



Washington, DC :: Oakland, California

436 14th Street, Suite 820 :: Oakland, California 94612 :: 510-844-0010 :: AmericanEnvironics.com ::

Overcoming Fear

New Research and Strategic Directions for a New Security and Rights Agenda

December 2008

I. A Historic Opportunity

Human rights advocates and philanthropists are today confronted with a historic opportunity to establish a new paradigm on national security, one that more accurately defines the terrorist threat and effective responses to it. The public still holds a remarkably similar view of 9/11 that it held in 2002. However, as the salience of the terrorist threat has declined, Americans are more open to hearing more accurate characterizations of the threat, and are more open to reconsidering what effective responses to the threat are.

A strategic communications effort to help the public gain a more accurate view of the threat, and effective responses to it, should be viewed as a challenge of equal importance as changing policy and winning legal victories. If the public remains locked in the post-9/11 paradigm for national security, our capacity to win legislative victories will be limited and subject to a potentially powerful political backlash.

Understanding the opportunity requires being clear-eyed about what has and has not changed. The opportunity to shift the national security paradigm was created by a new administration and a new Congress with the power to not only change laws and security practices but also the public's understanding of the threat and effective responses to it. The change of government was created largely by upset over the handling of the Iraq war and the economy in 2006, and by the financial crisis in 2008. The opportunity is not the result of widespread public rejection of the "war on terror" and its abuses of human rights and civil liberties. Indeed, as recently as October 2006, 58% of voters told CNN that Bush administration restrictions on liberties were about right (34%) or had not gone far enough (24%). While these numbers have declined somewhat, it is more in reaction to collapsing support for the Bush administration than a rejection of its national security policies and tactics.

Our research reveals the following core logic to the post-9/11 paradigm:

1. The new terrorist threat is perceived to be fanatical, suicidal, and bent on the destruction of the United States.
2. Therefore, traditional military, diplomatic, and law enforcement strategies are perceived to be insufficient to protect American lives when faced with an enemy that can neither be negotiated with nor deterred from attacking us.

3. Extra-legal measures are therefore perceived to be necessary to prevent attacks on America and American citizens.
4. These measures appear to have worked since there have been no attacks on American soil since 9/11.
5. Security and legal rights are viewed as needing to be balanced, which means that sometimes we may need to sacrifice rights for greater security.
6. Sacrificing rights in the name of security is therefore moral, as it is necessary to preserve American lives from an enemy that can not be contained or deterred through other means.

An alternative security/ rights paradigm must not simply challenge the individual elements of the post-9/11 paradigm, but replace it with a completely different story that describes America's response to 9/11 as panicked, irrational, and often counterproductive. It is a narrative that will, of course, require some degree of nuance. Indeed, a strategic communications and public re-framing effort should help the public and policymakers to gain a more complex understanding of the problem and the solution: there is a terrorist threat, but it is not well explained by the dominant framework, and while some things that we did in response to 9/11 worked, many other things did not.

The good news is that few Americans in key swing segments had ever heard either more accurate characterizations of the threat or critical evaluations of the efficacy of extra-legal measures. In other words, the problem is not that Americans have rejected the alternative paradigm but rather that they have never been exposed to it. This finding, and the recent change of government, offers advocates and philanthropists an opportunity to hit the reset button in the way the public thinks about terrorism, counterterrorism, and rights. While the opportunity is right, shifting old ways of thinking and reasoning takes time. The effort should be viewed as a marathon, not a sprint, one that will take years, not months.

II. Summary

American Environicsⁱ was hired by a consortium of foundationsⁱⁱ to conduct research on the underlying social and psychological factors that shape attitudes on national security and human rights. The research drew on 50-plus years of political psychology and included new empirical research. The findings have highly significant implications for national security and human rights policymaking, philanthropy, and advocacy. The findings also advance the academic understanding of two key concepts, threat assessment and the perceived trade-off between rights and security, in the field of political psychology.

