

The Punctuated-Equilibrium Theory and U.S. Counterterrorism Policy

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Abstract:

Despite the existence of large amounts of casualties associated with other causes of death in the United States, the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001 (and its associated body count) have become integrated into the pantheon of jarring historic moments where many can tell you exactly where they were when they heard about it. Often compared to the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor which inaugurated the United States' entrance into the Second World War, the September 11th attacks similarly lurched American policy on terrorism from a patchwork of different legal statutes and enforcement capabilities at various levels of government to a concerted national push on various fronts (including diplomatic, economic, and military). This is often referred to as the "Global War on Terror," and it has had a drastic effect on U.S. policy in general as well as counterterrorism in particular. This article seeks to explore this subject in depth by utilizing the punctuated-equilibrium theory in order to elucidate the phenomenon of American counterterrorism policy, post-9/11.

Keywords: Terrorism, conflict, global security, punctuated-equilibrium theory, counterterrorism, foreign policy, United States, War on Terror.

1. Introduction:

Modern terrorism within the contours of our understanding has been around since the middle of the twentieth century, with over 1,000 American casualties accrued before the critical events on September 11th (also referred to as "9/11"). Yet American counterterrorism policy was slow to keep pace and adapt with the changing international landscape over time, particularly after the end of the Cold War and its transformative effect on many countries and their societies (Honig, 2019). Even events such as the bombings by Al-Qaida on American embassies in Tanzania and Kenya in 1998 failed to create the massive policy shift to U.S. counterterrorism institutions and policies which the 9/11 attacks succeeded in doing.

What could explain this sequence of events, and how counterterrorism policies had maintained such a vulnerable status quo for so long before such a rapid oscillation occurred? The punctuated-equilibrium theory provides a good framework for understanding this phenomenon. In this article I will first discuss the theory itself, going in depth as to the particular notions found in punctuated-equilibrium theory. Following this, I will discuss the history and background of U.S. counterterrorism policy, as well as the 9/11 event. Next, I will discuss how the punctuated-equilibrium theory fits into U.S. counterterrorism policies. Then I will conclude with a brief summary and some final thoughts on the matter.

2. The Punctuated-Equilibrium Theory:

In the United States and elsewhere, political processes tend to be a slow-moving and incremental operation. Rapid changes are rare, and normally political processes are typified as being stable. However, this isn't always the case. Although stasis is typically the norm in a large amount of policy areas most of the time, there are occasionally abrupt and sudden large-scale changes in public policy. In a sense, it is probable that somewhere in the policy world at any given time there is large-scale change going on.

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But the policy world in the American context is vast, and is typically not in a state of complete drastic flux. Punctuated-equilibrium theory seeks to explain this duality, between incrementalism as the norm in public policies with occasional drastic breaks and changes. The fact that abrupt changes do happen regularly (albeit not often by our standard) in a sense makes them something of a norm, but more often than not policymaking goes forward through incremental, marginal changes (Kingdon, 1995; Baumgartner, Jones, 1991, 1993; Dodd, 1994; Kelly, 1994; Hill, Varone, 2017). Punctuated-equilibrium theory seeks to explain this dichotomy of stasis and incrementalism as well as drastic change by affixing the policy process to the two notions of bounded rational decision making (individuals and organizations have cognitive limits in making decisions) and political institutions (such as Congress or the Presidency), while noting the importance of two intertwined factors in the policy process: agenda setting and issue definition. It should be observed that the amount of incrementalism depends on both institutional interactions as well as the policy in question (Jensen, 2009). James True, Bryan Jones, and Frank Baumgartner (2006) neatly summarize the aforementioned intertwined factors by observing that “As issues are defined in public discourse in different ways, and as issues rise and fall in the public agenda, existing policies can be either reinforced or questioned... Reinforcement creates great obstacles to anything but modest change, but the questioning of policies at the most fundamental levels creates opportunities for major reversals in policy outcomes” (pg. 2). The theory has been successful in explaining public policies in many ways, but not of predicting exactly when drastic changes will occur in specific public policies. Political systems appear to largely favor the status quo, and are relatively conservative in that sense.

