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Misperceptions, the Media, and the Iraq War

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The Iraq war and its aftermath have raised compelling questions about the capacity of the executive branch to elicit public consent for the use of military force and about the role the media plays in this process. From the outset, the Bush administration was faced with unique challenges in its effort to legitimate its decision to go to war. Because the war was not prompted by an overt act against the United States or its interests, and was not approved by the UN Security Council, the Bush administration argued that the war was necessary on the basis of a potential threat. Because the evidence for this threat was not fully manifest, the Bush administration led the public to believe that Iraq was developing weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and providing substantial support to the al Qaeda terrorist group. The challenge for the administration was later intensified when the United States occupied Iraq and was unable to find the expected corroborating evidence.

From the outset the public was sympathetic to the idea of removing Saddam Hussein, though only a small minority of Americans was ready to go to war with Iraq without UN Security Council approval.¹ The majority was inclined to believe that Iraq had a WMD program and was supporting al Qaeda. However,

¹ Asked in a Chicago Council on Foreign Relations poll in June 2002 about their position on invading Iraq, 65 percent said the United States “should only invade Iraq with UN approval and the support of its allies”; 20 percent said “the US should invade Iraq even if we have to go it alone”; and 13 percent said “the US should not invade Iraq.”

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most were not persuaded that the case was strong enough to justify taking action unilaterally. The majority preferred to continue looking for more decisive evidence through the UN inspection process and to continue seeking the support of the UN Security Council.²

Nevertheless, when the President decided to go to war, the majority of the public expressed support. More significantly, when the United States failed to find the expected evidence that would corroborate the administration's assumptions that prompted the war, the majority continued to support the decision to go to war.³

This polling data raises the question of why the public has been so accommodating. Did they simply change their views about the war despite their earlier reservations? Or did they in some way come to have certain false beliefs or misperceptions that would make going to war appear more legitimate, consistent with pre-existing beliefs?

A variety of possible misperceptions could justify going to war with Iraq. If Americans believed that the United States had found WMD in Iraq or had found evidence that Iraq was providing support to al Qaeda, then they may have seen the war as justified as an act of self-defense even without UN approval. If Americans believed that world public opinion backed the United States going to war with Iraq, then they may have seen the war as legitimate even if some members of the UN Security Council obstructed approval.

Of course, people do not develop misperceptions in a vacuum. The administration disseminates information directly and by implication. The press transmits this information and, at least in theory, provides critical analysis. One's source of news or how closely one pays attention to the news may influence whether or how misperceptions may develop.

To find out more about the possible role of misperceptions in public support for the Iraq war, and the role of the media in this process before and during the war, the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) conducted a series of polls with the polling firm Knowledge Networks (KN). From January through May 2003, a more limited set of questions was asked in four different polls. Later, Knowledge Networks developed a more systematic set of questions that was included in a series of three polls, conducted from June through

² In August 2002, 55 percent thought Iraq "currently has weapons of mass destruction," and 39 percent thought Iraq is trying to develop these weapons but does not currently have them (*CNN/USA Today*). On al Qaeda, *Newsweek* asked in September 2002, "From what you've seen or heard in the news . . . do you believe that Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq is harboring al Qaeda terrorists and helping them to develop chemical weapons, or not?" Seventy-five percent said yes. Yet, in a 24–25 February 2003 CBS News poll, only 31 percent agreed that "Iraq presents such a clear danger to American interests that the United States needs to act now"; 64 percent agreed that "the US needs to wait for approval of the United Nations before taking action against Iraq," and 62 percent said that "the United States should wait and give the United Nations inspectors more time."

³ From May through November 2003, the Program on International Policy Attitudes/Knowledge Networks (PIPA/KN) has found a declining majority of 68 percent to 57 percent saying "the US made the right decision . . . in going to war with Iraq."

September, with a total of 3,334 respondents. These results were combined with the findings from four other polls, conducted from January through May, for a total data set of 8,634 respondents. In addition, relevant polling data from other organizations were analyzed, including polls that asked questions about possible misperceptions.

The polls were fielded by Knowledge Networks using its nationwide panel. Panel members are recruited through standard telephone interviews with random digit dialing (RDD) samples of the entire adult population and subsequently provided internet access. Questionnaires are then administered over the Internet to a randomly selected sample of the panel.⁴

This article first explores the degree of pervasiveness of misperceptions, particularly the following three: that since the war U.S. forces have found Iraqi WMD in Iraq; that clear evidence has been found that Saddam Hussein was working closely with al Qaeda; and that world public opinion was in favor of the United States going to war with Iraq. Second, it analyzes the relationship between the holding of these misperceptions and support for the Iraq war by using multivariate regression analysis to compare the strength of this factor with a range of other factors. Third, it analyzes the relationship between the holding of misperceptions and the respondent's primary news source. Fourth, it evaluates the relationship between attention to news and the level of misperceptions. Fifth, it analyzes misperceptions as a function of political attitudes, including intention to vote for the President and party identification. A binary logistic regression analysis including misperceptions and eight other factors provides a ranking of factors by power. The article concludes with an analysis of the various factors that could explain the phenomenon of misperceptions, including administration statements and media reporting.

MISPERCEPTIONS RELATED TO THE IRAQ WAR

In the run-up to the war with Iraq and in the postwar period, a significant portion of the American public has held a number of misperceptions⁵ relevant to the rationales for going to war with Iraq. While in most cases only a minority has had any particular misperception, a strong majority has had at least one key misperception.

Close Links between Iraq and al Qaeda

Both before and after the war, a substantial portion of Americans have believed that evidence of a link between Iraq and al Qaeda existed. Before the

⁴ For more information about this methodology, see the Appendix or go to www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp.

⁵ Herein the term "misperceptions" is not used to refer to controversial beliefs about what U.S. intelligence has been able to infer, such as the belief that Saddam Hussein was directly involved in September 11. The term is limited to noncontroversial perceptions such as whether actual weapons or actual evidence have in fact been *found*. The misperception related to world public opinion is established based on polling data discussed later.

TABLE 1
Evidence of Link between Iraq and al Qaeda
 (percentages)

Is it your impression that the US has or has not found clear evidence in Iraq that Saddam Hussein was working closely with the al Qaeda terrorist organization?	8-9/03	7/03	6/03	(6/03-9/03)
US has	49	45	52	48
US has not	45	49	43	46
(No answer)	6	6	5	6

Source: Program on International Policy Attitudes/Knowledge Networks.

war, in the January PIPA/KN poll, 68 percent expressed the belief that Iraq played an important role in September 11, with 13 percent even expressing the belief that “conclusive evidence” of Iraq’s involvement had been found. Asked in June, July, and August-September (Table 1), large percentages (45 to 52 percent) said they believed that the United States had “found clear evidence in Iraq that Saddam Hussein was working closely with the al-Qaeda [*sic*] terrorist organization.”

Harris Interactive in June and August asked, “Do you believe clear evidence that Iraq was supporting al Qaeda has been found in Iraq or not?” In June, 48 percent said that clear evidence had been found, with just 33 percent saying that it had not and 19 percent saying they were not sure. Despite intensive discussion of the issue in the press, in August the numbers were essentially the same: 50 percent believed evidence had been found, 35 percent believed that it had not been, and 14 percent were unsure.

Weapons of Mass Destruction

Before the war, overwhelming majorities believed that Iraq had WMD. Though it now appears likely that this belief was incorrect, it does not seem appropriate to call this a misperception because it was so widespread at the time, even within the intelligence community.

However, a striking misperception occurred after the war, when the United States failed to find any WMD or even any solid evidence of a WMD program. PIPA/KN first asked in May whether respondents thought that the United States has or has not “found Iraqi weapons of mass destruction” in Iraq, and 34 percent said the United States had (another 7 percent did not know). In June, Harris Interactive subsequently asked, “Do you believe clear evidence of weapons of mass destruction has been found in Iraq or not?” and 35 percent said that it had.

PIPA/KN asked again in late June—during a period with much discussion in the press about the absence of WMD—and found that the percentage hold-

TABLE 2
Existence of Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq
 (percentages)

Since the war with Iraq ended, is it your impression that the US has or has not found Iraqi weapons of mass destruction?					
	9/03	7/03	6/03	3/03	(6/03–9/03)
US has	24	21	23	34	22
US has not	73	76	73	59	75
(No answer)	3	3	4	7	3

Source: Program on International Policy Attitudes/Knowledge Networks.

ing this belief had dropped to 23 percent. This number then stayed roughly the same in July and early September. In late July, *NBC/Wall Street Journal* asked whether the United States has been successful in “finding evidence of weapons of mass destruction,” and 22 percent said that it had. Harris asked again in mid-August and found 27 percent saying that evidence of WMD had been found (Table 2).

