



DRAFT

PROMOTING PROGRESSIVE THINKING ABOUT POLICY IN FEARFUL TIMES

A Research Report Commissioned by the U.S. in the World Project of Demos in partnership with the National Security Network

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the research discussed in this memo is to assist the U.S. in the World project of Demos in developing a small set of *narratives* that can be deployed by progressive leaders either before or after a fear-inducing event – in particular, a terrorist attack.

Fear-inducing events are nearly inevitable over time, and a substantial body of research has shown that fear-inducing situations tend to drive people towards more conservative stances¹. For these reasons, leaders who believe in a more comprehensive and measured approach to security, for instance, should be prepared with effective messages that can help reduce the likelihood of rash and ill-advised responses, based on strong public sentiment channeled in unconstructive directions.

This initial phase of research has focused on several questions.

- What are the default patterns of thinking that guide Americans' responses to relevant messages?
- How do various ideas fare as they are presented to people in the context of the terrorist threat?

¹ See, e.g. Pyszczynski, Solomon and Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror*, 2002; Nail and McGregor, "Conservative Shift among Liberals and Conservatives Following 9/11/01," *Social Justice Research*, 2009.

- What kinds of ideas and messages have a better chance of moving public thinking and discourse in a positive direction in this context?

METHOD

The research focused on a set of sixteen brief texts reflecting a catalog of framing directions developed by USITW based on conversations with advocates in the field. For ease of comparison, and because terrorist attacks are the prime example of the fear-inducing event at the heart of the Fear Factor project, the texts all focused on *terrorism* and our responses to it.

The following sample illustrates the general length and structure of the texts.

"In a fearful time like the days following 9/11 it's important to ask ourselves, who benefits from our fear? Clearly the terrorists do. Our fear is their goal, and it makes us change how we live, how we treat others, how we feel, what we believe. But we must also remember that others in our own country benefit from our fear, and at our expense. Those who would like to take more power for themselves, and reduce our liberties and our privacy. Those who would like to impose their own vision of how we treat people and how we treat other nations – in ways that go against long American tradition. Fear benefits them and makes us vulnerable to their agenda as well."

The texts were assessed in a set of over 300 Internet questionnaires, pilot-tested in a small set of brief telephone interviews.

In each case, subjects heard or read the brief statement and were then asked a variety of questions concerning the understanding of the text's main point, what they could remember about it, whether they agreed and why, who would likely make such a statement, and so forth.

The purpose of the testing was to determine the effectiveness not of the particular texts, but of the key ideas they contain. A given idea – such as “terrorists are not as dangerous as we think” – can be expressed in several ways; and many of the key ideas being assessed appeared in more than one text.

Criteria used to assess the key ideas included:

- Whether a given idea “sticks” – i.e. whether people refer to it and repeat it when discussing a text
- Whether people can easily express the idea themselves, as if passing it along to others (These first two criteria are based on the assumption that unless messages are “sticky” in this sense they have little chance of having an impact on public thinking or discourse at a stressful time.)
- Whether a given idea helps justify a progressive approach to security, or a progressive policy approach more generally.

- Whether there are indications that an idea may help reduce fear.

See the Appendix for a sample of questions asked about the texts.

The special role of “mortality salience”

In order to approximate the stressful situation in which the messages would ultimately have to be effective, each of the tested texts was presented in the following context:

The following is from a statement made last year by a public official on the seventh anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. Before you read it, please think back to that awful day – where you were, how you felt when you saw the images of the planes flying into the towers, hearing about the people who died on the planes and in the towers, and so forth.

Past research on the mortality salience effect suggests that it can be induced through very brief (even subliminal) references². This means that all responses observed in the course of testing were, in principle, shaped by this initial priming. If the past research is a guide, this priming created an especially challenging context for the messages.

² See e.g. Arndt, Greenberg, Pyszczynski and Solomon, “Subliminal Exposure To Death-Related Stimuli Increases Defense Of The Cultural Worldview,” *Psychological Science*, 2006.

EXPLORING “THREAT MODE”

As communicators are already aware, the context of a fear-inducing threat to life and security creates substantial challenges for any message, and particularly one that tries to fight upstream against people’s well-documented tendency to become more conservative and so forth. We refer to this mental/cognitive state as “Threat Mode.”

The combination of anxiety plus a conscious focus on the topic of safety creates a mental state that guides thinking strongly in some directions, and away from others. Some communications tools that might ordinarily be effective are anything but in this context – from moral appeals, to analogies to other situations, to attempts to draw rational distinctions.

These effects may partly reflect mortality salience – people may insist that history is irrelevant, for instance, simply as a way of rationalizing a (fear-driven) *instinct* to “get tough” in ways we have traditionally considered unacceptable. They also reflect the difficulty of thinking carefully and rationally in a threat context. For instance, while Americans apparently have trouble maintaining a consistent distinction in their minds between *suspects* and *criminals/perpetrators*, the difficulty is even greater in the threat context.

In this section we review some of the special challenges that were apparent in testing. We hope this overview of the “landscape” communicators are confronting with will help them deal better with the various traps that can derail a constructive conversation. Each of the challenges here is triggered even more easily than communicators might think – and it will be important to keep them in mind going forward.

Security as a “trump” factor

The most straightforward consequence of Threat Mode is that Americans of all political stripes tend to feel that protecting their safety and the safety of others *trumps virtually all other considerations*, including moral principle.

A clear and well-understood message about “who we are” as Americans (i.e. a nation defined by various moral principles), elicited responses like the following:

What stands out is that we have to protect our country. If we are just good and don't detain suspects or get information from suspects, we are going to be attacked again. The Taliban has proclaimed war against us, and we just can't sit back and do nothing.

48-year old Republican man, Missouri

I am strongly liberal in all other aspects -- like affirmative action, taxation, health care, green initiatives. However, I don't want to die to a terrorist attack that could have been prevented by torturing someone who would want to harm us.

29-year old Democratic man, California

It is especially easy for Americans to accept violations of our principles when they have the “out” of emphasizing that we are talking about *exceptional* circumstances. There is a common cultural model stating that wartime, for instance, is an ugly time when normal morality/rules don’t apply.

The bottom line is that the means justify the ends when it comes to protecting our security.

