



DETECTING INTENTIONS, MANAGING FEAR

How Americans Think about National Security

Findings from Cognitive Elicitations

Produced by the Topos Partnership
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INTRODUCTION

A wide range of security experts have called for a new U.S. approach that is broader in outlook, more cooperative, balanced, farsighted, and accountable – an approach that recognizes the importance of our relationships with other nations; that respects international laws and agreements; that seeks to strengthen and build partnerships with key international institutions; and that takes into account the relationship between global stability and national security. Such an approach, these experts say, is likely to be the most effective in a complex, interdependent world.

Polls and focus groups provide valuable snapshots of *what* the American people think about national security. The National Security Network and US in the World have been working with the Topos Partnership to study *how* Americans understand national security – what it is, which strategies contribute to it, and how our political leaders do or don't further it. In Spring 2008, the National Security Network commissioned Topos to conduct fifty one-on-one in-depth interviews with a diverse cross-section of Americans, called *elicitations*. At the same time, Topos produced a companion meta-analysis of dozens of polls and focus groups on the topic

As Topos's recent meta-survey of public opinion research suggests, the American public too seems open to a new approach to security. In political terms, one major liability for Republicans in the current climate is their party's association with a (unilateral, narrow, military-focused) approach that has created many costs and few recognizable gains.

Politicians and candidates who advocate alternative security policies, more in line with the approach outlined above, enjoy a political advantage, at least for the time being.

On the other hand, Topos’ elicitations suggest that the *cognitive and cultural playing field remains tilted toward a conservative worldview and policy approaches*. At a deep level, Americans’ default ways of understanding security end up advantaging conservative leaders and policies. Core elements of the progressive worldview – such as the interconnectedness of global and national security – are often acknowledged as relevant, but they tend not to command lasting attention. They quickly disappear from the conversation as stronger *default* perspectives reassert themselves.

Dominant Patterns of Thinking

The elicitations with non-expert Americans revealed two particular patterns of thinking about security, each of which has a deep and powerful shaping effect on public opinion: the dominance of an *Interpersonal* understanding of how security works, and the important role of *peace of mind* as an organizing principle in non-expert people’s (as opposed to insiders’) thinking. Without taking these patterns and their implications into account, advocates of any particular approach to security stand little chance of navigating the cultural, psychological and political terrain effectively.

Pattern 1: Dominance of the Interpersonal Stance

When asked to think about security and about international relations, Americans *rely on their understanding of how people/individuals relate to one another*. While it is no surprise that non-experts would think primarily in terms of people and personal qualities (pushy, arrogant, generous, fair, etc.) when addressing this complex and unfamiliar domain, the dominance of this pattern has not been clearly appreciated. It is a consistent default perspective – even for those who are relatively educated on the issues – and has a number of distorting effects on non-expert people’s perceptions of *what national security is* and *how it works*.

A World of “Persons”

The default view of how security works is based on a world populated by *persons* interacting with one another, whether in good ways or bad. These can be real individuals, such as leaders or residents of particular countries, and can also be personifications of the countries themselves (as in “We leaned on France to join the coalition.”) These persons (real, hypothetical or metaphorical) are chiefly thought of in terms of their *moral, psychological and social qualities*.

This *interpersonal* vision is apparent in discussions of almost any specific national security issue:

- Why are terrorists terrorists? Because of their individual moral/psychological qualities (to the exclusion of conditions, historical or structural factors, globally or in their society).

- How is oil relevant to security? Certain “people” become angry if they feel we don’t need them anymore.
- Why is diplomacy important? Because generally speaking, we should “talk to people like people.”
- Why should we help foreign countries? So they’ll be nice to us, and so we feel that we are “good” ourselves.
- What should we do to become more secure? One thing is to stop “bossing people around.”

This reliance on Interpersonal thinking is not simply “wrong,” or entirely unhelpful. Experts also make liberal use of the Interpersonal stance in their own thinking about national security. But experts easily shift to a *structural* perspective, for instance, which takes in a host of additional causal factors that are largely invisible from the Interpersonal perspective.

In order to appreciate how deeply engrained and stubborn the Interpersonal Stance is for non-experts, it is helpful to consider it from a cognitive science perspective.

