



**THE VETERANS AND
CITIZENS INITIATIVE**

Moving Forward Together

Operation Iraqi Freedom at 20: Americans and the Iraq War

March 2023

THE VETERANS AND CITIZENS INITIATIVE

The Veterans and Citizens Initiative (VCI) launched in 2020 to serve as a connective tissue to elevate civic work being done by veterans and military family organizations and build connections between such organizations and the broader field of nonpartisan civic renewal efforts. Anchored in More in Common, a nonpartisan research and civic nonprofit, the VCI leads national research and engages with partners to elevate ways for veteran and military family organizations and civil society groups to come together around nonpartisan work that strengthens our democracy and builds a stronger shared sense of belonging.

VCI Partners



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

US Citizen Survey

Results are shown as “US Average”.

More in Common partnered with international polling company YouGov to conduct online survey interviews with N=2,000 adult US citizens from February 7 to February 14, 2023. The data was weighted to be representative of American citizens using propensity scores, with score functions including gender, age, race, education, and region. The weights were then post-stratified on 2020 Presidential vote choice, and a four-way stratification of gender, age (6-category), race (5-category), and education (4-category). The margin of error is +/- 2.2 for the US average and is higher for subgroups. Data on active-duty servicemembers is not included in this report due to small sample size. Numbers in data visualizations are rounded to the nearest whole number. Figures may total to larger or smaller than one-hundred percent due to rounding.

The survey also included open-ended survey questions. Open-ended responses to this survey question were coded manually by YouGov into comprehensive thematic categories that have been abridged in the presentation. Total responses do not sum to 100 percent since survey respondents provided multiple answers to each question.

In the survey, respondents were asked about opinions and memories from Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation New Dawn (2003 – 2011). These two operations are referred to as the “Iraq War” in this report.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Iraq War changed America and the world, yet its fingerprints appear barely visible in the minds and memories of most Americans. Twenty years after the launch of Operation Iraqi Freedom, only 1 in 4 Americans “often” or “sometimes” think about the Iraq War and only 1 in 5 say the war changed their life. Further, when asked about major events from the war, few Americans are familiar with much beyond the invasion, capture of Saddam Hussein, and the withdrawal in 2011. These findings are stark considering the enormous costs of the war. Over 4,440 service members gave their lives and over 32,000 were wounded during the Iraq War (2003–2011), and the cost to the US Treasury was approximately \$800 billion.¹

The picture is more complex, however. While the Iraq War appears remote and invisible for most Americans, they want to learn about it. 77 percent of Americans – with little variation across demographics or ideology – feel it is important, as individuals, to learn about the Iraq War. But Americans are hesitant about whether such learning should be done at the national level. Only 41 percent feel the country needs to do more to publicly learn from the Iraq War and 32 percent say it’s better for the country to put the Iraq War behind us and move on. Embedded in this hesitation are likely concerns that any public effort to grapple with the war will devolve into political battles to relitigate blame.

It’s easy to see how this might happen given how attributions of blame vary significantly by ideology. Democrats overwhelmingly say President George W. Bush and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld deserve most of the blame for aspects of the Iraq War that went poorly for America, whereas Republicans are most likely to assign blame to President Barack Obama. At a time when Americans are already exhausted by polarization, it’s understandable that they would be concerned about yet another partisan fight.

Yet, the costs of not doing more to learn about and from the Iraq War are even more concerning. Such costs will disproportionately be borne by soldiers on a future battlefield and by their families. Our challenge, then, is to disrupt the potential for polarization to dictate how we learn about the war as a society. Our research suggests two methods for achieving this.

First, there is overwhelming support – 69 percent – for states adopting Military History Months where schools and communities are encouraged to dedicate time to learning about American military history. By focusing on the state level, we can mitigate the hyper-polarization present at the national level and allow states to innovate and test new ways for teaching and learning about military history.

Second, we could do more to bridge veteran and military communities with the broader society. Only 3 in 10 Americans say they have talked with an Iraq War veteran about his or her service in the war. While not every veteran wants to talk about the war, nor should conversations with veterans only be about war, there is an urgent need to foster more social and community relationships with those who have served in the military. This is best done at the state and local level, though national institutions can help provide resources to expand such efforts.

1. *Casualty Report (U.S. Department of Defense)*; “What Did the Iraq War Cost? More Than You Think”. (*US News*).

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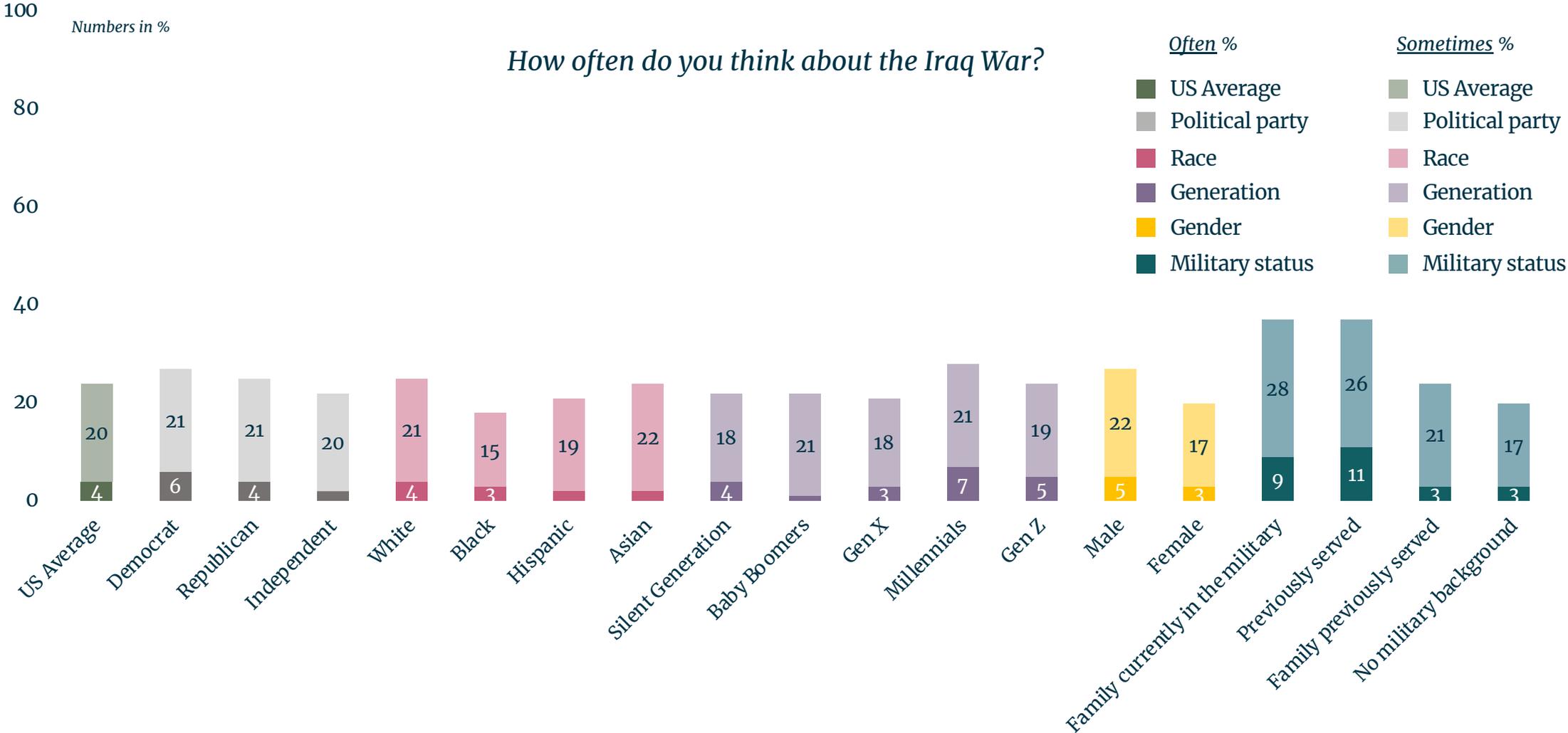
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Salience of the Iraq War

The Iraq War is largely invisible and out-of-mind for most Americans.

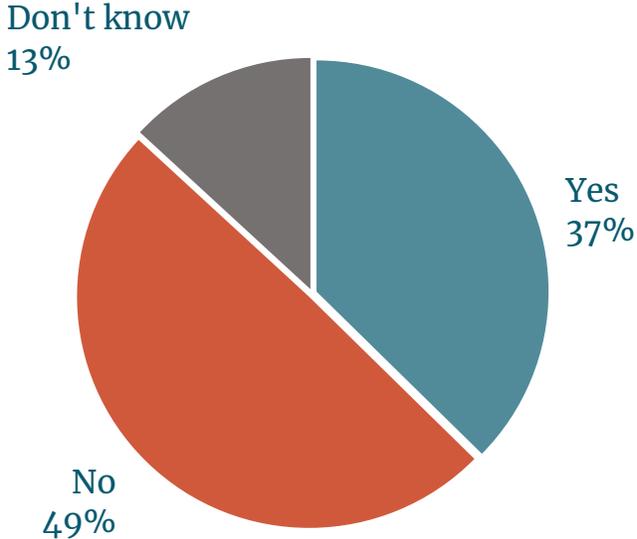
Most Americans don't think about the Iraq War often, and most have never talked to an Iraq War veteran about their service during the war.

Only 4% of Americans say they often think about the Iraq War. Veterans, military families, and Millennials are more likely to say they often or sometimes think about the war.

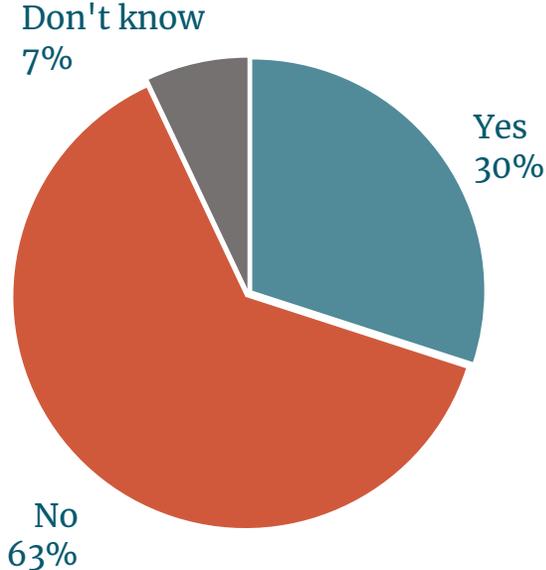


Fewer than 4 in 10 Americans say they know someone who served in the Iraq War and only 3 in 10 say they have talked with an Iraq War veteran about his or her service in the war.

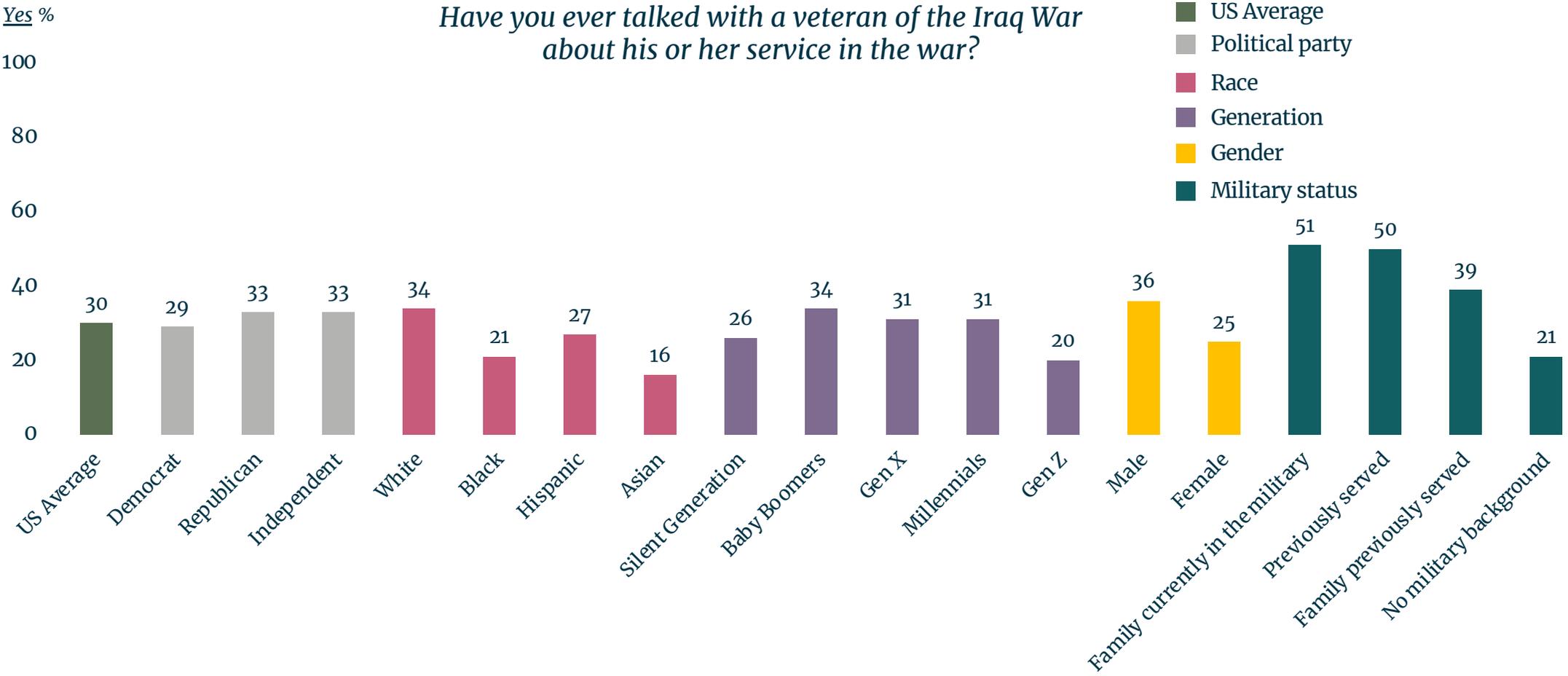
Do you know someone who served in the Iraq War?



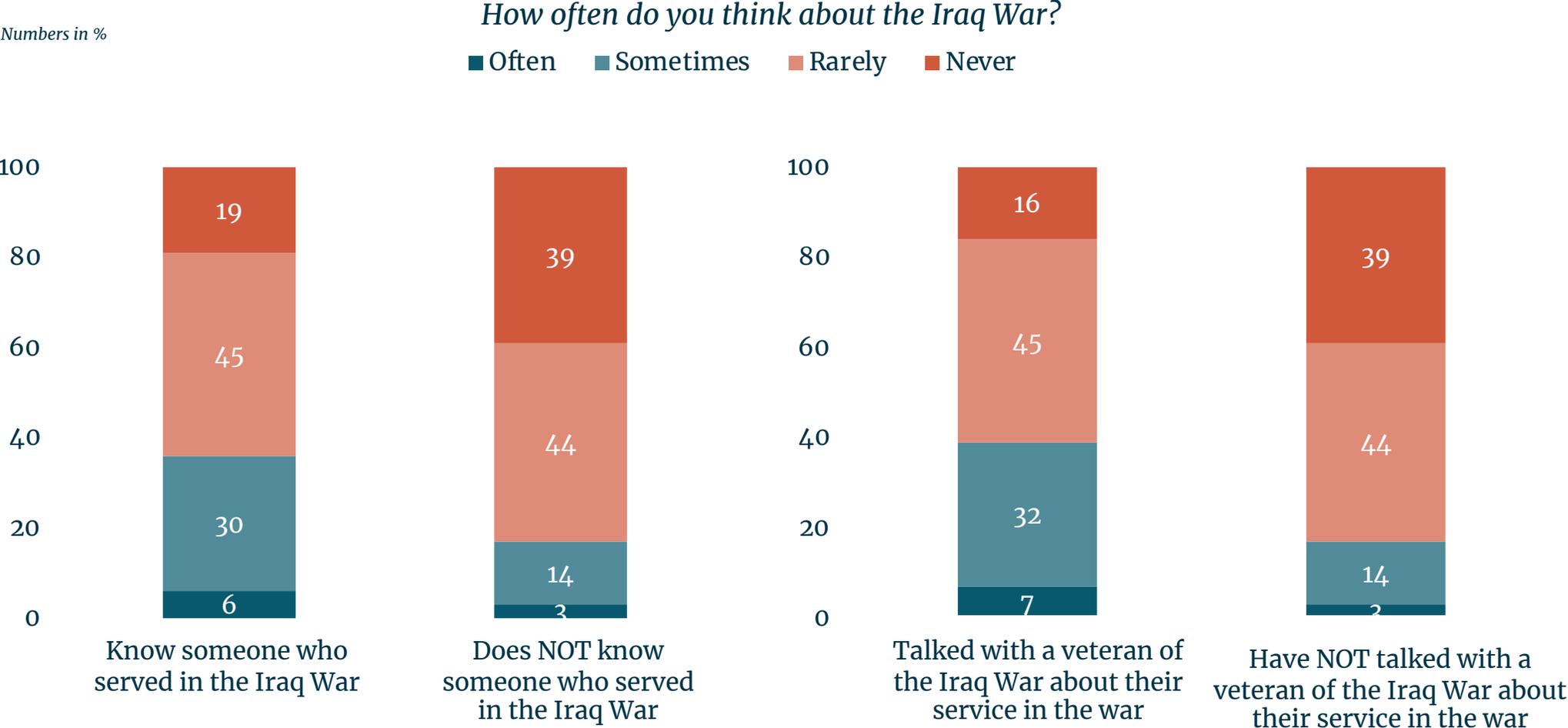
Have you ever talked with a veteran of the Iraq War about his or her service in the war?



Veterans and military families are much more likely to have spoken with veterans of the Iraq War about their service in the war.



Americans who know or have talked with veterans of the Iraq War are more likely to think about the war often or sometimes.

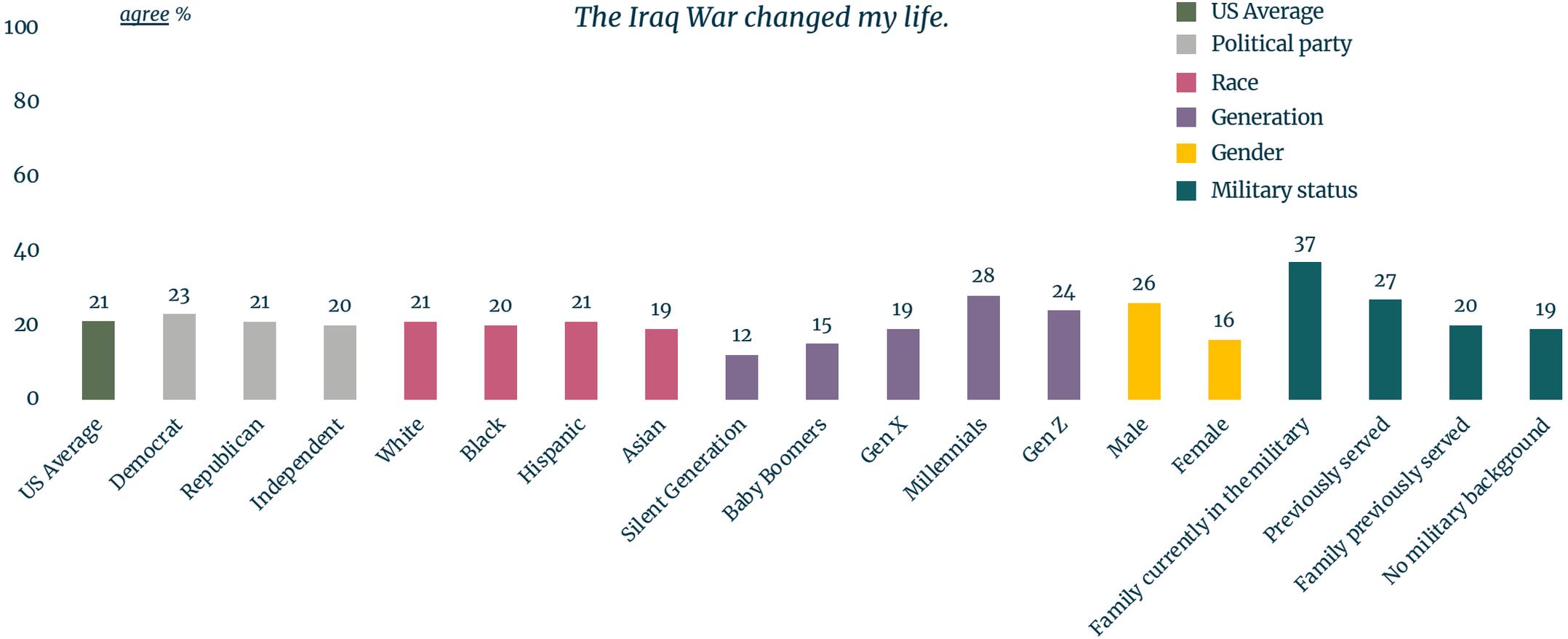


Only around 1 in 5 Americans says that the Iraq War changed their lives. Veterans, military families, and Millennials are most likely to feel this way.

Strongly + somewhat

agree %

The Iraq War changed my life.



