

Dark Clouds and Silver Linings:
Socio-psychological Responses to September 11, 2001

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There is clear evidence that the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon had both immediate and long-term effects on the American psyche¹. Some of the psychological consequences of the attacks were transparently hostile, negative, and defensive. An unfortunate consequence of terrorist attacks against Western liberal democracies is that people often react to these attacks by becoming more willing to sacrifice necessary cornerstones of freedom, that is, by becoming willing to restrict both their own and others' civil liberties, and often worse.

However, September 11 not only motivated political intolerance and hate, it also motivated many Americans to react with group and value affirming responses. For example, Americans donated blood, gave money and time to charity, and started organizations such as My Good Deed, a group committed to "changing the world, one good deed at a time" as a memorial to the victims of September 11.

This chapter reviews how the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon brought out some of the best and worst in Americans, and provides a psychological account for both reactions. We first review evidence of increased levels of political intolerance, prejudice and discrimination, hate crimes, and desires for vengeance. We then review evidence that Americans also responded with unprecedented levels of giving, as well as other attempts to reaffirm their commitments to fundamental standards of cultural value. Finally, we discuss some of the implications of this research for how people might best channel their responses when confronted with threats like terrorist attacks in the future.

The Dark Clouds of Intolerance, Discrimination, Hate, and Vengeance

Psychological theorizing suggests that people experience events like terrorist attacks as threats to their cultural worldviews²⁻³. Value protection theorists argue that people are intuitive prosecutors, who respond to moral transgressions with a strong sense of motivated arousal and distress, and with a desire to secure the moral perimeter from future threat⁴. This motivated arousal leads people to respond to threats like terrorist attacks with moral outrage, a reaction that includes cognitive, affective, and behavioral components such as negative attributions and vilification of the transgressor, rage, and punitive behavior⁵.

Consistent with value protection theory predictions, there was considerable evidence that Americans expressed various forms of moral outrage in response to the September 11 attacks. For example, as can be seen in Figure 1, significant percentages of Americans responded by admitting to having said something like “we should just nuke them” and talking about the need to go to war⁶. In addition to these examples of moral outrage, there was considerable evidence that Americans expressed moral outrage in the form of (a) higher levels of political intolerance, prejudice, and discrimination against groups symbolically associated with the attackers (e.g., Arab Americans and Muslims), (b) higher incidences of hate crimes against these same groups, and (c) with strong needs and desires for vengeance.

Political Tolerance and Intolerance

Political tolerance refers to attitudes, norms, and laws that prohibit discrimination against practices or groups that may be disapproved of by those in the majority. More specifically, political tolerance describes people’s degree of support for one of the foundations of liberal democracy, that is, the degree that a given society or cultural context supports its citizens’ civil liberties and ensures that all groups have the same political freedoms as others (e.g., freedom of

speech, freedom of association, rights to due process⁷⁻⁸).

One of Americans' many reactions to September 11 was a decrease in political tolerance. More than two-thirds of Americans reported that they were willing to sacrifice some civil liberties to fight terrorism, and one in four thought that the Bush Administration had not gone far enough to restrict civil liberties in the months immediately following the attacks⁹⁻¹⁰.

Although the tendency of people to become more politically intolerant under conditions of threat is well documented^{11, 12, 13, 14, 15} researchers only recently have noted the specific link between terrorist attacks and political intolerance. For example, cross sections of national opinion polls revealed that more people were willing to sacrifice civil liberties to fight terrorism in the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 (49%) and following the 2001 terrorist attacks (68%), than in 1997 (29%), when perceived threat of a terrorist attack was comparatively low (see also Figure 2¹⁶⁻¹⁷). Although political tolerance does appear to recover over time, terrorist attacks erode support for broad civil liberties for significant periods¹⁸, and therefore are particularly effective weapons against democratic functioning.

Prejudice and Discrimination

Americans also expressed considerable prejudice and discrimination against groups symbolically associated with the September 11 attacks. Specifically, more than half of Americans reported unfavorable attitudes toward Muslim and Arab Americans in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks, whereas majorities of Americans reported positive attitudes toward every other U.S. racial/ethnic group during the same time¹⁹.

Moreover, despite efforts by the Bush administration to curtail backlash (e.g., specific calls for tolerance in the immediate aftermath of the attacks), Muslim and Arab Americans experienced widespread discrimination after the attacks. For example, the American Arab Anti-

Discrimination Committee (ADC) reported more than 80 cases of passenger removal from airplanes due to concerns about the names or perceived ethnicities of Muslim and Arab American passengers in the first 13 months after the attacks²⁰. Illegal passenger removal occurred on every major U.S. airline and primarily resulted from passengers or crewmembers' uneasiness with the passenger-in-question's perceived ethnicity²¹.

Finally, the ADC also reported more than 800 cases of employment discrimination against Muslim and Arab Americans in 2001--a four-fold increase from the previous year²². The ADC also documented numerous instances of denial of service, housing discrimination, police and FBI misconduct (including racial profiling), and the harassment of Muslim and Arab American students in educational settings the year following the attacks²³. In summary, there is considerable evidence that portions of the American public expressed their moral outrage at the attacks by targeting groups symbolically associated with the attackers in the form of increased prejudice and discrimination. Even more severe expressions of moral outrage occurred in the form of a dramatic increase in the levels of hate crimes toward Arab American and Muslim targets, a topic we turn to next.

