with those who have done the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, the play dramatizes the funny, strange, heroic and heartbreaking true stories of these men and women. *War Words* is one expression of the council's commitment to a programming priority—fostering support for America's role in the world—that it adopted in response to the populist rejection of globalism punctuating electoral politics on both sides of the Atlantic in 2016. *War Words* aims to change our mindset about warriors from simple arm's-length admiration/antipathy to complex close-in affinity, and in so doing to improve the foundation for how we engage with our government's defense and foreign policies.

The considerable weakness of that foundation stands out in my read of the results from a recent survey of attitudes toward national defense that was commissioned by the Reagan Institute ahead of its annual National Defense Forum in early December. Here is a sampling of the survey's findings that exposes just how much work we who would promote America's leadership in world affairs have to do:

Foreign and defense policy are matters of low salience in the minds of most Americans.

- Of “the most important problems facing this country today,” topics that involve national security—terrorism, foreign policy, national defense—were mentioned by only 4% of respondents, well behind at least 10 other “important problems.”

- While the survey records surprisingly strong support for increasing government spending, only 10% of Americans indicate defense spending as their highest priority, well behind health care and education, which attract the preponderance of opinion about spending priorities.



- Asked to identify threats about which they are “extremely concerned” during the next five years, cyberattacks, domestic political violence and homeland terrorism top a list of seven; conventional military attacks rank at the bottom.

Americans exhibit a low engagement with and harbor abject misunderstandings about the fundamentals of U.S. foreign and defense policy.

- Below the level of our top-tier adversaries/competitors—North Korea, Iran, Russia, China—Americans’ grasp of “allies” and “enemies” is weak. Roughly 70% view Iraq and Afghanistan, two of the principal beneficiaries of U.S. foreign aid and military assistance, as enemies, whereas more than 40% regard Venezuela as an ally.

- When asked where the U.S. should focus its military forces, Americans identify the Middle East at rates more than twice as great as East Asia (read China) and four times as great as Eurasia (read Russia), suggesting that most still did not get the memo of our National Defense Strategy’s focus on “great-power” competition.

- Asked specifically about concerns with the U.S.-China relationship, only 10% of respondents identify military competition, and four times as many regard China as an economic rather than a military threat.

Finally, the survey reconfirms that a progressively declining segment of Americans have any direct connection to the military or notable hesitancy about sending American armed forces into harm’s way.

- Only about 1 in 10 respondents to the Reagan Institute survey are either veterans or have a member of their households currently in the military.

- Three out of four Americans would support the deployment of U.S. military forces to prevent human rights abuses, defend freedom in other countries and employ preemptive strikes against adversaries.

“Most people are detached from the costs of war. But how can you be connected to me if you don’t know me?” asks the *War Words* character Nate, an Army chaplain who regards his mission as helping soldiers work through what he calls the “moral injuries” of their service. “If we don’t know the people who serve, if they are not us,” he worries, “then we don’t have to actually see the consequence of sending them into harm’s way.”

To restore our citizenry's support for America's role in the world, *War Words* is making a start by helping us get to know our warriors and the life of warrior-ing much better. The U.S. and its allies have been fighting a global war on terror for nearly 20 years, but the conversation about war as an instrument of U.S. foreign and defense policy still is not very rich. Among its deficiencies, the conversation remains stunted by treatments of the topic that transport us right to the front lines but still keep us at a safe distance from the complex human experience. *War Words* explores that experience intimately and helps make it relevant to those of us who have not done the fighting over the past 20 years.

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