

“Lies, Damn Lies, and Democracy”

(With Apologies to M. Twain and B. Disraeli)

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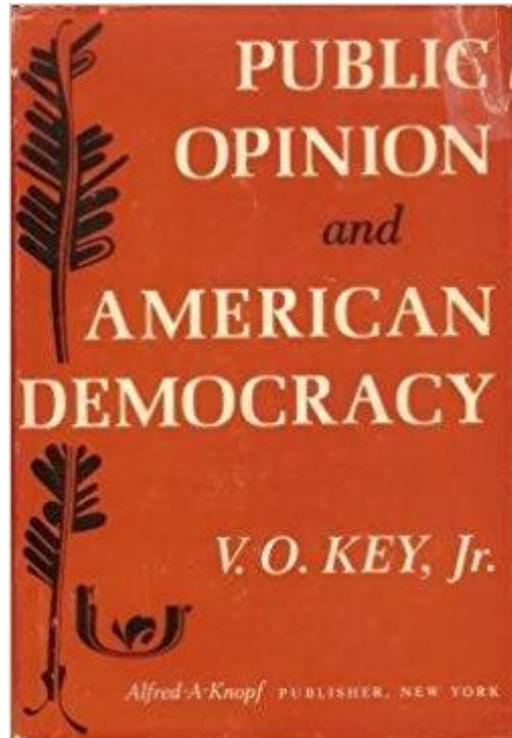
Abstract: The above title is not meant to imply that “democracy” is worse than “lies” and “damn lies” but rather refers to the threat that these types of lies pose for democracy. Specifically, covert manipulation and deception by political leaders have occurred throughout U.S. history, particularly in national security and foreign policymaking. Only recently have we seen the blatant public lying by leaders which poses a visible threat to democracy. This paper reviews the manipulation, deception, and now overt lies that have occurred in modern American politics. Addressing both empirical and normative concerns, it emphasizes that misperceptions of facts and lying threaten “*democratic competence*” at the level of the mass public and political leadership. This has occurred due to political polarization but it would exist, though at a lower decibel level, even if Donald Trump were not president. The “folk theory” (Achen and Bartels, 2016) is undermined in the greatest way by this. But the possibility of manipulation and deception has been an ever present and a greater threat to American democracy when outright lying is less directly visible. To what extent has this threat increased too? Are existing countervailing forces -- especially elite competition and institutions, including the press --- sufficient to combat this threat, as they arguably have been in the past, as had been suggested by the works of Page and Shapiro and Zaller (albeit twenty-five years ago, in 1992)?

The Importance of Truthful Information for Democracy

- This paper's title is not meant to imply that "democracy" is worse than "lies: and "damn lies" but rather raises the question of the threat that these two general types of lies pose for democracy.
- From a "Democratic/Populist" Perspective: These lies are a threat to the quality of public opinion ("rational public" arguments), which depends on truthful (based on the best available) information from leaders conveyed through the press/media. (The "democratic competence" of public opinion.)
- From an "Elitist" Perspective (e.g., Lippman): These lies negate the "democratic competence" of leaders who create them or of leaders who depend on such information from other leaders. (The "democratic competence" of elites.)
- How to combat these lies? The importance of **competing elite voices (with access to the same information—symmetric information), freedom of speech, and a free press**. But "damn lies" are more difficult (due to the asymmetric information on one elite side).

Present-day Overt Lies by Partisan Elites as a Challenge to “Democratic Competence”: “Those political *leaders* who shirk the task of popular education are misfits who do not understand the responsibilities of their jobs. And those *leaders* who act as if they thought the *people* to be fools responsive only to the meanest appeals deserve only *scorn*.”

—V. O. Key Jr., *Public Opinion and American Democracy*



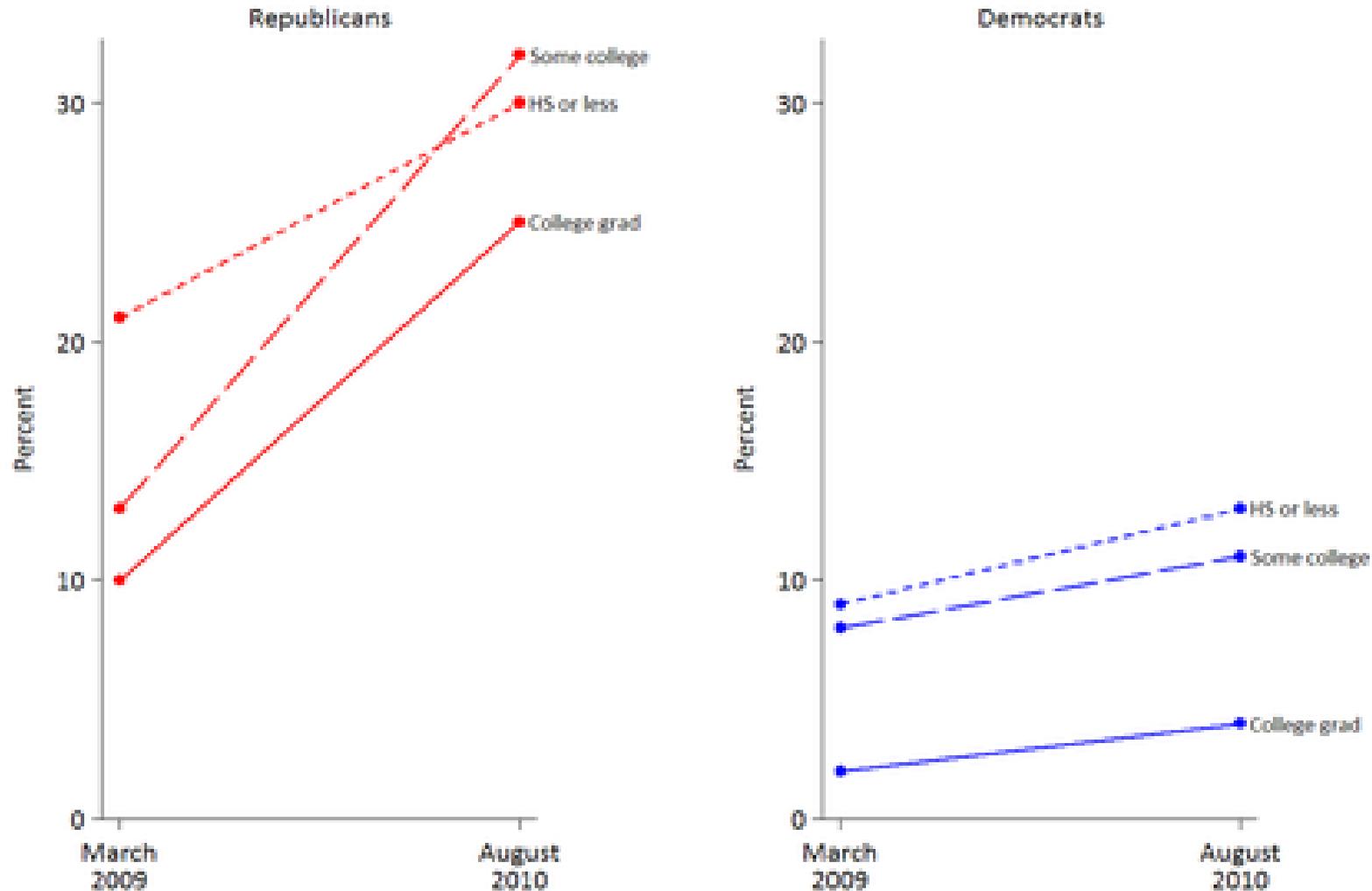
Overt Lies: "He doesn't have a birth certificate. He may have one, but there's something on that, maybe religion, maybe it says he is a Muslim," Trump told Fox News in 2011. "I don't know. Maybe he doesn't want that."



