

The Aftereffects of September 11

KEVIN POBST

ONE PHRASE often heard since September 11 is that “the United States has been transformed.” Some significant changes have indeed taken place in the attitudes of Americans to the threat of terrorism and challenges related to it, but opinion polls show that otherwise much has remained the same.

This article examines surveys of American attitudes to a number of major issues from September 11 to the end of January 2002. In addition to exploring views on the war on terrorism, America’s political leadership, and civil liberties, it also reports on responses by the American public to a number of questions asking how September 11 has affected them more personally.

The War against Terrorism

From the time of the Vietnam era, the reluctance of the American public to engage in military intervention overseas has been a constraint on U.S. foreign policy. Since September 11, this constraint has not been in evidence, and opinion polls show a much greater support for military intervention abroad, not only against al Qaeda, but also against countries considered to sponsor terrorism, even if they had no direct connection with the attacks of September 11.

Support for the war against terrorism compares very favorably with support for other U.S. wars of the second half of the twentieth century. More than 90 percent of persons surveyed in polls have regularly expressed approval of the insertion of ground troops into Afghanistan. Approval ratings for the use of ground forces in the Gulf War in 1991 were never this high. After the Gulf War ended and the question of reinserting troops came up in 1992-93, approval ranged from 55 to 70 percent. Support for the use of American ground troops in Bosnia (1995-1998) never rose higher than 53 percent and was usually less than 50 percent, while public disapproval of placing troops in Haiti in 1994 exceeded approval.¹

Americans appear to have accepted the notion that the war on terrorism is likely to be a long one. That practicality greatly surpasses Americans’ reactions to the war against Japan following the Pearl Harbor attack. Only 51 percent of Americans in December 1941 expected a long war, while 87 percent of the public in November 2001 understands that this unconventionally defined war may drag on and on. While 26

percent of Americans conceived of the war against Japan at the time as probably a “comparatively easy war,” only 4 percent of Americans have such a view toward this war.²

Despite the overwhelming public support for the war, three important factors that might affect this support in future are evident in opinion polls.

The success of the war. Although the war in Afghanistan was strongly supported from the start, optimism built from October to January. Poll results from October and early November reflected somewhat guarded expectations for the war effort and its progress to date, but as the air and ground offensives

WHAT THE POLLS TELL US

destroyed the Taliban and al Qaeda resistance, the enthusiasm of Americans understandably increased for the prospects of the more globally conceived war on terrorism described to the public in September. For this kind of war, a modest pessimism initially characterized the public attitude. In late September, only 37 percent of the public was “very confident” about succeeding (compared to 61 percent who were “very confident” at the beginning of the more narrowly and conventionally defined Gulf War).³ However, in early October, this kind of war garnered 49 percent support, and by late November, 62 percent of the public was on board.

Just as support for the war seems correlated to the success of the war, it also seems to be influenced by the extent of casualties suffered. Support for the use of ground troops in a war on terror, in Afghanistan or against other targets, decreased when pollsters qualified the question with the prospect of substantial military or civilian casualties, even though a sizable majority still supported conventional war in such circumstances.⁴

The elimination of bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. A closely related theme is that Americans are setting high targets for the success of the war. They consider the capture of Osama bin Laden as a key measure of the war’s “success” or “failure.” Most Americans want to see Osama bin Laden captured or

killed, and as of late January, 50 percent of Americans surveyed went so far as to state that the war would not be a success unless this happened.⁵ In an earlier poll that month that asked whether military force should be used to extract bin Laden from any country in which he might hide, 65 percent of those polled were supportive of that idea. The answers did not vary depending on whether the “host” country was cooperative or not.⁶

Ousting Saddam Hussein looms as an equally important yardstick for measuring victory. Sixty-one percent insist that before this war concludes, Hussein should be deposed. According to an ABC poll on December 18-19, 2001, 72 percent of Americans supported expansion of the war on terrorism into Iraq as a logical next step after Afghanistan.⁷ Among the American motives for attacking Iraq are suspicions that Iraq supported the September 11 attacks, harbors terrorists, and is developing weapons of mass destruction. Fifty-six percent of respondents supported action against Iraq even if this meant that the United States would suffer “thousands” of casualties, although among Democrats and non-whites, support for attacking Iraq fell below 50 percent if casualties were high. In addition to support for military action against Iraq, the ABC poll found strong support for military initiatives against Sudan (73 percent), Iran (71 percent), and Somalia (62-65 percent). Eighty-one percent of Americans also support the deployment of some troops to the Philippines to help make war on the Muslim separatists there.⁸

