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Spring 3-22-2020

## How Can Presidents Properly Calibrate the Terror Threat?

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### MSU Digital Commons Citation

Rubin, Gabriel, "How Can Presidents Properly Calibrate the Terror Threat?" (2020). *Department of Justice Studies Faculty Scholarship and Creative Works*. 139.

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## Chapter Five

### How Can Presidents Properly Calibrate the Terror Threat?

Since the 9/11 attacks, presidential rhetoric on the terror threat has only minimally changed. Many of the same themes harping on the importance of the threat and the resilience of America's adversaries are still employed by our leaders in 2019 that were employed in 2001. These themes were established and cemented by George W. Bush and have proved effective narratives for post-9/11 leaders to tap. Of course, as previously discussed, these themes are borrowed from previous fights including the Cold War and Ronald Reagan's grappling with state-sponsored terrorism.

After George W. Bush set the agenda for a global, anti-terror war, President Barack Obama was able to downplay the threat while still continuing with many of Bush's policies. Obama wanted to refocus America's terrorism policy on al Qaeda and Afghanistan and used his rhetoric to sell the troop surge in Afghanistan. President Donald Trump continued with many of Bush and Obama's policies, including the policy of targeted assassinations using drones, the USA Patriot Act and the war in Afghanistan, but his rhetoric has been markedly Islamophobic. One reason for this is that one of Trump's main policy goals is a reformation of American immigration legislation that focuses on pressuring or deporting undocumented people. Trump has tied the immigration issue to Muslims and terrorism, sometimes in a fashion so brazen that it has eroded the dignity of his office.

Chart 5.1 depicts how the perceptions of the terror threat have ebbed and flowed. Here we see that Bush in 2006 and 2007 and Obama from 2011 on, highlighted America's victories and a reduced terror threat to, in many cases, keep Congress and the public engaged in what is at the time of this writing a nearly two-decades long conflict. President Trump, however, has not leaned on the theme of a diminished threat as heavily and instead has turned to threat inflation. His ideological mix of isolationism with nativism means that he is not a categorical threat-inflater, but it is notable that in 2019 (the last bar covers Trump through February 2019) the terror threat is still being pushed and the theme that it has been reduced is not as prevalent as it was in the past. Certainly part of the issue is that different globally- and regionally-focused terror groups have periodically had success, but the flip side is that the framing of America's terror war continues to be expansive. President Obama attempted to narrow the field of focus, seeking to make the war about al Qaeda and Afghanistan. Despite his rhetorical attempts, America's adversaries shifted with the rise of ISIS and Obama continued Bush's global war against terrorists via targeted assassinations.

**[Insert Chart 5.1 Here]**

The findings from this study yielded results that will need to be incorporated into future work on the terror threat. For instance, Obama spoke about weapons of mass destruction being linked to terrorism with greater frequency than his supporters

care to admit. He also shifted strategies with the rise of ISIS, moving more toward George W. Bush's playbook. Each leader also employed rhetoric most often and emphasized the terror threat most frequently when selling new policies to the public and to Congress. The converse of this is that they did not need to speak often about the threat to maintain the status quo. Lamentably, not much has changed in rhetoric or in policy since 9/11. Guantanamo Bay still houses terrorist detainees, the American military is still involved in Iraq and Afghanistan, the USA Patriot Act is still settled law, and targeted assassinations continue unabated.

Notably, the discussion so far has touched very little on intelligence assessments. One might believe that these assessments drive how American leaders view the terror threat, but that does not seem to be the case. Instead, intelligence assessments seem to be manipulated, ignored or employed based on the pre-existing view of the commander-in-chief. All of the post-9/11 presidents have conducted extensive "behind the scenes" anti-terror campaigns that surely affirm the importance of the intelligence community in fighting terrorism. However, where broader public policy is concerned, these assessments seem to be secondary factors.

