

A CULTURE OF CRISIS:
INFORMATION AND THE SCOPE OF AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES
IN AN ERA OF TERRORIST THREAT

Linda M. Merola, J.D.

Thesis Advisor: W. Clyde Wilcox, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, a significant portion of the public debate in the United States has focused upon the threat of terrorism. Yet, previous scholarship has concluded that exposure to threatening information may result in significant alterations to individual decision making and, ultimately, in the adoption of new broad-based commitments. Though Americans are socialized to support equal extensions of rights to all individuals, many have questioned whether the current terrorist crisis has resulted in the erosion of our societal commitment to expansive guarantees of civil liberties.

Indeed, research conducted prior to 9/11 indicates that, when individuals feel threatened, they are more likely to depart from their socialization to be tolerant, weighing the content of incoming information more heavily. Further, the extraordinary public focus and intensity of purpose directed at the issue of terrorism since the attacks of 9/11 implies an even greater role for suggestions from the information environment than that contemplated by previous research and, as a result, a substantial likelihood of lasting alterations to public conceptions of the rights necessary to maintain a free society.

Through an inter-disciplinary, multi-method approach, this project explores alterations in information contained in our public discourse related to civil liberties in the post-9/11 period in order to uncover potentially influential changes in content. The research utilizes both traditional and computerized linguistic content analyses to examine discourse related to civil liberties in the media, in law review articles and in judicial opinions. Through the analysis of survey-experimental data, the project then seeks to gauge the impact of changes in the information environment through an investigation of the interaction of various salient forms of information with public support for civil liberties guarantees.

The results of these analyses suggest fundamental and influential alterations in both the content and preferred modes of information processing of the post-9/11 discourse related to rights. Further, these transformations are not confined merely to popular, non-elite sources but extend to the more professional, expert types of discourse examined. In addition, these alterations in content are shown to impact individual decision making with respect to the proper scope of civil liberties in the U.S. Recently, however, modifications in the writings of legal elites suggest increasing opinion leadership on the part of this community and other changes which may provide a mechanism for the post-9/11 stabilization of norms related to civil liberties.