Building a coalition. Although some of the findings might suggest support for a go-it-alone military approach, polls also find that a significant number of Americans still back diplomacy, and do not view military options as ruling diplomacy out. Both demographic and political differences emerge from the polls. While majorities of whites and Hispanics prefer using military force to create pressure on terrorist-sponsoring regimes, half of African Americans prefer diplomatic overtures first. Liberals also prefer diplomacy, while conservatives favor military action by 57 to 26 percent.⁹

Americans also seem to have become more willing to vet foreign policy initiatives with our allies than prior to the attacks. A substantial majority of Americans favor prosecuting the war on terrorism through a coalition of nations, rather than unilaterally. Surveys conducted from October through January show that Americans want to include the troops of other countries in military offensives, to seek UN Security Council endorsement of military action, and to use the NATO alliance, if possible. The majority of respondents support the empowerment of UN-sponsored forces that would enter and police countries, regardless of their approval, to root out suspected terrorists.¹⁰

The Popularity of President Bush

One byproduct of the support for the war has been a massive increase in the popularity of the president, who is considered by supporters of both parties to have been an extremely effective leader in time of crisis. After Bush’s inauguration in January, his approval rating in polls prior to September 11 had consistently been in the range of 50-60 percent. It shot up following

the terrorist attacks to a high of 92 percent in October 2001, the best rating ever recorded for a sitting president, and has maintained a high level since that time, with late January polls placing it in the high 70 percent or low 80 percent range.¹¹ A Zogby poll from January 21-23 found that Bush’s job performance was even rated either “excellent” or “good” by an unprecedented 61 percent of those who had voted for Gore.¹² During the period between September 11, 2001 and December 2001, support for Bush among African-Americans, substantially lower overall than his support among whites, also trended upward from 33 to 68 percent, paralleling the pattern among whites. No “measurable subgroup” of the American population deviates from this pattern.¹³

For the entire “quarterly” period from October 20 through January 19, the Gallup Organization calculated an 86 percent average approval rating for the performance of President Bush. The only higher “quarterly” rating of a president since World War II was that of President Truman from April to July of 1945 (immediately after his ascension following Roosevelt’s death). Bush’s father had a “quarterly” approval rating of 83 percent at the peak of the Gulf War. In contrast, none of Kennedy’s or Reagan’s ratings ever reached those heights.¹⁴

The high approval ratings for the president reflected a general tendency among Americans, in a time of rising patriotism, to rally behind all major institutions after the September 11 attacks. As the presidential job approval ratings rose dramatically, so too, for a while, did the public’s favorable feelings toward Congress. Immediately prior to September 11, the proportions of respondents expressing approval and disapproval of the performance of Congress were nearly equal, at around 42 percent. The proportion of persons expressing a favorable view rose to 85 percent by early October and then slid back to 72 percent, where it held through December. But by the time of the State of the Union address at the end of January, Congress’ ratings had dropped into more familiar territory (47 percent).¹⁵ The Harris organization found that the proportion with a favorable view of Republicans in Congress rose into the 60 percent range at one point, and that the proportion with a favorable view of Democrats did likewise, a higher number for both parties than at any time since 1997.¹⁶

Does President Bush’s popularity suggest that there will be a major shift in favor of the Republican Party? Polls asking questions about party affiliation and the likely vote for each party in the 2002 elections for Congress do not seem to indicate a shift that goes beyond the normal range of political ups and downs. A poll by CNN/USA Today/Gallup in mid-January 2002 suggested that voters tend to be closely divided between the two parties. In the four months following September 11, according to this poll, about 3 percent more Americans identified themselves as Republicans than Democrats (46 percent compared to 43 percent); by contrast, in the four months preceding the attacks, Democrats outnumbered Republicans in party affiliation by an average of 47 percent to 43 percent. However, the major polling organizations came up with different results when registered voters nationwide were asked in January who they would vote for in the upcoming elections for

