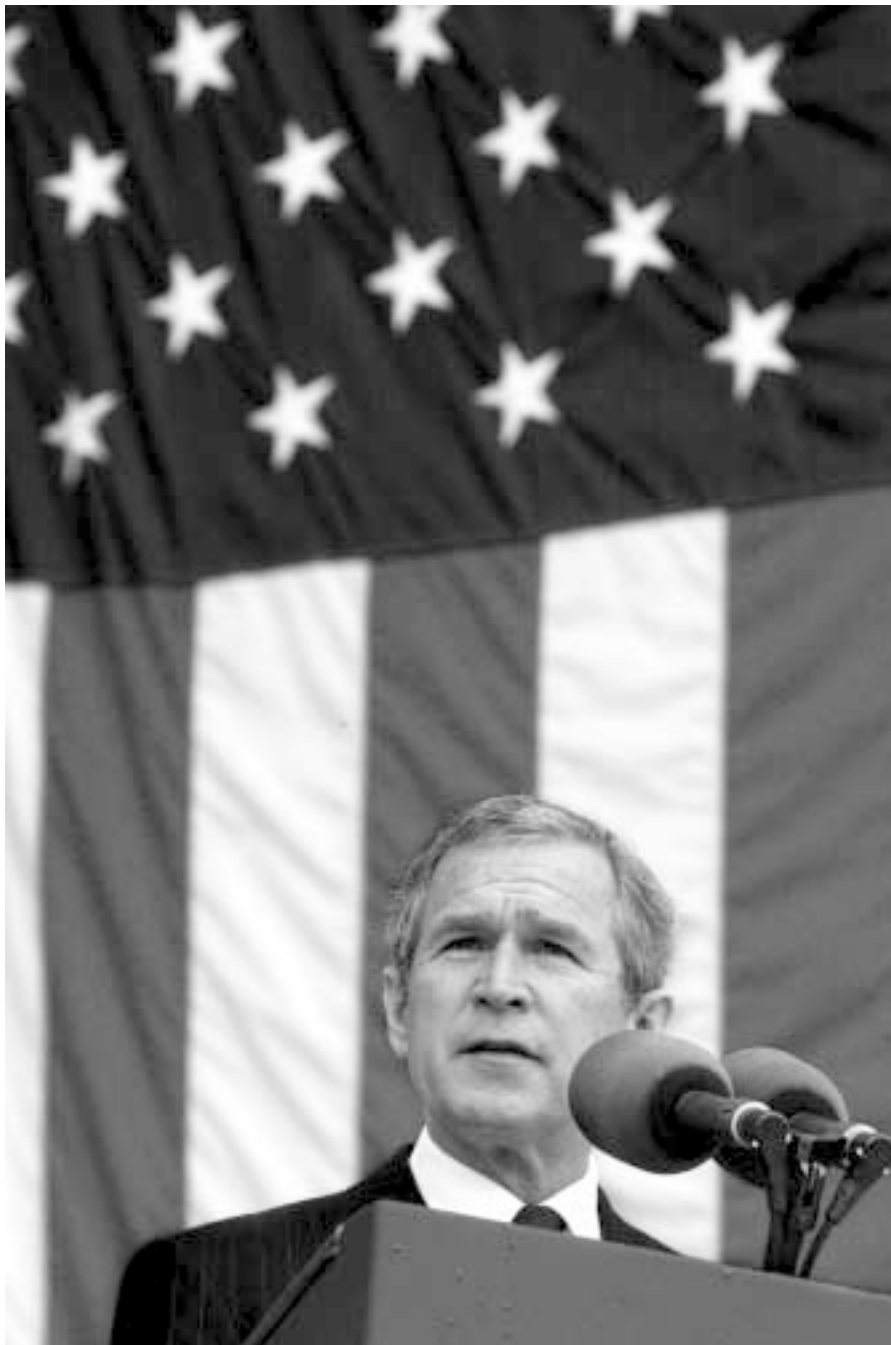


By David M. Alpern

# Behind the Bush Bounce



In January 2002, the glow of his halo made it difficult to remember that George W. Bush was not doing all that well in the public's view just before September 11. His job approval rating had been in the 50% zone since May, about the same as when he first came into office after his disputed election.

