

Trauma and Politics of Fear in the Wake of the 9/11 Terror Attacks

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Abstract: After the 9/11 terror attacks, the Bush administration launched two military operations that proved to be quite disruptive for South and Central Asia as well as the Middle East. This article examines how the 9/11 trauma triggered early coping mechanisms involving victimization and/or identification with the aggressor, specifically among White House officials and deputies.

Keywords: 9/11, anthrax, Bush-administration, identification-with-the- aggressor, PTSD, raging-violence, USA PATRIOT Act, victimization

On September 11, 2001, tens of thousands of Americans experienced a tremendous disruption in their daily lives. This multitude of individual tragedies was amplified by the media and television coverage of the events, which acted as an echo chamber. A national survey conducted within a few days revealed that adults watched an average of eight hours of news about the attacks, with one-fifth viewing 13 or more (Schuster et al., 2001). Half of them had at least one stress symptom defined as “substantial” based on a questionnaire that included five symptoms. The authors of this study pointed out that a disaster of this magnitude always has lasting effects, even on people who are not physically present, especially if relatives have been affected or if they are experiencing the event as potential victims. Given the emblematic nature of the terrorists’ targets, the possibility that all Americans would identify with the victims of the September 11 attacks was maximized. Indeed, although respondents in the New York City area showed the highest levels of stress reactions, other communities across the country, large and small, also reported significant levels of stress in the days following the terrorist attacks.

Triggering Earlier Traumas

It was therefore unlikely that the health impact and psychological consequences on the American population would disappear quickly. Indeed, overwhelming feelings of anxiety may fuel and prolong the initial stress response, a physiological reaction that would be easily rekindled by a reminder of the traumatic event through the media—making these people even more vulnerable later. But to grasp the full impact of the tragedy and its political ramifications, one must also consider that the event triggered earlier psychic wounds that time could not heal. For many Americans, the shock of 9/11 itself acted as a reminder of deeply repressed traumas, particularly as a result of routine violence and abuse to which many had been subjected throughout childhood. Many citizens have expressed the disbelief and extreme anxiety they felt when they saw such an imposing symbol of power as the Twin Towers waver and collapse, to the point of feeling that they themselves had been damaged. This identification mechanism was magnified by the fact that these were civilian targets; every American could have been in Manhattan that day or even counted among the victims. At the same time, the terrorists had not hesitated to attack the country’s institutions by also striking the Pentagon, which houses the Department of Defense. Such attacks thus challenged the country’s capacity to project its domination over the world and the government’s ability to guarantee the integrity of its territory.

When terrorists kill thousands of innocent people in cold blood, thus demonstrating their contempt for life and the most elementary moral principles, many are plunged back into the

situation of a powerless child left in the hands of tyrannical caretakers. During a telephone survey carried out by Gallup a few days after 9/11, the investigators were surprised to hear “an unprecedented outpouring of emotion by respondents as they were questioned over the phone. Some were crying” (Benedetto & O’Driscoll, 2001). Recalling their experience of the tragedy, many citizens later spoke of the feelings of helplessness and vulnerability that overwhelmed them and how they responded. One resident of a small New Jersey town that lost 12 inhabitants enlisted with his daughter in a federal emergency preparedness program, as did thousands of his fellow citizens: “I felt helpless on 9/11. I thought, ‘Boy, I’m so vulnerable!’ I want to be in a position of knowledge rather than being a victim” (Mihalopoulos, 2003, Section 1, p. 14). Although these people tried to put into words the emotions they felt in the aftermath of the attacks, they could not make sense of the distress that overwhelmed them. Unable to distinguish the tragedy that struck America from their own emotional upsurge, they instantly attributed the origin of their panic to the sole aggression of 9/11—a psychic defense mechanism they would reactivate thereafter.

