What Does National Security Mean in the 21st Century: A Deliberative Discussion of America’s Role in the World

Report by: Jan Levinson

What does “national security” mean in the 21st century? And how do we, as citizens of the United States, think our elected leaders should go about securing our nation? Does the answer lie in strengthening the military or balancing the budget? Or perhaps it’s a question of our active participation in a global society – working with other countries to find collaborative solutions to issues like overpopulation, nuclear proliferation, global warming, pandemics, and food shortages. On Sunday, March 29, 2010 moderators Jill Severn and Jan Levinson, leaders of the Russell Forum for Civic Life in Georgia, led a community forum on the issue of "America's Role in the World: What Does National Security Mean in the 21st Century" - part of the Life and Legacy of Jeannette Rankin Program Series. Each program in this event series explores the ideas and issues that Ms. Rankin devoted energy to during her lifetime; certainly, the role of America in a global society was a question she considered during her years as a member of the U.S. Congress, as well as in her life as an active citizen who traveled widely abroad.

Severn began the discussion by asking the audience to fill in a blank: the best path to national security is____? The attendees slowly began talking about what America is and is not, and perceptions of the United States held by those living outside its borders. One participant admitted, quite plainly, that in his opinion the United States is a bully and that is a perception held by many countries around the world. Others offered that the United States should be a place that supports diplomacy and democratic ideals, and that as a nuclear power it is seen as a protector for other nations. Some agreed that America’s reputation has changed in the world community drastically in recent decades and that it is often thought
of as a country that perceives itself to be superior to other countries and is resistant to listening and learning from other cultures. When prompted to return to the question of the essential components for ensuring national security, the crowd brought a variety of issues to the table but they all seemed to feel that the essential question went beyond a discussion of national defense or international trade policies and into the deep bipartisan rift that now divides Americans and American politicians. They agreed that the media has played a role in cultivating this rift, as well as in creating a heightened sense of insecurity.

The three approaches outlined by the issue guide were as follows:

**Approach 1: National Security Means Safeguarding the United States**
This approach suggests that our global objective must always be to maintain the safety of the United States and its citizens. We must give national security the highest priority and recognize that terrorism and unstable nations are our greatest threats, while not ignoring conventional threats either.

**Approach 2: National Security Depends on Putting Our Economic House in Order**
With such significant economic issues facing us, we need to focus on eliminating our staggering public indebtedness and improving the balance of trade. This means spending less on the military and reducing the amount of money that flows overseas.

**Approach 3: National Security Means Recognizing that Global Threat**
Today’s challenges face everyone on the planet, not just one nation. We must take a leadership role in working with other nations to address long-term threats to humanity: nuclear proliferation, environmental devastation and climate change, pandemics, overpopulation and food shortages, and the depletion of natural resources.

Is National Security the most essential function of government? The crowd countered this question offered by approach one, by offering another: what do we mean when we say “national security”? Some said that the U.S. meddles too much and that often its intervention is inspired by the prospect of economic or political gain. Although there was a reluctant consensus that we do need to maintain a robust military, many suggested that most often military service is not equitably distributed in our country. Participants suggested that the underprivileged in our population are disproportionately represented in the U.S. military. One participant suggested that a way to both keep our military strong, and to strengthen our national identity, would be to introduce a system of national service employed by some European countries. In such a system, young people would be compelled to give several years of service to their country following their high school graduation. The options for that service could include enlistment in the military. Many in the room found this suggestion acceptable; one participant, identifying herself as a Quaker, stated that although she was not in favor of the military she felt that so long as such an entity exists, that all Americans should serve. Most in the crowd strongly opposed the suggestion that the U.S. should increase military spending and questioned the effectiveness of the war on terrorism (which they described as “covert” and “misguided”). One participant suggested that the U.S. government is in a difficult position, as it wants to protect its citizens from future terrorist attacks but finds that taking on terrorists around the world is a tricky business and, that if a significant attack occurred again on U.S. soil the backlash from citizens would be severe. Another participant closed out
discussion of this approach by affirming that although she is opposed to some military decisions made by the U.S. government, she was by no means anti-military; she understands the value and potential of a strong military, despite its flaws and missteps. On a larger scale this participant asserted that progressives or liberals are not necessarily opposed to the military or to military spending.

