

Three in Four Americans Say If Iraq Did Not Have WMD or Support al-Qaeda, US Should Not Have Gone to War

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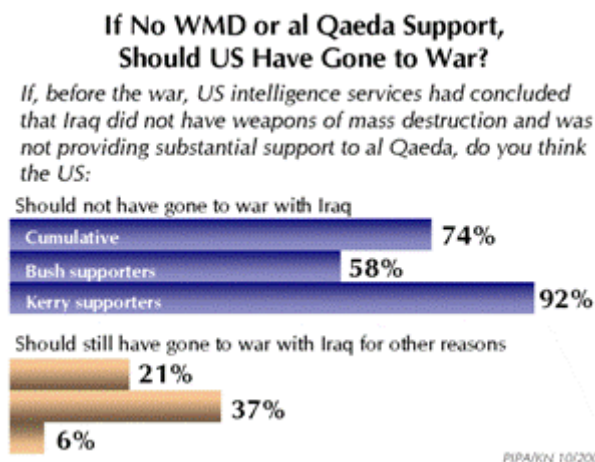
Saddam's Intent to Build WMD Not Seen as Sufficient Reason

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A new PIPA/Knowledge Networks poll finds a consensus among the American public that if Iraq did not have WMD and was not providing substantial support to al-Qaeda, the US should not have gone to war with Iraq. Seventy-four percent overall have this view, including 58% of Bush supporters, 92% of Kerry supporters and 77% of the uncommitted—those who have not made a definite commitment to vote for one or the other candidate.

A majority also rejects the argument that the US should have gone to war with Iraq because Saddam Hussein had the intention to acquire WMD. Presented two arguments, only 35% endorsed the one that said, “Even if Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction, the US still should have gone to war with Iraq, because Saddam Hussein had the intention to acquire such weapons at some point in the future.” Rather, 60% said that if Saddam only had a desire for such weapons, “instead of invading Iraq, the US should have made sure he did not get the capability to make them.”

Overall, support for the decision to go to war has eroded slightly, so that a bare majority of 51% now says that it was the wrong decision, and 46% say it was the right decision (as compared to August when 49% said it was the wrong decision and 46% the right decision).



Steven Kull comments, “It may seem contradictory that three quarters of Americans say that the US should not have gone to war if Iraq did not have WMD or was not providing

support to al-Qaeda, while nearly half still say the war was the right decision. However, support for the decision is sustained by persisting beliefs among half of Americans that Iraq provided substantial support to al-Qaeda, and had WMD, or at least a major WMD program.”

Despite the widely publicized conclusions of weapons expert Charles Duelfer's report to the CIA director on Iraq's WMD, 49% of Americans continue to believe Iraq had actual WMD (27%) or a major WMD program (22%), and 52% believe that Iraq was providing substantial support to al-Qaeda.

Views about the decision to go to war are highly correlated with beliefs about prewar Iraq. Among those who say that going to war was the right decision, 73% believe that Iraq had WMD (47%) or a major program for developing them (26%), and 75% believe that Iraq was providing substantial support to al-Qaeda. Among those who say it was the wrong decision, only 29% believe that Iraq had WMD (10%) or a major program for developing them (19%), and 33% believe that Iraq was providing substantial support to al-Qaeda.

Views of the current situation in Iraq lean to the negative. Fifty-four percent believe the situation in Iraq is getting worse (46% better). Fifty-one percent say that “the US military presence in Iraq is currently provoking more conflict than it is preventing” while 46% say it is “a stabilizing force.” Though large majorities of Kerry supporters express such negative views, Bush supporters say the opposite. Among the uncommitted, a 60% majority says the situation is worsening, and 60% say US military presence is provoking more conflict rather than being a stabilizing force (36%).

The public is divided about whether the operation will ultimately succeed. Forty percent express high confidence in ultimate success, 45% express low confidence, and 16% are neutral.

At the same time, only one in five think the US should completely withdraw from Iraq. When asked whether the number of US troops in Iraq should be increased, maintained, decreased or withdrawn completely, only 19% want to withdraw—down from 24% in August. Another 20% want to decrease troop strength, 29% to keep it steady, and 28% to increase it.

Two out of three say the US should not “have a permanent military presence in Iraq.” This is a consensus position, including clear majorities of both Bush and Kerry supporters (56% and 78% respectively) and the uncommitted (64%). An overwhelming 76% think the Iraqi people oppose such a permanent presence; only 21% think they favor it.

Nonetheless, asked whether they think “the US government is presently planning to have permanent military bases in Iraq, or to remove all of its military forces once Iraq is stabilized,” a modest majority—52%—think the US is planning permanent bases, while 42% think the US is planning to remove all of its forces after stabilizing the country.

These perceptions are polarized according to presidential preference, with 72% of Kerry supporters thinking the US is planning a permanent presence and 61% of Bush supporters thinking the US is planning an eventual full removal. Among the uncommitted, 52% think the US is planning a permanent presence and 40% think it is not.

More broadly, 77% assume that most people in the Middle East want the US to reduce its military presence there, and a growing majority—now 62% (up from 51% in September, 2003)—says that if this is the case the US should reduce its presence.

There are some indications that the Duelfer report may have made a modest impact on Americans' beliefs about pre-war Iraq. As compared to 54% in August, 49% now believe that Iraq had actual WMD (27%) or a major WMD program (22%). Two out of three now think that the Bush administration should have taken more time to find out whether Iraq had WMD.

The poll was conducted October 12-18 with nationwide sample of 968 American adults. The margin of error was 3.2 to 4%. 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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