

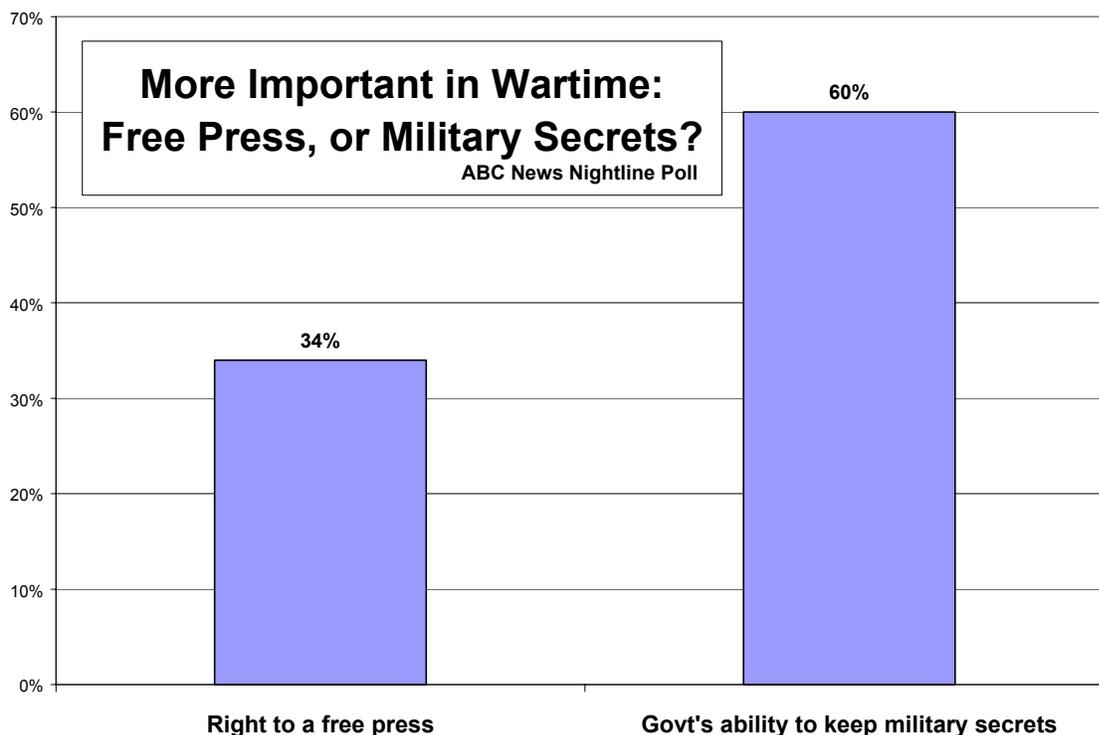
## **Public Views of Press Freedom: Wartime Changes the Equation**

Most Americans support the principle of an unfettered and probing press – but not necessarily in wartime.

In general, support for press freedom is broad: Nearly nine in 10 Americans in this ABC News Nightline poll say a free press is "very important" or "essential" to them. Most say the media should work mainly to question rather than to support government activities. And fewer than three in 10 say the government should have power to control what the media report.

But wartime raises different concerns. The public by a wide margin says that in times of war the need for military secrecy is more important than press freedom. Two-thirds say the government should have the power to prohibit the reporting of sensitive military information. And most favor a different, less adversarial approach to war coverage by the news media themselves.

Such views underscore how many Americans reject an unyielding concept of rights – either you have them or you don't – in favor of a more flexible view of competing interests, with priorities dependent on current concerns, and especially, crises. In this case, most say that where a free press butts up against the government's need to keep military secrets in wartime, the war effort prevails.



This poll was done in support of an ABC News Nightline special, "Viewpoint: Patriotism, Journalism and War" airing Friday, Jan. 17 at 11:35 p.m. Eastern time.

