

WHEN MEDIA GOES TO WAR

Hegemonic Discourse, Public Opinion, and the Limits of Dissent

by ANTHONY DiMAGGIO



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CHAPTER SEVEN

Public Rationality, Political Elitism, and Opposition to War

Political leaders are often distrustful of the American public's political competence. Many officials feel that the people lack the basic critical thinking skills and ability to play a direct role in public policy formulation. These feelings were perhaps best expressed in a 1998 Pew Research Center survey, which found that officials commonly felt that the public does not "know enough about issues to form wise opinions about what should be done." Only 31 percent of members of Congress, 13 percent of presidential appointees, and 14 percent of civil servants confirmed their trust in the public to form "wise" decisions on public policy issues. Conversely, 47 percent of congressional representatives, 77 percent of presidential appointees, and 81 percent of civil servants felt that Americans were unable to form informed decisions on policy matters.

A number of reasons are provided by officials for their suspicion of the public. Civil servants and presidential appointees highlight the "information problem" of the average citizen. Members of the public supposedly "do not fully understand what government is and what it does for them." Political elites blame the mass media for conveying negative stereotypes of government to the public. As one presidential appointee from the Department of Defense argues, "Americans' [negative] opinions [of government] are based on anecdotal information received from media, rather than through an understanding of the

extent of government and all it provides.”¹ Whatever their reasons, political officials are clear about their contempt for public opinion. If there is a problem with American politics, they contend, it lies in both overly critical media and an incapable public, not with unrepresentative or corrupt political leaders.

Although American leaders loudly proclaim their faith in the wisdom of the people, these expressions represent more rhetoric than reality. Officials publicly celebrate the ability of the masses to govern—especially during election years—but quietly express a discomfort with public opinion as a force for determining public policy. These conclusions arise out of the works of major scholars such as Benjamin Page and Marshall Bouton, who speak of a “foreign policy disconnect” between the public and their officials. After examining public opinion on a variety of issues such as the war in Iraq, United States–United Nations relations, and global warming, Page and Bouton remark that the public’s views “deserve more respect than they have been getting from decision makers.”² In *Politicians Don’t Pander*, Robert Shapiro and Lawrence Jacobs conclude that “politicians seek to move public opinion to where the parties want to go in terms of policy rather than responding to public opinion.”³

Is the U.S. public as ignorant or as incompetent as political leaders often assume? Are Americans capable of forming educated opinions about policy issues? Does it even make sense to speak uniformly about *one* public? To what extent can we differentiate between members of the general public, based on major demographic factors such as education, electoral attentiveness, and media consumption? These questions have yet to be addressed in any major detail in many studies, but are explored at length in the next two chapters.

The study of public opinion is vital in a democratic society. Citizens demand that government consider their wishes when setting public policy. Political leaders who ignore the mass public do so at their peril come election time. As the 2006 and 2008 elections demonstrate, large segments of the general public can effectively come together to punish the party of the president during times of domestic economic and foreign military crisis and unrest. Public anger over Iraq served as an effective catalyst for eliminating the Republican majority in Congress in the 2006 midterm election, while public anger at former President Bush during the 2008 economic meltdown aided President Obama in his victory of Republican presidential candidate John McCain.⁴

ELITE THEORIES OF PUBLIC OPINION

Intellectuals disagree over whether the American citizenry is competent enough to influence the political process. Those who take an elitist position on this issue emphasize the volatility of public opinion, and the inability of the public to form coherent opinions. Advocating an “elite theory” of public opinion, Phillip Converse contends that many Americans hold “non-attitudes” on political issues. This claim is based upon evidence that individual survey respondents vary considerably in their opinions of what constitutes the largest national problem from one survey to the next and on claims that many citizens do not hold uniformly conservative or liberal stances on a wide variety of political, economic, and social topics.⁵ Through his studies of public opinion, Gabriel Almond emphasizes that “large portions of an electorate do not have meaningful beliefs.” Almond contends that “foreign policy attitudes of most Americans lack intellectual structure and factual content.”⁶

Great efforts are made to differentiate between informed minorities and the uninformed mass public. James Rosenau distinguishes between the mass of Americans who are allegedly “uninformed about specific foreign policy issues or foreign affairs in general” and the most interested and educated, who play a more active role in foreign policy. Rosenau concludes that 75 to 90 percent of the public hold relatively “superficial, undisciplined feelings” on important policy matters. The mass “response to foreign policy matters” is “less one of intellect and more one of emotion.” Conversely, the “attentive public,” which constitutes perhaps 10 percent of the citizenry, is “more inclined to participate in the opinion making process.” This public, Rosenau claims, holds “structured opinions” that are “highly significant,” and these individuals are “more inclined to participate in the opinion making process.”⁷

Demographic factors are thought to play a major role in differentiating the political knowledge of citizens from various social groups. Michael Carpini and Scott Keeter discuss significant distinctions between individuals based upon their level of income, race, sex, and age.⁸ Formal education is also said to play a vital role in influencing public opinion. In his landmark work *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*, John Mueller presents evidence that “it is the well-educated segment of the population that most nearly typifies the follower mentality [in line with official positions]. Thus, contrary to a common belief, it has been the well-educated members of the society who have most consistently supported the prosecution of the wars

in Korea and Vietnam.” More specifically, those who held college degrees were consistently more likely to support both wars, as opposed to those who completed only high school or grade school.⁹

There is strong disagreement about how effective the mass public is in influencing foreign policy decisions. G. William Domhoff frames politicians as “highly responsive to the power of elites’ agenda . . . because of the power of the wealthy few to shape foreign, defense, and economic policies to their liking.” The mass public, Domhoff concludes, enjoys very little control over major policy areas related to economics, military spending, and international relations.¹⁰ Gladys Lang and Kurt Lang speak of a “bystander public,” claiming that “the preferences of the mass public do not translate directly into executive decisions,” since the public

is in no position to make policy, to draft a law, or even to commit a public body to follow through on a decision. . . . The mass public can obstruct or approve, but not directly implement. The “decision” they make when they vote is nothing beyond the expression of a judgment, a judgment on what others have done or are proposing to do.¹¹

The Langs cite the example of the Watergate scandal, explaining that the main force driving attention to the issue was not the media or the general public, but rather a political informant—in this case former FBI deputy director W. Mark Felt, also known as “Deep Throat.”¹²

Kurt and Gladys Lang’s rejection of an active public role in influencing public policy is challenged by a number of recent studies. Andrew McFarland explains that “social movements have a major impact on the American policymaking process.” McFarland portrays activists participating in the civil rights movement as “mature and educated” members of society, who utilized and actively worked with sympathetic government institutions such as the Supreme Court and the Eisenhower administration to promote desegregation.¹³ Jack Walker concludes that “spontaneous [social] movements that sweep through society . . . represent a form of mobilization from below that government leaders are almost compelled to recognize if they expect to maintain their legitimacy.”¹⁴ Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink argue in *Activists Beyond Borders* that social movements are not only successful at the national level but also at the transnational level in proactively influencing political systems. The authors explore a number of successful social movements that promoted the global abolition of slavery, human rights in Latin America, and women’s citi-

zanship and environmental protections the world over.¹⁵ All of these studies retain one important similarity—they demonstrate, contrary to the Langs' assumptions, that mass-based citizen movements can play a vital and direct role in formulating policy and influencing lawmaking. These social movements apply pressure on officials *prior* to governmental action, rather than following it.

