

The Political Psychology of Terrorist Alarms

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On April 18, 1775, patriot Paul Revere rode his horse on the famous “midnight ride” from Boston harbor toward Lexington, warning local colonial leaders along the way that the British army, the Redcoats, were coming. He urged them to take up arms to oppose their tyrannical rule. When the British arrived the next day, they were defeated at Concord by the colonial militia, and America’s Revolutionary War had its auspicious beginning. Revere’s warning was effective for four reasons: 1) he was known to be a highly credible communicator, both expert and trustworthy; 2) his alarm was focused on a specific anticipated event; 3) it was designed to motivate citizens to act, and 4) it called for a concrete set of actions. This Paul Revere paradigm for successful dissemination of public alarms is supported by contemporary psychological research. To be optimally effective, such alarms should arouse only a moderate level of motivation -- too low doesn’t energize action, and too high creates emotional overload and competing, distracting behaviors. The alarms must be based on reliable evidence, and presented clearly by trustworthy sources about specific dangers or threats that may be dealt with by taking some recommended action. If the threat is likely to persist over an extended time period, debriefing after an alarm is essential to correct misinformation, modify faulty recommendations, and to reinforce citizens for heeding the message and to reassure them of the value of their collaborative efforts. Finally, if the threat does not materialize, a reputable authority must provide some explanation of why, and then also lower or remove the threat alert.

Violations of Effective Alarm Principles

All of these basic, rather obvious, principles have been systematically violated in the design and delivery of the first six terrorist alarms issued by government officials to warn the public of imminent terrorist dangers. Different communicators were alleged to have reliable information from “credible” sources about an imminent attack by terrorists somewhere, some time soon, in the United States, or anywhere in the world against its offices or agencies. These alarms worked to create high levels of citizen fear, which over time morphed into generalized anxiety. There was no concrete action that citizens might take, other than to remain on alert and to keep their eyes open. The initial message, whether emanating from the Attorney General or other authorities, got replayed endlessly by different media sources and elaborated by various “expert” commentators. The psychological situation worsened when cognitive-emotional dissonance was induced by the administration’s collateral message to “go about your business as normal.” How is that possible after having declared the nation is under potential terrorist threat and our personal safety and security is about to be violated once again as it was on 9/11? The resulting sense of confusion spills over into feelings of helplessness and results in less than optimal information processing that would be essential to cope with terrorist attacks. It was never clear why the government had to warn the general public and not just relevant security forces at local and national levels since given that there was nothing

meaningful we could do other than to become open-eyed worriers.

But then there were none! Not a single terrorist attack on American soil for the past 17 months since September 11th. Where are the alleged thousands of terrorists inhabiting cells in our country? And where was the debriefing by our authorities to explain why nothing happened? It was nowhere in sight or sound. The high alert and its high anxiety induction just silently evaporated until another month or two, when the next call to alarm was sounded again, and again. We know from the classic story of the Boy Who Cried Wolf that after only three false alarms, people cease to take seriously the validity of previously credible messengers. After six no-consequence alarms, many Americans became desensitized to the need to be on high alert -- yet still lead normal lives. But for some, it became “normal” to be anxiously dreading the worst, given the lesson of the first horrific attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

That prolonged state of worry about one’s vulnerability without any clear action to alter it, can have a profoundly negative impact on our individual and collective mental health. I call it a “pre-traumatic stress syndrome.” It is likely that the failure even to debrief the nation after these false alarms was based on an inadequate public warning model that did not take into sufficient account their psychological impact. It may be that government officials felt no need for corrective information because they had already reminded the public not to worry and lead normal lives. Better safe than sorry, better we warned you and nothing happened than we did not, and something happened -- was the apparent reasoning. Or maybe, they realized they were wrong in their estimates and did not want to go public with that admission. Or, a more provocative hypothesis is that maybe they just preferred that the public remain eternally vigilant despite the psychic toll.

And Then There Were Seven

Something unusual must have happened between the last of the unmarked six-pack of terrorist warnings and the recent brightly Orange-colored, newly-framed Seventh Alarm that seemed at first to fit the psychologically effective Revere paradigm. It was presented clearly by one communicator, Tom Ridge, Head of Homeland Security, and it amplified the reliability of his source by indicating it was detected from multiple intelligence sources. It identified the terrorist targets as “soft” -- American homes and hotels — which targets everybody. In the next days, the target list expanded to include airlines, symbolic and strategic venues. The anticipated terrorist weapons escalated to the unthinkable; “weapons of mass destruction” -- chemical, biological, and radiological “dirty bombs.” With that much detail on the input side, then the Homeland Security Head added a shopping list of concrete actions Americans should take on the output side to be prepared for this all-out attack from any of the reported thousand terrorists operating on American soil and preparing to use these weapons of mass destruction against innocent civilians.