And Public's Belief that Obama is a Muslim, by Partisanship and Education

(Source: John Sides, Pew Research Center data, "Why do more people think Obama is a Muslim," http://voices.washingtonpost.com/ezra-klein/2010/08/why_do_more_people_think_obama.html)

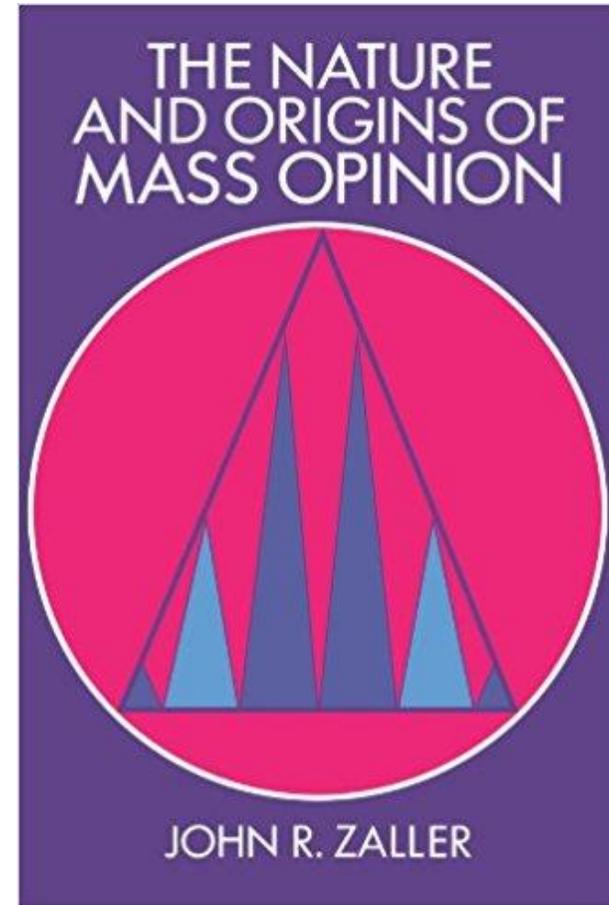
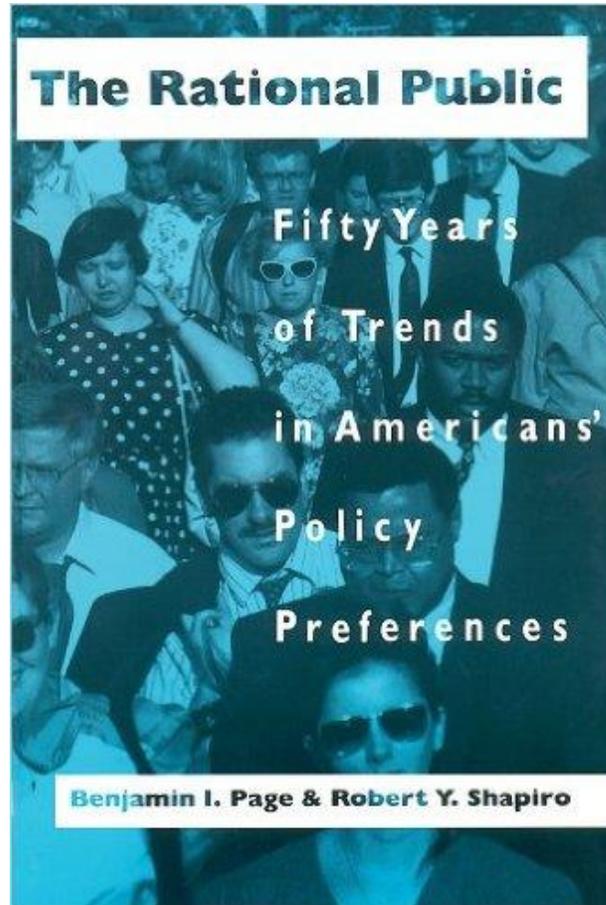
Belief that Obama Is a Muslim



Such Lies are openly debated by competing partisans and other elites. These debates are covered by the press/media. All sides have available the same information (symmetric information).

We see this today in the enormous list of President Trump's lies that can be cited and in his opponents and the press calling him out on them (with fact checking). Competing elite voices and a free press are at work, as emphasized, for example, by both Page and Shapiro (1992) and Zaller (1992) in their concluding chapters, though they did not foresee such large-scale blatant lying.