Survey question: Thinking about the US military action in the Iraq War, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

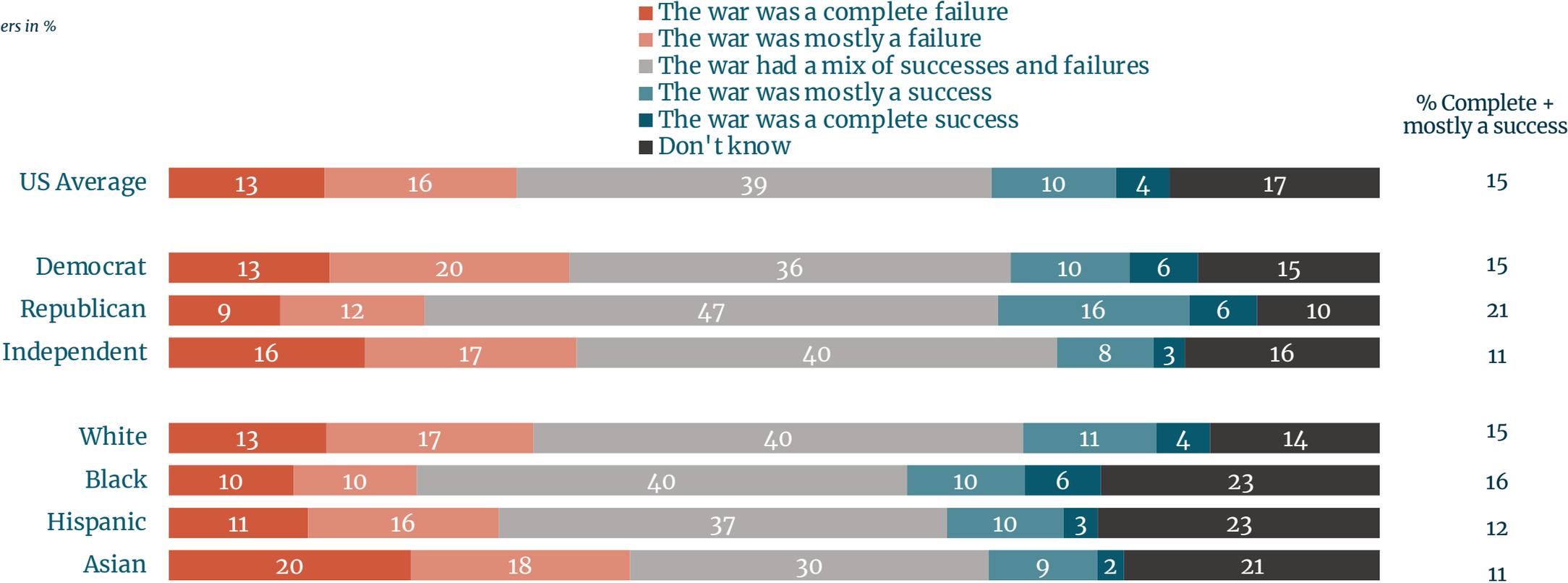
Views towards the Iraq War

Americans are mixed in their views of whether the Iraq War succeeded or failed, but generally hold mostly negative feelings towards the war.

Perhaps contrary to expectations, Republicans and Democrats hold views towards the war that are more similar than different. There are areas where they disagree, such as whether it was a mistake to send troops into Iraq, but the story is more so one of commonality in feelings.

4 in 10 Americans think the Iraq War had a mix of successes and failures. 3 in 10 see it more as a failure and fewer than 2 in 10 see it more as a success.

Numbers in %



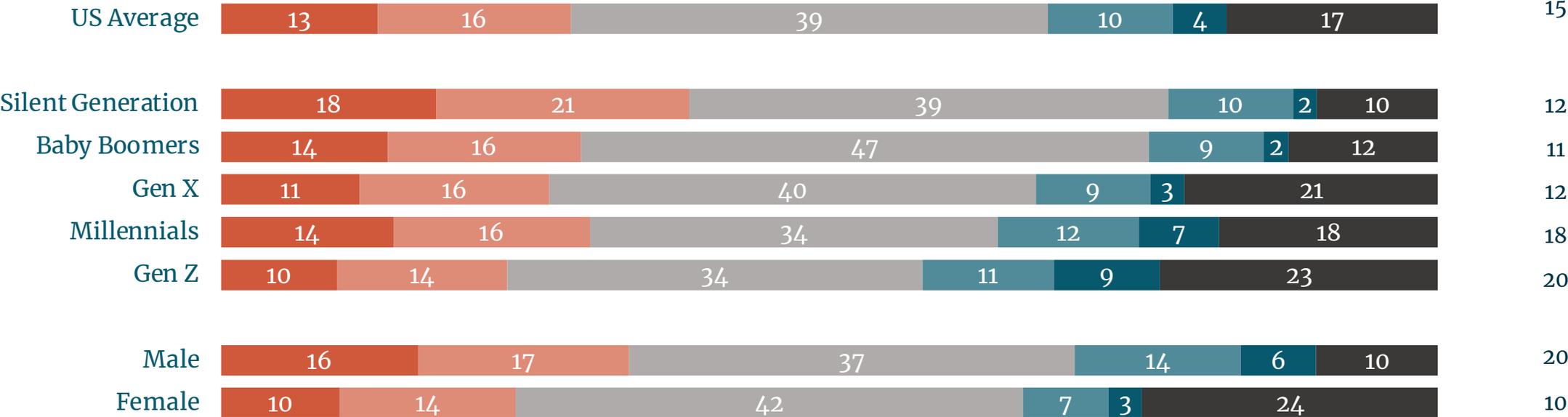
Survey question: Which of the following statements best reflects your assessment of America's success or failure with the Iraq War?

Younger Americans are slightly more likely than older Americans to say the war was a success or that they “don’t know.” Men are more likely than women to say either that the war was a success or that it was a failure.

Numbers in %

- The war was a complete failure
- The war was mostly a failure
- The war had a mix of successes and failures
- The war was mostly a success
- The war was a complete success
- Don't know

% Complete + mostly a success

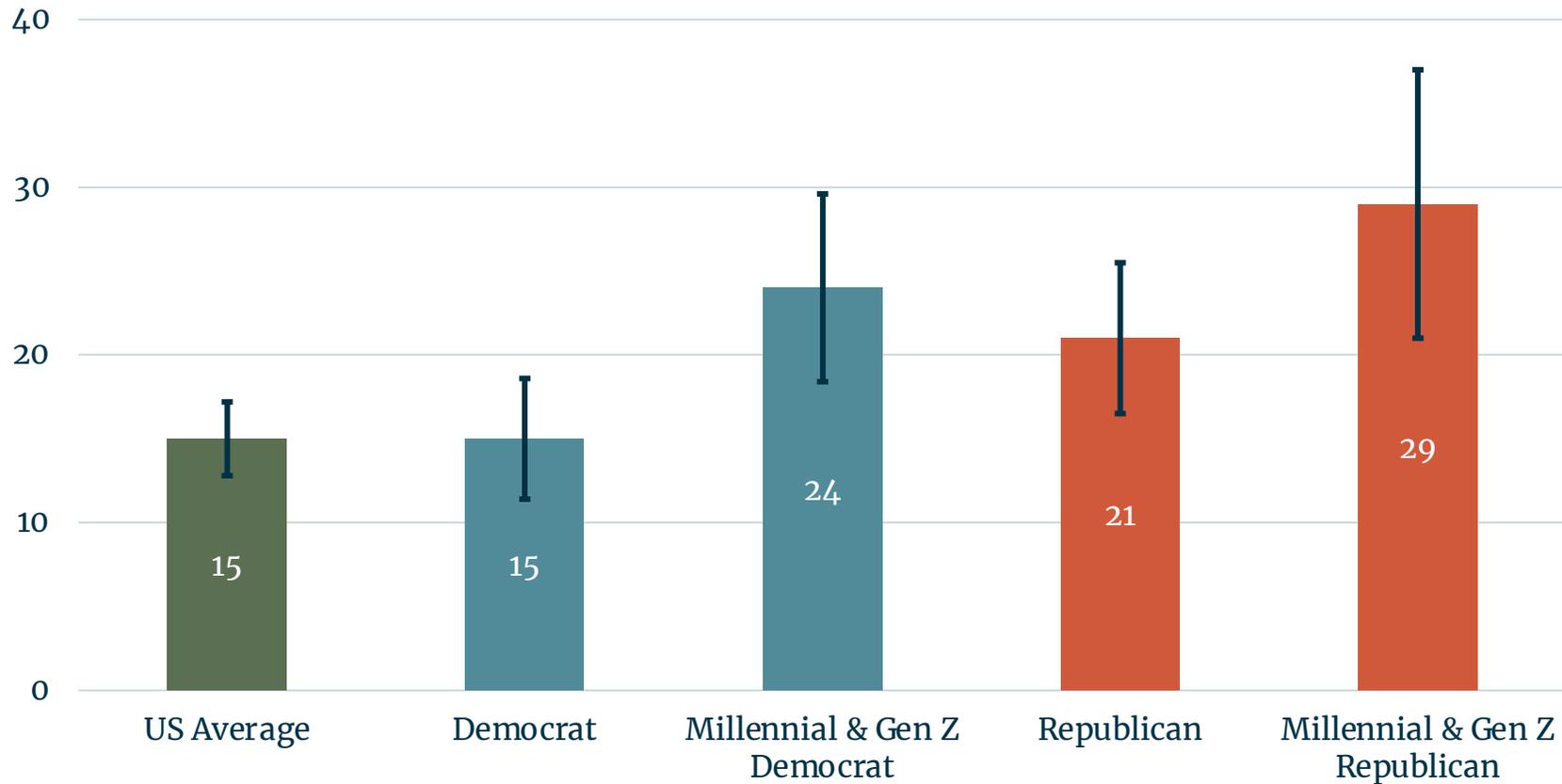


Survey question: Which of the following statements best reflects your assessment of America's success or failure with the Iraq War?

Both Democrats and Republicans from the younger generations appear more likely than the average Democrat and Republican to say that the war was a success.

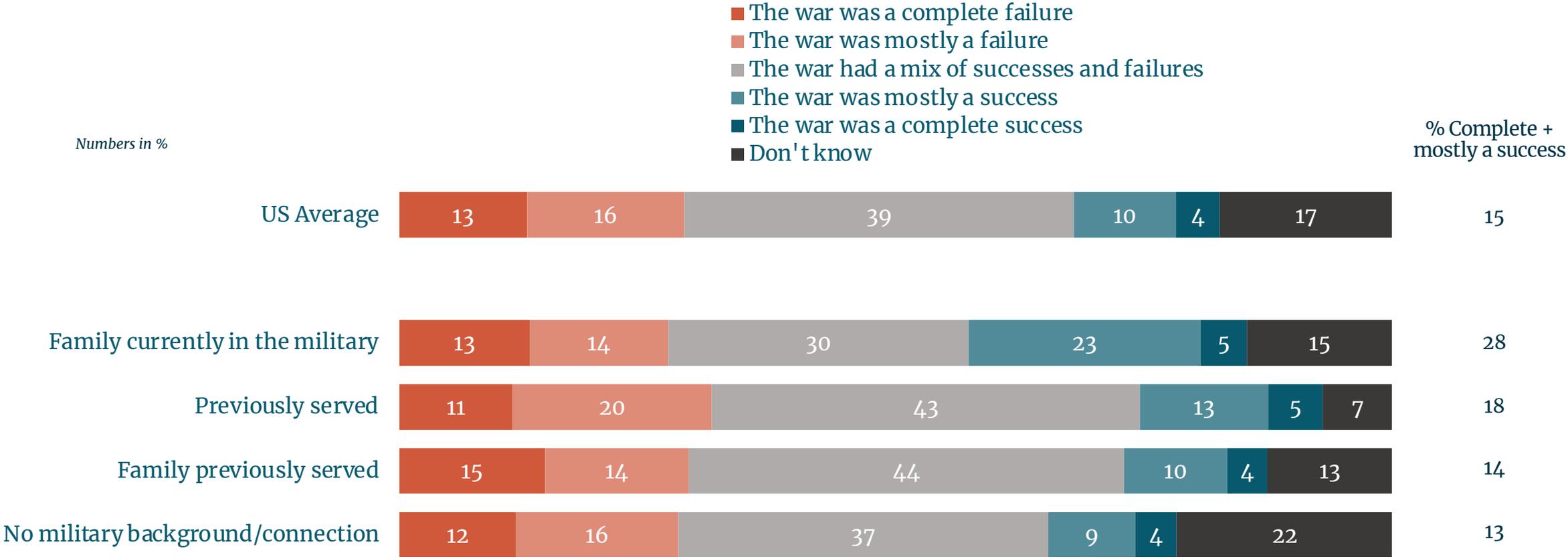
% The war was a complete success + The war was mostly a success

Error bars indicate margins of error at 95% confidence interval.



*Note: The difference between the Republican data and the Millennial & Gen Z Republican data is statistically significant at 80% confidence level.
Survey question: Which of the following statements best reflects your assessment of America's success or failure with the Iraq War?*

Those with family currently in the military are more likely than those with no military connection to say the Iraq War was a success.



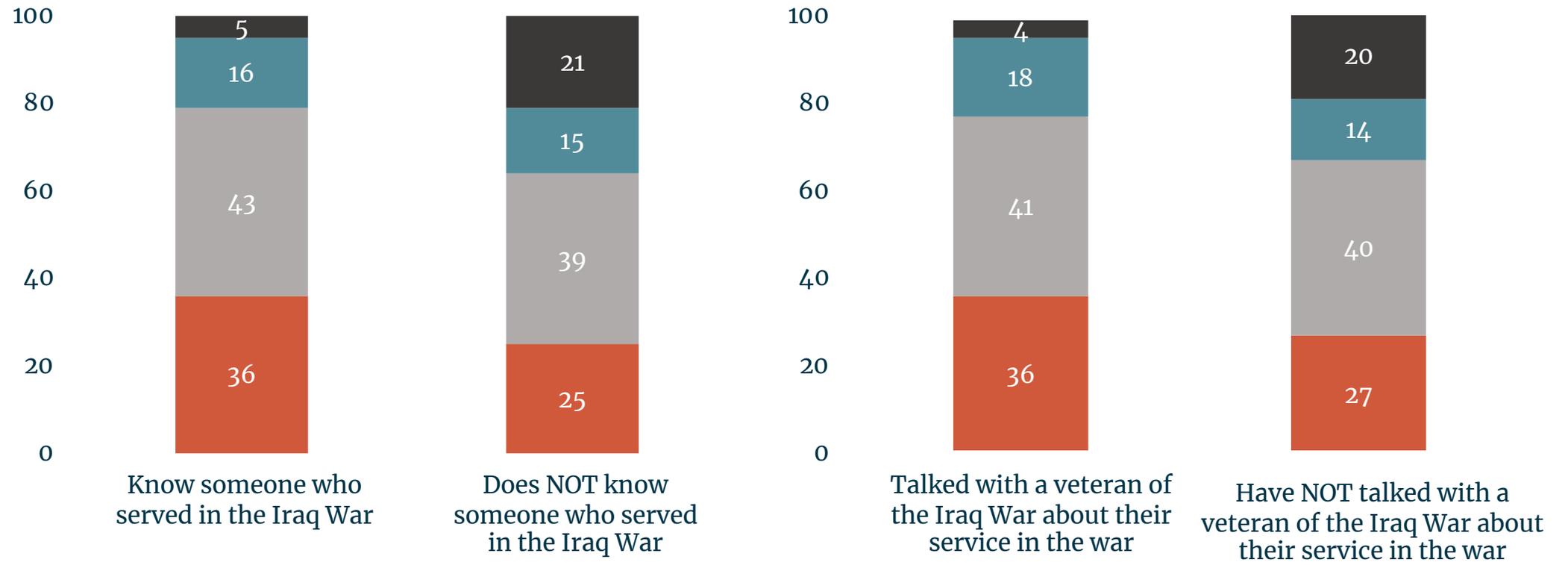
Survey question: Which of the following statements best reflects your assessment of America's success or failure with the Iraq War?

Americans who know or have talked with veterans of the Iraq War are slightly more likely to say that the war was mostly or a complete failure.

The Iraq War was...

Numbers in %

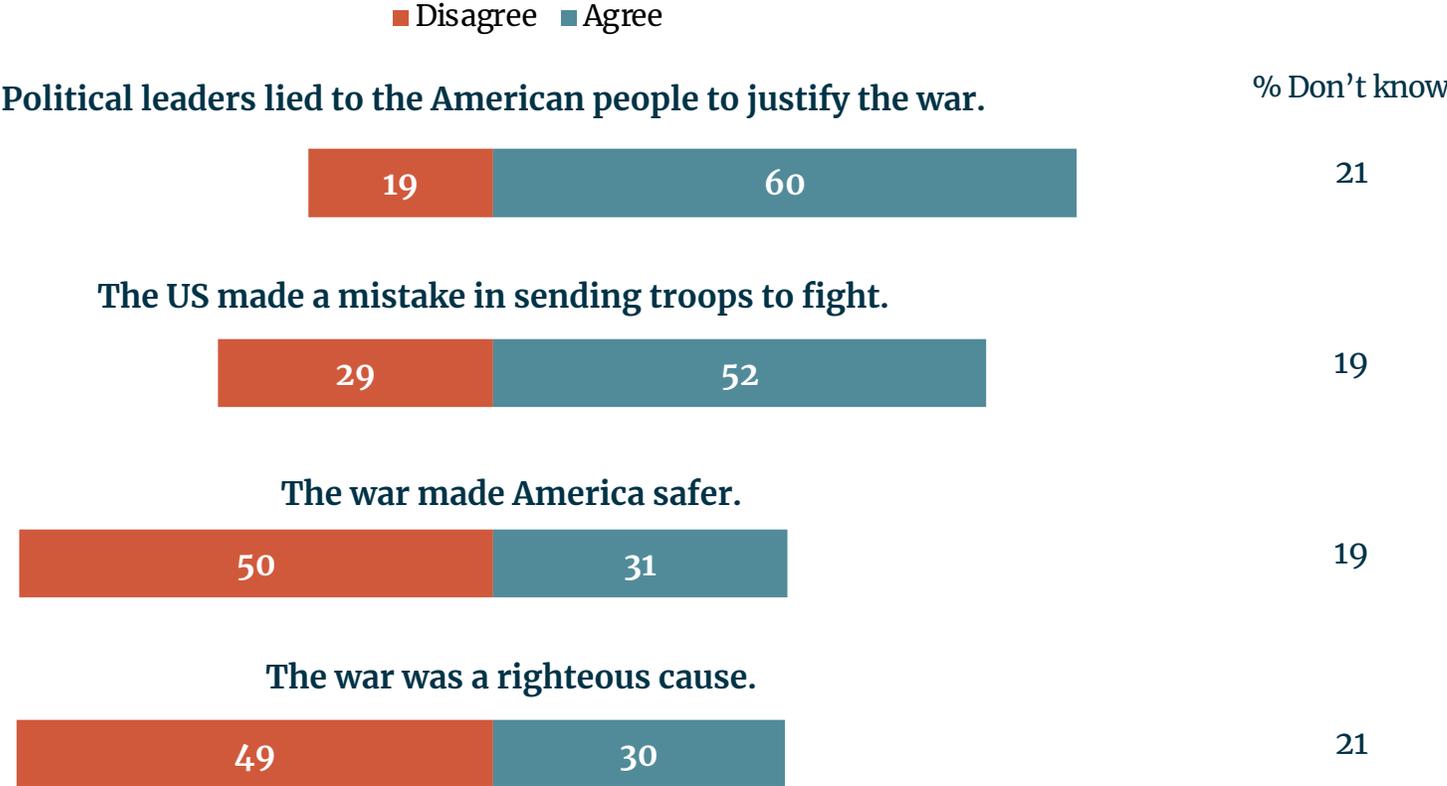
- Complete/mostly a failure
- A mix of successes and failures
- Complete/mostly a success



Most Americans believe that political leaders lied to the American people to justify the war. Less than one third believe the war made America safer or was righteous.

Thinking about the US military action in the Iraq War, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

Numbers in %



Around half of Americans feel proud of the way the military handled itself during the war and believe it demonstrated effective leadership.

Thinking about the US military action in the Iraq War, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

Numbers in %

■ Disagree ■ Agree

I am proud of the way the military handled itself during the war.

% Don't know



21

The US military demonstrated effective leadership in how it fought the war.



21

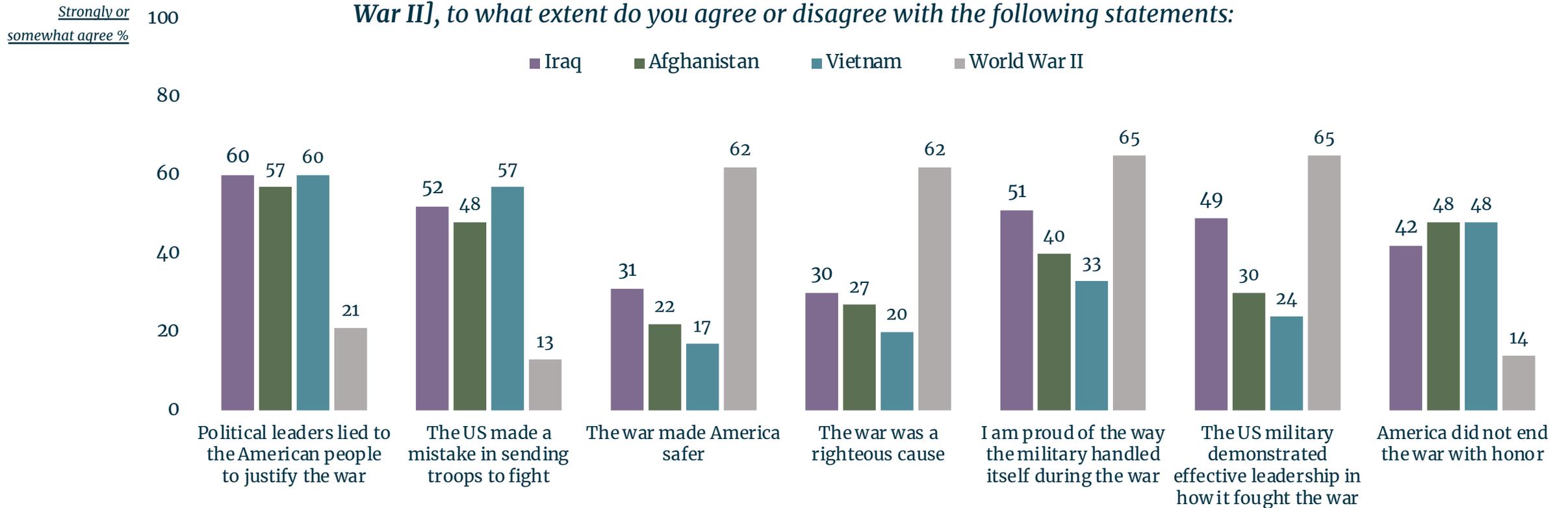
America did not end the war with honor.



26

In general, Americans view the Iraq War, the Afghanistan War, and the Vietnam War similarly; however, they are more likely to be proud of the US military's actions and leadership during the Iraq War.