Given the empirical data presented here, the question of how presidents should calibrate their rhetoric and approach toward the terror threat becomes a more complex one. The three "9/11 era" presidents have tried different tactics with varying results that make providing prescriptions difficult. Jack Goldsmith encapsulates this problem in his argument on the issues inherent in the "terror presidency." Goldsmith begins with a quote from Arthur Schlesinger's *The Imperial Presidency*: "The problem," Schlesinger writes, "is to devise means of reconciling a strong and purposeful Presidency with equally strong and purposeful forms of democratic control." Goldsmith continues:

"Schlesinger's argument, written in the shadow of Watergate, was that presidents had arrogated national security power in ways that threatened to upset the mechanisms of democratic accountability. The presidency in the age of terrorism – the Terror Presidency – suffers from many of the same vices of Schlesinger's Imperial Presidency. But these vices appear in new forms, and the Terror Presidency also faces new challenges to its twin and sometimes incompatible obligations to keep us safe and maintain our trust. The best-intentioned and best-prepared presidents, exercising uncommon leadership and good judgment, will make mistakes in managing the difficult trade-offs between security and liberty the seemingly endless terror threat presents"<sup>1</sup>.

The following prescriptions and findings derive from the work in this book and attempt to take into account the complications of the terror presidency.

**Presidential rhetoric is critically important in framing the terror threat.** Clearly, presidential rhetoric is important and needs to be taken seriously particularly when a threat may be attached to a group of people. Jeffrey Tulis concludes that rhetoric is a

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<sup>1</sup> Goldsmith, Jack. *The Terror Presidency: Law and Judgment Inside the Bush Administration* (New York: WW Norton 2007), pgs. 183-184; Schlesinger, Arthur. *The Imperial Presidency* (New York: Houghton Mifflin 1973).

kind of discretionary power that needs to be constrained by law<sup>2</sup>. Tulis pines for the old model of bargaining, but admits that the old way of leading the country would not be appropriate for the 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>3</sup>. In the face of crises, as we saw in Chapter 1, people look to their leaders to set the agenda and determine policies. In this book, we saw that rhetoric successfully pressed America toward wars, troop surges and liberty-restricting policies. Presidential statements were also able to tamp down or ratchet up public fears in the post-9/11 period. The high incidence of anti-Muslim hate crimes under Donald Trump when juxtaposed with lower hate crime figures under Barack Obama provide evidence for this fact. The power and importance of presidential rhetoric was, thus, reinforced by this study.

**The terror threat is not as great as people think it is, and that needs to be communicated more often.** As noted in *The Economist*, actual incidents of terrorism in America have been minimal in the years since 2001 and have not produced many casualties either compared to Western Europe or to the 9/11 attacks<sup>4</sup>. Of course, these figures may not include all acts of violence that they should in America, such as mass shootings. Still, the lack of terrorist successes on American soil since 9/11 certainly can be viewed as either a product of reinvigorated terror policies or of an overinflated threat. The fact is that both are likely true, which is why Wesley Windmaier's thesis is that presidents react to crises first with "fast-thinking" overreactions and then follow these with more "slow-thinking" refinements<sup>5</sup>. President Obama, as chapter 3 conveyed, tried to appropriately recalibrate the threat with his rhetoric but a number of factors, including the realities of the threat, actions of Congress and the difficulties in undoing certain policies, got in his way. Obama presents a critical case because his rhetoric shows that simply downplaying the terror threat provides no panacea.

Jack Goldsmith chronicles the Bush Administration's consciousness of this cycle of overreaction. The public's fearful reaction to the 9/11 attacks dropped precipitously from 85% of the public believing an attack was likely in the near future one month after the attacks to just 40% believing the same in 2007. Goldsmith notes that, "Public support for war is especially likely to be short-lived"<sup>6</sup>. "As the public perception of the terror threat...dimmed," Goldsmith reports, "the downsides of [America's] counterterrorism efforts [became] more salient"<sup>7</sup>. President George W. Bush, a crisis president, and his national security staff understood that the post-crisis impulse to eliminate the threat leads administrations "to do things that, in hindsight, will seem to be overreactions or errors"<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Tulis, Jeffrey K. *The Rhetorical Presidency*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2017), pg. 202.

<sup>3</sup> Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, pg. 208.

<sup>4</sup> The Economist, "Learning to Live With It," *The Economist*, 3 September 2016, <http://www.economist.com/news/international/21706250-people-are-surprisingly-good-coping-repeated-terrorist-attacks-america-and>.

<sup>5</sup> Windmaier, Wesley W. *Presidential Rhetoric from Wilson to Obama: Constructing Crises, Fast and Slow* (New York: Routledge 2015)

<sup>6</sup> Goldsmith, *The Terror Presidency*, pg. 187.

