

MISSING IN ACTION: SUPPORT FOR US

Going by public opinion polls, there is no evidence of global support for America's war against Afghanistan, except of course in the United States and Israel. A review of public opinion surveys, conducted in the US and UK since the terrorist attacks of September 11, has interesting findings. Not all of them were reported in the news media.

News media, both print and electronic, have been highlighting how the American public is overwhelmingly backing the US President, the Congress and the war. So also in the UK. However, a close look at various public opinion polls brings out that more often the coverage of poll findings has been partial to the extent of being selective.

Based on a Gallup poll in 31 countries, for example, only *Daily Mail* in UK had reported, a fortnight after the terrorist attacks of September 11, that "international opinion opposed a massive US military strike to retaliate". And, that only in Israel and the US did a massive majority favoured a military response.

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Cheerleaders of the Western media mostly do not reflect American or British popular opinion about the war in Afghanistan

BY DR N. BHASKARA RAO



the bombing was much higher among American women polled in the surveys, where they were told of the probability of civilian casualties.

Americans are rather willing to give up their much cherished civil liberties if that helps to catch those responsible for September 11. In fact, 69 to over 90 per cent of Americans favoured giving powers to the police to tap phones or intercept voice mails, which they have otherwise always opposed. That is why, last week, the president of Inter-American Press Association lambasted the thinking saying it went against the very values that the Americans have always cherished.

Sixty-one to 71 per cent of Americans favoured a war against terrorists and the nations that support terrorism. But, 25 to 32 per cent believed that the US should limit action to specific groups responsible for the terrorism of September 11. Americans are "worried" that further terrorist attacks "are likely soon". This percentage, interestingly, has gone up from 22 per cent in mid-September to 41 per cent in the first week of October. But, 14 per cent think that the US should have done more to find a diplomatic solution before starting to bomb Afghanistan.

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That public opinion surveys have become part of publicity "campaigns" is well known. Since the Vietnam War, and then in the Gulf War, such public opinion surveys have also become arsenals of propaganda wars, as is evident over the last few weeks in the context of America's war against terrorism being fought over Afghanistan.

The poll questions used in most surveys since September 11, in terms of their structure, sequence and sophistication, have little value in unravelling anything beyond an obvious "populist mood". Then there is the predetermined focused analyses of responses and, finally, the selectivity practised by the media about poll findings. Nevertheless, fortunately, websites of poll agencies these days provide better insights for a more objective summing up. "Threats" of all kinds, including from military or terrorists are often presented in the media as more real than they are. So that mobilisation of public opinion from such surveys leads to the public demanding or agreeing to increased budgets for government actions.

Nearly 70 per cent of Britons in the first couple of weeks after September 11, for example, felt that Britain should criticise the US on the issue of war against Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the media reported that UK's support to the war was uniform. But the media also prominently reported, sourcing an opinion poll, that a third of Americans would support Prime Minister Blair should he be a Presidential candidate!

Eighty-two per cent of the British public wanted military action to be "taken after identity of the perpetrators was already established". Even in the US, 62 per cent wanted a similar approach. But this was not highlighted by the mainstream media.

The British media however felt less constrained in giving a frank description of "the war against terrorism" promptly and more openly unlike in US, initially, the shock there being what it was. The *New Statesman* called American values "shallow and hypocritical". "The

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the US Congress. The *Washington Post* even cautioned the President for his "either with us or with the terrorists" rhetoric. The same was described as "down-right idiotic" by the *Economist*.

Conflicts are fought on two fronts — the battlefield and the minds of people. Misleading people with distortions, inaccuracies, exaggerations and even with fabrication is part of the process of receiving support of people within and across the continents.

That America engages public relations firms to manage its war propaganda is too well known. Going by the pattern so far in the Afghan war, the US is using the same PR firm, Hill & Knowlton, which it had used during the 1991 Gulf war. This "military control" on information in such situations obviously implies that the media would not give a complete picture. Examples of the US establishment, at the highest level, trying to influence the media coverage of the war against Afghanistan are rather too blatant and even imply an "expanded authority" of the State. All this in the name of "information psychology". Use of airborne broad-



GOVERNMENT'S VOICE: An image released by the Pentagon shows an Afghan early warning radar facility near Herat

pictures of the effects of bombing in Afghanistan so that the media networks are prevented from getting access to ground realities. Under certain laws, the US defence department has legal power to exercise "shutter control" over civilian satellites in order to prevent enemies using images while America is at war. Even in the UK, the Blair government followed the US model. In fact, the UK government went out of its way to appeal to the media to treat Taliban claims "with scepticism" as they are "pumping out lies and propaganda from the start". All this in the name of "sanitising" media!

