THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION
Research & Publishing
From the issue dated October 8, 2004

New studies find that people with subliminal fears of dying choose charismatic leaders at the polls

By DAVID GLENN

Memo to George W. Bush's political advisers: You're probably deciding what kind of television commercials to run during the campaign's homestretch. Do you want gauzy morning-in-America spots that feature President Bush guiding a prosperous and secure nation? Or muscular attack ads that paint John Kerry as an effete and gelatinous Boston Brahmin?

There is a third avenue that you might not have considered, one that may seem very odd at first: Forget your own advertising. Instead, get out your Rolodex, call up any friends you might have in the life-insurance industry, and persuade them to buy a lot of air time on election eve for their typical commercials.

Picture this. A grieving family walks slowly through an autumnal landscape. Moody chamber music. A sonorous voice intones: "It will happen to all of us someday. What if it happens to you tomorrow? Would your family be prepared to go on? Who would pay for the funeral? Perhaps it's time to consult with your local insurance agent."

If the Bush campaign could somehow manage to flood the airwaves with ads like that on the days just before November 2, the president's odds of victory might be even better than currently forecast.

That, at least, is one implication of a startling new series of experiments by a team of social psychologists who are scrutinizing voters' behavior. They have found that if people are haunted by not-quite-conscious anxieties about their mortality -- the kind of half-conscious anxiety one might suffer several hours after being asked to imagine one's own funeral -- they act very differently than do otherwise-similar people who have not been prompted to think about death. The death-haunted people are more

likely to prefer charismatic (as opposed to "relationship oriented" or "task oriented") leaders. And in studies in which people are asked about real-world candidates, the mortality-conscious participants are much more likely than their peers to prefer George W. Bush to John Kerry.

The five recent studies, which extend an intriguing 15-year-old line of experimental research on mortality anxiety, are described in the September issue of the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* and the forthcoming December issue of *Psychological Science.* All five had dramatic results. "It's very rare in social science to find a group of people agree with a proposition under one set of psychological conditions but disagree under another," says Sheldon Solomon, a professor of psychology at Skidmore College and one of the studies' designers. "These were whopping effects."

But if the results themselves are clear, how exactly to interpret them is a much hazier question. The researchers say they have shed light on a mechanism that could help demagogues rise to power during crises. They suggest that humans have a near-universal tendency to cope with mortal anxiety by idolizing parental figures -- sometimes including politicians -- who offer safety, purpose, and national or ethnic pride. At a time of post-September 11 fear, says Jeff Greenberg, a professor of psychology at the University of Arizona at Tucson and another member of the research team, "a charismatic leader gives you the sense that you're an important person in a meaningful reality, in a great nation. And that's what we think people want to hear."

Many questions remain, however. Mr. Greenberg and his colleagues have wandered onto the terrain of a decades-old debate among political scientists about "rally 'round the flag" effects -- that is, the public's tendency to give presidents much higher approval ratings during foreign-policy crises. Some participants in those debates have greeted these new psychological studies with great interest, but also with some skepticism. How exactly, they wonder, do the psychologists' laboratory results translate into the real world of citizens in voting booths?

Even though the researchers insist that these phenomena are indisputably nonrational, some observers urge caution about drawing broad conclusions about voters' susceptibility to demagogues. It isn't always easy to distinguish voters' rational responses to reasonable

warnings about plausible dangers from voters' irrational responses to jingoism and fear-mongering. One imagines that, say, Michael Moore and George Will would draw the line in very different places.

Buried Agitations

The new voting studies are only the latest component of a long-term project led by Mr. Solomon, Mr. Greenberg, and their colleague Thomas A. Pyszczynski, a professor of psychology at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs. The three men met as graduate students at the University of Kansas in the late 1970s, and later developed a shared interest in the work of Ernest Becker, a cultural anthropologist who died in 1974.

Mr. Becker, whose work drew on Erich Fromm and other radical Freudian thinkers, emphasized that humans are probably the only animals that consciously understand that they will die. All of human culture, Mr. Becker suggested, can be understood as an attempt to assuage our death anxieties. Culture, in this view, gives people the sense that they play a meaningful role in an enduring community or nation, and that when they die they will not simply pass into a void. Mr. Becker argued that these cultural processes are sometimes subject to horrible deformations, which can lead to ethnic slaughter and other forms of collective madness. In *The Denial of Death* (The Free Press, 1973), Mr. Becker wrote: "Natural narcissism -- the feeling that the person *next* to you will die, but not you -- is reinforced by trusting dependence on the leader's power. No wonder that hundreds of thousands of men marched up from trenches in the face of blistering gunfire in World War I."

Mr. Becker's concepts might seem abstract and grandiose, but in the late 1980s, Messrs. Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solo-mon decided to put them to small tests of concrete effects in the lab. The results have sometimes been remarkable.

