As the 21st century began to unfold, we all felt the tremors of an unsettling future. Globalization, ever oversold by its prophets, increasingly revealed itself as more promise than reality. Economic growth slowed. Oil prices leaped upward. Hopes of peace between Israelis and Palestinians drowned in bloodshed. And a small matter, an accidental collision between an American spy plane and a Chinese interceptor and the emergency landing of the American aircraft on Hainan Island, fully exposed a mean and dangerous streak in Sino-American relations. The new Bush administration damned the Kyoto Protocol on global warming and hoisted missile defense to the flagpole’s top, both moves setting off international puzzlement or distress.

One might have thought that these and other such events would have triggered renewed public or, at least, congressional interest in U.S. foreign policy. Yet only blips of attention could be found here and there, and even those were not many.

On the surface, this complacency shields no mystery. Since the Cold War’s end, the American people and their leaders have been enveloped in the embrace of peace and prosperity. It is as if nothing could hurt us. Cold wars and world wars, depressions and recessions, seem creatures of the past. Perhaps the wars are, but not the economic woes.

Yet, Americans have never been more involved with the world than now. Interdependence at virtually every level has created all the opportunities applauded by the prophets of globalization, as well as all the vulnerabilities ignored by the same prophets. Much of what happens anywhere in the world can now touch us here in America as never before, even hurt us—even, yes, bring us to our knees.

The specter of nuclear destruction haunted us during the Cold War, but except perhaps in the case of the Cuban missile crisis, it was always a remote possibility. The likelihood of terrorist attacks with weapons of mass destruction on U.S. cities, however, is not remote. These attacks will happen unless we are lucky. For all our history until now, economic distress in Asia would have been shrugged off by U.S. financial
markets. No longer. AIDS in Africa or mad cow disease in Europe can readily travel to American shores in these halcyon days of globalization. The hole in the ozone layer sits not just over Timbuktu, but also over Peoria. Those very distant bouts of ethnic and civil slaughter in Sierra Leone or East Timor or the Balkans touch us and our friends and allies quickly and repeatedly—as refugees, as terrorists, or as pricks upon our conscience. Yes, interdependence, or globalization, as we now call it, can hurt as well as help us, help us a lot and hurt us a lot.

Yet still, the intensity and quality of the public debate over U.S. foreign policy does small justice to the magnitude of the opportunities and threats facing us. Why? The inattention of the public and our leadership, a problem that has
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sources more intricate than complacency. President Clinton certainly did not make the discussion of international affairs his top priority or even his fifth one, though he may insist otherwise. President Bush remains somewhat of a mystery at this early hour in his tenure, though we are starting to see the effects of his foreign policy lightning bolts. Congressional debates and hearings often fail even modest tests of enlightenment, though legislators will have their counterclaims. And many lament the decline in quality, if not in quantity, of media coverage of foreign affairs, though many media tribunes claim their reports have never been better. Ideas and messages for public debate evaporate if messengers fail to deliver them or trivialize them or insist the public does not care to hear them.

But foreign policy organizations and experts should tremble before casting even pebbles at the public, legislators, journalists, or presidents. In the end, we experts bear much of the responsibility for the decline of public debate. It is in ourselves that we must now look for the answers, in the public policy schools at universities, the think tanks, and the Council on Foreign Relations in particular.

Those of us in this world of ideas do not have much influence over the media or political leaders. But we do have some, and it is roughly proportional to two things: the information we offer and the power of our ideas. We have not provided enough value on either front. A good deal has changed in the last decade, and we experts have not done much digging into what’s new and what’s not, or into discovering through empirical research the new rules and rhythms of international affairs, or into putting forward policies on how to solve or manage problems rang-
ing from ethnic warfare to financial crises. Here at the Council, we have been trying to dig these tunnels of fact and climb these walls of reality, inevitably with uneven success.

