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American Roulette: The Effect of Reminders of Death on Support for George W. Bush in the 2004 Presidential Election

Florette Cohen* and **Daniel M. Ogilvie**

Rutgers University

Sheldon Solomon

Skidmore College

Jeff Greenberg

University of Arizona

Tom Pyszczynski

University of Colorado at Colorado Springs

An experiment was conducted to assess the effect of a subtle reminder of death on voting intentions for the 2004 U.S. presidential election. On the basis of terror management theory and previous research, we hypothesized that a mortality salience induction would increase support for President George W. Bush and decrease support for Senator John Kerry. In late September 2004, following a mortality salience or control induction, registered voters were asked which candidate they intended to vote for. In accord with predictions, Senator John Kerry received substantially more votes than George Bush in the control condition, but Bush was favored over Kerry following a reminder of death, suggesting that President Bush's re-election may have been facilitated by nonconscious concerns about mortality in the aftermath of September 11, 2001.

*So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself
— nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror. . .*

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 1933

*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Florette Cohen, Department of Psychology, Rutgers University, N.B., Tillett Hall, Livingston, 53 Avenue E, Piscataway, NJ 08854 [e-mail: florette@rci.rutgers.edu].

When George W. Bush won the 2004 presidential election by a substantial margin of the popular vote, pollsters, pundits, and Republican Party officials agreed that Americans voted for Bush because he shared their moral and traditional values and were comfortable with Bush's approach to the war on terror. Others have, however, argued that President Bush prevailed, at least in part, because of non-conscious fears aroused by the events of September 11, 2001 and sustained by the Bush administration's claim that Americans' lives would literally be endangered by the election of Senator John Kerry. Indeed, Kerry himself, reflecting on the election on January 30, 2005 stated: "...the attacks of Sept. 11 were the "central deciding thing" in his contest with President Bush and that the release of an Osama bin Laden videotape the weekend before Election Day had effectively erased any hope he had of victory" (Nagourney, 2005). The present study, conducted in late September 2004, provides support for this assertion by demonstrating that while registered voters in a psychologically benign state preferred Kerry to Bush by a substantial margin, Bush was considerably more popular than Kerry after a subtle reminder of death.

In the Wake of 9/11

In *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror*, Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg (2003) presented an analysis of the causes and consequences of the events of 9/11 based on terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). TMT posits that although human beings share with all life forms a biological propensity toward survival, humans are unique in their awareness of the inevitability of death, that death is certain and can occur at any time for reasons that cannot always be anticipated or controlled, and that we are corporeal creatures perhaps no more important or enduring in the ultimate scheme of things than barnacles, beets, and beavers. To assuage the potentially paralyzing terror engendered by this knowledge, humans embed themselves in cultural worldviews: humanly constructed beliefs about reality shared by individuals in groups that provide a sense of meaning and significance and promises of symbolic and literal immortality to those who adhere to the standards of value prescribed by their culture.

Empirical support for TMT has been obtained in over 250 experiments by researchers in 13 countries, primarily by demonstrating that reminders of death (mortality salience) in the form of open-ended questions, death-anxiety questionnaires, pictures of gory accidents, interviews in front of funeral parlors, and subliminal exposure to the words "death" or "dead," instigate cultural worldview defense. For example, after mortality salience, people (1) have more favorable evaluations of people with similar religious and political beliefs and more unfavorable evaluations of those who differ on these dimensions; (2) are more punitive toward moral transgressors and more benevolent to heroic individuals; (3) are more

physically aggressive toward others with dissimilar political orientations; and (4) strive more vigorously to meet cultural standards of value. In addition, research has shown that mortality salience does not influence conscious affect or physiological arousal, and its effects are greatest following a delay, when death thought is highly accessible but outside of focal attention. Recent work has demonstrated that it is the potential for anxiety signaled by heightened death thought accessibility that motivates worldview defense and self-esteem bolstering, which in turn reduces death thought accessibility to baseline levels (see Solomon et al., 2004 for a recent review of terror management theory research).

