Britain, Public Opinion and the Iraq War[1]

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Printing note: Graphics colour-coded for ease of analysis

In the twelve months leading up to the outbreak of the Iraq war, the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and their key advisors engaged in a frenetic campaign of high-level diplomacy and political negotiation with a view to ensuring that, if America was to forcibly overturn Saddam Hussein's regime, the 'international community' would be behind Bush's decision. Throughout this period the Prime Minister was involved in a two-level game. Not only was Blair a player in the UN Security Council in New York, he had a major challenge domestically in persuading the British public of the case for a possible future war. Getting support at the UN was part of the strategy, as was the publication of intelligence 'evidence' suggesting Saddam Hussein was a 'serious and current' threat to Britain and a menace to the region.

Although the summits between Bush and Blair and the diplomatic maneuvering at the UN took place behind firmly closed doors, we now know a great deal about the high politics of the war.[1] After two public inquiries into aspects of the case for war, a number of scholarly articles on the use of intelligence and the reasoning of the Prime Minister and his inner cabinet, and the publication of memoirs and accounts by key insiders, we also know how and why Blair sought to sway public opinion in his favor. Yet, ironically, given the availability of an abundance of polling data collected over the last six years, *it is striking how insignificant public opinion has been in academic debates about the decision.* This silence about the opinion/policy nexus has a long history in foreign policy: the only book-length study of public opinion and UK foreign policy in the post-1945 era is a work on the Nigerian civil war.[2]

In the first part of this paper we document changes in public opinion on three specific issues: support for/opposition to the war, the threat posed by Saddam Hussein and attitudes toward the United Nations.[3] *We believe the data challenges the widely held assumption that Blair took Britain to war against 'the will' of the people.* Such a view, routinely expressed by leader writers and 'op-ed' stories in the broadsheet print newspapers, rests on a superficial reading of the polling evidence. At a minimum, commentators ought to have made it clear that there was never a consistent majority opposed to war; *the strongest 'anti-war' case that the data supports is that a plurality was against a war* throughout 2002 and during the crucial first few months of 2003. (Plurality refers to the largest number in a set which is less than 50%).

When looked at in conjunction with responses to other key questions such as whether the public viewed Iraq as having WMD, and the perceived level of threat posed by the Ba'athist regime, the data tells a different story. Our reading of the publics' views can be distilled into two core claims.

1. *The overwhelming preference of most people to secure UN authorization for the war ought not to be thought of as a coded opposition to the war.*

2. The second and connected claim is that the late surge in support once the UN process had ground to a halt was more than simply a 'rallying effect'. The public, ultimately, *were prepared to give war a chance.*[4]

In the 1950s, Gabriel Almond – a doyen of American political science - suggested that most Americans have little or no knowledge of world affairs and that, collectively, the public could be characterized as having 'formless and plastic moods which undergo frequent alteration in response to changes in events'.[5] Our analysis of British public opinion on Iraq supports a revisionist position which *views the public as being highly engaged with and capable of reaching reasoned judgments about the crisis and aggregate public opinion as responding explicably to changes in the political environment* and an overall intelligibility in the light of the values and identities defining a society.

Translating this into the Iraq case, we argue that there was an overwhelming preference for multilateral action in the pre-war phase, strengthening the claim that legitimacy matters in world politics.[6] Additionally, we believe the case adds a new dimension to the literature on when and why public opinion turns against a war. Rather than a specific concern with the state of Iraq, or with the loss of life of UK soldiers (the so-called 'body bag problem'), we argue that *the public turned against the war when it became clear that they had been misled on WMD.* In a sense, the strong support for the war that is evident from March 20th onwards was only ever 'on loan' to the government – it was not robust enough to withstand the shifting justifications given by the Labour leadership.

I – The Polling of Opinions: The Myth of Blair *versus* Britain

Among high profile journalists and commentators it was commonplace to read that the British people opposed the position of the Prime Minister. On the 6th of February, *The Guardian*, which was staunchly opposed to the war, described the war option as one which the 'majority opposed'. Just over a week later, the mass anti-war demonstrations in London, Glasgow and elsewhere, triggered a wave

of articles that unfavorably contrasted the legitimacy of the anti-war movement with that of the Government. On the 14th of February, *The Independent*'s Natasha Walter argued that 'the march represents the people; the Government does not'. A day later, *The Guardian*'s political editor, Michael White, wrote that 'public opinion at home and around much of the world is overwhelmingly against the use of force in Iraq. On the 17th of February a further *Guardian* editorial suggested that 'Mr. Blair's instincts are pointing in the opposite direction to those of the nation's voters. On the 18th of February *The Times*' Peter Riddell pointed to the 'widespread public hostility' to the war whilst, once again in *The Guardian*, Andrew Murray claimed 'never before' had 'the country gone to war with only a minority of the population in support'. Counter-intuitively, the belief that the war lacked support also seems to have been shared by The Prime Minister whose key pre-war speeches portrayed opinion as being divided and who, in defending his actions, reassured voters that he 'did not seek unpopularity as a badge of honour'.[7]

In the following paragraphs we subject this media reading of the British 'mind' to scrutiny. We draw on polling data to:

- Evaluate overall opposition/support for the war
- Examine perceptions of the threat posed by Iraq
- Analyze the difference 'the UN route', and how this factor altered in light of the fracturing of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) from the first few days in March 2003.

Opposition/Support for the War

In the aftermath of the September the 11th attacks there was strong but not overwhelming support for the newly declared 'war on terror'. A poll taken in September 2001 showed 66% support for military action against the terrorists responsible for the attacks, 59% support for military action against the countries found to be harboring those terrorists and 49% support for military action against those countries if that meant war.[8] There was however little initial support for a war against Iraq. In October 2001 a poll found that 36% supported and 47% opposed 'extending the war against terrorism to Iraq'.

Figure 1 plots changes in public opinion on Iraq revealed in an ICM tracking poll conducted between March 2002 and March 2003 which asked people whether they approved or disapproved of Britain backing military action against Iraq. What does it reveal? First, *that a plurality of voters consistently opposed the war* and that in specific months [March 2002 (50%), August 2002 (50%) and

March 2003 (52%)] a narrow majority opposed it. However, it we look at the pattern over thirteen polls, it is clear that there was no consistent majority against: instead, an average of 45% disapproved of military action and an average of 34% approved of it. Also important to note is that, on average, 21% of people either had not made their minds up about the war or refused to reveal their opinions to pollsters.

The tracking poll reveals a growing volatility in attitudes toward the war. Between the 15th of March 2002 and the 25th of October 2003 support for the war tended to vary by only a few percentage points between polls. Then on the 3rd of November – just five days before the UN Security Council unanimously approved Resolution 1441 giving Iraq 'a final opportunity to disarm' – approval for military action fell to 32%. Having then recovered to 36% in the poll taken on the 13th of December, approval fell to a new low of 30% on the 17th of January – one week after Hans Blix had told the Security Council that 'no smoking gun' had been found in Iraq – before recovering to 38% in a poll on the 14th of March.

Figure 1. ICM Tracking Survey, March 2002 – March 2003

Question. Would you approve or disapprove of Britain backing American military action against Iraq? (%)[9]
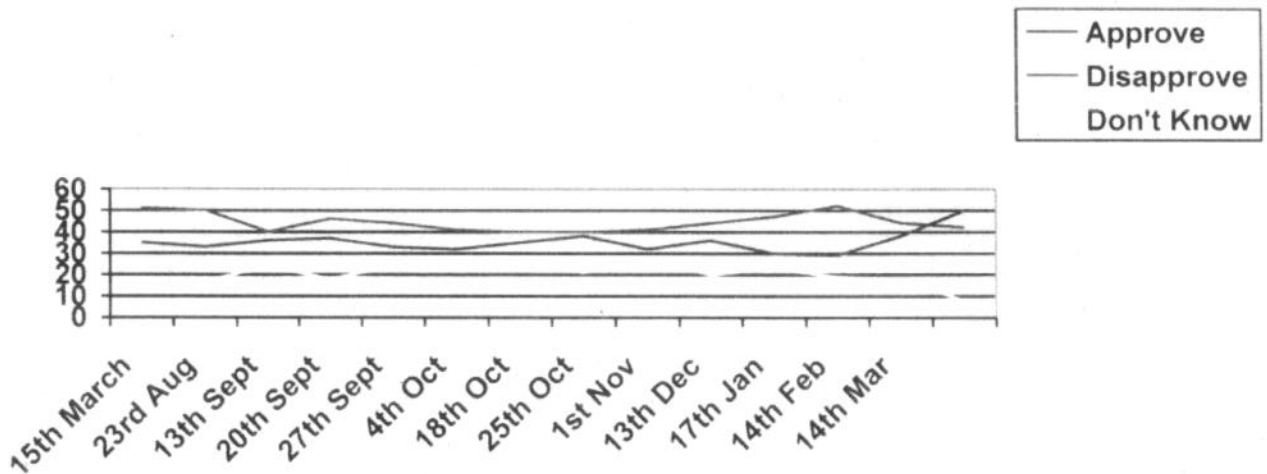
The ICM tracking poll reveals sustained public opposition to the war (albeit at a lower level than implied in much of the media). But if we switch the focus to the polling data taken in the days before the war began, there is evidence of a decline in opposition to the war. A YouGov poll on the 6th of March revealed that 36% supported and 57% opposed 'Britain going to war against Iraq now'. As we have already seen, the ICM tracking poll on the 14th of March showed 38% approval and 44%

disapproval of British support for American military action. But two polls on the day of the vote to authorize war in the House of Commons revealed a *sudden shift in opinion*. YouGov asked respondents two key questions. (1) 'A vote will shortly take place in the House of Commons on whether or not MPs support the Government's intention to use military action against Iraq. If you were an MP, how would you vote?' 52% said they would vote with the government and 42% against it. (2) 'Do you think the United States and Britain are right or wrong to take military action against Iraq (unless Saddam Hussein leaves the country?') 50% said that the United States and Britain would be right and 42% that they would be wrong.

While noting the exceptionally turbulent circumstances during which these polls were conducted, we believe these results are significant in view of the fact that this is the only occasion when the UK public is asked the same question as MPs in the House of Commons and crucially all other factors are detached from the question – once the UN-led option was off the table.

As expected in light of the 'ralleying effect' hypothesis,[10] there was a clear surge in support once the war started. **Figure 5** shows that the 50% believing the war to be right on the 18th of March rose to 53% on the 20th of March, 56% on the 21st of March, 63% on the 8th of April and 66% on the 10th of April. Furthermore, when asked on the 21st of March 'irrespective of whether you thought we should go to war with Iraq or not, now that the war has actually started do you think Britain and America should see it through to a successful conclusion or should they pull out', 82% said that the war ought to be seen through to a successful conclusion.

Figure 2. A Wartime Rally?

Question: Do you think the United States and Britain are right or wrong to take military against Iraq?
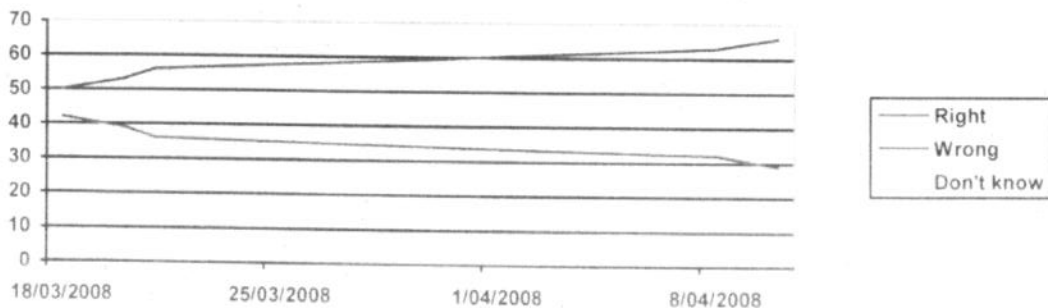

Once the war-fighting phase drew to a close,[11] support for the war fell (as recorded in a YouGov tracking poll which asked people whether they thought Britain and America had been right

or wrong to take military action against Iraq). **Figure 3** reveals that in ten of twelve polls, the proportion believing the war to be right was lower than it had been in the previous poll. The decline in support for the war was however far from being dramatic. It was not until July 2004 that support dipped below 40%. In September 2003 (a few weeks after the death of Dr. David Kelly) – and in January 2004 (the same month that David Kay, the Head of the Iraq Survey Group, had admitted 'we were all wrong' about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction), 50% still believed that the war had been right. Yet by June 2007, the last date in this tracking poll, the number who believed the war to have been right had fallen to just 30%.

Figure 3. YouGov Tracking Survey, April 2003 – June 2007.

Question: Do you think the United States and Britain were right or wrong to take military action against Iraq? (%)[12]
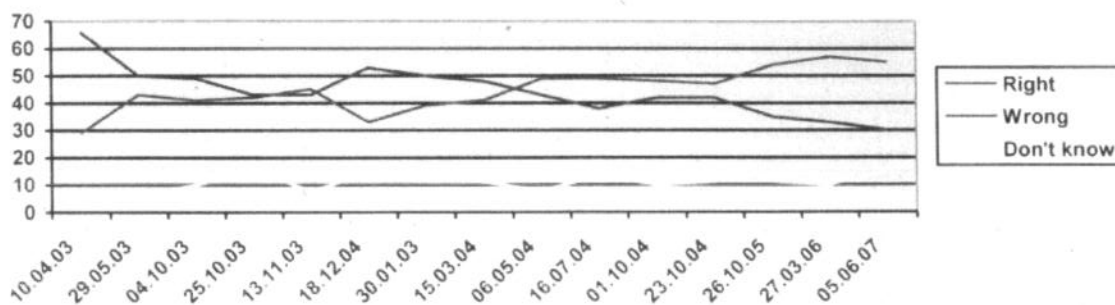
The Threat Posed by Iraq

As we have seen, public opinion was split on the question of whether a war against Iraq would be justified. On the issue of whether Saddam Hussein posed a threat to others, there was a clear consensus of opinion.

Polls taken in January and February 2003 showed that 67-75% of people believed that Iraq already possessed chemical and biological weapons and that 66-69% believed it was seeking nuclear weapons. A few days after Colin Powell had made his PowerPoint presentation to the United Nations on the 5th of February one poll showed 71% of people agreed and only 8% disagreed with the statement 'Saddam Hussein is deliberately hiding weapons of mass destruction from the United Nations arms inspectors'.[13] On the 17th of February, three days after Hans Blix had described Iraq's

cooperation with weapons inspectors as being more a matter of 'process' than of 'substance,' another poll showed 74% agreeing and only 12% disagreeing with the statement 'Saddam Hussein has no intention of disarming and is simply playing for time until the rest of the world loses interest in Iraq'.

In findings that would have gladdened the heart of the US Secretary of State for Defense, polls also showed that, prior to the start of the war, between 50% and 60% of people believed that Saddam Hussein was either 'helping' or had either 'some' or 'close' links' with Al Qaeda. A poll on the 23rd of March showed that whilst only 12% believed Saddam Hussein had already provided terrorists with weapons of mass destruction, 49% believed that he would have done 'had we not acted'. Perhaps the most revealing poll was one that did not mention Iraq or Saddam Hussein by name: in February 2003 ICM asked respondents whether they agreed with the statement 'September the 11th showed "the dangers of waiting until it's too late" to take military action against terrorist groups or dangerous states'. 51% agreed, 42% disagreed and 7% said they did not know.

Given their beliefs about Iraq's alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction, it is perhaps not surprising that, on average, 47% of people in three polls taken in January and February 2003 regarded Iraq as a 'serious threat to world peace'[14] or that 30% of people regarded it as either a 'very big threat' (6%) or 'a fairly big threat (24%) to 'the lives of people here in Britain'.[15] When asked 'which one of these aims, if any, do you personally think would best justify Britain taking part in a military action against Iraq's Saddam Hussein' the elimination of weapons of mass destruction was, as **Figure 4** shows, cited by 30% of people in the run-up to the war.

Figure 4. Justifications for War, 2003 (% citing)[16]

Question: 'And which of these aims, if any, do you personally think would best justify Britain taking part in a military action against Iraq's Saddam Hussein?'

|	10-12th Jan	30-31st Jan	1 April
To eliminate WMD	29	30	28
To overthrow Saddam	7	9	
To bring freedom and democracy	15	18	
To secure oil supplies	2	1	17
To defeat Al Qaeda	7	3	
To uphold international law and the UN	7	3	
To overthrow Saddam because he is evil		27	

The United Nations and the Multilateral Option

In seeking to gauge the level of support for the war we previously focused upon the results of those polls which gave respondents a binary choice between supporting and opposing the war.

But for twelve months British diplomacy was geared towards a grant strategy of getting UN approval for the war and a large number of the *polls taken during this period actually presented people with three options: supporting the war, opposing the war, or supporting it if it had UN approval.* Figure **5** shows that in six polls conducted between August 2002 and February 2003 there was majority support for taking military action with UN approval on three occasions, the 10th and 16th of January and the 7th of February, and that in only one poll, undertaken on the 10th of February, did the UN option not receive plurality support. In total, unconditional support for the war averaged 14%, unconditional opposition 31%, and support with UN approval 50%

Figure 5. Options for War, 2002-3.

Question: 'Would you support or oppose Tony Blair sending British troops into military action against Iraq?' Options:

(i) Support – no matter what the UN decides,
(ii) Support- but only if the action is approved by the UN,
(iii) Oppose- British troops should not be involved
(iv) Don't know
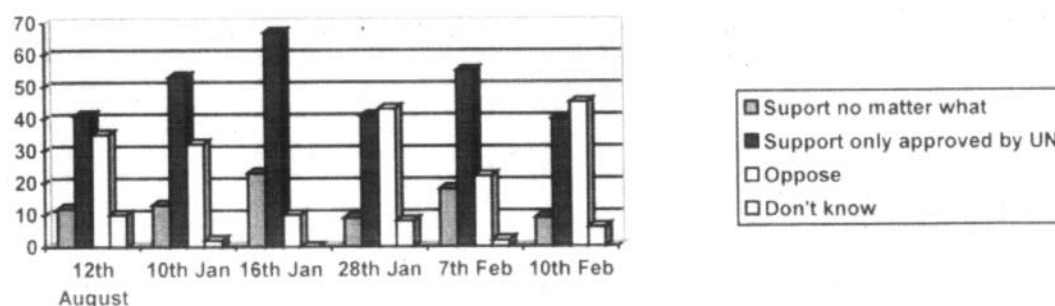
How are we to interpret the public's apparent determination to secure UN support? *It is clear that those journalists who described public opinion as being, for example, 'overwhelmingly' against the use of force had tacitly interpreted support for the UN as a form of coded opposition to the war.*[17]

This reasoning has a superficial attraction: if people only supported a war with UN approval then it might be thought that the failure to secure that approval meant they opposed the war.

We take a different view. As has already been noted, by January 2003 at the latest, a clear majority of the public were convinced that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction and that he constituted a threat to regional stability and world peace. On this basis many wanted the UN to take action against Iraq. A poll on the 7th of February 2003 showed that 57% agreed and only 30% disagreed with the statement 'taking everything into account do you think Saddam Hussein is sufficiently dangerous to justify the UN taking military action against him?' Three days later a poll showed that 53% agreed with the statement 'by defying the UN, Saddam Hussein has become an international outlaw [and] the UN should be prepared to take military action to enforce its authority, like the police acting against the head of a criminal gang'.[18] On the 17th of February 80% agreed and only 13% disagreed that 'Saddam Hussein should be given a deadline by which time he must satisfy the UN that he has eliminated all weapons of mass destruction' and 76% also agreed that 'if he fails to meet that deadline, the US, Britain and other countries [should] take military action against Iraq to force that country to disarm'. These polls would seem to reveal a desire for the UN to join the British and American governments in disarming Iraq, by force if necessary. *They suggest a preference for multilateral over unilateral military action but little support for inaction.*

In questioning the received wisdom that a majority opposed the war we have already pointed to a late surge in support for the war which occurred when the UN option was off the table – without the UN middle way, the public was left with a simple choice of either supporting or opposing war. When given this option, a majority of people wanted to secure UN approval for the war. It is not though, acceptable to infer that a pro-UN position is equivalent to being anti- the war.

If support for the UN had indeed been a form of coded opposition to the war then the public's preference ought to have become outright opposition when the UN option was off the table. Unfortunately, the data we have does not allow us to track changes in the attitudes of those who favoured the UN route. There is however circumstantial evidence which suggests that many did indeed switch 'from' the UN option 'to' supporting the war.

On the 14th of March an ICM poll showed 38% approval for the war. Four days later two YouGov polls showed that 50% thought the war was right and that 52% would have voted with the government to support the war if they had been an MP. If support for the UN had been a coded opposition to the war we would surely not have expected this surge to have occurred. But we cannot

simply and immediately infer that this surge was due to a late transfer of preferences from those who had previously supported the UN route. We cannot do so because the earlier poll had *already* required people to make a binary choice between supporting and opposing the war. These polls do, however, reveal some interesting additional information.

The poll on the 14th of March showed 38% approval and 44% disapproval for the war with 18% either not knowing or refusing to say. The second poll showed 50% support for the war and 42% opposition with 8% either not knowing or refusing to say. What is significant here is that the increase in support for the war seems largely to have come from a 10% fall in the number of don't knows with only a 2% fall in the number opposed. As we have already noted, the ICM tracking poll which asked people whether they approved or disapproved of the war generated an extraordinarily high 21% average of don't knows. In contrast, the six polls shown in **Figure 5** which gave people the additional option of only supporting the war if it had UN approval generated an average 4.6% don't knows. What we suspect happened here is that *a large number of people who were not comfortable with the binary choice they were being offered in the ICM polls at refused to endorse either option until it was clear that the UN option was gone: at that moment, many stopped answering 'don't know'.*

The alternative explanation for the rise in support for the war is that it was simply a 'rally' led by patriotic voters expressing their support for Britain and British troops. We have already noted that a surge in support did indeed take place in the early phase of the war. It would, however, seem strange to impute a 'rally effect' prior to the war commencing particularly if there was a widespread belief that this was the wrong war at the wrong time. By looking more closely at the data shown in **Figure 2**, we can better understand the anatomy of this surge. Overall, support for the war rose from 50% on the 18th of March, to 53% on the 20th of March, 56% on the 21st of March, 63% on the 8th of April and 66% on the 10th of April. This increase was caused largely by a significant fall of 13% in the number believing the war to be wrong: from 42% on the 18th of March, to 36% on the 21st and 29% by the 10th of April. It is possible that the fall in opposition to the war in April was a reasoned reaction to what, at the time, seemed to be a successful military campaign. But in its early stages in March the surge seems to have been driven entirely by people who now favoured a war they had opposed only a few days previously.

- Conclusion -

The paper has set out a number of straight forward empirical claims which we regard as having high saliency. What public opinion *really* thought about the war – before, during, and after the invasion – matters on a number of levels. First and foremost, we have revealed a widespread misrepresentation of the public 'mood' in the print media, particularly those writers who counterposed the pro-war position of the Blair government with an implied anti-war position of the public. We claim that such an analysis understates the fact that *the only consistent majoritarian opinion was in fact pro-war, albeit one that was deemed to have UNSC backing.*[19]

We believe the data also reveals a number of other telling points that have not yet received adequate attention. One example of this is the diminishing opposition to military action from early March onwards once the UN route was off the table. In the days immediately prior to the war, there was a notable shift towards supporting the Government's position: we do not think this correlates with a pre-invasion rallying effect, rather, a more convincing explanation is that the significant bloc of 'don't knows' shifts to support the Government.

