



Confronting the terrorist mind: explaining the repeated failure of intelligence

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I want to talk about how psychology should be applied to modern politics and conflict, and would help us if that happened. I will start off, in a slightly strange way, by talking a bit about the card game poker. Now, I'm honestly not looking for an excuse to talk about poker, though many of you will know that I enjoy playing the game. Poker is a game of bluff, deception, aggression and manipulation, and as a result, it's a game of strategy which, like chess, has attracted military tacticians as modelling some of the skills needed in warfare. Poker is actually closer to the real world of conflict and strategy in war than chess, because in chess, all the pieces are on the board for all to see, so there is no uncertainty about what is going on, and also there's no possibility of deception or bluff. In poker, the hand of cards you hold and its strength or weakness may be something your opponent never sees at all, because if you bet aggressively enough and force them to fold their hand, you take the pot without ever having to reveal what you actually held. In real warfare, there is uncertainty about what your enemy is up to and their actual resources or capabilities, and many of the moves and counter-moves in the strategy of politics and war are about outfoxing your opponent. Many world and military leaders are said to have honed their skills of political and military tactics first at the poker table, including Nixon, Truman, Eisenhower and General Patten. Poker is an excellent way of demonstrating one of the most important psychological concepts in human conflict, referred to as theory of mind.

Theory of mind is all about the idea that I have to take a good guess at what is going on in your mind in order to communicate with you, persuade you, or outwit you. This is called second order theory of mind, first order theory of mind being having some idea of what is going on in your own mind. Whatever you do, don't take first order theory of mind for granted. It's surprisingly absent in a large number of our fellow citizens. Third order theory of mind is a vital step all great military and political tacticians take but few others do. It's not just me thinking about what you're thinking, but going one step further and working out what you're thinking about what I'm thinking.

Let me illustrate this with a famous story from poker. It's a true story and comes from the Gold Rush in San Francisco of the 19th Century, when prospectors, having mined their gold nuggets, would get the slow boat to New York, where they would eventually cash in their bullion. But the only way to while away the time on the slow boat was of course to play poker on the deck with their nuggets. One day, a group of prospectors are sitting on the deck playing poker when the pot in the middle with their bets has grown to enormous proportions and a small fortune is waiting to be won. Then the last card gets dealt to each player, but before one prospector can take hold of his card, he catches a brief glimpse of it, but a gust of wind promptly blows the card overboard. He unhesitatingly dives into the sea to retrieve the card and is nearly drowned in the attempt. He is dragged back on to the deck by his fellow card players clutching the damp card fervently to his chest. He makes a big bet. All the other players reason he must have a great card because he was willing to drown to get it back, and so they all fold, leaving him the huge pot. He was of course bluffing. He had nothing. He was, however, demonstrating very effectively third order theory of mind. He worked out what they would think he was thinking from his actions.

I mentioned third order theory of mind because it's this tool which we need to understand the mind of a terrorist – not just what they're thinking, but what they're thinking about what we're thinking. It's this level that our leaders and our media never seem to get to when they engage with the issue of terrorism. It is third order theory of mind which helps us understand what is really going on and which unlocks the true answer to this rapidly growing and frightening problem.

This past January, a young Palestinian mother, feigning a limp and requesting medical attention, blew herself up at a security checkpoint leading from the Gaza Strip into Israel. The attack killed 4 Israeli security personnel along with the bomber herself, who left behind a three year old son and a one year old daughter. The Israeli defence forces automatically shut down the industrial zone, sending home the 5,000 Palestinians employed in its factories. Within hours, a general closure was enacted, barring some 20,000 Gazan commuters from working in Israel. With 60% of Palestinians living on less than two US dollars a day, one could question whom the attack hurt more, the Israelis or the Palestinians themselves. Why then do terrorist groups engage in such apparently self-defeating behaviour?

One obvious theory is that terrorism is a product of a non-rational, disturbed or psychotic mind. This appears to be our leaders' and the media's favourite theory, that the terrorist mind is beyond comprehension or understanding. This theory receives some support when you look into the psychology of people like Timothy McVey, who blew up the government building in Oklahoma in 1995, killing approaching 200 people, 19 of them children, as part of the building was a day care centre for children of government employees. McVey had bombed the building in revenge for the Waco raid by the FBI, in which cult leader David Koresh and 8 of his followers were incinerated, a siege that photographic evidence was later to show McVey had visited. The Oklahoma bombing occurred on the anniversary of the Waco raid.

