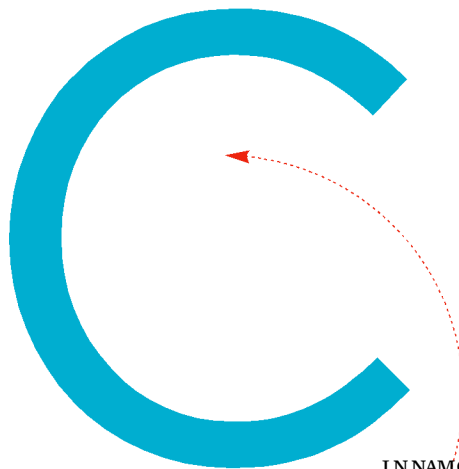
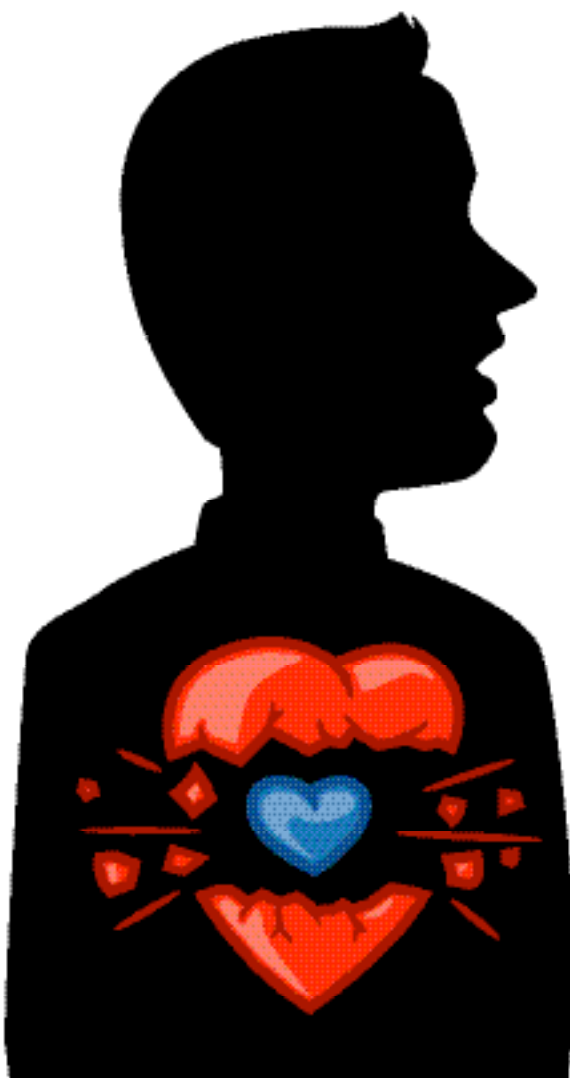


The Ideological Animal

The title 'The Ideological Animal' is presented in a large, black, serif font. The word 'Ideological' is split, with the 'o' replaced by a red circle containing a white star and the 'l' replaced by a blue circle containing a white star. The word 'Animal' is positioned below 'Ideological'. The word 'The' is positioned above 'Ideological'. Four dashed arrows, two red and two blue, form a circular path around the text, starting from the top right and moving clockwise.

We think our political stance is the product of reason, but we're easily manipulated and surprisingly malleable. Our essential political self is more a stew of childhood temperament, education, and fear of death. Call it the 9/11 effect.

By Jay Dixit ★ Illustrations by Christoph Niemann



IN NAMON STILLWELL NEVER THOUGHT she'd be the founder of a political organization. She certainly never expected to start a group for conservatives, most of whom *became* conservatives on the same day—September 11, 2001. She organized the group, the 9/11 Neocons, as a haven for people like her—“former lefties” who did political 180s after 9/11.

Stillwell, now a conservative columnist for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, had been a liberal her whole life, writing off all Republicans as “ignorant, intolerant yahoos.” Yet on 9/11, everything changed for her, as it did for so many. In the days after the attacks, the world seemed “topsy-turvy.” On the political left, she wrote, “There was little sympathy for the victims,” and it seemed to her that progressives were “consumed with hatred for this country” and had “extended their misguided sympathies to tyrants and terrorists.”

Disgusted, she looked elsewhere. She found solace among conservative talk-show hosts and columnists. At first, she felt resonance with the right about the war on terror. But soon she found herself concurring about “smaller government, traditional societal structures, respect and reverence for life, the importance of family, personal responsibility, national unity over identity politics.” She embraced gun rights for the first time, drawn to “the idea of self-preservation in perilous times.” Her marriage broke up due in part to political differences. In the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq, she began going to pro-war rallies.