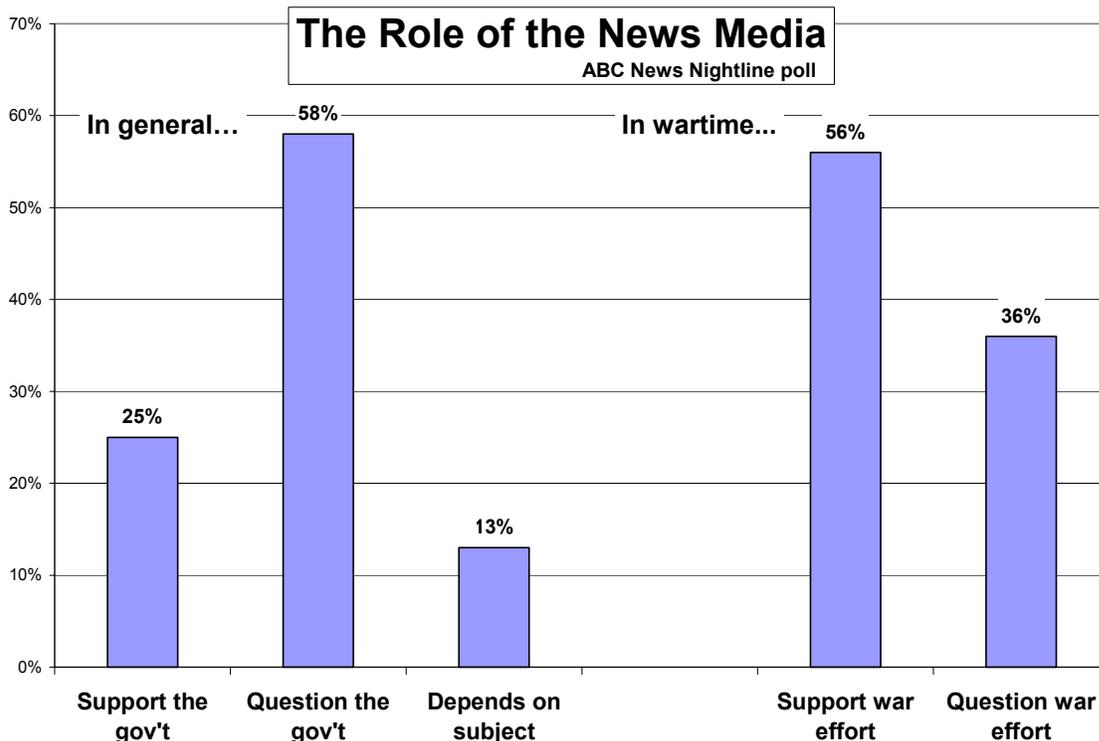
Measured independently, it finds, press freedoms and the importance of government secrecy in wartime both are seen by large majorities as very important or essential concerns. But somewhat more call military secrecy in wartime "essential" – 49 percent, compared to 38 percent who call press freedoms essential. And when the two are matched head on, Americans by 60-34 percent say the government's ability to keep wartime secrets is more important than the right to a free press.

Which is more important:  
 The right to a free press 34%  
 The govt's ability to keep military secrets in wartime 60

These views are premised on the special concerns associated with wartime. Outside of war, just 25 percent say the media's main obligation is to support what the government does; far more, 58 percent, say it's to question government activities (and 13 percent say it depends on the subject).

Similarly, 28 percent say that in general the government should have the right to control what information the media report, while again 58 percent oppose such constraints (and again 13 percent say it depends on the subject matter).

But in wartime these views change sharply. Fifty-six percent say the media is more obliged to support than to question how the government carries out a war. And by 66-31 percent the public says the government should have the right to prohibit media disclosure of military secrets.



In general, media should mainly	
Support the gov't	25%
Question the gov't	58
Depends on subject	13
In wartime, media should mainly	
Support gov't's war effort	56%
Question gov't's war effort	36

Other polling has also shown the extent to which the public takes a flexible view of constitutional rights. Last year the organization Public Agenda found that Americans by a 3-1 margin said constitutional rights are not “complete and absolute,” but instead come with “limits and responsibilities.” And by 62-35 percent respondents said these rights were not meant never to change, but “were meant to change with the times.” Separately, a review of decades of past polling, by Robert J. Blendon and John M. Benson of Harvard University, found that public attitudes tend to swing away from unfettered rights in times of national crisis, and back again when crises pass.

