

Police Work or War?

Public reactions to dates of infamy

“Like crime, terrorism has always existed and always will.”

By John Mueller

In urging a declaration of war upon Japan after that country had bombed American territory at Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Roosevelt declared the day of the attack, December 7, 1941, to be “a date which will live in infamy.” On September 11, 2001, with a similar combination of guile, careful planning, secrecy, ruthlessness, and luck, a band of suicidal terrorists attacked American territory and managed to kill even more Americans than had perished at Pearl Harbor. And that date, too, seems likely to be remembered with the same special designation.

Comparisons between the two dates of infamy have often been made, particularly with regard to the public response to the attacks. Some of these comparisons are apt, but others seem strained.

The events appear to be most similar in the impact they initially had on public opinion. Historian Gordon Prange observes of the reaction to the Pearl Harbor attack, “The American people reeled with a mind-staggering mixture of surprise, awe, mystification, grief, humiliation, and, above all, cataclysmic fury.” Omitting “humiliation,” it seems highly likely that one could use the same language to characterize the

public’s response to the September 11 events—Tom Smith and Kenneth Rasinski of the National Opinion Research Center have provided data to this effect from NORC’s National Tragedy Study [*Public Perspective*, September/October 2002].

An immediate beneficiary of public reaction in both cases was the President of the United States: not surprisingly, the events had a pronounced rally-’round-the-flag effect in boosting the presidents’ approval ratings. Before Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt’s approval was quite high—73%—but when next tapped, about a month after Pearl Harbor, it had risen to 84%.

The impact of September 11 on President George W. Bush’s ratings were similar, except that he had farther to go. Only about 53% of Americans expressed approval of the job he was doing before the attacks, but this abruptly soared into the 80s, even into the 90s in some polls, after they took place—the greatest uptick ever recorded in the data series.

More interesting, the decline for each president’s ratings from those stratospheric highs was very gradual—probably because each was leading the country in a continuing enterprise focused on a palpable, direct threat to American lives. Two years after December 7, when the polls last sought to tap Roosevelt’s approval rating, it still stood

at 66%. And, nearly a year and a half after September 11, Bush’s rating had declined only into the 60s, a particularly impressive achievement in light of his somewhat tepid pre-September 11 approval ratings.

Another similarity between the two post-attack reactions was the public’s willingness to go it alone against the threat, if need be. This was not much of an issue in 1941. Japan attacked not only the United States, but also the possessions of almost all the potential American allies in the area—Britain, France, China, and the Netherlands—while posing a clear military threat to Australia and New Zealand.

But no one would have thought about getting the cooperation of these countries even if they hadn’t already been on board—the threat to the US was all that mattered. Similarly, there was broad approval of Bush’s effective declaration of war upon Afghanistan in order to go after terrorists based there, even though this was essentially a unilateral action.

In the latter case, other states were asked to help, but there would have been broad support for the effort even if no help was forthcoming. In a Fox News poll conducted at the end of October 2001, 77% of registered voters said they would favor the United States’ continuing military action on its own if other countries withdrew their support. In-

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deed, except perhaps for Pakistan, the United States did substantially go it alone, at least initially.

However, there were also distinct differences between the challenges facing the United States after December 7 and those facing it after September 11.

As a number of people, including the distinguished military historian,

Michael Howard, have pointed out, the current campaign against terrorism more nearly resembles police work than war. In World War II the attacks originated from, were specifically sponsored by, and were taken to represent a specific regime in a specific state. The danger posed could be fully eliminated by conquering the country and deposing the regime. By contrast, terrorism is a tactic carried out by individuals or by very small groups who frequently owe little

allegiance to any one state and often receive little or no state sponsorship.

Terrorism is therefore much more like crime in its fundamental workings than like war. Although some terrorists and terrorist groups can be put out of action, and although warfare, as in Afghanistan, can sometimes be used to enhance the process, most of the methods applied to deal with them resemble those employed in combating crime.

