By Tom W. Smith and Kenneth A. Rasinski

Assassination and Terror

Two American tragedies compared

White House photo by Paul Morse

JFK Library

In the days following the death of John F. Kennedy, the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) surveyed the mood of stunned Americans. Upon learning of the September 11 terrorist attacks, I felt, for the first time in the intervening four decades, that the Kennedy Assassination Study should be replicated.

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I consulted with my NORC colleague, Ken Rasinski, and we decided to launch the National Tragedy Study (NTS). In less than two days, we secured NORC's commitment to conduct the NTS, raised funds from the National Science Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the Russell Sage Foundation, and settled on the sample design and questionnaire content. By September 13 we were conducting interviews.

The NTS drew heavily from the Kennedy Assassination Study, allowing comparisons of public response to these two great national tragedies. Data from NORC's General Social Surveys allowed pre- and post-September 11 comparisons.

Tom W. Smith

The assassination of President Kennedy and the September 11 terrorist attacks are closely linked in the collective memory of Americans. Both events profoundly disrupted and distressed the nation. But based on comparisons between the

Kennedy Assassination Study and the National Tragedy Study, Kennedy's death seems to have had a more negative emotional and psychological impact than the terrorist attacks did.

Reactions to the two tragedies were, of course, similar in many regards. Upon learning about Kennedy's assassination, most people (54%) did not continue their normal activities; 25% carried on as usual, but found this difficult; and 20% continued pretty much as usual (see Figure 1). When they found out about the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, 49% of Americans stopped their usual activities, 27% carried on with difficulty, and 24% continued as normal.

And whereas in 1963, 30% of Americans saw themselves as more upset than others were, 60% as equally upset and 8% as less upset, in 2001, 25% were more upset, 64% as upset and 8% less upset.

Additionally, about half following both events said they could remember another time when they had had the same sort of feelings as when they learned of the tragedies (47% in 1963 and 49% in 2001). After Kennedy's assassination, 24% thought of a personal loss, usually a death in the family; after the terrorist attacks, 17% said the same.

But differences emerged in response to the question of what past public events were most brought to mind by the two tragedies—some, obviously, necessitated by the passage of time. Following the assassination, 27% were reminded of Franklin Roosevelt's death and 8% of Pearl Harbor.

Although 13% of respondents in the 2001 survey also mentioned World War II (especially Pearl Harbor) as the public event they most related to the terrorist attacks, 11% thought of the Oklahoma City bombing. The event cited most frequently, by 17%, was the Kennedy assassination itself. This last connection was especially strong for those old enough to have experienced both events. Among those ages 50 to 64 in 2001, fully 43% said they had had similar feelings after Kennedy's death to those experienced after the terrorist attacks.

People also differed slightly regarding prayer. In 1963, 75% said "special prayers" after the events. In 2001, despite theories about the secularization of American society, 84% offered prayers.

More dramatic differences were expressed in the nature of feelings and concerns experienced right after the events (see Figure 2). In 1963 the most common feeling was shame that such a thing had happened (50% said it was among their very deepest feelings), followed closely by anger (44%).

The next most common feelings were worry about the political situation in the country (19%), confusion over how to feel (18%), and worries about international relations (16%). Relatively rarely mentioned were concerns about safety "in this country these days" (10%), how one's own life would be

Methodological Note

The National Tragedy Study was conducted September 13-27, 2001, by NORC, University of Chicago. It was a telephone interview of adults (18+) living in households with telephones in the United States. The total sample size of 2,126 comprised a national sample of 1,013 and additional samples in the New York City (406), Washington, DC (206), and Chicagoland (502) areas. The overall response rate was 52%, with a 56% rate for the national portion of the survey, 50% for New York, 41% for Washington, DC, and 51% for the Chicagoland area.