Change does occur in policymaking, usually marginal but occasionally drastic. An addendum to this observation is that both types of policy changes originate from the interaction of behavioral decision-making and multilevel political institutions (with occasionally overlapping jurisdictions or regimented separation). In effect, U.S. political institutions were designed to resist change which doesn't have a groundswell mobilization of support behind it. However, sometimes overlapping jurisdictions, open access to mobilizations, and separated institutions can reinforce change instead of resisting it. True, Jones, and Baumgartner (2006) note that once there is an interest mobilization for policy change under way (regardless of what sparked it), “...the diffuse jurisdictional boundaries that separate the various overlapping institutions of government can allow many governmental actors to become involved in a new policy area... Typically, the newcomers are proponents of changes in the status quo, and they often overwhelm the previously controlling powers” (pg. 4). Often singular controlling powers (aka policy monopolies) have a firm grip on power and control in their issue-oriented policy subsystem (also known as iron triangles or issue networks). Successful policy monopolies stifle moves for major change, known as a negative feedback process (True, Jones, Baumgartner, 2006). But punctuated equilibrium theory states that inevitably, there will be drastic changes which occur. Long-term overinvestment in a public policy may eventually result in the puncturing of proverbial “policy bubbles,” ushering in change (Jones, Thomas, Wolfe, 2014). These changes themselves become set into the institutional framework, creating a new equilibrium after attention to the issue has receded.

Policy subsystems are needed because the policy exigencies of the United States are of such a complicated nature that they require what is known as parallel processing. That is to say, because of policy subsystems the American government doesn't have to handle one issue at a time (serial processing), which would be remarkably inefficient for such a vast and complicated entity. Parallel processing allows the political system to handle multiple issues at the same time, but also inherently acts against drastic fluctuations in public policy. This type of processing occasionally is discarded, and policymakers resort to serial processing of high profile policy issues at the upper, macro-political levels of government. Baumgartner and Jones (2002) note that “When an issue area is on the macro-political agenda, small changes in the objective circumstances can cause large changes in policy, and we say that the system is undergoing a positive feedback process” (pg. 9). It is positive feedback which helps to surmount inertia and create drastic changes in policymaking.

It is at this juncture that major changes to policy occur, a time of disequilibrium. When this happens, frequently the media (and its inordinately strong amount of influence in shaping perception) is involved, as well as the definitions of issues undergoing fluctuation (Jones, 1994; Jeon, Haider-Markel, 2001; Honig, 2019). Large-scale, splashy events such as the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor (with images of it plastered on every newspaper, television set, and articulated on every radio broadcast) can have the effect of propelling policy issues into the macro-political levels of policymaking, leading to the President himself addressing Congress on the matter as the U.S. prepared to go to war in that instance. A rapid change in attention amongst Americans had just occurred, what is known as a “serial shift” (Jones, 1994). The policy image regarding the Japanese Empire had taken a sinister turn, and the decision-making which was happening occurred at the highest levels of the national government. Drastic alterations in policy occurs when images change (or there are new ones) and venues of public policies interact with this changing image.

For someone interested in affecting change in policy, it is common strategy to pursue policy venues (different courts, for example) which may seem like an ideal fit for one's cause (Pralle, 2003). True, Jones, and Baumgartner (2006) note that "A new [or altered] image may attract new participants, and the multiple venues in the American political system constitute multiple opportunities for policy entrepreneurs to advance their case...a mobilization stymied in one venue may be successful in another...Each institutional venue has its own language, set of participants, and limitations, leading to evolving sets of strategies among those who would try to affect the agenda-setting process" (pgs. 11-12). Thus, it seems when there is a perfect confluence of many factors in the realm of public policy, drastic changes can and do occur. However, more often than not public policy exists in a seemingly stable form of stasis, with only incremental change as the norm.

3. United States Counterterrorism Policies:

Terrorism itself is a subjective concept (one person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter, as the saying goes). However, Daniel Arce M. and Todd Sandler (2005) provide a useful definition that "Terrorism is the premeditated use or threat of use of violence by individuals or subnational groups to obtain political, religious, or ideological objectives through intimidation of a large audience usually beyond that of the immediate victims...By simulating randomness, terrorists create an atmosphere of fear where everyone feels vulnerable, thereby extending their sphere of influence as far as possible" (pg. 183). It is impossible to describe American counterterrorism policies outside the context of September 11th, 2001. But this is what makes that event so unique. Before it happened, the use of airplanes as suicide missiles seemed like a possibility no one had seriously considered. After the 9/11 terrorist attack, however, it has been seared into the American psyche. Organizations such as the Department of Homeland Security or activities like taking your shoes off and laptop out of its case before one goes through airport security have now become ubiquitous to the American experience. But beforehand, this was very much not the case.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the specter of terrorism had yet to appear on the radar of many Americans. Although spending on antiterrorism programs rose from \$61.7 million to \$205.3 million in the fiscal 1999 appropriations (and the military was already pushing for an increased role in counterterrorism), the patchwork of laws, jurisdictions, and actors in this policy realm caused lines of responsibility to blur and overlap (Crenshaw, 2001). This in turn led to a degree of confusion, and thus vulnerabilities. American counterterrorism policy prior to September 11th was largely focused on the extremes of the terrorist activity spectrum. These included such simple things as a bombing on one end, to attacks with weapons of mass destruction on the other. Critically, there was a vulnerable middle ground which Al-Qaida exploited by using airplanes as suicide missiles and coupling that with a formidable media campaign. Furthermore, efforts at the time by entrenched civil liberties interest groups and politicians pushed against counterterrorism policies which may have infringed on personal rights, creating resistance to change (and thus a negative feedback process). In the post-Cold War period, it appeared that counterterrorism policymaking would exist within a general framework of diffusion of power (Crenshaw, 2001).