From a TMT perspective, the actions of the terrorists and their supporters resulted in large measure from their adherence to a cultural worldview in which heroic martyrdom against evil confers death transcendence (e.g., 9/11 hijacker Mohamed Atta wrote in a letter to his co-conspirators: “Pledge allegiance to die . . . understand what God had prepared for the faithful—He prepared an everlasting paradise for the martyrs.”). We also asserted that the attacks of 9/11 constituted a massive mortality salience induction combined with a symbolic threat to the American cultural worldview: “The World Trade Center towers were the ultimate tangible representations of American prosperity and economic might. The Pentagon is a universally recognized architectural emblem of the United States’ globe-dominating, unassailable-at-home-or-abroad military power.” This led Americans, not surprisingly, to bolster faith in the rightness and enduring nature of their own worldview by asserting their patriotism and the greatness of their nation, attempting to help the victims of the attacks in any way they could, seeking vengeance and justice, and increasing their affection for political leaders such as Rudolph Guiliani and George W. Bush. But what makes such leaders so appealing when death is in the air?

The Politics of Mortality

Alliance to charismatic leaders may be one particularly effective mode of terror management. In *Escape from Freedom*, Eric Fromm (1941) proposed that loyalty to charismatic leaders results from a defensive need to feel a part of a larger whole, and surrendering one’s freedom to a larger-than-life leader can serve as a source of self-worth and meaning in life. Ernest Becker (*The Denial of Death*, 1973) posited that when mainstream worldviews are not serving people’s need for psychological security, concerns about mortality impel people to devote their psychological resources to following charismatic leaders who bolster their self-worth by making them feel that they are valued participants in a great mission to heroically triumph over evil.

To test this hypothesis, Cohen, Solomon, Maxfield, Pyszczynski, and Greenberg (2004) asked participants to think about their own death or a control topic and then read campaign statements purportedly written by three political

candidates in an upcoming gubernatorial election. The candidates varied in leadership style. The charismatic leader stated: "You are not just an ordinary citizen; you are part of a special state and a special nation." The task-oriented leader stated: "I can accomplish all the goals that I set out to do. I am very careful in laying out a detailed blueprint of what needs to be done so that there is no ambiguity." The relationship-oriented leader stated: "I encourage all citizens to take an active role in improving their state. I know that each individual can make a difference."

After reading these statements, participants selected the candidate they would vote for in an election. Results were striking. After thinking about a control topic, only four of 95 participants voted for the charismatic candidate, with the rest of the votes split evenly between the task- and relationship-oriented leaders. However, following a reminder of death, there was almost an 800% increase in votes for the charismatic leader (31); votes for the task-oriented leader were unaffected, but the relationship-oriented leader's votes significantly declined.

Analogous to these findings, President Bush's popularity soared after the massive mortality salience induction produced by the attacks of 9/11; since then, Bush has emphasized the greatness of America and his commitment to triumphing over evil, whether represented by Al Qaeda, Saddam Hussein, or the entire "axis of evil." Do reminders of mortality increase the appeal of such a leader? Studies by Landau et al. (2004) suggest that they do. In Study 1, a mortality salience induction dramatically increased support for President Bush and his policies in Iraq. In Study 2, subliminal reminders of 9/11 or the World Trade Center increased the accessibility of implicit thoughts of death; for Americans then, even nonconscious intimations of the events of 9/11 arouse concerns about mortality. Accordingly, in Study 3 participants were asked to think about death, the events of 9/11, or a benign control topic; both mortality and 9/11 salience produced substantial increases in support for President Bush among liberal as well as conservative participants. Finally, in Study 4, whereas participants rated John Kerry more favorably than George Bush after thinking about being in intense pain, after a reminder of death, evaluations of Bush increased and Kerry decreased, such that Bush was more favorably evaluated than Kerry.

The findings of the Landau et al. studies are consistent with the notion that President Bush's 2004 re-election campaign was buttressed by constantly reminding Americans of death either directly (e.g., "Vice President Dick Cheney told supporters at a town hall meeting in Des Moines that they needed to make "the right choice" in the November 2 election. "If we make the wrong choice, then the danger is that we'll get hit again—that we'll be hit in a way that will be devastating from the standpoint of the United States," Cheney said." CNN, 9/7/04) or indirectly ("Republican leaders said yesterday that they would repeatedly remind the nation of the Sept. 11 attacks as their convention opens in New York City today . . ." Nagourney & Toner, 2004). However, these studies suffered from three weaknesses that could call into question their relevance for explaining Bush's election. First, all of the Landau et al. studies were conducted six months or more

before the 2004 election; perhaps mortality salience effects on political preferences would be diminished or eliminated as Election Day approached and people became more serious and rational about their impending decision. Second, the Landau et al. studies (as well the Cohen et al. study) did not determine if participants were registered voters who intended to vote; a stronger case could be made for our claim that President Bush was re-elected as a result of terror management processes if a mortality salience induction increased his popularity among the politically enfranchised and engaged. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, none of these studies included a nominal measure of whom participants intended to vote for (as in the Cohen et al. study of hypothetical gubernatorial candidates); it was therefore unclear from these studies if these evaluative preferences would translate into differential voting intentions by registered voters in close proximity to the actual election.

