

Two in Three Americans Call Iraq a War of Choice, Not Necessity

March 15, 2006

Majority Now Says That Iraq Had No WMD Program But Still Divided on Whether Iraq Supported al-Qaeda

Bush Administration Perceived as Still Saying Iraq Had Major WMD Program and Supported al-Qaeda

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By a two-to-one margin Americans now say that the Iraq war was a war of choice, not a war of necessity--i.e., it was not necessary for the defense of the US--and that the war was not the best use of US resources, according to a new WorldPublicOpinion.org poll. For the first time, a majority now believes that Iraq did not have a weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program, though the public is still divided on whether Iraq supported al-Qaeda. Such beliefs are highly correlated with support for the war. A large bipartisan majority says that if Iraq did not have WMD or did not support al-Qaeda, the US should not have gone to war. Majorities in both parties perceive the Bush administration as continuing to say that Iraq did have WMDs or a major WMD program and provided substantial support to al-Qaeda.

These are some of the findings of a poll of 851 Americans conducted by WorldPublicOpinion.org and fielded March 1-6, 2006 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 and the Ford Foundation. The margin of error was plus or minus 3.4 - 4 percent.

Respondents were presented two views of the war with Iraq. Just 31 percent said it was a "war of necessity, that is, it was necessary for the defense of the United States." Sixty-seven percent held the view that it was a "war of choice, that is, some US interests and values were at stake, but it was not necessary for the defense of the United States."

Iraq War: War of Choice or of Necessity?

Would you say that going to war with Iraq was:

A "war of choice," that is, some US interests and values were at stake, but it was not necessary for the defense of the United States



A "war of necessity," that is, it was necessary for the defense of the United States



WPOXN 3/06 A growing majority perceives that the Iraq war was not the best use of resources in the war on terrorism. Asked, "for the war on terrorism" what would have been "the better use of US resources," only 37 percent said "to invade Iraq and overthrow Saddam Hussein, as the US did," while 59 percent said that it would have been better "to use those same resources instead for pursuing al-Qaeda and stabilizing Afghanistan." This majority is up from 53 percent in October 2004.

A majority of 54 percent now believe that the US made the "wrong decision" in going to war with Iraq. This is up from 51 percent in October 2004. Forty-four percent now say it was the right decision, down slightly from 46 percent in 2004. This is very similar to the findings of other organizations. In early March, Gallup found 55 percent saying "the United States made a mistake in sending troops to Iraq" (up from 47% in October 2004), while 43 percent say the US did not make a mistake (down from 52%). Also in March, CBS found 54 percent saying the US should "have stayed out" (up from 46% in October 2004), while 41 percent said the US "did the right thing in taking military action" (down from 50%).

Iraq War and US Resources

Thinking back, for the war on terrorism, do you think the better use of US resources would have been:

To invade Iraq and overthrow Saddam Hussein, as the US did



To use those same resources instead for pursuing al-Qaeda and stabilizing Afghanistan

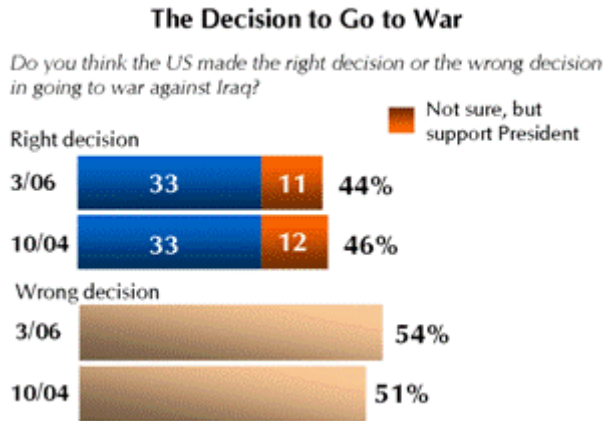


WPOXN 3/06 Of those who say it was the right decision, only 33 percent (of the full sample) said they "support having gone to war, because I think it was the best thing for the US to do" while 11 percent say "I am not sure if going to war was the best thing to do, but I support Bush's decision, because he is the president." The percentage fully endorsing the war has remained steady while the

percentage saying that they are simply supporting the President has been migrating to the wrong decision position.

