

11. The Impact of Fear on Public Thinking about Counterterrorism Policy: Implications for Communicators

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We have all heard admonitions about the need to manage strong emotions in order to make sound decisions. Children are urged to “count to 10” before acting or speaking out of anger. Adults who have lost a loved one or who have been diagnosed with a serious illness are counseled to “take some time” before making any major life choices. People nod in agreement when reminded that “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

The actual relationship between emotion and reason is complex. But commonsense cautions about the power of fear and other strong emotions are both common and sensible. Almost everyone can remember acting rashly or in a shortsighted, counterproductive way when faced with some frightening or traumatic situation.

Terrorism is exquisitely calibrated to exploit this tendency in individuals and societies. While public concerns about terrorism have been displaced somewhat by economic anxieties—Americans are not living in a constant state of fearfulness about terrorism—research and observation alike show that the thought patterns laid down by the trauma of 9/11 are easily reactivated. Fear and the worldview created by fear have played a significant role in shaping the national discussion about counterterrorism policy and approaches to the terrorism threat. Eight years after the events of 9/11, terrorism-related anxieties retain their power to enhance the appeal of some policies and diminish others. Fearmongering remains a tempting political ploy that can derail debate and narrow policy options. Events (such as recent attacks and attempts) continue to stimulate new public fears and provide new opportunities for the manipulation of those

fears. And countering fear-based arguments has proved extremely difficult for even the most skilled communicators.

Eliminating fear as a response to danger is neither feasible nor desirable. But concerned policy experts, advocates, elected officials, and community leaders can do a better job of *managing* the fear factor. By understanding how fear affects public thinking and by learning how to counter some of fear's negative effects, influential communicators may be able to help prevent strong public emotions from being channeled in unconstructive directions.

As described below, the fear factor has important psychological and cognitive dimensions as well as cultural dimensions, all of which have implications for communicators. Also described below are the results of messaging research conducted in 2009 by the Topos Partnership for the U.S. in the World Initiative. Influential communicators are already deploying a variety of themes and narratives intended to promote a different kind of public conversation about terrorism. Topos's research explored how some of those explanatory narratives actually fare when fear shapes public reasoning. The research asked which themes and messages, if reinforced both before and after the next crisis, might help us build and sustain support for farsighted, effective, and principled security policies—even under the adverse psychological and cognitive conditions created by fear.

Fear's Effects on Individual Psychology and Cognition

Many different academic disciplines and research methodologies have shed light on how people reason and how they see the world when they feel their safety is threatened. Such insights help to define the unique challenges that face communicators who are trying to build mainstream support for strategic, farsighted security policies in fearful times.

Mortality Salience: The Political Psychology of Fear

Since the late 1980s, academic psychologists in a growing area of study called “terror management theory” have looked at what happens to people's emotions and thought processes when they are confronted with reminders of their own eventual death.² In hundreds of published experiments, researchers have demonstrated that induced “mortality salience”—awareness of the inevitability of

death—leads people to cling more strongly to their cultural worldviews. The hypothesis is that since cultural worldviews function as symbolic protectors against psychological terror (by providing meaning, continuity, and self-respect), then reminding people of the underlying source of their fear increases their need to value their own worldview.³

To put this in more specific terms, mortality reminders seem to trigger disdain for other races, religions, and nations; a preference for strong, traditional leaders and for authoritarian rather than pragmatic leadership; a heightened fidelity to one's own group; and increased stereotyping and suspicion of other groups.⁴ It seems that mortal fear—fear of the sort that is triggered by threats to personal safety and the safety of loved ones—inclines people to favor a certain kind of leadership and an “us vs. them” approach to defining and meeting threats. During the Bush administration, political psychologists drew on terror management theory and the mortality salience hypothesis to explain the president's widespread popularity and the relative imperviousness to criticism of his administration's counterterrorism policies, even as some of those policies foundered or ran afoul of core democratic values.⁵ Indeed, in repeated experiments, asking research subjects to think about death or just reminding them of the attacks on 9/11 led to significantly increased support for President Bush and his security policies, regardless of the subjects' political affiliations.⁶

Serious fears of a more general nature (e.g., concerns about the “cultural disruptions” caused by economic insecurity or demographic change) may have similar effects, predisposing people to accept the authority of strong leaders, to exaggerate specific threats, and to believe that desperate measures are necessary and warranted.⁷

Implications for Communicators: These findings suggest that even sympathetic audiences will follow unhelpful paths of reasoning when they are under the influence of fear. Communicators need to be aware that some arguments and messages that ordinarily are effective may not have the desired result—and may even backfire—in the context of perceived threats to safety and security.

