

**National Security and Human Rights
Report on Focus Groups
(Atlanta and Chicago
September and October 2008)**

**By American EnviroNics
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Key Findings

General Findings

Civil Liberties and Human Rights

Nuclear Disarmament and Nuclear Proliferation

Characteristics of the Targeted Swing Segments

Descriptions of the Targeted Swing Segments: COO1 (Town Square Faithfuls) & COO3 (Reluctant Fearfuls)

The Major Relevant Differences between the Segments

Cognitive Dissonance, System Justification, and Human Rights

The Reason for Cognitive Dissonance

Direct Statements of Cognitive Dissonance

Torture

Rendition

Detention: Guantánamo

The Basic Reasoning Pattern: How to Reconcile Torture with Morality & American Principles

The Most Striking Elements of the Reasoning Pattern

There is nothing more moral than saving lives

Self-defense is a fundamental right

Torture is effective

Other Important Elements of the Reasoning Pattern

“Giving up” rights

Things have changed

“The authorities” vs. “the government”

The military vs. law enforcement

Cognitive Dissonance around Surveillance, Racial Profiling, and Deserving/Undeserving People

Deserving and Undeserving People

Surveillance and Persons of Interest

Terrorists Are Different from Americans

Nuclear Proliferation & Nuclear Disarmament: Metaphor, Scenarios, & Prototypes

A Basic Metaphorical Frame

Scenarios and Prototypes

Nuclear weapons with respect to nation-states

Iran

Disarmament

Terrorists with nuclear weapons (or dirty bombs)

Recommendations

General Recommendations

Human Rights and Civil Liberties

Nuclear Proliferation and Nuclear Disarmament

I. INTRODUCTION

The “Overcoming Fear” research project was commissioned to understand the ways in which fear and concerns about personal and national security are shaping people’s attitudes toward civil liberties, human rights, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and other aspects of national security policy. In order to explore these points, American Environics has taken a number of steps: (i) an analysis of our in-house American Values Survey data set to point up the relationship between key psychological factors and attitudes on these issues; (ii) an extensive literature review (involving 91 sources) of the psychological literature on this subject; (iii) a review of advocacy materials; (iv) a media review; and (v) a set of focus groups. The research was not intended to test-market existing advocacy messages, but rather to understand how we can best shape the public discourse on national security, human rights, and civil liberties.

Among the most important findings in the research literature, confirmed in our own research, is that increased “mortality salience” (i.e., increased emotional importance and cognitive awareness of the possibility of death) is consistently shown to provoke authoritarian and pro-war responses. Another important finding is the prominent role of “cognitive dissonance” (i.e., emotional discomfort when asked to hold contradictory opinions or attitudes at the same time). Cognitive dissonance occurs when people are faced with the need to reconcile their views about morality and American values in the abstract with what they currently believe is necessary in response to specific national security threats (e.g., torture, rendition, surveillance, and nuclear proliferation and disarmament) in order to keep themselves, their families, and the country as a whole safe. A third major psychological finding is that when faced with cognitive dissonance, people resolve this discomfort by “system justification” (i.e., finding reasons to justify the current system and its actions).

Other important findings include the need to separate the discussion of nuclear weapons from other national security issues; people reason about these differently, seeing defense against terrorism as necessarily preemptive while defense against nuclear weapons requires a metaphorical shield. Voters apply different prototypes to different nation-states, based on whether or not they believe nations can be reasoned with. For example, voters perceive Russia and India as nations that can be deterred, but not Iran because it is viewed as a terrorist state. This finding comes with the strong recommendation that nuclear proliferation and terrorism be spoken about separately, as their association provokes extreme mortality salience and support for preemptive nuclear attacks.

Given these findings, it is critical to find ways to contest the grounds on which these psychological reactions rest, whether by re-narrating the threat or questioning the assumed effectiveness of the system voters are justifying. Another way out of this cognitive dissonance and increased fear of death must thus be found, or people will continue to resolve these unpleasant sensations through system justification of the unconstitutional and immoral actions that have provoked them.

Methodology

The focus groups were designed to explore and observe the ways in which the mortality salience response works in terms of specific national security and civil liberties issues. Participants were recruited psychographically. Two groups recruited from COO1 (Town Square Faithfuls) of the National Security and Human Rights segmentation of the American Environics American Values Survey (conducted nationally in January 2007) were held in Atlanta, Georgia, on September 3, 2008; two groups recruited from COO3 (Reluctant Fearfuls) of the same segmentation were conducted in Atlanta on September 4; and two groups also recruited from COO1 and COO3 (one each) were conducted in Chicago on October 7. COOs 1 and 3 were chosen because they seemed the swing segments most likely to be receptive to progressive positions on human rights and national security.¹

The four Atlanta groups used the same focus group guide; the guide was revised for the two Chicago groups. The Atlanta groups were designed to explore dominant frames and reasoning patterns in public discourse about national security, human rights, and civil liberties; in Chicago hypotheses based on the undermining of key presuppositions in the reasoning patterns shared by the groups were tested: first, the hypothesis that an “effectiveness” frame (that is, questioning not the morality or the principles of torture, rendition, surveillance, and so on, but rather its underlying assumptions of effectiveness and a cost-benefit approach) would work well in undermining support for extralegal policies and practices, and, second, the hypothesis that if people can be convinced that the facts support a view of Al Qaeda as a disorganized and poorly disciplined enemy (while not minimizing the fact that they pose a threat), they will see less need to give up fundamental rights and principles to fight against them.

The focus groups were designed to explore the reasoning behind people’s attitudes toward civil liberties and national security, not to test specific policy proposals or messages. The key finding of all is the degree to which people are making their decisions about these issues based on their search for a way out of the psychological distress that results when they try to hold onto two incompatible sets of beliefs in a context of fear: their faith in the goodness of America on the one hand, and their appalled reaction to practices like wiretapping, torture, and rendition on the other. Stir in their belief that the world has become much more dangerous, much more unpredictable, and much more subject to the lunatic goals of people who do not value life—and the resulting cognitive dissonance drives them to seek a way out, quickly. The way out that they find is an implicit and unexpressed, and therefore unexamined, assumption that these practices work to save lives—along with a belief that saving lives is the highest morality of all.

¹The AVS, one of the largest social values surveys conducted in the United States, is used to correlate positions on issues and reported activities to the psychological drivers of political decision making. It contains more than 900 questionnaire items and is comprised of a national, random, representative sample of 1,803 adults age 15 and older (weighted), with a margin of error of +/- 2.3%, including a California oversample of 541.

These segments are profiled in section II of this report.

KEY FINDINGS

General Findings

1. Clearly, many of the arguments that advocates have been making have not reached the lay audience. There was no evidence that people had heard that torture does not work, for example, or for the most part that Al Qaeda is not a well-organized conspiracy of hatred against America.
2. Although there are some overlaps, there is no overall, one-size-fits-all approach to the issues of national security, civil liberties, human rights, terrorism, and nuclear proliferation and disarmament. The public sees these issues as multiple (though sometimes linked) problems.
3. At first glance, people appear to be less concerned about terrorism than they were a few years ago. However, once a discussion of terrorism and terrorists starts, they start moving back into that place of fear, and their attitudes resemble those closer to 9/11. Their opinions are the same: they just are not thinking much about it now. That is, its “salience” is less, which leads to the wrong impression about actual changes in attitude.
4. Increasing the salience of terrorism also results in increased “mortality salience” (i.e., increased emotional importance and cognitive awareness of the possibility of death). Increased mortality salience has repeatedly been shown to lead to increased support for authoritarian responses to perceived threats.
5. Changing attitudes is not easy, because other moralities and priorities (see the next points) still have strong claims on people, and these conflicts lead to “cognitive dissonance,” a kind of psychological and emotional discomfort that results from trying to hold contradictory opinions or attitudes at the same time.
6. When people suffer cognitive dissonance, they often resolve this discomfort by “system justification,” that is, by finding reasons to justify what is currently being done. One way they do this is by falling back on the priority of “the morality of saving lives” over all other moralities, and on the priority of “the right of self-defense” over all other rights. Therefore, simply arguing on the grounds of morality or civil liberties allows people to justify distasteful practices on the grounds of higher morality and a more fundamental right.
7. There is nothing more important in understanding people’s attitudes towards what is happening abroad and at home than to recognize that people do in fact see the issues of rights, liberties, torture, and so on as moral issues—the morality of saving lives—and as issues of human rights and civil liberties—the right of self-defense. These are two sides of the same coin: saving lives.

