

# GETTING OUT AND ABOUT: TALKING WITH AMERICANS BEYOND WASHINGTON ABOUT THEIR PLACE IN THE WORLD

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## A small team at CNAS is getting out of the Beltway "bubble" to talk to Americans about what role the United States should play on the international scene.

On any given day in Washington, dozens of think tanks that work on national security issues are busy drafting policy memos, meeting with embassy staff and foreign visitors, testifying before Congress, conducting press interviews, raising funds for their research, and hosting events, all in an effort to shape U.S. foreign policy. But in the weeks and months following the 2016 election, the normal rhythm of think tank work slowed considerably. The election of Donald Trump as America's 45th president raised some fundamental, and at times, paralyzing questions for Washington's think tank community. How did so many wonks both on the left and the right miss America's growing disaffection with globalization, a phenomenon that helped bring Trump to power? It is incumbent upon everyone who works in national security to ask ourselves what that fact says about the disconnect between Washington and the rest of the country. With an administration that prides itself on disregarding conventional expertise, we must also pose the question: What role should think tanks play moving forward?

Many of us in Washington are still mulling over those questions. But at the think tank where I work, the bipartisan Center for a New American Security (CNAS), my small team working on transatlantic security issues quickly came to the conclusion that it was time to try something different. Instead of spending most of our time interacting with other national security experts in Washington (both in and out of government) and meeting with allies and partners abroad, we needed to engage new audiences across the United States. We needed to escape the proverbial Beltway bubble. And because my program's mandate is to focus on transatlantic relations, my team knew that whatever initiative we were going to develop would need to include European national security experts as well.

In the spring of 2017, CNAS formally launched "Across the Pond, in the Field."<sup>1</sup> Over the course of three years, the project will take teams made up of two Americans and two Europeans to 12 cities across the United States. The two American envoys come from CNAS, while the Europeans

we've selected have been former ministers, current ambassadors, and think tank scholars. The project has multiple objectives. We want to expose Washingtonians and Europeans to a diverse range of American perspectives on transatlantic relations and U.S. foreign policy, something they don't necessarily get in national capitals. We also want to create opportunities for the Europeans on these trips to develop lasting relationships with cities outside of Washington and New York. Finally, our aim is to engage in a series of debates on U.S. global engagement with "grass-top" leaders – local individuals in industry and the public sector who serve as opinion leaders in their communities. Our goal has never been to lecture or teach Americans what they ought to think. Instead, we try to foster a genuine exchange of ideas that will allow the Americans we meet to ask us hard questions and challenge some of our longstanding, core assumptions about the transatlantic relationship and broader U.S. foreign policy.

Each trip that our teams go on follows the same general template. Over the course of two days, our small delegation hosts at least one large public event, speaks with members of the local press (which usually includes an editorial board meeting and AM talk radio), meets with business and political leaders, and visits a high school and/or a university. To date, we have visited Pittsburgh, Salt Lake City, and Tampa. As one might expect, these trips have taught us a lot so far, both about how to conduct programming "outside the Beltway" and about how Americans today are thinking about the world more broadly. Of course, a three-city tour doesn't lend itself to any conclusive generalizations, particularly because we aren't hearing from a full cross section of America in terms of race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. But we believe that some of the early lessons from those three trips are worth sharing.

*Americans are generally eager to interact and engage about their country's role in the world, but some remain skeptical.* The first question we asked ourselves when we started this program was whether anyone would show up. Do Americans outside of Washington want to hear from and

<sup>1</sup> This project is made possible through the government of the Federal Republic of Germany through funds of the European Recovery Program (ERP) of the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy. Additional funds provided by the Robert Bosch Stiftung.

engage in debates with the foreign policy elites who are popularly portrayed by the media as out of touch and irrelevant? To our great relief, especially after our well-attended public event in our first stop in Pittsburgh, we have found that people do indeed show up. Sometimes they turn out in stunningly large numbers. Our public events regularly draw audiences between 100 and 200 people, and I've personally spoken to audiences across the country that range in size from 300 to 700 people.

