

War or War?

From the Field

9/11 surveys restricted the options

By Frederic I. Solop and Kristi K. Hagen

Pollsters have a role to play in crisis situations such as September 11 and its aftermath. We mirror public thought and reflect the public mind back to society. We allow Americans a better understanding of who we are as a community of shared and differing opinions, values, ideas and actions. But do we sometimes overstep the boundaries of our discipline and shape opinion? Do we become active players in its formation?

On the evening of 9/11, President Bush defined the terrorist attacks as an “act of war.” Congress rapidly allocated \$20 billion to pursue those responsible for the attacks.

But the pollsters moved even more quickly. National polls that went into the field that day legitimated the language of war before the president’s speech.

Consider the wording of these questions:

- If the United States can identify the groups or nations responsible for today’s attacks, would you support or oppose taking military action against them? [If yes] What if that meant getting into a war—in that case would you support or oppose taking military action? (ABC News/*Washington Post*)
- Apart from those responsible for today’s attacks, would you support or

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oppose taking military action against countries that assist or shelter terrorists? (ABC News/*Washington Post*)

- Which comes closest to your view?... The US military should conduct military strikes immediately against known terrorist organizations, even if it is unclear who caused today’s attacks; the US military should only conduct military strikes against the terrorist organizations responsible for today’s attacks, even if it takes months to clearly identify them; or the US military should not conduct military strikes in response to today’s attacks? (Gallup/CNN/*USA Today*)

These early surveys never asked about levels of support for non-military options. There were no hints about the possibilities of diplomatic, economic, or legal resolutions to this crisis.

In the days that followed, the pollsters continued to define war as the only acceptable response to the terrorist attacks.

On September 12, NBC News asked if the US should take military action against the people responsible for the attacks, even if it meant risking further retaliation and the threat of war. *Newsweek* (September 13-14) asked if respondents favored or opposed attacking people suspected of terrorism against the US, even if we were not sure they were responsible for what happened. The Pew Research Center (September 13-17) and NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* (September 15-16) asked if the US should take military action against a nation that knowingly allowed the terrorists to live in their country, even if that country played no role in the attacks.

Typical responses to these and similar questions from other organizations showed support for war running in the high 80% to low 90% range. Support for alternatives was absent, or at least went unmeasured, because, for the most part, pollsters failed to present these options for active consideration. The message from the pollsters was that America was in a military frame of mind.

Some hint of an alternative to war appeared in NBC’s September 12 survey. Respondents were asked if they favored or opposed five different responses to the terrorist attacks. Four involved a military response: to combat and eliminate terrorists, to launch air strikes against terrorists proven responsible for the attacks, to take military action against nations sympathetic to terrorists, and to launch air strikes against terrorists most likely responsible. The range of support for these options was between 65 and 94%.

The only non-military option—to build a case against the people who were specifically responsible and seek justice in the world court—received 75% support. However, this was overshadowed in importance by the responses to the other options.

Similarly, a September 13-14 *Los Angeles Times* poll included one question involving a non-military option. After asking whether the US was in a state of war (68% said yes), and whether military action should be taken against Afghanistan, the poll presented this question:

What about Osama bin Laden’s organization itself? Do you think the United States should retaliate against bin Laden’s

group through military action, or should the United States pursue justice by bringing him to trial in the United States?

Sixty-nine percent favored military action, and 25% favored bringing bin Laden to trial. Of the 47 non-demographic questions in the survey, this was the only item involving a non-military option.

In a poll conducted September 20-21, *Newsweek* presented respondents with a list of military and non-military options and asked how effective each would be in preventing terrorist attacks in the future (although

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not whether they supported the measures in response to the current crisis). In this case, respondents thought non-military options, such as putting more intelligence agents in the field, freezing funding sources for terrorists, and putting bin Laden on trial, would be more effective than military strikes or the killing of suspected terrorist leaders.

Despite the apparent support non-military options received when they were made available to respondents, war fever prevailed. A Program on International Policy Attitudes report documented the depth of support for a military response from September 11 through November. The report reviewed a wide variety of polls and concluded, “Support for strong military action remains strong.”

And as of this writing, polls continue to show that the public supports a war on terrorists, even if it means Ameri-

can casualties, the loss of civilians abroad, or the loss of civil liberties at home. Alternatives to war are rarely found in the surveys.

When pollsters fail to ask these questions, are we actually reflecting public attitudes that disdain such alternatives? Or are we contributing to an agenda-setting process that keeps non-military options off the table? In failing to present non-military options to the public, are we reflecting opinion or shaping it?

The results of a Grand Canyon State Poll, conducted September 26-October 2 by Northern Arizona University’s Social Research Laboratory, may offer some insight into these questions. This survey presented both military and non-military options

to Arizona residents in an unbiased manner, in order to test support for both and to see which was preferred.

Similar to respondents in the national polls, 91% of Arizonans supported military action, including the use of ground troops, 80% supported military action against nations that assisted the terrorists, and 75% supported military action against nations that assisted or sheltered terrorists even if those terrorists held no responsibility for the recent attacks.

However, when presented with the option of diplomatic action, the level of support was found to be in the same range as that for military action: 85% supported “diplomatic efforts to bring those responsible for the attacks before a court of law.” And when asked directly if they favored diplomatic or military efforts, there was a distinct lack of consensus among Arizonans. One-third (31%) preferred diplomatic

efforts, 40% preferred military action, and 28% had no preference.

The results of this poll suggest that Arizonans wanted to see the United States respond to the situation but did not think military action was the only justified response. Since levels of support for military action in Arizona mirrored national levels, it can be assumed that support for diplomatic efforts ran high throughout the US as well. But the public opinion research community missed this story.

Reflecting on the role of public opinion research following September 11, we affirm the right of pollsters to move into the field quickly and play a role examining and reflecting public opinion during such a crisis. We applaud the ability of large firms to assemble the resources to do so. But we cannot help but believe that the complexity of America’s grief and sense of vulnerability and loss were deflated into a single dimension.

With assistance from the pollsters, the picture that emerged of the American people following September 11 was of a war-seeking public ready to avenge its honor. This portrait was neither accurate nor useful. We can only hypothesize about the difference it would have made if the public had been presented with a variety of options in our polling.

Pollsters have much to learn in the wake of the terrorist attacks. One lesson is that we bear a burden to reflect accurately the multiple dimensions of thought held by a public struggling through difficult times. While some alternative media sources such as *Utne Reader*, *The Nation* and *Mother Jones* were suggesting options besides military intervention, the national polls virtually ignored the voices of those who did not think such a military response was the only way. And in presenting a strongly one-sided view, the polling community might have prevented those voices from being heard. ●