8. In this way, debating these policies and practices on the grounds of morality or rights and liberties actually works to *increase* support for the practices.
9. There is thus general agreement that these unconstitutional or extralegal practices are effective in saving lives, and therefore necessary. The “highest morality and highest right” reasoning structure leads people to an acceptable resolution of cognitive dissonance through system justification, and people do not debate whether or not these practices are effective. They assume that they are.
10. In most participants’ view, there was no problem with holding to human rights, civil liberties, and American principles as long as the world was the way it was before 9/11. After 9/11, however, they believe that the situation has changed and that we may have to give up pre-9/11 expectations in order to adapt.
11. This situation results in deep cognitive dissonance as people try to reconcile incompatible belief structures. For the most part they do not even bring the incompatibility or the distress into consciousness and talk about it. It is as if the psychological distress is for the most part too painful even to acknowledge—as one might expect when two such emotional and core belief structures (in the goodness of America and the need to save lives) are brought into direct conflict. This is why giving people an out by allowing them to question the grounds on which the structure rests—such as effectiveness—is likely to be generally welcomed.
12. This cognitive dissonance does not appear at the abstract level of principles. At that level people are able to express the “American principles and morality” side of the issue without being confronted with the “but we need to save lives” position. When people consider any real-life situations, however, such as “torture,” “rendition,” “detention/Guantánamo,” or “surveillance,” they are immediately plunged into the cognitive and psychological dilemma.
13. However, even in this changed world people are able to consider an effectiveness argument and to change their support for undesirable policies and practices as a way of resolving their cognitive dissonance if they can be persuaded that they do not work.

Civil Liberties and Human Rights

14. People are used to the dominant framing of an opposition between “the rights of Americans” and “national security.” When this framing is used, people are not necessarily happy about giving up their rights, but for the most part they are willing to do so as long as they believe that doing so increases their security and that of their families and other Americans.

15. When it comes to civil liberties, people resolve cognitive dissonance by consciously dividing the world into deserving people and undeserving people, and explicitly discussing behavioral criteria about how to tell the difference. This distinction is operating with respect to human rights issues also, but since these almost never involve American citizens, people assume that for the most part the authorities are finding the undeserving non-citizens when it comes to torture, rendition, and detention.
16. People are generally unwilling to make deservingness a simple matter of race or ethnicity. They want to be able to point to some kind of evidence of wrongdoing, at least potentially—although they also believe that people who belong to terrorist groups or certain terrorist states think differently from Americans.
17. People are divided into “deserving” or “undeserving” depending on whether or not they do bad things and therefore have “something to hide.” American citizens who do not do bad things and therefore have “nothing to hide” should have full constitutional and human rights, including freedom from random wiretapping. Deserving non-American citizens should have human rights, although they are not guaranteed constitutional rights. Undeserving people, whether they are citizens or non-citizens, who do bad things and have “something to hide” should not have full constitutional and human rights, although more of these rights can be removed from non-Americans than from Americans. Undeserving non-American citizens lose even their basic human rights if it is a matter of saving lives.

Nuclear Disarmament and Nuclear Proliferation

18. Linking terrorists with nuclear weapons results in increased mortality salience. Mortality salience is strongly correlated with a worldview that favors military and militaristic actions.
19. “Nuclear weapons” and “terror” make use of two different mental frames. That is, people think differently about how to defend against terrorists from how to defend against nuclear attack. They view protection against terrorism as a frame of preemptive defense; they view protection against nuclear weapons as a shield frame of deterrence.
20. When the preemptive defense-against-terrorism frame is associated with nuclear weapons, it leads people to justify the preemptive use of military force—and even nuclear weapons. This includes military or nuclear action against a nuclear Iran, which is viewed as a terrorist state.
21. The shield metaphor used for defense against nuclear attack supports disarmament, but only up to a point. That is, the metaphor of a shield requires only that the shield be strong enough to deter adversaries from attacking U.S. Thus, the public might support some reduction in the size of the U.S. arsenal,

- because we have an overwhelming nuclear advantage. However, there is no support for going all the way to zero, because people believe that would leave the U.S. vulnerable to a rogue state, a terrorist state, or a terrorist group. Thus, any discussion of disarmament must be done in a way that is perceived as not creating a disadvantage or danger for the U.S.
22. Traditional nuclear non-proliferation arguments work in the context of nation-states that the public perceives can be reasoned with, such as India and Russia. Therefore, in discussions of disarmament, countries like India or Russia should be the prototype, not North Korea or (especially) Iran.
 23. Deterrence is viewed as possible with N. Korea, although not certain. Kim Jong-il is perceived as a man interested in self-preservation and maintaining his power who is imposing his rule on a generally reasonable country. Thus, deterrence and negotiation viewed as potentially effective when it comes to North Korea.
 24. Deterrence is viewed as impossible with Iran, because Ahmadinejad is viewed as unstable, extreme, bent on the destruction of Israel and the United States, and willing to die for his beliefs. Since the American public believes that the Iranian people share these characteristics and agree with his extremist agenda, Iran is viewed as a terrorist state. Voters thus believe Iran can't be allowed to gain nuclear weapons, and therefore a preemptive strike is viewed as justified. (However, people think that Israel will act preemptively first, so we won't have to.

II. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TARGETED SWING SEGMENTS

Two of the segments in the American Environics “roadmap” have been targeted as receptive swing segments. Complete demographics and values data is available; what is presented here are brief descriptions of each segment and a quick look at the most relevant ways in which they differ.

Descriptions of the Targeted Swing Segments (COO1 and COO3)

COO1 (Swing)—Town Square Faithfuls

For most people, making it to church once a week is hard enough, but not for Town Square Faithfuls. More than one in three members of this devout segment (68% are born-again Christians) attend church services at least twice a week. It’s no surprise then that their faith largely drives their worldview.

For Town Square Faithfuls, there is a right and a wrong way to be. Members of this segment strongly value *Everyday Ethics*, *Importance of Discipline* and *Propriety*, wanting to behave in ways that they see as respecting themselves and others. They also strongly hold the value *Emotional Control*, which indicates reluctance to experience or express emotions. They do not believe that current society holds these same values: they score quite high on *Moral Collapse*, the belief that contemporary American civilization is in a state of moral decline, and *Apocalypse*, the sense that human civilization is going to end disastrously, sooner than later. To them, America could benefit from a little prayer in schools and reminders in our courthouses about the Ten Commandments.

It would be a mistake, though, to equate this group’s *Religiosity*—their highest score and a staggeringly high score of 1000—with right-wing fundamentalism. Although the segment features many evangelicals and leans slightly Republican, 32% of Town Square Faithfuls identify as Democrats. (Representing 27% of the population, it is by far the largest of all segments.) Members of this segment strongly hold the values *Social Responsibility* and *Liberal Communitarianism*, the belief that it’s important to think about one’s own life in the context of others rather than focusing only on what benefits oneself.

Such beliefs lead Town Square Faithfuls, a majority of whom live in either a small town or a rural area, to be involved with their local communities. This provides them with a strong sense of *Social Connectedness* and *Social Intimacy* and serves to give their lives meaning and a sense of purpose.

Town Square Faithfuls prefer the simple life. Many members of this 56% female segment would probably trade places with Laura Ingalls Wilder if they could; they are not hippies or survivalists. Almost a quarter of them are retired and the group overall is averse to new technology and things that are complex and/or ambiguous. They also don’t care much about worldly goods and what people think about their possessions. Their favorite magazine is “*Reader’s Digest*” and that has probably been the case for much of their lives.

Their second highest score is *Traditional Family*. Town Square Faithfuls also have a strong sense of *Duty* and they score higher on *Obedience to Authority* than any other segment. To members of this segment, the world is hierarchical and that's just how it is; they firmly believe that humans are superior to animals, youth should respect their elders, and the father is the master of the house.

Of course, the ultimate authority is God, and Town Square Faithfuls believe in the teaching of brotherly love. Members of this segment (14% African American and 9% Latino) are not racist or xenophobic, though they want people to assimilate into American culture. They score high on *Altruism*, wanting to help other people and taking pleasure in doing so. But this is a choice for individuals to make; they don't think that it is the role of government to provide what they consider handouts, as evidenced by their low scores on *Government as Economic Equalizer* and *Largesse Oblige*.

To Town Square Faithfuls, government exists to keep them safe. As a result, members of this segment will accept federal invasions of privacy in the name of national safety. They are one of the groups most worried about another major terrorist attack, and the only segment with a majority of its members who say that the spread of nuclear weapons is one of the most important issues facing the United States.

Indeed, concern about Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons of mass destruction—along with their belief that America has a moral obligation to use force to prevent genocide—persuaded this group to support the invasion of Iraq. They also continue to support the war—one of only two segments with a majority of its members who believe that the war has been worth it—at least in part because there is a moral imperative to clean up our mess. People are responsible for their actions.