In 2005, she wrote a column called “The Making of a 9/11 Republican.” Over the year that followed, she received thousands of e-mails from people who'd had similar experiences. There were so many of them that she decided to form a group. And so the 9/11 Neocons were born.

We tend to believe our political views have evolved by a process of rational thought, as we consider arguments, weigh

As kids, liberals developed close relationships with peers and were rated by their teachers as self-reliant, energetic, impulsive, and resilient.

evidence, and draw conclusions. But the truth is more complicated. Our political preferences are equally the result of factors we're not aware of—such as how educated we are, how scary the world seems at a given moment, and personality traits that are first apparent in early childhood. Among the most potent motivators, it turns out, is fear. How the United States should confront the threat of terrorism remains a subject of endless political debate. But Americans' response to threats of attack is now more clear-cut than ever. The fear of death alone is surprisingly effective in shaping our political decisions—more powerful, often, than thought itself.

ABSTRACT ART VS. TALK RADIO: THE POLITICAL PERSONALITY STANDOFF

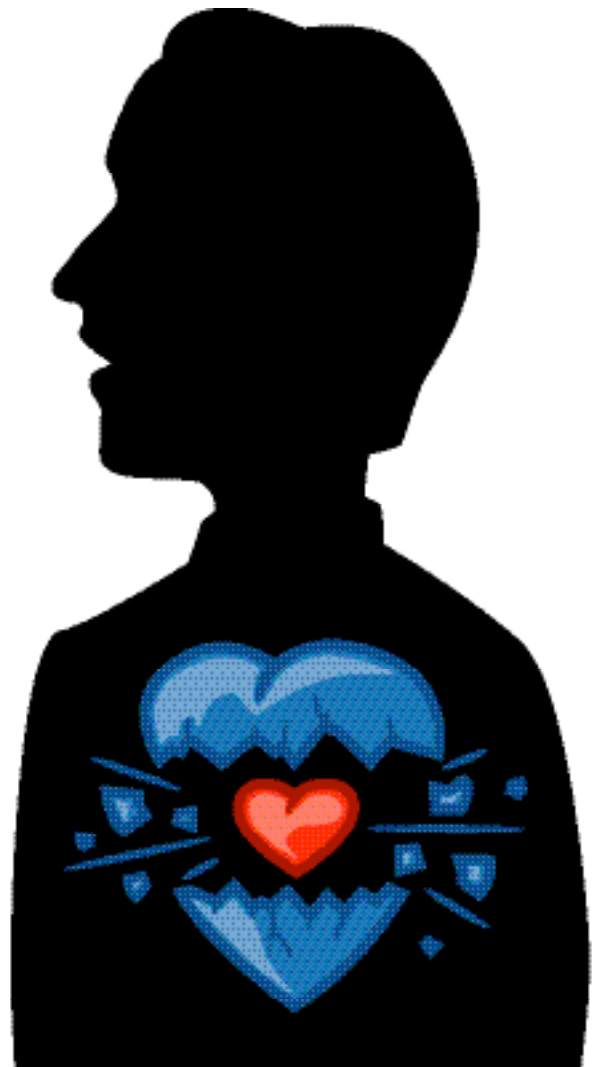
 MOST PEOPLE ARE SURPRISED TO LEARN THAT THERE are real, stable differences in personality between conservatives and liberals—not just different views or values, but underlying differences in temperament. Psychologists John Jost of New York University, Dana Carney of Harvard, and Sam Gosling of the University of Texas have demonstrated that conservatives and liberals boast markedly different home and office decor. Liberals are messier than conservatives, their rooms have more clutter and more color, and they tend to have more travel documents, maps of other countries, and flags from around the world. Conservatives are neater, and their rooms are cleaner, better organized, more brightly lit, and more conventional. Liberals have more books, and their books cover a greater variety of topics. And that's just a start. Multiple studies find that liberals are more optimistic. Conservatives are more likely to be religious. Liberals are more likely to like classical music and jazz, conservatives, country music. Liberals are more likely to enjoy abstract art. Conservative women are more likely than liberal men to prefer conventional forms of entertainment like TV and talk radio. Liberal men like romantic comedies more than conservative men. Liberal women are more likely than conservative women to enjoy books, poetry, writing in a diary, acting, and playing musical instruments.

“All people are born alike—except Republicans and Democrats,” quipped Groucho Marx, and in fact it turns out that personality differences between liberals and conservatives are evident in early childhood. In 1969, Berkeley professors Jack and Jeanne Block embarked on a study of childhood personality, asking nursery school teachers to rate children's tempera-

ments. They weren't even thinking about political orientation.