Hate Crimes

When a perpetrator targets a victim because of his or her membership in a certain social group (e.g., the victim's race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, or ethnicity/national origin) the perpetrators' actions can be legally designated as a hate crime²⁴. Hate crimes can range from words or actions meant to encourage or instigate violence to physical or sexual assaults, homicide, and other acts of actual violence²⁵. Psychologically, hate crimes can be distinguished from other crimes against persons or property in the symbolic and instrumental functions they serve²⁶. Hate crimes serve a symbolic function by conveying a message of fear and intimidation

to anyone even symbolically associated with the target group. Moreover, hate crimes can serve an instrumental function because they are intended to (and often do) alter the behavior of the targeted group, such as keeping them from patronizing a given business or from living in a certain neighborhood.

One consequence of the September 11 attacks was an increase in hate crimes against Arab Americans, Muslims, and similar targets. For example, anti-Muslim hate crimes reported to the ADC included more than 700 incidents over the first nine weeks after the attacks²⁷, relative to only a handful of incidents reported by the ADC in the years 1998-2000 (the 1998-2000 reports were mostly narrative accounts, and seem to cover less than 10 total incidents²⁸). FBI aggregated crime statistics revealed a similar massive spike in reported hate crimes against Muslims in 2001. The FBI reported 28 incidents of hate crimes against Muslims in 2000 compared to 481 incidents in 2001—a seventeen-fold increase²⁹⁻³⁰.

Figure 3 attempts to put these numbers into context. Specifically, Figure 3 summarizes hate crime statistics against Black, Jewish, and Muslim targets in the United States, weighted by the proportion of each of these groups in the population. Among other things, these results reveal much higher levels of hate crimes against Jewish than either Black or Muslim targets, with one important exception: the unprecedented increase in reported hate crimes committed against Muslims in 2001. Moreover, trends in these data indicate that hate crimes against Black and Jewish targets have been consistently lower in 2002-2006 than they were in 2000-2001.

Although hate crimes against Muslims fell dramatically after 2001, the rate of hate crimes against these groups has nonetheless stayed at a rate several times higher than it had been prior to the September 11 attacks. The current level of Muslim hate crime exceeds Black hate crime levels (whereas before 2001, it was many times lower in incidence than Black hate crime),

whereas levels of hate crimes against Jews rather dramatically exceeds the level of hate crimes against Blacks or Muslims every year, with the exception of 2001. To some degree, these statistics suggest that with some exceptions (e.g., the immediate reaction to the September 11 attacks), there may be a relatively stable level of violent hate, but whom perpetrators target for hate crime changes as a function of factors such as media attention, or which group perpetrators currently see as most threatening.

Other Expressions of Post-September 11 Desires for Vengeance

Another way that Americans expressed moral outrage following the September 11 attacks was in the form of strong desires for vengeance against whoever was responsible for the attacks³¹⁻³². Vengeance is defined as individuals' desire to punish moral transgressions by giving the offender his or her 'just' deserts³³. Vengeance is decidedly more about a punitive desire to hurt or harm transgressors than it is anything about more rational concerns, such as deterrence³⁴.

The need to serve up "just desserts" seems to have led some Americans to psychologically grab at Iraq as a target, regardless of how rational it was to do so. Specifically, in the months leading up to the Iraq War, polls found that 20% of Americans believed that Iraq was responsible for September 11 and 13% even said they believed that they had seen conclusive evidence of Iraqi involvement, despite widespread news coverage to the contrary³⁵. In addition, belief that Iraq was responsible or involved in September 11 was strongly related to support for going to war. Among those who believed that Iraq was directly involved in September 11, 58% said they would agree with the President's decision to go to war without UN approval³⁶. Moreover, as can be seen in Figure 4, 19% of Americans reported that attacking Iraq would satisfy their needs for vengeance for September 11 and slightly more than 25% reported that attacking Iraq would help satisfy their need to hurt those responsible for the attacks (see Figure 4³⁷)³⁸⁻³⁹.

These results--together with the evidence of post-September 11 intolerance, prejudice, discrimination, and hate crimes—have a number of disturbing implications. Among other things, these findings suggest that Americans have had (and may still have) very broad definitions of “those responsible” when thinking about the September 11 attacks. The moral outrage people experienced in association with September 11 clearly spilled over to affect not only those specifically responsible for the attacks (i.e., Al Qaeda), but also other groups that were at best only symbolically associated with the source of threat. This expansion of perceived responsibility in turn psychologically expands the number of potential targets for people’s wrath.

