

Trouble in Bush country: Iraq hammers president's poll ratings



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President George W. Bush is watching public support haemorrhage for his handling of Iraq, and the bleeding seems especially acute in Ohio, the state that sent him back to the White House.

A demographic microcosm of the US political map, Ohio suffered a devastating week, losing 15 young Marines in insurgent attacks in Iraq's wild west.

For some Ohians, grief ceded to quietly expressed anger, at a war which has now killed more than 1,800 US soldiers, more than two years after the ouster of Saddam Hussein.

A national Newsweek survey Saturday put Bush's national poll ratings on Iraq at a new low, with only 34 percent of Americans polled saying they approved of his management of the conflict.

While there are no recent equivalent surveys in Ohio, anecdotal evidence suggests sentiment is at least as bad in the tiebreaker state which Bush narrowly won over challenger John Kerry in the 2004 election.

Red flags were raised for Bush on Tuesday, when Democrat Paul Hackett, an Iraq veteran critical of his war leadership, narrowly lost a special election for the US House of Representatives in a hard core Republican district.

Republicans explained they had a weak candidate hampered by a scandal swirling around Republican Governor Bob Taft.

But Democrats saw an omen for the 2006 mid-term elections, amid signs that disquiet over Iraq may be reaching critical mass.

"I have seen this sort of boiling up over the last year," said Sean Kay, professor of political science, at Ohio Wesleyan University in Delaware, 30 miles (50 kilometres) north of the central Ohio city of Columbus.

Ohio is a political analyst's dream, as its mix of grimy multi-ethnic post-industrial Democratic-leaning cities and rural, conservative, Republican towns approximate the national political scene.

No Republican has ever lost Ohio and won the White House, so the state always has a starring role in national politics.

This was the week when war came calling in Delaware, as local boy Justin Hoffman, 27, was among those killed in an insurgent attack on his marine amphibious vehicle.

In Saturday's edition of the local Delaware Gazette, Hoffman's father Robert hit out at Americans who seem to be losing their nerve over Iraq.

"This country does not have the fortitude to stand up and fight a long-term fight," he said.

"I just hope the American people will continue to hold course on this operation until it comes to its right and correct conclusion and not pull out early."

The outburst was notable as Delaware would be among the last places you would expect to go soft on the war.

Delaware is Bush Country -- a tidy town, with a clutch of evangelist churches, a neat high street decked in American flags, and a radio dial bulging with country music and conservative talk shows.

Delaware county voted by 66 percent to 34 for Bush over Kerry last year.

But people here are worried, said Kay, who supported the Iraq invasion, despite reservations over its timing.

Bush, currently vacationing on his Texas ranch, "is losing not just people who were opposed to the war, but people who would have wanted to support him," Kay said.

"He ought to get out of Texas and up to Ohio, and explain to people what is going on."

The president on Thursday expressed sympathy for the Ohio marines killed in a deadly week for US forces in Iraq, saying their sacrifice was for a noble cause.

Some 193 kilometers (120 miles) north of Delaware, the Cleveland suburb of Brook Park, where the 15 dead marines were headquartered, battled to cope. Residents paid homage at a makeshift memorial of US flags, teddy bears, flowers and cards.

"I don't agree that we needed to be in Iraq," said Vietnam veteran Greg Roberson, whose son Chris serves in the same division as the dead Marines.

"We were told there were WMDs there -- I feel we have been BS'd."

At least two dozen people interviewed at random last week in Cleveland expressed similar feelings. Only a few said they were satisfied with the course of the war.

One man who still backs Bush, is Bill Cohen, a World War II veteran who lost a son in Vietnam, who lives in Parma, a Cleveland suburb.

"We have got to hit back, I don't care who they are, they knocked down our towers, killed 3,000 of our people," he said, referring to the September 11 attacks.

Anger is also evident in staunchly Republican Cincinnati, in Ohio's south.

A web chat set up for Cincinnati Enquirer readers to remember fallen marines turned into an online protest, with messages critical of the war outnumbering those in support.

"A war begun on lies will cause deep divisions at home," wrote one reader, Robbie Smith, of Hamilton, Ohio.

Another, Kathleen Murray, of Blue Ash wrote : "How many more of your children will you have to lose to a senseless war based on lies?"

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