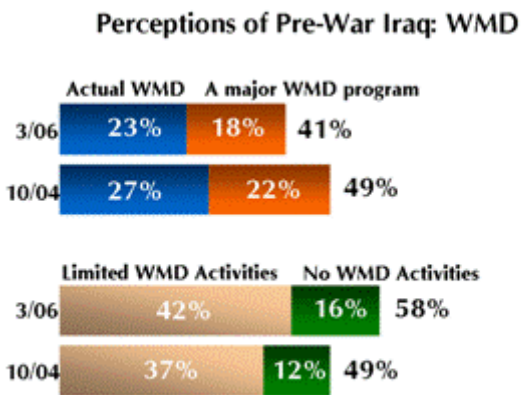
The percentage (33%) who take the firm position that the war was the best thing for the US to do is about the same as the percentage who take the position that the war was a war of necessity (31%) and who say that it was the best use of US resources (37%).

Whether Iraq Had WMD



WPO/KN 3/06 For the first time since the question has been asked, a majority now says that before the war, Iraq did not have a significant WMD program. Offered four options to describe what Iraq had before the war, 58 percent now say that Iraq either "had some limited activities that could be used to help develop weapons of mass destruction, but not an active program" (42%) or no WMD activities at all (16%). This is up 9 points from 49 percent in October 2004. At this point, 41 percent still say that Iraq has actual WMD (23%) or a major program for developing them (18%), down from 49 percent in October 2004.

A substantial majority also believes that the UN and its agencies have been vindicated in their prewar insistence that there was no clear evidence that Iraq had a WMD program.



WPO/KN 3/06 Respondents were asked: "As you may recall, before the war with Iraq the UN agency that was inspecting Iraq said that there

was no clear evidence that Iraq had a major program for developing weapons of mass destruction. Is it your impression that this UN agency has since been proven to be correct or incorrect about whether Iraq had a major program for developing weapons of mass destruction?"

Fifty-seven percent said that the UN agency has been proven correct, while 40 percent said it has been proven incorrect.

Those who said that the UN agency was correct were also asked whether "the US has admitted that it made a mistake when it said that Iraq had a major program for developing weapons of mass destruction." Forty-one percent (of the total sample) said that it has not, while just 16 percent (of the total sample) said that it had. An even slightly larger percentage, 44 percent (of the total sample) said that it is a good idea "for the US to admit that it made a mistake when it said that Iraq had a major program for developing weapons of mass destruction."

Perceptions of Experts on Pre-War Iraq: WMD

On the question of what Iraq had just before the war, is it your impression experts mostly agree Iraq...

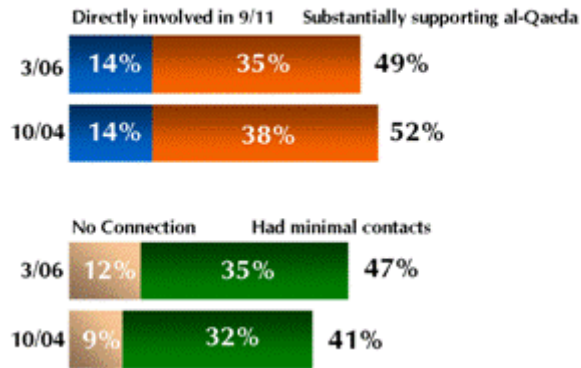
■ Had WMD ■ Experts Divided ■ Did not have WMD



WPO/KN 3/06 Those who said that the UN agency was incorrect (or did not know) were also asked, "If it is proven that the UN agency was correct, do you think it is a good idea or a bad idea for the US to admit that it made a mistake when it said that Iraq had a major program for developing weapons of mass destruction?" Among these respondents, 23 percent (of the total sample) said that it would be a good idea, while 17 percent (of the total sample) said it would be a bad idea.

Thus, a total 67 percent either believe that the US should now admit that it made a mistake or that it should admit it if it is proven the UN agency was correct.

Perceptions of Pre-War Iraq: Links to al-Qaeda



WPO/KN 3/06 A growing number of Americans

perceive that experts mostly agree that Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction, though still only half (50%) believe that this is the case--up from 38 percent in October 2004. The percentage who say that most experts believe that Iraq did have WMD is now 24 percent--down from 37 percent. Twenty-five percent now believe that experts are divided.