Thinking about US military action in the [Iraq War/Afghanistan War/Vietnam War/World War II], to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

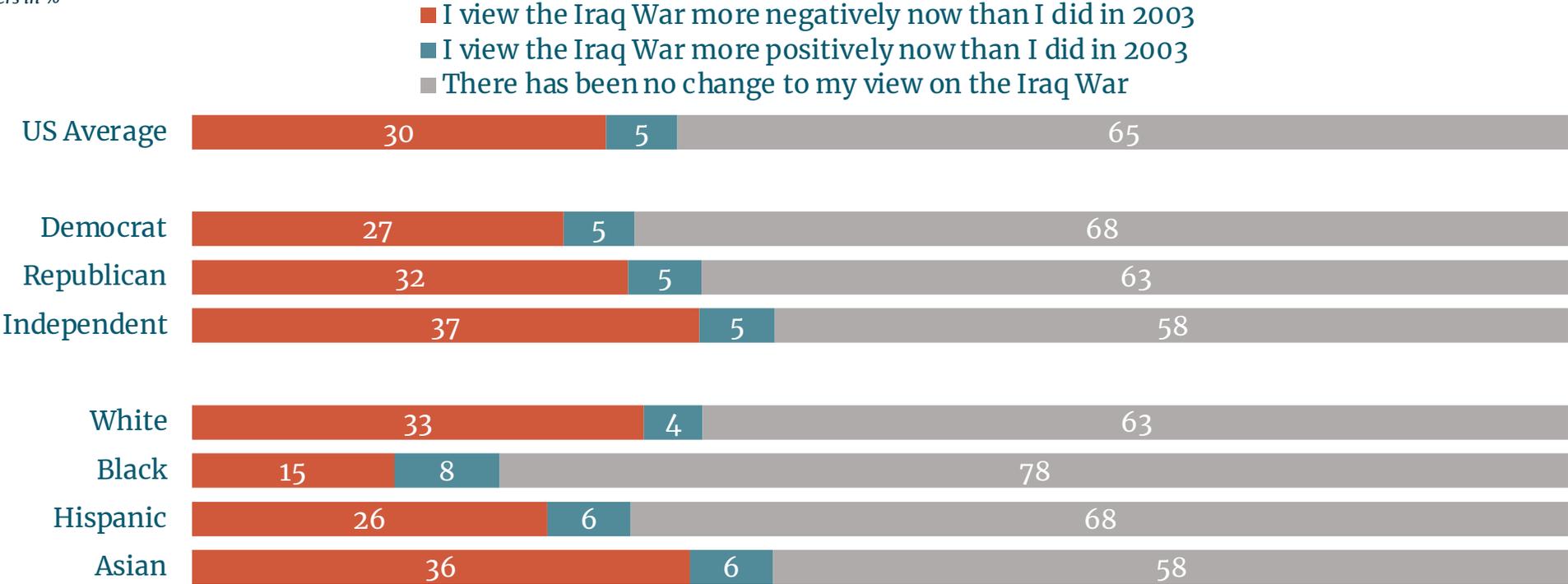


Note: The chart above includes data on Americans' views on the Afghanistan War, the Vietnam War, and World War II from a previous research study conducted by More in Common in September 2021. For additional information and methodology on this previous study, please see [After Kabul: Veterans, America, and the End of the War in Afghanistan](#) ([link](#)).

Most Americans who were adults in 2003 say there has been no change to their views on the Iraq War since then. Around one third across political affiliation view the Iraq War more negatively now.

*Which of the following statements do you agree with more?**

Numbers in %



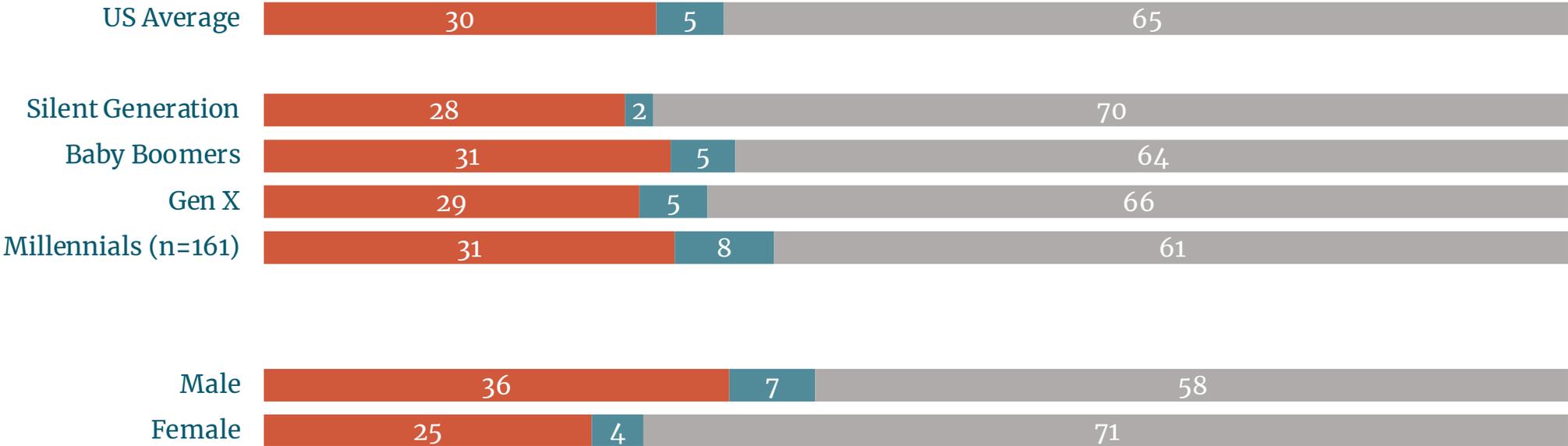
Note: This question was only shown to survey respondents born before 1985 (over 18 in 2003).

More than one third of men and around one quarter of women say they view the Iraq War more negatively now than they did in 2003.

Numbers in %

Which of the following statements do you agree with more?*

- I view the Iraq War more negatively now than I did in 2003
- I view the Iraq War more positively now than I did in 2003
- There has been no change to my view on the Iraq War



Note: This question was only shown to survey respondents born before 1985 (over 18 in 2003).

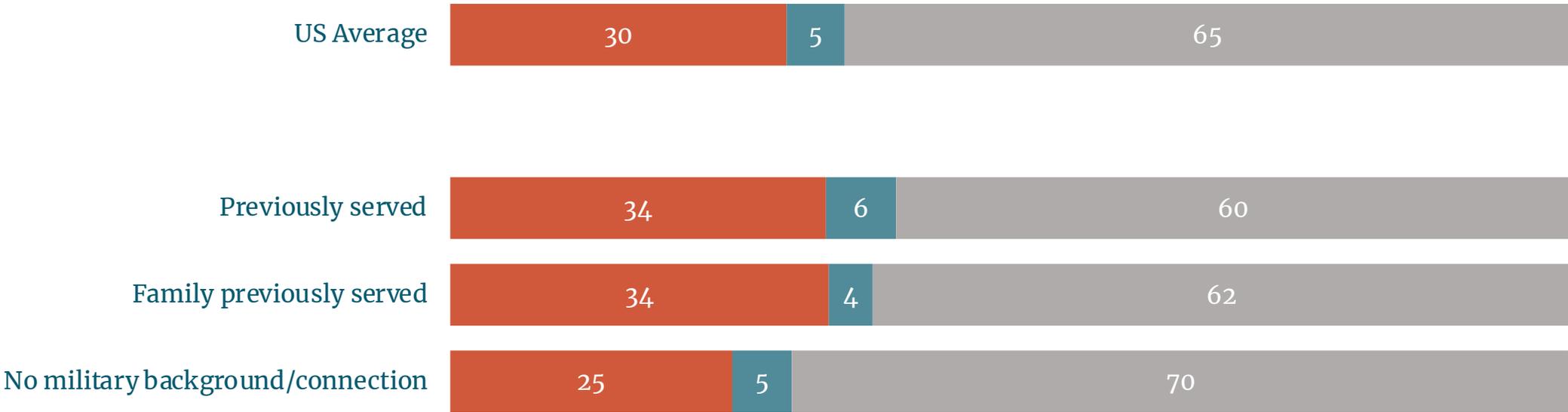


Veterans and those with family who served are slightly more likely than Americans with no military connection to say they view the Iraq War more negatively than in 2003.

Numbers in %

Which of the following statements do you agree with more?*

- I view the Iraq War more negatively now than I did in 2003
- I view the Iraq War more positively now than I did in 2003
- There has been no change to my view on the Iraq War

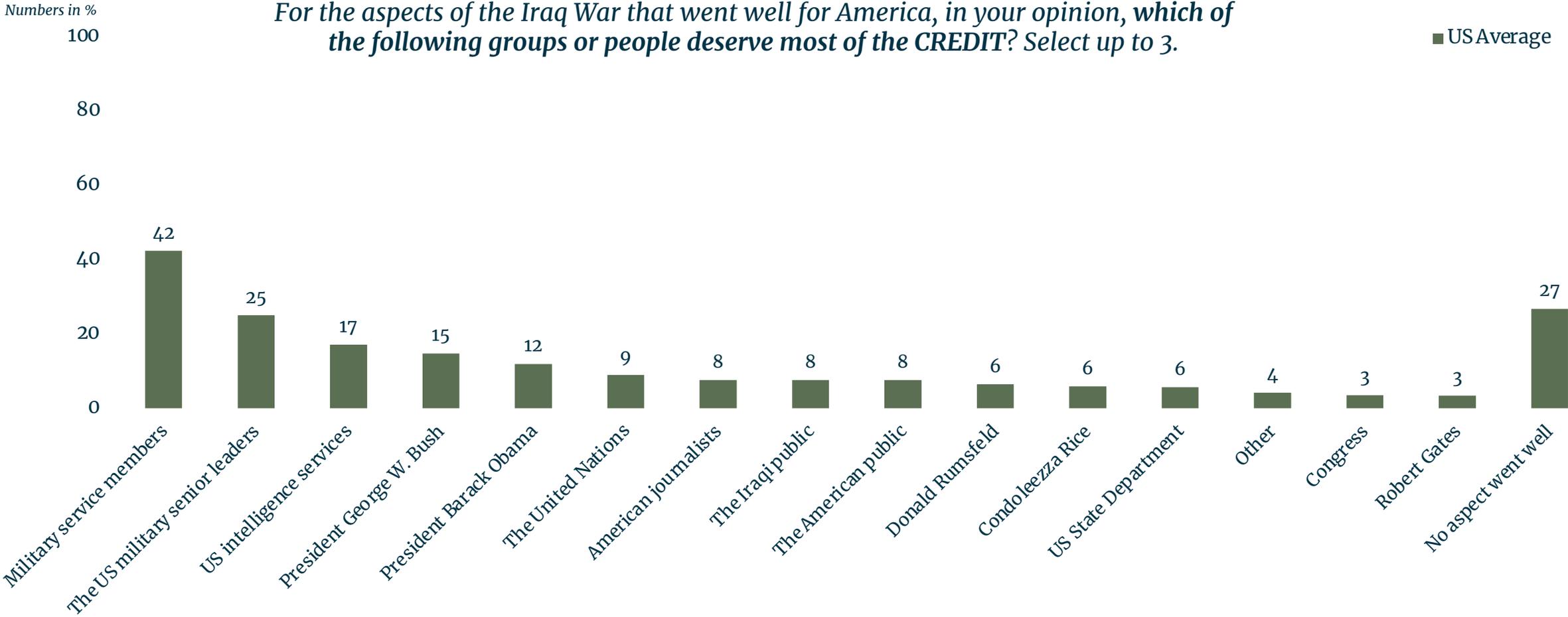


Note: This question was only shown to survey respondents born before 1985 (over 18 in 2003). Data of military family is not included due to small n size.

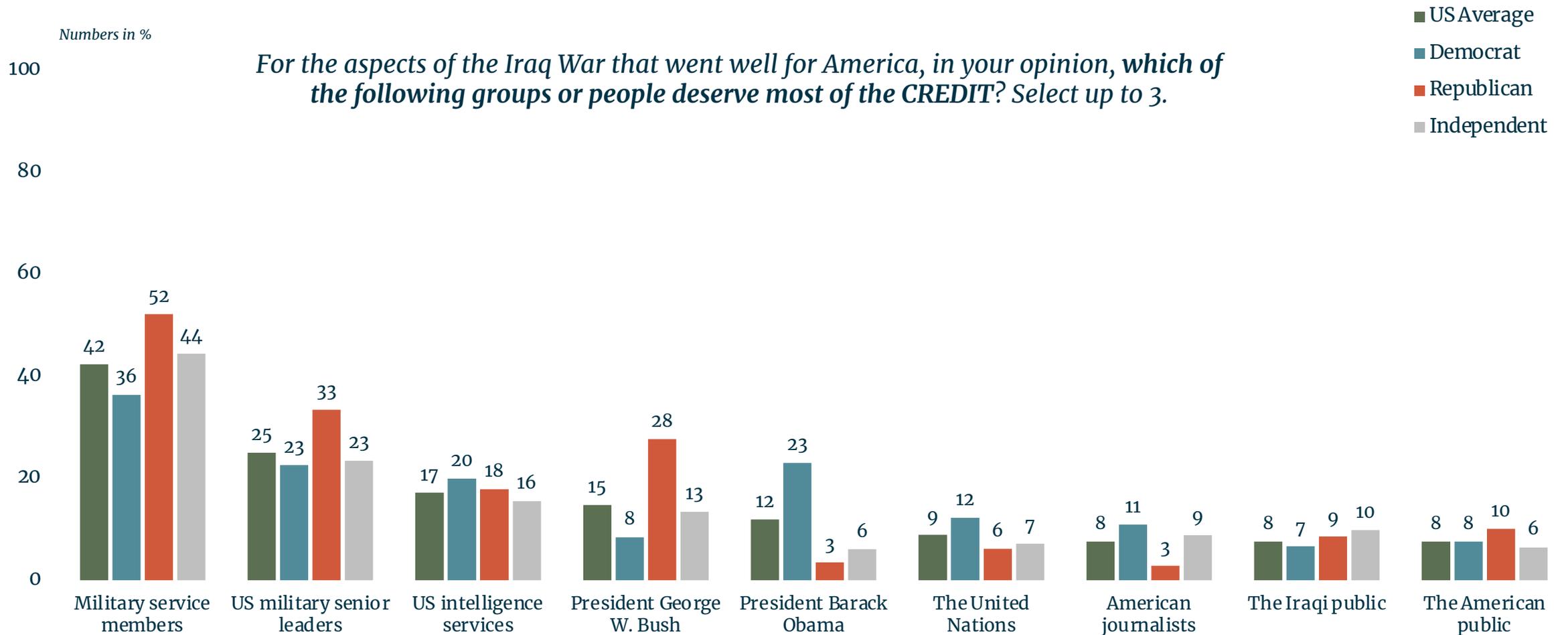
Credit and Blame

Americans are united in saying that the military deserves most of the credit for aspects of the Iraq War that went well, but there is significant variation by ideology regarding who deserves most of the blame for aspects of the Iraq War that went poorly for America.

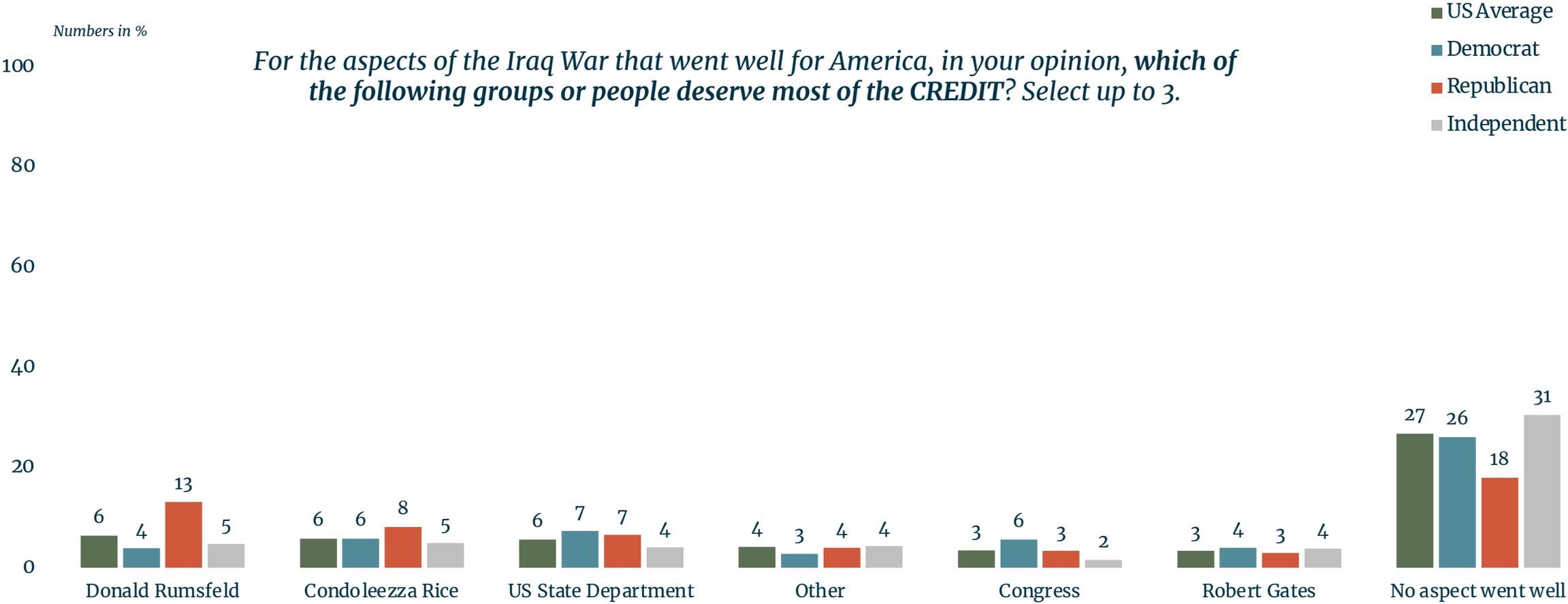
Americans believe that military service members deserve most of the credit for the aspects of the Iraq War that went well, followed by military senior leaders. Almost 1 in 3 Americans feels that there was no aspect of the war that went well for America.



Republicans are more likely than Democrats and Independents to say that President George W. Bush and military senior leaders deserve most of the credit.



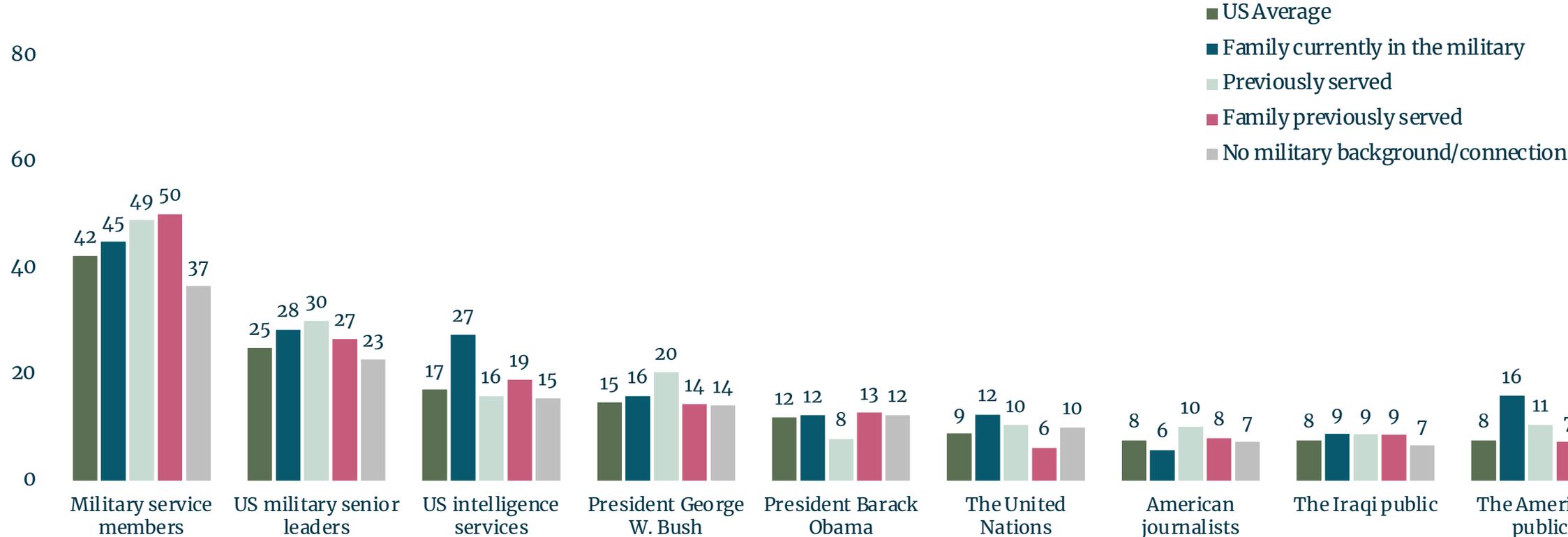
Compared to others, Independents are more likely to say that there was no aspect of the Iraq War that went well for America.



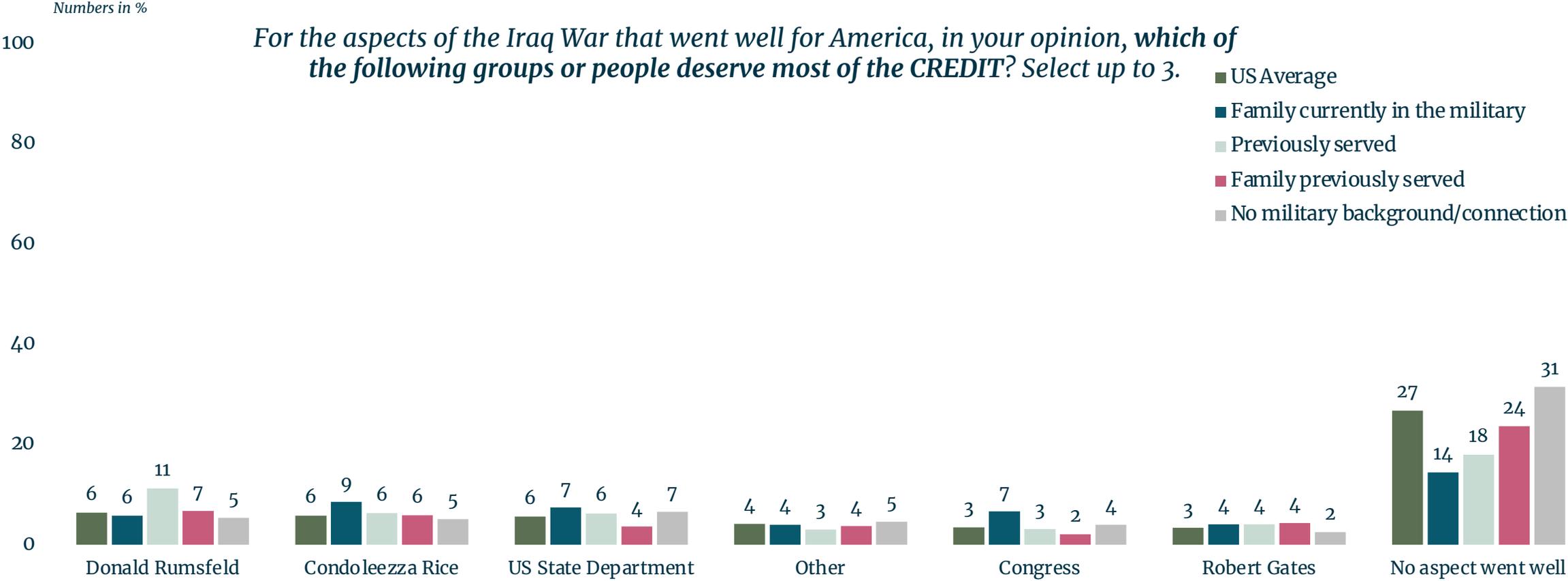
While Americans regardless of military background say that military service members deserve most of the credit for aspects of the war that went well, veterans and those with family who served are more likely to say so.