Average citizens are at times successful in proactively limiting American foreign policy. This point is stressed by William LeoGrande, who examines the Reagan administration's policy in Central America during the 1980s. In the case of Nicaragua, the public prohibited the Reagan administration from committing United States troops to combat the democratically elected leftist Sandinista government.¹⁶ The administration was forced to rely on a surrogate force, utilizing the anti-Sandinista Contra terrorist forces, which were responsible for destroying civilian, military, and political targets in Nicaragua.¹⁷

Scholars also address the 1991 Gulf war as an example of the public's ability to limit the United States' military power. The public developed a "Vietnam Syndrome" characterized by opposition to long-term wars of occupation. George H. W. Bush best expressed elite opposition to the Vietnam Syndrome when he explained, "I don't think that [public] support [for the 1991 Gulf war] would last if it were a long, drawn-out conflagration. I think support would erode, as it did in Vietnam." As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under the George H. W. Bush administration, Colin Powell also factored public opposition to open-ended wars into his planning of the 1991 Gulf War. The Powell Doctrine was developed from this understanding of public resistance to war, with the Bush administration committing to short-term, overwhelming use of force rather than an extended occupation.¹⁸ Political leaders are dissatisfied with the limits placed on them by the public. Resistance to extended war is seen as regretful, with antiwar sentiment interpreted as a sickness or "syndrome."¹⁹ These views speak volumes about elite distrust of a critical, proactive public.

John Zaller's *The Nature and Origins of Public Opinion* remains one of the most influential studies of public opinion. Similarly to Converse and other elite theorists, Zaller contends that the mass public is uninformed on political issues.²⁰ He cites Americans' poor performance on civics IQ tests as evidence of public ignorance. The public, Zaller argues, is often unaware of the context of political conflicts. For example, Americans remained largely unaware during much of the 1980s of which side the United States supported in the conflict with Nicaragua

(it supported the right-wing Contra guerillas against the leftist Sandinista government). Historically, research also shows that less than one-half of eligible voters are able to provide the name of their congressional representative.²¹

Public knowledge of foreign policy issues is based on a variety of sources, some of the most important including consumption of media, involvement and interest in the political process, and formal education.²² Only a small minority of people, however, heavily consume elite discourse as transmitted through national print media.²³ Such consumption, along with higher levels of education, plays a major role in indoctrinating a select number of Americans in favor of official views.²⁴ The indoctrinating effects of media and education are increasingly acknowledged in scholarly studies. Richard Sobel finds that political leaders “may encounter great difficulties in persuading a relatively uninformed public. Even though it might seem that the president could be most successful in persuading people who are least educated, informed, interested, or concerned about the issue . . . these individuals are least likely to expose themselves” to the messages of political leaders.²⁵ As Zaller concludes, “The more citizens know about politics and public affairs, the more firmly they are wedded to elite and media perspectives on foreign policy issues.”²⁶

The indoctrinating effects of education and media exposure are not uniform across the general public. When officials disagree on public policies, the most educated, most politically attentive, and those with the most exposure to media are more likely to follow and internalize the ideological biases driving debates between political elites.²⁷ This interested segment of the public becomes polarized, however, between competing views, as examples such as the Vietnam War and 1991 Gulf war demonstrate. In earlier periods of these conflicts when political leaders agreed on the course policy should take, the interested public reflected the consensus among officials; in later periods when political leaders disagreed strongly on the path of policy, the interested public was more likely than others throughout the mass public to reflect this conflict among Democratic and Republican political officials.²⁸

THE RATIONAL PUBLIC

It is encouraging for democracy that not all analysts of public opinion view the mass public as incapable, uninformed, or uninterested in poli-

tics. An increasing number of critics challenge elite theories of public opinion. These critics frame the American public as generally rational in its formulation of opinions, even if many citizens do not always understand the specific details of many policy disputes. They present extensive evidence of collective public reasoning on complex political topics, and argue convincingly that political leaders should pay more attention to public preferences.²⁹ James Stimson finds that public support for presidents, Congress, and local political officials fluctuates jointly in positive and negative directions over time.³⁰ The different political offices in the United States are evaluated collectively, with public approval of each branch of government inextricably linked to the others. Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro find high levels of stability over a number of years in the answers provided by those who are polled on major policy issues such as crime, education, foreign policy, transportation, and foreign aid.³¹ Page and Shapiro conclude that changes in public opinion are not unpredictable, but move in a gradual, stable fashion. The authors argue that “various bits of new information may cumulate and alter the individual’s beliefs in a systematic way that produces real long-term change in policy preferences.” In short, the public tends to respond when new information on political issues becomes available, and as reality changes over time.³²

The question remains: How is the public able to form coherent opinions on major issues, often with only meager attention to the specific details of political conflicts? William Gamson concludes that Americans display a considerable complexity in the ways they interact with the news regarding issues such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, among other topics.³³ Samuel Popkin argues in *The Reasoning Voter* that the mass public possesses “low information rationality”; they are able to form stable opinions with relatively little information compared to the voluminous information that is actually available. Low-information rationality is developed by the public’s accessing of “information they have learned about the political system in their personal lives, from the media, from political leader’s statements, from their demographic backgrounds, and from judging individual candidates’ ideologies from their party identification.”³⁴

Apathetic citizens also display the ability to amass increased knowledge of political issues. Television news viewers with little interest in political issues disproportionately learn more from watching television—the preferred medium of the masses. In contrast, newspapers and news magazines are more popular outlets of learning for those with higher interest in political issues.³⁵ The average American, Doris Graber argues,

“can think effectively and draw sound inferences on many fronts,” despite reliance on television news, which is demonized for low-brow programming and superficial news coverage of political questions.³⁶ As Graber finds through her intensive interviews with dozens of individuals with low incomes and low levels of formal education, people often display high levels of political sophistication. Detailed, thoroughly thought-out responses consistently dominate discussions of political and social issues in groups that Graber surveyed.³⁷

Americans are traditionally thought of as depoliticized, preferring entertainment programming and infotainment over traditional political news stories. However, entertainment-oriented audiences are more interested in political issues in recent years. This newfound interest appears to be, in great part, the result of increased consumption of entertainment-based “soft news” programs with a political focus. Soft news programs such as *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart, *Late Night* with David Letterman, and *The Colbert Report* mix traditional foreign policy stories with comedic editorializing. As consumption of soft news increases, viewers’ attention to, and interest in, foreign policy increases.³⁸ By framing international news stories within an entertainment format, soft news programs reduce the informational costs of becoming better informed about international relations. In short, a major by-product of soft news consumption is the transformation of the traditionally apathetic and politically disinterested into more engaged, civic-minded citizens.