Experts warned us over and over, on CNN, MSNBC, Fox, and other networks, to gas up our cars in case of immediate evacuation (and then the east coast was snowbound for days), store emergency supplies (as when preparing for natural disasters), and seal ourselves in our homes using plastic sheeting and duct tape. At last, we had a set of concrete actions we could take which seemed better than just sitting idly waiting for the inevitable. To make sure this message got on the nation’s psyche radar, after the mind-

dulling previous six false alarms, the Orange Alert was sounded and local, state and federal forces swung into defensive actions. Near panic buying of the recommended supplies followed in many cities. Amazingly, the collateral second message was once again sounded -- about living our lives as usual, going about our business as normal, when anticipating that a panoply of weapons of mass destruction were about to implode our homes!

But then it all began to unravel, as experts said we could suffocate by sealing off ventilation into our homes, and others said some of the “reliable” sources were hoaxes. Nevertheless, the Orange Alert remained in effect for weeks while the Head of Homeland Security began a nationwide campaign to promote emergency preparedness, fashioned after the programs of FEMA for natural disaster readiness, and supported by focus-group recommendations (obviously not the same “focus groups” dismissed by the President in his disdain of world-wide, massive anti-war protests). However, it should be apparent that natural disasters and disasters caused by human agents require very different models of response, since God and the impartial laws of nature are generally credited with nature gone awry, while the Devil’s evil doing is behind human nature’s malevolence.

The Psychology of Terrorism

Terrorism is not about war in any traditional sense of destroying the material resources of an enemy nation and taking over their country. Terrorism is about psychology. It is about taking strategic actions that incite terror and fright in civilian populations. Terrorism is about making ordinary people feel vulnerable, anxious, confused, uncertain and helpless. Ultimately, when terrorism works, citizens feel hopeless and lose trust in their leaders to guarantee the fundamentals of existence -- safety and security. Terrorism is about imagining the monster under our beds or lurking in dark closets -- the faceless, omnipotent enemy who might be the friendly candy man, our neighbor, or some horrible creature of our imagination. It has no one place, time, space or face. The power of terrorism lies precisely in its pervasive ambiguity, in its invasion of our minds.

Reactions to feeling personally vulnerable vary considerably from stimulating phobias, to triggering unresolved childhood conflicts, to prolonged stress reactions, to blindly obeying powerful leaders, and to intense feelings of anger. Anger is one form of displaced emotion that arises from feeling helpless or vulnerable. It is a turning out of intense and concealed feelings of weakness. Prejudice against out-groups is one consequence of such strong negative emotions, as is an increased readiness to attack “safe” targets, such as marginalized peoples in our nation, or even family members. Human nature, or at least traditional male human nature, seems to abhor feelings of personal weakness and uncertainty, seeking instead to ally one’s identity to those manifesting strength with conviction. In those times, people want to support leaders who are bold, decisive, single-minded, even arrogant men of action. They want our leaders to identify “the enemy” for them, to give it a name, a face and a location so that they can channel their collective hatred and unleash the strength of the military on a readily winnable war against that evil, though weak, enemy. Many Americans are then willing to accept that identifiable figure as proxy for the elusive, virtual terrorist enemy – or their leader, who ran and hid although trapped in a cave in Tora Bora, Afghanistan, to continue

haunting us. And Saddam Hussein is the perfect candidate, right out of central casting, to play the villain's role in this Orwellian drama of war and the clash of cultures.

False Alarms Do the Terrorists' Work

I wrote an essay after the third false alarm (*S. F. Chronicle*, Nov. 4, 2001) expressing concern that our mismanaged alarm procedures were doing the terrorists' work for them. These alarms were alarming us well beyond a realistic nation-wide risk level of any new terrorist attacks, and they were forcing the government to spend billions of dollars in combating these incipient threats. One possibility to consider is that seeing the frenzy created by the first alarms, terrorists intentionally put out misinformation on channels they assume are being monitored by U. S. intelligence. As comic Lenny Bruce might have said, the terrorists threw a lot of shit all over the place and we thought it was bad shit when it was just shit-shit. That "chatter," detected by our intelligence services, stirred up the desired national turmoil and wasted a lot of money in heightened security -- without terrorists having to engage in any suicidal attacks.