The following summarizes phases one and two of our research process. During phase three, we intend to develop concrete strategic communications and policy initiatives with several leading national security/human rights organizations:

- 1. The post-9/11 paradigm for thinking about the terrorist threat is virtually unchanged.** Though the salience of the threat has declined, it is easily made

salient once again. In mischaracterizing the threat, and effective responses to it, the post-9/11 paradigm is a central obstacle to overcoming public fear and achieving a more effective and humane security agenda.

2. Moral and legal arguments against extra-legal security measures (e.g., racial profiling, warrantless wiretapping) are often counterproductive and are never more effective than effectiveness arguments against those measures. When voters hear moral and legal arguments they assume that the tactic in question is effective in preventing terrorism. Voters are thus plunged into cognitive dissonance between two moralities: preventing terrorism and respecting rights. They resolve the cognitive dissonance by more forcefully supporting the extra-legal measures.

3. The current political moment offers a historic opportunity to replace the post-9/11 paradigm. A new paradigm would a) re-define the threat; b) challenge the effectiveness of ineffective tactics; c) help voters, the media, and policymakers understand which security measures are effective and which are not; and d) establish a national consensus that the ways we responded to 9/11 must never happen in America again. Understanding how to re-narrate this period while advancing new strategic initiatives are the goals of our proposed phase three research.

III. Methodology

The Overcoming Fear research project used five distinct research methodologies to arrive at our findings.

1. **An academic literature review** of 50-plus years of political and social psychological research. We hired two of the leading political psychologists in the country, Dr. John Jost of NYU and Dr. Robb Willer of UC-Berkeley, to write a thorough review of the political psychology literature as it relates to support for war and support for restricting rights. The literature reviewed covered hundreds of experiments and thousands of individuals (one paper, Jost et al., 2003, covered 88 experiments and 22,000 subjects).
2. **A values-based segmentation of the electorate** based on the underlying drivers of attitudes on national security and human rights. The segmentation of the electorate allows us to understand how and why Americans reason differently about national security and human rights issues. This segmentation is based on an 800+ question, 1,800 person, in-home social values survey conducted by American Environics. The questions on political psychology were provided by Dr. Willer. Because it is conducted in-home, the survey is unique in its ability to avoid social desirability bias.
3. **Six focus groups** (in suburbs of Atlanta and Chicago) with “swing segments” of the population.
4. **A cognitive linguistic analysis** of the focus group transcripts. This work was done by Dr. Pamela Morgan, a cognitive linguist who has worked with George Lakoff in the past and done cognitive analysis for social change

practitioners on global warming, health care, privacy, and other subjects for more than 10 years.

5. A two-by-two split **survey of 2,000 Americans** via the Internet to test “high vs. low threat” frames and “effectiveness vs. morality” frames. This survey came out of a methodology developed by Dr. Robb Willer and his graduate student, Nick Adams, now with American Environics, in their research on the partisanship effect of making the terrorist threat more salient. The on-line survey allowed respondents to become more intensely focused on the content than in a telephone survey, and the large sample allowed for an accurate segmentation of voters based on their values.