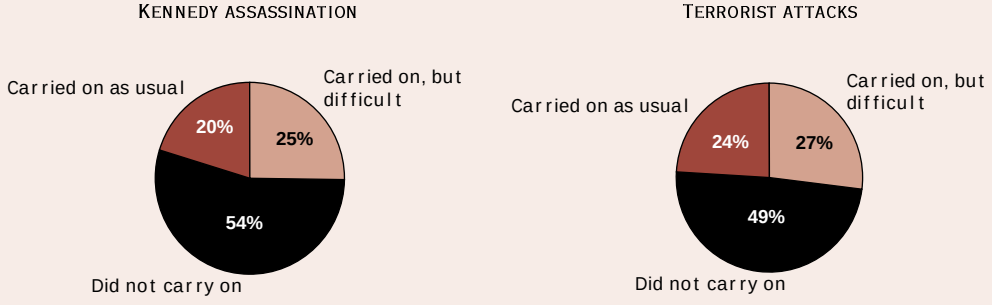
The Kennedy Assassination Study was conducted November 26-December 3, 1963, by NORC. It was an in-person interview of adults (21+) living in households in the United States and had 1,384 respondents. It used a modified probability sample.

Both questionnaires were organized in the same basic order, with the "heard about" and contact questions first, then items on similar events, carrying on as usual, etc. Next came the "deepest feeling" battery, followed by some items on the media asked only in 1963, and then the 15 symptoms battery. The 10-item affect balance item came much later, mostly after questions asked only in 1963 on children, Oswald, Ruby, and so forth.

Figure 1
Hard to Carry On

Question:

After you heard the news, did you continue your usual activities? Were you able to carry on pretty much as usual, or did you find it more difficult?



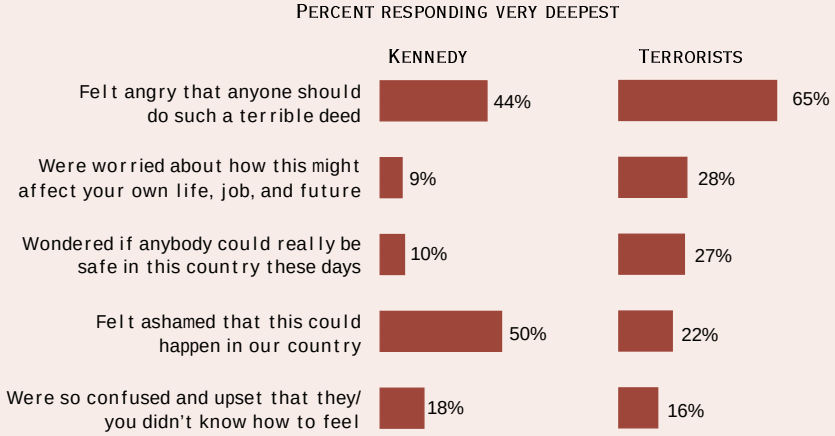
Source: Surveys by the National Opinion Research Center, November 26-December 3, 1963 and September 13-17, 2001.

Figure 2

Shame Exceeds Anger in '63

Questions:

I'm going to read some ways that some people felt when they first heard [that the president was dead/about the terrorist attacks] and I'd like you to tell me whether the statement represents your very deepest feeling, a feeling that was quite deep, whether the statement crossed your mind, or whether it never occurred to you. Here is the first statement:



Source: Surveys by the National Opinion Research Center, November 26-December 3, 1963 and September 13-17, 2001.

affected (9%), and whether Kennedy had brought his death on himself (2%).

After the terrorist attacks, the dominant reaction was anger (65%, up 21 percentage points from 1963). This was followed by worries about how one's own life would be affected (28%, up 19 points) and whether anyone was safe (27%, up 17 points). Next came feelings of shame (22%, down 28 points), concerns about foreign relations (20%, up 4 points) and domestic politics (17%, down 2 points), and confusion (16%, down 2 points). The idea that the nation brought the attacks on itself was felt by only 6% (up 4 points). In sum, anger and concerns about personal repercussions were up sharply after 9/11 compared to reactions after Kennedy's assassination. Feelings of being ashamed were down notably.

