What are We Teaching Students About 9/11 & the War on Terror?

A Survey of Introduction to American Government Textbooks

An Honors Thesis (POLS 404)

By

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May 2011

Expected Date of Graduation
May 2011
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Abstract

The 9/11 terrorist attacks are one of the most important political events to happen to the United States in the last several decades. This paper explores how a number of popular college Introductory American Government textbooks portray the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent War on Terror. We examine which issues these textbooks cover and which ones they omit. We also explore the extent and the tone of the coverage. The resulting data will help give us a picture of what we are teaching students in Introduction to American Government classes about 9/11 and the ongoing threat of terrorism.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Darren Wheeler from the Political Science department for advising me through the thesis process and providing my overall topic and my methods in order to complete it. Without him this would have been impossible.
Introduction

The attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. on September 11, 2001 marked catastrophe in the United States much like the attack on Pearl Harbor did in 1941. As tragedy struck almost a decade ago, some college-age individuals have vivid memories of the horrific scenes shown on live television while others were barely old enough to understand what had happened. Realizing that many of these students were not old enough to understand the severity of the attack on the United States puts an emphasis on the importance of how the events of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent War on Terrorism are taught in classrooms in introductory collegiate courses because of the potentially new opinions generated by a piece of the American population with voting influence.

By examining collegiate Introductory American Government textbooks we can see how September 11 and the War on Terrorism is portrayed, including overall volume of coverage on the subject, facts included or omitted, and the tone the books use to convey the message by critically analyzing the numbers generated from our methods and context of the facts. The way the textbooks handle these issues is crucial because the opinions generated from the material’s presentation can have a substantial effect on the tone of the course being taught. By evaluating the tone of the various textbooks, either positive or negative, in regards to the War on Terrorism we can potentially study an entire generation’s attitude towards it. We must realize that this material presents not only historical events but also an ongoing struggle for the United States politically and socially.

In order to preview some of our findings, a content analysis of a number of Introductory American Government textbooks indicates that the events of September 11,
2001 receive much attention whether the text is explaining the tragedy or using it as an example in an explanation of something else. The material presenting the attacks on September 11 rarely mentions the attack on the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. and instead focuses almost solely on the towers at the World Trade Center in New York City. These textbooks also infer, by lack of information or even lack of mention, that torture in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay and Supreme Court cases like Boumediene v. Bush are virtually insignificant.

This paper will continue in four more sections. Next we will discuss the particular method of research involved, what we used to conduct the study, and where the information of the supplemental research was gathered. Then we will look more closely at the numbers associated with our research through tables in order to give the reader a more visual interpretation of our work. The results section will also include three separate categories – 9/11, the War on Terrorism, and Torture and Civil Liberties – of what the various textbooks convey in regards to the War on Terrorism in order to help the reader group and analyze the results and our generalizations on his or her own. After we map out the particular findings of the research by using the three tables, we will be able to delve deeper into discussion about how the textbooks are conveying some key factors associated with these issues, and explore the extent and the tone of the coverage.

Methods

Our research on what we are teaching students about 9/11 and the War on Terror involves the way that Introduction to American Government textbooks illustrate and portray the events of September 11, 2001 and the ensuing War on Terrorism. Introductory textbooks are used in a great majority of college courses in American Government and Political Science across the
United States. The material covered can vary drastically not only depending on the teaching style of the professor but also depending on the textbook chosen for the course. If the textbook is heavily laced with U.S. Supreme Court cases, the course will inherently be geared toward the Judiciary. Since teaching styles and supplemental class material can fluctuate, we used the choice of textbooks as empirical evidence.

