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The following is a compilation of excerpts from the Introduction and Chapter 1 of my book ms, ***Fear and Present Danger: Extra-factual Sources of Threat Conception and Proliferation.***

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When U.S. Senator Arthur Vandenberg famously told President Harry Truman that he would have to “scare the hell out of the American people” to secure support for the coming Cold War, Vandenberg was tapping into a tried and true tradition of strategically cultivating fear to influence attitudes and change behavior. While this tactic has a long history of use, strikingly little has been written on precisely how, why, and when it actually works. To be sure, much *has* been written on the influence of cognitive biases on decision-makers’ behavior. However, previous IR research has been largely silent on the supply side of this equation: namely, on the strategic triggering and manipulation of audiences' emotions and cognitive biases to influence security-related political attitudes and outcomes. This book offers the first systematic theoretical and empirical exploration of this phenomenon.

Coupling findings from recent breakthroughs in cognitive science and psychology with theoretical insights from an array of political science subfields, *Fear and Present Danger* presents a new international relations-focused explanation of how emotionally resonant threat narratives can materially affect individual attitudes and collective political behavior, through the use of what might be thought of as cognitive hacking. It asks, “when uncertainty is high, and verifiable facts are inconvenient or few, how do individuals learn what to fear and how to respond to the threats they have identified?” These questions lie at the heart of national security decision-making at the highest levels of government as well as at the most intimate levels of human decision-making. The answers I proffer in the book speak both to the micro-

Greenhill, *Fear and Present Danger*

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foundations of individual belief and how those beliefs can translate into macro-level, policy consequences.

I further explain why actors employing cognitive hacking so frequently eschew fact-based arguments in favor of “truthier” alternatives, such as rumors, conspiracy theories, propaganda, fiction and so-called fake news, sources I collectively refer to as “extra-factual information” (EFI). I show how, by exploiting inherent human cognitive, psychological and biological limitations and predispositions, enterprising actors both inside and outside governments strategically employ EFI to transform vague, (often) inchoate, and sometimes remote, objective sources of anxiety into proximate, and even existentially menacing domestic or international security threats through a process I call *threat conflation*, an extreme manifestation of its more commonly known relative, threat inflation. I identify the conditions under which policymakers and the public tend to find EFI-infused threat narratives persuasive. I also show how such narratives have been used by governments, as well as against them, to create anxiety and the appearance of uncertainty, to sow discord, and to sell security-related policies where and when facts are not enough.

The book examines three dimensions of cognitive hacking and threat conflation, which serve three distinct analytical functions: the determinants of individual-level belief; the process by which conflationary threats are spread and sold within societies and across states; and the domestic and international policy consequences to which this manipulation can give rise. The proposed hypotheses are then tested quantitatively and qualitatively using a combination of statistical analysis and comparative case studies, drawn from across the globe from the mid-nineteenth century through the present. Exploration of crosscutting patterns across cases

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demonstrates that while EFI content and delivery platforms have changed over time, the underlying mechanisms that make cognitive hacking such an effective instrument of political influence, and EFI, such a useful handmaiden to it, have not. This should not be so surprising: although communications technology has changed radically over the last 150 years, the way our brains process the information on offer has not.

To make its case, the book employs primary and secondary sources. These include archival materials from a variety of foreign and domestic libraries and document repositories as well as contemporary history and public opinion polling data, including original survey data I gathered via two avenues: domestically with the assistance of YouGov-Polimetrix and internationally in conjunction with ongoing World Bank team efforts.

What follows in the rest of this contribution are excerpts drawn from the theory chapter of *Fear and Present Danger*. I begin with a discussion the definition of extra-factual information and outline the common factors that characterize many of the sources of information upon which individuals may rely when desirable, verifiable facts are scarce, as is often the case in the security realm. I then explain why individuals are vulnerable to believing in EFI and even sometimes favoring it over verifiable fact-based alternatives. The next section examines the three key factors—worldview, threat perception and prior exposure—that I posit collectively determine who adopts EFI as actionable “truth” or knowledge and under what conditions. I then transition to a discussion of how EFI can be used as a handmaiden to effective cognitively-driven political influence operations and, in particular, threat conflation exercises. I further articulate how threat conflation differs from garden-variety threat inflation and why threat conflation offers a more complete, albeit not altogether new, explanation for observed

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behaviors and outcomes than existing alternatives. I next proffer hypotheses and predictive indicators of what we should see if and when threat conflation is in play (as opposed to the most plausible alternative explanations for the same observed behavior(s)). The excerpted chapter concludes with a brief description of the rest of the book.

### **What is Extra-factual information (EFI)?**

Extra-factual information (EFI) is information that is either unverified or unverifiable at the time of transmission using secure standards of evidence, but which nevertheless can serve as an actionable source of knowledge about the world both for those who believe it to be true and for those who exploit the fact that others believe it to be true. Some EFI will eventually be revealed to be objectively true, and other EFI, shown to be objectively false. What is key is that at least at the time of transmission such a determination cannot be made decisively using commonly agreed evidentiary standards. EFI comprises a variety of types of claims that transcend widely accepted facts, and common sources include, but are not limited to, rumors, conspiracy theories, myths, propaganda and other information operations, “fake news,” religious beliefs, and some forms of entertainment media.

When employed as a cognitive hacking tool, EFI is intentionally promulgated in order to persuade—to *either* change *or* reinforce and bolster the opinions and behavior of its audiences. As such, EFI is often presented in the form of self-contained, emotionally resonant narratives, or framed in ways that nestle neatly within already pre-existing societal narratives. Although unverified or unverifiable at the time of transmission, EFI will simultaneously be viewed as

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unassailably true by its adopters and unambiguously false by its detractors in the same timeframe.

Although sources of EFI are diverse in nature and in origin and can exercise independent influence, they are frequently interconnected, and one form of EFI can readily give birth to another. For instance, religious beliefs can beget suspect ideas about non-believers or “infidels”, which can in turn give rise to negative, emotive rumors about members of “out-group(s)”. Rumors may then stimulate fabrication of elaborate conspiracy theories designed to help “in-group” members make sense of troubling or threatening events. Such theories may be “codified” and/or further elaborated in fictional narratives, which may in turn be treated as objectively truthful political artifacts, despite their rather dubious origins. Governments and non-state actors may then adopt these “facts” in national propaganda campaigns to help sell policies to their publics. The noxious and enduring influence of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a piece of fiction masquerading as fact provides just one, albeit a very potent, example of this interconnectedness in action.<sup>1</sup>

Although a regular feature of everyday life, EFI can be particularly pervasive (as well as particularly persuasive) in ambiguous or threatening situations, such as during wars, in periods

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<sup>1</sup> This wholly fictitious document, which purports to be a genuine record of minutes of secret meetings between Jewish conspirators bent on world domination, was used by the Nazis not only to explain the myriad ills afflicting Germany in the interwar period, but also to rationalize and justify the Holocaust as an act of self-defense against an existential threat to the German people. See, for instance, Jeffrey Herf, *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda during World War II and the Holocaust* (New York: Belknap Press, 2008); Hadassa Ben-Itto, *The Lie that Wouldn't Die: the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2005); Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (London: Serif, 1967); Michael Hagemeister, “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion: Between History and Fiction,” *New German Critique*, vol. 103 (winter 2008): 83-94. Despite the fact that *the Protocols* has been proven in courts of law to be a work of fiction—and plagiarized fiction at that—it has episodically exercised varied, and sometimes quite devastating, political influence on both the public and political elites not simply in Germany, but also in Russia, in the Palestinian Territories and elsewhere in the Middle East, in China (and beyond) since it first appeared in the late nineteenth century.

