

Fatal Attraction

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In the Wake of 9/11
The Psychology of
Terror

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“Republican leaders said yesterday that they would repeatedly remind the nation of the Sept. 11 attacks as their convention opens in New York City today ... “

(The New York Times, August 30, 2004)

Following the tragic terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the popularity of President George W. Bush increased dramatically. We have conducted a series of studies that offers an explanation for this phenomenon and demonstrates that for Americans, reminders of 9/11 and of death in general continue to increase President Bush's appeal. This research is based on the idea that reminders of death increase the need for psychological security and therefore the appeal of leaders who emphasize the greatness of the nation and participation in a heroic victory over evil. We would characterize this as a kind of charismatic leadership.

Terror Management Theory and 9/11

In our book *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror* (2003), we presented an analysis of the causes and consequences of the events of 9/11 based on terror management theory, or TMT. TMT posits that although human beings share with all life forms a biological propensity toward survival, humans are unique in their awareness of the inevitability of death, that death is certain and can occur at any time for reasons that cannot always be anticipated or controlled, and that we are corporeal creatures perhaps no more important or enduring in the ultimate scheme of things than barnacles, beets, and beavers. To assuage the potentially paralyzing terror engendered by this knowledge, humans embed themselves in cultural worldviews: humanly constructed beliefs about reality shared by individuals in groups that provide a sense of meaning and significance and promises of symbolic and literal immortality to those who adhere to the standards of value prescribed by their culture.

Empirical support for TMT has been obtained in over 200 experiments by researchers in 13 countries, primarily by demonstrating that reminders of death (mortality salience) in the form of open-ended questions, death-anxiety questionnaires, pictures of gory accidents, interviews in front of funeral parlors, and subliminal exposure to the words “death” or “dead,” instigate cultural worldview defense. For example, after mortality salience, people: 1) have more favorable evaluations of people with similar religious and political beliefs and more unfavorable evaluations of those who differ on these dimensions;

2) are more punitive toward moral transgressors and more benevolent to heroic individuals; 3) are more physically aggressive toward others with dissimilar political orientations; and 4) strive more vigorously to meet cultural standards of value. In addition, research has shown that mortality salience does not influence conscious affect or physiological arousal, and its effects are greatest following a delay, when death thought is highly accessible but outside of focal attention. Recent work has demonstrated that it is the potential for anxiety signaled by heightened death thought accessibility, which motivates worldview defense and self-esteem bolstering, which in turn reduces death thought accessibility to baseline levels.

In our book, we explained the actions of the terrorists and their supporters as resulting in large measure from their adherence to a cultural worldview in which heroic martyrdom against evil confers death transcendence (e.g., 9/11 hijacker Mohamed Atta wrote in a letter to his co-conspirators: “Pledge allegiance to die ... understand what God had prepared for the faithful – He prepared an everlasting paradise for the martyrs.”). We also asserted that the attacks of 9/11 constituted a massive mortality salience induction combined with a symbolic threat to the American cultural worldview: “The World Trade Center towers were the ultimate tangible representations of American prosperity and economic might. The Pentagon is a universally recognized architectural emblem of the United States’ globe-dominating, unassailable-at-home-or-abroad military power.” Americans, not surprisingly, responded by asserting their patriotism and the greatness of their nation, attempting to help the victims of the attacks in any way they could, seeking vengeance and justice, and increasing their affection for political leaders such as Rudolph Giuliani and George W. Bush. But what makes such leaders so appealing when death is in the air?

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Allegiance to charismatic leaders may be one particularly effective mode of terror management. In *Escape from Freedom*, Eric Fromm (1941) proposed that loyalty to charismatic leaders results from a defensive need to feel a part of a larger whole, and surrendering one’s freedom to a larger-than-life leader can serve as a source of self-worth and meaning in life. Ernest Becker (*The Denial of Death*, 1973) posited that when mainstream worldviews are not serving people’s need for psychological security, concerns about mortality impel people to devote their psychological resources to following charismatic leaders who bolster their self-worth by making them feel like they are valued participants in a great mission to heroically triumph over evil.