Then came the attacks in New York and Washington DC, and in the September 13-14 *Newsweek* poll, Bush's job approval jumped to 82% in a rally-round spike that suddenly put him in the same league as FDR after Pearl Harbor (84%, according to Gallup), Kennedy after the Bay of Pigs debacle (83%) Truman after victory in Europe (87%) and his own father after the Gulf War victory (89%).

The challenge for Bush—and the nation—was obvious: retaliate and end the terrorist threat as quickly and completely as possible. The question was not only whether the president could command such a victory, but also whether, like his father's in the Gulf

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*David M. Alpern was formerly a Newsweek senior editor and director of the Newsweek Poll, which is conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates. He continues as a contributing editor to Newsweek On Air, the magazine's weekly radio and internet program. This series of articles is adapted from a January 2002 presentation prepared for the Media Fellowship program at The Hoover Institution, Stanford University.*

War, it would ultimately be overshadowed by other factors—foreign and domestic—which could drive down both his ratings and chances for Republican victories in the next congressional and presidential races.

Throughout the remainder of 2001, however, our polling showed far more strength than weakness for Bush. His job-approval ratings continued climbing to a peak of 88% on October 18-19 before slipping back to 81% in the December 13-14 survey. Inevitably they fell back further in 2002, though only to the still-enviable 60% range. His popularity helped the president spark a historic Republican triumph in the midterm elections, enlarging a House majority and recapturing the Senate.

**A**s in the case of Bill Clinton in his most troubled year, with the Monica Lewinsky scandal leading to his impeachment [November/December *Public Perspective*], surveys after 9/11 showed notable sophistication in the public's view of its president. In Clinton's case, this was manifest in a willingness to distinguish between what was clearly fascinating tabloid fare and what was truly important to the question of unseating a president. For Bush, what was remarkable was how quickly Americans moved past the simple yen for revenge after 9/11 to a long view of the complex war against terrorism.

Support for the military action Bush ordered remained near constant near 90%. Perhaps more important, the public indicated it understood that the larger battle against terrorism would take years, that it was about more than Afghanistan, and that military action—while unavoidable—was not necessarily the most effective means to fight it anyway. So in a significant sense Bush was able to keep public opinion on a war footing, and solidly in his corner.

**L**ooking more closely at some of the post 9/11 poll findings, we find both support for retaliation and an impressive degree of patience. In a September 13-14 survey, 54% of Americans favored attacking people like Osama bin Laden even if Washington was not sure they were responsible for the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks; seven in ten favored attacking terrorist bases and the countries that hosted or supported them.

But even as hawks pressed the president for a quick military response, Americans in general were willing to wait. After two weeks, only 17% said action should already have begun, and even fewer said it should start within weeks; about six in ten said it should take as long as necessary to plan something that would work. That majority actually grew a bit in subsequent surveys.

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The public also showed a strong awareness that winning the war on terror would be neither quick nor simple. Even in that first week of shock and outrage, just under half of those polled (49%) said military action would be very effective in preventing similar attacks in the future.

Even fewer thought killing suspected terrorist leaders would be very effective—44%—compared with majorities of seven in ten or more who felt more intelligence agents in the field, and more security aboard aircraft and at airports, would be.

September 20-21 polling also showed that only 15% of Americans thought

the struggle against terrorism could be completed in a year or less; about eight in ten said it would take at least several years, and half that total figured ten years or more.

**A**s time passed following 9/11, Americans moved from a kneejerk to a more nuanced view of the varied factors motivating the terrorists. Two weeks after the attacks, the reason cited by the largest number of people as a major cause (68%) was Muslim opposition to US links with Israel and policies toward the Palestinian situation. But by the beginning of October, the Israeli-Palestinian factor had dropped ten points and into second place, behind resentment of US military and economic power generally, and followed by US military presence in the region (47%), economic hardships created by West-

ern capitalism (39%), and resentment of the impact of

American culture in Muslim countries (28%).