THE RATIONAL PUBLIC’S ASSESSMENT OF IRAQ

This book has focused on documenting the strength and effectiveness of official propaganda and hegemony in influencing messages transmitted in the American press. Although hegemony is clearly a valuable tool for understanding media coverage of war, this theoretical framework is not always useful in explaining the *effects* of media propaganda on the public. In increasingly larger numbers, Americans are often quite effective in rejecting media and political propaganda. In other words, mass opinion is not simply confined to pro-war feelings or to tactical criticisms. Americans subscribe to a number of challenges to the Iraq war that fall outside the bounds of the bipartisan hegemonic framework that operates in Washington.

Contrary to the claims of elitists, the American public does rationally react to changes in information related to military conflicts. Public opin-

ion collectively grew more critical of the occupation of Iraq in light of the war's increasing cost in financial resources, American and Iraqi lives, and the growth of sectarian violence. A comprehensive review of the status on the ground in Iraq reveals a land of increased desperation and destruction. Public infrastructure in Iraq was in worse condition by 2008 than prior to the 2003 invasion. In short, the state of Iraq grew steadily and significantly worse during the U.S. occupation, and Americans responded critically to these developments.

The United States originally allocated a meager \$18 billion for reconstruction in Iraq, and half of that money was redirected to the "pacification" of Iraqi resistance to the occupation.³⁹ Despite media and administration propaganda celebrating the American commitment to democratizing and rebuilding Iraq, such goals are far from a central part of the U.S. agenda. Contrary to their humanitarian rhetoric, American officials announced the end to limited reconstruction in Iraq as early as 2006.⁴⁰ Reports from 2006 through 2008 estimated Iraqi unemployment at between 60 to 70 percent, and the lack of jobs is considered a major factor fueling violent resistance to the United States.⁴¹ Iraq's electricity grid, according to government estimates, will not reach its pre-invasion capacity until 2011, and by 2008 it provided for less than half of the demand of the Iraqi people. Baghdad's neighborhoods have access to less than two hours of electricity some days. Estimates suggest that up to \$80 billion is required to reconstruct the country's electric network, more than three times the money allocated by the United States for all of Iraq's reconstruction.⁴²

Iraq's water treatment facilities suffered under years of neglect due to the American-British sponsored United Nations sanctions, as well as during the occupation. The U.N. sanctions, responsible for the deaths of up to 500,000 Iraqi children, prevented the importing of basic components needed to rebuild Iraq's shattered infrastructure. Problems with reconstruction continued following the end of the sanctions. The construction of the waste treatment plant in the city of Falluja, supposedly "the centerpiece of an effort to rebuild Iraq," is deemed a "failed" project by the *New York Times*. More than half of Iraqis in the years following the U.S. invasion suffered from a lack of access to safe drinking water.⁴³ Over 20 percent of Iraqi children were chronically malnourished by 2006—a dramatic increase following the onset of the occupation.⁴⁴

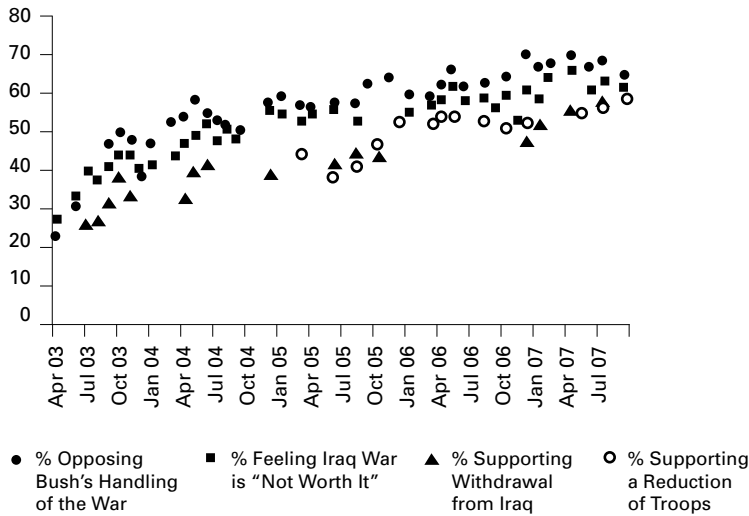
The occupation of Iraq, in light of the dire circumstances discussed above, was accompanied by a major human rights crisis, fueled by the increase in internally displaced and refugees fleeing the country as a result

of chronic violence. By mid-2007, an estimated four to five million Iraqis were expelled from their homes, half with no access to food.⁴⁵ Despite discussions in the American media of the 2007 surge's success, the Iraqi Red Crescent Organization estimated that the number of internally displaced actually increased from 499,000 to over one million after American forces were increased.⁴⁶ As mentioned in chapter 3, Iraqi deaths are estimated at over one million in the post-invasion period.⁴⁷

Much was made of the decline in monthly attacks following the "surge" of 30,000 troops that the United States sent to Iraq in 2007. There is significant disagreement, however, over whether the decline in Iraq's violence had anything to do with the expanded American troop presence or whether it was the product of a combination of the Sunni Awakening movement (in which Sunni resistance groups declared a truce with American troops in order to target al-Qaeda), the Sunnis' loss of the Sunni-Shia civil war in Baghdad, or the decision of Shia militiamen to stand down in their attacks on the Iraqi government and American troops.⁴⁸ Regardless of this debate, it should be remembered that Iraq remained one of the most dangerous countries in the world following the surge, as average attacks per month decreased from a high of between 5,000 to 6,000 per month in 2006 to about 1,000 to 2,000 per month in late 2007 and 2008. The decline in attacks needs to be evaluated *relative* to the lack of regular violence prior to the invasion. Although total deaths from bombings, shootings, and executions were estimated at between 2,000 to 2,500 deaths in early 2007 during the first stages of the surge, monthly violence remained at high, albeit relatively lower levels by late 2007, of between 900 to 1,100 people per month.⁴⁹ Again, this constitutes approximately 1,000 *more* deaths per month than occurred prior to the invasion. Under such circumstances, Americans are correct in assuming that Iraq is still plagued by high levels of violence.

