Stochastic Terrorism: A Linguistic and Psychological Analysis

by Molly Amman and J. Reid Meloy

Abstract

Stochastic terrorism has been bandied about in recent public discourse. However, it has received little scholarly attention, particularly in understanding its mechanics and the deeper psychological context in which it might flourish. The history and phenomenology of the term are elaborated upon, and its psychological meaning is explored through the application of linguistic pragmatics, the psychoanalysis of large group regression—what we term "poliregression"—and terrorism risk assessment. The January 6 Capitol siege and other historical events are used as illustrations.

Keywords: Stochastic terrorism, incitement, pragmatics, legitimation, insurrection, poliregression

Introduction

"Will no one rid me of this meddlesome priest?" These infamous words, attributed to Henry II of England, ominously preceded the Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Beckett's murder in 1170. To be clear, the king neither participated in, nor ordered, the notorious assassination, yet he is widely accepted as being largely responsible for it. Historical accounts reveal that Beckett, in a long-running disagreement with King Henry II, had recently excommunicated bishops supportive of Henry II, infuriating the king. Variations of the saying differ slightly, but Henry II is quoted as having said in full, "[w]hat miserable drones and traitors have I nurtured and promoted in my household who let their lord be treated with such shameful contempt by a low-born cleric! Will none of these lazy insignificant persons, whom I maintain, deliver me from this turbulent priest?"[1] The king's implication was clear—failure to support his desires through action would amount to treason in his mind. Ostensibly upon hearing their king's thoughts—directed at his own household, no less—four of his knights formed a plan and traveled to Canterbury. Lyttleton chronicled an original intention of confronting the archbishop and perhaps kidnapping him, but they ultimately killed Beckett when he resisted their attempts at arrest.[2] There has never been a credible suggestion that Henry II ordered violence against the archbishop. What his speech did, however, was trigger a chain of events directly ending in murder and making that result much more likely to occur than if he had never spoken.

Almost nine hundred years later, the coronavirus pandemic of 2020 forced most states to close or severely limit public activity at certain businesses such as bars, restaurants and gyms—and required masks to be worn in public, in order to slow the spread of the virus. Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer enacted several such measures relatively early in the pandemic, triggering criticism and protests from extreme-right groups. President Donald Trump publicly supported those protests, dismissively referring to Governor Whitmer as "that woman from Michigan" on Twitter, and tweeting on April 17, 2020, "LIBERATE MICHIGAN!" He also issued a call to "save" the Second Amendment, because it was "under siege." Two days later, several individuals including some from a previously organized extreme right-wing group, the Wolverine Watchmen, began discussions about taking action, starting with finding the governor's home address.[3] Over the next few months, they plotted to kidnap and potentially murder the governor, motivated by the belief she was exercising unrestrained authority. On April 30, 2020, they joined others who armed themselves and physically invaded the state capitol to protest; some protestors waved "Trump" flags and at least one wore a mask reading, "Liberate Michigan." The following morning, President Trump tweeted support for the protestors. Encouraged, the April plotters continued their research, planning and preparations. The FBI arrested them on October 7, and on the following day, President Trump tweeted, "…I do not tolerate ANY extreme violence. Defending ALL Americans, even those who oppose and attack me, is what I will always do as your President! Governor Whitmer—open up your state, open up your schools, and open up your churches!"[4]

Stochastic terrorism has been defined as the incitement of a violent act through public demonization of a group or individual.[5] Stated another way, the term has been said to mean "acts of violence by random extremists, triggered by political demagoguery."[6] It describes a pattern that cannot be predicted precisely but can be analyzed statistically.[7] In other words, a specific act against the demonized person or group cannot be forecast, but the probability of an act occurring has increased due to the rhetoric of a public figure. There is no formal, legal definition of stochastic terrorism in statutory or case law. Indeed, it is an academic, rather than legal, term. The word *stochastic* means random, stemming from the Greek *stochastikos*, meaning "proceeding by guesswork" or "skillful in aiming",[8] in contrast to determinism which is considered nonrandom. Terrorism has a number of statutory and research-oriented definitions, but in its simplest terms it refers to ideologically motivated or political violence against noncombatants, usually civilian populations. The joining of the two words, stochastic and terrorism, is originally attributable to mathematician and catastrophist Gordon Woo, who used the term to suggest a quantifiable relationship between seemingly random acts of terrorism and the goal of perpetuating fear through mass media's coverage of the violence. Woo thought the pace of attacks may be driven to an extent by the way news coverage of them unfolded.[9] The term was next taken up by anonymous blogger G2geek, who reversed the order and described it as incitement to violence through mass communication—speech first, then violence.[10]

