

## War on Iraq | The big `ifs'

*The San Diego Union - Tribune; San Diego, Calif.; Sep 12, 2002; Daniel Yankelovich;*

### **Abstract:**

*Most polls show majority support for military action against Iraq. The New York Times/CBS poll shows a 68 percent level of support. The CNN/USA Today/ Gallup poll reports a 53 percent level of support.*

*If this were the end of the story, then the administration could take comfort from it. But it is only the beginning of the story, not the end. Gallup reports that when people are asked whether they would support a war if it meant that the United States "would have a significant number of ground troops in combat situations for at least a year," the majority disappears, replaced by a 41 percent minority. Similarly, the New York Times poll shows that the 68 percent majority shrinks to 35 percent when people are given the alternative of giving "the United Nations more time to get weapons inspectors back into Iraq." Most dramatically, Gallup reports that when people are asked whether they would support a war if we had to go it alone, public enthusiasm for war drops off a cliff, with only 20 percent -- a mere one out of five Americans -- endorsing a unilateral initiative.*

*Another strong reason for taking the warning signs in polls on war with Iraq very seriously is the public's long-held position on internationalism. Before World War II, a strong tradition of isolationism prevailed in American public opinion. World War II and the Cold War swept away the isolationism, replacing it with a conditional internationalism that remains the prevailing doctrine of the American people.*

When political leaders have their minds set on a course of action, they look to public opinion polls for confirmation, not information. If the polls are ambiguous, they ignore the part of the poll that opposes their position and put a positive spin on the part that supports it.

The danger is less that they will deceive others than that they will mislead themselves -- with possibly disastrous results. This, I fear, may be happening now with polls that indicate large-scale public support for preemptive war against Iraq.

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If this were the end of the story, then the administration could take comfort from it. But it is only the beginning of the story, not the end. Gallup reports that when people are asked whether they would support a war if it meant that the United States "would have a significant number of ground troops in combat situations for at least a year," the majority disappears, replaced by a 41 percent minority. Similarly, the New York Times poll shows that the 68 percent majority shrinks to 35 percent when people are given the alternative of giving "the United Nations more time to get weapons inspectors back into Iraq." Most dramatically, Gallup reports that when people are asked whether they would support a war if we had

to go it alone, public enthusiasm for war drops off a cliff, with only 20 percent -- a mere one out of five Americans -- endorsing a unilateral initiative.

What the public is saying in these poll results is this: "Yes, we support the administration in its view that Saddam Hussein is evil and ought to be removed and yes, we believe that war may be necessary under the right conditions." But it is critical that these conditions be understood. They include having lots of allies, limited duration, and strong moral legitimacy.

There are powerful reasons for taking the public's conditions and qualifications seriously. One relates to the way public opinion evolves. If polls are taken when an issue is still unfamiliar and the public hasn't yet given it much thought, people's responses will typically be unstable and inconsistent. If people feel worrisome reservations, these can grow rapidly as people think through the consequences of their positions. (It is at this stage that you can most easily change the results by changing poll wording.)

It is only much later, when the public has made up its mind, that the polls grow firm and consistent. As the public reaches firm judgment, high levels of support can vanish overnight (which is what happened to the Clintons' health care plan a decade ago). Public opinion on war with Iraq is still in the early stages of evolution, exhibiting characteristic signs of inconsistency and instability.

Another strong reason for taking the warning signs in polls on war with Iraq very seriously is the public's long-held position on internationalism. Before World War II, a strong tradition of isolationism prevailed in American public opinion. World War II and the Cold War swept away the isolationism, replacing it with a conditional internationalism that remains the prevailing doctrine of the American people.

In support of our values, our national security and our friends, we are willing to undertake great risks -- with a few big "ifs." The main "if" is the condition that other nations are with us. We are not a nation of go-it-alone internationalists. We are a nation that requires that others believe in our cause.

We are also a nation that equates the moral with the legal. It would be very difficult for any administration to wage a war that violated clear legal precedent. After Sept. 11, there may be good reason for waging preemptive war. But it would arouse the deepest anxieties of the American people if we violated longstanding international legal conventions at the same time that traditional allies who stood with us in the past opposed our actions. (By 47 percent to 41 percent, Americans believe that "the U.S. should not attack another country unless that country has attacked the U.S. first.")

The clearest implications of these poll results is that the administration should not deceive itself into believing it has won the indispensable level of public support

needed to wage a preemptive war in the Middle East.

**[Illustration]**

1 DRAWING; Credit: Ryan Inzana

Credit: Yankelovich is founder and chair of Viewpoint Learning, Inc. and the Public Agenda. In the 1970s, he founded the NY Times/Yankelovich Poll.

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