

Americans Continue to Believe Iraq Supported Al-Qaeda, Had WMD

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Few Perceive Experts as Saying Contrary

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A new PIPA/Knowledge Networks poll finds that a large majority perceives the Bush administration making assertions about pre-war Iraq in sharp contrast to the conclusions of the 9/11 Commission and the Senate Intelligence Committee. Eighty percent perceive the administration as “currently saying that Iraq, just before the war, had actual weapons of mass destruction” (60%) or that it had a major WMD program (20%). Similarly, 70% perceive the administration as currently saying Iraq “gave substantial support to al-Qaeda” (43%) or was directly involved in the September 11 attacks (27%).

More striking, after having been largely stable since the end of the war, there has been an erosion in the majorities who agree. The percentage saying that Iraq was giving substantial support to al-Qaeda has dropped from 57% in a March PIPA/Knowledge Networks poll to 50% today. The percentage saying that Iraq had WMDs or a major WMD program has dropped from 60% to 54%. Sixty-nine percent now say that the US went to war based on incorrect assumptions.

These shifts have been accompanied by a comparable decline in support for the decision to go to war with Iraq. The percentage saying that the US made the “right decision” by going to war with Iraq has slipped 9 percentage points from 55% in March—a level that had been sustained consistently since November 2003—to just 46%. For the first time half (49%) said that going to war was the “wrong decision.” Those who said the decision was the “best” thing to do dropped to 33% from 40% in March.

Fifty-two percent said that it would have been better to put a higher priority on pursuing al-Qaeda and stabilizing Afghanistan, rather than pursuing the Iraq war. Only 39% thought invading Iraq and overthrowing Saddam Hussein was the better use of resources.

Steven Kull, director of PIPA comments, “Though the public hears the Bush administration still saying that Iraq had WMD and gave substantial support to al-Qaeda, since the 9/11 Commission and the Senate Intelligence Committee reports, more Americans have doubts and support for the decision to go to war has eroded.”

Public perceptions of expert opinion on pre-war Iraq have also changed. In March only 15% perceived most experts saying that Iraq was not providing substantial support to al-Qaeda: now 29% have this perception. Before these reports only 34% perceived most experts saying Iraq did not have WMD; now 43% have this perception.

Another key change that appears to be contributing to the declining support for the Iraq war is a growing perception that the world public opinion opposes the US going to war with Iraq. The percentage assuming that the majority of people in the world disapprove of the US going to war with Iraq has risen from 41% in March to 50% today. This is the first time there has been any such upward movement since the question was first asked in July 2003.

The percentage wanting to reduce US troops in Iraq has also risen to 53% from 39% in November. The percentage wanting to withdraw completely is also up 9 percentage points, but still only stands at 24%.

While it is common to assume that the number of US troop fatalities would impact attitudes about the war, this does not appear to be the case. Respondents were asked to estimate the number of US troops killed in Iraq. Those that made estimates well above the correct level were no more likely to oppose the decision to go to war. They were also no more likely to want to withdraw US troops or to withdraw before a democracy has been fully established in Iraq.

The public is divided on whether President Bush misled the public in the run-up to the war. This is not surprising given that half still believe that Iraq had at least a major WMD program and was providing substantial support to al-Qaeda. However, among those who do not have such beliefs 79% believe that he deliberately misled the public in the runup to the war and 70% say that they are less likely to vote for him as a result of his handling of Iraq.

The poll was conducted with a nationwide sample of 733 respondents August 5-11. The margin of error was plus or minus 3.7%.

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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