

A Report on the National Issues Forum

“Terrorism: What Should We Do Now?”

By

The Steering Committee of
The National Capital Region Public Issues Forums

With

**THE CENTER FOR COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP
DEVELOPMENT AND PUBLIC POLICY
AT MONTGOMERY COLLEGE**

By

Nathan Starr and Robert Walker

October 11, 2002

Introduction

The Steering Committee of the National Capital Region Public Issues Forums with The Center for Community Leadership Development and Public Policy at Montgomery College and co-sponsored with the Montgomery County Libraries offered six issues forums on *Terrorism: What Should We Do?* These forums were planned and conducted in conjunction with the Montgomery County¹ Executive's Memorial Committee for the Heroes and Victims of September 11, 2001. These forums were part of a tribute to the eleven Montgomery County residents lost in the tragedy of that date. The Office of Institutional Advancement (Media Relations) was able to have this series of forums announced in several local and regional newspapers.

The forums were held at three county libraries (Davis, Damascus, and White Oak) and three were held on the Takoma Park, Rockville, and Germantown campuses of Montgomery College. All of the facilities, except for the Rockville Campus Faculty/Staff Dining Room², were considered to be spacious and comfortable with good acoustics.

Framework for Deliberation

After September 11, 2001, the Public Agenda and the National Issues Forum Institute set in motion the process of researching, naming and framing this issue. The approaches outlined in the book reflect the various ways people in the United States have been thinking about the direction public policy should take to address the issue of terrorism. Those different ways of thinking have been condensed into three approaches:

- Approach One: The Sword of All-Out War
Advocates for this approach contend that global terrorism is a serious threat and the U.S. must take aggressive actions against terrorists, their networks and nations that provide support to terrorists and their organizations.
- Approach Two: The Shield of Homeland Security
Advocates for this approach contend that people in the U.S. will never be safe until we make security our priority. They feel we must give law enforcement more powers. We must scrutinize aliens more carefully and tighten our borders.
- Approach Three: The Battle for Hearts and Minds
Advocates for this approach are concerned about why people in other parts of the world are so angry with us. They feel if we could communicate better, engage in cultural exchanges and help resurrect their poor economies we could win friends instead of producing enemies.

Overview of the Forums

On September 3rd, 2002 the very first forum was held at the Davis Library. Three people attended the forum. It should be noted that one of the librarians at the White Oak library graciously researched and compiled a bibliography of their holdings on terrorism.

On September 4th, twelve people attended the second forum at the Damascus Library, most from the Damascus community. In addition there was a newspaper reporter from the Damascus Gazette.

¹ Montgomery County, Maryland is a north and western suburb of Washington, D.C.

² The acoustics at the Rockville campus Faculty/Staff Dining Room were poor making it difficult for people to be heard.

On September 5th, eight people were in attendance at the White Oak library forum. Included in this group was the lone person who had appeared for the first forum at the Davis Library.³

On September 17th, the next forum was held at the Montgomery College Takoma Park Campus. There were eight participants.

On September 18th, a forum was held in the evening at the College's Rockville Campus. This was the largest group we worked with, approximately 35 people.

On September 19th, the final forum in this series was held at the Germantown Campus of the College. There were six participants at this one. All did not stay. There were participants from the community and the College (including one student).

Working Through The Approaches: Overview

In general, the participants at all forums were still stunned from September 11, 2001. There were many people who felt anger, dismay, shock, confusion, apprehension over the future and an interest in better understanding the reasons behind the acts of terrorism.

None of the forum participants fully embraced Approach One. Most were comfortable with rooting out Al Qaeda terrorist cells in Afghanistan and where ever else they can be found. Most people were uncomfortable with unilaterally attacking any nation, including Iraq.