100 Numbers in %

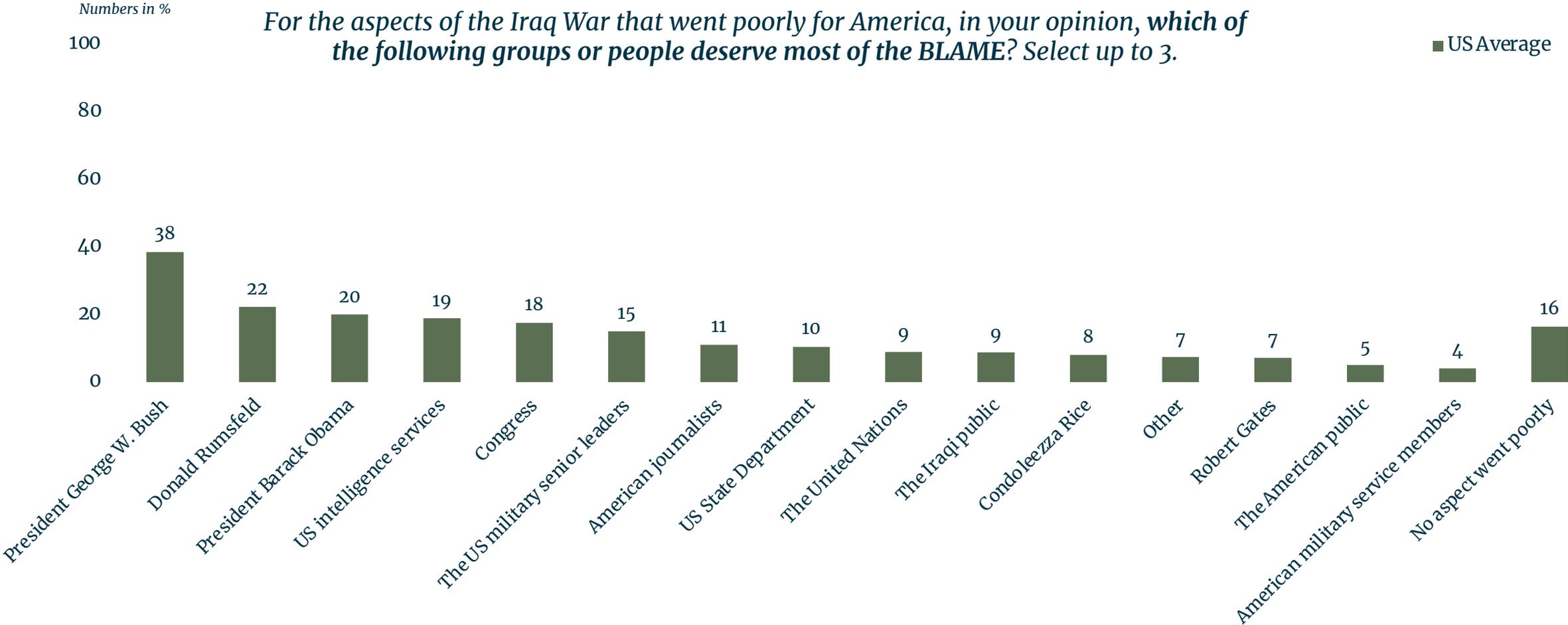
For the aspects of the Iraq War that went well for America, in your opinion, which of the following groups or people deserve most of the CREDIT? Select up to 3.



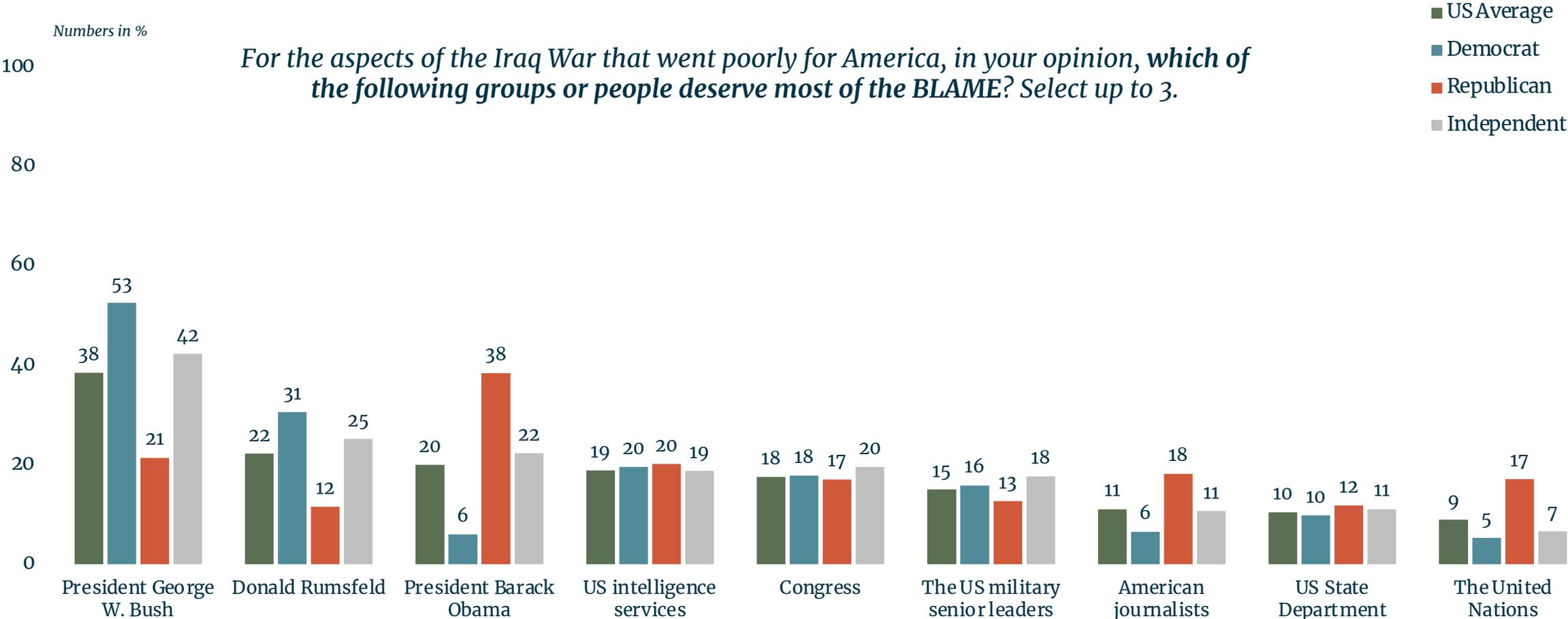
Veterans are slightly less likely than Americans without a military connection to say there was no aspect of the war that went well for America.



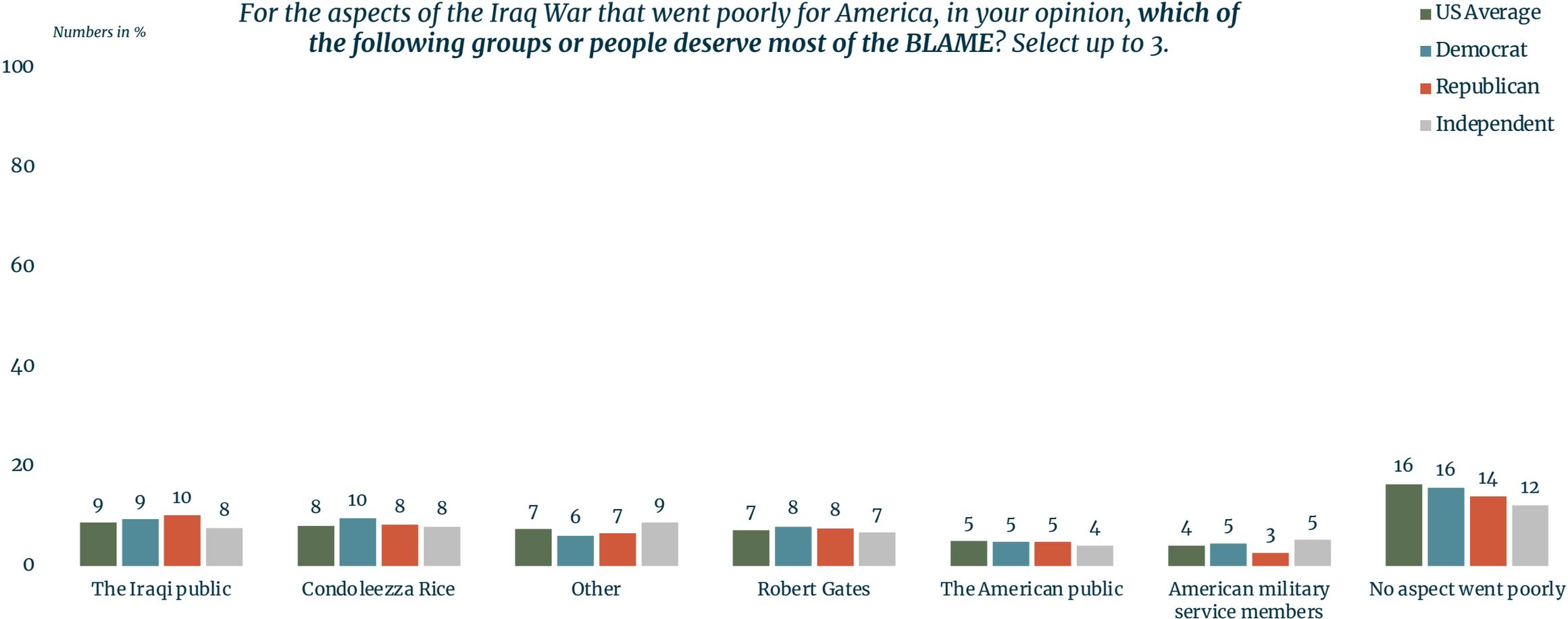
More than one third of Americans believe that President George W. Bush deserves most of the blame for the aspects of the Iraq War that went poorly for America, followed by former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and President Barack Obama.



Over half of Democrats blame President George W. Bush, while almost 4 in 10 Republicans blame President Barack Obama.

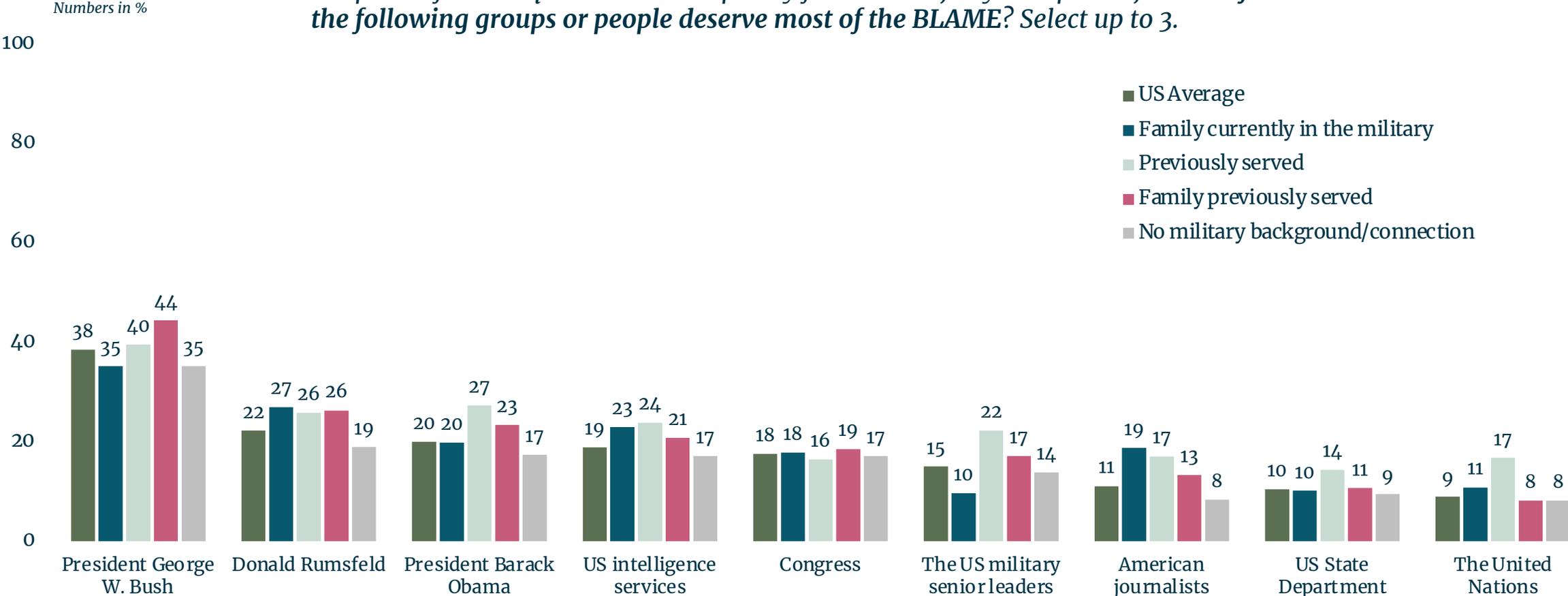


Only 16 percent of Americans say, “there was no aspect of the Iraq War that went poorly for America.”



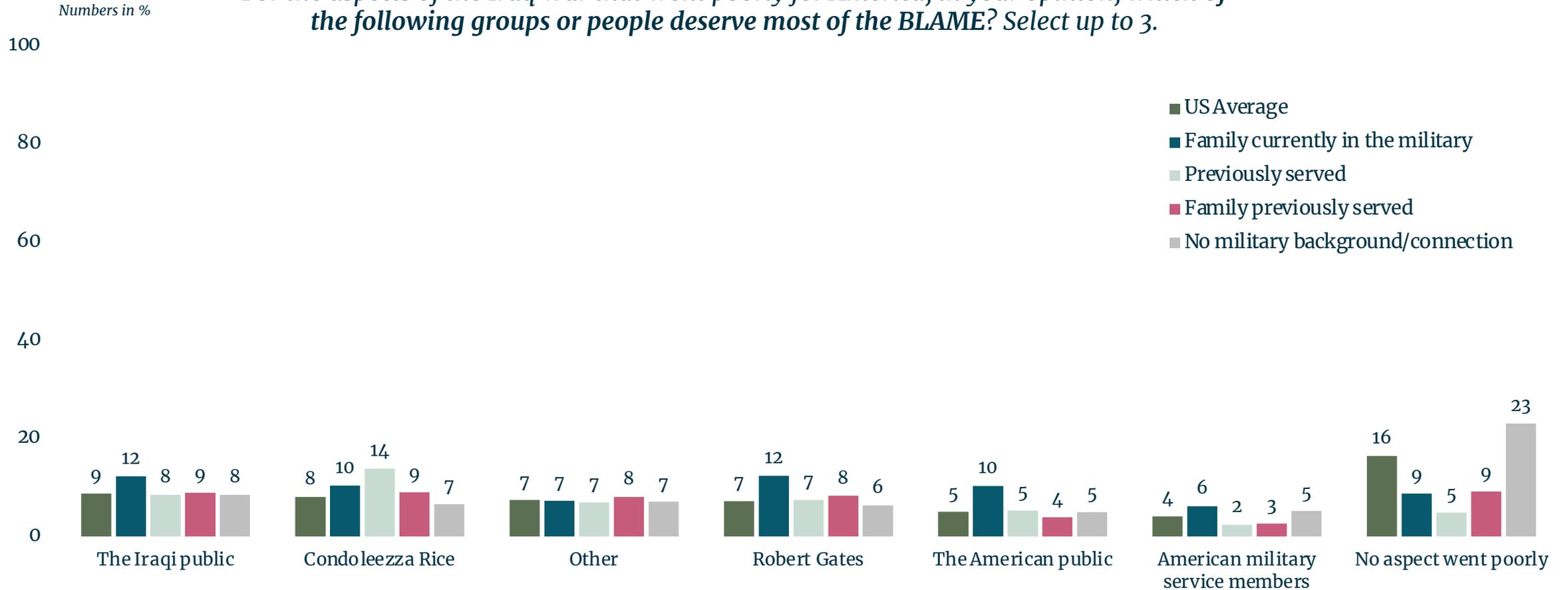
Attributions of blame vary only slightly across military status.

For the aspects of the Iraq War that went poorly for America, in your opinion, which of the following groups or people deserve most of the BLAME? Select up to 3.



23 percent of Americans without a military connection say that there was no aspect of the Iraq War that went poorly for America, compared to 5 percent of veterans.

For the aspects of the Iraq War that went poorly for America, in your opinion, which of the following groups or people deserve most of the BLAME? Select up to 3.

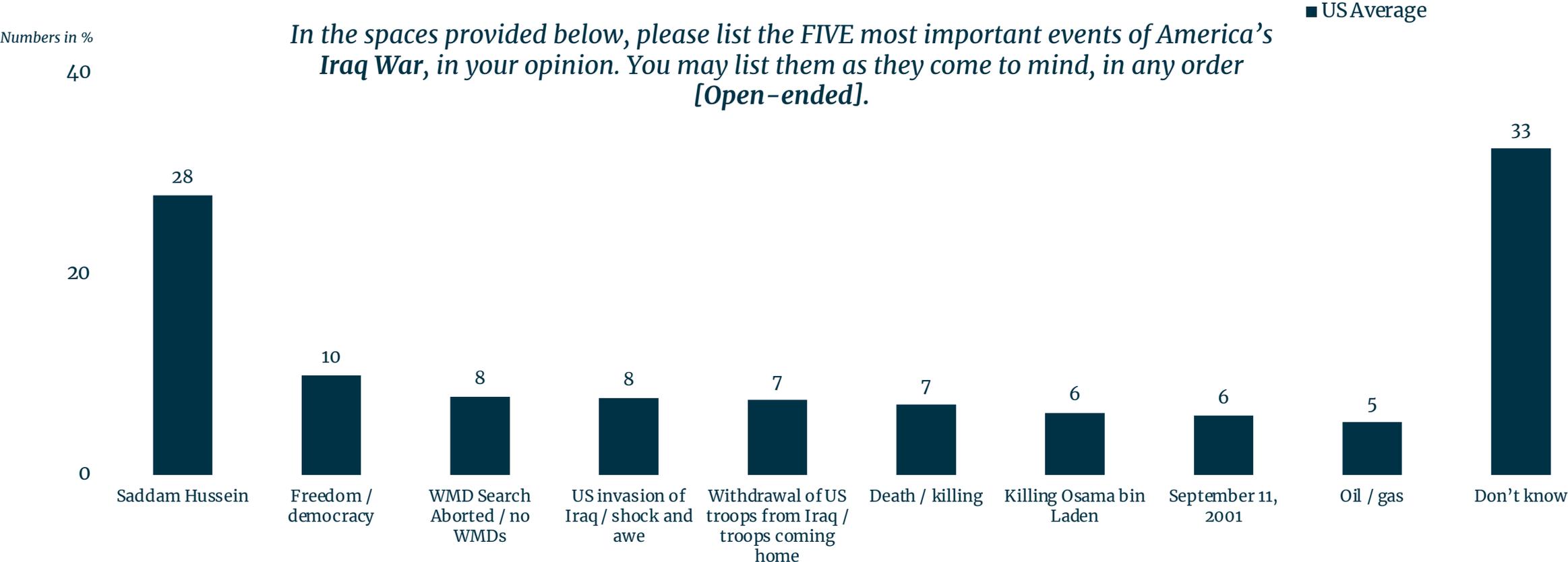


Memories of the Iraq War

Most Americans' level of familiarity with the Iraq War is limited. Americans remember the invasion, the capture of Saddam Hussein, and the withdrawal in 2011, but memories of other significant events are more muted.

Note: Please see the glossary at the end of the report for brief descriptions of the major events from the Iraq War referenced in this section.

When asked to provide the five most important events of the Iraq War, Americans cited Saddam Hussein, the general idea of freedom, and the lack of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). A plurality of Americans cannot name five events from the war.

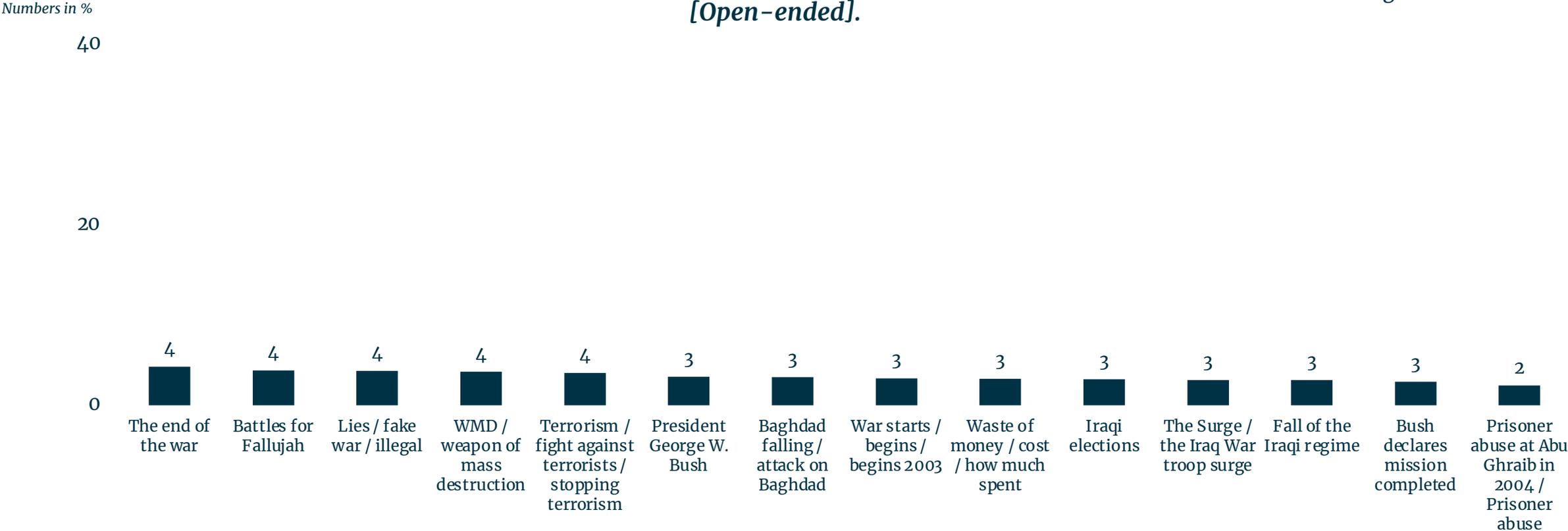


Note: Open-ended responses to this survey question were coded manually by YouGov into comprehensive thematic categories that have been abridged here. Total responses do not sum to 100 percent since survey respondents provided multiple answers to the question. Not shown: "Other" responses: 45%.