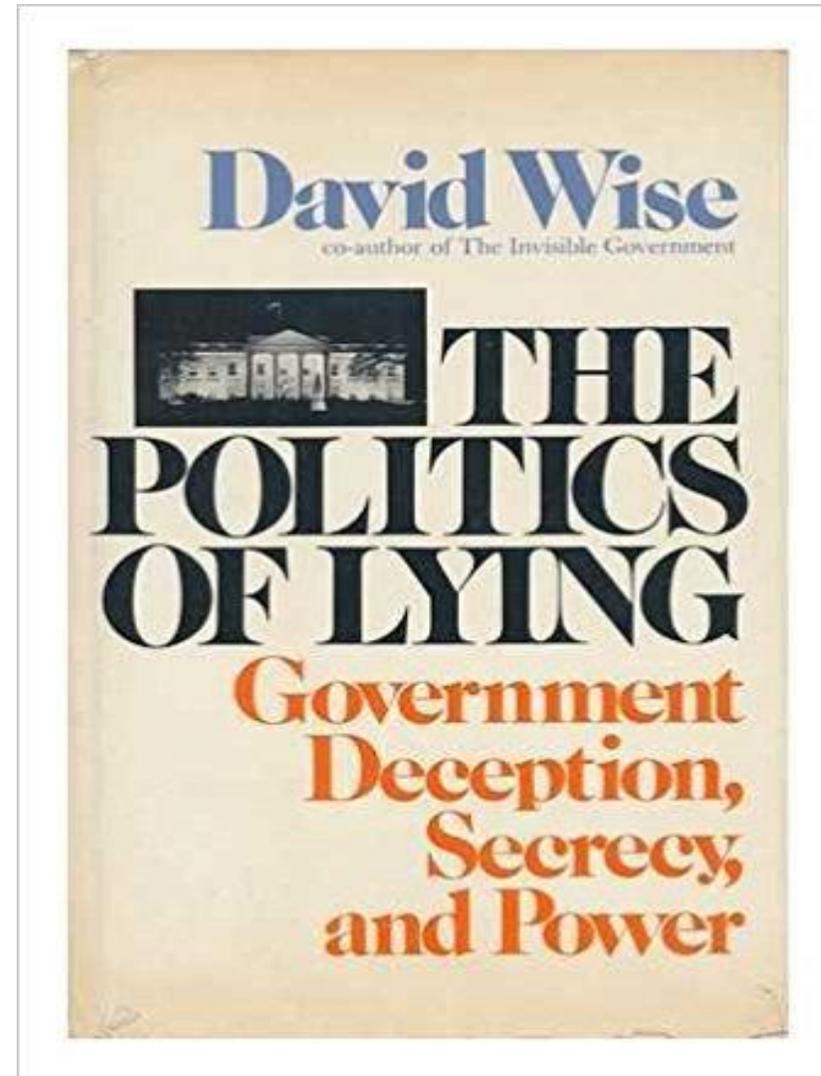
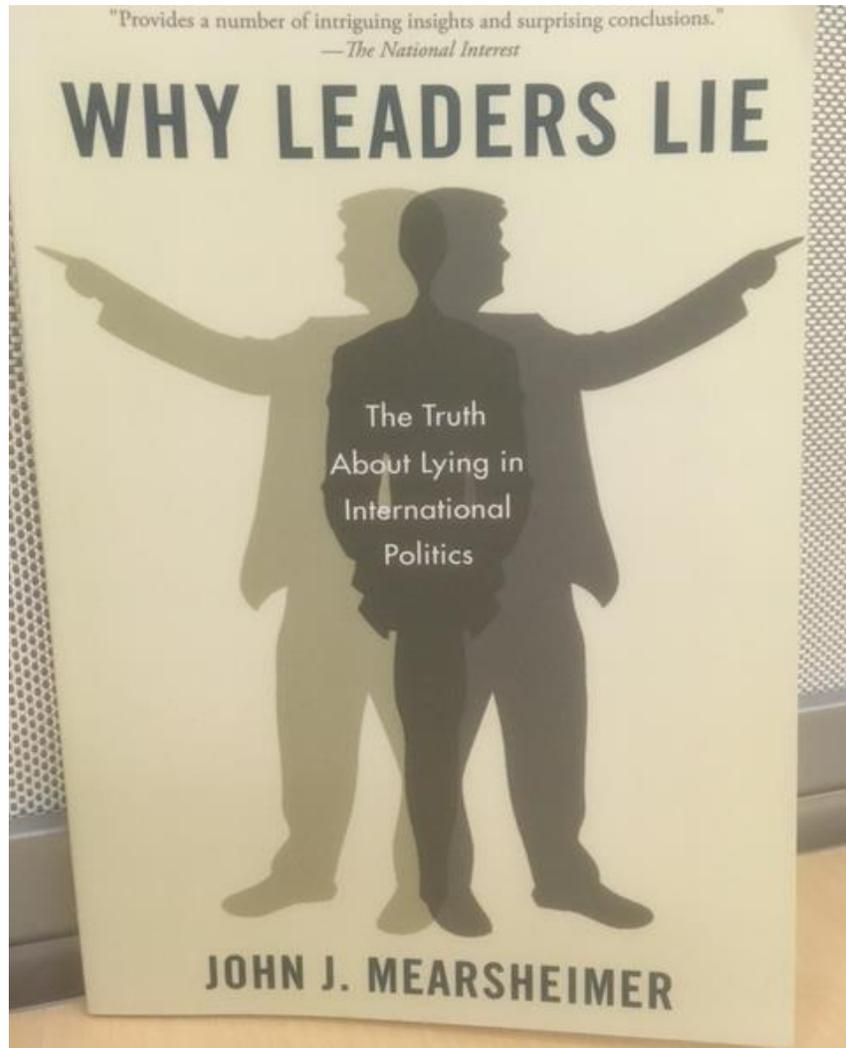
Forgive this 25th Anniversary Amazon Pitch



