

## **Americans on Terrorism Two Years After 9/11**

September 9, 2003

### **War on Terrorism Has Not Made Public Feel Safer**

[Full Report](#)  
[Questionnaire](#)

Two years after September 11, despite the various high-profile efforts of the war on terrorism, 76% of Americans say that over the last two years they have not come to feel safer from the threat of terrorism, according to a new PIPA/Knowledge Networks poll of 1,217 Americans, conducted August 26 through September 3. A repeat of a trendline question asked regularly over the last two years also found no reduction in concern about the possibility of terrorist attacks against the US.

A majority thinks the Bush administration is overemphasizing assertive and military approaches. Fifty-eight percent said that in the effort to fight terrorism, the Bush administration should put more emphasis on diplomatic and economic methods, while only 35% thought there should be more emphasis on military methods. In general, over the last two years 54% said that the Bush administration has been too assertive in relation to other countries, while 14% said it was too cooperative; and 28% said it has the right balance.

Sixty-four percent said that US military presence in the Middle East increases rather than decreases the likelihood of terrorist attacks against the US, and 64% think that the US should reduce its military presence there over the next 5-10 years. Fifty-eight percent said that "The US is playing the role of world policeman in the Middle East more than it should be."

A very strong majority believes that reactions to US foreign policy in the Islamic world are creating conditions that make it easier for terrorist groups to grow. Sixty-five percent perceive that in the Islamic world since September 11, feelings toward US foreign policy have grown worse, and 73% think that the majority of people there share many of al-Qaeda's feelings toward the US. An overwhelming 77% believes that "when there are widespread negative feelings in the Islamic world toward US foreign policy ... this creates a climate in which it is easier for terrorist groups to recruit new members and raise funds."

Majorities think the US should make greater efforts to improve relations with people in the Islamic world (78% in favor), and 60% reject the idea that an underlying clash of cultures makes it impossible to find common ground.

On the domestic front the public, has grown cool toward provisions of the USA Patriot Act. Two-thirds are concerned that removing limitations on the government's ability to monitor and detain individuals may lead the government to go too far. When presented the arguments about the USA Patriot Act, 52% side with those who say that it has gone too far in compromising constitutional rights. Support for further removing limits on US government powers to monitor and detain individuals is extremely low (28%). Eight in 10 think that American citizens detained under suspicion of being part of a terrorist group should have the right to meet with a lawyer and three in four are not aware that, with the USA Patriot Act, this is not the case.

Despite these implicit criticisms of the administration's policies, few say that due to his handling of terrorism, they are less likely to vote for the President (26%), and more say that as a result they are more likely to vote for him (41%) (no effect, 31%). Steven Kull, director of the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland, comments: "Other polls have also found a reluctance to criticize the President directly when it comes to terrorism. At the same time, when asked specifically about various policies that the administration is pursuing against terrorism, majorities say these policies are not making headway and may even be counterproductive. It appears that there is a persisting sense that when it comes to terrorism, the US is under threat, and thus the public should rally round the president—even as they seem ready to prod the administration to pursue some different approaches."

When asked what kinds of policies they would like to see on the foreign policy front, the public favors a higher level of emphasis on cooperative approaches. An overwhelming 81% said that the more important lesson of September 11 is that the US needs to work more closely with other countries to fight terrorism. Presented a series of methods for approaching terrorism, methods for working multilaterally were the most popular—ideas for working more extensively through the UN were endorsed by three out of four. The least popular were military methods—overthrowing the government of Iran and Syria was endorsed by just 30% and 21% respectively.

An overwhelming majority showed a desire for a higher priority on homeland security, especially in regard to monitoring US borders. Seventy-nine percent favored greater emphasis on putting more extensive checks on people entering the US. (However, only 43% endorsed the argument in favor of an across-the-board reduction in visas, while 53% simply opposed the idea or favored a more selective screening process.) A very large 75% wanted a higher priority for “increasing the monitoring of goods entering the US.” About two out of three also wanted a higher priority for “increasing airport security” (70%) and “increasing security at buildings and locations that have political, economic and cultural importance” (60%). The idea of “putting more government functions under the Department of Homeland Security,” however, elicited enthusiasm from just 37%.

The PIPA/KN poll was conducted with a nationwide sample of 1,217 respondents, August 26-September 3. The margin of error was plus or minus 3-4%, depending on whether the question was administered to the whole sample, three-quarters, or half of the sample.

The poll was fielded by Knowledge Networks using its nationwide panel, which is randomly selected from the entire adult population and subsequently provided Internet access. For more information about this methodology, go to [www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp](http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp).

Funding for this research was provided by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and the Ford Foundation.