

June 23, 2006

THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE POLL

Excerpts from Mystery Pollster

Mark Blumenthal, www.MysteryPollster.com

Last Sunday, Bush press secretary Tony Snow speculated about what polls might have shown during World War II: "If somebody had taken a poll in the Battle of the Bulge, I dare say people would have said, 'Wow, my goodness, what are we doing here?'"

In fact, there was a poll taken by Gallup from Dec. 31, 1944, to Jan. 4, 1945 -- three years into that war and right in the middle of the bloody Battle of the Bulge, where U.S. casualties were estimated between 70,000 and 80,000. It found that 73 percent of Americans would refuse to make peace with Adolf Hitler if he offered it and that 86 percent of Americans thought there was no chance that we would lose the war in Europe.

"If somebody had taken a poll in the Battle of the Bulge, I dare say people would have said, 'Wow, my goodness, what are we doing here?'"

Tony Snow, White House Press Secretary 6/18/06

Adam Berinsky, an associate professor of political science at MIT who found the survey in the Roper Center Archives while researching a book on World War II had this to say about the quote from Tony Snow.

Tony Snow might be surprised to learn that, in fact, somebody did take a poll during the Battle of the Bulge. In studying public opinion during World War II for my book manuscript, *America at War: Public Opinion during Wartime, From World War II to Iraq*, I uncovered some interesting data.

From December 31, 1944 to January 4, 1945, the American Institute of Public Opinion, headed by George Gallup asked Americans several questions about the war. At the time, survey research was in its infancy, and modern polling techniques were not yet well established. Nonetheless, the results are illuminating, not just for what they tell us about World War II, but what they can tell us about opinion concerning the Iraq War.

In the 1945 poll, Gallup asked his respondents, "If Hitler offered to make peace now and would give up all land he has conquered, should we try to work out a peace or should we go on fighting until the German army is completely defeated?" Contrary to Snow's speculation,

73 percent of the public expressed support for the stated U.S. policy of unconditional surrender; the American people wanted to continue fighting until victory was complete.

Support for the war crossed party lines. Of those respondents who had voted to re-elect FDR in the 1944 election, 78 percent wished to continue fighting. Among those who voted for the Republican candidate, Thomas Dewey, 73 percent wanted to fight until the Germany army met complete defeat.

Though war support was slightly higher among President Roosevelt's supporters than his opponents, this gap pales in comparison to partisans' opinions on the war in Iraq. As political scientist Gary Jacobson effectively demonstrates in his recent book, *A Divider, Not A Uniter: George W. Bush and the American People*, the Iraq war has created a schism between citizens who identify with Democrats and those who identify with Republicans. At the beginning of 2006, almost 80 percent of Republicans supported the Iraq war. However, barely 20 percent of Democrats backed the war at that time. The chasm in opinion on the Iraq war has characterized opinion on the war since 2003 and continues to this day.

This partisan gap is the real reason the war in Iraq finds only middling support among the mass public. Republican support for Iraq, after all, is comparable to Republican support for the U.S. military action during the Battle of the Bulge. Democrats, on the other hand, viewed the two wars very differently.

The roots of this partisan divide can be found in the actions of politicians. From 1938 through the end of 1941, support among politicians of both parties for some form of U.S. involvement in World War II increased generally over time. However, the gap between FDR and his critics on the necessity and wisdom of U.S. involvement in the Second World War remained large. But after U.S. entry in the war, FDR secured the support of his Republican opponents and both parties expressed a strong pro-war message. Conversely, even before it began, the war in Iraq has been strongly associated with President Bush and his Republican allies in Congress. Though Democratic politicians have not until recently expressed open opposition to the war effort, they have never joined en masse with their Republican counterparts in openly supporting the war.

Patterns of agreement and disagreement among partisan political actors play a critical role in shaping popular responses to war. As long as Republicans continue to support the President, support for the Iraq will continue to hover in the mid-forties - where, as Jacobson shows in his book, it has stayed since early 2004. But without the support of politicians from across the aisle, the American people as a whole will never support the Iraq war. Among both politicians and the mass public, the Iraq war is a Republican war.

THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE POLL

ASSIGNMENT:

Can you locate the question discussed in this blog posting? (hint: iPOLL)

Are there other questions at or around the same time period that tap public support or resistance for the War in Europe? What are they and what do they say?

What was FDR's job approval at the time of the survey? How did that point in his job rating compare to earlier times in his administration? (hint: Presidential Job Ratings)

Shortly after this question was asked of the American public, Truman became President. What did his presidential approval ratings look like throughout his term?

What was the level of support for the Iraq war at the time that Tony Snow made his comments?

CRITICALTHINKING:

What are some similarities in the two wars (World War II and the current Iraq War) that might lend analysts to compare public opinion data collected supporting or opposing US involvement?

What differences might there be that should be considered when comparing or contrasting the two time periods and two conflicts? Are there public opinion data that can support your answers?