



Commission on Smart Power

# Dialogue with America



July 19, 2007

**CSIS Commission on Smart Power  
Findings from a Dialogue with America  
July 19, 2007**

Purpose

Conduct a series of conversations about restoring U.S. influence in the world with a diverse group of Americans in four early primary states.

- 36 meetings in Iowa, Minnesota, South Carolina and New Hampshire from May to July
- 234 people including high school and university students, activists, ethnic groups, local officials and teachers
- From NAACP to Bob Jones University, Chambers of Commerce to Muslim organization, radio talk shows to World Affairs Council

A cross-section of citizens took 1-2 hours out of their day to grapple with broader questions about America's role and footprint in the world, what changes are desired, and ways that the U.S. can make a positive contribution in the coming years. There was a genuine appreciation across all groups and individuals that the Commission was seeking outside voices and a deep seated concern about the country's direction.

The overarching message was that citizens are ready for a meaningful role. They welcome change and are ready for action. They have great appetite for this discussion and want their leaders to articulate a clear vision for the country.

## Questions to Provoke Dialogue

Rick Barton, Commissioner and CSIS scholar guided the conversations allowing local citizens to do most of the talking. Meetings were conducted in an informal atmosphere. Participants were encouraged to think constructively about the future, and not get bogged down in current events. The stated assumption was that no subject-matter expertise was needed; all thoughts and opinions welcome.

After a brief introduction and overview, conversations generally opened with a question. The following are major questions and themes that emerged:

- How is America Seen in the World?
- How do we want to be seen? How do we see ourselves?
- What is the U.S.' responsibility? Do we have a responsibility?
- What has the U.S. done that is positive?
- What is the right level of humility?
- Which U.S. military interventions do you now favor?
- Do you have confidence in and what are your main sources of information?
- Do you feel that America or its leaders are knowledgeable?
- How do you feel about the balance in our spending between military and non-military?
- Where does the threat of terror fit in?
- Do we understand the Muslim world?
- Does the U.S. have a strategic plan?
- What should be the response to another terrorist attack like 9/11?
- What should be the next American narrative?

## Ten Major Impressions

After robust discussions with almost 250 people in four states, people had different points of departure, but came to strikingly similar conclusions. Several strong themes emerged:

1) **People are ready and eager for serious dialogue about America's position in the world. "A sense of reflection."**

- ✓ Ready to address fundamental questions:
  - Who are we as a nation?
  - What is the American Direction?
  - What should America's leadership look like?
- ✓ Mixed with a sense of powerlessness
- ✓ Worry about disaffected population

2) **Dissatisfied with how the U.S. is seen in the world**

- ✓ Arrogant, belligerent, self-centered
- ✓ Misunderstood
- ✓ Something that has been building for years

3) **Skeptical about the quality of information** they digest and feel that leaders are also uninformed

- ✓ News choices are suspect, despite a wide range of choices

4) **Desire to work more with friends**

- ✓ Problems are too big and complex for U.S. to solve alone
- ✓ Build relationships of trust

5) **Unhappy with divisions in our formal political process and its non-productive nature**

- ✓ Feel that insiders represent extremes or narrow special interests
- ✓ Dislike "corporate" direction
- ✓ Wonder why agreements are not reached

- 6) **U.S. has work to do here at home to be credible to the world.**
- ✓ Differed by place and meeting: some thought that our shortcomings in serious indicators and practices made us hypocrites while others wanted to see domestic investment for workers
  - ✓ “Get America right before solving world’s problems”
- 7) **Want more balance between threats and opportunities**
- ✓ Worry about terrorism but think that it has warped the discussion
  - ✓ Feel that too much attention is on small items vs. big anxiety concerns
- 8) **Military and diplomatic spending need shift to better understand and engage world**
- ✓ “Willing to trade the \$5B cost of an aircraft carrier for the capability to have folks trained in language, culture and how to maneuver in Arab world”
- 9) **Believe in America’s potential to do good**
- ✓ More measured use of military
  - ✓ Deliver on promises
  - ✓ More respect for others
  - ✓ Focus on what we do well
  - ✓ Do the important and don’t overreach
- 10) **Believe that a consensus about the “American Dream” can be forged**
- ✓ Sense of shared values: decency, pragmatism, community, respect, human rights
  - ✓ Concern with tawdry side of America

## **Opportunities for U.S. Action and Leadership**

Though relatively pessimistic about where we are, the American public is optimistic that we have the power and knowledge to change course. The following opportunities for U.S. leadership were mentioned several times in different contexts over the series of meetings:

### **1) Energy Use/Climate change**

- ✓ “Start focusing on the problem, not just how to get the price of gas under \$3”
- ✓ Synergy: huge potential for global leadership and U.S. economic benefit

### **2) Invest in People**

- ✓ Education as a national security priority
- ✓ Institute National Service, military and non-military
- ✓ People to people contact: Peace Corps, Fulbright, student and faculty exchanges
- ✓ Streamline Visa process

### **3) Develop and Maintain Partnerships**

- ✓ Unsure about role of lone superpower: build coalitions
- ✓ Reach out to friends and talk to enemies
- ✓ “U.S. isn’t necessarily the solution, but is integral to finding solutions (with others).”

