

## SUMMARY AND INTERPRETATIONS

China, abortion, and the flag were the stories that dominated the consciousness of Americans in early July. Each was followed very closely by nearly half of all American adults - a level of response that places these stories in the top quintile of all stories Times Mirror has tracked. Although all three stories attracted about the same amount of attention, the nature of public response to each was quite different.

The abortion ruling story is about a divisive issue that was closely followed, but poorly understood by the public. News reports about the political upheaval in China resulted in news organizations, especially television, getting a great deal of praise for their performance, while the flag story attracted a disproportionate amount of attention from those most offended by the news of the high court's ruling.

Despite the coverage and the level of attentiveness, only about half of all Americans could correctly answer a question about the effects of the Supreme Court ruling on abortion in America. In contrast, 59% knew the basis of the Supreme Court's decision on flag burning. Misinformation about an issue like abortion only further fuels the controversy. For example, among those who would like to see Roe v. Wade overturned, nearly one in five (19%) believe the new ruling reduces restrictions on abortion.

Lack of understanding belies the obvious nerve that was struck by the ruling, especially among women. Americans paid nearly twice as much attention to the Supreme Court's ruling on abortion in July as they had to the hearing of arguments on the case in May (47% vs. 25%). A good deal of this increase was accounted for by the greater attentiveness among women. In May women were only somewhat more likely than men to say they were following the story closely (28% vs. 23%). In July there was a substantial gender gap in the percent who closely followed the ruling (53% vs. 39%). It is important to point out that while abortion is a woman's issue, women are anything but united in their beliefs about the subject. Among women who say they followed the story very closely, 61% oppose overturning Roe v. Wade and 36% favor that action. But large percentages of these women favor restrictions on abortions such as fetal viability tests (57%), disallowing abortions in public hospitals (47%), and requirements of parental consent (59%).

The political upheaval in China continued to be a closely followed story during this period even though dramatic breaking news was no longer occurring. Moreover, the images of a month ago linger on. The poll found as many as 54% of respondents saying that they could recall the picture of the lone Chinese student demonstrator standing directly in front of a line of tanks. Such vivid imagery accounts for the fact that the public rated TV press coverage of the political upheaval in China more positively than the way they typically evaluate press performance. On average about 20% rate news coverage as excellent for the stories that have been tested in this series, excluding China. Coverage of events in China were rated as excellent by 40%. Much of the credit goes to TV coverage which received a 42% excellent rating for its performance compared to 25% for newspapers.

Although stories about the flag burning ruling attracted slightly more attention than the other two major stories, attentiveness varied sharply within the population. Among blacks and among younger people, this was not the dominant story that it was among older people and among whites. People in the South followed the story more closely and talked about it more than they did in other parts of the country.

Unlike the Supreme Court ruling on abortion, the culmination of Oliver North's trial and his sentencing did not result in correspondingly higher levels of attention being paid to the story. The proportion following the North story very closely rose only six percentage points from May to July (31% to 37%). Research again shows that North remains a sympathetic personal figure to many Americans. Those who felt his sentence was too harsh were more likely to have followed the story very closely, compared to those who think he got off too easily (49% vs 34%).

The charges that Pete Rose had bet on baseball games registered fairly low levels of attention considering the poll was taken in the height of the baseball season, and the story has been in the news for several months. Low levels of interest in this story are reflected in the fact that only 14% could correctly identify A. Bartlett Giamatti. Even among those who followed the Pete Rose story very closely (22%), only one-quarter know Giamatti is the Commissioner of Baseball. News organizations were given lower than average performance ratings for coverage of this story. This finding is consistent with the criticism of the press for the way it has covered stories

about other public figures under fire. Times Mirror polls about press handling of the Hart and Quayle stories are prime examples.