Twenty years later, they decided to compare the subjects' childhood personalities with their political preferences as adults. They found arresting patterns. As kids, liberals had developed close relationships with peers and were rated by their teachers as self-reliant, energetic, impulsive, and resilient. People who were conservative at age 23 had been described by their teachers as easily victimized, easily offended, indecisive, fearful, rigid, inhibited, and vulnerable at age 3. The reason for the difference, the Blocks hypothesized, was that insecure kids most needed the reassurance of tradition and authority, and they found it in conservative politics.

The most comprehensive review of personality and political orientation to date is a 2003 meta-analysis of 88 prior studies



Thoughts of death make people more conservative because they awaken a deep desire to see the world as fair and just, and to preserve the existing social order.

involving 22,000 participants. The researchers—John Jost of NYU, Arie Kruglanski of the University of Maryland, and Jack Glaser and Frank Sulloway of Berkeley—found that conservatives have a greater desire to reach a decision quickly and stick to it, and are higher on conscientiousness, which includes neatness, orderliness, duty, and rule-following. Liberals are higher on openness, which includes intellectual curiosity, excitement-seeking, novelty, creativity for its own sake, and a craving for stimulation like travel, color, art, music, and literature.

The study's authors also concluded that conservatives have less tolerance for ambiguity, a trait they say is exemplified when George Bush says things like, "Look, my job isn't to try to nuance. My job is to tell people what I think," and "I'm the decider." Those who think the world is highly dangerous and those with the greatest fear of death are the most likely to be conservative.

Liberals, on the other hand, are "more likely to see gray areas and reconcile seemingly conflicting information," says Jost. As a result, liberals like John Kerry, who see many sides to every issue, are portrayed as flip-floppers. "Whatever the cause, Bush and Kerry exemplify the cognitive styles we see in the research," says Jack Glaser, one of the study's authors, "Bush in appearing more rigid in his thinking and intolerant of uncertainty and ambiguity, and Kerry in appearing more open to ambiguity and to considering alternative positions."

Jost's meta-analysis sparked furious controversy. The House Republican Study Committee complained that the study's authors had received federal funds. George Will satirized it in his *Washington Post* column, and *The National Review* called it the "Conservatives Are Crazy" study. Jost and his colleagues point to the study's rigorous methodology. The study used political orientation as a dependent variable, meaning that where subjects fall on the political scale is computed from their own answers about whether they're liberal or conservative. Psychologists then compare factors such as fear of death and openness to new experiences, and seek statistically significant correlations. The findings are quintessentially empirical and difficult to dismiss as false.

Yet critics retort that the research draws negative conclusions about conservatives while the researchers themselves are liberal. And it's true that over the decades, a disproportionate amount of the research has focused on figuring out what's behind conservative behavior. Right shift is likewise more studied than left shift, largely because most of that research has been since 9/11, and aimed at trying to explain the conservative conversions of people like Cinnamon Stillwell.

Even with impeccable methodology, bias may creep into the

choice of *which* phenomena to study. "There is a bias among social scientists," admits Glaser. "They look for the variables that are unflattering. There probably are other nice personality traits associated with conservatism, but they haven't shown up in the research because it's not as well studied."

"There are differences between liberals and conservatives, and people can value them however they like," Jost points out. "There is nothing inherently good or bad about being high or low on the need for closure or structure. Some may see religiosity as a positive, whereas others may see it more neutrally, and so on."

RED SHIFT



BY 2004, AS THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION DREW NEAR, researchers saw a chance to study the Jost results against the backdrop of unfolding events. Psychologists Mark Landau of the University of Arizona and Sheldon Solomon of Skidmore sought to explain how President Bush's approval rating went from around 51 percent before 9/11 to 90 percent immediately afterward. In one study, they exposed some participants to the letters WTC or the numbers 9/11 in an image flashed too quickly to register at the conscious level. They exposed other participants to familiar but random combinations of letters and numbers, such as area codes. Then they gave them words like COFF__, SK__LL, and GR__VE, and asked them to fill in the blanks. People who'd seen random combinations were more likely to fill in COFFEE, SKILL, and GROVE. But people exposed to subliminal terrorism primes more often filled in COFFIN, SKULL, and GRAVE. "The mere mention of September 11 or WTC is the same as reminding Americans of death," explains Solomon.