McVey thought the army had implanted a computer chip in his buttock to track his movements. He apparently subscribed to the notion that the back of road signs have barcode stickers to assist UN troops in their takeover of the USA and therefore citizens needed to arm themselves to protect their rights in the face of their own government. When detained by a police officer, McVey was driving a vehicle with no licence plate, the hallmark of some extremist US groups that are anti-tax.

There is little doubt that McVey was suffering from such a severe disturbance of mind that he might well be labelled formally mentally ill. Yet terrorism of the most lethal type, as in September the 11 th, is mostly a group activity, and therefore ideas and forms of thinking are shared between group members, which normally precludes the kind of severe mental illness that McVey probably suffered from and which explains why he acted largely alone. Most severely mentally ill people become very isolated precisely because their beliefs are so strange, caused as they probably are by disturbed brain biochemistry, that no one else can comprehend them or dialogue with them. The larger the group involved in terrorist activity, the less likely there is to be medically abnormal states of mind supporting this venture.

In a widely read account of Palestinian martyrs published shortly after 9/11 in "The New Yorker" Nasra Hassan observed that none of the 250 or so suicide bombers and their handlers that she interviewed conformed to the typical suicidal or disturbed personality. None of them was uneducated, desperately poor, simple minded or depressed. Many were middle class, and unless they were fugitives, held paying jobs. Among them in fact were the sons of two millionaires.

Oddly enough, there is indeed evidence that terrorists do suffer from quite profound psychological dysfunction, but intriguingly, these tend to be Western terrorists brought up and living in Western liberal democracies, like Timothy McVey. In contrast, terrorism bred from other parts of the world far from Western liberal democracy, like the Palestinian and the Tamil scenarios, seems to be promulgated by those who appear entirely sane in the medical sense. Crucially, they are drawn from a larger community which supports the actions of terrorists. Two of the societies that have produced the highest number of the most

extreme form of terrorism, suicide bombers, the Tamils and the Palestinians, repeatedly are found in surveys to house large majorities who support terrorist activity. So the strategy cannot be legitimately described as arising out of individual abnormal experience or psychology.

Furthermore, these communities see terrorism as serving their interests. In other words, their view is that this is an entirely rational course of action to take. Recent polls show that up to 70% of the Palestinians in the West Bank in Gaza support suicide bombing, up from the 26% of the population that agreed with it in 1999. This is a remarkable change.

In addition, there is the immense popularity of the name Osama amongst newborns in Pakistan immediately September the 11th. Nigerians, in the largely Muslim city of Kano, name 7 out of 10 boys Osama. To explain terrorism, you have to account for why millions of people in some parts of the world endorse this extraordinary use of violence against unarmed combatants.

Many years ago, in a letter to Freud, Einstein asked “Why war?” Freud responded in a 30 page letter, which may be boiled down to a basic assertion. He posited that human beings are endowed by nature with hostile, violent feelings that, like water in a reservoir, start to build up over time. Although initially blocked by the restraints of civilisation, the hostility eventually breaks through, leading to a grand catharsis, namely war. According to this theory, equilibrium is then restored and the individual and society as a whole can continue to function. Freud saw this catharsis as a good thing, because he assumed it was necessary for the human race to have a periodic bloodbath in order to be able to maintain its sanity. Against the Freudian view that we are all deep down homicidal maniacs just waiting to be wound up and let loose to cause wanton destruction, is the opposing evidence that actually the vast majority of us suffer from strong compunctions against violence.

For example, it was discovered as recently as the 1950s that many American soldiers were not firing their guns during the Korean War. When their rifles were examined, only about 20% of the guns showed any use of ammunition. In others, shells were still in the guns. This was very disturbing to the military. Consequently, during the Vietnam War, they conditioned the trainees to killing by training them to shoot repeatedly at targets of the enemy. They went through many exercises of shooting these targets until it became second nature, like a reflex. The repeated practice bypassed their natural inhibitions against killing. This kind of conditioning could have contributed to the slayings that took place in Vietnamese villages, where the soldiers simply ran amok – that inner inhibition against killing had been removed.