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of economic or social unrest, or in the aftermath of terrorist attacks.<sup>2</sup> In such periods—when verifiable, fact-based data can be hard to acquire, particularly inconvenient to accept or subject to radical ambiguity—EFI can play important information-gathering roles for individuals and groups in search of answers and operating under uncertainty and bounded rationality.<sup>3</sup> Even if untrue, EFI can fill holes in people’s “knowledge” and enable them to cope with fear and uncertainty by generating shared explanations, often in the form of narratives that offer clarity, address anxieties, and provide rationalizations for otherwise inexplicable events. In some circumstances, this kind of collective “sense-making” can be invaluable, enabling individuals and groups to effectively function in times of acute stress, enhancing group solidarity, and providing a critical guide to action when facts are few and available data are ambiguous and confusing.<sup>4</sup>

EFI-driven sense-making can also be perilous. Extra-factual information can be leveraged into powerful political weapons and can influence policymaking at the highest levels of

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<sup>2</sup> Gordon W. Allport and Joseph Postman, *The Psychology of Rumor* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1947); Tamotsu Shibutani, *Imvised News: A Sociological Study of Rumor* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966); Nicholas DiFonzo and Prashant Bordia, “Rumor and Stable-cause Attribution in Prediction and Behavior,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, vol. 88, no. 2 (2002): 785-800; Gary Alan Fine, Chip Heath, and Veronique Champion-Vincent (eds.), *Rumor Mills: The Social Impact of Rumor and Legend*. Chicago: Aldine, 2005); Gary Alan Fine and Bill Ellis, *Global Grapevine: Why Rumors of Terrorism, Immigration, and Trade Matter*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> See e.g., Prashant Bordia and Ralph L. Rosnow, “Rumor Rest Stops on the Information Highway: A Naturalistic Study of Transmission Patterns in a Computer-mediated Rumor Chain,” *Human Communication Research* 25, no. 2 (1999): 163-79; Chip Heath, Chris Bell, and Emily Sternberg, “Emotional Selection in Memes: The Case of Urban Legends,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 81, no. 6 (2001): 1028-1041; Prashant Bordia, Nicholas DiFonzo, and Artemis Chang. “Rumor as Group Problem-solving: Development Patterns in Informal Computer-mediated Groups,” *Small Group Research* 30, no. 1 (1999): 8-28; Michael Shermer, *The Believing Brain: From Spiritual Faiths to Political Convictions? How We Construct Beliefs and Reinforce Them as Truths* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2012); Nicholas DiFonzo, “Ferretting Facts or Fashioning Fallacies? Factors in Rumor Accuracy,” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 4, no. 11 (2010): 1124-37; Jennifer M. Larson and Janet I. Lewis, “Rumors, Kinship Networks and Rebel Group Formation,” *International Organization* 72, no. 4 (2018): 871-903.

<sup>4</sup> Kelly M. Greenhill and Ben Oppenheim, “Rumor Has It” *International Studies Quarterly* (2017); Prashant Bordia, Nicholas DiFonzo, and Artemis Chang, “Rumor as Group Problem-solving: Development Patterns in Informal Computer-mediated Groups,” *Small Group Research* 30, no. 1 (1999): 8-28.

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government as well as in the field in the midst of ongoing military operations.<sup>5</sup> By tapping into individuals' desires and fears and, in some cases, mapping them onto emotionally resonant narratives of past events, problem solving by EFI can motivate or rationalize resorts to violence or other political action.<sup>6</sup> Throughout history and around the globe, savvy elites have both passively exploited and actively deployed EFI as a instrument of persuasion and influence, blending fact and fiction to sell threats, and corresponding policy responses, that may seem preposterous to some, while appearing self-evident to others.

### **Sources of Vulnerability to EFI**

Why would individuals and/or their leaders believe EFI or fall prey to EFI-infused fear appeals?

Four interacting and overlapping variables are responsible. In a complex world individuals can neither be experts on everything nor deeply cogitate on every stimulus they encounter. Thus some cognitive and knowledge gathering shortcuts are perforce required.<sup>7</sup> In the absence of personal or direct knowledge of the facts that underlie many of their decisions, individuals must rely on what others write, say or do. Yet, the quantity and quality of available information from which individuals can draw varies dramatically across time and space. Even in peacetime, the

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<sup>5</sup> For a recent example of influence in military operations, see Matthieu Aikins, "Doctors with Enemies: Did Afghan Forces Target the MSF Hospital?," *New York Times*, May 17, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Donald Horowitz and Ashutosh Varshney, "Lethal Ethnic Riots: Lessons From India And Beyond". *United States Institute of Peace Special Report 101* (Washington, DC, 2003), 5. Rumor dissemination alone may be an independently sufficient cause of ethnic conflict, See e.g., Ravi Bhavnani, Michael Findley, and Joseph Kuklinski, "Rumor Dynamics in Ethnic Violence". *Journal of Politics* 71, no. 3 (2009): 876-92; Larson and Lewis, "Rumors." On instrumental manipulation of emotions, see, e.g., Andrew Ross, *Mixed Emotions: Beyond Fear and Hatred in International Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2013). See also Jonathan Mercer, "Emotional Beliefs". *International Organization* 64, no. 1 (2010): 1-31; Marcus Holmes, "Believing This and Alieving That: Theorizing Affect and Intuitions in International Politics," *International Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (2015): 706-20.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Arthur Lupia and Matthew McCubbins *The Democratic Dilemma: Can Citizens Learn What They Really Need to Know?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Paul M. Sniderman, Richard Brody, Phillip E. Tetlock, *Reasoning and Choice: Explorations in Political Psychology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

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security realm is by its very nature not a verifiable fact-rich environment: verifiable facts about threats and risks we face can be hard to come by, not only because real and potential adversaries do not generally share their plans and capabilities with each other, but also because, even within one's own country, security is a realm characterized by an abundance of classified information, a general need for secrecy, and omnipresent imperatives to protect sources, methods, and data about capabilities.