Implication: Communicators should be very wary of messages that imply that security may not be the highest priority.

Focus on the immediate

Closely related to the previous point, the testing suggests that in the context of a fear-inducing event, people tend to focus on *responding right now*, as opposed to *considering the consequences* (such as alienating allies, losing our values, breeding new terrorists). Longer time windows or longer causal chains can be easily dismissed.

In a time of war, it is perfectly acceptable to give up some privacy in exchange for security (wiretapping, for example), but should only be temporary.

39-year old Republican man, California

This pattern of thinking reflects a universal human capacity to think in particular ways about “emergencies.” It is reasonable to assume this effect would be even stronger in a particularly stressful time.

Implication: If messages are to have an impact in the aftermath of a fear-inducing event, they must sound immediately relevant to the current situation.

Tendency to hear what we want or expect to hear

On all issues, communicators face a problem psychologists call “confirmation bias” – that is, people tend to misinterpret information so as to “hear” confirmation of what they already know or believe, even when this is the opposite of the intended point.

The threat context seems to exacerbate this problem. As a result, many messages intended to promote progressive approaches are heard instead as support for getting tough.

For instance, subjects responding to a text that reads, in part, as follows, found it consistent with non-progressive ideas about torture, detention etc.

In fearful times like the days that followed 9/11, it is important to remember that the foundations of our country were also laid in fearful times of wars and

massacres, and that our history and our founding documents give us guidance in how to face those challenges. The founders of the country knew that fear can sometimes bring out the worst in us, can lead some people to grab instinctively for power, can make others willing to give up their fundamental rights, can make us suspicious of those around us, can lead us to threaten the rights of others. The legal protections we have as individuals and the limits on the power of authorities - these are critical, long-standing safeguards against what fear could do to our society.

The following are all excerpts from surveys in which people were responding to this text:

Q: Please try to repeat as much as you can remember of what the public official had to say ...

A: When something bad happens we get scared, but we have had problems before and can get through it.

Q: What political party would you imagine the public official belongs to?

A: Republican ... I just feel he thinks like me.

Q: Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "It's acceptable to torture prisoners, because we might get information that could keep us safe."

A: Strongly agree. We need the info and they are the enemy.

48-year old Republican woman, Michigan

Q: What would you say is the main point the public official is trying to make?

A: That this country was built to withstand fear.

Q: What political party would you imagine the public official belongs to?

A: Republican because Republicans stand up and take it

25-year old Independent man, Minnesota

Q: What would you say is the main point the public official is trying to make?

A: We need to rely on our founding documents to deal with these fearful times and not take rights away from people.

Q: What are your personal responses to the text that you read?

A: Sounds good. I do believe that people want to take our rights away so

things seem "safer", although taking our rights away actually leads to a scarier situation where we don't have the power to choose what kind of life we want.

Q: What political party would you imagine the public official belongs to?

A: Democratic ... It sounds like something Obama would say but not really follow through with it because he wants to take all our rights away!

Q: Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "It's acceptable to torture prisoners, because we might get information that could keep us safe."

A: Agree. International terrorists are not US citizens and therefore, are not covered by US law and rights. They will not show us the same common courtesy of not torturing and therefore, if they need to be tortured, so be it.

35-year old Republican woman, Kentucky

Conservatives who want to reduce the role of government can hear the text as an argument to keep government out of our lives.

Confirmation bias has an extraordinary ability to transform messages. For example, messages about *getting it right*, or being *effective* in dealing with the terrorist threat can be taken many ways, depending on preexisting beliefs about what 'getting it right' means. "Smart bombing," "smart torture," "smart surveillance," "smart PR," "smart invasions" might all be considered examples of well-considered responses.

Implication: Communicators must be wary of messages that contain the slightest ambiguity about what kind of approach is best. Communicators should not assume that "agreement" with a message means that people share the intended perspective.

Resistance to messages/messengers that offer no plan

People's desire for effective action against threats is such that they are very resistant to ideas that seem mainly to take options *off* the table. Of course, progressive advocates *are* interested in taking a variety of options (back) off the table – from torture to preemptive, unilateral invasions, etc. But many subjects object to (what they hear as) suggestions that we should, in effect, do nothing.

After reading a text that included the following:

When we take stock of our real position – and the fact that we actually have more to fear from cigarettes and car accidents than from terrorists – we can start to think clearly again. The truth is that the best thing we can do is to continue living as we always have, and believing the things that make us who we are.

some subjects seemed very dissatisfied with the apparent call to turn the other cheek.

The day that the entire world stops torturing prisoners will be the day it is OK to stop [torturing prisoners]. If we refuse and then miss out on important information that could have stopped another 9/11 where will our moral high ground position have gotten us then?

41-year old Republican man, Michigan

For the most part, I agree with the substance of the text, but I think it would be foolhardy to think that we could, or should, ever go back to living like we did before 9/11. Hopefully, we are wiser, safer, and a better country today than we were eight years ago.

35-year old Republican man, Kentucky

Implication: Effective messages must include clear implications about ways in which we can and should act.

Rejection of comparisons with the past

The threat context seems to make people particularly skeptical about drawing lessons from past history. The context may make other eras and situations seem particularly remote and irrelevant.

While they are interested, to an extent, in the idea that our nation has historically stood for a certain set of values and principles, Americans also tend to focus on the fact that present times are different from past times, and often say that old rules (about trust and tolerance, for instance) simply may not be realistic anymore.

We need to deal with this issue differently than anything ever before . . . I don't want to live in a police country but when we are dealing with the terrorist next door we need to relinquish some privacy. . . [Torture is acceptable] sometimes, for the greater good and if we are sure they are very bad men.

53-year old Democratic woman, New York

History is nice, but the world is more complicated today and there are more things to be afraid of.

53-year old Republican woman, New York

Implication: Communicators should not be overly confident about appeals to American history and traditions. They should allow that the current moment is (by definition) unique, even if they go on to draw parallels to other situations.

Resistance to “minimizing” the danger

In the context of an awful, fear-inducing event, it is very difficult for people to focus on the idea that such events are *relatively* minor, quite uncommon, and so forth. In the face of what feels like an extremely compelling example to the contrary, such messages seem well off target – they are unrealistic, head-in-the-sand thinking, etc.