The terrifying point here is that many ordinary people in the right circumstances can be surprisingly influenced, given the right conditions and techniques, into violence, though they may not have been violent to begin with. But given the huge psychological and material cost of conflict, in personal and group terms, we need to go back to the central question, which is why does violent conflict occur in the first place?

In comparison to humans, whose history is dominated by warfare, there is relatively little violent conflict between animals of the same species, because animals first dispassionately assess how likely victory is and invariably opt to withdraw in the face of a superior adversary. There is indeed evolutionary pressure for all animals to accurately assess when it is not worth fighting. The widespread use of threat rituals in anticipation of combat amongst animals usually determines who is the superior party and so prevents numerous actual fights. It naturally follows that the human tenancy to war becomes an evolutionary puzzle. After all, humans frequently go to war when any rational assessment should have indicated a low probability of victory or little advantage to fighting for at least one side. Inaccurate prior battle assessment of your enemy, results in more damage and lower chances of future survival than if a more judicious withdrawal had been selected.

The answer is it seems that the universal human tenancy to suffer from positive self-illusions not only starts

many wars but also increases the chances of successfully bluffing the enemy into believing he's unlikely to win, and so it also increases the unpredictability of battles. In human conflict, it is surprisingly often the weaker side which wins through the use of deception and manipulation.

Sure enough, Bush and Blair have announced a war on terror, based on the unstated presumption that we can win such a war. Is this yet another positive illusion?

Video images of our precision weapons and the evocation of shock and awe as Baghdad was pounded invoked a sense of safety and superiority in us. Surely it's the terrorists who are mad for even thinking of taking on the might of the US and the UK military. After all, the US spends as much as the rest of the world put together on arms. At this level, the terrorists' temerity in taking on the West does indeed seem crazy. If both sides make an assessment as to the likelihood of victory and one side has enormous superiority in terms of conventional weapons, a crucial question becomes what is influencing the assessment of the weaker side that still decides to embrace conflict? They are clearly not just looking at the strength of their opponents. They must be seeing something that we are not considering. What are they thinking about which we are not taking into consideration? What is the third order theory of mind here?

Yes, they're doing excellent third order theory of mind. They see something which our leaders would rather we ourselves don't allow for, which is that yes, we have colossal strength, but also we harbour massive vulnerability. Our vulnerability is not to a conventional attack, but instead to an unconventional one, precisely indeed a terrorist one, and this is because we live in complex, intricate, densely populated cities which are enormously vulnerable to terrorist assault and also chaos from those strategies, including false alarms. Our leaders want us to believe that what we are up against are deranged madmen because this comforts us into thinking that our intellectual and physical superiority guarantee us eventual victory. If we instead conceive of terrorists as highly intelligent, clear thinking and deeply committed to our destruction, then other deeply terrifying possibilities begin to take shape, which our leaders don't want us to consider.

Imagine a kind of ultimate weapon: a bomb which possesses an onboard computerised processing unit of such advanced capability that it has its own kind of independent decision making ability, so that although typically launched against pre-designated targets, the bomb is able to provide real time course corrections on the way to its objective, veering the timing, the circumstances, and sometimes the specific target of attack to improve its chances of success. I have some grave news for you. We don't yet have such a weapon, but our enemy does – it's called a suicide bomber.

Individuals carrying out such attacks can be thought of as a low tech smart bomb with a human guidance system. Like their high tech counterparts, they offer a greater probability of engaging and destroying their targets. The cost effectiveness of suicide bombing is indeed impressive. The total cost of a typical Palestinian suicide operation is about 150 US dollars. This modest sum yields a grimly attractive return. On average, suicide operations worldwide kill about four times as many individuals as other kinds of terrorist attacks. In Israel, the average is even higher, inflicting six times the number of deaths and roughly 26 times more casualties than other acts of terrorism. But a key element of the tactic which is overlooked by Bush and Blair is that popular acceptance of suicide tactics is clearly an essential pre-requisite if a group expects to advance its position by killing off its membership and still find the follow on volunteers needed to sustain its campaign over time.

