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On the Issues

Defining the "Peace Party"

By Karlyn H. Bowman and James Q. Wilson

The authors find that the antiwar "peace party" has evolved since past military conflicts. Today this faction's composition may depend on the political party in power, yet it cannot be explained by age, income, or education. In addition, partisan opposition to the war reflects the higher level of ideological conflict among voters today, and war, always a black-or-white issue, will require Democratic and Republican candidates to tread carefully around peace party voters when seeking election.

About one-fifth of Americans strongly opposed the war in Iraq. Surveys taken in December 2002 showed that 15 to 20 percent of the public resolutely opposed the war three months before it began, and the numbers remained about as high in April 2003 after the war had been underway for a couple of weeks. While the level of support increased after the war began, the onset of fighting did not budge the war's strongest opponents. This "peace party" became known to the American public through antiwar protests and demonstrations, but media coverage of these events did not tell us much about the composition of this group. Who makes up the peace party? How many Americans have joined its ranks? And how do their numbers compare with antiwar groups from past military conflicts?

Answering these questions is quite difficult both because the Iraq war was unlike conflicts of the past and because there are limits to how much we can learn from polling data. In most polls, those surveyed are not provided with information about the events under review. They are left to make their own conjectures regarding such questions as the number of troops involved, likely casualties,

financial costs, and the aftereffects of the war. Press coverage during wartime also offers conflicting accounts. Both prowar and antiwar sentiments may reflect these uncertainties. In what follows, we shall try to discover the defining characteristics of America's "peace party" by limiting our analysis to those who were strongly antiwar.

An Exceptional Case?

Opposition to involvement in the Korean and Vietnam Wars began at roughly the same level as opposition to our fighting in Iraq: around one-fifth of the American public opposed joining the war in Korea in July 1950 and about one-quarter opposed sending troops to help South Vietnam in the second half of 1965. But neither of these wars progressed as rapidly or as successfully as the invasion of Iraq. By mid-1951, after China had entered the war, public opposition to the Korean War rose to over 40 percent. By late 1967, opposition to our military efforts in Vietnam increased to around 45 percent.

Despite the rapid defeat of Saddam Hussein's army (the ground war took three weeks compared to three years in Korea and twelve in Vietnam), the number of Americans voicing strong opposition never diminished. The war to defeat the Taliban regime in Afghanistan was more popular. Opponents of that effort never exceeded one-tenth of

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the public and were often a much smaller proportion than this. There are probably two reasons: our attack in Afghanistan came not long after the terrorist assaults of September 11, 2001, and large numbers of ground forces were never committed there. In the public's eye, our response to the terrorist attacks was both morally justified and relatively costless. But when pollsters asked people about the prospect of sending "significant numbers of U.S. ground troops" to Afghanistan, opposition more than doubled.

Those who were strongly opposed to our invasion of Iraq were indifferent to the role of the United Nations. About one-fifth opposed our military activity regardless of whether the United States had U.N. support or Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. A Gallup poll taken in early April 2003 showed that 15 percent of the respondents opposed the war "even if the U.S. finds conclusive evidence that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction." One-tenth of all voters said that we should "never" have attacked Iraq. In another poll, about one-tenth of all Americans said that they are "antiwar in general." And in yet another public-opinion survey conducted in March 2003, almost one-fifth said that war is "never morally justified."

The peace party's composition may depend in part on which political party is in power. When we fought in Korea and Vietnam, two wars begun under Democratic presidents, political scientist John Mueller found that Democrats supported the war more than Republicans did. Democratic opponents of the war in Vietnam began to equal or outnumber Republican critics only after Richard Nixon became president in 1969. We have no way of knowing whether Nixon's presence caused this shift (after all, the war had made critics among both Republicans and Democrats by that time), but it is striking that Democratic opposition shot up around the middle of 1969 while Republican opposition remained relatively constant.

Party Politics

The peace party today cannot be explained by age, income, or education. In a Gallup analysis of polls conducted in January and March of 2003, majorities regardless of age, income, or education supported the war, though not in equal numbers. One exception to this picture is that large numbers of people with advanced degrees tended to be implacable opponents of the war. Schooling does not make a difference, unless you have acquired a lot of it. Indeed, postgraduates are one of the most reliably liberal groups in America today. But there are large differences in support and opposition to the war that center on political party, ideology, and race.

Democrats were twice as likely to oppose the war as Republicans, and blacks were more opposed to it than whites by almost the same margin. Taken as a whole, women were somewhat more opposed than men, though this difference varied depending on whether the women had children, worked, or lived in rural areas. Mothers were less opposed than other women, and stay-at-home mothers were less opposed than working ones.

Party differences have deepened over the years. In a recent paper delivered at Princeton University, political scientist Gary Jacobson noted that, before the terrorist attacks of September 11, the gap between Democratic and Republican support of President George W. Bush was wider than it has been for any prior president, including Bill Clinton. Before September 11, 88 percent of self-identified Republicans supported Bush; only 31 percent of self-identified Democrats did. This 57-point gap was the largest Jacobson had ever found. After September 11, support for President Bush sharply increased, but the gap in party attitudes toward Iraq remained sharp. In March 2003, 57 percent of liberal Democrats opposed military action against Iraq while 95 percent of conservative Republicans supported it.