The Fear System in the Brain: Consciousness Commandeered

Mortality salience experiments yield important clues about the psychology of fear. But what is it about the *physiological* state of

fearfulness that makes people gravitate toward one course of action rather than another? Neuroscientific research offers insights about the “fear system” in the brain and what happens when that system is aroused.

In broad strokes, there is an “ancient” part of the brain, called the amygdala. It is the part of the brain we share with all mammals—and it produces near-instantaneous reactions to danger. Developed during the period of human evolutionary history when instinctive responses to attack made the difference between life and death, this part of the brain acts outside of consciousness, taking in stimuli, putting out stress hormones, raising blood pressure, accelerating the pulse. It mobilizes the familiar “fight or flight” response, but it can also trigger a freezing and numbing response, or submission.⁸ This ancient fear system coexists with the uniquely human part of the brain—the prefrontal cortex—that is the site of reason and judgment (i.e., conscious thought) and plays an essential role in generating such “social emotions” as compassion and empathy.⁹

The brain’s fear system produces terror when precipitously aroused and chronic anxiety during milder, sustained arousal. When hyperaroused, the brain’s fear system literally commandeers consciousness, as Topos puts it—guiding and influencing our thinking and in some instances determining whether we are able to “think” at all.

Neurologist Joseph LeDoux argues that the two parts of the brain are actually reciprocally related.¹⁰ In order for the fear system to respond to a perceived threat, the cortex has to be shut down—and along with it, presumably, some ability to think critically (such as about policy choices), to reference abstract concepts (such as justice or fairness), and to feel compassion for fellow beings. LeDoux suggests that the converse could also be true: activation of the prefrontal region might inhibit the fear system (although achieving this kind of reciprocity is likely to be difficult once the fear system has become hyperaroused).¹¹

Implications for Communicators: Fearful people are unlikely to be persuaded by arguments based on abstract concepts (even familiar ones like fairness) or fine cognitive distinctions (like the difference between a suspected terrorist who might be innocent and a proven terrorist). At the same time, if communicators can get people to

“think” by offering a fresh, credible idea—a new insight—it may help check the activity of the fear system and enable people to take in new information.

Fear’s Worldview: It’s a Jungle Out There

How does the world appear to people when they are operating in threat mode—when the fear system has been aroused or when mortality salience has been activated? Exploratory research conducted in 2008 for U.S. in the World and the National Security Network sheds light on how people think about threats to security in the current, post-9/11 environment.¹²

This research confirmed and extended findings about fear that have also emerged from the work of other investigators. The interviews showed how threats to personal safety or the safety of loved ones cause people’s lens on the world to narrow to the most immediate factors in the environment. People go on heightened alert for possible dangerous intentions on the part of others, and they become inclined to assume the worst about others’ intentions.

As the same team of researchers also found in an earlier project commissioned by the FrameWorks Institute,¹³ Topos found that people who are not experts on foreign policy tend to interpret security threats in personal terms, ascribing human motivations and mindsets to other countries. They think of other countries and world actors as friendly or malevolent, motivated by anger, kindness, or some psychological state like “hating” or “liking.” When people understand international relations in these interpersonal terms, factors like treaties, institutions, political dynamics, systemic conditions, and so on—the explanations and solutions that international relations and security experts emphasize—are “cognitively invisible.”

Similarly, nonexperts rely on analogies to familiar scenarios as ways of making sense of security threats. The most frequently cited scenario, in interviews and focus groups, is the schoolyard—the first place many of us experience conflict and confrontation with our peers (without the presence of adults), and where “standing up to bullies” is one of the lessons to be learned. Other analogies cited include “the Wild West” and “the jungle.” It is notable that these are all scenarios where self-reliance is key, where “appeasement” is a dangerous temptation, where the normal rules don’t apply, and

where following the rules is perceived as a disadvantage, since no one else is constrained by such niceties.

In short, when serious national security threats loom, nonexperts start to see the entire world as a scary place, full of enemies whose behavior cannot be modified or controlled except by force. Immediate concerns take precedence—after all, this is an “emergency”—and laws and values may have to be set aside in favor of doing “whatever it takes” to stay safe.

