

# THE PIPA/KNOWLEDGE NETWORKS POLL

THE AMERICAN PUBLIC ON INTERNATIONAL ISSUES

## The Separate Realities of Bush and Kerry Supporters

October 21, 2004

*PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR*

STEVEN KULL

*RESEARCH STAFF*

CLAY RAMSAY

STEFAN SUBIAS

STEPHEN WEBER

EVAN LEWIS



**PROGRAM ON INTERNATIONAL  
POLICY ATTITUDES (PIPA)**

A joint program of the Center on Policy  
Attitudes and the Center for International and  
Security Studies at the University of Maryland



**Knowledge  
NETWORKS**

A polling, social science, and  
market research firm based in  
Menlo Park, California

<b>PIPA Board of Advisors</b>		
<b>I.M. Destler</b> University of Maryland	<b>Alan Kay</b> Americans Talk Issues Foundation	<b>Robert Shapiro</b> Columbia University
<b>Gloria Duffy</b> Commonwealth Club	<b>Catherine Kelleher</b> US Naval War College	<b>Fred Steeper</b> Market Strategies
<b>Bill Frenzel</b> Brookings Institution	<b>Anthony Lake</b> Georgetown University	<b>Daniel Yankelovich</b> Public Agenda Foundation
<b>Alexander George</b> Stanford University	<b>Benjamin Page</b> Northwestern University	

**The Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA)** is a joint program of the Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland and the Center on Policy Attitudes. PIPA undertakes research on American attitudes in both the public and in the policymaking community toward a variety of international and foreign policy issues. It seeks to disseminate its findings to members of government, the press, and the public as well as academia.

**Knowledge Networks** is a polling, social science, and market research firm based in Menlo Park, California. Knowledge Networks uses a large-scale nationwide research panel which is randomly selected from the national population of households having telephones and is subsequently provided internet access for the completion of surveys (and thus is not limited to those who already have internet access).

**The Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland (CISSM)**, at the University of Maryland's School for Public Policy, pursues policy-oriented scholarship on major issues facing the United States in the global arena. Using its research, forums, and publications, CISSM links the University and the policy community to improve communication between scholars and practitioners.

**The Center on Policy Attitudes (COPA)** is an independent non-profit organization of social science researchers devoted to increasing understanding of public and elite attitudes shaping contemporary public policy. Using innovative research methods, COPA seeks not only to examine overt policy opinions or positions, but to reveal the underlying values, assumptions, and feelings that sustain opinions.

Steven Kull, Clay Ramsay, Evan Lewis, and Stephen Weber designed the questionnaires and wrote the analysis.

Knowledge Network's Stefan Subias adapted the questionnaires and managed the fielding of the polls.

Thanks to Gina Coplon-Newfield, Don Kraus, and Heather Hamilton for advising on the research regarding the candidates' positions.

Meredith Perry, Jeff Tinley, Daniel Maloney, Roman Gershkovich and Batsuuri Haltar contributed to the production of the report.

The search of existing poll data was done with the aid of the Roper iPOLL database.

This study was made possible by grants from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

## INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, the Program on International Policy Attitudes has regularly asked Americans not only about their attitudes but also their perceptions of reality. We have frequently found that such perceptions often diverge from reality and provide important insights into attitudes.

Since shortly after the Iraq war, PIPA has regularly asked Americans about their perceptions as to whether before the war Iraq had WMD, and whether it provided substantial support to al Qaeda. To a striking extent, majorities have believed that Iraq did have WMD or at least a major program for developing them, and that Iraq was providing substantial support to al Qaeda. With the reports of David Kay, the 9/11 Commission, the Senate Intelligence Committee, and, most recently, Charles Duelfer all refuting these beliefs, they have only modestly diminished, and are still held by approximately half of the public.

PIPA has also asked Americans about their perceptions of world public opinion. Despite indications of widespread international criticism of the US war against Iraq, also reflected in various international polls, many Americans appear to be unaware of this opposition. Few Americans show awareness of the extent of criticism of President Bush and his foreign policy as reflected in international polls.

PIPA has also explored Americans' perceptions of the foreign policy positions of public officials and frequently found significant misperceptions.

In this study PIPA has pulled together the findings from several polls and analyzed the variations in perceptions according to respondents' attitudes toward the Presidential candidates. The analysis revealed some striking differences between the perceptions of Bush and Kerry supporters.

The primary poll was conducted October 12-18 with 968 respondents, but the analysis also included polls that were conducted September 3-7 and September 8-12, with 798 and 959 respondents, respectively. Margins of error ranged from 3.2-4%. The polls were fielded by Knowledge Networks using its nationwide panel, which is randomly selected from the entire adult population and subsequently provided internet access. For more information about this methodology, go to [www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp](http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp).