Another conjecture concerns the unintended consequences of these many false alarms, and perhaps some intended ones. Given the void of terrorist attacks in our country after 9/11, compared to the great many in Israel for example, these alarms have worked to sustain a heightened sense of anxiety and confusion for more than a year. They reinforce a public willingness to spend huge sums on military defense spending and homeland security. The alarms also create a climate of hostility and danger that encourage moral disengagement in accepting restrictions on personal freedoms, and ignoring human rights violations from the "Patriot's Act," or mistreatment of civilian prisoners in our Cuban prison at Guantanamo Bay (whose interrogators are using torture and creating adverse conditions that may have contributed to the suicides and many suicide attempts among these Arab "enemy combatants").

Cynicism Conjures Conspiracy Conclusions

The content and timing of the seventh alarm raises cynical conjectures about the intentional manipulation of the psyche of the American public by the Bush Administration. First consider its proximal timing with accusations made by the Secretary of State at the United Nations just a day or two earlier. One justification to invade Iraq posited links with terrorism, asserting that Saddam Hussein would supply weapons of mass destruction to al Qaeda and other terrorist groups to use against the United States. Once that link is accepted, it is reasonable to deduce that by deposing that dictator and his piece of the Axis of Evil, we are helping to win the war against terrorism. Despite the fact that in a taped speech the next day, Osama bin Laden denounced Hussein as a "socialist infidel leader," the Administration focused on his call to arms of Iraqi Muslims if the United States invades their nation.

The Iraq-Terrorist connection is one critical lynch pin in the justification to fight the good war against terrorists by invading Iraq to cut off its supply of weapons of mass destruction. The Seventh Alarm, by explicitly raising the specter of terrorists using WMD against us, served as the ultimate rationale to the American public for the invasion of Iraq. It countered the validity of the massive anti-war demonstrations in the United States

and around the world as irrelevant to the imminent threats to national security posed by terrorists armed with these death-dealing weapons sold or given to them by Saddam Hussein. The majority of American citizens somehow continue to believe that Saddam Hussein was partly responsible for the terrorist attacks of September 11, despite the absence of any supporting information. That is enough to fuel fires of revenge against him, but adding this new danger of his alleged continuing terrorist alliances is sufficient to call for deposing the evil dictator, Saddam Hussein, by all means—including the all-out war against Iraq, certain to erupt very soon, and certain to kill untold number of innocent citizens there.

Now several weeks after the Feb. 7th Seventh Alarm, the Attorney General rejected the suggestion of the Head of Homeland Security to lower the Orange high alert because of alleged new terrorist information from yet again “credible sources.” Thus the American public is to be maintained on its high level of anxiety, sustaining its pre-traumatic stress syndrome, so that we keep in mind the image of Saddam, our collective enemy, whose face we know all too well. We invade Iraq, kill Saddam, put our military general in charge of that Arab nation, and Americans can sleep in peace with that threat to our national security eliminated—or so their story goes.

But terrorists remain faceless, elusive, still able to ‘run and hide,’ and to commit their unspeakable horrors in the absence of Saddam. But what if we do not find him in Iraq, and what if we do not uncover his cache of weapons of mass destruction, which he likely shipped to a sympathetic neighboring country? Then how will the administration justify the deaths of Iraqi citizens and American soldiers? And is it more or less likely that terrorist attacks will occur in retaliation against America for its invasion and colonial occupation of an Arab nation?

It is important to note that the leader of Hamas has warned that any invasion of Iraq by the United States will provoke immediate attacks by his group against Americans there and elsewhere. President Bush’s grand vision of creating peace in the entire Middle East region by deposing Iraq’s leadership will prove to be a nearsighted, simplistic and biased view. Having apparently given up on trying to broker peace between Israel and the Palestinians, how can we reasonably hope to create a climate of peace in this far-flung region with so many antagonists with disparate interests, needs and cultural values? Imagine our country in the role of peacemaker after having orchestrated an aggressive invasion of a nation that did not want to go to war against us in the first place, and after having killed innocent civilians before installing our colonial military empire. Reverse roles for a moment to acknowledge the folly in this formulation

There are of course, many other plausible hypotheses about the causes and consequences of these false alarms. Even assuming no manipulative intent, conscious or coincidental of the kind outlined here, there needs to be a serious reevaluation of how to best construct such future alarms, guide their optimal utilization and explain to the public why they do not materialize when they do not. Of course, we are all relieved when the alarms prove false rather than true, but when repeated over time they may serve only to induce a psychic numbing, lulling us asleep and unprepared to act constructively and effectively when the wolf does come to our door.