We adopt this order of events for our own discussion of the phenomenon. G2geek's particular vision of stochastic terrorism also holds that the terrorist is the user of inciting speech rather than the person actually committing the violent act. The speech-then-violence ordering has since been discussed, specifically in reference to speech by political leaders, in recent sociopolitical commentary regarding events in the United States and elsewhere. [11] Stochastic terrorism, moreover, is not a new term for a "lone-wolf terrorist" since it is a statistical construct rather than an adjectival inference concerning the asocial nature of an individual. In fact, recent research has found that the term "lone wolf" is a misnomer since the social networks of individuals who carry out acts of violence without any external command or control are often broad and deep, exist both online and on the ground, and often contribute to the inspiration for an attack—even though the attack is done alone.[12]

The purpose of this article is to advance the exploration of the concepts of stochastic terrorism and incitement to violence from both clinical and forensic psychological perspectives. After first describing stochastic terrorism's practical application, we approach the concepts from three perspectives: linguistic pragmatics, large-group psychoanalysis, and terrorism risk assessment utilizing an approach known as structured professional judgment.

The Phenomenology of Stochastic Terrorism

How does stochastic terrorism unfold in the course of real-world events? We propose a practical description of stochastic terrorism as an interactive process between the originator of a message, its amplifiers, and one or more ultimate receivers. A charismatic public figure, or perhaps an organization, lobs hostile rhetoric against a targeted out-group or individual into the public discourse to further some political or social objective. An unrelated consumer of the rhetoric absorbs and reacts with anger, contempt or disgust, often mirroring the speaker's emotional state, and adding his own fear and anxiety to that cocktail of negative emotionality; the fear and anxiety may be intentionally provoked by the speaker to substantiate the need for his leadership and enforce the feeling that some growing harm posed by the out-group will personally impact the speaker's in-group, which is portrayed as both special and persecuted.[13,14,15] The speaker's rhetoric may range from bombastic declarations that the target is a threat by some measure, to "jokes" about violent solutions, or to the shared problem posed by the target—always stopping short of requesting or directing an attack for reasons of plausible deniability. Social and news mass media outlets are exploited to spread and amplify the message. [16,17] Gradual degradation and dehumanization of the target may occur through escalation of verbal attacks on the target's personal virtues, combined with repetition and saturation of the overall message.[18] Once he reaches his personal tipping point, a consumer of the rhetoric, unknown to the speaker, mounts an attack against the targeted out-group or individual. In the aftermath, the speaker condemns the violence generally or specifically, or asserts his or her pro–law and order stance, or denies that anyone could have seen the violent incident coming, or all three, all of which have the effect of inoculating the speaker against subsequent blame,

even if the assertions themselves are unconvincing.[19,20]

While these attacks may defy specific predictability, like any act of targeted violence, their likelihood is greatly increased by the public demonization process described above. The speaker puts out a call, knowing that someone may answer that call even if there is no way to predict who or when someone will pick up the veiled message. The intent of the speaker to cause such violence may range from unwitting naivete—in the sense of an accidental sin—to full knowledge and hope that such violence will happen, the risk magnified by his or her public speech. The exact motivation, however, is often untraceable.

Although a legal analysis of stochastic terrorism is beyond the scope of this article and will be addressed separately in another publication, here is a very brief description of the law as it would be most likely to apply. Generally speaking, hate speech is protected by the First Amendment to the US Constitution. However, one class of unprotected speech is "incitement to imminent lawless action." In 1969, the US Supreme Court ruled in the landmark case of *Brandenburg v. Ohio*, holding that speech has no such protection when it is (1) intended to incite or produce imminent lawless action and (2) is likely, in fact, to do so.[21] This differs from stochastic terrorism in that actual violence is not required, but intent to incite is.