Suicide attacks even prove to be a source of unity between the terrorist group and its political constituents. The death of a martyr is presented as a collective loss, not only for the organisation with which he was affiliated, but the community from which he volunteered. Honouring his memory requires honouring the cause he chose to die for – a psychological response that further binds his survivors to the group. Palestinian groups, for example, now regularly videotape the last testaments of those who are about to die to distribute after their deaths. These tapes are specifically designed to evoke a sense of pride and reciprocal obligation on the part of their viewing audience. The tapes typically show the then living martyr

standing tall, wearing his suicide vest, holding a copy of the Koran and a Kalashnikov, calling on those he leaves behind to join him in paradise. Hanging in the background as a brand identifier for those who wish to sign on next is the flag or banner of the group that sent him on his way.

The heroic and selfless character of the martyr's sacrifice is the subject of sermons and discussions in local mosques. When news of a successful suicide strike is broadcast, candy is typically distributed in the streets, and women respond with traditional cries of joy. Martyrdom has become an ambition for our children, Fadl Abu Hein, a psychology lecturer from Gaza, observed. But the attraction of suicide terrorism is due not only to their average number of casualties but to the fact that the tactic itself is newsworthy in its own right. A terrorist action is ultimately a publicity stunt, designed to gain the highest possible media exposure. So equally significant is the inherent drama of the attack itself. Those killed do not die by chance, they are chosen for their innocence. The bomber selects his targets, walks among them, looks into their faces, and detonates his bomb. The choreographed brutality of the act commands attention.

Essentially, there are always two targets in the mind of a terrorist. One might well be the immediate unfortunate victims who bear the brunt of an explosion, but this is only a minor dimension of the actual but more clandestine aim. The second but indeed primary target of any terrorist incident is the psyche of the population. The mind is the key battleground where this new and peculiarly 21 st Century conflict is being fought. And one key question is: are we winning that battle of the mind? This is because the key effect of a terrorist incident is not the atrocity itself, but instead the way it affects everyone else who wasn't even directly involved. Here's an example of this effect.

Professor Gerd Gigerenzer, an expert on the psychology of risk at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin, has published a new study into how travel behaviour of Americans changed in the months following the September 11 attacks. Domestic air passenger miles fell roughly 16% in the final quarter. Americans dramatically switched from flying to using the roads in an effort to avoid the risk of being taken hostage by terrorists on planes sent crashing into buildings. But Gigerenzer demonstrates as a direct result there was a significant increase in the number of fatal car crashes in the last 3 months of 2001 compared with the same period in the year before the attacks. Because of the extra road traffic, 353 more people died in traffic accidents than would otherwise have done before the end of 2001. This represents a rise of fatal car accidents of 8%. This number of lost lives is an estimate of the price Americans paid for trying to avoid the risk of flying. It is perhaps particularly sobering to consider that the risk that millions of Americans were trying to avoid in not flying and driving instead was greater than that of the fate suffered by 266 passengers and crew members on board the 4 flights that crashed. In other words, more people died in trying to avoid the fate of becoming victims of terrorism than actually did flying on board the fateful planes.

The point of all this accumulating data is to demonstrate that the community is profoundly affected at an emotional level by terrorist attacks, and these emotions of panic, fear and depression in their turn produce behaviour whose ripple effects spread outwards causing more negative effects than could be envisaged simply by focusing on a terrorist act. Maybe the reason governments are reluctant to address the key issue, which is the effect of terrorism on our psyche, is because to do so would also necessarily involve examining the wider impact of terrorism, the cost in terms of extra security and disruption to a society. So let's look at how our contemporary leaders are dealing with the current threat and compare it with how authorities in the past coped with previous dangers.

In the US, on April the 18 th, 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 key reasons: one, he was known to be a highly credible communicator, both expert and trustworthy; two, his alarm was focused on a specific anticipated event; three, it was designed to motivate citizens to act; and four, 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 energise action, and too high creates emotional overload and competing distracting behaviours. 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.

All these basic, rather obvious, principles have been systematically violated in the design and delivery of the first seven terrorist alarms issued by the US Government officials since 9/11 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, sometime soon, in the US 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 generalised 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 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. But then there was none. Not a single terrorist attack on American soil since September the 11 th. Where are the alleged thousands of terrorists inhabiting cells in the country, and where was the debriefing by 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 previous credible messengers. After seven no consequence alarms, many Americans became desensitised to the need to be on high alert, yet still lead normal lives, but for some, it became normal to be anxiously dreading the worse, given the lesson of the first horrific attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. And then the other problem was the numerous false alarms, and there's one real possibility to consider, which is that seeing the frenzy created by the first alarms, terrorists intentionally put out mis-information on channels they assume are being monitored by US intelligence. As the foul mouthed 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.