Both of the following subjects are responding to the text that states, in part: “When we take stock of our real position – and the fact that we actually have more to fear from cigarettes and car accidents than from terrorists – we can start to think clearly again.”

The official is trying to dismiss and trivialize 9/11 and treat it like a one-time occurrence that will never happen again. It is probable something like that will happen again, and acting like it won't is the surest way to ensure it will . . . It may be true that the likelihood of a single person's life being affected by cigarettes or car accident is higher than that of a terrorist attack, but the attack will probably happen. It makes sense not forget the fear.

40-year old conservative man, Michigan

I think part of the attitude seems right and some of the attitude seems careless . . . This statement is trying to push things under the rug and just ignore what has already happened, making it destined to repeat.

27-year old liberal man, California

While some Americans have already thought about terrorist events, for instance, in this big-picture way, it is difficult for a message to persuade the rest to adopt this different view.

Implication: “Minimizing” messages are unlikely to be successful in the moments after a fear-inducing event.

No distinction between “suspected” and “guilty”

At least in the context of a fear-inducing event, it is very difficult for people to distinguish between people who *have* done wrong (such as terrorists) and people who *may have* done wrong (i.e. suspects).

Q. [Is] indefinite detention of people who are suspected of having ties to terrorists . . . a sad but necessary step?

A. I think that they should be put away so they cannot hurt us. I do not think they should be allowed in our society if they want to kill us.

29-year old Democratic man, California

Q. The US has to decide what do with the people held in camps like Guantanamo Bay. What do you think should be done about the ones that are suspected of being terrorists or “enemy combatants”?

A: Kill them.

39-year old Republic woman, Michigan

It is as though the fear/security context erases many conceptual distinctions leaving only such simple ideas as good/us, bad/them with nothing in between.

Implication: Communicators would need to work very hard if they want to establish “innocent until proven guilty” as a key principle in this context – simply relying on constitutional language, for example, will fail. And other “fine distinctions” are also likely to be lost in the threat context.

“FALSE LEADS”

It is instructive to consider some ideas that seem promising, and that tested well in certain respects – i.e. were memorable or persuasive on some level – but also “backfired” in These are directions that might be especially tempting, but also quite problematic for communicators.

1. People respond well to messages that encourage *anger at terrorists*.

One potentially effective way of “redirecting” people’s fear is to get them angry instead. Anger may be more empowering, and may reduce the “mortality salience” effect, for instance.

Texts that encouraged listeners/readers to be angry at terrorists were often responded to enthusiastically. For instance, the text that focused on “telling terrorists to go to hell,” by continuing to live as we always have and preserve our traditional values – proved memorable, and elicited quite a bit of agreement and engaged discussion, at least around the idea of defiance as the right stance.

*We live in country when we have freedom of whatever we want to pursuit,
no one can tell us how we want to live!*

19-year old Democratic man, New York

BUT anger is easily *channeled in the wrong directions*.

Subjects responding to the same “go to hell” text, and others, seemed ready to act on the anger by supporting harsher measures against suspects, etc. The same 19-year old Democratic voter as above went on to say about torture:

It’s OK to torture prisoners . . . People want the truth but truth often hurts.

Another subject responded to the text as follows:

*No terrorist, foreign or domestic, will ever beat us, because we have come
to treasure the freedoms that we have . . . I agree!*

*Q. [Is it] acceptable to torture prisoners, because we might get information
that could keep us safe?*

A. If it is a proven effective way to keep us safer, then I am all for it.

31-year old conservative woman, Virginia (#3)

In short, encouraging anger is playing with fire, and communicators would need to work hard to channel anger in only the intended directions.

2. People often respond well to messages about *manipulative politicians*.

Americans of all political orientations are engaged by messages about how politicians are manipulating their fear.

[I agree that] politicians are using the attacks of 9/11 to push an un-American agenda that contradicts our values.

36-year old Democratic man, Connecticut

We should have a healthy fear of what the terrorists could do, but not to the point of giving up what we inherently believe in. . . Fear can be used for good and for bad, but it seems that the ultimate goal of fear is to take power from you or me.

43-year old Republican woman, Washington

Based on past research, messages that encourage people to think about their own reactions may also have the positive effect of reducing mortality salience.

BUT the resentment of politicians is not necessarily constructive.

Research subjects who agreed with ideas about manipulative politicians often seemed to have *all* politicians in mind.

Q: Do you think politicians took advantage of the moment to do things that had nothing to do with terrorism?

A: Oh, gosh, you know, I would hate to think that, but they're politicians for goodness sakes, so I'm sure they did.

35-year old Democratic woman, Texas

And of course some simply rejected the messages as politically-motivated attacks.

I feel that this speaker is just trying to twist things for his/her own personal gain.

29-year old Republican man, Pennsylvania

responding to Fear-Mongering Politicians (see below)

[The statement] is obviously being made by an individual that has an agenda of their own.

33-year old Democratic woman, Washington

responding to Guarding Against Tyranny (see below)

[The message] sounds like someone trying to get elected.

31-year old Independent woman, New York

responding to Get It Right (see below)

We also suspect that such messages have a divisive quality that will not fare well in a context that in other ways invites unity. Following 9/11 Americans were more inclined than usual to put aside their differences, and such moments may be inopportune times for apparent ad hominem attacks.

In short, such messages might have a useful effect *before* an incident – provided they can be crafted to more effectively single out a small group of politicians – but there is little evidence they can be effective in the aftermath of an incident.

3. People often respond well to messages about our strength and relative invulnerability.

A number of texts included the idea that America will always survive – due to our strength, principles and so forth, and that we should rise above our fear. These texts often elicited enthusiastic responses that seemed to tap into a desire to rechannel anxiety in a more “positive” direction.

In order to not let the terrorists win, we must live our lives as Americans exactly as we have been before they attacked us. We should continue living in freedom, continue living without fear and continue our everyday lives . . . I strongly agree with that.

25-year old conservative woman, Texas (#3)

BUT such messages are not at all guaranteed to promote progressive perspectives.