Retaliation as Coping Mechanism

In a general context where the suffering of children is denied, many Americans likely experienced the attacks as the confirmation of a despair whose childhood origin they were unable to grasp. The status of “victims” that this tragedy gave them in the eyes of the international community conferred an unsuspected reality on other more deeply repressed traumas. The prospect of deploying the almighty U.S. military against these terrorists became—at least for many of them—a means of actively repressing the feelings of helplessness and vulnerability that had then overwhelmed them while preserving the image of a benevolent and protective father figure.

Based on Bessel van der Kolk’s (1989) research, victims of child abuse, rape, natural disasters, or war for instance experience chronic physiological hyperreactivity to all types of stimuli reminiscent of the initial trauma. These individuals tend to react to stress in a somatic manner rather than in an appropriate response to the situation, which triggers additional anxiety. They frequently adopt patterns of behavior that bring them back to the initial trauma, some in the role of the victim and others in that of the persecutor. In the latter case, they are likely to restage the violence they suffered from. By identifying themselves with the figure of their aggressor, they ignore the unbearable distress that had overwhelmed them and substitute a false feeling of omnipotence. While indicating that this mode of defense seems to be more frequent in abused men than in women, the latter being more inclined to condemn themselves or to attach themselves to a new aggressor, Van der Kolk (1989) underlines the determining role of the triggering event—a terrorist attack for instance—in the re-emergence of these survival strategies, even in apparently socially well-adapted subjects.

President’s Approval Rating at its Highest

Such psychological realities help to understand the considerable support that Americans quickly gave to the global “war on terror” launched by the Bush administration in the wake of 9/11. This perspective spoke to them on an unconscious level because they were themselves fighting against the re-emergence of their own childhood traumas by looking for culprits to whom they could re-enact their abuse. Therefore, they did not doubt the legitimacy of a response that the president himself presented as a punitive expedition. A September 13 ABC News/*Washington Post* (2001) poll showed that 93% of respondents supported a military response, 86% approved of war, and 77% favored it even if it meant harming or killing innocent civilians. The president’s approval rating jumped from 51% in the week before the attacks to 90% a fortnight later, the highest approval rating of his two terms in office (Gallup, 2001).

In this case, the public opinion survey was not a reflection of American confidence in President Bush's ability to respond appropriately to the 9/11 crisis. Rather, it reflected their relief at recognizing a familiar pattern in his behavior. By announcing retaliatory action, the head of state was deflecting from himself the anger that his fellow citizens must have felt at his government's impotence to prevent such attacks. By vehemently pointing at Muslim fundamentalists, he could direct his own aggression toward a target on which, like a father figure, he could exercise his compulsion to punish with the mighty power of Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces. Such attitude diverted most Americans from their own suffering by mobilizing their energy of repression in favor of a global military strategy the government could not enforce in other circumstances.

Manipulations of Power

The President was not alone in doing so. Classified memos leaked by *The Washington Post* showed that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was inundating his staff with e-mails urging them to "keep elevating the threat" to maintain an atmosphere of terror across the country and mobilize opinion in favor of the war (Wright, 2007). These messages were so numerous that Pentagon employees spoke of them as "snowflakes." A few months before his resignation in November 2006, Rumsfeld still said that the people would continue to rally around the idea of sacrifice because they wanted to be commanded. One memo stated: "Make the American people realize they are surrounded in the world by violent extremists." Under continuous stress and in the hope of putting an end to their anxiety, most citizens rallied behind the punitive father figure and demanded the measures that the government was planning to implement, even at the cost of certain freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution, as the September 13 ABC News/*Washington Post* poll also showed.