<sup>7</sup> Goldsmith, *The Terror Presidency*, pg. 188.

<sup>8</sup> Goldsmith, *The Terror Presidency*, pg. 190.

Still, the public needs to be made more aware of the diminished terror threat. A public that is constantly on guard for terrorism will be easy to manipulate. Leaders such as President Trump can also twist the terror threat to fan xenophobia or Islamophobia. A more rational discussion on the realities of the terror threat in America needs to be had and presidential rhetoric needs to reflect the facts.

The media and government surely both play a role here. Crises are traumatic due to their rarity and shocking nature. But they can also be put into context. Just like when any other disaster occurs, context can be provided when terror attacks occur. So, for instance, the rarity of terror attacks can be juxtaposed with their violence. This may help calibrate the threat for the public. Of course, high-casualty violence or particularly brutal attacks will still provoke fear, but counting America's wins in addition to its losses will help with moving past the age of terrorism<sup>9</sup>.

**There is no perfect way to calibrate the terror threat as human forecasting is always fallible. Still, presidents can do a better job of linking means and ends.** The issue with presidents calibrating the terror threat correctly is that the global terror threat is amorphous, hard to calculate, and complex because of the possibility of a low-probability/high-casualty event<sup>10</sup>. Additionally, the U.S. also has the means to pursue a wide range of foreign policies given its military might. As Joseph Nye writes, "The paradox of American military and economic power...is that the United States is too strong to be challenged by any other single state but not strong enough to solve global problems, such as terrorism, by itself"<sup>11</sup>. The world has certainly been on counterterrorism footing since 9/11, as exhibited by many countries folding counterterrorism into authoritarian practices such as shutting down political opposition or protests<sup>12</sup>.

As Elizabeth Saunders notes, "careful calibration of ends and means" are critical to the successful conduct of military operations<sup>13</sup>. The same can be said of presidential rhetoric. It is important that presidents gather as much information as necessary before making policy decisions. Saunders also notes, mirroring Windmaier, that presidents tend to be slow to shift their threat perceptions<sup>14</sup>, we saw this in how Obama dealt with the threat of ISIS and in how Bush 43 belatedly adjusted his strategy in Iraq.

**The public needs to be on guard for the terror threat being manipulated so as to grab power for the executive branch.** Threat calibration is not the only good with which presidents are concerned. Many times leaders seek to expand their power, and urgent threats can be employed toward this goal. Winkler finds that both Republican

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<sup>9</sup> James Fallows made a similar case in an article in 2006. Fallows, James, "Declaring Victory," *The Atlantic*, September 2006, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/09/declaring-victory/305124/>.

<sup>10</sup> Gambetta, Diego, "Reason and Terror: Has 9/11 made it hard to think straight?" *Boston Review*, February/March 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Nye, Joseph S, Jr. *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone* (New York: Oxford University Press 2002) in Ivie, Robert L. *Democracy and America's War on Terror* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press 2005), pg. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Vice, "SOFEX: The Business of War," 5 July 2012, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/mvp73b/sofex-the-business-of-war-full-length](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/mvp73b/sofex-the-business-of-war-full-length).

<sup>13</sup> Saunders, Elizabeth N. *Leaders at War: How Presidents Shape Military Interventions*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 2011), pg. 221.

<sup>14</sup> Saunders, *Leaders at War*, pg. 222.

and Democratic Presidents seek to expand executive power in response to terrorism and use both “the tools of law enforcement and the military to respond to terrorism”<sup>15</sup>. In *Freedom and Order*, I found that both presidents and prime ministers seek to use terrorism-induced crises to grab more power for themselves<sup>16</sup>. These power grabs may not be malicious – leaders in crisis seek unitary power so that they can act quickly and decisively – but they do erode democracy. As Fareed Zakaria writes, “America’s constitutional character [is threatened by] the ever-expanding power of the presidency.” Zakaria states that, “The fear after 9/11 proved to be the gateway for an out-of-control executive branch. The president gained the ability to snoop on private Americans, use military force at his whim, torture prisoners and detain people indefinitely. The president can now order the execution of American citizens who are deemed – by him – to be terrorists, without due process”<sup>17</sup>.