Implications for Communicators: The Topos Partnership’s analysis shows that when people are operating in threat mode, they will reject any policy prescription that seems to put principles before safety; anyone seen as making such a suggestion will be viewed as at best unrealistic and at worst dangerously irresponsible or deluded. Concerns about the long-range consequences of policy decisions (such as losing the trust of allies, breeding more terrorists, and so on) may be acknowledged as valid, but ultimately are likely to be dismissed as irrelevant to the current (emergency) situation. In general, people will reject solutions that cannot be connected intuitively to their personal safety (“How does this protect me and my family?”), which means that communicators have to do more than just assert a relationship between national security and (for example) respect for human rights. They must connect the dots for people in a simple, commonsense way.

Misjudging Risk: Stone-Age Brains in the 21st Century

Compounding fear’s problematic psychological and cognitive effects is the reality that humans are not particularly good assessors of risk—at least, not the kinds of risks they face in the 21st century.

There is a large and fascinating body of research on this topic.¹⁴ For example, it appears that people judge highly memorable events that have been broadcast everywhere through the media as more likely to recur, even if they are actually quite rare or remote (school shootings, child abductions, and, of course, terrorist attacks). People regard as more dangerous the things they have negative feelings about (foreigners, Islam), whereas they underrate as risks statistically more dangerous things about which they feel positive or neutral (cars, cigarettes). The perception that harm is intended by some

person or persons increases the sense of risk; the “scary other” (terrorist) produces a level and kind of fear that the “scary phenomenon” does not.

There are other relevant glitches in people’s ability to calculate risk. Even the most unlikely scenarios seem more probable if they contain one familiar, stereotypical element. This suggests that since people already know that terrorists “hate us” and “want to harm us,” any scenario involving a terrorist attack, no matter how complex or unlikely, becomes at least somewhat plausible. To complicate matters further, highly complex scenarios feel much more plausible to people than they actually are. People’s judgments also tend to conform with those of their peers, especially (surprisingly enough) when the issue is very important. If people think others are frightened—including the experts—this may exacerbate their own fearfulness, with all the consequences for reasoning suggested above.

Implications for Communicators: It will not be easy to change the public conversation about terrorism by citing data that compare the risk of dying in a terrorist attack to other risks or by putting terrorism “in perspective” as one among many important challenges that the United States must address. In fact, messages that seem to be aimed at minimizing the terrorist threat are likely to be rejected as “out of touch with reality.”

Coping with Fear: Responses to Psychological Trauma

The study of psychological trauma and recovery provides important clues about how, and under what conditions, people can move past unreasoning fear. These clues may help opinion leaders and communicators understand what is likely to exacerbate or reduce public fears.¹⁵

For traumatized individuals as well as communities, it seems that passivity and disempowerment are likely to feed fearfulness, while active coping and affiliation with others tend to calm fears. Sitting alone in front of a television watching endless repetitions of bad news is one of the worst things an individual can do in the aftermath of a crisis. At the community level, this means that crisis response strategies that are disempowering—like sending in teams of outside experts after the fact—are far less effective than building on existing

community resources and leadership to prepare for and cope with crisis.

Some psychologists and psychiatrists believe that the impulse to care for others—a “tend-and-befriend” response—is as ancient and hard-wired a response to stress as the fight/flight or freezing/numbing responses; it is certainly more conducive to recovery.¹⁶ Taking problem-solving action that is related to the current situation, especially in partnership with others (what psychologists call “affiliative coping”), aids healing.¹⁷ And while compulsive remembering is an inevitable aspect of trauma, collaboration to memorialize trauma can be an important step toward moving on. In Madrid, after the attacks of March 11, 2004, large public demonstrations of shared sorrow and sober determination probably helped to meet such a need.¹⁸

Implications for Communicators: Given the importance of positive and affiliative action for building individual and community resilience, it is clear that opinion leaders and elected officials who want to help the public manage fear must do more than offer a new explanatory narrative about terrorism and policy responses to it. They also need to encourage citizen action that strengthens the social fabric and is related to the emotions and concerns people are having (neither “go shopping” nor “here is my 10-point policy agenda” will fit the bill). Many policy experts are unaccustomed to connecting with their audiences in this way, and they may be especially uncomfortable with the notion of inviting citizens to help shape local or national responses to crisis. But overall, constructing opportunities for positive communal action may be one of the most important things leaders can do to reduce public fearfulness and, perhaps, to reduce the appeal of precipitous reactions that are based on fear.