As national public opinion polls demonstrate, American public support for war steadily declined in light of Iraq's deterioration. Public opinion became increasingly critical by late 2004 to early 2005. As the American National Election Study of 2004 found, a majority of Americans viewed the Iraq war as no longer worth it by late 2004, at the time of the presidential election. Information on increased public opposition to the war is provided in detail in Figure 7.1, which is derived from monthly polling data from CNN, the Pew Research Center, ABC News, and the *Washington Post*. As Figure 7.1 demonstrates, public opposition to the war, opposition to Bush's handling of the war, and support for

FIGURE 7.1: Public Opposition to the Iraq War (2003–2007)



Source: Data from Table 7.1 is pulled from www.pollingreport.com, and is from the following poll series conducted by: CNN, Pew Research Center, ABC News, and the Washington Post.

troop reductions and withdrawal increased steadily from 2003 to 2007.⁵⁰ Opinion changed in a rational, predictable way, despite short-term positive and negative fluctuations, as Iraq's security situation deteriorated.

In the four survey questions on Iraq listed in Figure 7.1, the average change in the opinion of all respondents for each individual question fluctuates by between 2.5 to 4 percent from each month to the next. These average fluctuations reinforce the extraordinary amount of stability of public opinion, contrary to elitist claims that the public is unpredictable and fickle.

Furthermore, there is a strong degree of overlap across the responses to the four questions above. The answers to each of the four questions listed in Figure 7.1 are strongly correlated with one another, specifically in the ways public responses to each question change from one month to the next.⁵¹ In other words, support for troop reduction and full withdrawal, opposition to Bush's handling of the war, and views of the war as not worth it all tend to change in a similar direction, increasing over time.

There is much disagreement about the reasons for why the public opposes war. Research finds that increasing American military casualties play a strong role in fostering antiwar sentiment.⁵² Americans favor military intervention when the stated goal is defending another democratic country but are less willing to use force to benefit dictatorships. Negative

media depictions of enemy countries and portrayals of an “enemy” state as aggressive, as violating international norms, or retaining an alien or hostile political culture, are all helpful in building domestic support for the use of force.⁵³ American intervention, when characterized as policing a country that is either suffering from civil war or in danger of falling into civil war tends to be extremely unpopular.⁵⁴ Former president Bush’s justifications for extending the occupation clearly fall under the unpopular rubric of fighting to prevent civil war.

Disagreement exists over whether civilian casualties are a powerful factor in fomenting opposition to war. Political scientist John Mueller concludes that in the wars in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq, “American public opinion became a key factor . . . in each one there has been a simple association: as casualties mount, support decreases. Broad enthusiasm at the outset invariably erodes.” Support for war in Iraq declined even more precipitously than did support in earlier conflicts.⁵⁵ Political scientist Christopher Gelpi challenges Mueller’s simple casualty narrative, arguing that the “American public regularly makes judgments about the potential costs and benefits of military operation[s]. As the likelihood of obtaining any benefits diminishes, the human cost of war becomes less tolerable, and casualties reduce support for operation[s]. On the other hand, if and when the public is optimistic about a successful outcome, it is far more willing to bear the human cost of war.”⁵⁶

Sadly, public opinion polls ignore the most obvious way to answer the question of why Americans turn against wars—simply ask them. Did the American public turn against the war because of the increasing cost in dollars and lives? Is opposition driven by feelings that the war is unwinnable? Or does the public see the war as immoral and repressive? This chapter and chapter 8 address these simple questions by surveying Americans to identify why they oppose war.

In 2009, I surveyed over two hundred Americans living in the Midwest on their feelings about Iraq. These respondents live in a variety of locations, including the city of Chicago, its suburbs, and rural areas in central Illinois. Participants represented a wide range of occupations, ages, and racial backgrounds. Although those surveyed clearly do not constitute a representative sample of the entire population of the United States, they at least provide some basic information on why many Americans oppose the war. Some hard-nosed social scientists may fault this survey as unrepresentative of the entire American public. This study, however, was not designed to generalize to all 300 million Americans. It

has a few simple purposes: to allow a small number of respondents to provide *more detailed* answers than are typically allowed in national surveys of larger numbers of people; and to provide a test run for a number of questions that are never or almost never asked by mainstream polling organizations and see whether these questions resonate enough with Americans that they may be asked again in future national polls.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of public opinion surveys never assess whether the public opposes war for moral, as opposed to pragmatic reasons. This study is meant to take the first step in addressing this problem. Respondents were asked to provide detailed reasons why they felt one way or another in questions related to Iraq. Since this is not a national survey, readers are advised to cautiously assess the percentages I provide in this chapter and in chapter 8. These percentages are not to be taken as definitive or irrefutable evidence of how people feel about the Iraq war. They are merely meant to show that a sizable number of Americans agree with one policy opinion over another, and that further examination is needed. Having acknowledged this limitation, however, it should be noted that all other public opinion data cited in this chapter and the next that are not associated with my Midwest survey *are* generalizable to the entire public. This information was gathered by national polling organizations that use survey techniques that allow them to generalize their questions to all 300 million Americans.

Americans began rejecting the pro-war views of the Bush administration claiming “progress” in the occupation within less than two years of the March 2003 invasion.⁵⁷ According to the Harris polling group, by 2005 63 percent of Americans supported “bringing most of our troops home in the next year,” with only 35 percent supporting extension of the occupation until a stable government is established. In that same year, over six in ten people felt that the Bush administration “generally misleads the American public” on political issues in order “to achieve its own ends.”⁵⁸ Critical opinions intensified in early 2006 when Iraq fell into civil war. By March of that year, when sectarian violence exploded, 68 percent of Americans supported a draw-down of troops. Two-thirds of the public felt, contrary to the promises of the Bush administration, that the situation in Iraq had and would continue to worsen, and expressed low confidence in the possibility of a successful occupation.⁵⁹

Bush’s claims that the Iraq war is a vital part of the “war on terrorism” were rejected by most people as well. By late 2006, 60 percent of Americans felt that the Iraq war actually increased, rather than

decreased, the likelihood of a terrorist attack against the United States.⁶⁰ Americans deferred to the wishes of the Iraqi public rather than those of the Bush administration when 73 percent expressed their support for American withdrawal if Iraqis desired such an action.⁶¹ Negative public opinion persisted, despite administration rhetoric in 2007 that the United States was succeeding through the surge in stabilizing Iraq. By May of 2007, four months into the surge, 75 percent of those surveyed felt things were going badly in Iraq, and six in ten felt that the United States should have never gotten involved in the occupation. Only 23 percent approved the Bush administration's handling of the conflict.⁶² By midyear 2007, most Americans supported the Democratic Party over the Republican Party, hoping they would pursue a major policy change in Iraq. President Bush's approval rating had reached an all-time low, at just 33 percent.⁶³

Supplementing the national survey data cited above, my survey of midwesterners provides much insight into the American public's feelings toward Iraq by 2009. Similarly to the American public as a whole, most midwesterners surveyed (68 percent) supported a timetable for withdrawal. The vast majority (81 percent) felt that the conflict was "not worthwhile," with 79 percent agreeing that the occupation was "not succeeding" in reducing violence in Iraq. Many of those surveyed opposed the conflict for failing to produce defensible results. For example, one respondent explained: "Currently no good has come from the war for our side or theirs. [Iraq] is still in disarray, and we are not gaining anything from being there." Another respondent explained, in the midst of the surge, that "there may be a temporary reduction in violence in Iraq related to the United States' presence, but the Iraqi people ultimately need to involve themselves to produce change—however, people in poverty (regular citizens) have much difficulty standing up to force—they're busy trying to feed themselves."