Clinical and Forensic Psychological Analysis

Linguistic Pragmatics

Viewing stochastic terrorism and incitement to violence from a linguistic standpoint offers an opportunity to understand the underlying rhetorical processes at play and examine how a speaker manipulates with words. Linguistic pragmatics deals with the meaning of language as understood from both the words and the context in which they are uttered; both literal and nonliteral aspects of language are considered when perceiving the ultimate meaning of a linguistic communication. We find it useful in the present context.

It has been argued that most public communication by leaders is inherently coercive due to the strategies employed in furtherance of legitimizing policies and actions.[22] Exploitation of fear and anxiety in order to facilitate agreement to a course of action can be observed throughout the history of public discourse. Two mild examples: in 2010, President Barack Obama proposed a plan to recoup the taxpayer funds used to rescue the large banks credited with causing the 2008 American financial crisis. In his speech, he warned of an impending return to business as usual by the big banks, implying the American consumer may be damaged once again by abusive corporate behavior, as a harmful alternative if his plan did not pass into law.[23] In 1964, Ronald Reagan, in his "A Time for Choosing" speech, described liberal elites as a threat to the American ideal of self-governance itself, in a bid to position the doomed Goldwater campaign as the superior alternative.[24]

Clearly, coercion in political speech need not necessarily lead to acts of violence. Public communications may adopt a threat-fear-solution pattern for different purposes and follow very different scripts. For example, establishing the public need for a civic arts project might tap into the pattern in this manner: (a) Threat: inner-city poverty is limiting exposure to the arts; (b) Fear: inner-city children with PTSD will never have access to arts-based PTSD therapy and therefore continue to suffer; (c) Solution: a publicly funded arts program will result in the therapy being offered, and therefore emotionally healthier children in the inner city. Advocacy for an interventionist military policy following this pattern might look more like this: (a) Threat: Iraq is developing a functioning weapon of mass destruction (WMD) (b) Fear: if Iraq acquires a WMD, it—or a proxy like Al-Qaeda—will use it against Americans; (c) Solution: invading Iraq and capturing its WMD capabilities will preserve American lives and make the world a safer place. Both examples—whether subsequently found factual or not—may be considered legitimate uses of threat discourse. Other versions of this script might be thought of as illegitimate, on the other hand, such as speech that incites criminal violence. The Islamic State terror group used such an approach: the West hates Islam; the West is intent on destroying Islam and Muslims; therefore, it is every Muslim's obligation to kill unbelievers wherever they may be found. The threat, fear, solution-through-violence motif is a common one in the use of the discrete emotion of fear to induce terrorist violence.[25]

Whether an act or a course of action is legitimate as a practical or moral matter is not the same thing as the process of legitimation by a public speaker. "Legitimate" surely has many standards depending on what is being measured—legality of behavior is one standard of legitimacy, whereas moral rightness is another. *Legitimation* (also called legitimization), on the other hand, is the intentional deployment of linguistic behaviors to establish, first and foremost, the speaker's right to be obeyed.[26] In the context of public speech, a primary objective of legitimation has been defined as "broad social mobilization around a common goal."[27] In our observations, that goal can be:

a. A previously existing and clearly identifiable ambition held by a broad segment of society. An example would be framing a mainstream political party platform as the rightful agenda of the United States.

b. Molded into a more refined state by a speaker, from an indeterminate but broad sensibility. An example might be a call to build a wall between the US and Mexico in response to a generalized sentiment by a large segment of society that illegal immigration is a problem and current strategies are not working.

c. Broadened by the speaker from a narrow sensibility held by a small minority of society. An example might be adopting elements of the Q-Anon conspiracy theory and weaving these into a wide-ranging election fraud stance in support of calls to overturn an election.

d. Created entirely *de novo* by the speaker. This could be exemplified by a cult leader establishing a bespoke ideology with himself positioned as a divine entity at its center. David Koresh, the leader of the Branch Davidians, established himself as such a divine entity, ultimately resulting in the deaths of 75 men, women, and children in Waco, Texas, on April 19, 1993.[28] This event inflamed the passions of anti-government militia groups, and became a moral outrage that Timothy McVeigh nurtured, culminating in the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City exactly two years later.[29]