The key findings were:

### ***1. Iraq, WMD, and al Qaeda***

A large majority of Bush supporters believe that before the war Iraq had weapons of mass destruction or a major program for building them. A substantial majority of Bush supporters assume that most experts believe Iraq had WMD, and that this was the conclusion of the recently released report by Charles Duelfer. A large majority of Bush supporters believes that Iraq was providing substantial support to al Qaeda and that clear evidence of this support has been found. A large majority believes that most experts also have this view, and a substantial majority believe that this was the conclusion of the 9/11 Commission. Large majorities of Kerry supporters believe the opposite on all these points.....3

### ***2. What the Bush Administration is Saying About Pre-War Iraq***

Large majorities of Bush and Kerry supporters agree that the Bush administration is saying that Iraq had WMD and was providing substantial support to al Qaeda. In regard to WMD, these majorities are growing.....6

**3. *The Decision to Go to War***

Majorities of Bush supporters and Kerry supporters agree that if Iraq did not have WMD or was not providing support to al Qaeda, the US should not have gone to war with Iraq .....8

**4. *World Public Opinion on the Iraq War and George Bush’s Reelection***

Only three in ten Bush supporters believe that the majority of people in the world oppose the US going to war with Iraq, while an overwhelming majority of Kerry supporters have this view. A majority of Bush supporters assume that the majority of people in the world would like to see Bush reelected, while a large majority of Kerry supporters believe the opposite. Bush supporters also lean toward overestimating support in Islamic countries for US-led efforts to fight terrorism, while Kerry supporters do not .....8

**5. *Candidates’ Foreign Policy Positions***

Majorities of Bush supporters misperceive his positions on a range of foreign policy issues. In particular, they assume he supports multilateral approaches and addressing global warming though he has taken strong contrary positions on issues such as the International Criminal court and the Kyoto Agreement. A majority of Kerry supporters have accurate perceptions of Kerry’s positions on the same issues.....11

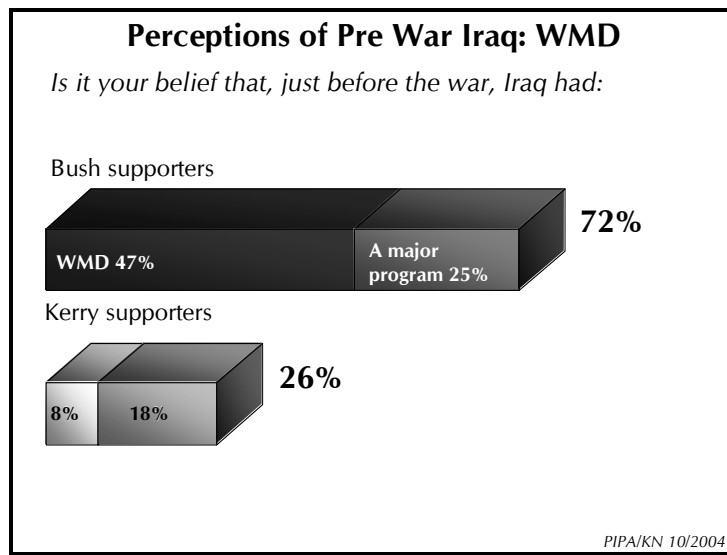
***Analysis***.....13

**FINDINGS**

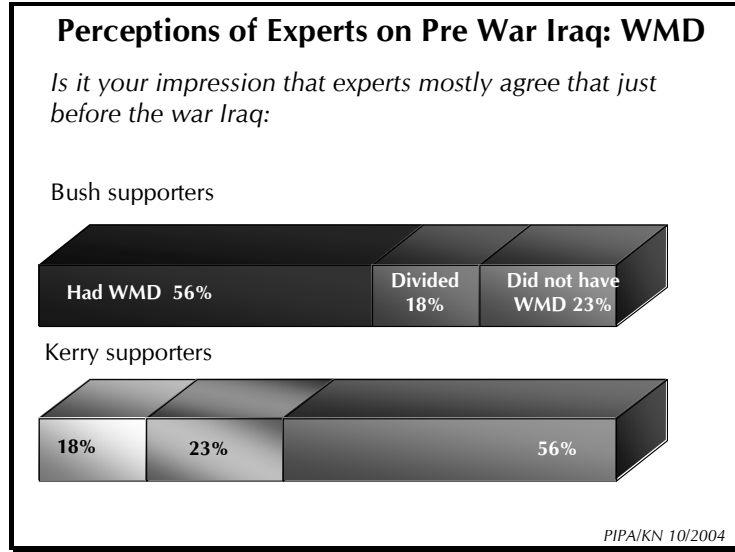
***1. Iraq, WMD, and al Qaeda***

A large majority of Bush supporters believe that before the war Iraq had weapons of mass destruction or a major program for building them. A substantial majority of Bush supporters assume that most experts believe Iraq had WMD, and that this was the conclusion of the recently released report by Charles Duelfer. A large majority of Bush supporters believes that Iraq was providing substantial support to al Qaeda and that clear evidence of this support has been found. A large majority believes that most experts also have this view, and a substantial majority believe that this was the conclusion of the 9/11 Commission. Large majorities of Kerry supporters believe the opposite on all these points.