The selection process for the various textbooks was made based on the visible popularity – having best-seller marks, etc. Most of the chosen textbooks have been able to withstand the test of time by publishing many editions and updates. We continued to narrow our textbook pool by only examining hardback books and excluding any specialized or brief editions in order to procure a sample of the most unabridged information possible. We went into the survey knowing that not everyone teaching or taking an introductory level American Government course or an introductory Political Science course uses a textbook of this caliber, but the vast majority do. The books chosen for the study were as follows:

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Magleby, Light, Nemacheck</td>
<td>Janda, Berry, Goldman</td>
<td>O'Connor, Sabato</td>
<td>Patterson, Thomas</td>
<td>Schmidt, Shelley, Bardes, Ford</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We fashioned a list of key terms we thought were essential to the discussion of the War on Terrorism and listed them on a spreadsheet. These key terms consist of notable names, a number of government agencies and departments, significant events, and important places. From here, we will refer to this list of terms as the Master Key Word List or Master Key. By using the index of each of the various Introductory American Government textbooks as a guideline, we
found matching terms or potentially relevant terms associated with 9/11 or the War on Terrorism, examined every possible match via the indices, and counted and recorded each occurrence of the terms in the text from the Master Key.

The actual counting process was an integral part of our research and merits a closer look and a deeper explanation. After manufacturing the Master Key Word List we meticulously reviewed each of the textbooks' indices for matching terms from the Master Key and other relevant terms that could have potentially been related to the events of 9/11 or the War on Terrorism, which could have lead to the key terms we recorded. We highlighted these items in the index when we came across them.¹

After the initial index review was complete we were able to begin the evaluation of the text itself. While going through the content with the index of each text as a guideline we highlighted each relevant occurrence of the terms from the Master Key and logged them accordingly in the Master Key’s Excel spreadsheet. If the term was present and was related to 9/11 or the War on Terrorism, it was highlighted and recorded, if the term was present but not related to 9/11 or the War on Terrorism, it was ignored. Once a term was accounted for it was then marked off. Many of the terms were cross-indexed but each term only received one count. By keeping a log of everything that we had already counted and the pages we had already visited and thoroughly analyzed, we were able to save time and stay consistent in the counting process.

Consistency in coding each term in the appropriate categories was imperative. If the context of a term did not exactly match the criteria for a particular category, but substantially related to the category, we either consistently placed them in the category or created a new category. There is always a chance of human error when it comes to the consistency of a survey

¹ Note: Master Key terms located in tables, vignettes, comparative perspective boxes, cartoons, and other illustrations were noted but not included in the official count.
related to the category, we either consistently placed them in the category or created a
new category. There is always a chance of human error when it comes to the consistency of a
survey but the effort put forth in order to eliminate as much inaccuracy as possible was a
fundamental part of the counting process.

After all the initial counting for each textbook was complete, we did another skim of each
book to find any terms that we may have missed. Any words or phrases missed were then
recorded in the Master Key’s Excel spreadsheet accordingly.

Counting each occurrence of the terms listed in the Master Key had its advantages as well
as its drawbacks. An advantage to the counting strategy was that, by looking at the raw numbers,
we were able to gauge the potential importance of the particular event, person, or place. The
more mentions of a key term may indicate higher importance. Also, by using the numbers as
guidelines we could see the formation of patterns or trends in each textbook and make
comparisons between them. By being able to find discernible trends, re-examining the data for
content rather than numbers proved manageable.

Disadvantages concerning the counting process included the depth of the index of each
book and the inability to evaluate specific content with raw number data. The former problem
concerning the depth of the indices evaluated stemmed from the fact that not every mention of
the September 11 attacks or any of the terms included in the Master Key may have appeared in
the index. Even references to these items that are indexed could have been obscure enough to
overlook. Missing these few mentions could have potentially been problematic to our raw data
results and could have ended in a mildly skewed evaluation. The latter disadvantage of the
counting process is that it did not lend itself to thorough content evaluation. A thorough analysis

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1 Textbooks may not index every single occurrence of a particular word or phrase.
Also, as mentioned earlier, the frequency that a term appears can give an idea of the
significance placed upon the particular event, the person, or the place. Unfortunately, the very
opposite can also be true. A high rate of recurrence of terms from the Master Key did not
necessarily parallel to high importance. This is why vigorous content analysis of each textbook
by reading and drawing conclusions about attitudes of the text from omitted facts and elaboration
of other facts, in addition to the counting process, was imperative to the success of our survey.