In addition to the rhetorical devices of the speaker, legitimation is aided by praise of the speaker's values and vision, his or her sanity and justification, and rightful authority;[30] it can be accomplished by the speaker or her/his surrogates, and it can be spontaneous or crafted by the object of praise. The darker side of legitimation is, of course, delegitimation of an opposing viewpoint, person or group. This strategy is frequently used in American political speech as a means of making a speaker's proposal that much more attractive when weighed against the "bad" choice. Delegitimation involves attacking the motives, justification, intelligence or even sanity of the "other;" blaming and scapegoating the other for society's troubles; marginalizing or devaluing the other on a personal level; and even dehumanizing the oppositional other.[31] For example, among former President Trump's nicknames and comments about 2020 Candidate Biden were: mentally weak, slow, crazy, corrupt, sleepy and creepy. By contrast, President Trump frequently described his accomplishments in superlative terms such as "Nobody respects women more than me" and "nobody knows more about taxes than me, maybe in the history of the world."[32]

Assertions and implicature also have roles in establishing legitimation.[33,34] Assertions shore up a speaker's credibility in part by referencing undeniable content such as facts and historically accepted ideas—providing a common ground between speaker and listener.[35] They tend to be used in sequences that collectively build up credibility needed to gain support for a desired, and potentially controversial, action or policy.[36] Living now, as we do in the United States, in the age of dual realities in which a common set of facts no longer exists between sociopolitical groups, assertions by any given leader (a) establish common frames of reference with smaller groups of people than they used to, and (b) silo groups off from one another by placing them in separate realities. The long-term effects of this phenomenon remain to be seen. One striking example by former President Trump was his statement, "I am a very stable genius."[37] Viewed from his political opposition, it was a laughable exaggeration. Viewed from his political base, it was a positive self-assertion that confirmed what they already knew. These completely opposite understandings of the world are often reinforced by the viewpoints and philosophical stances of mass media outlets who, at least in the United States, are not required to present information in a balanced and honest way.[38] These oppositional understandings are imbued with a false equivalency in the public mind, regardless of their actual merits.

Implicature, as it sounds, is a cousin of assertion that implies truth rather than stating fact. Implicature is particularly advantageous to the speaker in that its true meaning can incorporate a greater degree of subjectivity by the receiver than an assertion, allowing the speaker to communicate an idea without openly committing him- or herself to it.[39] Knowing his/her audience well, a clever speaker can imply something controversial without having to say it outright and know it will be interpreted in a predictable way. Should that interpretation land him in hot water, the beauty of implicature is that it provides an escape when a speaker needs to cancel an interpretation by simply adding more content.[40] It is a flexible and adaptive mechanism. A prime example was observed in former President Trump's various statements about the Mexican border wall. On the 2016 campaign trail, he stated, seemingly unambiguously, that Mexico would pay for the wall: "I would build a great wall, and nobody builds walls better than me, believe me, and I'll build them very inexpensively. I will build a great wall on our southern border and I'll have Mexico pay for that wall."[41] He reiterated this multiple times while campaigning. When it became clear that Mexico had no intention whatsoever of paying for a border wall, the President began to blur the meaning of his earlier statements: "Obviously…I never meant they're going to write out a check. Mexico is paying for the wall indirectly…many, many, many times over by the really great trade deal we just made…"[42] The implication of his first statement was that Mexico would directly fund the wall. Later, the President added content to this implication in order to change its meaning and avoid the impression of breaking a campaign promise. His supporters provided legitimation of the President's added content by praising his understanding of trade negotiations as a key aspect of his overall border wall policy.[43]

The role of personal consequence in legitimation is also notable. Threatening visions and expectancies tend to appeal to an audience when they are considered to be personally consequential.[44] The audience is presented with a threat-harm-solution scenario, framed as a dichotomous choice between "speaker/in-group/good" and "other/out-group/bad." In the 2020 Presidential campaign, President Trump framed the choice for American voters, "A vote for any Democrat in 2020 is a vote for the rise of radical socialism and the destruction of the American dream." He called Democrats "unhinged" and stated they "want to destroy you and they want to destroy our country as we know it."[45] It would be difficult to conjure a better example of the "othering" that forms the backbone of this dichotomy. Use of such rhetoric is further linked to Proximization Theory (PT).