Despite the increase in public discontent, the question remains of why, specifically, did people turn so quickly against the Iraq occupation? The evidence from the Midwest survey suggests that Americans respond, along the lines of the "rational public" thesis, to changes in events on the ground in Iraq. When those surveyed were asked for specific reasons why they opposed the war, the three most common reasons provided were that the occupation was too costly in the midst of economic meltdown and recession; military casualties were unacceptably high; and the conflict was "unwinnable."

TABLE 7.1: The Midwest Survey: Reasons for Public Opposition to War

Reasons for Supporting Withdrawal	Respondents Who Mentioned Reason	Respondents Citing Reason as Most Important Factor
The War Is Costing Too Much Money	27%	42%
American Casualties are Too High	21%	17%
The War Is Unwinnable	16%	23%
Iraqi Casualties Are Too High	16%	10%
The War Is Fundamentally Wrong and Immoral	7%	0%
Violence in Iraq has Increased Under the Occupation	9%	5%
The Surge Succeeded in Reducing Violence	4%	3%

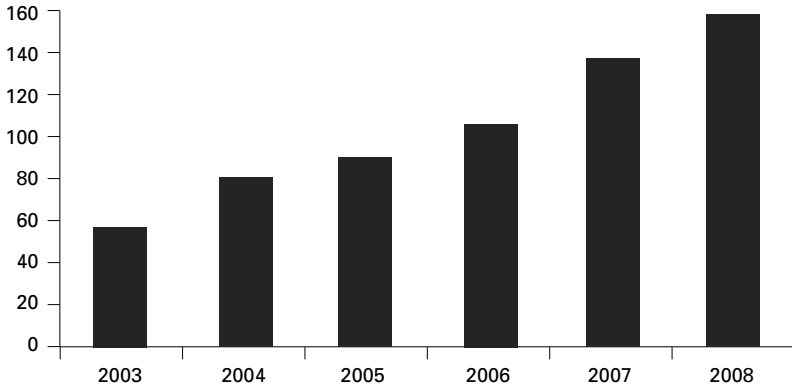
Source: Author research

Table 7.1 depicts the major reasons provided for opposition to war among midwesterners who supported a timetable for withdrawal. Although Gelpi and Mueller debate whether opposition to war is driven by assessments of the conflict as unwinnable or by the cost in American lives, in the Midwest survey both reasons retain major significance in motivating public resistance.

However, in times of economic downturn and recession, the cost of the conflict may trump both assessments of potential victory and military casualties. Other reasons for antiwar sentiment include the increase in Iraqi casualties; the increase in violence in Iraq since 2003; views of the war as immoral; and assessments that the surge opened up a window for withdrawal.

Setting a timetable for ending the Iraq war took on renewed urgency in light of the dire economic situation of many Americans. The conflict retains little significance for people who are unable to pay for basic cost of living expenses, or who are in danger of losing their homes during the subprime mortgage and financial crises. The increasing cost of the war is depicted in Figure 7.2. The Congressional Research Service estimates that the war directly cost American taxpayers more than \$600 billion from 2003 to 2008, but others project that it will cost between \$1 trillion to \$3 trillion in the long term.⁶⁴

FIGURE 7.2: Cost of War in Billions Per Year



Source: Amy Belasco, "The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11," Congressional Research Service, 15 October 2008, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL33110.pdf>

My survey of midwesterners reinforces the vital role of the war's cost in inciting antiwar opinions. Many feel the United States should be allocating hundreds of billions of dollars to address problems at home rather than committing funds to open-ended combat operations abroad. The concern with cost is not simply pragmatic but also moral. Many feel that the money spent does not help the Iraqis, but rather makes the security situation in Iraq worse. As one respondent explains, "In my opinion, this war just raises taxes and this seems pointless, there's no winning team. And this war puts a bad reputation on the president and the nation. Families who want the troops to come home are waiting, and we need to worry about ourselves rather than other countries."

Other responses express similar concerns:

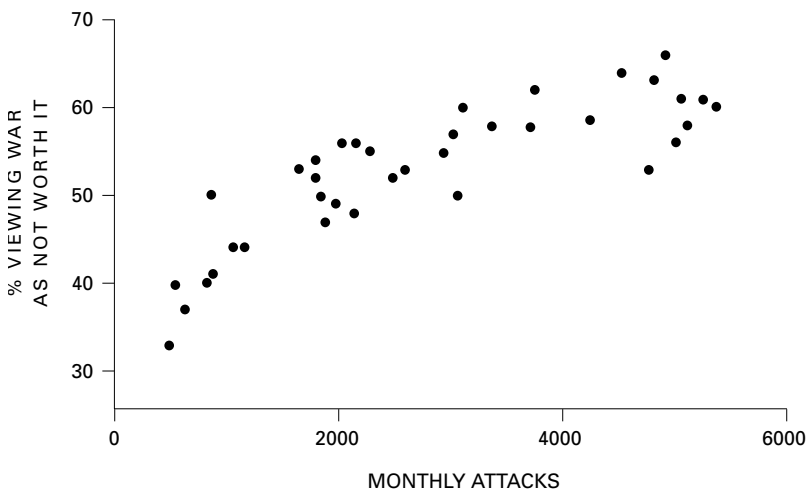
- The overall cost in money and lives has been insane. We are spending trillions on benefiting a people that would like to see us leave and money which could be used to fix domestic problems. American men and women are not coming home and Iraq men and women are dying as well.
- I think that a convincing reason to withdraw from Iraq is that it is costing the United States so much money. If you think about it, we're going to war and spending billions of dollars just to commit violence. On the other hand, you see that our economy is weak, the stock market is [negatively] affecting many citizens and

employment has become an issue in the United States. Therefore, to benefit our country, we can withdraw from Iraq and instead of using money toward killings and violence we can use the money to get our economy back on track.