Even if data are available, the nuts and bolts of many national security issues—e.g., the workings and capabilities of weapons systems; whether torture is an effective interrogation method; what intelligence gathering abilities a state actually has; how dangerous (and/or capable) is a particular foreign or domestic adversary—fall outside the experience and expertise of most people.<sup>8</sup> There is also a dearth of relevant analogies in civilian life that might provide alternative sources of data upon which citizens could draw or extrapolate. Faced with significant informational limitations, EFI helps fills in the blanks.

Moreover, individuals do not just gather information from consuming EFI; they actually learn about the world from it.<sup>9</sup> Not only can even explicitly fictional material change minds, but

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<sup>8</sup> Consider that, in late 2010, nearly 80,000 Americans were deployed in Afghanistan, while nearly 2.2 million Americans played *Modern Warfare 2* on the gaming console Xbox Live during *a single day* that same fall. This example highlights the potentially staggering gap between real, experientially derived knowledge and 'EFI'-derived 'knowledge' in the national security realm. Chris Suellentrop, "War Games," *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, September 8, 2010. See also Seth Schiesel, "Recruiting the Inner Military Hero in Man," *New York Times*, November 15, 2011. As the number of living Americans who served under the draft declines, the number of individuals with personal real world experience and expertise in this arena can only be expected to grow smaller.

<sup>9</sup> See e.g., Stephen J. Dubner and Steven D. Levitt, "The Jane Fonda Effect: Is a 1979 Thriller to Blame for America's Over Reliance on Fossil Fuels?," *New York Times Magazine*, September 16, 2007, 28-30; Cheryl Koopman et al., "The Effects of Watching Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 911* on Voting Intentions, Mood and Beliefs About Why President Bush and His Administration Initiated the War in Iraq," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 12 (2006): 139-56; and Kelly M. Greenhill, "'24' on the Brain," *Los Angeles Times Op-Ed*, May 28, 2007.



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its persuasive effects actually become more pronounced over time.<sup>10</sup> As time goes on, people tend to forget where they originally acquired information, and their confidence in its veracity consequently rises.<sup>11</sup> Even explicitly fictional sources routinely morph into credible, factual sources in individuals' recollection, and they do so within remarkably short spans of time.<sup>12</sup> Thus a film, a work of fiction, a rumor on a blog, a conspiracy theory, or even a piece of advertising may even retrospectively morph into a "factual" news source—granting still further credence to information with little or no basis in objective fact.<sup>13</sup> Paradoxically, however, while people do indeed learn from, and can be persuaded by EFI,<sup>14</sup> it is also the case that most individuals stubbornly reject the idea that they can be so influenced.<sup>15</sup> This translates into a potentially problematic lack of self-awareness about what is driving individuals' beliefs.

Psychological predispositions further blur the fact-fiction distinction. Because individuals' certainty about their beliefs, attitudes and opinions is less salient than the beliefs themselves, certainty-related information is more likely to be lost in the process of communication than is the information itself and the beliefs that undergird it. Less abstractly, what this indicates is that though individuals transmit their core beliefs when they

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<sup>10</sup> Markus Appel and Tobias Richter, "Persuasive Effects of Fictional Narratives Increase Over Time," *Media Psychology* 10 (2007): 113-34.

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, these veracity effects hold even when subjects are informed that what they have been told or read is not true. This finding comports with studies that find that debriefing does not work. Author's communication with Jon Krosnick, February 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Markus Appel and Tobias Richter, "Persuasive Effects of Fictional Narratives Increase Over Time," *Media Psychology* 10 (2007): 113-34.

<sup>13</sup> Karen Dill, *How Fantasy Becomes Reality: Seeing Through Media Influence* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 13.

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, *ibid.*; Richard J. Gerrig, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993); ; Jeffrey Strange and Cynthia Leung, "How Anecdotal Accounts and Fiction Can Influence Judgment of a Social Problem's Urgency, Causes and Cures," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 25 (1999): 436-49; Jeffrey Strange, "How Fictional Tales Wag Real-world Beliefs."; and Appel and Richter, "Persuasive Effects."

<sup>15</sup> Social psychologist and media scholar Karen Dill calls this phenomenon the "Media Manipulation Denial Syndrome. Dill, *How Fantasy Becomes Reality*.

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communicate with one another, they frequently fail to transmit their level of confidence or lack thereof about the veracity those beliefs. Thus, a belief originally associated with high uncertainty tends to lose this uncertainty across communications.”<sup>16</sup> This baseline tendency towards what might be thought of as “credibility creep” is amplified by the fact that repetition triggers a variety of cognitive biases that enhance the information’s credibility simply by virtue of repeated exposure and the fact that credibility grows organically as the number of people who believe something grows.<sup>17</sup>

Evolutionary biology can also play a role. Human brains process external stimuli in two ways: through so-called *low road* (emotions) and *high road* (rationality) pathways. The low road is a “quick and dirty”, “fast, automatic, intuitive and largely unconscious mode,” which allows for a swift reaction, which in dangerous situations may make a difference. The high, “higher reasoning” road is a “slow, deliberate, analytical and consciously effortful mode of reasoning” that produces a more discriminating, careful response to external stimuli, but takes more time. However, since getting it wrong or simply reacting too slowly can be deadly, there are powerful biological imperatives to err on the side of caution, even if this means perceiving threats that aren’t there.<sup>18</sup>

In sum, cognitive demands necessitate reliance on mental heuristics and shortcuts and

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<sup>16</sup> “David Dubois, Derek D. Rucker, Zakary L. Tormala, “From Rumors to Facts, and Facts to Rumors: The Role of Certainty Decay in Consumer Communications,” *Journal of Marketing Research* 48, no. 6 (2011): 1020-32.

<sup>17</sup> These biases include, but are not limited to: the *availability heuristic*—the tendency to overestimate the likelihood of events that are more salient or “available” in one’s memory; the *availability cascade*—a self-reinforcing process in which a collective belief gains plausibility through its increasing repetition in public discourse; the *frequency illusion*: the illusion in which a word, a name or other item that has recently come to one’s attention seems to appear with improbable frequency thereafter; the *exposure effect*—the tendency to express undue affinity for things that are familiar; or the *recency bias*—the tendency to attribute disproportionate salience to recent stimuli.

<sup>18</sup> Shermer, *The Believing Brain*, 59; LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain*, 165. Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*.

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information acquired from others. However, verifiable fact-based data on issues related to security and threats are often hard to acquire, especially in times of crisis and conflict. Coupled with psychological predispositions to learn from non-factual sources, forget said sources, and transmit information without reference to its reliability, it is hardly surprising that EFI often becomes “fact” for many information consumers, especially when “helped along” by threat merchants engaged in fear-based influence campaigns designed to fan fears that have little or no basis in objective reality, but may ring viscerally true to target audiences.

At the same time, however, not everyone believes all EFI, security-related or otherwise. So what drives who adopts a given piece of idea, and under what conditions? The following section provides an answer.

