

The Appeal of Leaders and their Foreign Policy When Death is in the Air:
A Perspective from Ontological Security Theory and Terror Management Theory

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Abstract

Perhaps dead bodies affect opinions of International Relations more than we think – or at least in a different way than we have thought about them before. Humans may not be fully aware of the subconscious forces that the thought of death supposedly awakens within them. This lack of awareness may lead to unsavory international policy outcomes (and seemingly irrational justifications thereof). Human mortality serves as an impetus, *inter alia*, for violent war (Archduke Ferdinand and WWI), the use of retaliatory torture (the CIA’s so-called enhanced interrogation techniques post-9/11), reconciliation and justice-seeking initiatives (after the genocides in Rwanda, Cambodia, and others), and the election of political leaders. However, does even just looking at pictures of a dead body change *how* we think about international policy?

The current body of IR security literature lacks an analysis of how visual images of dead bodies interact with the formation of public opinion of our own security, the U.S. president, and U.S. foreign policy. If such images stimulate our fear of death (as proposed by Terror Management Theory), then we manage that terror by changing our behavior, actions, and opinions. Our management of that terror makes us unstable. By seeking stability and rebuilding ontological security (as proposed by Ontological Security Theory), which is social and operates at the collective level (the ontological security of American society), Americans’ opinions about their security, the president, and the president’s foreign policy choices might change in relation to the events.

I test this hypothesis by looking at public opinion poll data from Gallup around the dates of events involving specific politicized dead bodies in the international world and see how support of the U.S. president and support of their foreign policy changes, if at all. The prediction is that support will increase around the time that the population is reminded of their own death (via a photo, video, dead-body event), but reports of the American public feeling safer will increase or decrease at the same time, depending on certain factors.

The results demonstrate mild support for Hypothesis 1, finding that security decreased during times when the public witnessed the bodies of fellow American citizens. I found inconclusive support for Hypothesis 2, that security during times of viewing dead bodies of enemies would increase. Lastly, the data demonstrate support for half of Hypothesis 3: the data do not support a correlation with approval of the president, but do lend mild support for a correlation with approval of their foreign policy.

Combining the lenses of Terror Management Theory and Ontological Security theory helps contextualize the societal-level receptivity to images of highly politicized dead bodies – specifically how U.S. citizens’ opinions about their own security, the president, and their country’s foreign policy fluctuates. Ontological security plays a role in how society perceives and reacts to these images, which in turn might compel a country to act in certain ways that are not understood by solely thinking about material security.

Trigger Warning: descriptions of death, physical violence, homicide, military casualties, and terrorist attacks. No images are reproduced.

Dedication

To all my friends and family, as well as the dearly departed in my life:
grandfathers Glen Miller and Alan Terwilliger, grandmother Rita Miller, cousin Tyson
Simpson, and father-in-law Kun Zhang Deng.

Acknowledgments

I recall watching an episode of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* where he discovers a dead goldfish in his aquarium. While burying the fish in his backyard, he calmly addresses the emotions of death, shares his own story about his late dog, and reassures us that it is okay to feel sad. Fred Rogers talked with kids in a respectful manner, especially about the uncomfortable topics of life. It is my hope, as it was his, that when something like death is mentionable, then it can become more manageable.

To the people that helped make this thesis manageable, I am in their debt. I thank my research advisor, Dr. Ariane Liazos, for helping me at the very start of this project. Over the course of a semester, she took my vague interest in death and foreign policy and nurtured it into a promising proposal. I thank my thesis director, Dr. Ieva Jusionyte, for consistently shining a light on helpful materials. Your thoughtful and detailed comments pinpointed exactly where I needed to incorporate and revise. I thank Madison Singell and Patrick Sanguineti for their drive-by comments and validation of the struggles of getting a thesis completed. You are great colleagues to work with.

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Chapter I.

Ontological Security and Terror Management in International Relations

“Yield to the dead man; do not stab him –
now he is gone – what bravery is this,
to inflict another death upon the dead?”

Sophocles, *Antigone* (1086–1088)

Introduction

The main tension in Sophocles’ play *Antigone* arises from what to do with a dead body. Specifically, the dead body is that of Polyneices – the son of the ruling King Creon. Polyneices led the opposing side in the destructive civil war – committing a serious crime that threatened the city of Thebes. The issue at hand concerns whether he should be given full burial rights (against the King’s demands) or suffer the punishment of being left out in the open for scavenging animals to eat his corpse. The daughter of the King, and Polyneices’ sister, Antigone, buries her brother against her father’s orders. The citizens turn against Creon when a prophet says that the gods demand the burial of Polyneices, and Antigone is led off to die alone in a cave for the allegedly illegal burial (Sophocles, *Antigone*).

Although the play was written more than a millennium ago, the central themes continue to play out on the modern international world stage. How do we justify the correct course of action when dealing with a dead body – whether it is a family member or an enemy? If state law is broken in pursuit of security, can the power of public opinion change the power of the state? How a state deals with a dead body can signify its

values. The public opinion of the state's actions with regard to the dead body can signify a fear that lies at the root of human behavior.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

What can dead bodies tell us about U.S. foreign policy? More specifically, do certain international events involving highly politicized dead bodies shed light on U.S. citizens' views of its security, foreign policy, and the president making those foreign policy decisions? Consider the disappearance of Osama bin Laden's body at sea without photographic evidence, or ISIS videos that show beheadings of American citizens. Does a correlation exist between these kinds of events and U.S. citizens' views on U.S. security, foreign policy, and support of the president? A relatively recent offshoot of security theory within International Relations argues that states not only seek physical security but also ontological security – a security of the self. This ontological security theory (OST) suggests that nations may act in a way that, while even potentially endangering their own physical security, rebuilds the psychological security of order and continuity in its daily routines. This stability is ontological security – the state's self-conception (Mitzen, 2006).

A dead body could be considered the ultimate representation of insecurity. Corpses are counted after tragedies, wars, and natural disasters. Often, dead bodies are objects for states to manage. What is lacking in security theory today is an analysis of the public's view of that management. This is not to suggest that there is a lack of representation of dead bodies in International Relations (IR) literature; one can readily analyze Correlates of War data on soldier casualties, deaths from natural disasters, repatriation, human rights violations, and more (Auchter, 2015; Casper & Moore, 2009;

Giroux, 2006; Marlin-Bennett, Wilson, & Walton, 2010; Verdery, 1999). Yet the current body of IR security literature lacks an analysis of visual images of dead bodies in relation to public opinion and U.S. foreign policy.

By looking to the realm of psychology and Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon's Terror Management Theory (TMT), however, we may be able to discover a person's internal motivator for their behavior towards corpses: a fear of death. In short, TMT argues that the prime motivator and predictor of human behavior is the desire to manage the terror caused by 'mortality salience,' or the awareness that one will eventually die. Furthermore, this management of that terror is accomplished by imbuing one's life with cultural and symbolic meaning and routinized relationships (1986). In this thesis, I expand the foundational conceptual writings about OST by bringing in the experimental work of TMT along with qualitative and quantitative analysis of public opinion polls. Together, these combined lenses of analysis could potentially help to explore and further understand the ways U.S. citizens view American foreign policy decisions and the president – perhaps finding unconscious reactions to threats of security wrought by events evoking heightened mortality salience. To my knowledge, no studies using public opinion polls have been used specifically to research a link between politicized dead bodies and support of U.S. foreign policy and the president.

This thesis aims to tackle a few key questions that arise from a combination of the analyses of ontological security seeking, mortality salience, and public opinion on U.S. foreign policy. The first of my research questions is: Do certain international events involving highly politicized dead bodies shed light on US citizens' views of their country's security? A corpse is both a person and a thing: anthropomorphized with legal

rights and emotional value, and considered worthy of security, it remains a member of the political community even after it departs the biologically living community. Because of this, I hypothesize that U.S. citizens tend to believe the security of their country is at risk or decreasing as their fellow citizens' dead bodies appear on the news and in discussion of foreign policy actions (Hypothesis 1). At the same time, I hypothesize that U.S. citizens' perception of their own security will increase as their country's enemies' bodies become more visible and widely discussed (Hypothesis 2).

My second research question asks: Is there a correlation between these selected events and U.S. citizens' views on U.S. foreign policy and support of the president? Informed by the work of TMT that proposes that reminders of death change certain behaviors, I hypothesize that events that produce highly politicized dead bodies (regardless of whether it is the body of a citizen or enemy) might translate into an increase in support of the president and U.S. foreign policy actions in public opinion polls (Hypothesis 3). I propose to answer these research questions by using public opinion polls gathered around the time of these events. The polls sampled have asked for a level of support of a few specific items (e.g., support of the president in general, support of the president's approach to foreign policy, and sometimes a question involving the specific events themselves). In addition, there are polls that ask security-related questions (e.g., do you feel safer from terrorism, will there be a terrorist attack in the next few weeks, etc.). In this thesis, I will divide the research based on the kinds of bodies represented: those of citizens of the United States and those of its enemies.

My larger aim is that this research will contribute to the OST literature by examining how a state's citizens respond to perceived security threats, as well as

contribute to the TMT literature demonstrating empirically the effect of mortality salience on human behavior and opinion – in turn potentially revealing new insights about public opinion of the president and certain U.S. foreign policy actions post-9/11. My initial sense is that the less a state sees or hears of its own citizens being killed, the more secure the citizens see their place in the world (i.e., remaining ontologically secure). Similarly, learning that one’s country has killed an enemy or seeing an enemy’s body as proof that they are no longer a security threat also creates this sense of stability. Hence, an analysis of public opinion in relation to these specific dead bodies may influence security policy and practice, and how support for United States leaders and foreign policy decisions may change during these events.

Literature Review of TMT and OST

In the IR security literature, dead bodies have been under-theorized in security studies and public opinion of foreign policy. Consider all of the ways IR scholars have analyzed the “intimate association between a cadaver and its predecessor” (Cantor, 2010, p. 4). Anthropologist Katherine Verdery’s (1999) seminal book, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies*, argues that bodies have a considerable posthumous political life. From Verdery, others have studied particularly the bodies of communist leaders (Giroux 2006; Casper and Moore, 2009). Dead bodies and body parts have been studied in terms of their management by international organizations (Auchter, 2015; Marlin-Bennett, Wilson, & Walton, 2010). Research on memorialization practices highlights the links between death and the formation of national identity (Forest & Johnson, 2002; Johnson, 1995; Sidaway, 2009). Yet, looking at these studies and many more that tackle the issue of death and political dead bodies, none have attempted to examine any links between

those dead bodies and their influence on public opinion of security, foreign policy decisions, and the leaders that make those decisions.

If we move beyond the boundaries of the IR literature, the field of psychology provides potentially useful insight into the effects reminders of death can have on the human psyche. In particular, in his 1973 Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker proposes the idea that humans have two contradicting paradigms that cannot be reconciled. The first is that we know we will eventually die (mortality salience), while the second is what Becker calls “man’s tragic destiny” (p. 34): the need to declare to the world that our lives have meaning, value, and permanence by maintaining a certain obliviousness to the inevitable end (pp. 48-49). The effort to reconcile what cannot be reconciled creates a constant “death anxiety,” which he then argues is the motivating factor behind most human action and belief – “the universal human problem” (p. 39).

Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski (1986) worked to formalize Becker’s ideas into a testable theory, naming it Terror Management Theory (TMT). Researchers of TMT have analyzed how increased mortality salience affects behavior – from judges administering harsher sentencing penalties, to medical personnel caring for patients of their own faith with more seriousness than patients from differing faith traditions (Solomon et al., 2015) and even extending life support past recommended termination (Kitchmeier, 2008, p. 59). This more practical application of Becker’s theory determines some ways in which death anxieties manifest in human action. In a large meta-review of TMT studies, researchers found that in hundreds of articles measuring mortality salience, 80 percent of the articles found a significant effect size (Burke, Martens, & Faucher,

2010). While these studies had relatively small sample sizes, my research will use the slightly larger sample size of the Gallup polls in an attempt to see if the suggestions of TMT are confirmed or denied by analyzing opinions of the U.S. public when highly politicized dead bodies make mortality salient.

A study that comes close is the work of Huddy, Feldman, & Weber (2007), which underscores the central TMT finding that support for a foreign policy decision is emboldened by reminders of a common external threat like the September 11th terrorist attacks. Two more studies in particular demonstrate the power that mortality salience had for support of George W. Bush during the period after 9/11 as well as his re-election win in 2004 (Cohen et al., 2005; Landau et al., 2004). Pyszczynski et al. (2006) demonstrate that when mortality is made salient, people may become more supportive of acts of violence in their country's foreign policy decisions. These studies asked a sample of participants to read essays and respond to questions. My research, on the other hand, will rely on evidence from public opinion polls taken around the times of the events. In other words, TMT posits that we should see an increase in support of the president and foreign policy decisions in the real world following a mortality salient event (in this research, the mortality salient event is represented by the chosen case studies). My study will translate what the TMT studies have done in small sample sizes and test their findings against contemporaneous surveys of Americans during a supposed time of heightened mortality salience.

Becker (1973) suggests that part of humanity's death denial increases defense of one's world view – a belief system that is engaged in a symbolic war against “evil.” When the value of one's group and beliefs is heightened, this increased defense can be

particularly useful in warding off death-related fears. Furthermore, Becker, borrowing from Max Weber's study of charismatic leadership, argues that when death fears are aroused (as in a time of economic, humanitarian, or social crisis), people are more likely to embrace leaders who provide ontological security by making their denizens feel they have a shared value and meaningful contribution in the nation's mission to eradicate "evil." Research of TMT confirms Becker's notions (Pyszczynski et al., 2006). We see something similar with the charismatic leaders that become the president of the United States – leaders that, as those TMT studies have shown, heighten fears of death by portraying their citizens as part of a virtuous charge to defend against external threats. Furthermore, once these leaders have died, research in TMT has shown that mortality salience increases favorable impressions of the dead leaders over comparable living leaders (Allison et al., 2009). In an effort to test whether the TMT studies' findings have further real-world application, my research linking mortality salient events with presidential approval may demonstrate if a correlation exists.

The empirical evidence gathered to support TMT's premise can provide direct support to another human anxiety buffer: ontological security. The gap I see in the OST literature is an often-missed opportunity to bridge the commonalities between these two approaches to understand self-identity-preserving behavior, even though Mitzen (2006) herself used TMT in support of her conception of OST.¹ In my analysis of public opinion polls of America's foreign policy decisions, I aim to find a correlation that lends more credence to the OST scholarship that provides a model to understand behavior that is necessary not for physical security, but a *security of being* among the American citizens.

¹ For the notable exceptions of combining OST and TMT, see Adams (2016) and Van Marle & Maruna (2010).

Under the threat of loss of ontological security or influence of the fear of death, people must cope – responding with a reassertion of one’s social and cultural worldviews as moral absolutes and favoring in-group members above all others (Van Marle & Maruna, 2010). My test of public opinion polls may show support for the models of human behavior proposed by OST and TMT.

The best attempt so far at answering my research question concerning the relationship between dead bodies and security seeking has been Charlotte Heath-Kelly’s book, *Death and Security* (2016). The book broadly explores the consequences of death for ontological security, as well as its relationship between mortality and security. However, Heath-Kelly focuses on the memorialization of four post-terrorism sites. While memorials and also reburials have the symbolic power to promote or prevent certain narratives, my focus specifically concerns times when specific politicized dead bodies heightened mortality salience of U.S. citizens – followed by then examining public opinion polls around those times to determine any effect on security, support for the president, and their foreign policy decisions.

To answer my questions, I will be using the Gallup surveys of public opinion, which is different than what the body of TMT research has done – experiments. TMT studies use an experimental design to study behavior at the individual level (Burke et al., 2010). However, we have fewer studies and data about reactions to death at the collective level (in this research, at the level of the ontological security of the American population). The process of experimenting is generally considered to possess better “internal validity” because a well-designed experiment can eliminate possible unrelated causes of certain phenomena. Surveys of public opinion, on the other hand, possess

better “external validity” because they can generalize better in regard to a whole population during real-time and real-world conditions (Weisberg, 2008).

Public opinion has a great influence over the public’s assessment of risk. Media frequently give the impression, via photos or descriptions, that a risk or threat is greater than it actually is. As the photographs and descriptions become more extreme and graphic, the public views them as more prevalent, and thus the public is more likely to regard the events as national issues (Kepplinger, 2008). Furthermore, these misinterpretations tend to increase over time (Gibson & Zillmann, 1994). For researchers of mass media, the unquestioned assumption of public opinion is that it maintains a linear relationship with the quantity and emphasis of news media coverage of certain events. Yet, people will understandably remain fearful about national disasters, terrorist attacks, and their own security far after mass media coverage of these events has subsided (Kepplinger, 2008). In other words, it is no surprise that something that would present a stark reminder of their own death would also continue to influence their perception of leaders and foreign policy in the future.

To test all of the above, I begin with three events involving the politicization of the dead body of an enemy. In the first two of these cases, the United States government chose to either display or disappear the images of the corpse. First, I examine the case of the U.S. government releasing photos of the bodies of Qusay and Uday Hussein. Next, I turn to an example of when the U.S. government decided to keep photos hidden – images of Osama bin Laden’s body after his extrajudicial killing by the Navy’s Seal Team Six.

Thirdly, I consider the case of Libya's Muammar Qaddafi.² The video of his death was not in the hands of the U.S. government, but rather recorded and distributed by the people directly responsible for it.

However, when a nation's own deceased are in the hands of the enemy, does that shift public opinion in a different direction? The next section turns from bodies of enemies to bodies of U.S. citizens. The Islamic State (ISIS) beheaded numerous people from various countries – including many Westerners. In an article in *International Affairs*, Simone Molin Friis (2015) examines the role of videos of these beheadings and demonstrates the importance of their visual imagery as a threat in modern warfare. Auchter (2018) examines how the ISIS beheadings were eventually taken for granted and became a fact of international politics at the time. In my research, I sample a few high-profile ISIS beheading videos specifically of U.S. citizens: journalist James Foley (August 19, 2014), journalist Steven Sotloff (September 2, 2014), and humanitarian worker Peter Kassig (November 16, 2014). In contrast to the Hussein brothers, bin Laden, and Qaddafi, these men were relatively regular citizens, until ISIS politicized their bodies. Examining polls before and after the release of the beheading videos may allow us to see if there exists any significant change in public opinion of security and approval of President Obama and U.S. foreign policy decisions in the fight against ISIS.

All of this leads us to why this study is needed. Pervasive anxiety in the United States over its changing identity and security of self necessitates thoughtful theoretical analysis. Advances in technology increasingly bring dead bodies and stories of death into our purview. It is more important than ever to understand how public opinion may shift

² I have chosen to use the spelling “Qaddafi” throughout, following the advice of the *New York Times*, “because the letter Q is typically used to render the glottal stop that is so common in Arabic and that begins Qaddafi’s name” (Fisher, 2011).

during times of heightened mortality salience when our ontological security is in need of rebuilding. Do U.S. citizens find themselves feeling less secure and unconsciously drawn to support the president and foreign policy decisions, as TMT and OST would suggest? This research will attempt to answer just that.

Definition of Terms

Highly Politicized Bodies

For this research, I have chosen dead bodies particularly that satisfy the following requirements: (a) the body was either a U.S. citizen or an enemy of the country post-9/11, (b) U.S. foreign policy either produced or had an effect on the dead body, (c) the body and the story around it generated immediate significant discussion among the American public, and (d) the body was politicized for either the security of the U.S., the promotion of foreign policy decisions of the U.S., or by the enemies of the U.S.

Mortality Salience

Research (reviewed in Greenberg, Solomon, & Arndt, 2008) shows that reminders of death (mortality salience) in the form of open-ended questions, graphic images, and subliminal exposure to the words “death” or “dead,” instigate a range of behaviors. “After mortality salience (relative to benign or aversive control conditions), people (a) have more favorable evaluations of similar ‘others’ and more unfavorable evaluations of dissimilar ‘others,’ (b) are more punitive toward moral transgressors and more benevolent to heroic individuals, (c) are more physically aggressive toward dissimilar ‘others,’ and (d) strive to meet cultural standards of value” (Cohen et al., 2005, p. 317).

Ontological Security Theory (OST, ontological security)

OST is a model to explain state behavior in seeking security of its self-identity by fulfilling its identity commitments. The loss of ontological security undermines a state's sense of stability and permanence in events. This loss destroys the cognitive and behavioral convictions that allow a state to remain an active participant in the international community (Mitzen, 2006, p. 342). States are challenged by certain situations in their environment because those situations threaten their self-identities. Ontological security is then rebuilt by routinizing relationships with significant others, and actors therefore become attached to those relationships (Mitzen, 2006, abstract). States seek security not only as physical survival, but also as survival of self-identity (Huysmans, 1998; Kinnvall, 2004; McSweeney, 1999; Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008; Zarakol, 2010). In this thesis, my unit of analysis is at the level of the American population. In short, America's ontological security is shorthand for the collective and social ontological security of American society.

Terror Management Theory (TMT, fear/denial of death)

TMT is premised on the centrality of the fear of death in the construction and maintenance of human psychology and behavior. The theory argues that humans buffer the anxiety of awareness of their own eventual death by investing in worldviews that imbue life with meaning (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986).

Chapter Breakdown

In Chapter I, I define the key terms and research questions underpinning this work. I outline the three hypotheses and review the literature of Ontological Security

Theory and Terror Management Theory, examining how I build upon prior research and explaining how prior research will help answer my research questions.

In Chapter II, I outline the six cases of highly politicized dead bodies at the center of the research: Qusay and Uday Hussein, Osama bin Laden, Muammar Qaddafi, James Foley, Steven Sotloff, and Peter Kassig. Then, I briefly introduce the context of polls and public opinion in relation to the methods. I explore the relationship between images and dead bodies and establish a framework of how this thesis will analyze and view the dead bodies in this thesis. The chapter finishes with research methods and the framework for analysis using OST and TMT.

