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David Houghton
University of Central Florida

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U.S. Foreign Policy Can be Only as Good as Public's Understanding of World Affairs

By David Houghton
UCF Forum columnist
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Poll after poll shows that most Americans are woefully ignorant about foreign policy and the rest of the world.

In a 2006 Roper poll, only 37 percent of young Americans could place Iraq on a map – just three years after we invaded that country. An astonishing 88 percent couldn't place Afghanistan, four years into that war that is still ongoing.

In 2003, 53 percent of Americans believed Saddam Hussein was personally involved in 9/11, according to a CBS/New York Times poll, and according to Newsweek – which administered an official citizenship test in 2011 to "natural born" citizens – an astonishing 73 percent of Americans could not identify Communism as America's main concern during the Cold War. And perhaps most surprisingly, according to a 2011 Marist poll, nearly 25 percent of Americans don't know that the United States declared its independence from England.

Public ignorance has potentially very grave consequences for American foreign policy.

Should we be invading places that many Americans cannot even pinpoint on a map? Should we be allowing our presidents to wage foreign wars without our knowledge?

In 1964, the issue of Vietnam was hardly mentioned during the presidential election campaign, except that Lyndon Johnson claimed he would never send "American boys" over to Vietnam. But the following year – and largely in secrecy – the Johnson administration began a slow-motion escalation of the war. It would ultimately cost 58,000 Americans, and probably millions of Vietnamese, their lives.

In the 1980s the Reagan administration waged a secret war against the government of Nicaragua, hidden from Congress and the American people. And we may need only look

at recent drone attacks in Yemen, Pakistan and Afghanistan to surmise that the same thing is happening again now. In one unexplained attack in 2011, which has never been completely explained, a U.S. drone in Yemen attacked and killed a U.S.-born teenager, Abdulrahman Anwar Al-Aulaqi, who had not been accused of anything but his father was the inciter of hatred against Americans via the internet.

Some advocate an elitist approach to American foreign policy. The 18th century British Member of Parliament Edmund Burke articulated this approach to political leadership, arguing that elected officials must employ their own judgment and experience to determine what policy is best for the country.

Some question whether our leaders know best. Hardly anybody was clamoring for war with Iraq until President George W. Bush made weapons of mass destruction a justification for it. In the subsequent war, 4,000 Americans and probably well over 100,000 Iraqis lost their lives.

In a democracy, elected officials are supposed to be the delegates of the people. And here lies the significance of popular ignorance of American foreign policy: it makes a delegate-style approach harder, since an electorate that doesn't inform itself about the issues cannot possibly hope to guide what leaders do, and cannot hope to prevent the kind of blunders with which some American foreign policy has been littered.

The answer, in a word, is education. This is why I teach American foreign policy.

As Zbigniew Brzezinski, former national security advisor for President Carter, said: "We are a democracy. We can only have as good a foreign policy as the public's understanding of world affairs."

When it comes to the big things, ordinary Americans usually have it about right. They may not be highly informed about geography or history or strategy, but their support for key facets of American foreign policy has been fairly stable over time.

Survey trends show solid and stable support for U.S. international involvement and participation, for instance, and the general public usually offers mostly reasoned responses to foreign policy problems, at least after the fact. And when we take the time to inform ourselves about what is happening, we usually react logically to situations such as unsuccessful wars.

In Plato's *The Republic* – centuries later a model for many of the ideas of the radical Iranian cleric Ayatollah Khomeini – the Greek philosopher presented a stark, anti-democratic vision of the world in which only the "learned" and the knowledgeable were permitted to rule. The rest of us were assumed to live in the darkness of "the cave." An uninformed mass public truly empowers the Platonists of American foreign policy – those such as diplomat George Kennan, political scientist Gabriel Almond and journalist Walter Lippmann, all of whom believed that top decision-makers should be left alone to make foreign policy as they see fit, without the checks and balances of "the herd."

But that kind of thinking brought us the Bay of Pigs. It brought us Watergate. It brought us Vietnam and Iraq, before public opinion turned against what policymakers were doing. And today they are waging wars without our knowledge for which our children may one day pay the price.

The less we know, the more we place American foreign policy in the hands of those who want to make foreign policy without troubling themselves with our input or burdening themselves with the terrible costs of war.