The next two sections of this paper will give more detail of the results our methods
yielded, categorize each key term into more smooth groups, and provide commentary and draw
conclusions about the results. In order to present a clearer view of the work done for the study,
the next section will give a visual of the Master Key and its terms separated into respective
subcategories – September 11, 2001, the War on Terrorism, and Torture and Civil Liberties –
and will also give a more comprehensible and polished perspective of what we thought was
significant to the study.

After the results are conveyed, the discussion will then provide a commentary of what the
results mean to our survey, make generalizations, and explain likely consequences generated
from the results. Also, we can generate inferences about the overall tones of the textbooks to
establish what we are teaching college students about the attacks of 9/11 and the War on
Terrorism.
### Results

#### 9/11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Government by the People</th>
<th>The Challenge of Democracy</th>
<th>American Government Roots and Reform</th>
<th>The American Democracy</th>
<th>American Government and Politics Today</th>
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<td>Creation</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>19</td>
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<td>Patriotism and</td>
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## War on Terrorism

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### Torture & Civil Liberties

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<td>Civil Rights (of Arab Americans)</td>
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<td>Detainees</td>
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<td>As Enemy Combatants</td>
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<td>Tried in Civilian Courts</td>
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<td>FISA</td>
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<td>Guantanamo Bay</td>
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<td>Bush and</td>
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<tr>
<td>Obama and</td>
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<td>Habeas Corpus (Writ of)</td>
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<td>Bush and</td>
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<td>Obama and</td>
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<td>&quot;Sneak-and-peek&quot; Searches</td>
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Discussion

By studying the various portions of our results, it is clearly important for all the textbooks surveyed to cover the events of September 11, 2001 and the War on Terrorism in some depth. The issues of torture and civil liberties are not comparable in most of the textbooks. Some of them do not even mention either issue but others go in depth discussing civil liberties stemming from the USA PATRIOT Act. The mere mentions of the attacks on 9/11 in each book are sizable – ranging from 12 to 29 times—and unmatched by any other term included in the Master Key, although the focus is overwhelmingly on the Twin Towers at the World Trade Center, gives much less attention to the attack on the Pentagon, and relatively no attention to the hijacked plane that crashed in Pennsylvania. Understandably, the focus on the Twin Towers can easily stem from the sheer number of casualties suffered there and the power the Towers represented in American culture. September 11, 2001 is illustrated by each textbook as tremendously important to the understanding of the United States’ current condition – whether they are examining the significance of the attacks, in particular, or using the event to illustrate how various U.S. governmental departments work.

The depth of coverage each textbook gives to 9/11 varies. The references to Al-Qaeda and references to terrorism in general are consistent across each textbook, although American Government and Politics Today mentions the 9/11 attacks an astounding 29 times, where the other textbooks range from 12 to 19 times. Although it does not mention the plane crash in a rural Pennsylvania field, American Government and Politics Today also emphasizes that 9/11 did not only occur in New York City by having the most references to the attack on the Pentagon with five. All of them give overviews on the threat of terrorism even though none touch on the Department of Homeland Security’s color-coded alert system for the supposed terror threat, and
hold Al-Qaeda solely responsible for 9/11. Osama bin Laden appears in every text from one to six times, which pin him as the head of Al-Qaeda and put a face and name with the attacks.

Surprisingly, none of the books analyzed even mention Khalid Sheik Mohammed, who is considered the premiere architect of the 9/11 attacks according to the 9/11 Commission Report, or Zacarias Moussaoui, who made headlines for being convicted for plans of the 9/11 attacks (Rosenthal 2008). Moussaoui, a self-described Al-Qaeda member and the only person convicted of conspiracy dealing with the 9/11 attacks, does not garner any attention whatsoever even though the jury hesitated to give him the death penalty that the prosecution pushed for and received a life sentence (New York Amsterdam News 2006). Only three of the five books surveyed write about the 9/11 Commission Report, those three only mention it once, and it is referred to as if the Report bears little importance to the discussion or explanation of the September 11 attacks. The Report bridges the gap between personal experiences and national experiences. Since the 9/11 Commission Report is the most unabridged explanation of the attacks the U.S. government has provided the American people, it seems as though it should be important for these Introductory American Government textbooks to address the Report and encourage an understanding of its key concepts (Warren 2007).