In Chapter III, I pull the data and discuss the findings concerning the bodies of enemies – Qusay and Uday Hussein, Osama bin Laden, and Muammar Qaddafi. In Chapter IV, I do the same with the bodies of U.S. citizens acted upon by ISIS.

In Chapter V, I discuss my research limitations and consider issues for further research. In Chapter VI, I finish with concluding thoughts.

Chapter II.

Research Framework and Methods

“Death is the dark backing that a mirror needs if we are to see anything.”

Saul Bellow, *Humboldt's Gift* (p. 265)

Case Selection

I hypothesize that the less one sees one's own fellow citizens being killed, as well as the more one sees the perceived enemy being killed (Hypotheses 1 and 2), the more secure one sees one's place in the world, and the more supportive one (here, specifically an American citizen) will be of the president and their foreign policy decisions around that time when mortality is made salient (Hypothesis 3). Which cases will be used to test these hypotheses, then? I have chosen dead bodies particularly that satisfy the following requirements: (a) the body was either a U.S. citizen or an enemy of the country post-9/11, (b) U.S. foreign policy either produced or had an effect on the dead body, (c) the body and the story around it generated significant discussion among the American public, and (d) the body was politicized for either the security of the U.S., the promotion of foreign policy decisions of the U.S., or by the enemies of the U.S.

The following are listed chronologically and based on the citizen/enemy divide outlined previously:

1. Enemy – The killing and release of pictures of the bodies of Uday and Qusay Hussein – July 24, 2003

2. Enemy – The killing and disappearance of the body of Osama bin Laden – May 2, 2011
3. Enemy – The video recorded killing of Muammar Qaddafi – October 20, 2011
4. U.S. Citizen – Beheading of journalist James Foley – video online August 19, 2014
5. U.S. Citizen – Beheading of journalist Steven Sotloff – video online September 2, 2014
6. U.S. Citizen – Beheading of humanitarian worker Peter Kassig – video online November 16, 2014

Polls and Emotions

When the specter of death confronts us through either visual media or vivid description, it stimulates an emotional response. People can often recall with detail where they were and what they were doing when they learned JFK was assassinated or saw the destruction on September 11th. Earlier research on the political consequences of emotions demonstrates the weight that emotions bear on presidential approval (Conover & Feldman, 1986; Marcus, 1988; Marcus & MacKuen, 1993; Way & Masters, 1996). Furthermore, more recent research has found that, with more frequent surveys, emotional reactions to political events can help explain presidential approval rates immediately after the event (González-Bailón, Banchs, & Kaltenbrunner, 2012). In their article examining how emotional reactions to political events shape public opinion, González-Bailón and her colleagues utilized online discussions to analyze reactions to contemporaneous political events. They also demonstrated that emotions triggered by issues salient (in this

thesis, mortality) in the public's mind could help explain political evaluations (in this particular study, in the form of presidential approval).

In this thesis, I employ a similar research method. The emotional reactions in this case are the attempts by the human psyche to manage the terror of one's own death. Instead of online discussions, I use the Gallup polls to evaluate presidential approval. Approval polls, like Gallup, use reasonably identical questions for long periods – which creates a measure of opinion that can be compared across time. Although the Gallup polls do not go into the reasons as to *why* respondents approve or disapprove of the president and their foreign policy decisions, it is measured with enough frequency to identify inertias that routinely materialize during the typical lifecycle of U.S administrations (González-Bailón et al., 2012).

Ontological Security Theory Considerations

The notion of leaders (and the states they manage) adapting their choices as a response to their citizens' emotions is still ripe for analysis. It is only one of the many strands that have emerged from the research on Ontological Security Theory. At the risk of oversimplification, the theory attempts to answer the question: "Why would a state adopt a foreign policy that so clearly deviates from its material interests?" The research method begins from two premises. First, power and interest are not material things, but ideas. Secondly, people act on the basis of meanings, rather than material forces (see Barnett & Duvall, 2005; Wendt, 1999). After this, the literature splits into a variety of tests and debates on the referents of security and how or why ontological security is broken and rebuilt through various means by various agents. The theory is both frustrating and liberating: it is frustrating due to its lack of clarity and agreement on what

ontological security is, but through the myriad debates surrounding its definition, it becomes liberating – opening up new ways of understanding actions that people and states make every single day.

Therefore, this thesis is an attempt to expand on merely one of OST's research strands. This research neither attempts to clarify what is vague, nor prescribe what is unknown. I begin with the premise that the ability to make choices and take actions is dependent on one's sense of self, which is stable and secure; this stability is produced at the level of routines and background narratives we tell others and ourselves. This is ontological security. We seek it at an individual level, as well as a collective level.

OST's Unit of Analysis

Since the recent explosion of OST research, there remains a debate on what is the unit of analysis of ontological security with regard to IR. The OST literature is not always clear about which perspective it takes. The discussion considers which agents can be analytically studied as seekers of ontological security. While the original theory refers to individuals, most of the scholars using the concept in the IR field extrapolate this same logic to states (Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008; Zarakol, 2010). Mitzen and Steele both identify different perspectives and justify them (Mitzen, 2006, pp. 351–353; Steele, 2008, pp. 15–20). I will summarize their perspectives here and end with why I choose their final option.

A country's ontological security might be treated literally, as if a state is an agent that literally needs to build and maintain ontological security. While one can agree with Mitzen that states might be *a provider* of ontological security, I do not agree with the singular anthropomorphic view of a state – treating it and its need in the same manner as

an individual person. Next, a country's ontological security might be studied and understood in an *as if* sense, with the goal that productive insights are possible when assumed as such (Mitzen, 2006, pp. 351–353; Steele, 2008, pp. 15–20). While I view this perspective as an equally valid way to study ontological security that is easily accessible, it is not the approach I take here. Thirdly, a country's ontological security might be taken to refer to the ontological security of specific individuals making decisions for foreign policy. Even though I am using polls about an individual decision-maker (in this case, the president of the United States), “qualitative case studies of ontological security tend to emphasize individual elites and their perspectives on what is acceptable to both members of the public and other elites” (Mitzen & Larson, 2017, p. 12). This view broadly sidesteps the question of which entity actually has ontological security needs (sometimes, it is the elites, and sometimes it is the media that are manipulated by those elites).

Therefore, the perspective I am adopting in this research is the fourth way: America's ontological security is shorthand for the ontological security of American society, which can be manipulated or reinforced by all of the above – the media, terrorist groups, and the elites such as the president. More specifically, I am acknowledging that individuals desire a stable sense of identity, and that this sense of identity is social and can operate at the level of states.

I must emphasize that ontological security refers to the *feeling* of stability – not that our identities are stable and unchanging – but the *feeling*. Given that it is part of the human experience to contend with life's ephemeral and unstable nature, the very feeling of stability is one worthy of sustaining, though simultaneously difficult to achieve. With

life comes the awareness of life's fragility. To be constantly aware of this fragility and one's own mortality, one could argue, would certainly lead to insurmountable existential dread. It is this very reason why the starting point of ontological security is the suppression of this awareness. Because our routines and sustained self-narratives are crucial to our well-being, we become attached to and emotionally invested in them, and feel profound anxiety, and potentially even self-doubt and disassociation, at the very thought of their destabilization. In such situations, we seek ontological security by reasserting routines or appealing to comfortable narratives – a view shared by Terror Management Theory. That is, the act of seeking ontological security means “engaging self-consciously in practices that remind us of and reproduce who we feel ourselves to be” (Mitzen & Larson, 2017, p. 4).

Terror Management Theory Considerations

This way of analyzing a collective public's behavior aligns well with Terror Management Theory. When death is salient, the research demonstrates that people react to death in a way similar to how they would react to a threat to their physical security. This mortality salience is a threat to ontological security; it is existential and undermines people's sense of self. The management of that threat (i.e., terror) propels individuals to defend their cultural worldviews through a host of behaviors that include, *inter alia*, prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination. In short, the terror of death, according to TMT, increases positive reactions to people who share similar worldviews and ideas that confirm one's stereotypes while also increasing negative reactions to out-groups (Ryan, Kesebir, & Pyszczynski, 2012; Schimel et al., 1999).

For the analyses in this thesis, I am primarily focusing on the TMT research by Huddy et al. (2007), Landau et al., (2004), and Cohen et al., (2005), which suggest that mortality salience was central to the increase of support for President George W. Bush and his foreign policy decisions after the September 11th attacks. Will the highly politicized dead bodies trigger the expected terror management that results in increased support for the president in these cases? Admittedly, none of the case studies considered here compare to the scale and emotional toll of 9/11. However, if we follow TMT's suggestion, we should still see some kind of increase in support around these times that remind the American people of their own mortality.

Research Methods

I hypothesize that U.S. citizens tend to believe the security of their country is at risk or decreasing as highly politicized dead American citizen bodies appear on the news and in discussion of foreign policy actions (Hypothesis 1) – a finding that would support the view outlined by OST that a society would need to rebuild ontological security when threatened in such a manner. At the same time, I hypothesize that a highly politicized body of an enemy would alleviate a feeling of insecurity (Hypothesis 2). In both cases, as TMT would suggest, we should see an increase in support of U.S. foreign policy and the president (Hypothesis 3) because the highly politicized bodies stimulate our fear of death. The research in this thesis will use a deductive reasoning approach by utilizing the data surveyed and collected by the Gallup U.S. Poll while contextualizing the results in the OST and TMT theories of collective and individual behavior.

I accessed the polls via the Gallup Analytics online research platform through my Harvard credentials. For every event studied, I downloaded a complete list of Gallup's

presidential approval data for each president. The question asked was: “Do you approve or disapprove of the way [George W. Bush or Barack Obama] is handling his job as president?” Those data were put into an Excel spreadsheet, where I created a column for “week offset” to denote how long before or after the dead body event that the question was asked. For example, Osama bin Laden was killed on May 2, 2011. Gallup asked the above presidential approval question from April 25–May 1 (listed as “-1” to indicate it was asked approximately one week before the event), from May 2–8 (listed as “0” to indicate it was asked during the week of the event), and from May 9–15 (listed as “1” to indicate it was asked approximately one week after the event). I continued as such, both in the weeks prior and the weeks after the base date of May 2, 2011. If the polls were not exactly one week apart, the best estimate was made (e.g., 5 days after an event was considered one week). This process created a table for each of my six events that appear as follows:

Table 1. Example Table of Data Created from Gallup Polls.

Date	Approve	Disapprove	No Opinion	Event-Date Offset
Mar 7–13	47	45	9	-8
Mar 14–20	48	44	9	-7
Mar 21–27	45	47	8	-6
Mar 28 – Apr 3	48	44	8	-5
Apr 11–17	45	46	9	-3
Apr 18–24	43	48	9	-2
Apr 25 – May 1	44	47	9	-1
May 2–8	51	40	9	0
May 9–15	49	43	8	1
May 16–22	50	43	8	2
May 23–29	49	43	8	3
May 30 – Jun 5	50	42	8	4
Jun 6–12	46	44	9	5
Jun 13–19	47	45	8	6
Jun 20–26	43	49	7	7
Jun 27 – Jul 3	46	47	8	8

Source: Author.