The researchers' technique has been to induce some of their subjects to become anxious about their own future deaths, and to compare their behavior to that of a control group. Most frequently, they have triggered thoughts of death (or, in the parlance of social psychology, they have triggered a "mortality-salience condition") by asking people to reflect on what their funerals will be like or what will happen to their bodies after they die.

It is important to note that the researchers bury these mortality questions within a long, Potemkin-village series of word games and personality tests, which are administered to both the control and treatment groups. At the end of the battery of tests, members of the treatment group generally are *not* consciously thinking about death, but instead have ticklish, uncomfortable thoughts of death hovering on the periphery of their consciousness because they were asked about their funerals 15 minutes earlier. (How do the researchers know this? See accompanying graphic.) "What's kind of interesting," says Mr. Pyszczynski, "is that if we're fully conscious and actively thinking about death, we defend against anxiety in very different ways -- ways that do logically bear on the problem of death. ... We try to remind ourselves that our grandparents lived to be 99, or we make promises to ourselves, like we're going to get more exercise." By contrast, Mr. Pyszczynski says, when people are fighting off not-quite-conscious anxieties about death, they employ odd and apparently irrelevant defense mechanisms.

In a now-famous 1991 paper, the team reported that people in a mortality-salience condition are much more likely than members of the control group to praise their own ethnic or national group and to scorn outsiders. That finding has subsequently been replicated in dozens of other experiments in "terror-management theory," as the researchers have dubbed their approach.

"In Germany, mortality salience increases nostalgia for the Deutsche mark over the euro," says Mr. Pyszczynski. "In the Netherlands, a country that prides itself on not being nationalistic, people in a mortality-salience condition are much more likely to predict that their soccer team will win." Perhaps the oddest result: Scottish people in a mortality-salience condition are much better at the task of distinguishing between English and Scottish faces in photographs.

In response to early skepticism, the researchers have demonstrated that such surprising results are specific to anxiety about death and are not a product of general emotional distress or agitation. When people are asked to reflect not on their funerals but instead on being in extreme physical pain or taking a difficult examination, their behavior is not affected in any significant way.

Anxiety Attack

In 2002 Mr. Solomon, who was then a visiting professor at Brooklyn College, was approached by an undergraduate student, Flor-ette Cohen, who wanted to explore Max Weber's concept of charismatic leadership using terror-management theory. Ms. Cohen and Mr. Solomon presented 190 people, half of whom had been placed in mortality-salience conditions, with paragraphs written in the voices of three hypothetical gubernatorial candidates. One was charismatic ("you are part of a special state and a special nation"), one was task-oriented ("the goals set out before us are realistic yet challenging"), and the third was relationship-oriented ("everyone's contributions are recognized and appreciated").

The results were not subtle. Within the control group, only 4 out of 95 people said they would vote for the charismatic candidate; within the mortality-salient group, 31 out of 95 said they would do so.

"I think I was the most surprised person on the planet," says Mr. Solomon. "I'd told Florette, 'This is very interesting ... but I surely don't expect there to be any difference when we ask them who they're going to vote for.' And frankly, the most astonishing aspect of those findings is the sheer magnitude of the difference."

In another recent study, the team asked 97 students at Rutgers University, half of whom had been placed in a mortality-salience condition, to read a paragraph that praised President Bush's foreign policies. Those in the death-haunted group were much more likely to report that they agreed with such statements as "Personally, I feel secure knowing that the president is doing everything possible to guard against any further attacks against the United States."

The researchers then tried a variation of that approach with another group of Rutgers students. This time the students in the treatment group were asked to reflect on the September 11, 2001, attacks, not on their own funerals. This "September 11 salience" effect turned out to be almost as powerful as the mortality-salience effect in raising support for the president. Strikingly, the effect was equally strong for both liberal and conservative students. (And liberals, oddly, were more affected than moderates.)

Finally, the kicker: In May the team asked 157 Brooklyn College students, half of whom were asked to imagine being in intense pain and half of whom were asked to imagine their funerals, about their feelings toward the two major candidates and to predict how they would vote in November. The control group -- the "intense pain" students -- overwhelmingly preferred Senator Kerry. The "funeral" group preferred President Bush by a small margin.

Poll Bearers

What does all this mean? Do these results reflect an essentially harmless quirk of human psychology, like the adage that the taller presidential candidate invariably wins the popular vote? Or is there something more substantive and disturbing at work?

The researchers themselves are generally gloomy. In their *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* paper they write, deadpan, that their results "may not bode well for the philosophical democratic ideal that political preferences are the result of rational choice based on an informed understanding of the relevant issues."

If people decide through rational deliberation that President Bush's policies are wise, that is one thing, the researchers say. But if people are being driven by an irrational desire for charismatic protection, that is something else. "There's a world of difference between feeling safe and being safe," says Mr. Solomon, who personally believes that Senator Kerry's approach to foreign policy is much more sound than the president's. "And I think psychologically speaking -- even for myself, frighteningly -- Bush is much more comforting." Mr. Solomon believes that President Bush might win in a landslide.

