

Americans Reevaluate Going to War with Iraq

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Majority Believes US Acted on Incorrect Assumptions in Rush to War

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According to a new PIPA-Knowledge Networks poll, a majority of Americans (55%) believe that the Bush administration went to war on the basis of incorrect assumptions. An overwhelming 87% said that, before the war, the Bush administration portrayed Iraq as an imminent threat, while a majority (58%) believes that the administration did not have evidence for this and only 42% believe that it was the case. A majority believes that the US went to war precipitously, with 61% saying that the US should have taken more time to find out if Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and 59% saying it should have taken more time to build international support.

A majority of Americans believe that the evidence that the US had on Iraq did not meet the proper international standards for going to war without UN approval. While most believe that countries have the right to go to war if they have evidence they are in imminent danger of being attacked with WMD, only a minority also believes that the US had such evidence (32%) or, given what is known now, that Iraq in fact posed such a threat (35%). A majority (53%) believes the US had evidence that Iraq was acquiring WMD that could be used against it at some point in the future, but only 31% said such evidence legitimates going to war.

A strong majority (67%) believes that countries have the right to overthrow governments, without UN approval, if they have strong evidence that the government is providing substantial support to a terrorist group that has attacked them. However only 38% both believe this and think the US had strong evidence that Iraq was providing substantial support to al-Qaeda.

Most Americans believe President Bush was determined to go to war irrespective of the evidence. If US intelligence services had told the president there was no reliable evidence that Iraq possessed or was building weapons of mass destruction or was providing substantial support to al-Qaeda, 63% said he would still have gone to war.

Majorities are questioning the president's veracity. Only 42% said that the president is honest and frank, while 56% said they have doubts about things he says. Seventy-two percent (up from 63% in July) said that when the administration presented evidence of Iraqi WMD to justify going to war, it was either presenting evidence it knew was false (21%) or stretching the truth (51%).

This shift may be related to a sharp drop in the misperception that the US has found WMD in Iraq from 24% in September to 15% now, perhaps in response to the interim report by David Kay, head of the Iraq Survey Group.

Growing doubts about the president's veracity may help explain a 12-point jump in the percentage saying that the president's handling of Iraq has decreased their likelihood to vote for him. This number has jumped from 30% in PIPA/KN's August-September poll to 42% in the current poll, and is now higher than the 35% who say that his handling of Iraq has increased their likelihood of voting for him (no effect: 21%).

A majority also does not believe that the US had the right to go to war based on Iraq's human rights record. Only 27% think that countries have the right, without UN approval, to overthrow another government that is committing substantial violations of its citizens' human rights. A majority supports intervention if the violations are large-scale, extreme and equivalent to genocide, but only 32% both believe this and think Iraq was committing this level of human rights violations. An additional 12% saw intervention justified on the basis of substantial violations alone, and believed that only this standard was met.

Despite these doubts, only 38% take the position that going to war was the wrong decision. Forty-two percent say the war was the best thing for the US and another 15% support the war so as to support the president, though they are not sure if it was the best thing to do. Sustaining this support is the belief that Iraq did have a WMD program (71%) and was providing support to al-Qaeda (67%).

Steven Kull, director of PIPA comments, "The majority's views about the decision to go to war are nuanced. It believes there were legitimate concerns that prompted the decision, while at the same time it believes the threat was not imminent and the decision was taken precipitously, without proper international support."

The public shows little enthusiasm for the administration's handling of the postwar reconstruction. Sixty-six percent said that the administration's planning for postwar Iraq was poor. Only 27% think that the number of terrorists in Iraq is lower than it was before the war, while 35% think it higher and 35% think it is about the same.

Nonetheless, support for continuing the operation in Iraq is undaunted. Only a very small minority (15%) favor withdrawing US troops. An overwhelming majority (77%) continues to think the US has the responsibility to remain in Iraq until there is a stable government. When asked how long US troops will need to be in Iraq, the median estimate is three years—up from two years in earlier polls.

The poll did not find evidence to support the Bush administration's complaint that the media is overplaying the bad news in Iraq. The public did not appear to have an exaggerated idea of how badly things are going in Iraq. The median respondent sharply underestimated the number of attacks on US troops, only slightly overestimated the number of US troops fatalities since the end of the war. Most assume that the majority of

the Iraqi people are glad that the US overthrew Saddam Hussein and want the US to stay a while longer.

The PIPA/KN poll was conducted with a nationwide sample of 1,008 respondents October 29-November 10. The margin of error was plus or minus 3-4.5%, depending on whether the question was administered to the whole sample, three quarters or half of the sample.

The poll was fielded by Knowledge Networks using its nationwide panel, which is randomly selected from the entire adult population and subsequently provided Internet access. For more information about this methodology, go to www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp.

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