Our main Studies Department effort, an ongoing one these past seven years, has been to develop policy-oriented studies in what we call “geoeconomics” or political economy, the intersection of foreign policy and economics. Almost every major world problem has an economic core or a large economic dimension. As Hank Greenberg explains in his message this year, we have a dual mission: first, to link the study of economic and financial matters to traditional national security, country and regional affairs, science and technology, and new agenda issues such as drugs, environment, and health; and second, to thereby create the next generation of foreign policy expert—the geoeconomist.

We are convinced that new insights will emerge from fusing research efforts and thinking in these ways. For example, we should be able to measure reasonably well whether and how fast China is emerging as a military power. Insights will come from statements by Chinese leaders and by paying careful attention to the state of their military industries, their technological competitiveness, and the roads and railways being constructed to transport their troops. Taken all together, these factors can either temper the warnings about Beijing’s intentions or give them weight. Hank’s message gives other examples of what we expect to reap. More and more of our Studies Department’s activities will fall under this geoeconomic rubric, as we add value in information, insights, and policy ideas.

BP Senior Fellow for International Economics Michael M. Weinstein will serve as acting director of our new Geoeconomics Center. Michael, who has a Ph.D. in economics from M.I.T., was the head of the Economics Department at Haverford College and the lead economics writer on the editorial board of the New York Times. His clarity and precision are matched by his ability to write. Michael will work closely with Roger M. Kubarych, the
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Henry Kaufman adjunct senior fellow in international economics and finance. Roger came to the Council with a solid background in financial markets, both in the private sector and with the New York Federal Reserve Bank. Michael and Roger will work with Vice President and Director of Studies Larry Korb and our other senior fellows to produce articles and books that we hope will command the attention of political leaders and journalists.

We also hope to give our leaders and tribunes something to talk about and debate through the work of our Center for Preventive Action. The idea is to see if we can produce operational plans to head off the scourge of ethnic and civil wars. Concreteness and tangibility are key; more analyses and more moral lectures to love thy neighbor have not stayed and will not stay the bloody swords of hatred. Our center has to present strategies for concrete actions by governments and nongovernmental and international organizations. Those strategies will derive from a careful inventory of local and international groups, their influence in target areas, and the best strategy to use that influence.

The center is led by Bill Nash, a retired army major general. Bill commanded the American division that entered Bosnia pursuant to the Dayton Accords, and he served as deputy administrator for the United Nations in Kosovo. He has the experience to put together Council task forces that will be charged with developing prevention plans.

A further word about Council task forces is in order here as well. In his message this year, Pete Peterson talks about this relatively new feature of the Council landscape. Again, going back about eight years, the Council leadership felt strongly that public debate, particularly policy debates, had begun to dry up. We wanted to put some life back into this process. So we established Council-sponsored independent task forces. Once we choose members of these diverse and nonpartisan groups, what they say is entirely up to them. We launch a task force when we decide that, despite public bashing, an issue is ripe for agreement among fair-minded people of varied persuasions. When task force reports have been sharp,
pointed, and practical, they have caused ripples of debate and even changes in government policy.

Increasingly, we have taken draft task force reports out to our members around the country for their consideration and debate. Our National Program, ably led by Senior Vice President Mike Peters and National Director Irina Faskianos, is now strong enough to provide real input into all our intellectual work. One of our aims is to generate a solid core of Council members in each key city around the country so that they can carry on discussions at times and on issues more of their own choosing. Specifically, we are looking toward establishing round-table groups in several cities where 20 or so members can gather half a dozen times yearly to exchange views, with or without Council senior fellows.

At our Annual Term Member Conference, superbly organized by Elise Lewis, vice president of membership and fellowship affairs, and her staff, debating the big issues was very much the main event. Our younger members, mostly between the ages of 27 and 37, need to confront the central foreign policy issues. While a good deal has changed in the recent world, the foreign policy dialogue in America remains dominated by my very able generation of thinkers molded during the Cold War. It is now up to the next generation to stake its intellectual claims and put down its markers.
In our view, the most telling issue of all to debate is the definition of national security in the 21st century. Throughout our history and that of most other nations, the national interest has had a rather limited and specific definition, covering military threats to friends, allies, and one’s homeland. Some nations included economic threats and opportunities as well, but often as an adjunct to the military dimension. In public opinion polls, Americans now include economic threats as high on their list of fears as military ones, though most of our foreign policy experts would not, I suspect.