High levels of violence in Iraq are considered in large part to be a consequence of the occupation itself. Figure 7.3 depicts the relationship between attacks in Iraq and criticisms of the war. Clearly, increased criticisms of the war are expressed more often when violence increases.⁶⁵ Feelings that the war increases instability in Iraq are also expressed in the Midwest survey. Sixty-five percent feel that the war in Iraq is no longer “worthwhile” and is not succeeding in reducing violence in Iraq, as opposed to only 6 percent who feel the conflict is “worthwhile” and is succeeding in reducing violence. One of those surveyed expresses his concern with the harmful effects of the occupation this way: “I agree that it [the war] has generally not been worthwhile. The only way to promote Iraqi stability is if American troops withdraw and let the Iraqis establish their own stability. As long as we Americans are taking sides, violence will never end. The best thing is to remove our troops from Iraq and let the Iraqis establish their own government.”

Another respondent feels that the United States’ “inability to identify a clear enemy prevents us from warring in the preferred American style—

FIGURE 7.3: Monthly Attacks & Opposition to War



Source: www.pollingreport.com and from an ABC/Washington Post poll series, the data on attacks in Iraq comes from the MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base.

big battles. The result is violence against the civilian population, often-times alienating the very group we are supposed to protect.”

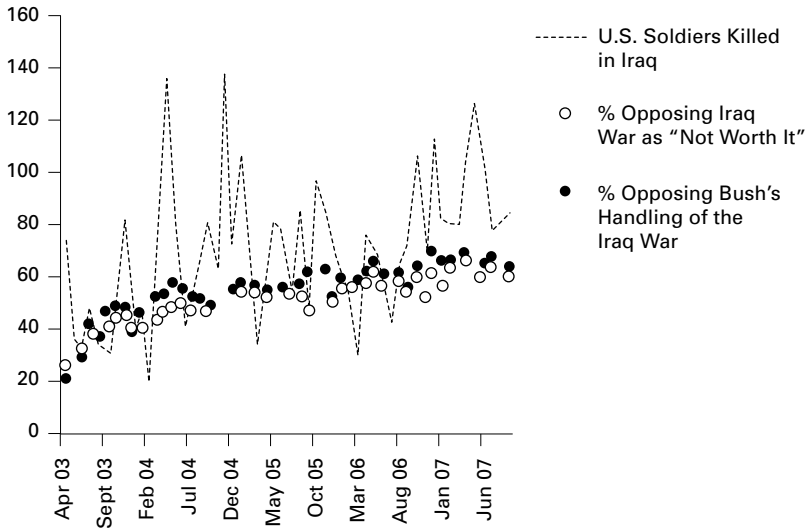
By a three-to-one ratio, midwestern respondents feel that the United States is guilty of contributing to Iraq’s deterioration rather than reducing it. Similarly to the American public at large, a majority of respondents either somewhat or strongly agree that the United States is “responsible for increasing the violence in Iraq,” and less than one-quarter somewhat or strongly disagree with this statement.⁶⁶ This opposition to the war is well summarized in these survey comments:

- Iraqis will not cooperate with American troops because they do not want us there. Therefore, it [the occupation] has not helped their community at all. People in Iraq are rejecting American troops there and this has caused an increase in violence in Iraq.
- Just the fact that we have been in Iraq for so many years says that we have not accomplished what we set out to do. By causing so much strife, just from being over there, we seem to be promoting conflict between the groups of Iraqis, as well as sectarian violence. . . . I think that the fact that we are occupying Iraq makes the Iraqi citizens angry and encourages them to engage in acts of violence against the United States. I think that they use suicide bombings and car bombings as a way of protesting our occupation. If we were not there, thousands of innocent civilians would not be killed.
- I don’t think we have seen any positive effects from the United States’ occupation, and there continues to be violence and instability. The United States is clearly escalating the violence just by occupying Iraq. We are not greeted as heroes but as enemies.

The American public’s conclusion that the United States is contributing to Iraq’s instability corresponds closely to the views of the Iraqi people (addressed in more detail in chapter 9). The American public appears to possess a remarkable insight in terms of its perceptions of the Iraq conflict, in contrast to the condescending claims made by elite theorists. These insights are very much in line with Iraqis who experience the conflict on the ground.

Antiwar feelings are strongly linked to month-to-month fluctuations in American military deaths. Though casualties do fluctuate more wildly

FIGURE 7.4: Public Opposition to War & Military Casualties



Source: www.pollingreport.com and from an ABC/*Washington Post* poll series.

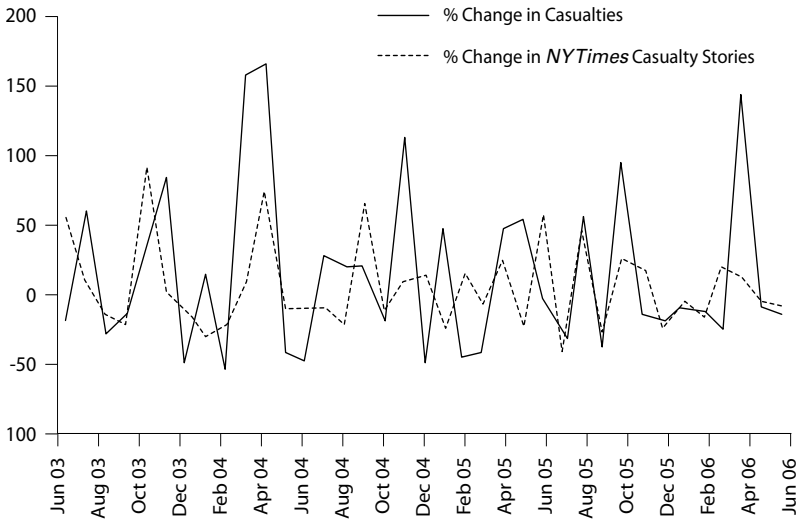
than public opinion, the positive relationship between casualties and opposition to war is statistically significant.⁶⁷ Opposition to Bush's handling of the war and feelings that the war is "not worth it" significantly increase during months when casualties are growing.⁶⁸ This relationship is represented in Figure 7.4.

American public opinion reached its tipping point in 2004, when monthly American casualties reached their highest level in the entire five-year period examined (2003 to 2007).⁶⁹

Critical coverage of the war is also related to changes in casualties. As Figure 7.5 indicates, increased *New York Times* attention to American deaths, though fluctuating greatly, is positively and significantly associated with increased monthly casualties.⁷⁰ Although the growth and decline of monthly casualty stories is relatively small—often by just a few stories a month—the pattern is clear: elite media outlets' reporting of American casualties generally changes proportionately with rising and falling casualty levels.