From these tables, I created graphs with a line centering on the “week 0” in my tables. With each event centered on their “week 0” of polls, I created line graphs. This is the totality of those line graphs:

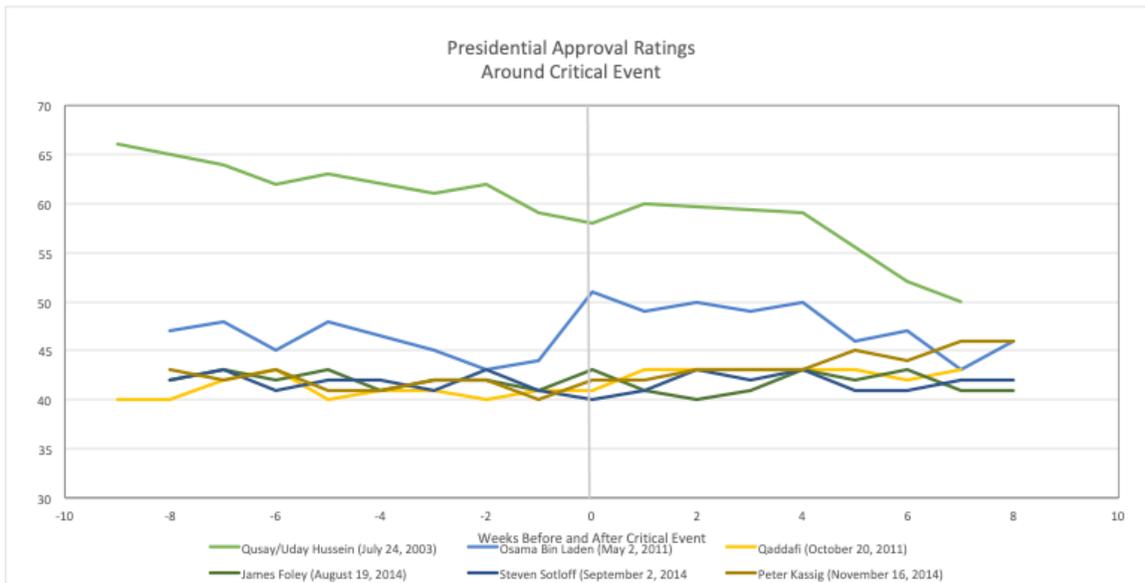


Figure 1. Complete Line Graph of Presidential Approval for All Events.

Source: Author.

I also used polls that, although not asked as consistently on a week-to-week basis as the presidential approval questions, asked what Gallup calls “issues approval” questions. Specifically, I focused on the responses when this question was asked: “Do you approve or disapprove of the way [George W. Bush or Barack Obama] is handling foreign affairs”? Instead of asking this question weekly, it appeared in the Gallup polls, on average, about once or sometimes twice a month. With the longer gaps between the surveys with this question, it is not as contemporaneous as the aforementioned question

more directly assessing presidential approval, but there are nevertheless a few things worthy of note.

In addition to the questions about approval of the president in general, I brought in other polls with specific questions related to the event. Some polls asked how closely respondents were following the news about the story. Others asked if they feel safe from a terrorist attack. These were necessary to bring in to demonstrate the psychological security aspect of this research.

Framework for Analysis of Images of Death

There is something intangible about death that seems to make it appropriate for description with words but not always appropriate with photos. At first glance, a photograph appears to be a relatively neutral form of evidence of what it portrays – documenting something that exists in reality. As Susan Sontag famously observed: “To remember is, more and more, not to recall a story but to be able to call up a picture” (Sontag, 2003, p. 94). However, photographs can do more than just corroborate a death. Photographs are a key means by which media, and through them, the public, come to terms with that death. Yet, photographs are not substitutes for personally witnessing an event. By themselves, photographs cannot serve as documentary evidence; they can neither confirm, for example, that a death has happened, nor can they entirely explain the circumstances of that death. Rather than being objective, photographs *objectify* – turning an event or person into something that can be possessed (Sontag, 2003, p. 81).

Those in possession of an image are what Zeynep Gürsel (2012) calls “image brokers”: intermediaries for images through acts such as commissioning, evaluating, licensing, selling, editing, and negotiating. Whether or not they produce the images

themselves, image brokers are the people who “move images or restrict their movement” (Gürsel, 2012). The display of a body involves active decision-making. Sometimes, the body is deemed unfit for publishing. Historically, editors have decided what to publish by carefully considering the risks or benefits of the graphic images – making a determination of what is of social or political significance to their audience. Mainstream media are no longer in the game alone. As technology is at virtually everybody’s fingertips, the emerging technique of creating synthetic media like “deepfakes”³ poses the potential threat of manipulating or outright faking images of dead bodies to further international policy purposes. Furthermore, the bright lines between “mainstream” and “citizen” journalism have almost completely disappeared. People who happen to be “on location” can become the first image brokers of breaking news. Yet, regarding the events in this thesis, a different type of image broker from outside of the industry was attempting to control those discussions of political significance. In this thesis, our nontraditional image brokers include the U.S government, Libyan citizens, and the ISIS organization.

What, then, does this new media environment entail for stories about death and dead bodies? As we will see, that can depend on who the dead are. When concerning the death of an enemy, the inhibitions against showing graphic gore are often lifted (Moeller, 2015). Donald Rumsfeld ordered the Qusay and Uday Hussein pictures to be released. Qaddafi’s victims (and those who considered themselves his victims by proxy) wanted to see not just his corpse but also the moments immediately preceding his death. With bin Laden, people exhibited a considerable need to see unexpurgated photos of his corpse.

³ Deepfakes are primarily videos in which a person’s likeness is replaced by someone else’s likeness – in essence, creating a fake video in which it appears a person is saying something they have not said in reality by using artificial intelligence called deep learning.

Though, with bin Laden, the inhibition for showing pictures was not necessarily due to the gore, but supposedly due to security concerns.

It must be emphasized that gory and gruesome images are of little help if the goal is to understand. History and narrative can help us understand; photographs can haunt. The images of the decapitated heads of James Foley, Steven Sotloff, and Peter Kassig are truly haunting. The ISIS terrorists succeeded not just in performing violent acts, but also in controlling their point of view – by controlling the news images representing their acts. The impact of their violence depended on their circulation of the images. For they must have acknowledged that, throughout the visual history of photography, images of decapitated Caucasian heads are much scarcer than those of severed non-Caucasian heads (Gürsel, 2012, p. 148).

Humans seem less horrified by the dead bodies of international politics, even when overtly visible, perhaps because of who the dead bodies are. If certain bodies are unworthy victims (Herman & Chomsky, 2002) or not considered grievable (Butler, 2010), then how are they to be viewed? As Jessica Aughter (2017) points out, there is no way for a body to reciprocate our visual consumption of it. When the dead body cannot view back at us, who or what will hold us accountable for our viewing of it? To photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude (Sontag, 2003, p. 46). We must ask ourselves what is excluded as we look at these images.

Therefore, we need an inclusive framework through which we will view these images in this thesis. First and foremost, I want to make it clear that I will *not* be reproducing any images at all in this thesis. I consider it neither my desire nor my responsibility to psychologically prepare readers to become a privileged witness to visual

atrocities against their will. I will leave it to the reader to locate and view the images discussed for themselves, if they so desire.

As we consider each case, we must understand a few things. First, under which conditions was the photo produced and distributed? The answer to this query helps to contextualize the image in the time and place in which the American public viewed the highly politicized dead body. Some images were withheld or displayed in support of a securitizing narrative. Others were meant to instill confidence in a foreign policy, or represent a threat of future deaths. In this thesis, we are assuming the TMT position that the image of a dead body (or hearing the news of an event involving that dead body) subconsciously stimulates a fear of death. So the research focuses on the effect of this fear and a public's sense of ontological security as a society.

Secondly, how does the producer of the image affect the public response? In this thesis, the cases are divided by the identity of the corpse (an enemy or a U.S. citizen). In doing so, the images also become divided by the entity that manufactured the image in the first place. The forthcoming analysis considers the image brokers as key to trying to understand the public's responses to the survey questions about security and approval. Because the images represent extraordinary events – which violate the traditional Western taboo of not displaying a corpse outside the context of a funeral service – the analysis of the images in relation to public opinion can elucidate how the public forms such opinions about their country's political agenda, leader, and the world at large.

Framework for Analysis of Hypotheses

The poll data are one side of the story. The test at the center of this thesis is not just about the changing approval rates, but also the way in which the approval rates are

supported or not by predictions made by the OST and TMT literature. Under nonthreatening conditions, an average sampling of citizens of most countries can tolerate, appreciate, and even seek out new knowledge of people from other cultures. However, when we are confronted with a dead body, TMT predicts that people need to maintain and uphold their cultural worldview because doing so manages the existential terror of their own eventual deaths. A study by Pyszczynski et al. (2006) chillingly demonstrated that Americans reminded of their own death were willing to sacrifice thousands more of their fellow citizens' lives if it led to capturing or killing Osama bin Laden. OST suggests that an individual who has lost ontological security enacts a process of demonizing "the other" in order to legitimize their own identity (Darwich, 2016, p. 13). Furthermore, OST hypothesizes that people form images of other states on the basis of perceived relative power, perceived threat/opportunity, and perceived culture.

With the poll data in hand, then, I aim to determine how many, if any, of the various hypotheses that these two literatures make stand up to live and real cases during this timeframe of American history. In other words, without claiming causation, how do the poll data stand up with regard to OST and TMT hypotheses?

Chapter III.

Bodies of Enemies

“If it can save American lives, I’m happy to have made the decision I made.”
– Donald Rumsfeld, U.S. Secretary of Defense (Brahimi, 2003)

“We are going to make sure the Iraqi people believe us at the end of the day.”
– Paul Wolfowitz, U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense (Blair & Harnden, 2003)

In this chapter, we look at the way in which enemy bodies—specifically, terrorist bodies—are produced and viewed. Defining a terrorist as a key threat to security implies a policy to eliminate the terrorist. This raises important questions about who or what is being secured, as well as what the dead body represents in relation to an achievement of that security. By targeting terrorists with the purpose to cause their deaths, their corpses thus become the symbols of the end of a security risk or threat. Even more than a symbol, the terrorist’s dead body can provide concrete evidence that a security threat is now eliminated.

Qusay and Uday Hussein – July 24, 2003

Let us consider our first case and see if the photos indeed increased the support of the American public, as Terror Management Theory suggests they might. For the first time since 9/11, in the early days of the Global War on Terrorism, the United States decided to make certain photos of a deceased foreign foe public. In July 2003, the Department of Defense allowed the dead bodies of Qusay and Uday Hussein, the sons of Saddam Hussein, to be photographed and publicized to all mainstream media outlets.