While we are broadening our definition of security to include economics as well as traditional defense, we have another dimension to confront. Should the roster of primal threats to our lives and livelihood include environmental degradation, disease, health, drugs, crime, overpopulation, refugees, and the like? Most foreign policy experts resist this broadening. Without trivializing these matters, foreign policy experts tend to argue that these issues can be treated separately and on their own terms, apart from foreign policy or national security. But it is difficult to imagine any one of these issues being given the necessary top-level attention and resources unless they become part of the national security debate. President Dwight Eisenhower certainly understood this in the late 1950s when he...
used the Soviet Union’s launching of the Sputnik satellite to wrest new moneys from Congress to support public education in math and the sciences.

This debate will be neither easy nor pleasant. Its outcome will reshape the organization of government, the distribution of funds, and the time and attention of our leaders. But to many of us at the Council, this debate should be a principal calling for our younger members and their generation. We saw the need for this on a practical level this year when Jordan Kassalow, adjunct senior fellow for global health policy, published a short report, Why Health Is Important to U.S. Foreign Policy, which became an instant “best-seller.”

Stimulating public debates on policy issues, and especially on foreign policy, is a task worthy of Job. We have been at it for several years now in our bread-and-butter general meetings programs in New York and Washington, D.C., which continued their tradition of success thanks to the leadership of Anne Luzzatto and Paula Dobriansky, respectively. We lifted debates into a separate and special category during the presidential election campaign. Our Campaign 2000 effort, featured on the cover of last year’s Annual Report, succeeded very well in its website and online versions. We also did well from time to time with face-to-face debates on college campuses. Anyone who observed our Atlanta debate on national security between Newt Gingrich and Andrew Young at Georgia State University, or the one on defense policy between Senators Carl Levin and Jon Kyl at Georgetown University, can attest to this.

But getting prominent people or prominent foreign policy experts to debate turns out to be an unnatural act. Most of them do not want to debate. Some shy away from the hand-to-hand combat and the possibility of embarrassment, and that is understandable. During campaigns, many more demur for political reasons: either they or their political handlers fear rhetorical slips that might damage their candidates’ prospects.

But by the time we finish understanding everyone’s personal and political realities, serious debate slides out of
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the public arena. And when it does, our democracy declines. For all its flaws, nothing matches serious debate—head-on give-and-take between contenders and their contending ideas. Individual speeches and one-on-one interviews surely have their place, but well-moderated direct exchanges still provide the best tool for the public to understand the issues.

To me, our foreign policy friends and political leaders owe the American people a serious debate on foreign policy. It is hard to see how our democracy can flourish without a fair and direct rendering of facts and choices. The jokes that often pass for debate too often demean facts and public choices.

This sounds melodramatic, I know. I thought I had forsworn melodrama for my tenure as Council president. But the consequence of transforming public discourse into a joke is to make democracy a joke.

Members and friends of the Council are generally accomplished people. This success and influence confers on us the heavy responsibility to maintain the quality of debates and ideas in our country. Our forefathers understood this perfectly. They gave us, among other things, the Federalist Papers and their opposition papers, almost all magnificent discourse. Equally impressive, newspapers and journals throughout the colonies carried these disquisitions for all to read. They set the standard for what those who have the time and talent to know owe to those who do not. Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas managed at once to enlighten and amuse their Illinois neighbors. Congress fathered serious debates during the Vietnam War and the Gulf War. Surely, those who would lead us and provide ideas to our leaders can muster the courage to argue and explain where they would lead us and why.

Leslie H. Gelb
President