Additionally, in the months when casualties—and media attention to those casualties—increases, public opposition to the war grows significantly.⁷¹ Americans seem to respond to aggregate monthly changes in American casualties as reported in media. Reporting of landmark casualty counts—when casualties reached 1,000 and 4,000—seem to gain serious attention from news consumers. As columnist Victor Davis Hansen observes:

FIGURE 7.5: American Deaths & Media Coverage

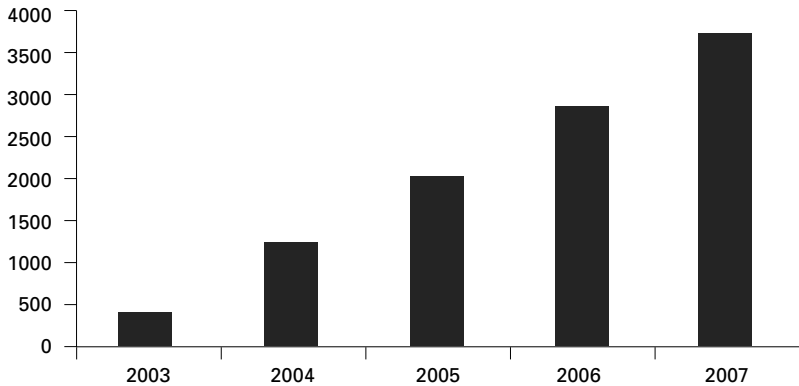


Source: Lexis Nexis and from the Iraq Coalition Casualty Count Project: <http://www.icasualties.org/>

“Public support for the war [in 2005] commensurately declined” in response to increases in “the aggregate number of American military fatalities,” and in light of “the nightly ghoulish news of improved explosives and suicide bombers.”⁷² American opposition to the war, however, is more likely affected by audiences reading about the total number of deaths at any given time, as reflected in Figure 7.6, rather than as a response to small increases in the number of news stories on casualties per month.

It is no accident that increasing violence in Iraq is accompanied by a growth in American military casualties. Violent attacks in Iraq reached new heights in late 2006 and 2007, when the civil war reached its peak, and as cumulative American casualties steadily increased (see Figure 7.7). The relationship between press attention to casualties and increased public opposition to war, however, appears to be a complex one. On the one hand, we see a positive relationship between increases in monthly casualties and increased public opposition to war, and on the other, there is no statistically significant relationship between monthly increases in the number of *New York Times* stories covering casualties and increased public opposition to war. A number of possible explanations can account for the lack of a relationship. For one, the month-to-month fluctuations in a paper like the *New York Times* may not be replicated in other newspapers

FIGURE 7.6: U.S. Military Deaths (Cumulative)



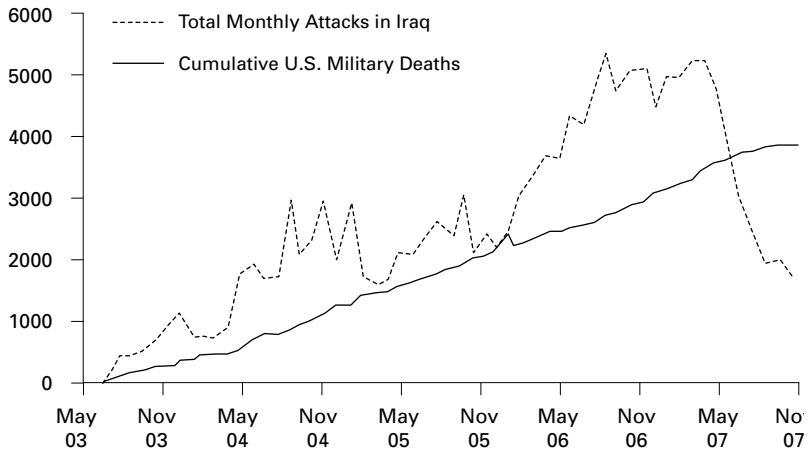
Source: The Iraq Coalition Casualty Count Project: <http://www.icasualties.org/>

and in television news outlets, although another analysis needs to be undertaken to demonstrate this.

Another possibility is that the public reacts mainly to aggregate numbers of soldiers killed, responding to estimates provided on a monthly basis by media outlets. This possibility seems more likely than the alternative scenario, where the public responds to very small month-by-month fluctuations in the number of casualty stories in the news. News readers and viewers are probably reading or watching a relatively small number of stories each month (perhaps as little as one story)—or talking to friends and family who see stories summarizing whether casualties are on the rise or decline, and they are responding accordingly. This seems to make sense, since the fluctuations in the month-by-month coverage of casualties in papers like the *New York Times* are so minuscule, and unlikely to produce much of an effect in and of themselves. To put these minor fluctuations into perspective, the total attention to casualties in the *New York Times* increases, on average, by just 1.5 stories during months when casualties are increasing in Iraq, whereas coverage decreases on average by only two stories per month when monthly casualties are declining. It is extremely doubtful that the general public would notice such small changes in the frequency of casualty stories.

There is strong evidence, however, that Americans pay close attention to U.S. casualties in Iraq on a more general level. Table 7.2 reproduces the findings of polls conducted by the Pew Research Center from 2006 through 2008.⁷³ The results demonstrate that most Americans did pay close attention to casualties in the news, as over 60 percent of respondents

FIGURE 7.7: Escalating Attacks & Casualties in Iraq



Source: The MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base and from the Iraq Coalition Casualty Count Project: <http://www.icasualties.org/>

correctly estimated the number of Americans killed in both 2006 and 2007, although only a plurality were able to do so in 2008. The 2008 decline in casualty awareness can likely be explained by the fact that the issue of Iraq largely fell out of major newspaper headlines and television stories by late 2007 following the surge, and because American casualties had reached an all-time low by this period.⁷⁴ Decreased attention to Iraq, then, was followed by increased public ignorance about the number of U.S. military deaths in the country.

Further examination of the Pew polls finds that although knowledge of casualties was high across different demographics, those who followed news on Iraq were statistically more likely to provide an accurate estimate of the number of U.S. soldiers killed. More specifically, consumers of Rush Limbaugh's radio program, NPR listeners, and Fox News Bill O'Reilly viewers were better able to provide the correct number of Americans killed, as compared to those who did not consume these programs.⁷⁵ In short, a majority of Americans appear to have followed stories on U.S. casualties in the news on some level, and regular news consumers are particularly effective at providing information on casualty levels.

Much of the limited month-by-month variation in coverage of casualties is explained by the media's reliance on official sources. Officials at the Department of Defense exercise tremendous informal power over reporting, with 75 percent of the stories on casualties in the *New York Times*

TABLE 7.2: Public Knowledge of U.S. Casualties

April 2006	% Providing Each Response	Feb 2007	% Providing Each Response	Dec 2008	% Providing Each Response
500	3%	1,000	4%	2,200	14%
1,500	17%	2,000	17%	3,200	23%
2,500*	61%*	3,000*	62%*	4,200*	43%*
3,500	19%	4,000	17%	5,200	20%

*Boldface figures indicate the correct response to questions about how many Americans died, as well as the percent of Americans who correctly estimated casualties.

