

U.S. Public Believes Bush Administration Stretched Truth on Iraq's WMD and Links to Al-Qaeda

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Though 52% Believe Evidence of Close Links to al-Qaeda Have Been Found

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A new PIPA/Knowledge Networks poll finds a majority of 62 percent saying that “when the U.S. government presented evidence of Iraq having weapons of mass destruction to justify going to war with Iraq” it was either “stretching the truth, but not making false statements” or was “presenting evidence they knew was false” (52% and 10% respectively). Just 32 percent said they thought the government was “being fully truthful.” Sixty-three percent said that Congress should “investigate the intelligence agencies’ performance in providing intelligence on whether Iraq had weapons of mass destruction.”

Similarly, 56 percent said that “when the U.S. government presented evidence of links between Saddam Hussein’s government and al-Qaeda to justify going to war with Iraq,” it was either “stretching the truth, but not making false statements” or was “presenting evidence they knew was false” (46% and 10% respectively). Just 39 percent said they thought the government was “being fully truthful.”

Asked, “Do you think that the Bush administration did or did not imply that Iraq under Saddam Hussein was involved in the September 11th attacks?” a very strong 71 percent said that it did. However, only 25 percent of the whole sample said they thought “Iraq was directly involved in carrying out the September 11th attacks.”

At the same time 52 percent believe, incorrectly, that the United States has “found clear evidence in Iraq that Saddam Hussein was working closely with the al-Qaeda terrorist organization.” Also, 23 percent believe, incorrectly, that the United States has “found Iraqi weapons of mass destruction”—down from 34 percent in May.

Steven Kull, director of the Program on International Policy Attitudes, notes, “Despite doubts about the administration’s candor there has been only a slight erosion of the public’s support for the decision to go to war with Iraq.” Sixty-five percent support the decision, with 46 percent saying going to war was the best thing to do and 18 percent saying they are not sure if it was the best thing, but they support the president. This compares to 68 percent, 53 percent and 15 percent respectively in the May PIPA/KN poll.

“Also the percentage saying that they believe that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction before the war is staying steady at 58 percent, and is likely to help sustain support as long as this perception holds,” Kull comments.

While various polls conducted in May found majorities believing that the post war operation in Iraq was going well, a modest majority now has a negative perception. Fifty-three percent described the process as going “not very well” or “not at all well” (40% and 13% respectively), while just 40 percent described it as going “somewhat well” (39%) or “very well” (1%).

Perhaps in response to these difficulties, the last two months has seen sharp growth in the numbers of Americans wanting to see the U.N. take a leadership role in Iraq. The percentage saying that the United Nations should “take the lead to work with Iraqis to write a new constitution and build a new democratic government” has jumped 14 percent—from 50 percent in April to 64 percent today. Those choosing the United States to take the lead dropped to just 31 percent, from 47 percent in April. Similarly, those saying the U.N. should direct economic reconstruction in Iraq are now a very strong 69 percent—up from 57 percent in April. Those saying the United States should do so is down to 27 percent from 40 percent in April.

Americans show a fairly accurate perception of the level of U.S. troop fatalities. Asked to give their impression of “about how many American soldiers... have been killed by hostile fire in Iraq since the fall of Baghdad on April 9 up to the present” the median estimate was 40. This is quite close to the actual number of American deaths in postwar Iraq from hostile fire since Baghdad’s fall—46. Likewise, the public’s median estimate of combat deaths from the beginning of the war to the fall of Baghdad—100 deaths—is

fairly correct. The Pentagon's official figure is 87. (Source: Reuters, according to official Pentagon figures.)

Despite this awareness of troop fatalities and the perception that Iraq reconstruction is not going very well, the public is showing overwhelming support for the operation. An overwhelming 80 percent said the United States has "the responsibility to remain in Iraq as long as necessary until there is a stable government." This is down only slightly from the 86 percent that answered this way in April. The public is also not assuming that the operation will be short lived. Asked to estimate how long U.S. troops will have to remain in Iraq, the median estimate was two years.

Given the government's failure to find weapons of mass destruction or significant links to al-Qaeda, there has been much recent discussion about whether ending the severe violations of Iraqis' human rights committed by Saddam Hussein's regime constitutes an appropriate justification for invading Iraq. As a general principle, 75 percent endorse the idea that the United States should be willing to intervene when a government is committing large-scale violations of human rights, even when U.S. security interests are not threatened, but only 23 percent supports doing so without broad international approval.

Though the United Nations was sidelined in the Iraq war and post-war reconstruction, only 23 percent of respondents thought that the U.N. would now play a less important role in the world and 60 percent said that the United States should not feel more free to use military force without U.N. approval.

The poll was conducted with a nationwide sample of 1,051 respondents June 18-25. 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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