

Americans on U.S. Role in the World After the Iraq War

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While Strongly Endorsing the Iraq War, Public Rejects a New U.S. Role Marked By Unilateral and Military Approaches

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A new PIPA/Knowledge Networks poll finds that, while strongly endorsing the war with Iraq, the public does not support its momentum carrying over into a changed U.S. role in the world. Majorities reject emphasizing a more unilateral or more militarily oriented approach to dealing with world problems in general, as well as dealing with the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Seventy-five percent approve of U.S. policy on Iraq and Americans show more confidence than at the beginning of the war that the consequences of the war will be positive. Majorities said that, as a result of the war, Iran (68%) and Syria (62%) would be less rather than more inclined to make weapons or mass destruction, though for North Korea the response was divided.

“At the same time, the public’s enthusiasm for the Iraq war is highly compartmentalized,” explains Steven Kull, director of the Program on International Policy Attitudes. “There is no evidence of a spill-over into other areas.” Only one in five (21%) supports the idea of going to war with Syria and two out of three (67%) want the United States to pull its troops out of Saudi Arabia once Iraq is stabilized.

Asked what role the United States should play in the world, the response is the same as before the war: only a small minority (12%) opted for the United States being “the preeminent world leader,” while an overwhelming 76 percent said “the U.S. should do its share in efforts to solve international problems together with other countries.” Sixty-two percent still say, “The U.S. plays the role of world policeman more than it should.” Only 38 percent agree that “The U.S. has the right and even the responsibility to overthrow dictatorships.”

Support for working through the United Nations is still strong, despite the failure to get Security Council approval for the war against Iraq. Asked, “Looking back, do you think that it was the right thing to do or a mistake for the United States to have tried to get U.N. authorization to take military action against Iraq?” an overwhelming 88% said it was. Sixty-one percent said that in the future the United States should not feel more free to use military force without U.N. authorization. Majorities favor the UN rather than the U.S. taking the lead in dealing with Syria (61%), Iran (57%) and North Korea (67%).

The public divides on whether the United Nations or the United States should manage the development of the new Iraq government. However, clear majorities favor the U.N. directing humanitarian relief and economic reconstruction (57%) and continuing to manage the oil for food program (70%). Only 29 percent said the U.S. military should be responsible for relief and reconstruction efforts.

Even when it comes to maintaining civil order in Iraq, 54 percent preferred “a U.N. police force of police officers from various countries” rather than the U.S. military.

Beyond this, 73 percent say that it is necessary to get the participation of a substantial number of other countries in the process of reconstruction, with 66 percent saying that it is necessary to get Arab countries involved.

Overall, the public is showing unflagging and overwhelming support for an ambitious reconstruction effort in Iraq. Eighty-six percent said that the United States has “the responsibility to remain in Iraq as long as necessary until there is a stable government,” with the median estimate that this will take two years. Even when presented the argument that “We shouldn’t spend money on rebuilding Iraq when we have so many problems here at home,” 73 percent rejected it in favor of the argument that leaving Iraq “would be unwise and immoral.” Expectations for what will be achieved are high: 72 percent said the United States should not leave until a government has been elected and there are laws that protect human rights.

Despite the president’s popularity, an overwhelming 77 percent rejected the idea that “Congress should give the president full control over the way money is spent on Iraq assistance and reconstruction,” opting instead for Congress retaining oversight.

The poll was conducted with a nationwide sample of 865 respondents over April 18-22. The margin of error was plus or minus 3.5%. 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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