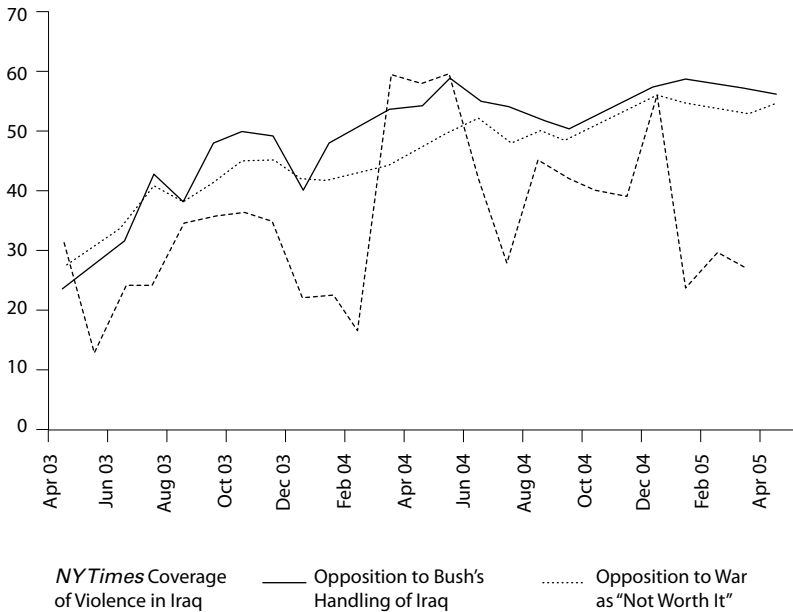
Source: Pew Research Center, "April 2006 News Interest Index," April 2006, <http://people-press.org/dataarchive/>; Pew Research Center, "February 2007 Political Survey," 2 February 2007, <http://people-press.org/dataarchive/>; Pew Research Center, "December Political and Economic Survey," 3 December 2008, <http://people-press.org/dataarchive/>.

every month based solely on press statements released by the DOD listing the names of the dead.⁷⁶ Only one-quarter of the stories in the *New York Times* originate from the actual reporting of events in Iraq that led to the deaths of soldiers. Fluctuation in month-to-month reporting, then, is influenced more directly by the decision of military officials to release casualty reports than it is upon actual changes in the number of attacks and deaths on the ground in the war zone.

The great irony of the findings in this chapter is that elite media never *intended* to foster antiwar dissent in their reporting of casualties and violence in Iraq. The liberal editors of papers such as the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* did not even endorse a withdrawal from Iraq timetable until 2007, almost four years into the conflict. Nonetheless, simply by reporting that Iraqi violence and American casualties were on the rise from 2003 through 2007, it appears that national news outlets played a major role in mobilizing public opposition to war. As Figure 7.8 suggests, the most important period in terms of the media's effect appears to be from mid-2003 through mid-2005.

As violence in Iraq grew rapidly from relative calm to thousands of attacks per month in 2004 and 2005, Americans grew increasingly skeptical of a war that appeared to be spiraling out of control. Figure 7.8 suggests that public opposition grew most strongly during months when coverage of the violence increased dramatically.⁷⁷ This rapid growth in violence stood in stark contrast to the promises of the Bush administration that United States forces would be greeted as "liberators" and that the resistance against the occupation was confined to a few "dead enders."

FIGURE 7.8: Coverage of Iraq Violence & Opposition to War



Source: Vanderbilt News Archive, as well as from the ABC/Washington Post poll series drawn from www.pollingreport.com

Although U.S. media were responsible for inciting opposition to the war, this does not mean, as conservative media critics contend, that reporters are consciously or ideologically driven to undermine the war at every turn. There is little evidence that reporters were driven by partisan considerations to promote a Democratic Party “antiwar” agenda at the expense of a Republican president in power.⁷⁸ A more likely reality is that reporters felt compelled to cover increasing violent attacks in Iraq, in addition to growing American casualties, because they feared they would lose credibility if they refused. Few Americans, after all, would take media outlets seriously if they refused to acknowledge that Iraqi violence and American casualties were on the rise from 2003 to 2007.

THE MIDWEST SURVEY AND IRAQ

The relationship between increased casualties and opposition to war is also evident in the Midwest survey. Many of those questioned cite both increases in Iraqi violence and increased military casualties as justifica-

tions for opposing the occupation. Respondents consistently speak of the dangers faced by American soldiers in the face of growing violence:

After the September 11th attacks Americans were eager to fight terrorism on all fronts and to explore all the avenues to go about it. When no weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq they started to have the first doubts about the motives for the war. I think people are generally supportive of all the humanitarian effort but as the occupation drags on, with weekly bombings and casualties, people are afraid it will turn into another Vietnam, another no-win situation.

Similarly, another respondent comments:

Every single soldier from the United States is put in danger by terrorists, as well as the danger of “friendly fire” that may be hard to prevent, but remains a threat. I’m concerned for needless death of any being on our planet. These people are someone’s father, mother, son, daughter . . . and the after-effects [post-traumatic stress disorder] will continue to devastate families for a long to come, even if they do survive.

Midwesterners often expressed anger at sacrificing American lives for a conflict with no foreseeable end and with questionable benefits for American national security. The loss of American lives is considered unacceptable in a civil war that continues to kill thousands of Iraqis and in which the long-term stability of Iraq is in doubt.

Iraqis’ mass contempt for the occupation is seen as delegitimizing the occupation, despite the American media’s celebrations of the surge and the limitations of criticisms to pragmatic grounds.⁷⁹ As one respondent explains:

It is obvious that the Iraqis do not respect our presence and are still lashing out at our troops. I do not see the reason for us to be there. The longer we are there, the more casualties we are going to have without a main cause. Many critics are saying that this war is Vietnam all over again, and I am starting to believe it.

Another critic of the war comments that the “success” of the surge came at the expense of the military’s credibility in future conflicts:

Our soldiers are dying for private gain and the strain is eroding the United States military. We are severely constrained by these efforts. We are unable to deal with

a real threat to security. Future threats will meet skepticism from the public because of needless waste built on lies. We will suffer an “Iraq syndrome” as we suffered from the “Vietnam syndrome” in the past.

HOPE FOR THE PUBLIC'S POWER IN DEMOCRATIC POLITICS

A number of key points with regard to public opinion, media, and war were identified in this chapter. Contrary to the conclusions of many intellectuals, the public is quite rational, responding to changes in information when formulating its opinions on Iraq. That the general public is attentive enough to follow major political issues such as Iraq while formulating informed opinions is encouraging for supporters of democracy. Sadly, political contempt for public opinion serves as a major impediment to democratic representation. Political and media elites continue to play a vital role in limiting democratic government. By conceding that the public is able to reject many of the media's hegemonic messages, I do not want to obscure the fact that there are crucial differences between sectors of the public based upon their demographic backgrounds. The effects of education, political attentiveness, and media consumption on public opinion are discussed at length in the next chapter. The role of the media and American educational institutions in indoctrinating the most privileged members of the public also receives significant attention.