The present study was designed to rectify these weaknesses and thereby better assess the relevance of the terror management explanation of the outcome of election. The study was therefore conducted in late September 2004; registered voters who reported intending to vote in the 2004 election were asked to anonymously report who they were going to vote for after either a mortality salience or control induction. Based on the previous research, we predicted that President Bush would fare significantly better in a mock election after a reminder of death.

Methods

Participants and Design

One hundred and eighty-four Rutgers university undergraduate students (114 females and 70 males) were randomly assigned to a mortality salient or TV salient control condition. Participants were recruited from a social psychology course.

Procedure

The experimenter introduced the study as an investigation of the relationship between personality attributes and opinions about matters of public interest. Participants were told that they would be given a questionnaire booklet and informed that they could withdraw from the study and leave the room at any time if they became uncomfortable answering any of the questions.

All participants completed a questionnaire packet similar to those used in other TMT research (e.g., see Greenberg et al., 1990; Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski & Lyon, 1989). The packet began with two filler questionnaires (the neuroticism subscale of the Eysenck Personality Inventory (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1967) and an adult attachment scale (from Shaver, Hazan, & Bradshaw, 1998) to sustain the cover story and obscure the true purpose of the study, followed by the manipulation of mortality salience. In the MS condition, participants responded to

two open-ended questions (used in previous TMT studies, e.g., Greenberg et al., 1990; Rosenblatt et al., 1989): “Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you” and “Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you as you physically die and once you are physically dead.” TV salient control participants responded to parallel questions regarding watching television.¹ All participants then completed a self-report mood scale (Watson and Clark’s PANAS-X, 1992) to assess possible affective consequences of the MS induction, and read a short literary passage to serve as a delay and distraction because previous research (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994) has shown that mortality salience effects emerge more clearly over time.

Participants then completed some questionnaires asking their opinions about some social issues² followed by a final page of the booklet that assessed the primary dependent variable, who they intended to vote for in the 2004 presidential election: George Bush, John Kerry, Ralph Nader, or Undecided. Participants were also asked if they were registered to vote in the upcoming presidential election, if they intended to vote, and questions regarding basic demographic information, e.g., gender, ethnicity, and religion. The study was concluded at this point. Participants were subsequently debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Results

Votes

After removing nonregistered voters and those who did not intend to vote from the sample we were left with 131 participants for analytical purposes. Results of

¹ The television control condition does not control for the possibility that thoughts of any aversive event would lead to the same results as thoughts of death. However, the results of this study are conceptually similar to those of Cohen et al. (2004) and Landau et al. (2004) Study 3, which used thinking about students’ next important exam as the control condition, and Landau et al. (2004 Study 4), which used thinking about intense pain as the control condition.

² Specifically, participants were asked to respond to three short questionnaires: (1) a strongly worded statement either supporting George Bush or John Kerry followed by questions about participants’ agreement with them; (2) a statement bemoaning the use of public school funds for unnecessary administrative and consulting expenses followed by questions about participants’ agreement with them; and (3) a description of how people often wish they could fly followed by questions asking participants if they ever fantasized about flying and how attractive being able to fly would be for them at that moment. The order of presentation of these questionnaires was counterbalanced. The Bush or Kerry questionnaire was a conceptual replication of Study 4 of Landau et al. (2004) and thus we expected a MS induction to produce more positive reactions to Bush and more negative reactions to Kerry. The public school questionnaire was intended to be a neutral issue and was therefore not expected to be affected by the MS induction. And the flying questionnaire was included as a pretest for another experiment testing the hypothesis that reminders of death would increase the desire to fly (based on Ogilvie, 2003). Results were in accord with all of these predications and were not influenced by the order of presentation of the materials. However, because the main dependent measure for this study was whom the participants intended to vote for in the upcoming election, these findings will not be presented in the results or further discussed in this article.