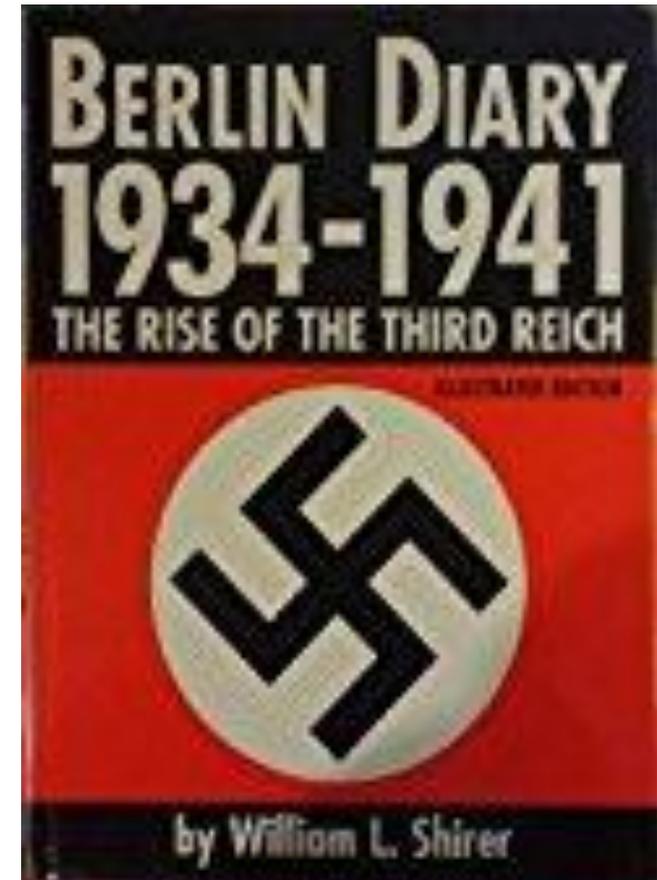
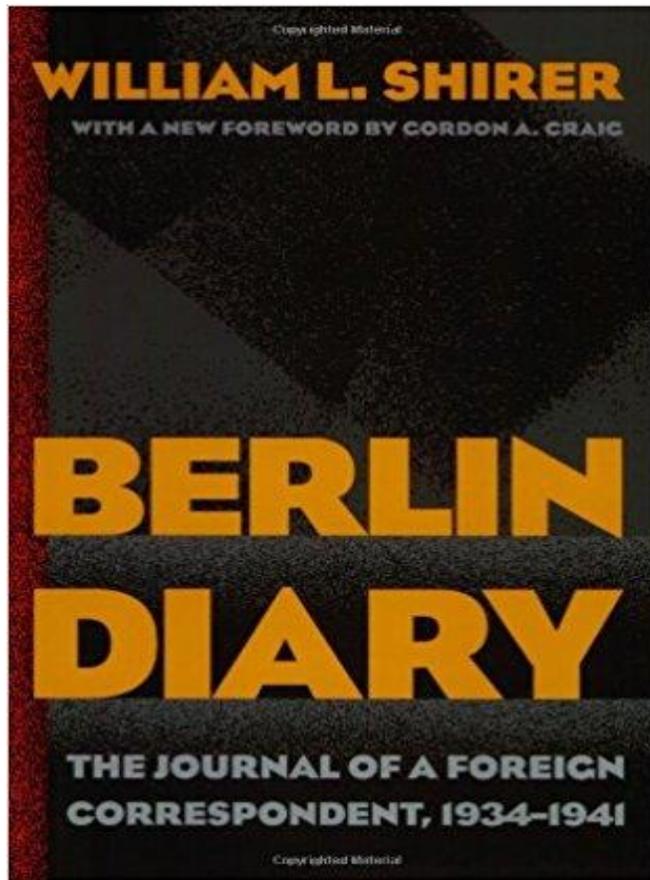
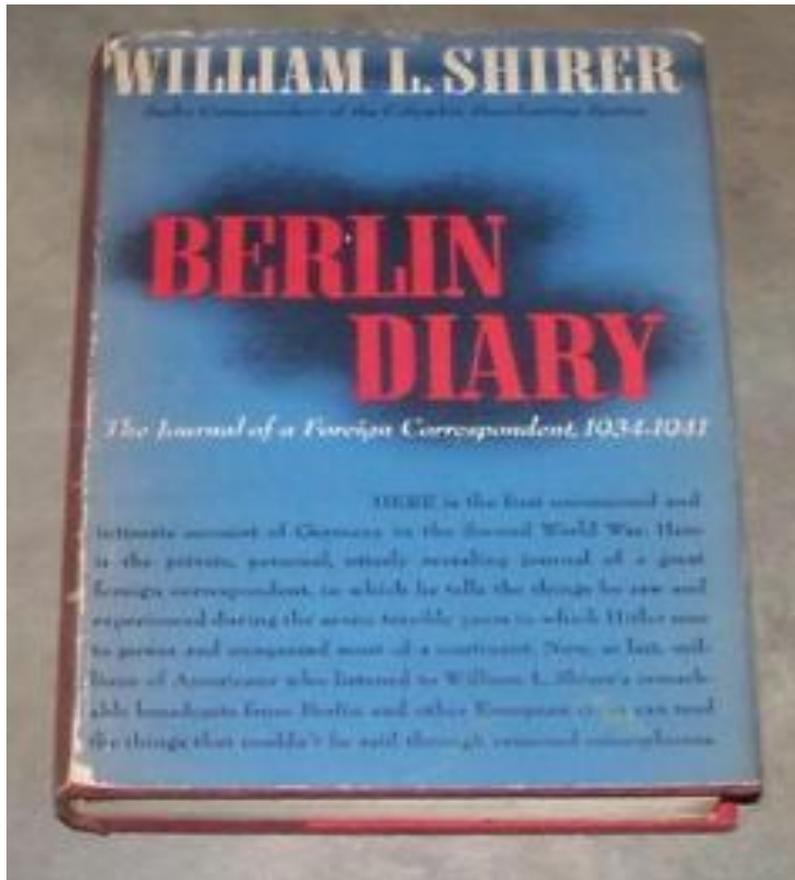
The Result

- This lying in the context of (and caused by) highly emotional partisan conflict and polarization has had negative consequence on politics and public discourse, and overall civility.
- But there is no domination by lying elites because of the competing voices that have challenged the lies. Net result: stalemate. Which is good and bad news (others may disagree with this conclusion).
- This threat from lying remains and negating it depends on competing elites, free speech, and a free press.
- **“Damn Lies” are the bigger threat.**

Damn Lies. Asymmetric Information. With Lack of Freedom of Speech and the Press, but also with these Freedoms in Place in a Democracy. Are Cases of One-Sided Elite Dominance of Information



Damn Lies. But also with Symmetric Information but Freedom of the Press Suppressed; E.g., Nazi Germany. But more concern here, cases of...



...Asymmetric Information. Freedom of the Press



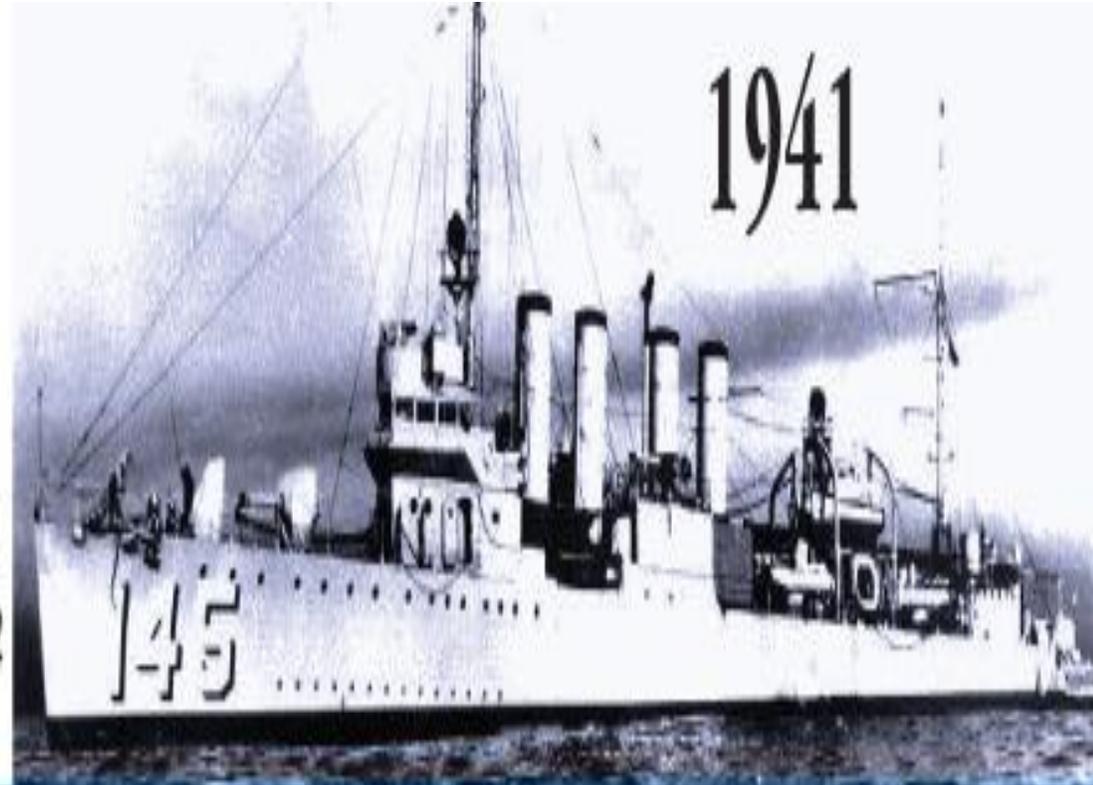
The Greer Incident

USS Greer (DD145)

- Wickes class destroyer
- Incident started at 0840 off Iceland
- 19 depth charges dropped on U-652

Day in History

4 September



Greer had held U-652 in sound contact for 3 hours and 28 minutes; evaded 2 torpedoes; & become the first American ship in WW II to attack the Kriegsmarine.