The “Intention Detector”

The Interpersonal stance is not simply an *idea* about how things work, that might be “corrected” by additional information. Instead, it should probably be thought of as ***part of the basic equipment of the human mind***. Neuropsychological research, for example, has identified an inborn capacity to automatically and unconsciously make guesses and calculations about the *intentions* of other people – a kind of “Intention Detector,”¹ that is probably one of our essential tools for success and survival.

When non-expert people try to wrap their minds around unfamiliar and highly abstract domains like foreign affairs generally, and national security issues more specifically, they rely heavily on this built-in Intention Detector. Put generally, it helps people make sense (rightly or wrongly) of what they hear, in the news and in conversation, in terms that are deeply familiar and emotionally convincing. As the research demonstrates clearly, non-experts ***don’t especially hunger for a better understanding*** of how international relations work. On the contrary, they tend to *resist* or filter out new stories, discarding information about foreign affairs that doesn’t fit the Interpersonal frame.

Analogies with Familiar Scenarios

There are a number of particular Interpersonal scenarios that are most commonly drawn on for thinking about security. In particular, the language and thinking that non-expert Americans bring to the issue of national security seems to be borrowed to a striking degree from the *schoolyard* experience – which may be the purest experience we have of the social calculations and negotiations that the Intention Detector has equipped us to

¹ See, e.g. *Understanding Other Minds: Perspectives from Developmental Cognitive Neuroscience*, Oxford University Press, 2000.

deal with. In the schoolyard, kids are mostly aware of and focused on *each other*. It is where the official authority of rules and teachers has the least reach, and where parental authority is generally absent altogether. It is an arena for early learning about *dealing with other people*, full stop.

More particularly, the emotionally-charged Schoolyard experience probably creates early and powerful understandings of security (and insecurity) in a collective setting. Our understanding of how power, alliances, friendships, isolation, and the role of institutions like the UN is largely and unconsciously conditioned by our schoolyard experience.

To take a specific example from the current research, the word “bully” came up over and over in the elicitations. It is natural that much of our thinking about how to relate to others, or how not to, etc. is based on the strong cultural models related to bullies – a significant if unfortunate part of the schoolyard experience. In the minds of most Americans, the U.S. *is often cast as the bully*, clearly not an attractive or even acceptable role. But the idea of bullies also comes up as non-experts think about *appeasing* other groups or nations. Part of growing up is learning how to “stand up” to bullies, both for our own character and for the good of others.

Finally, while apparent schoolyard analogies were most common among our informants, there are clear parallels with two other familiar cultural scenarios such as the Wild West, and the Urban Jungle. In each of these three “stripped-down” scenarios, there are *bullies*, an emphasis on *self-reliance* and *toughness*, the temptation of *appeasement*, and the relative *absence or weakness of institutions and laws*.

Personas as Security Strategies

If security is about Interpersonal relations, then there is a certain list of character traits that are relevant to the problem of national security. We can think of these as “folk security strategies” (parallel to “folk medicine,” “folk etymology,” “folk physics” etc.) – i.e. intuitive understandings of what makes us safe that bear little relation to what experts would recognize as a “strategy” or a sensible response.

The research suggests that *all* Americans use *all* of these (sometimes overlapping) models at one time or another, but individuals may be more strongly drawn to one or another of them, often based on political orientation, or may be cued to toggle from one to another based on context. And significantly, these broadly shared patterns and their effects have important consequences not just for thinking about security, but for thinking about the pros and cons of different leaders and different political parties:

- *Strength*
The tougher we are the less likely others are to “mess with” us.
- *Working well with others*
Another common, instinctive interpretation of what makes us safe is making friends and being respected and liked. Many elicitation subjects commented that not being liked – and having a bad “image” – can hurt our security.

- *Maintaining isolation/autonomy*

The elicitations confirm that the Neighbor analogy is one of the ones used by non-expert Americans for thinking about international relations. According to this model, the world is a neighborhood and the guide to behavior is the concept of a Good Neighbor.

For better or worse, an important aspect of the current American cultural model of Neighbors is that they should maintain a strong degree of autonomy from each other, and we may even work to create the impression of having no neighbors, outside of occasional and/or superficial contacts.

