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Eight Years in the Wake of 9/11: A Terror Management Analysis of the Psychological Repercussions of the 9/11 Attacks

*Spee Kosloff, Mark Landau, Dave Weise,
Daniel Sullivan, and Jeff Greenberg**

As we write this chapter, eight years have passed since the tragedy of September 11, 2001, when 19 members of al Qaeda hijacked and crashed multiple jet airliners into the Twin Towers and Pentagon, killing 2,974 people and striking terror in the hearts and minds of most Americans. While the initial worry, anger, patriotism and bloodlust caused by the 9/11 attacks seems largely to have subsided, psychological fallout from the attacks continues to influence contemporary American culture, its international standing, and concerns over the very real threat of international terrorism.

In this chapter we utilize terror management theory (TMT) and research to help understand this psychological impact. The theory addresses the psychological defenses people marshal to cope with the potential for terror engendered by the awareness of their own mortality. TMT is particularly well-suited

***Jeff Greenberg** is Professor of Psychology at the University of Arizona. He co-developed terror management theory and its associated research program, coauthored a variety of articles and chapters pertinent to understanding the causes and consequences of terrorist acts, and also coauthored the book *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror*.

Spee Kosloff and **Dave Weise** are doctoral candidates at the University of Arizona.

Mark Landau is Assistant Professor of Psychology at the University of Kansas.

Daniel Sullivan is a graduate student at the University of Kansas.

for providing insights into the effects of terrorism because, at its core, terrorism is a strategy to advance an ideological agenda through terror generated by death threats.

TMT is based on the writings of Ernest Becker, a cultural anthropologist who, beginning in 1962, took it upon himself to figure out what is responsible for the uniquely human penchant for terror and violence. In the books *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (1962/1971), *The Denial of Death* (1973), and *Escape from Evil* (1975), Becker developed an analysis of the core motives that drive human behavior.¹ His analysis was subsequently synthesized and systematized into TMT by social psychologists Jeff Greenberg, Tom Pyszczynski, and Sheldon Solomon.² Along with many students and colleagues, this trio has spent the last 20 years researching and refining the theory. In their book, *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror*, Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg explained how TMT provides an empirically supported account of the psychological causes and consequences of the 9/11 attacks.³ In the following sections we summarize TMT and its analysis of 9/11's immediate and sustained psycho-cultural impact.

TMT

TMT begins with the observation that humans, like other animals, have many biological systems directed toward keeping us alive. Additionally, though, humans possess unique mental capacities, including self-consciousness and the ability to contemplate the past and future, which enable us to be aware that these systems will ultimately fail: that sooner or later, each of us will die. The awareness of personal mortality in an animal predisposed in so many ways to stay alive creates the potential for humans to experience intense and even paralyzing anxiety. To avoid a fearful confrontation with death anxiety, humans use their unique intelligence to construct and maintain *cultural worldviews*—shared views of reality that imbue the world with order, meaning, and permanence. Worldviews also provide opportunities to acquire *self-esteem*—the belief that one is a significant, enduring being in a world of meaning, rather than a mere animal fated only to obliteration upon death. This belief is buttressed by literal and symbolic forms of death transcendence provided by cultures. Literal immortality is the sense that one will literally continue on in some form after death, and is provided by the spiritual concepts evident in virtually all known ancient and traditional cultures, such as an everlasting soul or spirit, heaven, and reincarnation. Symbolic immortality is the sense that one leaves a lasting mark or symbol of one's existence even after physically dying, and is obtainable by identification with larger groups and causes, offspring, and culturally valued achievements in the arts and sciences.

In summary, TMT posits that humans manage fear stemming from their awareness of death's inevitability by (a) sustaining faith in a cultural worldview

that imbues reality with order, meaning, and permanence and provides paths to literal and/or symbolic immortality for those who meet prescribed standards of value; and (b) maintaining self-esteem by perceiving oneself as meeting the culture's standards of value.

Basic Findings of TMT Research

Over the past 20 years, laboratory research has gathered a large body of evidence in support of TMT. Much of this research is guided by the idea that, if cultural worldviews and self-esteem help protect people from death-related concerns, then reminding people of their inevitable death should motivate them to affirm faith in their culture and strive to feel like a valuable contributor to it. Researchers have used diverse ways of heightening awareness of mortality—or inducing *mortality salience* (MS)—such as asking people to write about their death, having them view gory accident footage or stand near a funeral home, and even presenting the word *death* subliminally, outside of conscious awareness.

