



# Sizing up the threat: The envisioned physical formidability of terrorists tracks their leaders' failures and successes



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## ABSTRACT

Victory in modern intergroup conflict derives from complex factors, including weaponry, economic resources, tactical outcomes, and leadership. We hypothesize that the mind summarizes such factors into simple metaphorical representations of physical size and strength, concrete dimensions that have determined the outcome of combat throughout both ontogenetic and phylogenetic experience. This model predicts that in the aftermath of tactical victories (e.g., killing an enemy leader), members of defeated groups will be conceptualized as less physically formidable. Conversely, reminders that groups possess effective leadership should lead their members to be envisioned as more physically formidable. Consonant with these predictions, in both an opportunistic study conducted immediately after Osama bin Laden's death was announced (Study 1) and a follow-up experiment conducted approximately a year later (Study 2), Americans for whom the killing was salient estimated a purported Islamic terrorist to be physically smaller/weaker. In Studies 3 and 4, primes of victorious terrorist leaders led to inflated estimates of terrorists' physical attributes. These findings elucidate how the mind represents contemporary military power, and may help to explain how even largely symbolic victories can influence reasoning about campaigns of coalitional aggression.

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## 1. Introduction

The announcement that the United States' military had killed Osama bin Laden triggered an outpouring of triumphant jubilation across the US. In President Obama's words, "The death of bin Laden marks the most significant achievement to date in our nation's effort to defeat al Qaeda" (2011). Regardless of one's perspective on the American "war on terror," understanding the psychology underlying intergroup aggression is vital. Violent intergroup conflict has been a significant determinant of fitness throughout the evolution of our species (Kelly, 2005; Wrangham & Peterson, 1996), indicating that humans may have evolved efficient ways of representing group for-

midability in order to facilitate assessments of whether to fight, flee, or appease enemies. At the proximate level of analysis, conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) postulates that concrete, familiar domains of embodied experience provide intuitive structures with which to reason about relatively abstract domains (e.g., the danger posed by well-organized versus leaderless enemy groups). Here, we investigate the effects of bin Laden's death on Americans' representations of the physical size and strength of members of their current focal adversary, the al Qaeda terrorist network. Conversely, we also explore the influence that perceptions of effective leadership exert on representations of the bodily formidability of members of terrorist groups.

Modern technology has largely decoupled the threat that adversaries pose from considerations of their literal physical brawn. Nevertheless, from infancy onward, experience teaches that bigger, stronger people typically win conflicts. Likewise, body size and strength are elementary

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determinants of the outcome of agonistic interactions in many species, and the same has likely been true throughout human evolution (Archer, 1988). Thus, complementary ontogenetic and phylogenetic considerations suggest that physical size and strength provide ready dimensions with which formidability may be conceptualized by the mind. In a recent finding bearing directly on the representation of actors in contexts of potential violence, persons capable of inflicting harm for reasons entirely unrelated to their bodily characteristics (i.e., possessing a gun or knife) were rated as physically larger and stronger (Fessler, Holbrook, & Snyder, 2012). Likewise, providing additional support for the hypothesis that formidability is conceptualized in terms of size and strength, men in the presence of allies were found to estimate a prospective violent adversary as smaller and weaker than were men who were either alone or had been temporarily isolated from their group (Fessler & Holbrook, *in press*). In related research, Schubert and colleagues have documented psychologically active size and verticality metaphors underlying concepts of social power (Schubert, 2005; Schubert, Waldzus, & Giessner, 2009; Zanolie et al., 2012; also see Duguid & Goncalo, 2012), and social power likely entails intuitions of dominance and the potential for violence (Clark, 2010). In sum, converging lines of evidence indicate that representations of formidability employ the dimensions of body size and strength.

In modern intergroup conflict, military power is the product of numerous factors, including weaponry, economic resources, alliances, tactical outcomes, and leadership. Our formidability representation model holds that the mind heuristically summarizes such variables, so that ongoing developments (e.g., victories or defeats) update a simple metaphorical representation of the conflicting parties' size and strength relative to one another. By this logic, indications that an adversary's group has suffered a strategic setback, such as a loss of leadership, may engender intuitions that members of that group pose less danger – and hence are physically diminished. The killing of Osama bin Laden by US forces provided a unique opportunity to test this prediction. We predicted that Americans for whom the killing of bin Laden was psychologically salient would evaluate a representative al Qaeda militant as physically smaller/weaker, and that this bias would not be explainable in terms of covarying patriotism or political attitudes. We also included an exploratory measure designed to test whether a symbolic representation of a group itself, rather than a constituent member, would show a similar size bias attendant to bin Laden's death: reflecting the recent US victory over al Qaeda, we hypothesized that the flag of the United States would be envisioned as physically larger by US citizens for whom bin Laden's death was salient.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants and overview of procedure

Six hundred and thirty nine adults living in regions across the US were recruited between May 3rd (the day

after bin Laden's death was announced) and May 18th, 2011 via Craigslist.org to participate in an unpaid online study advertised as a survey of Americans' perspectives on world events. Data were pre-screened to ensure that participants identified as Americans, completed the writing task, did not enter frivolous height estimates (e.g., estimating the terrorist to be over 7 feet tall), and affirmed at the close of the study that they believed reports that bin Laden had been killed (a topic of some debate at the time). The final sample consisted of 481 adults (336 female) with a mean age of 36.1 years ( $SD = 14.46$ ); the ethnicity of the sample was 79.5% White, 5.5% Hispanic, 3.4% African American, 2.1% Asian, and 9.6% mixed or Other.

After providing informed consent and demographic information, participants were asked to write about “the most personally exciting or gratifying news” they had heard in the past year concerning world events. Twenty-eight percent of the sample spontaneously wrote about bin Laden's death, an indication that the event was salient in their minds given that no reference to bin Laden, terrorism, or violence had been presented in either the study advertisement or the writing prompt. Following the open writing task, participants were asked to self-report personal traits, such as patriotism, likely to correlate with electing to write about bin Laden's death. Participants then estimated the physical characteristics of a purported terrorist based on a facial photograph depicting a swarthy, bearded man, identified as “an al Qaeda militant photographed at a training camp”. The image was cropped to ambiguate the model's bodily traits (see Fig. 1). Finally, participants were probed for suspicion about the hypotheses, asked whether they harbored doubts about whether bin Laden had been killed by US forces, thanked, and debriefed. Although several participants speculated that the study might involve terrorist stereotypes, none evinced suspicion that such stereotypes would relate to physical attributes influenced by politics, patriotism, or the salience of bin Laden's death.

### 2.2. Measures of individual differences

Our predictions concerned the consequences of bin Laden's death for American participants' mental representations, not the individual differences likely to correlate with choosing to write about bin Laden's death in the writing task. In order to take such differences into account, we asked participants to rate (using 9-point Likert scales) their political conservatism (1 = *Very liberal*, 9 = *Very conservative*), opinion of the current international prestige of the US (1 = *Not respected*, 9 = *Extremely respected*), and preference for US military intervention to resolve overseas conflicts (1 = *Diplomacy at all costs*, 9 = *Swift military action to neutralize any threat*). Patriotism was assessed using six items taken from Huddy and Khatib's (2007) patriotism scales (e.g., “How important is being American to you?”;  $\alpha = .87$ ).

### 2.3. Measure of terrorist bodily traits

Participants estimated the height, overall size, and muscularity of a purported terrorist on the basis of a facial

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