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Trends. Psychological Research as Support From and Support For Terrorism

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Abstract: This Trends article discusses the political psychological impact of terrorism.

9/11 is commonly viewed as a watershed in taking the threat of terrorism seriously and in doing what needs to be done to meet the threat. Unfortunately, one can argue that post-9/11 response has been too short on antiterrorism and counterterrorism efficacy and too long on activity supporting terrorism efficacy.

One example of the latter is the plethora of scholarly journal articles about the psychological consequences of 9/11. Theoretical postulations, the delineation of survey and experimental hypotheses, the crafting of methodologies, the seizing upon some collected data as opposed to others, and interpretive and discursive paeans all are founded on a priori suppositions of doom. This doom may be elaborated as post-traumatic stress disorder; permutations and combinations of anxiety, depression, and anhedonia; shock, shock mingled with disbelief; and timeless and timely social roles of the tragic victim.

The very promulgation of such articles creates demand characteristics of self- and social-fulfilling prophecy. These demand characteristics increase the probability that psychological intermediary phenomena arise as desired by terrorists on a causal sequence towards the achievement of terrorist political objectives. In fact, the vivid descriptions of iatrogenically enhanced sequelae and plaintive pleas for the funding of trauma research and therapy play right into terrorist hands.

Is it too much to ask that a competent and compassionate psychology might allocate its primary resources towards preventing or attenuating terrorist motive, as opposed to reinforcing terrorist reach through victimology? (See Lowry, J. L., & Lating, J. M. (2002). Reflections on the response to mass terrorist attacks: An elaboration on Everly and Mitchell's 10 commandments. Brief Treatment & Crisis Intervention, 2, 95-104; Rushing, S. E., & Jean-Baptiste, M. (2003). Two cases of brief psychotic disorder related to media coverage of the September 11, 2001 events. Journal of Psychiatric Practice, 9, 87-90; Walker, K. L., & Chestnut, D. (2003). The role of ethnocultural variables in response to terrorism. Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology, 9, 251-262; Zywiak, W. H., Stout, R. L., Trefry, W. B., LaGrutta, J. E., Lawson, C. C., Khan, N., Swift, R. M., & Schneider, R. J. (2003).Alcohol Relapses Associated with September 11, 2001: A Case Report. Substance Abuse, 24, 123-128.) (Keywords: Political Psychology, Terrorism.)