Cultural Dimensions of the Fear Factor

In addition to its psychological and cognitive dimensions, the fear factor has important cultural dimensions that have implications for communicators.

Many observers have pointed, appropriately, to the fear-amplifying role played by a sensationalistic media and by a political climate in which ideologues feel free to manipulate public fears.¹⁹ These dynamics are so troubling that it is easy to overlook the pressures and even the positive intentions that drive some journalists and

politicians to amplify public fears. But an appreciation of these nuances can help communicators think more strategically about how to cultivate allies in the media and government who might be willing to play a more constructive role in managing public fears.

For example, the principle of “if it bleeds, it leads” is deeply entrenched in the media. The news and entertainment media bear significant responsibility for the pervasiveness of certain familiar, unhelpful narratives related to terrorism (like the “ticking time bomb” scenario that the majority of Americans now connects with the issue of torture or the images of fanaticism and violence that dominate depictions of Muslim and Arab societies). But most individual journalists are simply motivated to tell a good story.²⁰ After all, journalists are storytellers, not professional risk assessors, and the best stories are vivid, dramatic, emotionally compelling, and unusual—unfortunately, the very features that lead readers to overestimate the consequences and the probability of an event’s recurrence. While a journalist may be personally skeptical of a given prediction or claim about some impending danger, the daily pressures of reporting offer few opportunities and little encouragement for pursuing those doubts.

As for political leaders, some undoubtedly have used fear to advance their agendas (and to frame their agendas in ways the media will cover). But elected leaders in general are driven by a dread of being wrong; they have every reason to overwarn and very little reason to reassure the public about threats that might materialize despite their best efforts. In addition, elected officials are inevitably preoccupied with putting out fires, not with educating the public about the “big picture.” And for many elected leaders and their staffs, there is a significant knowledge and confidence gap when it comes to terrorism and counterterrorism issues.²¹ Meanwhile, policymakers are being bombarded with threat analyses that typically start by assessing our vulnerabilities rather than our adversaries’ capabilities and intentions, with the result that the “consequences” part of the analysis trumps the “probability” part every time.²²

There is also reason to believe that Americans as a people may be less resilient when it comes to fear than they were in the past or than citizens of other developed nations. Peter Stearns, a historian of emotions, argues that Americans have tried so hard to eliminate

fear from their lives and their children's lives that they have come to believe they should never have to experience fear. When they do, they are outraged as well as frightened and are desperate to blame or punish someone for making them afraid. In their efforts to avoid the experience of fear, Americans may have lost some confidence in their ability to handle fear; it also seems possible that highly individualistic Americans may be less inclined to organize collective responses and support systems for coping with fear-inducing events. In short, this analysis suggests that some of the negative effects of fear are amplified for Americans by the very nature of their "relationship" with the emotion of fear.²³

Implications for Communicators: In light of these cultural dynamics, communicators should avoid implying that people are simply weak or ignorant if they feel more afraid of terrorism than experts think they ought to be. By the same token, communicators should not imply that people are immoral if they have concluded, based on the "ticking time bomb" scenarios so common in the media, that torture may be necessary in exceptional cases. Furthermore, understanding the needs that shape the decisions of politicians and journalists could help communicators craft their "asks and offers" more strategically. Opinion leaders might work to make it politically safer for elected officials to model a more pragmatic and disciplined kind of leadership on terrorism issues by providing validation and backup for efforts to calm public fears. To help potential allies in the media play a constructive role in managing public fears, opinion leaders might share their concerns and point to credible research findings about the negative effects of fear on public reasoning, while also working to ensure that their own communications to the media tell a compelling story without stoking unnecessary fearfulness.