Taking revenge by targeting those symbolically classified as responsible for the attacks, however, appears to have done very little to help people successfully cope with the distress created by September 11. For example, people who expressed higher levels of moral outrage following September 11 were more intolerant of a number of groups post-September 11, including Arab Americans, new immigrants, and Muslims⁴⁰. If expressing moral outrage against groups symbolically associated with those responsible for the attacks helped people alleviate September 11 distress, we would predict that higher levels of expressing intolerance against these groups would be associated with greater psychological closure (i.e., willingness to put the events of September 11 behind them). No such relationship between intolerance and closure was found⁴¹. In short, seeking vengeance against those symbolically associated with the attacks did not effectively help people deal with their distress and anger.

The Silver Linings of Moral Cleansing and Value Affirmation

In addition to motivating people to defend the moral perimeter from further intrusions (e.g., expressions of moral outrage), value protection theories predict that people also respond to threats to their worldviews or sense of moral order with attempts to morally cleanse, that is, by

reaffirming their commitment to important cultural or moral values, or by doing good deeds to remind themselves and others of their own comparative moral commitment and worthiness⁴²⁻⁴³. Moral cleansing psychologically removes the contamination people feel when exposed to perceived immorality or evil⁴⁴, and provides a sense of psychological safety by reassuring people that those in their own group (unlike the moral transgressors) are fundamentally trustworthy and good⁴⁵. Moral outrage is a more interpersonal or intergroup response geared toward shoring up the moral perimeter and guarding against future threat. In contrast, moral cleansing is a more intrapsychic response designed to reassure oneself and other in-group members of one's commitment to in-group ideals. There were numerous examples of moral cleansing as a response to September 11. For example, large percentages of the American public engaged in behaviors such as donating blood, giving money to charity, displaying the American flag, as well as increasing their attempts to do nice things for friends and family and be a better person in response to the attacks (see Figure 5⁴⁶). We go into further detail about some of these examples below.

Blood Donation

One way people attempted to reaffirm their core values and conceptions of themselves as decent and good was to donate blood. Blood donation levels were 2.5 times greater in the first week after the attacks and 1.3-1.4 times greater in the second through fourth weeks after the attacks compared to the same weeks in 2000⁴⁷. Most striking was the rise in first-time donations of blood, which increased 5.2 times in the week after the attacks compared to the four weeks preceding them⁴⁸⁻⁴⁹. Although there is generally a strong community response to disasters, blood donation rates following September 11 well-exceeded donation rate spikes observed in response to the Persian Gulf War or after the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing of the Murrah Federal

Building^{1, 50}. In short, people appeared to respond more strongly to the September 11 attacks than other seemingly similar events.

Charitable Giving

Charitable giving, like blood donation, rose to unprecedented levels following September 11 attacks. Individuals, corporations, and foundations contributed \$1.9 billion to September 11 related charities and efforts—more than was given to any other relief effort up until that time⁵¹. Surveys indicated that 70% of Americans donated blood, money, or time in response to the September 11, 2001 attacks. Moreover, 73% of those who donated money indicated that they planned to contribute as much money as they normally did to other charities (in other words, people did not just transfer their usual amount of giving to a new cause⁵²).

Displaying the American Flag

Another reaction many Americans had to the September 11 attacks was an impulse to display the American flag. National surveys indicated that between 74% and 82% of those surveyed displayed the American flag on their homes, cars, or person as a reaction to September 11^{53, 54, 55}. A study of a nationally representative sample of adults in the months immediately following the September 11 attacks found that displaying the American flag was a phenomenon more closely related to the same impulses that led people to donate blood and almost \$2 billion to 9/11 charities, rather than feelings of nationalism, xenophobia, or negative feelings about various out-groups⁵⁶. In short, people flew the flag out of a sense of increased patriotism², a desire to affirm

¹ The Oklahoma City bombing was a domestic terrorist attack against the U.S. government. The Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building was bombed in an office complex in downtown Oklahoma City, Oklahoma on April 19, 1995. The attack claimed 168 lives and left over 800 people injured. Until the September 11, 2001 attacks, it was the deadliest act of terrorism on U.S. soil.

² There are important distinctions between patriotism (which is defined as love of country and feelings of in-group solidarity with fellow citizens) and nationalism (which is defined as uncritical acceptance of national, state, and political authorities, a belief in the relative superiority of one's group, in combination with feelings of hostility toward outsiders). Although patriotism and nationalism can sometimes go hand in hand, people can and do experience positive feelings about their own group or nation states without necessarily feeling negative feelings

American values, and out of a desire to bolster their own and others' feelings of solidarity with and connectedness to their fellow citizens. These results do not mean that displays of the American flag always express people's feelings of in-group solidarity. The flag and other symbols of group identity can clearly shift in meaning as a function of the context in which they are used. National polls, for example, indicated that the number of people who still displayed the American flag after the Iraq War began was significantly lower (56%) than those who displayed the flag in the immediate months after the September 11 attacks (74% to 82%⁵⁷). One can speculate that what it means to display the American flag since the Iraq War began may have shifted more toward the nationalistic than patriotic end of the spectrum, a sentiment fewer Americans may have wanted to endorse.