Table 1. Votes as a Function of Priming Condition

	George Bush	John Kerry	Ralph Nader	Undecided
TV salient	8	34	3	15
Mortality salient	32	14	2	23

the “election,” votes for George Bush, John Kerry, Ralph Nader or Undecided, are presented in Table 1. A two-way chi-square test revealed a significant interaction between experimental conditions and presidential preferences, $\chi^2(3, N = 131) = 23.86, p < .001$. To better understand this interaction, we then conducted separate two-way chi-square tests comparing votes for Bush versus Kerry as a function of experimental conditions and comparing Nader versus Undecided as a function of experimental conditions. The Bush versus Kerry chi-square was significant ($\chi^2(1, N = 88) = 22.60, p < .001$), indicating that votes for each candidate varied as a function of experimental conditions; specifically, while in the control condition Kerry beat Bush by a margin of more than 4:1 (34 vs. 8), Bush’s votes increased 400% in the MS condition, beating Kerry by more than 2:1 (32 vs. 14). However, mortality salience did not influence votes for either Nader or Undecided ($\chi^2(1, N = 43) = .77, ns$).

Affect

To assess whether MS affected mood, we performed analyses of variance on the subscales of the PANAS-X (Watson & Clark, 1992) including Positive Affect and Negative Affect. Consistent with previous TMT research demonstrating that mortality salience does not engender conscious affect, there were no significant differences found for any of these analyses. Thus, we are quite confident that as in past research, these findings are not the result of affective differences between the MS and TV salience conditions.

Discussion

The present study adds convergent support to the idea that George W. Bush’s victory in the 2004 presidential election was facilitated by Americans’ nonconscious concerns about death, as evidenced by the fact that registered voters in this sample reported intending to vote for Senator John Kerry by a huge margin in psychologically benign conditions, but favored Bush after a mortality salience induction.³ Although the participants in this study are hardly representative of the American electorate, and although we do not mean to imply that all support for

³ Some people (including a thoughtful reviewer of this article) have asked us to account for the striking magnitude of these findings, with Kerry favored over Bush by 4:1 in the control condition, but Bush having a more than 2:1 edge following the mortality salience induction. We believe there are

President Bush was necessarily a defensive reaction to concerns about death or that support for Senator Kerry was totally unencumbered by defensive affectations, these results are consistent with the possibility that frequent government-issued terror warnings (see Willer, 2004) for evidence that there was a “consistent, positive relationship between terror warnings and presidential approval”) and relentless reference to 9/11 by the Bush administration during the campaign⁴ (recall that Landau et al., Study 2 found that asking Americans to think about 9/11 increased the accessibility of implicit death thoughts) topped off by the release of the Osama bin Laden tape on October 29, 2004 influenced the outcome of the election.

In support of this proposition, the following are excerpts from several news bulletins just prior to the election.

Monday, October 25, 2004: John Kerry capitalizes on the Bush Administration’s “unbelievable incompetence” in allowing over 300 tons of high explosives in Iraq to disappear right after the toppling of Saddam’s regime. At this time polls show Kerry ahead in Ohio, Florida, Colorado and Minnesota (Left Coaster, 10/25/04).

The Turning Point

Friday, Oct. 29, 2004: In a new videotape Osama bin Laden made a direct, formal address to the American people, saying that the best way for Americans to avoid a repeat of the attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, was to stop threatening Muslims’ security. The videotape of the leader of Al Qaeda was the first to surface in more than a year (Jehl & Johnston, 2004). The tape, shown by Al Jazeera, materialized as the two candidates had begun to make their final appeals to a bitterly divided nation and added new uncertainty to the deadlocked race. For Mr. Bush, who started his day with a speech in which he made his response to the Sept. 11 attacks the central theme of his appeal for another term, the videotape assured that terrorism would dominate the closing days of the campaign (Stevenson & Goren, 2004).

two viable explanations for this result. First, the mortality salience induction produces robust effects; e.g., the first terror management experiment (Rosenblatt et al., 1996, Study 1) found that municipal court judges prescribed a \$455 bond for an alleged prostitute after a MS induction, a nine-fold increase over the \$50 bond prescribed by judges in the control condition. Second, these findings may be a reflection of Americans’ ambivalence and uncertainty regarding President Bush; it is conceivable that he is perceived by the same individuals as arrogant, blustery, and impulsive at times and principled, forceful, and decisive at other times, depending on the psychological vagaries of the moment their opinions are solicited.