HOW NOW – The news media get good marks for their current performance. In covering the possibility of war with Iraq, just 13 percent say the media have been too supportive of the Bush administration, and 17 percent say they’ve been too critical; rather, 61 percent say the media’s approach has been “about right” in balance. Views on coverage of the war on terrorism are very similar.

	Too supportive of Bush admin.	Too critical of Bush admin.	About right
Media coverage of the war on terrorism	19%	15	60
Media coverage of possible of war with Iraq	13	17	61

PARTISANSHIP – There are partisan differences in these results. In the largest, Republicans are much more apt to say the government’s ability to keep military secrets in wartime is “essential” – 65 percent of Republicans say so, compared to 47 percent of independents and 38 percent of Democrats. It follows that Republicans are more apt to say that keeping military secrets is more important than ensuring press freedom in wartime – 76 percent of Republicans say so, compared to 55 percent of Democrats (still a majority) and 52 percent of independents.

Republicans also are less apt to say the media should be more questioning rather than supportive in their relationship with government – 44 percent of Republicans hold that view, compared to 67 percent of Democrats and six in 10 independents. And Republicans are more apt to say the media have been too critical of the administration in covering the situation with Iraq – but even among Republicans, just one-third hold this view.

	Right to a free press	More important: Military secrets in wartime
Republicans	19%	76
Democrats	41	55
Independents	42	52

	Media should mainly:	
	Support the gov't	Question the gov't
Republicans	39%	44
Democrats	22	67
Independents	16	61

There are also regional and racial differences; Westerners, blacks and other nonwhites are much less apt than their counterparts to say the need for secrecy in wartime trumps press freedom.

METHODOLOGY - This ABC News Nightline survey was conducted by telephone Jan. 8-12, 2003, among a random national sample of 1,037 adults. The results have a three-point error margin. Sampling, data collection and tabulation by TNS Intersearch of Horsham, Pa.

Analysis by Gary Langer.

ABC News polls can be found at ABCNEWS.com on the Internet at:  
<http://www.abcnews.com/sections/us/PollVault/PollVault.html>

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Full results follow.

1. How important to you is the right to a free press in this country - would you say it's essential, very important, somewhat important or not especially important?

	Essential	Very important	Somewhat important	Not especially important	No opin.
1/12/03	38	49	10	3	1

2. In general, do you think the news media have more of an obligation to (support what the government does), or more of an obligation to (question what the government does)?

	Support	Question	Depends on the subject (vol.)	No opin.
1/12/03	25	58	13	4

3. In general, do you think the government should or should not have the right to control what information the news media can report?

	Should	Should not	Depends on the subject (vol.)	No opin.
1/12/03	28	58	13	1

4. How important to you is the government's ability to keep military secrets in wartime - would you say it's essential, very important, somewhat important or not especially important?

	Essential	Very important	Somewhat important	Not especially important	No opin.
1/12/03	49	34	13	4	1

5. If you had to pick, which of these would you say is more important - (the right to a free press in this country) or (the government's ability to keep military secrets in wartime)?

Right to a free press	Government's ability to keep military secrets in wartime	No opin.

1/12/03

34

60

6

6. Specifically in a time of war, do you think the news media have more of an obligation to (support how the government carries out the war) or more of an obligation to (question how the government carries out the war)?

	Support	Question	No opin.
1/12/03	56	36	8

7. Again, specifically in time of war, do you think the government should or should not have the right to prohibit the news media from reporting sensitive military information?

	Should	Should not	No opin.
1/12/03	66	31	4

8a. (HALF SAMPLE) In covering the war on terrorism, do you think the news media have been (too supportive) of the Bush administration, (too critical) of the Bush administration, or about right?

	Too supportive	Too critical	About right	No opin.
1/12/03	19	15	60	6

8b. (OTHER HALF) In covering the possibility of war with Iraq, do you think the news media have been (too supportive) of the Bush administration, (too critical) of the Bush administration, or about right?

	Too supportive	Too critical	About right	No opin.
1/12/03	13	17	61	9

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