

From the Field Confidants of Our Sorrows

Interviews and interviewers on September 11

By Steve Crabtree

The term “defining moment” tends to be overused, but few would argue that it applies to the events of September 11, 2001. No one will ever forget where they were when they first learned of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon—or how they felt. For many, it’s as if the past has been split: one can speak of pre-attack conditions and post-attack conditions, but it’s difficult to reconcile the two.

Gallup interviewers were in a unique position to witness the mindset of Americans at that critical juncture when they conducted a special poll the evening of the attack, and then again when regular polling resumed three days later. While the data from those surveys provide a valuable record of Americans’ reactions, the results are aggregated, impersonal. They represent opinions rather than emotions. Speaking with interviewers who actually conducted the surveys helps add color to the spectrum of feelings with which those opinions were expressed.

Gallup suspended all normal polling for the two days following the attacks but went into the field the evening of September 11, just prior to President Bush’s speech to the nation, to capture Americans’ immediate reactions to the tragedy. Several of the interviewers who worked on that initial Gallup/CNN/USA Today poll, as well as the

first poll conducted once other interviewing resumed September 14, provided comments for this article.

Despite the unprecedented circumstances, several interviewers said they weren’t so much nervous about getting on the phones that evening as they were interested in how people would respond. Moreover, they were motivated by a sense that, in providing a look at the public’s collective reaction to the tragedy, they might help people realize they weren’t alone in what they were feeling. “I really didn’t feel apprehensive about doing the survey for CNN,” said Cheryl. “I knew [survey respondents] would be willing to talk to me because people need to try to make sense of such a mind-boggling event.”

Dom found that that indeed was the case: “Oddly enough, almost everyone was willing to talk. I think the fact that I was working on a CNN survey gave me a sort of legitimacy during that terrible tragedy. Only two qualified respondents refused to talk to me; I believe that they had difficulty grasping what had happened.”

Interviewers’ perceptions that respondents were more accommodating to the intrusion of a survey on this particular night are borne out in the cooperation rate: it turned out to be among the highest obtained in any Gallup poll conducted this year.

Not that that made it an easy night—several interviewers remember being emotionally

drained by the experience. “It was one of the toughest [studies] I’ve ever done,” said Erma. “But it was also the project with the highest sense of mission I’ve ever done at Gallup.”

“It was an odd feeling working that evening,” another interviewer said. “It had a positive effect on me—I felt as if it gave me some control in the situation. I felt like it also made the respondents feel needed, as if their opinions *really* counted on a night like that.”

And the vast majority of Americans were united in their opinions in that initial poll, reported Gallup Poll senior editor David Moore. He wrote that the results showed “a remarkable level of consensus among Americans” about how to interpret the event. Eighty-six percent viewed the attacks as an act of war, and 87% saw them as the most tragic news event in their lifetimes.

More than seven in ten Americans also agreed that the most appropriate response was for the government to conduct military strikes only against the terrorist organizations responsible for the attacks, even if it would take months to identify who they were. In the poll conducted September 14-15, Americans expressed solidarity for military action, even when faced with severe consequences.

Dom said this sense of determination was the strongest general impression he carried away from the evening of September 11: “The vast majority of respondents believed we were in a state of war, and they were

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willing to take whatever means [were] necessary to win that war. Most people were responsive and levelheaded. There was a resolve to take care of the problem, even to the point of making personal sacrifices. One female respondent told me she would be in favor of the draft even though she had a 19-year-old son, because this was something that needed to be done.”

There were times when that resolve spilled over into outright anger. “One female was appalled that our country could let this happen,” said Jim. “She lost someone in World Trade Center 2 and wanted to make [those responsible] pay right there and then. After she stopped crying and calmed down she said maybe that wasn’t right, but it was the way she felt.”

The reaction the interviewers best recall from the evening of the eleventh, however, was one of grief. Questions about how the attacks might affect them personally were particularly affecting to respondents, and elicited a lot of soul-searching hesitation. Most interviewers said at least one of their respondents began to cry; some became so upset they were unable to complete the interview. “There was an overwhelming impression of despair coming from a few respondents,” said Dom. “One woman choked up during a survey and couldn’t finish. She had a sister who worked in the World Trade Center [who] was not answering her cell phone.”

Gallup interviewers are specifically trained not to inject their own feelings into the survey, but on September 11 there were, understandably, instances in which that professional barrier broke down. Erma said she will always remember a particularly heart-wrenching dialogue: “One woman started to cry when she was talking about how she felt seeing bodies falling from the windows [of the World Trade Center]. I started crying also. She was black and I’m white, but at that point there was

no difference between us—we were just two people crying together.”

That need to connect with other people was obvious in all aspects of American life. In response to the September 14-15 poll, 77% of Americans said the events of the previous Tuesday had caused them to show more affection for their loved ones. Suddenly, interpersonal conflicts seemed terribly petty next to the loss of life and the war that had effectively been declared.

As Erma recalled, the same impulse that had members of Congress spontaneously linking arms and singing “God Bless America” on the steps of the Capitol building was present in the interviews conducted that evening: “[The interviewers] had a group meeting prior to starting, and the managers told us to be very cautious with people. What I didn’t expect was that they would be so cautious with *us*—so nice, so gentle. I remember one interview when I stumbled over a question and had to repeat it. I started to apologize but the guy stopped me, saying, ‘Don’t apologize, take your time...’”

“There was a lot of sadness and disbelief on the part of the respondents, but there was a kindness, also, among everyone I spoke to,” said Cheryl. “There were no irritated people, as we get sometimes when dialing during a normal day. Everyone I spoke to was very eager to talk about this event. I think it was an experience that touched all of us and gave us a sense of connectedness no matter where we live.”

“The majority of respondents seemed friendlier than usual,” another interviewer concurred. “No one was *nasty*. I remember people telling me to ‘Take care,’ and ‘God bless.’”

The interviewers who have polled on the conflict in the weeks following the attacks report that the experience has been less emotional than on that first night, though many respondents continue to express anger and grief. The initial shock has faded, and while Americans remain resolute in their support of the war on terrorism, Gallup interviewers sense that people are moving on. Recalling the tone of the interviews she conducted once regular polling resumed, Erma said, “About ten days after [the attacks], I could tell people were coming out of that mourning phase, and things were starting to get back to normal.”

It’s safe to say, however, that life in America will never again be exactly the same as it was prior to September 11, 2001. The interviewers working in the hours and days immediately following the attacks explored an emotional landscape unique in the history of America’s national consciousness—a landscape they hope they never have occasion to revisit. ●