Consistent with TMT, hundreds of published studies have shown that MS heightens people's motivation to support and defend their cherished cultural beliefs (i.e., *worldview defense*), and intensifies individuals' efforts to convince themselves and others that they possess self-esteem-bolstering attributes and skills (i.e., *self-esteem striving*).⁴ For instance, after MS, Americans derogate American and foreign critics of the United States, Canadians derogate those who criticize Canada, and conservative and liberal Americans allocate high levels of painfully spicy hot sauce to another student who criticized conservatives and liberals, respectively. Research has further shown that MS instigates efforts to deny one's corporeal or animal nature, to affirm the value of close relationships, and to increase liking for people and everyday events that confer meaning, order, and stability.⁵

Research inspired by TMT has also demonstrated the unique role of death concerns in worldview defense and self-esteem striving. This work has shown, for example, that defensive responses to MS are not elicited by reminders of other topics that are anxiety-provoking (e.g., pain, paralysis), future-orientated (e.g., upcoming events), self-relevant (e.g., embarrassment, exclusion) or existential in nature (e.g., uncertainty, meaninglessness). Furthermore, sufficiently intense threats to individuals' worldview and self-esteem have been shown to increase unconscious concerns with death but not other negative thoughts, while defending those structures reduces unconscious death concerns.⁶

Studies have also revealed a specific sequence of defenses activated by conscious reminders of mortality.⁷ When thoughts of death are in conscious attention, they trigger a set of *proximal defenses* aimed at removing such thoughts from consciousness. People try to convince themselves that they are healthy, that death is a distant problem, and they actively avoid further thoughts about

death. However, thoughts of death no longer in conscious attention can continue to resonate at an unconscious level, and it is under these conditions—after proximal defenses have subsided—that death concerns elicit *distal defenses* aimed at shoring up faith in one's worldview and self-esteem. Although these distal defenses are superficially unrelated to death, they prevent anxiety-provoking thoughts of death from flooding back into consciousness. Research supporting this analysis shows, for example, that subliminal primes of the word *death* immediately lead to worldview defense, whereas conscious reminders of death do so only after people are distracted from such thoughts.

To summarize this somewhat technical section, TMT proposes that individuals seek to maintain faith in a cultural worldview and bolster their self-worth in order to protect themselves from anxiety-provoking confrontations with personal mortality. Laboratory research supports this analysis by showing that reminding people of death heightens their motivation to maintain a meaningful conception of the world and self-esteem.

Terror Management in Responses to 9/11

How does TMT, and its associated research, inform our understanding of the psychological consequences of 9/11? As we've discussed, TMT claims that people typically keep concerns with their mortality buried beneath the surface of consciousness by maintaining faith that their culture and its symbols are permanent, reliable and invulnerable sources of meaning and value. The 9/11 attacks, however, rudely disrupted these assumptions, on the one hand by demolishing symbols of American socioeconomic supremacy (e.g., the WTC and the Pentagon) and on the other by forcing Americans to confront the fact that death can occur for reasons that cannot be fully anticipated or controlled.

This two-pronged threat set in motion a series of psychological processes observed in many prior laboratory studies of TMT. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, when fears of terror and death were particularly palpable, Americans proximally defended against death-related fears by distracting themselves from self-awareness. People consumed more alcohol, particularly in New York City; Las Vegas reported increased slot machine use; Blockbuster movie rentals soared; and primetime television viewing was up 4 percent relative to similar periods from the preceding two years.⁸ Meanwhile, President George W. Bush publicly encouraged the American people to "go out shopping."⁹

In addition to seeking distraction, Americans sought to escape feelings of vulnerability to death by avoiding airports and other public places (e.g., the Superbowl) that might be targets for terrorist attacks, stockpiling food and weapons, and buying gas masks and thyroid-protecting pills. The United States government also took efforts to reduce Americans' elevated concerns with vulnerability to terror and death, such as ramping up airport security and civilian

surveillance protocols, and implementing a terror alert system much to the (initial) approval of most citizens.¹⁰