IV. Research Findings

1. **The post-9/11 paradigm remains largely intact, and though concern about terrorism has declined dramatically since 9/11, it is easily made salient once again.** Voters still widely believe in the paradigm, constructed by the Bush Administration after 9/11 with little effective resistance from Democrats or liberal national security advocates, that Al Qaeda is a well-organized, coordinated, religious, and disciplined conspiracy, with sleeper cells in the U.S., bent on the destruction of America and our way of life. Americans are largely unaware of expert views that diverge from the Bush Administration’s framing of the threat. Focus groups revealed that few Americans in the swing segments of the electorate had heard alternative characterizations of the threat or what to do about it.
2. **While some Americans hold the 9/11 paradigm more strongly than others, it is the dominant way of thinking about terrorism, counterterrorism, and rights for most American voters.** We should not be lulled into thinking that, because 70 percent of Americans disapprove of President Bush, similarly large numbers are rejecting his administration’s framing of terrorism and counterterrorism. Indeed, the quantitative survey we conducted reveals that the two “base” segments most sympathetic to the position of civil libertarians are very unique compared to other Americans. For example, the values differences between the civil libertarian base and all other groups is more predictive of attitudes toward extra-legal detention than any argument made against detention.
3. **Defining the terrorist threat as serious but nonetheless decentralized, disorganized, criminal but not religious, and primarily concerned with local and national level disputes — in terms largely consistent with independent expert views — reduces the salience of the terrorist threat.** Moreover, lower threat salience results in decreased support for extra-legal security measures (e.g., racial profiling, detention, and warrantless wiretapping). Further analysis revealed that, at least in the case of racial profiling, the alternative threat characterization had synergistic, not merely additive, effects to redefining effective counterterrorism (double what would be expected if it were merely additive). Given this, we believe that efforts to redefine the threat must be as high of a priority as efforts to better explicate effective ways of countering it.
4. **Most Americans make a clear distinction between the rights of American citizens and non-Americans, particularly Muslims suspected of terrorist**

activities. Americans appear to be much more comfortable with extra-legal security measures (e.g., torture and detention) that target “out groups,” such as non-American Muslims, than measures (e.g., racial profiling and warrantless wiretapping) that explicitly target American citizens.

5. **While most Americans strongly defend civil liberties in the abstract, they quickly and readily abandon many of them when they believe they contradict national security needs.** This finding is broadly consistent with fifty years of scholarly, empirical research that shows most people will sacrifice at least some of their rights — and even more of other people’s rights — when they feel their security is threatened. The American psychologist Abraham Maslow posited that there is a hierarchy of needs, and that people must feel that their security needs are met before they want or demand liberty. There are, of course, exceptions to this broad trend. Individuals and groups will risk their personal security and even give up their lives for freedom. But what the literature review, the values-based segmentation of the electorate, and the survey show is that these individuals and groups are exceptions to the rule. Moreover, the 9/11 paradigm justifies the restriction of civil liberties as a necessary if distasteful means to protecting American security *and* protecting our freedom.
6. **Moral and legal arguments against extra-legal tactics (e.g., they violate the Constitution, are repugnant, are contrary to American values, etc.) are often counterproductive.** Recognizing that this appears to be a counter-intuitive finding, there is in fact a clear logic at work.
 - a. **When many Americans hear moral and legal arguments against extra-legal tactics, they assume that the extra-legal measures are effective in preventing terrorism.**
 - b. **Moral arguments against extra-legal security measures create a conflict between two competing moralities — “protecting American lives” vs. “upholding American values” — and thus the experience of cognitive dissonance.** This creates serious and visible emotional discomfort among voters.
 - c. **Americans resolve their cognitive dissonance by more strongly supporting the extra-legal measures in the name of what they believe is the higher morality of protecting American lives.** This “system justification” often takes the form of voters more forcefully insisting that that the authorities must know what they are doing.
7. **Arguments that challenge the effectiveness of extra-legal tactics decrease the public’s estimation of both the effectiveness and the morality of such tactics.** Effectiveness arguments against extra-legal security measures appear to provide the cognitive closure needed by Americans who are conflicted between their commitment to civil liberties and their belief that protecting American lives is paramount.
8. **Torture appears to be the one extra-legal security measure where Americans draw a line.** Strong majorities of Americans oppose torture, even in circumstances that presuppose that torture is an effective means to extract

information that could save American lives. This appears to be the case in both high salience and low salience threat contexts.