### **EFI Adoption and Its Functions**

For any given EFI-derived contested social fact, there are three kinds of audiences: receptives, neutrals, and skeptics.<sup>19</sup> This does not mean that there are three groups in a given society that will respond to all EFI in the same way, but rather that for any given piece of EFI, there will be three baseline audiences; who falls into what category will depend on the content, context and source of the EFI on offer. *Receptive* individuals (or disciples) will require little or no persuasion; they will view the EFI on offer as self-evidently true. *Neutrals* (or agnostics) require some degree of persuasion, but are open to the idea that the information *might* be true. *Skeptics* (or atheists) will reject the information outright, at least at the outset. Thus, a given piece of EFI can have one of four possible effects on its recipient: 1) it can change the person’s mind; 2) it

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<sup>19</sup> Terminology borrowed from Cass Sunstein, *On Rumors*.

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can reinforce or strengthen his or her preexisting beliefs; 3) it can be acted upon instrumentally and used as a device to sell EFI to others, without being believed; or 4) it can have no effect whatsoever. The first effect is most likely to be observed among agnostics, while the second is most often observed among disciples. Instrumental use can be found among all three types (receptives, neutrals and skeptics), although, if conditions are right, even the most cynical skeptics sometimes become disciples over time (and vice versa).

Three factors determine whether an individual will be receptive, agnostic, or skeptical about a given piece of EFI:

1. **Worldview:** the degree to which the content of the EFI fits with the individual's pre-existing mental map: the set of concepts, beliefs, and experiences through which they (consciously or unconsciously) interpret and judge reality;
2. **Salience/threat perception:** how anxious the individual is about issues directly related to the EFI on offer; and
3. **Repetition** (prior exposure): how often the individual has heard the EFI (or related EFI) before.

### *Worldview*

The term "worldview" refers to an individual's fundamental cognitive orientation. A person's worldview comprises her knowledge, experience, and point of view, including her values, emotions, ethics, and other beliefs. Worldview affects how one interprets, responds to and feels about other individuals, events, and institutions.

What people believe and "know" before they hear a new piece of information

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influences how they receive and interpret it.<sup>20</sup> Information that comports with individuals' previous beliefs and existing worldviews is easier to assimilate than information that causes what is known as cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance is defined as "an uncomfortable feeling caused by holding two contradictory ideas simultaneously."<sup>21</sup> Dissonance occurs when a person perceives a logical inconsistency in his beliefs, when one idea implies the opposite of another. Incoming information must pass a prima facie "laugh-test"—it must seem plausible. If and when the two conflict, worldview will be ultimately more influential than plausibility.<sup>22</sup> In other words, social truth will trump objective truth.<sup>23</sup>

Just as individuals differ in terms of levels of personal trust, risk acceptance, and tolerance for uncertainty, they also vary in their baseline levels of personal credulity—i.e., in their predisposition to be generally receptive to, neutral toward or skeptical of unverified information.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, no one is immune to EFI: if the information feels "right" and helps satisfy acute cognitive and psychological needs, it is more likely to be embraced.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Charles Lord, Lee Ross, and Mark R. Lepper, "Biased Assimilation and Attitude Polarization: The Effects of Prior Theories on Subsequently Considered Evidence," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37 (11) (1979): 2098-2109.

<sup>21</sup> Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957).

<sup>22</sup> P. Sol Hart and Erik Nisbet, "Boomerang Effects in Science Communication: How Motivated Reasoning and Identity Cues Amplify Opinion Polarization About Climate Mitigation Policies," *Communication Research* (2011); Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions," *Political Behavior* 32 (2010): 303-30.

<sup>23</sup> Kari Edwards and Edward Smith, "A Disconfirmation Bias in the Evaluation of Arguments," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 71 (1996): 5-24; Charles S. Taber and Milton Lodge, "Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs," *American Journal of Political Science* 50 (2006): 755-69. As Wood et al. found among those skeptical or fearful of authority, "distrust of official narratives may be so strong [among believers] that many alternative theories are simultaneously endorsed in spite of any contradictions between them." Michael J. Wood, Karen M. Douglas and Robbie Sutton, "Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories," *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 3 (2012): 767-73.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Shermer, *The Believing Brain* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2012); Wood, Douglas and Sutton, "Dead and Alive."

<sup>25</sup> As John Zaller has argued, "Every opinion is a marriage of information and predisposition: information to form a mental picture of the given issue, and predisposition to motivate some conclusion about it...the public opinion that

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There are multiple ways to measure the effect of worldview on receptivity to information. Due to their particular importance in motivating attitudes on issues of security, I focus on the role of political ideology, and the sources and the content of the EFI on offer. I discuss each in turn.

Since publication of *The American Voter* nearly 60 years ago, political scientists have recognized the influence of political ideology as one kind of “perceptual screen” through which citizens process political information.<sup>26</sup> Individuals with pronounced ideological leanings will exhibit resistance to information inconsistent with their beliefs, a tendency that is not mitigated by high levels of knowledge.<sup>27</sup> This tendency is further heightened when the issues on which the information bears are ones about which individuals feel strongly. In fact, after reading “balanced materials” that offer competing arguments, opponents of an idea may even become strengthened in their opposition and more firmly committed to the contrary viewpoint.<sup>28</sup> Individuals with strong political leanings may even evince resistance to believing brute facts, if accepting the information would require updating or altering their political evaluations and beliefs.<sup>29</sup> These tendencies may be exacerbated by what Weber and Jentleson call “affiliative sorting,” or the ability of information consumers to screen out unwanted opinions and to

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exists on a given issue can rarely be considered a straightforward response to ‘the [brute] facts’ of a situation.” John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 12-13.

<sup>26</sup> Campbell et al., *The American Voter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); Zaller, *Nature and Origins*; Larry M. Bartels, “Beyond the Running Tally: Partisan Bias in Political Perceptions,” *Political Behavior* 24 (2002): 117-50.

<sup>27</sup> Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*; Bartels, “Beyond the Running Tally”; Taber and Lodge 2006; Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels, “It Feels Like We’re Thinking: The Rationalizing Voter and Electoral Democracy,” <http://www.princeton.edu/~bartels/thinking.pdf>; Charles S. Taber and Milton Lodge, “Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs,” *American Journal of Political Science* 50 (2006): 755-69; Bryan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, “When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misconceptions,” *Political Behavior* 32 (2010): 303-30.

<sup>28</sup> Sunstein, *Going to Extremes*, 51.

<sup>29</sup> See, e.g., Achen and Bartels, “It Feels Like We’re Thinking,” <http://www.princeton.edu/~bartels/thinking.pdf>.