The Case of the Missile Gap

(President Kennedy Views Some Missiles)



Gulf of Tonkin. Asymmetric Information.



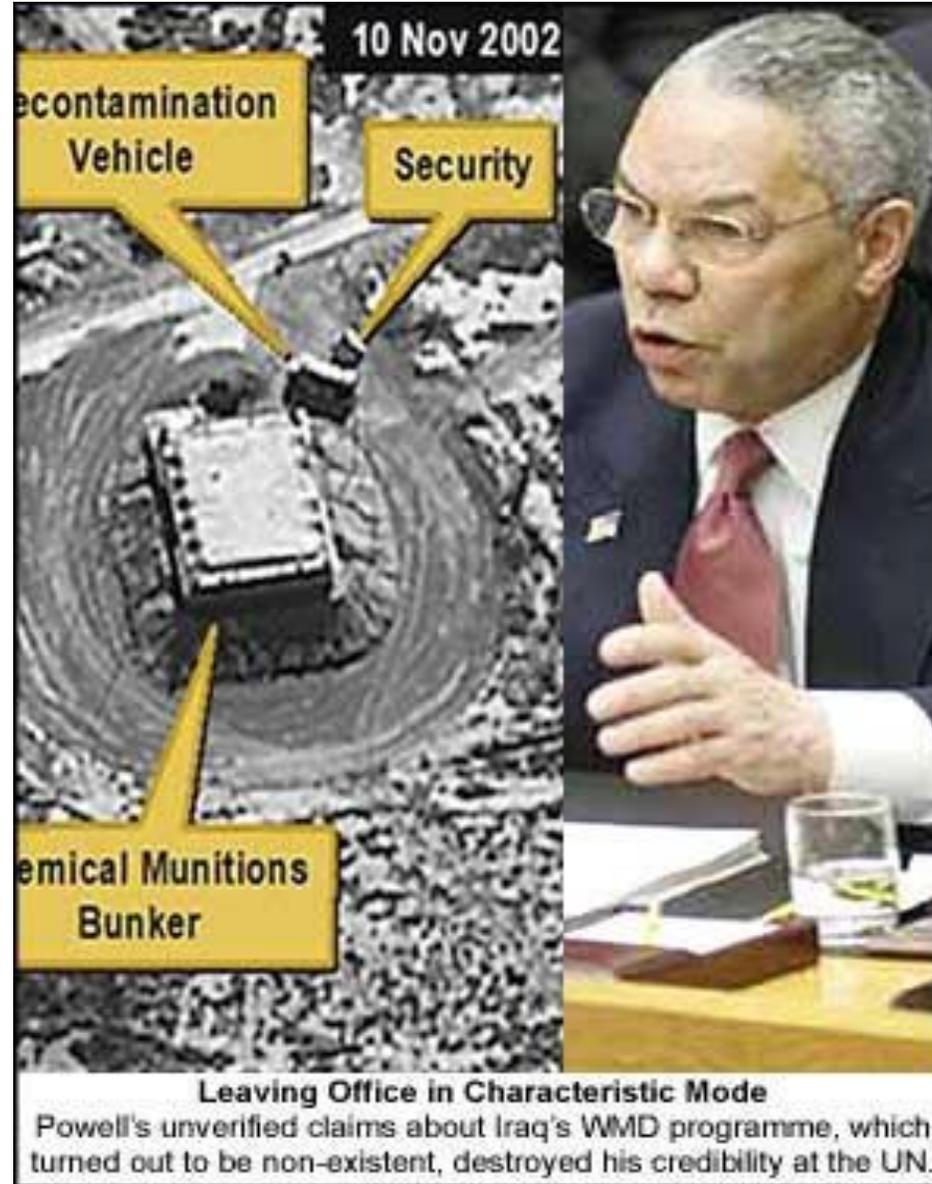
USS Maddox DD 731



USS Turner Joy DD 951



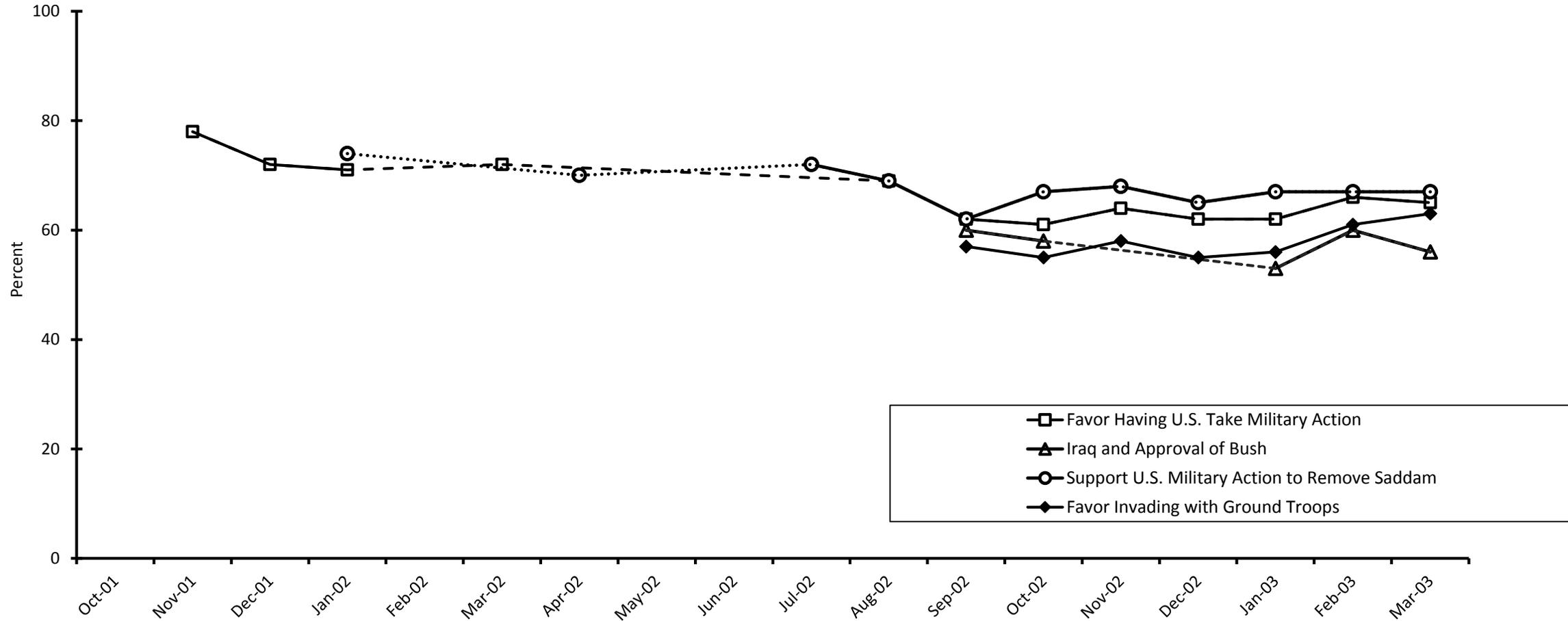
Iraq's WMDs and the Al Qaeda Connection: Asymmetric Information...