Americans have also incorrectly believed that Iraq actually *used* WMD in the recent war with the United States. PIPA/KN asked respondents whether “Iraq did or did not use chemical or biological weapons in the war that had just ended.” In May, 22 percent of respondents said that it had. In mid-June, *ABC/Washington Post* presented a slightly adapted version of the question and found 24 percent said that that they thought it had. When asked by PIPA/KN again in August-September, the percentage saying that Iraq had used such weapons slipped only slightly to 20 percent.

World Public Opinion

A key factor in American public support for going to war with Iraq has been its international legitimacy. Right up to the period immediately before the war, a majority favored taking more time to build international support. A key question, then, is how the public perceived world public opinion on going to war with Iraq.

PIPA/KN polls have shown that Americans have misperceived world public opinion on the U.S. decision to go to war and on the way that the United States is generally dealing with the problem of terrorism. This has been true during and after the war and applies to perceptions about world public opinion as a whole, European public opinion, and public opinion in the Muslim world.

In March 2003, shortly after the war started, PIPA/KN asked respondents “how all of the people in the world feel about the US going to war with Iraq.” Respondents perceived greater support for the war than existed at the time or has existed since.⁶ Only 35 percent perceived correctly that the majority of

⁶ 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, fifty-six countries were

people opposed the decision. Thirty-one percent expressed the mistaken assumption that views were evenly balanced on the issue, and another 31 percent expressed the egregious misperception that the majority favored it. Asked again in June, July, and August-September, these views changed very little.

Perceptions have been a bit more accurate when it comes to perceiving European public opinion, but still there are widespread misperceptions. Asked in June and August-September, nearly half (48 to 49 percent) correctly said that the “majority of people oppose the United States having gone to war.” But 29 to 30 percent believed incorrectly that views are evenly balanced, and 18 percent believed that the majority even favors it.⁷

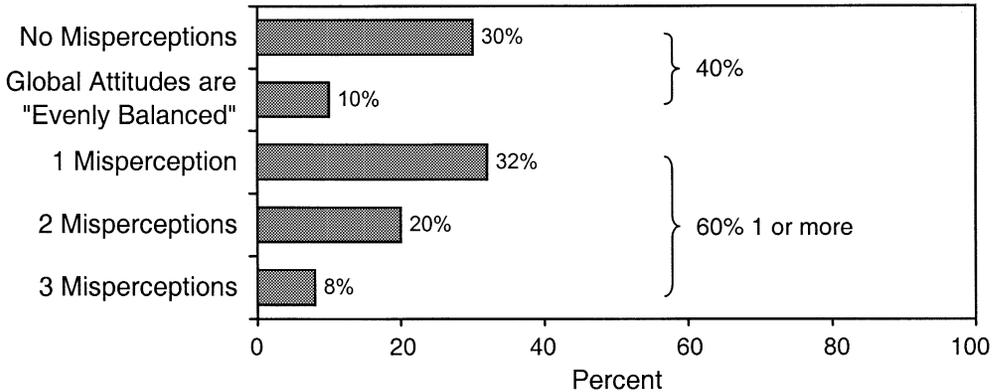
A substantial number of Americans also misperceive attitudes in the Islamic world toward U.S. efforts to fight terrorism and its policies in the Middle East. Respondents were asked in August-September whether they thought “a majority of people in the Islamic world favor or oppose U.S.-led efforts to fight terrorism.” A plurality of 48 percent incorrectly assumed that a majority of Islamic people favors U.S.-led efforts to fight terrorism, while 46 percent assumed that they do not. When asked whether respondents thought “a majority of people in the Islamic world think U.S. policies in the Middle East make the region more or less stable,” 35 percent incorrectly assumed that the majority of people in the Islamic world feel that U.S. policies make the region more stable, while 60 percent perceived attitudes correctly.⁸

surveyed. The January Gallup International poll asked, “Are you in favor of military action against Iraq: under no circumstances; only if sanctioned by the United Nations; unilaterally by America and its allies?” Of the thirty-eight countries polled (including twenty European countries), not a single one showed majority support for unilateral action, and in nearly every case the percentage was very low. When asked, “If military action goes ahead against Iraq, do you think [survey country] should or should not support this action?” in thirty-four of the thirty-eight countries polled (seventeen out of twenty in Europe), a majority opposed having their country support this action. In April-May, the Pew Global Attitudes Survey asked respondents in eighteen countries how they felt about their country’s decision to participate or not participate in “us[ing] military force against Iraq.” Among the thirteen 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 United Kingdom and Australia, a majority approved; in Spain, a majority was opposed. For the two countries that had allowed the United States to use bases, in Kuwait, the majority approved; in Turkey, the majority was opposed. For full results, see www.gallup-international.com and www.people-press.org.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ The Pew Global Attitudes survey in summer 2002 and May 2003 asked in seven countries with primarily Muslim populations (Turkey, Indonesia, Pakistan, Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait, and Morocco, plus the Palestinian Authority): “Which of the following phrases comes closer to your view? I favor the US-led efforts to fight terrorism, or I oppose the US-led efforts to fight terrorism.” In six of the eight cases, strong majorities ranging from 56 to 85 percent in summer 2002, and rising to 67 to 97 percent in May 2003, said they opposed “US-led efforts to fight terrorism.” In only one case—Kuwait in May 2003—did a majority say they favored U.S. efforts. In the case of Pakistan, a plurality of 45 percent opposed U.S. efforts in the summer of 2003, rising to 74 percent in May 2003. In May 2003, respondents were asked: “Do you think US policies in the Middle East make the region more stable or less stable?” In six of the eight cases, majorities said that U.S. policies in the Middle East make the region less stable. These majorities ranged from 56 percent in Lebanon to 91 percent in Jordan. In Pakistan, 43 percent said U.S. policies make the Middle East less stable, but another 43 percent said

FIGURE 1
*Percentage Having Key Misperceptions:
 Evidence of Links to al Qaeda, WMD Found, and World Public Opinion Favorable*



Composite of Polls Conducted June-September 2003

Source: Program on International Policy Attitudes/Knowledge Networks, October 2003.

Combined Analysis

Most specific misperceptions are held by a minority of respondents. However, this does not tell us if these misperceptions are held by the same minority or if large percentages have at least one misperception. To find out, we repeated three key perception questions over three polls, conducted in June, July, and August-September with 3,334 respondents.

The three key perception questions used were the ones that found the most egregious misperceptions, and to qualify as a misperception the most extreme form of the misperception was used. These were the beliefs:

- Clear evidence that Saddam Hussein was working closely with al Qaeda has been *found*.
- Weapons of mass destruction have been *found* in Iraq.
- World public opinion *avored* the United States going to war with Iraq.

To determine the pervasiveness of misperceptions, we focused on the 1,362 respondents who heard all three of the perception questions.

Misperceptions were not limited to a small minority that had repeated misperceptions. A majority of 60 percent had at least one of these three unambiguous misperceptions, and only 30 percent had no misperceptions (Figure 1). Another 10 percent had the more modest misperception that world public opinion was evenly balanced between support and opposition to the Iraq war.

U.S. policies either "made no difference" (12 percent) or that they did not know (31 percent). In Kuwait, a 48 percent plurality said U.S. policies made the Middle East more stable.

MISPERCEPTIONS AND SUPPORT FOR WAR

The misperceptions about the war appear to be highly related to attitudes about the decision to go to war, both before and after the war. In every case, those who have the misperception have been more supportive of the war. As the combined analysis of the three key misperceptions will show, those with none of the key misperceptions have opposed the decision while the presence of each additional misperception has gone together with sharply higher support.

Close Links to al Qaeda

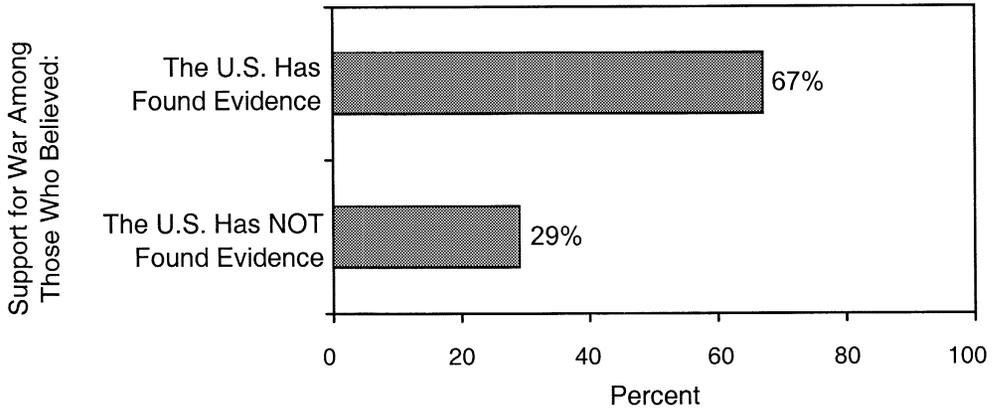
Before the war, those who believed that Iraq was directly involved in September 11 showed greater support for going to war even without multilateral approval. In the January PIPA/KN poll, among those who wrongly believed that they had “seen conclusive evidence” that “Iraq played an important role in September 11 attacks,” 56 percent said they would agree with a decision by the President to proceed to go to war with Iraq if the UN Security Council refused to endorse such an action. Among those who said they had not seen such evidence but still believed that Iraq was involved in September 11, 42 percent said they would support such a decision. Among those who said they had not seen such evidence and were not convinced that it was true, only 9 percent said they would agree with such a decision.