But as the smoke over lower Manhattan cleared, distraction and direct attempts to avoid lethal threats gave way to *distal defenses*—efforts to reaffirm faith in the American way of life, including its symbols, values, and ideology, and to quash the perceived evils that threatened it. Distal terror management responses were apparent in nearly every aspect of American life, and were especially prominent in religious and political arenas. A September 21, 2001 Gallup Poll found the highest levels of church attendance since the 1950s, even among self-proclaimed atheists.¹¹ Bible sales skyrocketed, as did the number of visits to religion-related websites.¹² Patriotism also peaked: sales of American flags flourished, and songs like "God Bless America" and "America the Beautiful" were omnipresent. Concurrent with this affirmation of American identity were unsavory efforts to suppress "dissenting" attitudes (e.g., Bill Maher's forced resignation from the television show *Politically Incorrect* after making remarks seen as anti-American), and overtly discriminatory acts against minorities (e.g., the destruction of mosques in Texas, Indiana, and Ohio; the slaying of Balbir Singh Sodhi, an Indian Sikh, at a gas station in Mesa, AZ). These many "real world" efforts to affirm faith in one's religious and national ideologies resemble the intensified religiosity and nationalism observed among mortality-primed participants in laboratory studies of TMT, suggesting that Americans were collectively struggling to cope with the threatening reality of mortality.¹³

Such surges in cultural identification following national tragedy are typically accompanied and fomented by the presence of a "charismatic" leader—one who confidently and optimistically affirms the righteousness of one's cultural values and promises hope and bold action to overcome terror and evil. Landau and colleagues reasoned that, following 9/11, President George W. Bush took on such a role.¹⁴ Specifically, these researchers proposed that, in the aftermath of the attacks, Bush helped assuage Americans' distal terror management concerns by championing resolve for American ideals and promising to rid the world of terror through proclamations such as: "Our war that we now fight is against terror and evil. . . our struggle is going to be long and difficult. But we will prevail. We will win. Good will overcome evil."¹⁵ Consistent with this idea, national polls found that Bush's approval rating went from 50 percent just prior to 9/11 to 88 percent a few days later.¹⁶

Landau and colleagues put this analysis to the test prior to the 2004 presidential election by examining whether MS and reminders of the 9/11 attacks would increase Americans' support for President Bush and his war on terror. Reminders of death and 9/11 indeed heightened support for Bush. One study showed, for example, that participants who did not get MS showed a strong preference for Bush's political opponent, the purported flip-flopper Senator John Kerry, whereas mortality-primed participants strongly favored Bush, the crusader against evil. Moreover, these effects of MS and 9/11 reminders were found among both liberal and conservative Americans, suggesting that Bush's

charismatic leadership served a terror management function for Americans regardless of their political orientation.

Terror Management since 9/11: The Changing Face of Proximal and Distal Defenses

At the time of writing, the sociopolitical events set in motion by the 9/11 attacks continue to determine the trajectory of American international relations, as well as the cultural climate within America itself. But many aspects of the cultural climate have shifted in interesting ways, begging the question of whether terror management defenses stemming from the 9/11 attacks may have changed over time, and if so, how?

Looking first at proximal defenses, there are signs that Americans are regaining confidence in their physical safety. For example, the small post-9/11 increase in handgun applications had subsided by November of that year, and there was no overall increase in firearm purchases in response to the attacks.¹⁷ But vigilance is still high. Overall some \$23 billion in domestic security financing has been funneled to the states from the American federal government since the attacks.¹⁸ And the American government continues to expand search and surveillance powers over citizens. The Total Information Awareness program of 2003 was proposed as a way of gathering purchase histories, medical records, and other personal information on every American, and the New York Police Department's Operation Sentinel, planned for completion in 2010, entails photographing and storing information on every vehicle that enters Manhattan.

Accordingly, the perceived necessity of measures taken in response to 9/11 to directly protect citizens from death seems deeply ingrained in the national consciousness. At the same time, awareness of 9/11 has for many Americans receded from the forefront of consciousness, becoming like a white noise resonating in the background of everyday life. As discussed earlier, these are precisely the conditions under which TMT would predict distal defenses to be high. How have those manifested in the years since 9/11?

There are some signs that they've abated in intensity. The FBI reported that bias-related assaults, threats, and vandalism targeting Muslims and individuals of Arab (and Arab-appearing South Asian and Sikh) ethnicity increased by 1,600 percent from 2000 to 2001, with more than 1,700 incidences of violence against Muslims within five months following the attacks.¹⁹ Consequently, scores of families emigrated, and the flow of immigration from Egypt, Pakistan, and Morocco thinned dramatically. But although hate crimes certainly haven't disappeared, five years after 9/11, Muslims were immigrating to the United States in record numbers.

What about the initial upsurge in support for charismatic leaders? The initial and unprecedented spike in support for President Bush, including his

policies that were largely irrelevant to terrorism, remained high well into 2004, and was periodically boosted in response to government-issued terror warnings.²⁰ In 2002 more than 85 percent of Americans supported Bush's military actions against the Middle East, which was essentially the same level of support seen in 2001.²¹ But in the waning years of Bush's administration, his support reached a record low, and even conservatives questioned the utility of a protracted and expensive war in Iraq.

