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That Not-Winning Feeling - The War on Terror

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Changing views on the war on terror

Public opinion is turning against the war in Iraq. How significant is this?

THE war in Iraq has usually made comparisons with Vietnam look foolish. When it began, the word “quagmire” was barely out of critics' mouths before American troops were marching confidently into Baghdad.

Now the Vietnam analogy is returning to haunt debate once again. Between one-third of Americans (in a poll by the Pew Research Centre) and almost half (in one for ABC) say Iraq will turn out to be another Vietnam. That is less than those who think America will avoid a quagmire, but a lot more than last year, when people decisively rejected the Vietnam analogy.

These lurid fears reflect a genuine turn in public opinion. This week, a Gallup poll found that 56% of people said it was not worth going to war—the lowest level of support since the invasion in 2003. Disapproval rates for President George Bush's conduct of the war have reached new peaks. The Pew survey found that almost as many people want troops to come home as want them to stay until the situation stabilises (46% to 50%: a tie, given the margin of error). For the first time, more than half the population thinks the war has not contributed to American security.

It is possible to claim—as the administration does—that these trends do not amount to a decisive turn in public opinion against the war. People are uneasy, the argument goes, but not defeatist. Their unease causes their views to fluctuate wildly in response to short-lived bad news.

There is some truth to this. Seventy-seven Americans were killed in May, making it the fifth deadliest month since war began in March 2003. But if news from the front should start to improve, opinion will change rapidly.

The administration itself has probably worsened public unease with its own optimism. Mr Bush hailed the election in Iraq as “a great and historic achievement”, which it was, but said rather less about the problems the new government would inherit. When civilian casualties soared, reaction set in. The president may perhaps be forgiven for his comment, but there seems little excuse for the remark at the end of May (a time of massive car bombs) by the vice-president, Dick Cheney, that the insurgency was in its “last throes”. The administration's pattern of overselling achievements—remember “Mission accomplished”?—has probably made public opinion more nervous and volatile than it would otherwise be.

Arguments over the mistreatment of prisoners in Guantánamo Bay may have further depressed opinion by raising questions about the essential rightness of America's behaviour in the war on terror. In late May, the secretary-general of Amnesty International compared the detention centre in Cuba with a Soviet gulag. Mr Bush called the analogy “absurd” (which it was: the gulags were essential to the operation of the Soviet state). But the charge still caused something of a rift in the Republican coalition.

Mr Cheney said there was no plan to close the camp and insisted that “the important thing to understand is that the [prisoners] are bad people.” But two Republican senators, Chuck Hagel of

Nebraska and Mel Martinez of Florida, both argued that the facility may be more trouble than it is worth. Mr Martinez's comment ("At some point you wonder about the cost-benefit ratio") is especially striking considering his background: he was a member of the administration, and ran for the Senate with the encouragement of the White House. He is no Republican maverick wandering about off the reservation.

Stories of prisoner abuse would really make a difference, though, if they significantly dented Americans' image of themselves as the good guys abroad. So far, they have not done that. By a wide margin, people believe the reports are isolated incidents, not part of a wider pattern. This division is partisan. Liberal Democrats believe there is a wider pattern; everyone else thinks they are isolated incidents.

So it is notable that while a clear majority is worried about the war, Americans are more evenly split on whether it was the right thing to do in the first place. Even now, slightly more people think the decision was right than wrong (though the majority is dwindling). That suggests there are reservoirs of support.

The administration can further claim that, despite all the wobbles, people essentially made up their minds about Iraq during the election campaign last year, and have not changed them since. The Pew poll provides intriguing evidence that this may be true. The centre asked respondents whether they were more or less emotionally involved in news about the war. The number of those saying they feel less involved has risen sharply. The turn in opinion is taking place in people's heads, not their hearts.

Lastly, the decline in support could be explained away as part of a wider outbreak of second-term blues. The president's job-approval ratings are miserable. Congress's are worse. The best indicator of political chirpiness—the question, "Do you think things are on the right or wrong track?"—is far below what it was after September 11th or during most of the late 1990s. Opinion on Iraq reflects, as well as contributes to, the malaise.

For all these reasons, it seems unlikely that the change in public opinion will cause any fundamental reappraisal of the administration's Iraq policy. And, of course, that would be extremely unlikely anyway. Mr Bush has staked his presidency on success in Iraq. It would take a huge backlash to force him to accept anything that smacks of failure or defeat, and the decline in public support is nowhere near strong enough to make him contemplate such a course.

But if the White House thinks this situation is sustainable—that it ploughs steadily on while public support bounces around—it is taking a big risk. Yes, opinion on Iraq bobbles around each month. But, argues Christopher Gelpi, a professor at Duke University, the most important single factor determining the level of support is Americans' belief that they are winning. As long as they think they are, they will accept heavy casualties, and even discount torture as part of the price that must be paid.

This was true in Vietnam: opinion did not turn against that war until the Tet offensive in 1968, which was seen by the public as a defeat. Iraq has followed suit.

America's death toll passed 1,000 last September, and this received a lot of coverage in the country. November was the bloodiest month since the war began, with a spate of insurgent attacks. Yet during this period, support for the Iraq policy rose slightly—because Americans were looking ahead to the elections in January and believed their country was making progress towards that goal, despite the level of violence. This summer, the pattern has been the opposite. Iraq seems to be in political stalemate, nobody knows how to bring the Sunnis into the constitutional process—and support has fallen, even though the American death rate is lower than it was a few months earlier.

All this points to two dangers for the administration. First, by overselling the progress it has made, it risks reducing voters' patience in the face of inevitable setbacks. Second (and most important), public support depends critically on progress actually being made—which at the moment, it does not seem to be.