Talking about Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism

Given the power of the fear factor to influence thinking, promoting a more constructive public conversation about terrorism and responses to terrorism is one of the toughest communications challenges facing responsible opinion leaders today. In recent years, as the extent of this challenge became more evident, communicators have worked hard to develop messages about terrorism that might help listeners avoid some of the cognitive and psychological traps

set by fear, opening the door to public consideration of alternative policy approaches. Which strategies for talking about terrorism with the mainstream American public are most likely to achieve this goal? Summarized below is a unique qualitative research effort that was commissioned by U.S. in the World and carried out by the Topos Partnership.²⁴

Testing Themes and Frames

In the spring and summer of 2009, U.S. in the World and members of its network of issue experts and advocates collected and cataloged some of the core ideas that opinion leaders have been using to try to calm public fears and introduce arguments about the need for more farsighted approaches to security and counterterrorism. These were among the ideas in circulation:

- Terrorism is not really the existential threat it has been made out to be.
- Responses to terrorism should be consistent with America's values.
- Our counterterrorism policies have to be smarter and more effective.
- We should consider the long-range consequences of our decisions.
- We must not let ourselves be guided by fear.
- We need to beware of politicians who manipulate our fears for their own purposes.
- Our national history proves we are strong enough to withstand the terrorist threat.

The Topos Partnership then designed a qualitative test of these and other core ideas, seeking to gauge their effect on people's thinking about terrorism-related policy choices. The core ideas were embodied in paragraph-length "narratives," all of which were presented to the research subjects as statements made by public officials on the seventh anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. Participants were also instructed to think back to that frightening day in order to create an even more challenging context for the messages. After hearing or reading the statement, participants were asked questions about their understanding of the main point, what they could remember about it, whether they agreed, who they thought would make such a statement, and why.²⁵

The purpose of the testing was not to develop specific messaging recommendations or talking points but rather to determine which big themes and ideas—which cognitive frames (a frame is a central organizing idea for making sense of events or information)—might help reduce public fear, stimulate different thinking about security options, and be memorable and repeatable enough to hold up under the stress of a fear-inducing event.

The findings were sobering, though there were also some promising results.

Overall Observations The research confirmed many of the communications challenges identified in the first section of this chapter. Findings showed that safety concerns consistently trumped moral principles, even among respondents who agreed about the importance of America's values. The "emergency" frame consistently trumped efforts to encourage attention to the long-term consequences of our decisions. With 9/11 as the explicit context, messages that seemed to minimize the danger of terrorism or that focused on the relatively small risk of dying in a terrorist attack were dismissed by many as off-target and unrealistic. And as would be expected, fear and safety concerns made it difficult for people to hold on to fine conceptual distinctions, such as between terrorists and suspected terrorists. Instead, simple contrasts between good/bad and us/them prevailed.

The testing also highlighted some additional and important challenges for communicators:

- People desire *action* against threats. Narratives that seemed to take options off the table without offering clear alternatives that address people's security concerns were heard—and rejected—as counseling inaction. Communicators must provide clear signals about ways in which we can and should act.
- Appeals to history and tradition ran up against the belief that the current moment is unique and urgent. People questioned the relevance of lessons from the past, especially if that was the primary thrust of the message. Messages should sound immediately relevant and should not rely too heavily on appeals to history or tradition.
- Narratives about being smart and effective were appealing, but they did little to change people's thinking. Being "smart" was

taken to mean whatever people already believed about how to fight terrorism. Many interpreted the message as support for being tough and aggressive, for example. Or they heard the message as support for “smarter bombing,” “smarter use of torture,” or “smarter use of surveillance technology”—not as an argument for rethinking the overall approach to counterterrorism. The researchers concluded that communicators must be wary of messages that contain the slightest ambiguity about what kind of approach to counterterrorism is best.

False Leads This last observation points to a cross-cutting challenge affecting many of the messages about terrorism: Apparent agreement with a message does not mean that all its inferences are taken to heart. People can accept and even repeat many propositions, but the effects on thinking may not be significant.

For example, respondents greeted messages about the importance of America’s values with enthusiasm and could easily repeat them, but most would immediately assert that we do not have the luxury of respecting our values in the current emergency situation. People responded well to messages that tried to redirect fear into anger or scorn for terrorists (such as, “Let’s tell the terrorists to go to hell by living as we’ve always lived and preserving our values”), but the anger was easily channeled away from its basis in “not forgetting who we are” to support for “tougher” treatment of terrorist suspects (including treatment that is not consistent with our values). Messages about not letting ourselves be manipulated by fearmongering politicians also engaged respondents, but they tended to default to the belief that all politicians are manipulative and that nobody in government can be trusted.