Collateral Damage in Iraq

There has never been anything like the degree of hostility toward the Iraqi people that there was toward the Japanese after Pearl Harbor. For example, a *Los Angeles Times* poll conducted during the Gulf War found that fully 60% of the American public held the Iraqi people to be *innocent of any* blame for their leader's policies. Nonetheless, this did not translate into a great deal of sympathy among the American public for civilian casualties in Iraq.

As Figure 1 indicates, sentiments about the deaths of civilians were not activated by the extensive pictures and publicity about the civilian casualties resulting from an attack on a Baghdad bomb shelter during the Gulf War of 1991. More-

over, images of the "highway of death" in that war and the seemingly authoritative reports at its end that 100,000 Iraqis had died in the war (a figure, however, that is almost certainly far too high) scarcely dampened the enthusiasm of the various "victory" and "welcome home" parades and celebrations.

Similarly, continuous reports that the sanctions inflicted on Iraq in the years since the war have been a necessary cause of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi deaths—most of them small children and none of them Saddam Hussein—have gone almost completely unacknowledged and undiscussed in the political debate.

Figure 1

Unmoved by Losses

Question:

Which of these three statements comes closer to your own view—the United States should be making a greater effort to avoid bombing civilian areas in Iraq; the United States is making enough of an effort to avoid bombing civilian areas in Iraq; [or] the United States is making too much of an effort to avoid bombing civilian areas in Iraq?



Source: Surveys by ABC News/ *Washington Post*, February 1991.

Moreover, like crime, terrorism has always existed and always will, and the best hope is to reduce its frequency and consequences sufficiently that people come to feel generally, though never completely, safe from it. There can therefore never be a VT Day like the VJ Day that was celebrated when Japan surrendered in 1945.

In two respects regarding the public's reaction, however, the war analogy may be more apt than the policing one.

First, although it sometimes does happen, police, in general, are not expected to die in the line of duty. By contrast, the taking of casualties is a standard, calculated aspect of warfare. That is, the death of even a single police officer in efforts to apprehend a criminal is not generally considered acceptable, while combat losses in war are normal and anticipated.

Polls suggest that public opinion after September 11 was fully willing to adopt a more nearly military approach in the sense that it accepted the necessity that American casualties—even fairly high ones—might well be suffered in the campaign against terrorism.

Seventy-four percent of Americans in a November 2001 NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll thought the war in Afghanistan was worth risking substantial numbers of military casualties. In a March 12-13, 2002, Fox News poll, 94% of registered voters said they supported the action in Afghanistan. They were asked if they would maintain their support if a recent trend of increasing casualties continued. Seventy-eight percent said they would.

Second, the acceptance of “collateral damage”—the deaths of innocent bystanders—is much more a military concept than a policing one. Blowing up an apartment

building filled with innocent people in order to kill a dangerous criminal inside is not admissible police practice, but it is often accepted in military actions. In the campaign against terrorism, the American public seems quite willing to accept high rates of collateral damage.

In considerable measure, however, this is probably because it is anticipated that the innocent lives snuffed out in the process will be those of foreigners. In a Market Opinion Research poll conducted for Americans Talk Security in 1988, fully 79% of registered voters contended that the number of civilians that might be killed in the area of combat should be a very important factor when considering whether to use American armed forces in hostilities, almost as many as held the number of American lives that might be lost to be important.

However, this concern does not seem to be very deep in practice, or at least it didn't in the wake of September 11. Seventy-seven percent of national adults in a poll taken by ABC News/*Wall Street Journal* in the days immediately following the attacks said the United States should take military action against any groups or nations found responsible, even if it meant innocent civilians in other countries might be hurt or killed; 60% in a CBS News/*New York Times* poll said action should be taken even if thousands were killed.

Some of this sentiment might be attributed to the initial shock of the attacks. By March, that had, presumably, moderated somewhat. Even so, nearly three in five of the war supporters in the March 12-13 Fox News poll said they would continue their support even if the action cost the lives of thousands of civilians in the countries attacked; another fifth were not sure.

It is not surprising to discover that the Japanese population was intensely hated by the American population during World War II. Many saw Japanese civilization as one huge war machine directed against the United States, and the fact that Japan had begun the war with a “sneak attack” enraged Americans, while the brutalities visited upon American prisoners of war by the Japanese intensified this contempt.

