

INTERNATIONAL ASSEMBLY ON MANAGING
THE PSYCHOLOGY OF FEAR AND TERROR

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The Language of Leadership

How terrorism is addressed by leaders, and the language used by leaders in doing so, frames the way a population, including journalists, think and feel and respond to what is happening.

Language of leaders is integral to the psychological phenomenon of terrorism. Words do have meaning and will trigger cognitive behaviour patterns. In short, the vocabulary of public discourse determines how we perceive the problems that have overtaken us. Yet there is more.

The choice of acts and words, in response to terrorist violence, by those wielding the power of the state, reflects the state of their mind. As I emphasized at the International Assembly in Texas on the Psychology of Fear and Terror, that choice is central to how this challenge of terrorism becomes manifested in society.

For example, when an act of terrorism begins and state leaders *must* respond, they do have choices. They can define the surprise act causing death and devastation as a crime and move heaven and earth and deploy the police forces and launch covert operations of state and invoke the mechanisms and treaty powers of international law to bring the criminals to justice. *Or*, they can define the surprise act as an attack on the country and declare, "We are at war!" The first choice criminalizes the act and focuses attention; the second militarizes the issue and sets in chain a series of expanding activities that escalate fear.

If you were a terrorist, you'd dream that the leadership would choose that second option: the work of a terrorist is to spread paralysing fear, not to see it contained and dampened down. You'd almost think Osama bin Laden had written Mr. Cheney's speeches delivered in Iowa and New Hampshire this week.*

The point I stressed at our Texas Assembly, and repeat now, is that a terrorist act is a catalyzing event, but how it plays out and how successful it is will be a direct function of how the psychology of fear and terror impact on decision-makers in government – and their own role in instilling fear in the public or a section of the public.

Once you use the broad language of war and militarize the response to terrorism, in contrast, say, to using the focused energy of concerted police action, the ground rules change. So does the mindset of all concerned. Instead of us observing justice being done, we become participants in escalating conflict and spreading fear. Anyone can join in, and many do.

Thirty years ago in this country, Irving Janis and co-researchers launched their psychological studies of policy decisions, looked especially at the U.S. ‘Bay of Pigs’ invasion of Cuba, and proposed a model for “defective” decision outcome by a small, isolated group of homogenous and cohesive members in a stress situation. They called the phenomenon ‘Groupthink’. New work by Prof. John McMurtry shows how Groupthink is itself an expression of ‘Group Mind’ – a larger, deeper and more controlling phenomenon that really goes upstream to the headwaters of what we are dealing with here.

Forty years ago in my country, terrorist acts by the Front de liberation du Quebec – FLQ – were escalating. The FLQ promoted emergence of an independent, socialist Quebec, separated from Canada, using propaganda and terror as their instruments.

The FLQ carried out more than 200 bombings between 1963 and 1970, increasingly powerful bombs with escalating destruction. In October 1970, these terrorists kidnapped and held hostage British trade commissioner James Cross, and kidnapped, held hostage and murdered Quebec’s minister of labour Pierre Laporte. The FLQ’s list of grievances and demands was broadcast on television and radio.

Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau responded by invoking the War Measures Act. All civil liberties were suspended. Tanks occupied the streets of Montreal, soldiers in Ottawa patrolled Parliament, 450 people were arrested in the night without warrant, many held as ‘suspected’ FLQ members. The premier of Canada’s most populous province John Robarts, showing solidarity and reinforcing the mindset of the leadership’s response to the terrorists, declared, “This is war!”

The Groupthink response in Canada did not prevail. We had protests and a national debate in a very chilling atmosphere of militarized politics during what became known as ‘The October Crisis’. In the end, the violent acts of the terrorists were not treated as new order political crimes, but as straight-line crimes under the existing *Criminal Code*. When the separatists were captured and brought to trial, they were not charged with ‘political assassination’ as they’d hoped, but for murder. Its leaders in prison or exile, seen as murderers not martyrs, the FLQ ceased activity by 1971.

For government leaders and political players, the context of terrorist acts needs to be narrowed to the specific threats rather than broadened to a generalized and paralysing state of apprehension.

The way of characterizing threats and addressing them requires a realistic and specific focus rather than an amorphous and rhetorical ‘war on terrorism’. Those who observe the politics of the United States understand that melodramatic rhetoric is intrinsic to the positioning of public issues here – recalling the War on Poverty, the War on Cancer, the War on Drugs, pretty much tells where the War on Terrorism is headed, but with a lot of self-induced terror along the way.

The choice of appropriate instruments of governance – police action to apprehend criminals, for instance, contrasted to military action to attack an unknown and unseen ‘enemy’ that compounds the problem – would certainly express a more constructive management of the psychology of fear and terror.

I say more ‘constructive’ because, as Major Konstantin Komarov of Russia told another assembly in this country for first-responders dealing with terrorists, at Denver this spring, no society can sustain high levels of anticipatory stress for long. What’s required, suggests Komarov, and I quote in agreement, is a “state of relaxed tension that allows you to function normally, while you are preparing for an attack.”

[*The United States Vice-President forcibly asserted that election of the rival Democratic Party’s candidate for President would result in more terrorist attacks on the U.S.A.]

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