Messages about “being stronger than the terrorists are” were heard as efforts to “buck people up”—an appropriate thing for leaders to try to do but not relevant to the problem of taking action against terrorism. Told that “we shouldn’t give terrorists what they want—they want us to be fearful and to abandon our values,” people agreed that Americans should not be fearful, but this formulation did not prevent listeners from suspecting that they were being asked to put principles over their safety, a tradeoff they consistently rejected.

Finally, because the public is already familiar with the broad outlines of the debate about “rights” and “security,” many relevant

ideas no longer have much power to change how people think about terrorism and counterterrorism. Familiarity leads many people to stop paying attention to the substance of arguments—concluding, “Oh, I know what this is about”—especially because people have also become very attuned to the ideological orientation of narratives. People are quick to identify certain narratives as “Democratic” or “Republican” and to dismiss such messages as partisan.

Emotional Management Is Not Enough

Another important observation to emerge from this qualitative research is that managing fear is not enough, by itself, to promote a more constructive conversation about terrorism. Messages that calmed or seemed to have the potential to calm fears did not automatically change thinking about policy choices. The gap between the individual/personal perspective on this issue and the collective/national perspective seems to be very difficult to bridge.

Fear, by its nature, is experienced at the level of individual feelings and decisions, and people were inclined to stay at that level. Messages about not falling prey to fear were typically taken to refer to individuals’ own feelings, not to collective policy decisions. Reduced to a “Churchillian exhortation” (as the researchers put it) about mastering our own personal fears, such a message ends up being quite compatible with all sorts of policy approaches. Calming fear is probably a necessary but insufficient precondition for constructive public conversation about counterterrorism policy.

Green Shoots?

Two narratives showed some promise for doing both—calming fears and promoting new thinking about policy directions.

Overreaction Hurts Us The most helpful frame tested was the idea that “when we overreact to terrorism, we hurt ourselves.” The idea that overreaction hurts us is simple and user-friendly. It works at both the individual and collective levels. As suggested at the beginning of this chapter, almost everyone understands the risk of overreacting to stress in a counterproductive way—yet people also had little difficulty applying the idea to policy reactions, such as abuses of government power, excessive use of military force, not working closely with allies, or losing our identity/values.

The message seems to calm fears without sounding as if it counsels inaction (though we will return shortly to the question of which

actions this message does support). It is fresh enough to stimulate people intellectually (i.e., it is not the typical framework for talking about responses to terrorism), and it connects the dots clearly (i.e., it does not just warn against overreacting but explains that “we mustn’t overreact because then we make mistakes in judgment that harm us”).

Respondents did not tend to default immediately to existing beliefs but rather engaged with the message at some length. In other words, one might argue, this narrative seems to have the power to activate a listener’s critical faculties—the cognitive part of the brain whose activation may help suppress the fear system—in ways that other narratives did not. Respondents’ reactions suggested that this narrative might even help inoculate people against efforts at fearmongering.

Self-Aggrandizing Terrorist. One weakness of the very promising “overreaction” narrative is that it may not be emotionally engaging enough to satisfy in a crisis since it is about dampening emotions and actions. Another tested narrative seemed to have an effect on thinking but also seemed to be emotionally engaging. This narrative asserted that terrorists are common criminals who want to be treated as something more—as supervillains or martyrs—and we should not accommodate them (by creating special rules or courts for them, by putting aside our values, by reorienting our foreign policies, etc.).

The notion here is not just that terrorism should be treated as a law enforcement matter (a now-familiar concept that has little effect) but that we should treat terrorism as a law enforcement matter because self-aggrandizing terrorists want us to treat it otherwise. This new element appears to be emotionally and intellectually engaging; it does not downplay the idea of maintaining security, and it even provides for retribution of a sort.

The “self-aggrandizing terrorists” frame has some real weaknesses, though, including the fact that the anger it attempts to channel turns out to be compatible with support for policies that may be counterproductive. Also, the concept may not hold up in the aftermath of a major terrorist act that feels more like an act of “war” than a “crime.”

Finally, this frame fails to take account of the probable need in some instances for counterterrorism activities that fall outside the domain of law enforcement. On balance, the weaknesses of this

narrative are problematic enough that Topos urges caution about using it on its own or without careful attention to context.

Developing a Successful Message

A better understanding of how fear affects public thinking and a hard look at the limitations of some messages are making clearer the kinds of messages that can manage the fear factor effectively.

