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Antiwar Groups Say Public Ire Over Iraq Claims Is Increasing

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SAN FRANCISCO -- The letters are pouring in like a water main break -- fast and, yes, furious. From Alabama: "We want to know the truth!" From Arizona: "If there's nothing to hide, what's the harm in a bipartisan inquiry?" From Mississippi: "We must get to the truth -- whatever it is!"

About 400,000 people from every state have contacted members of Congress in the past three weeks as part of a MoveOn.org petition that asks Congress to investigate the controversial claims that led to the war on Iraq, with more than 50,000 people signing on to the liberal activist Web site in the past five days alone.

"It seems more and more people who supported the war are signing on," said Eli Pariser, MoveOn.org's campaigns director. "They're angry. People who in the past couple of weeks before the war decided to support it are swinging back."

For organizations that opposed the war, these are busy days. Not since hundreds of thousands of people across the country marched in antiwar rallies in the weeks before the U.S.-led invasion has the rationale for the preemptive war come under such fire. The groups hope to galvanize a broad spectrum of the American people, a majority of whom supported the war, but with reservations. The goal is to persuade public officials to support an independent, bipartisan commission modeled on the panel investigating the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. In the week since the administration admitted that President Bush's State of the Union speech in January should not have mentioned that the British had "learned" Iraq had tried to buy uranium from Africa for a nuclear weapons program, antiwar groups say that more and more Americans have been contacting them, looking for answers.

"You know an issue has momentum," said Andrea Buffa, co-chair of the United for Peace and Justice coalition, "when people are coming into your office to ask if there's a protest planned about it."

And, with other intelligence claims about an Iraq nuclear program under scrutiny, weapons of mass destruction yet to be found and U.S. soldiers dying in Iraq nearly every day, antiwar coalitions are seizing on the public's growing concerns over the war, as recent polls have indicated, to try to reenergize their movement and force an examination of the process and the policies that led to the war.

So far, Congress has been split along party lines on the issue of formal reviews and the issue, some in the movement fear, could become a strictly partisan one, diluting its appeal. The Democratic National Committee has begun running a television ad accusing Bush of deception -- ads the Republicans have asked broadcasters not to air. Last week, Senate Democrats proposed examining the prewar intelligence, while Republicans in the majority voted against the proposals, each side accusing the other of playing partisan politics. (Republicans also say that intelligence reviews are already underway in House and Senate committees.)

But antiwar groups, almost by definition also anti-Bush, say they hope this issue reaches beyond party politics. They point out that two House bills -- one to create a nonpartisan, independent commission on the intelligence questions, the other to create a committee in the House to investigate the controversy

(and to complete its findings before the 2004 election), are sponsored by California Democrats who voted to authorize the war, Reps. Henry Waxman and Ellen Tauscher, respectively.

Both United for Peace and Justice and Win Without War, the largest mainstream antiwar coalitions, with hundreds of member groups, including the National Council of Churches and the AFL-CIO, have launched campaigns that include petitions demanding an investigation into the intelligence that led to war, print and television ads that accuse Bush of misleading the nation with discredited or unproven claims about Iraq's nuclear arsenal and suggestions for organizing at the local level to reinvigorate the broad movement that developed in the weeks before the war.

"Since the war started we've had a pretty lackluster response from the grass roots and this issue has really lighted a fire," said David Cortright, co-founder of Win Without War and president of the Fourth Freedom Forum, a foreign policy think tank that advocates nonviolent conflict resolution. "Our strategy is to keep trying to reach those persuadable voters. We're going to do a new ad and pick major cities -- say, Detroit or Des Moines -- to air them and at the same time try to work on local events. Local groups will lobby their members of Congress. We'll have a series of public communication action efforts."

Groups such as Cortright's Fourth Freedom Forum, which investigated several administration claims, including linking Saddam Hussein to al Qaeda, say they have been ready for this moment to disseminate the information they have gathered over the past several months.

The public is clearly anxious for information, said Erik Gustafson, a Gulf War veteran who founded the Education for Peace in Iraq Center (EPIC) in 1998 to call attention to what opponents of U.S. policy describe as a humanitarian catastrophe created by economic sanctions imposed on Iraq because of the 1991 war.

"The number of people who actually read our e-mail alerts was 3,000 last June and 10,000 this June, which gives you some indication of interest," he said. But, he added, the public also clearly needs the authority of a full-scale official investigation. When he tried convincing Americans that the case for war had not been made, he said, "the greatest challenge was the number of people who said, 'There must be something there.' But I think even the Americans who will say that war was a good idea overall want accountability."

Like members of the large antiwar organizations -- EPIC considers itself neither antiwar, per se, nor anti-Bush -- Gustafson's organization has been asking the public to lobby Congress for an investigation into the claims about weapons of mass destruction, as well as the chaos that has gripped much of Iraq since the war.

But some of those who were raising questions about the claims for war early on remain skeptical that these efforts will lead to any meaningful investigation. Mark Karlin, editor of BuzzFlash.com, with 2.4 million readers per month, said his readership doubts anything will come of the disputed intelligence claims. "I think the BuzzFlash readership is very skeptical that this is going to be kept alive," he said, "because they've heard claims outed before and nothing has come of them."

Still, Win Without War and MoveOn.org are already calling a 30-second ad they co-sponsored, which aired over the past week in the Washington and New York area cable markets, an unqualified hit. The ad, which labels Bush a "misleader," brought in thousands of people to the MoveOn.org Web site to sign the petition. The coalition said it will place ads in at least 10 other cities over the next two weeks.

Waxman's bill doubled its co-sponsors in the week after the ad aired, from 23 to nearly 50, said his chief

of staff, Phil Schiliro. "And we expect quite a few more directly as a result of the petition," he added.

Last Wednesday, co-sponsors of Waxman's bill began reading MoveOn.org petition letters on the House floor after the last vote of the night. Rep. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio) said he and his colleagues were doing this because Republicans wouldn't allow them to debate the subject of an investigation on the floor. He said they plan to read letters every night until the August recess.

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