Congress, with some polls favoring the Republicans and others the Democrats.¹⁷

One trend favoring the Republicans is that Americans state that they have more confidence in the ability of Republicans than Democrats to deal with military and security issues. A gap was detected by Gallup between confidence in the Republican party and the Democratic party on issues of terrorism (38 points), national defense (41 points), and foreign affairs (26 points).¹⁸

After the victory in Afghanistan and the establishment of a new government in the country, however, the attention of Americans began to revert to more “normal” issues. The elections for Congress in November may, therefore, be fought over issues that are less favorable to Republicans than those that arose immediately after September 11. By the time of President Bush’s State of the Union speech on January 29, 2002, Americans were once again more concerned about the economy than about the war on terrorism. A national *New York Times*/CBS News Poll conducted between January 21 and 24 suggested that more Americans thought that the “most important problem for the government” was “the economy and jobs,” as compared to “terrorism/war/security” (27 percent to 25 percent). Statistics from Harris polls have yielded a similar result. In January 2002, the rating given to military and defense issues was similar to the rating it was given in January 2001 (26 percent). Most Americans (55 percent) believe that the “U.S. is ready now to return to business as usual.”¹⁹

Tolerance

In one respect, this first war of the twenty-first century has shown a significant change in American society, compared to previous wars. That change is in the reaction of Americans to minorities who share common characteristics with the enemy.

“The public has a better opinion of Muslim Americans than it did before the attacks,” concludes the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, based on poll results released on December 6, 2001. Although a substantial number of Americans believe that the September 11 terrorists had primarily religious motivations (30 percent), the public’s “favorable” view of Muslim Americans rose from 45 percent in March 2001 to 59 percent by November. ABC News polling tracked “suspicion of people of Arab descent” and found that from September to December, the proportion of Americans who reported themselves to be prone to this suspicion dropped from 43 to 31 percent.²⁰

September 11 has been a national “teachable moment.” And, according to survey data gathered since September 11th, we have taken advantage of it. President Bush has used his position to send an emphatic message about the need for tolerance. Political and other leaders—from the broadcast news pundits, to local leaders in churches, synagogues, and mosques, to teachers in classrooms across the country—have seized the moment to fight stereotyping. Without question, hundreds of incidents of intolerant behavior toward Muslims and South Asians have been logged since the tragedies in New York and Washington, D.C., but overall progress seems to have been

Views on Civil Liberties Issues, December 2001

Average citizens must be willing to surrender some civil liberties.

55% agree
39% dissent

Military Tribunals

Americans in general express approval for the use of military tribunals: 65%

Whites

for 68%
against 19%

African Americans

for 48%
against 42%

John Ashcroft’s leadership in handling domestic criminals

approve 76%
disapprove 14%

Sources: “Toughest Work Ahead,” Gary Langer, ABC News.com, December 20, 2001 [www.abcnews.com] accessed December 28, 2001; “Americas Favor Force in Iraq, Somalia, Sudan,” no author cited, Pew Center for the People and Press, January 22, 2002 [www.people-press.org] accessed January 30, 2002; “Latest summary: American Public Opinion and the War on Terrorism,” no author cited, The Gallup Organization, December 21, 2001 [www.gallup.com/poll/releases] accessed December 28, 2001.

made in the consciousness that Americans have of the values of tolerance and diversity.

This aversion from stereotyping does not seem to have been accompanied by any major increase in knowledge about Islam. Only 38 percent of Americans affirm a knowledge of Islam and few (31 percent) acknowledge any similarities between Islam and Christianity. Among those who profess “some” or “a lot” of knowledge of Islam, the commonalities of the “peoples of the book” are recognized; 48 percent of the knowledgeable see the religions as having “a lot in common.” Among those who consider themselves to have “not much” knowledge about Islam, 79 percent see great differences or offered no judgment. Knowledge about Islam correlates positively with tolerant views toward Muslim Americans. This seems to be a clear lesson for social studies teachers to take into their classrooms.²¹

