



Media Reality ✓ Check

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MRC Study: TV Coverage Since 9/11 Portrays U.S. Government as Abusive and Violating Civil Liberties

Pushing Fear of America, Not Fear of Terror

Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, ABC, CBS and NBC have slanted news coverage in favor of left-wing critics like the ACLU who suggest we Americans have more to fear from our own government than from the al-Qaeda terrorists who killed nearly 3,000 of us five years ago. In coverage of three important anti-terror programs, reporters cast the U.S. as threatening Americans' civil liberties and violating captured terrorists' human rights.

Those are the findings of a new Media Research Center study of 496 stories aired on the ABC, CBS and NBC evening newscasts from September 11, 2001 through August 31, 2006. Analysts examined 91 stories about the USA Patriot Act, 277 stories about the treatment of captured terrorists at Guantanamo Bay, and 128 stories about the National Security Agency's once-secret terrorist surveillance program, disclosed by the *New York Times* late last year.

The full report is available at www.mrc.org. Among the results:

■ Most TV news stories about the Patriot Act (62%) highlighted complaints or fears that the law infringed on the civil liberties of innocent Americans. Anchor John Roberts, then with CBS, claimed on the July 4, 2003 *Evening News* that "as Americans celebrate their independence today, concern is growing that civil liberties are threatened as never before by the Patriot Act."

■ ABC, CBS and NBC heavily favored critics of the Patriot Act. Of 23 soundbites from independent experts (such as law professors or ex-FBI agents), 61 percent faulted the law as a threat to privacy rights. Of 19 soundbites from ordinary citizens, every one condemned the Patriot Act, despite polls showing most Americans support the Patriot Act and believe it has prevented new acts of terrorism.

■ Most network coverage of Guantanamo Bay focused on charges that the captured al-Qaeda terrorists were due additional rights or privileges (100 stories) or allegations that detainees were being mistreated or abused (105

stories). Only 39 stories (14%) suggested the prisoners were dangerous men, and only six stories revealed that some released prisoners have committed new acts of terror.

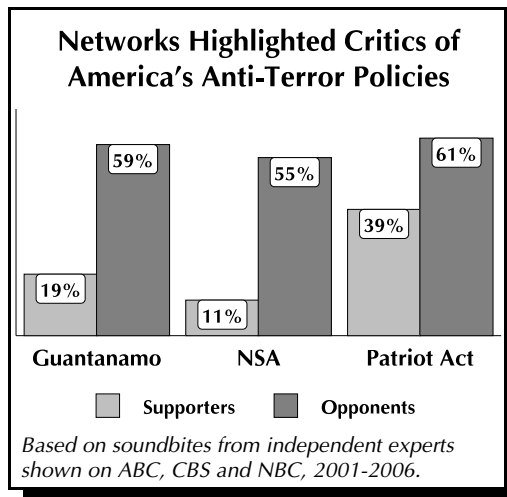
■ TV reporters portrayed the Guantanamo inmates as victims, with one in seven stories including the word "torture." ABC's *World News Tonight* chose the second anniversary of September 11 to present a sympathetic view of the prisoners. "There have been 31 suicide attempts to date," reporter Claire Shipman fretted. "Letters home obtained by ABC News show despair. One Kuwaiti prisoner writes [that] he wants, quote, 'to die, as I cannot stand this place.'"

■ Most TV stories (59%) cast the NSA's post-9/11 terrorist surveillance program as legally dubious or outright illegal. Half the stories (64) framed it as a civil liberties problem, while just 16 percent mentioned the NSA program's value in the War on Terror.

■ Most of the time (87% of all descriptions), reporters cast the NSA program as affecting ordinary Americans, compared with just 13 percent of descriptions that indicated the NSA had targeted just terrorists or those in contact with suspected terrorists. On December 16, 2005,

ABC's *World News Tonight* began with the words "Big Brother" beside a picture of President Bush; anchor Bob Woodruff teased, "Big Brother, the uproar over a secret presidential order giving the government unprecedented powers to spy on Americans."

The networks could have spent the past five years pressing government to enact the toughest possible anti-terror policies. Instead, reporters have opted to join the ACLU in fretting that the War on Terror has already gone too far. — Rich Noyes



L. Brent Bozell III, Publisher; **Brent Baker**, **Rich Noyes**, **Tim Graham**, Editors; **Geoffrey Dickens**, **Brad Wilmouth**, **Megan McCormack**, **Mike Rule**, **Scott Whitlock** and **Justin McCarthy**, Media Analysts; **Michelle Humphrey**, Research Associate; **Michael Chapman**, Director of Communications. Sign up for daily *CyberAlerts* at www.mrc.org.