The Bush Administration, in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, created the Department of Homeland Security in 2002. Each book includes a few details about the department’s creation, but as mentioned earlier, none of them include the color-coded alert scheme for which the Department of Homeland Security is most widely known. Also, none of the textbooks cover criticisms of the Department of Homeland Security whatsoever. The Department of Homeland Security has often gone under fire from Democrats in Congress for its inefficiency and its
deals with private contractors in Iraq (Margetta 2007). The Department’s official government website even offers a disclaimer that supposed facts stated could be inaccurate and the information provided could be outdated or incomplete (Schollmeyer 2006). Offering no censure of the department, we can safely assume that these textbooks want to illustrate it in a positive light and could even consider it a success of the Bush Administration.

The sense of patriotism after September 11, 2001 in the United States was almost surreal compared to the previous few decades. It is said that U.S. citizens’ patriotism had a significant upsurge after 9/11 such as flying the American flag (Furia 2004). The idea of patriotism after 9/11 is only portrayed in Government by the People and not covered in any of the other texts. The notion of patriotism after 9/11 is imperative in discussing the aftermath of the attacks. To emphasize a sense of patriotism can lend itself to a more fluid explanation of the policies of the ensuing War on Terrorism. U.S. citizens’ attitude and support toward our leaders in a time of crisis can greatly impact what the people deem necessary for the nation’s cause like compromising civil liberties in order for supposed greater protection, budget cuts to social programs, and budget hikes to defense spending. Public support in times of extreme patriotism can be extraordinarily powerful for political leaders.

The discussion of the September 11, 2001 attacks is not complete without involving the Authorization of Use of Military Force (AUMF) from September 18, 2001. The 107th Congress acted quickly in order to put the AUMF into law so President Bush could have the authority to deploy troops. Section 2(a) of this law states:

(a) IN GENERAL- That the President is authorized to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001,
or harbored such organizations or persons, in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States by such nations, organizations or persons (*Authorization of the*, 2001).

This grants the President an extraordinary amount of power and also puts huge responsibility upon his shoulders in the wake of a national tragedy. Out of the Introductory American Government textbooks we analyzed, not one of them includes even a mention of the Authorization of Use of Military Force. The AUMF on September 18, 2001 is an integral element to the transition from the attacks of 9/11 to the War on Terrorism in an emergency situation (Vermeule 2008). AUMFs, in general, have garnered much more criticism from scholars since 9/11. They argue that the terms of AUMFs should be limited and only give “the president congressional approval to use military force in a specific manner, and that other actions by the president, such as approving domestic surveillance operations or establishing military commissions, require additional and explicit authorizations (Weinberger 2009).”

The bulk of coverage that these five Introduction to American Government textbooks give to the War on Terrorism is immense. The sheer numbers in the figure on page nine indicate that these authors and publishers want to convey the message that the War on Terrorism is incredibly important to the understanding of American Government today and that it is ongoing in our lives. The “War in Afghanistan”, “George W. Bush”, and the “Iraq War” garner the most attention from each textbook in order to explain the War on Terrorism. Each of these key terms from the Master Key contain subcategories that cross-reference each person or event as shown in the figure on page nine. For example, the term “Afghanistan War” has subcategories for both George W. Bush and Barack Obama, among others.
The United States deployed troops to Afghanistan shortly after 9/11. The volume of information on the War in Afghanistan is mostly in general terms throughout these books but offers insight on the way that President Bush handled the occupation and how President Obama is currently managing the War. Although President Bush took the United States into Afghanistan, the current situation there and President Obama receive more attention. This is probably because our current situation is with President Obama and his administrations strategies are what are under scrutiny right now. Also, the present administration is capable of implementing an exit plan. *Government by the People* and *The Challenge of Democracy* are the only two books that include information on casualties in Afghanistan, which is somewhat troubling. In order to grasp the severity of an armed conflict, we must have the picture painted for us, blood and all. *War, Presidents, and Popularity*, an article by Benny Geys, suggests that war casualties do not bode well for incumbents in office (Geys 2010). This could correlate to the textbooks not wanting to put the war or the former President in a negative light. The texts that do include casualties only discuss American casualties and leave out civilian, Afghan casualties, which is also noteworthy because, while American citizens clearly value the lives of American troops more than the lives of a potential foreign enemy, it is essential to recognize that American troops are not the only people in danger from the decision to invade and occupy Afghanistan.