Q. [Is it] acceptable to torture prisoners, because we might get information that could keep us safe?

A. *I completely agree with torture. The terrorists wouldn't even think twice about torturing us not even for information, just because we're Americans. So why should we feel guilty inflicting the same punishment they would do to us? At least we have a reason for it. They don't.*

(continuation from same 25-year old subject as above)

While the idea that the U.S. cannot be brought down by terrorists (for instance) is attractive, memorable and engaging – and may have some effect on mortality salience – it is also very compatible with the policies and practices progressive advocates are working to eliminate.

In short, it may not be constructive (for purposes of this project) to focus on messages that *reassure* unless these messages also *inherently support a new approach to security*.

General observation: “Toggling”

A general finding of the research is that many seemingly promising messages may actually count as “false leads.” While respondents were responsive to rather many of the ideas that were tested, their “agreement” did not necessarily change their thinking in fundamental ways. In part, this is because many of the arguments are familiar to most people, presumably as a result of the last 8 years of intensive coverage and emotional investment in this topic.

In part, this is good news, both because people already understand many of the points we are making, and because some people are relatively conscious of the various excesses, manipulations, and outright deceptions, have followed 9/11, and may have been partly inoculated against the “lurch to the Right.”

On the other hand, this knowledge has certainly not had the broad effect of guarding against unproductive patterns of thinking. We suspect that for this topic, more than for many others, people are quite capable of holding different and even contradictory frames at once. Ordinary people have made room for a variety of convincing stories about many aspects of the topic, and the question is which one really sticks when it counts.

MULTI-DIMENSIONAL TERRAIN

Before moving to a discussion of the particular texts and how they fared in testing, it is worth considering one additional, over-arching challenge communicators face. Part of the difficulty of selecting, creating and assessing messages about terrorism is that the terrain is multi-dimensional– both from an expert point of view and in terms of the cognitive factors involved.

The strategic communications objectives can be orthogonal or cross-cutting – and require a shifting perspective. Think three-dimensional chess. Messages might reasonably focus on a wide variety of content points, at a range of different scales, with different kinds of emotional significance, and so forth.

Numerous conceptual topics

Messages about a fear-inducing event such as a terrorist attack can potentially focus on a wide variety of *conceptual topics*. For instance, they may focus on:

- Perpetrator: What kind of person is the terrorist?
E.g. a terrorist should be thought of as a common criminal.
- Plan: What are the intentions behind an attack? What are the intended outcomes?
E.g., a terrorist's plan is to disrupt normal living.
- Event: What is the nature of the event? How should we understand the event itself, including its scale and its short-term and long-term consequences?
E.g. a terrorist event does not threaten the nation's survival, affects relatively small numbers, etc.
- Emotion: What our emotional responses to such an event? What should they be?
E.g., Fear hurts us because it impairs judgments.
- Action: What are the concrete steps we take as a result of the event, or to avoid such events?
E.g. Actions should not violate basic American principles.
- Results: The outcomes of the action(s)
E.g. we can lose needed allies as a result of our responses to terrorism.

Each of these topics (and others) can be approached in a variety of ways – in ways that may or may not take account of any of the others.

Three cognitive “focal lengths”

To further complicate the “apples and oranges” challenge, there are three distinct stances or perspectives that people can take on the topic, which we will refer to here as the Individual, Big-Picture, and Country-as-Person perspectives.

Individual perspective

Laypeople (including all of us, in contexts removed from our areas of expertise) gravitate to a perspective dominated by our own immediate situation, our own feelings (e.g., fear), the actions we can take, for example to protect our own safety (e.g., buying a dust mask, laying in supplies).

Some messages might focus on the situation and response of individuals to a terrorist attack, for instance. But while such messages could in principle be reassuring, past experience suggests that they are likely to limit thinking about policy. When the big picture is absent, we don’t perceive the kinds of steps that the nation might take for the collective good.

Big-picture perspective

This point of view brings a complex and often abstract set of assumptions to bear on the problem. It is a perspective often taken by experts and, by definition, the one that is closest to how the world actually works. The expert view takes in causal forces that cannot be inferred from everyday experience, facts that are not immediately intuitive, etc. (e.g. that torture is no more effective than simple interviewing in eliciting reliable information, that people become terrorists for complex reasons, etc.).

The Big-picture perspective is obviously helpful if people can achieve it, but the empirical question is whether, or to what extent, this is really possible.

Country-as-Person perspective

Previous research conducted by the authors has demonstrated that ordinary Americans make use of a simple metaphor when trying to make sense of the otherwise very unfamiliar and “hard-to-think” topic of international relations.³ According to this metaphor, the United States and other countries are thinking/feeling *persons* writ large. For instance, a country can *get mad, hit back, lose control, send a message* etc. The metaphor allows laypeople to move beyond the Individual perspective and to think about national/collective policy, but in ways that are different from the expert’s Big-picture perspective.

³ Aubrun, Axel and Joe Grady. 1999. “American Understandings of the United States’Role in the World: Findings from Cognitive Interviews

Reason vs. Emotion

A third complicating factor is the special role of emotion on this issue. One of the most problematic dynamics concerns the effects of emotion (anxiety about death) on reasoning. And terrorism can be understood as a tactic that is expressly designed to prevent or “hijack” rational thinking. The challenge is different both in kind and in degree from the usual problems that face progressive communicators, such as the public’s “apathy,” “ignorance,” “inaccurate understandings of the issue,” etc.

Communicators face difficult choices, such as whether to let sleeping dogs lie and avoid talking about scary things, or whether to give the public conceptual tools to help it master feelings of helplessness if and when a terrorist event happens – whether to reassure people directly about their fears or to offer them messages that are indirectly reassuring, for instance.

These three sets of dynamics (and the list is of course longer) suggest a long list of possible *points of intervention* that can be disorientating from a strategic communications perspective. It is always tempting to find one that “works” in some sense, and to ignore the others; and to ignore as well the fact that a given communications intervention is likely to have effects at more than one point.

SPECIFIC TEXTS

In this section, we briefly discuss how various specific texts fared in testing. In particular, we focus on texts with significant liabilities, and how responses reflect the challenges discussed earlier. Texts that performed better will be discussed in the subsequent section.

As a reminder, all texts were presented in the following context:

The following is from a statement made last year by a public official on the seventh anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. Before you read it, please think back to that awful day – where you were, how you felt when you saw the images of the planes flying into the towers, hearing about the people who died on the planes and in the towers, and so forth.