Whether Iraq Supported Al-Qaeda

A growing percentage of Americans have come to the view that before the war, Iraq was not providing substantial support to al-Qaeda, such that views are now evenly divided on the issue. Forty-seven percent of respondents said that "A few al-Qaeda individuals visited Iraq or had contact with Iraqi officials but Iraq did not provide substantial support to al-Qaeda" (35%) or that there was no connection at all (12%). This is up 6 points from 41 percent in October 2004. Forty-nine percent believe that "Iraq was directly involved in carrying out the September 11th attacks" (14%) or that "Iraq gave substantial support to al-Qaeda, but was not involved in the September 11th attacks" (35%), down 3 points from 52 percent in October 2004.

Experts on Iraq and al Qaeda

On the question of the relationship between Iraq and al Qaeda is it your impression experts:

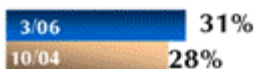
Mostly agree Iraq WAS providing substantial support to al Qaeda



Mostly agree Iraq WAS NOT providing substantial support to al Qaeda



Are evenly divided on the question



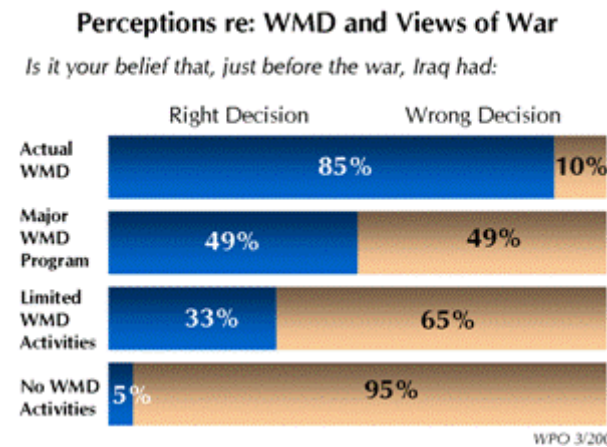
WPO/KN 3/06 The percentage who believe that Iraq

experts mostly agree that Iraq was not providing substantial support to al-Qaeda has inched up a mere 3 points since 2004, and still only 31 percent have this perception. A larger number--36 percent--believe that experts agree that Iraq was providing substantial

support, down 5 points from 2004. The perception that views are evenly divided is now 31 percent (26% in 2004).

Relation Between Beliefs About Prewar Iraq and Views of War

Beliefs about prewar Iraq are highly related to attitudes about the decision to go to war. Among those who believe that Iraq had WMD prior to the war, 85 percent feel that the war was the right decision. Among people who believe that Iraq had no WMD activities, 95 percent feel that the war was the wrong decision. Among those who believe Iraq had limited WMD activities, but not an active program, 65 percent feel the war was the wrong decision.

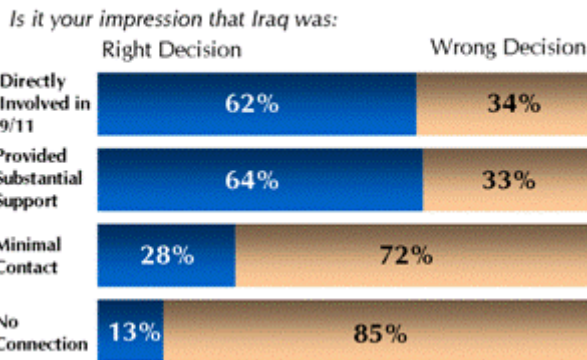


Similarly, among those who felt that Iraq was directly involved in the September 11th attacks, 62 percent said the war was the right decision as did 64 percent of those who believe Iraq gave support to al-Qaeda; whereas, of those who felt that there was no connection between Iraq and al-Qaeda a large majority (85%) felt the war was the wrong decision, as did 72 percent of those who believe that Iraq had only limited contacts with al-Qaeda.

Should the US Have Gone to War in Either Case?

Consistent with the finding that continuing approval of the decision to go to war is closely related to the belief that Iraq had a WMD program or supported al-Qaeda, a large bipartisan majority says that if Iraq did not have WMD or was not providing support to al-Qaeda, then the US should not have gone to war.

Perceptions re: Links to al-Qaeda and Views of War



WPO 3/2006

Asked, "If, before the war, US intelligence services had concluded that Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction and was not providing substantial support to al-Qaeda," a clear majority of 71 percent said that the US should not have gone to war, while just 27 percent said that the US "should still have gone to war with Iraq for other reasons." This is a bipartisan majority. Fifty-three percent of Republicans and 87 percent of Democrats think that in this case, the US should not have gone to war.

