

Concern and Credibility



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*I*t has been a cliché that September 11 “changed everything.” In fact, if you watch *American Idol* on Fox TV, you see it hasn’t changed everything. Large parts of the culture are impermeable.

But September 11 has indeed changed the political and psychological dynamic in this country. The public looks to the president, in a generic sense, in a much different way than it did before September 11. We are looking for a protector-in-chief. All the business about threats before September 11, during the Cold War and the post-Cold War period, were generally abstract to this country.

Outside of the Cuban missile crisis, there were very few moments in time in the last fifty years when Americans actually felt threatened physically, in their homes, and September 11 changed that. The number-one job of the president became protecting American citizens. It became the number-one job of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and a lot of other bureaucracies.

When people look to a protector, they do so with a strong bias in favor of that protector succeeding because they have a direct interest in that person’s success. Gore Vidal would call it the “Big Father Figure.” But you don’t want to look at your Big Father Figure and find fault in him because that means your life is more insecure, and that actually means you have to do some more things for yourself or become further engaged in what are some very, very difficult issues.

Because of this, there now is a tremendous bias in the political system in favor of whoever is sitting in the White House. People don’t want to see a failed president, and there is a tremendous amount of deference toward the president when it comes to real threat from terrorism. There is a strong bias in favor of what can be called the conventional approach: be strong, fight back. It is law-of-the-jungle-type stuff. It is what resonates on an emotional level. It is immediate. It may work. It may not work.

One of the most effective political ads in the last twenty years was in the 1984 Reagan campaign: the “bear in the woods” ad. All it showed was the bear—he was a friendly-looking bear—walking through the woods. The message was that some people say there’s a bear in the woods, and some people say there’s not; but shouldn’t we protect ourselves, just in case there *is* a bear in the woods?

The bear ad really fed on public fear, and the solution offered was to implement the Republican agenda: to build up the military, create Star Wars, and so on. The Democratic response was to say that Star Wars is destabilizing. It will cause the Chinese to build more weapons, anger our friends in the Soviet Union, and create an arms race between India and Pakistan. All true, but that takes a paragraph to say, and there’s no bear to put next to the words.

The lesson is that Democratic policy alternatives must be wrapped in themes with immediacy and resonance. Two central themes we will discuss here are lack of concern for and lack of credibility with the rest of the world.

LACK OF CONCERN

America is indeed the last superpower and does, indeed, have real security concerns. We talk about Islamic terrorism, nonproliferation, and instability in other parts of the world. But the issue is whether these are things the United States can handle alone or, even if we can, whether we might do a better job if we had some friends and partners working with us. The notion of working with the rest of the world for our own interest is something that can be made politically acceptable. But if America wants countries to be concerned with our security, we have to be concerned with theirs.

It is stunning that the United States was able to get away with the anti-French campaign and forget about the Germans, Russians, Chinese, Mexicans, and Canadians—all were opposed to the war. The United States ignored international opinion on the Kyoto treaty, the International Criminal Court, twelve different conventions on chemical and biological weapons, and the racism conference in South Africa. We told the rest of the world “we’re not playing with you. We’re taking our ball and going elsewhere.”

Democrats did get the Bush administration to go to the United Nations regarding Iraq. The administration sought permission for war. It tried to finesse the request, to look like America was doing the right thing. In fact, we didn’t get permission, but Democrats still applauded the administration for going to the United Nations.

Real concern, of course, means going far beyond applause. We need to form partnerships. That means agreeing with some of the priority agenda items of the other parts of the globe. The Middle East obviously is one.

LACK OF CREDIBILITY

Concern for the rest of the world ought to be one theme through which Democrats present their policy alternatives. Another should be the theme of credibility.

The absence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq lost the United States a great deal of credibility in the world. Not only did the administration fail to find weapons of mass destruction, but it didn't even move quickly to secure nuclear facilities. The International Atomic Energy Agency did know what nuclear materials existed—materials that could be used in dirty bombs and uranium that could conceivably be processed into weapons-grade material. But when we invaded Iraq, no American was assigned to go to these sites and secure those areas. So we had the sorry spectacle of locals going into the al Tuwaitha nuclear facility, which is only eleven miles south of Baghdad, and taking barrels holding uranium, dumping them out, bringing them back to their homes, filling them up with water and bathing and drinking from them for weeks before they were bought back by international inspectors for \$3 a barrel.

The Patriot Act is equally illustrative. If the American government could demonstrate an honest need for all the provisions in the act, it might be acceptable. But honest need has not been demonstrated.

Weapons of mass destruction and the Patriot Act are just two of the more obvious areas where America has lost its credibility. We fight for freedom in Iraq at the same time that we cut deals with Uzbekistan, which has about 7,000 political prisoners. We fail to effectively deal with nuclear proliferation and disarmament. We pass on the Kyoto Treaty and do little to encourage alternative energy sources to prevent global warming. We fail to address poverty and inequality in any meaningful new way and give no priority to reforming the World Bank and International Monetary Fund into institutions responsive to local development needs and human-rights policy. We champion free trade but don't create cost-effective and humane policies for the workers who are affected. We sign trade accords that preserve the free flow of capital and ignore the rights of workers. We sit back as NAFTA decimates local farmers in Mexico who then join the ranks of the impoverished in Mexico City. We don't implement policies like Dick Gephardt's proposal to create a global minimum wage, adjusted to the cost of living in every country.

The loss of credibility is a serious security issue for the United States. When credibility is lost, the American government becomes less effective in terms of doing what actually might be needed, if not today, then a month or a year from today. What if there is a legitimate security issue that arises in North Korea involving weapons of mass destruction? The United States now has a harder time making the case. What if there is a new civil-liberties-threatening device that the Justice Department thinks would really help against a new threat? The Department now is hindered from action.

THE MEDIA

Mainstream media will not do much to develop these themes of concern and credibility. They did a fairly good job on weapons of mass destruction, but the story will fade unless there is a continuing political element to it.

As Eric Alterman, Amy Goodman, Robert McChesney, and John Nichols discuss in part V of this volume, most media today, owned by huge corporations, exist primarily to make a profit. The owners no longer are families with public-affairs missions.

The newspapers present a great amount of the material on how America has been misled in Iraq. The problem is that it doesn't get covered as a meta-story, as an overarching story, because no one is making that case. The media are geared toward covering drama and tension—that is what kept the Clinton impeachment and Whitewater alive. With the impeachment and Whitewater, the Republicans ran with the ball. They held hearings. They kept accusing the president of doing this, that, and the other thing. The political press takes its cues from political players, so it kept the stories alive. Accordingly, today, if there were Democrats stressing overriding issues of concern and credibility, there would be press coverage. That could still happen if more information leaks out and Democrats make bolder statements that political media can run with. Short of that, we cannot expect corporate media to generate an issue-oriented frame.

SENSITIZING THE CITIZENRY

With Americans looking for a Big Father, the government can ride the conventional approach very far, as long as nothing catastrophic happens. The only chance we have is to set forth bold alternative policy made appealing to the Americans who have been sensitized—and angered—by our lack of concern for and credibility with the rest of the world. Luckily, there are new ways of organizing, and groups such as MoveOn.org are paving the way, as Eli Pariser discusses in chapter 31. These grassroots efforts are the best hope for creating an alternative to the current destructive policy.

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