

War, Death, and Cognitive Dissonance: A Case Study for Social Psychology

by

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Many Ohioans Stand Behind Bush But Some Losing Patience after Heavy Losses

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By Joe Smydo, *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* (with Cindi Lash and David Templeton)

DELAWARE, Ohio -- With U.S. flags flying from businesses, yellow ribbons wrapped around utility poles and "I love my country" scrawled on the side of a downtown building, this city about 20 miles north of Columbus is prepared to press on with the war in Iraq despite a number of casualties that hit home last week.

John Vass, commander of Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 3297, said he encounters few war critics among his peers.

"We got a few come in here, but they don't whisper too loudly against President Bush and his war policy because most of us are behind him solidly," said Vass, a career Navy man who participated in the 1962 missile crisis blockade of Cuba and later served in Vietnam.

Working at a downtown frame shop a few miles and a political universe away from the VFW, Linda Shearer's eyes filled with tears as she accused Bush of leading the American people into war with false claims about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and ties to al-Qaida. But Shearer stopped short of calling for an immediate troop withdrawal, saying she didn't know a good way out of the "mess."

The hotly contested state of Ohio went for Bush last year, its 20 electoral votes a key part of his re-election victory over U.S. Sen. John F. Kerry of Massachusetts. But with the battleground state taking major hits on the battlefield -- it lost 20 Marines last week alone, including Sgt. Justin Hoffman, whose father, Robert, lives in Delaware -- some observers sense a growing unease among Ohioans.

People aren't demanding the United States cut and run, but they're growing tired of Bush's "happy talk" and want to hear a plan for completing the war and withdrawing, Sean Kay, chairman of the international studies department at Ohio Wesleyan University in Delaware, said. "It is not working anymore just to say, hold the course," said Kay, a former adviser to the Joint Chiefs of Staff....

John Mueller, professor of political science at Ohio State University, said he has noted a steady erosion of support for the war in Ohio and other parts of the country. He said there's a partisan divide: Republicans remain supportive, while the loss of faith among Democrats is acute. "It's almost hit bottom," he said. "It's incredibly low...."

"I think the most important thing we can do is honor them by continuing our course and making sure we are successful in freeing the people of Iraq," said state Sen. David Goodman, a Republican from Columbus.

Goodman's district includes the headquarters of Lima Company, a Marine unit that's lost 23 members since deployment in March. That's more deaths than any other unit in the Marine Reserve, Capt. Chris Logan, a spokesman for the Marines, said last week....

After learning his son, Justin, was one of 14 Marines killed Wednesday by a roadside bomb in the western Iraqi town of Haditha, Robert Hoffman was quoted in newspapers and heard on radio saying the loss shouldn't weaken the nation's resolve to finish the war.

"Make no mistake: These people aren't insurgents and rebels," Hoffman said of those who killed his son. "They're nothing but thugs and terrorists.... You have to go after them."

[VFW commander] Vass said Hoffman's words were inspiring. If the United States pulled out now, he said, "you'd just laugh at the ones who died." To be sure, Vass doesn't want the community to waffle as it sends another group of soldiers to Iraq.

Vass' post and other veterans groups were to host a picnic yesterday for the 175th Quartermaster Company, an Army reserve unit from Delaware scheduled for deployment this fall. A dinner and military ball also were to be held last night at Ohio Wesleyan.

[Linda] Shearer, who opposed the war from the beginning and has a sign in her store window advocating peace, now wrestles with whether the nation should go forward or backward. Because the nation has started the war, she said, perhaps it should go all the way and annihilate the opposition. "Make them a grease spot," she said

Questions

1. What combination of attitudes and/or behaviors are in potential conflict among these residents of Ohio?
2. What predictions would cognitive dissonance theory make for resolving tensions/conflicts around:
 - a. the residents' attitudes toward President Bush, arguably the largest proponent of the war?
 - b. the residents' attitudes toward the war in Iraq?
 - c. the residents' attitudes toward withdrawing troops from Iraq?
3. What strategies did these residents use to cope with their dissonance? Given the evidence related to coping in the article, which predictions from Question 2 are supported?
4. Are there any alternative explanations for the evidence presented in this article?

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