1. Safest People on Earth

We should be deeply angry at the people who did this, but we should also remember that by and large Americans are among the safest people on Earth. We actually have more to fear from cigarette smoke or car accidents than we do from terrorists. They were a small group to begin with and they have been significantly hampered by worldwide security efforts since 9/11. They achieved something awful seven years ago today, but they never had and still have no hope of weakening the greatest democracy on Earth. Let us each recommit ourselves to upholding our unique heritage of democracy, fairness and freedom.

Responses to this text reflect the problem with “minimizing” the risks of terrorism. A minority of subjects already seemed comfortable with the “big picture” perspective on the risks of terrorism, but the comparison was more often rejected.

The references to traditional values at the end had no real impact – as opposed to the discussion of safety.

2. Continuing To Live

Something awful happened seven years ago today, but something wonderful has happened every day since. Americans have won, by continuing to live the way we always have, and believing in the things that make us who we are. Have we stopped having picnics on a nice day? Stopped being charitable to folks in need? Stopped going to work and doing the best job we know how? Stopped innovating and inventing? Have we given up on freedom and the pursuit of happiness? On the value of the individual? No, no and no again. Our ideals are the same as they have always been, and that is why no terrorist, foreign or domestic, can ever beat us.

Responses to this text seemed to reflect two of the Challenges discussed earlier:

- It is unsatisfying because it *offers no vision of what we should to do* combat terrorism.
- The argument that our ideals have not changed is challenged by many people's strong intuition that we are in a new era.
- Since it does not unambiguously promote any particular course of action, it is compatible with the "wrong" approaches to security: The references to "freedom" and the "value of the individual" are not enough to evoke a more progressive view of security, and the message can be heard as confirming the Bush approach.

3. GO TO HELL

People sometimes ask, "What can I do about terrorists?" There's one simple answer: Tell them to go to hell! How do we do that? By continuing to live the way we always have, and believing in the things that make us who we are. Have we stopped having picnics on a nice day? Stopped being charitable to folks in need? Stopped going to work and doing the best job we know how? Stopped innovating and inventing? Have we given up on freedom and the pursuit of happiness? On the value of the individual? No no and no again. Our ideals are the same as they have always been, and that is why no terrorist, foreign or domestic, can ever beat us.

As discussed earlier, people are often enthusiastic about the defiant tone of this message. They also find it easy to identify with the speaker. (Either Democrats or Republicans can believe the speaker belongs to their own party.)

But while responses are often enthusiastic, they are also often accompanied by calls for harsher, tougher action.

4. FEAR-MONGERING POLITICIANS

This may sound harsh, but I believe it's important to say. In a way, the politicians who have tried to scare us over the past 7 years, by reminding us of the attacks, have actually been helping the terrorist cause. Has any of us forgotten the attacks? Do we need to be reminded? No. But putting a bit of fear into us serves certain agendas, and lets people get away with things they couldn't otherwise – like gradually undermining our freedoms. What we have to remember is that this is exactly what the terrorists want. They win by changing our minds, our hearts, our habits, our way of life. If we stand for what we've always stood for, they lose and we win. We can be smart, vigilant and practical without being fearful. And that has always been the American way.

Many Americans are happy to condemn politicians for any number of reasons, and this message sometimes proves memorable and engaging.

On the other hand, it is often interpreted as a (justified) condemnation of *all* politicians, and also strikes many others as a politically-motivated attack

5. OUR REAL POSITION

Everyone feels fear at times like those, but we don't need to be controlled by that fear. Instead we can take a deep breath, and start to get a new perspective on things. We realize that as awful as an event like this is, we will survive and we still live in the world's greatest democracy. As a matter of fact, the best way to ensure our future is by not letting fear get the better of us. When we take stock of our real position – and the fact that we actually have more to fear from cigarettes and car accidents than from terrorists – we can start to think clearly again. The truth is that the best thing we can do is to continue living as we always have, and believing the things that make us who we are.

This message is engaging to many people. Americans seem receptive to the general recommendation that they not fall prey to fear.

Unfortunately, the reference to fear seems to encourage thinking about an individual's own situation rather than thinking about policy. Much of the rest of the message is lost to a simple exhortation that we master our fear. And reduced to this Churchillian expression, the message is compatible with all sorts of policies or even attitudes – for example jingoism.

6. LED ASTRAY

9/11 was a terrible day. But for our country, we should actually be more concerned about the days that followed – and the ways in which we let fear lead us astray. Americans believe torture is wrong, something they do in less democratic countries – but out of fear we let torture happen repeatedly in our name. Americans believe in individual privacy, but out of fear we allowed unprecedented intrusions into our personal lives and communications. Americans believe in fairness, but out of fear we abandoned basic fairness in our legal system – holding prisoners with no evidence or charges against them. When fear leads us astray in these ways, the terrorists have scored a victory.

This text tells a coherent story, that many people understand, remember and agree with, at least in principle.

On the other hand, it fails to imply a vision of what we should do to protect ourselves, and it illustrates the problem that principle is usually trumped by safety considerations – i.e. even people who agree with the ideas insist that sometimes you simply have to do whatever is necessary.

7. GUARDING AGAINST TYRANNY

In fearful times like the days that followed 9/11, it's important to remember that the foundations of our country were laid in fearful times of wars and massacres, and that our history and founding documents give us guidance in how to face those challenges. The founders of the country knew that fear can sometimes bring out the worst in us, can lead some people to grab instinctively for power, can make others willing to give up their fundamental rights, can make us suspicious of those around us, can lead us to threaten their rights. The legal protections we have as individuals, the limits on the power of authorities – these are critical, long-standing safeguards against what fear could do to our society.

8. WHO BENEFITS?

In a fearful time like the days following 9/11 it's important to ask ourselves, who benefits from our fear? Clearly the terrorists do. Our fear is their goal, and it makes us change how we live, how we treat others, how we feel, what we believe. But we must also remember that others in our own country benefit from our fear, and at our expense. Those who would like to take more power for themselves, and reduce our liberties and our privacy. Those who would like to impose their own vision of how we treat people and how we treat other nations – in ways that go against long American tradition. Fear benefits them and makes us vulnerable to their agenda as well.

