



from  
**VALUES**  
to **ADVOCACY**

Activating the Public's Support  
for U.S. Engagement in an  
Interdependent World

A Three Year Report on the Global Interdependence Initiative



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 1996 the Rockefeller Brothers Fund convened a group of leaders concerned that U.S. policy and programs were failing to keep pace as the world rapidly became more interdependent. Elite opinion generally blamed this lag on public apathy or even hostility toward international cooperation. Yet survey findings presented at the meeting showed clear public support for a broader U.S. role, development aid, and active participation in cooperative structures like the United Nations. Why did policy diverge from public preferences? Survey data showed that the public's values and convictions did not readily translate into advocacy for policy change.

The Global Interdependence Initiative (Initiative) of the Aspen Institute had its genesis in this gap between attitudes and action. The Initiative's goal is to transform the latent beliefs of the American public into active support for forms of U.S. international engagement that respond to the implications of global interdependence, reflect core American values, and address critical human needs. This report summarizes the Initiative's activities during its first three-year phase.

## THE INITIATIVE:

### STRUCTURE AND ACTIVITIES

Princeton Lyman, former Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs, leads a three-person staff based at the Aspen Institute. During its first phase the Initiative has had an advisory **Working Group** composed of some 25 CEOs or other senior leaders of American-based organizations that focus on global issues. (For a description of the activities of the Working Group, see page 1.) The Working Group helped shape an innovative strategic communications research program designed to improve understanding of American beliefs about global issues and this country's world role. The research also sought to determine how to communicate more effectively with the public about global problems and solutions. (See page 4 for an overview of research projects conducted by the FrameWorks Institute. Research is available online at [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org).)

The Initiative, its research team, and the Working Group disseminated and applied the research findings. Efforts included:



Americans want the United States to be part of a global team, but they don't see it happening.



- A toolkit and training from FrameWorks for communications professionals.
- Re-grants totaling \$350,000 from the Initiative to Working Group members to enable them to apply the research results to specific issues and campaigns.
- Briefings by Initiative staff for journalists, policymakers and policy analysts, businesspeople and NGO leaders to explore how the research might shape the communications of these opinion leaders.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS: WHAT WE'RE UP AGAINST

Research commissioned from the FrameWorks Institute identifies the “dominant frame” through which the public views and understands the world and the U.S. role. The research indicates that creating a favorable climate of opinion for more active U.S. global engagement requires reinforcing alternative frames. Findings show that:

1. *The public's fundamental attitudes are remarkably consistent with the U.S. behavior and policies the Initiative wishes to foster.* Research shows that the public has consistently supported an active and cooperative world role for the United States. Americans' views on global problems are shaped by their core values and beliefs, although the public generally lacks specific policy preferences anchored in broad factual knowledge.
2. *Misperceptions and confusion, however, undermine public support for more effective U.S. global engagement.* Americans believe the United States does more than its fair share of addressing the world's problems, and are therefore unlikely to advocate for a more active U.S. role. They also have difficulty recognizing cause and effect in global issues, assigning responsibility, and identifying ways that they can make a difference. This, too, undercuts activism on global issues.
3. *Public attitudes are rarely reflected in the priorities of those who most directly shape U.S. engagement in the world.* Lacking a clear sense of causality and accountability, the public also lacks confidence in its views in this area and often remains silent. This leaves elected officials free to ignore majority public opinion without suffering political damage.

4. *The media's handling of international news fosters public misperceptions and widens the disconnect between public views and those of policy makers.* The limited international news on television generally focuses on wars, natural disasters, accidents, coups and demonstrations—episodes presented without context or cause. People in other countries are not seen helping themselves or helping others. Through the “dominant frame” created by this portrayal, the public sees the United States acting alone to bring order to global mayhem. The public would prefer America to play a different role, but cannot see that role through this frame.
5. *We need to overcome this dominant frame before we can mobilize public support for policies consistent with the realities of global interdependence.* The dominant frame leaves global interdependence, long-term engagement, and effective cooperation outside the picture. The research pointed to alternative frames through which to see the world better, and help enable ordinary Americans to speak with confidence to policymakers in support of a more appropriate role for the United States.

See page 6 for more about the research findings.

### FRAMING GLOBAL INTERDEPENDENCE:

#### TELLING A NEW STORY

The climate of public opinion we seek—active support for principled and cooperative U.S. engagement—cannot be achieved simply by presenting facts. People reject facts that lie outside their frame, or don't fit their mental map. The task of the Initiative is to strengthen alternative frames, a task that requires a new kind of storytelling—and a lot of it.

The FrameWorks Institute found that a good “global interdependence” story should highlight solutions and effectiveness, teamwork and partnership, and emphasize principles rather than self-interest. The story should focus on communities more than on individuals, and feature values held in common. It should offer meaningful ways that Americans can act in support of these values as consumers, volunteers, advocates and voters. Examples of “re-framed” communications appear on pages 10-15.

#### MOVING THE WORK TO A LARGER STAGE

The terrible attacks of September 11, 2001 have heightened the public's awareness of global issues. The Initiative completes its first three-year phase at what can be a “transformative moment.” We are challenged now to offer, on a broader front, frames that encourage the public to act in support of the systemic changes required to build a better and safer world. This requires more than using new

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communications strategies in independent issue campaigns. *It requires building a purposeful coalition on behalf of more appropriate global engagement by the United States.*

The Initiative will need to take an active stance, using its communications strategies as a critical tool. As it seeks funds for its second phase, the Initiative is investigating several options outlined on pages 16-18:

- *Engage directly with the public and policymakers to promote more effective communication about global issues.* The public can be reached through approaches like town hall meetings, a paid advertising campaign, media outreach, and the use of spokespeople. Presenting global issues through new frames can enable people to use everyday language to speak from their values in support of a broader policy framework. Op-ed pieces, meetings and other means can bring the same message to policymakers.
- *Develop a network of allied organizations among and beyond the original Working Group, draw on them in public campaigns, and support them in creating new opportunities for public dialogue.* The coalition could offer multiple channels through which alternative frames can be reinforced. Allies would also provide expertise which, successfully reframed, can enable Americans to speak confidently and increase the public's standing in shaping international policy.
- *Build capacity in allied organizations.* The Initiative can help organizations apply the research and broaden their impact, encouraging our allies, including those within journalism, to tell different stories. Tools will include training, technical assistance and Web-based help to coordinate efforts.
- *Create new mechanisms for accountability.* Tools such as a yearly global citizenship index can help the public measure this country's international behavior against core values of global citizenship and community building.

Challenging a dominant frame and changing the climate of opinion is a complex and ambitious task. As the Initiative's second phase takes shape, our work so far offers hope for a new story and a better future.