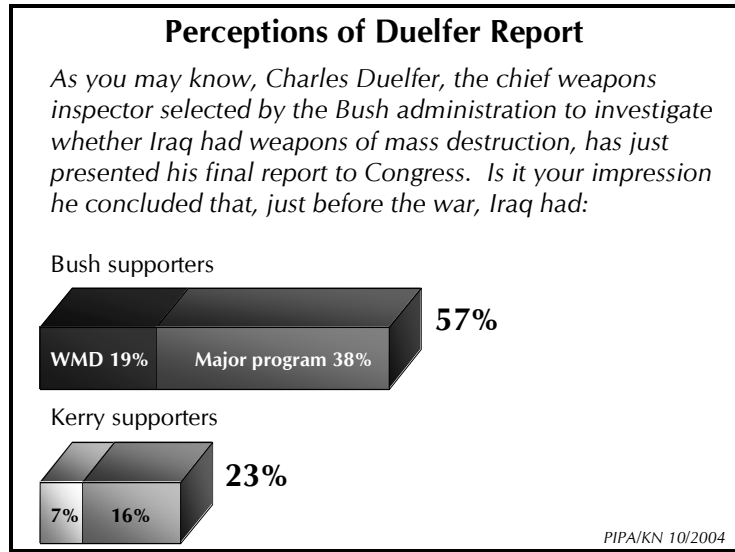
In recent months, the American public has been presented reports by the Senate Intelligence Committee, and the heads of the Iraq Survey Group David Kay and Charles Duelfer (chosen by the president), concluding that before the war Iraq had neither weapons of mass destruction, nor even a significant program for developing them. Nonetheless, 72% of Bush supporters continued to hold to the view that Iraq had actual WMD (47%) or a major program for developing them (25%). Only 26% of Kerry supporters hold such beliefs.



Furthermore, 56% of Bush supporters (as compared to 18% of Kerry supporters) believe that *most experts* say that Iraq did have actual WMD, and another 18% say that the experts' views are evenly divided on the subject. Only 23% think that most experts believe Iraq did not have WMD.



Though this poll was taken immediately after chief weapons inspector Charles Duelfer delivered his report to Congress on whether Iraq had WMD, a majority of Bush supporters misperceived the conclusions of his report. Fifty-seven percent believed that that he concluded that Iraq did have either WMD (19%) or a major program for developing them (38%).



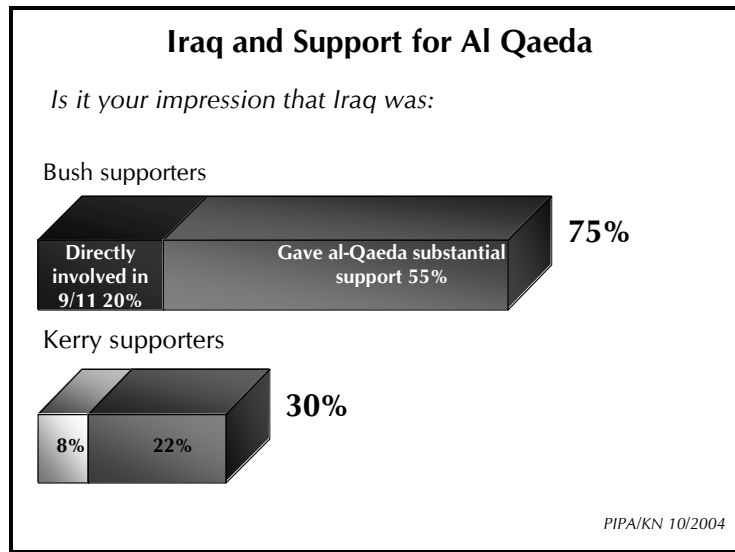
This misperception down only very slightly from when Bush supporters were asked in August what the Senate Intelligence Committee had concluded about prewar Iraq. At that time, 58% of Bush supporters said the committee had concluded that Iraq had at least a major WMD program. However, when asked now about the Duelfer report, the percentage of Bush supporters saying its conclusion was that Iraq had actual WMD was only 19%—down sharply from the 36% who said this about the Senate Intelligence Committee. More Bush supporters have shifted to the perception that the report says Iraq had a major WMD program (up from 22% to 38%). In fact, 18% of Bush supporters still believe Iraq had WMD or a major WMD program despite knowing the Duelfer report concluded otherwise.

Among Kerry supporters, only 23% assumed Duelfer concluded Iraq had WMD (7%) or a major WMD program (16%). This showed a marked downward movement from August, when 33% of Kerry supporters assumed a report said Iraq at least had a major WMD program. In the case of Kerry supporters, there was decline in both the percentage assuming a report said Iraq had actual WMD (from 12% to 7%) and in those who assumed it said there was a major WMD program (21% to 16%).

When PIPA polled in March and asked respondents about the conclusions of David Kay’s Senate testimony in January on whether Iraq had WMD, 63% of Bush supporters thought, incorrectly, that he had concluded that Iraq had at least a major WMD program. Thirty-four percent of Kerry supporters had the same impression.

**Iraq and al Qaeda**

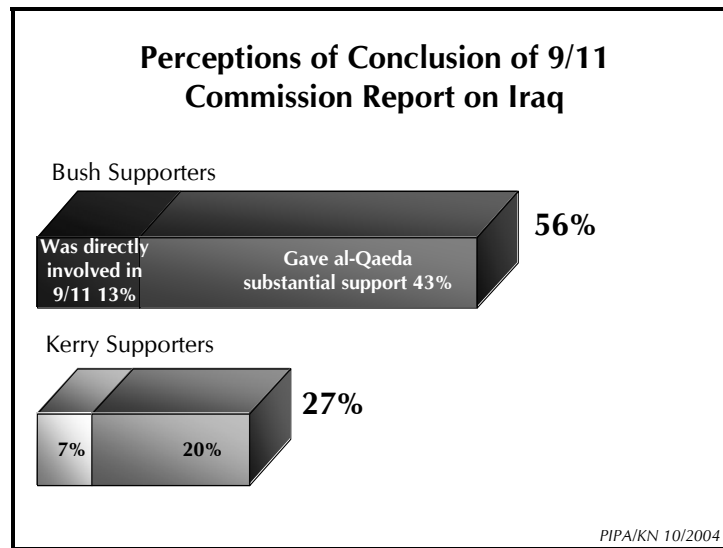
Despite the 9/11 Commission report saying there is no evidence Iraq was providing significant support to al Qaeda, 75% of Bush supporters believe Iraq was providing substantial support to al Qaeda (30% of Kerry supporters), with 20% believing that Iraq was directly involved in 9/11.<sup>1</sup> Sixty-three percent of Bush supporters even believe that clear evidence of this support has been found, while 85% of Kerry supporters believe the opposite.