Taken together, there was clear evidence that the events of September 11 motivated many Americans to do something to reaffirm cultural standards of value. They donated blood, gave billions to charities, and engaged in a host of other behaviors designed to reassure themselves and others of Americans' capacity for goodness. To what extent was engaging in moral cleansing effective in helping people to cope with the attacks? Our evidence indicated that it was quite effective⁵⁸. People who engaged in more moral cleansing behaviors post-September 11, were higher in psychological closure within four months after the attacks.

Taken together, there is considerable evidence that people responded with moral outrage and moral cleansing to September 11. This evidence begs the question of whether the people who engaged in these different behaviors were one and the same, or if instead, people tended to cope using one or another strategy. We turn to this question next.

about other groups or nation-states (e.g., Blank & Schmidt, 2003; Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989; Peña & Sidanius, 2002; Schatz & Staub, 1997).

Psychological Redundancy in Coping with September 11

When threats to people's sense of moral order are especially severe, people are likely to respond with redundancy and overkill reactions in their attempts to restore a sense of psychic balance, rather than rely on one or another reaction alone⁵⁹. Our data suggests that a plurality of Americans had a redundant response to the September 11 attacks, that is, they reported high levels of both moral outrage and moral cleansing. More specifically, (a) 37% of Americans responded with high levels of both responses, (b) 18% expressed high moral outrage, but did not express much moral cleansing, (c) 16% engaged in high levels of moral cleansing, but low levels of moral outrage, and (d) 29% were low on measures of both moral outrage and moral cleansing.³

We conducted a number of analyses designed to explore how groups who used these four coping strategies differed. The major difference between these groups was the extent to which they responded to the September 11 with anger versus fear. People who were more angry than afraid tended to respond with higher levels of moral outrage. In contrast, people who were more afraid than angry tended to respond with higher levels of moral cleansing. People high in both anger and fear were the most likely, and people lowest in both anger and fear were the least likely, to engage in both reactions⁶⁰. In other words, these results support the notion that most people respond to terrorist attacks with aversive arousal, and the nature of this aversive arousal directs their subsequent reactions to the attacks.

³ These estimates are based on calculating how many Americans scored above and below the average values on measures of moral outrage and cleansing (see Skitka et al., 2004 for more details about these measures). There are other ways to conceive of whether people responded with high levels of moral cleansing and outrage, for example, but using relative endorsements of specific levels of each of these variables rather than the mean to determine what levels count as high or low. For example, if we use cut-offs of those who score 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale of each of these measures as "high" and those who score below 4 as the measure of "low," 75% of Americans would be classified as responding with high levels of both moral outrage and cleansing. Almost regardless of how one determines what counts as the appropriate cut-off for high or low levels of moral outrage, however, it is clear a plurality of Americans had both responses to the September 11 attacks.

Conclusion

People responded to the September 11 attacks with what at first glance seemed to be an odd mix of reactions: Hostility on the one hand, charitable responses on the other. However, when viewed through the lens of value protection theory, these reactions begin to make sense. People respond to threats to their core worldviews or conceptions of moral order with a sense of motivated distress and arousal. People attempt to resolve this sense of motivated arousal by expressing moral outrage or engaging in moral cleansing. If people's distress is sufficiently high or if one or another strategy appears to be ineffective by itself, people sometimes respond with both reactions.