A December 6-7 poll found that nearly half of Americans saw US support for friendly but dictatorial governments in the Middle East as part of the problem, increasing the appeal of Islamic extremism among common people—the so-called “Arab Street.” Only 30% disagreed with that view. And nearly half also said the US should put more pressure on Middle East governments to increase democracy in their lands, even if it meant Islamic extremists might win power.

Not that Americans were under any illusions about what such power shifts

might mean. About half in that early December poll said it was very likely that if Islamic extremists won the right to rule they would develop or obtain weapons of mass destruction. More than four in ten said major reductions in human rights and civil liberties would be very likely under Islamic extremist rule.

We came back regularly to the question of Israel, particularly as bin Laden started making it a major argument in his struggle. But Americans were not spooked. In the first week after the attack, only 32% agreed with the statement that “The US should reduce its ties to Israel in order to lesson the acts of terrorism against us,” and 50% disagreed. This was virtually the same as in 1985, during an earlier period of Mideast-related terrorism. By October 4-5, 2001, only 22% favored reducing ties.

The issue of domestic security is closely tied to that of civil liberties. And the polling here showed solid, patriotic support for the president’s strong steps, but also some fault lines which, it seemed, could create problems for him down the road.

In the second week after the terrorist attacks, 63% agreed that to curb future terrorism in this country, it would be necessary for the average person to give up some civil liberties. No previous polling had ever found such a majority. Toward the end of the year, only 11% said the administration had gone too far in restricting civil liberties in response to terrorism, while another 14% said it had not gone far enough, and an overwhelming 72% said the restrictions were about right.

There were some underlying concerns, however. In our September 27-28 poll, more than four in ten thought it would be going too far to make it easier

for intelligence and law enforcement agents to monitor private phone calls and emails. In late November, 59% feared it was at least somewhat likely that military tribunals would be overused by the government to sweep up criminal cases that should be tried in regular courts.

Yet, almost a year later, an August 28-29, 2002, poll found little growth in such concerns: only 16% thought the administration had gone too far in restricting civil liberties, while 20% said it had not gone far enough, and a 58% majority found the Bush approach about right.

As for military operations beyond Afghanistan, the public’s greatest support from the start was for attacking Saddam Hussein and his military in Iraq—fully 81%

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in October 2001. But our polls and others showed significant deterioration over time in support for an attack on Iraq. By October 2002, it was down to 64%.

The same survey also showed a 50% to 37% split in favor of delaying any attack to organize more support from our allies, with majorities favoring formal backing from the United Nations (61%); the European allies (61%); and friendly Arab nations (52%). Bush’s personal job approval fell to 61%, with only 49% in late September thinking his administration had a well thought-out plan for using military force against Iraq.

Also problematic for Bush and the Republican party were developing complaints about a weakening national economy, called the nation’s top problem by about as many people as cited terrorism in a January 2002 CBS News poll.

Later in 2002, the collapse of Enron, other corporate scandals, and a tumultuous stock market focused new attention on the underpinnings of the American economy. Our poll of July 18-19 found only 36% who thought Bush’s proposals for corporate reform were sufficient, while 50% found them not tough enough (and merely 2% too tough).

While Bush got a 59% for handling foreign policy in mid-October, his approval rating for handling the economy was just 50%. And our October 24-25

poll showed more concern about the economy (29%) than Iraq (23%), with another 29% citing social issues such as health care and 13% local issues.

But those priorities did not help the Democrats as much as they had hoped. As he went into the 2002 midterm elections still riding high on his popularity as a wartime president, Bush campaigned coast to coast to spark a GOP triumph, capturing full control of Congress, laying a firm new foundation for the conservative agenda he never gave up on—from tax cuts to health care to the complex Office of Home Security—and improving his own chances for re-election in 2004. ●