As a follow-up, Solomon primed one group of subjects to think about death, a state of mind called "mortality salience." A second group was primed to think about 9/11. And a third was induced to think about pain—something unpleasant but non-deadly. When people were in a benign state of mind, they tended to oppose Bush and his policies in Iraq. But after thinking about either death or 9/11, they tended to favor him. Such findings were further corroborated by Cornell sociologist Robert Willer, who found that whenever the color-coded terror alert level was raised, support for Bush increased significantly, not only on domestic security but also in unrelated domains, such as the economy.

University of Arizona psychologist Jeff Greenberg argues that some ideological shifts can be explained by terror management theory (TMT), which holds that heightened fear of death motivates people to defend their world views. TMT predicts that images like the destruction of the World Trade Cen-

ter should make liberals more liberal and conservatives more conservative. “In the United States, political conservatism does seem to be the preferred ideology when people are feeling insecure,” concedes Greenberg. “But in China or another communist country, reminding people of their own mortality would lead them to cling more tightly to communism.”

Jost believes it's more complex. After all, Cinnamon Stillwell and others in the 9/11 Neocons didn't become more liberal. Like so many other Democrats after 9/11, they made a hard right turn. The reason thoughts of death make people more conservative, Jost says, is that they awaken a deep desire to see the world as fair and just, to believe that people get what they deserve, and to accept the existing social order as valid, rather than in need of change. When these natural desires are primed by thoughts of death and a barrage of mortal fear, people gravitate toward conservatism because it's more certain about the answers it provides—right vs. wrong, good vs. evil, us vs. them—and because conservative leaders are more likely to advocate a return to traditional values, allowing people to stick with what's familiar and known. “Conservatism is a more black and white ideology than liberalism,” explains Jost. “It emphasizes tradition and authority, which are reassuring during periods of threat.”

To test the theory, Jost prompted people to think about either pain—by looking at things like an ambulance, a dentist's chair, and a bee sting—or death, by looking at things like a funeral hearse, the grim reaper, and a dead-end sign. Across the political spectrum, people who had been primed to think about death were more conservative on issues like immigration, affirmative action, and same-sex marriage than those who had merely thought about pain, although the effect size was relatively small. The implication is clear: For liberals, conservatives, and independents alike, thinking about death actually makes people more conservative—at least temporarily.

FEAR AND VOTING IN AMERICA

CAMPAIGN STRATEGISTS IN BOTH PARTIES HAVE never hesitated to use scare tactics. In 1964, a Lyndon Johnson commercial called “Daisy” juxtaposed footage of a little girl plucking a flower with footage of an atomic blast. In 1984, Ronald Reagan ran a spot that played on Cold War panic, in which the Soviet threat was symbolized by a grizzly lumbering across a stark landscape as a human heart pounds faster and faster and an off-screen voice warns, “There is a bear in the woods!” In 2004, Bush sparked furor for running a fear-

CHRIS WEEKS/WIREIMAGE.COM



PARTY HOPPERS

“IF YOU'RE NOT a liberal when you're 25, you have no heart,” goes a quote often attributed to Winston Churchill. “If you're not a conservative by the time you're 35, you have no brain.” And indeed, the general trend is that people become more conservative as they grow older. But what about people who make sudden U-turns? Here's a list of the better-known political about faces.

THE REPENTER (Conservative to liberal) Self-described “conservative hit man” **David Brock** earned his keep doing journalistic hatchet jobs of people like Bill Clinton and Anita Hill. When assigned to assassinate the character of Hillary Clinton, he got to know her first and couldn't bring himself to do it. Over time, he realized he'd been “a witting cog in the Republican sleaze machine” and wrote *Blinded by the Right: The Conscience of an Ex-Conservative*.



THE GADFLY (Conservative to liberal) Described unironically by her own ex-husband as “beautiful” but “evil,” arch-conservative **Arianna Huffington** took her name from millionaire Michael Huffington, the conservative Republican who won a seat in the House of Representatives after marrying her in 1986. They later divorced and he came out as gay. She eventually decided that the Republican Party doesn't help the “less

fortunate” and reinvented herself, not as a moderate but, as Al Franken put it, as “some strange, liberal, green kind of thing to my left.”

THE COMMUNICATOR (Liberal to conservative) While earning a reputation for being the “Errol Flynn of the B-movies” in the '30s and '40s, **Ronald Reagan** was a Democrat, supporting Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal. Then, during two stints as the president of the Screen Actors Guild, he crusaded against communist influence in Hollywood, becoming convinced that Republicans were likelier to keep the enemy at bay. He became a Republican in the '60s, running under that party's banner to become governor of California and the nation's 40th president.