- *Having Control*

The more control over a situation we have, the safer we generally feel, and the general idea of having more control was alluded to often in the elicitations – e.g. the idea that the current mission in Iraq is to *regain control* (often with little further discussion of why that is an appropriate or important goal). And when informants are asked “Why do we have so many military bases abroad?” typical answers center on the control-related idea of “keeping an eye on the people there,” rather than on any sense of international systems of security.

- *Reliance on authority*

Finally, it is no surprise that, for many Americans, especially those who lean towards Conservative perspectives, trust in authority (e.g. the president), lining up behind a strong leader, and related appeals to patriotism, are important aspects of a security stance.

Pattern 2: National Security as “Peace of Mind”

For experts, the problem of national security involves analyzing and addressing a variety of factors, and amounts to an applied science. For laypeople, on the other hand, national security is centrally connected to the *feelings*, of peace of mind on the one hand, and fear on the other.

From a cognitive perspective, fear is an emotion that has an especially important role, because of its ability (through arousal of the limbic system) to “commandeer” the brain. In other words, fear doesn’t simply have a guiding influence on our thinking, but can in some instances determine whether we “think” at all.

Just as importantly, even the *threat* of fear is important, because peace of mind is a powerful value and priority for most Americans.

In short, communicators need to take into account common patterns of perception that, like the Interpersonal stance, make lay people’s thinking about security very distant from that of experts.

National Security and Home Security

Some interviewees explicitly compared national security to *home security*, and others also seemed to think in terms of a general idea of keeping the *home* safe, protecting it

from intrusion. From the other direction, home security specialists talk, in quasi-military terms, about “securing the perimeter,” and the darkest imaginable event in this scenario is “home invasion” (a term which itself blurs the distinction between home and nation).

In this scenario, security is understood in terms of the simple idea of keeping people who don’t belong here *out*.

Connections to “Other” Topics

Since Americans’ idea of “security” often corresponds to something like *having an overall sense of wellbeing*, ***threats to security can include anything that threatens our wellbeing, makes us anxious – from terrorism, to crime, to massive immigration, to economic and job-related problems***. In other words, many factors that experts would consider to be “off the table,” count as important.

A number of specific issues stood out in the elicitations:

- ***Illegal Immigration***

For many Americans, the most significant “intruders” we need to protect ourselves against are *illegal immigrants*. This topic came up consistently in discussions of security. Part of the connection between immigration and national security lies in ideas about control and lawbreaking. “If we can’t manage to keep undesirable people out, how secure can we really be?” and even more basically “how much is this really our home?”

While terrorists are one obvious group who need to be kept out, discussions of illegal immigration made it clear that this is only one part – probably the lesser part – of Americans’ concern about immigration. The broader concern has to do with what might be called “***Cultural Disruption***” – a general sense that American life is changing in disturbing ways and even becoming unrecognizable.

- ***Crime and War***

While experts make a key distinction between crime and war, the line seems much blurrier in the default thinking of non-experts. Both crime and war create a feeling of *insecurity* at a personal level, and by the “logic” of the limbic system, they’re equivalent.

This functional equivalence goes a long way to making ideas such as the “War on Terror,” or Bin Laden’s one-man “War on America” seem natural and convincing. In cognitive terms, it is well known that people have a hard time make accurate judgments about the *scale* of a given threat (obviously a key concern of experts): It is difficult for laypeople to see in stark terms the difference between the War in Iraq and World War II, for instance. And a very scary and violent event *feels* like war, even it is perpetrated by a small, clandestine group of individuals.

- *Economic Insecurity*

Offshoring, job insecurity, health care, the housing crisis, Social Security have all contributed to Americans' strong sense that the country is "on the wrong track," and that they are themselves at risk. This topic too came up regularly in discussions of security – partly due to the (rational) judgment that a weaker economy can mean a weaker defense capacity, but also due to the *emotional* link between economic worries and security worries.

Reinforcing the Interpersonal Stance

As anyone who's seen a horror movie knows, there is a tight connection between the feeling of fear and an instinctive focus on those who might do us harm. At these times, even a moving branch seems full of malevolent intention. A large body of research suggests that strong emotions, and especially those related to the "flight or flight" response, tend to narrow our attention to the most immediate factors, and to hijack our reasoning processes. Once fear takes hold, the mind focuses narrowly on the Bogeyman's plans and how to counter them.