And only small fractions of Americans recall specific events, such as the Battles for Fallujah, the Iraqi elections, or prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib.

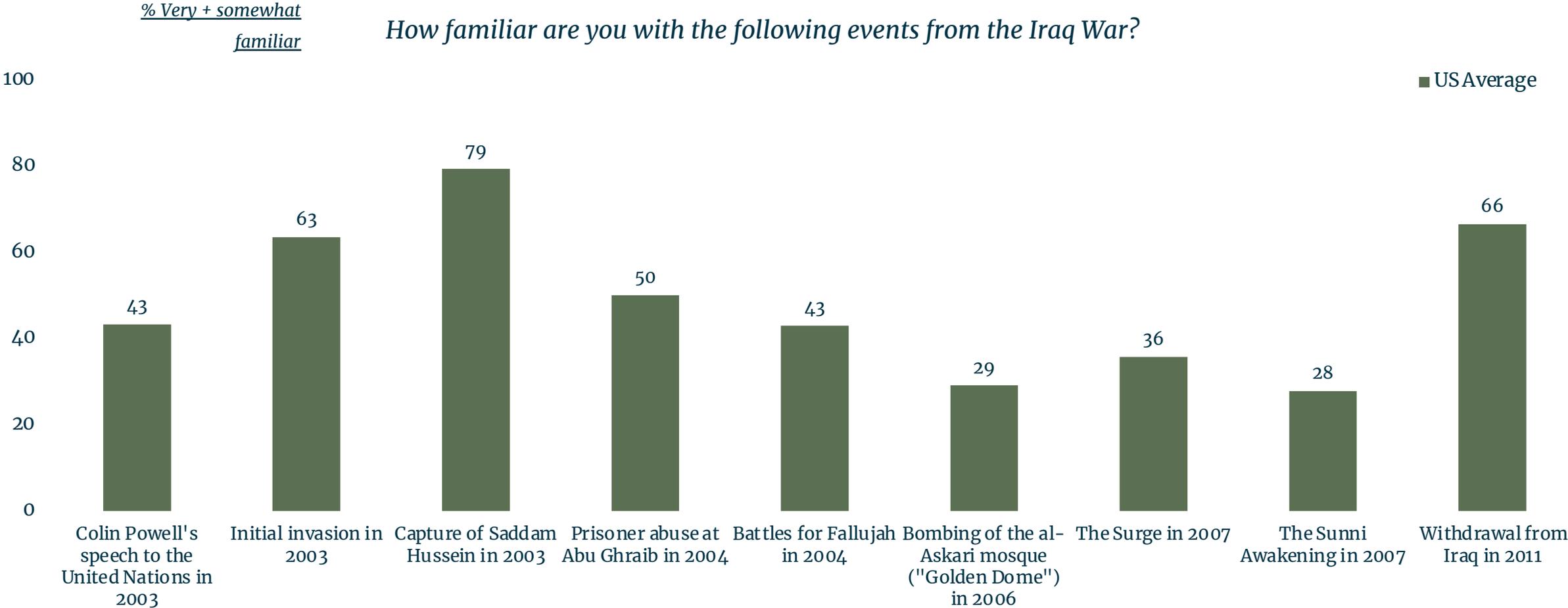
In the spaces provided below, please list the FIVE most important events of America's Iraq War, in your opinion. You may list them as they come to mind, in any order [Open-ended].

■ USAverage

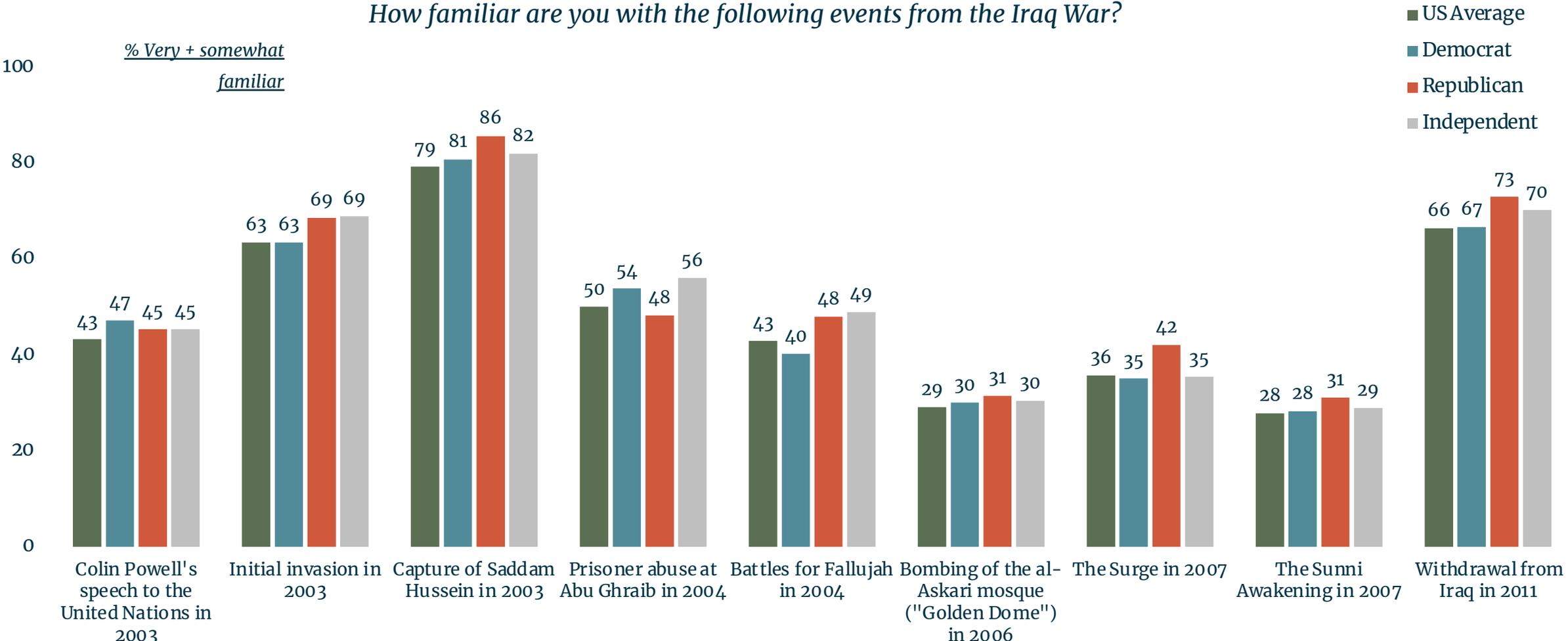


Note: Open-ended responses to this survey question were coded manually by YouGov into comprehensive thematic categories that have been abridged here. Total responses do not sum to 100 percent since survey respondents provided multiple answers to the question. Not shown: "Other" responses: 45%.

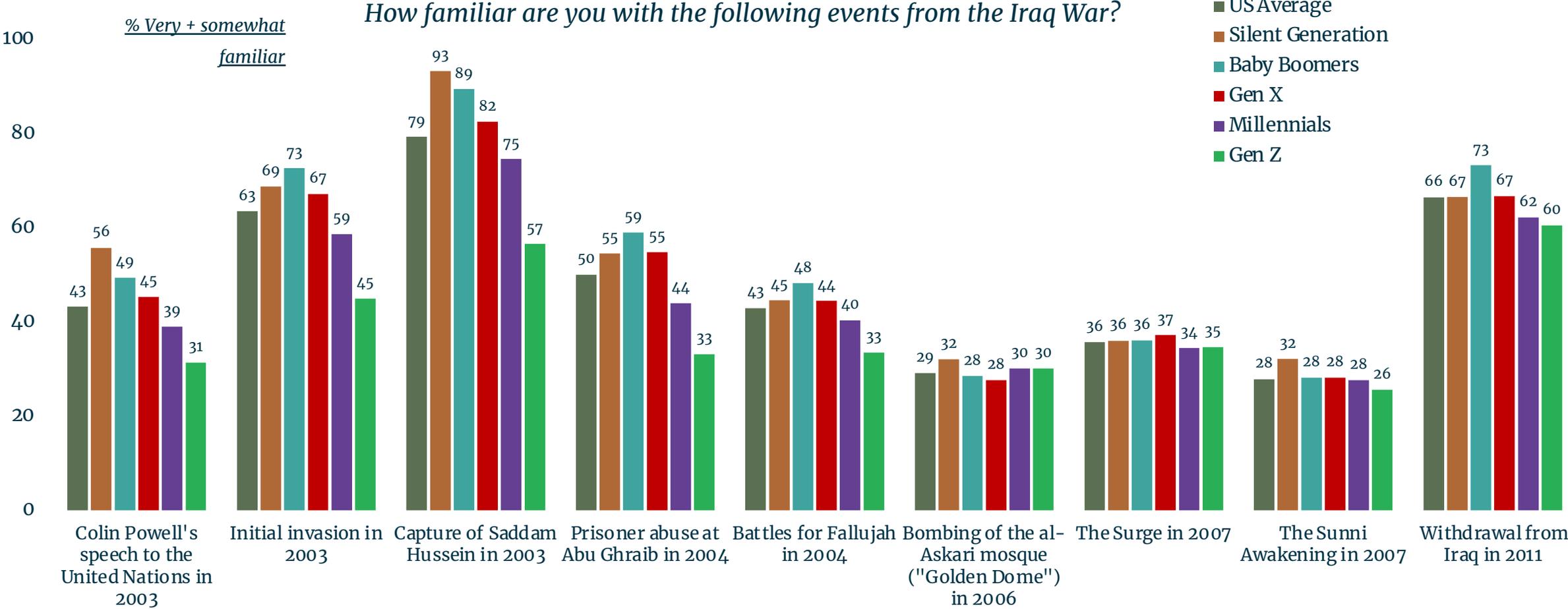
When presented with a list of select major events from the Iraq War, most Americans say they are familiar with the initial invasion, the capture of Saddam Hussein in 2003, and the withdrawal from Iraq in 2011.



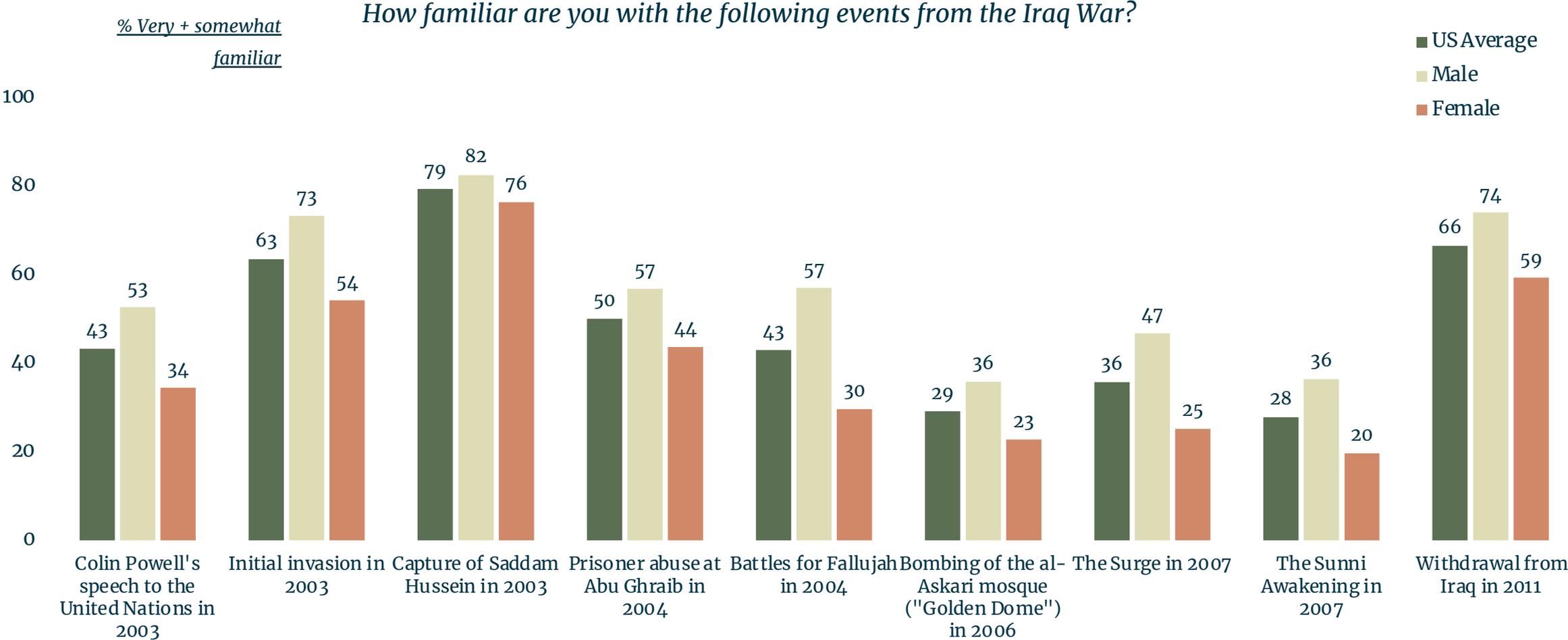
There is little variation in self-reported familiarity by political ideology.



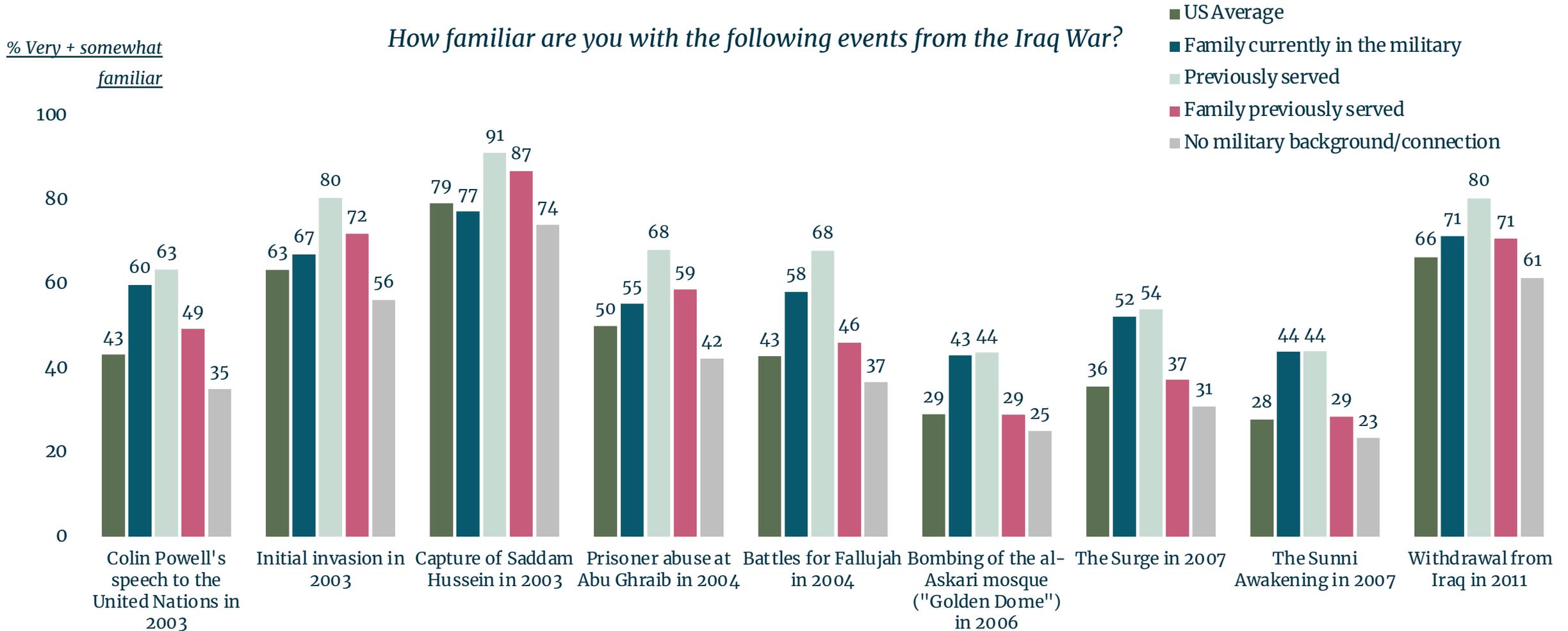
Americans from older generation are much more likely than Gen Z and Millennials to say they are familiar with events from the Iraq War.



Men are more likely than women to say they are very or somewhat familiar with events from the Iraq War.

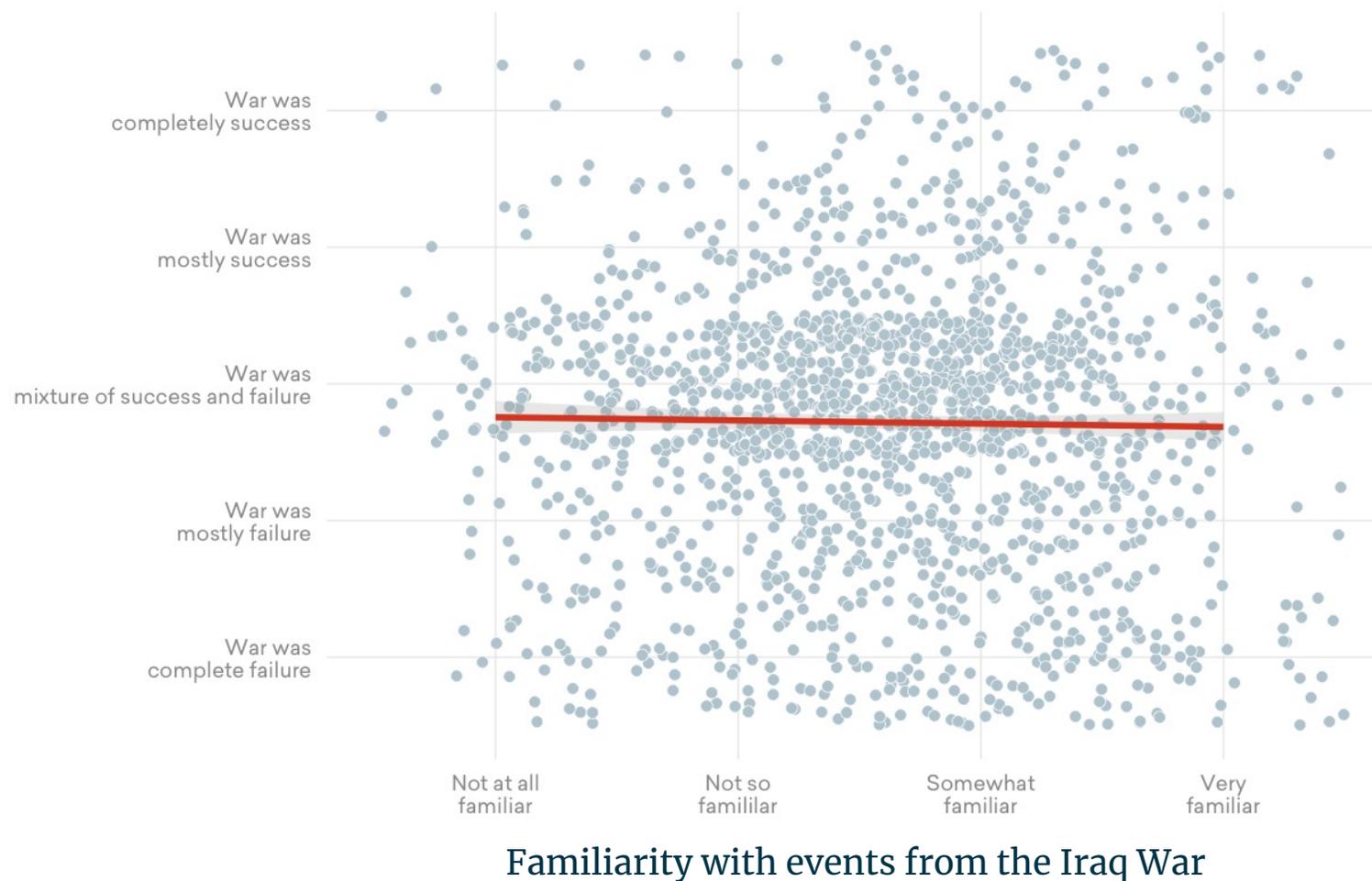


Compared to civilians with no military connection, veterans are much more likely to say they are very or somewhat familiar with events from the Iraq War.



There is little to no relationship between familiarity with the Iraq War and assessment of whether the war was a success or a failure.

