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Americans Say U.S. Is Losing War

Public, Politicians Split on Iraq Panel's Ideas

By Peter Baker and Jon Cohen

Most Americans think the United States is losing the war in Iraq and support a bipartisan commission's key proposals to change course, according to a poll released yesterday. But the Iraq Study Group's report has become a political orphan in Washington with little backing from either party.

Nearly eight in 10 Americans favor changing the U.S. mission in Iraq from direct combat to training Iraqi troops, the Washington Post-ABC News survey found. Sizeable majorities agree with the goal of pulling out nearly all U.S. combat forces by early 2008, engaging in direct talks with Iran and Syria and reducing U.S. financial support if Iraq fails to make enough progress.

Yet neither President Bush nor Democratic leaders who will take over Congress in three weeks have embraced the panel's report since it was released last week. Bush set it aside in favor of his own review, but, faced with conflicting advice within the administration, the White House said yesterday that plans to announce a new Iraq strategy by Christmas would be delayed until January. Democrats remain undecided and kept their distance while trying to pressure Bush.

"I don't think I've ever seen politicians walk away from something faster," said Gordon Adams, who was a White House defense budget official under President Bill Clinton.

The dichotomy between the public's support for the plan and the Washington establishment's ambivalence illustrates the complex political environment as Bush searches for a new strategy in a war that has outlasted U.S. involvement in World War II. A war-weary public appears hungry for ideas that would represent a major change, but political leaders remain uncertain whether the plan's proposals would improve the situation.

The lukewarm reception to the report contrasts sharply with earlier expectations for a panel led by former secretary of state James A. Baker III and former congressman Lee H. Hamilton (D-Ind.). In the weeks leading up to the report's release, many in Washington predicted that the Iraq Study Group would become the next Sept. 11 commission, its conclusions imbued with an aura of bipartisan authority. Instead, conservative Bush supporters labeled it a plan for surrender while liberals called it a sellout for not proposing a firm timetable for withdrawal.

"Part of the problem is the expectation was so high," said panel member Vernon E. Jordan Jr. "The expectation was proportionate to the seriousness of the issue and how greatly people were concerned about it. The problem is there is no absolute correct answer."

Conventional wisdom emerging from both parties holds that the report's real value is its assessment of the situation in Iraq, which it terms "grave and deteriorating," a judgment some said changed the debate in Washington by ending any lingering illusions or pretense.

The public's discontent with the war has grown even since last month's congressional elections, when voters tossed out Republican majorities in favor of Democrats critical of Bush's leadership in Iraq. Bush's approval rating now stands at 36 percent, down four points from before

the elections and the second-worst of his presidency. The poll found the lowest-ever approval for his handling of Iraq, 28 percent.

Overall, 52 percent now say, the United States is losing the war, up from 34 percent last year. Three in 10 say the United States is making significant progress in restoring civil order; nearly half thought so in June. And 41 percent say Iraq is now in a civil war, up from 34 percent in August. Forty-five percent describe the situation as close to a civil war.

Although the public remains leery of immediate withdrawal, it has lost faith that the Bush administration has a clear solution for Iraq. Twenty-five percent think it does, down 13 points since September. Even Republicans are no longer convinced, with 49 percent saying the president has a clear plan, down 22 points since September. The solace for Bush is that just as few Americans say the Democrats have a clear plan.

The public is more open to the Iraq Study Group plan, with 46 percent for it and 22 percent against it. When asked about some of its specific recommendations, respondents are dramatically more supportive. Seventy-nine percent favor shifting U.S. troops from combat to support; 69 percent support withdrawing most combat forces by early 2008; 74 percent support reducing aid if Iraq fails to make progress toward national unity and civil order; and about six in 10 support talking with Syria and Iran to try to resolve the conflict.