THE ICONOCLAST (Liberal to conservative) Once a Trotskyite journalist known for his savagely witty contributions to leftist publications like *The Nation*, **Christopher Hitchens** hardened after the fatwah on his friend Salman Rushdie, decrying what he called “fascism with an Islamic face.” Though he's never wavered from his signature blend of atheism, antifascism, and antimonarchism, he found himself siding with the neo-conservatives and resigned his post at *The Nation* after 9/11.

“Without 9/11 we would have a different president. The Osama bin Laden tape was sufficient to swing the election.”

mongering ad that used wolves gathering in the woods as symbols for terrorists plotting against America. And last fall, Congressional Republicans drew fire with an ad that featured bin Laden and other terrorists threatening Americans; over the sound of a ticking clock, a voice warned, “These are the stakes.”

“At least some of the President’s support is the result of constant and relentless reminders of death, some of which is just what’s happening in the world, but much of which is carefully cultivated and calculated as an electoral strategy,” says Solomon. “In politics these days, there’s a dose of reason, and there’s a dose of irrationality driven by psychological terror that may very well be swinging elections.”

Solomon demonstrated that thinking about 9/11 made people go from preferring Kerry to preferring Bush. “Very subtle manipulations of psychological conditions profoundly affect political preferences,” Solomon concludes. “In difficult moments, people don’t want complex, nuanced, John Kerry-like waffling or sophisticated cogitation. They want somebody charismatic to step up and say, ‘I know where our problem is and God has given me the clout to kick those people’s asses.’”

INTO THE BLUE



STUDIES SHOW THAT PEOPLE WHO STUDY ABROAD become more liberal than those who stay home. People who venture from the strictures of their limited social class are less likely to stereotype and more likely to embrace other cultures. Education goes hand-in-hand with tolerance, and often, the more the better: Professors at major universities are more liberal than their counterparts at less acclaimed institutions. What travel and education have in common is that they make the differences between people seem less threatening. “You become less bothered by the idea that there is uncertainty in the world,” explains Jost.

That’s why the more educated people are, the more liberal they become—but only to a point. Once people begin pursuing certain types of graduate degrees, the curve flattens. Business students, for instance, become more conservative in their views toward minorities. As they become more established, doctors and lawyers tend to protect their economic interests by moving to the right. The findings demonstrate that conservative conversions are fueled not only by fear, but by other factors as well. And if the November election was any indicator, the pendulum that swung so forcefully to the right after 9/11 may be swinging back.

TIPPING THE BALANCE



POLITICAL CONVERSIONS THAT ARE EMOTIONALLY induced can be very subtle: A shift in support for a given issue or politician is not the same as a radical conversion or deep philosophical change. While views may be manipulated, the impact may or may not translate in the voting booth. Following 9/11, most lifelong liberals did *not* go through outright conversion or shift their preferred candidate. Yet many liberals who didn’t become all-out conservatives found themselves nonetheless sympathizing more with conservative positions, craving the comfort of a strong leader, or feeling the need to punish or avenge. Many in the political center moved to the right, too. In aggregate, over an electorate of millions—a large proportion of whom were swing voters waiting to be swayed one way or the other—even a subtle shift was enough to tip the balance of the Presidential election, and the direction the country took for years. “Without 9/11 we would have a different president,” says Solomon. “I would even say that the Osama bin Laden tape that was released the Thursday before the election was sufficient to swing the election. It was basically a giant mortality salience induction.”

If we are so suggestible that thoughts of death make us uncomfortable defaming the American flag and cause us to sit farther away from foreigners, is there any way we can overcome our easily manipulated fears and become the informed and rational thinkers democracy demands?

To test this, Solomon and his colleagues prompted two groups to think about death and then give opinions about a pro-American author and an anti-American one. As expected, the group that thought about death was more pro-American than the other. But the second time, one group was asked to make gut-level decisions about the two authors, while the other group was asked to consider carefully and be as rational as possible. The results were astonishing. In the rational group, the effects of mortality salience were entirely eliminated. Asking people to be rational was enough to neutralize the effects of reminders of death. Preliminary research shows that reminding people that as human beings, the things we have in common eclipse our differences—what psychologists call a “common humanity prime”—has the same effect.

“People have two modes of thought,” concludes Solomon. “There’s the intuitive gut-level mode, which is what most of us are in most of the time. And then there’s a rational analytic mode, which takes effort and attention.”

The solution, then, is remarkably simple. The effects of psychological terror on political decision making can be eliminated just by asking people to think rationally. Simply reminding us to use our heads, it turns out, can be enough to make us do it. **PT**