In the February PIPA/KN poll, support for going to war was high among those who believed that Saddam Hussein was directly involved in September 11 but was progressively lower as the perceived link between Iraq and al Qaeda became more tenuous. Among those who believed that Iraq was directly involved in September 11, 58 percent said they would agree with the President deciding to go to war with Iraq even without UN approval. Among those who believed that Iraq had given al Qaeda substantial support but was not involved in September 11, support dropped to 37 percent. Among those who believed that a few al Qaeda individuals had contact with Iraqi officials, 32 percent were supportive, while just 25 percent expressed support among those who believed that there was no connection.

During the war, Americans who supported the war also said that the supposed link was a major reason for supporting the decision to go to war. An April poll for *Investor's Business Daily* and the *Christian Science Monitor* asked the 72 percent who said they supported the war to rate the importance of a number of reasons for their support. “Iraq’s connection with groups like Al-Qaeda” was rated as a major reason by 80 percent.

After the war, nearly half of the respondents mistakenly believed that clear evidence that Saddam Hussein was working closely with al Qaeda had been found. PIPA/KN found a strong relationship between the belief that evidence of such links has been found and support for the decision to go to war. Combin-

FIGURE 2
Support for War and Misperception of Evidence of Iraqi Links to al Qaeda



Composite of Polls Conducted June-September 2003

Source: Program on International Policy Attitudes/Knowledge Networks, October 2003.

Note: The question also offered respondents the option of saying that they did not know if going to war was the best thing to do, but that they nonetheless supported the President. Here and in comparisons discussed later, we have limited our analysis to those who took an unequivocal position in favor or against the decision to go to war.

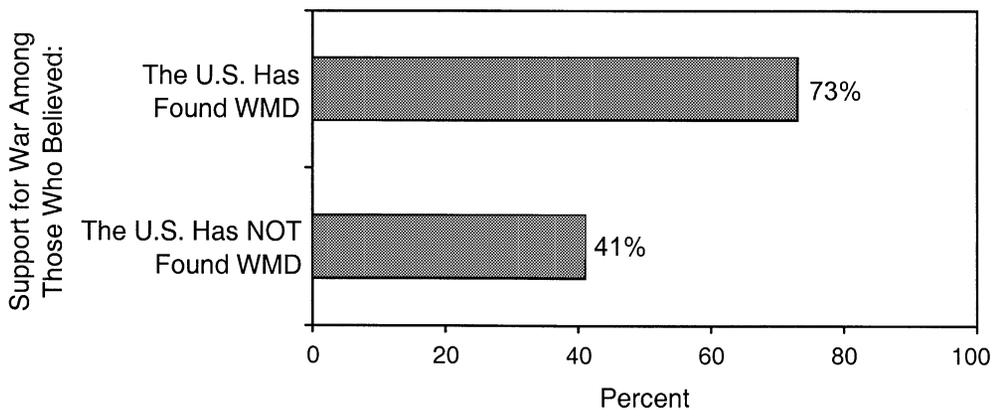
ing data from June through September, among those with the misperception, 67 percent held the view that going to war was the best thing to do, while only 29 percent expressed support among those who did not have the misperception (Figure 2). Among those without the misperception, 52 percent said it was the wrong decision.

Just as before the war, in the postwar period there was also a strong relationship between beliefs about the nature of the connection between al Qaeda and Iraq and support for the war. Among those who believed that Saddam Hussein was directly involved in September 11, 69 percent said going to war was the best thing to do. Among those who believed that Iraq had given al Qaeda substantial support but was not involved in September 11, approval dropped to 54 percent. Among those who believed that a few al Qaeda individuals had contact with Iraqi officials, 39 percent were supportive, while just 11 percent expressed support among those who believed that there was no connection. Among those who believed that there was no connection, 73 percent thought that going to war was the wrong decision.

Weapons of Mass Destruction

The mistaken beliefs that WMD have been found in Iraq, or that Iraq used WMD in the war, have been highly related to support for the decision to go to war. Consolidating all respondents asked by PIPA/KN in four polls conducted from May through September, among those who believed that WMD have been

FIGURE 3
Support for the War and Misperception that Iraqi WMD Found



Composite of Polls Conducted May-September 2003

Source: Program on International Policy Attitudes/Knowledge Networks, October 2003.

found, 73 percent thought that going to war was the best decision (Figure 3). Among those who did not have this misperception, only 41 percent held this view.

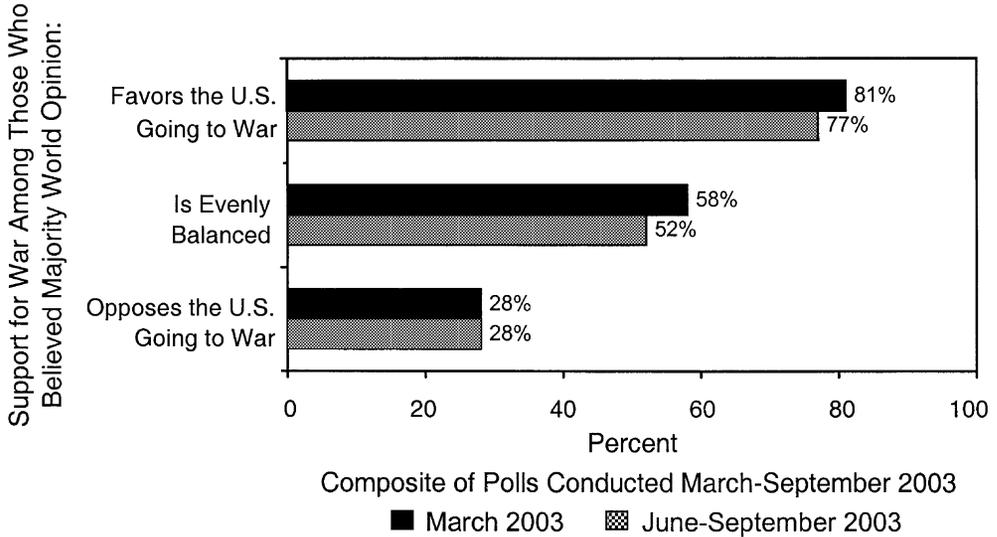
Similarly, consolidating two polls conducted in May and August-September, among those who believed that Iraq had used chemical and biological weapons in the war, 64 percent said they thought going to war was the best thing to do. Among those who did not have this belief, only 48 percent thought it was the best thing to do.

World Public Opinion

Perceptions of world public opinion on going to war with Iraq have been significantly related to support for the war. This has been true during and after the war.

In the PIPA/KN poll conducted in late March, shortly after the onset of the war, among those who wrongly believed that the majority of the people in the world favored the United States going to war with Iraq, an overwhelming 81 percent said they agreed with the President's decision to go to war with Iraq, despite his failure to garner UN Security Council approval. Among those who—also incorrectly—believed that views were evenly balanced on this question, 58 percent said they agreed. Among those who correctly believed that the majority of people opposed it, only 28 percent said they agreed with the President's decision. When polled after the war (May-September) the pattern was basically the same, though a different question was used to measure support for the war (Figure 4).

FIGURE 4
Views of World Public Opinion and Support for War During and After the War



Source: Program on International Policy Attitudes/Knowledge Networks, October 2003.

