

Comments to the National Press Club

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Steven Kull, Director of the Program on International Policy Attitudes and the PIPA/Knowledge Networks Poll

This morning I am going to be sharing with you the findings of a new PIPA/Knowledge Networks poll that was conducted March 22-25 with a nationwide sample of 795 American adults. In this poll we explored attitudes about many aspects of the war with Iraq.

Where I want to start is not with the question of how the public feels about the war in a narrow time frame. As you know there are many media polls taking the public's temperature every few days. Where I want to start is with the question of how Americans view the broader implications of the fact that the US went to war with Iraq without the approval of the UN Security Council.

As you may know, for the months leading up to the decision to initiate hostilities a strong majority of the public insisted that the US must get UN Security Council approval before going to war with Iraq. Right up to March 17, when the President announced that the US would proceed without such approval, the majority of Americans favored continuing with the inspections process and taking more time to build support in the UN.

However, once the president decided to proceed and hostilities began, the public rallied behind the president. In our poll, which went into the field on the Saturday after the war started and stayed in the field through the following Tuesday evening, a very strong majority -- 75% -- expressed support for the president's decision.

This raises a key question: does this mark a watershed for the public's attitudes about the use of military force? Has a precedent been set in the public's mind such that the public will feel more free about the US using military force without multilateral approval? Might the public feel more ready to use the threat of military force against the other members of the 'axis of evil' --Iran and North Korea?

More broadly it raises key questions about the role of the UN. When the president went to the UN to get approval for military action, he declared that if it failed to grant this approval, the UN would become irrelevant in the future. Does the Americans public now think that the UN has become irrelevant?

The short answer to all these questions is, "no." The public is not viewing the decision to go to war with Iraq as a watershed that signifies the declining importance of the UN or a precedent for the US to feel more free to use military force without UN approval.

Let's start with the broader question about the future of the UN. When we asked what "the UN's role in the world will be" after the war with Iraq, only 26% said it would be less important while 71% said it would be at least as important as before the war, with 30% saying that it would be more important. Even in a question that highlighted that the US did not get authorization from the UN Security Council, and basically made the president's argument, only 37% endorsed the idea that "this means that the UN will not be relevant to matters of war and peace in the future," while 58% said the UN will continue to be relevant.

Americans also do not believe that the US should regard the choice to go to war without UN approval as a precedent that should make the US feel more free to do so in the future. Asked, "Do you think that in the future the US should or should not feel more free to use military force without UN authorization?" only 29% said that it should, while 66% said that it should not.

More broadly, Americans show support for the UN playing a leading role in a variety of key areas central to US security concerns. We asked, "Once Saddam Hussein's government is toppled and all hostilities have ceased, who do you think should be in charge of governing Iraq until a new Iraqi government is established?" Respondents were offered the options of the US, the UN or they could provide their own preferred option. Fourteen percent offered their own option (the most popular being the Iraqi people), just 30% the option of the US, while 52% chose the option of the UN.

Respondents also showed strong support for the UN taking the lead in other areas. They were asked "When it comes to trying to stop North Korea from making nuclear weapons, which would be better...for the US to take the lead" or "for the UN to take the lead?" Just 26% chose the US while 72% chose the UN.

The problem of Iran was viewed similarly. Asked, "When it comes to trying to ensure that Iran does not make nuclear weapons and does not support Palestinian groups that use terrorism, which would be better?" just 32% favored the US taking the lead while 63% favored the UN taking the lead.

Although the American public is standing behind the use of military force against Iraq, Americans do not appear to be generalizing this attitude by emphasizing the potential role of military force in relation to North Korea and Iran.

Asked whether, "the US should deal with the government of North Korea primarily by trying to build better relations" or "by pressuring it with implied threats that the US may use military force" only 15% preferred the approach based on military threats while 79% preferred building better relations.

When asked the same question about Iran 80% thought the US should deal with the Iranian government "primarily by trying to build better relations," and just 16% preferred to primarily work with implied threats.

So, if Americans are not showing a great deal of enthusiasm about the use of military force and insist on getting UN approval for future military operations, why then do they appear to be showing so much support for the current war against Iraq when it did not get UN approval?

A closer examination of the polling data reveals that, while very large majorities express support for the war, the portion that shows unequivocal support is not that large. Many will even say that they do not really support the policy, but that they are supporting the president. This 'rally round the president' dynamic is common in wartime.

When respondents were given three options in the current poll just 54% said they agreed with the President's decision to go to war without UN approval, while 21% said they disagreed with the decision, but that they still support the president.

The Pew Center found a similar result in a recent poll. Seventy-two percent said they thought the decision to use military force against Iraq was the right decision. However in a follow on question only 50% (of the whole sample) said they thought this was "the best thing for the US to do," while 18% said they supported going to war because they "support Bush's decision because he is president." Four percent were unsure.