More generally, Americans are ambivalent about politicians invoking 9/11 and its portents to bolster their campaigns. Many mainstream media outlets satirized Bush's decision to rekindle the memory of 9/11 in his 2006 televised address challenging criticism of the Iraq war. Also, in 2007 Rudolph Giuliani initially focused his presidential campaign on issues such as his career in the Justice Department, but when his polls dropped he took up the theme of 9/11 that had transformed him from a lame-duck mayor to a popular national figure six years earlier. But the public failed to take his message seriously, and the media mocked him for what they saw as a gratuitous exploitation of fears for political gain.

That said, invocations of the memory of 9/11 continued to appear prominently in political discourse, even well into the 2008 presidential campaign. In fashioning his political persona as a tough, embattled war hero, Senator John McCain emphasized his strength on the issue of national security and his readiness to prevent "another 9/11." By doing so, McCain may have catered to proximal terror management concerns, those linked to the literal threat of death, rather than trumpeting a trail-blazing message that America might renew its symbolic greatness in the post-Bush, post-9/11 era. By contrast, Barack Obama, who inspired record voter registration and turnout at primaries by packaging himself as an agent of change and hope, appeared more concerned with reshaping America's strategic and ideological prospects than with reigniting the raw anxieties of 9/11. From the perspective of TMT, then, Obama's forward-looking strategy of promising charismatic leadership and participation in a novel, grand and enduring vision may partly explain his victory in the 2008 presidential race.

A similar dynamic has arisen in debates over the appropriate way of commemorating 9/11. On the one hand, every anniversary of the attacks has been marked by national tributes. In 2006, for example, cathedral bells rang in Chicago, Carnegie Hall hosted a memorial concert, and students at MIT erected a 25-foot model fire engine atop a campus building bearing the Latin word *meminimus* ("we remember"). This suggests that memory of the attacks, and the surge of solidarity that followed, have remained unvarnished by time. On the other hand enthusiasm is waning, as evidenced by the decreased willingness to fund and complete large-scale commemorative projects. To mention two of many examples, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey has postponed construction on a 9/11 memorial plaza until 2010, and the building of enormous metal wings forming the roof of the main hall at the World Trade

Center transportation hub has been stymied by budget limitations. In short, there are clear signs of Americans wishing to “move on” from the events in a way that would have seemed sacrilegious a few years ago.

A third and equally interesting response joins the urge to remember and the urge to forget, namely, the urge to secure a clear, coherent understanding of how and why the attacks happened. This search for understanding has led to a number of self-searching analyses, many of which paint the United States in unflattering terms. The best-selling 9/11 Commission Report outlined numerous weaknesses in America’s government and safety response institutions. Popular movies such as *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *Charlie Wilson’s War* suggested that America may have sown seeds of aggression in its prior dealings with the Middle East. Such works were accompanied by a proliferation of conspiracy theories accusing the United States government of covering up details of the attacks and even aiding in their execution.

How can we make sense of this response? From a TMT perspective, a common distal defense against mortality concerns is the belief in a just world—the belief that people generally get what they deserve and do not suffer unjustifiably. And in TMT laboratories MS has been shown to increase people’s preference for clear explanations of a tragic event.²² Analogously, when Americans witnessed the senseless murder of innocent civilians on 9/11, many sought a clear causal explanation by eagerly pointing to evidence of an international network of terrorism connecting Iraq, Iran, and Syria, and cooperation between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda. But another, more insidious way of restoring the belief in a just world is to derogate victims as a way to view them as somehow deserving of their misfortune (“They must have been doing *something* wrong!”). Indeed, studies show that MS leads people to assign more blame to the victim of a senseless, but not a more comprehensible, tragedy.²³ These findings suggest that, at least for many Americans, viewing their country as incompetent, myopic, and even morally destitute is an acceptable cost for a clear understanding that assuages fears over the capriciousness of death.