While Americans and Europeans generally accepted the photos as sufficient evidence, lingering doubts remained among some Iraqis that the brothers were actually dead. A mortician had touched up the bodies. Qusay's beard had been shaved off – only his trademark moustache remained. According to the BBC, a US official told reporters the aim was to make the men more closely resemble how they appeared in life in order to convince people that Uday and Qusay are indeed dead and not to deceive anybody (“Media films Saddam sons,” 2003).

For government officials, the release of the photographs to the public was justified because, according to a reporter at the time, “there was no other, less graphic, way to prove to people that the potential heirs of Saddam's Baathist regime were gone” (Hedges, 2003, p. A23). Additionally, the photos provided, according to another reporter, “higher troop morale...and irrefutable evidence that Saddam's tyranny is over” (Manly, 2003, p. 4).

Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, stated: “[Uday and Qusay Hussein] are dead now...The Iraqi people have been waiting for confirmation of that, and they, in my view, deserve having confirmation of that” (“DoD Briefing—Secretary Rumsfeld and Ambassador Bremer,” 2003). After the photos came out, Rumsfeld claimed the publication of the pictures would save American lives. For both the American and Iraqi publics, this was a command to look. Releasing the images was an attempt to assuage the fear that the former rulers of Iraq would return.

Data

Here are the approval ratings for George W. Bush around this time:



Figure 2. Line Graph of Presidential Approval – Qusay and Uday Hussein.

Source: Author.

The week 0 date represents the Gallup survey issued between July 25–27, 2003. This was immediately after the July 24, 2003 date of the release of the photos. The week 1 date represents the Gallup survey issued between August 4–6, 2003. We see a negative trend in the weeks leading up to the release of the photos, a very small uptick during the following week, and then a sharp negative trend in the weeks after. For the remainder of Bush’s presidency, the approval rate continually decreases and never again reaches the levels we see here on this graph.

However, did Americans at the time of this survey actually know about the Qusay/Uday story? Later on in the July 25–27 survey, Gallup asked respondents if they followed the news about their deaths and if the event was a major achievement for the U.S. For the 1,006 respondents surveyed, 77.92% reported that they were following the news “very closely” or “somewhat closely”, with only 5.79% responding with “not at

all.” When asked if killing the brothers was a major achievement for the United States, 62.86% agreed.

Gallup also asked respondents the following question: “Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling the situation in Iraq?” The responses surrounding the date of the Qusay and Uday photos is reported as follows (in percentages):

Table 2. Gallup Poll Responses to Bush’s Handling of the Situation in Iraq.

Month	Date	Approve	Disapprove	No opinion
Jun	12–15	63	34	3
Jul	7–9	58	39	3
Jul	18–20	57	39	4
Jul	25–27	60	38	2
Aug	25–26	57	41	2
Sep	8–10	51	47	2

Source: Created by Author from Gallup Poll data. Highlight represents week of event.

During the week of the photographs, there is a 3% increase in the approval rating of George W. Bush (from 57% to 60%), which decreases back to pre-photograph levels when asked on the next occasion a month later. This might support half of Hypothesis 3: even though the president’s approval rating did not significantly increase, approval of his Iraq foreign policy did ever so slightly.

Just a few days before the news of the Hussein brothers’ deaths, Gallup asked respondents: “How likely is it that there will be acts of terrorism in the United States over the next several weeks?” Gallup next asked the question again a month later. Responses are represented by percentages:

Table 3. Gallup Poll Responses to Likelihood of Acts of Terrorism in the U.S. (1).

Date	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Not too likely	Not at all likely	Don't know	Refused
07/18/2003– 07/20/2003	6.46	33.10	41.45	16.35	2.12	0.51
08/25/2003– 08/26/2003	10.53	43.57	34.64	10.00	1.08	0.19

Source: Created by Author from Gallup (July poll, N=509; August poll, N=512).

We see an increase of 14.54% of people who responded that the U.S. is “very likely” or “somewhat likely” to experience acts of terrorism during the next several weeks.

During the same surveys as above, Gallup asked respondents: “How worried are you that you or someone in your family will become a victim of terrorism?”

Table 4. Gallup Poll Responses to Question on Likelihood of Becoming a Victim of Terrorism (1).

Date	Very worried	Somewhat worried	Not too worried	Not at all worried	Don't know	Refused
07/18/2003– 07/20/2003	5.78	23.63	37.72	32.52	0	0.24
08/25/2003– 08/26/2003	10.73	30.29	33.21	25.42	0	0

Source: Created by Author from Gallup (July poll, N=494 [split sample]; August poll, N=1008).

We see here an increase of 11.61% of people who responded to this question with “very worried” or “somewhat worried” that they or a family member would become a victim of terrorism.

Discussion

What might we infer from the above data? Perhaps of greatest interest are the responses to how people think Bush was “handling the situation in Iraq.” Instead of an overall presidential approval rating, the 3% increase in approval of Bush on this specific question supports the OST and TMT suggestion that a dead body, especially one of a perceived enemy of the state, can make people more supportive of punitive measures (killing an enemy) and prejudicial actions (releasing the photos of an enemy’s death while simultaneously criticizing when those enemies attempt to do the same).

Let us turn now to Hypothesis 3 – that we should see an increase in support of the president around this time. In this case, we do not see direct support of that. True, Bush’s approval was on the decline before and after this event, so perhaps this was not a big enough event to sway public opinion. The decline continues in a negative direction for the rest of his presidency, so perhaps that downward pull that had been trending negatively every month since the beginning of the Iraq War could not be overcome by seeing the vanquishing of Saddam’s sons.

What can we say about the collective American public’s ontological security, then? In Hypothesis 2, I predict that seeing an enemy’s body would increase feelings of security. The responses to the likelihood of a terrorist threat on either the country or individuals and their family are telling and do not support that hypothesis, because we see a decrease of self-reported security. How might we explain this? TMT would suggest that the photographs of these dead bodies would trigger a threat to the cultural worldview that their home, the United States, is a country that respects enemy dead and would not display them in such a manner. Thus – individual *insecurity* would increase. OST

suggests that this insecurity must be mitigated by appealing to routines and comfortable narratives (i.e., “We Americans are always threatened by terrorism and it could happen at any time, so it is a good thing I live in the United States where my government will try to protect me and my family”). In the two polls that are taken a month apart (one right before the photographs and the next one a month afterwards), we see an increase of self-reported insecurity and anxiety about terrorism. Even though the majority of the Americans surveyed (88.09%) considered the death of the Hussein brothers to be a major or minor achievement, insecurity in the public increased when the photographs and news of the deaths appeared.

So perhaps seeing a vanquished enemy’s body will not automatically increase security on its own merit. As we see, rather, security decreased by 11%. With our next case, we can question if the outcome will be different when the enemy’s body is hidden.

Osama bin Laden – May 2, 2011

After many years of a global manhunt for the mastermind behind the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Osama bin Laden’s death was central to stories of “American heroism” and “making the world a safer place.” Yet while the narrative of his death became public, his body was quickly buried at sea, and a debate ensued over whether pictures—proof of his demise—would ever be released. To this day, no pictures of his body have been declassified, released, or leaked. In the end, rendering his final resting place, and his body, essentially invisible created a feeling that the insecurity engendered on 9/11 was in some way alleviated (Schlag, 2018). Furthermore, Cox & Wood (2017) suggest that the “justice” reaped by his death was a proxy for state revenge, furthering the IR analysis of how emotions are collectivized and made public. A content analysis of headlines

regarding his death suggests that newspapers in some areas presented the story as a “patriotic killing,” whereas newspapers from other parts of the country were more likely to present his death as a sort of “restoration of justice” (Bowman, Lewis, & Tamborini, 2014). My test surrounding this event is centered on how the American public responded to a death without any photographic proof. Did Obama’s approval rating increase? Did Americans report feeling safer from a terrorist attack after his death?

Data.

First, let us take a look at the approval ratings for President Obama around this time:

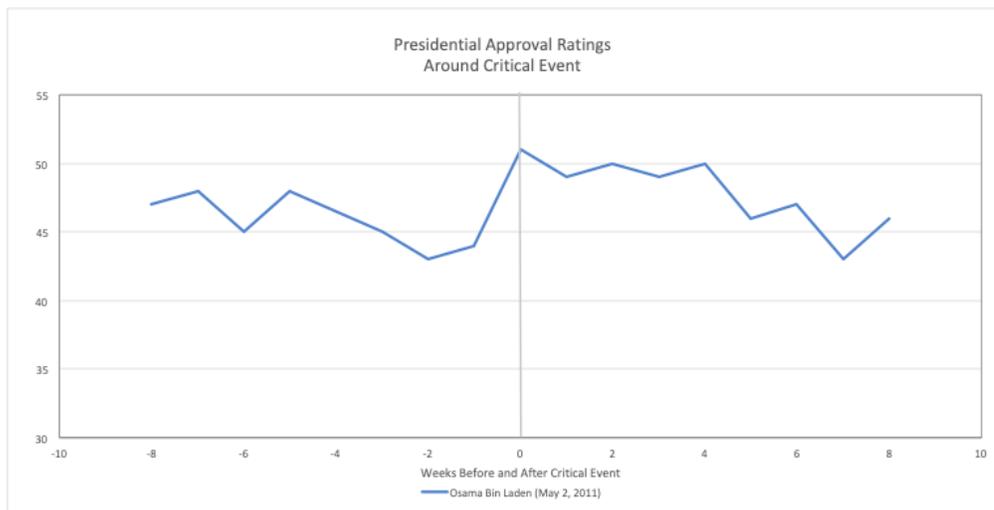


Figure 3. Line Graph of Presidential Approval – Osama bin Laden.

Source: Author.

Week 0 represents the poll asking this question during the week of May 2–8, 2011, which immediately followed the news of bin Laden’s death. We see the approval rate increases 7% during the week and remain around that level for about a month before returning to the typical approval rating during Obama’s presidency for the 2011 period.

Again, we must ask, how aware was the public of the event during this time? During Gallup’s Poll Social Series on Values & Beliefs, they surveyed 1,018 respondents during May 5–8, 2011. Gallup asked: “How closely are you following the news about the U.S. military finding and killing Osama bin Laden?” Around 83% responded that they followed the news “very closely” or “somewhat closely” with 4% responding with “not at all.”

Gallup also asked respondents the following question: “Do you approve or disapprove of the way Barack Obama is handling foreign affairs?” The responses surrounding the date of bin Laden’s death is reported as follows (in percentages):

Table 5. Gallup Poll Responses to Obama’s Handling of Foreign Affairs (1).

Month	Date	Approve	Disapprove	No opinion
Mar	25–27	46	47	6
May	12–15	51	43	7
Aug	11–14	42	51	6

Source: Created by Author from Gallup Poll data. Highlight represents week of event.

We see a 5% increase in the approval rating of his foreign policy in general. For the rest of his term, the approval rating to this question does not reach 51% again.

A few times a year, Gallup asked specifically if the respondent approved or disapproved “of the way Barack Obama is handling terrorism.”