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connect only with like-minded individuals and news sources that are concordant with their views.<sup>30</sup>

A second key determinant of how and whether a piece of EFI fits within an individual's worldview is the perceived veracity its source.<sup>31</sup> How sources are evaluated in turn depends on what are known as the *politics of plausibility* and the *politics of credibility*.<sup>32</sup> Assessing source plausibility entails evaluating a recipient's interpretation of events.<sup>33</sup> While it is not necessary for an individual to believe a reported event did or will happen, he or she must believe that it could have happened or could happen in the future. How long something is viewed as plausible depends on the idea's popularity and its spread.<sup>34</sup>

Credibility, in contrast, depends on whether the source would have access to the information about which he or she speaks, and whether the claims are likely to be true by virtue of *who* the speaker is.<sup>35</sup> In assessing the answers, individuals evaluate the source's proximity to the event, whether the information asserted would be available to the source, and the source's motivations for conveying the information.<sup>36</sup> Hence, if a source is deemed

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<sup>30</sup> Steven Weber and Bruce Jentleson, *The End of Arrogance: America in the Global Competition of Ideas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>31</sup> See also Kelly M. Greenhill and Ben Oppenheim, "A Likely Story? "The Role of Source in Rumor Believability and Diffusion" (under review).

<sup>32</sup> See, e.g., Gary Alan Fine and Irfan Khawaja, "Celebrating Arabs and Grateful Terrorists: Rumor and the Politics of Plausibility," in Gary Alan Fine, Veronique-Campion-Vincent, and Chip Heath (eds.), *Rumor Mills: The Social Impact of Rumor and Legend New* (Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Press, 2005).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Joel Best, *Flavor of the Month: Why Smart People Fall for Fads* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006).

<sup>35</sup> Randall Calvert, "The Value of Biased Information: A Rational Choice Model of Political Advice," *Journal of Politics* 47(1985): 530-555; Andrew Kydd, "Which Side Are You On? Bias, Credibility, and Mediation," *American Journal of Political Science* 47(2003): 597-611; Arthur Lupia and Mathew D. McCubbins, *The Democratic Dilemma: Can Citizens Learn What They Need to Know?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>36</sup> James N. Druckman, "Political Preference Formation: Competition, Deliberation, and the (Ir)relevance of Framing Effects," *American Political Science Review* 98(2004): 671-86; James Kuklinski and Norman Hurley, "On Hearing and Interpreting Political Messages: A Cautionary Tale of Citizen Cue-Taking," *Journal of Politics* 56(1994): 729-751;

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plausible and credible, the EFI itself will more readily be accepted as true or plausibly true.

With respect to content, worldview manifests itself in myriad ways in individuals' attitudes and beliefs, including their levels of trust or distrust. As Eric M. Uslaner observes, "your worldview, not your resources, determines whether you will trust other people."<sup>37</sup> The same logic holds for how individuals feel about social, religious and political institutions. Consequently, one way to operationalize and isolate the influence of worldview on belief in a particular piece of EFI is to measure the level of trust one feels towards the actors implicated in the EFI in question. I posit therefore that individuals will be more likely to believe EFI that assigns culpability and responsibility to people, groups, and institutions about which they *already feel* skepticism, hostility, or distrust and far less likely to believe corresponding EFI about actors and entities for which they feel amity, affinity, and trust. So, as distrust of an entity implicated in an EFI rises, the more likely it is the EFI on offer will be perceived as possibly or definitely true.<sup>38</sup>

### *Threat perception*

Worldview does not operate in a vacuum, however. Its effects can be augmented or mitigated by issue salience, and, in particular, by an individual's level of fear and anxiety about issues related to the content of a particular piece of EFI. As Davis and Silver observed, "if any single factor is likely to drive people to cede civil liberties [even if doing so runs counter to their values

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Paul Sniderman, Richard Brody, and Philip Tetlock, *Reasoning and Choice: Explorations in Political Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>37</sup> Eric M Uslaner, *The Moral Foundations of Trust* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2002), 109; see also Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

<sup>38</sup> Additional measures of worldview are explored and formalized in Chapters 1 and 2 of *Fear and Present Danger*.



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and worldview], it is threat.”<sup>39</sup> Threats have been shown to promote political learning and decrease reliance on habitual cues and/or “standing decisions”—e.g., ideology and partisanship—when making political decisions.<sup>40</sup> “Affective intelligence theory” (AIT), for instance, contends that, because anxiety is unpleasant, when individuals grow anxious about political issues or actors, they will be motivated to attempt to decrease their anxiety by seeking information that will either confirm previous attitudes or help them change their minds—and thereby alleviate their anxiety. A significant implication of AIT is that individuals tend to rely on their existing political views to guide new decisions unless anxiety arises. When anxiety does arise, however, individuals will be highly motivated to acquire additional information, pay more attention to news coverage, and base political decisions more heavily on newly acquired information rather than on partisanship.<sup>41</sup> Higher levels of threat perception increase attention both to the source of the threat and to sources of information. Not only will anxious individuals pay closer attention to news that they encounter, but they will also seek out additional information that bears on issues and/or individuals that provoked the anxiety in the first place. Consequently, anxious individuals are not only more informed—if perhaps in a selective way—

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<sup>39</sup> Darren Davis and Brian Silver, “Civil Liberties vs. Security: Public Opinion in the Context of the Terrorist Attacks on America”. *American Journal of Political Science* 48(1) (2004): 30.

<sup>40</sup> Ted Brader, *Campaigning for Hearts and Minds: How Emotional Appeals in Political Ads Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); George Marcus, *The Sentimental Citizen: Emotion in Democratic Politics* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002); George E. Marcus, W. Russell Neuman, Michael MacKuen, *Affective Intelligence and Political Judgment* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000); W. Russell Neuman, et al., *The Affect Effect: Dynamics of Emotion in Political Thinking and Behavior* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. (Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen).

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but are also more open to persuasion.<sup>42</sup> Of course, this information-seeking tendency may backfire when facts are in short supply and the only information on offer is the unverified kind.

Moreover, while moderate anxiety can motivate fact-finding, extreme anxiety stymie individuals' capacities to engage in a rational assessment of the knowledge they have gathered, which can lead to a heightened susceptibility to threatening interpretations of otherwise ambiguous events or data.<sup>43</sup> Highly fearful individuals are more likely to follow emotion-driven, "low-road" thinking than "high-road" deliberative and critical thinking.<sup>44</sup> Under such circumstances, individuals are less likely to interrogate the logic or plausibility of unverified information<sup>45</sup> and, in seeking to alleviate anxiety and risk, may be more willing to accept the costs of Type I (false positive) than Type II (false negative) errors. Furthermore, emotions such as distrust and anxiety influence what sorts of evidence individuals seek out and retain, and those that they discard. Emotions also influence how material realities, such as capabilities, and dangers are received, understood, and acted upon.<sup>46</sup>

The aforementioned factors can interact to create a reinforcing cycle of EFI adoption. During periods of instability, violence, or insecurity, the ratio of EFI to fact can rise due to information scarcity, while high levels of anxiety and fear are more common due to the heightened (perceived) level of risk and danger. Thus, as threat perception rises, so does the

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<sup>42</sup> See, e.g., Shana Kushner Gadarian, "The Politics of Threat: How Terrorism News Shapes Foreign Policy Attitudes," *Journal of Politics* 72(2010): 469-483.

