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# African Americans and the Persian Gulf Crisis

by

Jacqueline Howard-Matthews

*This article addresses two issues: the African-American response to United States involvement in the 1990–91 Persian Gulf war and interrelated factors explaining the nature of that response. Despite the historical symbolism associated with African-American participation and disproportionate representation in the military, African Americans composed the most consistently identifiable strata either opposed to or suspicious of the deployment of U.S. troops and military equipment in the Gulf. The pattern of African-American response to the Gulf War is remarkably similar to its underlying reactions to military conflicts taking place in the recent past, including the Vietnam War and Laos invasion of the 1960s and 1970s. The weight of the evidence suggests African-American public opinion during the Gulf War was not simply part and parcel of a growing national isolationism. Rather, it reflects African America's level of political dissent, tolerance, and anti-imperialism.*

## **The African-American Response to United States Involvement in the Persian Gulf Crisis**

When the Bush administration deployed the first U.S. troops and equipment to Saudi Arabia on August 8, 1990, the weight of history gave it every reason to assume that the public would overwhelmingly support its response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. If the Gulf War ended quickly with relatively few American casualties, the Bush administration hoped it would be rewarded by a sorely needed increase in its public approval rating, possibly one strong enough to decisively influence the upcoming elections. Since the end of World War II, the pattern of Americans' response to U.S. military involvement is one of sustained support in the early- to mid-stages of the conflict. However, as the toll of the combat dead rises and domestic socioeconomic hardship associated with the war appears to be irremediable, gradual doubt over the wisdom of the government's action and frustration replace optimism and exuberant loyalty. Finally, with failure to quickly resolve the conflict, the plurality of public opinion registers high disapproval and pessimism with both military involvement and the president in power.

Using examples over a forty-year period, from 1950 to 1990, the above observation sheds light on the pattern of majority-response to foreign military involvement and its transitory nature. The hysteria surrounding the fear of communism, blind loyalty to the publicly stated goals of U.S. foreign policy, and national bravado combined to give U.S. involvement in Korea an approval rating of 65

percent by August 1950 with only 20 percent certain that it was a mistake.<sup>1</sup>

By 1951, however, only 38 percent believed the American presence in Korea was not a mistake while 49 percent believed it was. During the Eisenhower and Kennedy years, Americans did not seem to be aware of the gradual increase in military presence in South Vietnam; by 1965, support for Lyndon Johnson's plans to intervene in South Vietnam reached roughly 65 percent with a two-to-one margin of support for his decisions. From 1966 to early 1967, less than 40 percent of those polled characterized U.S. intervention as a mistake,<sup>2</sup> although 37 percent disapproved of Johnson's management and 41 percent approved.<sup>3</sup> By April 1968, the public's wariness with sustained yet murky signs of victory became evident. After the Tet offensive and the Pueblo incident, approval of the U.S. presence in Vietnam dropped to 35 percent. On November 3, 1969, Richard Nixon called for the "Vietnamization" of the war; although 55 percent of the public described itself as "doves" and only 31 percent as "hawks," he received generally high approval (67 percent) and conduct of the war (64 percent) ratings. After the invasion of Laos, Nixon suffered a 7 percent decline in approval with the majority now disapproving of his handling of the war. By 1971, 61 percent of the public described the entanglement of U.S. troops in Vietnam as a mistake.

The response to Gerald Ford's decision in the Mayaguez incident and Jimmy Carter's handling of the takeover of the U.S. embassy in Teheran and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 followed the pattern of first overwhelming and later waning support for foreign military action. Ronald Reagan's reaction to the October 1983 bombing of the U.S. embassy, which resulted in the death of 241 U.S. citizens, is perhaps one model of how the government might override and benefit from the transient nature of public support for armed conflict. Three days after the bombing and before the public reaction could be recorded, Reagan announced the invasion of Grenada. The victory occurred swiftly and without significant domestic hardship. Conflict analysis could be propagandized to favor the government in its management of international affairs during this period. Reagan's approval rating for the period was a resounding 59 percent. And last, the approval rating of George Bush's order to invade Panama in 1989 reached 80 percent and influenced the increase in the approval rating for his overall Central American policy (66 percent). However, by 1990, the rising cost of the war and problems occurring in the trial against Manuel Noriega returned his Central American approval ratings back to 42 percent.

