

Red in the Morning: Recent Trends in American Attitudes Toward the Soviet Union and Communism

by Tom W. Smith

He answered and said unto them, When it is evening, ye say, It will be fair weather: for the sky is red. And in the morning, It will be foul weather today: for the sky is red and lowering. O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times?

—Matthew 16:2-3

During the early 1970s Soviet-American relations basked in the glow of detente. From the SALT I accords in 1972 to the Helsinki Agreements in 1975 the Soviets and Americans reached a series of understandings that raised the promise of peaceful coexistence and normalized relations. Then in the late seventies relations chilled in the face of a huge Soviet arms build up, Russian-Cuban adventurism in Africa, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and Communist repression in Poland.

Two questions included in NORC's General Social Survey to tap attitudes toward the Soviet Union and Communism document this shift. The percentage expressing extreme dislike of the Soviet Union (-5 on a 10 point scale)¹ increased from about 23 percent in 1974-75 to 45 percent in 1982. Similarly, the percentage considering Communism the "worst form of government"² rose from 44 percent in 1973 to 61 percent in 1982-1984.

The shift in public opinion is, however, most dramatically shown by changes in support for defense spending. In 1973, in the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War, there was little support for additional spending for defense: only 12 percent favored it.³ Support rose during the mid-seventies until, by 1978, 29 percent backed more spending. Then, in 1980, immediately following the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and the seizure of American diplomatic hostages in Iran, support doubled, with over 60 percent favoring more defense spending. The late seventies and early eighties thus saw public sentiment shift strongly against Communism and in favor of military preparedness and sparked a number of commentators to talk of a "Second Cold War" (Smith, 1983).

A Second Cold War?

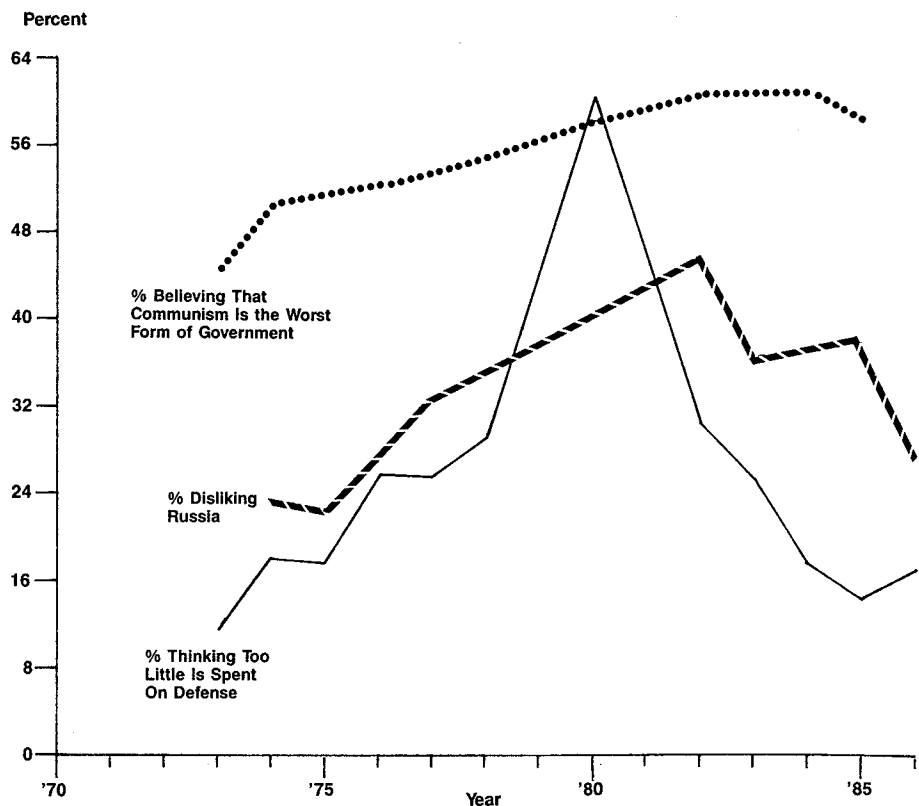
Yet several major factors distinguished this period from the Cold War of the late

1940s and 1950s. First, though foreign problems in general and conflict with Communism in particular dominated public concerns in the earlier period, the public was more troubled by domestic problems in the seventies. Thus, while the public became more concerned about Communism, foreign affairs concerns did not dominate the public agenda as they had earlier (Smith, 1980a; 1985).

Second, the latter period included no Red Scare to run roughshod over civil liberties. In 1954, at the height of the Army-McCarthy hearings, only 27 percent of Americans were willing to allow a Communist to make a speech in their community.⁴ In 1973-1974, at the peak of detente, support for free speech for Communists had risen to around 60 per

cent (similar rises occurred for allowing a Communist to teach in a college and to have a book in the public library). Moreover, this percentage showed virtually no change during the late seventies and early eighties while dislike of Russia and of Communism climbed. This lack of connection was not because attitudes toward domestic and international Communism are unrelated. There are moderate to substantial associations between dislike of Communism and opposition to civil liberties for Communists (gammas of .2 to .5). Despite this association, however, the large increases in hostility to international Communism led to little growth in intolerance of domestic Communists.