Though a case can be made for the growth of an atmosphere of tolerance after September 11, the Muslim-American community still has deep-felt concerns about the possibility of intolerance. Zogby International’s polling in mid-November 2001 asked Muslim Americans to rank issues of importance to their community. The top six issues on the list concerned different aspects of intolerance and discrimination. Seventy-four percent of the survey’s respondents agreed that “Americans have been respectful and tolerant of Muslims” but almost 50 percent of American Muslims have overall concerns about the level of respect shown to Muslims by Americans and by American society.²²

How Others See the U.S. After September 11

Americans' perceptions of the war on terrorism are dramatically different from those of citizens of other nations. Both Gallup International and the Pew Center's Global Attitudes Project surveyed citizens of other nations in the fall of 2001. Gallup's survey included citizens in twenty European countries, seven Latin American countries, India and Pakistan, Israel, South Korea, and South Africa. The Pew Center surveyed "opinion leaders" in Western Europe, Eastern Europe and Russia, Latin America, Asia, the Mid-East, and Islamic nations. The Americans were asked the same questions as the non-Americans, and the responses were contrasted.

U.S. Policies Caused the Terrorist Attacks on September 11

Americans	18%
Non-U.S. "opinion leaders"	58%
Western Europeans	38%

In the other regions of the world, substantial majorities blame U.S. policies for the attacks. When asked whether it was "good for the U.S. to feel vulnerable," every region of the world answered affirmatively, ranging from 65 percent in the Middle East to 76 percent in Asia. Although Americans saw their attacks in Afghanistan as "multilateral" (70 percent), the "opinion leaders" in all other regions of the world disagreed. The percentages who agreed with that American view never exceeded 37 percent and were as low as 25 percent.

Reasons Other Nations Dislike the United States

View of non-U.S. respondents

U.S. causes a rich-poor gap	52%
Resentment of U.S. power	52%

View of Americans

Resentment of U.S. power	88%
U.S. support of Israel	70%

Respondents were also asked for the reasons why people might like the United States. Americans think we are liked because of our "democratic ideas" (70 percent). Most of the regions of the world agree (68-63 percent), with two exceptions. In the Middle East and the Islamic nations, a majority of respondents did not find democratic ideas to be a main reason for liking the United States, but rather the fact that the United States is seen as a "land of opportunity." Only Americans believe that we are liked because the "U.S. does a lot of good." And only Americans disagree that a major source of admiration for America is because of "advances in technology and science."

There is a fundamental gulf between American perceptions of America's role in the world, and the perceptions of that role by other nations. If a concerted campaign to educate our own citizens about the dangers of prejudice has enabled us to become a more tolerant society as a response to September 11, perhaps an intensive effort to see ourselves through the eyes of the world could lead us to become better citizens of the global community. The social studies have embraced that goal for many years, but survey data show us just how far we have to go. —K.P.

Sources: "Little Support for Expanding War on Terrorism: America Admired, yet Its New Vulnerability Seen as a Good Thing, Say Opinion Leaders," no author cited, The Pew Center for the People and the Press. November 19, 2001 [www.people-press.org] accessed December 27, 2001; "Gallup International Poll on Terrorism in the U.S." no author cited, Gallup International. [gallup-international.com/terrorismpoll_figures.htm] accessed December 28, 2001.

Civil Liberties

Americans are willing to see some compromises on civil liberties during the war on terrorism. Attitudes toward this issue have not changed dramatically from late September 2001 to mid-January, 2002 (see chart on p. 105). But deep-seated American wariness about excesses in the government's use of power is detectable in the Pew Center's mid-January survey conducted in conjunction with the Council on Foreign Relations. More respondents were concerned that the government might compromise civil liberties too much rather than too little. But since September 11, there has been a notable decline in negative

views of government activities in general. At its peak in 1995, 55 percent of Americans described the government as a "threat to...constitutional rights"; when surveyed in early December 2001 by ABC News, only 39 percent held such a view.²³

African Americans and highly educated Americans are more concerned about compromising civil liberties than are other subgroups. The wariness of African Americans about government action is the most acute among all subgroups.²⁴ That "racial divide" also characterizes public opinion on military tribunals.