Three days after Iraq invaded Kuwait, the majority of U.S. public opinion expressed limited support for U.S. actions conveying opposition to the invasion.<sup>4</sup> Under specific conditions—if U.S. citizens became hostages of Iraq, for example, or if Iraq invaded Saudi Arabia—those individuals polled said they would advise direct military intervention. The majority of those polled also called for economic sanctions against Iraq and if a gasoline shortage

were to result from Iraq's actions, they would recommend a military response. The fact that two-thirds of the public viewed the war as inevitable suggests that, regardless of the conditions, the public was preparing itself for direct military involvement.

When the answers are disaggregated by race, a specific racial division of opinion appears to have existed from the very beginning of the conflict between Iraq and Kuwait. When asked if they favored (f) or opposed (o) direct U.S. military involvement against Iraq, the percentage of answers supplied by whites (f:23; o:69) and blacks (f:23; o:70) were similar as of August 4. When asked if Iraq invaded Saudi Arabia as well as Kuwait, slight differences slowly emerged in the answers of whites (f:61; o:25) and blacks (f:57; o:27). An even more detailed set of questions revealed a decided racial difference of opinion (see Table 1). First, African-American response to the administration's policies did not follow the overall national pattern of staggering, clear-cut support. Second, when compared to whites, blacks were far more reticent to sanction any form of U.S. aggressive response.

In short, while Americans as a whole continued to approve of some form of action, more than any other racial group, African Americans recorded disfavor with U.S. military policy during the early stages of war.

By November 1990, the difference in public opinion between the races expanded significantly. Nationally, 65 percent of the citizenry supported the initial announcement of troops being deployed to the Gulf as a means of blocking an anticipated Iraqi assault against Saudi Arabia.<sup>5</sup> Yet, only 47 percent approved of sending another round of troops, which was upwards of 150,000 (see Table 3). Two questions measuring reaction to troop build-up and the use of war as the primary tool for conflict resolution confirmed that the vast majority of blacks polled—at least 70 percent—very strongly opposed U.S. military decisions strengthening the likelihood of direct, retaliatory action against Iraq. One month later, an ambivalent national public had evolved with approval for initial U.S. troop assembling but no consensus on the next steps.<sup>6</sup> For 45 percent of the public, the issues arising from roughly 120 days in the Gulf did

**Table 1: Possible U.S. Responses to Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait**

Question: Would you favor or oppose the following actions the U.S. has taken or could take? (answer in %)

	Freeze Kuwaiti Assets			Ban Iraqi Imports			U.S. Navy to Gulf		
	Favor	Oppose	No Op.	Favor	Oppose	No Op.	Favor	Oppose	No Op.
National	80	10	10	72	17	11	68	22	10
Race									
White	83	9	8	74	16	10	71	20	9
Black	67	17	16	55	25	20	45	39	16
Other	68	21	11	63	24	13	62	27	11
	Bomb Military Targets			Send U.S. ground troops			Allied Oil Boycott		
	Favor	Oppose	No Op.	Favor	Oppose	No Op.	Favor	Oppose	No Op.
National	31	57	12	32	56	12	76	13	11
Race									
White	33	55	12	32	56	12	79	11	10
Black	27	63	10	28	61	11	59	23	18
Other	25	71	4	47	44	9	70	17	13

Source: *The Gallup Poll Monthly*, August 1990, 4-5. Note: "No Op" = no opinion.

Following earlier response patterns, after Bush deployed troops and equipment on August 8, both whites and blacks registered a higher approval rating of the government's handling of Gulf-related issues (see Table 2). However, blacks progressively revealed more doubt or displeasure with heightened U.S. military action than did the nation as a whole. While Bush's ratings points (approval, disapproval) improved among whites (29 percent, -5 percent) questioned from August 3-4 to August 9-12, black support for his handling of the crisis increased by only 21 points while dissatisfaction increased 7 points. Although African Americans' approval ratings never fell to the August 3-4 level, disapproval of his management of the crisis steadily rose.

not merit a U.S. declaration of war; they did for 47 percent. With the exception of blacks, there was an almost equal amount of ambiguity and very little consensus among the races. Of those polled, 49 percent of whites found that the situation was worth a war, while 42 did not; 45 percent of the races identified as "other" advocated war and 51 opposed it. For blacks, who showed the lowest support for war and the highest resistance to it, the percentages were 32 and 63, respectively. By early December, Saddam Hussein began to hint that he might authorize the release of foreign hostages, which he failed to do in the weeks to come. Partly in response to Hussein's behavior and to the media campaigns of the Bush administration, public opinion swung more in favor

of the decisions of the White House by mid-December. In keeping with what was by now an established, racially based opinion discontinuity, while the national average was 63 percent approving and 30 percent disapproving, black response was 34 and 59 percent, respectively.