Once again our data show that Washington scandals, and stories about the internal affairs of foreign governments are not followed closely by the public. While the HUD story has been on the front pages for several weeks, it still has not managed to attract public attention. Only 15% said they were following it very closely. Political change in Poland evoked even less interest - 12% followed this story very closely.

Further evidence of the public's lack of interest in some Washington stories is the small number of people who could correctly identify Thomas Foley. The new Speaker of the House, who was the subject of much political coverage in June, was correctly identified by only 14% of respondents.

### Stories People Followed in Early July

Three news stories attracted similarly high levels of public attention in early July. More than eight in ten Americans were following the Supreme Court's rulings on abortion (83%) and the burning of the U.S. flag (83%), and the political upheaval in China (81%) either very or fairly closely. Nearly half followed each of these stories very closely (47%, 51%, and 47% respectively). However, when asked which one story they had been following most closely in the last month, a plurality chose China (31%).

Slightly more than one-third followed the sentencing of Oliver North very closely (37%). In the May Times Mirror XXXXX, thirty-one percent were following North's trial that closely. The current poll also reveals that nearly one-fifth (22%) were following very closely the charges that Pete Rose had bet on baseball games.

Two stories received significantly lower levels of attention -- the scandal involving the Department of Housing and Urban Development (15%), and the Solidarity movement's role in governing Poland (12%).

The Supreme Court ruling on burning the flag received about as much attention as the top news item in the May poll -- the oil spill in Alaska (very closely 51% vs. 52%). Those over fifty years of age were more interested in the flag burning story than their younger counterparts (59% vs. 48%). The story also attracted more attention among whites than among non-whites (54% vs. 40%); and among Southerners as compared to the rest of the country (57% vs. 49%).

Interestingly, although the ruling on the flag was followed closely by a large number of Americans, when asked to choose which one story they followed most closely, the public placed this story fourth out of seven. This might be explained by the fact that the higher ranking stories have either been in the news for a longer period of time (China), or have been on the front pages more recently (the abortion ruling, Oliver North sentencing).

Americans paid nearly twice as much attention to the Supreme Court's ruling on abortion in July as they had to the hearing of arguments on the case in May (47% vs. 25%). In fact among the seven stories, this ranked second as the one followed most closely.

One of the most interesting findings was the increase in gender differences on the abortion issue over this period. In the current poll, 53% of women followed this story very closely, as compared to 39% of men. In May, the comparable figures for following the Supreme Court's hearing of the Missouri abortion case, were 28% vs 23%, for at that time, education was a stronger indicator of interest in the abortion story than gender. College educated men and women expressed higher levels of interest than those with less formal education of either sex. However, in July, gender is the stronger discriminator -- 62% of college educated women followed this story very closely as compared to only 48% of college educated men.

The political upheaval in China was followed more closely by the better educated (60%) and the more affluent (53%). In addition, residents of the West were more likely than the rest of the nation to follow this story very closely (56% vs 44%). Although the implications of the two recent Supreme Court rulings gave it some competition on the front page, China was ranked first in terms of the story being followed most closely (31%). This may be due in part to the fact that this story has consistently been on the front pages longer than most of the other stories measured.

Unlike the Supreme Court ruling on abortion, the culmination of Oliver North's trial and his sentencing did not result in correspondingly higher levels of attention being paid to the story. The proportion following the North story very closely rose only six percentage points from May to July (31% to 37%). The only significant demographic differences were age and region, with higher levels of attention being paid by older people (46%) and Southerners (44%).

Among the seven news stories tested, the North trial ranked third as the one story followed most closely, beating even the Supreme Court ruling on burning the flag. This research again shows that North remains a sympathetic personal figure to many Americans. Those who felt his sentence was too harsh were more likely to have followed the story very closely, compared to those who think he got off too easily (49% vs 34%).

The charges that Pete Rose had bet on baseball games registered fairly low levels of attention considering the poll was taken in the height of the baseball season, and the story has been in the news for several months. As expected, men are more likely than women to follow this story very closely (26% vs 19%). In addition, those with less than a high school education show more interest than do college graduates (28% vs. 18%).