Assessment of the Iraq War



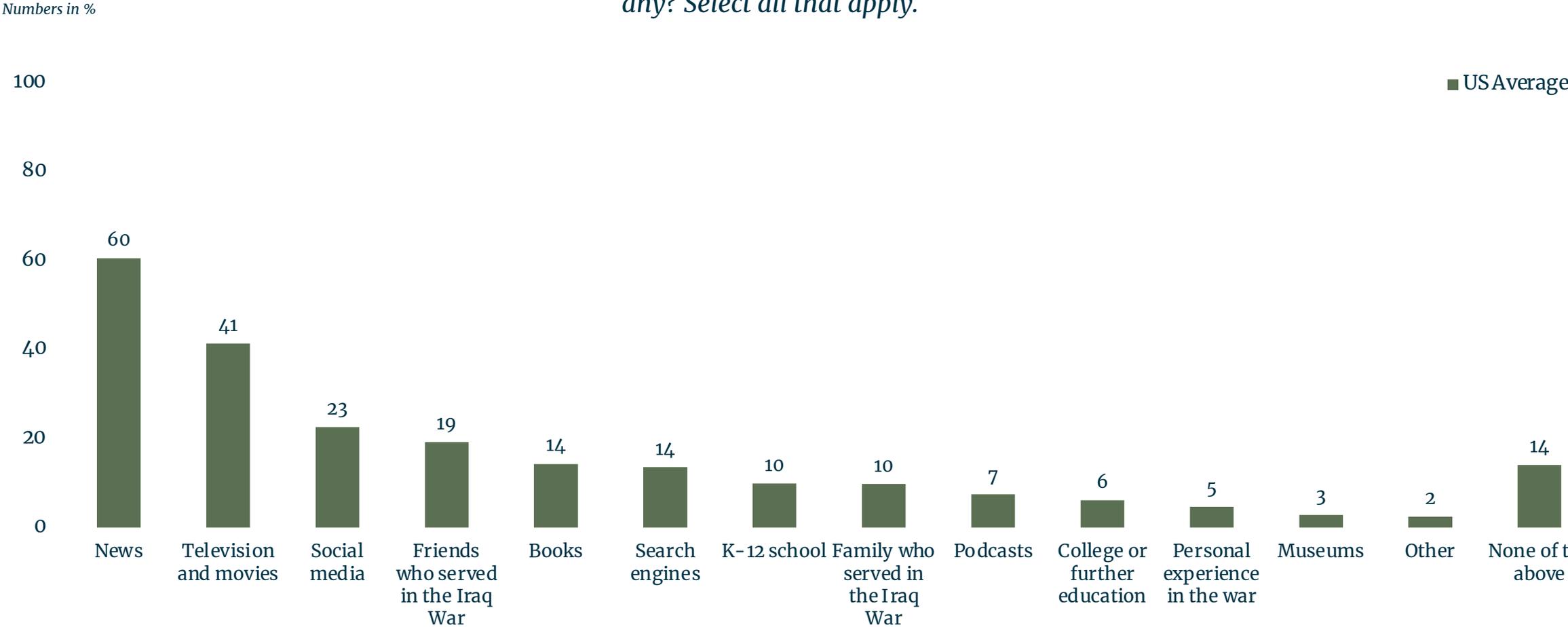
Note: The familiarity scale on the x-axis represents the average self-reported levels of familiarity with key events from the Iraq War on slide 42.

Sources of Knowledge

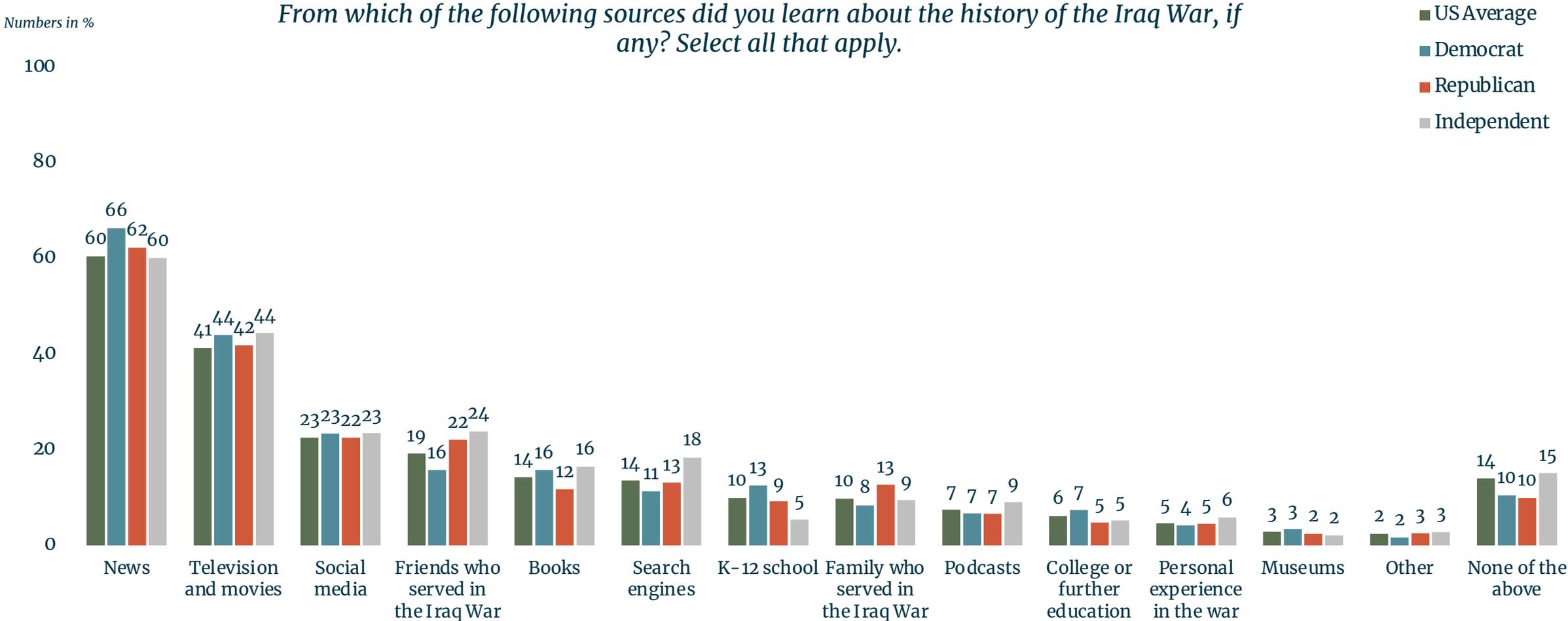
There is significant variation on sources of knowledge about the Iraq War by generation.

Most Americans say they learned about the history of the Iraq War from news, followed by TV and movies.

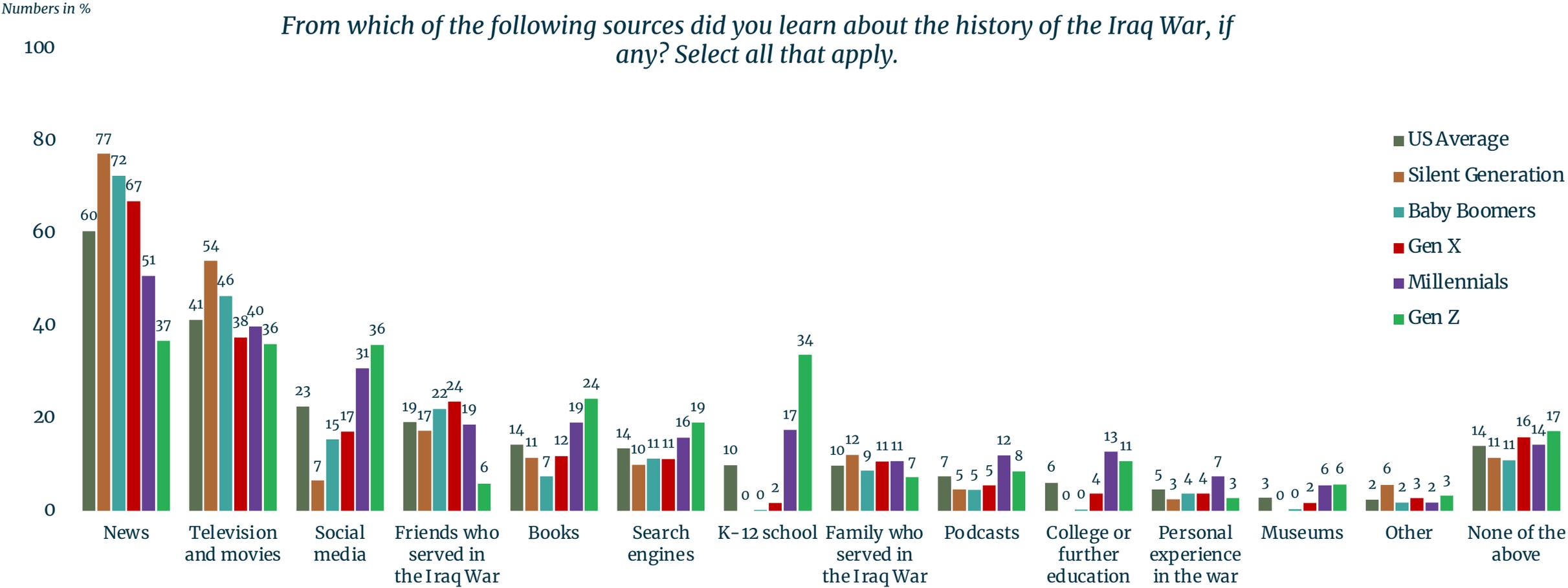
From which of the following sources did you learn about the history of the Iraq War, if any? Select all that apply.



There is little variation by party affiliation.



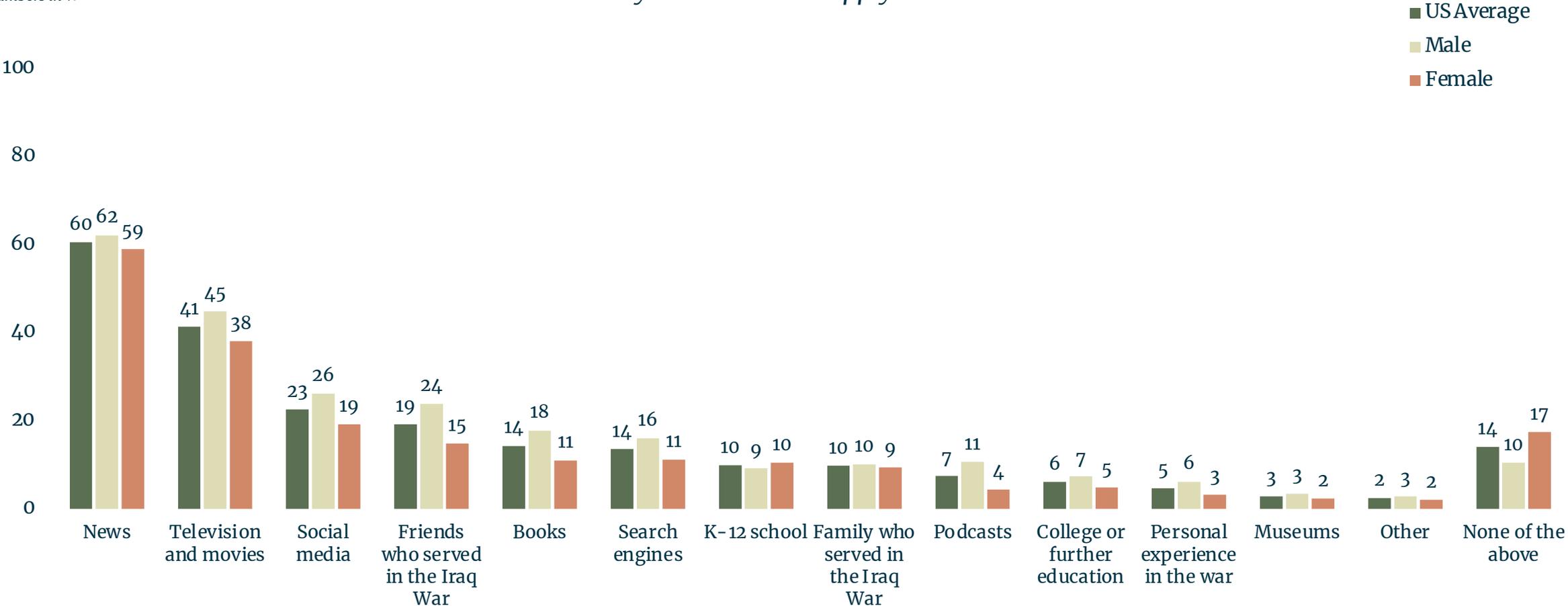
Older Americans are much more likely than younger Americans to have learned about the war’s history on the news, whereas younger Americans are more likely to cite social media and K-12 school as sources of knowledge on the war.



There is little variation by gender.

From which of the following sources did you learn about the history of the Iraq War, if any? Select all that apply.

Numbers in %



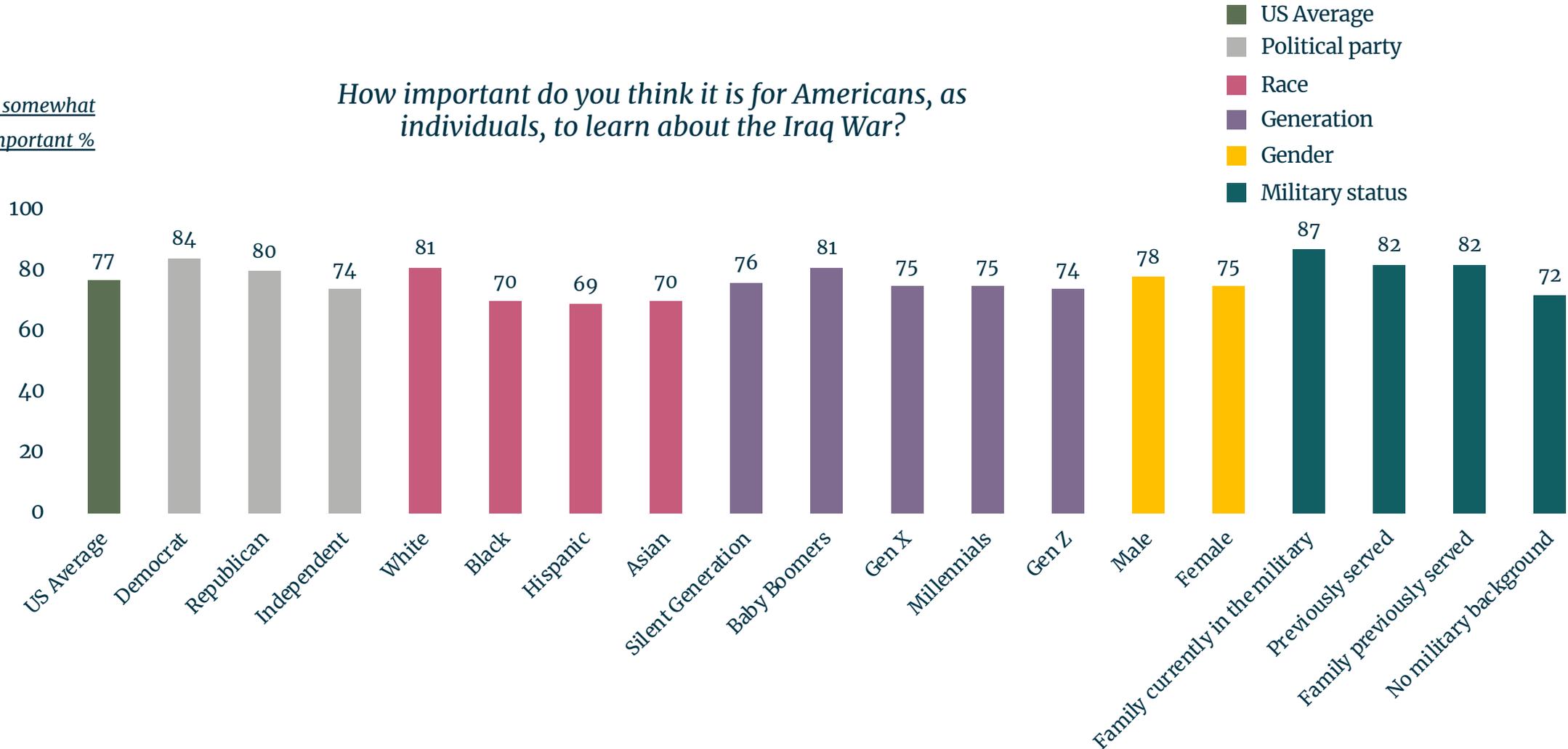
Learning from the Iraq War

Americans are united in saying it is important for individuals to learn about the Iraq War, but hold mixed views on whether our society needs to do more to publicly learn from the war.

Most Americans, regardless of demographics, political affiliation and military background, feel that it is important for individuals to learn about the Iraq War.

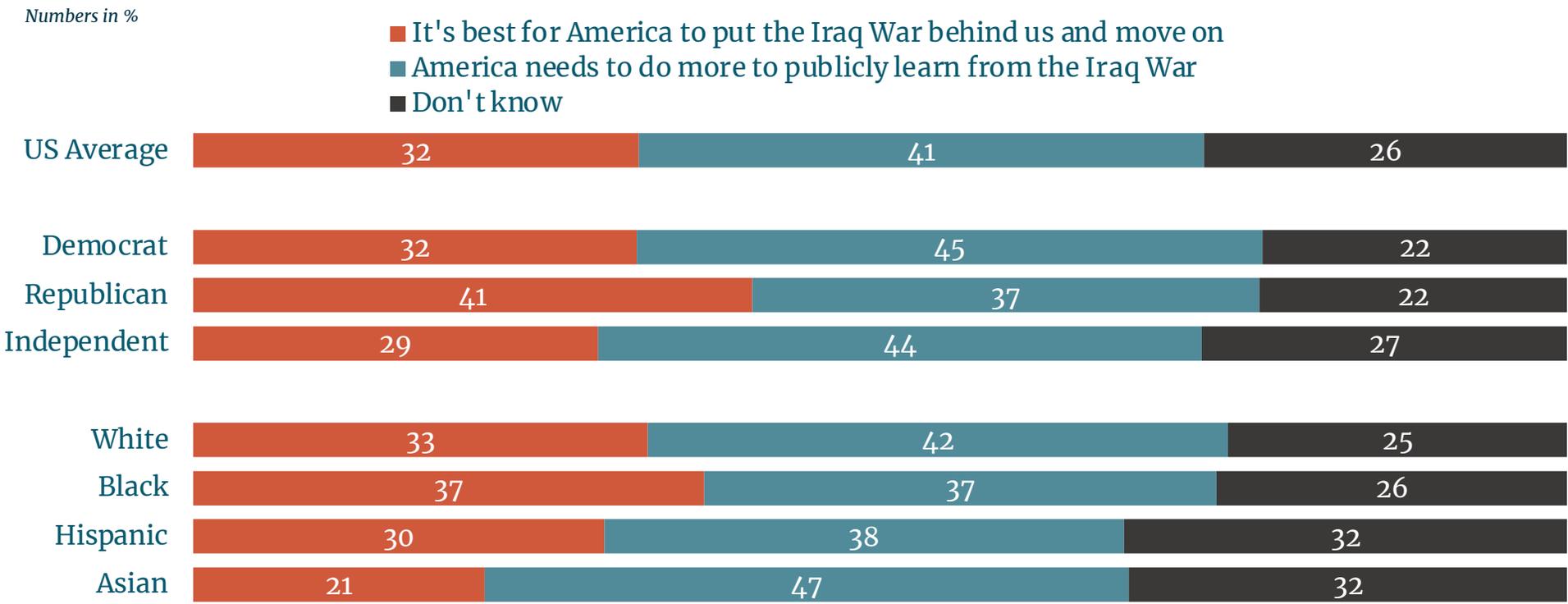
Very + somewhat important %

How important do you think it is for Americans, as individuals, to learn about the Iraq War?



However, Americans are divided on whether the country should do more to publicly learn from the Iraq War. 4 in 10 agree, compared to 3 in 10 Americans who it is best to put the Iraq War behind and move on.

Which of the following statements do you agree with more?

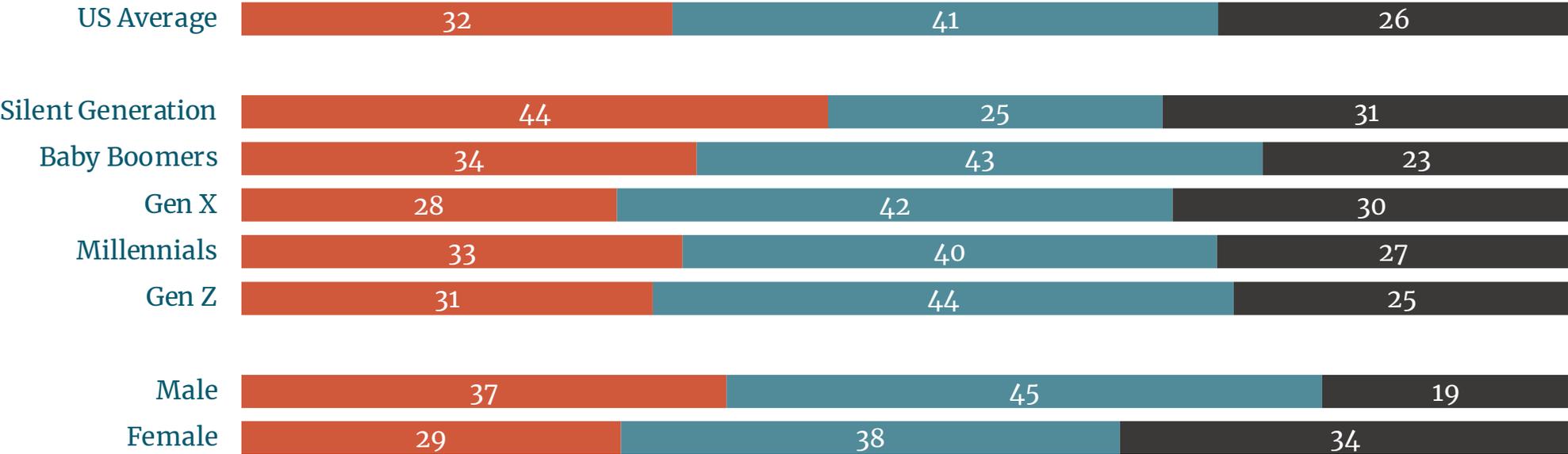


Americans within each generation are divided on whether to move on or learn more from the Iraq War.

Numbers in %

Which of the following statements do you agree with more?

- It's best for America to put the Iraq War behind us and move on
- America needs to do more to publicly learn from the Iraq War
- Don't know

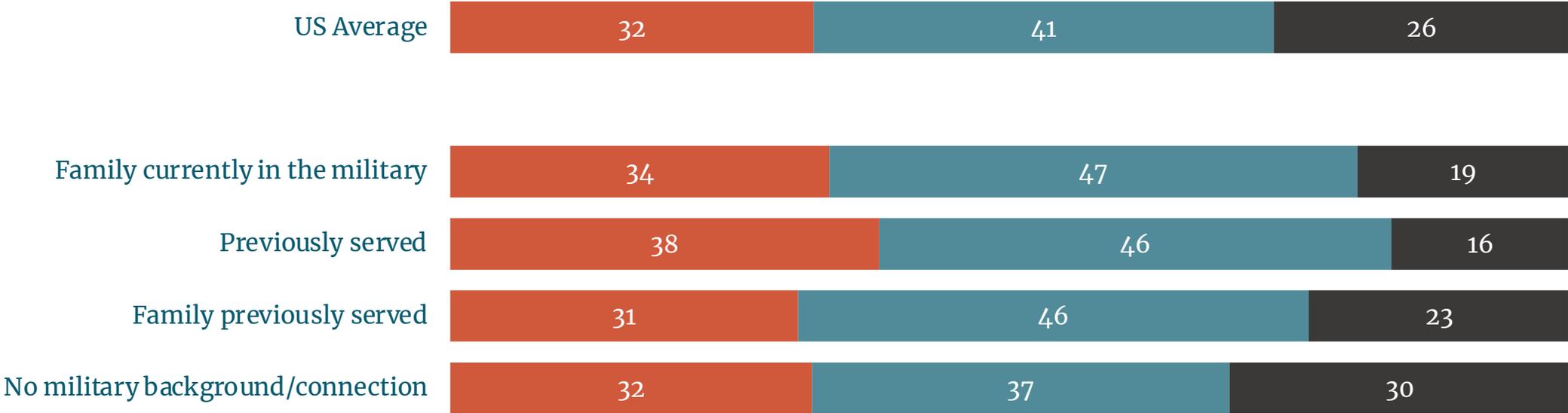


Americans with military connections, including veterans, are divided on whether to do more to publicly learn from the war or to put it behind us and move on.