Tony Blair was reported to have said at the end of the first week of bombing that the "West is losing the propaganda war... There is need for us to communicate effectively." London's *Guardian* declared in its headline that "Bin Laden is winning the propaganda war". In fact, unlike in the case of Gulf War, only 42 per cent Americans think that the US and its allies are winning the present war, against 44 per cent who think that neither side is winning. Eleven per cent think that the terrorists are winning. This is the public perception despite a high

favourable" opinion of Arabs, against 37 per cent who have "very unfavourable" or "mostly unfavourable" opinion of Arabs.

Also, 48 per cent of Americans think that the fighting in Afghanistan will continue for two years or beyond. Only 31 per cent of Americans are confident that the US will be able to prevent terrorism in mainland America. In fact, 94 per cent of Americans realise that the war against terrorism is comparatively "difficult" to win. President Bush indicated that the war on terrorism will last two years, one week after the Gallup poll had indicated so.

Noted radical scholar Noam Chomsky recently described the US as "one of the most indoctrinated societies in the world". As an example, he cited the American invasion of Grenada; then people in the US discussed the claim that Grenada was a military threat to America (!), the same way as the Taliban are being discussed today. Three-fourths or more of the American public are concerned and agitated about issues related to September 11, including 46 per cent who are concerned about "terrorism".

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cent think that the US should have done more to find a diplomatic solution before starting to bomb Afghanistan.

About 43 per cent of the Americans said that the government had done all that could be done to prevent attacks while 44 per cent said the officials "could have done more". And yet two-thirds of Americans trust the Federal government "to do the right thing". This is more than double the percentage who expressed such confidence in the Federal government before September 11. This phenomenon is what Gallup describes as the "rally effect" of American public. And that is how the approval ratings of the President, the Congress and the government go up, not down, during such times of crisis, and to the highest ever levels. Public approval of President Bush last week was 89 per cent among the Republicans and 80 per cent in the case of Democrats.

Most surveys found consumer or investor confidence dropped sharply prior to the attacks, between August and September. Interestingly, however, after the US attack on Afghanistan, polls indicated that confidence was up significantly. Those who were positive rose from 32 per cent in the Gallup polls conducted just before the attacks on September 11, to 46 per cent in the first week of October 2001. Also, confidence in the system has gone up even more significantly. Similarly, those who said the economy is getting better rose from 19 per cent to 28 per cent over the same period. In fact, only 20 per cent of Americans cited last week economic matters to be the ones they are concerned about.

The question that comes to the mind is whether in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, America has collapsed psychologically. In retrospect, it can be said that the Indian media, particularly newspapers, did a far more objective, free and dispassionate job during the Agra Summit when compared to the American media in context of September 11.

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The British media however felt less constrained in giving a frank description of "the war against terrorism" promptly and more openly unlike in US, initially, the shock there being what it was. The *New Statesman* called American values "shallow and hypocritical". "The US had gone selfish," it further wrote, in the context of US campaign against Taliban.

It took three weeks even for the *New York Times* to come up editorially and chide President Bush for his "dead or alive" oratory in

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favourable" opinion of Arabs, against 37 per cent who have "very unfavourable" or "mostly unfavourable" opinion of Arabs.

Also, 48 per cent of Americans think that the fighting in Afghanistan will continue for two years or beyond. Only 31 per cent of Americans are confident that the US will be able to prevent terrorism in mainland America. In fact, 94 per cent of Americans realise that the war against terrorism is comparatively "difficult" to win. President Bush indicated that the war on terrorism will last two years, one week after the Gallup poll had indicated so.

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That majority of Britons oppose bombing Afghanistan risking civilian casualties comes out from four surveys, which had included this aspect in their questioning. Forty-five to 60 per cent opposed the bombing. The opposition to

said the officials could have done more". And yet two-thirds of Americans trust the Federal government "to do the right thing". This is more than double the percentage who expressed such confidence in the Federal government before September 11. This phenomenon is what Gallup describes as the "rally effect" of American public. And that is how the approval ratings of the President, the Congress and the government go up, not down, during such times of crisis, and to the highest ever levels. Public approval of President Bush last week was 89 per cent among the Republicans and 80 per cent in the case of Democrats.

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■ **DR N. BHASKARA RAO** is a pioneer in public opinion research in India and chairman of Centre for Media Studies (CMS), New Delhi