Among the seven stories tested this month, the scandal surrounding Pete Rose ranked fifth as the story people followed most closely. Low levels of interest in this story are reflected in the fact that only 14% could correctly identify A. Bartlett Giamatti. Even among those who followed the Pete Rose story very closely, only one-quarter know Giamatti is the Commissioner of Baseball.

As observed in previous Times Mirror research, Washington scandals (the Jim Wright story), and internal affairs of foreign governments (the resignation of the Japanese Prime Minister), are not followed closely by the public. July's xxxxxx found that Americans were paying similarly low levels of attention to the HUD scandal (15%) and to recent democratic developments in Poland (12%). While the HUD story has been on the front pages for several weeks, it still has not managed to attract public attention.

Further evidence of the public's lack of interest in some Washington stories is the small number of people who could correctly identify Thomas Foley. Despite the intense press coverage of Jim Wright's troubles and the partisan attacks on Foley in June, only 14% were able to identify the new Speaker of the House.

**% FOLLOWING EACH NEWS STORY "VERY CLOSELY"**

	<u>Flag Burning</u>	<u>Upheaval in China</u>	<u>Abor- tion</u>	<u>Oliver North</u>	<u>Pete Rose</u>	<u>HUD Scandal</u>	<u>Sol idari ty/ Pol and</u>
Total	51	47	47	37	22	15	12
<u>Sex</u>							
Male	54	46	39	36	26	14	14
Female	50	48	53	38	19	16	11
<u>Race</u>							
White	54	48	47	37	22	13	13
Non-white	40	40	45	40	28	24	10
<u>Age</u>							
Under 30	45	46	47	33	23	9	8
30-49	50	49	45	33	18	13	10
50+	59	46	48	46	28	21	19
<u>Education</u>							
College Graduate	48	60	55	35	18	18	14
Other College Graduate	50	52	54	34	19	11	15
High School Graduate	56	43	43	39	24	16	10
Less than H. S. Graduate	49	34	37	38	28	14	12
<u>Region</u>							
East	53	46	48	37	22	15	14
Midwest	46	44	41	33	21	14	12
South	57	44	50	44	26	16	10
West	48	56	47	32	20	15	15
<u>Party Id</u>							
Republican	53	49	46	36	21	11	13
Democrat	53	45	50	43	25	16	12
Independent	49	46	44	33	22	18	13

Question: Now I will read a list of some stories covered by news organizations this past month. As I read each item, tell me if you happened to follow this news story very closely, fairly closely, not too closely, or not at all closely.

### Stories People Were Talking About

In general, the stories people talk about most are the stories they say they have been following closely. More than seven in ten discussed the recent Supreme Court decision on the flag (72%) as well as the political upheaval in China (71%). Whites are more likely to say they have discussed the flag ruling than non-whites (75% vs 57%), as are Republicans compared to Democrats (78% vs. 71%). With regard to the China story, discussion was most prevalent among college graduates (89%), the more affluent (88%), and Westerners (78%).

The Supreme Court decision on abortion has been the topic of discussion among 68% of Americans. Interestingly, women show little difference from men on this measure (70% vs. 65%). Age and education prove to be more important determinants, with college educated and those under thirty years of age being most likely to discuss this topic (79% and 74%, respectively). Nearly as many people were discussing the sentencing of Oliver North as were discussing the Supreme Court decision on abortion (66% vs. 68%).

A bare majority of Americans have discussed the Pete Rose story (52%), with incidence of discussion being higher among men than among women (59% vs. 46%). The more affluent and the college educated are also discussing this story in greater numbers (67% and 64% respectively).

Less than three in ten are discussing the scandal involving the Department of Housing and Urban Development (28%), and even fewer people are talking about the role Solidarity is playing in governing Poland (17%). Again, this reflects the low level of interest Americans have in these kinds of stories.