What about the aforementioned spike in religiosity? American college students interviewed in November 2001 reported being significantly more invested in goals related to “intrinsic” religiosity, such as giving and receiving love, than they were pre-9/11, although they were no more concerned with extrinsic goals such as being physically attractive.²⁴ Indeed, this personal quest for religious meaning was an effective way for many Americans to cope with the emotional strain associated with the threat of terrorist attacks.²⁵ But in the years since, religious identification has become more defensive and partisan. So-called “moral” issues were certainly fomenting on the cultural stage prior to 9/11, but they came to a head in the years since the attacks, in part due to America’s support for a president who openly endorsed Christian evangelical values. We witnessed a renewed collaboration between the Christian Right and United States domestic policy, as seen, for example, in the Ten Commandments Defense Act permitting religious displays on state property,

the Marriage Protection Act, and protracted debates about stem cell research and the teaching of evolution that continue at the time of writing. At the other ideological extreme, mistrust of Islamic fundamentalism, amplified by the Madrid train bombings of 2004, stoked contempt for Christian fundamentalism in America and Europe, as evidenced by a wave of controversial atheistic manifestos in 2006 and 2007 (e.g., Dawkins’s *The God Delusion*; Hitchens’s *God is Not Great*). So, whereas post-9/11 religious identification was initially a source of personal security and meaning, it has in the wake of the attacks become the battleground for bitter debates and partisan divides.

A similar dynamic occurred with regard to political ideology. At first Americans across ideological spectra put aside their differences and united as Americans, yet now the country appears once again fiercely divided over political issues. Liberals and conservatives, who had commonly clung to Bush’s charismatic leadership toward the end of his first term, now appear to have returned to partisan identifications as sources of psychological security. Ironically, this revitalized divisiveness may reflect a common concern with “threat” since 9/11, with members of both sides employing apocalyptic rhetoric to advance their respective agendas: conservatives voicing staunch support for border security (immigrants “invading” the country’s borders), and advocating building a wall to keep illegal immigrants out; and liberals zealously embracing issues like global warming (carbon emissions “destroying” the environment). Indeed, Kosloff, Greenberg, Weise & Solomon recently found that for liberal and conservative Americans, MS increased the appeal of a fictional charismatic gubernatorial candidate if that candidate advocated values central to the study participant’s liberal or conservative political orientation.²⁶ And Weise and colleagues recently found that MS augmented the perceived importance of non-terrorism-related issues relevant to individuals’ political orientation, causing liberals to place greater weight upon issues like getting minorities into college and helping the disadvantaged and conservatives to show greater concern with legislating against abortion and homosexual marriage.²⁷

TMT helps us understand why 9/11 initially inspired personal meaning-seeking and national unity but, with time, helped to fuel ideological gridlock and intergroup enmity. Laboratory research shows that a sustained, blatant reminder of personal mortality initially leads to tendencies toward personal growth and relaxed defensiveness, but that these effects diminish as the awareness of death recedes into the background of consciousness.²⁸ For example, Kosloff and Greenberg found that immediately after being reminded of their mortality, people showed decreased preference for extrinsic but not intrinsic goals, but when reminded of their mortality and then distracted from such thoughts, people reported a greater desire for extrinsic goals like fame and wealth.²⁹ Analogously, after 9/11 people were explicitly coping with mortality concerns and clung to their belief systems for personal security rather than to dominate the person next door, but as those mortality concerns receded over the years into the background of the American consciousness, they motivated

a more rigid, comparative form of worldview defense that seems to have fueled many cultural and political controversies.

Terror Mismanagement: Troubles in Coping with a Cultural Trauma

In addition to these political, religious, and ethnicity-based consequences, 9/11—both the attacks themselves and the haunting memory of them—presents an emotionally distressing, at times overwhelming, reminder of the fragility of life. Much like Pearl Harbor or Hiroshima, 9/11 was an emotional shock to an entire cultural system, one that remains partly unhealed. Salzman and Halloran have used TMT to propose the development of a diagnosable “cultural trauma syndrome,” based on the premise that violent assaults (such as colonizing or terrorist acts) perpetrated against a collective with explicit intent to discredit or eradicate that collective’s worldview are more than mere physical infringements.³⁰ Considering this, we are inclined to agree with Hartmann and Basile, who—having found an increase in the intensity of dream images of a random sample of Americans after 9/11—proposed that the terrorist attacks “produced some degree of trauma or at least serious stress in everyone living in the United States.”³¹

There is evidence that Americans in general have suffered emotional upheaval after 9/11, and that adverse psychological effects of 9/11 persisted months after the attacks.³² New York City inhabitants have varied in their long-term responses to the attacks,³³ but, consistent with TMT, Updegraff, Silver and Holman recently found that those less successful in procuring a meaningful account of the attacks experienced elevated fears of future terrorism, leading to poorer psychological adjustment years after the attacks.³⁴

