Classroom Discussion suggestions for [*American Public Opinion on the Iraq War*](http://press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=1039750)

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Political scientist John Mueller once described the 1991 Gulf War to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait as “the mother of all polling events.” The Iraq War that started with the American-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003 has far surpassed the Gulf War in the number of public opinion surveys about the conflict. This book draws upon more than a 1,000 survey questions posed by such polling organizations as Gallup, Pew, the Program on International Policy Attitudes, New York Times/CBS News, Wall Street Journal/NBC News, Washington Post/ ABC News, and others. The many key questions include: Did the U.S. do the right thing in using force in Iraq? How well is the American military effort going? Has the American action in Iraq made the U.S. safer? Was the U.S. military effort in Iraq worth the costs?

Many other questions are included in the analysis. An early chapter analyzes the convoluted relations between Washington and Baghdad during the decades prior to the invasion of Iraq. The discussion then turns to the impact of public opinion and the many administration efforts to generate support for its Iraq policies. The conclusion addresses questions about what the Iraq case tells us about the venerable debate about the proper role of public opinion in the conduce of foreign policy; the role of the media in informing the public; and the possibility that the Iraq War might give rise to “stab in the back” theories should the outcome fall short of American hopes and expectations when the war was launched.

Discussion questions:

• What does the Iraq War case teach us about the impact of public opinion on foreign policy?

• What does the Iraq War case teach us about the proper role of public opinion on foreign affairs in a democracy? Can the public play a useful role in foreign policy, as some liberal theorists [such as Woodrow Wilson] maintain, or is it mostly a hindrance in the effective pursuit of national interests, as many “realists” [such as Henry Kissinger and George Kennan] believe?

• Did the media play its proper role in the run-up to the Iraq War? During and after the successful overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime in Baghdad? Why or why not?

• Why were the expectations in Washington of a brief and successful transformation of Iraq from a brutal dictatorship into a stable, democratic regime prove too optimistic?

• Given what has been achieved in Iraq, have the costs of the war, in blood and treasure, been worth it?

• What are likely to be the long term impacts of the Iraq War of how the American public views the country’s proper role in the world? Why?

Further sources:

• On a broader assessment of American public opinion: Ole R. Holsti, [*Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*](http://press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=6750), Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, rev. ed., 2004.

• On American military policy: Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco*, New York: Penguin, 2006.

• On the Gulf War and Iraq War by an “insider“: Richard N. Haass, *War of Necessity, War of Choice*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009.

• On how publics in many countries abroad viewed American policy in Iraq: Ole R. Holsti, [*To See Ourselves as Others See Us: How Publics Abroad View the U.S. Since 9/11*](http://press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=148997), Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008.

• For continuing evidence of American public opinion on foreign affairs:

 Gallup Organization: [www.gallup.com](http://www.gallup.com)

 Pew Research Center: <http://www.people-press.org>

 Program on International Policy attitudes: <http://www.pipa.org>

 Chicago Council on Global Affairs: <http://www.thechicagocouncil.org>