**% WHO DISCUSSED EACH NEWS STORY WITH FRIENDS, FAMILY OR CO-WORKERS**

	<u>Flag Burning</u>	<u>Upheaval in China</u>	<u>Abor- tion</u>	<u>Oliver North</u>	<u>Pete Rose</u>	<u>HUD Scandal</u>	<u>Sol idari ty/ Pol and</u>
Total	72	71	68	66	52	28	17
<u>Sex</u>							
Male	75	72	65	66	59	27	19
Female	69	71	70	65	46	28	15
<u>Race</u>							
White	75	73	68	65	53	27	17
Non-white	57	59	66	70	48	34	15
<u>Age</u>							
Under 30	72	71	74	66	52	20	13
30-49	74	77	71	64	57	27	16
50+	71	65	59	69	48	35	21
<u>Education</u>							
College							
Graduate	76	89	79	66	64	36	24
Other College	75	79	72	67	56	27	18
High School							
Graduate	73	68	66	69	49	26	14
Less than H. S.							
Graduate	64	50	54	59	44	23	13
<u>Region</u>							
East	72	70	71	66	53	30	19
Midwest	67	69	63	67	52	24	15
South	77	69	69	68	54	31	16
West	72	78	67	60	49	27	19
<u>Party Id</u>							
Republican	78	78	73	66	57	24	16
Democrat	71	66	66	68	50	31	16
Independent	68	71	64	63	50	29	18

Question: Have you had occasion to discuss (**INSERT NEWS ITEM**) with friends, family or co-workers, or hasn't it come up in conversation?

Press Performance

Overall the press received higher ratings for its performance in July than it did in May. In the most recent survey one quarter (26%) rated press coverage as excellent, while only 19% percent felt that way two months ago.

This more positive assessment of the press can be attributed to the high marks given to the coverage of China. This point is illustrated by the fact that in July, press coverage of all news events other than China received virtually identical ratings to press coverage of all news events in May (20% vs. 19% respectively).

Among those who followed the China story most closely, four in ten rated press coverage as excellent, nearly twice the rating the press received for its job on any of the other stories tested. In fact, fully three-quarters of the public said coverage of China was either excellent or good. Interest in the China story is further evidenced by the high number of people (54%) who said they saw the picture of a Chinese student standing in front of a line of tanks in Tiananmen Square. Among those who followed this story very closely, the number of people who recall seeing the image increases to 68%.

Three other stories received similarly positive ratings: the Supreme Court ruling on abortion and the flag (each 67%), and the sentencing of Oliver North (63%). However, the rating of the Pete Rose story was less positive, with 20% saying the coverage was poor. Perhaps these lower ratings echo the public's distaste for the way news organizations cover stories about public figures under criticism, particularly when they are baseball heroes.

**PRESS COVERAGE RATINGS OF NEWS STORIES**

	Story Followed Most Closely:					
	<u>Total</u>	<u>Upheaval in China</u>	<u>Flag Burning</u>	<u>Pete Rose</u>	<u>Oliver North</u>	<u>Abortion</u>
Excellent	26%	40%	23%	21%	20%	19%
Good	42	36	44	36	43	48
Only Fair	21	18	22	23	26	20
Poor	10	5	10	20	10	12
Don't Know	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Sample Size	(1191)	(412)	(139)	(107)	(186)	(316)

Question: In general, how would you rate the job the press has done in covering (STORY FOLLOWED MOST CLOSELY IN Q.21 ); excellent, good, only fair, or poor?

### Ratings of Newspaper vs. Television Coverage

Another question asked respondents to separately rate newspaper and television coverage of the story they followed most closely. People were more likely to rate television coverage as excellent (27% vs. 18%), resulting in a higher overall positive (excellent + good) rating for this medium (70% vs 60%).

