

Why did so many Americans believe Saddam Hussein was behind the 9/11 attacks?

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Althaus and Largio argue that the resilience of this belief was in fact an artifact of pollsters' switch to forced-choice questions: although open-ended survey questions find very small percentages blaming Saddam for 9/11, forced choice questions reveal a high proportion of the public willing to believe in Saddam Hussein's culpability even before the administration shifted its focus from Afghanistan to Iraq, and that this means that "The American public's apparently widespread belief that Saddam Hussein was responsible for the 9/11 terror attacks was no feat of misdirection by the Bush administration. Instead, the Bush administration inherited and played into a favorable climate of public opinion" (Althaus and Largio, 2004). But where did this favorable climate of public opinion come from?

We suggest that answers on forced-choice questions and support for politicians' actions are both examples of inferred justification: when responding to forced-choice questions, respondents assume that there is a good reason why a name is present among a list of choices (even if there is not); similarly, in judging politicians' actions, voters assume that there is a good reason why a politician supports a policy measure, particularly one as consequential as the decision to go to war. We test this theory on a sample of respondents in Illinois, and show that 20% of respondents give an inferred justification response. In essence, in invading Iraq the administration presented the public with the equivalent of a forced choice survey question of whether or not Saddam was responsible for 9/11; some respondents concluded that, if we invaded Iraq, there must have been a good reason for doing so, and 9/11 seemed to them the most obvious justification.

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