



By James M. Lindsay and Caroline Smith

RALLY

Opinion in
the United
States
before and
after the
Iraq War

The Iraq War validated a basic rule of American politics: the American public closes ranks in times of national crisis. In the prolonged march to war, the public was divided and ambivalent about the wisdom of invading Iraq rather than relying on continued United Nations weapons inspections. Most of those doubts evaporated once the bombs began falling. And the surge of patriotism not only boosted public support for President Bush, but extended beyond the White House to raise optimism about the country's institutions and American society as a whole.



AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

The United States now confronts the question of how to win the peace in Iraq. From the early polls it is clear that Americans are not demanding the swift withdrawal of U.S. forces or expecting the rapid reconstruction of Iraq. President Bush, then, has considerable freedom to chart his own course in rebuilding Iraq. The polls—and historical experience—also show, however, that he may gain little lasting political benefit from the U.S. victory. Americans are already beginning to put aside his accomplishments overseas to evaluate what he has accomplished at home.

Public Opinion before the War

Iraq dominated the headlines throughout the fall of 2002 and into the winter of 2003. Public opinion on the wisdom of war, however, stabilized relatively early and slightly in favor of war. Gallup found that from August 2002 through early March 2003 the share of Americans favoring war hovered in a relatively narrow range between a low of 52 percent and a high of 59 percent. By contrast, the share of the public opposed to war fluctuated between 35 percent and 43 percent.

Not surprisingly, Republicans (75 percent in favor) backed war more strongly than did Democrats (only 40 percent). Younger Americans also tended to be more supportive of the war than older Americans. Six of out ten Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 favored war, as against fewer than five out of ten of those older than 65. The greater willingness of young Americans to endorse the use of military force is nothing new. Although Vietnam is remembered for its college-aged protesters, younger Americans on the whole tended to be more supportive of U.S. military action in southeast Asia than older Americans were.

The only three major demographic groups to show majority opposition to the war before its start were blacks (56 percent opposed in a February Gallup poll), people with post-graduate education (56 percent), and Democrats (55 percent). Although women are usually less supportive of the use of force than men, a slim majority of American women (51 percent) favored invading Iraq. Meanwhile, Hispanic Americans were slightly more supportive of the war (60 percent) than Americans as a whole—suggesting that arguments that the

rapid growth of the nation's Latino community is destined to shift U.S. foreign policy away from regions like the Middle East and toward Latin America are misplaced.

Although the American public leaned slightly in favor of war in 2002 and early 2003, the polls also showed that their support was ambivalent and conditional. Only about a third of the public accepted President Bush's contention that Iraq posed an imminent threat to U.S. security. When people were given the choice between going to war or giving UN weapons inspectors more time, a majority preferred more inspections. Support for the war also fell when people were given scenarios in which the UN refused to authorize the fighting or U.S. troops suffered heavy casualties.

Even many Americans who favored war were not demanding it. Gallup asked those who supported attacking Iraq whether they would be upset if President Bush decided not to go to war. Roughly half said no. The *Los Angeles Times* asked those who approved of the job Bush was doing as president why they supported him. Fewer than one in ten said they based that approval on his policy toward Iraq.

In sum, public opinion on the eve of war with Iraq was permissive—it was willing to follow the White House to war but not demanding war. About 30 percent of Americans were convinced that war was not only just but necessary. Another 30 percent firmly believed that a war could not be justified. The remaining 40 percent could imagine scenarios in which it made sense to go to war as well as scenarios in which it didn't. It was this "movable middle" that the Bush White House targeted in its public comments in the weeks leading up to war.

The Rally

The movable middle began to shift in the White House's favor even before the first bombs fell on Baghdad. In mid-March, as diplomacy began breaking down, public support for war crept higher. The last Gallup poll before the invasion began showed 64 percent in favor.

This shift surprised commentators who had put stock in earlier polls showing that Americans were less likely to support the war if the UN refused to authorize it. The surprise reflected a misreading of what Americans were saying rather than an inconsistency in what they were thinking. Most Americans did not interpret questions about UN authorization as meaning that war could be legitimate only if the UN authorized it. Rather, for them it was a proxy for whether the United States should go it alone in Iraq or act with others. In the few instances in which pollsters asked people whether they would support attacking Iraq if the UN Security Council refused to authorize war but President Bush nonetheless assembled a coalition of the willing in support of U.S. policy, a majority of Americans supported war.