Most participants were comfortable with increased security in airports as advocated in Approach Two. By the end of the forums, none were accepting to the idea of a national identification card. Participants were generally comfortable with the suggestion that immigrants be more closely scrutinized before entry into the United States. There was consensus on keeping a closer watch on immigrants, people with student visas and foreign visitors to the U.S. There was a concern among participants over the impact Approach Two would have upon people's rights and freedoms. Participants were conflicted over racial profiling. Most, by a slim margin, were opposed to racial profiling. There was strong agreement that the government should enhance espionage activities to gather more intelligence regarding terrorist activities, even if it meant working with less reputable people.

Approach Three was embraced by a larger number of participants as a means to minimizing the number of future attacks. The strongest voices spoke to increasing the activities of Voice of America. The most difficult part was how to implement it.

At all forums, most participants embraced the idea of an Approach Four. This approach embodies most of Approach Three with additional elements from Approaches One and Two. However, there was not much agreement as to which elements from those approaches should be considered.

³ In attendance at the Davis, White Oak and Rockville forums was an individual who was quite passionate in his anti-Muslim beliefs. This person was uninterested in deliberation of the approaches.

The Takoma Park forum participants fully embraced Approach Three but not without conditions (Approach Four). There seemed to be minimal divergence in terms of the choices. Due to the lack of political diversity, this was the most amiable group. They enjoyed the experience of a forum.

Due to size of the Rockville Campus forum, we had to divide the group into two smaller groups. Additionally, the anti-Muslim participant from the Davis and White Oak libraries was present. At the end of this forum, the moderator stepped between this person and one of the Muslim females whom he had begun to taunt. Additionally, in the company of one of our female faculty, it was necessary for the moderator to escort this person to her car, for she was concerned about her safety. This was a contentious but deliberative forum.

In one of the small groups at Rockville, one person's solution to the issue of terrorism was to give everyone in the United States a gun (later he was passing out flyers). The peace activist asked the Muslim women why didn't they go back to where they came from. Others in the group echoed this sentiment. The few voices of reason in that group were somewhat disgusted with the behavior and viewpoints of these two and the moderator. The moderator felt it necessary to allow him to speak to reveal himself to others in the group so that they could understand where he was coming from. Further, the participant who espoused a liberal political line also felt the Muslim woman (Palestinian) should go back to Palestine.

Highlights from the pre-forum questionnaires:

The majority of forum participants said they either had a general sense or definite opinion of what should be done. Most frequently participants indicated that the "root cause" of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks were attributable to the hatred Arabs and Muslims have towards the United States. At the Rockville and Takoma Park Campuses, many participants also felt that Arabs have some legitimate grievances about the U.S. No one at the White Oak Library shared that feeling. A majority of participants at all, except Takoma Park, felt that the U.S. must be aggressive with other countries that sponsor terrorism.

The Damascus Library, Rockville and Takoma Park participants were the only forums where participants had favorable feelings regarding U.S./Israel policy. Further, the Damascus Library and Rockville Campus participants had favorable to strong feelings regarding rooting out terrorism and that the U.S. should punish governments that support terrorism.

An overwhelming majority of participants at all forums favored or strongly favored the U.S. reducing our dependence upon Persian Gulf oil. Participants were divided over the other options (Military tribunals and military action).

Highlights from post-forum questionnaires:

After deliberation, forum participants either felt they had a general sense or definite opinion of what should be done. The largest group of participants felt that Arab and Muslim hatred was a root cause of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks. There was much less agreement on the other factors related to causation. Far fewer people favored changing U.S./Israel policy after their

deliberations. More people (especially at the Rockville campus) favored rooting out and destroying terrorists and punishing governments supporting terrorists than before the forums.

A larger number of people favored reducing U.S. reliance upon Persian Gulf oil.

