TERROR MANAGEMENT OF FEAR, HATE, POLITICAL CONFLICT, AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE: A REVIEW

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Terror Management Theory (TMT) conceptualizes political ideology as a particularly important component of the cultural worldviews upon which people rely for protection from deeply rooted existential fears. This article summarizes the central ideas of this theory and basic supporting evidence and then reviews research on the implications of TMT for understanding ideological conflict, support for leaders, policies, and political violence. It considers the various sources of security upon which people can rely and suggests that chronic and situational activation of specific worldview values is one important determinant of the specific aspects of the worldview that people rely on for security. It also considers research on factors that encourage and discourage violent solutions to political conflicts, the determinants of ideological consistency across diverse issues, and possible explanations for the current political divisiveness that is found in many nations.

Key words: Politics; Intergroup conflict; Terror Management Theory; Political violence; War.

Democracy, in which ordinary people vote to pick their representatives and leaders, certainly sounds like a good idea. Indeed, most people consider it a far better system than anything else human beings have yet devised to govern and regulate their societies. Ideally, individuals vote to support candidates and policies on the basis of a rational balancing of their own self-interest with the good of the various communities to which they belong — including humankind in general. However, psychological research has repeatedly shown that human judgments and attitudes are rarely, if ever, immune from irrational bias. In particular, recent research inspired by Terror Management Theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) has shown that existential fears rooted in human awareness of their vulnerability and mortality have a profound and pervasive influence on political preferences. This article will review this work and discuss its implications for understanding the psychological processes that determine political preferences, including support for leaders, policies, and political violence.

TERROR MANAGEMENT THEORY

TMT posits that, although highly adaptive, the evolution of sophisticated intellectual abilities gave rise to some unique problems for our species. The human capacity to use language to think about oneself and one's future makes us aware of the inevitability of death. Awareness of the inevitability of death in an animal that is predisposed to want to continue living creates the potential for overwhelm-

ing terror. Early humans "solved" the problem of death by creating cultural systems of meaning and value to manage their terror. This potential for terror put a "press" on emerging explanations for existence so that people were more likely to invent and subscribe to belief systems that decreased anxiety by providing hope of either literally or symbolically transcending death. Literal immortality is provided by cultural, especially religious, teachings regarding continued life after physical death and an everlasting soul (e.g., heaven, reincarnation). Symbolic immortality is provided by cultural values and institutions that enable people to construe themselves as valuable, memorable contributors to larger entities that continue to exist after their physical death. Because these death-transcending beliefs are fragile human constructions, those who share one's worldview increase one's faith in it; those with different worldviews threaten it. TMT posits that the fear of death is a major contributor to the human need for life to be meaningful and the self to be of value (self-esteem).
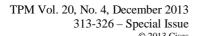
To date, over 500 studies conducted worldwide have supported TMT hypotheses (for a recent review, see Greenberg & Arndt, 2012). This research has shown that: (a) increasing self-esteem or faith in their worldviews makes people less vulnerable to anxiety and anxiety-related behavior in response to threats; (b) reminding people of death (mortality salience) increases positive reactions to those who support their worldview, negative reactions to those who threaten it, striving for self-esteem, and belief in an afterlife, prayer, and God (for nonatheists); (c) increasing self-esteem or validating one's worldview eliminates these effects of death reminders; (d) threats to self-esteem or worldview increase the accessibility of death-related thoughts and boosts to self-esteem or worldview reduce death thought accessibility; and (e) evidence of the existence of consciousness after death eliminates these effects of death reminders. These studies provide converging support for the important role that the fear of death plays in diverse aspects of human behavior. Although alternative explanations for some specific TMT findings have been offered (e.g., Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; van den Bos & Miedema, 2000), we know of no serious alternative explanation for the entirety of this literature.

FEAR OF DEATH AND POLITICAL ATTITUDES

Much of the research on TMT has focused on the role of death concerns in political attitudes. Specifically, research has assessed the role of terror management processes in attitudes and behavior toward other people with political attitudes similar or dissimilar to one's own, support for political leaders, candidates, and specific policies, and support for political violence (including war and terrorism). Research has also demonstrated the role of salient cultural values in determining which attitudinal positions are most attractive when facing existential threat and the role of existential threat in promoting ideological consistency across various specific political issues. Given the powerful role religion plays in the politics of many nations, past and present, research on the role of death concerns in religious devotion is highly relevant to understanding contemporary politics. We turn now to a review of this research.