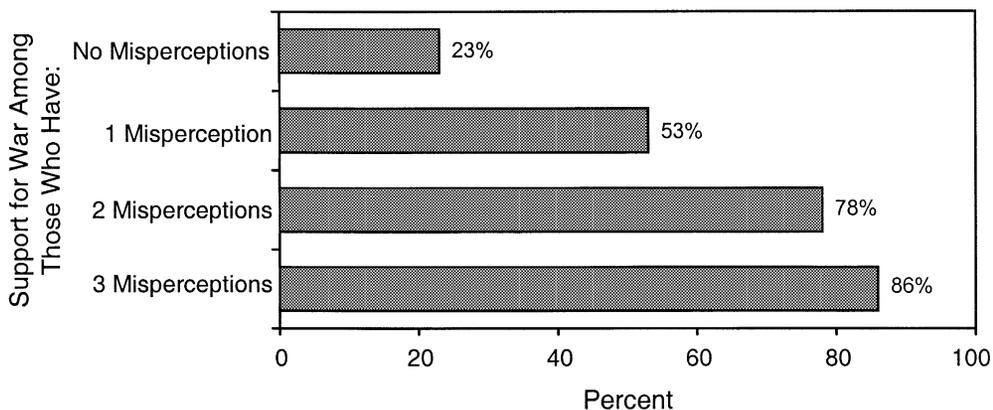
Combined Analysis

To determine the cumulative strength of the relationship between various misperceptions and support for the war, we analyzed those who had been asked all of the three key misperception questions—whether evidence of links between Iraq and al Qaeda have been found, whether WMD have been found in Iraq, and whether world public opinion favored the United States going to war with Iraq—in three polls conducted from June through September. These polls revealed a strong cumulative relationship (Figure 5).

Multivariate Analysis

To determine how strong a factor misperceptions are in predicting support for the war as compared to other factors, a binary logistic regression analysis was performed together with eight other factors. Four of the factors were demographic: gender, age, household income, and education. Two other categorical factors were party identification and intention to vote for the President in the next election as opposed to an unnamed Democratic nominee. In addition, there were the factors of how closely people follow events in Iraq and their primary news source. The odds ratio statistic was used to determine the relative likelihood that respondents would support the war. Support for the war was defined as the respondent saying that he or she thought the war was the right decision and the best thing to do, not that he or she was just supporting the President. For this analysis, the number of respondents was 1,219.

FIGURE 5
Cumulative Effect of Having Key Misperceptions on Support for the War



Composite of Polls Conducted June-September 2003

Source: Program on International Policy Attitudes/Knowledge Networks, October 2003.

Note: Misperceptions included were that clear evidence of Iraq-al Qaeda links have been found, WMD have been found, and world public opinion favored the Iraq war.

When all respondents with one or more of the three key misperceptions were put into one category and compared to those with none of these misperceptions, the presence of misperceptions was the most powerful predictor of support for the war, with those misperceiving being 4.3 times more likely to support the war than those who did not misperceive. The second most powerful predictor was the intention to vote for the President, with those intending to vote for the President being 3 times more likely to support the war than those who planned to vote for the Democratic nominee. Those who intended to vote for the Democratic nominee were 1.8 times less likely to support the war. All other factors were far less influential. Those who followed the news on Iraq very or somewhat closely were 1.2 times more likely to support the war than those who followed it “not very closely” or “not at all.” Men were 1.5 times more likely to support the war than women. Those with higher incomes were very slightly more likely to support the war. All other factors were insignificant, including education and age. Party identification by itself would be predictive, but when intention to vote for the President is included, party identification also becomes insignificant.

To determine the cumulative strength of misperceptions as a predictor of war support, the smaller sample that received all of the three key misperceptions questions was analyzed. Respondents were divided into four categories of no misperceptions, exactly one misperception, exactly two misperceptions, and all three misperceptions. Those with just one misperception were 2.9 times more likely to support the war, rising to 8.1 times more likely among those with exactly two misperceptions and to 9.8 times more likely among those with all

three misperceptions. In this sample, all other factors remain essentially unchanged, with those intending to vote for the President being 2.8 times and men 1.5 times more likely to support the war. Those intending to vote for the Democratic nominee were 1.6 times less likely to support the war. Attention to news coded as a binary form, however, became insignificant while remaining significant as a continuous variable.

When the three key misperceptions are treated as separate factors, there is wide variation in their power to predict support for the war. By far, the strongest is the perception of world public opinion, with those who perceive the world public opinion as approving of the war being 3.3 times more likely to support the war themselves. Those with the perception that evidence of links to al Qaeda have been found were 2.5 times more likely to support the war, and those who perceived that evidence of WMD have been found were 2.0 times more likely.

MISPERCEPTIONS AS A FUNCTION OF SOURCE OF NEWS

The widespread presence of misperceptions naturally raises the question of whether they are to some extent a function of an individual's source of news. To find out, in three different PIPA/KN polls conducted in June, July, and August-September, an aggregate sample of 3,334 respondents was asked, "Where do you tend to get most of your news?" and offered the options of "newspapers and magazines" or "TV and radio." Overall, 19 percent said their primary news source was print media, while 80 percent said it was electronic. Respondents were then asked, "If one of the networks below is your primary source of news please select it. If you get news from two or more networks about equally, just go on to the next question." The networks offered were ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, Fox News, PBS, and NPR. Because the PBS and NPR viewers were such a small percentage, we combined them into one category of public networks. In the case of ABC, CBS, and NBC, we do not know how many people primarily got their news from local affiliates and how many from national news shows. Likewise, we do not know if all of those who said that they got their news from Fox News primarily got their news from the national cable news network and how many from local Fox affiliates.⁹

The same respondents were also asked about their perceptions, with 1,362 respondents receiving all three key perception questions and 3,334 respondents receiving at least one of them—that is, whether evidence of close links between Iraq and al Qaeda has been found, whether WMD have been found in Iraq, and whether world public opinion approved of the United States going to war with Iraq.

⁹ Numbers for those naming a network as their primary news source were as follows: Fox, 520; CBS, 258; CNN, 466; ABC, 315; NBC, 420; NPR/PBS, 91. All findings in this section were statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level, except where noted.

TABLE 4
Frequency of Misperceptions per Respondent: WMD Found, Evidence of al Qaeda Link, and World Majority Support for War (percentages)

<i>Number of misperceptions per respondent</i>	<i>Fox</i>	<i>CBS</i>	<i>ABC</i>	<i>CNN</i>	<i>NBC</i>	<i>Print Media</i>	<i>NPR/PBS</i>
None of the three	20	30	39	45	45	53	77
One or more misperception	80	71	61	55	55	47	23

Source: Program on International Policy Attitudes/Knowledge Networks.

COMBINED ANALYSIS

Because it provides the best overview of the relationship between media sources, this article first analyzes the relationship between media sources and the presence of multiple misperceptions to explore the variation in the level of misperceptions according to the respondents' news source. Afterward, it analyzes the variance for specific misperceptions.

An analysis of those who were asked all of the key three perception questions does reveal a remarkable level of variation in the presence of misperceptions according to news source. Standing out in the analysis are Fox and NPR/PBS, but for opposite reasons. Fox was the news source whose viewers had the most misperceptions. NPR/PBS are notable because their viewers and listeners consistently held fewer misperceptions than respondents who obtained their information from other news sources. Table 4 shows this clearly. Listed are the breakouts of the sample according to the frequency of the three key misperceptions (that is, the beliefs that evidence of links between Iraq and al Qaeda has been found, that WMD have been found in Iraq, and that world public opinion approved of the United States going to war with Iraq) and their primary news source. In the audience for NPR/PBS, there was an overwhelming majority who did not have any of the three misperceptions, and hardly any had all three.

To check these striking findings, the data were analyzed a different way by using the larger sample of 3,334 who had answered at least one of the three questions just mentioned. For each misperception, it was determined how widespread it was in each media audience, and then for each media audience this frequency was averaged for the three misperceptions. Table 5 shows the averages from lowest to highest. Again, the Fox audience showed the highest average rate of misperceptions (45 percent) while the NPR/PBS audience showed the lowest (11 percent).

Close Links to al Qaeda

The same pattern in the distribution of misperceptions among the news sources was obtained in the cases of each specific misperception. When asked whether

TABLE 5
*Average of Three Misperception Rates among Viewers and
 Listeners: WMD Found, Evidence of al Qaeda Link,
 and World Majority Support for War
 (percentages)*

<i>News Source</i>	<i>Average Rate per Misperception</i>
Fox	45
CBS	36
CNN	31
ABC	30
NBC	30
Print Media	25
NPR/PBS	11

Source: Program on International Policy Attitudes/Knowledge Networks.

the United States has found “clear evidence in Iraq that Saddam Hussein was working closely with the al-Qaeda terrorist organization,” among the combined sample for the three-month period, 49 percent said that such evidence had been found (Table 6). This misperception was substantially higher among those who get their news primarily from Fox, 67 percent. Once again the NPR/PBS audience was the lowest at 16 percent.

Variations were much more modest on the perception that Iraq was directly involved in September 11. As discussed, the view that Iraq was directly involved in September 11 is not a demonstrable misperception, but it is widely regarded as fallacious by the intelligence community. In this case, the highest level of misperceptions was in the CBS audience (33 percent) followed by Fox (24 percent), ABC (23 percent), NBC (22 percent), and CNN (21 percent). Respondents who got their news primarily from print media (14 percent) and NPR or PBS (10 percent) were less likely to choose this description.