Between CNAS' "Across the Pond" trips, my own personal invitations to speak to audiences in places like Ohio and New Hampshire, and anecdotes from colleagues running similar programs, there is no question that Americans are hungry to engage with policymakers and experts on foreign policy. That said, not everyone has welcomed us with open arms. In advance of our trip to Pittsburgh, I placed an op-ed in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* explaining the goals of our project and why it was important for folks like myself to get outside of Washington. The day that piece ran, CNAS received seven or eight phone calls — some profanity-laden — telling us to stay home. Because some of the calls included thinly veiled threats, we asked for police presence at our public event. Fortunately, we haven't ever encountered that sentiment in person. But the fact that a program designed to seek and listen to alternative viewpoints can create such a visceral reaction has taught us a thing or two about just how deep the mistrust and animosity towards Washington really runs.

Those phone calls reminded me of some of the reactions I encountered when I walked around the Washington monuments last summer with a video camera to ask American tourists what they thought about NATO. Most of the folks I approached were happy to offer a few comments. On a few occasions, however, parents held their children close and told me to back away, noting that they never talk to the "lamestream media." My efforts to reassure them by stating calmly that I did not work for a TV or radio station failed. What has become clear to me both through that experience and our city visits is that we may never find ways to engage certain sectors of the population, particularly those that reject the premise that dialogue in itself is a useful exercise. Working for a think tank in Washington means I come from a different tribe and for some people, that's enough reason to keep me at arm's length.

*Finding a willing conservative, public audience in a large American city is difficult.* Many U.S. cities are home to nonprofits such as the World Affairs Councils of America or the American Committees on Foreign Relations. The mission of

these organizations is to create opportunities for dialogue with global leaders and policymakers. They play a critical role in educating both their members and the general public about pressing national security challenges. However, because many U.S. cities (even in red states) tilt blue, the audiences that those organizations draw tend to be heavy on the Democrats' side. One of the

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major challenges we face in working with people outside of the Beltway has been identifying partner organizations that can help us reach a more politically diverse set of Americans. In the case of Pittsburgh, that meant leaving the downtown area and driving an hour to a neighboring red county to hold an event at a public library. In the case of Tampa, it meant spending hours on the phone finding libertarian and conservative groups and asking to help publicize our public event downtown. Those calls aren't always easy to make. You spend an enormous amount of time explaining who you are, what you do, who funds your work, why you're coming to town, and why they should care. In most cases, after a couple of calls, people offer to help. Occasionally, though, Washington's image as an elitist, out-of-touch, and globalist hub fuels skepticism about the motives behind our project and ends the conversation.

*Form and format matter and can easily make or break efforts to engage Americans in an honest and civil debate.* Americans might be interested in engaging on foreign policy, but they aren't in the mood for a lecture, especially from a bunch of elitist wonks from the coast. That's why we have very deliberately banned speeches at every event we attend or host. For large public forums, our moderator starts with one or two questions for our panelists and then immediately goes to the audience, often collecting four or five questions at a time in order to maximize the number of people that we can hear from. Audiences have reacted



positively to that format, often noting that they were surprised and relieved that we didn't open with a long lecture. We also try to host a reception after our public events where people can approach our delegation one-on-one. With an audience of 100 to 200 people or more, it's impossible to engage in an ideal dialogue. However, using some of these formats has helped us hear from as many people as possible.

Another important lesson from this project is the importance of humility and a willingness to admit your mistakes, especially regarding policies that your audience might oppose. It is impossible to foster a genuine exchange of ideas if you start in a defensive crouch. In some of the events we've hosted, I have intentionally outlined some of the policies that I believe we got wrong during the Obama administration in which I served. Our European guests also have been refreshingly honest about some of their own policy errors or miscalculations. This kind of openness and honesty

can help disarm an American audience that is regularly bombarded with accusatory and divisive stories about folks on the other side of the aisle.