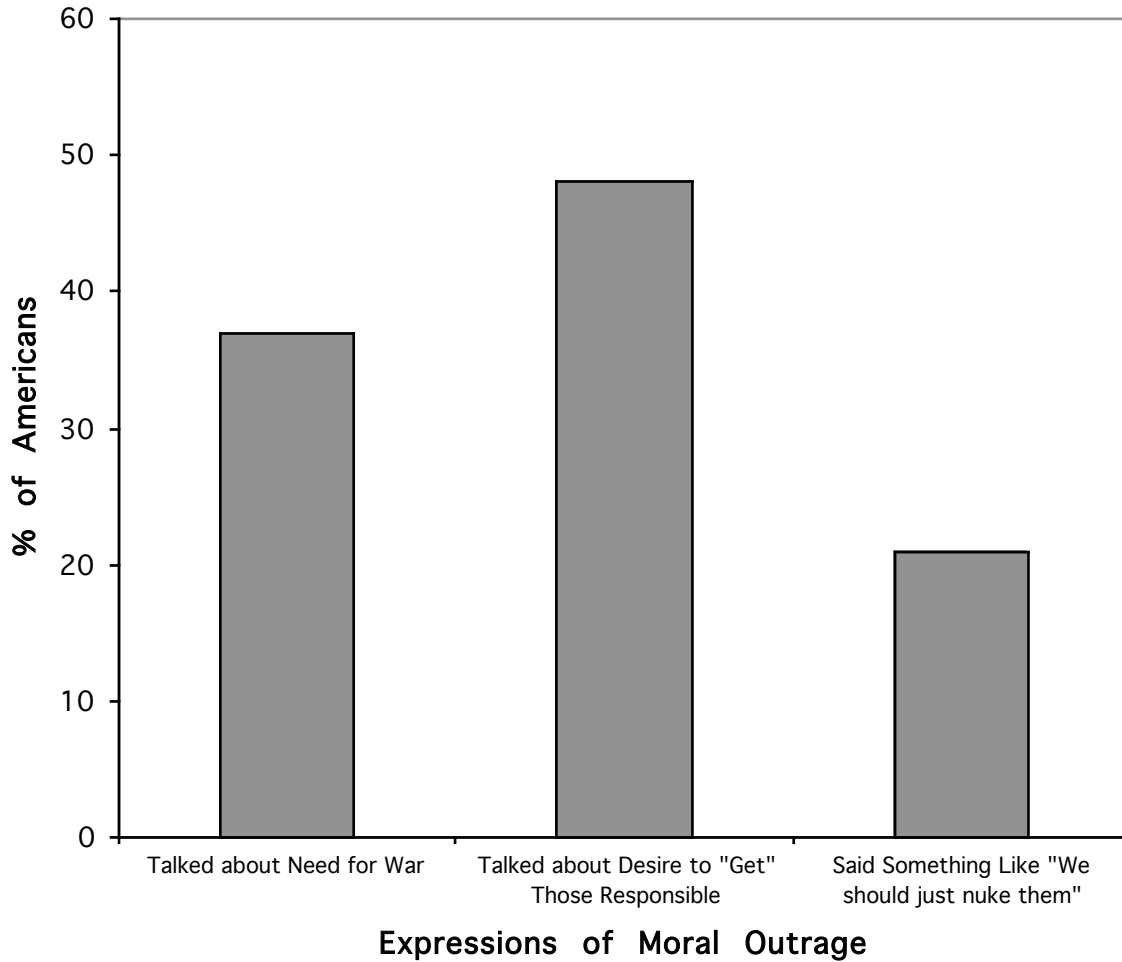
Consistent with value protection theory predictions, there was considerable evidence that Americans responded to September 11 with moral outrage (e.g., intolerance, prejudice, discrimination, hate crimes, and support for war) in an attempt to shore up the moral perimeter against future threat. A troubling finding, however, was that few of the targets of moral outrage bore any actual responsibility for the terrorist attacks. The real perpetrators were either killed in the attacks or had gone into hiding (e.g., Bin Laden), making it difficult to exact vengeance on those actually responsible for them. Once aroused, however, moral outrage seems to require an outlet, and many people therefore targeted individuals within the U.S. borders (Arab Americans, Muslims) as well as outside of them (e.g., Saddam Hussein and Iraq). Although much more research is needed to fully understand the psychology of moral outrage, we now know that it is a likely response to terrorist attacks and that there is considerable risk of collateral damage when people cannot target their rage at those responsible for them. Moreover, expressing moral outrage—at least when it was directed at non-responsible targets—seemed to do little to help

those who engaged in it. In other words, expressing greater moral outrage was not related to eventual psychological closure following the attacks⁶¹.

A potentially more effective strategy than moral outrage for coping with the dark clouds of terrorism may be to seek silver linings, that is, to cope by reaffirming one's commitment to cultural standards of value and to engage in behavior designed to reassure oneself and others that people can be decent, good, and kind. In addition to considerable evidence of moral outrage following September 11, there was also widespread evidence of moral cleansing. Americans gave blood, donated billions to charity, flew the American flag to express their solidarity with other citizens, and engaged in numerous other efforts designed to reaffirm their commitment to their fellow citizens. Most important, engaging in moral cleansing proved to better serve people's psychic needs to arrive at a sense of post-September 11 closure.