In the second approach, the group considered national security from an economic perspective. Does the U.S. need to rethink trade policies? Can we afford to stop sending jobs abroad, or is the increase in employment at home worth a decrease in available, cheap goods? One vocal supporter of this approach said we should abolish the phrase “everyday low prices” originated by Walmart. He said this idea is untenable, and the maintenance of this promise generally means an exploited workforce and abused environment; a broadened definition of “price” should take into account these tradeoffs. Several in the group expressed their concern over the country’s dependence on foreign oil. They suggested at the heart of this issue is our culture’s wasteful mindset, and that in order to change these longstanding behaviors we should use government powers – the offer of subsidies, an increase in taxes, or new efforts in public education – to reshape our demands for energy and drive for massive consumption. When asked what should be cut in order to reduce the national debt several suggested the military budget, although the question of what particularly was puzzling. Wasteful spending was the general response – but what does it mean? This lead the discussion back to a question of political motives and the idea that many times wars are promulgated because of the inherent profits they yield to many industries.

Moving into approach three, the group returned to discussions of bipartisan politics and division in the United States. Nearly all participants agreed that the United States should work with other countries to attack global threats, but feared that the lack of bipartisan efforts in the Congress could stand in the way of these efforts; if we can’t get along with each other, how can we collaborate with other countries? Several said that the United States is already a leader in research studies that explore means to address poverty, hunger, environmental impact, and pandemics, but admitted that there seems to be a difference between the country’s commitment to addressing these problems at the policy level and the efforts of individual Americans to live up to these promises. When asked by moderators if the U.S. would be willing to become the “first among equals” in global initiatives as opposed to a superpower, one participant submitted that we might not have a choice. As the economies of China and India boom, the U.S. is losing its grip on the #1 spot it has occupied since the close of World War II. We are already collaborators on many issues and this is a trend that will only continue in the future.

Near the end of the forum, several in the group commented that there had been relatively little disagreement during our discussion, pointing to the fact that there were many people not at the table for this forum. They mentioned that many of their neighbors in Oconee County would likely have a very different perspective on this issue, and might offer more support to spending on the military as a means of maintaining national security. Meanwhile, other attendees felt that while there was much agreement in the room, they were still able to learn new ideas from attendees with similar views.

In keeping with the theme of the Life and Legacy of Jeannette Rankin series – programs inspired by ideas and ideals that Rankin supported during her lifetime – this program closed with some words from
Jeannette herself. Margaret Holt, one of the founding mothers of the Jeannette Rankin Foundation, offered a few words about Ms. Rankin’s stance against isolationism. She read a speech that Rankin delivered in 1929, which addressed the reality that the United States did not exist in a vacuum and that the country had entered a time period in which every issue was a global issue. The speech roused clapping from attendees, who seemed amazed at the relevance of commentary written more than eighty years ago.

Excerpts from Mrs. Rankin’s 1929 Speech, read aloud to the group:

“Today we not only know the world is round, but we know that we are living in the world, that we are no longer living in a community, state or nation; that whatever happens in one part of the world affects every other part sooner or later to a greater or lesser extent. Our communications are worldwide. Our banking and commercial and industrial institutions operate on the basis of a world unit. Today we are compelled to adjust ourselves to a fact that requires a much greater change in attitude than has ever been presented to the human race, and that is not only is the world round and we are living in the world, but there is enough to go around – enough food, raiment and shelter and leisure to go around. The United States has the potential power to feed the world.

When there was not enough to go around certain conduct was of value to the individual. The savage, in obeying the savage laws, knowing that some had to starve said to himself, ‘Myself first, myself above all other, myself alone, myself right or wrong.’ Later groups said the same until larger groups called the nations, knowing some had to perish, said: ‘My State, my country first, my country right or wrong.’ New standards of conduct must be adapted to the changed condition....

Today we must recognize that our security lies in providing security for all. Not only security against war but security against destitution. Surely with the ingenuity and genius of the people that can produce enough of this world’s good to go around, surely we have enough intelligence and goodwill to make it go around.”

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