Ideology Matters

Partisan opposition to the war probably reflects the higher level of ideological conflict that exists among voters today. That conflict makes it possible for antiwar candidates such as Howard Dean to run effective campaigns for the Democratic presidential nomination. According to Matt Bai, writing in the *New York Times Magazine*, when Dean's campaign began he was getting about fifty e-mail messages of support a day. After making clear his opposition to the war in Iraq, e-mail messages to his website shot up to about 2,000 a day. In the second quarter of 2003, Dean raised significantly more money than his rivals, with over $4 million coming through his website. Clearly, Dean has energized the liberal, antiwar wing of the Democratic Party. Some of its members, such as Harvard law professor Christopher Edley, are delighted by a candidate who is "unashamed and unembarrassed to express what we stand for." Others such as Bruce Reed, president of the Democratic Leadership Council, worry that if Dean pulls the party

too far to the left, "it'll be a disaster for the party and the country."

Greater ideological polarization may also reflect lingering resentments over Clinton's impeachment and the view of many Democrats that Bush "stole" the 2000 presidential election. But we suspect that deeper forces are at work. For one, votes in Congress have become markedly more partisan over the years. In 1970, about one-third of all House and Senate votes pitted the majority of one party against the majority of the other, but by 1998 more than half of the votes were of this sort. In 1970, about 70 percent of each party's congressional members voted on partisan lines when a majority of one party was opposed by a majority of the other. In 1998, that number had risen to 90 percent. When President Clinton was impeached, 98 percent of House Republicans voted for at least one of the four impeachment articles, while 98 percent of House Democrats voted against all four. Even in House districts where most voters opposed impeachment, almost all Republican members voted in favor of it.

There are many reasons why Congress is more polarized politically than it once was. Drawing district lines to reward incumbents has protected most Democrats and Republicans from the risk of any serious electoral opposition. Party leaders are more ideological. But beneath all of this is the possibility that the voters themselves are more polarized. Both Gary Jacobson and fellow political scientist Larry Bartels have produced data suggesting that, in comparison to twenty or thirty years ago, voters today are more comfortable with ideological labels and more ready to identify with a particular party on the basis of its ideology. This is especially true of more educated voters. Anyone who doubts these findings need only listen to radio talk shows or compare Fox News with public-broadcasting news to encounter daily evidence of a profound market segmentation in the media—a segmentation that could only exist if there were large numbers of ideological voters to whom different programs could appeal.

One of the results of this polarization is the existence of a large group of hawkish voters who favor a muscular American military policy and a smaller but intense number of dovish ones who oppose military action under almost any circumstances. These groups —the "war party" and "peace party"—correspond closely to party identification.

There are parallels between the peace party here and the ones we find abroad. When the Pew Research Center in 2003 polled voters in twenty nations, it found that people having a "somewhat" or "very" unfavorable attitude toward the United States made up about one-fifth of the public in friendly countries such as Australia, Canada, Great Britain, Israel, Italy, Kuwait, and South Korea. The Pew researchers then asked about these unfavorable views: was it some general problem with America or mostly because of George W. Bush? In sixteen of the twenty cases, the respondents said it was Bush. Now, it is hard to know what this means, but it does suggest that the leader of the country makes a difference. And it reminds us that in those countries most friendly to us, the anti-American party is about the same size as the peace party here.

Black Opinion

A Gallup analysis that combined the results of two polls taken in late March 2003 found that only 28 percent of blacks supported the war while 68 percent were opposed to it. This is quite different from African-American attitudes in earlier conflicts. John Mueller noticed that from 1950 to 1953, the number of black men who opposed the Korean War was not significantly different from the number of white men or women who opposed it (black women, by contrast, were the most opposed). In the late 1960s, black men displayed roughly the same level of opposition to the war in Vietnam as did white men. Once again, black women were the most opposed.

By 2003, a big change had occurred. Nearly two-thirds of all blacks opposed the war. Opposition was much greater than it had been in Operation Desert Storm twelve years earlier. A Gallup analysis of polls from late March and early April 2003 showed a sharp decline in black support since Kuwait in 1991. Fifty-nine percent of all blacks supported American military involvement in Kuwait; when we invaded Iraq a dozen years later, only 28 percent supported the effort.

The changing influence of race is difficult to explain. Defense Department officials responsible for recruitment regularly survey prospective recruits and conduct focus-group interviews in order to measure the "propensity to serve." Among black high school seniors, the willingness to serve decreased significantly in the aftermath of the showing of two motion pictures, *Boyz N the Hood* (1991) and *Get on the Bus* (1996). In the first of these, a well-known black actor says that the U.S. government is funneling drugs into black communities and argues that the Army is no place for a black man. In the second film, a character who said positive things about Colin Powell is called an Uncle Tom.