Public Support for Military Action Against Iraq, 2001-2004

(Source: Nacos, Shapiro, and Block-Elkon, *Selling Fear*, 2011, see below)

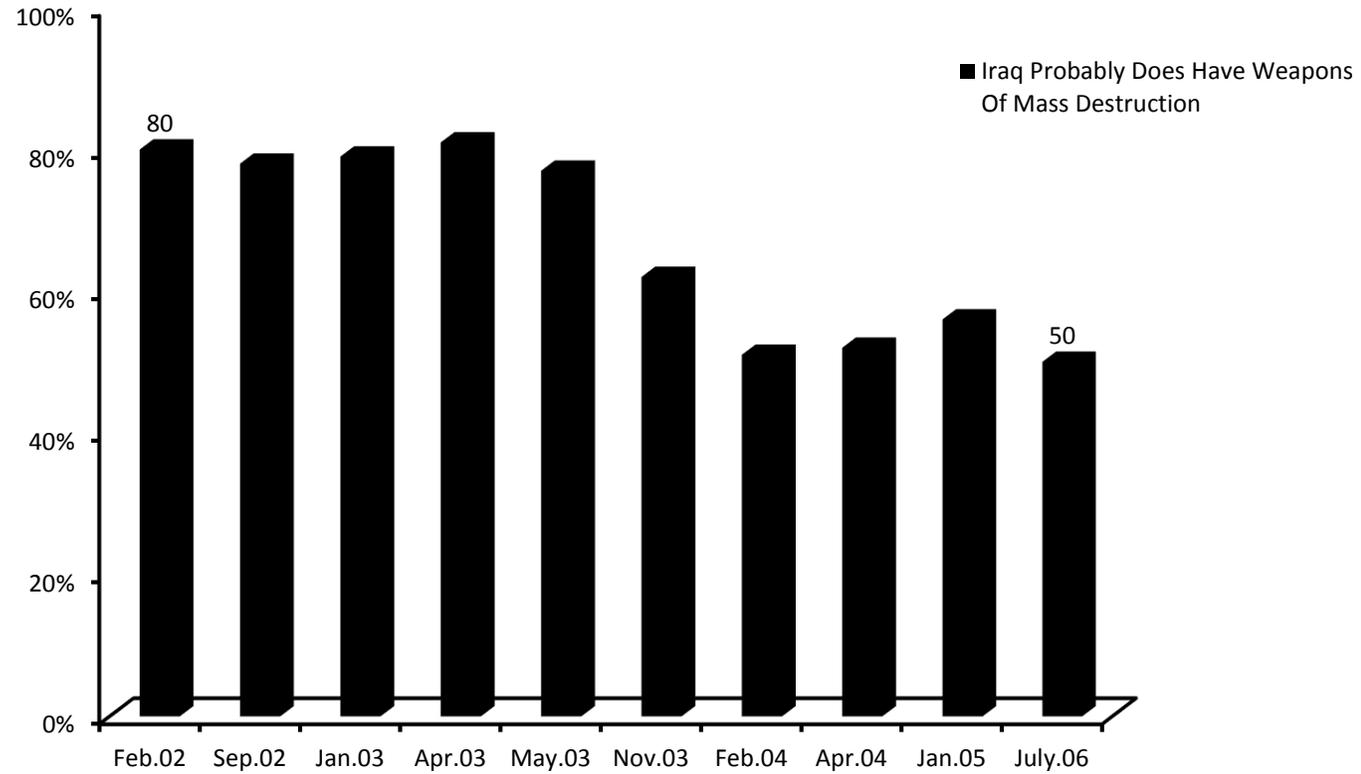
Fig. 4.6 Iraq and Saddam Hussein's Threat
October 2001-December 2004



Public Belief that Iraq Had WMDs, 2002-2006

(Source: Nacos, Shapiro, and Block-Elkon, *Selling Fear*, 2011 see below)

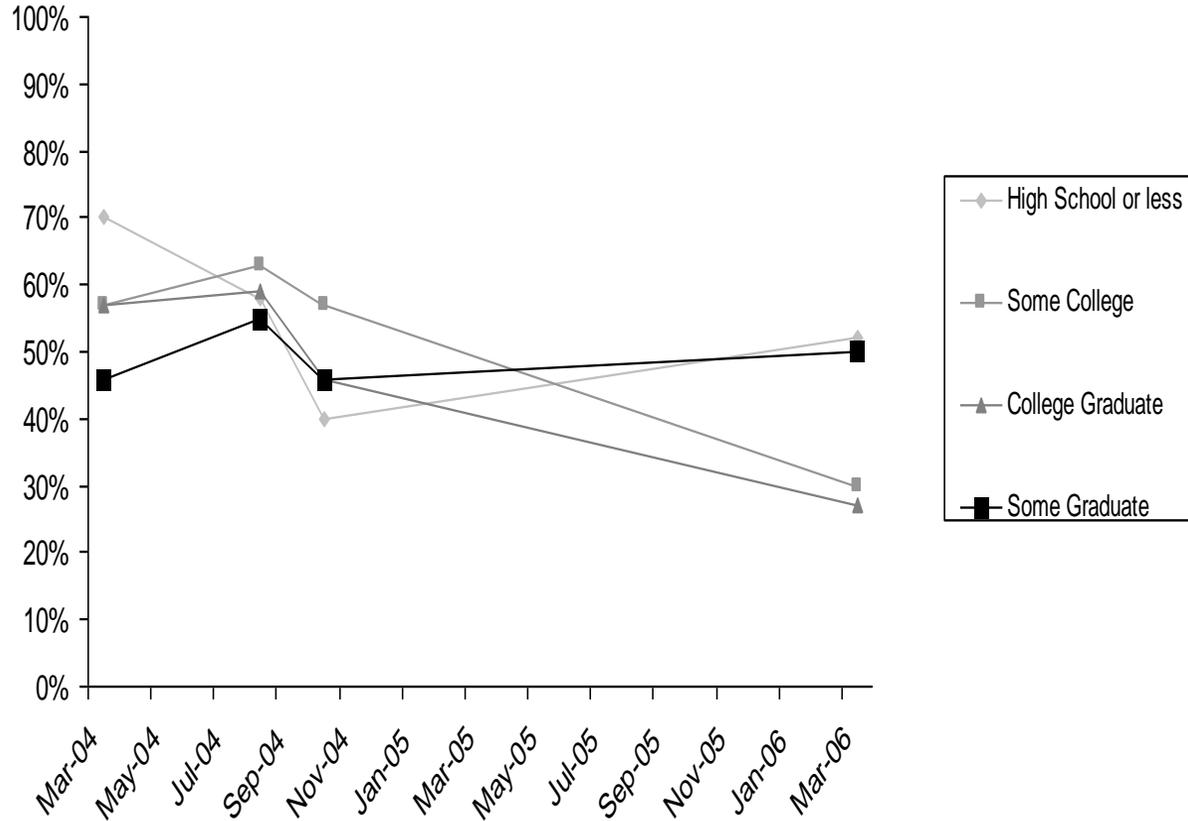
Fig. 4.5 Iraq and Weapons Of Mass Destruction