During this period the association between military preparedness and civil liberties for Communists attenuated. Tolerance increased among the neutral and pro-military spending groups while dropping among the anti-spending groups, with the percentage difference between spending groups falling from



35.2 percent in 1973 to 14.2 percent in 1980. Since the pro-spending group was still less tolerant than the anti-spenders in 1980, the loss in overall tolerance caused by the switch into the pro-spending group was offset by the growth of tolerance within the pro-spending and neutral groups. This change is explainable by a pattern of turnover in which people who were neutral or anti-spending in 1973 switched their attitudes on military spending without making any change in their civil libertarian leanings. Similarly, the changes in dislike of Russia and in evaluations of Communism failed to trigger anti-Red hysteria similar to that of the 1950s (Smith, 1980b).

The Importance of Afghanistan

A third difference from the Cold War days of the fifties was that heightened distrust of Russia and Communism began to fade within a few years and by the mid-eighties had leveled off or begun to turn around. Attitudes toward Communism as a form of government have shown the least change, but this may come largely from the fact that we don't have a time point in 1986. Dislike of Russia has declined significantly from its peak of 45 percent in 1982 to 27.5 percent in 1986.

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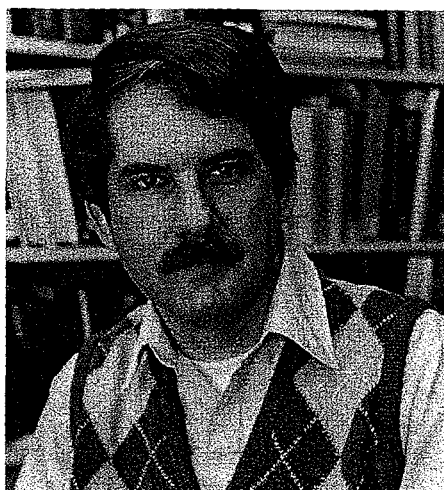
As noted, the most dramatic turnaround has been on defense spending. After having doubled from 1978 to 1980, support for more spending fell by one-half between 1980 and 1982—by far the largest shift in public opinion observed on any variable in the 14-year history of NORC's General Social Survey. And support then continued to fall until it bottomed out at 15 percent in 1985.

The huge rise in 1980, then, was arguably a strong but short-term reaction to the rise in Soviet aggression culminating

in the Afghanistan occupation. The continued drop after 1982 (a point at which we can see defense spending as having settled back to its pre-Afghanistan level) was not a slide back to the post-Vietnam, anti-militarism of the early seventies. While support for more spending slipped to a level commensurate with that earlier point, it must be remembered that during this period the real level of defense spending was growing from \$69.5 billion (1972 constant dollars) in 1979 to \$96.8 billion in 1985. In percent of gross national product this represented an increase from 4.9 to 6.6 percent. Thus, the dropping support for more spending resulted not from a rejection of the military but from a growing consensus that *expenditures had risen to meet U.S. military needs* and that further (or more rapid) expansion was unnecessary.

A More Complex Response

Finally, another possible difference between the attitudes of the recent period and the old Cold War (we lack comparable data to know what the fifties were actually like on this point) is that at the same time that Americans wanted to get "tough on Communism" and build up the military, they also increasingly believed that major efforts should be made "to improve relations with the Russians" and to "reach agreement on nuclear arms with Russians." The support for major efforts to improve U.S.-Soviet relations rose from 33 percent in 1973 to 60 percent in 1984, and support for nuclear agreements increased from 58 percent in 1975 to 71 percent in 1984 (Smith, 1986).



Tom W. Smith

Americans know there's a bear in the woods and during the seventies and eighties grew increasingly hostile to its presence. But this heightened wariness led to neither anti-Communist hysteria nor one-dimensional hostility in response. Even the naval spy trials and such incidents as the downing of the Korean airliner did not trigger public support for McCarthyism at home or a policy of saber-rattling and military confrontation abroad. On the international front the watchword of Americans is "be prepared"—prepared to match the Soviets with armaments and prepared to meet them with negotiations.

Notes

¹You will notice that the boxes on this card go from the highest position of "plus 5" for a country that you like very much, to the lowest position of "minus 5" for a country you dislike very much. How far up the scale or how far down the scale would you rate the following countries? RUSSIA.

²Thinking about all the different kinds of governments in the world today, which of these statements comes closest to how you feel about Communism as a form of government?

It's the worst kind of all.

It's bad, but no worse than some others.

It's all right for some countries.

It's a good form of government.