Only two of the textbooks include mention of an exit from Afghanistan. This could lead us to various assumptions about the tone of these books. The War in Afghanistan is not seen in such a negative light as compared to the Iraq War in these books and is viewed as a necessary war, according to President Barack Obama. *Government by the People* and *The American Democracy* include exit from Afghanistan twice and once, respectively. With such little attention to an exit strategy or even withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, we can infer that
these books want to illustrate the ongoing struggle that is the Afghanistan War with no clear end in sight for the Afghan people, American troops and their families, and the rest of the American population alike.

Not surprisingly, George W. Bush receives an immense amount of attention when we discuss the War on Terrorism. The “Mission Accomplished” Speech became kind of a stamp on George W. Bush’s presidency. Three of the five textbooks surveyed include this botched assumption and speech made by the President on May 1, 2003 and those three include a photo of the President in front of the notorious “MISSION ACCOMPLISHED” banner. After the insurgency began in Iraq, it was obvious that the United States’ mission had not been accomplished and criticism of the government and the President flourished (Murphy 2003). By including this embarrassing mistake made by the Bush Administration, these three textbooks may be subtly offering criticism of the former President and the decision to invade Iraq.

President Bush’s view of executive power also surfaces in the three of the five textbooks surveyed – The Challenge of Democracy, The American Democracy, and American Government and Politics Today. The President’s view of executive power usually shows itself while the books discuss the USA PATRIOT Act with his willingness to put civil liberties of citizens aside. To put the former President in this secretive sort of light can lead to at least two assumptions by students studying these texts – either the President did these things for the safety of the American public, or that he had his own agenda and his secrets may have resulted in political suicide if disclosed.

The Iraq War garners more attention than any place, event, or person concerning the War on Terrorism. It is mentioned upwards of 15 times in a single book. Like the War in Afghanistan, the Iraq War is an ongoing struggle for the U.S. Military and the U.S. Government.
The coverage of each of the subcategories of the Iraq War found in the Master Key are somewhat inconsistent though. Unlike the War in Afghanistan, concerning Presidents Bush and Obama, the Iraq War focuses much more on the policies of President Bush like the troop surge to fight insurgency and the handling of prisoners of war rather than those of President Obama. This seems logical because President Bush had many controversial policies and it has even been coined “Bush’s War” and also had a much longer span of time to deal with Iraq than President Obama has thus far.

Even though each books discusses the Iraq War in detail, none of books really convey what we feel to be necessary in the discussion in terms of casualties, cost, and actually finding weapons of mass destruction. Only two of the textbooks even mention the casualties in Iraq. This is a huge flaw considering more Americans have died in Iraq than died in the September 11 attacks and continue to perish. As included earlier in the discussion, to fully understand war, we must be confronted with its ugly side.

The Iraq War has not only cost lives but it has cost exorbitant amounts of money. The United States is now in the biggest deficit crisis in its history, partly because of Iraq, which has cost over $806 billion to date (Belasco 2011). The students studying and trying to gain an understanding of the War on Terrorism need to understand the consequences the war brings to us now as U.S. citizens and what it will bring in the future. Not only from the cost of the thousands of men and women of a younger generation who have been killed or seriously injured due to the Iraq War, but the younger generations in the United States will have to pay for this war someday.

Lastly, the reason that the American people were given in order to invade Iraq – weapons of mass destruction – garners discussion. Only three of the textbooks even mention weapons of mass destruction. This is highly concerning because the assumption that Saddam Hussein was
harboring weapons of mass destruction in Iraq was the entire reason President Bush and the U.S. Military invaded Iraq in the first place. As we all know, those weapons of mass destruction were never found in Iraq and did not exist (Shuster 2008). Why do these books put so little emphasis on weapons of mass destruction when President Bush and media ran with the idea back in 2002 and 2003? Putting the three concepts together – casualties, cost, and weapons of mass destruction – we can clearly see that the textbooks did not want to put the Iraq War in a more negative view than it has already experienced from the media and from both liberal and conservative members of Congress for the past eight years.