To measure the effects of these events on psychological well-being, both surveys used a 10-item "affect balance scale," developed by Norman Bradburn and described in his book, *The Structure of Psychological Well-Being* in 1969. The scale has five measures of "positive affect" and five measures of "negative affect" and is calculated by subtracting the number of negative affects from the total of positive affects.

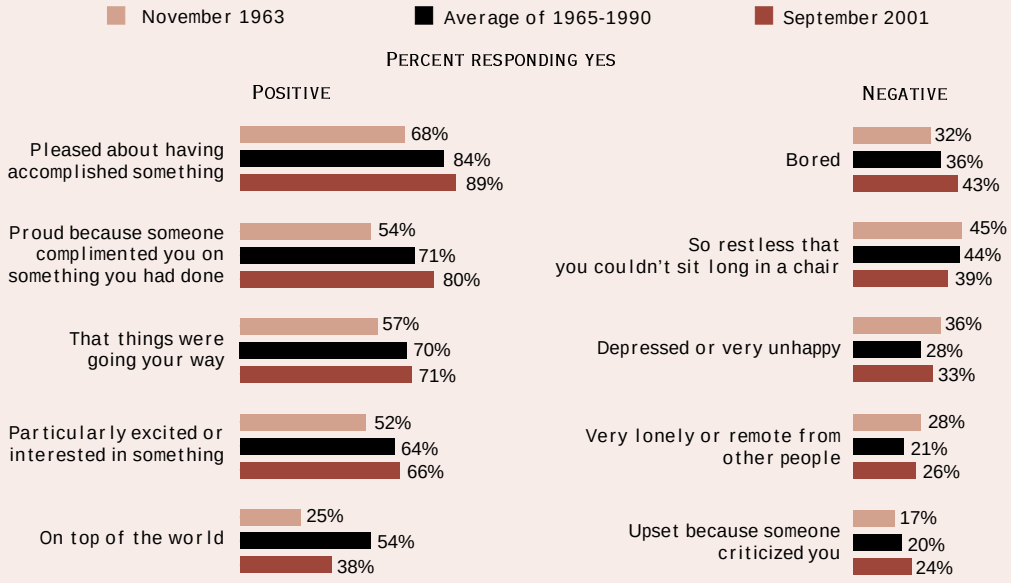
Following Kennedy's assassination, all measures of positive affect showed record lows (see Figure 3). Respondents' reports of being proud over a compliment, feeling that things were going their way, and having been pleased about an accomplishment were 13 to 17 percentage points lower than the average of readings taken during more normal times. Feelings of being "on top of

Figure 3

Measures of Psychological Well-Being

Question:

Here are a few questions we have been asking people regularly during the last few years, and we'd like to get your answers now. During the past few weeks, did you ever feel...?



Source: Surveys by the National Opinion Research Center, latest that of September 13-17, 2001.

the world" were less than half of typical readings, down about 29 points. Negative affects (feeling restless, bored, or upset by criticism) appeared little affected by the president's assassination. Loneliness and depression or unhappiness were slightly higher than at other times, but most negative affect measures fell within the normal range.

In contrast, after the September 11 attacks, positive affect not only differed little from typical readings; it was slightly stronger than usual. Being proud of a compliment, being pleased about an accomplishment, and feeling that things were going their way were all at record highs, although only pride was significantly greater than usual. Negative affect also was close to long-term norms. Reports of being bored and being upset by criticism were at record highs, but still not much above average.

In short, as reported by the authors and Marianna Toce in their 2001 report, *America Rebounds: A National Study of Public Response to the September 11th Terrorist Attacks*, by this measure Kennedy's assassination seems to have had a larger impact on psychological well-being overall than the attacks. Positive affect was down notably in 1963, but it was actually somewhat higher than normal after the terrorist attacks. Along with gains in national pride, confidence in institutions, and faith in people evidenced by comparisons of the NTS with the GSS, this pointed to the resiliency of Americans in September 2001.