While some research subjects appreciated the first message – particularly the reassuring point that we should not let fear control us – it suffers from several clear problems:

- Its historical focus can be dismissed as irrelevant to current times.
- It can easily be misheard as *only* a message about not giving into fear – making it easily compatible with the “wrong” approaches to security (harsher treatment of prisoners, etc.).
- It talks about what not to do, but is unsatisfying in that it implies no alternative approach to protecting ourselves.

Perhaps because it is not as clear as the first, the second message did not elicit consistent responses in our respondents.

9. “WHO WE ARE”

When we are faced with terrible events like 9/11, the best and most reassuring thing we can do is to remember *who we are*, as Americans. The principles that make us who we are, are also the ones that have made us great, powerful and admired. The country that stands for freedom and opportunity – that's who we are. A place where fear doesn't guide our actions – that's who we are. A people that doesn't torture or hold prisoners without evidence – that's who we are.

Terrorists and fear-mongers would like to change who we are, but they can't, and that's why we will always win in the end.

This message (and the phrase "who we are") proved very memorable and engaging. It appeals to people's sense of who they would like to be as Americans.

On the other hand, it clearly suffers from appearing to put principle ahead of safety. The result is that quite a few subjects (regretfully) disagreed that we can afford to simply be guided by those principles.

10. GET IT RIGHT

If something this awful ever happens to Americans again, and we're forced to contemplate how to respond, I hope we remember one simple idea: Let's get it right. Are we getting it right when we invade countries that have nothing to do with the attack? Or do we get it right by targeting our power at places that represent real threats? Are we getting it right when imprison thousands of potentially innocent people indefinitely, turning them into bitter enemies. Or do we get it right by continuing to uphold our traditional values of freedom and fairness – so that others around the world are eager to ally with us? Ultimately, getting it right means making us secure.

This message – and the phrase "getting it right" – proved memorable and engaging. The message appeals to people's desire to be smart and effective.

On the other hand, some objected to the apparently political tone, the indirect criticisms of a particular President and Party.

And more generally, the idea of "getting it right" is so open to interpretation that it can be compatible with nearly any approach to security, *done well*.

11. WHAT TERRORISTS WANT

"Terrorism has only one weapon that works – fear. Terrorists know that when we are afraid we can overreact; by lashing out at others; by accepting government authority without question. When we are afraid, we are less open and tolerant. We will even break our own laws and go against our own values in order to get revenge. Of course, these are all things that terrorists want. They want to provoke a reaction that moves people away from an open, lawful society and toward a closed, fearful society where people feel they have to give up freedoms and privacy in order to be safe. The countries that have prevailed against terrorism are the ones that have taken that weapon – fear – away from the terrorists. These are countries that have stayed true to their values and dealt with the terrorists as the thugs and criminals that they are."

People responded well to the idea of not being fearful, in fact that was what most people took away.

The several ideas that follow, building up an argument against giving up our principles did not register nearly as well.

In addition, the paragraph seemed to suffer from two problems that affected other paragraph: the interpretation that we are being asked not to do much; and the idea that we being asked to put our principles above our safety – an exchange that few people are willing to make.

12. ALLERGIC OVERREACTION, 13. CHRONIC CONDITION 14. OVERREACTION 1

"Terrorism experts tell us that the most important threats from terrorism come from what some call Allergic Overreaction. As with an allergic response to a bee sting, the real danger is less from the initial pain, than from the body's potentially lethal overreaction to the small amount of poison. Similarly, terrorism is effective when, following the initial loss of lives or property, a society overreacts – cutting itself off from allies, lashing out in ways that do more harm than good, forgetting its own values. Societies that do well in response to terrorism avoid this kind of overreaction. "

"Terrorism experts agree on two things: The threat of terrorism won't entirely disappear anytime soon. And terrorists can't actually threaten our country's existence, the way that the Soviet Union used to. The threat of terrorism, they say, is like a chronic medical condition that has to be managed – patiently, intelligently, and relentlessly. Experts point to several key do's and don'ts for reducing and managing the terrorism threat. Some of the Don'ts include: Don't try to go it alone – we need close cooperation among law-abiding countries to best limit the problem. Don't breed new terrorists – people are recruited to the terrorist cause every time we bomb civilians or torture people. Don't overreact – any chronic condition involves outbreaks, and if we temporarily abandon our values and principles we beat ourselves."

"Terrorism seeks to weaken strong powers like the United States by goading them to overreact and waste their own blood and treasure, give sympathy and recruiting gains to terrorists, and come loose from their ideological moorings. Beyond avoiding war and misdirected homeland security efforts, sound counterterrorism strategy requires subtle awareness of the different ways a victim state's actions can play into terrorists' hands. Countering the strategic logic of terrorism will require policymakers to adopt very disciplined responses and deny superficially appealing impulses toward overreaction."

See also expanded discussion of Overreaction idea in section titled “Two Partial Wins” below.

All three of these texts suggest metaphors aimed at getting to the idea of overreaction. Each produced evidence of constructive thinking in respondents. The chronic condition frame in particular seemed to inoculate against Threat Mode thinking.

The specific metaphors of an allergic reaction to a bee sting, and that of a medical condition, were not picked up by many respondents – but neither were they rejected. This is perhaps evidence for the robustness of the idea of overreaction – there are many ways of making the case.

The third paragraph elicited some constructive response, but also a fair amount of confusion among respondents. (It was later rewritten in more user-friendly language and the results are discussed in the next section).

TWO PARTIAL “WINS”

While none of the tested paragraphs proved to be a “silver bullet,” two ideas performed the most useful work. Both, compared to other frames we tested, were stronger on the following general criteria:

- Memorability – subjects remembered the gist of the argument.
- Agreement – most people explicitly agreed with the idea.
- “Ahah!” moment – the idea felt like an insight to many.
- Intellectual stimulation – responses tended to be longer, more thoughtful.
- Neutrality – the fame was not perceived as overtly political, unlike many other frames tested.

1) Terrorists are criminals who want to be treated as something more, but we should not accommodate them.

The idea that we should treat terrorists as common criminals, and terrorism as a crime rather than an act of war is a familiar one to advocates. The current round of research demonstrated that ordinary people accept and make use of one version of this frame to guide their thinking in productive directions.

