

THE CRISIS IN THE MIDDLE EAST:
A REVIEW OF PUBLIC OPINION IN
THE U.S., AND IN EUROPE

Editor's Note: This issue of Public Perspective went to press on November 2, exactly three months after Iraq invaded Kuwait. In the pages that follow (immediately, and then continuing after the Center Section), we examine public judgment on the crisis -- especially in the US, but in Europe as well. Polling expert and Bush advisor, Robert J. Teeter, leads off with some overall assessments of what's distinctive in the American public's response.

Public Perspective: Iraq's invasion of Kuwait posed an important *substantive* challenge for US policy. It also produced *political* challenges, foreign and domestic. As to domestic politics, was the Bush administration concerned initially that sufficient public backing might not be forthcoming?

Robert Teeter: No, I don't think so. I think that, first, there was the feeling that you had to do what you had to do. And, second, that public support would be there. Later, when I began to look at polling data, I know I was struck by how strong and how widespread the support was. But the main feeling in the administration when the decision was taken — remember it happened pretty quickly — was that it's one of those things you have to do. It was also a situation where the kind of things that had to be done to make sure the US had international support tended to be the same things that build and retain public support in the United States.

PP: As you have examined the data on the public's response to the crisis, what stands out as most striking or important?

RT: One has been the willingness to use military force. I don't recall any other time, as long as public opinion surveys have been around, when there was a clear willingness to use military force *before the fact*. Of course, the public has said it would support the use of US troops if the USSR invaded western Europe. But I don't know of any crisis situation, going back to World War II, where there was a majority willing to use military force; before we actually used it. I think I also found striking the degree of the approval of calling up the Reserves that we have seen in our NBC/Wall Street Journal surveys — the approval of about two-thirds of the public.

PP: What's your explanation for why we got a different kind of response here on using force than we've seen in the past?

RT: I see two factors, though I'm not sure they fully answer the question. One involves the widespread international consensus on standing up to Hussein. When you have such a consensus, it tends to affirm for Americans the rightness of their government's position. Secondly, in this case there was a real villain. In Hussein you really have one drawn about as vividly as possible.

PP: Do you see anything to the idea that if there was an immediate post-Vietnam mindset in the United States, we are now looking at a post-post-Vietnam response? Has the public shifted significantly from where it was in the 1970s?

RT: Yes. There was a very strong post-Vietnam syndrome, which lasted a very long time. This is the first time we've seen a situation where you can say that public opinion does not evidence that syndrome to any significant extent. We are past the Vietnam era. The response to Iraq proves it. Americans have resumed their post-World War II willingness to have the United States play a strong role in world affairs.

PP: What about the hostage situation? Some 1,400 British citizens are still being held in Iraq or Kuwait — yet polls taken in Britain don't suggest the public there is being put off from taking a hard line by fear for the hostages. We have this same situation in the United States. The American hostages don't seem to be a political issue domestically.

RT: Yes, that's right. It also struck me that (in one of the questions in our September Wall Street Journal survey) we found such huge support for military action if any of the hostages were harmed. I think, again, you really can't overstate the importance of the fact that the US is not in this alone. We don't have either our allies or our old adversaries shooting at us verbally.

PP: Has US opinion on our policy and response changed in any significant way over the three months since Iraq's invasion of Kuwait?

RT: I don't see any major structural change. That's perhaps the most important single poll finding on the crisis — that now almost three months into it there really have not been any major opinion changes. General support for US actions has remained high. Now, as from the beginning, there is a group that would like stronger action, and one that thinks our response has been too strong. It's important to note that critics have been divided into these two polar camps.