An opinion poll conducted between December 6 and 9 clarified the basis of African-American disapproval with the course of action in the Gulf.<sup>7</sup> Of four possible actions for the nation, 69 percent of the African Americans asked sought a nonmilitary resolution to the Gulf crisis, 19

African-American institutions, the activities of black elected officials and national organizations reveal a degree of opposition to official U.S. policy in the Gulf crisis. In the case of congressional debates on the issue of U.S. involvement in the Gulf, prior to direct military intervention, critics effectively raised a number of issues against U.S. policy. Once the United States initiated the bombing of Iraq, however, many critics felt compelled to cease their vocal opposition. Surprisingly, to some observers, a decisive number of black congressional

**Table 2: Changes in Bush's Middle East Approval During August**

Question: Do you approve or disapprove of the way George Bush is handling this current situation in the Middle East involving Iraq and Kuwait?

	August 3-4			August 9-12			August 16-19			August 23-26		
	A	D	NO	A	D	NO	A	D	NO	A	D	NO
National	52	16	32	80	12	8	79	14	7	76	17	7
Race												
White	53	15	32	82	10	8	82	12	6	78	14	8
Black	41	21	38	62	28	10	60	33	7	56	36	6
Other	49	23	28	77	17	6	66	28	6	70	23	7

Source: *The Gallup Poll Monthly*, August 1990, 22-23. Note: "A," "D," and "NO" are abbreviations for approval, disapproval and no opinion respectively.

percent favored withdrawal and 50 percent were for sanctions—only 28 percent wanted war. Whites were split (49 percent and 48 percent) between a nonmilitary reaction and war; 57 percent of other races favored peaceful means with only 39 percent ready to use force. Almost six weeks after this survey, the United States led a high-tech allied force against Iraq, televised internationally.

The results of these polls did not surprise too many African Americans. As several commentators in Washington, D.C., and Boston, Massachusetts, observed after the resolution of the immediate crisis in the Gulf, during the media blitz of the war, almost all that one could hear in black-owned establishments—barber shops, churches, restaurants, and cleaners—was criticism of the official policy in the Gulf and expressions of sorrow that lives on both sides would be lost. The vigorous debates waged in the historically black colleges—particularly those in the Clark Atlanta University Complex—and campus demonstrations were equally informative. The bluster and almost hysterical demand for military retribution against Iraq that characterized the media coverage of public opinion was simply not a consistently recognizable position in the black community. This is even more remarkable given that many African Americans realized their sons and daughters would comprise a sizeable contingent in the U.S. military in the Middle East and also might have clearly doubted the appropriateness of Iraq's invasion.

In addition to discussions in local neighborhoods and

members did not succumb to the notion, "when at war, loyalty to the flag." The oppositional consistency of African-American representatives in the Congress and the waning of their colleagues' critical attacks against the policy is instructive. Although the majority of blacks in Congress are active in the Democratic party and loyal to the party line, many of them participated in antiwar rallies. They became some of the most outspoken critics of U.S. policy, even after the House of Representatives (250 to 183) and the Senate (52 to 47) voted in favor of the White House policy.<sup>8</sup> Included among these outspoken members of Congress were Ron Dellums (California), John Lewis (Georgia), Charles Rangel (New York), John Conyers (Michigan), and Cardiss Collins (Illinois).

There were two major antiwar groups, the National Coalition to Stop U.S. Intervention in the Middle East and the National Campaign for Peace in the Middle East. The former refused to denounce the Iraqi invasion, opposed sanctions against Iraq, and included in its organizational membership the Palestine Solidarity Committee. It was led by Dick Gregory and former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark. The latter group, representing mainstream antiwar groups, denounced the invasion and supported the United Nations sanctions against Iraq. Of the two groups, black veterans committees formed to oppose the war, community development groups, and students orchestrating demonstrations on historically black college campuses were more prone to affiliate with the National Coalition. In addition, as the immensity of the bombings became increasingly evident, national black leaders,

including Joseph Lowery of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Ben Chavis met with the aim of demanding an immediate cease-fire and reevaluation of the agenda of the American-led forces. More than fifty leaders attended the last such meeting in New York, a few days before Iraq met the stipulations of the United Nations resolution on the removal of its military from Kuwait.

What about African-American opinion after Baghdad agreed to the terms outlined by George Bush and the United Nations and the return home of most of the U.S. troops? The approximate number of U.S. soldiers deployed in the Persian Gulf was at least 250,000 between August 1990 and July 1992. The death toll amounted to 268, of which 158 died in combat, and the number of wounded reached 458 men and women. Following the national public opinion pattern described previously, a war or any form of military conflict generating a low death toll in combat and implemented swiftly would garner widespread support. Yet, as the racial opinion dichotomy has evolved since the views of African Americans and other races have been taken into consideration, African Americans are far more suspicious of and less likely to fall in line with publicly stated U.S. foreign military policy. True to form, almost six weeks after the cease-fire declared on April 6, 1991, when asked if the war in the Persian Gulf was worth it, the national pattern and racial configuration remained constant (see Table 4).