This basic human tendency underscores the importance of the element of "fear mongering" in the media environment. What we read, see and hear on television, the radio, and the internet – from news, to political discourse, entertainment, advertising, etc. – is laced heavily with material that is bound, even designed, to provoke insecurity. Fear sells, not just in the coverage of crime and foreign affairs, but on the weather channel.

Consequences for Policy Debate

The patterns of thought revealed in the elicitations have clear implications for the national conversation on security issues. In short, the cognitive and cultural playing field on which the issue of national security plays out is tilted towards a Conservative worldview, in several important ways.

Cognitive Blindness to Institutions/Structures

In their discussions of the issue of security, and of international relations, non-expert Americans hardly ever bring up either institutions (U.N., NATO, World Bank, International Criminal Court, etc.) or structures such as agreements and treaties among countries. ***It is as though all of this international apparatus – often set up specifically to promote security – simply didn't exist.*** For the most part, it is "cognitively invisible," thanks in large part to the dominance of the Interpersonal perspective.

Of course Americans *know about* the U.N. at least, but such institutions are far from top of mind. And when non-experts do think about the U.N., their thinking is far from consistent on the topic – probably because it is unclear what conceptual slot the institution fits into: Is it simply a "place" where nations come together to talk? A (dysfunctional) "club" of individuals? A personified entity in its own right, with intentions and a particular character? A bureaucratic entity something like a rule book?

The relentless tendency to reduce complex causes and effects to questions of identity and *persona* – What kind of people are the terrorists? What kind of people are we? Our leaders? – amounts to a ***cognitive blindness to the structural factors*** that experts recognize have a huge role in determining national security outcomes. In this context it is difficult to hope for a constructive discussion of those same institutional and structural factors, or for an appreciation of progressive security approaches that center around those factors. Skillful diplomacy, insistence on a strong legal/institutional infrastructure, and the creation of multi-lateral interrelationships may actually be the most vigorous and powerful means we have of achieving our security goals, but the elicitations suggest that this reality is currently all too “hard to think.”

Furthermore, the effects of fear can only exacerbate this (Conservative-friendly) “structure blindness,” as it promotes Intention-Detecting and a focus on who’s plotting what against us.

Weak Appreciation of Global Security/Stability

Elicitations subjects often mentioned our weak economy as a security issue. Unfortunately, due to the dominance of a particular kind of Interpersonal thinking, this potentially promising attention to a big-picture issue actually plays out in a way that works against progressive messages:

Put simply, *economic strength* is understood as *physical strength*, and in a world that resembles a Schoolyard, economic decline means an increased vulnerability to being challenged (“messed with”) by others.

Ultimately, this way of thinking suggests that ***we are better off when other countries are economically weaker***. For example, emergent economies like those of India and China are regularly cited as emerging *rivals* and (therefore) *threats*. Overall, as non-experts understand it, the (Interpersonal) economy-security connection is perfectly consistent with a belligerent, “us-versus-them” stance.

And while elicitation subjects were often able to nod along with the idea that our security is threatened by economic (and political, social) instability in other countries, this idea was easily dismissed by many, and never made a lasting impression. (It disappeared quickly from the conversation, in favor of “take care of our own.”)

Parties Judged by Respective “Personas”

Some of folk strategies discussed earlier are more “masculine” – Strength, Control, Authority – and are more strongly associated with Republicans. Working Well With Others, the more “feminine” approach, is associated with Democrats. In the current context, nearly anything that a given candidate or elected leader does is susceptible to interpretation in these terms – including stances towards issues “unrelated” to security, such as welfare, crime, immigration, etc.

While the “feminine” strategy – of working well with others – is often cited as important, it is also often seen as an idealistic and naïve stance towards other actors in the world. “Don’t we wish that being friendly were really enough to secure our safety. But when

push comes to shove, toughness is what counts.”