Attitudes toward Those with Political Attitudes Similar and Dissimilar to One's Own

Perhaps the most widely investigated effect in the TMT literature is that of mortality salience on attitudes toward those who support or threaten one's cultural worldview. These studies
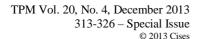
usually assess evaluations of a person who praises or criticizes one's country or political orientation or who simply holds a worldview discrepant from one's own. For example, one early study showed that death reminders increased liking for a person who praised the United States and decreased liking for a person who criticized it (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Veeder, Kirkland, & Solomon, 1990); similar findings have emerged among citizens of Japan, Canada, the Netherlands, and other countries in response to praise or criticism of their nation or people (e.g., Heine, Harihara, & Niiya, 2002). Such criticism of one's country has been shown to increase the accessibility of death-related thoughts (Hayes, Schimel, Arndt, & Faucher, 2010) and derogation of the critic has been shown to decrease the accessibility of these thoughts (Harmon-Jones et al., 1997).

TMT research has also shown that mortality salience increases physical aggression against a person who derogates one's political orientation and decreases such aggression against a person who criticizes a political orientation that opposes one's own (McGregor et al., 1998). Specifically, participants reminded of their own mortality administered more hot sauce to a person who dislikes spicy foods when that person criticized their political orientation but less hot sauce when that person criticized the opposing political orientation. These studies also showed that, at least in the case of responses to a single instance of verbal criticism of one's politics such as this, physical aggression and attitudinal derogation seem to be interchangeable; derogating the person who has criticized one's attitudes eliminates the tendency to aggress physically, and vice versa. Thus the hostility that many people display toward those with political orientations different from their own appears to be rooted, at least in part, in their need for security in the face of the tenuous nature of human existence.

Support for Political Leaders and Candidates

On September 10, 2001, U.S. President George W. Bush had an approval rating of about 50%; on September 12, 2001, Bush's approval rating had sky-rocketed to over 90%. Of course the fateful events on the day in between these assessments — the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks — were likely responsible for this dramatic increase in Bush's popularity. This conclusion was born out by research showing that reminders of the 9/11 attacks increased agreement with an essay praising Bush and his policies. It was also found that priming stimuli associated with these attacks increased the accessibility of death related thoughts and that reminders of one's own mortality had an equivalent effect to reminders of the attacks in increasing support for Bush (Landau et al., 2004); this suggests it was the existential threat posed by the 9/11 attacks that was responsible for this increase in Bush's popularity, rather than a specific link between Bush and competent handling of this tragic event. A follow-up study conducted shortly before the 2004 U.S. presidential election showed that although challenger John Kerry was strongly preferred under neutral conditions, reminders of death reversed this preference, making Bush a clear favorite. Consistent with these findings, correlational research showed that the higher the government-issued terrorist threat level, the greater was the support for Bush in the year leading up to the 2004 election (Willer, 2004).

Research has also shown that reminders of death and related threats increase support for specific policies. Landau et al. (2004) found that both death and 9/11 reminders increased support among Americans for the so-called Patriot Act, which gave intelligence agencies unprecedented

power to spy on citizens; Pyszczynski, Abdollahi, Solomon, Greenberg, and Weise, (2006) showed that reminders of death or terrorism increased support for the use of extreme military tactics, including nuclear and chemical weapons, to fight terrorism. In a related vein, Chatard, Selimbegovice, and Pyszczynski (2013) found that both reminders of the Fukushima nuclear disaster and imagining a similar disaster occurring locally decreased support for further reliance on nuclear energy in France among French participants with proenvironmental attitudes, but counterintuitively *increased* support for nuclear energy among those low in environmental concern. In these studies, reminders of the cost of a political position opposed to one's own actually increased support for that position.