Table 6. Gallup Poll Responses to Obama’s Handling of Terrorism (1).

Date	Approve	Disapprove	Don't Know	Refused
1/10/10	48.9	46.02	4.37	0.71
2/3/10	48.31	48.77	2.41	0.52
8/8/10	47.91	45	6.17	0.92
5/15/11	63.26	33.28	3.25	0.2

Source: Created by Author from Gallup Poll data. Highlight represents week of event.

About two weeks after the killing of bin Laden, this question was asked again. There is a 10-month gap between the last time this was asked. Nevertheless, two weeks after the killing, the approval of Obama’s handling of terrorism increases by 15.35%.

Furthermore, when asked “Does the death of Osama bin Laden make you more confident in Barack Obama as commander-in-chief, or not?” 53% responded that they were either “a lot more” or “a little more” confident in the president. The above seem to support Hypothesis 3, that approval of the president and their foreign policy increases when the politicized dead body of an enemy crosses our purview.

Let us turn now to the questions of security and safety around the time of this event. Gallup surveyed the U.S. population on the day of bin Laden’s death. The organization asked 645 respondents the following question: “How likely is it that there will be acts of terrorism in the United States over the next several weeks?” It is difficult to compare the response of this question across time, as the last time it was asked previously was in November 2009. With such a distance in time between when this question was asked, I will just report the responses from May 2, 2011 and the next time it was asked during August 11–14, 2011:

Table 7. Gallup Poll Responses to Likelihood of Acts of Terrorism in the U.S. (2).

Date	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Not too likely	Not at all likely
May 2, 2011	17	45	27	8
August 11–14, 2011	7	31	42	18

Source: Created by Author from Gallup (May poll, N=645; August poll, N=645).

This shows that 62% of people responded that an act of terrorism in the U.S. would be “very likely” or “somewhat likely” to occur in the following weeks. We also see a sharp drop in the following months, indicating the American public felt safer in those months following bin Laden’s death. In the same poll, Gallup also asked: “Do you think the death of Osama bin Laden will make the U.S. safer or less safe from terrorism?” (Question qn6). 53.91% responded “safer,” while 27.76% responded “less safe.”

Discussion

How well do these data line up with Hypothesis 2? I hypothesize that a highly politicized body of an enemy would alleviate a feeling of insecurity. The majority of the Americans surveyed felt safer from terrorism after his death. At this point, we can pose the hypothetical: Would releasing pictures of his dead body have made the public feel more secure, or less? For the U.S. government, the risk of release outweighed any potential benefits – in stark contrast to what they did with the Hussein brothers.

According to Justice Department lawyer Robert Loeb: “While the US was concerned that releasing photos of the bodies of Saddam Hussein's sons could spark riots, officials determined the release was necessary to assure the Iraqi people they were dead...That wasn't the case with the bin Laden photos” (Reilly, 2013).

Multiple reasonable arguments existed for not releasing the photos of bin Laden. For one, they were likely to be gruesome: officials said he was shot in the face, leaving a massive head wound complete with visible blood and brain matter (Just, 2011). While he was apparently easily identifiable in death, the extent of the damage could have put their value of evidence of his death in doubt (Montopoli, 2011). U.S officials likely remembered the skeptical criticism lodged against the Qusay and Uday photos because a mortician touched them up. With bin Laden, the same skepticism of the death led some in the public to demand the release of the photos – to ensure that he was indeed dead.

This time, the United States did not release the photos. As noted by Auchter (2017), with highly politicized corpses, certain things can be done to them that may otherwise be considered taboo. In some cases, the body of one's enemy is sometimes deemed necessary to put on display. Like in the case of the Hussein brothers, the pictures of their corpses served as a justification for the death itself. In other cases, like bin Laden, the viewing of the dead could be a threat to the security of a nation. Officials seemed to believe that by simply looking at bin Laden's photos, we would become less secure. In this case, their decision seemed to have served its intended purpose. I do not have the data to compare the hypothetical responses to feeling safe if the pictures of bin Laden were disseminated; to this day, they still remain unreleased. However, what we do see is that Americans reported feeling safer – supporting Hypothesis 2.

Muammar Qaddafi – October 20, 2011

For our final evaluation of a highly politicized body of an enemy, we move from still photographs to recorded video. There is a marked difference between what happened to bin Laden's body and that of Libya's Muammar Qaddafi: not only was

Qaddafi's violent death caught on video, but also his corpse was put on display for all of the global media to see. Unlike with bin Laden, it somehow seemed more acceptable to see Qaddafi's corpse – even to celebrate it, as Auchter (2015) noted in her analysis of the satirization of his death in media and specifically on Twitter. The video of his death was not in the hands of the U.S. government, but rather recorded and distributed by the people directly responsible for it. Will this change what we see in the approval ratings and responses to security-related questions in the Gallup polls?

Data

Only a few months after bin Laden's killing, Obama's approval rating around the time of Qaddafi's death looks like this:

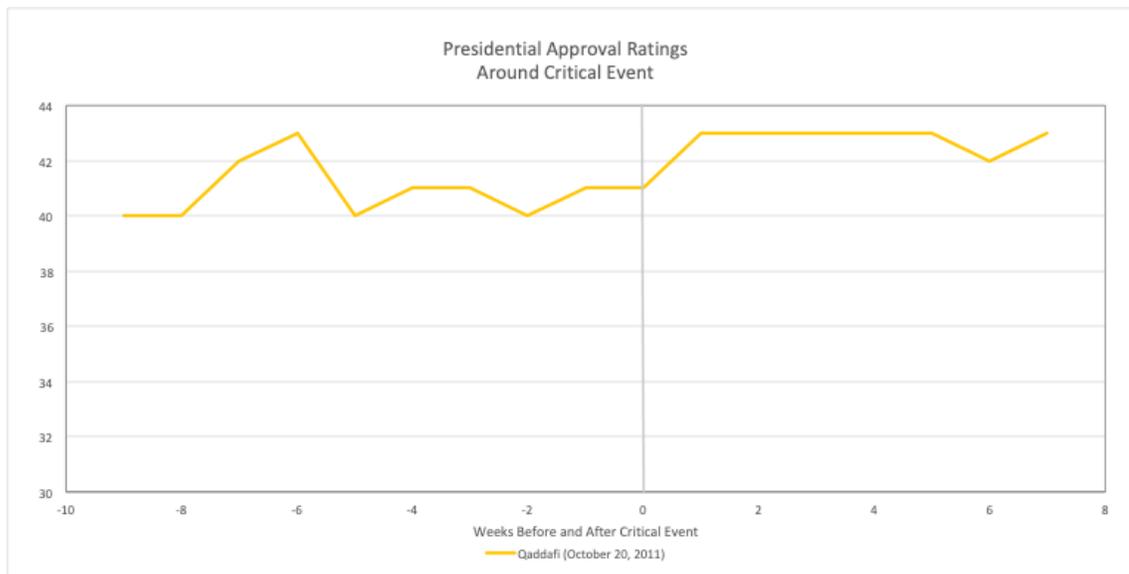


Figure 4. Line Graph of Presidential Approval – Muammar Qaddafi.

Source: Author.

As previously noted, the estimation of weeks before and after the poll is as close to reality as possible. This survey represents this necessary estimation. Week 0 here represents the Gallup poll that was asked between October 17–23, 2011. Since Qaddafi’s death was on October 20, this survey fell right in the middle. We can safely presume that a non-insignificant amount of people was surveyed before the event occurred. Weeks 1 and 2 represent the exact 7 and 14 days, respectively, after the Week 0 poll. We see a slight increase in support of the president in the two following weeks after Qaddafi’s death, although it is only by 2% in that second week. The 43% approval rating remains stable for a few subsequent weeks after, likely due to the event signaling the likely conclusion of the involvement of the U.S. military in Libya. Gallup did not specifically ask in any poll whether the respondents were following the news of Qaddafi’s death, so it is being assumed that most Americans had heard about Qaddafi’s death within the three weeks of the above surveys.

Gallup again asked the following question: “Do you approve or disapprove of the way Barack Obama is handling foreign affairs?” If we expand on the table from the bin Laden discussion, we can see the two dates highlighted representing both of these cases as they happened right after each other. The responses surrounding the date of Qaddafi’s death is reported as follows (in percentages):

Table 8. Gallup Poll Responses to Obama’s Handling of Foreign Affairs (2).

Month	Date	Approve	Disapprove	No opinion
Mar	25–27	46	47	6
May	12–15	51	43	7
Aug	11–14	42	51	6
Nov	3–6	49	44	7

Source: Created by Author from Gallup Poll data. Top highlight represents week of bin Laden event. Bottom highlight represents week of Qaddafi event.

Of course, this question was next asked based on Gallup’s timeline and falls two weeks after Qaddafi’s death. Still, we see the expected spike of an increase in the approval rating of Obama’s handling of foreign affairs.

Gallup asked again if the respondent approved or disapproved “of the way Barack Obama is handling terrorism.” Just like before, if we extend the table from the bin Laden discussion and highlight the poll around Qaddafi’s killing we see the following:

Table 9. Gallup Poll Responses to Obama’s Handling of Terrorism (2).

Date	Approve	Disapprove	Don't know
1/10/10	49	46	4
2/3/10	48	48	2
8/8/10	48	45	6
5/15/11	63	33	3
8/14/11	53	40	6
11/6/11	63	31	6

Source: Created by Author from Gallup Poll data. Top highlight represents week of bin Laden event. Bottom highlight represents week of Qaddafi event.

Discussion

While the general approval rating gives little, if any, support to Hypothesis 3, the 6% increase of approval of the president’s foreign policy, in addition to the 10% rebound of approval of his handling of terrorism, lends itself to supporting the hypothesis in a slightly more convincing manner.

The U.S. government stated that the goal of their operation in Libya was to protect Libyan citizens from attacks by their own country’s government. Gallup asked during a June 22, 2011 poll whether the ultimate goal should be to remove the government (Qaddafi) from power. 85% of respondents agreed that U.S. military action

should continue in Libya until that happened (Jones, 2011). When it did happen, NATO announced that it would end its military operations in the country (“NATO’s Libya mission ‘accomplished’ after Gaddafi death,” 2011), and the de facto government at the time, the National Transitional Council (NTC), announced plans for a democratic state and declared Libya to be liberated (Deshmukh, 2011). The next time that Gallup asked American citizens about their “satisfaction with the nation’s security from terrorism,” 72% responded that they were either “very satisfied” or “somewhat satisfied.” Likely due to the halo effect coming from bin Laden’s death and Qaddafi’s killing, this 72% was the highest rating of security during Obama’s administration. This seems to lend support to Hypothesis 2 that self-reported security would increase when the images of Qaddafi’s death were distributed.