Concerning the War on Terrorism, it seems as though concepts and events receive more attention than particular individuals. This is likely because Introduction to American Government textbooks would rather deal with the bigger picture and more general concepts than individuals and their positions. People integral to the War on Terrorism may not receive attention like the Vice President’s Chief of Staff David Addington, John Ashcroft, George Tenet, Robert Gates, and even General David Patraeus, who was only mentioned in one book once, are seldom mentioned or not mentioned a single time in any of the textbooks surveyed. If these courses had subsequent courses or sister courses related to them that dug deeper into the current American Government behavior, it seems as though specifics like names, titles, and dates would be included. These aspects of coverage on the events of 9/11 and the War on Terror are important because they provide students with a timeline and names to go along with the actions being discussed.

A few more huge concerns for scholars of the War on Terrorism are the presence of torture at detention centers like Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. Most of the textbooks do mention Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. The information involving Abu Ghraib is solely on
the torture and inhumane activity that was discovered to be going on there but the information
given for Guantanamo Bay is much more general. Torture and, more specifically,
waterboarding, is rarely included in the textbooks at all. The books' publishers may be
concerned with presenting evidence on tortuous treatment of prisoners because they do not want
to seem to have an agenda of their own or they do not want to attach a negative connotation to
the CIA, FBI, or other governmental agencies. By including these details in passing, the tone
presented on torture at these detention centers undermines the critical importance of the issue.

Various Supreme Court cases involving the civil liberties of prisoners detained at these
centers, and the dwindling of civil liberties for American citizens mostly stemming from the
provisions in the USA PATRIOT Act are also concerns for scholars. Supreme Court cases
involving Writ of Habeas Corpus like *Hamdan v. Rumsfeld* among others receive virtually no
attention in these textbooks. A few references to *Boumediene v. Bush* and *Hamdan* were made
but most of the books ignored this area of the War on Terrorism and the civil liberties of
detainees as enemy combatants completely. This gives the impression that the human aspect of
war does not belong in the discussion of the War on Terrorism and that torture and the
Constitution of the United States of America does not concern prisoners of war.

Concerning the dwindling of civil liberties American citizens can see throughout the
provisions of the USA PATRIOT Act, namely its sunset provision to use warrantless electronic
surveillance, we see more information throughout the five textbooks surveyed (Bazan 2006).
The textbooks include the USA PATRIOT Act across the board and do not hesitate to offer
criticism of it. This is surprising and unnerving considering there is virtually no criticism of
torture of prisoners of war or of the detention center at Guantanamo Bay. Since the inclusions of
the USA PATRIOT Act could potentially affect U.S. citizens on American soil, this garners
much more attention than the former. *American Government and Politics Today* offers the most extensive information on the USA PATRIOT Act and the most information, in detail, about the National Security Letters, the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA), and warrantless electronic surveillance. The tone and quality of information in this textbook with regards to the USA PATRIOT Act far surpasses the other four books surveyed. The clarity with which it explains the caveats and inner-workings of the Act is phenomenal compared to the pool.

Comparing the coverage of the Supreme Court cases involving detainees and the USA PATRIOT Act, it is simple to infer that these textbooks value the civil liberties of Americans much more than those of foreign prisoners of war. This is understandable because we as American citizens should know where our rights are but discussing the rights of those detainees can also lead to discussions on our rights as citizens as well in addition to the debate on the rights given to enemy combatants.

**Conclusion**

By conducting this survey and analyzing and discussing our results, we have been able to infer and make assumptions on what American college students are learning about the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the War on Terrorism in Introduction to American Government courses. Both 9/11 and the War on Terrorism are essential in understanding the current of the U.S. Government and the way this material is presented to America’s college-age population is very important in forming attitudes and potential future policies. For further research on the topic we can suggest a bigger pool of research regarding the survey so the results can delve deeper and provide even more accuracy.
Works Cited