Presumably, these increases in support for leaders and ideas when confronted with reminders of death occur because of the existential security that they provide. One possible explanation for Bush's effectiveness as a source of existential security for Americans in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks is that he was a charismatic leader who proclaimed the greatness of the United States and the American people, and promoted a crusade to rid the world of the evil promulgated by Islamist terrorists. To assess this possibility, Cohen, Ogilvie, Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (2005) assessed the effect of mortality salience on support for a hypothetical gubernatorial candidate whose presentation emphasized either his task-oriented competence, his socially oriented desire to encourage cooperation, or the charismatic greatness of the state. Whereas the task-oriented candidate was strongly preferred under neutral conditions, mortality salience increased support for the charismatic candidate but not the others. Thus ethnocentric and nationalistic sentiment seems to be especially appealing when existential threat is high.

Conservative Shift or Attitude Polarization?

Interestingly, the effects of reminders of death and terrorist attacks on support for President Bush were *not* moderated by participants' political orientation: both conservatives and liberals became more supportive of Bush when reminded of either 9/11 or their own mortality. This raises the intriguing question of whether existential threat leads people to cling to their preexisting worldviews or shift in a conservative direction. Reasonable arguments for both possibilities can be derived from TMT.

On the one hand, it could be argued that conservative ideology provides more certainty, stability, order, and consistency with tradition, and that for these reasons people would gravitate in a conservative direction when existential threat is high. Indeed, Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, and Sulloway (2003) reviewed a large body of evidence showing that measures of dogmatism, intolerance of ambiguity, needs for order, structure and closure, fear of threat and loss, and death anxiety correlated positively with adherence to conservative ideology. Self-professed conservatives are also more likely than liberals to endorse traditional cultural values and religious forms of morality, to support authority figures and to oppose changing the status quo. Research has also shown that reminders of mortality increase preferences for well-structured information and enhance just world motivation and stereotype-consistent thinking (e.g., Landau, Greenberg, Sullivan, Routledge, & Arndt, 2009; Landau et al., 2004). These findings are consistent with the idea that conservative ideology, at least as it manifests in contemporary Western nations, may be especially appealing when one is feeling threatened or insecure. Greenberg and Jonas (2003) have
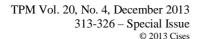
argued, however, that left wing ideologies have the same potential to provide structure and order, especially when they become the dominant force within a nation, and that leftist ideologies have been associated with rigidity and allegiance to the status quo in the past in countries such as China, the Soviet Union, and many of its satellite nations.

On the other hand, it follows from TMT that people's political positions are chosen largely because of the existential security that they provide. Due to one's upbringing, socialization, and perhaps temperament, some people find conservative ideology more comforting while others find greater security in liberal ideology. This suggests that death reminders should lead to a polarization of political attitudes. Indeed, findings of mortality salience increasing preference for structure are typically specific to persons high in need for structure and recent studies (e.g., Vess, Routledge, Landau, & Arndt, 2009) have shown that people low in need for structure show reduced preference for structured stimuli after mortality salience and instead seek novelty and complexity. These findings suggest that although structure can indeed be comforting and is therefore sought by some people when faced with existential threat, not everyone copes in this way; those who value complexity and novelty sometimes seek new experiences, creative thinking, and more complex meanings as a way of dealing with such threats (for a review, see Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Arndt, 2011).

Indeed, research supports both of these possible effects of existential threat on political preference. The aforementioned studies of reminders of death and terrorism increasing support for George Bush among Americans regardless of political orientation (Landau et al., 2004) documents a conservative shift, as does Bonnano and Jost's (2006) finding that, regardless of their initial political orientation, high-exposure survivors of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York City exhibited a shift toward conservative attitudes and away from liberal ones in the 18 months following the attacks. In a similar vein, Echebarria and Fernández (2006) reported that compared to prior to the attacks, the aftermath of the Madrid terrorist attacks (March 11, 2004) was associated with increased endorsement of traditional conservative values. On the other hand, Chatard, Arndt, and Pyszczynski (2010) demonstrated in a nationally representative Swiss sample that the death of loved ones led to a polarization of political orientation over a 7-year period. Whereas conservative individuals who experienced the loss of close friends and relatives became significantly more conservative over time, liberals displayed a trend toward becoming more liberal, though the latter effect did not reach statistical significance. In a related vein, Kosloff, Greenberg, Weise, and Solomon (2010) found that mortality salience increased support for a charismatic political candidate but only if he shared one's political orientation; mortality salience decreased support for a charismatic candidate of the opposing political orientation. A recent meta-analysis of research on the effect of mortality salience on political attitudes revealed support for both conservative shift and polarization effects but concluded that support for polarization was stronger (Burke, Kosloff, & Landau, 2013).