PP: On the matter of domestic political implications of the crisis: Have there been any and if so, what are they? Are

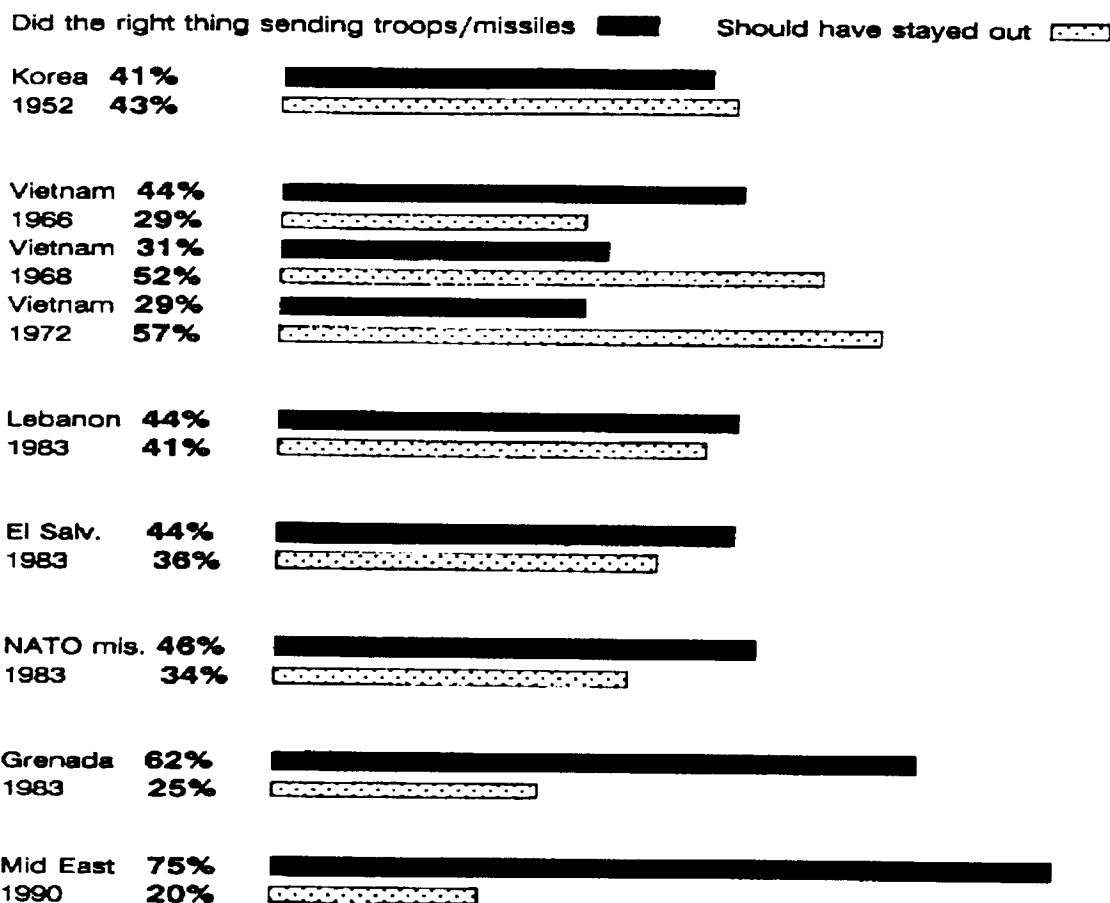
The Crisis in the Middle East/Teeter/cont.

the various political and economic developments surrounding our action in the Gulf affecting the course of the November election?

RT: Because of the public focus on the budget problems in recent weeks, the Iraq crisis is unlikely to have any appreciable effect on the election. Back in September I

thought that while it might not have a great affect, it would tend to help Republicans — in the sense that it dominated the agenda and kept the focus on something that has been a Republican strength, and that appears to strengthen a Republican president. But anything of this sort has been offset by the fact that the country's focus shifted from Iraq to the budget in October.

WAS INTERVENTION JUSTIFIED?: FROM KOREA 1952 TO THE MID-EAST 1990



Korea/Vietnam data, U. of Michigan, election studies; others MOR 11/83
 El Salvador - "sending military advisors to..."
 Grenada - "sending U.S. troops to..."
 Lebanon - "sending U.S. marines to..."
 NATO - "sending Pershing II & cruise missiles to Western Europe..."
 Mid East 1990, ATS 14 Q4.

Source: Graph from Americans Talk Security, *The Use of Force: Showdown in the Gulf 1990*. Mid-East data from a survey by Market Strategies, September 20-26, 1990.