The researchers are willing to entertain the idea (which has been suggested to them by conservatives who have read about these studies) that anxieties about death might actually make voters' decision making *more* rational, by heightening their sense of what is really at stake in the election. "Some people have said, 'Death is a real threat here, and in fact Bush is literally protecting us from death,'" says Mr. Greenberg. "That could be a legitimate issue with interpreting these results." He emphasized, however, that the participants in these studies are only half-consciously anxious about death, and that there does not appear to be any rational deliberation involved.

One question looms for future research: To what extent are these effects dependent on President Bush's particular personal style and rhetorical strategy, and to what extent are they effects that almost any incumbent president would enjoy?

In a 1973 book, John E. Mueller, now a political-science professor at Ohio State University, noted that rally-'round-the-flag effects can benefit presidents even at highly improbable times. "Roosevelt's approval ratings went up immediately after Pearl Harbor, and Carter's went up immediately after the hostages were seized in Iran," he says. "Logically, you could argue that that's absurd -- they hadn't done anything yet to deal with the crisis." But in another sense, Mr. Mueller says, those spikes in approval are an understandable, and essentially benign, expression of social solidarity. At a time of crisis, he says, people think "we're all in this together," and short-term approval of the president is one form taken by that feeling.

Richard A. Brody, a professor emeritus of political science at Stanford University, who has also studied rally effects, says that he is not certain how these new psychological studies might relate to the older debate about the dynamics of presidential approval. The new studies focus on effects on individuals, whereas Mr. Mueller and his followers have tended to conceive of patriotism as a highly social phenomenon. Mr. Brody says that he has always been uneasy with political scientists' reliance on patriotism in these discussions because "it never was measured -- it was always sort of implied by the fact of the rally itself. And that's kind of disturbing. It's circular." Psychological experiments like the new terror-management studies, Mr. Brody says, might someday identify more precisely the actual causal mechanisms that underlie spikes in presidents' approval ratings.

Another wrinkle comes from a new study by Darren W. Davis and Brian D. Silver, two political scientists at Michigan State University. Mr. Davis and Mr. Silver, who have been closely tracking public opinion in Michigan for many years, have generally found since the September 11 attacks that the more frightened people are of future terrorist attacks, the more likely they are to support President Bush. For a few months in mid-2004, however, that pattern reversed itself: Michigan residents who were frightened of future terrorism were *less* likely to support the

president than were their less-alarmed neighbors. Their study suggests, says Mr. Silver, "that the most cynical interpretation of the orange alerts" -- that is, that the Bush administration manipulates the alerts for political gain -- "is probably not accurate. Or, in any case, if the warnings *are* designed to shore up President Bush's approval, it's not actually working."

Mr. Pyszczynski and his colleagues, meanwhile, have another round of advice for the White House: Terrorism itself, they say, can partly be explained through terror-management theory. If the United States and its allies had managed to bring better security to Baghdad's streets, Mr. Pyszczynski suggests, Iraqi citizens would have been less likely to turn to extremist and sectarian groups. "When death is in the air, people are going to become more nationalistic, more prone to cling to their culture," Mr. Pyszczynski says, adding that between 10,000 and 30,000 Iraqis are estimated to have died so far. "You've got a lot of reminders of death," he says. "You've got a lot of insecurity. That's going to lead to lashing out at people who are seen as outsiders."

HOW SCHOLARS DETECT THOUGHTS OF DEATH

Scholars of "terror-management theory," who study how anxieties about death affect people's attitudes and behavior, want their experimental subjects to have thoughts of death hovering on the periphery of their consciousness but not to be consciously thinking about death.

To find out if the subjects have half-conscious thoughts of death, the researchers ask them to do a word-completion task.

In one recent study, for example, participants were asked to complete 34 word stems, of which six could be completed with either an emotionally neutral or a death-related word:

COFF _ _ (can be completed as "coffee" or "coffin")

SK _ _ _ (can be completed as "skill" or "skull")

MU _ _ _ _ (can be completed as "muscle" or "murder.")

GR _ _ _ (can be completed as "grape" (among other

things) or "grave")

BUR _ _ _ (can be completed as "burden" or "buried")

STI _ _ (can be completed as "stick" or "stiff")

In this particular experiment, the treatment group had been prompted to think subconsciously about terrorist attacks. Shortly before the word-completion task, the treatment group had seen the phrases "911" and "WTC" flashed so quickly on a screen that they could be detected only subliminally. The control group, by contrast, saw neutral stimuli (like "307," the local area code) flashed at subliminal speeds.

Even though they had not consciously processed the "911" and "WTC" cues, the members of the treatment group were significantly more likely than the control-group members to complete the word stems in morbid ways: coffin, skull, murder, and so on.

SOURCE: Mark J. Landau et al., "Deliver Us From Evil," Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, September, 2004

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Section: Research & Publishing
Volume 51, Issue 7, Page A14