Perceptions of What Bush Administration is Saying About Prewar Iraq

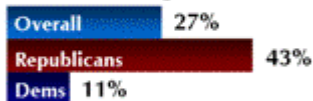
A large and bipartisan majority perceives that the Bush administration continues to say that Iraq had a major WMD program or actual WMD and that Iraq was providing substantial support to al-Qaeda. However, these majorities have diminished significantly over time.

Asked their impression of what "the Bush administration is currently saying" about prewar Iraq, 69 percent thought it is saying that Iraq had actual WMD (39%) or a major program for developing them (30%). This is a bipartisan view, with 74 percent of Republicans and 70 percent of Democrats perceiving this (independents 63%).

Should US Have Gone to War in Either Case?

If, before the war, US intelligence services had concluded that Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction and was not providing substantial support to al Qaeda, do you think the US:

Should still have gone to war with Iraq for other reasons



Should not have gone to war with Iraq

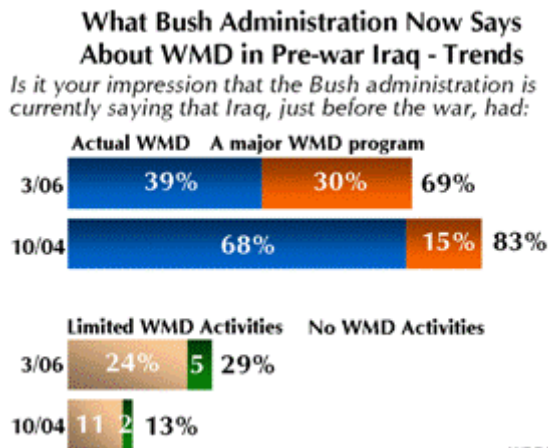


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Since 2004, there has been a sharp 29-point drop in the percentage perceiving that the Bush administration was saying that Iraq had actual WMD (down from 68%), but an increase (from 15% to 30%) in those

perceiving the administration saying that Iraq had a major program. The percentage perceiving the administration as taking one of these two positions is down 14 points.

A majority of 65 percent also perceives the Bush administration as saying that Iraq was providing significant support to al-Qaeda, with 21 percent perceiving the administration as saying that Iraq was directly involved in the September 11th attacks and 44 percent saying that Iraq provided substantial support to al-Qaeda but was not directly involved in the 9/11 attacks. Here again, this is a bipartisan perception of the administration's statements, with 72 percent of Republicans and 62 percent of Democrats having one of these two perceptions (independents 58%).



WPO/KN 3/06 This perception of the administration has

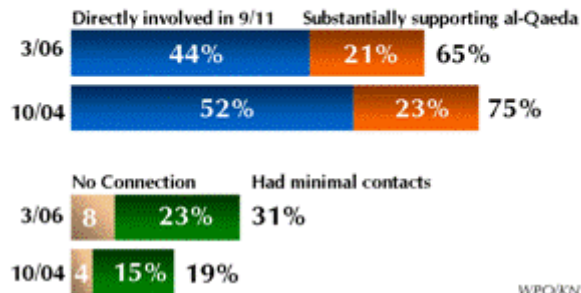
also been in some decline, though a more modest one. In October 2004, 75 percent perceived the administration as saying that Iraq was at least giving al-Qaeda substantial support--10 points higher than today. Interestingly, this change has come almost entirely from a decline among Democrats and independents, more of whom now think the administration is saying there were only a few contacts or no connection between al-Qaeda and Iraq. Republicans hear the administration in the same way as they did in 2004.

Perceptions of the Bush Administration's Process in Going to War

A large and growing majority believes that President Bush, unlike most Americans, was determined to go to war with Iraq independent of whether Iraq had WMD or was providing substantial support to al-Qaeda. A modest majority appears to perceive that the President was so intent on doing so that he did not give the country the most accurate information he had and thus misled people. However, only one in three go so far as to say that the President clearly knew that the assumptions that were the stated basis for going to war were incorrect. Three-quarters believe that the intelligence the Bush administration received concluded that Iraq was supporting al-Qaeda. At the same time, two out of three believe that some key people in the intelligence community knew that the President was acting on incorrect assumptions.

What Bush Administration Now Says About Pre-war Iraq and al-Qaeda - Trends

Which of the following comes closest to your impression of what the Bush administration is currently saying the relationship was, just before the war, between the Iraqi government under Saddam Hussein and the terrorist group al-Qaeda?