Support for Political Violence

Research has also shown that thoughts of death and related threats increase support for political violence. From the perspective of TMT, intergroup bias, hatred, and violence are motivated, in part, by threats to one's worldview and self-esteem posed by the beliefs, values, and be-

havior of outgroup members (for a review of research on TMT and intergroup conflict, see Castano & Dechesne, 2005). Mortality salience has been shown to increase support for military solutions to current conflicts among Americans and Israelis, and support for martyrdom missions to kill Americans among Iranians (Hirschberger & Ein-Dor, 2006; Pyszczynski et al., 2006). However, this tendency for existential threat to increase support for war is attenuated when the perceived personal costs of political violence are high, as in the case of Israelis who have personal experience of war or terrorist attack or who have been prompted to think about the personal ramifications of war. These findings suggest that rational concerns about the utility of political violence sometimes short-circuit the connection between fear and support for political violence.
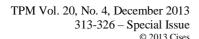
However, another recent set of studies shows that the pursuit of justice plays an even more powerful role and may sometimes overwhelm rational concerns about the utility of war when existential threat is high. Hirschberger et al. (2013) found that mortality salience increased Israelis' support for justice but not utility based arguments for escalation of military action, and that support for justice but not utility based arguments mediated support for such escalation. They also found that, among Palestinian Citizens of Israel, mortality salience increased support for political violence against Israel when a justice-oriented mindset was primed but decreased support for such violence when a utility oriented mindset was primed. Another pair of studies by these researchers showed that, among Israelis and South Koreans, mortality salience increased support for a reprisal in response to a deadly attack by a rival even when such a reprisal was presented as having little utility in preventing future attacks. Thus the desire to maintain justice seems to play an important role in the relationship between existential threat and political violence, even to the point of leading people to support policies that have little utility.

Recently Primed Values

The TMT literature provides a wealth of evidence that mortality salience increases commitment to one's cultural worldview and behavior that conforms to its dictates. But modern cultural worldviews are complex multidimensional sets of ideas and values that are often derived from a multitude of diverse cultural traditions. Even relatively parochial worldviews typically contain a variety of beliefs and values that sometimes call for differing and sometimes competing responses to a given situation. For example, many religions admonish people to be compassionate, fair, and respectful of tradition. For many contemporary social issues, these values can pull people in competing directions. Whereas the values of compassion and fairness might encourage people to support marriage equality for gay and lesbian people, respect for tradition might lead them to oppose it. How do people resolve such conflicts?

From the perspective of TMT, this is a question of which worldview people are most prone to rely on when their need for security is heightened. The previously discussed question of whether existential threat encourages a conservative shift or polarization in the direction of one's preexisting attitudes is another instance in which more than one pathway to security are available to people — what determines which choices they make?

Research suggests that behavior is heavily affected by thoughts and values that are high in accessibility, that is, those that come to mind quickly and easily. The accessibility of values is likely to vary across both persons and situations (e.g., Bargh, Gollwitzer, Lee-Chai, Barndollar,

& Trotschel, 2001). Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Chatel (1992) provided evidence for the moderating effect of both individual and situational differences in value accessibility. In their first study, they found that whereas conservatives become less favorable toward liberals and more favorable toward fellow conservatives following mortality salience (the widely documented worldview defense effect) liberals actually become less favorable toward a fellow liberal and more favorable toward a conservative. They interpreted this finding as reflecting the greater emphasis that the liberal worldview places on tolerating those with opinions different from one's own; in other words, the value of tolerance may be chronically accessible among staunch liberals. Consistent with this reasoning, a follow-up study found that although mortality salience led people to increase their preference for others who shared their political orientation under neutral conditions, priming the value of tolerance (by giving participants the opportunity to endorse the highly popular idea that people have a right to their own opinion) eliminated this effect. In this case, situational priming determined how people responded to mortality salience.

