

The Post-Tragedy ‘Opportunity-bubble’ and the Prospect of Citizen Engagement

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“The evil that men do lives after them.”
William Shakespeare

The September 11 2001 terrorist attacks are an example of evil that has lived on, echoed in atrocious acts of violence against ordinary people around the globe over the last ten years, most recently, in Oslo. Most Americans remember 9/11 as an exceptional event, a contemporary equivalent to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. From a psychological perspective, however, many aspects of the public’s response to 9/11 followed a pattern quite familiar to students of group dynamics and inter-group relations, a pattern that warrants the close attention of leaders at all levels because it reveals an *opportunity-bubble* – a promising, yet fleeting, opportunity to shape the course of subsequent events. In order for leaders to take advantage of this opportunity-bubble in a timely and effective manner, they must first understand it. By studying the group and intergroup dynamics that follow tragedies, leaders can lead in such a way as to ensure the opportunity-bubble leads to constructive rather than destructive outcomes.

One of the most robust and pervasive trends in social behavior is the relationship between perceived in-group threat and group cohesion.¹ Both experimental evidence and historical case studies demonstrate this relationship:² when individuals perceive a serious threat to the in-group (such as from an enemy attack or natural disaster), they show greater solidarity with other group members and increase their support for the group leader. “Showing greater solidarity” can mean making enormous sacrifices in order to support the in-group, and standing firmly behind the leader even when mistakes are seen to be made in leadership decision making. It can also mean demonstrating extraordinary resilience in the face of pressures and difficulties. Thus, examples of the kind of “Dunkirk spirit” the British public

displayed during the London Blitz bombings in World War II often occur during wars, crises, and disasters.

Judging correctly when and how to make constructive use of the opportunity-bubble after a tragedy is a hallmark of great leadership. Enormous potential for civic generosity and sacrifice is available at the height of an opportunity-bubble, but leaders must choose the kinds of sacrifices and the timing of calls to action carefully. Timing is of the greatest importance: too early, and people – still reeling from the impact of the tragedy – may be unable to respond; too late, and people may have grown too detached from the tragedy and accustomed to non-commitment; even later, people (and the media) may focus critically – and perhaps angrily – on leadership’s failure to have asked for more.

We argue that although great crisis will inevitably invite consideration of many alternatives, leadership must pay special attention to opportunities to engage the public as capable *partners* in their country’s response to the crisis – calling upon them as citizens with civic duties, as well as rights. Such opportunities will often entail significant sacrifice, which we believe will generally be accepted if the public’s role is clearly explained and accompanied by ample means to readily acquire information about the crisis, future threats, and the government’s response.

Undoubtedly, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 Americans were ready and willing to make personal and collective sacrifices. Over the first three weeks following the attacks, the rate of volunteerism increased more than six standard deviations above average throughout the nation.³ Within only three months, charitable donations for 9/11 victims and their families exceeded \$1.5 billion.⁴ An

extraordinary, albeit brief, increase in social capital signaled the publics' readiness for civic contribution. Public trust and confidence in government reached a thirty-year peak in the first few weeks following the attacks.⁵ Support for leadership was extraordinarily high and widespread. Even prestigious, traditionally skeptical newspapers – for example, *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* – were uncritically supportive of leadership decisions after 9/11, including the momentous decisions to wage wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, according to retrospect scholarly analysis.⁶ Yet, in as little as six months, the large majority of Americans who in early post-9/11 surveys had reported increased trust in government and had sought greater opportunities for political and social engagement simply vanished.⁷ The opportunity-bubble had begun to burst.

This is not to say that leadership had not called for civic contributions. In his first State of the Union Address after 9/11, for example, President Bush called on Americans, as a “responsible nation,” to commit “at least two years – 4,000 hours over the rest of your lifetime – to the service of your neighbors and your nation” and invited Americans to join the newly created USA Freedom Corps, which would “focus on three areas of need: responding in case of crisis at home; rebuilding our communities; and extending American compassion throughout the world.”⁸ Nevertheless, in the years to follow, aside from military enlistment, opportunities for civic engagement associated directly with the threat of terror seemed largely confined to calls for increased citizen vigilance. Interviewed on the eve of the Iraq War troop surge,⁹ President Bush was asked why, given the importance he often stressed the war on terror represented for the country's future, as well as the disproportionate share the volunteer military and their families had sacrificed relative to the rest of the country, the president had not “asked more Americans and more American interests to sacrifice something,” in particular, sacrifices that would “muster the support” and would involve Americans “in the struggle.” In response, President Bush referred to his earlier call for volunteerism and his decision to establish the Freedom Corps and asserted

that he had strongly opposed what were apparently the primary potential forms of sacrifice considered after 9/11: compulsory military service and tax increases.