Asked what most experts believe to be the case, 60% of Bush supporters assume that most experts believe Iraq was providing substantial support to al Qaeda. Only 21% of Kerry supporters believe this to be the case.

<sup>1</sup> Note: When other polling organizations have asked about whether Iraq was involved in the September 11th attacks they have often found a higher percentage than PIPA/KN has found. For example in September, Newsweek asked, “Do you think Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq was DIRECTLY involved in planning, financing, or carrying out the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, or not?” and 42% said that it was while 44% said it was not. In the PIPA/KN question respondents were given four response options including the option of saying that Iraq was not directly involved in 9/11 but was providing substantial support (overall 38% chose this option) as well as the option of saying they were directly involved in 9/11 (14% chose this option). Thus it appears that when offered only two response options, as in the Newsweek poll, some that answered that Iraq was involved in 9/11 were likely to trying to express their belief that Iraq was providing some kind of significant support to al Qaeda.

Asked in August what the 9/11 Commission had concluded, 56% of Bush supporters said that it had concluded that Iraq was providing substantial support to al Qaeda. Twenty-seven percent of Kerry supporters assumed this to be the case.



**2. What the Bush Administration is Saying About Pre-War Iraq**

**Large majorities of Bush and Kerry supporters agree that the Bush administration is saying that Iraq had WMD and was providing substantial support to al Qaeda. In regard to WMD, these majorities are growing.**

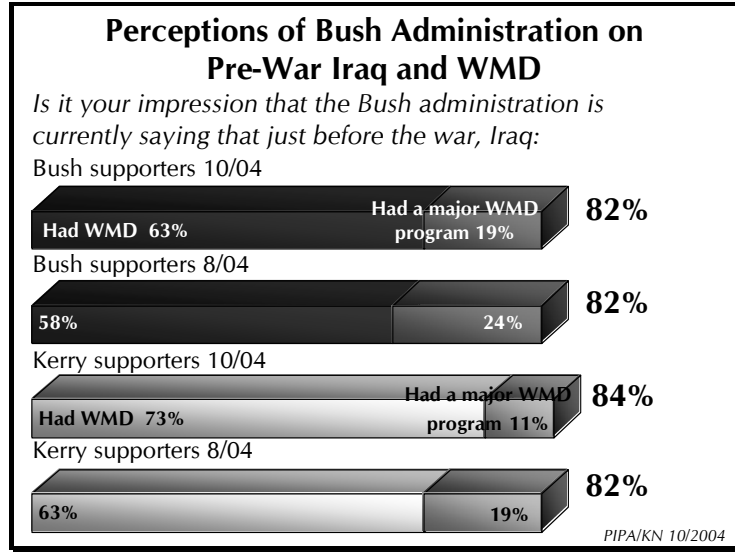
So why are Bush supporters clinging so tightly to these beliefs in the face of repeated disconfirmations? Apparently one key reason is that they continue to hear the Bush administration confirming these beliefs.

Among Bush supporters, an overwhelming 82% perceive the Bush administration as saying that Iraq had WMD (63%) or a major WMD program (19%). Only 16% of Bush supporters perceive the administration as saying that Iraq had some limited activities, but not an active program (15%), or had nothing (1%).

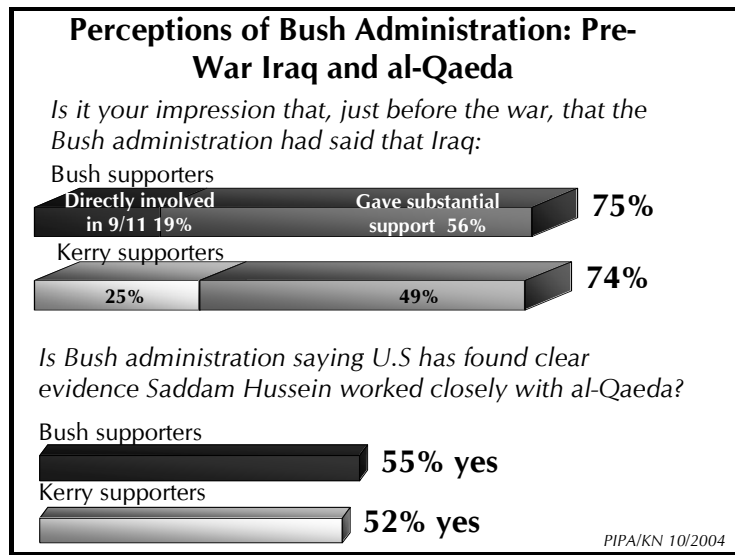
The pattern on al Qaeda is similar. Seventy-five percent of Bush supporters think the Bush administration is currently saying Iraq was providing substantial support to al Qaeda (56%) or even that it was directly involved in 9/11 (19%). Furthermore, 55% of Bush supporters say it is their impression the Bush administration is currently saying the US has found clear evidence Saddam Hussein was working closely with al Qaeda (not saying clear evidence found: 37%).

