

# Past to Future

*Directions for polling in the coming war*

*By Robert J. Blendon and John M. Benson*

On September 11, 2001, for the second time in 60 years, the United States suffered a surprise attack carried out by foreign enemies. The attack led to enormous destruction and tragedy, as well as many examples of personal heroism. As in the case of Pearl Harbor, within two days the President of the United States asked Congress to declare a state of war. In the earlier case, the declaration was against Japan and world tyranny; this time it is against an unnamed enemy and international terrorism.

In spite of the similarities between the events that led to the US entry into World War II and those that have spawned the current worldwide campaign against terrorism, there are many differences. Perhaps most important is that the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks were carried out on the US mainland and involved far greater civilian casualties than those inflicted at Pearl Harbor.

Another important difference is that public opinion polls are likely to play a far more prominent role in tracking American attitudes about the coming war. As the data collections in the Roper Center's archives attest, public polling during World War II was conducted infrequently, and surveys often involved relatively few questions. By contrast, American attitudes about this

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new war are likely to be probed by at least six weekly national polls offering in-depth measures of support for the war effort and preferences for future national action. Unlike the earlier war, our elected politicians, allies, the press, the country as a whole, and even our enemies will know almost instantaneously the state of American opinion on the continuation and conduct of the conflict.

Based upon historical media coverage and archived polls from World War II and the wars in Korea, Vietnam, and the Persian Gulf, we have identified five issue areas that could become major themes in future US polling. We want to make clear that we fervently hope many of these occasions for polling will never arise. But if they do, pollsters will have to be thinking about the following lines of questioning, and looking to history for guidance as to where their focus ought to be.

*How much confidence does the public have in its wartime leaders?*

Almost all of our military conflicts have started out with strong expressions of confidence in the president. At this early stage of the present crisis, President Bush has the overwhelming support of the American public. His 90% overall job approval rating in the September 21-22 Gallup/CNN/*USA Today* poll was the highest ever recorded for an American president. In nine polls conducted September 13-25, 84 to 91% approved of the job Bush had done so far specifically in handling the crisis.

But the experience of a prolonged war, high casualties, and uncertainty of victory can weaken confidence, as we saw during the Korean and Vietnam wars. Continuing attention will be paid to weekly polls measuring approval of George W. Bush's overall performance

as president and his handling of the war, confidence in the nation's ability to prevail, and trust in the government to prevent further terrorist attacks.

*Where does the public stand on military action, and how will its position change?*

**“In this new world of frequent polling during wartime, public opinion could end up playing a more direct role in setting policy.”**

In the immediate aftermath of September 11, Americans' support for taking military action against those responsible for the attacks was overwhelming. In several polls conducted during the first two weeks of the crisis, support for retaliation ranged from 82 to 94%, including 82 to 86% support in response to questions that explicitly added the phrase “even if it means war.” Two-thirds (68%) of respondents to a September 20-23 CBS News/*New York Times* poll favored military action against those responsible even if it means going to war with a nation that is harboring them. The same percentage was in favor even if “many thousands of innocent civilians may be killed,” and the same again expressed support for military action even if a large number of American ground troops are killed.

In spite of this high level of initial support, public opinion may waver if the war actually does result in large numbers of casualties to US ground troops or to foreign civilians not directly involved in the terrorist attacks, or leads to major new terrorist attacks in the United States.

Some policymakers and scholars have held that Americans in the post-World War II era are unwilling to continue conflicts if US troops suffer substantial casualties over prolonged periods

of time. Others, such as Eric V. Larsen in *Casualties and Consensus*, have argued that if the military conflict is seen as an important mission for the US and is perceived as likely to be successful, the American public will continue its support in spite of growing numbers of casualties.

*Where will the public stand on the conduct of a war overseas if there are more attacks on American civilians, either abroad (e.g., hijackings) or on American soil (e.g., bombings or biological or chemical terrorism)?*

A protracted war or a difficult situation on the homefront could lead to a debate similar to those held throughout World War II, Korea, and Vietnam about whether to bomb more cities to affect the enemy's morale and/or ability to continue. Will Americans support massive bombings, like those inflicted in World War II upon Dresden and Tokyo, that would involve substantial civilian casualties, or will the public resist air actions that are not primarily focused on terrorist camps or military targets?

If initial ground efforts are unsuccessful, America will also be faced with a decision about escalating ground troop deployment. Will the public support Vietnam-like levels of troop commitments, or will support drop if ground commitments expand beyond small, highly focused units? Americans will have to choose among escalating troop commitments out of obligation to those who have already died; withdrawing ground troops and relying more heavily on air power; or negotiating an end to the conflict.

If terrorist groups flee to other countries that give them sanctuary but were not involved in the attacks on the US, should these countries be subject to attack? The expansion of US military operations into Cambodia and Laos during the Vietnam War is the most familiar analogy to apply to this scenario.