A successful message will be “easy to think,” in the words of the Topos Partnership; it will allow for consideration of action against terrorism; it will be concrete rather than abstract; it will connect the dots and suggest a bigger picture in some simple, accessible way. More specifically, it will perform both at the level of “emotional management” (calming fear, dampening the tendency to precipitate action, reducing submissiveness to authority) *and* at the level of reasoning about policy (encouraging people to think about the bigger picture/longer-term consequences, promoting clearer thinking). Finally, an effective message will point to a *better* response to terrorism, not simply negate unhelpful responses that are nonetheless consistent with people’s instinctive reactions and perceptions.

Additional research to refine promising messages should certainly be done. But advocates, issue experts, scholars, and policy advisers who want to promote new thinking about counterterrorism also need to do some work of their own, informed by messaging research. While policy analysts have written extensively about the nature of the terrorism threat and appropriate responses to it, there is not yet a simple, positive narrative that can compete effectively with the logic of prevailing narratives like “doing whatever is necessary to capture or kill terrorists.” Until concerned opinion leaders have developed and built consensus around a clear, commonsense message about what exactly Americans and their government *should* do, think, and feel about terrorism, even the most effective explanations of why some responses to terrorism are counterproductive will not significantly change public thinking in times of fear.

During the weeks and months immediately after 9/11, opinion surveys showed that the American public—despite its sorrow, fear, and anger—wanted the government to take time before reacting in order to build international support and make the right strategic choice.²⁶ It seems that the popular wisdom about strong emotions

mentioned at the beginning of this chapter actually guided public thinking in those early days.

Yet in the years since then, public fears have often been channeled in harmful directions, and today the public remains divided and uncertain about some of the most important issues related to counterterrorism policy. Focus group research suggests that even citizens who question aspects of America's response to terrorism find it difficult to articulate their logic or defend their point of view when confronted with fear-based arguments.²⁷

Communicating strategically about terrorism, like any effort to change the public conversation about a major policy issue, is both a messaging challenge and a substantive challenge, and the two are interconnected. There are important lessons to be learned and built on from the messaging research described in this chapter. But if influential communicators are to reframe the debate about terrorism, they must also do a more compelling and accessible job of describing what an alternative counterterrorism agenda looks like and how it works to keep us safe. In other words, they must provide their own clear answer to a critical question: What do we do after we "count to 10"?

Chapter 11 End Notes

1. Priscilla Lewis is codirector of the U.S. in the World Initiative (<http://www.usintheworld.org>), a project of Dēmos, a nonpartisan public policy research and advocacy organization based in New York City. This chapter was prepared in close collaboration with U.S. in the World codirector Sue Veres Royal. It reflects valuable insights from the issue experts, policy advocates, funders, and communications researchers who have participated in various ways in U.S. in the World's Managing the Fear Factor Project. Specific contributions from project participants have been noted wherever possible; necessarily, many informal contributions have gone unnoted—but not unappreciated.

2. This theory was developed in the late 1980s by Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski (now professors of psychology at Skidmore College, the University of Arizona, and the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, respectively), who have published extensively in this area.

3. See, for example, Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, and Tom Pyszczynski, "Terror Management Theory of Self-Esteem and Cultural Worldviews," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 29 (1997): 139; and Jamie Arndt, Jeff Greenberg, Tom Pyszczynski, and Sheldon Solomon, "Subliminal Exposure to Death-Related Stimuli Increases Defense of the Cultural Worldview," *Psychological Science* 8, no. 5 (1997): 379–85.

4. As reported, for example, in Emanuele Castano, "In Case of Death, Cling to the Ingroup," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 34 (2004): 1–10; and in Jeff Schimel and others, "Stereotypes and Terror Management: Evidence That Mortality Salience

Enhances Stereotypic Thinking and Preferences,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 77, no. 5 (November 1999): 905–26.

5. For example, see Tom Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror* (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2003); and John B. Judis, “Death Grip: How Political Psychology Explains Bush’s Ghastly Success,” *New Republic*, August 27, 2007, <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=19566>.

6. Relevant experiments by Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski are summarized in Drew Westen, *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2007).

7. Axel Aubrun, Andrew Brown, and Joseph Grady, “Detecting Intentions, Managing Fear: How Americans Think about National Security,” report produced by the Topos Partnership for the National Security Network and the U.S. in the World Initiative, Summer 2008, <http://www.usintheworld.org>.