In the framework of PT, which meshes several aspects of threat discourse into a single, coherent theory, a threat is presented as an escalating one, creating pressure to react by following the speaker's leadership as a means of averting a disaster which would personally impact the audience in a consequential way.[46] Praise and attack, and assertions and implicature are rhetorical tools used to legitimize the speaker's position and thereby shore up support. Usually, it can be assumed that a speaker's ultimate goal is to ensure popular support for his/her agenda. However, either unknown and unforeseen by the speaker, or a darker possibility, by design or by aspiration of the speaker, the receiver of rhetoric may take matters into his/her own hands and act independently. This is the operational outcome of the perlocutionary effect: meaning statements are made with the intention of producing an effect on an interlocutor—an engaged receiver—even if that effect sometimes manifests itself differently than expected by the speaker.[47]

A thread which runs through all such discourse and demagogic rhetoric is the communicating of urgency and the need to act. Time is compressed, violent action is necessary, typically to ward off an existential threat. If the threat can be successfully defined in this manner, institutions of democracy, and by extension, the guardrails of normative behavior, are subverted.

Threat discourse and stochastic terrorism do not, as generally understood, seem to entirely overlap. Though many differences between them could be resolved to coincide under the right circumstances, the published discourse literature typically envisions a leader promoting threat discourse to generate support for his or her own policy or action, rather than to inspire lawless action by others completely separate and apart from the leader. We think that the more legitimate the leader's ascension to power, such as within a functioning democracy, the greater the likelihood that advocacy for lawless action would be opaque; it would be much more transparent in an illegitimate leader's rhetoric, such as a leader of a terrorist group or an autocrat.

The power and speed of social and other media to accelerate and amplify this process, as referenced in our

stochastic terrorism process description, is an important aspect of the mechanics of demagoguery resulting in action in the cyber age. A detailed analysis of this aspect will be taken up in a subsequent publication.

Large-Group Psychoanalysis

The study of linguistic pragmatics invites reflection on the role of large group dynamics in shaping the impact of words upon the individual. There has been much psychoanalytic thinking about the topic of mass psychology, substantially shaped by the work of Freud.[48] Studies have ranged from small group dynamics to the dynamics of genocide and the geopolitical maneuvering of states.[49,50,51] What is most relevant to the discussion of incitement to violence and stochastic terrorism is large group regression of an unstructured group as explained by Kernberg, a process we term "poliregression."[52]

In the absence of specific and reasonable tasks, a large group can regress under the influence of a narcissistic or paranoid leader, the regression closely mirroring the oftentimes primitive defenses of a severe personality disorder. Kernberg writes, "a narcissistic regression of the group…stimulates the emergence of a narcissistic, self-congratulatory, self-assured leader who thrives on the admiration of others and assumes the role of an 'all giving' parental authority, on whom everybody else can depend for sustenance and security. In the throes of its regression, the group's members become passive and dependent upon that leader, and assume that it is their right to be fed and taken care of."[53] A benign sense of specialness and entitlement suffuses the group, much as it does the personality of the leader. Kernberg then goes on to explain the more dangerous paranoid regression of the group:

> "A group involved in a paranoid regression becomes hyper-alert and tense, as if there were some danger against which it would have to establish an aggressive defense. The group selects a leader with a strong paranoid potential, a hypersensitive, suspicious, aggressive and dominant person, ready to experience and define some slight or danger against which he and the group following him need to protect themselves and fight back. The members of the group, in turn, tend to divide between an 'in-group', rallying around the group leader, and an 'out-group' who are suspect and need to be fought off. The mutual recriminations and fights between the in-group and the out-group give a frankly hostile and paranoid quality to the entire group, and may lead either to splitting into paranoid splinter groups, or the discovery of an external enemy against whom the entire group can consolidate around the leader. The fight then evolves between that paranoid group and the external world."[54]

This shift from a more benign narcissistic group regression to a paranoid group regression was recounted by Michael Sherwin, who initially led the federal prosecution's inquiry into the January 6, 2021, US Capitol siege. He happened to witness the regression as it unfolded: "after he dressed in his running clothes and entered the crowd at the rally near the White House, he observed a 'carnival environment' of people listening to speeches and selling T-shirts and snacks. 'I noticed there were some people in tactical gear. They were tacked up with Kevlar vests…those individuals, I noticed, left the speeches early. Where it was initially pro-Trump, it digressed to anti-government, anti-Congress, anti-institutional…when I saw people climbing up the scaffolding, hanging from it, hanging flags, I was like, this is going bad fast.'"[55]

Kernberg's writings are prescient of the January 6 Capitol siege almost two decades later, and further help us to understand the nexus between incitement to violence and the mob violence that emerged that January 2021 afternoon. Such *poliregression* in particular helps explain the remarkably paradoxical violence by some members of the mob who were either law enforcement or military toward other law enforcement officers, the US Capitol Police, some of whom were also retired military. This is the most factually based, dramatic, and unexpected example of the emotional power of poliregression. It also illustrates how group dynamics will overwhelm individual discretion, even among trained military and police officers.