During the course of the war, the proportions who told NORC that they believed the Japanese people would always want to go to war to make themselves as powerful as possible ranged from 41 to 57%. Another 25 to 29% thought that while the Japanese might not like war, they had shown they were too easily led into it by powerful leaders.

Asked what should be done with the Japanese after the war, 10 to 15% of Americans in various polls conducted during it suggested extermination. After the war was over, 23% in a Roper Organization poll for *Fortune* magazine said they regretted that many more atomic bombs had not “quickly” been used on Japan before it had a chance to surrender. Twenty-five percent in a NORC poll said that if they had been the ones to decide how to use the bomb, they would have “wiped out cities” (as opposed to using it on one city at a time, 41%; using it where there were no people, 21%; or refusing to use it, 4%).

For all similarities born of the initial shock, it seems likely that the “war” against terrorism after September 11 will not prove to be as preoccupying or as fully and urgently embraced in the long term as was the war against Japan after December 7. That is, in this respect, the public has been reacting to terrorism more as a policing issue than as a strictly military one.

Figure 2

Alarm About Terrorism Waxes and Wanes

Question:

What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?



Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization, latest that of January 13-16, 2003.

	Terrorism	Fear of war	Economy	Unemployment
2001				
August 16-19	0%	1%	15%	9%
September 7-10	0	1	22	10
October 11-14	46	10	13	4
November 8-11	37	13	16	6
December 6-9	24	17	19	9
2002				
January 7-9	23	8	21	8
February 4-6	24	9	24	11
March 4-7	22	12	18	8
April	—	—	—	—
May 6-9	22	7	14	7
June 3-6	33	7	14	8
July 9-11	30	4	20	6
August 5-8	23	5	25	6
September 5-8	19	10	24	8
October	—	—	—	—
November 11-14	19	14	28	7
December 5-8	18	20	30	7
2003				
January 13-16	10	31	26	10

For analysis, it would be useful to be able to compare the impact of the events on the frequently-asked poll question, “What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?” As it happens, comparisons can only be tentative because, although the question had been asked quite a few times before Pearl Harbor, it was completely neglected during World War II and was revived again only after the war.

The reason for this is not difficult to grasp: it was so obvious that winning the war was the most important problem that pollsters felt the question lost all meaning. This is suggested by the fact that the few times the question was approached during the war, it was phrased, “Apart from winning the war, what do you think...”

The most important problem question has been repeatedly posed in the wake of September 11, however, and Figure 1 details the results found by Gallup since the summer of 2001.

In general, the behavior of this poll item suggests that a foreign concern must really be quite notable

to divert Americans from domestic preoccupations.

That is, it appears that the best way to look at how the American public relates to international affairs is to suggest that the mode tends to inattention: people principally focus on domestic matters, but from time to time their attention can be diverted by major threats or by explicit, specific, and dramatic dangers to American lives. Once these issues vanish from the scene, people return their attention to domestic concerns with considerable alacrity—rather like “the snapping back of a strained elastic,” as political scientist Gabriel Almond once put it.

In the past 70 years, in fact, only a few events have notably caused the public to divert its attention from domestic matters. These have been World War II, certain Cold War crises before 1963, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, fleetingly, the Iran hostage crisis of 1979-80, perhaps embellished by concern over the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the apparent prospect in the mid-1980s of nuclear war, and the Gulf War of 1991. Also of interest is the fact that, once these problems were

resolved, the public turned back to domestic matters with a virtuosity that is really quite remarkable.

At no time between the Tet offensive in the Vietnam War in early 1968 and the September 11 bombings did foreign policy issues outweigh domestic ones in the public’s concerns. As Figure 2 indicates, however, this condition abruptly changed in the autumn of 2001. Since then, terrorism has remained an important issue, though its salience has declined considerably as economic concerns have come to command more attention.

Another massive terrorist attack in the United States could abruptly reverse this decline, of course. But, like concern over crime and unlike the preoccupying concern that was apparently sustained after the Japanese attack that launched World War II, alarm about terrorism is likely to wax and wane with events.



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