Numbers in %

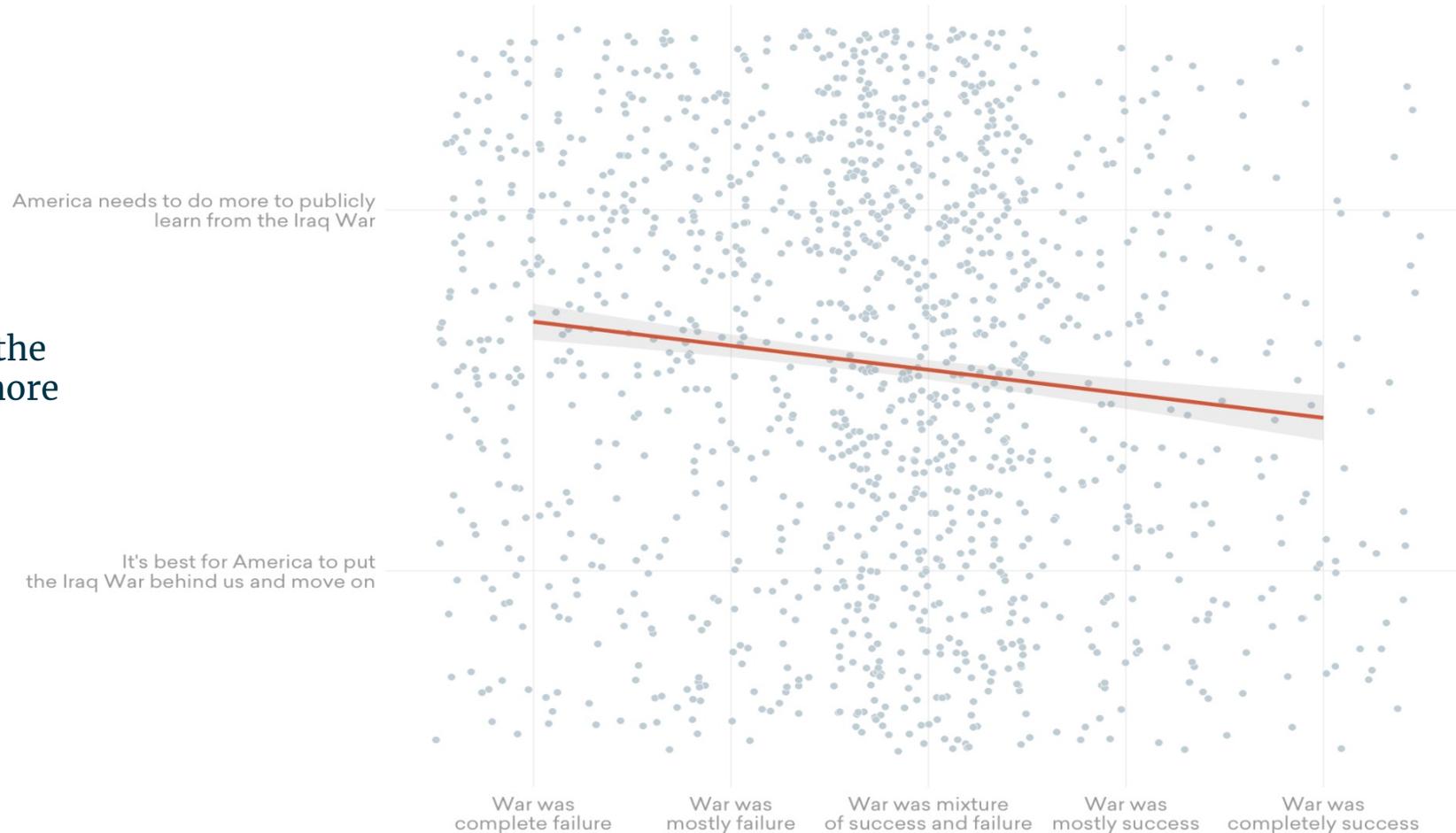
Which of the following statements do you agree with more?

- It's best for America to put the Iraq War behind us and move on
- America needs to do more to publicly learn from the Iraq War
- Don't know



Americans who view the Iraq War as a failure are more likely to say that we need to publicly learn more from the Iraq War, while those who see it as a success are more likely to say that we need to move on.

Move on from the War vs. Learn more



Point-biserial correlation = $-.12$, $p < .01$

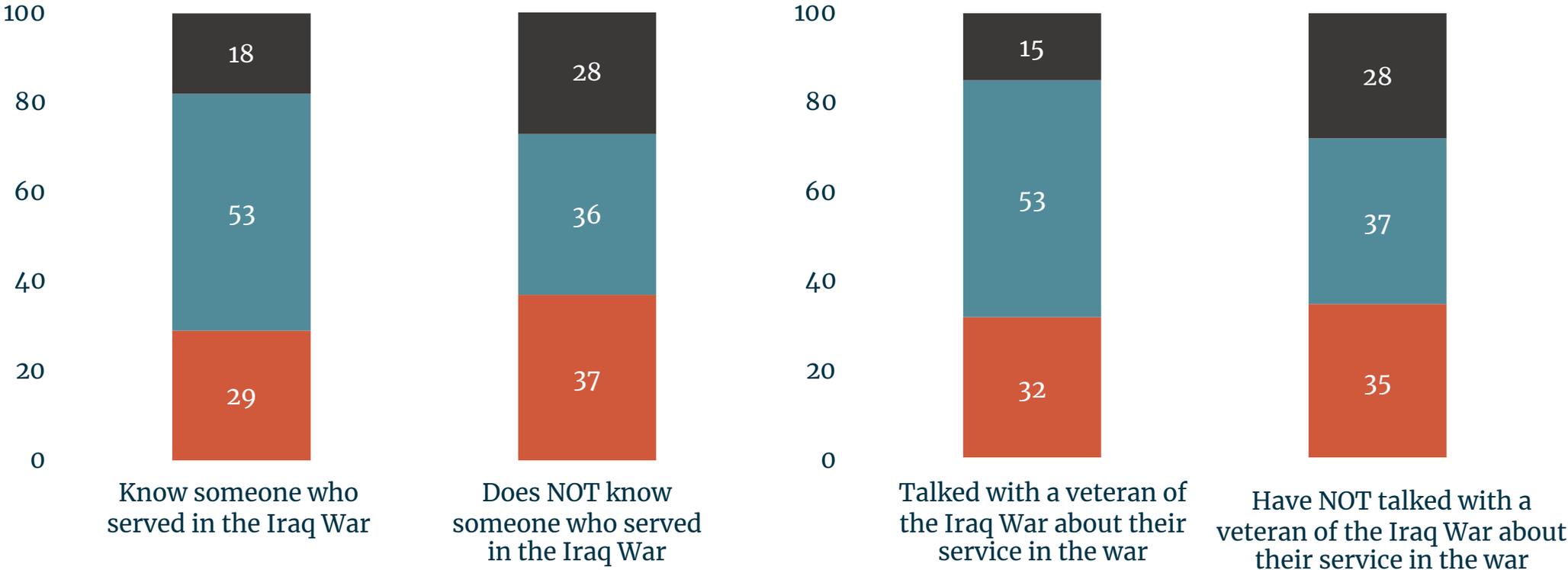
Assessment of the Iraq War

Americans who know or have talked with veterans of the Iraq War are more likely to say that America needs to do more to publicly learn from the war.

Which of the following statements do you agree with more?

Numbers in %

- Don't know
- America needs to do more to publicly learn from the Iraq War
- It's best for America to put the Iraq War behind us and move on



Veterans and Citizens

Americans have complex views towards Iraq War veterans.

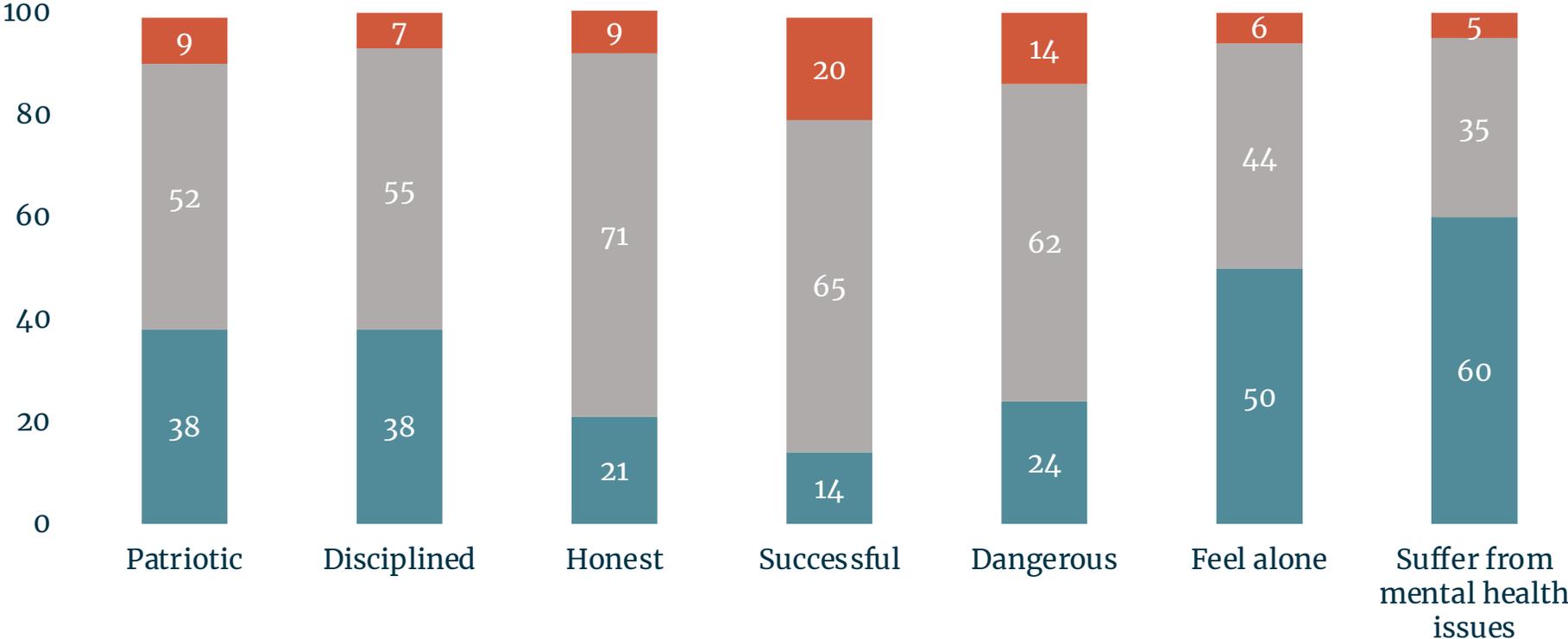
Americans are likely to see Iraq War veterans as patriotic and disciplined but also lonely and suffering from mental health issues.

Most Americans feel that Iraq War veterans are more likely than the average American to suffer from mental health issues and feel alone.

Compared to the average American, do you think veterans of the Iraq War are more or less likely to exhibit the following qualities, or is it about the same?

Numbers in %

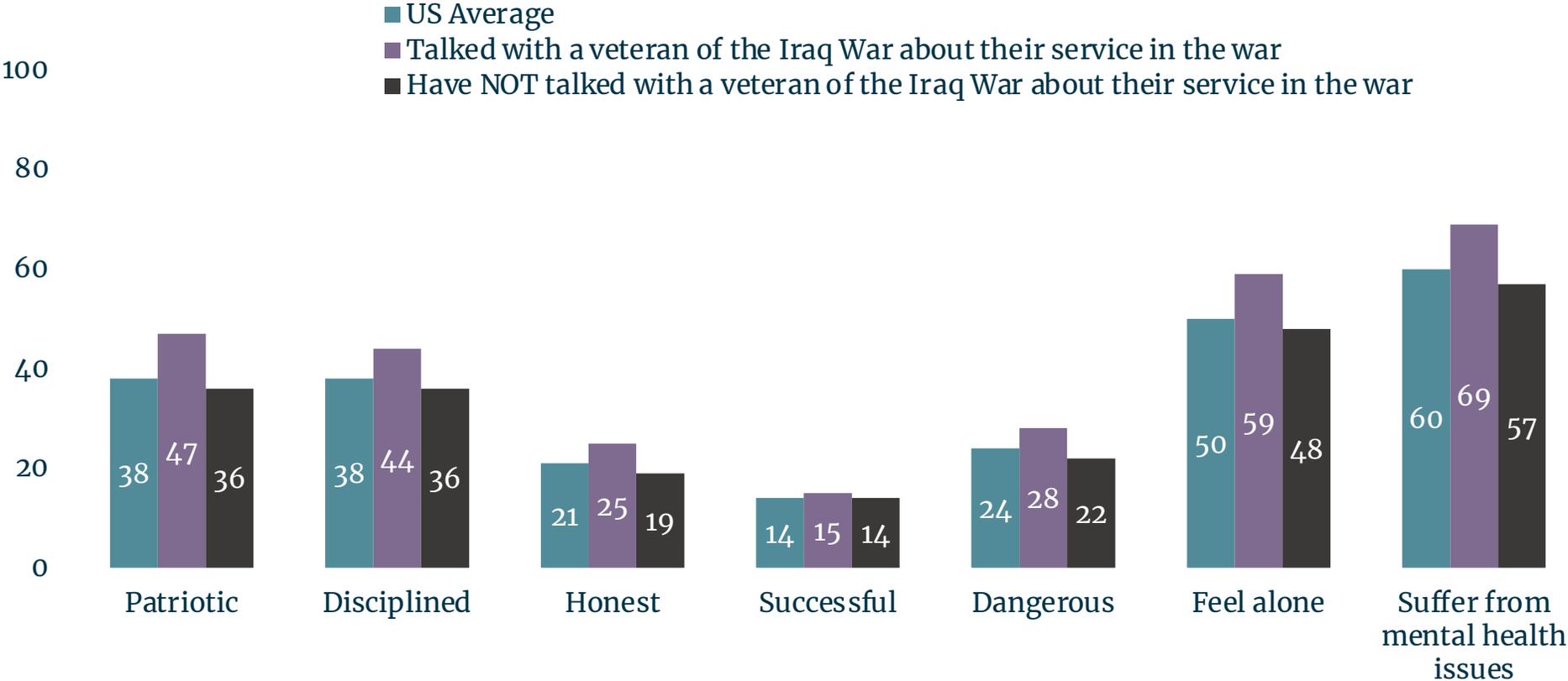
■ More likely among veterans of the Iraq War ■ About the same ■ Less likely among veterans of the Iraq War



Americans who have talked with veterans of the Iraq War are more likely to say that, compared to the average American, Iraq War veterans are likely *more* patriotic, disciplined, lonely, and suffering from mental health issues.

*% of Americans who believe that, compared to the average American, veterans of the Iraq War are **MORE LIKELY** to exhibit the following qualities*

Numbers in %

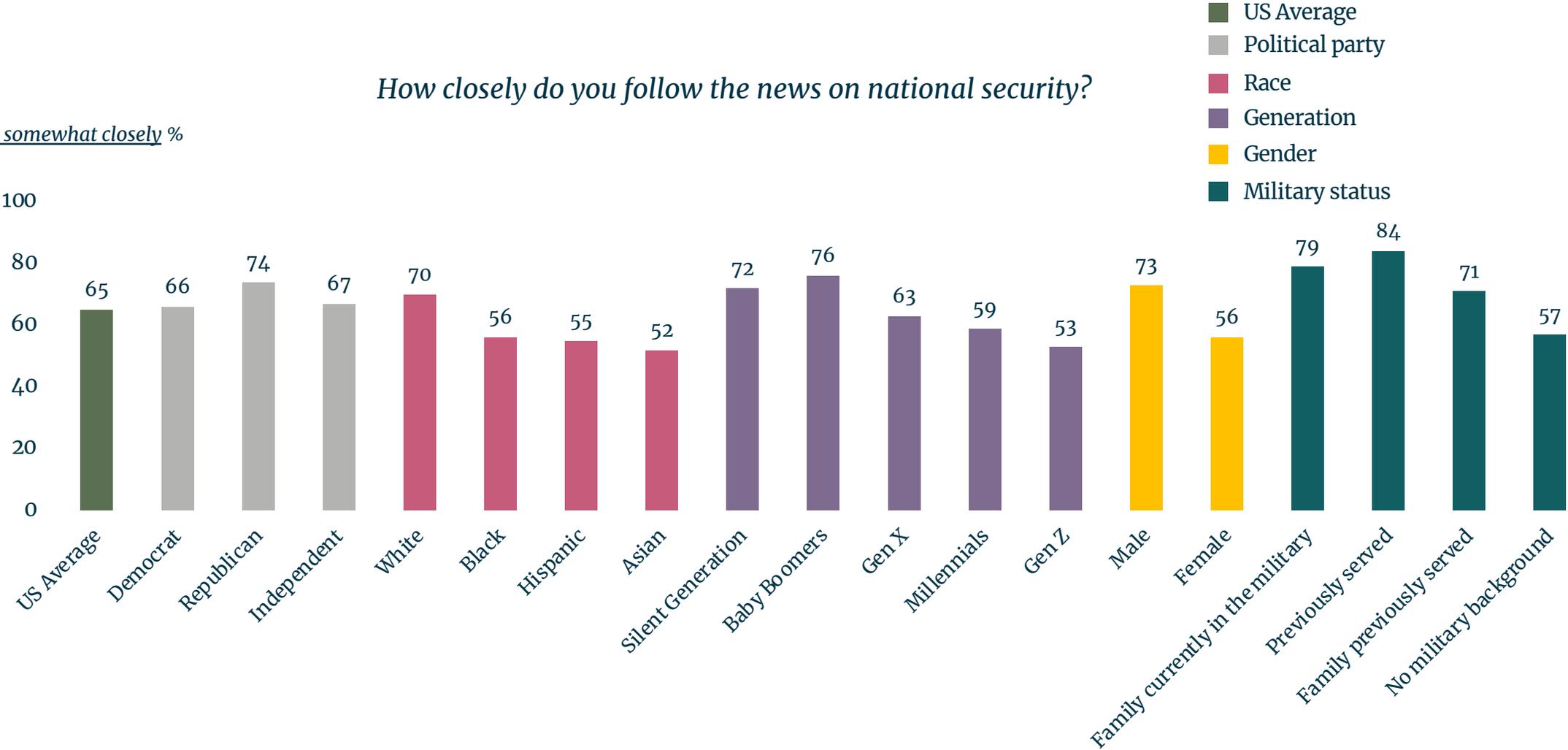


American Society and War

About two thirds of Americans say they closely follow national security news, though there is variation by race, age, gender, and military status.

How closely do you follow the news on national security?

Very + somewhat closely %

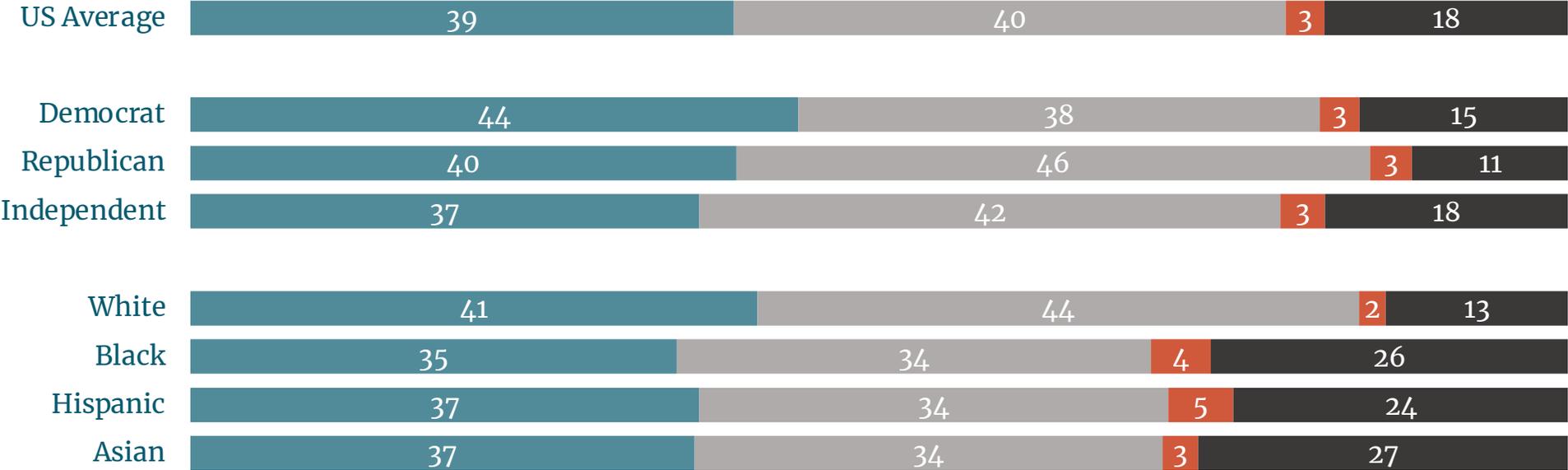


Around 4 in 10 Americans say they would follow national security news more closely if the military draft was brought back, while another 4 in 10 Americans say it would have no impact on their news consumption.

Numbers in %

Bringing back the military draft would...