Interestingly, these perceptions of what the Bush administration is saying are something on which Bush and Kerry supporters agree. On WMD, 84% of Kerry supporters perceive the Bush administration as saying Iraq had WMD (73%) or a major program (11%).





On al Qaeda, 74% of Kerry supporters perceive the Bush administration as saying Iraq gave al Qaeda substantial support (49%) or was directly involved in 9/11 (25%). And 52% of Kerry supporters say the administration is saying clear evidence of a close collaboration has been found (not saying clear evidence found: 43%).



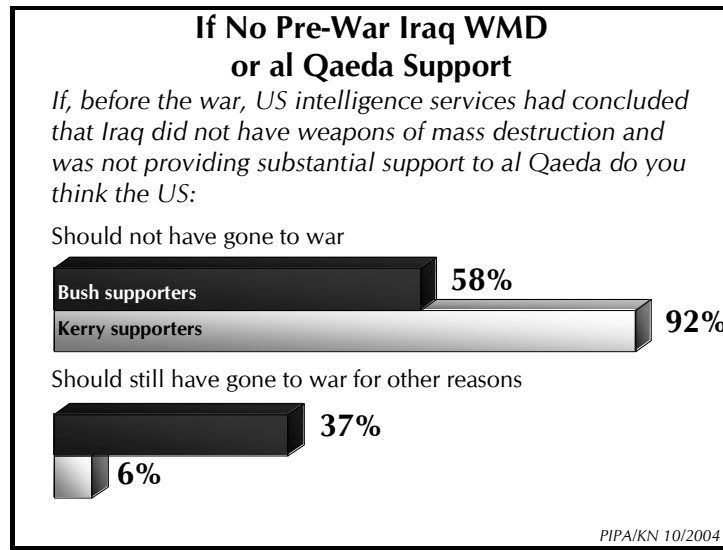
It is striking that the experience of the debates, and the resulting increased exposure to the president and vice president’s arguments, seems to have only increased the perception that the administration is saying Iraq had actual WMD before the war. Between August and mid-October, the number of Bush supporters who thought this went up from 58% to 63%; among Kerry supporters, it went up from 63% to 73%.

**3. The Decision to Go to War**

**Majorities of Bush supporters and Kerry supporters agree that if Iraq did not have WMD or was not providing support to al Qaeda, the US should not have gone to war with Iraq.**

Another key reason why Bush supporters may hold to the beliefs that Iraq had WMD and supported al Qaeda, is that these beliefs are necessary for them to support the decision to go to war with Iraq. Eighty-five percent of Bush supporters say that going to war was the right decision. However, asked what the US should have done “If, before the war, US intelligence services had concluded that Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction and was not providing substantial support to al Qaeda,” 58% of Bush supporters said in that case the US should not have gone to war. Furthermore, 61% express confidence that in that case the President would not have gone to war. To preserve the belief that that going to war was the right decision, it appears necessary for Bush supporters to believe that the assumptions that prompted going to war were correct.

Nearly all Kerry supporters (92%) agree that if US intelligence services had said that Iraq did not have WMD and was not providing support to al Qaeda, the US should not have gone to war. Consistent with their belief that Iraq did not have WMD, and did not support al Qaeda, 90% of Kerry supporters say that going to war was the wrong decision. Kerry supporters, unlike Bush supporters, overwhelmingly believe (83%) that if Bush had been given such information, he would still have gone to war for other reasons.

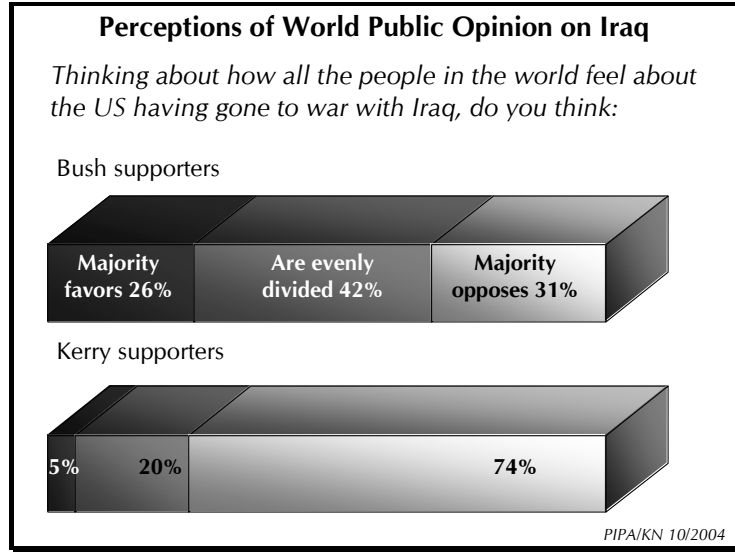


**4. World Public Opinion on the Iraq War and George Bush’s Reelection**

**Only three in ten Bush supporters believe that the majority of people in the world oppose the US going to war with Iraq, while an overwhelming majority of Kerry supporters have this view. A majority of Bush supporters assume that the majority of people in the world would like to see Bush reelected, while a large majority of Kerry supporters believe the opposite. Bush supporters also lean toward overestimating support in Islamic countries for US-led efforts to fight terrorism, while Kerry supporters do not.**