And, finally, how about the unthinkable—the use of nuclear weapons? If the US is unable to bring a successful end to the war, if there are additional terrorist attacks on the homefront, or if other countries such as Iraq enter the war, will Americans reach a level of frustration where

they will support the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons or even the broader use of nuclear bombs? This latter alternative was widely discussed during the Korean conflict and, to a lesser degree, in the Vietnam War.

*How will concerns about the homefront affect Americans' views about their freedoms?*

From the US point of view, the coming conflict will be a two-front war. During no conflict in the last century except World War II have Americans been worried about attacks on the homefront. But in this case the public will be concerned about what's being done to protect against further terrorism at home, and they will pay special attention to incidents across the country. Many will also be concerned about the constraint of civil liberties that might seem necessary in the course of protecting against such threats.

At the outset of this conflict, the American public is willing to accept some restrictions on civil liberties, but they set important limits. Large majorities favor strengthening security at airports, placing armed federal law enforcement officers on US flights, and requiring people who enter office buildings and public places to pass through metal detectors and show identification.

Americans are much less supportive of making it easier for authorities to monitor the personal phone calls and emails of ordinary Americans, or to tap their phones. Only 29% in a September 14-15 Gallup poll favored allowing police to stop people on the street at random to search their possessions.

The public is more inclined to approve of constraints on groups who might come under suspicion. In a *Los Angeles Times* poll conducted September 13-14, a large majority (84%) favored tougher restrictions on visas for foreign students and other visitors to the US. Two-thirds (67%) approved of law enforcement officials randomly stopping people who may fit a profile of suspected terrorists.

When it comes to the rights of Arab Americans in particular, the public is conflicted. According to a recent Zogby poll, most (62%) hold a favorable view of Arab Americans. However, many are willing to give law enforcement officials significant discretion to stop and investigate those Arab Americans or visiting Arabs who might fit a profile of possible terrorists. For instance, 58% said they were in favor of requiring Arabs, including US citizens, to undergo intensive security checks before boarding planes, and about half (49%) favored requiring them to carry special identification.

If the conflict takes a bad turn, we could see a public debate about more stringent restrictions on the civil liberties of Arabs and/or Muslims in this country. Just as in earlier “scares,” proposed measures might include the deportation of non-citizens from countries identified as unfriendly. Another issue that might arise is the detention of Arab Americans who are members of organizations that oppose US foreign policies.

But even at this stressful moment, perhaps remembering the injustices done to Japanese Americans during

World War II, only 29% in a September 13-17 Pew Research Center poll said they favored putting legal immigrants from unfriendly countries into internment camps.

### *How will Americans decide when the war should end?*

In the early stages of the crisis, polling organizations have asked about war goals hypothetically, but prior experience suggests that public attitudes are strongly affected by perceptions of how well the conflict is going and how winnable it will ultimately be. Regardless of the initial goals set by President Bush, the public may or may not be willing to stay the course for his broader objectives.

Initial polling portrays an American public willing to support greater rather than lesser degrees of military response. For instance, 63% told ABC News/*Washington Post* on September 20 that they favored a broader war to vanquish both terrorist groups and nations that support them, rather than a more limited action. But as the conflict goes on and the human costs of the campaign become clearer, many Americans may be willing to settle for the more limited goal of eliminating only the terrorist groups involved in the attacks.

As casualties rise or the conflict drags on for years, it will become all the more important to identify what constitutes victory and whether the US can achieve it. The main choice is likely to be between negotiating a truce (as we did with Saddam Hussein at the end of the Gulf War) without changing the governments involved, or continuing the conflict. In other words, the US might punish one or more of the groups involved, say, “We taught them a lesson,” and decide that’s enough. Or we could overthrow one or more governments and occupy those countries until the terrorists are gone. Will the public be willing to occupy these countries

as we did in post-World War II Germany and Japan, or would they rather avoid this and bring our troops home as we did at the end of the Gulf War?

Unlike the cases of Somalia and Bosnia, or even Korea and Vietnam, where military involvement might be perceived by many as having been peripheral to American interests, the public may think that finishing the job is crucial this time, especially considering the huge loss of civilian lives that has already been suffered at home. On the other hand, the president might consider such geopolitical factors as declining support among US allies, the maintenance of Middle East stability, the preservation of the supply of oil, or the well-being of Israel, and decide that a settlement is in order. The president’s decision could also be affected by anti-war protests like we saw during Vietnam.

**W**e do not know how many of these questions will become relevant in the future, or how the public will answer if they are asked. What we do know is that as these and other issues arise, the American polling community will almost certainly tell the world where Americans stand. This may ultimately change how the coming war is fought.

The usual view is that public opinion does not determine the direction of foreign policy or military affairs. Rather, it sets limits—what V.O. Key and later authors have called “opinion dikes”—on policymakers’ discretion. But in this new world of frequent polling during wartime, public opinion could end up playing a more direct role in setting policy, particularly if the conflict goes on for a long time or if there are more terrorist attacks on the homefront. Perhaps even the very nature of how presidents make decisions during wartime will be changed by the high level of public involvement in the critical choices we face in this major conflict. ●