Based on media coverage, it is easy to surmise that African Americans had little to say about the presence of the United States in the Persian Gulf. The exception would have

leaders and organizations, and the level of doubt voiced by blacks in their communities speak for themselves.

### Political Tolerance and Anti-imperialism as Factors Influencing African-American Response to the Gulf War

Unraveling the complexity of the relationship between African Americans and the military reveals that the objective of equal opportunity in the military and overall full citizenship between the 1700s and 1960 and disproportionate representation in the military from 1965 to 1992 do not fully define the parameters of African America's world view. Although not a part of an historical viewpoint that is emphasized today, it is clear that while some African Americans fought bravely as Buffalo Soldiers on behalf of the state, a smaller minority physically opposed the government by participating in wars, for example, on the side of the Indians during the Seminole Wars and Indian campaigns, and as militants during the Spanish-American War. Many more opposed U.S. participation in World War II and the Vietnam War. Questioning state propaganda, therefore, is not without historical basis. If there were no such basis for dissent and suspicion stemming from racial oppression, disproportionate representation in the military, and fear of appearing to be disloyal to the nation, African Americans might be compelled to be less independent in their analyses.

A brief review of public opinion associated with major military conflicts in the 1960s and 1970s emphasizes

strong, contemporary threads of critical thinking which in their appearance are decidedly anti-imperialist within the context of U.S. political culture. From 1960 to 1975, even as citizens labeled the U.S. involvement in Vietnam a blunder, they could neither pardon draft resisters nor approve of complete withdrawal. Racial breakdown demonstrates a specific pattern to this ambiguity, with blacks disassociated from positions suggesting strident levels of unwillingness to condemn government policy.

In the early 1970s, the majority of citizens believed it was a mistake for the nation to become involved in Vietnam with black opinion fluctuating between 58 and 71 percent and white opinion in the 50 to 59 percent range.<sup>9</sup> Admitting the mistake, however, did not necessarily mean that Americans were willing to condone draft evasion, with which they continued to find fault during the Vietnam War and even a year after the signing of the peace accord. In May 1970, Americans were asked to determine the penalty for draft evaders. At this time, the percentage of black casualties appeared to be abnormally high and blacks complained

**Table 3: Public Opinion Regarding Troop Buildup and Going to War**

Question: Do you approve or disapprove of the President's decision to send an additional 150,000 troops to the Middle East? (answers in %)

	Approve Buildup?			Initiate War?		
	Approve	Disapprove	No Op.	Favor	Oppose	No Op.
National	47	46	7	37	51	12
Race						
White	51	42	7	38	49	13
Black	20	78	2	24	70	.6
Other	40	54	6	36	58	6

Source: *The Gallup Poll Monthly*, November 1990, 16.

been the ever-present media interview of a person who directly or indirectly knew a black man or woman stationed in the Gulf. In the first four demonstrations in Boston, for example, African Americans comprised less than 15 percent of the marchers. In New Orleans, black participation in antiwar marches amounted to less than 20 percent. An examination of the racial composition of sit-ins and mass civil disobedience activities would reveal similar, if not lower, figures. In the final analysis, one might conclude that African America did not respond. Yet, the consistency of public opinion polls, the activities of African-American

that far too many of them were assigned to frontline combat. Yet, they were decidedly reluctant to advise the harshest possible punishment against draft resisters and were almost evenly divided on sending them to Vietnam in a noncombat capacity or applying no penalty at all. White public opinion, on the other hand, strongly advised some form of punishment with preference for noncombat duty in Vietnam.

Four years later, a majority of Americans opposed unconditional amnesty, although only 8 percent recommended imprisonment or fines. Both whites (63 percent) and blacks (72 percent) interpreted opposition to the draft as being based on moral objections, as opposed to a total rejection of the nation.<sup>10</sup> While 50 percent of blacks would have allowed draft resisters to return to the United States without punishment and 36 percent would not, the majority of whites (62 to 31 percent) favored some form of castigation upon return.