⁴ We do not mean to imply that President Bush or Republicans in general have a monopoly on the strategic use of fear to gain political advantage. In 1964, Democratic President Lyndon Johnson’s campaign against Barry Goldwater featured a TV commercial where a young girl gathering daisies is rudely interrupted by a mushroom cloud from a nuclear explosion, the implication being that electing Goldwater would increase the likelihood of a nuclear conflagration. It should be noted, however, that this commercial was aired only twice in local markets, and that Goldwater was known for his inflammatory rhetoric and unwavering enthusiasm for nuclear war, e.g., “extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice,” and “Let’s lob one into the men’s room at the Kremlin.”

Saturday, October 30, 2004: Acting on the release of the Osama bin Laden video, the federal government alerted state and local officials to be extra vigilant in anticipation of Tuesday's elections. The bin Laden tape and a second video that showed a self-proclaimed American member of Al Qaeda were "clearly intended to influence and instill fear in the American people." (Associated Press, 10/30/04).

Tuesday, Nov. 2, 2004, Election Day: Terrorism command centers were activated in dozens of states and cities throughout the country on Tuesday because of fears of an election-year attack (Johnston, 2004).

Wednesday, November 3, 2004: Senator John Kerry conceded the race for president, calling President Bush at the White House to congratulate him after his aides concluded he would be unable to win a victory in Ohio.

In sum, a week before the election Senator John Kerry was reported to have a slight edge. On Friday, October 29, Osama Bin Laden's videotaped threat reminded Americans of the death and destruction of 9/11. Americans once again became anxious as the Terror Alert was raised and the Bush administration relentlessly raised the specter of death should John Kerry be elected President. On November 3 Bush was declared the winner of the election by a margin of 3.5 million popular votes. From a terror management perspective, the United States' electorate was exposed to a wide-ranging multidimensional mortality salience induction. Bush's rise in popularity after September 11, 2001 and eventual victory in the 2004 presidential election seems highly likely to have been influenced by the appeal of his leadership style (i.e., proclaiming himself divinely ordained to rid the world of evil) to an electorate that was continually reminded of the trauma of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

We would like to think that Americans across the political spectrum would agree that this is antithetical to the democratic ideal that voting behavior should be the result of rational choice based on an informed understanding of the relevant issues. National elections are no guarantee against totalitarian outcomes. Nazis and Fascists were both duly elected during psychologically discomfiting times in German and Italian history, respectively; perhaps terror management concerns contributed to these and other historical examples of bad choices by an electorate.

The best antidote to this problem may be to monitor and take pains to resist any efforts by candidates to capitalize on fear-mongering. As David Myers (2004) so eloquently put it in an op-ed piece in the *Los Angeles Times*: "It is perfectly normal to fear purposeful violence from those who hate us. When terrorists strike again, we will all recoil in horror. But smart thinkers also will want to check their intuitive fears against the facts and to resist those who serve their own purposes by cultivating a culture of fear." As a culture, we should also work to teach our children and encourage our citizens to vote with their "heads" rather than their "hearts" as research (Simon et al., 1997) has demonstrated that mortality salience effects are attenuated when people are asked to think rationally. And it may also be helpful to raise awareness of how concerns about death affect human behavior.

Hopefully, such measures will encourage people to make choices based on the political qualifications and positions of the candidates rather than on defensive needs to preserve psychological equanimity in response to reminders of mortality.

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FLORETTE COHEN is a graduate student in the Social Psychology program at Rutgers University-New Brunswick. Her research examines political preference as a worldview defense mechanism within the mortality salience paradigm.

DANIEL OGILVIE is a professor of Psychology at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. Since the publication of his book *Fantasies of Flight* (2004), he has resumed his earlier interests on the topic of the undesired self.

SHELDON SOLOMON is a professor of Psychology at Skidmore College. His research investigates how the uniquely human awareness of death influences all aspects of human behavior. He is a coauthor of *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror* (2003, APA).

JEFF GREENBERG is professor of Psychology at the University of Arizona. His research investigates the core motivational and affective concerns that influence people's attitudes and behavior. He is a coauthor of *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror* (2003, APA) and a coeditor of *The Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology*.

TOM PYSZCZYNSKI is professor of Psychology at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs. He is involved, with coauthors Solomon and Greenberg, in the development and testing of Terror Management Theory, and he is currently focused on applying the theory to the issues of terrorism, political extremism, and coping with death in later life. He is a coauthor of *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror* (2003, APA) and *The Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology*.

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