Later research built on these findings to discover ways of directing people's response to existential threat away from political violence and toward negotiation and compromise. Rothschild, Abdollahi, and Pyszczynski (2009) found that priming the value of compassion reversed the tendency of mortality salience to increase support for political violence among both Iranians and American religious fundamentalists. Although mortality salience increased hostility toward the other side among both of these groups in the absence of such priming, priming the value of compassion by assessing participants' agreement with compassionate teachings from the Bible or Koran resulted in mortality salience reducing support for armed conflict between these groups. Motyl et al. (2011) found that activating a sense of shared humanity by reminding participants of experiences that all humans share (e.g., family, childhood) eliminated the effect of mortality salience on anti-Arab and anti-immigration attitudes that was found under neutral conditions. In a related vein, Pyszczynski et al. (2012) found that priming the shared threat of global climate change eliminated and in some cases reversed the increase in support for war and other forms of political violence that was found in the absence of such priming. These studies suggest that, although existential threat often leads to increased hostility and intergroup conflict, this is not the only way of fending off such threats, and that greater cooperation between groups can be encouraged — even in the face of existential threat — by making prosocial values a prominent part of public discourse.

Mortality and Morality

Findings, concerning justice, compassion, shared humanity, and cooperation to fend off common threats, suggest that moral values are especially central components of the cultural worldviews that people use to cope with the problem of death. This should not be surprising given that the vast majority of world religions, past and present, have taught that one's fate after death — in TMT terms, literal immortality — is virtually entirely dependent on the morality of one's actions. Living up to moral standards also appears to be necessary for maintaining both self-esteem and the approval of others. Research shows that moral beliefs are among the most strongly held beliefs people possess, that the morality of one's actions is especially important in

determining evaluations of both self and others, and that moral differences are a particularly disliked type of dissimilarity (Haidt, Rosenberg, & Hom, 2003; Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005).

If moral concerns are especially central to the worldviews that people use for existential security, one would expect mortality salience to have ubiquitous and consistent effects on moral judgments and behavior. Consistent with this notion, Kesebir and Pyszczynski (2011) recently reviewed research showing that mortality salience affects judgments and behavior related to each of the five moral intuitions specified by Moral Foundations Theory (Haidt & Joseph, 2004). Specifically, research has shown that mortality salience increases charitable donations and other forms of helping of people in need (e.g., Jonas, Schimel, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002; caring), punishment of moral transgressors and defensive reactions to injustice (e.g., Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989; fairness), respect for leaders and authority figures (e.g., Landau et al., 2004; authority), ingroup bias (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1990; loyalty), and belief in God and disdain for animals (e.g., Goldenberg et al., 2001; Norenzayan & Hansen, 2006; sanctity).

From the perspective of TMT, awareness of death transformed moral intuitions from a set of innate behavioral proclivities that function to maintain solidarity and minimize conflicts within groups (Haidt & Josephs, 2004) into internalized cultural strategies for transcending death by either pleasing the deity or leaving an indelible mark on the culture. The key point here is that the intended audience of one's moral displays changed from the fellow members of one's group to an all-seeing all-powerful deity who controls access to the afterlife (Pyszczynski & Kesebir, 2012). This suggests that the moral principles that guide political action likely go beyond a concern for maintaining harmony within one's society toward pursuing a society that is consonant with the wishes of the deity upon which people place their hopes in an afterlife. Religion plays an important role in the politics of many nations, from Washington to Tehran, and Cairo to Tel Aviv.

Religion and Politics

Politicians often use religion to justify their policies. Both George Bush and Osama bin Laden framed their policy ideas as coming from long sessions of prayer and sometimes direct advice from God. Religious arguments can often be offered by proponents of both sides of many issues. For example, although opponents of marriage equality for gays widely cite proscriptions against homosexuality from the Bible's Leviticus to argue against gay marriage, proponents just as often use Biblical teachings of compassion to argue in favor of gay marriage. Of course this use of religion to bolster political arguments inevitably involves a rather selective interpretation of the holy books from which the leader is drawing, picking those parts that fit the desired policy and ignoring those that do not. The aforementioned studies of the effects of priming values of compassion, common humanity, and shared responsibility on how people respond to mortality salience (for a review, see Pyszczynski, Rothschild, & Abdollahi, 2008) suggest that such tactics can channel people toward using specific aspects of their worldviews as a basis for protection from anxiety.

