

After Boston: Terrorism and Response

Written by Francis A. Beer, Alice F. Healy, and Lyle E. Bourne Jr.

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After Boston: Terrorism and Response

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FRANCIS A. BEER, ALICE F. HEALY, AND LYLE E. BOURNE JR., MAY 13 2013

Boston Marathon Bombing: Bystanders Respond

Terrorism remains at the top of the news. Each new day seems to bring word of attacks in different parts of the world. The Boston Marathon bombing is the latest example.

Motivated by prior events, we ran a series of psychological laboratory experiments with university students as subjects, during a period spanning more than 25 years, examining how individuals reacted to simulated news reports of international conflict and terrorist attacks. Our experimental studies are obviously not the real world, nor are the participants real victims. At the same time, our subjects are now part of the mainstream electorate, and we believe that their reactions may illuminate more general human tendencies.

Our experiments make it clear that responses to terrorist attacks are complex and highly variable. People react to terrorist attacks in diverse ways, depending on attacker identities, motives and targets as well as characteristics of those attacked—their own personalities, genders, roles, prior relationships, and other attributes.

The result is often different from the terror intended by the terrorists. Obviously such attacks do terrorize some individuals. Fear and confusion are natural results. But the effects are not the same for everyone.

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Boston Marathon Bombing: First Responders Respond



Boston Marathon Bombing: Mourners Respond

Although some people are afraid for their own safety, terrorist attacks also mobilize first responders to serve and protect. Other individuals see an attack as a challenge, are wildly angry, or swear revenge. For many, it is a personal or collective tragedy, an occasion for grief and mourning.

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Boston Marathon Bombing: President Obama Responds

Many are determined to strengthen security so that it will never happen again. This has been the typical response of political leaders to the recent events.

If there are several consecutive attacks, our experiments show that fear and anger increase, whereas possible forgiveness for the attackers declines. This escalation in fear and anger, and reduction in forgiveness, probably would have happened if the Tsarnaev brothers had gone on to New York and bombed Times Square, as it seems they planned to do.

Targets matter. We found that terrorist strikes on military targets generally provoked more forceful responses than did attacks on cultural or educational targets. An attack on a military site is more likely to be viewed as an act of war. An attack on a cultural or educational target like the Boston Marathon sends a less focused conflictual signal.

Gender matters also, at least in our research. This result may be controversial, but we did find it. In our experiments, when men read reports of terrorist attacks, they generally wanted to strike back in kind. Women, on the other hand, sometimes had less conflictual reactions. Further, men tended to be angrier and women more fearful in response to terrorist attacks.

At the same time, the role of gender is more complicated than this general finding. Prior relations among those involved matter. In our experiments, gender effects seemed to vary with perceived prior relations. Overall, women tended to be more forgiving and respectful of established political associations.

If attacks came from actors identified with a friendly democratic regime, women ultimately responded less conflictually than if the attackers had non-democratic connections. In our research, when terrorists were reported to come from nations where there was no prior democratic bond – as the Tsarnaevs came from Russia – women reacted more harshly than when terrorists were reported to come from democratic nations, at least after repeated attacks. Men tended to behave in the opposite fashion. While women seemed to want to preserve existing relationships, men appeared to emphasize retaliation for friends' perceived betrayal. When terrorists came from democracies, men ultimately reacted more conflictually than when terrorists came from non-democratic countries. As this interaction of gender and prior relationships suggests, the effects of gender are much more complicated and subtle than common sense or folk wisdom would have it.

Boston Marathon Bombing: Senator Elizabeth Warren Responds

Finally, personality matters. Often it overrides gender. In some of our experiments, women tended to score lower on dominance and higher on submission measures than men. But everyone knows that all women and men are not equally dominant or submissive. Some women are very dominant, and these women generally responded forcefully to terrorist attacks. Similarly, there are many men who are quite submissive, and such non-dominant men tended to respond less forcefully to terrorism.

As we suggested earlier, the results of our psychological laboratory experiments may be relevant, by extrapolation,

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for events like the Boston Marathon bombings. Terrorism, by definition, is designed to produce terror, but it does not actually do so all the time, in all circumstances, for all individuals. Terrorist attacks arouse dominant individuals to respond not with terror but with anger and action. Those who would inspire terror, or even shock and awe, might consider this consequence.

Each of us comes to a terrorist event with intricate personal psychological predispositions that condition our responses. We all need to be conscious of terrorism's complex psychological effects on different classes of individuals with different genders and personalities.

At the same time, other aspects of our cultural, social, and political environment also shape how we respond. For example, these tragic, recurrent, terrorist dramas have more roles than the conventional good guys/bad guys, white hats/black hats, heroes/villains. The French philosopher Albert Camus famously wrote, during the dark terrorist events of the Algerian war, that protagonists should be neither victims nor executioners. In Boston, there was a large cast with many different additional characters, including perpetrators, victims, bystanders, first responders, caregivers, media, and political leaders. Such roles also helped determine the complex nexus of reactions to terrorism.

As we have suggested, international and domestic terrorism may affect different individuals in different ways, depending on the profiles of both the attackers and the attacked. It can, for example, make a difference if terrorists are affiliated with friendly or unfriendly groups or if they act by themselves. The responses of those attacked can depend on their individual psychologies, as well as cultural, social, and political roles. We do and should react to terrorists and to each other with appropriately layered responses.

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