Not a group to leave things up to chance (it's the segment least likely to buy lottery tickets), Town Square Faithfuls believe in making sure that promises are kept. (Gambling is also morally wrong.) It is important to play by the rules, which explains why members of this segment have the second highest level of support for honoring international treaties, even though they also can support a go-it-alone war.

This is why Town Square Faithfuls are such a compelling swing segment. They score very high on *National Pride* and *Importance of National Stability*, but score fairly low on *American Entitlement*. It is not a blind faith that they have for their country; it's important to them for America to do the right thing, as they believe it usually has. Stances that come across as radical—even though Jesus was a rebel—will not go far with this group.

COO3 (Swing)—Reluctant Fearfuls

The animal totem for this group is probably an ostrich. While other Americans may draw a line in the sand, Reluctant Fearfuls simply want to bury their heads in it.

The top value for this most female of all segments (61%) is *Aversion to Complexity*. Intimidated and threatened by the vagaries of modern life, Reluctant Fearfuls like things to be simple and straightforward. And when things aren't, as is usually the case, their typical response is a mixture of stress, fear and desire to flee. This runs the gamut from *Technology Anxiety* (their fourth highest value) to the sense that we're in a state of *Moral Collapse* (their fifth highest).

Such fretting is not exclusive to times of financial meltdown or global terror. Members of this meat-and-potatoes group are regularly concerned about their ability to put meat on the table. Their seventh highest score is for *Unmet Basic Needs* and because things can always get worse, Reluctant Fearfuls also hold *Saving on Principle* among their top ten values.

Their second highest score is *Fear of Violence*; members of this segment worry about everything from child predators to being personal victims of terrorist attacks. Some of this anxiety is driven by the fact that 85% of Reluctant Fearfuls are parents. The only segment that lists "*Family Circle*" among its top ten magazines, members of this group find raising kids in today's world to be a scary proposition.

That only 64% of them are married means that there are a lot of single moms (and some single dads) consumed by family matters. As a result, there isn't the time—never mind the lack of motivation—for Reluctant Fearfuls to get involved in much beyond their families and immediate community.

Conformity to Social Norms is another top ten value for Reluctant Fearfuls, the third-largest segment overall at 15% of the population. They do their best to avoid risky behavior and unusual situations, and for the most part are able to stay out of trouble. This caution and apprehension influences their belief in the *Importance of Brand*, but it is as much about the reliability of their purchases as it is about fitting in. If their dad bought Buicks, then they will buy Buicks.

Seventy-six percent of Reluctant Fearfuls identify as political moderates. It's not so much that they are always centrist in their views, it's more that they don't like going out on a limb. They don't want to upset the status quo. Politically agnostic, members of this segment pay little attention to issues that don't directly affect them; the idea that there is a moral duty to help the less fortunate, *Largesse Oblige*, has little resonance with this group. The domestic issues that they care about are things such as the security of Social Security and health of their health care plans.

Their biggest source of anxiety, however, is the threat of terrorism. Reluctant Fearfuls, who score very low on *Rejection of Authority*, are willing to trade some of their privacy in return for an increased sense of national security. They are fine not knowing what is being done to protect them (their military policy: we won't ask, and please don't tell).

To Reluctant Fearfuls, there is such a thing as too much freedom. Their second lowest score is for *Unfettered Individualism*, the belief that neither one's community nor one's

government should restrict how individuals live their lives, and they also don't believe in the values *Live and Let Live* and *Importance of Spontaneity*.

They are the only group to have among its lowest values both *American Entitlement*, the belief that Americans are especially deserving of wealth, and *American Liberty*, the expectation that Americans have a right to personal and political freedoms. Both values are about exceptionalism and Reluctant Fearfuls don't feel exceptional. To them, there is no *Innate Good and Evil*; people are people wherever you go.

That said, members of this segment perceive the outside world to be full of dangers. Reluctant Fearfuls (18% African American and 16% Hispanic) are not sexist, racist or xenophobic, yet they score extremely low on *Global Consciousness* and have little interest in the fate of people in other countries. They have the second lowest percentage of members who totally agree that the U.S. should honor its commitment to international treaties.

Members of this segment also worry about making new enemies. Only 9% of Reluctant Fearfuls say that America would be very justified in using nuclear weapons to respond to a nuclear attack on a U.S. ally. Some of this is because when asked questions about how justified or how much in agreement they are with various statements, members of this group tend to avoid extreme responses. But it is also that they see how violence begets violence and that nuclear anything—whether it's power plants or proliferation of weapons—arouses safety concerns.

So the way to reach this swing segment is to understand their worries and insecurities. Statements that highlight the clear consequences of a problem and offer reassurances that the remedy is simple and safe—and that don't call for radical action—should appeal to Reluctant Fearfuls. When cornered and unable to hide or flee, ostriches will often resort to a mighty kick.

The Major Relevant Differences between the Segments

Although both segments agreed on the basic reasoning patterns described in the remainder of this report, there were some interesting differences in emphases and values between the Town Square Faithfuls and the Reluctant Fearfuls. The following tables show some of the important relevant social values in which the two segments differ.

Town Square Faithfuls	Reluctant Fearfuls
Pro-hierarchy and trusting in authority	Low/Very Low or Average in all hierarchical values, both pro- and anti- (conservative-lean/liberal-lean); Average in <i>Obedience to Authority</i> and Very Low in <i>Rejection of Authority</i>

Town Square Faithfuls	Reluctant Fearfuls
Very High Importance of <i>National Stability</i>	Average Importance of <i>National Stability</i>

Town Square Faithfuls	Reluctant Fearfuls
Like things to be orderly, settled, and without nuance: Average <i>Aversion to Complexity</i> , Low <i>Rejection of Order</i> ; Average/Low <i>Importance of Spontaneity</i>	Really like straightforward order and decision making and a lack of nuance, even more so than Town Square Faithfuls: Very High <i>Aversion to Complexity</i> ; Average on many relevant values; Very Low <i>Importance of Spontaneity</i> ; Low <i>Rejection of Order</i> —including not wanting to know details of problems

Town Square Faithfuls	Reluctant Fearfuls
Value reason, self-control, responsibility for oneself: Very High <i>Propriety</i> , <i>Importance of Discipline</i> , <i>Duty</i> , <i>Everyday Ethics</i> , <i>Emotional Control</i> ; High <i>Personal Control</i> , <i>Work Ethic</i>	Less concerned about self-control, responsibility: Average <i>Work Ethic</i> , <i>Saving on Principle</i> , <i>Everyday Ethics</i> , <i>Propriety</i> , <i>Emotional Control</i> ; Low <i>Duty</i> , <i>Importance of Discipline</i> , <i>Personal Control</i>

Town Square Faithfuls	Reluctant Fearfuls
People do not get to make up their own rules (Very High <i>Liberal Communitarianism</i> , <i>Traditional Community</i> ; Very Low <i>Every Man for Himself</i> , <i>Unfettered Individualism</i>)	Groups have right to put constraints on individual behavior (Liberal-leaning subsegment: Low <i>Every Man for Himself</i> ; Conservative-leaning subsegment: Very Low <i>Liberal Communitarianism</i>)

Town Square Faithfuls	Reluctant Fearfuls
America is special and on top (Very High <i>National Pride</i>)	NOT “America = particularly special” (Average in <i>National Pride</i>)

Town Square Faithfuls	Reluctant Fearfuls
Strong friends/family: Very High <i>Social Connectedness</i> , <i>Liberal Communitarianism</i> , <i>Search for Roots</i> ; High <i>Social Intimacy</i> , <i>Community Involvement</i> , <i>Meaningful Moments</i> ; Very Low <i>Social Isolation</i>	Not particularly connected to friends or family: Average <i>Meaningful Moments</i> , <i>Community Involvement</i> , <i>Social Connectedness</i> , <i>Social Isolation</i> ; Low <i>Social Intimacy</i> , <i>Search for Roots</i> ; Very Low <i>Liberal Communitarianism</i>)

Town Square Faithfuls	Reluctant Fearfuls
Black/white, good/bad (“America = good”): Average <i>Aversion to Complexity</i> (but Low <i>Just Deserts</i>)	Even more black/white, good/bad (but not as strongly “America = good”): Very High <i>Aversion to Complexity</i> (Average <i>Just Deserts</i>)

Town Square Faithfuls	Reluctant Fearfuls
Very High <i>Xenophobia</i>	Very Low <i>Xenophobia</i>

Town Square Faithfuls	Reluctant Fearfuls
Very, very religious (in demographics and social values)	Still very high in all the religion demographics

Town Square Faithfuls	Reluctant Fearfuls
High in <i>Personal Control</i> and Low in <i>Fatalism</i>	Average in <i>Fatalism</i> and Low in <i>Personal Control</i>

Town Square Faithfuls	Reluctant Fearfuls
World is going downhill (Very High <i>Moral Collapse, Apocalypse</i>)—(Average <i>Fear of Violence</i>)	NOT <i>Apocalypse</i> (Low), though higher than Town Square Faithfuls in fear (Very High <i>Fear of Violence</i>) (<i>Moral Collapse</i> is High)

These differences in values and attitudes are often recognizable in the quotes in this report and are highlighted in the discussion where they are the most important.

