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Americans want this war -- or so they tell pollsters

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Michael Gartner

Well, here we go to war. It's what the president wants. It's what Congress wants. And it's what the people want. So say the polls.

 Last month, just after Secretary of State Colin Powell ([news - web sites](#)) addressed the United Nations ([news - web sites](#)), six different polls sponsored by U.S. media organizations said a large majority of American people favored taking military action against Saddam Hussein ([news - web sites](#)). And polls don't lie. But what were the questions?

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* CBS and *The New York Times* asked: "Do you approve or disapprove of the United States taking military action against Iraq ([news - web sites](#)) to try to remove Saddam Hussein from power?" Seventy percent of respondents approved.

* ABC and *The Washington Post* asked: "Would you favor or oppose having U.S. forces take military action against Iraq to force Saddam Hussein from power?" Sixty-six percent favored.

* CNN and USA TODAY asked: "Would you favor or oppose invading Iraq with U.S. ground troops in an attempt to remove Saddam Hussein from power?" Sixty-three percent favored.

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But what would the answers be if the questions were different?

Polls by their very nature are abstract. They are carefully designed not to influence opinion. That way results can be compared and measured over time.

But the abstract nature of polls means that they don't always give people a more concrete view of the horrors of war. Here's a poll someone should take:

* "In the six-week Gulf War ([news - web sites](#)), it has been estimated by the Defense Intelligence Agency that more than 100,000 Iraqis died from direct and indirect military action. Would you favor or oppose war in Iraq if you knew that another 100,000 Iraqis would die?"

* "In the Vietnam War, 47,000 U.S. troops died in battle. In Korea, 34,000 American troops were killed. In the Gulf War, 148 American troops died. Would you favor or oppose war in Iraq if you knew that 47,000 American troops would die? If 34,000 would die? If 148 would die?"

* "Would you favor or oppose having U.S. forces take action against Iraq to force Saddam Hussein from power if you knew that 100 young men and women from your town would lose their lives in the attempt?"

* "Would you favor or oppose invading Iraq with U.S. ground troops if you knew that a young man or woman from your block would lose his or her life in the attempt? A young relative of yours? Your son or daughter?"

What do you suppose those poll numbers would be?

Polls can make real events seem abstract or hypothetical. But the civilians who will die in Iraq are real people. The American soldiers who will die in Iraq are real people. The young men and women who will die -- like the 124,917 U.S. war dead interred at the 24 permanent American burial grounds on foreign soil, like the more than 200,000 military heroes buried at Arlington National Cemetery -- are someone's townsfolk, someone's neighbors, someone's sons and daughters.

Ponder those figures. Look at your family.

Do you really mean what you're telling the pollsters?

Michael Gartner has been editor of newspapers large and small and president of NBC News. In 1997, he won the Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing.

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