<sup>43</sup> Bordia and DiFonzo, "Psychological Motivations," 89. See also Colin MacLeod and Ilan L. Cohen, "Anxiety and the Interpretation of Ambiguity: A Text Comprehension Study," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 102 (1993): 238-47.

<sup>44</sup> Marcus and MacKuen 1993; Huddy, Feldman, Taber, and Lahav 2005; Shermer 2012.

<sup>45</sup> M.V. Pezzo and J.W. Beckstead, "A Multilevel Analysis of Rumor Transmission: Effects of Anxiety and Belief in Two Field Experiments," *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 28 (2006): 91-100.

<sup>46</sup> See, for instance, Kelly M. Greenhill, "Of Wars and Rumors of Wars: Extra-factual Information and (In)Advertent Escalation," commissioned white paper for the Stanley Foundation/CISAC/Hoover Institution (December 2018).

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probability that a piece of EFI related to the object or source of anxiety will be perceived as possibly or definitely true.

### *Repetition (prior exposure)*

Whenever EFI is spread through a group, levels of exposure vary. Some individuals hear the information on myriad occasions; others never hear it. Leaving aside the particular

characteristics of a particular piece of EFI, repetition matters for three inter-related reasons.

First, per the discussion above, repeated exposure to information can trigger a variety of cognitive biases and responses that tend to enhance a piece of information's credibility simply by virtue of having been heard before; this is what is known as the illusory truth effect.<sup>47</sup>

Second, over time people forget where they learned things, and even fictional sources routinely morph into "factual" sources in individuals' recollections, often within remarkably short spans of time.<sup>48</sup> This can both enhance the credibility of a piece of EFI and lead to its being treated as fact, thereby enhancing the probability that neutral agnostics will become receptive believers.

Third, credibility grows with as the number of believers grows. Per the discussion above, as the adage goes, "if so many people believe X, it must be true." The result is that the more often EFI is repeated, the more likely it is that neutrals will be persuaded of its veracity, and the more likely it is that previously skeptical individuals may become neutral or even receptive. This is especially likely because EFI is often spread within kin, friendship, and social circles.<sup>49</sup> As Garrett and Danziger found in a study of the spread of rumors electronically, "It is a self-reinforcing

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<sup>47</sup> See e.g., <https://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/features/xge-0000098.pdf>.

<sup>48</sup> Appel and Richter.

<sup>49</sup> See again Fine; and Larson and Lewis.

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process that seems to amplify rumor beliefs through repetition. ... People who are biased to accept the rumors they receive from friends, [are more likely to] forward [rumors reported in] e-mail to other friends, who repeat the process over and over again.”<sup>50</sup> In sum, all other things being equal, having heard an EFI before heightens the probability that it will be viewed as possibly or definitely true.

In sum, the ease (or difficulty) of cognitive and psychological buy-in to a piece of EFI—be it a rumor, a conspiracy theory, or a piece of fake news or government propaganda—is a collective consequence of existing beliefs,<sup>51</sup> prevailing levels of fear and anxiety,<sup>52</sup> and prior exposure. But whence do exposure and heightened fear and anxiety come? How does one get from openness to EFI to actual adoption, further dissemination and measurable policy responses?

### **Cognitive Hacking and Threat Conflation**

Appeals to fear and to the narratives that undergird them have a long (and often sordid) history of serving as effective, if sometimes dangerous, tools of political mobilization, in every kind of regime (from the most closed and authoritarian to the most open and liberal). By separating "us" from "them" and "in-groups" from "out-groups", leaders of all stripes have successfully

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<sup>50</sup> <http://economistsview.typepad.com/economistsview/2011/03/rumorology.html>.

<sup>51</sup> See also, e.g., Robert Jervis' excellent discussion of cognitive dissonance in *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*; Steven Weber and Bruce Jentleson, *The End of Arrogance: America in the Global Competition of Ideas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010);

<sup>52</sup> See also, e.g., Ted Brader, *Campaigning for Hearts and Minds: How Emotional Appeals in Political Ads Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); George Marcus, *The Sentimental Citizen: Emotion in Democratic Politics* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002); George E. Marcus, W. Russell Neuman, Michael MacKuen, *Affective Intelligence and Political Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); W. Russell Neuman, et al., *The Affect Effect: Dynamics of Emotion in Political Thinking and Behavior* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). Shana Kushner Gadarian and Bethany Albertson, "Anxiety, Immigration, and the Search for Information," *Political Psychology* 35, no. 2 (2014): 133-64.

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sold acts of aggression, expansionism, repression and violence as acts of self-defense and group preservation. Such appeals don't always work, but mobilization based on appeals to fear is often easier to catalyze, in a far wider array of political environments and regimes, than many like to believe. Such mobilization can lead countries to war, and incite individuals to violence. That such fear appeals may be grounded as much in fiction as in fact is immaterial; this is not only an inconvenient truth, but also a brute fact.

One key cognitive and psychological manipulation method by which EFI can be used to generate threat and mobilize political action is through the process of *threat conflation*—an extreme manifestation of its better-known sibling, *threat inflation*.<sup>53</sup> Like threat inflation, threat conflation involves the exaggeration of a security-related risk or danger for political or military ends. However, threat inflation entails the exaggeration of an already generally recognized and agreed threat beyond the range of ambiguity inherent in such assessments. Threat conflation ups the ante and goes exponentially farther. Threat conflation entails coupling an (often) inchoate, and sometimes remote, objective source of anxiety—such as economic duress in post-World War I Germany, or irregular migration patterns in post-9/11 America and Europe—with a more proximate and menacing, albeit unverifiable, existential threat—such as there is a plot by Jews to take over the world in post WWI Germany; and many refugees are hardened criminals and terrorists, in the contemporary American and European contexts. EFI serves as a critical “threat multiplier” in such narratives.

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<sup>53</sup> Per Chaim Kaufmann, threat inflation is defined as: (1) claims that go beyond the range of ambiguity that disinterested experts would credit as plausible; (2) a consistent pattern of worst-case assertions over a range of factual issues that are logically unrelated or only weakly related; (3) use of double standards in evaluating intelligence in a way that favors worst-case threat assessments; or (4) claims based on circular logic. Chaim Kaufmann, “Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas,” *International Security* 29 (summer 2004): 8-9.

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Put another way, purveyors of threat conflation narratives marry a kernel or kernels of truth about an anxiety-producing issue with emotive and fear-producing EFI, in ways designed to heighten and broaden threat perception and generate newfound and significant support for a pre-existing policy objective—war, oppression and ultimately genocide in the case of the Nazi Germany; and tightening of immigration and refugee policies, building of fences and walls in the case of contemporary US and EU politics. By using dramatic, emotive, and fear-inducing EFI to blur the boundaries between widely shared sources of anxiety, enterprising actors can mobilize support for policies that fact-based appeals (even inflated ones) fail to muster.

