

The Separate Realities of Bush and Kerry Supporters

October 21, 2004

Bush Supporters Still Believe Iraq Had WMD or Major Program, Supported al-Qaeda

[Full Report](#)
[Questionnaire](#)

Even after the final report of weapons expert Charles Duelfer to Congress saying that Iraq did not have a significant WMD program, 72% of Bush supporters continue to believe that Iraq had actual WMD (47%) or a major program for developing them (25%). Fifty-six percent assume that most experts believe Iraq had actual WMD and 57% also assume, incorrectly, that Duelfer concluded Iraq had at least a major WMD program. Kerry supporters hold opposite beliefs on all these points.

Similarly, 75% of Bush supporters continue to believe that Iraq was providing substantial support to al-Qaeda, and 63% believe that clear evidence of this support has been found. Sixty percent of Bush supporters assume that this is also the conclusion of most experts, and 55% assume, incorrectly, that this was the conclusion of the 9/11 Commission. Here again, large majorities of Kerry supporters have exactly opposite perceptions.

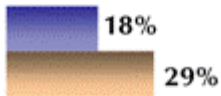
These are some of the findings of a new study of the differing perceptions of Bush and Kerry supporters, conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes and Knowledge Networks, based on polls conducted in September and October.

Steven Kull, director of PIPA, comments, "One of the reasons that Bush supporters have these beliefs is that they perceive the Bush administration confirming them. Interestingly, this is one point on which Bush and Kerry supporters agree." Eighty-two percent of Bush supporters perceive the Bush administration as saying that Iraq had WMD (63%) or that Iraq had a major WMD program (19%). Likewise, 75% say that the Bush administration is saying Iraq was providing substantial support to al-Qaeda. Equally large majorities of Kerry supporters hear the Bush administration expressing these views—73% say the Bush administration is saying Iraq had WMD (11% a major program) and 74% that Iraq was substantially supporting al-Qaeda.

US Military Presence in Iraq

Do you think that most people in the Middle East want the US military presence in the Middle East maintained at its present level, or do you think most people want it reduced?

Maintained at its present level



Reduced



PIPA/KN 10/2004

Steven Kull adds, “Another reason that Bush supporters may hold to these beliefs is that they have not accepted the idea that it does not matter whether Iraq had WMD or supported al-Qaeda. Here too they are in agreement with Kerry supporters.” Asked whether the US should have gone to war with Iraq if US intelligence had concluded that Iraq was not making WMD or providing support to al-Qaeda, 58% of Bush supporters said the US should not have, and 61% assume that in this case the President would not have. Kull continues, “To support the president and to accept that he took the US to war based on mistaken assumptions likely creates substantial cognitive dissonance, and leads Bush supporters to suppress awareness of unsettling information about prewar Iraq.”

This tendency of Bush supporters to ignore dissonant information extends to other realms as well. Despite an abundance of evidence—including polls conducted by Gallup International in 38 countries, and more recently by a consortium of leading newspapers in 10 major countries—only 31% of Bush supporters recognize that the majority of people in the world oppose the US having gone to war with Iraq. Forty-two percent assume that views are evenly divided, and 26% assume that the majority approves. Among Kerry supporters, 74% assume that the majority of the world is opposed.

Similarly, 57% of Bush supporters assume that the majority of people in the world would favor Bush’s reelection; 33% assumed that views are evenly divided and only 9% assumed that Kerry would be preferred. A recent poll by GlobeScan and PIPA of 35 of the major countries around the world found that in 30, a majority or plurality favored Kerry, while in just 3 Bush was favored. On average, Kerry was preferred more than two to one.

Bush supporters also have numerous misperceptions about Bush’s international policy positions. Majorities incorrectly assume that Bush supports multilateral approaches to various international issues—the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (69%), the treaty banning land mines (72%)—and for addressing the problem of global warming: 51% incorrectly assume he favors US participation in the Kyoto treaty. After he denounced the International Criminal Court in the debates, the perception that he favored it dropped from 66%, but still 53% continue to believe that he favors it. An overwhelming 74% incorrectly assumes that he favors including labor and environmental standards in trade

agreements. In all these cases, majorities of Bush supporters favor the positions they impute to Bush. Kerry supporters are much more accurate in their perceptions of his positions on these issues.

“The roots of the Bush supporters’ resistance to information,” according to Steven Kull, “very likely lie in the traumatic experience of 9/11 and equally in the near pitch-perfect leadership that President Bush showed in its immediate wake. This appears to have created a powerful bond between Bush and his supporters--and an idealized image of the President that makes it difficult for his supporters to imagine that he could have made incorrect judgments before the war, that world public opinion could be critical of his policies or that the President could hold foreign policy positions that are at odds with his supporters.”

The polls were conducted October 12-18 and September 3-7 and 8-12 with samples of 968, 798 and 959 respondents, respectively. Margins of error were 3.2 to 4% in the first and third surveys and 3.5% on September 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.

Funding for this research was provided by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.