Television's higher rating is largely due to the much more positive evaluation the public gave to its coverage of China. Forty-two percent rated television's coverage of China as excellent, compared to only one-quarter of those who felt that way about newspaper's coverage. In three other stories --the sentencing of Oliver North, flag burning and abortion -- television enjoys somewhat higher ratings, but not nearly to the extent evidenced in the coverage of the China story. In the Pete Rose story, there is little difference in assessments of television and newspaper coverage.

Interestingly, the number of people who claim not to have read any newspaper reports of each of these stories, is consistently higher than those who claim not to have seen any television reports.

**TELEVISION COVERAGE RATINGS OF NEWS STORIES**

	Story Followed Most Closely:					
	<u>Total</u>	<u>Upheaval in China</u>	<u>Flag Burning</u>	<u>Pete Rose</u>	<u>Oliver North</u>	<u>Abortion</u>
Excellent	27%	42%	20%	24%	24%	17%
Good	43	38	50	39	45	46
Only Fair	20	13	18	25	24	24
Poor	6	3	6	7	5	8
Didn't See Any TV Reports	3	3	4	4	1	4
Don't Know	<u>1</u> 100%	<u>1</u> 100%	<u>2</u> 100%	<u>1</u> 100%	<u>1</u> 100%	<u>1</u> 100%
Sample Size	(1191)	(412)	(139)	(107)	(186)	(316)

Question: Now, thinking about television only, how would you rate the job television news has done in covering (STORY FOLLOWED MOST CLOSELY IN Q. 21 ); excellent, good, only fair, or poor?

**NEWSPAPER COVERAGE RATINGS OF NEWS STORIES**

	Story Followed Most Closely:					
	<u>Total</u>	<u>Upheaval in China</u>	<u>Flag Burning</u>	<u>Pete Rose</u>	<u>Oliver North</u>	<u>Abortion</u>
Excellent	18%	25%	13%	23%	16%	14%
Good	42	44	47	37	37	43
Only Fair	24	20	25	23	32	24
Poor	6	2	5	10	7	9
Didn't Read Any Newspaper Reports	8	9	8	7	5	9
Don't Know	<u>2</u> 100%	<u>0</u> 100%	<u>2</u> 100%	<u>0</u> 100%	<u>3</u> 100%	<u>1</u> 100%
Sample Size	(1191)	(412)	(139)	(107)	(186)	(316)

Question: Now, thinking about newspapers only, how would you rate the job newspapers have done in covering (STORY FOLLOWED MOST CLOSELY IN Q. 21 ); excellent, good, only fair, or poor?

### Concepts in the News

Despite the fact that the Supreme Court decision on abortion was tied for second among stories followed very closely, only 53% were able to correctly identify the fact that the ruling made it easier for states to restrict abortions. Equal numbers thought that there are now fewer restrictions on a woman's right to have an abortion (19%) or that abortions are now illegal except when the mother's life is in danger (17%). Significant differences exist by age, education, race, party identification, and income. The young, the better educated and the affluent were all more likely to know the affect of the Supreme Court ruling on a woman's right to an abortion. Specifically, among whites, 57% gave the correct answer compared to only 32% of non-whites, as did 62% of Republicans compared to only 46% of Democrats.

A majority of Americans -- 59% -- understand that the Supreme Court decision on the burning of the flag was based on freedom of expression guaranteed by the first amendment. Respondents were offered two other alternatives as a basis for the decision: the Supreme Court did not wish to overturn state laws that allowed flag burning or the flag is a person's private property and they are free to dispose of it as they see fit. Only one-in-seven chose either of these responses (16% and 12%, respectively), and an additional 13% could not answer the question.

There were significant differences across nearly all demographic groups. Among those most likely to understand the Supreme Court decision on flag burning are the college-educated (83%), the more affluent (81%), Republicans (69%), and Westerners (67%). In addition, whites were more knowledgeable on this issue than non-whites (63% vs. 37%), as were males compared to females (64% vs. 54%). Interestingly, those who grew up in the 60's generation, who are now aged 30-49, were more aware of the concept underlying the decision than any other age group (65%).