Threat conflation is a variation on a tried and true instrument of propaganda: create a problem and then offer a solution to it. This bait-and-switch simultaneously permits manipulators to achieve their pre-existing policy objectives and to look like heroes for promising to vanquish ostensibly significant—but actually illusory—threats. Threat conflation, in other words, comprises not only the identification of critical threats, but also proposed (frequently, silver bullet) solutions for combatting and vanquishing the identified threats.

#### *Pathways to Policy and Overton Window Shifts*

EFI-enhanced cognitive hacking in the service of threat conflation efforts can be effected via several distinct, non-mutually exclusive, pathways: EFI can be deployed and spread by leaders to influence their publics and/or other elites; EFI can be deployed by actors outside government to directly influence the beliefs and policy positions of leaders within it; and EFI can be introduced by non-governmental elites into society and then spread with the (sometimes unwitting) assistance of the public (and of the media), with the expectation that the EFI will

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spread like a virus throughout society via social contagion and, in turn, influence government decision-making by generating pressure for action at the top, which appears to have emanated from below. If successful, threat conflation can also facilitate the normalization of previously abnormal ideas.

At any given time, there is a range of ideas and potential policies that a politician can recommend without being considered too extreme to gain public office. This range is referred to as the “Overton window” after Joseph Overton, the public relations executive who developed the concept. Ideas that fall outside the prevailing Overton Window are usually rejected without much debate. Yet the Overton Window is not fixed—the range of acceptable ideas can be shifted over time. Publicly arguing for fringe ideas and policies can make other ideas—even those that would have been considered extreme relative to the status quo—appear moderate by comparison. By introducing conflated threats into policy discussions and deliberately promoting extreme solutions to them, political actors can make ever-so-slightly less fringe ideas seem to be acceptable compromises, thereby normalizing as potentially acceptable the previously unmentionable.

### *The Role of a Ripe Environment*

All this being said, given the scale and scope of the policy responses usually associated with threat conflation appeals—e.g., significant increases in military spending; conscription; war; mass atrocities and/or genocide; etc.—such campaigns are as a rule only successfully launched in the aftermath of domestic or international “shock events”. Shock events are “events that are

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unexpected and confusing and throw a society into chaos.”<sup>54</sup> If and only if such permissive conditions arise, the resulting threat conflation campaigns tend to rely on simultaneously targeted *and* indiscriminate informational carpet-bombing by elites (again, inside government, outside government, or both), with the complicity or inadvertent assistance of the fact-based media, and the active engagement of public relations firms and/or other information progenitors. These efforts tend to be coupled with—or even primarily reliant on—the deployment and exploitation of entertainment media and a relative paucity of authoritative dissent and debunking to succeed. Given what is required, threat conflation is rarely a policy instrument of first resort. Rather, it is most commonly employed when earlier attempts to sell the same objective through traditional policy processes or even garden-variety threat inflation have failed.

### *The Cognitive Dimension of Conflation Campaigns*

Successful threat conflation operations rely on exploitation and manipulation of an array of cognitive vulnerabilities common to all human beings. While susceptibility is universal, what specific information will trigger vulnerabilities varies across time, space and segments of populations. Tapping into the innate human tendencies outlined in the first part of this chapter, threat conflation strategies are intentionally designed to rely on fear and high anxiety to trigger audience members’ cognitive biases; to artificially stimulate more (and more artificially

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<sup>54</sup> Heather Cox Richardson, “Shock Events.” See also Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Karen M Douglas, “Conspiracy Theories as Part of History: The Role of Societal Crisis Situations,” *Memory Studies* 10(3) (2017): 323–33.



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extended) low-road, emotion-driven (vs. high-road, reason-driven) information processing; and, in extreme cases, even to trigger biological survival instincts.<sup>55</sup>

That cognitive hacking works (and, in some cases, is necessary) to sell certain ideas, policies and products (broadly defined) has long been intuitively understood and exploited by actors in politics, intelligence, public relations, and marketing. As Richard Barnett argued many decades ago, sometimes exaggeration is not enough, especially when aiming to generate support for policy objectives that affect societies as a whole—militarily, politically and/or economically. Under such circumstances, it may be necessary alternately to frighten, flatter, excite, and/or calm; indeed, to turn “the theater of crisis into a high art.”<sup>56</sup> Thus these techniques and their employment are not new. What *is* new is the fact that recent advances in cognitive science have now made it possible for us to understand exactly how and why this kind of intentional manipulation works--i.e., how our own brains can be used against us as means to political and military ends.<sup>57</sup> How and why does this process work?

In the center of the human brain is an almond-shaped amygdala. It is the fulcrum of humans’ most primitive (“reptilian”) and powerful emotions, including fear. Essential fears, such as fear of death and fear of the unknown, light up amygdala like Christmas trees. On an immediate basis, when fear is triggered, individuals respond with an outpouring of stress

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<sup>55</sup> Kahneman; and Shermer.

<sup>56</sup> Richard Barnett, *Roots of War: The Men and Institutions Behind U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Penguin, 1971), 267.

<sup>57</sup> These same techniques are being used commercially and for political marketing. In addition to in conjunction with polls and focus groups, for instance, functional magnetic resonance imaging is now being used by ‘neuromarketers’ to analyze oxygen uptake to different brain regions, such as the amygdala, and the insula, or insular region at the center of the forebrain under the cortex associated with body awareness, disgust and hate. MRI maps religious thoughts to the frontal cortex (inferior frontal gyrus), areas associated with the theory of mind, with higher order cognition. They also use EEG and non-invasive techniques such as measuring muscle, skin, and pupil response.

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hormones known as a “fight or flight” response that not only stimulates action, but also clouds perception.

By employing the same cognitive bias-activating and psychological manipulation techniques employed in neuromarketing campaigns and other types of fear appeals, enterprising actors can force individuals to remain in heightened states of anxiety, leading to extended low-road, emotion-driven thinking. When anxiety is at very high levels, not only will anxious individuals pay closer attention to data they encounter, but they will also seek out additional information that bears on issues and/or individuals that provoked the anxiety in the first place. At the same time, extreme anxiety stymies individuals’ capacities to rationally the knowledge they have gathered, leading to a heightened susceptibility to threatening interpretations of otherwise ambiguous events or data.<sup>58</sup> Consequently, highly anxious individuals are not only likely to be more selectively informed, but are also more open to external persuasion.<sup>59</sup>

Due to the significance of repetition in driving perceptions of veracity, existing research suggests more selective information seeking is also likely to further bolster EFI-driven persuasive effects. For instance, political fear appeals heighten desire for still more information relevant to the issues covered in said appeals, and that the most evocative appeals also heightened recall of information relevant to the message purveyed.<sup>60</sup> As Brader put it: “images and sounds, or even words that tap personal experience or deeply ingrained symbols of

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<sup>58</sup> Bordia and DiFonzo, “Psychological Motivations,” 89. See also Colin MacLeod and Ilan L. Cohen, “Anxiety and the Interpretation of Ambiguity: A Text Comprehension Study,” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 102 (1993): 238-47.