Indeed, one could argue that politics direct religious beliefs just as much as religion directs political beliefs. Research by Winter and colleagues (e.g., Winter, 2007) showed that, in the United States, Christian fundamentalism is *negatively* correlated with endorsements of the values

expressed in the Sermon on the Mount, considered by many to be the cornerstone of Christianity, when they were paraphrased as simple statements in contemporary English. For example, participants in this study who were higher in religious fundamentalism were less likely to agree with the values underlying common Christian admonitions to "turn the other cheek" and "judge not lest ye be judged." In a related vein, our studies of the effect of priming compassionate values discussed above showed that these values directed mortality salience responses away from intergroup conflict only when they were clearly linked to their religious tradition; in the absence of such framing, mortality salience increased support for war and violence, just as it did in the absence of any priming.
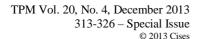
The research on religion and politics suggest that framing a policy in ways that make it appear to follow from higher moral principles is a particularly potent form of persuasion when one's audience is highly religious. This of course is an extremely common strategy used by politicians the world over. Indeed, it's difficult to remember a major speech given by a recent American president that did not end with the phrase, "and God bless the United States of America." Interestingly, our research also suggests that religious framing of messages can backfire among audiences low in religious devotion. Rothschild et al. (2009) found that, among people low in religious fundamentalism, priming the value of compassion (something they almost certainly agree with) actually increased their support for war (a policy they typically oppose) when those values were presented as quotes from the Bible. Taken together, the research on value priming suggests that, to be effective, values must be primed in ways that resonate with their audience.

Ideological Consistency

Our analysis might also shed light on the internal structure of political attitudes. Why are attitudes toward protecting the environment predictive of attitudes toward marriage equality? Why are attitudes toward tax breaks for the wealthy related to attitudes toward abortion? Some might argue that there are subtle underlying moral themes involved in these issues that account for these interrelationships, and that might be true in some cases. We suspect, however, that these relationships have more to do with ideological identity than rational consideration. We recently undertook a series of studies of some of the determinants of the extent to which one's attitudes are clustered around ideological allegiances, what we refer to as ideological consistency.

Based on the large literature showing that political conservativism is associated with high levels of need for structure, dogmatism, intolerance for ambiguity, and preference for tradition, we expected that political conservatives would typically show higher levels of ideological consistency than political liberals. This intuition was shared with every psychologist with whom we discussed this issue. An online survey showed that is also widely held within the general population. But we found exactly the opposite; across four studies, conducted on diverse American samples, liberals consistently displayed higher levels of ideological consistency than conservatives (Kesebir, Phillips, Motyl, & Pyszczynski, 2013).

Why this is the case is not yet clear. One possibility is that political conservatives base their conceptions of right and wrong on a broader palate of moral intuitions than political liberals (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). Moral foundations theory research has shown that whereas liberals display higher endorsement and use of the harm/care and fairness/reciprocity foundations
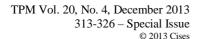
than the ingroup/loyalty, respect/hierarchy, or purity/sancitity foundations, conservatives build their moral systems more evenly on all five foundations (Graham et al., 2009). This "broader morality" of conservatives might lead them to discern more distinctions between political issues than liberals when making moral judgments and decisions, and thus result in more within-person variability in their political attitudes. Another possibility is that the conservative movement at this point in American history reflects a broader coalitions of more diverse interest groups than today's liberal movement. Political discourse often entails discussion of economic and social conservatives, foreign policy hawks, libertarians, tea party patriots, the religious right, and proponents of unfettered capitalism (Crowson, 2009; Stenner, 2009). Similar distinctions are rarely, if ever, made in discussions of contemporary liberal ideology.

Interesting, existential threat, which has been shown to increase the pursuit of cognitive structure in persons who dispositionally prefer structure — as conservatives have been shown to do — and decrease the pursuit of structure among those who prefer unstructured situations — as liberals have been shown to do — has opposing effects on these two types of persons. Across two studies, mortality salience was found to increase the ideological consistency of conservatives but decrease the ideological consistency of liberals (Kesebir et al., 2013). This might help explain the energizing effect that the 9/11 terrorist attacks seemed to have on American conservatives and the reduced adherence to a consistent progressive ideology it seemed to have on American liberals.