*No single foreign policy issue occupies the minds of Americans today — their questions vary by the hour.* Looking at polling data on American threat perceptions, it is easy to get the impression that Americans are singularly worried about terrorism.<sup>2</sup> In the three cities we visited, however, we did not encounter many questions about terrorism or the Islamic State. Instead, we heard a wide array of questions and opinions on everything from NATO to North Korea to NAFTA. Unsurprisingly, the headlines shape the questions people ask, as do the backgrounds and expertise of our European guests. For example, the British Labor Party politician we took to Salt Lake City was peppered with questions about Brexit. The current Swedish ambassador to the United States was asked about her country's efforts to be fossil-free by 2050. The former German defense minister took some pointed questions on defense spending.

*Some conspiracy theories and misleading narratives have taken root.* Broadly speaking, the Americans we've met both at public events and in one-on-one meetings have been very well-informed. But in the age of disinformation<sup>3</sup> and with a president who has openly admitted to creating facts out of whole cloth,<sup>4</sup> it is not uncommon to stumble upon sometimes disturbing myths, conspiracy theories, or falsehoods. This is especially true on the issues of immigration and refugees. The Swedish ambassador was asked by an audience member if Muslims living in her country were taking over Swedish culture or outproducing Swedes. On another trip, a local resident asked the current Danish ambassador to the United States if it was safe to travel to Europe because he had heard "there is a terrorist attack every single day and that people are getting robbed by gangs of refugees." In Pittsburgh, I recorded a podcast with the former president of the Pittsburgh Rotary Club, who, in a discussion about U.S. and European immigration policies, claimed — falsely — that some predominantly Muslim cities in both Michigan and North Carolina have fully

2 In a 2018 Pew Research Center poll, "defending against terrorism" ranked among the public's leading priorities for the president and Congress, with nearly three-quarters (73 percent) saying it is a top priority. See Kristin Bialik, "State of the Union 2018: Americans' Views on Key Issues Facing the Nation," Pew Research Center, Jan. 18, 2018, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/01/29/state-of-the-union-2018-americans-views-on-key-issues-facing-the-nation/>.

3 Darrell M. West, "How to Combat Fake News and Disinformation," Brookings Institution, Dec. 18, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/how-to-combat-fake-news-and-disinformation/>.

4 Josh Dawsey, Damian Paletta, and Erica Werner, "In Fundraising Speech, Trump Says He Made Up Trade Claim in Meeting with Justin Trudeau," Mar. 15, 2018, *Washington Post*, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2018/03/14/in-fundraising-speech-trump-says-he-made-up-facts-in-meeting-with-justin-trudeau/?utm\\_term=.a91a8dea0453](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2018/03/14/in-fundraising-speech-trump-says-he-made-up-facts-in-meeting-with-justin-trudeau/?utm_term=.a91a8dea0453).



implemented Sharia.<sup>5</sup> While this project isn't about lecturing the Americans we meet, we have seized on opportunities to engage in myth busting where appropriate.

*The issue of Russia has become so politicized that it's dangerous to raise.* Of all the issues we've debated to date, none is as politically charged as Russia, specifically Russian meddling in the 2016 election. Recent polling data has shown the emergence of a noticeable split among Democrats and Republicans on their views towards Russia, attempts to engage the Russians, and the president's own relationship with Russia.<sup>6</sup> For nearly two decades, Americans on both sides of the aisle have held similarly negative views toward Russia. But that ended after the 2016 election. Democrats now hold a far less positive view towards Russia than Republicans do<sup>7</sup> — only 15 percent of Democrats have a favorable view of Russia, while 30 percent of Republicans do. Like domestic issues such as gun violence and the Second Amendment, one's views on Russia now can easily reveal political party affiliation.