Combining the above group with those who had the less egregious but still unproven belief that Iraq gave substantial support to al Qaeda, the pattern was similar. Among CBS viewers, 68 percent had one of these perceptions, as did 66 percent of Fox viewers, 59 percent of NBC viewers, 55 percent of CNN view-

TABLE 6
*Viewers' Beliefs on Whether the United States Has Found
 Evidence of an al Qaeda-Iraq Link
 (percentages)*

<i>Clear Evidence of al Qaeda Link</i>	<i>NBC</i>	<i>CBS</i>	<i>ABC</i>	<i>Fox</i>	<i>CNN</i>	<i>NPR/PBS</i>	<i>Print Media</i>
US has found	49	56	45	67	48	16	40
US has not found	45	41	49	29	47	85	58

Source: Program on International Policy Attitudes/Knowledge Networks.

TABLE 7
Perception that the United States Has or Has Not Found WMD
 (percentages)

<i>Weapons of Mass Destruction</i>	<i>NBC</i>	<i>CBS</i>	<i>ABC</i>	<i>Fox</i>	<i>CNN</i>	<i>NPR/PBS</i>	<i>Print Media</i>
US has found	20	23	19	33	20	11	17
US has not found	79	75	79	64	79	89	82

Source: Program on International Policy Attitudes/Knowledge Networks.

ers, and 53 percent of ABC viewers. Print readers were nearly as high at 51 percent, while NPR/PBS audiences were significantly lower at 28 percent.

Weapons of Mass Destruction

When respondents were asked whether the United States has “found Iraqi weapons of mass destruction” since the war had ended, 22 percent of all respondents over June through September mistakenly thought this had happened. Once again, Fox viewers were the highest with 33 percent having this belief. A lower 19 to 23 percent of viewers who watch ABC, NBC, CBS, and CNN had the perception that the United States has found WMD. Seventeen percent of those who primarily get their news from print sources had the misperception, while only 11 percent who watch PBS or listen to NPR had it (Table 7).

World Public Opinion

Respondents were also asked to give their impression of how they think “people in the world feel about the US having gone to war with Iraq.” Over the three-month period, 25 percent of all respondents said, incorrectly, “the majority of people favor the US having gone to war” (Table 8). Of Fox watchers, 35 percent said this. Only 5 percent of those who watch PBS or listen to NPR misperceived world opinion in this way. As usual, those who primarily get their news from print media were the second lowest, with 17 percent having this misperception.

TABLE 8
World Public Opinion on the United States Going to War
 (percentages)

<i>Majority of people in world . . .</i>	<i>NBC</i>	<i>CBS</i>	<i>ABC</i>	<i>Fox</i>	<i>CNN</i>	<i>NPR/PBS</i>	<i>Print Media</i>
Favor US going to war in Iraq	20	28	27	35	24	5	17

Source: Program on International Policy Attitudes/Knowledge Networks.

Numerous respondents also chose the option of saying that in world public opinion, views are evenly balanced between favoring and opposing going to war—a misperception, though less egregious. Combining those who said views were evenly balanced with those who assumed that the majority favored the Iraq war—a more inclusive definition of misperception—the same pattern obtained. Fox viewers had the highest level of misperceiving (69 percent) and NPR/PBS the lowest (26 percent). The others also formed a familiar pattern: CBS viewers at 63 percent, ABC at 58 percent, NBC at 56 percent, CNN at 54 percent, and print media at 45 percent.

The same question was asked about European opinion. Perceptions of European views are more accurate among the U.S. public: only 17 percent thought there had been majority support among Europeans for the war. Over the three months, CBS viewers most frequently misperceived European opinion (24 percent); Fox viewers were second (20 percent). The NPR/PBS audience and those relying on printed media were lowest, both at 13 percent.

If one adds together those who thought there was European majority support with those who thought views in Europe were evenly balanced, 47 percent misperceived European opinion; CBS viewers were highest at 56 percent, NBC and Fox viewers were next at 52 percent and 51 percent respectively, while the NPR/PBS audience was lowest at 29 percent. ABC viewers and those using print sources were tied for second lowest at 41 percent.

The Effect of Variations in Audiences

The question thus arises of whether the variation in misperceptions is a function of variations in the demographics or political attitudes of the audience. Some audiences varied according to education, party identification, and support for the President. However, as is evident in the regression analysis, when all of these factors are analyzed together, the respondent's primary source of news is still a strong and significant factor; indeed, it was one of the most powerful factors predicting misperceptions.

MISPERCEPTIONS AS A FUNCTION OF LEVEL OF ATTENTION TO NEWS

It would seem reasonable to assume that misperceptions are due to a failure to pay attention to news and that those who have greater exposure to news would have fewer misperceptions. All respondents were asked, "How closely are you following the news about the situation in Iraq now?" For the summer as a whole (June, July, August-September), 13 percent said they were following the news very closely, 43 percent somewhat closely, 29 percent not very closely, and 14 percent not closely at all.

Strikingly, overall, there was no relation between the reported level of attention to news and the frequency of misperceptions. In the case of those who primarily watched Fox, greater attention to news modestly *increased* the likeli-

hood of misperceptions. Only in the case of those who primarily got their news from print did misperceptions decrease with lower levels of attention, though in some cases this occurred for CNN viewers as well.

The most robust effects were found among those who primarily got their news from Fox. Among those who did not follow the news at all, 42 percent had the misperception that evidence of close links to al Qaeda has been found, rising progressively at higher levels of attention to 80 percent among those who followed the news very closely. For the perception that WMD have been found, those who watched very closely had the highest rate of misperception at 44 percent, while the other levels of attention were lower, though they did not form a clear pattern (not at all, 34 percent; not very, 24 percent; somewhat, 32 percent). Among those who did not follow the news at all, 22 percent believed that world public opinion favored the war, jumping to 34 percent and 32 percent among those who followed the news not very and somewhat closely, respectively, and then jumping even higher to 48 percent among those who followed the news very closely.

With increasing attention, those who got their news from print were less likely to have all three misperceptions. Of those not following the news closely, 49 percent had the misperception that evidence of close links has been found, declining to 32 percent among those who followed the news very closely. Those who did not follow the news at all were far more likely to misperceive (35 percent) that WMD had been found than the other levels (not very, 14 percent; somewhat, 18 percent; very, 13 percent). Twenty-five percent of those who did not follow the news at all had the misperception that world public opinion favored the war, dropping to 16 percent for all other categories.

CNN viewers showed slightly, but significantly, lower levels of misperception on finding WMD and world public opinion at higher levels of attention, though not on evidence of links to al Qaeda.

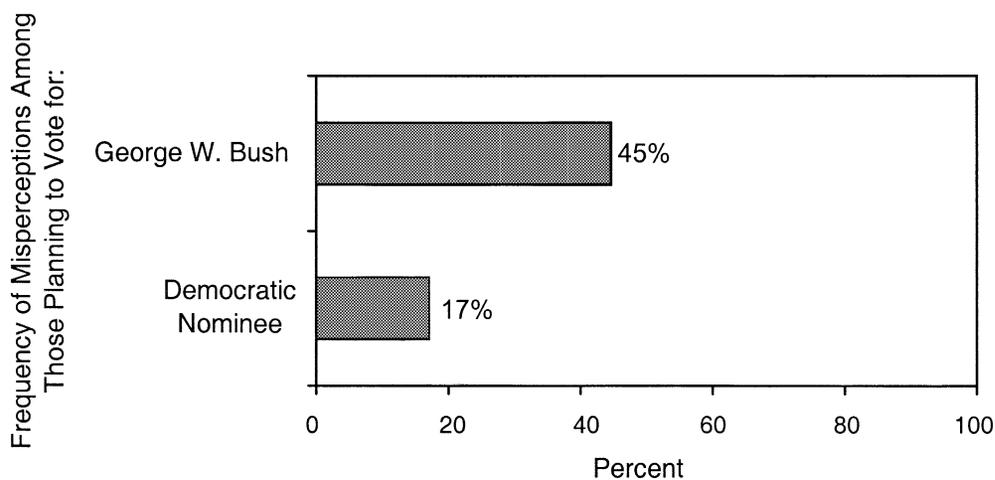
MISPERCEPTIONS AS A FUNCTION OF POLITICAL ATTITUDES

Not surprisingly, political attitudes did play a role in the frequency of misperceptions. The intention to vote for the President was highly influential. Party identification was also influential; however, this effect disappeared after controlling for intention to vote for the President.