Another dimension of the Feminine persona that works against a progressive message is that Democrats are often perceived as being more attentive to taking care of our own at home than to dealing with threats from abroad. That is, *they are seen as being fundamentally less interested in and focused on the (critical) issue of national security.*

History and Its Lessons Largely Invisible

In earlier decades, it would have been absurd to suggest that Republicans are the party of “strength,” and it is tempting to believe that historical “reminders” can move Americans past the current, unhelpful Republican/Democrat dichotomies.

Unfortunately, the elicitations show clearly that historical references have a very limited capacity to shift thinking – partly because awareness of past events and contexts is weak, and partly because of an American tendency to dismiss the past simply because it is the past. Progressives interested in “reviving” a tradition of muscular Democratic foreign policy, for instance, would likely find that there is little left to revive in the public consciousness, and that a new tradition must be created instead.

Severe Limitations of the Common Analogies

The common analogies used for thinking and talking about security nearly always advantage Conservative approaches. Most fundamentally because they are strongly Interpersonal– Protecting the Home, handling yourself in the Schoolyard, maintaining good relations with Neighbors – and therefore obscure many of the policy options and solutions favored within a big-picture, progressive approach.

Furthermore, the scenarios themselves often have a Conservative bent when examined closely. The Neighbor model, for instance, tends to shed a negative light on prolonged and “entangling” engagements with other countries – including the kind that, from expert perspectives, might significantly enhance security. And protecting the Home has more to do with locks and guns, than with diplomacy or the spread of stability.

Generalized Sense of Insecurity Favors Authoritarian Perspective

Specific strong fears (of mushroom clouds, for example) diminish people’s ability to think critically about the issues, and increases their tendency to assume the worst about the intentions of Others, to take desperate (but seemingly warranted) action, to accept the authority of strong leaders, etc.

Perhaps more surprising, the research also shows that a variety of anxieties – what we term the sense of Cultural Disruption, caused by disparate factors including economic insecurity, (illegal) immigration, etc. – have the insidious effect of both predisposing the public to accepting the authoritarian perspective, and to exaggerating specific threats.

“Promising” Patterns of Thought

A number of patterns suggest potentially promising directions for an effective message.

- To the extent Cultural Disruption is a serious factor in Americans’ thinking about security, Progressives can control their own image. How they handle issues like the *economy, crime and immigration* will make an important difference in how they are perceived on the issue of (national) security. For example, people are increasingly ready to make a connection between our economy and our handling of the war in Iraq. (More generally, the economy is an example of a domain in which people are more likely to take a *structural* perspective.)
- While Americans are not particularly convinced that problems in other countries have to be our problems, they are somewhat more engaged by the *positive vision* of helping to create positive things, structures abroad (helping create a school system, health system, clean water supply, etc.). This is something to build on.
- There is, at least temporarily, real skepticism about a stereotypically “masculine” approach to national security – unilateralism and aggression are not in favor. The public seems ready to see the difference between the strong but unaggressive, capable, deeply moral, and decent actor (think Atticus Finch – the lawyer who represents the African-American defendant in *To Kill A Mockingbird*) on the one hand, and the spineless appeaser on the other.
- Finally, and perhaps most importantly, people are increasingly aware of the rhetorical/manipulative nature of expressions of fear and force. They are potentially more open to the commonsense case that the world is not a schoolyard, we are not cowboys on the range, etc.

Conclusion

The elicitation research shows clearly that communications about national security cannot rely on rational arguments alone. The dominance of a set of widely shared and deeply held patterns of thinking virtually guarantee that this sort of communication will not be taken as intended.

For example, simply telling people that we are less safe now than before the invasion of Iraq is likely to *increase* the sense of insecurity, and even sympathy for authoritarian approaches to national security. Similarly, simply trying to switch the conversation about Terrorism from a War frame to a Crime frame doesn’t necessarily make the conversation much more productive – the “Dirty Harry” Persona fits quite comfortably within a Crime frame.

Findings from the interviews underscore the reality that if Progressives are to take advantage of the current moment – to build on the public’s desire for a change of course on security – they will have to acknowledge and grapple with powerful, entrenched patterns of thought, that have deep roots in both human cognition and American culture. These fundamental patterns can never be displaced entirely, but the challenge facing advocates of a new approach to security is to work with or around them in order to

promote appreciation of a broader perspective, one that is both more in line with most expert thinking, and more consistent with progressive outlooks.



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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