**Credibility gaps harm presidential legitimacy and a leader’s ability to act. Leaders should be aware that “wishful thinking” or fabrications can lead to losing critical support and legitimacy.** The words our leaders use to describe the terror threat are very important. Those words also need to connect to reality. When they don’t, credibility gaps form that erode our leaders’ ability to sell policy or set agendas. Presidential rhetoric, as we saw in chapter 1, serves to frame who Americans are fighting and how they should react<sup>18</sup>. Growing credibility gaps can lead to a changing of the guard via the ballot box, a natural process in the American two-party system.

No president is immune to credibility gaps. Further neither inflating nor deflating the terror threat is a panacea here either. President Obama tried to deflate the terror threat after President Bush had inflated it, both projects led to credibility gaps. This, again, speaks to the complexity of the issue. Surely, the threat of clandestine non-state forces attacking one’s country is not easy to quantify.

That said, there is an element of manipulation in selling wars and calibrating the terror threat. For instance, the Afghanistan Papers show that Bush 43, Obama and Trump all continually lied to the public about a war and nation-building effort that was going terribly. As *The Washington Post* report found, “A confidential trove of government documents ... reveals that senior U.S. officials failed to tell the truth about the war in Afghanistan throughout the 18-year campaign, making rosy pronouncements they knew to be false and hiding unmistakable evidence the war had become unwinnable”<sup>19</sup>. Future presidents need to better weigh transparency with the

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<sup>15</sup> Winkler, Carol K. *In the Name of Terrorism: Presidents on Political Violence in the Post-World War II Era* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press 2006), pgs. 200-201.

<sup>16</sup> Rubin, Gabriel. *Freedom and Order: How Democratic Governments Restrict Civil Liberties after Terrorist Attacks—and Why Sometimes They Don’t*. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Zakaria, Fareed, “It’s hard to be an optimist about America right now,” *The Washington Post*, 29 November 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/its-hard-to-be-an-optimist-about-america-right-now/2019/11/27/8020e526-115b-11ea-b0fc-62cc38411ebb\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/its-hard-to-be-an-optimist-about-america-right-now/2019/11/27/8020e526-115b-11ea-b0fc-62cc38411ebb_story.html).

<sup>18</sup> See Salvatore, Christopher and Gabriel Rubin, “A Socio-Demographic Analysis of Responses to Terrorism,” *Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management*, 12 :4 (December 2015).

<sup>19</sup> Whitlock, Craig, “At War With the Truth,” *The Washington Post*, 9 December 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-confidential-documents/>.

public against continuing policies they support. When presidents support failed policies, they do themselves a disservice as credibility gaps erode their ability to enact their policy goals.

**Relatedly, the terror threat is an issue area where our leaders know more than the public. Transparency may not always be possible, but it should be a goal.** In a policy space where leaders and intelligence officers have much more information than the general public, presidential rhetoric is critical. As we have seen, George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Donald Trump have all continued with the same expansive anti-terror agenda that Bush began albeit with some adjustments. These adjustments were made to sell specific policies (as in the case of the Muslim ban) or to shift existing ones (as in the move to focus more on the war in Afghanistan). The public is asked to trust that leaders are doing what they can to make Americans secure. Eighteen years after 9/11 this is not good enough. The public needs more information about the threats and what their government is doing in the citizenry's name. The trend, unfortunately, is the opposite: the terror war is becoming more secretive not more transparent.

Transparency may not be possible in covert intelligence operations, but the terror war has become too secretive. Most in the American public have no idea about American strikes in Yemen let alone Somalia. In a democracy, delinking war efforts from public approval is troubling. Where possible, transparency needs to be reestablished so that the public can get a better sense of the war efforts being carried out in their name.

**Presidential rhetoric can build goodwill between peoples – or do the opposite. Statements of tolerance could reduce violence while intolerant statements could do the opposite.** Presidents Obama and Trump each ushered in important rhetorical changes. Obama tried to underplay the terror threat, as compared to his predecessor, and to reach out with greater tolerance toward Muslims. President Obama wanted to repair relationships with nations and peoples that felt hurt by George W. Bush's policies. Obama's rhetoric certainly built goodwill with others around the world as world opinion data shows<sup>20</sup>.