III. COGNITIVE DISSONANCE, SYSTEM JUSTIFICATION, AND HUMAN RIGHTS

These focus groups have shown one thing very clearly: Americans are in a state of psychological distress called “cognitive dissonance”—the psychological and emotional discomfort that results from trying to hold contradictory opinions or attitudes at the same time—because of the conflict between what they believe on the one hand is moral and American, and on the other hand what they believe is necessary to do to keep Americans safe—and therefore is also moral.

People do not want to stay in this uncomfortable state. The usual way that people resolve cognitive dissonance on these issues is to resort to “system justification,” or the removal of the psychological distress by rationalizing the existing system, policies, and procedures rather than by removing the disturbing elements—and this is what happens when it comes to national security, human rights, and civil liberties. People justify violations of human rights and civil liberties by prioritizing the saving of lives over any other kind of morality. No matter how unhappy they are with that decision, they show no indication of abandoning it, given the current dominant frames and reasoning patterns. Furthermore, the more that anyone talks about terrorism, the more mortality salience is increased, which leads to more fear (consciously or not); and the more fearful that people become, the more likely they are to favor authoritarian responses. The way out of this spiral is to offer people other ways to resolve their cognitive dissonance in the first place.

This dilemma comes up over and over again: with respect to the loss of civil liberties in the U.S. and rendition, Abu Ghraib and torture, nuclear proliferation and disarmament. In every one of these national security and human rights issues, cognitive dissonance is driving people’s contradictory responses, between what they believe in the abstract and what they think should be true in America, and what they think is necessary to save lives and keep America safe. It is also very important to note, however, that when people resolve their cognitive dissonance by finding the highest morality in saving lives, they are *assuming* that the actions that distress them and cause the cognitive dissonance are in fact effective.

The cognitive dissonance that thus arises when people confront human rights and national security issues explains why “morality” arguments are not likely to prevail. Another argument entirely is required. We suggest that “effectiveness” arguments may provide this lever by questioning one of the central presuppositions on which the entire structure rests. If people can be brought to think that in fact these objectionable techniques do *not* work, they are allowed to resolve their cognitive dissonance in a different way, one that allows them to return to supporting American morality and American principles that prohibit torture, rendition, surveillance, racial profiling, and so on.

The following discussion shows how the current grounds of the discussion about rights, liberties, and national security are used by people to reason to hardline conclusions that diminish rights and liberties instead of protecting and strengthening them.

The Reason for Cognitive Dissonance

The psychological distress that arises when morality and American principles are set against a belief that certain practices are necessary to save lives is only rarely expressed, because people have accepted the default discourse of fear and trade-off that currently underlies public discussion about national security, civil liberties, and human rights.

Fear

People accept the fear framing; it is almost never contested as the following participant did.

Atl Town Square Faithfuls (TSF) 8pm WOMAN 5: Well, yeah. Just saying how I think our government has us fearful to the point that most of us will go to anything to be safe, you know? And I think that . . . I think we should be wise in our planning ahead, but I don't think that we need to have our people go along with some of the stuff that we do out of fear and not thinking it through. That's a notion and not a principle.

People speak of their own state of mind as both less fearful than immediately after 9/11 and as always fearful. There are slight but significant differences between the two COOs. The Town Square Faithfuls are more concerned than fearful, and more religious in their outlook and response; the Reluctant Fearfuls express more of a sense of edginess and vulnerability.

Furthermore, by the end of two hours of talking about terrorism and national security people in the focus groups were talking in a much more emotionally charged fashion about terrorists.

MODERATOR: How would you describe Al Qaeda? Top of mind, what comes to mind when I say that?

Atl Reluctant Fearfuls (RF) 6pm M Voice: Hate.

Atl RF 6pm M Voice: Sneaky sneaky.

Atl RF 6pm W Voice: Brainwashed.

Atl RF 6pm M Voice: Growing.

Atl RF 6pm M Voice: Evil.

Atl RF 6pm W Voice: Evil.

Atl RF 6pm W Voice: Evil.

Atl RF 6pm M Voice: I think they're just confused.

Atl RF 6pm W Voice: Brainwashed from birth.

Atl RF 6pm M Voice: You know, they say the same thing about us.

Atl RF 6pm W Voice: Yeah, that's true.

The Dominant "Balancing" Frame

The common frame for discussing civil liberties and human rights at the present time is one of "balancing" these against national security. In the Atlanta focus groups (although not in the Chicago groups) we explored this dominant metaphor through an exercise.

Atlanta participants were given 10 poker chips and asked to allocate them to a drawing of a balance scale. One side of the scale was labeled “Rights of Americans” and the other side was labeled “National Security.” the balance between “national security” and “the rights of Americans.” The fact that it was specifically “Americans” triggered some very interesting and not entirely unexpected comments about what people were willing to grant to non-Americans; see below. The 10 chips were not given any labels, but the fact that there were 10 of them probably predisposed participants to equate them with the ten rights of the Bill of Rights. When people were asked in this exercise to “balance” civil liberties and rights without any context, they referred to both morality and American principle.

However, when they were asked about rights and liberties in specific contexts, they were in fact willing to give up those same rights and liberties—in the service of the greater morality of saving lives. They may not like the conclusion they come to, but they come to it nonetheless.

When any of the specific issues come up, such as “torture,” “rendition,” or “detention/Guantánamo,” people are immediately plunged into the cognitive and psychological dilemma of cognitive dissonance. Few people are willing to confront it directly.

Direct Statements of Cognitive Dissonance

Only a few participants stated any definitive reservations about the way things are being conducted. When they did, however, they expressed fear and vulnerability, as well as stating the importance of rights and what one might term ‘decent behavior.’ The deep cognitive dissonance that resulted from trying to hold both of these positions at the same time showed also in their stumbling around in their language, with more false starts, internal inconsistencies or incoherencies, and so on, than usual. Only a handful of comments expressed actual revulsion at what is going on, however, whether on “moral” grounds or on “American” grounds. It is as if the psychological distress is for the most part too painful even to acknowledge—as one might expect when two such emotional and core belief structures (the goodness of America and the need to save lives) are brought into direct conflict. This situation is why giving people an out by allowing them to question the grounds on which the structure rests—that of effectiveness—has shown promise and is likely to be generally eagerly welcomed.

Torture

A few people express antagonism to the use of torture—much less than one would expect if one merely listened to their comments in the abstract about the need to protect civil liberties and human rights.

Atl TSF 6pm WOMAN 3: I thought about moving one of my national security chips back, just because, please nobody take offense, I'm rather shocked at what a sane and normal group of people this is, and how readily they've

accepted something that I was not prepared for. I thought that this group would surely say no torture, more along the lines of where I was going.

However, one of the findings that have become clear in the course of this research is that the cognitive dissonance does not appear at the abstract level of principles. At that level people are able to express the “American principles and morality” side of the issue without being confronted with the “but we need to save lives” position. When the choice appears to be between saving lives—whether at home or of American soldiers abroad—and protecting the human rights of terrorists, very few people hesitate.

Atl RF 6pm M Voice: The only problem I have with it [torture] is that we have Marines over there. It opens up her son and others to the same treatment. That would be the only reservation or problem I had with it, as long as it was “time is of the essence.”

Rendition

Once again, a willingness to step directly into cognitive dissonance—by labeling the particular instance as immoral or un-American as they did the abstract principle—was rare. Only a couple of participants expressed concern about this conflict or even recognized its existence.

Atl TSF 6pm WOMAN 1: I’m embarrassed as an American citizen. I’m just embarrassed; I’m just mortified.

Furthermore, people consistently saw rendition as “letting other people do our dirty work.” It was seen as both bad and good, often by the same person, but usually the cognitive dissonance was resolved (as usual) through system justification—by deciding that rendition, like torture and everything else, is necessary, relying on the unspoken and therefore unquestioned assumption that torture works.

Detention: Guantánamo

With respect to detention and Guantánamo, people are able to express slightly more criticism, and at somewhat more length, probably because the dissonance and distress are slightly less, since the affront to American principles is over process not bodily harm:

Atl TSF 6pm MAN 2: It’s like, how can we be an example for the world when we’re violating everything that we’re supposedly fighting for?

Atl TSF 6pm WOMAN 3: He’s right.

Atl TSF 6pm WOMAN 1: It’s not the American way.