We have felt that partisan divide on Russia in every city we have visited. Merely mentioning Russia quickly morphs into a scathing discussion about U.S. politics. Democrats are accused of conducting a “witch hunt.” Republicans are accused of being AWOL on Russian election meddling. There are also some fascinating twists and turns in all the Russia-related finger-pointing. Republicans

from Russian interference in our election and ask some of our European guests to describe their country's experiences with Russian aggression and what they're doing about it. Europeans have been dealing with Russian acts of intimidation, energy coercion, and disinformation campaigns far longer than the United States. Sharing those experiences helps our audiences appreciate the scope of the problem. It also serves as a useful reminder that the transatlantic relationship isn't always about America teaching or lecturing Europe. In many cases, such as how to grapple with Russian disinformation, we Americans can learn a lot from our European allies.

*U.S. mayors and other local politicians don't feel hindered by today's hyper-partisanship and are making up for the paralysis across Washington.* After visits to only three cities, it's hard to offer generalizable findings about anything that we've observed. We have found it refreshing, however, to hear so many stories from local politicians in the cities we have visited about their efforts to rise above the party politics currently paralyzing the nation's capital. Unlike their counterparts in Congress, the mayors and county executives we've met are extending hands across the aisle, developing new relationships at home and abroad, and forming alliances across state lines to advance common agendas on everything from climate change to the opioid crisis.

*Americans of all political stripes are tired of carrying the proverbial burden of the West.* Irrespective of party affiliation, hometown, or age, many of the Americans we have met have expressed some level of frustration with burden-sharing in international matters. That sentiment takes different forms: America does too

## “Across the Pond” is an attempt to mine the country for fresh ideas.

much for European defense, America is the world's policeman, or America provides too much aid to other countries. The basic message is that America is unfairly doing too much of something. What that means for the future of U.S. foreign policy, though, is far from clear. For some, Trump's “America First” slogan and his accompanying policies on everything from trade to Syrian refugees are the answer. For others, however, the feeling that

who have attended our events like to remind Democrats that they once mocked presidential candidate Mitt Romney for stating that Russia was America's greatest threat. Democrats at our events like to remind Republicans that they still mock former President Barack Obama for his Russian “reset” policy, even though many Republicans now support Trump's effort to do something similar. In our discussions, we try our best to get away

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5 Julianne Smith and Andy Dlinn, “Andy Dlinn Talks Transatlantic Relations, Meaning Behind ‘America First,’” Center for a New American Security, Nov. 3, 2017, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/podcast/andy-dlinn-talks-transatlantic-relations-meaning-behind-america-first>.

6 According to YouGov polling, in July of 2014 just 10 percent of Democrats and nine percent of Republicans considered Russia “an ally” or “friendly” to U.S. interests. Three years later, in July of 2017, those numbers were 11 percent and 30 percent, respectively. Recently, in light of the Mueller probe, that gap has started to close. See Dylan Matthews, “Trump has Changed How Americans Think About Politics,” Vox, Jan. 30, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/1/30/16943786/trump-changed-public-opinion-russia-immigration-trade>.

7 See the second chart, “Americans’ Opinions of Russia, By Party,” in Megan Brenan, “Americans, Particularly Democrats, Dislike Russia,” Gallup, Mar. 5, 2018, [http://news.gallup.com/poll/228479/americans-particularly-democrats-dislike-russia.aspx?g\\_source=link\\_NEWSV9&g\\_medium=tile\\_1&g\\_campaign=item\\_1642&g\\_content=Americans%2c%2520Particularly%2520Democrats%2c%2520Dislike%2520Russia](http://news.gallup.com/poll/228479/americans-particularly-democrats-dislike-russia.aspx?g_source=link_NEWSV9&g_medium=tile_1&g_campaign=item_1642&g_content=Americans%2c%2520Particularly%2520Democrats%2c%2520Dislike%2520Russia).

America is doing or has done too much in the world doesn't necessarily translate into opposition to free trade or a desire to leave the NATO alliance. In fact, a higher percentage of Americans in 2017 believed that global trade was good for the U.S. economy and consumers than in 2016.<sup>8</sup> American support for the NATO alliance is also on the rise.<sup>9</sup> But there is a palpable sentiment that America needs to encourage others to share a greater portion of the burden when it comes to global challenges. No future U.S. president can afford to ignore this. Even in cases where they support global engagement, Americans express a clear desire for more "leadership" from our partners and allies.