Conclusions about Enemy Bodies

Showing off the enemy dead has a long history. From the aforementioned fictional story of *Antigone* to real examples in the present, that long history is, however, not a proud one. The Romans would use crucifixion to humiliate, kill, and send a political message all at once (Tombs, 1999). Joyful anti-fascists hung up Benito Mussolini upside down on a meat hook in the public square (Luzzatto, 2005). Romania showed the crumpled bullet-ridden bodies of Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife on national TV (Kozinski, 1991). Showing off the enemy dead is not a passive act, but rather an active illustration of violence.

The stories of the Hussein brothers, Osama bin Laden, and Muammar Qaddafi are stories of violent deaths. What are the politics when a death, especially a violent one, is celebrated, rather than mourned? While a dead body often represents a failure, we see

here that it can also represent the success of a system. A body has been transformed into a corpse for the purposes of enhancing security. In Achille Mbembe's (2003) analysis of necropolitics, he examines the creation of the state's Other as a permanent enemy to be killed. Even more than a right to kill, he makes clear that a state uses social and political power to expose its own citizens and global citizens to death. At the core of contemporary governance is the necropolitics of display and disposition of corpses of one's enemies.

Specifically, the contrast between the framing of bin Laden and Qaddafi is useful here. The Qaddafi story is one of reinforcing the triumph of democracy over dictatorship. The circulation of the video and its related images represented framing to legitimize viewing – supporting a democratization policy in the region. On the other hand, the bin Laden story is one of framing to legitimize the active suppression of images for the purposes of maintaining security. His body was too obscene to be shown. With Qaddafi, the public became privileged witnesses to the obscenity. Osama bin Laden was whisked away to the sea, while Qaddafi was put on display for government officials and global citizens. A loss for Qaddafi is a win for democracy and Western democratic values.

The video of Qaddafi's last seconds of life was unscripted. Filmed by the active participants in the assassination, the amateur videographers captured moments of Qaddafi when he was weak – bloody, confused, taunted, and terrified. The purpose of the video was not just to document but also to humiliate. As sociologist Tiffany Jenkins wrote, "The weakness of Gaddafi's position before he died meant he was easier to dominate when dead; bin Laden, on the other hand, was feared until the end, and his supporters are still considered extremely dangerous. Even in death, he remains a threat" (Jenkins, 2011).

What we see in this analysis of enemies is a few things. First, it is not always certain that the approval of the president will increase around times of mortality salience, as TMT would suggest. However, we can see that perhaps half of Hypothesis 3 is supported by these three cases – not the support of the president, but rather the support of their foreign policy. In these cases of enemy dead bodies, responses to questions of support of the president’s “handling of the situation” or their foreign policy showed mild-to-significant increases.

In terms of security in the face of an enemy’s body (Hypothesis 2), the data are inconclusive. Putting the Hussein brothers’ bodies on display seemingly decreased security. Refusing to release images of Osama bin Laden’s body correlated with an increase of security. After the video of Qaddafi’s death, people also felt increased security. At best, one could hypothesize that security decreases when one’s own government puts enemy bodies on display but increases when one’s own government refrains from doing so or when another government displays one’s enemy. More cases and tests would need to be done to investigate those hypotheses.

Chapter IV.

Bodies of U.S. Citizens

“It's no fun to appreciate to the full the truth of the materialist proposition that I don't have a body, I am a body.” – Christopher Hitchens, *Mortality* (p. 41)

Governments tend to downplay or avoid altogether the moments when their citizens view the human consequences of their foreign policy. How a government views the bodies of its soldiers can be indicative of how it views its citizens. The lengths a government will go to provide material security and dignity to a dead soldier tells us something about the formation of a political community and identity. In the same vein, treatment of the enemy's dead reflects the attitude toward the enemy's social and cultural system. Governments are not the only image brokers in the War on Terror. Terrorists desire an audience as well.

In this chapter, we look at how a country's citizens respond when the politicized dead body is of one of their own. These bodies were first ordinary American citizens whose bodies then became politicized by ISIS. As the reports, still images, and videos circulated around the world, how did they affect the support of the president, their foreign policy choices, and the nation's ontological security? Since these events each happened within months of each other, and in quick succession, the combined analysis will come at the end.

It is worthwhile to note that unlike the images of enemy bodies discussed in the previous chapter, the images of these bodies were either uploaded or leaked and then

quickly removed from mainstream sites. Even though they persisted in some form on underground sites, it is unlikely that people who responded to the polls watched the actual videos. It is fair to question if just hearing about the beheading and knowing that it was filmed was enough to trigger the heightened mortality salience. The Gallup polls did not ask if the respondents viewed the beheading videos themselves. For this chapter, then, it is reasonably assumed that the reaction of American citizens to these events is in response to the news about the events, not necessarily the images that they may or may not have seen. Simply learning that such videos exist is enough to affect one's sense of security, if we are to follow the TMT view.

Beheading of Journalist James Foley — Video Online August 19, 2014

The wave of beheadings of Westerners and others by ISIS has its root in a few justifications first emailed to James Foley's family on August 12, 2014. As a response to the American airstrikes in Iraq, Foley became the first American citizen beheaded by ISIS. On August 19, 2014, a video uploaded to YouTube titled "Message to America" circulated online. The video was quickly deleted, although it continued to circulate on the internet through various means. It does not show the beheading itself, but rather cuts to Foley's beheaded corpse. His executioner, known by his hostages as Jihadi John, then announces that the next captured journalist, Steven Sotloff, will also be killed if Obama refuses to halt air strikes on ISIS.

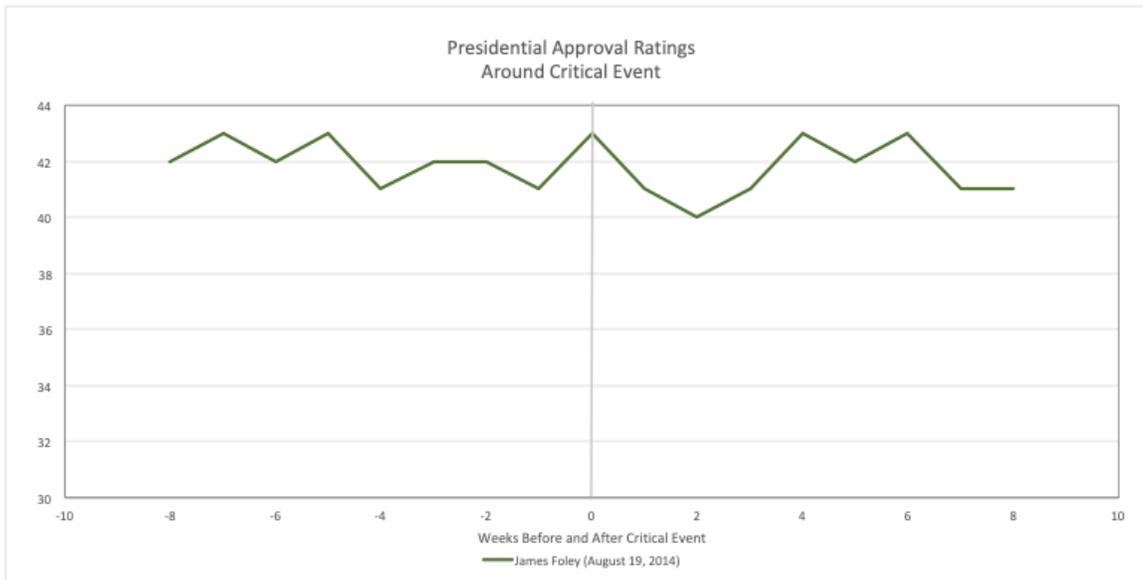


Figure 5. Line Graph of Presidential Approval – James Foley.

Source: Author.

In the approval ratings, we see a slight 2% increase in approval during the week of the James Foley video, which then returns to pre-event levels. The approval ratings are pretty flat around this time, so I see no significant change one way or the other around this event. This lends no support to Hypothesis 3 about approval ratings.

Beheading of Journalist Steven Sotloff –Video Online September 2, 2014

Just days after the message from the Foley video, Obama stepped up air strikes on ISIS near Mosul. A file-sharing site discovered a video of the execution of Steven Sotloff on September 2, 2014 – supposedly before its intended release by ISIS (Farrow, 2014). Like the Foley video, it begins with a speech from Obama – this time, denouncing Foley’s beheading. The video then shows Sotloff delivering a prepared statement while kneeling and handcuffed. The executioner, Jihadi John, makes a statement and then beheads Sotloff; the footage is shot from multiple angles and was likely edited with skill

and modern equipment. Jihadi John then threatens to behead the next prisoner, British aid worker David Cawthorne Haines.



Figure 6. Line Graph of Presidential Approval – Steven Sotloff.

Source: Author.

In this case, the approval rating decreased by 1% during the week of the release of the Sotloff video. There appears to be no statistical significance to the approval ratings around this time – lending no support to Hypothesis 3.

Beheading of Humanitarian Worker Peter Kassig – Video Online November 16, 2014

ISIS captured the American aid worker Peter Kassig in October of 2013. In the following October of 2014, the beheading video of English aid worker Alan Henning named Kassig as the next victim. On November 16, ISIS posted a video showing Jihadi

John standing over the decapitated head of Peter Kassig. The beheading was not shown, and it is speculated that Kassig refused to provide a video statement.

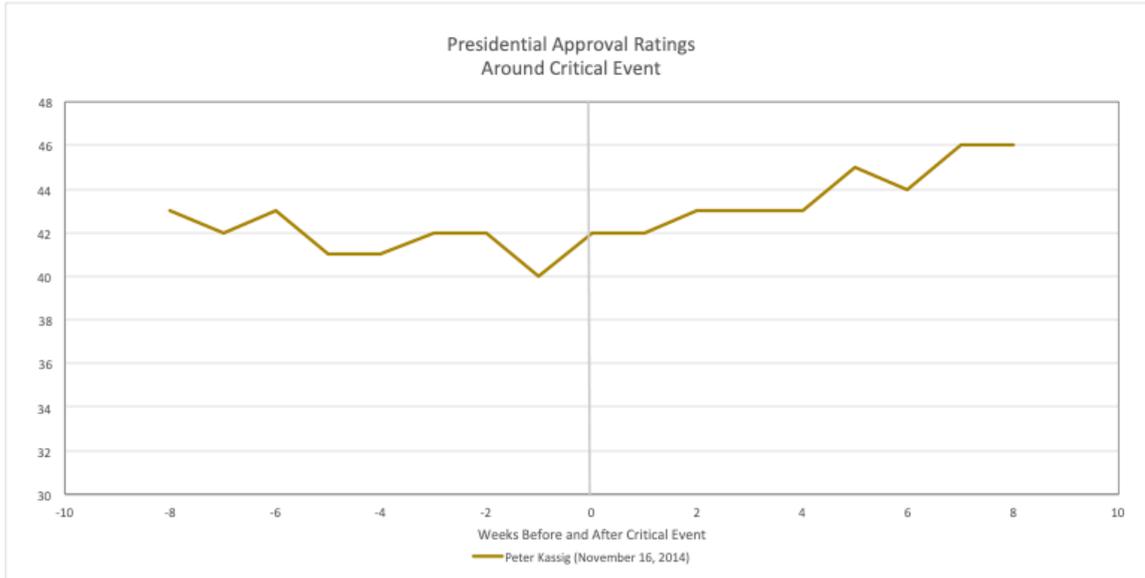


Figure 7. Line Graph of Presidential Approval – Peter Kassig.