Intention to Vote for the President

The polls of June, July, and August-September all included a question, placed near the end, asking whether the respondents thought they would vote for Bush or for the Democratic nominee in the presidential election (Figure 6). In all cases, the responses were very similar to those in numerous other polls at the same time—and showed either a slight edge for Bush or a statistical tie. Only 10 percent did not answer the question. When Bush supporters and supporters

FIGURE 6
Support for President and Frequency of Misperceptions



Composite of Polls Conducted June-September 2003

Source: Program on International Policy Attitudes/Knowledge Networks, October 2003.

of a Democratic nominee are compared, it is clear that supporters of the President are more likely to have misperceptions than are those who oppose him. Multivariate analysis indicates that intention to vote for the President is the single most powerful predictor of misperceptions.

Taking the averages of the percentage that had each of the three key misperceptions—evidence of al Qaeda links found, WMD found, and world public opinion favors war—those who said they would vote for the President were far more likely to misperceive. On average, those who would vote for the President held misperceptions 45 percent of the time, while those who say they will vote for a Democrat held misperceptions, on average, 17 percent of the time (Figure 6).

Looking at the specific cases, in response to the question “Has the US found clear evidence Saddam Hussein was working closely with al-Qaeda?” a strikingly large 68 percent of Bush supporters believed that the United States has found such evidence. On the other side, an equally striking 66 percent of supporters of a Democratic nominee knew that such evidence has not been found. When asked to characterize the relationship between the previous Iraqi government and al Qaeda given four choices, 29 percent of Bush supporters said, “Iraq was directly involved in the 9/11 attacks.” Only 15 percent of Democratic supporters chose this description.

Only minorities of either Bush supporters or supporters of a Democratic nominee believe that the United States has found evidence of WMD in Iraq. However, three times as many Bush supporters as Democrat supporters hold this misperception. Thirty-one percent of Bush supporters think the United States has found such evidence, while only 10 percent of Democrat supporters think this.

When asked, “How do you think the people of the world feel about the US having gone to war with Iraq?” Bush supporters were more than three times more likely than supporters of a Democratic nominee to believe that “the majority of people favor the US having gone to war.” Thirty-six percent of Bush supporters had this misperception, while only 11 percent of Democratic supporters did.

The PIPA/KN polls asked the same question about Europe, on which misperceptions are less widespread among Americans. Twenty-six percent of Bush supporters mistakenly thought that a majority of Europeans favored the war, while only 7 percent of supporters of a Democratic nominee believed this.

Party Identification

Republicans are also more likely than Democrats or independents to have misperceptions. However, when the analysis controls for support for the President, this party difference largely disappears. For example, among Bush supporters, Republicans, Democrats, and independents were similarly likely to believe that the United States has found clear evidence that Saddam Hussein was working closely with al Qaeda (pro-Bush Republicans, 68 percent; pro-Bush Democrats, 77 percent; pro-Bush independents, 67 percent). On whether the United States has found evidence of WMD, the same pattern among Bush supporters was present (31 percent of pro-Bush Republicans believing such evidence has been found, 29 percent of pro-Bush Democrats believing this, and 29 percent of pro-Bush independents believing this). The same pattern appeared in all cases tested.

RELATIVE STRENGTH OF VARIOUS FACTORS RELATED TO LEVEL OF MISPERCEPTION

To determine which factors had the most power to predict the likelihood of misperceiving, we performed a binary logistic regression analysis, together with eight other factors. Four of the factors were demographic: gender, age, household income, and education. Two other categorical factors were party identification and intention to vote for the President in the next election, as opposed to an unnamed Democratic nominee. In addition, we included the factors of how closely people follow events in Iraq and what their primary news source was. The odds ratio statistic was used to determine the likelihood that respondents would have misperceptions.

In the regression analysis, the most powerful factor was the intention to vote for President Bush. As compared to those who intended to vote for the Democratic nominee or were undecided, those who intended to vote for the President were 2.9 times more likely to believe that close links to al Qaeda have been found, 3.0 times more likely to believe that WMD had been found, and 2.6 times more likely to believe that world public opinion was favorable to the war. Overall, those who intended to vote for the President were 3.7 times more likely to have at least one of these misperceptions.

TABLE 9
Significant Variances in Misperceptions by Primary News Source

	<i>Primary Media Source</i>	<i>Odds/Ratio</i>	<i>N</i>
US has found WMD (N = 2,202)	Fox	1.6	361
	CBS*	1.4	182
	NPR/PBS*	-1.3	53
US has found clear evidence of Iraqi link to al Qaeda (N = 2,202)	Fox	2.0	366
	CBS	1.8	188
	NPR/PBS	-3.5	59
Majority of world favors US having gone to war with Iraq (N = 1,827)	Fox	1.7	294
	CBS	1.9	168
	NPR/PBS	-5.6	55
At least one misperception (N = 2,506)	Fox	2.1	414
	CBS	2.3	213
	NPR/PBS	-3.8	66

Source: Program on International Policy Attitudes/Knowledge Networks.

* Not statistically significant at the 0.05 level. All other media sources did not vary significantly. For data, please contact the authors.

The second most powerful factor was one's primary source of network news. Analysis shows the factor to be highly significant, but assessing each network is difficult. Though several networks are significant, others are not. To determine the relative importance of each network as a primary source of news, another regression was performed, treating each network as a binary variable and comparing each network's respondents to other respondents. When this analysis is performed, having Fox, CBS, or NPR/PBS as one's primary news source emerges as the most significant predictor of a particular misperception and of misperceptions in general.

To determine the overall importance of one factor to another, a comparison of statistical measures is necessary.¹⁰ Overall, Fox viewing has the greatest and most consistent predictive power in the analysis on a variety of these statistical measures. Table 9 presents the results.

Fox is the most consistently significant predictor of misperceptions. Those who primarily watched Fox were 2.0 times more likely to believe that close links to al Qaeda have been found, 1.6 times more likely to believe that WMD had been found, 1.7 times more likely to believe that world public opinion was favorable to the war, and 2.1 times more likely to have at least one misperception. Interestingly, when asked how the majority of people in the world feel about the war, if the response "views are evenly balanced" is included as a misperception along with "favor," only Fox is a significant predictor of that misperception.

¹⁰ PIPA compared two statistical measures, the Wald statistic and the difference in the -2 log likelihood if the factor is removed from the analysis.

Those who primarily watched CBS were 1.8 times more likely to believe that close links to al Qaeda have been found, 1.9 times more likely to believe that world public opinion was favorable to the war, and 2.3 times more likely to have at least one misperception. However, they were not significantly different on beliefs about the uncovering of WMD.

On the other hand, those who primarily watched PBS or listened to NPR were 3.5 times less likely to believe that close links to al Qaeda have been found, 5.6 times less likely to believe that world public opinion was favorable to the war, and 3.8 times less likely to have at least one misperception. However, they were not significantly different on the issue of WMD.

Level of attention to news was not a significant factor overall, with the exception of those who primarily got their news from Fox. This is consistent with the finding that Fox viewers were more likely to misperceive the more closely they followed events in Iraq. Multiplicative variables were derived for each network by multiplying attention to news by each network dummy variable. A multivariate analysis was performed on misperceptions in which each new combined network-attention level variable was added to the previous model. The results show that Fox viewers are the only ones to be significantly more likely to misperceive with higher levels of attention to news.

The third most powerful factor was intention to vote for the Democratic nominee. As compared to those who intended to vote for President Bush or were undecided, those who intended to vote for the Democratic nominee were 2.0 times less likely to believe that close links to al Qaeda have been found and 1.8 times less likely to believe that world public opinion was favorable to the war. Overall, those who intended to vote for the Democratic nominee were 1.8 times less likely to have at least one of these misperceptions, but did not quite achieve significance on the WMD question.

The fourth most powerful factor was education. Those who had no college, as compared to those had at least some college, were 1.3 times more likely to believe that close links to al Qaeda have been found and 1.4 times more likely to have at least one misperception, but did not quite achieve significance on the other misperceptions.

Age was a very weak factor, with older people being very slightly less likely to misperceive. All other factors—gender, party identification (when intention to vote for the President was included), level of attention to news, and income—were not significant. In a separate analysis, region of the country was included and also not found to be significant.

ANALYSIS

These data lead to the question of why so many Americans have misperceptions that appear to be having a significant impact on attitudes about the Iraq war and why these misperceptions vary according to one's source of news and political attitudes. This analysis starts with possible explanations based on exogenous factors and then moves inward.