Excerpts from the Personal Stake

- Feels horrified
- Safety
- Need to save lives
- Concerned about living afraid
- Threat to freedom
- With 3 sons, concerned about re-instating the draft
- Fear
- Closer to friends/family
- Fearful
- Paranoid
- Grateful no loss of family/friends
- Sad
- Prayerful
- Change perspective about life
- Economy/retirement
- Nervous/uneasy
- Personal involvement
- Action-reaction
- Lack of focus
- Anger
- Friend on plane that hit the Pentagon
- Too much taken for granted prior 9/11... fortunate
- Family working at Pentagon-tho not 'til noon
- Job evacuation plans
- "Normal" now different
- Lack of surprise
- Family Capitol Hill worker+ EMT NYC- other relatives
- Notice increased security in D.C.
- It affects me, not seen the last of terrorism
- Friend called to active duty
- Touched as an American, feels impatient with other minorities...targeted for their race
- Imbalance in politics
- We all feel pain
- Compassion for terror victims
- Not enough understanding with other cultures, we don't teach this anymore, this can impact public policy
- Loved ones at-risk
- Change the way we perceive life

- Feeling vulnerable, changed the way we think of that date
- Long interest and concern about terrorism-Poverty global
- We are in danger
- Teach peace-worried about teaching violence in our response
- Fear, anger, uncertainty
- How to respond as a Christian
- As a Jew, fell threatened-where was our military
- Offended, on other level, long problem
- [Terrorism] not going away
- Kids safety and spouse's safety
- Anthrax threat-unsettling feeling
- Freedom to move about
- Capitol Hill-nephew in military
- Nation not finding an answer-politics, economics and foreign policy

Excerpts from the Choice Deliberations

Approach One: The Sword of All-out War

- Degrades the capacity of the enemy
- Makes people feel like they are doing something
- Losing moral high ground
- Current policy is doomed
- We are doing this and it works
- Costly but, worth the expense
- Show of strength...hit back but don't strike first
- Do not reinstate the draft
- It's costly
- Unilateral action causes global backlash
- Infiltrate and eliminate fanatics
- We can't get them all
- Does not address the cause
- Seek coalitions
- Expel diplomats for rouge nations
- Halt the flow of finances
- Might send a message to the world
- Boost to slumping economy
- Fight force with force
- Messages of consequences for attacking the U.S.
- Force creates the need for more force
- Long-term military presence on foreign soil
- Reallocation of own domestic resources
- May not be practical
- Don't know what our government is doing

Approach Two: The Shield of Homeland Security

- Higher security
- We should be more strict on immigration
- We should monitor foreign immigration
- We should close public facilities
- Gives a false sense of security
- Felt personally violated
- This compromises our rights
- The technology is not yet available
- We should have a military presence at our borders
- We should apprehend all illegal aliens
- All Muslims should be made to leave the U.S.
- This approach will make Americans feel safer
- Racial profiling is acceptable
- Racial profiling is unacceptable
- People are innocent until proven guilty
- We need baggage screening
- We will lose our freedoms
- This is a costly approach
- There are long lines at airports
- Free speech is compromised
- There should be more surveillance on the internet
- Law enforcement needs to talk to one another
- We should enhance espionage activity for intelligence gathering
- This approach will ultimately fail
- This approach sounds ominous
- Don't tie the hands of the police
- Don't close monuments
- National ID card is a bad idea
- This approach does not address the issue

Approach Three: The Battle for Hearts and Minds

- We should build churches in Islamic nations
- Because of the opponent (Muslims) this will not work
- We should curtail violence in published materials
- Teach to love not hate
- Expand the Peace Corps
- Terrorists are evil
- We don't know enough about Islam
- This approach supports humanitarianism
- If we followed this approach, maybe we wouldn't be at odds with others
- Need to negotiate a peace settlement in the Mid-east
- We need education for others and ourselves...there is an ignorance about each other
- Why are they so angry?