But maybe our government wants to induce a particularly emotional state from all these false alarms in order to exploit it. False alarms have worked to sustain a heightened sense of anxiety and confusion for several years. They reinforce a public willingness to spend huge sums on military defence 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 or mistreatment of civilian prisoners as in Guantanamo Bay.

The latest emergency preparedness information on the US website of the Department of Homeland Security informs the public of the easy steps to be taken in a worse case scenario, a neighbourhood nuclear blast: step one, take cover; step two, assess the situation; step three, limit your exposure to radiation. And there are other steps 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 undercover? Doesn't being undercover also fix the distance from the blast to you? We deserve better from our leaders, and we need to make this demand of them.

Security and preparedness are essential components in countering terrorism, but so are honesty, transparency and accountability of our leaders in whom we must trust. 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 frighten civilian populations. Terrorism is about making ordinary people feel vulnerable, anxious, confused, uncertain and helpless. Ultimately, when terrorism works, citizens feel hopeless, and trust in their leaders to guarantee the fundamentals of existence, safety and security is lost. Terrorism is about imagining the monster under our beds or lurking in dark closets: the faceless omnipotent enemy who might be the friendly ice cream van driver, our neighbour, 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 blindly obeying powerful leaders to intense feelings of anger. Anger is one form of displaced emotion that arises from feeling helpless or vulnerable. 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 these 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 anything that can be identified as a foe. Many of us are willing to accept any identifiable figure as proxy for the elusive virtual terrorist enemy. While we prepare to save our bodies, we must not lose our minds. Our government is not getting the best scientific advice on how to construct terror alerts and how to think like terrorists in selecting probable targets for attack. High levels of sustained stress on its citizens can have a greater long-term destructive impact on a nation than the consequences of any single terrorist attack.

Much psychological research reveals the ease with which ordinary people can be recruited to engage in harmful behaviours against their fellows. In one classic study by Stanley Milgram, the majority of ordinary American citizens who participated in it blindly obeyed an authority figure and administered what they believed were painful, even lethal, shocks to a stranger. In another demonstration from Zimbardo's Berkeley laboratory, normal college students recruited to role play prison guards became their roles in a matter of days, behaving with escalating violence and sadism toward their prisoners, other college students. We know that a cult leader, Jim Jones, Reverend of San Francisco's People's Temple, was able to programme his followers to commit suicide or to kill one another on his command. More than 900 American citizens did so in the jungles of Guyana. Research by John Steiner, an Auschwitz survivor, indicates that most Nazi concentration camp guards were ordinary men before and following their years of perpetrating evil. Many more examples could be used to illustrate reasons why we should not demonise terrorists as an alien breed.

Instead, we should focus on a better understanding of the mind control tactics and strategies that might make even good people engage in evil deeds at some time in their lives and that might recruit new generations of impoverished young people into lives of terrorism. The efforts of our military forces in tracking down and destroying the terrorist leaders has a collateral risk. It models revenge and retaliation at a national level that can become a stimulus for individual hostility toward innocent citizens.

Research by Dane Archer shows that homicide rates increase dramatically following all wars, the same for victor or loser nations, presumably because individuals learn to use violent means of conflict resolution as had been sanctioned by their national leaders. We cannot allow that transfer of hostility to develop because it fuels the cycle of violence started by the terrorists. Terrorists create terror, terror creates fear and anger, fear and anger create aggression and aggression against citizens of different ethnicity or religion creates racism, and that in turn creates new forms of terrorism.

Suicide tactics have been adopted by a growing number of terrorist organisations around the world because they are shocking, deadly, cost effective, secure, and very difficult to stop. There are only two

basic operational requirements that an organisation must be able to satisfy to get into this game: a willingness to kill and a willingness to die.

We must, individually and collectively, refuse to adopt the terrorist devaluing of human life. If we do not and we yield to the quiet rage of hatred that their vile deeds have generated in most of us, then our desire to destroy them at all costs allies us more with the forces of evil than of good. We have seen the enemy. Do not allow it to become us.

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