Two major critical themes appear in particular: the need to make sure that things move along in a timely fashion and (in Atl RF) the need to follow the Geneva Conventions.

Still, in the end, we have to do what we have to do; people believe that they are out to get us and we have to stop that.

For the most part, people consistently resolve this obvious discomfort in that way: by reasoning that even if something is distasteful or worse, it works, and above all it is necessary, to save lives.

Atl TSF 8 pm WOMAN 5: How long has our country been looking for Osama bin Laden?

Atl TSF 8 pm MAN 1: That's fine. You can throw that up there, but at the same time, we haven't been attacked since 9/11.

IV. THE BASIC REASONING PATTERN: HOW TO RECONCILE TORTURE WITH MORALITY AND AMERICAN PRINCIPLES

People are able to reconcile not only torture but all violations of human rights and civil liberties by means of the following fundamental reasoning pattern, one that reduces their psychological discomfort: The most moral thing of all to do is to save lives, and the most fundamental right is that of self-defense.

Both target segments share this reasoning pattern, although there are minor differences in some (but not all) of the details. The Atlanta focus groups were exploratory in nature, constructed to elucidate the reasoning of the two targeted swing segments, and therefore most of the quotes are from those groups. The same reasoning appeared in the Chicago groups, although less explicitly due to changes in the moderator's guide.

The reasoning pattern is laid out in the table on the following pages.

The Most Striking Elements of the Reasoning Pattern

Although all of the steps in the reasoning pattern are essential to reach the conclusion, three of them are perhaps the most striking.

There is nothing more moral than saving lives

Because there is nothing more moral than saving lives, we must "give up" some of our rights and abandon some of our traditional American principles in order to save American lives.

There is nothing more important in understanding people's attitudes towards what is happening abroad and at home than to recognize that people do in fact see the issues of rights, liberties, torture, and so on as moral issues—the morality of saving lives—and as issues of human rights and civil liberties—the right of self-defense.

As long as lives are not at stake, people want to abide by American principles and morality—but as soon as lives are seen to be at stake in concrete scenarios, the "higher morality" of saving lives wins out.

Atl RF 6 pm F Voice: If it's going to save one life, if it's going to save someone's life, yes, by all means. But just to randomly every day tapping my phone for no reason at all, no.

Therefore, people are less willing to protest these practices on human rights grounds, even though they are uncomfortable with the actual practices. Here is where the cognitive dissonance appears. Notice, however, that this argument relies on the belief that violations of human rights (e.g., torture) are in fact *effective* in saving (American) lives. *Undermine this, and the reasoning structure fails.* It also resolves their cognitive dissonance and gives psychological relief.

TABLE 1: THE REASONING PATTERN: THE MOST MORAL THING TO DO IS TO SAVE LIVES, & THE MOST FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT IS THAT OF SELF-DEFENSE

- 1. In normal times, Americans start out with complete and unequivocal support of civil liberties and human rights on the grounds of morality and Americanism.**
 - a. In normal times, since Americans are moral and live by principles, Americans never do anything that is wrong or un-American.**
- 2. However, post-9/11, people do not think that times are normal. Things have changed, and America is facing a new kind of enemy. Therefore, America cannot use the same kind of defenses that was used before 9/11 against the old kinds of enemies.**
 - a. These new enemies:**
 - Are out to destroy America in any way they can.**
 - Are hidden among ordinary Americans.**
(Reluctant Fearfuls are, not surprisingly, more fearful on this point than are Town Square Faithfuls.)
 - Are clever long-term planners with a lot of patience.**
 - May seem disorganized or at each other's throats, but share a common goal.**
 - Were more competent at the time of 9/11 than America was.**
(They were able to damage the U.S. severely; how could they do that if they were incompetent?)
 - Are willing to do whatever it takes to reach their goal, even if it means they die. They do not value human life as much as Americans do.**
 - b. Americans are no longer as naïve as before 9/11. Therefore, Americans cannot hold to the same idealism as before 9/11; Americans have to face facts and be realistic.**
- 3. Therefore, Americans need to “give up” some rights and—however reluctantly—abandon some traditional American principles in order to save American lives as a matter of self-defense.**
 - a. There is nothing more moral than saving lives, and Americans should do what is most moral. When moralities conflict, there is nothing more important or moral to do than doing what has to be done to save (American) lives.**
 - b. Similarly, the right of self-defense is the most fundamental right of all.**

(continued)

TABLE 1: THE REASONING PATTERN: SAVING LIVES & SELF-DEFENSE, CONTINUED

- c. Furthermore, American lives are worth more than the lives of murderers who don't value human life.**
- 4. What we are doing is effective:**
 - a. Americans "in authority" (i.e., experts who are not conceptually the same as the politicians and bureaucrats who make up "the government") know what they are doing. Therefore, we are right to allow those in authority to decide what to do (even if we generally mistrust "the government").**
 - b. Because Americans know how to do things better than any other people can, whatever Americans do is by definition effective.**
 - c. Therefore, everything we are doing is actually effective self-defense and saves American lives.**

CONCLUSION

Therefore, since torture, rendition, detention, surveillance, and so on are effective in saving American lives, we have to do those things, even if the practices seem to run counter to human rights or civil liberties. Doing so expresses both morality at the highest level and the most fundamental right of all. We may not be happy about it, but under the changed post-9/11 circumstances it is the most moral thing to do and represents our most fundamental human right and liberty.

Self-defense is a fundamental right

Similarly, to defend oneself (and one's family, and by extension one's country) is the most fundamental right of all.

Atl TSF 6pm MAN 3: You have the right to defend yourself, though.

When this most fundamental right of self-defense comes into conflict with other rights, even other fundamental ones, it triumphs, just as the morality of saving lives triumphs other moralities. *Furthermore, the two are two sides of the same coin: saving lives.*

Torture is effective

There is general agreement, therefore, that torture works, because the “highest morality and highest right” reasoning structure leads people to an acceptable resolution of cognitive dissonance through system justification.

Atl RF 6pm F Voice: I think it's sometimes absolutely. The only way, because sometimes that's the only way to get them to surrender, to really talk and to tell it all. And sometimes they'll die for their country or whatever it is, even after extreme punishment, [beating?] and whatnot, they still won't tell. So I think sometimes absolutely—

MODERATOR: You're saying it's the only way to get information.

Atl RF 6pm F Voice: Sometimes, yeah.

Atl RF 6pm M Voice: So you can't just say . . . Well, they've had successes with rendition, they've had successes with interrogation tactics I thought was torture. You know, but they've had some successes with it. Everything doesn't pan out. But they've had successes.

Even though people acknowledge the fact that suspects might not tell the truth at first when tortured, they believe that this too is part of their way of fighting against us. Since people have to believe that torture works in order to justify it, they say that when this happens, it means that the torture has not yet reached an effective level.

Atl RF 6pm M Voice: I think they'd say the untruth pretty much right off the bat. I would. And hope that that would put them off.

MODERATOR: So increased techniques would make them tell the truth.

Atl RF 6pm M Voice: I think so.

Other Important Elements of the Reasoning Pattern

Things have changed

Post-9/11, people do not think that times are normal. Things have changed, and America is facing a new kind of enemy. People are very ready to talk about the world having changed after 9/11: Americans are no longer as naïve as before, and it is now a much more dangerous world where some people are out to get America by any means possible.

Furthermore, the people who are out to get America are a new, different kind of enemy with a common goal of destroying America. Why has nothing happened since 9/11? They are willing to wait.

Atl RF 6pm M Voice: Just straight up a dislike for America, that's the basic . . . Any kind of principle that America stands for, they just don't like.

MODERATOR: First, what are the goals of Al Qaeda? What's their objective?

Atl RF 6pm F Voice: Destroy.

Atl RF 6pm F Voice: Destroy.

MODERATOR: Destroy what?

Atl RF 6pm F Voice: Whatever they're told to destroy. In this case, it's probably America.

They are clever, long-term thinkers with a lot of patience. They are hidden in America, biding their time; they might be anywhere.

MODERATOR: So, the terrorist groups are more important?

Atl RF 6pm M Voice: One is seen and one is unseen.

Atl RF 6pm F Voice: Yeah.

Atl RF 6pm M Voice: We know where Iran is, we can find them right now.

Atl RF 6pm M Voice: And terrorists can strike anywhere.

Atl RF 6pm F Voice: They might be down the hall.

MODERATOR: And what are they like? What kind of—?

Atl RF 6pm F Voice: Normal, every—like us.

Atl RF 6pm F Voice: They're getting our money; they're running businesses here.

Atl RF 6pm F Voice: At the Philly Cheese Steak places, and the BP gas stations.

Atl RF 6pm F Voice: And the gas stations.