Negative affect, on the other hand, seemed little changed by either tragedy. One possible explanation is that these levels are largely shaped by the mundane experiences of people's personal lives and how individuals interpret and respond to everyday events, rather than to extraordinary and catastrophic occurrences.

Affect balance (the number of positive experiences minus the number of negative experiences) was higher for men than women, for the better educated than the less educated, and for whites than blacks after both tragedies. There were no meaningful differences by religion in 1963, but Protestants scored higher in 2001 than other religious groups did. Affect balance was greatest among those ages 40 to 49 in 1963, tailing off to lows among respondents under 29 and those 65 and over, but it was lowest for this age group in 2001 and peaked among those 50 and over.

Both surveys also included a fifteen-item battery of stress and anxiety symptoms. Consistent with the readings of the affect balance scale, it indicated that Americans had a weaker physical and emotional response to the terrorist attacks than to Kennedy's assassination (see Figure 4). Compared to 1963, significantly fewer people in 2001 reported seven out of the 15 symptoms, and about the same proportion reported six. A greater proportion in 2001 reported two.

The four most commonly reported responses in 2001, however, were also the top four in 1963; these were "felt very nervous and tense," "felt sort of dazed and numb," "cried," and "had trouble getting to sleep." Each was reported by at least two-fifths of our samples.

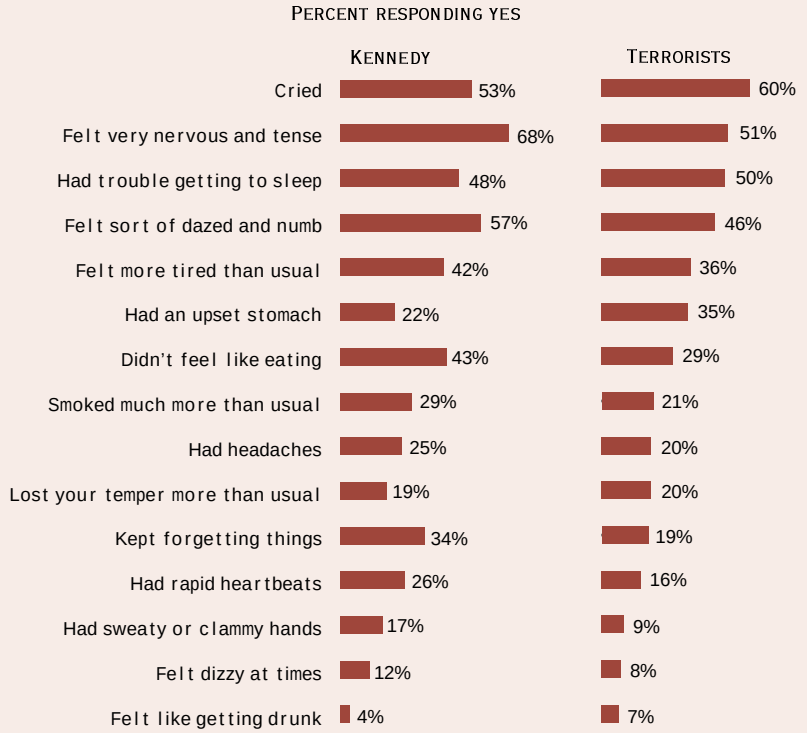
Crying was the most commonly reported reaction (60%) in 2001. More than half the nation also reported feeling very nervous and tense and having trouble getting to sleep, while a little less than half reported feeling dazed and numb. About one in three re-

Figure 4

Shocks to the System

Questions:

Here is a list of things some people have said happened to them during this period... During this period, was there any time when you...?



Source: Surveys by the National Opinion Research Center, November 26-December 3, 1963 and September 13-17, 2001.

ported feeling more tired than usual, having an upset stomach, and not feeling like eating, while about two-fifths reported smoking, having headaches, losing their tempers, and forgetting things more than usual.