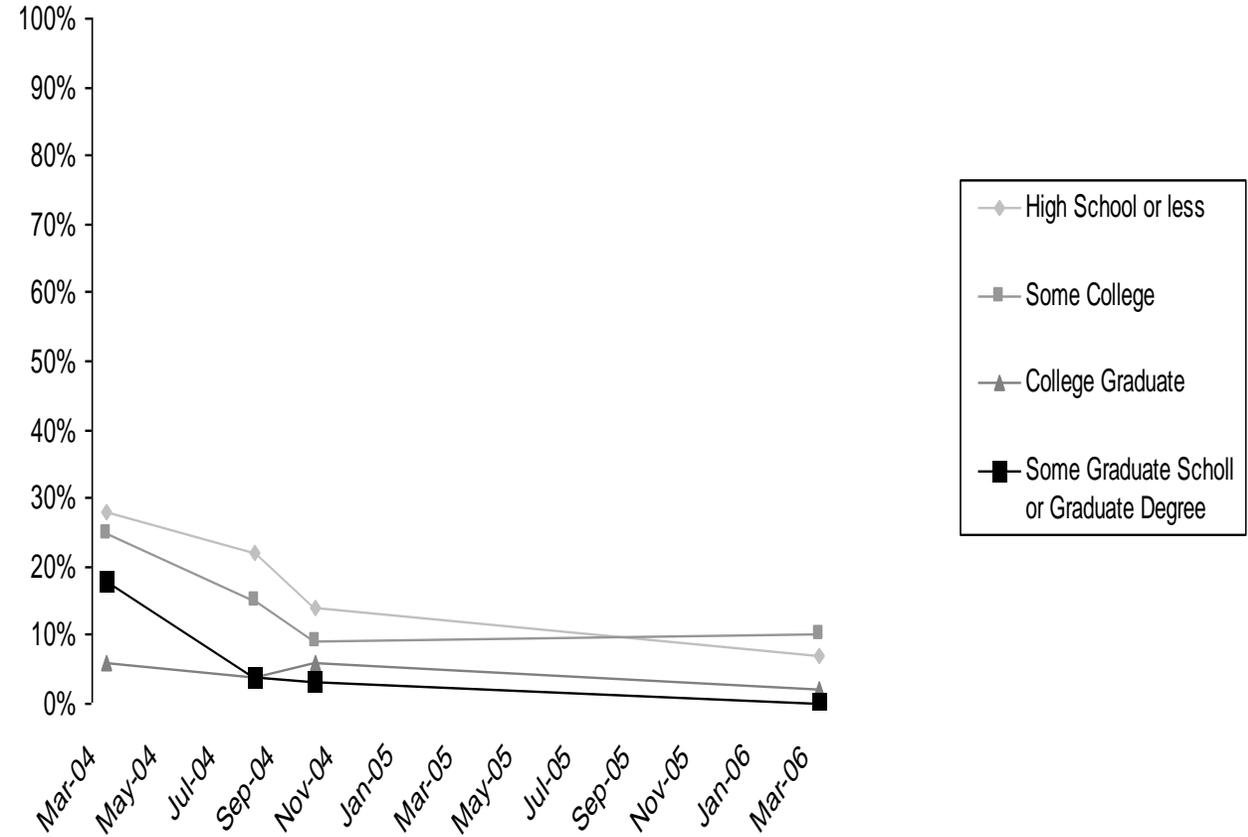
Public's Belief about Iraq's WMDs, by Partisanship and Education

(Source: Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon (2006) <http://themonkeycage.org/Shapiro%2520and%2520Bloch.pdf>)

Iraq had WMD: Perceptions of Republicans by education (source: PIPA surveys)



Iraq had WMD: Perceptions of Democrats by education (source: PIPA surveys)

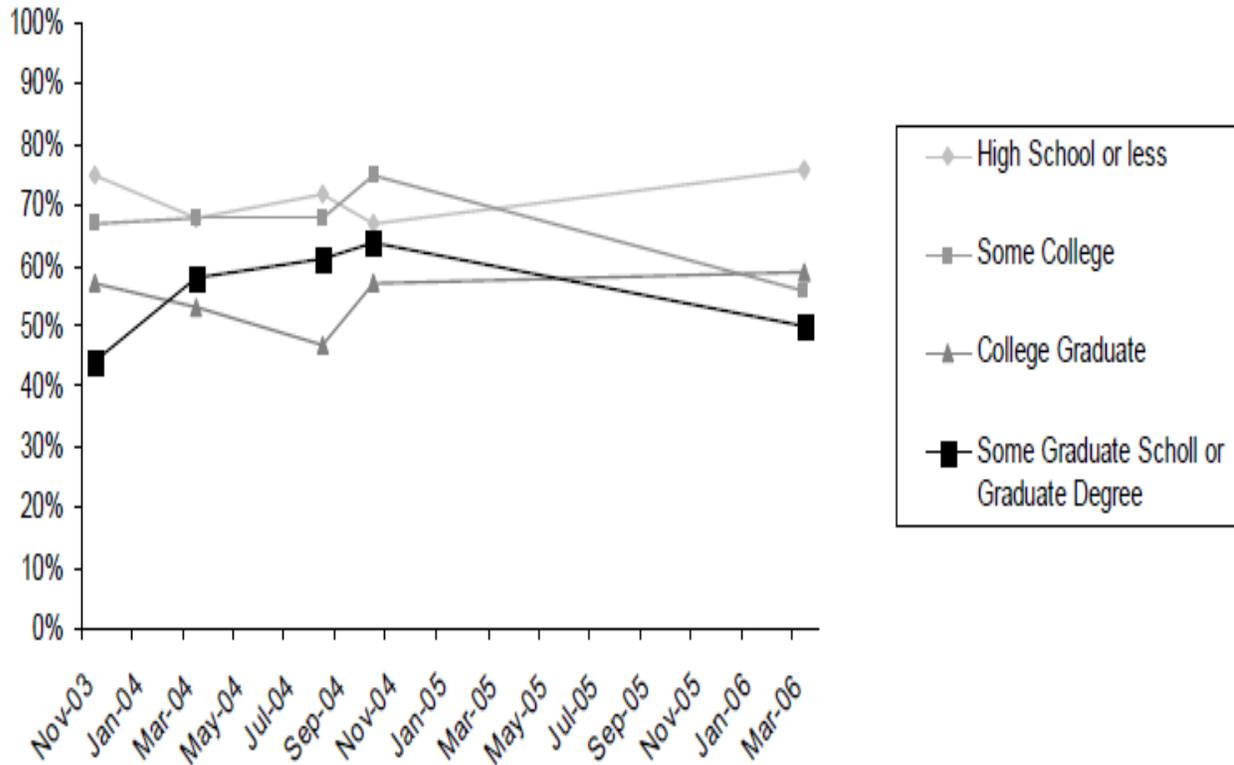


Public's Belief about Iraq's/Saddam's Connection with Al-Qaeda, by Partisanship and Education

