

Headlines

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Half of U.S. Still Believes Iraq Had WMD

by Charles J. Hanley

-- Do you believe in Iraqi "WMD"? Did Saddam Hussein's government have weapons of mass destruction in 2003?

Half of America apparently still thinks so, a new poll finds, and experts see a raft of reasons why: a drumbeat of voices from talk radio to die-hard bloggers to the Oval Office, a surprise headline here or there, a rallying around a partisan flag, and a growing need for people, in their own minds, to justify the war in Iraq.

People tend to become "independent of reality" in these circumstances, says opinion analyst Steven Kull.

The reality in this case is that after a 16-month, \$900-million-plus investigation, the U.S. weapons hunters known as the Iraq Survey Group declared that Iraq had dismantled its chemical, biological and nuclear arms programs in 1991 under U.N. oversight. That finding in 2004 reaffirmed the work of U.N. inspectors who in 2002-03 found no trace of banned arsenals in Iraq.

Despite this, a Harris Poll released July 21 found that a full 50 percent of U.S. respondents _ up from 36 percent last year _ said they believe Iraq did have the forbidden arms when U.S. troops invaded in March 2003, an attack whose stated purpose was elimination of supposed WMD. Other polls also have found an enduring American faith in the WMD story.

"I'm flabbergasted," said Michael Massing, a media critic whose writings dissected the largely unquestioning U.S. news reporting on the Bush administration's shaky WMD claims in 2002-03.

"This finding just has to cause despair among those of us who hope for an informed public able to draw reasonable conclusions based on evidence," Massing said.

Timing may explain some of the poll result. Two weeks before the survey, two Republican lawmakers, Pennsylvania's Sen. Rick Santorum and Michigan's Rep. Peter Hoekstra, released an intelligence report in Washington saying 500 chemical munitions

had been collected in Iraq since the 2003 invasion.

"I think the Harris Poll was measuring people's surprise at hearing this after being told for so long there were no WMD in the country," said Hoekstra spokesman Jamal Ware.

But the Pentagon and outside experts stressed that these abandoned shells, many found in ones and twos, were 15 years old or more, their chemical contents were degraded, and they were unusable as artillery ordnance. Since the 1990s, such "orphan" munitions, from among 160,000 made by Iraq and destroyed, have turned up on old battlefields and elsewhere in Iraq, ex-inspectors say. In other words, this was no surprise.

"These are not stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction," said Scott Ritter, the ex-Marine who was a U.N. inspector in the 1990s. "They weren't deliberately withheld from inspectors by the Iraqis."

Conservative commentator Deroy Murdock, who trumpeted Hoekstra's announcement in his syndicated column, complained in an interview that the press "didn't give the story the play it deserved." But in some quarters it was headlined.

"Our top story tonight, the nation abuzz today ..." was how Fox News led its report on the old, stray shells. Talk-radio hosts and their callers seized on it. Feedback to blogs grew intense. "Americans are waking up from a distorted reality," read one posting.

Other claims about supposed WMD had preceded this, especially speculation since 2003 that Iraq had secretly shipped WMD abroad. A former Iraqi general's book _ at best uncorroborated hearsay _ claimed "56 flights" by jetliners had borne such material to Syria.

But Kull, Massing and others see an influence on opinion that's more sustained than the odd headline.

"I think the Santorum-Hoekstra thing is the latest 'factoid,' but the basic dynamic is the insistent repetition by the Bush administration of the original argument," said John Prados, author of the 2004 book "Hoodwinked: The Documents That Reveal How Bush Sold Us a War."

Administration statements still describe Saddam's Iraq as a threat. Despite the official findings, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has allowed only that "perhaps" WMD weren't in Iraq. And Bush himself, since 2003, has repeatedly insisted on one plainly false point: that Saddam rebuffed the U.N. inspectors in 2002, that "he wouldn't let them in," as he said in 2003, and "he chose to deny inspectors," as he said this March.

The facts are that Iraq _ after a four-year hiatus in cooperating with inspections _ acceded to the U.N. Security Council's demand and allowed scores of experts to conduct more than 700 inspections of potential weapons sites from Nov. 27, 2002, to March 16, 2003. The inspectors said they could wrap up their work within months. Instead, the U.S. invasion aborted that work.

As recently as May 27, Bush told West Point graduates, "When the United Nations Security Council gave him one final chance to disclose and disarm, or face serious consequences, he refused to take that final opportunity."

"Which isn't true," observed Kathleen Hall Jamieson, a scholar of presidential rhetoric at the University of Pennsylvania. But "it doesn't surprise me when presidents reconstruct reality to make their policies defensible." This president may even have convinced himself it's true, she said.

Americans have heard it. A poll by Kull's WorldPublicOpinion.org found that seven in 10 Americans perceive the administration as still saying Iraq had a WMD program. Combine that rhetoric with simplistic headlines about WMD "finds," and people "assume the issue is still in play," Kull said.

"For some it almost becomes independent of reality and becomes very partisan." The WMD believers are heavily Republican, polls show.

Beyond partisanship, however, people may also feel a need to believe in WMD, the analysts say.

"As perception grows of worsening conditions in Iraq, it may be that Americans are just hoping for more of a solid basis for being in Iraq to begin with," said the Harris Poll's David Krane.

Charles Duelfer, the lead U.S. inspector who announced the negative WMD findings two years ago, has watched uncertainly as TV sound bites, bloggers and politicians try to chip away at "the best factual account," his group's densely detailed, 1,000-page final report.

"It is easy to see what is accepted as truth rapidly morph from one representation to another," he said in an e-mail. "It would be a shame if one effect of the power of the Internet was to undermine any commonly agreed set of facts."

The creative "morphing" goes on.

As Israeli troops and Hezbollah guerrillas battled in Lebanon on July 21, a Fox News segment suggested, with no evidence, yet another destination for the supposed doomsday arms.

"ARE SADDAM HUSSEIN'S WMDS NOW IN HEZBOLLAH'S HANDS?" asked the headline, lingering for long minutes on TV screens in a million American homes.

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