



# Media Reality ✓ Check

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ABC, CBS, CNN & NBC Pressed Ashcroft on Civil Rights Abuses; No Inquiry on Protecting Citizens

## One-Sided Questioning of Attorney General

Attorney General John Ashcroft was interviewed by ABC's Charles Gibson, CBS's Bryant Gumbel, CNN's Paula Zahn and NBC's Matt Lauer on each of the networks' morning news programs today. All four pushed the Attorney General from the left; not a single one of those journalists asked whether Ashcroft's Justice Department was doing enough to protect the public from new attacks by yet-undiscovered terrorists.

CBS, NBC and even ABC ignored a new poll conducted for ABC and the *Washington Post* documenting widespread public support for the measures the media insist on terming "controversial." Uniquely, CNN's Zahn cited polling data showing that Ashcroft "has the support of a majority of Americans," with far more saying the current policies don't go far enough (26 percent), compared to 10 percent who think civil liberties have been too restricted. The journalists' questions showed that they don't reflect the public's way of thinking:

■ **ABC's Gibson** framed the story just as Ashcroft's critics have: "Among the controversial measures the White House has put in place recently: military tribunals for suspected terrorists and their attorneys, detentions of more than 600 aliens and calling in some 5,000 Middle Eastern men for questioning." Gibson told the Attorney General he had "become something of a lightning rod for those who feel that the administration may be abridging the civil rights of some." Citing Spain's unwillingness to extradite terrorist suspects if they'll face a military tribunal, Gibson demanded, "Aren't your own rules, in some respect, hampering your own investigation?"

■ **CBS's Gumbel** focused on petulant politicians: "You're catching an awful lot of heat from your [former] Senate colleagues who are outraged that they weren't consulted about many of the measures you're taking. Why do Senators have to learn about what you're doing only after the fact?" Then he asked Ashcroft to publicize the government's evidence: "You're also catching heat for detaining hundreds

of people supposedly to combat sleeper cells of terrorists waiting to strike. Do you not feel it necessary to present evidence to the American people of at least the cause for your suspicion?" Supposedly?

■ After reporting that Ashcroft's policies were getting wide public support, **CNN's Zahn** claimed they were being attacked from all sides: "You've certainly been a lightning rod for criticism, as you know, from both sides now," then cited complaints from Democratic Senator Patrick Leahy, who has launched hearings on the issue of civil liberties, and Republican Senator Arlen Specter, who disputed President Bush's authority to hold military tribunals.

■ **NBC's Lauer** was appalled by Ashcroft's standards: "You said the other day at a press briefing, in referring to the question of are we infringing on the civil rights of some of these people being detained, you said there hasn't been one civil rights lawsuit brought against the Justice Department or the American government. Is that really a standard we want to live with? That we push things as far as we can until someone

sues us?" Ashcroft replied that his point was that if there had been any violations, someone would surely have sued by now. Lauer then pressed Ashcroft to admit "if an American citizen were taken into custody in another country and tried in a military tribunal there, wouldn't we be up in arms here?"

Given that the U.S. remains under high alert for possible new terrorist attacks, you'd think at least one reporter would ask one question aimed at promoting public safety. But liberal pack journalism may not allow such independence.

— Rich Noyes

### Widely Supported, but Still "Controversial"

"Seven in 10 Americans believe the government is doing enough to protect the civil rights of suspected terrorists. An equally large majority believe the government is sufficiently guarding the rights of Arab-Americans and American Muslims as well as non-citizens from Arab and Muslim countries. The findings reflect a wellspring of public support as the Bush administration continues even its most controversial investigative methods to bring suspected terrorists to justice." — *The Washington Post's* Richard Morin and Claudia Deane in Nov. 29 front-page story headlined "Most Americans Back U.S. Tactics."

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