(Source: Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon (2006) <http://themonkeycage.org/Shapiro%2520and%2520Bloch.pdf>)

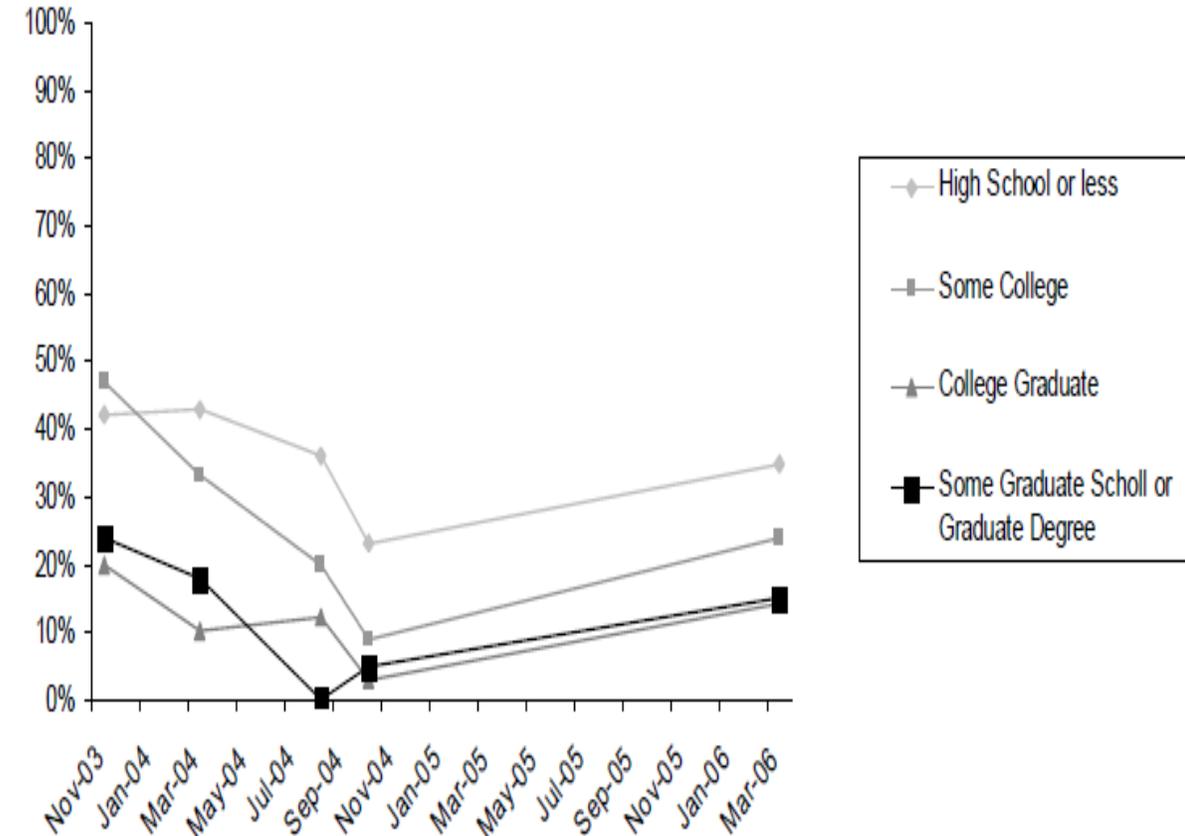
Clear evidence Iraq/Saddam - Al-Qaeda: Perceptions of Republicans

by education
(source: PIPA surveys)



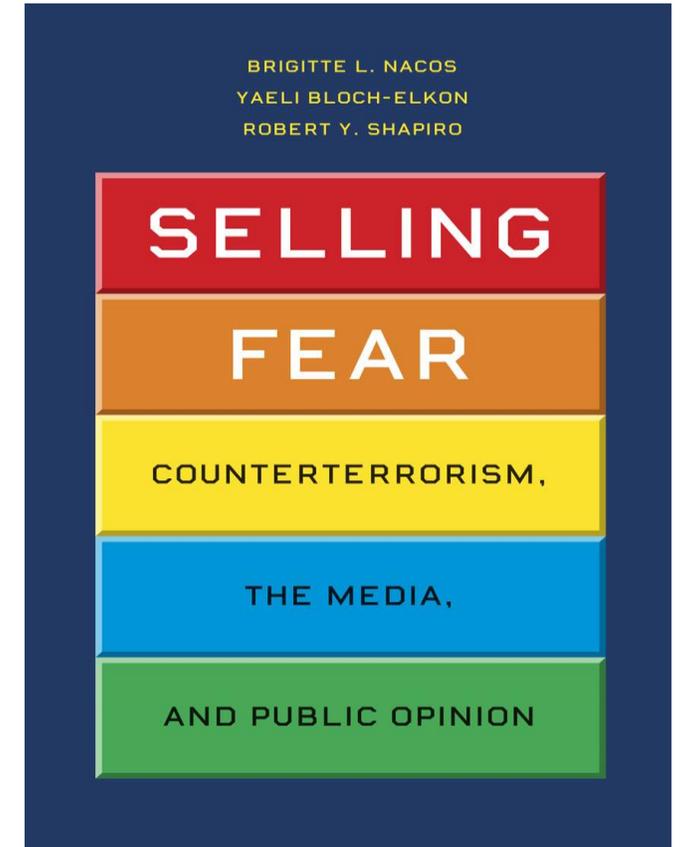
Clear evidence Iraq/Saddam - Al-Qaeda: Perceptions of Democrats

by education
(source: PIPA surveys)



Could We See this Today? Could It Happen?

- Yes; it has happened before (previous slides).
- But has learning occurred? The lessons from Iraq and the WMDs? E.g. →
- But limits to what a free press is able to uncover.
- Reliance on government leaks/whistle blowers, which we have seen more of.



- **Recent Cases in Point:**

“U.S. Kept Silent About Its Role in Another Firefight in Niger”

By [CHARLIE SAVAGE](#), [ERIC SCHMITT](#) and THOMAS GIBBONS-NEFF, MARCH 14, 2018, *The New York Times*

“ICE Spokesman Resigns, Saying He Could No Longer Spread Falsehoods for Trump Administration”

By [JONAH ENGEL BROMWICH](#), MARCH 13, 2018, *The New York Times*

- **There are a lot of major political fronts to watch, including:**



A Closing Case in Point



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Thank you