

1-14-2000

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Recommended Citation

Editor (2000) "The Last Article About a New Millennium? Alarms About Alarms About Political Terrorism," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol8/iss2/5>

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International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: The Last Article About a New Millennium? Alarms About Alarms About Political Terrorism

Author: Editor

Volume: 8

Issue: 2

Date: 2000-01-14

Keywords: Millennium, Terrorism

Abstract. This article describes some of the communication complexities in informing and alerting the general public about political terrorism.

Some might find it alarming that warnings about impending terrorism related to the impending new millennium seem to have been much to do about nothing. After all, nothing of the dire sort seems to have occurred beyond the usual incidence and prevalence of human tragedy and atrocity.

Common responses on the part of the various terrorism experts that brought the alarm might seem somewhat defensive in nature. Why did the "big one" not occur? The very alarm deterred terrorism. Or the various antiterrorism and counterterrorism initiatives elicited by the alarms did the trick. However, it is probably not that simple.

There is a faith-like, if not superstitious, aspect to identifying causal factors of observed events. This, perhaps, is even more so when causality is sought for what does not happen. It is a very difficult task to demonstrate that significant terrorist events associated with the millennium did not occur because of the alarms and behaviors elicited by the alarms. Or that terrorist events would occur without the alarms and behaviors.

However, matters become even more complex. Political terrorism is successful via alarms. How is this? The terrorist act is to hurt, damage, and/or threaten to do so. The terrorist act elicits a psychological response in victims and observers (if any observer can truly be said not to be some sort of victim) of the act. The psychological response leads to a behavior in some combination of victims and observers that achieves or helps achieve some political objective of the sponsor of the terrorist act. Alarms convey terrorist threat--often magnifying the threat--and actual hurt and damage. This conveyance facilitates the psychological response that helps achieve the terrorist sponsor's political objective.

Thus, alarms work to the terrorist's advantage. Yet, the converse--no alarms--also works to the terrorist's advantage because acts featuring hurt and damage can more easily be effected.

How about non-political terrorism? Here, terrorism is truly to hurt, damage, and/or threaten to hurt, damage, and/or threaten. Even if there are no political objectives to achieve, alarms can still convey threat and non-alarms can still facilitate hurt and damage. In fact, here, as with political terrorism, there seems to be little functional distinction between alarms and warnings.

Is it any wonder that terrorism has long been a political tool for millennia--especially of those at a disadvantage in traditional analyses of military and political power? And this is what is truly alarming. (See Anderson, S.K. (1998). Warnings versus alarms: terrorist threat analysis applied to the Iranian state-run media. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 21, 277-305; Buss, D.M. (1997). Human social motivation in evolutionary perspective: grounding terror management theory. *Psychological Inquiry*, 8, 22-26; Byman, D. (1998). The logic of ethnic terrorism. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 21, 149-169; Gerecht, R.M. (December 23, 1999). Alarmism abets the terrorists. *The New York Times*, p. A29; Medd, R., & Goldstein,

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

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