In paranoid regression, the incitement to violence of the leader's speech defines the large group as threatened by an out-group against which violence must be used to fend off an attack. In other words, defensive violence is necessary against the threat from the outside, and furthermore, the threat is both *imminent* and *existential*.

Such language advancing the need for imminent action can be highly persuasive once the group is convinced of the immediacy and magnitude of the threat. By characterizing the threat in this manner, certain psychological and biological changes follow: first, the existential nature of the threat overrides any commitment to nonviolent organizational and political forms of governance. For example, an intellectual commitment to central elements of democracy, such as free and fair elections, is subsumed by the emotional drive for the violence of action now. Second, hidden within the paranoid regression is a pathologically narcissistic belief that the group is special and entitled to such targeting given the secrets to which it is privy—as the old saying goes, it is better to be wanted by the FBI than not wanted at all. There is an "intolerance of indifference" in paranoid regression.[56] For example, the paranoid group alone holds the conspiratorial secrets of the rigged election. Third, beliefs shared among group members become more simplistic, binary, and absolute—what we term "extreme overvalued beliefs"—once the out-group is clearly identified.[57] For example, the group believes they are the sole defenders of democracy, and must use violence to ensure a victory over antidemocratic forces, the Republicans in Name Only (RINOs), a term utilized by Trump in his speech just hours before the Capitol siege. Fourth, the compression of time and portrayal of an imminent threat also resolves whatever cognitive dissonance the receiver may have had concerning his heretofore self-identity as a nonviolent person, and the fact that he or she is now setting forth on a violent pathway. The resolution is found by redefining the act of violence as a *defensive* necessity to fend off an imminent threat, and therefore is justified. What was plainly observed by televised media as offensive violence in the Capitol assault, for example—a mob of individuals breaking into the building and some members of the mob assaulting police officers—was likely rationalized in the minds of many of the mob that they were carrying out an act of defensive violence, largely due to its characterization as necessary in the face of an existential and imminent threat. In addition, such psychological processes are deeply intertwined with the activation of the autonomic nervous system, specifically the amygdala and other related areas of the limbic system, whenever an imminent threat to survival is perceived—conveyed by the persuasive rhetoric of the leader. Such limbic reactivity is both faster and less discerning than cognitive processing in higher cortical areas of the brain; the former is evolutionarily predisposed to prompt immediate action rather than ponder the reasons for such action.[58] Human survival on the African savannah was not enhanced by pondering the movement in the bush—is it the wind or a lion?—but instead by taking action: freeze, flee, or fight. In the case discussed here, it was the third option for many of those marching to the Capitol as they were instructed to "fight like hell" (the words of President Trump) and engage in "trial by combat" (the words of his personal attorney, Rudy Giuliani).

The demographics and behaviors of those who breached the Capitol on January 6, moreover, ranged from those caught up in the poliregression of the group, to those with more planned and purposeful intent, organizing beforehand with the conscious agenda of overturning the election through violent means. We think that these individuals, most amply illustrated by members of the "Oath Keepers," an extremist group largely composed of retired law enforcement and military who have been federally charged with a variety of crimes, were the exception to the poliregression of most; and by virtue of their professional training, advanced on the Capitol cognizant of their pathway to violence.