Political Divisiveness

To many people in many nations, it feels as if the political climate has become increasingly hostile and divisive in recent years. For example, in the United States, within one year after the 2008 presidential election, in which Barack Obama became the first African American president in history, prominent conservative pundits (e.g., Rush Limbaugh) and candidates (e.g., Mitt Romney) were telling their audiences that they hoped Obama failed and that their primary mission was to make sure that he does. Although democracy has been a rough game since its earliest days among the Greeks and Romans (consider the assassination of Julius Caesar) opposing parties in past eras have typically tried to at least appear like they wanted to work together toward shared goals. On a smaller scale, many Americans report the rancor and hostility that arises at family gatherings when members of differing political parties gather. What might be responsible for such political divisiveness?

TMT suggests that commitment to one's own worldview and resistance to opposing views will be especially high in times of increased existential threat — when death is in the air and the systems of meaning and value that normally provide protection against those threats are under attack. The 9/11 terrorist attacks might have played some role in the current climate of divisiveness in the United States. These attacks were incredibly potent reminders of death; Americans were continually reminded of the 3000 persons who died that day, watching films of the planes crashing into the twin towers, scenes of survivors scrambling through the debris, and interviews with tormented family members who lost loved ones that day. The attacks targeted major symbols of American economic and military power (the World Trade Center and Pentagon), and were perpetrated by people who believed they were acting in the name of their God to punish the USA for a litany of wrong doings. The fact that 19 men with box cutters could bring our na-

tion to a virtual halt for more than a week and exert devastation that continues to this day was taken by many as an extreme humiliation — a threat to collective self-esteem. Thus the 9/11 attacks confronted the USA with a dramatic reminder of death and vulnerability coupled with a potent attack on the structures that protect them in this regard (for an extended discussion of the psychological impact of the 9/11 attacks, see Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2003).

Although the initial response to 9/11 was an increase in national unity, this soon faded as the different political parties began making plans to take action to deal with the problem of terrorism. These divergent plans highlighted deep ideological, cultural, and moral differences between liberals and conservatives in the USA. Perhaps because of the existential threat that was in the air, people became more sensitive to the threat posed by divergent beliefs and values within their culture. Many other nations faced difficult decision and conflicting attitudes about how to respond to the terrorism and the many other threats that emerged during the last decade. Major economic collapse, environmental degradation, continuing wars, and changing moral values may have combine to create a state of disequillibrium in which it was less clear which beliefs and values bound the people of their nation together.

Perhaps political divisiveness is an escalating process that feeds on itself. There is some evidence that dissention from within one's group is more unsettling that disagreement with those from other groups. It may be that the increasingly divergent political positions of liberals and conservatives (or any other political groups that oppose each other) interferes with people's ability to obtain security from the broader culture to which they subscribe. For a liberal American, the views of conservative pundits such as Rush Limbaugh, Shawn Hannity, and Ann Coulter, who typically portray themselves as patriots and accuse those who disagree with them of being "un-American" may make it difficult to feel pride and comfort in their American identity. For conservative Americans, the attitudes expressed by popular liberal media figures such as Rachel Maddow, John Stewart, and Bill Maher likely have a similar disenchanting effect. This might be exaggerated by the subtle and sometimes not so subtle questions they raise about their opponents intelligence and rationality. Lacking the protection they crave from their broader cultural worldviews, people on both sides of the political divide may wish desperately to change the opinions of those on the other side, and failing this, may lash out at them in an attempt to defuse the threat that the differing views from within the broader society pose to their own emotional security.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

From the perspective of TMT, political ideologies and orientations are important aspects of the cultural worldviews that protect people from the potential for anxiety that results from their awareness of the inevitability of death. Political ideology is both influenced by, and exerts powerful influences on, other important aspects of people's worldviews, such as religion, attitudes toward science, the environment, and many other issues. Existential threat increases people's tendency to cling to their worldviews and support leaders, policies, and initiatives that are framed as affirming important elements of their worldviews. The research on these issues shows that the fear of death plays an important role in the political process, and thus impinges on important policies involving health, the environment, war, and peace. Effective politicians and leaders often intuitively use persuasive tactics that are rooted in an implicit understanding of the psychology of

meaning, self-esteem, and existential threat. Understanding these processes might be a useful tool to immunize the voting public against the fear and value based manipulations that have become (and perhaps always have been) a central feature of political persuasion.

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