<sup>59</sup> See, e.g., Shana Kushner Gadarian, “The Politics of Threat: How Terrorism News Shapes Foreign Policy Attitudes,” *Journal of Politics* 72(2010): 469-483.

<sup>60</sup> Ted Brader, “Striking a Responsive Chord: How Political Ads Motivate and Persuade Voters by Appealing to Emotions,” *American Journal of Political Science* 49(2005): 388-405. See also Brader 2006.

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success, failure, or danger, can help unleash the desired emotional response in an audience.”<sup>61</sup> Such effects—especially in light of the posited interaction effects of threat perception, repetition and EFI adoption—in turn redound to the benefit of purveyors of threat conflation campaigns.<sup>62</sup> Under George W. Bush’s administration, for instance, how threatened one felt was a significant predictor of how supportive individual Americans were of Bush’s foreign policy agenda, including the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as how supportive citizens were of the president himself.<sup>63</sup> Feelings of threat heighten fear and lead citizens to support policies that they believe will neutralize the source of those threats.<sup>64</sup>

In the next section, I outline what we should see if threat conflation exercises are underway, how to distinguish them from alternative explanations for the same observable behaviors, and what observable changes should be evident, if such campaigns are in fact successful.

### **Evidentiary Predictions**

If my argument is correct, in the cases examined, we should find evidence of threat claims that are not simply exaggerations of recognized threats, but instead extend beyond stretching uncertainty estimates into the realm of what was understood to be highly implausible or

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<sup>61</sup> Brader, “Striking a Responsive Chord,” 390-91.

<sup>62</sup> Mary-Kate Lizotte, Milton Lodge, and Charles Tabor, “Measuring Emotions in Political Surveys: Semantic versus Somatic Responses,” Paper presented at the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, 2006.

<sup>63</sup> Stanley Feldman and Leonie Huddy, “The Paradoxical Effects of Anxiety on Political Learning,” Paper delivered at the 2005 meeting of the Midwestern Political Science Association Annual Meeting; *ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Carol Gordon and Asher Arian, “Threat and Decision Making,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45 (2001): 196-215; Mark Landau et al., “Deliver Us from Evil: The Effects of Mortality Salience and Reminders of 9/11 on Support for President George W. Bush,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 30 (2004): 1136-50.

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(nearly) impossible, even at the time. We should also find evidence of desired political-military objectives—or, in the absence of action, feared political-military outcomes—that *predate* a domestic or international shock. In the aftermath of permissive condition-creating societal shocks, we should in turn observe shifts in threat framing that marry objectively measurable, but limited, threats to EFI-laden and unverifiable *existential* threats to state and/or societal security. We should also see evidence of this self same EFI being broadly and widely deployed in policy discourse. We should correspondingly observe the pre-shock policy objective(s) being introduced post-shock as a comprehensive solution to the problem.

On the other hand, we should not find evidence of proposed solution that are consistent with widely recognized and objectively measured security threats—i.e., we should not find evidence that suggests that the observable policy outcomes were rational, if oversold, responses to the prevailing security environment, which is to say, balancing. We should also not find evidence that decision makers were influenced to adopt the policies they did as a straightforward consequence of an information failure—i.e., that decision-making and policy implementation was an organizational theory-driven intelligence failure. We should also not find evidence that observed policy outcomes could be attributed to some other, non-generalizable, context-specific set of events or other material influences.

If threat conflation efforts successful, and the constructed, envisioned, and imagined become accepted as actionable truth by key constituencies (be they a narrow set or elites or a broad swath of a society), we should be able to identify observable shifts in the nature of discourse about prevailing threats and their severity as well as the formulation and implementation of policy responses to those threats. Moreover, such shifts should happen *only*

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after the introduction of EFI. Moreover, the proposed responses should be allegedly directed at addressing not only verifiable threats, but also the posited, but unverifiable, existential ones. Ideally, one would also find evidence of a desired political-military objective that predates a domestic or international shock, and post-shock we should see shifts in threat framing that marry objectively measurable threats to unverified, *existential* threats. We should also see evidence of this self same EFI being broadly and widely deployed in policy discourse and should correspondingly see the pre-identified policy objective being introduced as a comprehensive, solution to the problem.

### **Roadmap for the rest of the book**

Following the quantitative analysis presented in the next chapter, the remainder of the book explores the interaction of the micro- and the macro-level processes through a series of case studies that examine variations in the influence of EFI in the realm of national security across time and space, in both democracies and dictatorships. Chapter 3 investigates the influence of the invasion literature genre in pre-WWI Britain and the instrumental role it played in feeding invasion fears and spy mania between the Franco-Prussian and Great Wars. Chapter 4 tackles the enduring influence of the so-called Jewish world conspiracy, with a particular focus on its influence in Tsarist Russia and Weimar and Nazi Germany, but also highlighting its ongoing influence in parts of the Middle East and East Asia today. Chapter 5 examines the two most significant red scares in the US, comparing and contrasting the post-WWI and post-WWII iterations of this national and international security issue and, using newly released archival material, demonstrates the somewhat surprising connections these cases have to those

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explored in the previous chapter. Chapter 6 compares two cases that focus on US-Japan relations, a Japan “threat” that (somewhat oddly) arose in the US in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and a real threat that was not fully appreciated in the years, months and days leading up to the devastating attack on US forces at Pearl Harbor and East Asia in December 1941. Chapter 7 comprises a set of illustrative recent and ongoing mini-cases that demonstrate the contemporary applicability and policy relevance of my theory; these include pre-invasion Iraq, post-invasion Ukraine, the ongoing European and Central America migration crises, the rise of China and the 2016 US Presidential election. Chapter 7 summarizes the book’s findings, identifies cross-cutting patterns across time and cases, details how policymakers can combat as well as harness the power of EFI to more comprehensively address today’s national security challenges and identifies current trends and what they may portend for the future.

Taken together, the cases not only illustrate the deployment of various kinds of EFI and their domestic and international interaction effects, but also explore how widely divergent cases can be intimately interconnected. For instance, the White Russian response to the Bolshevik Revolution helped introduce the Protocols into post-WWI Germany (Chapter 4), and also helped fuel the first Red Scare, which in turn laid the groundwork for the second Red Scare, in the US (Chapter 5). Decades later, this same piece of EFI is effectively being used in parts of the Islamic world as both an instrument of radicalization and a justification for acts of terrorism, which in the post-9/11 era, has in turn engendered its own array of EFI-influenced policy responses (Chapter 7). Finally, they show, consistent with the recent research by Uscinski and Parent on American conspiracy theories, that the influence of EFI is not a new, internet era,

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social media-driven phenomenon.<sup>65</sup> As I noted near the outset of this piece, technology has shifted; human cognition has not.

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<sup>65</sup> Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).