Atl RF 6pm F Voice: I think they're waiting to catch us off-guard, and right now they know that we're trying to be on point, and they're waiting for us to become lax, as everybody says we are, so that they could come in and push us over.

People currently believe that these enemies share a common goal. Furthermore, they are competent: They were able to damage the U.S. severely; how could they do that if they were incompetent? At least at that time, they were more competent than America was—they have to be taken seriously. They are willing to do whatever it takes to reach their goal, even if it means they die. One of the main reasons that nothing more has happened since 9/11 is that to some extent the government has done a good job, but another important reasons is that the terrorists are just waiting.

"Giving up" rights

In normal times, Americans start out with complete and unequivocal support of civil liberties and human rights on the grounds of morality and Americanism.

That is, in normal times, Americans start out with all their chips on the "rights and liberties" side of the balance. However, they see everything in a transactional framework, and therefore it is necessary to pay for what one gets. In the balance frame that has been the default frame for the public discussion, that means giving up something (rights and liberties) in order to get something else (safety).

The key to recognizing the first point—where Americans start—is the language used by the participants to explain their allocation of chips in the balancing exercise. They spoke of “giving up rights,” “going away from rights,” “losing rights,” and so on.

At the same time, only a couple of kinds of “rights” were mentioned as worth the trade-off: taking off one’s shoes and losing prohibited items (cologne, a Swiss Army knife) in airports, eavesdropping and “wiretapping,” and so on. It is not surprising that airport security should come up first, since this is the only example of constriction of freedom that most people have personally experienced. That is, it is “basic level” in their categorization of ‘constrictions of freedom.’ Furthermore, it is a direct intrusion on one’s person by requiring the removal of an article of clothing, and in this way also it can be more significant that it first appears and stand for the larger category of ‘the right of someone to order you around.’

People draw the line in different places, but for the most part they specifically do not want to give up the kinds of rights that appear in the Bill of Rights. The “right to privacy” is talked about as constitutional also because of wiretapping, but people see its loss as a necessary trade-off.

Because the world has changed, we have to face facts and give up some of our rights in order to be safe. If we don’t, we will be to blame when another terrible event occurs.

Atl RF 6 pm MAN 5: I believe our rights, freedom [and whatever] that we have are fairly precious, [but] Everything’s changed; the world is not as naïve. So we have to give up some of our rights in order to make sure we are secure. Things like, I guess some of our rights of privacy that we’ve sacrificed. Things like that happen to us at airports, the way security is at airports. I hear people complain about it, but then something happens on another plane, then they’re going to come back and say, “Why didn’t you have that security at the airport?”

“The authorities” vs. “the government”

People make a few stabs at resolving this cognitive and psychological distress in other directions besides just relying on the morality of saving lives. One of these is to appeal to the “checks and balances” and due process of the American system of government and law. They want to believe that this system will rein in any gratuitous abuses. One weakness in depending on this belief to counter current practice is that it does not outweigh the morality of saving lives (it merely repeats the problem); another is that people may trust the system in theory but they do not always trust the people in the government in practice—another instance of cognitive dissonance.

Another way, therefore, to try to resolve cognitive dissonance is to trust the people who are doing the things that cause the dissonance—to assume that they know what they are doing. Because we need to gather intelligence in order to save lives, it is all right, even desirable, to wiretap and torture people who are acting suspicious, and people tend to trust “authorities” rather than “the government” to make that decision. Again the

language is key: when they are speaking about these practices, they tend to talk about them in words related to “authority”; they do not talk about “government.” An “authority” is an expert who knows what to do and carries out his or her job responsibly and based on evidence and rules; people who make up “the government” are incompetent bureaucrats and politicians.

Atl RF 6pm MAN 2: And as far as when [wiretapping] is appropriate, that’s not up to me. I don’t work for any law enforcement agency, nor am I conversant with the law, but there are people who are experts on that, and are authorized to make those decisions.

Atl TSF 6pm MAN 2: I think there’s such a thing as sophisticated torture that is by trained professionals who can discern whether they think they’re getting valid information.

Because these persons are experts—what they do is effective in saving lives. *The resolution that people ultimately reach in order to resolve their cognitive dissonance rests on this assumption.*

Ultimately people are uneasy with what is being done, and they have to justify it by a belief that the people who know best think that it is necessary.

Atl TSF 6pm MAN 3: I think that we should have people that are trained well enough and moral enough to do what needs to be done. If they think it’s the best thing to do, then do it. If they have problems with it, then don’t do it.

The military vs. law enforcement

The belief that torture is effective and sometimes necessary is one of the reasons people prefer to handle terrorism with the military rather than law enforcement. Expressed reasons include the inability of law enforcement agencies to work together, and the view that Al Qaeda does not have much in common with criminal gangs like the Mafia or drug lords: it’s too big; it’s like a religion. Furthermore, many participants believed that it is difficult to get a warrant, so there might be times when things need to move too quickly for a warrant, or the wrong people might find out.

The most important reason, however, is that law enforcement has to follow rules in a way that the military does not. This requirement causes trouble because the world has changed and the most important of those who threaten America no longer play by the rules. Americans play by the rules,² but many people believe that America risks its own security by continuing to play by the rules against people who do not, no matter how distasteful going outside those rules may be. The necessity argument again triumphs: these measures are viewed as necessary to save (American) lives.

²Atl RF 8pm MAN 4: “I think that what makes America special as a country is that we don’t do whatever . . . We don’t go outside the rules; we have specific procedures that we follow.”

Atl TSF 6pm WOMAN 5: That's the way that the mob and the druglords and all those, they all operated that same way, though. The terrorists that we're dealing with today, Al Qaeda and stuff like that, they don't operate on the . . . We have to operate on their level somewhat in order to beat them.

MODERATOR: Let's just think about treating Al Qaeda with law enforcement methods.

Atl RF 8pm MAN 2: No, because law enforcement has rules to go by, and if you get somebody that really doesn't care about the rules, I think you fight fire with fire.

For all these reasons, the law enforcement frame was rather strongly rejected.

V. COGNITIVE DISSONANCE AROUND SURVEILLANCE, RACIAL PROFILING, AND DESERVING/UNDESERVING PEOPLE

When it comes to civil liberties, people resolve cognitive dissonance by relying on a similar belief in necessity, but with an additional conscious element: They consciously divide the world into deserving people and undeserving people, and explicitly discuss behavioral criteria about how to tell the difference. This distinction is operating with respect to the human rights issues also, but since these almost never involve American citizens, people assume that for the most part the authorities are finding the undeserving non-citizens when it comes to torture, rendition, and detention.

The two most significant points about surveillance and racial profiling are (1) the strong linking of the acceptability of these policies to the deservingness of the target, and (2) the unwillingness of participants to make deservingness a simple matter of race or ethnicity. People want to be able to point to some kind of evidence of wrongdoing, at least potentially—although they also believe that Americans are different from non-Americans.

Deserving and Undeserving

People are divided into “deserving” or “undeserving” depending on whether or not they do bad things and therefore have “something to hide.” American citizens who do not do bad things and therefore have “nothing to hide” should have full constitutional and human rights, including freedom from random wiretapping. Deserving non-American citizens should have human rights, although they are not guaranteed constitutional rights. Undeserving people, whether they are citizens or non-citizens, who do bad things and have “something to hide” should not have full constitutional and human rights, although more of these rights can be removed from non-Americans than from Americans. Undeserving non-American citizens lose even their basic human rights if it is a matter of saving lives.

Several aspects of “deserving” and “undeserving” people are lined up together, and determine who should be treated with full constitutional and human rights.

DESERVING	UNDESERVING
<i>do not do bad things</i>	<i>do bad things</i>
<i>therefore have “Nothing to Hide”</i>	<i>therefore have “Something to Hide”</i>
<i>therefore are deserving</i>	<i>therefore are undeserving</i>
<i>and should have full constitutional and human rights (although even deserving non-American citizens do not have full constitutional rights)</i>	<i>and should not have full constitutional and human rights (although they do have some rights, such as the “Geneva Convention,” and these rights should not be violated—unless <u>there is evidence</u> that it will save lives)</i>

Surveillance and Persons of Interest

One group got into a discussion about definitions of wiretapping in an attempt to resolve their cognitive dissonance about “infringing upon personal rights” versus “keeping us safe.” They resolved it by dividing random wiretapping (unacceptable) from wiretapping based upon hearing keywords (acceptable). This conclusion is a concrete application of the Nothing to Hide/Something to Hide principle: it is acceptable to wiretap if there is good reason to think that the person being wiretapped has Something to Hide. A person who has Something to Hide is “undeserving” by definition, and therefore deserves whatever he or she gets.

