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Terror Management Theory, Terrorism, and Terror: Political Psychological Status

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Abstract. This article provides a commentary on the utility of terror management theory in understanding, explaining, preventing, and resolving incidents of terrorism.

Recently, two special agents of the United States (US) Federal Bureau of Investigation testified during hearings in Federal District Court in Manhattan. They contended that a defendant arrested in an alleged plot to smuggle explosives into the US for terrorist purposes had agreed to speak voluntarily during an interrogation that lasted over 10 hours. The defendant, however, has insisted that he was not read his rights properly before the interrogation and that he was terrified about what the agents might do to him if he did not respond in a manner in which he inferred that they desired. Irrespective of the veracity of the special agents and defendant, of note is that the psychological phenomenon of terror is often given very salient status concerning the political phenomenon of terrorism.

In actuality, psychological terror is neither necessary nor sufficient for successful terrorism--although it can be either or both. Instead, the essence of terrorism is the use of violence or its threat against assets commonly perceived as noncombatant or "innocent" (by many but not all targets, victims, perpetrators, and observers) for the purpose of achieving political objectives. The psychological intermediary variables between terrorist act and the achieving of political objective may or may not include the experience of terror on the part of all or some of those aware of the terrorist act and its consequences.

Interestingly, a well-researched theory from scientific psychology--terror management theory--supports the notion that terror is a psychologically motivating force in the terrorist. The rationale is as follows. One byproduct of human consciousness is the awareness of death and its inevitability and of living in a basically meaningless universe. Awareness of death, its inevitability, and meaningless induces abject terror in humans. To ward off the abject terror, humans create culture--shared beliefs about reality--to acquire a sense that the universe has meaning and that humans have a meaningful role in it. Because one's specific culture serves these functions, the mere existence of alternatives to it is threatening because it risks undermining that which supports one's own psychological stability and sense of worth. Therefore, those who espouse alternatives to our culture are perceived as rigorously needing to be discounted, verbally attacked, assimilated, or killed. The latter case may well afford the psychological substrate of terrorism.

Self-reports and analyses of terrorists, however, suggest that the terror management explanation of terrorism is problematic. Although some terrorists seem to be well accounted for by the theory, many others seem to be motivated purely by financial reward and sensation-seeking that appear reinforcing for reasons other than attenuating existential dread. Just as the defendant in Federal District Court may be terrorized by special agents or merely making a bogus claim, terrorists may be acting out of terror or merely throwing a mantle of bogus ideology over primitive and egoist pursuits.

Of course, terror management theorists might argue that even the latter pursuits ultimately attenuate some rudimentary, existential dread. Thus, it may be more reasonable to posit that terror management theory--and the data on which it is supported--succeeds in informing us of the terror potential in all of

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

us. We are all potential terrorists, terrorist targets, and terrorist victims. (See Byman, D. (1998). The logic of ethnic terrorism. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 1998, 21, 149-169; Crenshaw, M. (2000). The psychology of terrorism: An agenda for the 21st century. *Political Psychology*, 21, 405-420; Leary, M. R., & Schreindorfer, L. S. (1997). Unresolved Issues with terror management theory. *Psychological Inquiry*, 8, 26-29; Suspect's statement disputed. *The New York Times*, p. A27; Wicklund, R.A. (1997). Terror management accounts of other theories: Questions for the cultural worldview concept. *Psychological Inquiry*, 8, 54-58) (Keywords: Terror Management Theory, Terrorism.)