9. **However, there is tolerance — as opposed to support — for torture in circumstances where its use is circumscribed, conducted by well-trained personnel, and supervised by responsible authorities.** Notably, support for torture, such as it exists, appears to be largely immune to effectiveness or morality arguments, and is largely motivated by a desire to punish those who have been involved with terrorist activities. This is a finding from the quantitative survey that was foreshadowed by several focus groups participants who appealed to the principle of “an eye for an eye” when torture was raised by the moderator.
10. **When presented with scenarios where terrorists gain access to nuclear weapons, the salience of the threat increases dramatically, as does support for preemptive military action and extra-legal security measures.** Moreover, invocations of a nuclear Iran, which is viewed as a terrorist state, appear to undermine support for non-proliferation and disarmament efforts while increasing support for preemptive military action, including the use of tactical nuclear weapons to destroy Iranian nuclear facilities. Iran is not viewed at present as a state that can be negotiated with or rationally deterred from using nuclear weapons once they have obtained them. Rather, it is seen as a nation of fanatics led by a madman bent on the destruction of Israel.

V. Recommendations

1. **Never suggest that terrorism is either not a threat or is less of a threat than people think.** Doing so undermines the credibility of advocates as people who take the terrorist threat seriously and are committed to protecting American lives as their top priority.
2. **Help the public and policymakers gain a more accurate view of the threat as uncoordinated, divided, and not primarily focused on attacking the United States.** Early reports from the recent Mumbai attacks, for instance, claimed that attackers were intentionally targeting American and British citizens. These reports almost certainly increased the salience of the Mumbai attacks and terrorism. Subsequent corrections that reported that the attackers had killed indiscriminately and were primarily motivated by the conflict between India and Pakistan over the Kashmir could have decreased the salience of those attacks, but only if these corrections and retractions had received more sustained media attention and been elevated by journalists, advocates and experts as a cautionary tale for the media. Opinion research should explore other ways to re-define the threat, including public education about the ways in which American Muslims have rejected religious extremism and embraced the American way of life.
3. **Contest aggressively the efficacy of extra-legal security measures.** Notably, very few people in the focus groups had ever heard *effectiveness* arguments against tactics like racial profiling and wiretapping. The potential power of these arguments remains largely untapped. It is unclear to what extent moral and effectiveness arguments can be combined. It may be that once efficacy is effectively challenged, moral arguments strengthen the case. Or it may be that

the addition of moral arguments undermines receptivity to effectiveness arguments if they lead the audience to question the intentions of the spokesperson. The credibility of effectiveness arguments may hinge upon the confidence that those who make these arguments are primarily concerned with keeping Americans safe from attack. Future research should resolve these questions, given the significant implications for advocacy communications.

4. **Offer effective security and law enforcement as alternatives to ineffective extra-legal ones.** For instance, arguments against racial profiling may be more effective if they are followed by an alternative basis for profiling suspects that promises better results.
5. **Invest in an aggressive media relations war room operation to more accurately define the threat, re-narrate the post-9/11 period, and promote effective national security tactics.** This operation, which may be an expansion and coordination of an existing organization or organizations, would: book national security and terrorism experts, along with retired military experts, on national radio and TV shows; act as a watchdog to media reporting on terrorist events like the Mumbai attacks; publish journal-length articles, op-eds, and regular blog posts that analyze and define the threat and promote effective strategies for countering it.
6. **Investigate whether moral-legal framing helps or detracts from efficacy framing.** It is an open question whether moral and legal arguments against extra-legal tactics support or undermine the case against extra-legal tactics. Against the temptation to embrace both framings, we should recognize that some and even most Americans may question the motivations of experts and others arguing against the efficacy of particular tactics if they believe that they are more motivated by protecting civil liberties than keeping Americans safe. This is a question that will be fairly straightforward to answer through additional quantitative research.
7. **Undermine the assumption that the individuals being tortured are guilty.** Here, the breakthroughs achieved by American capital punishment opponents by focusing on the innocent on death row may be a useful guide. Concern that innocent people have been put to death, and are on death row, resulted in a cognitive shift in the way voters and policymakers thought about the death penalty, resulting in important reforms. A similar communications effort exposing Americans to the innocent victims of torture (as well as other extra-legal measures) may result in a similar paradigm shift. This is a hypothesis that could be answered through future research.
8. **Convene top American scholars to re-assess America's reaction to 9/11.** This could be a conference, a book, and regular meetings to establish a new scholarly consensus about what happened and why. This effort should invite scholars from a range of disciplines, from history to political psychology to sociology. The goal should be to support scholarship that seeks to expand our understanding of the psychological, political, and sociological drivers of our response to 9/11, and offers insight into how we can avoid repeating similar mistakes in the future.