Once Operation Iraqi Freedom began on March 19, support for the war surged to 72 percent in Gallup's polling and

remained there throughout the fighting. President Bush also benefited personally, gaining greater public approval; in the first days of fighting, Gallup recorded a 13-percentage-point rise. The increase, however, was much smaller than either the 35-percentage-point leap Bush enjoyed immediately after September 11—or the 24-point jump his father received at the start of the 1991 Gulf War.

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larly sharp contrast to the experience of the Gulf War. Then, overwhelming majorities of members of both parties closed ranks behind the president despite being deeply split on the eve of war. The lower Democratic support for the Iraq War reflected disagreement over the wisdom of preemptively attacking another country, doubts about the sincerity of the administration's diplomatic efforts at the United Nations, and bitterness over how Bush and other Republicans had questioned Democrats' patriotism in the run-up to the war.

Reactions to the start of war also reflected a deep racial split. Whereas 78 percent of whites favored the decision to attack Iraq, only 29 percent of blacks did. The lukewarm black support for the Iraq War stands in marked contrast to blacks' views on the Persian Gulf War, when 59 percent of blacks backed the decision to go to war. Differences in question wording may explain some of the 30-percentage-point difference. A bigger factor would seem to be much greater skepticism about the need for the Iraq War and deep doubts about George W. Bush's interest in addressing problems that matter to blacks.

Although most commentary on public opinion focused on how Americans rallied around President Bush, the increase in patriotic and optimistic attitudes extended beyond the White House to the government and the country as a whole. As with the Persian Gulf and the Afghanistan wars, the invasion of Iraq also prompted the public to give higher marks to Congress and to express greater confidence in the country's future. A *New York Times*/CBS poll conducted in March found that the approval ratings for Congress jumped 7 percentage points, to 52 percent. Gallup found that the share of the public that was satisfied with the direction of the country surged from 36 percent to 60 percent. On the whole, Americans felt safer and more satisfied with the position of the United States in the world—and even felt slightly better about the environment. Rather than simply being about President Bush, the Iraq rally is better understood as a surge of patriotic support for the government and country as a whole.

Early Evaluations

In the weeks immediately after the capture of Baghdad and the end of major combat operations, Americans continued to

support the decision to invade. In late April, Gallup found that seven in ten Americans believed that President Bush had been right to order this attack. Support held even though nearly two out of every three people surveyed thought that the war was not yet over. Nor were Americans overly concerned about continued sporadic fighting or scenes of looting in Iraqi cities. More than eight in ten Americans said that they believed that things were going “very well” or “moderately well” with the end of major fighting in Iraq.

Not surprisingly, given the speed with which U.S. forces unseated Saddam Hussein, most Americans also were optimistic about the war’s consequences. In late April the share of the American public saying that the United States and its allies were winning the war on terrorism stood at 65 percent, up from 37 percent two weeks before the start of war. This optimism roughly equaled what Gallup found in the immediate aftermath of the Afghanistan war. The newfound confidence in America’s success in the war on terrorism was clearly boosted by the overall rally effect. When specifically asked whether the Iraq War had made Americans safer, the share of the public saying yes was somewhat lower at 58 percent.

The public was also untroubled by the failure, at least initially, of U.S. forces to uncover weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. At the start of fighting, Gallup found that only 38 percent of Americans said the war would be justified if the United States failed to find such weapons. In early April, by contrast, 58 percent said it would be. Moreover, the share of the American public that believed it was “very likely” that U.S. forces would eventually uncover Iraqi weapons of mass destruction fell from 59 percent in early April to 39 percent in late April.

Polls taken immediately after the war also indicated that the American public was not demanding a quick exit from Iraq. Gallup found that Americans rejected by a three-to-one margin the notion that the United States should set up a government in Iraq and leave as quickly as possible. Instead, 75 percent agreed that the United States should “take the time to make sure a democratic government is established in Iraq even if that results in U.S. troops staying in Iraq for a year or more.” The vast majority of Americans expected the U.S. occupation to last at least six months, with 28 percent believing it would last one to two years, and 21 percent longer than two years.

