

U.S. Public Shows Growing Readiness to Disagree with President on Iraq

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Majority Sides With Security Council Members Calling for More Inspections

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In the run-up to the President's State of the Union message, a new poll reveals that the American public is showing a growing readiness to disagree with the President on Iraq. When respondents were told that President Bush was pressing the U.N. Security Council for more immediate action against Iraq, a strong majority nonetheless favored continuing U.N. inspections. Steven Kull, director of the Program on International Policy Attitudes, commented: "What is striking here is that the poll posed the issue as a debate between President Bush and other members of the Security Council, but only 31 percent took the President's side, while 66 percent sided with the other members calling for continuing inspections."

The poll of 1,063 American adults was conducted January 21-26 (margin of error plus or minus 3%).

Americans also show an increasing readiness to disagree with the President, should the President decide to take military action against Iraq following a failure to get Security Council approval. Sixty-three percent said they would disagree with such a decision—up from 55 percent when PIPA/Knowledge Networks asked this question in November. Only 33% said they would agree—down from 43 percent in November.

The President, though, can still expect some rallying-round-the-President if he does proceed to take such action. Sixty percent indicated they would support the President, even though many of those say they would disagree with the decision. However, this percentage has slipped from 70 percent in November.

Americans also show a greater readiness to give a negative rating for US foreign policy on Iraq. Those giving a negative rating have increased from 25 percent to 37 percent since November, while those giving it a positive rating have slipped from 52 percent to 45 percent; those giving a neutral rating have gone from 16 percent to 15 percent.

A strong majority also appears to disagree with the Administration's assertion that earlier U.N. Security Council resolutions provide the necessary authority to take action against Iraq. Sixty-seven percent said that, at this point, it is still necessary for the United States to get U.N. Security Council approval before invading Iraq.

While some members of the administration have implied that the discovery of the undeclared Iraqi artillery shells constitutes a violation of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1441 and is thus a cause for military action with or without further U.N. approval, the public is not convinced. Asked whether “the fact that Iraq did not declare these weapons is or is not a good enough reason for the U.N. to authorize an invasion of Iraq,” a slight majority of 51 percent said that it was not a good enough reason, while 45 percent said that it was. It is likely that an even smaller number would see this discovery as a good reason for unilateral U.S. action.

Steven Kull comments, “This poll provides some insight into one of the possible reasons why in this and many other polls most Americans make U.N. approval a necessary condition for taking military action against Iraq. Many Americans are not sure that the U.S. has the right to use military force to prevent a country from acquiring nuclear weapons, but most think the U.N. does.” Asked about the right to take military action to prevent nuclear proliferation in general, an overwhelming 76 percent said “the U.N. Security Council has the right to authorize the use of military force to prevent a country that does not have nuclear weapons from acquiring them.” However, when asked whether countries in general or the United States has such a right, the public was evenly divided. Asked whether the United States has the right to take such action against Iraq, a modest 53 percent said that it did. Thus, while there is an overwhelming consensus that it is legitimate for the U.N. Security Council to take such action, there is not such a clear consensus in other cases; even in the case of Iraq, despite the unique situation of the Gulf War armistice.