



Hype & Glory

Walter Shapiro

Real people more nuanced than hawks and doves

Richard Nixon ran for president in 1968 promising that he had a "secret plan" to end the war in Vietnam. George W. Bush, in contrast, seems to have a not-so-secret plan to *start* a war in Iraq. Bush bristled with impatience Tuesday as he said, "Time is running out on Saddam Hussein. He must disarm. I'm sick and tired of games and deception. And that's my view of timetables."

On the eve of battle during World War I, soldiers would ask, "When's the balloon going up?" That was not a metaphorical question. In those days, before the development of tactical aircraft, armies would loft observation balloons for a final check on the enemy's position. By escalating his rhetoric, Bush has America wondering exactly when the balloons will be launched heralding the battle for Baghdad.

As USA TODAY reported Monday, Pentagon officials now say that the earliest timetable for a full-scale attack would be late February or early March. Logistical delays and Turkey's reluctance to provide bases have moved the invasion clock backward by about two weeks. But preventive war requires more than positioning soldiers and aircraft carriers. A more important factor in a democracy is whether the president has the political support to achieve regime change in Iraq.

The latest USA TODAY/CNN/Gallup Poll offers a conflicting view of American sentiments about war. Yes, a 56% majority (consistent with earlier surveys) supports sending troops to oust Saddam. But a different picture emerges when voters are asked what event would be necessary to justify an invasion. Only 23% back sending ground troops as soon as Bush declares that Iraq is hiding weapons of mass destruction, while 52% want to wait until United Nations arms inspectors find Saddam's secret arsenal.

Even the most rigorously administered telephone polls have limitations. Virtually every response invites follow-up questions. But few Americans will spend hours on the phone explaining the nuances of their positions. What is needed, as the nation girds for war, is to bring together a cross-section of the nation for a weekend of face-to-face discussion of American foreign policy.

Impossible? Well, tell that to 343 Americans who gathered in Philadelphia last weekend. Funded by a group of foundations and televised on PBS, the National Issues Convention Deliberative Poll provided an intriguing portrait of public opinion. Drawn from a national poll of 881 adults, the 343 delegates who accepted a free weekend in Philadelphia mirrored the diversity of the larger survey in all major demographic categories.

Everyone who writes about politics has theories about the national mood. But there is a humbling awe to actually seeing an approximation of the mosaic that is America gathered in the same room. My impression, based on observing the deliberations and interviews with delegates, is that Americans are neither jingoistic nor

apathetic about the threats from rogue nations such as Iraq and North Korea. Rather, they idealistically tend to believe that we should use our unparalleled military power judiciously and in concert with the United Nations.

It is a ridiculous conceit to believe that one person is an emblematic American. But Dennis Maitland, 37, the manager of a Jiffy Lube in North Fort Myers, Fla., comes close. Maitland, who voted for Bush in 2000, says about invading Iraq: "If we're going in for weapons, I don't have a problem with that. But if we're really going in for somebody else's oil rights, I don't think so."

The smaller sessions in Philadelphia revolved around writing questions to pose to panels of experts who were drawn from the Bush foreign-policy team, academia and prior administrations. Rather than demand simplistic answers, the delegates looked for guidance in resolving the complexities and contradictions in America's approach to a perplexing world. The Bush doctrine of pre-emption gave rise to this pesky query: "By what criteria does America name her enemy? Who gets to decide who's bad or dangerous or evil?"

Richard Haass, the director of policy planning at the State Department, used to this query to talk with surprising candor about America's vastly differing reactions to Iraq's quest for nuclear weapons and the seeming reality of North Korea's nuclear arsenal.

"You'd like to have a foreign policy that's always consistent in application," Haass said, "but the bottom line is that you just don't have that luxury."

After acknowledging the discrepancy in our responses to Iraq and North Korea, Haass added, "Obviously, I would suggest that they need to be different, but it doesn't make it any easier to sit here and explain why we are following one course of action."

Unlike a standard survey, a "deliberative poll" charts changes in attitudes after participants are exposed to pro-and-con expert opinion. Over the weekend, sentiment regarding Iraq evolved in two directions: Delegates became both more willing to support an invasion to disarm Saddam and more reluctant to act without the explicit support of the U.N. Security Council. As Jim Fishkin, the University of Texas political scientist who invented the deliberative poll, put it, "The public doesn't want to go into this war by ourselves or with just a couple of allies."

That underscores Bush's dilemma. Does the president have the patience to wait for the Security Council? Or does he risk antagonizing public opinion by attacking Saddam as soon as the military is ready?

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