American history, however, provides many examples of quite effective alternatives to calls for compulsory public sacrifice. The decision to meet the enormous requirements of the World War II war effort by supplementing taxes with a campaign calling upon citizens in all income categories to make voluntary contributions through War Bonds is particularly instructive. The War Bond campaign was carefully crafted to create an emotionally compelling sense of civic duty and public partnership in the war effort. During an all-day fundraising radio broadcast in 1943, for instance, the popular singer and celebrity Kate Smith explained to her fellow citizens: “when we buy War Bonds, we're not buying tanks and guns and shells and planes. What we're doing is buying our boys back ... bringing them home to us, safe and sound once again.”¹⁰ The call for voluntary contributions through War Bond commitments generated \$98.3 billion by 1945, representing almost half the then Gross National Product.¹¹

Our own data, utilizing a nationally representative probability sample of several thousand American adults surveyed in late 2008, underscores the public's sustained desire for and disappointment in the lack of opportunities they believed government offered to serve a meaningful role in the country's response to terrorism.¹² Seven years after 9/11, only 37 percent of Americans adults reported that they had ever made sacrifices on behalf of the “war on terror.” While Americans continued to engage in voluntary, unpaid civic services (32 percent), only a few (6 percent) reported participating in volunteer activities directly associated with crisis or disaster preparedness. A slim majority (52 percent) nevertheless indicated a desire for volunteer opportunities designed to prepare for and respond to disasters or acts of terrorism. Moreover, nearly two thirds of survey respondents felt that government had failed to provide or clearly explain ways for average citizens to play a role or participate in their country's defense against terrorism. Most respondents (66 percent) indicated that government had failed to

clearly explain citizens' role in the country's fight against terrorism and even more (74 percent) that government had failed to adequately explain how to prepare for acts of terror.

PREPARING FOR THE NEXT 'OPPORTUNITY-BUBBLE'

Although social scientists have often helped government craft patriotically appealing and persuasive calls for civic action during national crises in patriotically appealing and persuasive ways, we do not suggest that the results are inevitably effective or desirable. Political scientists contributed to the successful WWII war bond campaign. In contrast, similar efforts by the Federal Civil Defense Administration and the Psychological Strategy Board, designed to engage the public in the Cold War civil defense movement, ultimately backfired. Public outrage and distrust increased as the public's growing appreciation of the catastrophic destructive capacity of nuclear weapons emphatically contradicted the threat minimization and implied survivability underlying civil defense propaganda.¹³

Our main goal in this brief discussion is to call attention to the opportunities and challenges ahead. Tragedies will happen, even with the best planning. But leadership can take advantage of opportunity-bubbles to ensure that citizens are effectively engaged in constructive activities in post-tragedy eras. Thus, our message is that it is not enough to plan ahead to avert tragedies; it is also essential to plan ahead to take advantage of opportunity-bubbles when tragedies do come about.

The present climate of suspicion that pervades public attitudes towards government might well undermine enthusiasm for such planning, as well as confidence in prospects for capitalizing on opportunities. Indeed, distrust has long characterized public attitudes towards government. Throughout the decade following World War II, four out of five Americans reliably claimed broad trust and confidence in their government; by the millennium, only two in five Americans made similar claims.¹⁴ With respect to government

institutions charged specifically with homeland security or crisis management and preparedness missions, our own data reveals a parallel and troubling lack of public trust and confidence. Over the years 2006 and 2007, for example, we observed that between 20 and 30 percent of the public claimed "absolutely no confidence" in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). By December 2008 an even greater proportion (30-46 percent) did not trust DHS would be "open and honest with the public," "provide what was needed when it was needed," or "do the right thing" in the aftermath of a terrorist attack or other crisis – levels of distrust exceeded only by the public's appraisals of FEMA. To make matters worse, popular literature has suggested that government has and will cynically exploit the public's vulnerability and suffering inflicted by the "shock" of disasters and other crisis to enact highly unpopular political policies.¹⁵

On the surface, these trends seem disheartening for leadership, because they seem to suggest that citizens will not be influenced by leadership communications. However, to understand why this is not the case, it is useful to remind ourselves of typical behavioral trends in post-tragedy situations. The vitally important feature of opportunity-bubbles is that, for a fleeting period, citizens cast aside their doubts, criticisms, distrust, and negative attitudes, and become ready to sacrifice for the group and strongly support leadership. Thus, although the level of public trust in authorities is generally low at present, we can predict with high certainty that there will be a widespread readiness among the public to make sacrifices for society during the next opportunity-bubble.

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⁷ T.H. Sander and R.D. Putnam, "Still Bowling Alone? The Post-9/11 Split," *Journal of Democracy* 11, no. 1 (2010): 9-16.

⁸ George W. Bush, *State of the Union Address*, January 29, 2002, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/>.

⁹ Jim Lehrer, "President Bush defends decision to send additional troops to Iraq," interview by Jim Lehrer, *PBS NewsHour*, January 16, 2007, http://www.pbs.org/newshours/bb/white_house/jan-june07/bush_01-16.html

¹⁰ J.T. Sparrow, "Buying our Boys Back: The Mass Foundations of Fiscal Citizenship in World War II," *Journal of Policy History* 20, no. 2 (2008): 263.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² James N. Breckenridge, *The American Perceptions Study: Attitudes and Appraisals of Homeland Security* (Monterey, CA: The Center for Homeland Defense and Security, 2009).

¹³ A.D. Grossman, *Neither Dead nor Red. Civil Defense and American Political Development During the Early Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

¹⁴ Pew Research Center, "Trust in Government 1958-2010," in *Distrust, Discontent, Anger and Partisan Rancor: The People and Their Government* (Washington, DC: The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2010), 13-22, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1569/trust-in-government-distrust-discontent-anger-partisan-rancor>

¹⁵ See, for example, N. Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (NY: Henry Holt & Company, 2007).



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