

U.S. Public Favors Putting Iraq Operation Under U.N. If Other Countries Will Contribute Troops

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Growing Pessimism About Reconstruction Effort, But Little Desire to Withdraw

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Seven in 10 Americans say that the United States should be willing to put the entire Iraq operation under the United Nations, with joint decision making, if other countries would then contribute troops. This option is likely to gain greater prominence as US troops become increasingly stretched in Iraq and major allies and other countries—such as Germany, France, Russia, and India—continue to say that they will only contribute troops and other resources if the Iraq operation is put under the United Nations.

Steven Kull, director of the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland, comments, “For some months now majorities have favored the U.N. taking the lead in various aspects of Iraq reconstruction and are now showing a readiness to put the entire operation under the U.N. Americans do not like anything that smacks of the United States acting like the world’s policeman, and if putting the operation under the U.N. provides the bonus of other countries contributing more troops, then it is a formula for a broad consensus.”

Kull continues, “Support for sharing the burden is likely enhanced by the public’s downbeat assessments about how the operation is going and how difficult the reconstruction effort will be.” The percentage saying that the process of rebuilding Iraq is not going well has risen to 57 percent.

More striking, only 30 percent believe that Iraq would have a stable government in six months down sharply from 53 percent in April. The percentage believing that Iraq will be “unstable and chaotic” in six months has risen from 42 percent to 65 percent. Only 17 percent say that in Iraq “the greatest challenges are behind us” while an overwhelming 79 percent say that “the greatest challenges remain ahead.”

Despite all this pessimism, however, only 9% favor withdrawing US troops.

In response to the raging debate about President Bush's incorrect assertion that Iraq sought to acquire uranium from an African country, about half (48%) said that the President in some way mishandled the evidence, with 15 percent saying the president "knowingly presented false information," and 33 percent saying the president "assumed that something like this was true, so was not careful about the evidence he used to support his case." Forty-five percent chose the most forgiving option that he was "simply given intelligence that proved to be wrong." Also, simply asked whether when he presented the evidence he "knew it was false" a strong 68% said he did not."

These recent revelations still appear to have shaken the public's confidence in the president at least a little. A majority of 61 percent said that it did so to some extent with 21 percent saying "a little," 19 percent "some," and 21 percent "a lot." Fifty percent said they would feel more wary if, in the future, "the president presents evidence that a country has a secret program for building weapons of mass destruction," while 46 percent indicated they would "trust what the president says just as much as before."

It now appears that the president's handling of Iraq is not likely to be a net benefit for his reelection bid. Respondents were asked how the president's handling of Iraq will affect their likeliness to vote for him on a scale of +5 (meaning it would very much increase the likelihood) to -5 (meaning that it would very much decrease the likelihood). The mean score was just a hair above a completely neutral score at +0.09. A larger percentage (37%) said it would increase the likelihood of voting for Bush than would decrease it (29%), but those that said it would decrease the likelihood gave more extreme ratings, producing a net wash.

Those who felt Bush has managed the situation with Iraq well declined to 49 percent from 52 percent in June. Sixty-three percent of those surveyed felt that the difficulty facing the United States in Iraq "was greater than the Bush administration assumed it would be."

There has been a slight increase in the public's perception that the U.S. government was not entirely truthful when it presented evidence for going to war with Iraq, so that this is

now a strong majority position. When it presented “evidence of Iraq having weapons of mass destruction,” 63 percent said that it was either “presenting evidence it knew was false,” (16%—up from 10% in June) or “stretching the truth (47%). When the Bush administration presented “evidence of links between Saddam Hussein’s government and al-Qaeda 60 percent felt the US government was “presenting evidence it knew was false,” (15%—up from 10% in June) or was “stretching the truth (44%).

Other key findings:

- The belief that Iraq had WMD before the war has dropped to 53 percent from 58 percent in June and the false belief that WMD have been found has slipped to 21 percent.
- The controversial belief that there were substantial links between Iraq and al-Qaeda before the war has dropped to 53 percent from 61 percent in June and the false belief that the United States has found clear evidence of links between al-Qaeda and Iraq has eroded to 45 percent from 52 percent.
- Most respondents (76%) assume that the majority of the Iraqi people is glad that the United States overthrew Saddam Hussein. However only 53 percent believe that at this point the most Iraqis want the United States to remain in Iraq. If the United Nations were to be in charge of reconstruction 64 percent assume that a majority would want the United States to stay.
- The public is divided on whether, at this point, the United States should conduct elections in Iraq even if it is likely that candidates unfriendly to the United States will be elected. But an overwhelming majority agrees that the United States will eventually need to do so.
- A clear majority continues to say that the United States made the right decision in going to war with Iraq, but only a minority says that the war was the best course of action for the United States, and responses vary on whether the war was necessary.
- Most Americans continue to be unaware that the majority of world public opinion is negative toward U.S. action in Iraq, though a majority perceives that world public opinion is negative toward U.S. foreign policy in general.

The poll was conducted with a nationwide sample of 1,066 respondents July 11-20. The margin of error was plus or minus 3-3.5%, depending on whether the question was administered to the whole sample or three quarters of the sample.

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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