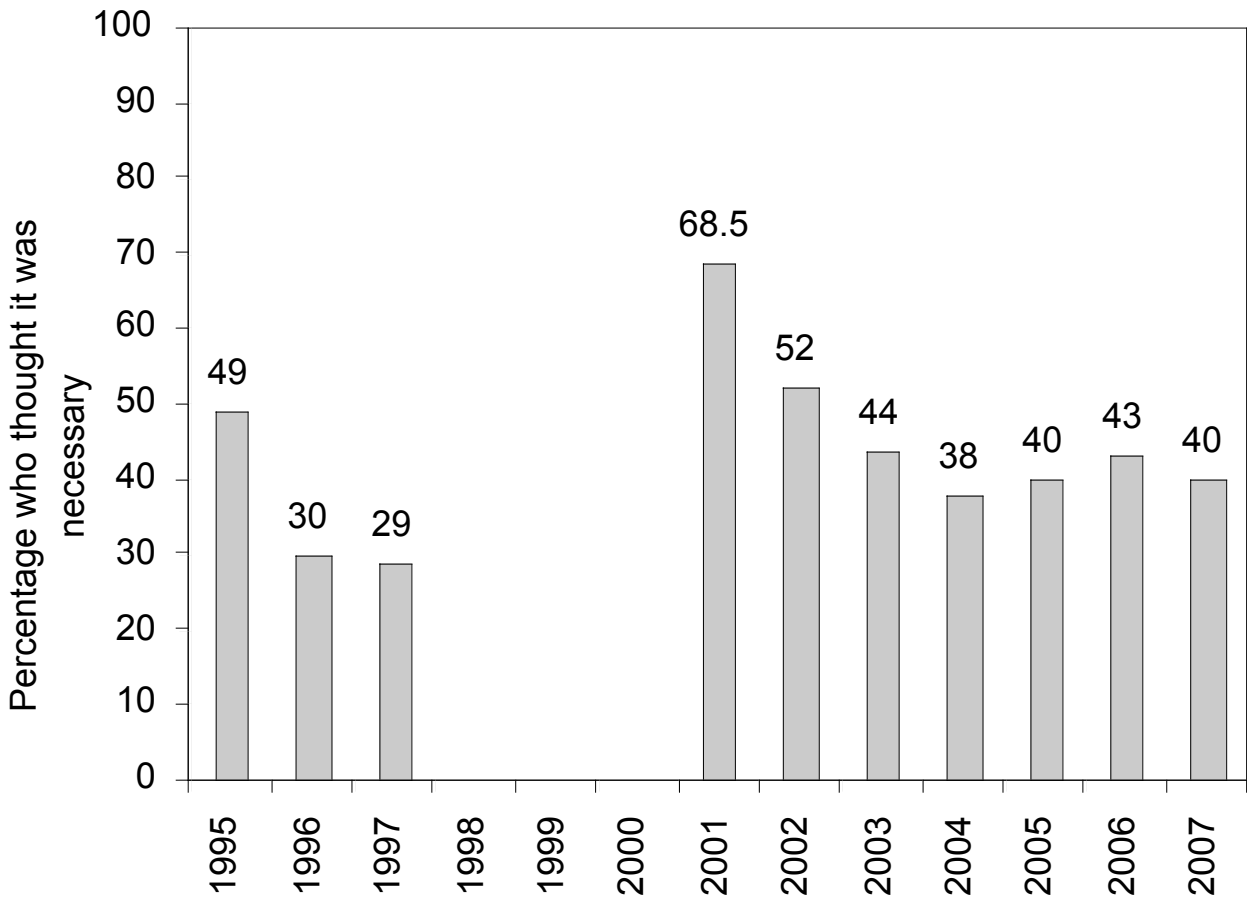
Our findings have a number of potentially important implications. Given that there appears to be little discrimination in the targets of moral outrage, the risks of harming innocents is high. Moreover, there is some evidence that misdirected moral outrage and vengeance serves little psychological purpose, and no evidence to suggest that targeted moral outrage will serve much better purpose. Instead, there is a considerable body of evidence that suggests that vengeance breeds vengeance, and creates cycles of violence that are very difficult to resolve⁶². Although it may be important and necessary to respond punitively to attacks for reasons of national security, moral outrage is a relatively dysfunctional and disruptive response at the level of individual citizens. Responding by engaging in moral cleansing, however, seems to have little risk or downside, has clear benefits for both the individual and the group, and importantly, it is more effective in helping citizens resolve the distress associated with terrorist attacks.

Figure 1. Percentage of Americans who expressed various forms of moral outrage after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon.



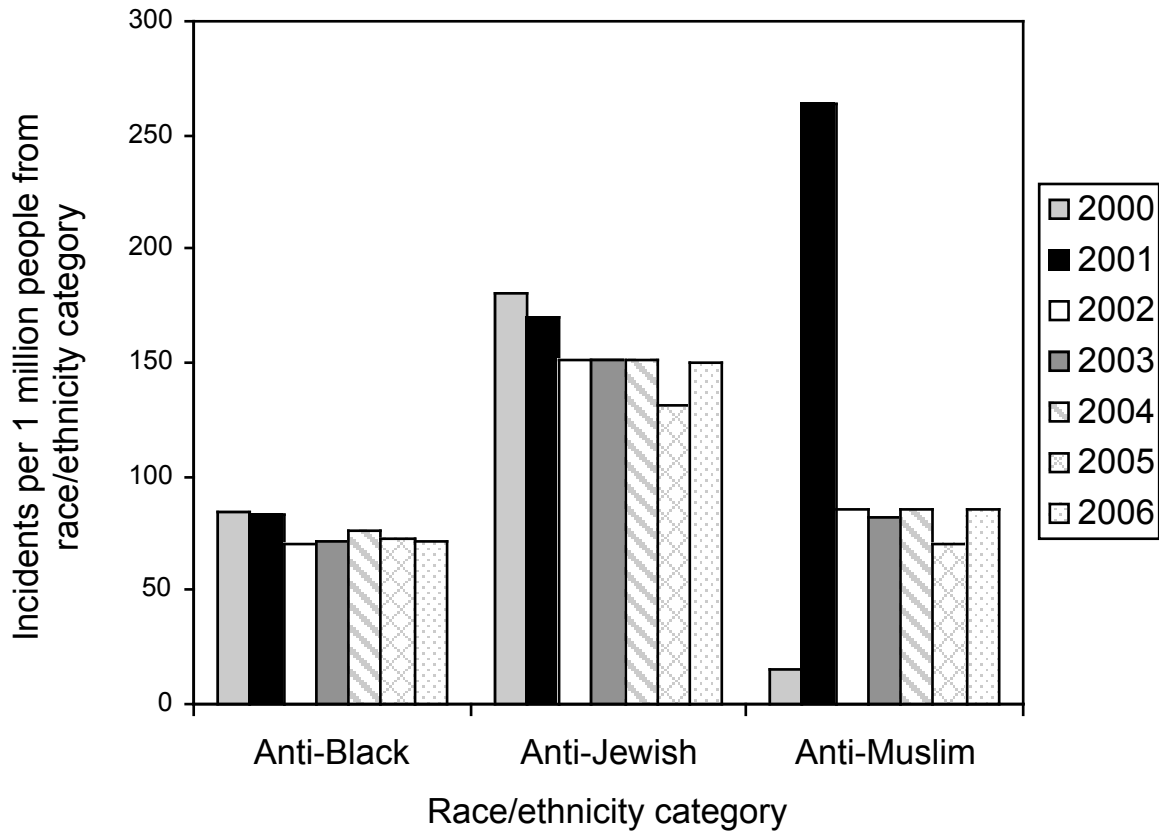
Note: These percentages are based on a national random sample of adults surveyed within the first four months of the attacks, $N = 550$.

