The Political Effects Of Existential Fear

October 18, 2011

Why did the approval ratings of President George W. Bush— who was perceived as indecisive before September 11, 2001—soar over 90 percent after the terrorist attacks? Because Americans were acutely aware of their own deaths. That is one lesson from the psychological literature on "mortality salience" reviewed in a new article called "The Politics of Mortal Terror." The paper, by psychologists Florette Cohen of the City University of New York's College of Staten Island and Sheldon Solomon of Skidmore College, appears in October's *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, a journal published by the Association for Psychological Science.

The fear people felt after 9/11 was real, but it also made them ripe for psychological manipulation, experts say. "We all know that fear tactics have been used by politicians for years to sway votes," says Cohen. Now psychological research offers insight into the chillingly named "terror management."

The authors cite studies showing that awareness of mortality tends to make people feel more positive toward heroic, charismatic figures and more punitive toward wrongdoers. In one study, Cohen and her colleagues asked participants to think of death and then gave them statements from three fictional political figures. One was charismatic: he appealed to the specialness of the person and the group to which she belonged. One was a technocrat, offering practical solutions to problems. The third stressed the value of participation in democracy. After thinking about death, support for the charismatic leader shot up eightfold.

Even subliminal suggestions of mortality have similar effects. Subjects who saw the numbers 911 or the letters WTC had higher opinions of a Bush statement about the necessity of invading Iraq. This was true of both liberals and conservatives.

Awareness of danger and death can bias even peaceful people toward war or aggression. Iranian students in a control condition preferred the statement of a person preaching understanding and the value of human life over a jihadist call to suicide bombing. But primed to think about death, they grew more positive toward the bomber. Some even said that they might consider becoming a martyr.

As time goes by and the memory of danger and death grows fainter, however, "morality salience" tends to polarize people politically, leading them to cling to their own beliefs and demonize others who hold opposing beliefs—seeing in them the cause of their own endangerment.

The psychological research should make voters wary of emotional political appeals and even of their own emotions in response, Cohen says. "We encourage all citizens to vote with their heads rather than their hearts. Become an educated voter. Look at the candidate's positions and platforms. Look at who you are voting for and what they stand for."