

What was once absurd is now the New Normal

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KNIGHT RIDDER NEWSPAPERS

Imagine the reaction if someone had predicted Sept. 10 that Paul McCartney would write a war chant, toddlers at airports would be searched for weapons and the plastic wrap on roasted chickens would proclaim "United We Stand."

As absurd as this might have seemed six months ago, they barely register on the cultural radar today.

They're among the alterations in the fabric of the every day that make up the New Normal.

In the New Normal, words that had little significance a short time ago pepper the national conversation: lurqa, bunker buster, homeland, deploy, thermobaric, evildoers, Cipro, sleeper agents, daisy cutter.

It is now normal to live with low-level anxiety, to ponder a life of public service and to sing along with Sir Paul: "I will fight for my right to live in freedom."

The New Normal says thumbs up to body searches at basketball games, thumbs down to ironic cynicism.

"Those of us who have lived through these challenging times have been changed by them," said President Bush, who was routinely mocked as a bubblehead before Sept. 11 and now has an approval rating above 80 percent.

How have we changed?

It's much too soon for sweeping historical perspective, but some things are clear.

- **More attention is paid to actual news.**

It has replaced celebrity gossip on the cable news networks, and ratings are up.

A third of adults are spending more time reading newspapers, a fifth of adults more time perusing magazines, reports a McPheters & Company/Beta Research tracking study initiated after Sept. 11.

- **Public service is hot.**

Peace Corps applications are up 39 percent since the president called for volunteers in his State of the Union address. More people are seeking jobs at the FBI and the CIA.

- **Patriotism persists.**

Fewer flags flutter from car antennas, but Parents magazine offers readers "10 Ways to Teach Kids to Love America," and tricolor ribbons lend

new normal after 9/11, 2002

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