

# U.S. Public Rallies to Bush and Supports the UN

By Jim Lobe | April 1, 2003

While a strong majority of the U.S. public is rallying behind President George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq, they also support the United Nations Security Council and back multilateral diplomacy rather than unilateral U.S. action, according to a major poll released in Washington, DC on Monday, March 31. The poll, conducted during the first five days of the war by the University of Maryland's Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), found that the current high levels of support for the war—between 70 and 75% in most polls—might be due more to a rallying effect than to real conviction on the public's part.

It also suggested that right-wing arguments that the Security Council has made itself irrelevant by failing to comply with U.S. demands for a war resolution have not significantly influenced the public's views. Majorities—sometimes quite significant—said they preferred the United Nations to take leading roles in international security rather than the United States.

While PIPA found 75% of the public rallying behind the war, almost one third said they disagreed with Bush's decision to ignore the Security Council, leaving a slight majority of only 54% of respondents in support. Twenty-three percent flatly opposed both the decisions to ignore the Security Council and to go to war, while 21% said they agreed with the statement, "I do not agree with the decision (to ignore the Security Council), but I still support the president."

The question then is how long those who are now rallying behind the war will support it. "Support for the war may not be quite as strong as it looks," said Steven Kull, PIPA's director and a veteran expert on U.S. public attitudes toward international affairs. Nor does a majority of the public consider Bush's choice to go to war without the Security Council's approval a precedent that should be repeated, as many neoconservative and right-wing hawks have urged since Bush decided to withdraw a U.S.-British draft resolution authorizing war earlier this month.

Asked whether the UN's importance in global affairs will be diminished by the U.S. decision, 71% of respondents said the body will be at least as or more important than it was before the war. Only one

in four respondents said it should be less so, roughly the same percentage of the U.S. public that has opposed multilateral commitments Washington over the past 25 years.

Moreover, asked whether in the future U.S. leaders should or should not feel freer to use military force without UN approval, only 29% said that it should, while two out of every three respondents said it should not. A strong majority of respondents—75%—also rejected calls by some hawks, particularly in Congress, to punish those countries that opposed the U.S. position in the Security Council.

More broadly, respondents said they continue to support a strong UN role in areas considered central to U.S. security interests. Asked for example, who should be put in charge of governing Iraq until a new Iraqi government was established, 52% chose the United Nations, while only 30% took the administration's view that U.S. officials should run the country. The remainder either offered no opinion or a third option, usually "the Iraqi people."

Strong support was also found for the idea that the United Nations is the forum best suited to deal with possible confrontations with the other two members of Bush's "axis of evil," Iran and North Korea. Asked which would better "ensure that Iran does not make nuclear weapons and support Palestinian groups that use terrorism," 63% chose the United Nations, and only 32% opted for Washington. Likewise with North Korea's nuclear weapons: 72% said the world



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body was best suited to take the lead, while only 26% chose the United States.

The notion that Bush is currently enjoying a “rallying effect” that could diminish over time was not only uncovered in the PIPA poll. A survey released last week by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press found that while 72% of respondents thought the decision to use military force against Iraq was correct, only 50% agreed that was “the best thing for the U.S. to do.”

Even the 54% in the PIPA poll who said they supported the decision to go to war may be overstated, said Kull, who noted that the percentage of the public who supported going to war before U.S.-led forces launched the conflict ranged from 33-43%. “Some of this jump to 54% may be a genuine attitude change,” Kull said, “but in a wartime environment there is a general tendency to suppress disagreement with the president.”

The notion that public support is not as strong as the gross figures indicate is bolstered by the sense among respondents that the war’s consequences may be far more negative than positive. For example, only

14% agreed with administration officials who have suggested that the war could decrease the likelihood that North Korea will produce nuclear weapons; that rose to a mere 24% with respect to Iran.

Pluralities also predicted that Washington’s relations with the rest of the world would suffer. Only 15% assumed it will be easier “for the U.S. to get cooperation from other countries on important international issues in general,” while 37% said it would be harder. Most of the rest predicted no change or had no opinion.

Presented with the neoconservative view that U.S. relations in the Muslim world will improve after a convincing victory over Baghdad because it would inspire respect for Washington, only 12% of respondents agreed. Forty-eight percent said they would be worse. A majority of 51% said the war will increase the risk of terrorist attacks against the United States, while only 21% assumed they would be lower.

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