Looking more closely at the 54% in the PIPA/Knowledge Networks poll who said they agreed with the president's decision, it is not entirely clear how much of this group is genuinely supporting the policy, rather than the president. Over the last months we have asked a similar question about the prospect of the US going to war without UN Security Council approval and found only 33-43% saying they would agree with such a decision. Some of this jump to 54% may be a genuine attitude change, but some may be from respondents who want to support the president and do not think that the best way to do that is to answer a poll question by saying they also disagree with him.

In a wartime environment there is a general tendency to suppress disagreement with the president. As you know, the president's approval ratings have jumped and in some polling we have done, ratings of US foreign policy performance have jumped across the board, including in areas that have nothing to do with the war with Iraq.

There are also other indications that the public's support is not robust. When respondents were given a fine-grained means of expressing their attitudes, they showed a moderate level of confidence that the decision to go to war was the right one. Respondents were asked, "How do you feel about the decision to go to war with Iraq without UN Security Council authorization? Please answer on a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 being certain that it was the wrong decision, 10 being certain that it was the right decision, and 5 being unsure." Fifty-nine percent gave a response above 5-- on the 'right decision' side of the spectrum-- while 27% gave a response of 10. The mean score was 6.32.

In other ways respondents also showed concerns about the consequences of going to war. Relative to various US foreign policy concerns, few respondents saw these consequences as positive while a large percentage saw them as negative.

One key area of discussion currently is how the US going to war with Iraq will affect the likelihood that North Korea and Iran will make nuclear weapons. Some have argued that going to war with Iraq will deter them from building weapons lest they come to the same fate as Iraq, while others have argued that doing so will increase their desire to acquire such weapons so as to deter the US from attacking them.

When respondents were asked in the poll how the US going to war with Iraq effects the likelihood that North Korea will make nuclear weapons, only 14% thought it reduced the likelihood, while 45% thought it increased the likelihood. Thirty-eight percent said it has no effect one way or the other.

Asked about Iran, just 24% though going to war with Iraq reduces the likelihood that Iran will make nuclear weapons, while 41% thought it increases the likelihood. Thirty-one percent said it has no effect.

Respondents were also asked, "how things will be after the war with Iraq is over" in regard to a variety of foreign policy areas of concern to the US. In nearly every case more respondents predicted negative consequences than positive ones.

Only 15% assumed that it will be easier "for the US to get cooperation from other countries on important international issues in general." Thirty-seven percent assumed that it will be harder.

Asked about how "feelings toward the US will be" "in the Muslim world," only 12% assumed that they would be better" while 48% assumed that they would be worse.

The most widely perceived negative consequences were in regard to the "risk of terrorist attacks against the US." A slight majority of 51% said they thought this risk will be higher while just 21% assumed that it will be lower.

Now all this is not to say that the underlying doubts that the public has about the decision to go to war without UN approval and their uneasiness about the potential consequences of the war means that support for the war is precarious. Provided that the war continues to go reasonably well it appears likely that the public will continue to support it.

Polls have shown for months that the public does believe that Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction and that disarming him is a very important priority. Assuming that the US finds evidence of weapons of mass destruction this should further consolidate the view that the purpose of the operation is valid.

Even if there are substantially more casualties it is unlikely that the public will turn against the operation. In a study that Clay Ramsay and I did of the impact of casualties on support for military operations, we found that as long as there was the perception that the operation was succeeding support was sustained. Support for the Vietnam War did

not drop because of casualties alone. It was when the operation was perceived as terminally bogged down that Americans turned against it.

Of course casualties play some role in determining whether the operation is perceived as succeeding. And given the underlying doubts about the war that we have discussed, sustained casualties might dampen enthusiasm for it. But it is very unlikely that the public will turn against it. In an earlier poll we found that the median respondent estimated that 1,000 Americans would die in a war with Iraq. Since the war started other polls have found these estimates going up and down depending on how the war is going. But those early estimates show that the public has gone into this war with sober expectations.

One unknown is how the public is likely to respond if, as part of the war, there are attacks against American cities with weapons of mass destruction. Our earlier polling showed that Americans saw this as being quite likely. Of course we do not know how they will respond when it comes to the actual event, but Americans say that they have already factored that possibility into their expectations.

In summary, what the findings of this poll suggest is that while Americans are likely to sustain their support for the war, they have entered into it with substantial reservations. These reservations are primarily derived from the fact that the operation did not receive UN approval. But there is also uneasiness that the war will have negative consequences in terms of the likelihood that Iran and North Korea will make nuclear weapons. There is also concern that after the war the likelihood of terrorist attacks will increase and US relations with the Muslim world will be negatively affected. Even a great military success is unlikely to eradicate these concerns.

Overall it appears doubtful that even a highly successful operation will lead to a major reorientation of Americans' attitudes about the role they want the US to play in the world. Americans do not show any tendency to generalize their willingness to support the use of military force against Iraq by showing more willingness to use military threats against North Korea and Iran. They want the US to continue to have as its default position going to the UN for approval before using military force. And they want the UN to continue to play at least as prominent a role in the world as it did before the war.