Terrorism Risk Assessment

Measuring the risk for violence as a result of stochastic terrorism and incitement to violence within a group is daunting. However, the validation of a risk assessment instrument, the Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol, when applied to lone-actor terrorists, provides some insight into characteristics of receivers—as described in our stochastic terrorism process description—of such persuasion by political leadership.[59]

The TRAP-18—developed by the second author—is a structured professional judgment instrument composed of 18 indicators: eight proximal warning behaviors and ten distal characteristics. The proximal warning behaviors, most notably *pathway, identification, and last resort*, have been shown to discriminate between terrorist attackers and those persons of national security concern who do not attack;[60,61,62] the proximal warning behaviors also form a cluster among terrorist attackers as opposed to non-attacking persons of national security concern in multidimensional scaling analysis;[63] and finally, the warning behaviors directly precede

an attack—and follow the distal characteristics—through the application of time sequence analysis as predicted by the theoretical model.[64]

Pathway warning behavior is measured by late-stage markers in behavior, including research, planning, preparation, and implementation of an attack.[65] By the time these behaviors are occurring, the receiver of such persuasive language would likely have already decided that violence was the only solution to the perceived problem; he or she would intend to be violent, and would be beginning to mobilize for such violence. Reasoned action theory has empirically demonstrated the sequential movement of such psychology, progressing from belief to attitude to intent to act.[66]

Identification warning behavior is defined in the TRAP-18 instrument as a psychological desire to be a pseudo-commando, or have a warrior mentality;[67,68] closely associate with weapons or other military or law enforcement paraphernalia; identify with previous attackers or assassins; or, in the case of the individual terrorist, to identify oneself as a soldier or agent to advance a particular cause or belief system. We have discussed this warning behavior in detail in another publication.[69] In the context of the receiver characteristics of persuasive speech implicating violence as the solution to the problem at hand, identification as a warrior or soldier for a cause helps mobilizing for violence. However, research has also found that *fixation*, another proximal warning behavior which is defined as preoccupation with a person or a cause, occurs in >80% of targeted violence cases, yet does not discriminate between attackers and non-attackers.[70,71] What does discriminate is the evolution from fixation—what one thinks about all the time—to identification—what one becomes.[72] Such "identity claims" may appear in words and visual images. Striking examples seen at the January 6, 2021, assault on the US Capitol included statements, flags and banners, and militia uniforms—but most relevant to incitement to violence and stochastic terrorism is the intent to act and the capability to do so as a self-appointed soldier for the cause after receiving direction from the leadership.[73] Without such a self-identity, there may be enthusiasm and even righteous indignation, but there is no intent to be physically violent toward the target.

Last resort, the third proximal warning behavior which separates attackers from non-attackers in the TRAP-18 research, is defined as a "violent action/time imperative".[74, 75] It is typically expressed in words or in deeds, i.e., final statements or "final acts."[76] Simply put, the subject believes that he must act violently, and he must act now. This proximal warning behavior is often preceded by a triggering or precipitating event, and in the context of incitement to violence, such a trigger is demagogic rhetoric. The fact that last resort behavior significantly discriminates between terrorist attackers and non-attackers underscores the centrality of time compression and urgency in incitement to violence. It is captured by the word "imminent" in the *Brandenburg* case cited above, but the importance of imminency of the threat, often falsely portrayed as existential, is underappreciated as the primary accelerator for violent action by the receiver of the persuasive speech. That sense of imminent threat is fundamental to the necessity for immediate violent action by the listener, whose intent and capability have already been established. But for the urgent time element in incitement to violence, the heightened probability of risk of violence is smaller.

There are other terrorism risk assessment instruments, such as the VERA 2R,[77] that will also help understand both the push and pull factors related to such violence—and the importance of protective factors to mitigate such risk. The TRAP-18, however, measures behaviors that are in close time proximity to a violent attack—which other terrorist violence measures do not—making it most applicable to our analysis.

Conclusion

We have attempted to advance a psychological understanding of stochastic terrorism and incitement to violence through the lens of linguistic pragmatics, large-group psychoanalysis, and terrorism risk assessment. There are other theories which help to understand the weaponizing of words,[78] but here we have emphasized the cognitive and emotional impact of demagogic rhetoric upon the receiver or listener, and the movement from idea to violent action. The signals for violence are often hidden in the noise of extremist rhetoric, particularly when coming from those who purport to be the voice of the people. But the signals resonate loudly and clearly with primed receivers. Lone offenders and regressed groups, when reacting to threat discourse, want to act

quickly given the seemingly urgent nature of the threat communicated by the speaker. They feel compelled to engage in imminent violent action. Public safety professionals, in turn, must act even more efficiently in order to somehow identify and prevent such bad acts, which can rapidly unfold. It is as dire as it sounds. As often said by law enforcement officials, they have to win the race every time, but a violent actor only has to win once.

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Notes

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