Overall, people experienced an average of 5.0 symptoms in 1963 and 4.3 in 2001. After both tragedies, women had many more symptoms than men did (men 3.9 and women 5.9 in 1963; men 3.3 and women 5.1 in 2001). Likewise, at both times the middle-aged reported more symptoms than the young or old (30 to 39 year olds were the highest in 1963 with 5.4, and 40 to 49 year olds topped others with 5.0 in 2001).

Similarly, in both years Jews and Catholics suffered more than Protestants did, and symptoms decreased with level of education (but not significantly in 2001). Race made a difference, with blacks having more symptoms than whites did in 1963 (6.9 versus 4.7) but marginally fewer than whites in 2001 (4.2 versus 4.3). Paul B. Sheatsley and Jacob J. Feldman, in their 1964 *Public Opinion Quarterly* article, argued that blacks had more symptoms in 1963 because they were more pro-Kennedy as a result of his civil rights initiatives.

How do we explain the apparently greater negative impact of the Kennedy assassination on the minds and emotions of the American people? One reason may lie in the feelings experienced right after the event. While, as we have seen, respondents in 2001 cited anger most frequently as their deepest initial feeling after the attacks, people in 1963 compounded their anger with an even higher measure of shame.

Why were more people ashamed in 1963? In part, it was because Kennedy's assassin was a fellow American rather than foreign terrorists. Some evidence shows that many also thought our internal divisions had somehow led to the crime.

The role played by anger in 1963 may also have made feelings of distress more difficult to bear in the earlier tragedy. After the terrorist attacks, the country was immediately galvanized by efforts of rescue and recovery and the launching of the war on terrorism, imperatives that allowed the anger to be directed and become productive. People grieving over Kennedy's death, on the other hand, had no useful way to direct and dissipate their anger once Lee Harvey Oswald had been killed.

Finally, it may be significant that the vast majority of Americans learned about the shooting of President Kennedy and the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon within a half hour of the respective events. Perhaps because the Kennedy assassination occurred during the midday hours, while the terrorists struck as the workday was beginning in New York and Washington, slightly more people (68% to 59%) reported being with someone else in 1963 than on September 11 when the news broke.

Perhaps this last finding explains why one way in which the 2001 reaction was more intense was the need to reach out to others on the day of the event. More people said they felt like talking to others (74% to 54%), reported being contacted by others(49% to 38%) and contacted others (67% to 37%). This appears to reflect a need to overcome the greater isolation that comes with being alone at the moment one learns that tragedy has struck the nation.

Bearing the Brunt

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in October and June positive about the ability of New York's economy to recover from the terrorist attacks.

A comparison of the results from the New York City polls to those of national polls provides some informative context for these findings. The following are based on the June 2002 New York City poll and a CBS News national poll conducted from June 18-20, 2002:

- While New Yorkers' expectations of another terrorist attack weren't that different from those of Americans overall, the fear among New Yorkers hit closer to home. Seventy percent were personally very concerned about a terrorist attack in their area, with 28% not concerned. In the national poll those figures were reversed—29% of Americans were very concerned, and 70% were not (see Figure 3, page 28).

- New Yorkers were more critical than Americans overall of the government's efforts to prevent future attacks. Forty-six percent said the federal government was doing enough to help protect their city from terrorist attacks, and 44% said it was not. Nationally, 64% said the government was doing enough in the area in which they lived; 27% said it was not.

- Life went on, for New Yorkers and for Americans overall. In both polls, 66% said their lives were back to normal following the events of September 11.

One change that may last—at least for awhile—is that Americans now have a much more positive view of New York City than they have ever had before. The June national poll showed that 82% had a good image of the city—not much different from views last October, and a significant increase from previous polls.

And, as the nation's perception has brightened, New Yorkers continue to express a broad sense of pride in their troubled city. In October 2001, 93% said they had a good image of New York. In June 2002, 86% still did.