It is important to notice that part of the resolution of the cognitive dissonance between principles and safety/necessity is the consensus that the way to determine who should be wiretapped or otherwise surveilled or stopped is by listening in to everyone and choosing the undeserving persons of interest based on what they say or do rather than on ethnicity or religion. That is, people say—and want to believe—that there must be evidence that the person of interest is doing something that will put lives at risk, or is involved in some way with someone like that.

Atl TSF 8pm WOMAN 1: Okay, let me say it like this. When you look up stuff on line, like how to make a bomb—that’s a person you should read their email.

Atl RF 6pm F Voice: Someone that may be a friend of someone, then you’re connected with them, they want to know what I know. I might not be a party that they’re looking at, but I know that person.

This alignment also helps resolve cognitive dissonance, since deserving people who have Nothing to Hide will by definition not object to doing something that will save lives. (In fact, listening to these people will be boring.) The only people who will object to doing something that will save lives are undeserving people who have Something to Hide.

Atl TSF 6pm MAN 1: I personally don’t have anything to hide. I’m not soliciting any illegal substance or planning any kind of plot or anything like that. So if they listen in on me, they’d probably get a little bored and tune out. So, for me it’s not impactful.

Atl RF 6pm WOMAN 1: I don’t know if my thumb is up or down, but I think if you’re a good person, you’re not gonna be saying anything on the phone that you wouldn’t want anybody else to hear.

Therefore, it is acceptable to surveill (and so on) ordinary Americans on the grounds of Nothing to Hide, and to surveill, stop, etc. terrorists on the grounds of Something to Hide.

The opposite opinion was only once expressed in these groups.

Atl RF 6pm M Voice: Just because I'm not planning to do anything improper, I'm not going to give up my constitutional rights.

Terrorists Are Different from Americans

A few people directly expressed the underlying belief that Americans are just basically different from terrorists and national leaders like Ahmadinejad—and better. People think that for the most part people in Iraq, Pakistan, Iran, and so on, as well as members of Al Qaeda, are different from Americans. They do not play by the rules like we do and they do not value human life like we do.

Atl TSF 6pm WOMAN 4: I think if they're that damn crazy, if you say, well, the situation is that you catch a guy that he's got like 97 things of dynamite strapped to him, he's going to be willing to die anyway, it wouldn't make a hill of beans worth a difference. I just think that the one thing that's made us civilized is our ability to stop at some point. And when we lose that, we lose a lot.

Atl RF 6pm M Voice: These days, as far as terrorism is concerned, it's a holy war for them. They don't care about the Geneva Convention, they don't care about our rights, they don't care about anything. There is a whole different mindset going on, a whole different indoctrination from anything we have experienced as Americans until the last seven years.

A very few people referred to Timothy McVeigh, but for the most part participants concentrated on foreign-born terrorists.

VI. NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION AND NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT: METAPHOR, SCENARIOS, AND PROTOTYPES

Less cognitive dissonance is present when it comes to issues around nuclear weapons. Here the situation is most usefully approached through a focus on a metaphorical frame, a set of different nuclear scenarios for nations, and a set of prototypes for nations that have gone or may go nuclear.

A Basic Metaphorical Frame

For both COOs, the purpose of the U.S. nuclear arsenal is entirely defensive. The same could be said of approaches to other aspects of national security, but there is a critical distinction in the way that “defense” is approached when it comes to nuclear weapons versus, say, terrorism.

For terrorism, the need for defense takes on a proactive or preemptive frame: “We are justified in torturing suspected terrorists so that we can prevent them from attacking us.” This frame easily leads people to violations of American principles that, in the abstract, they otherwise hold dear.

On the other hand, the defensive frame for nuclear weapons is one of a metaphorical shield: “We need to retain at least some nuclear weapons in case we are attacked.” This frame led people in the focus groups to bring up readily and positively the idea of a “missile shield.” This may not be one of the entailments that we want, but the “shield” frame also has more acceptable entailments. In particular, people seem to accept the idea of deterrence as seen through a “minimal-level” frame: that is, they are amenable to the possibility of reducing the number of our nuclear weapons as long as we have enough to form a protective shield against any attackers, whether they are terrorists (not a major concern), states with rogue leaders such as Kim Jong-il of North Korea, or states that are just basically out of control, like Iran.

The “shield” frame is not simple, however. There are four kinds of nuclear scenarios, and people’s reasoning in each is slightly different. The four kinds of scenarios are the following:

1. Nuclear weapons with respect to nation-states
2. Iran (technically part of the nuclear proliferation issue, but almost always discussed separately)
3. Disarmament (e.g., Kissinger and Schulz)
4. Terrorists with nuclear weapons (or dirty bombs)

Each scenario involves a threat assessment of the danger to the U.S., and a defense assessment of the best way to respond to that threat.

Scenarios and Prototypes

People have the same general attitude about nuclear weapons that they do about the use of surveillance, torture, and rendition: What we have to do may be deplorable, but sometimes it is unavoidable when higher morality and higher rights involving the saving of lives are at stake.

Nuclear weapons with respect to nation-states

Since (even apart from Iran) nations differ in kind and in their relationship with us, there is more than one kind of threat and more than one degree of danger when it comes to nuclear weapons. As people see it, the problem is not the weapons; the problem is the people who have control of them.

First of all, everyone agrees that some nation-states can be reasoned and negotiated with (such as India or Russia). Russia in particular is either a potential ally against more dangerous states (Town Square Faithfuls) or a reviving aggressor (the more fearful Reluctant Fearfuls, who do not see them as a nuclear threat).

The nuclear danger posed by nations in this group at the moment is not great and the defense response is to reason with them through negotiation and diplomacy. If we can reason with them because they think like we do, we probably will succeed in negotiation, and no further defensive action will be needed.

Secondly, everyone also agrees that some other nation-states cannot be reasoned with, because they simply do not have the same values we do. Specifically, people think that people in these countries they do not “value life” the way we do. The best example (i.e., prototype) of this group is Iran, which in addition has an extremist (they think)for a leader.

Atl TSF 6pm MAN 2: Yeah, but I think the difference is, and I'm not speaking for like the whole country thinks that way, but they [terrorists] are willing to die, whereas we have more respect for life, or so we think, than they do. The suicide terrorists prove that. They're willing to die to prove their point. I think a certain leader in Iran or whatever, if his concept is that he's freeing the world of the great evil America or Israel, whatever, and he has to eliminate a billion people to do that, then he may think that's a worthy goal.

The nuclear danger posed by this kind of nation-state is potentially serious, and we may need to step in and stop them from having full nuclear capability. (See the discussion of Iran in the next scenario.)

Finally, some nation-states are in the middle, because people disagree on their nature. The prototype of this group is North Korea. Some people—but not everyone—think that

North Korea is led by an unstable man but that the people are not crazy and do not think all that differently from Americans. This view holds that, even if they are not entirely trustworthy, they can at least be bought off.

Chi TSF MAN 2: North Korea's made a lot of negotiations, made a lot of promises, and changed them when they felt it was to their advantage. . . . I think there are some economic things that we can do to influence North Korea.

Other people think that they are led by an unstable man and that their people do think differently from Americans, just like Iran.

Chi RF MAN 1: It was mentioned earlier by somebody that their concept of life, like we value life, we don't like torture, we see in North Korea that is entirely different, in China that's different. Life means nothing to them. Same thing with Iraqis, Iranis, the Pakistanis, the Afghanis, life really means nothing, they're willing to sacrifice their life, so they do not care about it. I think they would use it. I think—in North Korea, they call him the exalted leader. I think he's crazy enough to do it, and he can reach us, he can just go right over Alaska and wipe out our oil fields, wipe out . . .
[interrupted]

The threat assessment and defense plan with respect to nations in this third group depend on whether they are placed with our friends or with the “crazies.”

In general, the degree of threat has to do with the mental state of the leaders of nations or terrorist groups who can choose to use nuclear weapons. People tend to think that in fact the nuclear weapons themselves are not the problem—after all, we have them. The problem is irrational and/or extremist people who are willing to use them against countries like America or Israel.

Iran

Iran is in a class by itself, and people have a definite way of thinking about the nuclear danger when it comes to Iran. At the moment it is the most salient example of a nuclear threat, but it is not typical of most nations with nuclear weapons, because most nations can be reasoned with and negotiated with, and people believe that Iran cannot. They view the people as Islamic extremists, and Ahmadinejad as the head-of-state equivalent to a suicide bomber.

First, they are a danger if they get nuclear weapons. We have to “eliminate the threat” (Atl TSF 6pm MAN 2).

Because Iran is not viewed as typical, no matter how salient a country it is in the nuclear discussion, the defense assessment with respect to Iran is tailored to that country. It is also completely thought out:

Step 1. Go ahead and try negotiating, but don't expect it to work.