Source: Author.

In these approval ratings, we see a small 2% increase, but nothing statistically significant to support Hypothesis 3.

Discussion and Analysis of All Three Bodies of U.S. Citizens

Gallup asked respondents the following question: “Do you approve or disapprove of the way Barack Obama is handling foreign affairs?” This question was asked right before the Foley video and just before the Kassig video. The responses surrounding the dates of these events are as follows:

Table 10. Gallup Poll Responses to Obama’s Handling of Foreign Affairs (3).

Month	Date	Approve	Disapprove	No opinion
Aug	7–10	36	58	6
Nov	6–9	31	63	6

Source: Created by Author from Gallup (August poll, N=1032; November poll, N=828).

We see a 5 % decrease in approval of Obama’s foreign policy in the midst of these beheadings. This finding, along with the straight approval responses, does not support Hypothesis 3. Rather, there is more evidence that the ISIS beheadings had a slight negative effect on the approval rating of Obama’s foreign policy. This seems reasonable at first glance. It would generally be the safe bet that citizens that are killed in such a manner as a direct result of the country’s foreign policy would result in lower approval ratings. The suggestion of TMT that such visceral images of death would in turn stimulate our internal fear of death and result in increased and united support of a leader does not seem to be supported in these cases.

As to the questions of security (Hypothesis 1), these events occurred within such a relatively short timeframe that the Gallup polls do not provide frequent enough questions for comparison. At the very least, there is a poll from their Gallup Poll Social Series on crime – which was surveyed between 10/12/2014–10/15/2014 (after Foley and Sotloff, but before Kassig). This question, with annual frequency, asks: “How often do you, yourself, worry about the following things – frequently, occasionally, rarely or never? How about – Being the victim of terrorism?”⁴ Of the 1,017 individuals surveyed, 28% responded that they worry about being a victim of terrorism frequently or occasionally. This rate is typical across the years and shows no statistical significance during this time.

⁴ Question qn17k – GPSS crime, Gallup.

The next best thing Gallup provides is a question asked in 2013 and the next time in 2015. “How worried that you or someone in your family will become a victim of terrorism – very worried, somewhat worried, not too worried, or not worried at all?” Responses (given in percentages) were:

Table 11. Gallup Poll Responses to Question on Likelihood of Becoming a Victim of Terrorism (2).

Date	Very worried	Somewhat worried	Not too worried	Not worried at all
04/24/2013– 04/25/2013	11	29	33	27
06/02/2015– 06/07/2015	15	34	25	24

Source: Created by Author from Gallup (April poll, N=1500; June poll, N=1500).

While fully acknowledging the very wide spread between these dates, we see a 9% increase of people who reported feeling very worried or somewhat worried over this time period. This makes reasonable sense: as beheadings of one’s fellow citizens increases, so too would one’s fear of something similar continuing (and perhaps even befalling oneself or a loved one). It also gives a little bit of support to Hypothesis 1, that feelings of security would decrease when confronted with images of slain members of one’s own country. In this case, these fellow citizens were not leaders of the government or military personnel. They were neighbors, family members, and close friends. To have such people being victimized could likely bring the looming security threat that much closer to the average American citizen. As OST suggests, this would give rise to actions that, while not being necessary for physical security of a domestic population that is generally

safe from such beheadings, would *feel* necessary for rebuilding psychological stability as a nation.

Chapter V.

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations

There are a few principal limitations to this research. First and foremost, the judgment lies solely with the researcher regarding which events to study. Case studies are frequently vulnerable to the criticism that their findings are not generalizable. I have selected events specifically between 9/11 and the end of Obama's administration – which precludes research on many historical examples one could select for a research project of larger scope. Consider the image of Phan Thi Kim Phuc, dubbed “the napalm girl,” and images like it that influenced the American public's opinion of the Vietnam War. In 2015, the image of drowned Syrian 3-year-old Alan Kurdi made global headlines and generated increased discussion of the Syrian civil war and European attitudes to refugees. More recently, the bodies of Salvadoran citizens Oscar Alberto Martinez Ramirez and his 2-year-old daughter Valeria increased discussion among the American public about border relations with Mexico and the Trump Administration. These cases are just as worthy of study for research like mine, yet I specifically limited my research, as defined before, to U.S. citizens or its enemies between 9/11 and the end of the Obama Administration.

I am constrained by which polls to choose. I have chosen Gallup, as they are considered a consistent, reliable, and neutral source. Other polls from mainstream media may have useful polls as well, in addition to more specific questions on security, stability, and anxiety. In the end, to control for the variable of viewership demographic differences

between the news channels, I have limited myself to Gallup's weighted samples of dual-frame telephone interviews.

I am also constrained by the polls themselves in the timing around the events. The polls are not precisely equidistant on either side from the event in question. For the polls that deal with security, some questions were only asked annually. For questions of approval, some polls are a week prior, and others just a day after the event hits the news. A poll one week before compared with a poll one day after each case will undoubtedly have different results. In the attempt to maintain an "apples to apples" comparison, I have averaged out the poll dates by their relative week. For example, if a poll was collected 5 days before an event, I have marked it down as occurring a full 7-day week. Likewise, a poll 8 days after an event has been marked as occurring a full 7-day week after the event. It is not perfect, but it is the simplest way to view the data and compare across similar time frames.

Lastly, it is up to a rather subjective set of standards by which one can discern what we can and cannot tell from opinion polls – as they are generally weak in assessing causation. Polls tend to measure individual public opinion, even though those opinions are often generated via group processes (Weisberg, 2008). Growing evidence exists demonstrating that the reporting of public opinion can indeed have an impact on subsequent opinions (Traugott, 2008). Polling is a tool, rather than a principle. We must meet its methodology with skepticism. Do polls ask the right questions, avoid asking leading questions, and does a group with a special interest fund the poll? These are but a few of the questions we should ask as we consider a poll's reported results.

These doubts are all valid, and no single poll should be considered more authoritative than any other. At the very least, Gallup is often quoted in news media and it transparently presents its methods.⁵ The nature and analysis of the data is limited by how I am able to control for other factors at the time of the polls – in this case, I am not able to control for other factors. I fully acknowledge there may be myriad variables outside of the highly politicized dead bodies that influenced public perception of security, the president, and U.S. foreign policy at the time. Polls are opinion, not behavior – and are not designed to be predictive. Hence, I am constrained to only exploring a correlation while attempting to bring in other sources of data to test and analyze the findings.

Issues for Future Research

If a researcher were to continue asking the questions posed in thesis, it would be advisable to use more polls. If they were able to control for the typical variables present in comparing polls from news media organizations (i.e., Fox News, MSNBC, CNN, etc.), a more thorough and richer dataset would be available to them than what is presented here. Secondly, questions like these could benefit from more numerous case studies far beyond the six outlined in this thesis. At the time of this writing, there is debate whether or not President Trump will release images of the corpse of Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi taken before he was buried at sea in the same manner as bin Laden. Just as well, as outlined previously in the limitations section, there are many historical examples pre-9/11 that could be tested in a similar manner with the rich datasets that Gallup, Roper, Pew, and other polling organizations have gathered over the decades.

⁵ For its methodology on the U.S. Poll, see: <https://www.gallup.com/224855/gallup-poll-work.aspx>.

Furthermore, perhaps productive insights could be found if future researchers were to expand the in-group from the one in this thesis (a single group of citizens bound by country of nationality) to a larger group (such as Westerners or Europeans). This thesis focuses the research on American citizens' bodies. ISIS also made beheading videos of citizens from other countries. It begs the question if the percentages within the polls would shift were the surveys asked to a larger group than the United States population.

Secondly, Terror Management Theory is an attractive explanatory model for certain behaviors. However, it is hard to demonstrate outside of controlled settings where the interventions that trigger mortality salience are carefully and deliberately introduced to every participant in the study. The TMT experiments are convincing, in part, due to the immediacy of its supposed effect on human behavior. With the research in this thesis, we see poll data that are days, weeks, and months away. It would benefit future researchers of TMT to see if they can demonstrate the pull of mortality salience over a longer period of time than what the current literature demonstrates.

Lastly, Ontological Security Theory opens up new areas of research related to issues of dead bodies and foreign policy. Since states do not pursue ontological security in the same way as material security, future scholars of OST could think about specific instances when a state made a specific policy choice and how it resonated with its collective citizenry. The first example that comes to mind is how the torture method known as waterboarding was justified and defended when the American public learned about what actions their government was taking against prisoners of war. Another example could be an in-depth research project on the history of the United States, among

other countries, treating the dead of its enemies on the battlefield. Again, these are things that do not lend themselves to attaining the ends of physical security, but rather ontological security.

Chapter VI.

Conclusions

“Often when you think you're at the end of something, you're at the beginning of something else.” – Fred Rogers, *The World According to Mister Rogers* (p. 40)

The data in this research are rather inconclusive. I employed two theories – one of individual behavior, and the other of collective behavior. Using data from Gallup polls around events that should have produced the intended effects, I simply compared the opinions that the real-world examples produced. Highly politicized dead bodies certainly have an effect on people, but it is by no means demonstrated here that the effect of these dead bodies have a strong correlation with the hypotheses of Terror Management Theory or Ontological Security Theory.

The results demonstrate mild support for Hypothesis 1, finding that security would decrease during times of viewing U.S. bodies. I found inconclusive support for Hypothesis 2, that security during times of viewing enemy bodies would increase. Lastly, the data demonstrate support for half of Hypothesis 3. The data do not support a correlation with approval of the president but did lend mild support for a correlation with approval of their foreign policy.

Obscene images of death can be a political tool. They can convey a society's values and measure which countries are winning the battle of ideas. While some are displayed, others are concealed. The management of the images serves to justify specific foreign policies. This management either fails or succeeds based on how the collective

citizenry reacts to those choices. As visual historian David Perlmutter concluded in his history of warfare and images, “[W]hatever the actual power of pictures, the first-person effect can drive the way we make war if political and military leaders base policy on it....[I]f leaders believe that opinion is driven by images, they will act accordingly to encourage or forestall opinion” (Perlmutter, 1999, p. 208).

This is why it is important to understand the societal receptivity to these highly politicized dead bodies. Ontological security plays a role in how society perceives and reacts to these images, which in turn might compel a country to act in certain ways that are not understood by solely thinking about material security. Human individuals, likewise, may not be fully aware of the subconscious forces that the thought of death supposedly awakens within them.

As Susan Sontag wrote, “the gruesome invites us to be spectators or cowards” (2003, p. 42). If *not* looking is cowardice, then, that may entail that there is something courageous in looking at the gruesome and obscene. Often, we find it difficult to look away. Such images are not just alluring, but also commanding us to look. Do they have the power to effect change? Can we make things better, simply by looking? It is this researcher’s opinion that we can.

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