WPOXN 3/06

Asked what the President would have done "if, before the war, US intelligence services had told President Bush there was no reliable evidence that Iraq possessed or was building weapons of mass destruction or was providing substantial support to al-Qaeda," 66 percent said that "he would still have gone to war with Iraq for other reasons," including 47 percent of Republicans (51% of Republicans think he would not have).

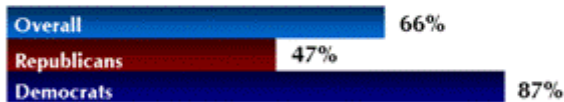
This perception of the President as determined to go to war with Iraq may be related to a perception, held by a modest majority, that the President was not entirely forthcoming about the intelligence he had and in this sense misled people. A modest majority (53%) now believe that before the war, President Bush "deliberately misled people to make the case for war with Iraq," up from 49 percent in August 2004. Forty-six percent say that he "gave the country the most accurate information he had" (down slightly from 48%).

However, only one-third (34%) give the President the harshest judgment-- that he decided to go to war on the basis of assumptions about Iraq that were "incorrect, and the President knew they were incorrect" (up 10 points from 2004). The largest percentage (39%) continues to say that he acted on assumptions that were "incorrect, but the President believed they were correct" though this number is down 10 points from 2004. A steady one in four says the President's assumptions were correct. Overall, 73 percent said that the President acted on incorrect assumptions.

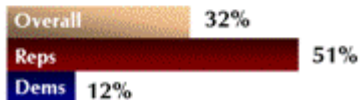
Would Bush Have Gone to War with Iraq in Either Case?

If, before the war, US intelligence services had told President Bush there was no reliable evidence that Iraq possessed or was building weapons of mass destruction or was providing support to al Qaeda, do you think

He would still have gone to war with Iraq for other reasons



He would not have gone to war with Iraq



WPO/KN 3/06 At the same time, a large majority

believes that some key people in the intelligence community knew that the assumptions that were prompting the war were incorrect. The 73 percent who said that the assumptions were incorrect were then asked: "Do you think that some key people in US intelligence agencies knew these assumptions were incorrect or do you think none of the key people knew?" Sixty-four percent (of the total sample) said that they thought that some key people knew, while 9 percent (of the total sample) said that they thought no one knew.

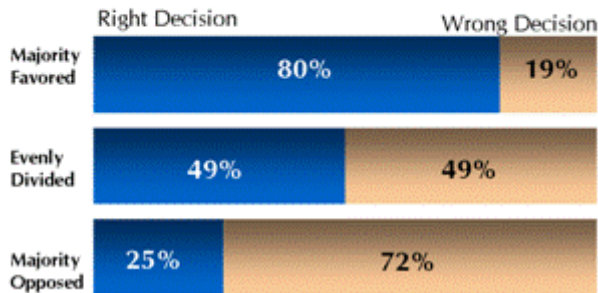
It is of course interesting that while 73 percent say that the President acted on incorrect assumptions, a large number (62%) believe in one or both of the two major assumptions for the war (Iraqi WMD or support for al-Qaeda). However, at the same time, a large majority is aware that at least one of these two assumptions was wrong--72 percent, about as many as answered that the President acted on incorrect assumptions.

Perceptions of World Public Opinion

Respondents were asked "how all the people in the world felt about the US going to war with Iraq in 2003." The largest percentage (49%) perceive that the majority of people opposed the US going to war, while an equal number are divided between the view that majority favored it (21%) and that views are evenly divided (28%).

Perception of World Public Opinion and View of Iraq War

Thinking about how all the people in the world feel about the US having gone to war with Iraq, do you think:



Curiously, there has been a slight decline in the perception that a world majority opposed the war, from 53 percent in 2004 to 49 percent today. The percentage believing that the majority favored it has also risen from 14 percent to 21 percent. The biggest shifts were among Democrats, fewer of whom thought the majority opposed it (from 76% to 67%) and Republicans, more of whom thought that the majority favored it (from 22% to 34%).

Perceptions of world public opinion are highly related to attitudes about the decision to go to war. Among those who believed that the majority of people in the world favored the US going to war, 80 percent felt the war was the right decision; among people who believed world opinion opposed the war, 72 percent felt the war was the wrong decision.

When a regression analysis was performed, perception of world public opinion was one of the most powerful predictors of approval of the decision to go to war. Indeed, it was even stronger than party identification and beliefs about whether Iraq had a WMD program or supported al-Qaeda.