The first and most obvious reason that the public had so many of these misperceptions is that the Bush administration made numerous statements that could easily be construed as asserting these falsehoods. On numerous occasions the administration made statements strongly implying that it had intelligence substantiating that Iraq was closely involved with al Qaeda and was even directly involved in the September 11 attacks. For example, in his 18 March 2003 Presidential Letter to Congress, President Bush explained that in going to war with Iraq he was taking “the necessary actions against international terrorists and terrorist organizations, including those nations, organizations, or persons who planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001.”¹¹ When Secretary of State Colin Powell addressed the UN Security Council on 5 February 2003, he presented photographs that were identified as al Qaeda training camps inside Iraq, leaving unclear the fact that the camp in question was in the northern part of Iraq, not under the control of the central Iraqi government.¹² Administration figures continued to refer to the purported meeting between Mohammed Atta and an Iraqi official in Prague even after U.S. intelligence agencies established that Atta was in fact in the United States at the time.¹³ More recently, on 14 September 2003, Vice President Richard Cheney made the following ambiguous statement: “If we’re successful in Iraq . . . so that it’s not a safe haven for terrorists, now we will have struck a major blow right at the heart of the base, if you will, the geographic base of the terrorists who have had us under assault now for many years, but most especially on 9/11.”¹⁴ Sometimes the association has been established by inserting a reference to September 11 that is a non sequitur and then simply moving on, or implying that the connection is so self-evident that it does not require explanation. For example, President Bush’s own remarks at his press conference of 28 October 2003 could appear to reinforce multiple misperceptions:

The intelligence that said he [Saddam Hussein] had a weapon system was intelligence that had been used by a multinational agency, the U.N., to pass resolutions. It’s been used by my predecessor to conduct bombing raids. It was intelligence gathered from a variety of sources that clearly said Saddam Hussein was a threat. And given the attacks of September the 11th—it was—you know, we needed to enforce U.N. resolution (sic) for the security of the world, and we did. We took action based upon good, solid intelligence. It was the right thing to do to make America more secure and the world more peaceful.¹⁵

¹¹ President George W. Bush, “Presidential Letter,” 18 March 2003, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/03/20030319-1.html>.

¹² Secretary Colin L. Powell, “Remarks to the United Nations,” New York City, 5 February 2003, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2003/17300.htm>, 12 October 2003.

¹³ Dana Priest and Glenn Kessler, “Iraq, 9/11 Still Linked By Cheney,” *Washington Post*, 29 September 2003.

¹⁴ Vice President Richard Cheney, “Meet the Press,” 14 September 2003.

¹⁵ Full transcript: “Bush Defends Foreign Policy,” *Washington Post*, online edition, 28 October 2003, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn?pagename=article&node=&contentId=A29127-2003Oct28¬Found=true>.

Here the listener could mistakenly interpret the President's comments as meaning that the same intelligence that determined the United States' policy on war had been accepted as correct by the UN Security Council in its deliberations and that the September 11 attacks, a UN Security Council resolution, and the choice to invade Iraq all followed a logical progression ("given the attacks of September the 11th—it was—you know").

In any case, it is quite clear that the public perceived that the administration was asserting a strong link between Iraq and al Qaeda, even to the point of Iraqi direct involvement in September 11. When PIPA/KN asked in June, "Do you think the Bush administration did or did not imply that Iraq under Saddam Hussein was involved in the September 11th attacks?" 71 percent said that it had.

The administration also made statements that came extremely close to asserting that WMD were found in postwar Iraq. On 30 May 2003, President Bush made the statement, ". . . for those who say we haven't found the banned manufacturing devices or banned weapons, they're wrong. We found them."¹⁶

Another possible explanation for why the public had such misperceptions is the way that the media reported the news. The large variation in the level of misperceptions does suggest that some media sources may have been making greater efforts than others to disabuse their audiences of misperceptions they may have had so as to avoid feeling conflict about going or having gone to war. Of course, the presence or absence of misperceptions in viewers does not necessarily prove that they were caused by the presence or absence of reliable reporting by a news source. Variations in the level of misperceptions according to news source may be related to variations in the political orientations of the audience. However, when political attitudes were controlled for the variations between the networks and the same attitudes still obtained, it suggests that differences in reporting by media sources were playing a role.

There is also evidence that in the run-up to, during, and for a period after the war, many in the media appeared to feel that it was not their role to challenge the administration or that it was even appropriate to take an active pro-war posture. Fox News' programming on the war included a flag in the left-hand corner and assumed the Defense Department's name for the war: "Operation Iraqi Freedom." When criticized in a letter for taking a pro-war stance, Fox News' Neil Cavuto replied, "So am I slanted and biased? You damn well bet I am. . . . You say I wear my biases on my sleeve? Better that than pretend you have none, but show them clearly in your work."¹⁷ Interestingly, even CBS News, which tends to have a more liberal reputation, seemed to think along these lines. CBS anchor Dan Rather commented in a 14 April 2003 interview with Larry King, "Look, I'm an American. I never tried to kid anybody that I'm some internationalist or something. And when my country is at war, I want

¹⁶ Mike Allen, "Bush: 'We Found' Banned Weapons; President Cites Trailers in Iraq as Proof," *Washington Post*, 31 May 2001.

¹⁷ David Folkenflik, "Fox News defends its patriotic coverage: Channel's objectivity is questioned," *Baltimore Sun*, 2 April 2003.

my country to win. . . . Now, I can't and don't argue that that is coverage without a prejudice. About that I am prejudiced."¹⁸

A study of the frequencies of pro-war and anti-war commentators on the major networks found that pro-war views were overwhelmingly more frequent.¹⁹ In such an environment, it would not be surprising that the media would downplay the lack of evidence of links between Iraq and al Qaeda, the fact that WMD were not being found, and that world public opinion was critical of the war. Furthermore, the fact shown in the present study that the audiences of the various networks have varied so widely in the prevalence of misperceptions lends credence to the idea that media outlets had the capacity to play a more critical role, but to varying degrees chose not to.

Reluctant to challenge the administration, the media can simply become a means of transmission for the administration, rather than a critical filter. For example, when President Bush made the assertion that WMD had been found, the 31 May 2003 edition of the *Washington Post* ran a front page headline saying, "Bush: 'We Found' Banned Weapons."²⁰

There is also striking evidence that the readiness to challenge the administration is a variable that corresponds to levels of misperception among viewers. The aforementioned study of the frequency of commentary critical of the war found that the two networks notably least likely to present critical commentary were Fox and CBS—the same two networks that in the present study had viewers most likely to have misperceptions. This is clarified by statistics from Rendell and Broughel's content analysis of network coverage: "The percentage of U.S. sources that were officials varied from network to network, ranging from 75 percent at CBS to 60 percent at NBC. . . . Fox's Special Report with Brit Hume had fewer U.S. officials than CBS (70 percent) and more U.S. anti-war guests (3 percent) than PBS or CBS. Eighty-one percent of Fox's sources were pro-war, however, the highest of any network. CBS was close on the Murdoch network's heels with 77 percent. NBC featured the lowest proportion of pro-war voices with 65 percent."²¹

¹⁸ Dan Rather, during the 4 April 2003 *Larry King Show*. Quoted in Steve Rendell and Tara Broughel, "Amplifying Officials, Squelching Dissent: FAIR study finds democracy poorly served by war coverage," *Extra!* (May/June 2003), Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, available at www.fair.org/extra/0305/warstudy.html.

¹⁹ Steve Rendell and Tara Broughel, "Amplifying Officials, Squelching Dissent."

²⁰ Allen, "Bush: 'We Found' Banned Weapons," 31 May 2001.

²¹ See footnote 19. Forthcoming studies by Susan Moeller are likely to offer a much more comprehensive view of these dynamics than is available at the time of writing. A report on media coverage of WMD under the aegis of the Center for International and Strategic Studies at the University of Maryland is in preparation for release in early 2004. See also Susan Moeller, "A Moral Imagination: The Media's Response to the War on Terrorism" in Stuart Allen and Barbie Zelizer, eds., *Reporting War* (London: Routledge, forthcoming). On the issue of embedded reporters, see a content analysis by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, "Embedded Reporters: What Are Americans Getting?" at www.journalism.org/resources/research/reports/war/embed/default.asp.

Another contributing factor may also have been a dynamic in reporting that is not unique to the Iraq war: the absence of something does not constitute a compelling story, while even the prospect of the presence of something does. Thus, shortly after the end of the war, numerous headlines trumpeted even faint prospects that evidence of WMD were about to be found. However, when these prospects failed to materialize, this did not constitute a compelling story and, thus, reporting on it was given a far less prominent position. The cumulative effect of repeatedly hearing the expectation that weapons were about to be found, while hearing little or no disconfirmation, could well contribute to the impression that at least one of these leads was indeed fruitful.

Other more subtle dynamics may also have been at work. The fact that world public opinion was so opposed to the United States going to war with Iraq may have been obscured by giving such high visibility to the U.S. conflict with France in the Security Council. The key story became one of French obstructionism, eclipsing the fact that polls from around the world, as well as the distribution of positions in the UN Security Council, showed widespread opposition to U.S. policy.²²

One could well argue that this plethora of exogenous factors obviates the need for any explanations based on endogenous factors. Indeed, the fact that no particular misperception studied was found in a clear majority of the public and the fact that 40 percent had none of the key misperceptions buttress confidence in the capacity of the public to sort through misleading stimuli. At the same time, a majority had at least one major misperception, raising the question of why so many people have been susceptible.