CNAS' "Across the Pond" project isn't a scientific study about American attitudes, nor is it an attempt for policy elites to teach Americans in faraway places how to think about transatlantic relations and U.S. foreign policy. What it is at its core is a much-needed attempt at civil discourse and debate, free of insults and partisan attacks. But what about its *impact*, a term deeply familiar to those of us working in think tanks. In other words,

through the partisan noise and helping folks learn from each other. There are, however, a few concrete ways to measure change. The CNAS intern pool, often dominated by applicants from the East Coast, has become more geographically diverse. We are now receiving applications from every city we've visited, and we hope that will continue as we visit another nine cities. The Transatlantic Security Program also produces a weekly podcast and puts out a weekly newsletter, via email, on transatlantic issues. We have seen an increase in the number of subscribers to those two products, which helps CNAS with national outreach.

Perhaps the biggest impact, though, has been in regards to my own personal views about transatlantic relations. I have spent more than 20 years working on Europe and advocating for a strong partnership with European allies. Over the course of the last year, I have worried that Trump's sometimes benign, sometimes antagonistic views towards Europe were moving the two sides of the Atlantic away from their shared history and shared values. I have warned that making the transatlantic



what's the point?

We don't survey the people we meet through this project, so it is hard to know, short of a lot of positive feedback, whether our events are breaking

relationship more transactional would spell disaster. But as some of the people we've engaged outside of Washington have reminded me in recent months, it seems Europe has adjusted quite well

8 "Munich Security Report 2018: To the Brink – and Back," Munich Security Conference Foundation, Nov. 28, 2017, 22, <https://www.securityconference.de/en/discussion/munich-security-report/munich-security-report-2018/>.

9 "Pew: NATO Approval on the Rise," *American Interest*, May 24, 2017, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/05/24/pew-nato-approval-on-the-rise/>.



to this new era. Contrary to my warnings, our European allies haven't abandoned us just because we have a president who questions the utility of NATO and supports Brexit. Are these relationships more durable than I realized? Is the values aspect of the transatlantic relationship overstated?

These are the questions my colleagues and I don't necessarily encounter in the near constant cycle of meetings and conferences across Washington. Many of us, myself included, can find ourselves trapped in defending the status quo. For example, U.S. presidents always reiterate America's unwavering commitment to NATO's Article 5 clause on their first trip to Brussels. When Trump failed to do this last summer, Washington pundits, scholars, and journalists spent weeks warning about the consequences of departing from that tradition. This project gives us an opportunity to interact with people who don't necessarily react the same way to a president that regularly challenges the bipartisan consensus on U.S. foreign policy.

Finally, "Across the Pond" is an attempt to mine the country for fresh ideas. Not all of the answers for addressing Chinese cyber-attacks, Russian disinformation campaigns, or a brewing trade war with Europe — to name just a few of today's challenges — can be found in the White House Situation Room or large conference tables at Washington think tanks. Policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic must engage chambers of commerce, trade associations, and the private sector where one finds a greater degree of agility and innovation. Former policymakers on these trips also need to signal to universities what kind of skill sets governments will need in the future. For example, with so many U.S. adversaries relying on asymmetric tactics designed to undermine America's technological edge, the U.S. government will need more graduates with backgrounds in both policy and technology. These are some of the conversations we're having on these trips.

On their letterhead, program materials, and websites, think tanks often make oversized claims about their impact. They are either solving intractable problems or charting a course towards a better world. Or both. We certainly aren't prepared to argue that our "Across the Pond, in the Field" project is going to change the world. We do believe, however, that it is a much-needed attempt to break out of the conventional think tank model. That doesn't mean we'll stop researching and working on those tough policy dilemmas in Syria and North Korea. All of that important work will continue. But we will continue to implement this project in parallel to give us (and our European guests) the

chance to pause, get outside the Beltway, question our core assumptions, and hear from folks that look at the world differently. Our next stop will be Grand Rapids, Michigan, in June. 🐎

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