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Poll results

Utah's LDS no longer firmly back Iraq war

Support drops after Hinckley talks of 'terrible cost of war' in general, high-profile Mormons speak out

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The Salt Lake Tribune
Salt Lake Tribune

Article Last Updated:03/25/2007 10:16:01 AM MDT

As a group, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have been staunch supporters of President Bush and his management of Iraq since the war began four years ago.

So Jeffrey Jones wasn't surprised to see that a two-year compilation of Gallup polls showed American Mormons, more than any other religious group over that period, believed the United States was right to invade Iraq.

"It seemed to make sense," said Jones, a political analyst with Gallup, a New Jersey-based national polling firm. "Mormons are overwhelmingly Republican, and party affiliation is a powerful predictor of people's view on the war."

But that steady tide may be turning, even in the heart of Zion.

A January poll by *The Salt Lake Tribune* showed a precipitous drop in support for Bush's handling of the war among Utah's Latter-day Saints.

In the survey, just 44 percent of those identifying themselves as Mormon said they backed Bush's war management. That's a level considerably higher than Bush gets from Utah's non-Mormon population and the nation at large, but it's also a 21 percentage point drop from just five months earlier. The poll's margin of error was plus or minus 4.7 percentage points.

Such abrupt moves in group opinion are uncommon. Pollsters say numbers generally move gradually, unless "spooked" by something.

But what?

LDS Church spokesman Mark Tuttle insisted there has been "no additional statement, clarification, changed policy or announcement that can account for" the rapid change in Utah church members' perceptions of the war. And he reiterated that the church has no official position on Iraq.

But that doesn't mean prominent Mormons didn't have plenty of influence on how members were thinking about war and peace between August and January.

Rather than one unmistakable message from the church, the change may have been ushered by a rapid series of more subtle signals that it was indeed acceptable for Mormons to question their president during wartime.

And it all may have started at the very top.

Spooked on Halloween

Speaking to Brigham Young University students on Oct. 31, LDS Church President Gordon B. Hinckley lamented "the terrible cost of war."

"What a fruitless thing it so often is," he said. "And what a terrible price it exacts."

Hinckley recalled standing at the graves of some of history's most powerful military and political leaders. "In their time they commanded armies," he said. "They ruled with near omnipotence, and their very words brought terror into the hearts of people," he said.

And yet, he noted, all of them were now dead: "They have all passed into the darkness of the grave."

Though brooding heavily on the consequences of war in general, Hinckley never mentioned Iraq or President Bush specifically. But in the following days, online message boards and e-mail discussion groups lit up with conversation about what Hinckley - "prophet, seer and revelator" to millions of Mormons worldwide - might have meant in regard to the nation's current wars.

"He may or may not have intended anything by it, and he certainly didn't mention Iraq in that speech, but the speech certainly may have been interpreted by the LDS community as an indictment against the world's violence," said Kirk Jowers, director of the University of Utah's Hinckley Institute of Politics. "Small phrases by President Hinckley are to the LDS community as Alan Greenspan's words were to the financial community."

While ambiguous in relation to Iraq, Hinckley's words wouldn't be the final indication that Bush's war leadership was rightfully subject to question among the LDS faithful.

There would be other, clearer messages to come.

Pessimism from politicians

The month after Hinckley's speech, Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. - one of the more prominent politicians who are LDS members - returned from Iraq with an unfavorable report about the chaos he saw in the war-torn nation's capital city.

"The security situation in Baghdad is out of hand," said Huntsman, who enjoys wide popularity among Utahns. "I am less optimistic about a successful outcome."

Huntsman's dismay echoed that of other well-known Mormon politicians from both sides of the aisle - Sens. Harry Reid, a Nevada Democrat, and Republican Gordon Smith of Oregon - who were also issuing disappointing proclamations about what the Bush administration had hitherto referred to as Iraq's "progress."

November and December brought on crushing congressional defeats for Republican legislators, the resignation of war architect and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and a damning report on the war's progress by the Iraq Study Group, a bipartisan panel commissioned to come up with solutions to increasing violence and a burgeoning civil war.

"That was an independent assessment of the circumstances" in Iraq, Rep. Jim Matheson said.

The Utah Democrat, who like all of Utah's congressional delegation is a member of the LDS Church, said he believes fellow Mormons respond rationally when confronted with such evidence.

That's an opinion shared by blogger Guy Murray, author of *Messenger and Advocate* - <http://messengerandadvocate.wordpress.com> - a popular blog about Mormon issues.

"It's true that, in general, LDS members are more conservative as a whole, but at one point the whole country backed this war and this

president," said Murray. "Over the years, the country has soured on this war, and Mormons may be just following the national trend."

Murray said he believes that, as the war has lumbered violently on, it has become less socially perilous for Mormons to express "alternative" opinions about Iraq. Especially, he noted, as "the church has gone out of its way to stress political neutrality."

"I think there is an element of comfort in that," he said.

On both sides

Though *The Tribune's* January poll showed Bush had lost the backing of many of Utah's Latter-day Saints - bringing the "reddest state in the nation" below the mark for majority support - it also showed a nearly even split among Mormons themselves, with 44 percent expressing support and 41 percent asserting disapproval of the president's war handling.

Even among members of tight-knit LDS families there is disagreement about how faith should inform a Saint's political views.

"Do I still support the war? Yes," said Peter Sorensen, an insurance agent in Salt Lake City and a Mormon. "I have always felt from a religious standpoint that fighting against evil and looking out for the well-being of our earthly brothers and sisters was reason enough for going into Iraq."

Sorensen's cousin, fellow Mormon and lifelong friend Joe Marshall sees things differently.

"My faith is unwavering," Marshall said. "Christ advocated unconditional peace, and he expects it from his disciples. . . . I ache to see so many fellow lovers of Jesus casually letting their political agendas come before these principles, espousing this unjust act of violence, rather than despising it."

In their family, as in Utah, the issue remains open for debate - perhaps now more than ever.

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- **Guy Murray**, author of a popular blog about Mormon issues.