³We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I'm going to name some of these problems, and for each one I'd like you to tell me whether we're spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount. THE MILITARY, ARMAMENTS, AND DEFENSE.

⁴Now, I should like to ask you some questions about a man who admits he is a Communist. Suppose this admitted Communist wanted to make a speech in your community. Should he be allowed to speak or not?

References

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General Social Survey

(from page 3)

challenge to interviewers and makes the response rates achieved a noteworthy accomplishment. Instruction in these and other matters is supplemented by role playing sessions designed to simulate the challenges posed by the survey—from knocking on a stranger's door through the completion of a 90-minute interview. Following the field period, questionnaires are processed by NORC and a data tape prepared. The entire data collection and data tape preparation effort takes about 12 weeks.

Methods

Throughout the history of the GSS its principal investigators, NORC Research Associate and former NORC Director James A. Davis and NORC Senior Study Director Tom W. Smith, have put the survey through an impressive series of methodological experiments in order to improve data quality. The subjects of these methodological experiments include respondent cognitive recall, wording and context effects, optimum oversample experiments, nonresponse bias, and investigations of the sampling process to ensure that the integrity of the time series was not affected.

On the 1984 and 1985 surveys an experiment in question wording was conducted to determine respondents' sensitivity to certain terms. A striking contrast was observed between public support for increased "assistance for the poor" and public support for increased "welfare." GSS researchers found that when income transfer programs were called assistance for the poor they were supported by Americans at a level 39 percentage points higher than when they were referred to as welfare.

The 1986 question module on the feminization of poverty employed the technique of factorial vignettes to measure public evaluation of welfare needs. Each respondent was given seven vignettes about young families and three about old women. Each of the ten vignettes described the life circumstances of the subjects and asked whether their resources should be augmented by government assistance.

The young-family vignettes contained ten dimensions, including number and

age of children, marital status of parents, parental employment situation, and financial prospects. The old-woman vignettes had five dimensions, including age of woman, housing tenure, and income. The experimental variation of levels along the specified dimensions of the vignettes allows the systematic evaluation of how differing levels on those dimensions influence attitudes.

In the United States the GSS scientists have cooperated with the Social Science Research Council and the U.S. Bureau of the Census on methodological issues and item design.

International Cooperation

In the arena of international survey research the GSS team helped found the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) in 1985. The ISSP grew from the collaboration between NORC and Zentrum für Umfragen, Methoden, und Analysen (ZUMA) of the Federal Republic of Germany and from the cooperative efforts of GSS, British, and Australian researchers. NORC and ZUMA developed a series of questions on job values that was used on the 1982 GSS and on the Federal Republic's ALLBUS.

Since 1985 Davis and Smith have attended two ISSP conferences: one in London, called to draft the questionnaire module on social support networks, and one in Mannheim, West Germany, to draft the questionnaire module on social and economic inequality. International representation at the London conference included researchers from the United Kingdom, Germany, and Australia. At the Mannheim conference representatives of these nations were joined by Austrian, Irish, Italian, Dutch, and Hungarian researchers.

The National Data Program and the conduct of the GSS benefit from the advice of a board of overseers. This group of 15 distinguished academic researchers is chaired by Duane Alwin of the University of Michigan.

The primary sponsor of the National Data Program is the National Science Foundation. The Russell Sage Foundation, the Ford Foundation, Andrew M. Greeley, and other agencies and research organizations have also supported data collection.

The GSS: A User's Guide

The trends in American attitudes and behavior uncovered by the General Social Survey can be invaluable to scientists, journalists, and others seeking to understand the processes that shape public opinion.

To assist users of the GSS, NORC offers several forms of documentation. The first is the *Cumulative Codebook*, prepared at NORC and distributed by NORC and the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut. The *Codebook* contains the questions and response categories for each year of the survey, the numbers of persons choosing each response category, and a cumulative total representing the overall response. In several appendices the *Codebook* offers information on the conduct of the survey and on papers produced by NORC on GSS topics.

Because of the amount of information reproduced, the 1986 *Codebook* contains data for the individual surveys from 1983 through 1986 and a cumulative total for the years 1972 through 1982. Single-year data for the years 1972 through 1982 can be found in the 1982 *Codebook*. The 1982 codebook is available from NORC and the Roper Center for \$10. The 1986 codebook is available from these organizations for \$15.

Information on secondary analysis of GSS data is available in *The Annotated Bibliography of Papers Using the General Social Survey*, by Tom W. Smith and Ruth Fujimoto, and in Tom W. Smith's selective summary work *Compendium of Trends on General Social Survey Questions*. The *Annotated Bibliography* is available from the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) at the University of Michigan. The *Compendium*, NORC Report No. 129, is available from NORC for \$9.50. Additional information on GSS data analyses is available from the Paul B. Sheatsley Library at NORC. Interested persons should contact NORC librarian Patrick Bova.

For those wishing to perform their own analyses, data tapes are available from the Roper Center and from ICPSR.