President Trump's big change has been in the opposite direction – a more abrasive foreign policy coupled with very harsh anti-immigrant rhetoric. In fact, Trump has ushered in a new era of crude and incendiary rhetoric meant to bully detractors and opponents<sup>21</sup>. Trump's use of Twitter as a link to his supporters is critically important. His linking of anti-immigrant nativism with the terror threat can be likened to Bush's linking of the terror threat to Saddam Hussein and Iraq. A big difference with Trump,

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<sup>20</sup> See Wike, Robert, "7 Charts on How the World Views President Obama," *Pew Research Center*, 24 June 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/06/24/7-charts-on-how-the-world-views-president-obama/>; Wan, William and Scott Clement, "Most of the world doesn't actually see America the way Trump said it did," *The Washington Post*, 18 November 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/obama-legacy/global-approval-rating.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Gerson, Michael, "Trump and his Fox News Supporters are no longer Content just spewing propaganda," *The Washington Post*, 18 November 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trump-spurs-a-wild-west-of-continuously-worsening-political-rhetoric/2019/11/18/59185e5a-0a3a-11ea-97ac-a7ccc8dd1ebc\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trump-spurs-a-wild-west-of-continuously-worsening-political-rhetoric/2019/11/18/59185e5a-0a3a-11ea-97ac-a7ccc8dd1ebc_story.html).

as chapter 4 showed, is that he is demonstrably Islamophobic. This Islamophobia has had real effects as seen in the hate crimes data presented in Chapter 4.

Tolerant speech can build bridges between communities within America and between Americans and the world. Obviously, it is best if this speech is matched with tolerant action, but a return to presidential rhetoric that nods to unity and tolerance toward minorities, particularly Muslims, will benefit all people. In the least, such speech will tone down the Islamophobic and xenophobic mobilization of domestic extremists fomented by President Trump.

**Presidents need to be more precise with how they use the term “terrorist.” Domestic terrorism needs to be taken more seriously.** While Obama’s critics craved a counterterror campaign focused on “Islamic radicals,” the shift to a narrative focus on Muslim fundamentalists is not without its own issues. Such a focus “heightens the elusive nature of the enemy,” especially given the difficulty in differentiating between a “terrorist” and a “peaceful Muslim.” Focusing on Muslim fundamentalists also begs the question regarding the terrorist violence portended by fundamentalists of other religions<sup>22</sup>. If terrorism is reserved for Muslims, domestic incidents, as we have seen in the late 2010s under President Trump, are likely to get ignored or miscategorized.

Indeed, if we are to take the terror threat seriously, our leaders need to more readily call domestic attacks terrorism. American Presidents have defined domestic and international terrorists dramatically differently. Domestic terrorists are viewed as lone actors while international ones are seen as syndicates with all manner of real and fabricated connections<sup>23</sup>. American Presidents also consistently omit the goals of terrorists or mischaracterize them as being against “freedom, democracy or liberty”<sup>24</sup>. This serves to dehumanize the terrorist Other<sup>25</sup>. The many-times narrow political objectives of terrorists get lost in this framing.

**America and its leaders need to become more comfortable with different regime types and different peoples. Presidential rhetoric can help guide Americans toward this goal.** Robert Ivie writes that, “The American republic...is prone to war because, paradoxically, it remains forever insecure no matter how many weapons it adds to its arsenal or how strong its economy or widespread its influence”<sup>26</sup>. Ivie contends that America is unnecessarily distrustful of non-democratic nations. He opines that, “The ‘curious myopia,’ as John Lewis Gaddis calls it, that nations possessing different forms of government are hostile to the United States, has become an ideological litmus test that repeatedly exacerbates misunderstandings and grossly exaggerates the dangers facing Americans in a post-cold war world”<sup>27</sup>. This distrust of nations with different government types spilled over into war with Iraq and has led to tensions with other countries, including Iran and North Korea. Americans have been inured since the Cold War to “a cultural pathology of perpetual peril under the guise of

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<sup>22</sup> Winkler, *In the Name of Terrorism*, pg. 211.

<sup>23</sup> Winkler, *In the Name of Terrorism*, pg. 191.

<sup>24</sup> Winkler, *In the Name of Terrorism*, pg. 198.

<sup>25</sup> Winkler, *In the Name of Terrorism*, pg. 199.