That all changed on the tragic day of September 11th, 2001. On that day, 19 Al-Qaida operatives hijacked four airliners (despite several of them being singled out for further security inspection) on a one-way mission. By the end of it, they and over 3,000 individuals had perished. To put this in perspective, about 1,000 Americans had died in total from terrorism prior to this (Hoffman, 2002). Two of the airplanes on 9/11 flew into the World Trade Center, leveling it in the process. One airplane managed to heavily damage the Pentagon, while the final plane crashed in a field in rural Pennsylvania after the crew and passengers attempted to regain control. Although modern terrorism as we know it has existed since the Palestinian "Black September Organization" in the 1970s, this attack was on a scale unfamiliar to most Americans. Hallmarks of this attack were its participants' striking level of dedication, sophistication, synchronization, and secrecy. Shortly thereafter, Osama Bin Laden appeared on television to claim responsibility (and to again declare war against the United States).

In a rapid staccato of events, the United States mobilized for a response. Shortly after the attacks, Al-Qaida targets were bombed in their sanctuaries in Afghanistan. A drastic revamping of counterterrorism policy occurred in the United States, as the military, law enforcement, and intelligence agencies saw themselves streamlined into a singularly focused effort for conducting the "Global War on Terror." The Department of Homeland Security (as well as the Transportation Security Administration) was founded. The passage of the "USA Patriot Act" gave sweeping new powers to policymakers and actors in the realm of counterterrorism. Where once there hadn't been the political will to mobilize, the American people and government were galvanized by what they saw as a very personal attack on the United States. This allowed a drastic reformation of what had come before.

Not only did the intervention in Afghanistan's civil war begin as a result of 9/11 (as well as many other deployments of U.S. military power around the globe) (Honig, 2019), but on the domestic front there was a considerable effort made to protect the American homeland. In the words of Attorney General John Ashcroft at the time, "The September 11 attacks demonstrate that the war on terrorism must be fought and won at home as well as abroad." Funding was made available for systems designed to aid information sharing at the local, state, federal, and tribal levels of law enforcement, forming a monolithic effort to combat terrorism which has taken on a life of its own (Waxman, 2009). According to Richard Jackson (2011), this post-September 11th effort includes "...military actions in Afghanistan, Iraq...and elsewhere...a global intelligence-gathering and terrorist suspect interdiction and rendition program; an international public diplomacy program, the expansion of military assistance programs; the enactment of major new domestic counterterrorism legislation; the reorganization of domestic security and intelligence agencies; the construction of a vast new public safety infrastructure, including widespread surveillance and data-collection; vastly increased expenditures for the military and security agencies; and the funding of counterterrorism research and development programs" (pgs. 392-393). This multifaceted, coordinated response is a far cry from what counterterrorism policy looked like prior to September 11th, when it resembled more of a patchwork quilt than a coherent national response. Furthermore, these policies have largely remained the same since their inception under the administration of George W. Bush, up through Barack Obama's administration and continuing on through to Donald Trump's current administration.

4. Punctuated-Equilibrium Theory and U.S. Counterterrorism Policies:

The general meandering of counterterrorism policies in the U.S. prior to the events of 9/11, coupled with the thunderclap of the attack itself which led to their drastic reformation, can be explained using the punctuated-equilibrium theory. Before 9/11, changes in U.S. counterterrorism policies were incremental. These policies seemed to exist in stasis rather than in any manner of drastic flux. There was some modest raising of attention and funds prior to 9/11 for the purposes of counterterrorism, which fits into the notion of incremental change. But the attack itself was the catalyst which propelled drastic change to these policies. 9/11 succeeded in blasting counterterrorism policies out of their subsystems in the various courts, intelligence agencies, and law enforcement institutions and into the intense spotlight of the macro-political levels of government.

