

## Less Than Half the World Believes al-Qaeda Was Behind 9/11 Attacks

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An international poll released this week by the Project on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) found that outside the United States, many are skeptical that al Qaeda was really responsible for the Sept. 11 attacks. Sixteen thousand people in 17 countries -- allies and adversaries in Asia, Europe, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East -- were asked the open-ended question: "Who do you think was behind the 9/11 attacks?"

On average, fewer than half of all respondents said al Qaeda (although there was significant variation between countries and regions). Fifteen percent said the United States government itself was responsible for the attacks, 7 percent cited Israel, and fully 1 in 4 said they just didn't know.

Among our closest allies, very slim majorities believe al Qaeda was the culprit. According to the study, "Fifty-six percent of Britons and Italians, 63 percent of French and 64 percent of Germans cite al Qaeda. However, significant portions of Britons (26%), French (23%), and Italians (21%) say they do not know who was behind 9/11. Remarkably, 23 percent of Germans cite the U.S. government, as do 15 percent of Italians."

Whatever one thinks of "alternative" theories of who the perpetrators were that day, the results are an eye-opening indication of how profoundly the world's confidence in the United States government has eroded during the Bush era. The researchers found little difference among respondents according to levels of education, or to the amount of exposure to the news media they had. Rather, they found a clear correlation with people's attitudes toward the United States in general. "Those with a positive view of America's influence in the world are more likely to cite al Qaeda (on average 59%) than those with a negative view (40%)," wrote the authors. "Those with a positive view of the United States are also less likely to blame the U.S. government (7%) than those with a negative view (22%)."

Interestingly, Americans are also dubious, with more than a third of those polled by Scripps Howard News Service in 2006 saying it was "very likely" or "somewhat likely" that "federal officials either participated in the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon or took no action to stop them" because they "wanted the United States to go to war in the Middle East." The poll didn't, however, distinguish between those who believed the government actively participated in the events of that day or merely had foreknowledge that the attacks were imminent. (Another poll that year, by CBS News and the New York Times, found that fewer than 1 in 5 Americans believed the government was being fully forthcoming about the attacks.)

In one sense, these findings should come as no surprise. America, like other countries, has been known to conduct "false-flag" operations before. And it has used falsehoods to justify going to war. In the now-infamous "Gulf of Tonkin Incident" -- the incident that would be used to justify America's involvement in that conflict -- a minor skirmish occurred between U.S. naval ships and two North Vietnamese coastal vessels. Two days later, the Johnson administration reported that there had been a second attack, which it claimed was evidence of "communist aggression" on the part of the North Vietnamese. But, as a National Security Agency report revealed in 2005 (PDF), the second incident -- the one that created a "pattern" of aggression -- was invented out of whole cloth. "It is not simply

that there is a different story as to what happened; it is that no attack happened that night," reads the report.

In 1990, on the eve of the first Gulf War, Pentagon officials cited top-secret satellite images and said definitively that Saddam Hussein had amassed a huge army -- with 250,000 men and 1,500 tanks -- along the Saudi border in preparation for an invasion of that country. Jean Heller, a reporter with the St. Petersburg Times, purchased some Russian satellite images of the same piece of desert and found that in fact there was nothing there but sand. After the U.S.-led attack, a "senior (U.S. military) commander" told New York Newsday, "There was a great disinformation campaign surrounding this war."

Those incidents are in no way analogous to the attacks of 9/11. But in 1962, the Joint Chiefs of Staff proposed to Defense Secretary Robert McNamara that the CIA might launch a series of terror attacks within the United States, blame Cuba, and use the ensuing panic to justify military action against the defiant island-nation. (The plan, called "Operation Northwoods," which became public in 1997, was reportedly killed off by John F. Kennedy himself -- it got that far up the food chain.)

