



Message from APA President Philip Zimbardo

Dear Colleagues,

I am looking forward to an exciting and challenging year ahead as the new President of APA, and will enjoy working with— and for— you.

Below is an essay that was published in the SF Chronicle on 12/30/01, it is part of my mission to present Psychology as a vital force in our society, and to do that we must develop more effective relationships with all the media. I have just been made the psychological consultant to NBC, and hope to use that position to spread the word about all the good we are doing.

S.F. Chronicle "Insight" Year-End Special Edition, Dec. 30, 2001, p. D6

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF TERRORISM: MIND GAMES AND MIND HEALING

As the war in Afghanistan winds down and the relentless hunt for Osama bin Laden continues, our government is gearing up for what is promised to be a long battle against the shadowy, ubiquitous enemy of world wide Terrorism. Leaders from the corporate, scientific and technical sectors of our country are collaborating to develop strategies for combating almost every conceivable kind of terrorist attack - bio-terrorism, cyber-terrorism, nuclear-terrorism, terrorism against our reservoirs, grain stores, food delivery systems, and of course airlines, tunnels and bridges. They are working on the assumption of international enemies with sophisticated technologies and ample resources to deliver lethal attacks that would cripple our nation's functioning. Putting their big security plans into operation will cost billions of "better safe now than sorry later" taxpayers' dollars. Given the current state of national angst over the devastating attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, along with the anthrax mail contamination, most Americans are ready to pay almost any price for greater security.

But what is missing in this big view of the demonic, technologically savvy Enemy bent on mass destruction? Missing is the recognition of the less obvious psychological perspective on what terrorism is all about. Terrorism is the process of inducing fear in the general population by means of acts that undercut an established sense of trust, stability and confidence in one's personal world. Unpredictable, dramatic acts of seemingly random violence are the terrorist's signature. Our fear is a realistic emotional response to events that can harm us, and we react to fear by fleeing or fighting it, or freezing in its presence. Fear becomes anxiety when it generalizes beyond the specific danger situation to become a more pervasive feeling of personal vulnerability to things that are not intrinsically dangerous, but are linked symbolically or historically to danger. Anxiety may be triggered by current events that link to unresolved earlier

conflicts, to feelings of loss of control, or to childhood states of inadequacy. The actual danger of most terrorist attacks is relatively small compared to on-going dangers in our every day lives, such as accidents, stress-induced heart attacks, obesity-induced diabetes, or disability and death from smoking. It is the irrational anxiety that terrorists are able to spread wide and deep that amplifies their impact. Kill one president, make everyone feel threatened. Torture and rape a few and make many feel insecure. Destroy a building and have citizens worry that theirs will be next. The terrorists' omnipresent weapon is exaggerated fear that spreads into action-crippling anxieties, especially when delivered repeatedly by television and print media. It is more likely that terrorists would suicide bomb some urban subways or time bomb a few rural school buses than poison our water or food supply. The key to combating terrorism is adopting their minimalist mind set of the rippling impact of singularly dramatic deeds, not using the lens of our grand vision of what major calamity we would inflict given our power — if we were terrorists.

In a profound sense, everything of terrorism is about psychology. Beyond their mind games is the way we cope with their threat. When national leaders repeatedly issue alarms for hyper-vigilance, they ignore all the psychological research about the negative effects of non-specific warnings without any action focus - only making us more paranoid and less mindfully alert. Many of the victims of the Sept. 11 attacks have turned to psychologists for counsel, therapy and aid to help with their overwhelming personal and family grief and stress, and we have continued to give them our services freely. Psychology is also at work in the remarkable transformation that has been taking place in communities throughout the United States. We have changed since our initial sense of feeling victimized as the hated enemy of unknown forces, as being vulnerable in a way Americans have never felt on our homeland. We are developing a more thoughtful, mature outlook on life, sensitive to the preciousness and fragility of all life, and aware of the need to connect more deeply to family and friends. Research shows that reinforcing one's social support network is the single most powerful act any of us can do to improve our health and longevity. There seems to be a shift away from our preoccupation with future goals and materialistic ambitions towards a better blending of our time frames to include present joys and indulgences as well as embracing past links to our roots and spiritual values. In volunteering money, blood and services, more Americans than ever before are reaching out to help our near and distant neighbors. We have all been the beneficiaries of learning of the sacrifices of so many ordinary men and women in police, fire and emergency forces at Ground Zero, who have become the nation's new breed of hero, replacing celebrities and the idle rich and famous.

The losses of Sept. 11 still hurt and sadden us, but we are emerging as wiser, and are collectively discovering new sources of resiliency that are apparent only when our resolve and courage are put to extreme tests. We are going beyond simplistic patriotism, with its songs and slogans, to question how much of our basic freedoms we are willing to surrender for an illusion of security? We are becoming aware that there are not simple, immediate solutions for complex problems that have been in the making for decades. We can be proud of the ways in which most Americans have demonstrated tolerance for the ethnic and religious diversity that so enriches our national purpose. We can now better appreciate the depth of resiliency that has always been the hallmark of people of color and the poor in our nation, learning from them that a sense of community and kinship helps tran-

scend suffering and victimization.

Psychology is all about making the human connection, about understanding and contributing to enriching human nature. And it is about our enduring televised imprinted memory of September 11. Vibrant lives of thousands of people from New York City and its neighboring Global Village are now images held tenderly in the arms of our million memories. Psychology is about thinking, feeling and acting — sometimes to create a bit of hell and sometimes a bit of heaven on earth.

Cordially,

Philip Zimbardo, President

American Psychological Association

Psychology Makes a Significant Difference