The effect of these films and of black antiwar leaders such as Jesse Jackson was undeniable: black students volunteered these portrayals in their focus-group discussions as reasons for their negative views of the military. But these effects were temporary. Over the long haul, recruitment of blacks into the military has remained more or less constant. In 2000, about 20 percent of all enlisted recruits were black, with higher numbers in the Army than in the other armed services.

Because so few black respondents are found in typical public-opinion polls, measuring attitudes among particular groups of blacks is difficult. For the most part, we must rely on the published statements of black leaders. They have made essentially three arguments. First, they maintain that a war in Iraq diverts resources and efforts away from domestic programs that would benefit blacks. Second, they argue that because blacks are overrepresented in the armed forces, they will in all likelihood be overrepresented among American casualties. Third, and more generally, many blacks still believe that President Bush "stole" the election and find his policies on race anathema.

The trouble with the first two criticisms is that they fail to explain the sharp increase in black opposition to the war in Iraq in comparison with past wars. The wars in Korea, Vietnam, and Kuwait consumed resources that might have been used for domestic programs, but blacks supported these military efforts in spite of it.

Clearly, something has changed. It is possible that blacks have begun to move left on issues of war and peace. They may have decided that support for the wars in Korea and Vietnam gained them few advances in key areas of concern. But though that argument might explain sentiments in the 1950s—a decade during which next to nothing was done to improve race relations—it cannot as easily explain them in 1972 after major civil-rights laws had been passed, school desegregation was underway, and a war on poverty had been launched.

As for the second argument, black Americans have not been greatly overrepresented among troops who have died in war. In the Korean conflict, 8.4 percent of deaths were of blacks. In Vietnam, black soldiers made up 11.3 percent of the troops and 12.4 percent of the deaths— hardly a significant difference. In the 1991 Persian Gulf War, blacks were underrepresented among the dead: black soldiers made up 22.8 percent of the troops there but only 17.2 percent of the deaths. The same pattern emerged in Operation Iraqi Freedom: blacks were 22.8 percent of the troops in the area but only 16.5 percent of the military deaths through May 1, 2003.

Moreover, as political scientists David King and Zachary Karabell point out in their recent book, *The Generation of Trust* (AEI Press, 2003), blacks have made significant progress in achieving racial integration in the military. The military, and especially the Army, launched programs that sharply increased the percentage of blacks among senior noncommissioned and commissioned officers. As sociologists Charles Moskos and John Sibley Butler have shown, black soldiers are more satisfied with their jobs than white civilians are with theirs.

One new factor that may well help us understand the shift in black opinion is the widespread dislike of George W. Bush within the black community. The president is indisputably less popular among blacks than President Clinton. "Bush puts forth an agenda seen by black people as antagonistic," according to Elijah Anderson, a black sociologist at the University of Pennsylvania. This reaction explains "a huge amount of the alienation in the black community." Not only did Bush supposedly steal the election, but he did so in a contest in which many black votes in Florida are believed to have gone uncounted and after having served as the governor of Texas, a state that led the nation in executing prisoners, many of whom were black. But it is also likely that black opinion on some issues, such as foreign and military policy, has moved left, as is the case among Democratic voters generally.

The Peace Candidate

Today's peace party may only amount to about one-fifth of all Americans, but it may enjoy a special position in selecting presidential candidates for the Democratic Party. Primary elections and local caucuses give a special advantage to committed activists. In the Republican Party, this means that anti-abortion and pro-gun groups are likely to have more influence in picking candidates than they will in determining the outcome of general elections. In the Democratic Party, pro-abortion, anti-gun, and peace activists will also have more influence in selecting candidates than they will in deciding who wins in November's election. Since most contests for a seat in the House of Representatives are essentially uncontested, with one party or the other holding an insurmountable advantage, the identity of the candidate is more important than the outcome of the election. For many Senate seats and for the presidential race, there is much more electoral competition.

Political analyst Charlie Cook cited clear evidence that very liberal Democrats are overrepresented among

those likely to vote in primaries. A February 2003 survey showed that 63 percent of likely primary voters favored military action against Saddam Hussein, but about half of Democrats opposed it. "Core Democrats"—that is, liberal Democrats likely to vote in the primaries—were opposed by nearly two-thirds. As Cook observed, while these core Democrats make up only about one-third of the party's members, they are its most active and visible members.

Democratic and Republican candidates with varying views on abortion and guns have won the presidency because the public is divided on these matters. That is not the case as regards war. Democratic senatorial and presidential candidates will have to tread carefully. They will need to be sufficiently critical of war initiatives to win the nomination yet sufficiently supportive of the armed forces to win the general election. The strategy by which this is now being carried out seems clear: criticize the steps leading up to a war (by demanding that the United Nations or our allies support it) but back the troops once war begins.

Whether this stratagem will remain effective is unclear. Peace demonstrators in 2003 took pains to shun overt displays of anti-American sentiment and made a point of displaying American flags, but most Americans were still put off by their message. Politicians who declare themselves antiwar but say they support our troops will have to explain why they voted against a war that quickly and with remarkably few deaths displaced a monstrous dictator, ended the terror of the Iraqi people, and diminished the support available to terrorist organizations.