*Chi RF 8pm WOMAN 6: I think communication's important, but
They have a different mind. (MODERATOR: Who's "they?"*

WOMAN 5: The head guy of Iran.)

*Chi RF 8pm F Voice: It would be nice to say we could sit down and
all negotiate, but if they're not willing, then there's no negotiating.*

Step 2. When negotiation doesn't work, take the weapons in some way.

Peacefully if you can. By military action if you have to. And require proof.

*Atl RF 6pm F Voice: I would make the decision to confiscate those nuclear
weapons, to just get them and take them from them so they don't do anything
with them.*

The first way that people tried to avoid the cognitive dissonance involved in using uncomfortable preemptive action for the moral purpose of saving lives was by passing the buck. Many people responded that we probably won't have to do anything about it, because Israel will take care of things first.

*Atl RF 6pm MAN 2: I'm with him. I would call up the Israelis, they can have the
job done in 30 minutes, and that'll be the end of it.*

*Atl RF 6pm M Voice: I don't think it will be our problem, because the Israelis
will probably do it before we even bring it up.*

But if America does have to do something, don't risk American troops, even if this means a preemptive nuclear strike using nuclear weapons. People are also concerned about getting trapped in another country.

*Atl RF 6pm M Voice: We've got missiles that can do that. We don't have to
send people in. And I believe you're right about it, we'd get in there and be in
a quagmire and surrounded on all sides. If we stay out, I believe we could
take care of it with a couple well-placed missiles.*

Atl TSF 6pm MAN 2: I just don't think sending troops in is going to work.

*Atl TSF 6pm MAN 2: Yeah, you're going to mobilize like World War Two or
something where we're going to have a draft, and we're going to have a 15,
16 million man army and we're in it for the long haul, then it's going to
work, but you're going to have to occupy a country—*

*MODERATOR: Do you think we should [send troops in] instead of using a nuke
to just take out a deep bunker where they have their nukes?*

Atl TSF 6pm MAN 1: No.

Atl TSF 6pm MAN 3: Take it out.

Atl TSF 6pm MAN 2: Take it out.

Atl TSF 6pm WOMAN 4: Take it out.

In any event, we should not go it alone, although we certainly can if necessary.

Atl RF 6pm WOMAN 1: It'd be nice that a lot of countries go in with us. If there is a danger that seems imminent, and everybody else says, "Well, best of luck," then it might be that we have to go in, without being supported.

Atl RF 6pm F Voice: I don't think we need other countries, but as a whole, I think that we should work together. I think that the U.S. can pretty much handle it by ourselves. I think we're powerful enough to do that.

U.S. military action in this understanding is not seen as offensive in nature; it is seen as defensive. Again, the right (and morality) of saving ourselves predominates.

Atl TSF 6pm WOMAN 5: I think we have to protect ourselves. That means if we're sure that they're gonna . . . Which, we don't need to give them a chance to, first to see if they're going to do something. We have to make sure we don't let them.

Disarmament

Disarmament is an attractive idea, and people wish it would work, but they don't believe it can—not just that it will not, but that it cannot.

Chi TSF 6pm MAN 2: I think that [the Shultz-Kissinger proposal] is a great principle, but I don't think it's practical.

There is deep suspicion of others in general—there will always be somebody out to get us, and you can't be trusting. Not surprisingly, Reluctant Fearfuls are more explicitly distrustful, but Town Square Faithfuls have a similar attitude.

Chi RF 8pm F Voice: I don't think [disarmament, in the Shultz-Kissinger proposal] would ever happen.

MODERATOR: Why not?

Chi RF 8pm F Voice: Because I don't think you can trust everybody to honestly do it.

Some people do not mind telling other countries they cannot have nuclear weapons, but other people are not happy with telling other nations that as long as we have them ourselves. Even here, however, the defensive point of our nuclear weapons is clear, and once again preemptive action is defensive.

Atl RF 8pm MAN 2: That's hypocrisy. "I've got it, but you can't get it."

Atl TSF 8pm MAN 2: Russia. That's six or seven countries have the bomb. If we can have it, Iran can have it. And I'm a real hawk, as you've probably already figured out. I'm a real hawk. If Iran is threatening us,

[unintelligible]. *But they have a right to have a bomb. Like I say, I've wrestled with it a long time, but that's my conclusion. Who are we to tell them they can't have a bomb? But: If they make a false move, blow them out of the water.*

When it comes to disarmament, the threat is undefined until someone actually threatens us, but it is always there, and the way to protect ourselves against this threat is not to disarm. We don't know what the future holds, and we can't afford to leave ourselves defenseless.

We should defend ourselves by continually improving our technology, including not only nuclear weapons but also intelligence-gathering technology and defense systems, so we can see anything before it gets to us. We might be able to cut back the numbers, but we cannot cut back in quality.

Atl RF 6pm M Voice: We can cut the numbers. We've still got to keep up with technology and whatnot if we're going to have 'em.

Atl RF 6pm M Voice: We have defense systems in place. We should continue with those mechanisms to detect any attack that might be imminent.

Atl RF 6pm F Voice: I agree. We should always continue to upgrade our technology, always.

Just having a strong nuclear arsenal provides defense also: people will be afraid to attack us because we'll blow them out of existence, even if we never have to use the weapons. Once again, however, people are at least a little worried that this defense may not work with the people in the world who do not value human life, including their own lives.

Atl TSF 6pm WOMAN 1: I think it would be crazy to try to attack us, because we could fry Iran down to the last roach that was over there. I mean, don't we have the largest arsenal in the world?

Atl TSF 6 pm MAN 2: Yeah, but I think the difference is, and I'm not speaking for like the whole country thinks that way, but they're willing to die.

Disarmament could make us look weak, and we can't afford that.

Chi RF 8 pm WOMAN 4: Honestly, I see us staying at the level of other countries, if not one step ahead. Unfortunately I think that would become another thing that we would have to do. For the safety of our country, we always have to do one-up, we're always going to have to one-up them, just to give off, just to look like we are stronger. We may never have to use them, we may never have to touch them, but just to say we're one better.

Terrorists with nuclear weapons (or dirty bombs)

Terrorists are sometimes mentioned as a danger to us if they buy nuclear weapons because—just like Iran—they do not care if they die themselves; as we have seen, people

believe that these groups do not think the same way we do and do not respect life. In this context, however, they are rarely mentioned.

However, terrorists are small scale, and they are more likely to have dirty bombs than they are to have nuclear weapons. Furthermore, because terrorists are not nation-states with a fixed location, they do not make good targets for nuclear attacks.

Therefore, the way to defend against terrorists with nuclear weapons or dirty bombs is by catching them (using surveillance, torture, and so forth), not by using any version of a nuclear-based strategy.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

All of these findings may seem very discouraging—but there are always opportunities to question presuppositions and thus change the discourse.

General Recommendations

1. Since (despite some important overlaps) there is no overall, one-size-fits-all approach to “national security and human rights,” “civil liberties,” and “nuclear proliferation and disarmament,” these issues require some degree of difference in the approaches and language used.
2. Nothing here should be understood as a recommendation to use language that says that national security threats do not exist. Do not argue that Americans should not be concerned about these threats—but do use language that lowers their salience, so that fear, mortality salience, and authoritarian reactions will be decreased.
3. There is a threat from terrorists like Al Qaeda, but it is important to talk about the threat in ways that do not increase mortality salience. The greater the mortality salience, the more receptive people become to authoritarian policies. Therefore, while not dismissing or downplaying the seriousness of the threat, in order to build support for civil liberties and for rolling back the abuses of the Bush administration, it is necessary to re-narrate the nature of the threat.
4. Directly contesting the threat is neither effective nor appropriate. Rather, there is a need to accurately describe the threat in language that makes it more difficult to picture and less salient, by describing it as diffuse, disorganized, and focused more on local struggles than engaged in a vendetta against the U.S. In this way, mortality salience and the resulting authoritarian responses are reduced rather than increased.

Human Rights and Civil Liberties

5. Avoid triggering cognitive dissonance and system justification in the first place by contesting the effectiveness of practices for catching terrorists (and so on) that violate civil liberties and human rights. This allows people to re-assert the morality and principles that they hold to in the abstract and to reject the idea that practices they find distasteful in the abstract are necessary in concrete circumstances in order to save lives.
6. Do this by contesting the fundamental presupposition that extralegal procedures make us safer and help prevent attacks on us. Then system-justification responses will not be provoked; people will not attempt to justify the morality of the acts in question.

Nuclear Proliferation and Nuclear Disarmament

7. Do not link terrorism and nuclear weapons.
8. When talking about disarmament, use India and Russia as prototypical examples.
9. Normalize relations with, and perceptions of, Iran.
10. Frame the U.S. nuclear stockpile as duplicative and more than is necessary for a sufficient defense.