## **Next Steps in Dialogue with America**

The Dialogue with America has created a community of interested and engaged citizens in these four early political states. As the Commission releases its findings and recommendations in November of 2007, we have a responsibility and an interest in keeping in touch with the individuals and the organizations (local and national) with whom we spoke.

### **1) Return to previously visited states**

- ✓ Provide a feedback loop through conferences and town hall meetings
- ✓ Create confidence in public input process

### **2) Disseminate information broadly**

- ✓ Target national networks of foreign policy advocates
- ✓ Develop national media campaign around the Commissioners' work

### **3) Post-Election**

- ✓ Forge relationship with members of new Administration's foreign policy team
- ✓ Organize and hold high-profile conference with local partners and members of new Administration's transition team on "Smart Power"

## **DIALOGUE WITH AMERICA: GROUPS AND ORGANIZATIONS VISITED**

### **SOUTH CAROLINA**

Retired General and Chair of Greenville County Council  
Greenville County Chamber of Commerce  
Bob Jones University  
The Greenville News  
Greenville Mayor White  
Environmental/ conservation attorneys group  
Gospel Fellowship Association  
University Students from 4 schools in region  
NAACP  
Latino Consortium

### **IOWA**

The Muscatine Journal  
Small business owner/residents  
Chamber of Commerce  
Sierra Club  
Women's Resource Action Center  
Iowa City Police Chief  
University of Iowa, students  
Muslim American Society  
State Senator Bolkcom  
The Stanley Foundation  
Progressive Action for the Common Good  
Chris Dodd Event

### **MINNESOTA**

Suburban residents  
Elementary School Teachers  
Univ. of MN undergraduate students  
Network of Spiritual Progressives  
Students of South St. Paul High School  
Minnesota Public Radio  
Star Tribune  
University of Minnesota graduate students

### **NEW HAMPSHIRE**

Active and concerned residents of North Conway  
Gibson Center for Senior Citizens  
New England College students  
WTPL Talk Radio Show (hosted by local Fish & Game writer)  
State Senators Burling (D) and Downing (R)  
World Affairs Council

**TOTALING:           15 Municipalities, 36 groups and 234 people**

**For examples of statistics on American public opinion, please see:**

- **Zogby International:** [www.zogby.com](http://www.zogby.com)  
“Voters Believe Media Bias is Very Real,”  
<http://www.zogby.com/news/ReadNews.dbm?ID=1317>  
  
“Partisanship Out, Competence In for Next President,”  
<http://www.zogby.com/news/ReadNews.dbm?ID=1317>
- **Public Agenda:** <http://www.publicagenda.org/>  
Guide to the Issues Polled: <http://www.publicagenda.org/issues/issuehome.cfm>  
  
“Confidence in U.S. Foreign Policy Index,”  
<http://www.publicagenda.org/foreignpolicy/index.cfm>  
  
“America’s Global Role”  
[http://www.publicagenda.org/issues/frontdoor.cfm?issue\\_type=americas\\_global\\_role](http://www.publicagenda.org/issues/frontdoor.cfm?issue_type=americas_global_role)
- **World Public Opinion:** <http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/>  
“Americans and the World,” <http://www.americans-world.org/>  
  
“World Public Favors Globalization and Trade but Wants to Protect Environment and Jobs,”  
<http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/btglobalizationtradera/349.php?nid=&id=&pnt=349&lb=btgl>  
  
“World Public Rejects U.S. Role as World Leader,”  
[http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/views\\_on\\_countriesregions\\_bt/345.php?nid=&id=&pnt=345&lb=btvoc](http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/views_on_countriesregions_bt/345.php?nid=&id=&pnt=345&lb=btvoc)
- **Pew Research Center:** <http://people-press.org/>  
“A Portrait of ‘Generation Next,’”  
<http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=300>
- **Gallup Poll:** <http://www.gallupoll.com/>  
“General Mood of the Country,”  
<http://www.gallupoll.com/content/default.aspx?ci=1669>  
  
“Military and National Defense,”  
<http://www.gallupoll.com/content/default.aspx?ci=1666>

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