To test this hypothesis, we and our colleagues Florette Cohen and Molly Maxfield conducted an experiment that will appear in the December 2004 issue of *Psychological Science*, in which students were asked to think about their own death or a control topic and then read campaign statements purportedly written by three political candidates in an upcoming gubernatorial election. The candidates varied in leadership style. The charismatic leader stated: “You are not just an ordinary citizen, you are part of a special state and a special nation.” The task-oriented leader stated: “I can accomplish all the

goals that I set out to do. I am very careful in laying out a detailed blueprint of what needs to be done so that there is no ambiguity.” The relationship-oriented leader stated: “I encourage all citizens to take an active role in improving their state. I know that each individual can make a difference.”

After reading these statements, participants selected the candidate they would vote for in an election. Results were striking. After thinking about a control topic, only four of 95 participants voted for the charismatic candidate, with the rest of the votes split evenly between the task and relationship oriented leaders. However, following a reminder of death, there was almost an 800 percent increase in votes for the charismatic leader (31); votes for the task-oriented leader were unaffected, but the relationship-oriented leader’s votes significantly declined.

Analogous to these findings, President Bush’s popularity soared after the massive mortality salience induction produced by the attacks of 9/11; since then, Bush has emphasized the greatness of America and his commitment to triumphing over evil, whether represented by Al Qaeda, Saddam Hussein, or the entire “axis of evil.” Do reminders of mortality increase the appeal of such a leader? Studies published in the September 2004 issue of *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* suggest that they do. In Study 1, a mortality salience induction dramatically increased support for President Bush and his policies in Iraq. In Study 2, subliminal reminders of 9/11 or the World Trade Center increased the accessibility of implicit thoughts of death; for Americans then, even non-conscious intimations of the events of 9/11 arouse concerns about mortality. Accordingly, in Study 3 participants were asked to think about death, the events of 9/11, or a benign control topic; both mortality and 9/11 salience produced substantial increases in support for President Bush among liberal as well as conservative participants. Finally, in Study 4, whereas participants rated John Kerry more favorably than George Bush after thinking about being in intense pain, after a reminder of death, evaluations of Bush increased and Kerry decreased, such that Bush was more favorably evaluated than Kerry. From a TMT perspective, this may reflect the psychological security afforded by the consistency of Bush’s public image, his message of good versus evil, his high status as President, the psychological insecurity associated with the popularized image of Kerry as a waffler, or a combination of these factors.

Interpreting the Findings

How should these findings be interpreted? With some degree of caution. First, although the mortality salience-induced boost to President Bush’s popularity has been obtained at three very different institutions, the participants in these studies are hardly representative of the American electorate. We also do not mean to imply that all support for President Bush is necessarily a defensive reaction to concerns about death. And although it is a matter of public record that President Bush’s re-election campaign has been carefully crafted to emphasize the war on terrorism and domestic security, the strategic use of fear to advance political agendas has a long history in American politics (all politics for that matter) and is by no means confined to the Republican Party.

However, the fact that a subtle, brief manipulation of psychological conditions (asking people to think about their own death or the events of 9/11) produced such striking differences in political preferences (for charismatic leaders in general and President Bush in particular) suggests that close elections could be decided as a result of non-rational terror management concerns. We’d like to think that Americans across the political spectrum would agree that this is antithetical to the democratic ideal that voting behavior should be the result of rational choice based on an informed understanding of the relevant

issues. National elections are no guarantee against totalitarian outcomes.

The best antidote to this problem may be to monitor and take pains to resist any efforts by candidates to capitalize on fear-mongering. As David Myers so eloquently put it in an op-ed piece in the *Los Angeles Times*: “It is perfectly normal to fear purposeful violence from those who hate us. When terrorists strike again, we will all recoil in horror. But smart thinkers also will want to check their intuitive fears against the facts and to resist those who serve their own purposes by cultivating a culture of fear.” As a culture, we should also work to teach our children and encourage our citizens to vote with their “heads” rather than their “hearts.” And it may also be helpful to raise awareness of how concerns about mortality affect human behavior. Hopefully, such measures will encourage people to make choices based on the political qualifications and positions of the candidates rather than on defensive needs to preserve psychological equanimity in response to reminders of death.

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