- We need to broaden our knowledge of history
- We should stop single-minded pursuit of interest in the Middle East
- We should move away from reliance on Persian Gulf Oil
- We should support democracy overseas
- We must stop the collapse of Middle East economies
- Use the Voice of America
- Change U.S./Israel policy
- The arrogance of ignorance produces a lot of public policy
- We should pay our U.N. debt and cooperate more with the U.N.
- Need to examine our own domestic and international policies
- We should slash the defense budget and redistribute funds to social priorities
- Encourage a “reformation” in Islam
- This is a “feel good” approach
- Fanatics will never buy-in...We should move to Saudi reliance and remove troops from Saudi
- We’ve been selective in policy choices-makes us look bad
- Allows radicals a venue for change
- We should work n more with moderate states
- We do not have infinite resources
- What kinds of short and long-term investments must we make?
- Whose hearts and minds?

Excerpts of Reflections

Individual Reflections:

- Surprised that my thinking is similar to others
- I’m starting to question our policies (foreign and economic)
- Not getting enough information impairs our decision-making. We need information to help dispel fear
- War will lead to chaos/anarchy
- We must be cautious, those who seem like friends (Saudis) have their own self interest
- Impressed with the knowledge of the group
- I have more faith in the public
- Forum helped me to understand more
- I have given more thought to other approaches

Group Reflections:

- There should be an approach four which incorporates parts of all the other choices
- We should educate Muslims and let them teach people in their own countries
- Do not tolerate prejudice
- Don’t take away our rights
- We should reexamine our policies
- Let’s not be afraid
- We need more communication with others
- Approach Three is critical

- Approach Four is a fusion of all three with an emphasis on 3
- We should market our best products (media) overseas, not trash
- We should ask Muslim nations to halt financial support for terrorists
- We should tighten our visa program
- We should protect public facilities, like water supply
- There needs to be better coordination of security activities
- Keep civil liberties and privacy rights
- All concerned about terrorism with a common sense of frustration

Most of the forum participants advocated a fourth approach. However there was not agreement on all of its contents.

Approach Four:

- Deport them (meaning all Muslims)
- Reduce reliance on oil
- Need value for freedom
- Need value to not feel violated and not be oppressed
- We should not have a police state
- Our fat cat lifestyle should change
- We need more information
- We need the Patriot Act

Next Step Reflections:

- What do we still need to talk about?
 - History versus distorted information
 - Israel policy
 - Is democracy a cure-all?
 - Is the U.S. in the regime removal business?
- People seem to think violent acts are freedom of speech
- Study international policies
- Security limits
- We need more forums

Conclusions/Recommendations

Only one person at any of the forums had ever participated in a National Issues Forum before. Since this was the first experience for all of the other attendees, most were unsure of what to expect. In all cases, except for the Rockville Campus forum, participants left pleased, uplifted and interested in more forum experiences. There is some concern among the Center staff and faculty that the anti-Muslim person will return for more forums if they are held in the evenings⁴. Currently, there is disagreement as to a strategy for dealing with this person whose presence is disruptive and not in the spirit of deliberation. One proposal has been to approach him and try to explain the inappropriateness of his behavior in a deliberative forum. Another has been to call security or the police if he shows up again. We will continue to deliberate on this issue.

⁴ The Davis and White Oak libraries and the Rockville Campus forums were held in the evening.

Additionally, there is concern among Center staff and faculty about the presence of reporters from the media and their impact upon the forum experience. At one forum a participant, fearing what would be reported, left after discovering the presence of a newspaper reporter who was there to report on the forum. We wish to discuss this issue and see whether we can develop a policy for reporters when they attend to report on a forum so as not to impair the experience for other participants.

These forums were conducted in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan region; it is not surprising that so many forum participants expressed concerns for the safety of themselves, family and friends. Forum participants' still express strong feelings of concern over one year after September 11, 2001.

No one at any forum embraced one particular choice. In all cases, participants advocated a fourth approach combining a mixture of all three choices with a heavier emphasis on Approach Three. Most participants said they left the forums with "new knowledge", i.e., they now possessed a more complex understanding of the issue than before they began deliberation.

Finally, there has been a suggestion to conduct this forum monthly and gauge whether there are changes in people's responses as time passes. We will have to discuss this in upcoming planning meetings to determine the feasibility of this suggestion.