In the one clear departure with the Bush administration’s policy, a majority of Americans looked favorably on letting the United Nations take a lead role in Iraq’s reconstruction. Gallup found that 52 percent of Americans favored putting the United Nations in charge of overseeing the transition to a new government in Iraq. An even larger majority, 65 percent, favored putting the UN in charge of providing humanitarian assistance to Iraqi citizens. This preference probably owes less to a principled belief among Americans that the UN would be the most legitimate midwife to Iraqi democracy than to a pragmatic desire to share the costs and burdens of reconstruction with other countries.

The one open question is how long the public’s confident and optimistic view of the Iraq War will last. Much will depend on whether the Bush administration is as successful in

winning the peace in Iraq as it was in winning the war. Public support for U.S. military interventions in Lebanon in the early 1980s and Somalia in the early 1990s collapsed after deadly attacks on U.S. forces. Those two operations started with much lower public support, but the broader political lesson remains—the American public will not be willing to make an unlimited investment in Iraq. If Iraq begins to look like Lebanon or Somalia, the public pressure to withdraw U.S. troops could quickly become intense. Many Democrats would clearly be delighted to argue that President Bush has committed a foreign policy blunder of historic proportions.

More generally, the public’s final evaluation of the wisdom of the Iraq War could be years in coming. At the end of the Persian Gulf War, 72 percent of Americans thought that the liberation of Kuwait had been worth the loss of lives and other costs. Ten years later, however, with Saddam Hussein still in charge in Baghdad, only 51 percent of Americans believed the war had been worth it.

Looking Ahead

Although the Iraq War boosted President Bush’s public approval ratings, history suggests that he will not be able to translate battlefield victory into a greater say over domestic policy. His father failed to do so after the 1991 Gulf War—perhaps because he lacked a clear domestic agenda to enact. Nonetheless, the younger Bush experienced the same difficulties after September 11 and the Afghanistan war. Democrats blocked his economic stimulus plan, rejected his proposal to drill for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and stonewalled his judicial nominees even though U.S. forces had orchestrated the rout of the Taliban. Indeed, even as bombs were falling on Iraq, Bush rediscovered that a Congress that is deferential abroad can be defiant at home. On the second day of the war, the Republican-controlled Senate voted once again to kill his proposal to drill for oil in the Arctic. It later voted to cut his \$726 billion tax cut in half.

Nor does an impressive victory in Iraq guarantee President Bush’s reelection in 2004, as he knows all too well from family history. His father’s public approval ratings were in the 80s at the end of the Persian Gulf War—or about 15 points higher than his own at the end of the Iraq War—yet the older Bush garnered only 38 percent of the vote in the 1992 election. Some poll results suggest that the younger Bush may be vulnerable to a repeat of history. In late April, 54 percent of Americans told Gallup that Bush was not paying enough attention to the economy. By a margin of 47 percent to 42 percent, Americans also said that his proposed tax cuts were a bad idea. And on the question of whether Bush was “in touch or out of touch with the problems ordinary Americans face in their daily lives,” the public split down the middle. Exactly 50 percent said in touch, while 48 percent said out of touch.

President Bush looks to be keenly aware of his potential vulnerabilities. His response to victory in Iraq was to hit the road to make the case for his economic policy proposals. And that illustrates another basic law of American political life: when wars end, domestic politics quickly reverts to normal. ■

Arab

PUBLIC OPINION

By Shibley Telhami

Postwar Prospects for

survey that I conducted in six Arab countries in late February and early March found an unprecedented tide of public opinion running against the United States as American troops massed outside Iraq. Only 4 percent of respondents in Saudi Arabia, 6 percent in Jordan and Morocco, 10 percent in the United Arab Emirates, and 13 percent in Egypt expressed a favorable view of the United States. Even in Lebanon, where opinion was more positive, only 32 percent of respondents had a favorable view (see table 1). And when respondents were asked, in an open question, to name the world leader they most admired, the name mentioned most often was French Prime Minister Jacques Chirac, who confronted the Bush administration directly to try to stop the U.S. war effort.

Shibley Telhami, a nonresident senior fellow in the Brookings Foreign Policy Studies program, is Amwar Sadat Professor for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland. This project is funded in part by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. For details on the survey, see <http://www.bsos.umd.edu/SADAT/mesurvey.htm>.