Figure 2. Percent of Americans who believed that the average person would need to sacrifice civil liberties to curb terrorism in the United States, 1995 – 2007



Note. The 1995 data were collected in an April *Los Angeles Times* poll. The 1996 and 1997 data were collected in a March, 1996 and April, 1997 *PEW Research Center* polls. The 2001 data are the average of several polls, including: a *CBS/New York Times* poll collected on September 13 and 14; a *Los Angeles Times* poll collected on September 13 and 14; a *PEW Research Center* poll collected between September 13 and 17; a *Newsweek* poll collected on September 20 and 21; a *CBS/New York Times* poll collected between September 20 and 23, and a *CBS* poll collected on October 8. 2002 data are the average of two *PEW Research Center* polls, collected in January and June of 2002. The 2003 – 2007 data were collected in August *PEW Research Center* polls conducted during each of those years.

Figure 3. Hate crimes by race/ethnicity: 2000 – 2006.



Note: Data were transformed by dividing the number of hate crimes reported by each racial/ethnic group within the listed reporting year by each racial/ethnic group's estimated population within the listed year and multiplying that number by 1 million. Hate crime data were taken from the Federal Bureau of Investigation compilations of hate crime statistics^{63,64,65,66,67,68,69}. Population estimates for Anti-Black hate crimes were taken from U.S. Census population estimates⁷⁰. Population estimates for Anti-Jewish hate crimes were taken from the *American Jewish Committee Archives' Annual Yearbook*^{71,72,73,74,75,76,77}. Population estimates for Anti-Muslim hate crimes were taken from the CIA's *World Factbook*⁷⁸.

Figure 4. Percent of participants who reported that going to war with Iraq would satisfy each of the following either “much” or “very much”