9. **Invest in on-line investigative journalism and news analysis of terrorism and counterterrorism.** The Mumbai attacks revealed how quickly wrong information — that Americans were being targeted — can spread. The rapid decline of American newspapers has left a journalistic vacuum. But it has also created an opportunity to grow intelligent on-line journalism and news analysis. Support for top-notch journalism fellows should be part of this, but it not enough. A serious on-line news operation, perhaps affiliated with a premier journalism school, dedicated to reporting and commenting on terrorism, national security, and rights would instantly have a large audience and could help Americans and policymakers better understand the threat.
10. **Do not elevate fears of nuclear terrorism.** Efforts to link nuclear weapons and terrorism are unlikely to drive greater public demand for disarmament or stronger non-proliferation policies. For most Americans, the logical entailment of terrorists with nuclear weapons leads to support for pre-emptive military action against terrorists and the states that support and arm them, not to negotiate new treaties. Voters demonstrate little faith that disarmament in the U.S. will deter states that are determined to acquire nuclear weapons from doing so.
11. **Efforts to negotiate with Iran and normalize relations, formally and informally should be strongly supported and encouraged.** The more that Americans see Iran as a normal state, with rational interests and a modern and educated population, the less potent the calls for pre-emptive military action will be. Voters view North Korea as a state that can be negotiated with, despite the real-world difficulty of negotiations, because Kim Jong Il is viewed as a corrupt tyrant who takes advantage of his people and whose primary motivation is to maintain his power. Hence, Americans view him as someone who, like Communists of the Soviet era, can be deterred. Voters do not believe he can be persuaded to give up his nukes, but they don't think he would use a nuclear weapon since it would result in his own destruction. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, by contrast, is viewed as such an extremist that he would sacrifice his life and country to destroy Israel. Seeing Iran negotiate with the U.S. would almost certainly change how voters perceive Iran. There may also be an important role for citizen diplomacy and a related media relations effort to change American perceptions of Iran.
12. **Elevate states like Russia and India as the prototypes for states that would be involved in disarmament and non-proliferation.** Americans believe that these states, and even North Korea, can be both negotiated with and deterred from using nuclear weapons. They are seen as rational actors who have a strong desire for self-preservation, even when we are in conflict with them. This is not perceived to be the case with Iran or terrorist organizations. When “terrorist states” like Iran become the focus of disarmament and non-proliferation debates they undermine support for multilateral, negotiated approaches to the nuclear proliferation problem.

Contact: Michael Shellenberger, Managing Partner, American Environics,
510-844—0010 x356, Michaels@AmericanEnvironics.com

ⁱ The American Environics team consisted of: Dr. Pamela Morgan, a cognitive linguist who worked closely with George Lakoff in the past; Dr. John Whaley, a former political pollster with Hart Research; Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger, opinion researchers and strategists; two preeminent political psychologists, Dr. John Jost, New York University, lead author on the landmark 2003 *Psychological Review* article “Political Conservatism as Motivated Social Cognition,” and Dr. Robb Willer, UC – Berkeley, author of seminal research on testing effects of terror warnings on political behavior; and two Ph.D. graduate students, Matthew Feinberg and Nick Adams.

ⁱⁱ Funders of Overcoming Fear included Proteus Fund, Open Society Institute, Ford Foundation, Colombe Foundation, Ploughshares, and Educational Fund for America.