SELF-AGGRANDIZING CRIMINALS

"The man who sets off a bomb in a train station is a common criminal, but he doesn't want to be treated like a common criminal. He certainly doesn't want to be hand-cuffed and given a fair trial and put in prison. He wants to be a supervillain and a martyr. He wants Americans to think that he is something special – something fearsome. Something to write new laws about, something to create special prisons for, and something to make us change our foreign policies; something to make us change our values. But he doesn't deserve that. He's just a criminal with a bomb who doesn't care about other people's lives. We already have laws for that."

It is important to note that this frame is not identical with the familiar ideas that terrorism is a law-enforcement matter. This frame adds an element of logical argument based on the terrorists' own motivations: Terrorism should be treated as a law-enforcement matter not just because of the nature of the crime, but because terrorists want us to treat it otherwise.

The research showed that the frame gets people thinking, as opposed to merely reacting reflexively– Talkback responses tended to be both longer and more thoughtful than with many other frames tested:

I think a terrorist deserves the death penalty. Not a big trial and circus coverage. If you do the crime do the time. Stop the fanfare.

50- year old Liberal woman, OH

I agree totally with the statement. When we start treating them as special, then they become special. We already have laws that deal with them, we already have prisons that can house them . Why should we spend more money on this type of scum?

55- year old Conservative man, FL

I agree that we tend to overreact when we encounter super-villains because we are horrified by their actions which involve the deaths of many individuals by violent means. We also become frightened because we indentify with the horror of the actions and think we could be next. We want our government to protect us so that we are not victims.

60- year old Independent woman, Wisconsin

A person who bombs people on a train is a criminal, but he doesn't want to be thought of as a common criminal. He wants to be a martyr, a superhero. he wants us to build special prisons for him and create special laws and foreign policy. He's really just a common criminal though who thinks nothing of hurting innocent people.

46- year old Liberal woman, CA

Individuals who perpetrate terrorist acts want to be regarded not as a common criminals but as supervillains who elicit exaggerated responses to their crimes; responses that lead to changes in societal values and or foreign policy.

39- year old Liberal man, New York

In addition, ore than half of our respondents agreed with the basic idea, and perhaps more significantly, even those who disagreed were willing to entertain the idea and to acknowledge at least some validity.

Finally, many people demonstrated an emotional response to the frame, suggesting that it has the power to channel some emotion in a productive direction – put another way, it satisfies to a significant degree people’s urge to feel safe in the face of terrorism – in particular by not downplaying the ideas of security, and even retribution. At the same time, it can be contrasted with the idea of telling the terrorists to “go to Hell,” which people find engaging, but which takes them in an unproductive direction.

Weaknesses of the “Self-Aggrandizing Criminal” frame

On the other hand, the Self-Aggrandizing Criminal frame has some real liabilities, which prevent us from recommending it without reservation:

- It doesn't provide an absolute firebreak against Authoritarianism (the "lurch to the Right"). While the common criminal frame is compatible in principle with a

more Progressive perspective, and does certainly focus on different policy tools (e.g., surveillance rather than bombing), it is also compatible with what George Lakoff would describe as “Strict Father” thinking (e.g., suspending habeus corpus, surveilling, treating prisoners harshly, etc.)

- There is no guarantee that this frame won’t be swept away in the heat of the moment: To some extent, the actor is defined by the act, and major terrorist acts – despite the fact that they are conducted by small groups of stateless individuals – seem cognitively much more like “acts of war” than like the acts of “common criminals.”
- The “Self-Aggrandizing Criminal” frame doesn’t automatically preclude the “war” frame. In many people’s minds, a terrorism suspect can be classified as *both* “enemy combatant” and “common criminal” – the status of common criminal is simply *added* to that of enemy combatant, with each status subtracting additional rights.
- The “Self-Aggrandizing Criminal” frame doesn’t take account of all of our responses to terrorism: In point of fact, even a progressive strategy for fighting terrorism would include components that do not fit within the domain of law-enforcement.

2) When we overreact (to terrorism), we hurt ourselves.

One version of the idea that we should not “overreact” to a terrorist attack did particularly well in testing:

OVERREACTION HURTS US

"Terrorists try to weaken strong powers like the United States by goading them to overreact. When we overreact to terrorism, we hurt ourselves in several ways:

- We waste our own blood and treasure.
- We betray our own values – for example by giving up our civil liberties.
- We create sympathy and new recruits for terrorists.

Military experts tell us that effective counterterrorism strategy begins with not doing what the terrorists want us to do. This means we have to control our fear and anger – and respond calmly, rationally, and ethically."

The idea that Overreaction Hurts Us is simple and user-friendly, and works at nearly every level, applying equally well to feeling, thinking, and action; and to the individual or policy level. As with Self-Aggrandizing Criminal, the frame gets people thinking, as opposed to merely reacting reflexively– Talkback responses tended to be both longer and more thoughtful than with many other frames tested:

I mean, the media over-sensitizes everything. It's just overkill. And I think the media makes things worse sometimes when the job is just to inform. It's just overkill with that kind of thing . . . It's just drawing more attention to it, and you get the overreaction with all of the attention.

36-year old liberal woman, Ohio

I think it makes sense. Even though a terrorist attack may be a very traumatic event, overreacting to a single event may yield consequences even worse than the attack.

22-year old conservative man, New Jersey

It's like being brainwashed in a way. Fear is very powerful and I have overreacted many times myself when feeling that way. I try to remain calm, but it isn't always easy.

54-year old conservative woman, Maryland

Overreaction to terrorism is more dangerous than terrorism itself . . . I strongly agree. The text for me invokes ex-President Bush's overreactions to terrorism, and I couldn't have disagreed more with almost everything he said and did for his full term.

27-year old liberal man, New York

We have to be prepared but not paranoid.

43-year old moderate man, California

Q: How do you think that we sometimes overreact?

A: The Patriot Act is a huge thing of how we overreact. The Patriot Act should never have been put in. It denies you and me (who are not terrorists), basic civil liberties, and it allows the government to look into everything and anything that they want to, wiretap without a warrant, that type of thing. So, the Patriot Act is one of the worst ways I think that we overreacted after 9/11. ... We have to be on the offense, but not overreact.