Further findings from Kosloff and colleagues have directly linked death-related concerns to 9/11-related distressed outcomes among otherwise healthy individuals.³⁵ In two studies, MS increased retrospective reports of psychological dissociation during the 9/11 attacks; individuals attempted to defuse threatening, 9/11-related cognitions and emotions by viewing them as surreal and distant from the self. While initially a protective response, dissociation during a trauma is associated with the delayed onset of anxiety-related pathology, presumably because the initial traumatic concerns remain undealt with.³⁶ Consistent with this process, Kosloff and colleagues found that MS-induced dissociation heightened individuals’ reported concerns with experiencing anxiety, suggesting that persistent memories of 9/11, coupled with the thought of one’s own death, may contribute to long-term distress.³⁷

However, TMT also suggests that the impact of cultural trauma should be most pronounced among individuals who generally struggle to maintain faith in their cultural bases of meaning and value. Studies show that the effects of MS are particularly pronounced among individuals incapable of maintaining

a positive self-image or sense of security within the dominant cultural paradigm, such as those prone to chronic depression, low self-esteem, or neuroticism.³⁸ And MS increases phobic and compulsive tendencies in those with a proclivity for such behavior.³⁹

Analogously, evidence suggests the terror induced by the 9/11 attacks had pronounced negative impacts upon those predisposed to psychopathology. In a national longitudinal study of almost 2,000 people, Silver and colleagues found that individuals with a prior mental disorder were highly likely to develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms and global distress during the 18 months following the attacks.⁴⁰ Furthermore, in a more specific sample of low-income, Hispanic primary care patients at New York Presbyterian Hospital, Neria and colleagues found that 79.6 percent of those patients who screened positive for 9/11-related PTSD displayed comorbidity with one or more other mental disorders (the most frequent being major depression, generalized anxiety disorder, and panic disorder).⁴¹

In sum, the 9/11 attacks exposed most Americans to intense death-related fear and anxiety while bringing them into distressingly close contact with the fragility of their cultural meaning system. Through direct and indirect exposure to the attacks, the cultural trauma of 9/11 became widespread. Accordingly, memories of those events, coupled with humans’ symbolic awareness of their mortality, may contribute to negative mental health outcomes, especially among those for whom protective sources of meaning and value are tenuous and unreliable.

Conclusion

The 9/11 attacks forced Americans to take a long hard look at the existential reality of death, while simultaneously cleaving them from secure faith in the permanence and inviolability of their culture. Like participants in a TMT experiment on a grand scale, American citizens sought to put a convincing cap on the death anxiety spurred by those tragic events, initially by allaying literal concerns with mortal vulnerability, and later by rallying in support of their religious and political values and beliefs.

Still, eight years later, concerns with national security remain quite high. Americans are willing to endure long lines at airline security checkpoints with no more than a bit of grumbling, perhaps also aware that such measures serve the broader aim of protecting themselves and close others from further devastation at the hands of terrorists. While the societal imprint of proximal responses to the 9/11 attacks can still be observed in such lingering concerns, distal terror management responses to 9/11 have altered radically over time as American social and political climates have changed. In the wake of 9/11, Americans initially rallied together in support of God and country, and former president George W. Bush. Yet later, Americans became disillusioned with

Bush and his policies, rallying instead in support of Barack Obama's voice of change and revitalized Americanism. At the same time, however, long-standing adherences to party-line beliefs seem as prevalent as ever, perhaps even strengthened by apocalyptic rhetoric reminiscent of the dire messages following the 9/11 attacks but now applied in the context of polarizing debates over border security and global warming.

Hopefully, additional research will identify factors that reduce the tendency of death-related concerns to promote divisiveness in post-9/11 American culture. Indeed, some experimental investigations have shed promising light on this prospect, showing that defensive responses to mortality are attenuated when individuals personally prioritize values of tolerance or encounter the idea that all humans share a common identity (*homo sapiens*) that cuts across differences within and between cultures.⁴² Additionally, deeper contemplation of personal mortality (e.g., thinking in particularly explicit, prolonged and concrete ways about one's death) has sometimes been found to promote less defensive and more growth oriented responses, perhaps because particularly realistic confrontations with death heighten appreciation of the individuals and experiences one may encounter in this short life.⁴³ Continued investigations along these lines may thus reveal that emerging conflicts, motivated in part by memories of 9/11 and existential concerns associated with them, can be eclipsed by acknowledging the common human identity we all share, regardless of our cultural background, and the conscious knowledge that we are all equally mortal.

Notes

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