8. See Jaak Panksepp, *Affective Neuroscience: The Foundations of Human and Animal Emotions* (New York: Oxford University Press: 1998); and Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).

9. Damage to the prefrontal cortex has been associated with impairment of the capacity for empathy. See, for example, S. G. Shamay-Tsoory, R. Tomer, B. D. Berger, and J. Aharon-Peretz, “Characterization of Empathy Deficits Following Prefrontal Brain Damage,” *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 15, no. 3 (April 1, 2003): 324–37.

10. Joseph LeDoux, *Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are* (New York: Viking Press, 2002).

11. A few mortality salience experiments have demonstrated that the negative effects of mortality reminders can be offset by asking subjects to “think carefully” before answering researchers’ questions or by prompting subjects to consider the “common humanity” that we share with other people. See Jay Dixit, “The Ideological Animal,” *Psychology Today*, January 1, 2007, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200612/the-ideological-animal>.

12. Aubrun, Brown, and Grady, “Detecting Intentions, Managing Fear.”

13. “Public Perceptions of U.S. Global Engagement, Pre- and Post-9/11,” U.S. in the World, *Talking Global Issues with Americans: A Practical Guide* (New York: Rockefeller Brothers Fund, 2004), p. 22, <http://www.usintheworld.org>.

14. The juxtaposition of “Stone Age brains” and modern dangers is the subject of Daniel Gardner’s synthesis of research on risk, titled *The Science of Fear: Why We Fear the Things We Shouldn’t—and Put Ourselves in Greater Danger* (New York: Dutton Adult, 2008). Gardner covers the points made here as well as many other relevant insights.

15. The observations here are based on an unpublished presentation delivered by Judith Lewis Herman, M.D., at a retreat organized by U.S. in the World in 2008. Dr. Herman is the author of *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992) and director of training at the Victims of Violence Program at Cambridge Hospital.

16. The tend-and-befriend model was developed by Shelley E. Taylor, distinguished professor of psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles, whose work focuses on how social relationships protect against stress.

17. Dr. Herman cites the work of Ann Wolbert Burgess and Lynda Lytle Holmstrom on recovery from rape, including “Adaptive Strategies and Recovery from Rape,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 136 (1979): 1278–82.

18. Neil Smelser, university professor of sociology emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley, has written on societal responses to terrorism in *The Faces of Terrorism: Social and Psychological Dimensions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); and “September 11, 2001, as Cultural Trauma,” in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Gieson, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 31–59.

19. See, for example, Gardner, *The Science of Fear*; also David L. Altheide, *Terrorism and the Politics of Fear* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006); and Marc Siegel, *False Alarm: The Truth about the Epidemic of Fear* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2005).

20. As Daniel Gardner, himself a journalist, reminds readers in *The Science of Fear*.

21. From unpublished remarks by Heather Hurlburt, executive director, National Security Network, at a retreat organized by U.S. in the World in 2008.

22. From unpublished remarks by Brian Jenkins, senior adviser to the president of the RAND Corporation, made at the same retreat.

23. Peter N. Stearns, *American Fear: The Causes and Consequences of High Anxiety* (New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2006).

24. See Axel Aubrun and Joseph Grady, with Andrew Brown, “Promoting Progressive Thinking about Policy in Fearful Times,” report produced by the Topos Partnership for the U.S. in the World Initiative, in partnership with the National Security Network, 2009. Funded by the Open Society Institute and available at <http://www.usintheworld.org>.

25. This method of testing, called TalkBack Testing, was developed by Topos cofounders Axel Aubrun and Joseph Grady, based on principles and techniques of the cognitive and social sciences. In TalkBack Testing, subjects are presented with brief texts (roughly 80–150 words) and then asked several open-ended questions, at least one of which focuses on their ability to repeat the core of the message or pass it along to others—as in the game of telephone. The testing is designed to assess whether a given idea has the capacity to become an organizing principle for thinking and communicating about the issue.

26. Personal communication from Steven Kull, director of WorldPublicOpinion.org and the Program on International Policy Attitudes and director of the PIPA/Knowledge Networks poll of the U.S. public. Also see Steven Kull, “The Voice of the Public,” in U.S. in the World, *Talking Global Issues with Americans*, pp. 14–20.

27. Personal communication from Meg Bostrom, cofounder of the Topos Partnership.