36-year old liberal woman, Michigan

As these responses suggest, the frame seems to have a calming effect without precluding action in itself. In addition, the frame refers naturally to any number of concrete or general policy choices:

- Government takes too much power
- Lashing out militarily
- Alienating friends
- Temporary loss of identity/values

Weaknesses of the “Overreaction Hurts Us” frame

The greatest weakness of the idea that Overreaction Hurts Us may be that it is not as emotionally engaging as some other messages, such as Common Criminal – partly by definition, since it is about dampening emotions and actions. This liability is to some degree a reflection of actual progressive recommendations, which center on *not* doing or feeling the wrong things. In other words, the idea of avoiding overreaction is simply the most direct and effective translation of the progressive position on this issue – a general admonition rather than a specific recommendation about what exactly we should do, think, or feel.

It is worth noting that the two directions are not mutually exclusive. For example, by reducing the category “terrorists” to individual actors, the Common Criminal frame supports the idea that we avoid Overreaction.

CONCLUSION: THE STRATEGIC CHALLENGE OF COMMUNICATING ABOUT TERROR

Though the current round of research had the limited objective of evaluating a small set of frames distilled from existing communications directions, it inevitably cast some light on the immense challenge of defending a progressive worldview in the wake of a terrorist event.

First, this research reinforces the idea that acts of terror are themselves strategic communications. Reinvented and refined over centuries, terrorism is a perfectly engineered manipulation that works against the core elements of a progressive agenda – by exploiting a deeply rooted set of human propensities. Like a well-designed virus, terrorist acts are in the worst instances capable of “taking over” the machinery of the body politic.

While the mechanisms aren’t completely understood, a number of features stand out fairly clearly. Acts of terror:

- Cause a kind of emotional “hijacking” of the brain and mind.
- Tap into very basic schemas that prescribe “fighting back” as the best/only way to:
 - Prevent further threats, and
 - Balance the moral books.

The problem is compounded by the fact that terrorism effectively exploits people’s tendency to think of countries as metaphorical persons. This causes a “scaling up” of what people judge to be an appropriate response: Acts of terror are cognitively hard to put in the Law-Enforcement box.

Terrorism also exploits the human tendency to turn to “circle the wagons.” This response includes a cluster of related features such as submitting to the authority of a strong leader, protecting perceived borders, and focusing on shared identity (demographic and ideological).

The limitations of the two most promising directions uncovered in this research – “Self-Aggrandizing Criminal” and “Overreaction Hurts Us” – makes clear that more work needs to be done. At the same time, a richer understanding of how terrorism affects people’s thinking does allow some predictions about the characteristics of a successful message.

What will a successful message look like?

1) As expected, effective messages must be “psychologically robust” if they are to survive the highly toxic cognitive environment associated with a terrorist event. Key attributes include:

- An idea/proposition that is simple or “easy to think”
- A focus and tone that emphasizes efficacy
- Concreteness rather than abstractness
- Terms/sound bites that people can easily access
- An absence of political identification
- An emotional dimension that people can engage with

2) At the same time, a message that counters the effects of terrorism will ideally operate across several dimensions at once. Such a message might, for example,

- Dampen feelings, of fear, anger, and also of submissiveness to authority
- Encourage people to think clearly, for example about causes and effects
- Encourage people to consider the bigger picture
- Dampen the tendency to precipitate action

3) Finally, an effective message will provide a sense of an effective response, rather than simply negating the most natural and intuitive actions and feelings.

This last attribute points to the most urgent next step in communicating strategically about fear-inducing events: While the idea that Overreaction Hurts US works well across a number of contexts – emotional *and* rational, individual *and* policy – it cannot substitute for a clear description of what a progressive security agenda looks like, and how it will work to keep us safe.



Founded by veteran communications strategists Axel Aubrun and Joe Grady of Cultural Logic and Meg Bostrom of Public Knowledge, Topos has as its mission to explore and ultimately *transform the landscape of public understanding* where public interest issues play out. Our approach is based on the premise that while it is *possible* to achieve short-term victories on issues through a variety of strategies, *real change* depends on a fundamental shift in public understanding. Topos was created to bring together the range of expertise needed to understand existing issue dynamics, explore possibilities for creating new issue understanding, develop a proven course of action, and arm advocates with new communications tools to win support.

For more information:
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APPENDIX A: TWO UNTESTED PROMISING DIRECTIONS

Two promising directions emerged from the research, which communicators may try for themselves, or that could be subjected to additional testing in the future. Each of these directions fits the basic criteria suggested by the testing, and avoids the key traps, and could play out in a variety of different forms.

Explaining cynical political techniques.

Some of the tested ideas and texts focused on the idea of manipulation by domestic fear-mongers. The general idea of manipulation was effective at capturing certain truths and at harnessing emotional energy. But these messages also had downsides discussed earlier, including that they could seem too overtly political and ad hominem; that they sometimes led to condemnation of all politicians; and that they seem ill-suited to times when there is a pull towards putting our differences aside.

A focus on *techniques* of manipulation, as opposed to the *people* doing the manipulating, might avoid these pitfalls, and effectively inoculate Americans against certain kinds of cynical exploitation of a frightening incident.

Our current approach to security is making us less safe.

A number of the tested ideas and texts offered hints at how our recent approaches to security might backfire. None of the texts, however, treated this as the central, organizing idea. Given the importance of placing a high priority on safety (as opposed to principle, for instance), such a message might be effective – *if it makes clear that there is a viable alternative*.

Such a message might be most useful *before* an incident rather than after it, but could make a significant difference if repeated often enough to be established as common wisdom.

APPENDIX B: QUESTIONNAIRE

- Please try to repeat as much as you can remember of what the public official had to say. If you can remember exact words or phrases, great, but please also paraphrase all the main points as well as you can.
- What would you say is the main point the public official is trying to make?
- What are your personal responses to the text that you heard/read?
- What else stands out to you about the statement?
- What political party would you imagine the public official belongs to? (And why?)

In addition, subjects were asked before and after exposure to the text about their opinions on a small set of relevant policies (surveillance and other “invasions of privacy”; torture of prisoners; indefinite detention of individual suspected of having ties to terrorists).