<sup>26</sup> Ivie, *Democracy and America’s War on Terror*, pg. 10.

<sup>27</sup> Ivie, *Democracy and America’s War on Terror*, pg. 15.

seeking peace and in the form of a national security state”<sup>28</sup>. Presidential rhetoric can guide the public toward more acceptance of different regimes and peoples. Just because a country is not democratic, does not mean it seeks to destroy America. This “Cold War-style” thinking needs to end. The logic of democratic peace theory – that democracies don’t fight one another – needn’t be coupled with a logic that democracies distrust and war with non-democracies. Democracy is also not a cure-all for the world’s ills. Plebiscites in Iraq and Afghanistan have, for instance, not necessarily changed those countries for the better.

**The agenda of the global war on terror needs to be re-examined and narrowed.** This study has shown that while policies within the war on terror agenda have come and gone since 2001, the agenda has remained largely the same in the past eighteen years. Recall that the agenda-setting role of our leaders entails the “power to construct narratives”<sup>29</sup>. For the war on terror, the narrative of a dangerous world replete with terrorist enemies that need to be challenged through military might was firmly established by the George W. Bush Administration. Barack Obama tried to soften this narrative, but did not totally erase it. Donald Trump has since exacerbated the narrative.

Changing that narrative surely does not have to mean completely ignoring or forgetting about the terror threat. Instead, a new use of language could “build tolerance and sow peace” just as it sowed division and violence under Bush<sup>30</sup> and Trump. Ivie calls for the primacy of democracy – true democratic values, not hollowed-out terms – to be pushed by American leaders<sup>31</sup>. This tactic would overturn the “us against them” dynamic set in motion by the global terror war. This may sound like it is in contrast to accepting non-democratic governments, but it need not be. America could promote liberal, democratic values while also working to better accept the diverse regimes that exist in the world.

More concretely, recent domestic terror attacks have led to a call to reappropriate counterterror funds given the paucity of jihadist terror attacks<sup>32</sup>. Such a reevaluation would be a welcome change given the need to reexamine an agenda set by Bush in 2001. In fact, cost-benefit analyses of all that the Department of Homeland Security and other counterterror arms of the U.S. government need to happen. Funding and support needs to be cut where appropriate, and moved to new areas where justified. A full reevaluation should include reexamining the USA Patriot Act and the campaign of targeted assassinations as well.

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<sup>28</sup> Ivie, *Democracy and America’s War on Terror*, pg. 188.

<sup>29</sup> DiMaggio, Anthony R. *Selling War, Selling Hope: Presidential Rhetoric, the News Media, and U.S. Foreign Policy since 9/11*. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press 2015), pg. 187.

<sup>30</sup> Hodges, Adam. *The “War on Terror” Narrative: Discourse and Intertextuality in the Construction and Contestation of Sociopolitical Reality* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press 2011), pg. 160.

<sup>31</sup> Ivie, *Democracy and America’s War on Terror*, pg. 176.

<sup>32</sup> Miller, Greg, “Rise of far-right violence leads some to call for realignment of post-9/11 national security priorities,” *The Washington Post*, 5 August 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/rise-of-far-right-violence-leads-some-to-call-for-realignment-of-post-911-national-security-priorities/2019/08/05/5a9b43da-b7ad-11e9-a091-6a96e67d9cce\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/rise-of-far-right-violence-leads-some-to-call-for-realignment-of-post-911-national-security-priorities/2019/08/05/5a9b43da-b7ad-11e9-a091-6a96e67d9cce_story.html).

The public has an important role to play in dislodging the narrative that has been prevalent since 9/11. As this book has shown, American leaders continue to manipulate the terror threat to their own ends. Some leaders seek to downplay it, while running deadly operations in the background. Others twist the threat so that it will conform to policies they seek to sell. Unfortunately, the agenda of a global war against terrorists, set after the 9/11 attacks, lives with us today. We can expect future leaders to perpetuate the cycle of downplaying and inflating the threat for their own benefit. American citizens, in turn, need to avail themselves of the realities of the threat – international terrorism in America and against Americans is exceedingly rare. Eventually, American Presidents will adjust the agenda set by Bush, but they will only do so if an informed electorate views terror threat inflation skeptically.