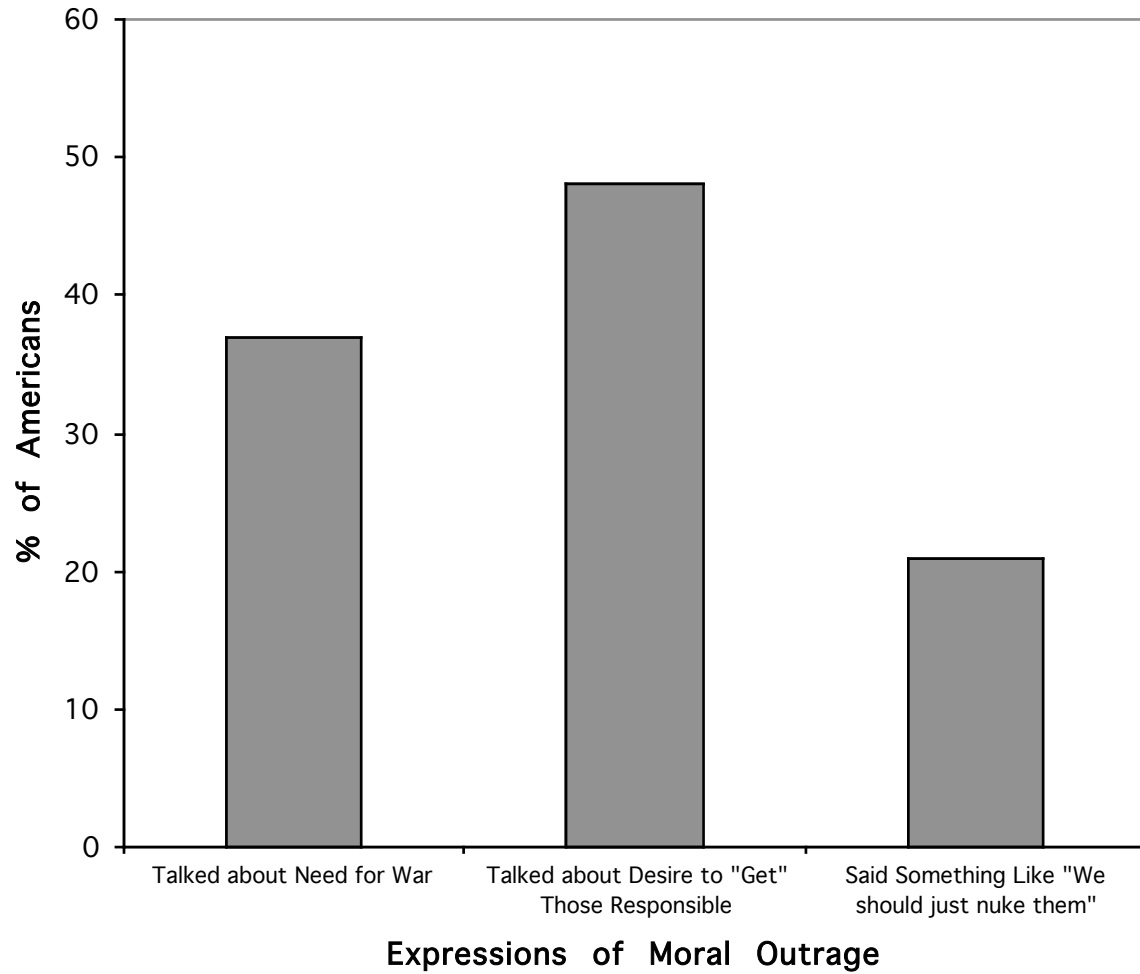
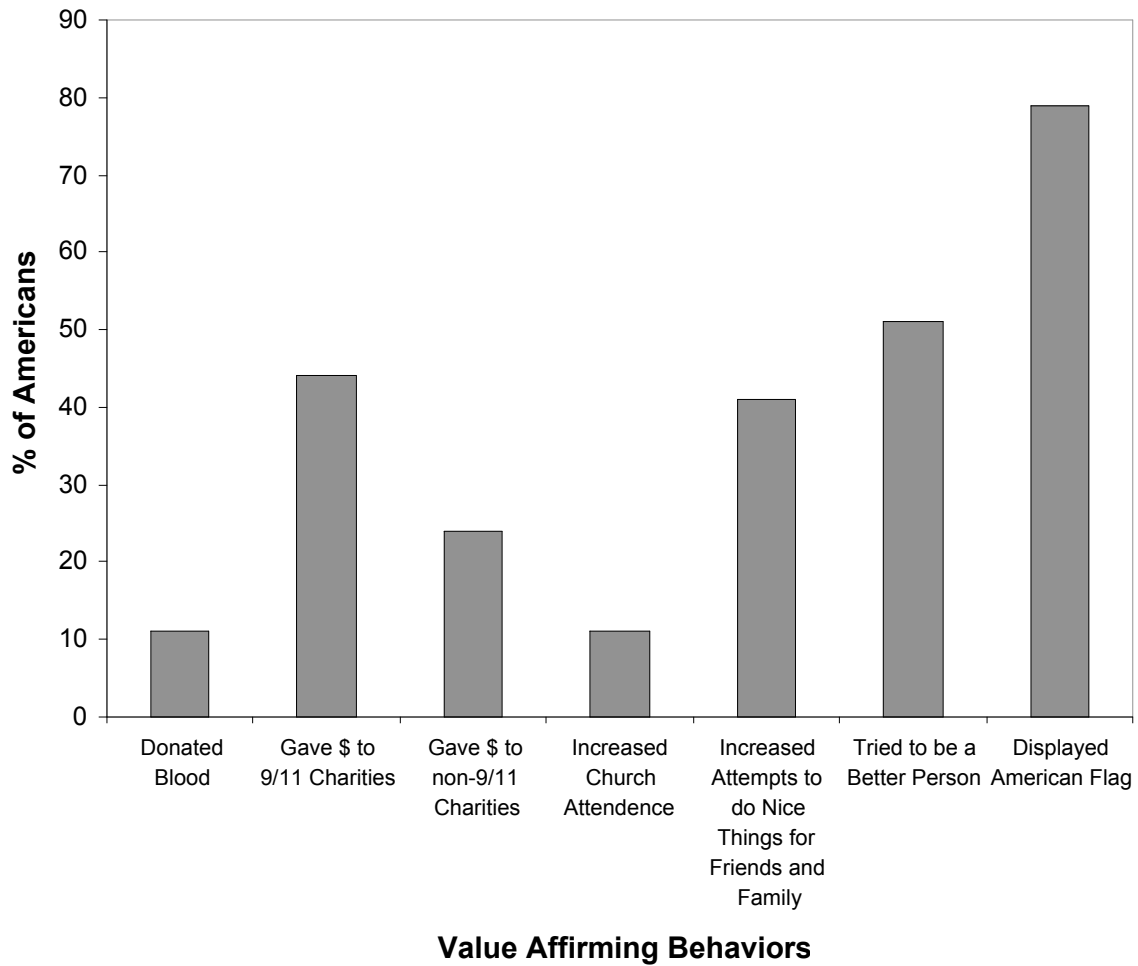


Figure 5. Percentage of Americans who engaged in various forms of value affirming behavior after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon.



Note: These percentages are based on a national random sample of adults surveyed within the first four months of the attacks, $N = 550$.

Author Notes

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