Yet, whatever the historical context, there can be little doubt that the Bush administration's penchant for secrecy and well-documented dishonesty fuels the debate over who perpetrated the attacks of 9/11. Earlier this year, an independent study conducted by the Center for Public Integrity documented 935 lies mouthed by senior administration officials to gin up support for the invasion of Iraq (one of which was Donald Rumsfeld repeating the long-disproved claim that Saddam had amassed a huge army on the Saudi border in 1990).

Just the fact that the administration blamed a group in Afghanistan for the attacks and then invaded a different country -- with some of the world's richest oil reserves -- would have been enough to create suspicion around the world. And no satisfactory explanation has ever been given for why the Bush administration didn't step up airline security in the face of repeated warnings -- some quite specific in terms of time and place -- from foreign governments and their intelligence agencies, warnings from allies like Israel's Mossad to "enemies" like the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The credibility gap that has developed around the world's pre-eminent power is more than a matter of academic interest. Around the world, many of those who embraced us immediately after 9/11 and offered almost unconditional support for our policies now don't believe a word coming out of our officials' mouths, and that affects U.S. foreign policy, and the stability of the whole international system, in ways both obvious and subtle.

A good, obvious example is Pakistan, where most Americans believe we're allied with the government and a majority of the Pakistani people against a small group of Al Qaeda extremists who are undermining the U.S.-led battle against their terrorist brethren in Afghanistan (where we are allied with that government and most of that country's people). American politicians expend much hot air accusing the Pakistani government of "not doing enough to rein in extremists" in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan.

But as Princeton scholar Zia Mian wrote in July, "most damaging of all for the United States is that people in Pakistan overwhelmingly see the United States as the problem." Mian cited a poll (PDF) conducted in May by the Pakistan Institute for Public Opinion, which found that "60 percent of Pakistanis believe the U.S. 'war on terror' seeks to weaken the Muslim world, and 15 percent think its goal is to 'ensure U.S. domination over Pakistan.'" About a third had a positive view of al Qaeda, twice as many as the number that viewed the United States in a positive light. Mian touched on what is probably the key finding in the study -- and one that speaks to our officials' utter lack of credibility

when they say that they're fighting "extremism" or "terrorists." The poll found that "44 percent of Pakistanis believe the United States is the greatest threat to their personal safety ... (while) the Pakistani Taliban, who ... by some estimates have up to 40,000 fighters, are seen as a threat by less than 10 percent. Al Qaeda barely registers as a threat, slightly surpassing Pakistan's own military and Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI)."

With almost half of the population saying the United States is the greatest threat to their own personal safety, any Pakistani government will be left between a rock and a hard place. In that part of the planet, the real-world consequence of our government's credibility gap is that the cooperation Washington seeks from Islamabad -- both internally and with neighboring Afghanistan -- can only result in destabilizing an already unstable political scene.

Around the world, the United States is at the nadir of its post-World War II influence. Among foreign governments and publics, in international institutions and commercial markets, our ideologies haven't had less power to sway people than they do today. We've never had less "soft power;" hard power doesn't come cheaply or without unintended consequences, and there's no guarantee that the Iron Fist can ever be put back into the Velvet Glove now that it's been exposed.

The fact that fewer than half of the world's citizens believe we were really attacked by al Qaeda seven years ago is merely a reflection of far deeper problems that our foreign policy makers are going to have to try to face in the coming years. That's Bush's foreign policy legacy.

All of which brings us to what historians will probably consider the great irony of the decline of the brief U.S.-led mono-polar order that existed between the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the second Gulf War: The neoconservative movement, which was so obsessed with the preservation of American power and the suppression of its rivals -- from its birth in the Nixon administration, through Reagan's "Dirty Wars" in Latin America and culminating in the 2003 invasion of Iraq -- ultimately oversaw the crash and burn of the World's Only Superpower's ability to influence world events.

<http://www.nsa.gov/vietnam/releases/relea00012.pdf>

<http://www.terrorfreetomorrow.org/upimagestft/PakistanPollReportJune08.pdf>

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