

War on Innocents

The People Respond to the Attacks on America

By Richard C. Rockwell

In the terrible hours and days following the attacks on America, the people spoke often to each other. They voiced their fears, their rage, and their resolve. They sought to be comforted and to comfort each other. These conversations strengthened them.

Some of the people had a different kind of conversation: they spoke with pollsters, who called them or came to their doors to try to get an early reading on how the nation was bearing this tragedy.

It was not the first time pollsters had talked with the American people immediately following a national tragedy. After the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, a major study was quickly fielded by the National Opinion Research Center. It greatly helped in understanding what the nation was experiencing then and how it was bearing up in that dreadful time. As I write this, major parts of that study are being fielded again.

There was concern within the polling industry whether it ought to be asking questions of Americans about their fears, their hopes, and their plans so soon after the tragic events in New York City, Washington DC and Pennsylvania. Emotions seemed too raw, and asking the people to answer questions about their wounds seemed to some to be asking too much. The listserv operated by the American Association for Public Opinion Research carried dozens of messages on September 12 and 13 debating whether polling might not be insensitive or even worthless at this time. How

could a stunned and stricken people respond cogently to pollsters' questions?

The outcome of these discussions was the right one: the profession determined that even in this most trying time, polling still offered a powerful way for the American people to speak. The more articulate of us can write letters and papers, can give speeches, and can otherwise be heard. Polling offers a way for anyone to speak and an equal chance for each and every American to be heard.

This issue of *Public Perspective* is a partial record of what the American people had to say immediately after the attacks and for some days afterward. It also seeks to provide some historical context for understanding how Americans reacted, by drawing on the record of reactions to previous disasters.

Hurriedly put together, the issue is devoid of incisive analysis, much less interpretation. Those will come later. Indeed, a subsequent issue of this magazine will examine these data in depth, along with the new polls that will have accumulated in intervening months. It will draw upon the full resources of the Roper Center and its deep archives for other data, on a variety of issues, that are relevant to understanding this time. Authors of articles that will also draw upon these data are already being commissioned.

What we see in the first days after the attacks will not be what we see in the ensuing months. Pollsters will be asking more nuanced questions, and people will be giving more nuanced

responses. The rage to retaliate is already turning into a characteristically American concern that the innocent be spared, that the darkness that led to the hatred be lifted, and that justice, not just vengeance, be achieved. The goodness of the American people will shine forth in these polls. It is an odd coincidence that we had already scheduled for the present issue an article on the laws of war. It is under those laws that America will proceed as it reacts.

The polls may play a significant role in coming months or years in protecting our civil liberties. They will enable Americans to tell their governments just how far they are comfortable in going with new security measures, and how far is too far. They will perhaps play a role in shaping a new immigration policy.

If the people speak as I trust they will, the polls should play a role in comforting Muslim and Arab American citizens and residents, for they will show that the vast majority of the people do not hate them. Pollsters need to be prepared to ask hard questions of the people. Some of the questions asked will cause respondents pain.

I hate having to publish this issue of this magazine. I treasure the archives that made it possible.

Richard C. Rockwell is executive director of the Roper Center. "War on Innocents" coverage begins on page 17.

Correction

In the September/October issue of *Public Perspective*, the last figure on page 20, showing public attitudes toward improving the existing public schools versus providing vouchers, was incorrectly noted as having been asked only of those who had given a particular response to a previous question. The data actually represent the responses of the entire national adult sample.