Worries about more domestic terror attacks declined from October to the end of 2001. Americans now appear to be equally committed to taking actions to defend against terrorism at home as they are supportive of U.S. offensive military action to preempt terrorism abroad. Individual worries about becoming a victim of a terrorist attack declined to about 40 percent by late November. They remained modest in mid-January, at 38 percent.²⁵

Religion

Most Americans believe that the influence of religion on American life has grown as a result of the September attacks, but there is no evidence that this is actually true. The Pew Center data indicates a dramatic shift in the perception of the role of religion in American life. After years of polls showing that a substantial majority of Americans perceive a decline in the role of religion (55 percent in March 2001, 69 percent in 1994, 56 percent in 1974, for example), in November 2001, 78 percent of Americans thought that the role of religion was increasing. This number is twice that of any rating since 1984 and the highest percentage since figures began to be compiled in 1957. Two indicators of religion do not, however, confirm the perception. Gallup Organization data reinforce conclusions also reached by the Pew Center. Church attendance is the same as March 2001 and the number of Americans testifying to the importance of religion in their own lives is essentially the same as it was in March.²⁶

The Psychological Impact

What about the psychological impacts of September 11? By early November 2001, Americans' personal worries had settled into a pattern that has persisted. Almost 60 percent of Americans articulated little concern, whereas only 13 percent were "very worried." These numbers were similar to responses to the same questions from the summer of 1996. The greatest concern for personal safety was expressed among urban populations on the two coasts. In the weeks after September 11, 71 percent of respondents reported feelings of "depression." But by November, those reports declined to 24 percent.²⁷

Two-thirds of Americans have not made any "life-altering" decisions as a result of the September 11 attacks, but 33 percent claim that they have. A CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup poll, given just prior to the New Year, found that of those Americans who said that they had changed their lives, more than half said that they were trying to spend more time with their families and friends. Women were much more likely than men to have found September 11 to be a life-changing event (42 percent to 24 percent) as were non-Whites (50 percent) and conservative Christians (46 percent). Other demographic sorting did not produce dramatic differences.²⁸

Americans' "fear of flying" after September 11 was only severe for the first few weeks after the attacks, but it changed appreciably by October and sustained those levels into January. ABC News polling measured the immediate aftermath of the September 11 event. The proportion of those who

were "personally worried" about flying on September 13th was as high as 59 percent. By the first week in October, the rate had dropped to 42 percent. A CBS News poll conducted in early January reported that 20 percent reported being "afraid to fly" in January 2002. Those who were "not at all afraid" comprised 46 percent.²⁹

'An Underlying Sense of Optimism'

A factor perpetuating Bush's popularity may be what the *Washington Post's* Morin and Milbank refer to as "an underlying sense of optimism" among Americans.³⁰ Zogby International reports that as of January 7, 73 percent of Americans believed that the nation was headed in the "right direction" with only 14 percent registering dissent. Prior to September 11, "satisfaction" and "dissatisfaction" with the direction of the country had been running "neck and neck" throughout 2001, with ratings between 40 and 50 percent. But "satisfaction" vaulted into the 60-70 percent range following the terrorist attacks and has remained 20 to 30 points higher than "dissatisfaction" since then. Seventy-eight percent of Americans are "highly optimistic" about the country's future in January 2002, compared to about 67 percent one year ago. Gallup finds Americans to be similarly optimistic about their personal lives. Other polling organizations report more modest but similarly positive numbers.³¹

Before the New Year, Morin and Claudia Deane concluded from survey data collected by a *Washington Post*-ABC News Poll that not only did the public feel that the terrorist attacks had introduced "permanent change" to the nation, but also that it would be "change for the better." Almost two-thirds of those polled—men, women, Democrats, Republicans, youth, and seniors—shared this rosy outlook. People cited increased pride, security, unity, and caring as manifestations of the change. This optimism persisted, despite the fact that most Americans expect the war on terrorism to be a financial drain on the country's resources, taking money away from important needs. More than half of those polled, at least in December, believed the war was "worth the expense."³²

Notes

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Kevin Pobst is the social studies department chairperson at Hinsdale South High School, Darien, Illinois.

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