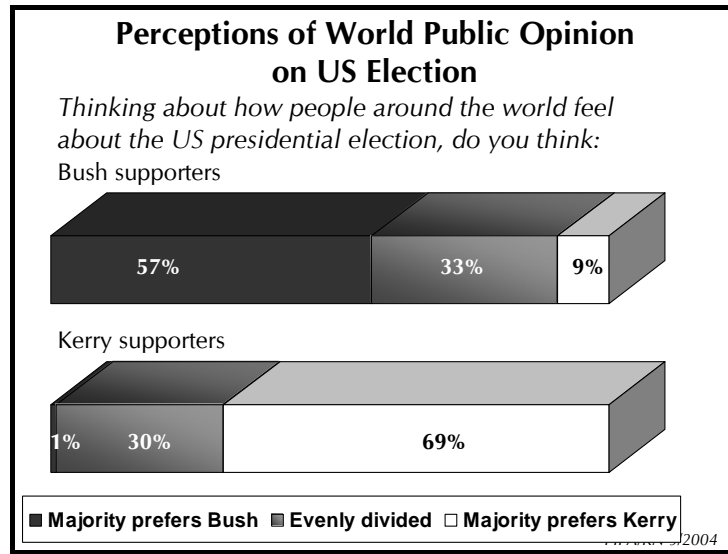
This tendency of Bush supporters to ignore dissonant information also extends to other realms. One of these arenas is world public opinion. Despite a steady flow of official statements, public demonstrations,

and public opinion polls showing that the US war against Iraq is quite unpopular,<sup>2</sup> only 31% of Bush supporters recognize that the majority of people in the world oppose the US having gone to war with Iraq. Rather, 68% assume that views are evenly divided (42%) or that the majority favors it (26%). Among Kerry supporters, 74% assume that the majority is opposed (evenly divided, 20%, majority favors it, 5%).



Bush supporters also believe that world public opinion favors Bush’s reelection. In a September 3-7 PIPA/KN poll, 57% of Bush supporters assumed that the majority of people in the world would prefer to see Bush reelected, 33% assumed that views are evenly divided and only 9% assumed that Kerry would be preferred. Kerry supporters held the opposite view, with only 1% assuming a preference for Bush, 30% thinking that views are equally divided, and 69% assuming that Kerry would be preferred.

<sup>2</sup> Most recently (September-October 2004), eight nations were asked whether the US was “right or wrong in invading Iraq” by an ad hoc group of ten international newspapers. Majorities said the US was wrong in Canada, Mexico, France, Spain, Russia, Japan and South Korea; Israel had the opposite result (see [www.cyberpresse.ca](http://www.cyberpresse.ca)). Gallup International conducted two international polls (in January and April-May 2003) and Pew Research Center conducted one (in April-May 2003) which included poll questions that directly measured support or opposition to the Iraq war. In the three polls taken together, 56 countries were surveyed. Of the 38 countries polled by Gallup International (including 20 European countries), not a single one showed majority support for unilateral action and in nearly every case the percentage was very low. In April-May the Pew Global Attitudes Survey asked respondents in 18 countries how they felt about their country’s decision to participate or not participate in “us[ing] military force against Iraq.” Among the 13 countries that had not participated, in every case, a large to overwhelming majority approved of the decision. For the three countries that contributed troops, in the UK and Australia a majority approved; in Spain a majority was opposed. For the two countries that had allowed the US to use bases, in Kuwait the majority approved; in Turkey the majority was opposed. For full results see [www.gallup-international.com](http://www.gallup-international.com) and [www.people-press.org](http://www.people-press.org).



International polls have found a strong preference for Kerry. Polling conducted by GlobeScan and PIPA (summer 2004) of 35 of the major countries found that in 30 countries a majority or plurality preferred to see Kerry elected president, while 3 countries favored Bush. On average, 46% favored Kerry while 20% favored Bush. Most recently, a September-October 2004 poll in 10 countries conducted by an ad hoc group of ten international newspapers (see [www.cyberpresse.ca](http://www.cyberpresse.ca)) found majorities or pluralities preferring Kerry in eight countries, and Bush in two.

When asked (September 3-7) about world public opinion on US foreign policy under the Bush administration, 82% of Bush supporters believed that a world majority either feels better about the US due to its recent foreign policy (37%), or thought views are about evenly divided (45%). Only 17% thought that a majority now feels worse about the US. Among Kerry supporters, 86% thought a majority now feels worse about the US, and 12% thought views were evenly divided (feels better, 2%).

In fact, in the GlobeScan poll of 35 countries, in 30 countries a majority or plurality said “the foreign policy of George W. Bush” had made them “feel worse about the United States” (feel better: 3 countries). On average, 53% said they felt worse about the US while 19% said they felt better. Most recently, in the 10-country poll just cited, in eight out of ten countries majorities said that “over the course of the last two or three years” their “opinion toward the US has worsened.”

**Opinion in Islamic Countries**

A slim majority of Bush supporters (51%) think a majority of people in the Islamic world favor “US-led efforts to fight terrorism,” while 44% think a majority opposes these efforts. Among Kerry supporters, fully three in four (75%) think a majority in the Islamic world opposes US-led efforts to fight terrorism (favors them, 21%).

Between summer 2002 and February 2004, the Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Survey polled a number of countries with large Islamic populations—some of them three times—asking whether people favor or oppose “the US-led efforts to fight terrorism.” The four countries asked in 2004 (Turkey, Pakistan, Jordan, and Morocco) all had majorities in opposition. Of the nine countries asked in 2003, seven showed majorities opposed to US-led efforts; the exceptions were Kuwait and Nigeria. The results in summer 2002 were quite similar; for details see [www.people-press.org](http://www.people-press.org).