According to punctuated-equilibrium theory, it was only a matter of time until this happened. Although predicting the attacks themselves would have been troublesome, the theory does account for the transformation of U.S. counterterrorism policies after 9/11. Within the realm of those involved in policymaking (Congress, the Executive Branch, etc.), other issues were forced to the side as institutions switched to serial processing in order to handle the enormity of the crisis. Not only was it a tragedy, but media attention to it was nonstop. The entire image which counterterrorism policy had been viewed with (perhaps a suspicious one, that these policies were inclined to take away personal liberties) was transformed. Objection to activities such as eavesdropping and domestic spying now became unpatriotic, as the policy image of counterterrorism changed. Bruce Hoffman (2002) observed that "...before September 11 the United States arguably lacked the political will to sustain a long and determined counterterrorism campaign...The record of inchoate, unsustainable previous efforts effectively retarded significant progress against this menace...The carnage and shock of the September 11 attacks laid bare America's vulnerability and too belatedly resulted in a sea change in national attitudes and accompanying political will to combat terrorism systematically, globally, and, most importantly, without respite" (pg. 306). The events of 9/11 were enough to puncture the stasis which is not unusual in policymaking (in this case, counterterrorism), and thus were the aberrant event which precedes drastic policy changes predicted by the punctuated equilibrium model. It was 9/11 which created the positive feedback process which resulted in the "Global War on Terror."

With the massive media attention that 9/11 received, as well as its privileged place at the top of the policy priority pyramid, the national agenda regarding counterterrorism and the "Global War on Terror" had been set and the issues defined. Terrorists were portrayed as malevolent social discontents and psychopaths, intent on peddling their hateful ideology through any activities necessary. Terrorism is a problem, it is evil, it must be eliminated (as the narrative was, and continues to be). Where the system had once discouraged change in the realm of counterterrorism policy (with its constellations of vested interests and different jurisdictions), it now served to reinforce the drastic changes to American policies which had been engendered by the events on 9/11.

Almost instantaneously, a new policy equilibrium had occurred and entrenched itself in the United States. The "Global War on Terrorism" had reared its head, never to recede again. But as focused attention to terrorism itself receded in the years since 9/11, the changes which were made during that heady time have become locked in and thus are the new equilibrium.

But at that time, both policymakers and the media were heavily involved in defining and redefining the images and symbols which have now become institutionalized as part and parcel of counterterrorism policies. This redefinition took place in tandem with the serial shift in attention paid by Americans to terrorism after 9/11. All of a sudden, Americans knew where countries which may have been difficult to pronounce beforehand were located on the globe. The notions of Sunni and Shiite Islam became household conversation in the U.S., and the bearded specter of Osama Bin Laden became a symbol of everything which America stood against. Jackson (2011) rightfully observed that U.S. counterterrorism policy and the “Global War on Terror” is “...socially constructed through the public language or linguistic representations expressed by political leaders and counterterrorism officials, which provide the explanation, rationale, justification and necessary social consensus for the particular policies made and actions undertaken...In addition, the public language is accompanied by a familiar set of symbolic and ritualistic elements, which provide narrative coherence and public legitimacy, such as flags, ribbons, medals, symbols, ceremonies, public rituals and the like” (pg. 392). Although fighting terrorism was always seen as laudable, now it has become part of the American identity. Where once incrementalism and stasis ruled counterterrorism policy in the U.S., the tragic events of 9/11 were enough to trigger the occasional drastic policy change predicted by the punctuated-equilibrium theory, which led to a significant transformation in policy. But as time goes on, this transformation has now become institutionalized. Thus, in a sense, U.S. counterterrorism policies have reverted back to a position of stasis and incrementalism.

5. Conclusion

It often seems that policymaking and change occurs in slow-motion. Despite punctuated-equilibrium theory’s assertion that major policy changes are occurring somewhere in the realm of U.S. policymaking at any given time, their observation in action can be somewhat challenging to discern. The events of September 11th, 2001 do not fall under that generalization. Literally overnight, the country was at war in a new and very different sense. Not a conventional war such as in the past, but a never-ending, asymmetric struggle against irregular enemies using unconventional tactics. Terrorism, both international and domestic, had existed since the 1970s at least. But change prior to 9/11 to U.S. counterterrorism policies was incremental, and seemed to exist in a dangerously oblivious state of stasis. The 9/11 attacks themselves resulted in drastic changes on many levels for a plethora of people in the United States (both within the policymaking world and outside of it), causing a major realignment in the political institutions and structure of government in the country as well as altering the image which Americans had of counterterrorism policies. What once may have seemed to be an infringement on civil rights is now the norm in terms of counterterrorism, with a substantial domestic spying program in place tasked with maintaining security within the American homeland (amongst many other measures). Criticizing this arrangement became unpatriotic after the events of 9/11, as the drastic policy changes following the attack became embedded in American political institutions. The punctuated-equilibrium theory does an excellent job of explaining these events within the context of public policy.

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