Just as I came to the end of this essay, I was alerted by my local newspaper to review the newest emergency preparedness information on the website of the Department of Homeland Security, www.ready.gov. Some of it is indeed quite useful and it is a

welcome addition to general emergency preparedness for the nation. But does it give advice about how to prevent public panic and promote citizen cooperation when in dangerous situations, where panic can kill, such as at the nightclub fires recently in Chicago and Rhode Island? No. Instead of preparing for probable emergency events, it informs the public of the easy steps to be taken in case of the worse case scenario – a neighborhood Nuclear Blast.

Step 1: Take cover. Step 2: Assess the situation. Step 3: Limit your exposure to radiation. And there are others that make as little practical sense in terms of what any individual can do in a nuclear attack, for example, “Putting some distance between you and the blast will also help.” How do you do an assessment of the situation when under cover? Doesn’t being under cover also fix the distance from blast to you? A more likely terrorist scenario than Nuclear Blasts is Chemical Threat. Again, as was true with the false alarm warnings, there are mixed, confusing actions recommended. First, “take immediate action to get away;” then “staying put and avoid uncertainty outside.” Go-Stay? Which way? Clicking on “shelter-in-place” informs citizens to “go to an interior room with as few windows as possible,” but before doing so, be sure to “seal all windows, doors and vents with *plastic sheeting and duct tape*”! (Italics added to remind us that experts said doing this could suffocate us to death). Fortunately, there is now an alternative strategy to follow. An enterprising entrepreneur has begun marketing “Terror Tents.” This anti-terrorist device is a tent of 3 small rooms that when erected within one’s large home supposedly protects citizens from chemical attacks -- for only \$8,000. That is cheaper than the cost of 1950’s family fall-out shelters and doesn’t even require backyards for city folks. In the promotion for these “Terror Tents” it was noted that they were already in place at the Pentagon and the White House, so why not your house as well?

Action Conclusions

There are terrorists who are indeed dangerous, who hate some of what America stands for in their eyes, and will try to attack us in various ways, including suicide bombings. Security and preparedness are essential components in countering terrorism, but so are honesty, transparency and accountability of our leaders in whom we must trust. While we prepare to save our bodies we must not lose our minds. Our government is not getting the best scientific advice available on how to construct terror alerts, on how to educate the public in this new realm, on how to manage man-made disasters that require different models than traditional natural disasters, and on how to think like terrorists in selecting probable targets for attack. We need to reassess our full-coverage security of venues unlikely to ever be considered targets by terrorists, such as high school sports events, so as to focus limited municipal resources on higher probability targets of symbolic, sentimental value, Disneyland, for example, or with major disruptive value, such as urban subways. High levels of sustained stress of many citizens of all ages can have a greater long-term destructive impact on the nation than the consequences of any single terrorist attack. Emergency preparedness for any form of terrorist attack would benefit from a wiser appreciation of the mental health implications, of the essential features of the psychology of terrorism, and from less political involvement and intrigue.

SEE ADDENDA NEXT PAGE ABOUT LEARNING FROM THE PAST

Those Who Do Not Remember The Past Are Doomed To Repeat It.

For all those who are voicing their dissent in opposing the imminent war against Iraq by the United States of America, it is instructive to learn from a voice from the past, which helped his administration bend the will of the public to want war.

We must not be so blindly led into this catastrophe, rather we must dissent, challenge, reason with, and then disobey any administration urging an aggressive war when there is no immediate compelling reason for doing -- that is our duty as patriotic Americans.

BENDING THE MASS WILL TO WANT WAR.

"Why of course the people don't want war... That is understood. But, after all, it is the leaders of the country who determine the policy and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy, or a fascist dictatorship, or a parliament, or a communist dictatorship.

Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders.

That is easy. All you have to do is to tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the peacemakers for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger.

It works the same in any country." –

Hermann Goering, Nazi Officer,
Statement during his Nuremberg War Crimes Trial.