***5. Candidates' Foreign Policy Positions***

**Majorities of Bush supporters misperceive his positions on a range of foreign policy issues. In particular, they assume he supports multilateral approaches and addressing global warming though he has taken strong contrary positions on issues such as the International Criminal court and the Kyoto Agreement. A majority of Kerry supporters have accurate perceptions of Kerry's positions on the same issues.**

PIPA selected a set of questions from polls taken by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations about foreign policy issues on which the candidates have taken clear and documented positions.<sup>3</sup> Surveys were conducted September 8 – 12, and then again October 12 – 18, on some issues to see if there had been changes as a result of the presidential debates during which the candidates discussed their positions on the International Criminal Court and missile defense.

Bush supporters have numerous misperceptions about Bush's international policy positions. Majorities incorrectly assumed that Bush supports multilateral approaches to various international issues—the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (69%), the treaty banning land mines (72%); 51% incorrectly assumed he favors US participation in the Kyoto treaty—the principal international accord on global warming. After he denounced the International Criminal Court in the debates, the perception that he opposed it increased from 24% to 38% among Bush supporters, but a majority of supporters (53%) continued to believe that he favors it. Only 13% of supporters are aware that he opposes labor and environmental standards in trade agreements – 74% incorrectly believe that he favors including labor and environmental standards in agreements on trade.

In all these cases, there is a recurring theme: majorities of Bush supporters favor these positions, and they infer that Bush favors them as well. For example, in PIPA's September 8 – 12 poll, 54% of Bush supporters favored participation in Kyoto, 66% favored participation in the land mines treaty, and 68% favored a treaty prohibiting testing nuclear weapons (CTBT). Apparently in the absence of evidence to the contrary, Bush supporters assume Bush feels as they do.

In two cases Bush supporters had a better understanding of the president's positions. They were divided between those who knew that Bush favors building a new missile defense system now (47%), and those who incorrectly believe he wishes to do more research until its capabilities are proven (41%). However, majorities were correct that Bush favors increased defense spending (57%), and wants the US, not the UN, to take the stronger role in developing Iraq's new government (70%).

Kerry supporters were much more accurate in assessing their candidate's positions on all issues. Majorities knew that Kerry favors including labor and environmental standards in trade agreements (81%); the US being part of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (77%); the International Criminal Court (65%); the land mines treaty (79%); and the Kyoto Treaty on climate change (74%). They also knew that

---

<sup>3</sup> The positions of President Bush and Senator Kerry were documented from six sources:

- Council on Foreign Relations "Campaign 2004" website on the candidates' positions (<http://www.cfr.org/campaign2004/>)
- Answers given by Bush and Kerry's campaigns to a questionnaire submitted by Time magazine and AOL News, available at [www.presidentmatch.com](http://www.presidentmatch.com).
- Official public documents of the State Department, available at [www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov)
- The White House's Office of Management and Budget website (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2005/defense.html>)
- Kerry's answers to questionnaires submitted to him by the Stop the Arms Race Political Action Committee (see [www.starpac.org](http://www.starpac.org)) and Peace Action (see [www.peace-action.org](http://www.peace-action.org)).

he favors continuing research on missile defense without deploying a system now (68%), and wants the UN, not the US, to take the stronger role in developing Iraq's new government (80%). A plurality of 43% was correct that Kerry favors keeping defense spending the same, with 35% assuming he wants to cut it and 18% to expand it.

Issue	Bush's position	Bush supporters assuming Bush:		Kerry's position	Kerry supporters assuming Kerry:	
		Supports	Opposes		Supports	Opposes
Labor and environmental standards in trade agreements (Oct.)	Opposes	74	13	Supports	81	10
Participation in land mines treaty	Opposes	72	20	Supports	79	12
Participation in a treaty that bans the testing of nuclear weapons	Opposes	69	24	Supports	77	12
Participation in the International Criminal Court (Oct.)	Opposes	54	38	Supports*	65	24
Participation in Kyoto agreement on global warming	Opposes	51	39	Supports*	74	13
* Supports in principle but wants to negotiate terms for US involvement						

Issue	Options	Bush's position	Perceived Bush position	Kerry's position	Perceived Kerry position
Building a missile defense system (Oct.)	Build now	X	47		9
	Do more research		41	X	68
	Do not build		2		13
Defense spending	Increase	X	57		18
	Keep same		28	X	43
	Decrease		9		35
Who should take the lead in Iraq on writing a new Constitution and building a democratic government	US	X	70		13
	UN		25	X	80

**Analysis**

It is normal during elections for supporters of presidential candidates to have fundamental disagreements about values (such as the proper role of the government) or strategies (such as how best to defend US interests). As we have seen, the current election is unique in that Bush supporters and Kerry supporters have profoundly different perceptions of reality.

So why is this the case? And, more specifically, why are Bush supporters holding so tightly to beliefs that have been so visibly refuted? As discussed, one key possible explanation for why Bush supporters continue to believe that Iraq had WMD or a major WMD program, and supported al Qaeda is that they continue to hear the Bush administration confirming these beliefs.