### **SURVEY METHODOLOGY**

The survey results are based on telephone interviews with 1,253 adults, 18 years of age or older, during the period of July 6-9, 1989. For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects is plus or minus 4 percentage points. In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

TIMES MIRROR DATABASE  
PUBLIC ATTENTIVENESS TO MAJOR NEWS STORIES  
(1986 - 1989)

	Percent <u>Very</u>
<b><u>Closely</u></b>	
The explosion of the Space Shuttle Challenger	80
The little girl in Texas who was rescued after falling into a well	69
The U.S. air strikes against Libya	58
The Alaska Oil Spill	52
<b>SUPREME COURT DECISION ON FLAG BURNING</b>	<b>51</b>
The flight of the space shuttle (Oct 88)	50
The drought and its effects on American farmers	49
The TWA hostage crisis that took place last summer in Beirut, Lebanon (July 86)	48
<b>THE POLITICAL UPHEAVAL IN CHINA</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>THE SUPREME COURT DECISION ON ABORTION</b>	<b>47</b>
The nuclear accident at Chernobyl in the Soviet Union	46
News about the presidential campaign in 1988 (Oct 88)	43
The hot weather this summer and the greenhouse effect (Aug 88)	42
The downing of an Iranian passenger plane by a U.S. Navy ship	42
The stock market crash	40
News about the presidential campaign in 1988 (Aug 88)	39
The U.S. Navy escort of Kuwaiti oil tankers in the Persian Gulf (Sept 87)	38
The U.S. Navy escort of Kuwaiti oil tankers in the Persian Gulf (Oct 87)	37
The stories about Dan Quayle, the Republican Vice-Presidential candidate	37
<b>THE SENTENCING OF OLIVER NORTH</b>	<b>37</b>
The hijacking of the Achille Lauro cruise ship in the Mediterranean	35
The explosion and fire on the U.S. Battleship Iowa	35
The Congressional hearings about the Iran-Contra affair (Sept 87)	33
The world series (Oct 88)	31
The Oliver North trial	31
The Democratic convention (Aug 88)	30

	<b>Percent Very Closely</b>
The attack and sexual assault on a female jogger in Central Park, New York, by a group of youths	29
The problems at nuclear reactor plants (Oct 88)	28
The end of Gary Hart's candidacy and the Donna Rice allegations	28
The Republican convention (Aug 88)	27
The Supreme Court's hearing of arguments in a Missouri abortion case	25
The April hijacking of a Kuwaiti airplane by Shiite Moslems (May 88)	22
The cease fire in the war between Iran and Iraq	22
News about the presidential campaign in 1988 (May 88)	22
<b>THE CHARGES THAT PETE ROSE HAS BET ON BASEBALL GAMES</b>	<b>22</b>
The attempts by the U.S. government to depose General Noriega in Panama	20
Discussions of a U.S. Soviet arms agreement (Sept 87)	19
The stock market crash	18
The conflict in the Middle East between Palestinians and the Israelis in the occupied territories (May 88)	18
The nomination of Robert Bork to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court	17
The ethics committee's investigation of Speaker of the House Jim Wright	15
News about the Democratic candidates for the presidential nomination (Oct 87)	15
Conflict of interest allegations about Attorney General Ed Meese (May 88)	15
<b>THE SCANDAL INVOLVING HUD</b>	<b>15</b>
Coverage of the Democratic and Republican candidates for the Presidential nomination (Sept 87)	14
The pending divorce between Mike Tyson and Robin Givens	14
News about the Republican candidates for the Presidential nomination (Oct 88)	13
<b>SOLIDARITY'S ROLE IN GOVERNING POLAND</b>	<b>12</b>
The scandal involving the Japanese Prime Minister and other high ranking officials	6