In terms of deploying either troops or arms and materials in military conflicts, Americans were more likely to agree to the latter but with opinion split on withdrawal.<sup>11</sup> The decision appears to have been based on concern for the lives of U.S. troops. A closer inspection reveals that blacks cautioned against deployment of troops in Cambodia and Laos and, in the case of Vietnam, supported withdrawal. African Americans consistently registered reluctance to send U.S. troops (76 percent) and equipment (55 percent) to Cambodia in 1970 with lukewarm support for the deployment of soldiers (13 percent) and arms (24 percent). While national and white opinions opposed increased troop involvement (59 percent), they favored supplying arms and materials to Cambodia (55 percent to 33 percent, respectively).

By March 1971, Americans viewed the invasion of Laos as a measure destined to extend the Vietnam War and therefore did not support Nixon's plan to place barricades along the Ho Chi Minh Trail as a way of shoring up South Vietnam. While the national consensus to return troops by the end of 1971 was a resoundingly clear 71 percent with 21 percent opposed, black support for withdrawal reached 81 percent with 12 percent against.<sup>12</sup>

More than twenty years after the Vietnam War, blacks and whites still disagree on significant issues, although the gap is closing with both holding on to the view that the United States erred in its decision to enter the war in Vietnam and questioning the long-term, positive consequences of the war. In terms of opinions on war and deterrence, neither whites nor blacks have arrived at internal consensus over the use of war as a way of resolving conflict. The wider implications of these differences in opinion shown in Table 5 is that in the future, when compared to whites, blacks will most probably not easily and immediately accept the government's Communist scare argument as an explanation for involving the U.S. military in foreign wars. If military involvement does occur, blacks are more likely than whites to continue to support early withdrawal.

Explanations of opinion all too frequently and easily

assert that political partisanship is the overarching explanatory variable, which conveniently allows very comfortable labeling of responses on the basis of "hawks" and "doves," liberals and conservatives. Indeed, in the 1960s and in 1992, this was assuredly the case. Today it is fashionable to say that demands for concentrating on domestic rather than foreign affairs are indicative of a "return" to isolationism. Certainly, the vast majority of Americans demand that the government attend to domestic affairs. After all, few would argue against the assertion that long-term, failed state policies are the foundation of the nation's immediate crises. Those African Americans who consistently supported U.S. involvement in the Gulf most definitely realized that protecting the nation's vital interest at a cost of well over \$2 million exacerbated already tight budgetary

**Table 4: Persian Gulf: Was It Worth It?**

Question: All in all, was the current situation in the Mideast worth going to war over, or not.  
(answer in %)

	Yes	No	No opinion
National	72	23	5
Race			
White	74	21	5
Black	46	48	6
Other	68	26	6

Source: *The Gallup Poll Monthly*, June 1991, 50.

constraints. They were undoubtedly cognizant of the innumerable problems faced by their own communities and the failure of the government to address them adequately. For that reason, the vast majority of African Americans are urgently seeking some form of redress.

African Americans are not simply a sizeable percentage of citizens clamoring for resolution of socioeconomic problems because of being "especially hard hit by the recessionary times."<sup>13</sup> Were redress of domestic socioeconomic problems the only pressing concerns of African Americans, 64 percent of them would not have veered from the thrust of so-called isolationism today. That 64 percent comprises the dominant force for ending anti-imperialist, military excursions abroad and is acting within the tradition of political dissent challenging the prevailing national ideological view. Unlike others, whatever false consciousness regarding national loyalty this group possesses, in times of war and peace, it does not allow itself to be barred from questioning the rationale behind military policy abroad and interjecting warnings against injudicious action.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>*The Gallup Poll Monthly*, August 1990, 27. Herein referred to as *Gallup*.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, December 1990, 9.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, August 1990, 28.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, August 1990, 6.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, November 1990, 13.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, December 1990, 16.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, December 1990, 17.

<sup>8</sup>*Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, 1990, 750.

<sup>9</sup>*Gallup*, May 1970, 3; July 1970, 4; March 1971, 12.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, May 1974, 21–24.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, June 1970, 5–7.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, March 1971, 11.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, January 1992, 12.

### Table 5: Mistakes in Vietnam

Questions: Looking back, do you think the U.S. made a mistake sending troops to fight in Vietnam? Some people say that the U.S. should have cut its losses by accepting a negotiated withdrawal from Vietnam much earlier. Others say the U.S. should have made an even greater military effort to try to win a victory there. Which comes closest to your view? (%)

	Mistake To Be There			Best Course of Action		
	Yes	No	No Op.	Earlier Withdrawal	Greater Military	No Opinion
National	74	22	4	56	38	6
Race						
White	73	22	5	55	39	6
Black	76	23	1	63	33	4
Other	78	19	3	55	42	3

Source: *The Gallup Poll Monthly*, May 1990, 16.

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