- Increase how closely I follow national security news
- Have no impact on how closely I follow national security news
- Decrease how closely I follow national security news
- Don't know

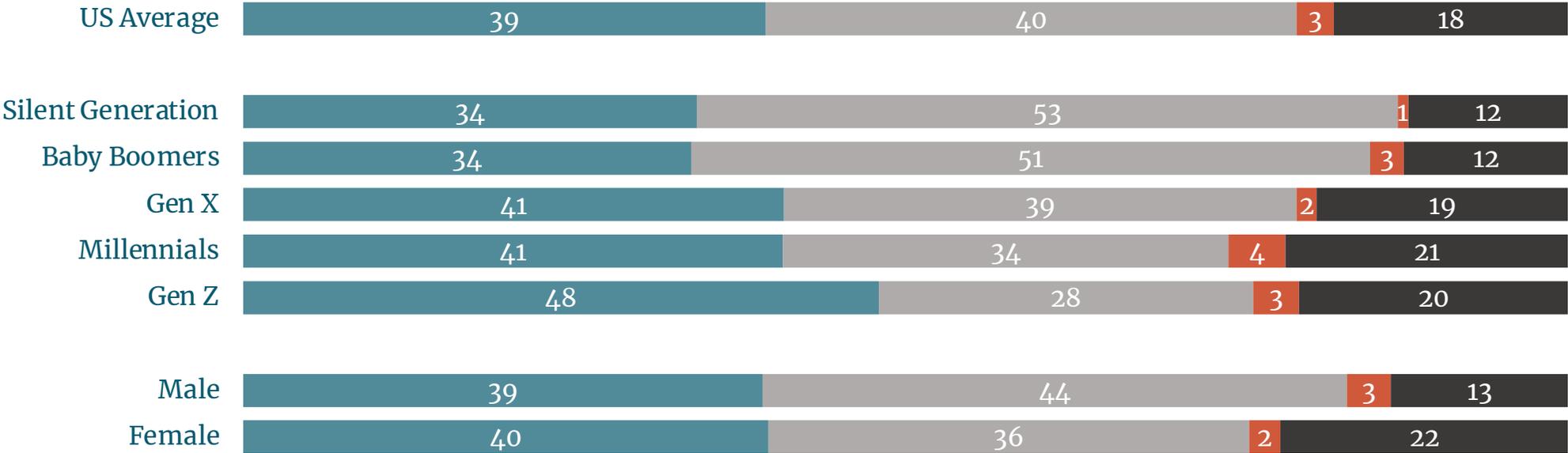


Americans from the younger generations say they would follow national security news more closely if the draft was brought back.

Numbers in %

Bringing back the military draft would...

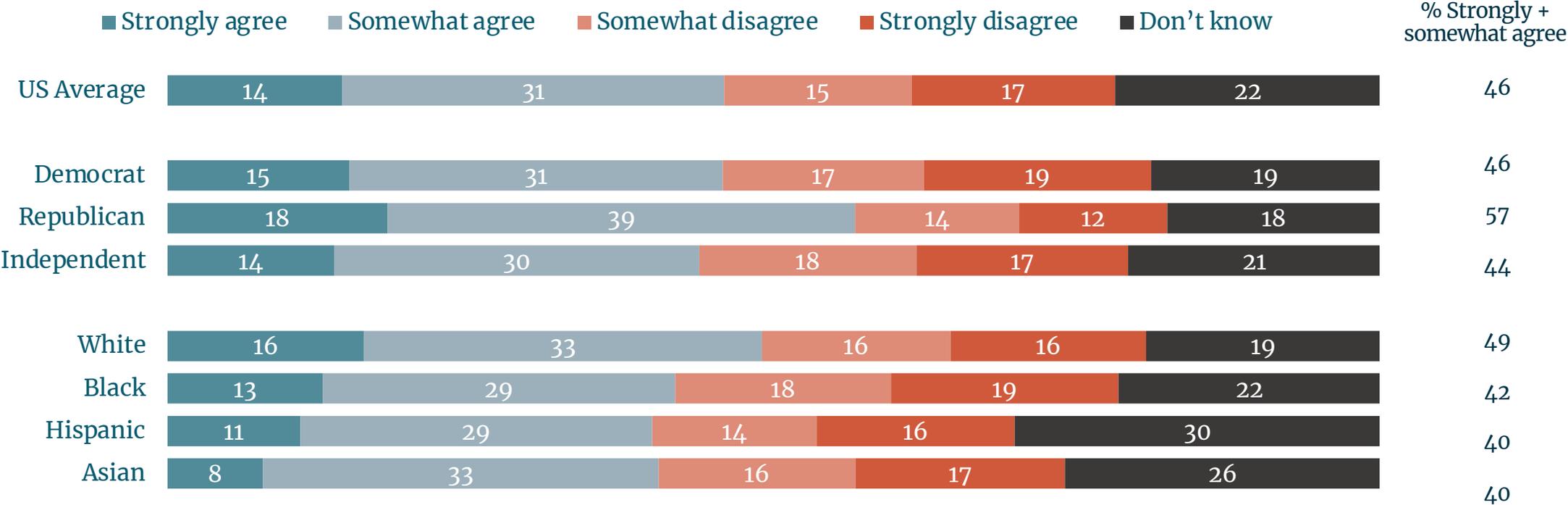
- Increase how closely I follow national security news
- Have no impact on how closely I follow national security news
- Decrease how closely I follow national security news
- Don't know



Americans are unsure whether all Americans should be required to sacrifice in some form when the country is at war. Republicans are more likely than Democrats to feel that all Americans should be required to sacrifice during wartime.

Numbers in %

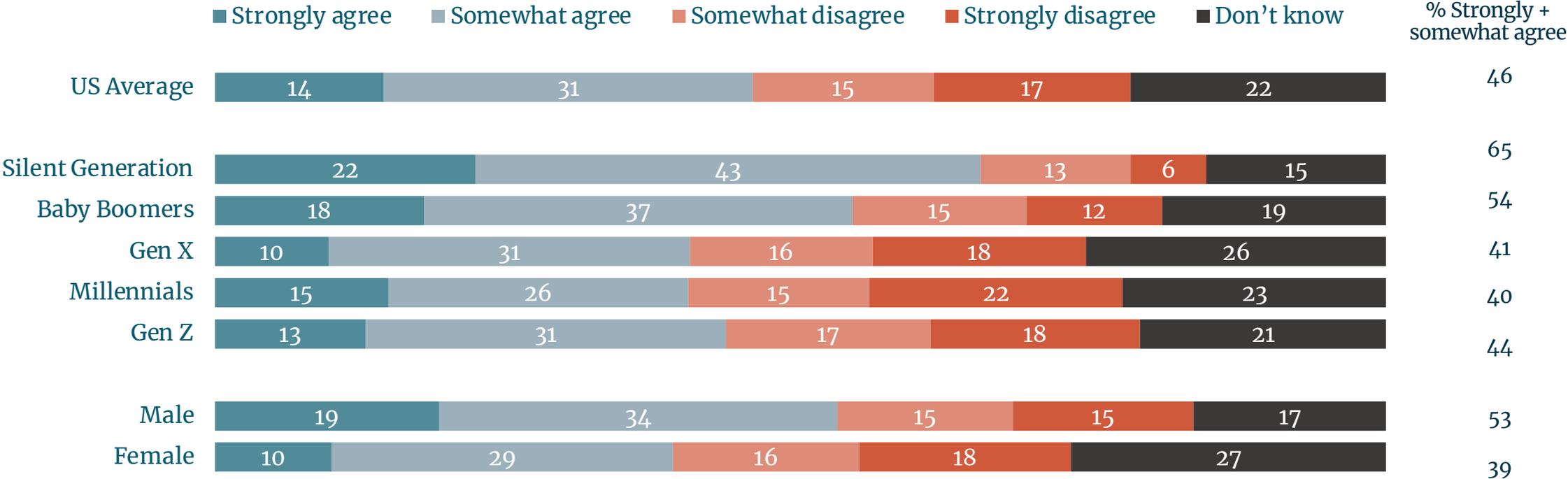
All Americans should be required to sacrifice in some form when the country is at war.



Men and older Americans are more likely than women and younger Americans to say all Americans should be required to sacrifice in some form when the country is at war.

Numbers in %

All Americans should be required to sacrifice in some form when the country is at war.

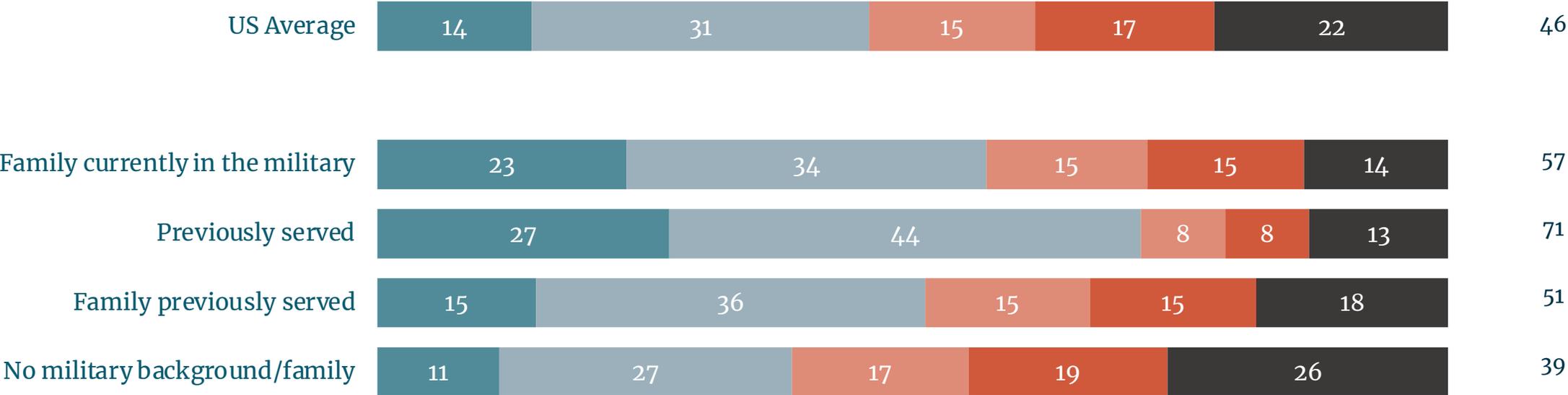


Veterans are much more likely than Americans with no military connection to say that all Americans should be required to sacrifice in some form when the country is at war.

Numbers in %

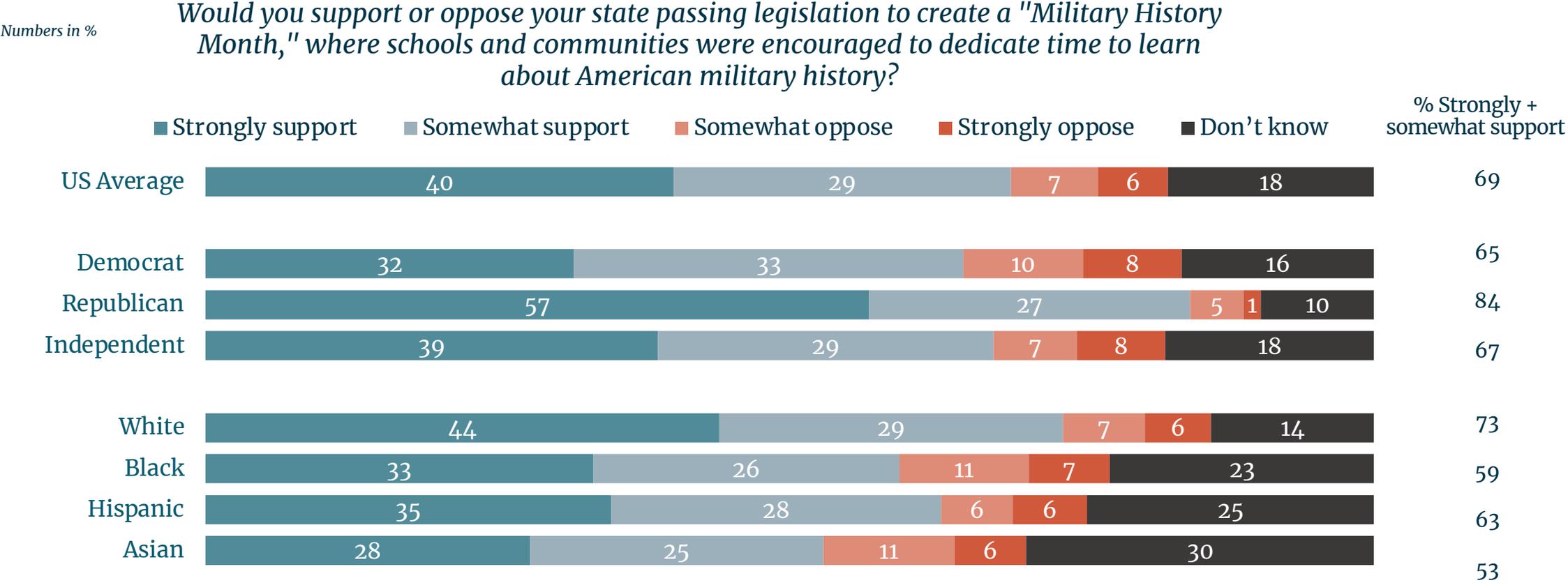
All Americans should be required to sacrifice in some form when the country is at war.

■ Strongly agree
 ■ Somewhat agree
 ■ Somewhat disagree
 ■ Strongly disagree
 ■ Don't know
 % Strongly + somewhat agree

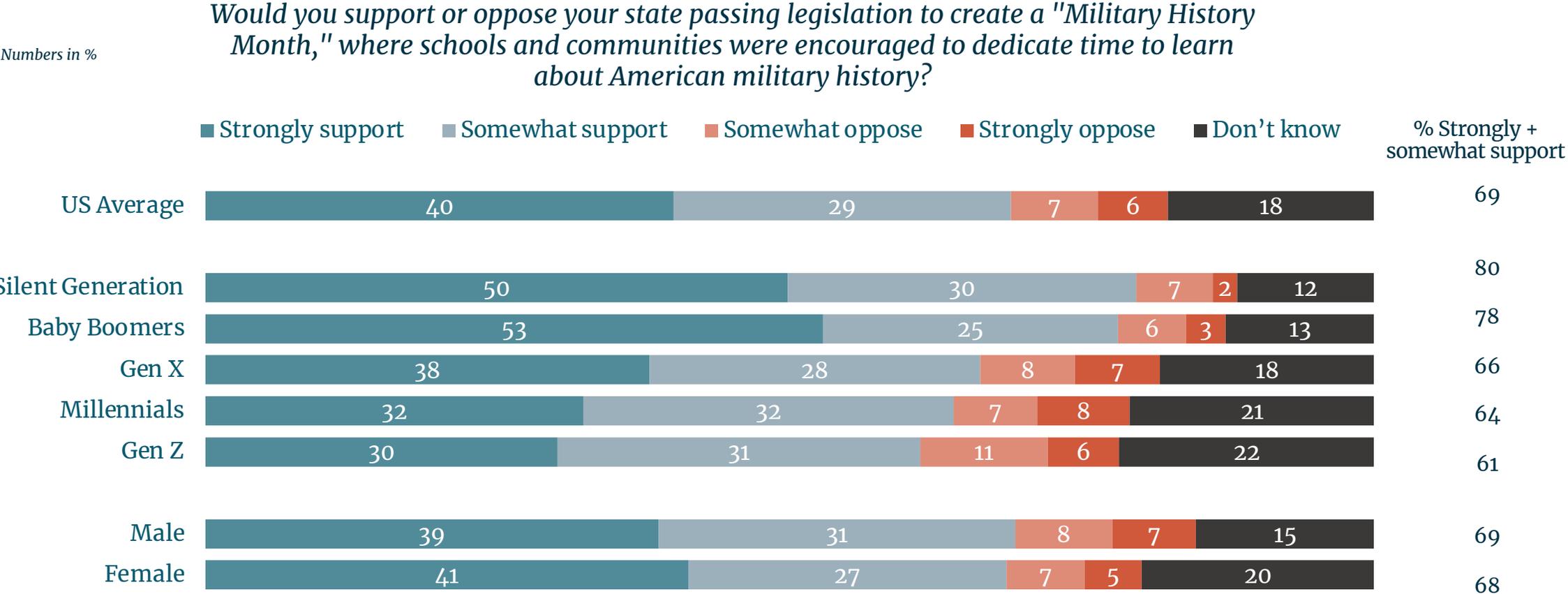


Americans across the board support the idea of their states adopting a “Military History Month,” where schools and communities are encouraged to learn about military history.

Over two thirds of Americans support creating a “Military History Month” that encourages schools and local communities to learn about American military history.



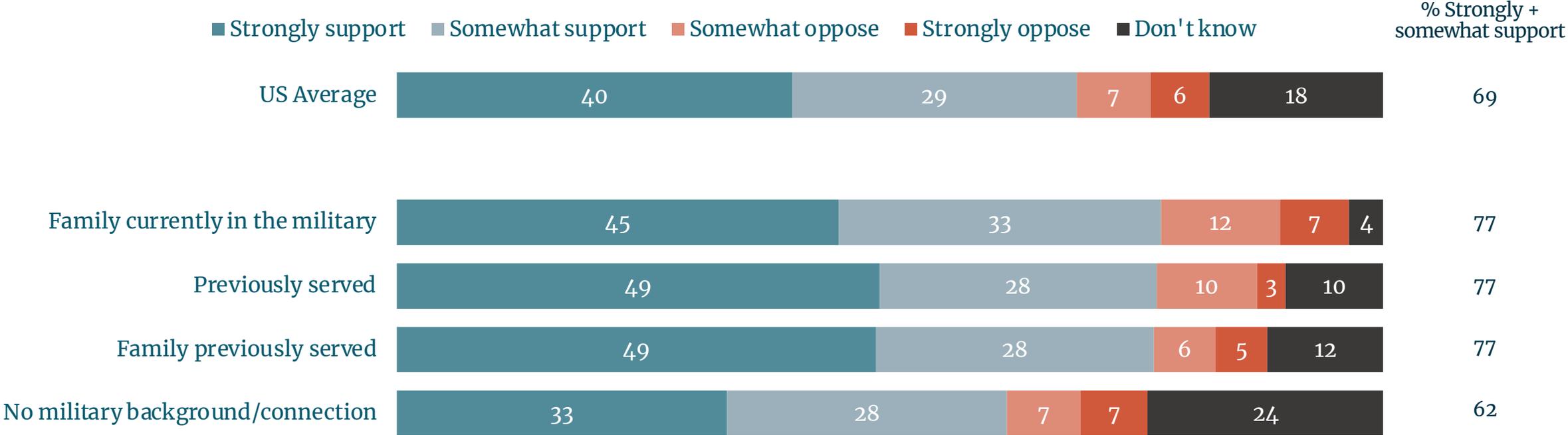
The majority of Americans across generations support creating a “Military History Month,” although older Americans are more likely to strongly agree with the idea.



Veterans and those with family who served are more likely than civilians with no military connection to support creating a “Military History Month.”

Numbers in %

Would you support or oppose your state passing legislation to create a "Military History Month," where schools and communities were encouraged to dedicate time to learn about American military history?



Glossary

GLOSSARY

Colin Powell's speech to the UN in 2003

On February 5, 2003, Secretary of State Powell addressed the UN Security Council in a speech that claimed that Saddam Hussein was intent on producing weapons of mass destruction and posed a threat to international security. This speech, which has since been shown to have relied on faulty intelligence for its most significant claims, was widely seen as a critical and persuasive endorsement of military action against Iraq ([20 years ago, the U.S. warned of Iraq's alleged 'weapons of mass destruction' : NPR](#)).

US Invasion of Iraq

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq became a key focus of U.S. national security interests. On October 11, 2002, Congress authorized President George W. Bush to use force, if necessary, against Saddam Hussein. On March 20, 2003, US and Coalition forces invaded Iraq ([Timeline: Timeline of Iraq war | Reuters](#)).

Capture of Saddam Hussein

On December 13, 2003, American soldiers captured Saddam Hussein. They found him hiding in a small underground chamber near the city of Tikrit ([The U.S. Army in the Iraq War: Volume 1](#), pg. 238).

Prisoner Abuse at Abu Ghraib

In April 2004, 60 Minutes II broke a story about US soldiers abusing detainees at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. The story received widespread media coverage and was seen as a major source of recruitment for anti-coalition forces in Iraq. ([The U.S. Army in the Iraq War: Volume 1](#), pp. 311-312).

GLOSSARY

Battles for Fallujah

The U.S.-led coalition fought two battles in 2004 to secure the city of Fallujah. The first battle, fought in April, was launched in response to the murder of four American contractors by insurgents. In November, the United States launched a second battle to clear the city, known variously as the Second Battle of Fallujah, Operation Phantom Fury, and Operation al Fajr. This second battle ended with the city cleared and under Coalition control by the end of December 2004. The effort was led by the U.S. Marine Corps and was the bloodiest battle of the Iraq war (U.S. Marine Corps University, [Fallujah](#)).

Bombing of the al-Askari mosque in 2006

The al-Askari mosque – one of Shi'a Islam's four holiest shrines, also known as the "Golden Dome Mosque" – was bombed on February 22, 2006 by al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which set off a wave of sectarian violence that claimed the lives of thousands in Iraq ([The U.S. Army in the Iraq War: Volume 1](#), pg. 342 & [UN News](#)).

The Surge (2007 – 2011)

The “Surge” refers to a U.S. military counteroffensive strategy of deploying a surge of U.S. troops (30,000 additional troops to complement the approximately 130,000 troops already deployed) into Iraq in the hopes of dismantling al-Qaeda in Iraq, defeating the insurgency, and ending the war (US Institute of Peace, [Iraq Timeline](#)).

GLOSSARY

The Sunni Awakening in 2007

The violence on the part of al-Qaeda in Iraq eventually led large segments of the Sunni community in Iraq to side with US and Coalition forces and fight against the insurgency, a development referred to as the Sunni Awakening. The Sunni Awakening was made up of the Anbar Awakening and the Awakening councils (i.e., Sons of Iraq program) ([*The Iraqi and AQI Roles in the Sunni Awakening*](#)).

The Withdrawal from Iraq

The final US troops left Iraq on December 18, 2011, ending a war that began in 2003. Military forces were succeeded by a diplomatic mission charged with overseeing American interests. The Council on Foreign Relations summarized the effort by noting that since the start of the war in 2003, "more than one million airmen, soldiers, sailors, and Marines served in the country. The costs of the conflict were high: \$800 billion from the U.S. Department of the Treasury, with nearly 4,500 Americans and well over 100,000 Iraqis killed" ([*Council on Foreign Relations, Timeline: The Iraq War*](#)).



THE VETERANS AND CITIZENS INITIATIVE

Moving Forward Together

Thank you

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