The seemingly obvious explanation—that the problem is that people just do not pay enough attention to the news—does not hold up. As discussed, higher levels of attention to news did not reduce the likelihood of misperception, and in the case of those who primarily got their news from Fox News, misperceptions increased with greater attention. Furthermore, the presence of misperceptions was not just noise found randomly throughout an inattentive public—the presence of misperceptions formed strong patterns highly related to respondents' primary source of news.

Perhaps the most promising explanation is that the misperceptions have performed an essential psychological function in mitigating doubts about the validity of the war. Polls have shown that Americans are quite resistant to the idea of using military force except in self-defense or as part of a multilateral operation with UN approval.²³ Even if a country is developing nuclear weapons, there is not a consensus in the public that the United States would have the

²² See footnote 6.

²³ Evidence from the 1990s is reviewed in Steven Kull and I.M. Destler, *Misreading the Public: The Myth of a New Isolationism* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), 42–57, 67–80, 94–110. The public's views at the outset of the current Iraq experience are documented and analyzed in the report "Iraq Debate 2002," available at www.americans-world.org.

right to use military force to prevent it, though a very strong majority agrees that the UN Security Council would have this prerogative.²⁴

Thus, to legitimate the war without UN approval, the President had to make the case that the war would be an act of self-defense. The war against the Taliban had been overwhelmingly approved as legitimate because the Taliban had provided support to al Qaeda and, thus, was a party to the September 11 attack on the United States. Americans showed substantial receptivity to the administration's assertion that Iraq also had links to al Qaeda and that the possibility that Iraq was developing WMD that could be passed to al Qaeda, creating a substantial threat to the United States. But the public also appeared to recognize that the evidence was circumstantial—and this was not a president who commanded so much respect in foreign policy realms that they could simply take his word for it.

The public felt the need for UN approval as an alternate normative basis for war. Early polls showed that a very strong majority was ready to act with UN approval, but less than a third were ready to act unilaterally, and even days before the war a majority was still saying that the United States needed to wait for UN approval.²⁵ But even months before the war, a clear majority of the public said that if the President were to decide to go to war without UN approval they would support him,²⁶ and when the time came they did. This was a standard rally-round-the-president effect, no doubt intensified by a felt imperative to close ranks in the post-September 11 environment.²⁷

²⁴ In January 2003, PIPA/KN asked a series of general questions about whether a right existed “to use military force to prevent a country that does not have nuclear weapons from acquiring them.” Only 46 percent thought that, without UN approval, a country had the right to use military force on another country in this situation; virtually the same number (48 percent) thought the United States had this right. Seventy-six percent thought the UN Security Council had the right to authorize military force for this purpose. PIPA/Knowledge Networks Poll, “Americans on Iraq and the UN Inspections I,” 27 January 2003, available at www.pipa.org/online_reports.html.

²⁵ For early polls, see footnote 1. Just days before the war in a CBS News poll conducted 4–5 March, only 36 percent agreed that “Iraq presents such a clear danger to American interests that the United States needs to act now,” while 59 percent agreed that “The US needs to wait for approval of the United Nations before taking any action against Iraq.”

²⁶ In December 2002, January 2003, and February, PIPA/KN presented respondents the following scenario: “Imagine that President Bush moves that the UN approve an invasion of Iraq to overthrow Saddam Hussein, but most of the other members of the UN Security Council want to continue to use threats and diplomatic pressure to get Iraq to comply, and the motion does not pass. President Bush then decides that the US will undertake an invasion of Iraq, even if the US has to do so on its own. Just based on this information, what do you think your attitude would be about this decision?” Respondents were offered the option of agreeing with the President's choice, disagreeing, or choosing “I would not agree with this decision, but I would still support the President.” In all cases only a minority of 33 to 43 percent said they would agree, but another 25 to 27 percent said they would support but not agree, thus creating a majority ready to support the President should he decide to proceed.

²⁷ On the rally effect, see Richard A. Brody, “Crisis, War and Public Opinion: The Media and Public Support for the President” in W. Lance Bennett and David L. Paletz, *Taken by Storm: The Media, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy in the Gulf War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); R.A. Brody and C.R. Shapiro, “A Reconsideration of the Rally Phenomenon in Public Opinion” in S. Long, ed., *Political Behavior Annual*, vol. 2 (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989); and John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* (New York: Wiley, 1973): 208–213.

Such rally effects, though, are fairly superficial. Even during and after the war, when asked whether they really approve of the decision to go to war as distinguished from just supporting Bush “because he is the president,” only about half or less have said they think that going to war was the best thing, while another 15 to 22 percent have said that their approval of the war was just a way to support the president.²⁸

Americans had expected that once the United States went into Iraq, they would find evidence that Iraq was linked to al Qaeda and was developing WMD, thus vindicating the decision to go to war as an act of self-defense. Therefore, it is not surprising that many have been receptive when the administration has strongly implied or even asserted that the United States has found evidence that Iraq was working closely with al Qaeda and was developing WMD, and when media outlets—some more than others—have allowed themselves to be passive transmitters of such messages.

CONCLUSION

From the perspective of democratic process, the findings of this study are cause for concern. They suggest that if the public is opposed to taking military action without UN approval and the President is determined to do so, he has remarkable capacities to move the public to support his decision. This in itself is not worrisome—to the degree it is the product of persuasion, based on the merits of an argument. What is worrisome is that it appears that the President has the capacity to lead members of the public to assume false beliefs in support of his position. In the case of the Iraq war, this dynamic appears to have played a critical role: among those who did not hold the key false beliefs, only a small minority supported the decision to go to war. In a regression analysis, the presence of misperceptions was the most powerful factor predicting support for the war, with intention to vote for the President close behind. This does not prove that the misperceptions alone caused support for the war. It is more likely that it is one key factor that interacted with the desire to rally around the President and the troops. However, it does appear that it would have been significantly more difficult for the President to elicit and maintain support for the decision to go to war if the public had not held such misperceptions.

²⁸ Seven times in March and April 2003, Pew Research Center for the People and the Press asked, “Do you think the US made the right decision or the wrong decision in using military force against Iraq?” Those who said it was the right decision were asked whether they supported going to war because they think it was “the best thing for the US to do” or whether they were not sure if it was the best thing to do but they “support Bush’s decision, because he is the president.” During the war, 69 to 74 percent said the United States made the right decision, of which 48 to 54 percent thought it was the best thing to do, while 15 to 22 percent were unsure of this but supported the President. Each month from May through September, PIPA/KN repeated this question. Over this period, 45 to 53 percent thought that the war was the best thing to do, and 14 to 18 percent were unsure but supported the President.

The President's influence is not limitless. He does not appear to be capable of getting the public to go against their more deeply held value orientations. If he did, then it would not be necessary for the public to develop false beliefs. But he is capable of prompting the public to support him by developing the false beliefs necessary to justify the administration's policies in a way that is consistent with the public's deeper value orientations.

It also appears that the media cannot necessarily be counted on to play the critical role of doggedly challenging the administration. The fact that viewers of some media outlets had far lower levels of misperceptions than did others (even when controlling for political attitudes) suggests that not all were making the maximal effort to counter the potential for misperception.

To some extent, this period may be regarded as unique. We are still living in the aftermath of September 11. With the persisting sense of threat, the public may be more prone to try to accommodate the President, and the media may be more reluctant to challenge the President or to impart news that calls into question the validity of his decisions. And yet, it is also at times of threat that the most critical decisions are likely to be made.

It is likely that with time, public misperceptions will tend to erode. For example, after media coverage of David Kay's interim progress report on the activities of the Iraq Survey Group, the belief that WMD have been found dropped to 15 percent, although the belief that evidence of links to al Qaeda has been found did not drop. At the same time, there was a significant rise in the percentage that said they thought that the President at least stretched the truth when he made the case for war based on Iraq having a WMD program.²⁹ However, when the mechanisms for informing the public are in some way compromised, the process of the public gradually catching on is a slow one. In the meantime, the administration, by giving incorrect information, can gain support for policies that might not be consistent with the preferences held by the majority of Americans.

APPENDIX

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 U.S. population on such variables as age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, geographical region, employment status, income,

²⁹ See Steven Kull, "Americans Reevaluate Going to War with Iraq," PIPA/Knowledge Networks Poll, 13 November 2003, available at www.pipa.org.

and education. The panel is recruited using stratified random digit-dial (RDD) telephone sampling. RDD provides a non-zero probability of selection for every U.S. household having a telephone. Households that agree to participate in the panel are provided with free Web access and an Internet appliance that 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, and identifying information is 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.