According to Geoff Metcalf (2001), a conservative radio host, many listeners expressed a "visceral desire for revenge" after 9/11. One of the two questions he heard most frequently on his daily show was: "When will we hit [the enemy] back" (Metcalf, 2001)? Equally interesting, the second question was about when the terrorists would attack America again. This concern was rekindled by *The Washington Post*, on October 5, 2001, in an article that won the Pulitzer Prize the following year (Schmidt & Woodward, 2001). According to confidential sources communicated to the members of the Senate Intelligence Committee by secret service officials, the risk of a second terrorist attack on American targets was very high. Although he could not justify this claim with classified information, Senator Richard C. Shelby, a Republican member of the Committee, confided to journalists: "We have to believe there will be another attempt by a terrorist group to hit us again. You can just about bet on it" (Schmidt & Woodward, 2001).

Anthrax Letters

The fears of a new terrorist attack were soon corroborated by the death of the first victim of the five "anthrax letters" that had been sent to various media a week after 9/11. On October 12, Vice President Dick Cheney said on Jim Lehrer's show *The News Hour*: "We know that [Bin Laden] has over the years tried to acquire weapons of mass destruction both biological and chemical." In his weekly radio address on November 3rd, President Bush also confirmed that this was "a second wave of terrorist attacks upon our country." However, a DNA analysis carried out on the night of October 4th by a team of geneticists from Northern Arizona University (NAU) on behalf of the FBI had shown that the strain of anthrax contained in the first contaminated letters sent to the media came from an American laboratory and not from Afghanistan. This strain called Ames had been isolated in 1981 and, because of its virulence, became most widely used by military scientists, with the idea of developing a vaccine to protect troops from a bacteriological attack.

But White House officials continued to publicize that the anthrax attacks were connected to international terrorists. In their daily meetings with intelligence officials, they pressured FBI Director Robert Mueller to deliver evidence that the killer bacilli were the work of Bin Laden. “They really wanted to blame somebody in the Middle East,” a former FBI official would later say (Meek, 2001). “Very quickly [Fort Detrick, Md., experts] told us it was not something some guy in a cave could come up with” (Meek, 2001). The highest authorities of the State were also informed of experiments that the laboratories of the U.S. Army carried out in the field of bacteriological weapons. A week before September 11, 2001, *The New York Times* published an article revealing that several months earlier the Pentagon had launched a research program to genetically engineer a highly virulent strain of anthrax for military purposes supposed to be fully consistent with the Biological Weapons Convention of 1972.

Raging Flood of Violence

Behind such agitation, one can discern the defense mechanisms of denial, splitting, and projection. White House medical officers immediately prescribed ciprofloxacin, a powerful antibiotic that could fight anthrax, to several of its employees, including Vice President Dick Cheney’s entourage. Richard Cohen (2008), a reporter for *The Washington Post*, revealed that he had also been encouraged to take the antidote: “The tip had come in a roundabout way by a high government official, and I immediately acted on it. I was carrying Cipro way before most people had ever heard of it.” Thus, before the first anthrax envelope was opened, the prospect of a bioterrorist attack was already “the ultimate freakout,” according to reporter Judith Miller of *The New York Times*, whose writings played a large part in feeding this collective trance.

The chronology of the second wave of tainted letters attests to a more troubling coincidence. On October 9th, while a member of the Senate was still trying to oppose some amendments to Attorney General John Ashcroft’s new anti-terrorism law, the final version of which would become the controversial USA PATRIOT Act, two identical letters containing a lethal dose of anthrax were sent to Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle and Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee Patrick Leahy, both Democrats. As a precautionary measure, the House of Representatives and three Senate offices were closed for five days. In a state of emotional shock, members of Congress could not denounce the Bush administration’s forceful passage of legislation that infringed on civil liberties. The following week, when the text was approved by an overwhelming majority of both houses, most of them had barely read it.

After 9/11, White House officials were undoubtedly coping with their own childhood traumas. With the prospect of a retaliatory war, they cut an unconscious deal with the American people and their representatives in Congress. To suppress an unbearable sense of vulnerability through projective identification with the aggressor, citizens would accept restraining public freedoms and merge with their leaders in making way for the flood of violence soon to be unleashed against Afghanistan, then Iraq.

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