Another possible explanation is that Bush supporters cling to these beliefs because they are necessary for their support for the decision to go to war with Iraq. Asked whether the US should have gone to war with Iraq if US intelligence had concluded that Iraq was not making WMD or providing support to al Qaeda, 58% of Bush supporters said the US should not have, and 61% assume that in this case the president would not have. To support the president and to accept that he took the US to war based on mistaken assumptions is difficult to bear, especially in light of the continuing costs in terms of lives and money. Apparently, to avoid this cognitive dissonance, Bush supporters suppress awareness of unsettling information.

This tendency of Bush supporters to ignore dissonant information extends to their perceptions of world public opinion. Despite an abundance of evidence that world public opinion has opposed the US going to war with Iraq, only 31% of Bush supporters are aware that this is the case, and only 9% are aware that Kerry is a more popular candidate than Bush in world public opinion.

Finally, Bush supporters also frequently misperceive their candidate's foreign policy positions. In particular they tend to assume that he supports more pro-multilateral positions than he, in fact, does. In all cases, there is a recurring theme: majorities of Bush supporters favor these positions they impute to Bush. They have trouble believing that Bush does not favor them too.

So why do Bush supporters show such a resistance to accepting dissonant information? While it is normal for people to show some resistance, the magnitude of the denial goes beyond the ordinary. Bush supporters have succeeded in suppressing awareness of the findings of a whole series of high-profile reports about prewar Iraq that have been blazoned across the headlines of newspapers and prompted extensive, high-profile and agonizing reflection. The fact that a large portion of Americans say they are unaware that the original reasons that the US took military action--and for which Americans continue to die on a daily basis--are not turning out to be valid, are probably not due to a simple failure to pay attention to the news.

The roots of the resistance to this information very likely lie in the traumatic experience of 9/11, and equally in the near pitch-perfect leadership that President Bush showed in its immediate wake. In response to an unprecedented attack on US soil, with the prospect of further such attacks, Bush responded with a grace and resolve that provided reassurance to an anxious public. In the war with the Taliban he showed restraint as well as effectiveness. Large numbers of Americans had a powerful bonding experience with the president--a bond that they may be loath to relinquish.

When the president turned his focus to Iraq, this robust public support began to waver. His case about Iraq's WMD and support for al Qaeda touched a nerve, but most Americans were not entirely convinced of the imperative to act. Most wanted Bush to first get UN support and allied participation before going

into Iraq and were willing to stick with the inspection process for a while longer. Many were very wary of the US getting itself into a position reminiscent of Vietnam, when the world turned against the US.

Nonetheless, the majority was still inclined to give Bush the benefit of the doubt and backed him when he decided to go ahead without UN approval. At the same time, though they acquiesced, a majority of Americans did not actively favor taking action at the time Bush did. This was Bush's war.

If all had worked out as advertised, the president's relation with the public would probably have not missed a beat. While the initial war was easier than the public anticipated, the aftermath was much more difficult and drawn out than originally assumed. Concurrent with these rising costs, the benefits of the war began to be challenged by the failure to find WMD or evidence of Iraqi support for al Qaeda. The extent of international criticism took on tones of the Vietnam period.

Gradually the support for the decision to go to war and, concomitantly, public confidence in the president, began to wither. Moving in tandem down this slowly descending arc were the declining beliefs that Iraq had WMD and links to al Qaeda, and that world public opinion approved of the US going to war with Iraq.

But now, while others have peeled off, Bush supporters continue to hold onto their image of Bush as a capable protector. To do this it appears that many need to continue to screen out information that undermines this image.

Bush appears to assume that his support is fragile. He refuses to admit to making any mistakes. He admits that he was surprised that WMD were not found, but does not say that the most reasonable conclusion is that they were never there and continues to talk about "disarming" Iraq. He asserts that he never said that Iraq was directly involved in 9/11, but maintains that there were contacts with al Qaeda in a way that implies that they were significant. Most telling, his supporters as well as his opponents overwhelmingly say that they hear him still saying that Iraq had WMD and supported al Qaeda. To remain loyal and bonded to him means to enter into this false reality.

Bush may be right. Admitting his mistakes may shatter his idealized image in a way that some supporters may not forgive. But there also risks in succeeding in getting elected based on false beliefs. The number of people in the public who see through the illusion will likely continue to grow, eating away at the implied mandate of an election. Further, the cohesion of society can be damaged by a persisting and fundamental division in the perception of what is real, undermining pathways to consensus and mutual sacrifice, and making the country increasingly difficult to govern.



**METHODOLOGY**

The poll was fielded by Knowledge Networks, a polling, social science, and market research firm in Menlo Park, California, with a randomly selected sample of its large-scale nationwide research panel. This panel is itself randomly selected from the national population of households having telephones and subsequently provided internet access for the completion of surveys (and thus is not limited to those who already have internet access). The distribution of the sample in the web-enabled panel closely tracks the distribution of United States Census counts for the US population on age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, geographical region, employment status, income, education, etc.

The panel is recruited using stratified random-digit-dial (RDD) telephone sampling. RDD provides a non-zero probability of selection for every US household having a telephone. Households that agree to participate in the panel are provided with free Web access and an Internet appliance, which uses a telephone line to connect to the Internet and uses the television as a monitor. In return, panel members participate in surveys three to four times a month. Survey responses are confidential, with identifying information never revealed without respondent approval. When a survey is fielded to a panel member, he or she receives an e-mail indicating that the survey is available for completion. Surveys are self-administered.

For more information about the methodology, please go to:  
[www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp](http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp).