

## CHAPTER ONE

# Iraq and the Polls— The Myth of War Support

She referred to herself as “a tall redhead with a foreign accent,” but to the audience her physical characteristics and her considerable humor were her least important attributes. She came to the meeting a “sworn enemy” of pollsters, in their view an articulate but misguided soul who had started a campaign to end all polling, which she dubbed on her website a “Partnership for a Poll-Free America.” She wanted the public to take pollsters to court and put them out of business. The notion that pollsters are listening to the vox populi is pathological, she argued, noting “the ludicrousness of basing anything on increasingly inaccurate opinion polls, with their plummeting response rates, laughably small samplings and precision-flouting margins of error.”<sup>1</sup>

Because of her antipathy to their profession, the pollsters had invited her to address the 2003 annual meeting of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, the foremost professional organization of survey research practitioners and scholars in the country. She had just finished her speech to the people she wanted to see unemployed, and the first respondent to her arguments was Rich Morin, who then was the polling director of the *Washington Post*.

“There are actually two Arianna Huffingtons,” Morin told

the audience as he nodded toward the guest speaker. There was the “delightful, witty, charming, and perceptive” Arianna, with whom he and several other members of the association had dined earlier; and there was the public persona Arianna, the one with her website and column and public appearances: “the shrieking pundit from hell!” Laughter erupted from the audience, as well as from Huffington and the other respondents on the dais.<sup>2</sup>

In her speech to the pollsters, however, Huffington was less a shrieking pundit and more a conciliator, urging members to find a way “to put the real problems the country is facing” high on the political agenda. Ideally, she argued, polls would help political leaders to understand what the public wants, but in actual practice, polls do not represent what the public is really thinking. She excoriated former President Bill Clinton for running a poll-driven presidency, and she lambasted President George W. Bush for allowing public opinion polls to lead him into war. She reiterated her contention, developed earlier on her website, that “the greatest threat to the body politic is that polls turn political leaders into slavish followers of the most shallow reading of the electorate’s whims and wishes.”<sup>3</sup>

As it turns out, she was wrong about Bush’s following opinion polls into war. We now know that Bush and his major advisors were intent on invading Iraq from the beginning of his presidency, and that the decision to do so was made in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Public opinion had no influence on that decision. But the public’s apparently positive response to the Bush administration’s campaign for war did, arguably, influence many others in the country, especially many Democratic political leaders in Congress, who were intimidated by public opinion into voting for war despite their reservations about attacking a country that had not directly threatened the United States.

In the months leading up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, all the major media polls appeared to show substantial public support

for the war.<sup>4</sup> Within a week of the invasion, the polls reported approval running ahead of disapproval 2-to-1 or better. The ABC/*Washington Post* poll reported 71 percent of Americans in favor, 27 percent opposed. The NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll reported 65 percent in favor, 30 percent opposed. The CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup poll reported a similar split, 64 percent to 33 percent. *Newsweek* said it was 70 percent to 24 percent.

Much research suggests that when large majorities of the public are perceived in favor of certain policies, people with different opinions tend to suppress their own views. As scholar Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann, notes:

If people believe that their opinion is part of a consensus, they have the confidence to speak out in both private and public discussions, displaying their convictions with buttons and car stickers, for example, but also by the clothes they wear and other publicly visible symbols. Conversely, when people feel that they are in the minority, they become cautious and silent, thus reinforcing the impression of weakness, until the apparently weaker side disappears completely except for a hard core that holds on to its previous values, or until the opinion becomes taboo.<sup>5</sup>

Although polls suggested that hard-core opponents of the war included at least a quarter of the American public, it's noteworthy that few demonstrations against the war occurred in the United States until years later, after polls showed a majority of Americans saying the war was a mistake.

The news media also hopped onto the war bandwagon, giving biased coverage in favor of policies that appeared to be supported by large majorities of Americans and limiting coverage of dissenting opinions. Two years after the start of the Iraq war, the *New York Times* published a startling admission: that leading up to the invasion, it had failed its readers by slanting its news very heavily in favor of the Bush administration's position, giving less than one-tenth of its coverage to dissenting views.

The *Washington Post* made a similar admission. Though the *Times* and the *Post* apologized for their behavior, they were not alone in their biased coverage. The rush to war was aided and abetted by virtually all of the major news media organizations, which mostly emulated the two most prestigious national newspapers.<sup>6</sup>

This climate of public opinion in favor of the war apparently also intimidated Democratic members of Congress, especially those who had any thoughts of running for president. In the U.S. House, not traditionally a launch pad for presidential candidates, Democrats voting against the resolution that gave Bush the authority to invade Iraq outnumbered Democrats voting for it 126 to 81 (61 percent to 39 percent). But in the U.S. Senate, a source of many hopeful presidential candidates, 29 of the 50 Democrats casting votes supported the war resolution, including several senators who had been mentioned as possible presidential candidates or who later ran for president: Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton, Tom Daschle, Chris Dodd, Evan Bayh, John Edwards, John Kerry, and Dianne Feinstein. The new Senate majority leader in 2007, Harry Reid, also voted for the resolution, though—like the others—he later opposed the war. Had these nine senators ignored public opinion polls and voted to oppose the war in March 2003, the Senate vote among Democrats would have approximated the House vote among Democrats—30 to 20 votes (60 percent to 40 percent).

Those 20 Democratic votes in favor of the resolution, along with the votes of 48 of the 49 Republican senators, would have ensured passage even had the nine Democratic senators not been intimidated by the polls. Still, the supportive votes by those nine senators, along with biased media coverage and suppression of war dissent, supported Arianna Huffington's criticisms. Polls turn political leaders and (though she didn't mention it) the news media "into slavish followers of the most shallow reading of the electorate's whims and wishes."

Contrary to media reports on that climate of war opinion,

three CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup polls conducted in the months leading up to the war and immediately after the war began showed that a majority of Americans were not calling for war.<sup>7</sup> The second of these polls, conducted in February 2003, about a month before the invasion, showed an evenly divided public—about three in ten Americans wanted the United States to attack Iraq, three in ten were opposed, and four in ten *did not care one way or the other*. That this divided state of public opinion was not measured by the other media polls and that neither CNN, *USA Today*, nor Gallup emphasized the public's ambivalence about the war reveals much about the way that media polls manufacture public opinion for their own purposes.

THE REASON THAT all the polling organizations missed the actual split in public opinion on Iraq is that pollsters typically insist on asking policy questions of everyone in their sample, regardless of whether the people know or care anything about the issue. And respondents happily go along with the “don’t ask, don’t tell” game that we pollsters play—we don’t ask them, and they don’t tell us, how little they know or care about an issue. That way, we end up with a “public opinion” that is more interesting to report than one that acknowledges the truth of substantial public ignorance and apathy.

This issue had troubled me ever since I joined the Gallup Organization. By the time of the Iraq war, my Gallup colleague Jeff Jones, who by then was the managing editor, and I, the senior editor, had been running a series of experiments designed to give more meaning to our poll findings. We were given limited space to run the experiments, and this was one of those times when we were able to include a special follow-up question to test the firmness of people’s views.

In the February 2003 poll, we asked a standard version of the question that all the other pollsters asked, “Would you favor or oppose sending American ground troops to the Persian

Gulf in an attempt to remove Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq?” And like the other polls, we found a substantial majority in favor of the war—59 percent to 38 percent, a 21-point margin. Only 3 percent said they did not have an opinion. We followed up that question with another, which essentially asked if people really cared that their opinion might prevail. And the results here revealed a very different public.

To people who said they favored the war, we asked if they would be upset if the government did not send troops to Iraq. And to people who opposed the war, we asked if they would be upset if the government did send troops. More than half of the supposed supporters and a fifth of the opponents said they would *not* be upset if their opinions were ignored. The net result is that 29 percent of Americans actually supported the war and said they would be upset if it didn’t come about, whereas 30 percent were opposed to the war and said they would be upset if it did occur. An additional 38 percent, who had expressed an opinion either for or against the proposed invasion, said they would not be upset if the government did the opposite of what they had just favored. Add to this number the 3 percent who initially expressed no opinion, and that makes 41 percent who didn’t care one way or the other (see fig. 1).

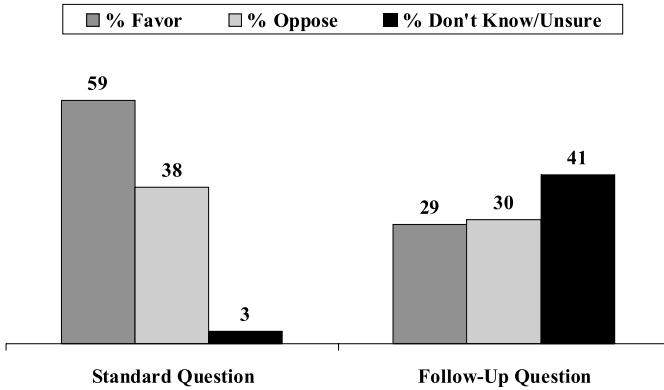
These results from the follow-up question reveal the absurdity of much public opinion polling. A democracy is supposed to represent, or at least take into account, the “will” of the people, not the uncaring, unreflective, top-of-mind responses many people give to pollsters. If people don’t care that the views they tell pollsters are ignored by their political leaders, then it hardly makes sense for pollsters to treat such responses as the Holy Grail. Yet, typically we do, making no distinction between those who express deeply held views and those who have hardly, if at all, thought about an issue.

It is useful here to differentiate between “directive” and “permissive” opinion. People who have an opinion about the war and care that their political leaders listen to it can be

FIGURE 1

## Favor or Oppose War With Iraq?

(CNN/USA Today/Gallup Poll, February 17-19, 2003)



viewed as having a “directive” opinion, because they implicitly want to direct their leaders to follow it. Our poll showed that 59 percent of Americans had a directive opinion in February 2003, but were evenly divided over the war, with 29 percent in favor and 30 percent against. The other 41 percent can be viewed as having a “permissive” opinion, because they didn’t care if their views were followed or not, or they expressed no preference one way or the other. Essentially, they were permitting their representatives to make the crucial judgment, presumably on behalf of the citizens as a whole. After all, that’s the reason citizens elect legislators and governors and presidents, so they will take the time to evaluate what policies are in the best interests of the public. Many people simply don’t have time to consider all of the facts surrounding an issue and come up with a good decision as to how best to proceed.

What our polling results meant in 2003 was that a public consensus existed either *for* going to war or for *not* going to war. Seventy percent would have been content with invading Iraq (the 41 percent who didn’t care plus the 29 percent who sup-

ported the war and would have been upset if it hadn't occurred), and 71 percent would have been content with *not* going to war (the 41 percent who didn't care plus the 30 percent who opposed the invasion and said they would be upset if it did occur). It was up to the elected leaders to make the call. Today, numerous pundits argue that the American people were partly responsible for going to war with Iraq because they gave overwhelming support for it. That simply isn't true. Maybe people should be held accountable because they *tolerated* the invasion, but the truth is that there was no majority of Americans *calling* for the United States to invade Iraq. Indeed, as many people opposed the war as supported it, with a major segment of the population "permitting" government officials to do whatever they thought best.

After the war began, most polls showed a surge of public support for the effort. A CNN/USA *Today*/Gallup poll conducted about three weeks after the invasion began found 68 percent who favored the war and 28 percent opposed. But the follow-up question on permissive versus directive opinions revealed that just 35 percent of Americans wanted the war to happen, 24 percent did not, and 41 percent didn't care one way or the other. The notion that the public "rallied around the flag" after the war began is a distortion of what really happened: about a third of Americans actually supported the war after it was launched, whereas a plurality of Americans still didn't care. Actual support increased by just a few percentage points, and opposition dropped by about the same magnitude. Thus, among those who did care about their opinions, the ones favoring the war outnumbered those opposing it by about 11 percentage points.

HOW IMPORTANT IS IT that the public didn't support the war before it was launched but was in fact evenly divided over it? Very important. Though it is clear now that the Bush administration

was intent on going to war regardless of public opinion or congressional support, administration officials still used public opinion polls to mute criticisms and to help justify its actions. The fact that a large majority of the public appeared to support the war was a major element of the political climate that led to the actual invasion of Iraq, with the implicit message that public support at least partly justified the war.

An unusual reaction against this notion that public opinion can be used to justify policy decisions came from a prominent pollster in December 2001, barely three months after the terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C. Humphrey Taylor, chairman of the Harris Poll, wrote to the *New York Times*<sup>8</sup> expressing his agreement with recent articles by Anthony Lewis<sup>9</sup> and William Safire,<sup>10</sup> which contained scathing criticisms of the Bush administration's new rules on the way suspected terrorists could be treated and tried. Lewis noted that the military tribunal order established special military courts to try the terrorists, but they were to have more relaxed standards of what could be admitted as evidence than is allowed in either the U.S. civil or military courts, easier standards for conviction, no judicial review, and no assurance for defendants of choosing their own attorneys, among other provisions. Safire referred to the order as "the sudden seizure of power, bypassing all constitutional checks and balances," and suggested that "cooler heads" in the government were beginning to recognize that it was "more than a bit excessive."

Taylor was concerned because administration supporters had rebutted the two *New York Times* columnists by quoting polls, including his own, "which show that [the Bush administration's] actions and proposals enjoy the support of large majorities of the public." He didn't deny the poll results or suggest they might constitute a misreading of the public will, but instead argued that they should not be used to defend bad policy. "In times of war and national emergencies—from John Adams's Sedition Act to Franklin D. Roosevelt's rounding up of Japa-

nese Americans—most people have probably approved of draconian measures that we later came to regret,” Taylor wrote. “Our legislators should certainly be well informed about public opinion. But they should make up their own minds on the merits of the case, with one eye on how history will judge them.”

And he had a point, since numerous polls over the years have shown that, in general, a majority of Americans do not support the Bill of Rights when the freedoms it protects are presented as hypothetical situations. In fact, Safire referred to polls showing “terrorized Americans willing to subvert our Constitution to hold Soviet-style secret military trials. No presumption of innocence; no independent juries; no right to choice of counsel; no appeal to civilian judges.” But such views, however widespread among the people, are not considered justification for violating the Constitution.

Apart from such use of polls, my concern was more basic: Did the polls about military tribunals even give us an accurate reading of what the public really wanted to happen? Gallup addressed the issue<sup>11</sup> by asking the public two questions, the first one being, “If suspected terrorists are captured and put on trial, do you think they should be tried by an international court or by U.S. authorities?” For people who know nothing about international law or what treaties the United States has signed or what U.S. policy is toward other nations that capture U.S. citizens in combat, why wouldn’t they choose “U.S. authorities”? And indeed a majority did, 56 percent to 41 percent. The next question asked that if suspected terrorists were to be tried in the United States, would respondents rather see that happen “in a regular court of law in which evidence would be presented in a public trial, or a military tribunal in which U.S. officers would examine evidence in secret hearings?” Since the choice was for terrorists to be tried by a regular court or a military tribunal, it would seem logical that terrorists, who constituted the enemy in a military “war against terrorism,” should be tried by a military tribunal. Sure enough, a majority took that position,

53 percent to 42 percent. Did all the respondents in the poll pay close attention to the whole question and realize that the military tribunal would accept evidence only in secret hearings, or did they just get the idea that there were military prisoners who would be tried in military courts? Sometimes, we pollsters pack a lot of meaningful information into our questions, and foolishly expect that the respondents will absorb every nuance.

My assumption was that for many people these results reflected a top-of-mind response, in large part influenced by the way the question was phrased. If we had asked all the respondents whether they cared if their choice was the one the government followed, I suspected that many would readily admit they didn't really care. I was never able to test that suspicion on the military tribunal questions, but eventually Gallup did measure public commitment to opinions on a similar matter—the closing of the prison in Guantanamo Bay.

### **Alleged Public Support for “Gitmo”**

In the summer of 2005, a major controversy arose over the U.S. imprisonment of suspected terrorists at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba—something that had been authorized four years earlier, but now, in the aftermath of the Abu Ghraib scandal, was receiving new attention. The controversy over the Guantanamo prison received a great deal of press attention, but it was still just one of many public policy issues in the news. If we pollsters were going to ask people what the government should do about the facility, at least we ought to know how much, if anything, they knew about it. But, of course, that was not what the media wanted to find out, because the public's lack of attention to the issue might call into question the validity of any opinions we were going to measure. So, in June of that year, we didn't ask what people knew. Instead, we gave *them* information, to be sure they would feel they knew enough about the issue to answer us:<sup>12</sup> “As you know, since 2001, the United States has held

people from other countries who are suspected of being terrorists at a detention facility in Guantanamo Bay in Cuba.” This is at best a bland presentation of a rather controversial situation, where the issues were possible torture of prisoners and U.S. violation of the Geneva Convention on handling prisoners captured during war. We used phrasing to encourage people to respond, even though they might feel they didn’t know enough to comment: “Based on what you have heard or read, do you think the U.S. should continue to operate this facility, or do you think the U.S. should close this facility and transfer the prisoners to other facilities?” Essentially, we asked for their best guess.

Without knowing how many people even knew about the prison at Guantanamo Bay, or what proportion might know about the controversy over the lack of safeguards required by the Geneva Convention or any of the other details, Gallup could report that a majority of Americans, 58 percent, supported the Bush administration’s continued operation of the prison facility, 36 percent were opposed, and only 6 percent were unsure.

For people who had not followed the news on these matters, why shouldn’t they give positive responses? The prison, after all, was for suspected terrorists—Gallup just told them that. And Americans’ immediate reaction to government activity on behalf of the national defense is understandably positive; our government, after all, wouldn’t mistreat prisoners. The likely truth, of course, was that relatively few people had heard of the Guantanamo Bay prison, and that even among those who had, most were undoubtedly ignorant of what was actually happening there. The accurate report on public opinion should have included, at the very least, how few people were truly informed about the issue, instead of results that indicated a solid majority of the American people in support of the policy.

Two years later, Gallup finally included that issue as part of the series of experiments that Jeff Jones and I had initiated

(although by that time I had left Gallup, and it was only Jones who continued with that effort). The new question was different from the old one in two aspects. It was not preceded by any explanation about the prison—no feeding of information so respondents would know what the issue was about. (There was no question that asked how much respondents actually knew about the prison.) And it asked only whether the prison should be closed or not, rather than whether the government should continue to operate it or close it (a minor wording difference with the original question): “Do you think the United States should—or should not—close the prison at the Guantanamo Bay military base in Cuba?” Not surprisingly, more people volunteered they didn’t have an opinion (13 percent) in 2007 than did so in 2005 (6 percent) when they were fed some information. Nevertheless, among those offering an opinion, the public was divided about the same in 2007 as it had been earlier—53 percent against closing the base to 33 percent in favor of it, a margin only two points smaller than the one in 2005 (see fig. 2).

The big revelation came when pollsters asked the follow-up question: whether the respondent would be upset if the government did the opposite of what he or she had just said. A majority, 52 percent, indicated they did not care (would not be “upset”) one way or the other. The rest were divided, with 28 percent opposed to closing the base, and 19 percent in favor.

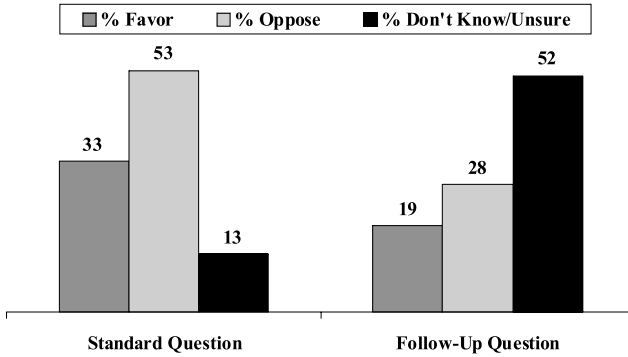
Instead of a 20-point margin between the two sides, the follow-up question found only a 9-point margin, with a majority not caring one way or the other. This was a picture of public opinion very different from the one Gallup reported in 2005 and very different from the Harris polls that showed majority support for the special military tribunal procedures announced by the Bush administration in 2001. In reality, large numbers of people simply had not thought about the issue and didn’t have opinions that they wanted the government to follow.

If “forced” to give an opinion in a survey, many respondents

FIGURE 2

## Favor or Oppose Closing Prison at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba?

(USA Today/Gallup Poll, July 6-8, 2007)



will indulge the interviewers and select a response that seems logical on the surface. But that choice hardly qualifies as a view that elected officials should treat with deference—especially when large numbers of respondents say immediately after expressing their view that they don't care whether or not it prevails.

### Why NOT an Antimissile Shield?

Even with the follow-up question, the results about Guantanamo prison probably overestimated the number of people who actually had a developed opinion on the issue. The original question was in a “forced choice” format, which means respondents were offered only two options. If the respondents felt they didn't know enough about the issue to have an opinion, they had to volunteer that information. Sometimes, however, a policy question explicitly offers a “don't know” option and, in those cases, the percentage of people who acknowledge not

having an opinion is always much higher than when people have to volunteer that information.

That was the case with a poll in April 2002, when Jeff Jones and I included two questions on antimissile defense that had been asked in previous years.<sup>13</sup> One included an explicit option for the respondent to indicate “don’t know,” and it was asked of half the sample of respondents. The other question was in a format that offered no options other than support or opposition, and it was asked of the other half of the sample.

At the time, news reports indicated that the Bush administration was getting ready to withdraw from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty signed by the United States and the Soviet Union, in order to undertake development of systems that were banned by that treaty. (The official withdrawal occurred on June 13, 2002). Both poll questions began by telling the respondents, “Recently there has been some discussion about the possibility of the United States building a defense system against nuclear missiles.” They then asked, “Do you think the government should or should not spend the money that would be necessary to build such a system?” One question stopped there, whereas the other added, “Or are you unsure?”

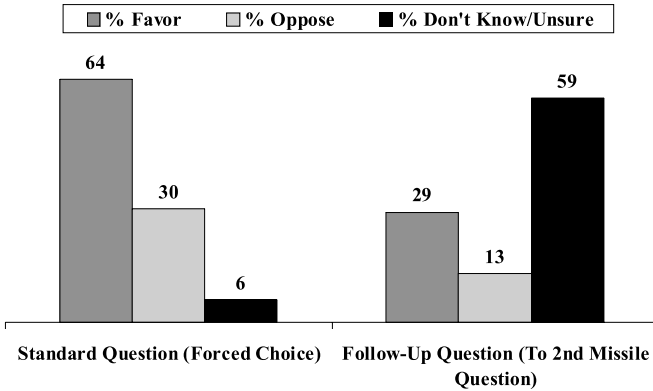
The standard question found more than 2-to-1 support for building an antimissile system, 64 percent to 30 percent. Just 6 percent of respondents volunteered they didn’t know. For people who had no knowledge about the proposed system—how much it would cost, whether it would work, and what the political implications might be—the answer was a no-brainer. Who wouldn’t say yes to a system that promised defense against nuclear missiles?

The second question, asked of people who had not been asked the forced-choice format question, found a third of respondents (33 percent) willing to say they were unsure. The rest favored building an antimissile system 47 percent to 20 percent. When these respondents were then asked whether they would

FIGURE 3

## Favor or Oppose Anti-Missile System?

(*USA Today*/Gallup Poll, April 22-24, 2002)



be upset if the government did the opposite of what they had just said, 29 percent favored the system (and would be upset if it were not funded), 13 percent were opposed (and would be upset if it were built), with 59 percent indicating either that they did not have an opinion or didn't care what the government did (see fig. 3).<sup>14</sup>

The contrast in results between the two approaches to measuring public opinion on this issue provides a telling insight into what is wrong with standard polling methods. In both cases, there is 2-to-1 support for the antimissile system, but the reported proportion of the public that is engaged in the issue differs significantly in the two approaches. The standard question portrays virtually the entire public as engaged and well informed, with only 6 percent declining to express an opinion. But when people are first offered the option of saying they are unsure—as they were in the second question—and are then asked if they care whether their opinion is followed by the government, we find a substantial majority of the public neither engaged in nor well informed about the issue.

Two years earlier, several polling organizations asked about the antimissile program and produced results that differed according to how they phrased the questions. Most found initial support, but when they read negative information about the program—including its \$60 billion cost, its low likelihood of working, and the need to break a thirty-year-old treaty with Russia if development was to proceed—support dropped precipitously.<sup>15</sup> The ease with which opinions could be manipulated suggests how superficial they really were.

IT'S CLEAR THAT on three of the most militarily aggressive policies of the twenty-first century to date, the major media polls have erroneously described: a saber-rattling public in the lead-up to the Iraq war, substantial majorities of Americans in favor of the draconian steps taken by the Bush administration to deprive suspected terrorists of their rights under the U.S. Constitution and the Geneva Convention, and widespread support for the construction of an antimissile system. All of these poll measures included large numbers of people, at least four in ten, who in fact had no emotional or intellectual commitment to the views they put forth. They were just as ready to see an outcome opposite to the one they chose. Once these people are correctly classified, the resulting picture of public opinion is substantially different from the portrayal provided by the media pollsters.

Still, whether accurate pictures of public opinion would have prevented the war in Iraq or given our political leaders second thoughts about supporting the missile shield and the prison at Guantanamo Bay are only of tangential concern. My major worry is with the broader implications of mismeasuring the public will—that on all sorts of issues, the media polls continually and systematically distort public opinion, with severe consequences for us all.

## CHAPTER TWO

# Manufacturing Public Opinion

In March 1993, when I joined the Gallup Organization as a vice president and managing editor of the Gallup Poll, I quickly realized that my preconceptions about the nature of public opinion, at least as measured by the news media polls, were inaccurate. I discovered that it wasn't by accident or inattention that the media manufacture public opinion based on the myth of an all-knowing, rational, and fully engaged public. To the contrary, it appears as though all of the media polls have an unwavering commitment to such a mythological public, perhaps feeling that only such an attuned citizenry can justify the beat of public opinion. If a large proportion of Americans has no real opinion on an issue, most media organizations might dismiss the poll results as having no news value. And if that happened on a regular basis, the whole enterprise of media polls could be jeopardized.

The hard truth is that on most policy issues, large proportions of the public know or care little about the specifics, and thus have developed no meaningful opinion about them. But news media polls typically gloss over public ignorance and apathy, and instead, through the use of forced-choice questions, squeeze some type of answer out of virtually all respondents—