The sight of millions taking to the streets and participating in mass anti-war rally's was treated by some as being a sign that transnational civil society had been mobilised. Articles in the *New York Times* picked up on Mary Robinson's phrase that 'world public opinion' had become 'the second super-power'. Yet, our analysis suggest that those on the march represented a minority as Britain stumbled along the pathway to war.

It is dangerous in politics to accept a narrow consequentialism as a guide to action. Getting the decision wrong although in a procedurally acceptable manner, *does* matter for a range of reasons not least the precedence that is set for future potential cases where there is a push to war. As noted previously, the fact that public opinion made such a clear and distinct separation between a UN-led war and a US-led war is a striking example of how much multilateralism matters to international legitimacy.

References

[1] See, for example, Lawrence Freedman, "War in Iraq: Selling the Threat," *Survival*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (2004). Tim Dunne, "'When the Shooting Starts': Atlanticism in British Security Strategy," **International Affairs**, Vol. 80, No. 5 (2004), pp. 893-909. John Kampfner, *Blair's Wars* (London: The Free Press, 2004). Paul Williams, *British Foreign Policy under New Labour 1997-2005* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

[2] In light of the importance of public opinion to inter-war idealists, it is not surprising that works relating to this historical period continue to be produced. See, P.H.M. Bell, *John Bull and the Bear: British Public opinion, foreign policy, and the Soviet Union* (London: Edward Arnold, 1990), and Sarah Wilkinson, *Perceptions of Public Opinion: British foreign policy decisions about Nazi Germany 1933-1938* DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2000. Given grandiose claims made recently about the power of public opinion, it is surely time for greater engagement with opinion-policy nexus.

[3] Our data is primarily about UK public opinion: we are unable, in this piece, to draw any meaningful connections between these expressed views and wider transnational currents of opinion.

[4] To use Edward Luttwak's chilling phrase.

[5] Gabriel Almond, The American People and Foreign Policy (New York: Praeger, 1950), p. 53).

[6] The recent literature on legitimacy is vast. See, for example Ian Clark, *Legitimacy in International Society* (Oxford: OUP, 2004).

[7] *Observer* 16 February 2003.

[8] Given the sheer number of the polls cited in this article we only provide the name of the polling organisation and the reference for a poll on a few key occasions. This information cited here can be obtained from the authors upon request. ICM (http://www.icmresearch.co.uk/, Ipsos Mori (http://www.ipsos-mori.com/) and YouGov (http://www.yougov.com/) maintain extensive archives of polling material.

[9] These polls were conducted over either a two or three day period. All dates used in the text and in the diagrams shows the date on which fieldwork began.

[10] Add refs.

[11] Many take this date to be 1 May 2003 when President Bush declared Operation Iraqi Freedom to have been completed.

[12] There were slight variations in the wording of this question reflecting the passage of time. In 2003, for example, respondents were asked whether it had been right or wrong to take military action against Iraq 'earlier this year'.

[13] YouGov, 'The Propaganda War Poll', fieldwork conducted 7-10th February 2003.

[14] The same polls showed that an average 36% believed that he 'poses a threat to other parts of the Middle East but not the world' and only 15% that he 'poses no real threat to anyone outside Iraq' (2% don't know).

[15] 53% regarded him as a 'fairly small threat' and 17% as 'no threat at all'.

[16] This is a composite of the results. The precise options offered to respondents varied across the three polls.

[17] Michael White, the Guardian, 15th of February 2003.

[18] Respondents in this poll were offered three statements and asked which they found most convincing. The first statement was that 'Saddam Hussein is a tyrant who threatens world peace. The UN should be prepared to go to war to stop him'. The second statement is quoted above. The third statement was that 'neither statement is convincing'. 14% selected the first statement and 30% the third. This means that, in total, 67% selected a statement which favoured UN action.

[19] The general trend data (though incomplete) on the willingness to use force shows a consistent majority in favour over several cases whether it is for 'the defence of the realm', as was arguably the case in 1982, or for humanitarian purposes. Such a propensity challenges an assumption in the liberal internationalist literature on violence which presupposes that ordinary citizens, when given a choice, will be war-averse.