

LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE

**THE VIOLENT TRUE BELIEVER: FUNCTIONAL TYPES,
NEEDS/SENSITIVITIES, AND INTERVIEW APPROACHES**

J. Reid Meloy, Ph.D.

Behavioral Analysis Program

Counterintelligence Division

Federal Bureau of Investigation

July 11, 2002

The Violent True Believer: Functional Types, Needs/Sensitivities, and Interview Approaches

The violent true believer has been defined as an individual who is committed, or appears to be committed, to an ideology or belief system which advances the killing of the self and others as a

LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE

LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE

legitimate means to further a particular goal.¹ The ideology or belief system could be based in a nationalist-separatist attitude which is concerned with seeking certain political and territorial gains, such as the Palestinian Liberation Organization²; or it could be based in a theocratic attitude which seeks to promulgate worldwide—or to the sea—a particular religious movement which ignores national or territorial boundaries, such as Hamas or Al Qaeda^{3 4}.

Violent true believers typically operate in cells, but appear to accentuate the individual or the group according to the degree to which the society from which they spring emphasizes the autonomy of the single person or the power of the collective. For example, violent true believers in the past decade in the United States have included individuals such as Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols.⁵ McVeigh believed that through his act of bombing the Murrah building in Oklahoma City he would be the first hero of the second American revolution. Violent true believers from outside the United States, such as members of Hamas or Al Qaeda, emphasize that the intentional homicide-suicide of a particular individual will allow him to take his place among a group of true believers or martyrs that have preceded him. Economic and social rewards may also be showered on family members that he has left behind.

Violent true believers, however, do not fit a particular mold, just as all individuals who

¹Meloy JR, Mohandie K, Hempel A, Shiva A. (in press). The violent true believer: homicidal and suicidal states of mind (HASSOM). Journal of Threat Assessment.

²Robins R, Post J. Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997.

³Juergensmeyer M. Terror in the Mind of God. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2000.

⁴Bodansky Y. Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America. New York: Random House, 1999, 2001.

⁵Puckett KM. The Lone Terrorist. A Study for the Counterterrorism Division of the FBI. Washington: Dept. of Justice, 2001.

LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE

LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE

ascribe to certain beliefs each have their own personalities and unique backgrounds. Psychology has long known that all persons are both the same and different; and the scientific method by which this reality is addressed is called a classification or typology: the sorting of individuals into subgroups based upon certain shared characteristics, while also emphasizing the differences among the subgroups. The functional purpose of placing individuals into certain types is to further communication and understanding. From a law enforcement or intelligence perspective, the development of types should aid in the refinement of interview and interrogation techniques. It is for these purposes that the following attempt to place violent true believers into different types is offered. It includes the description of each type, the needs/sensitivities of each type, and interview approaches to each type.

The proposed seven types are: **1) the unwavering true believer, 2) the affiliative true believer, 3) the opportunistic true believer, 4) the criminal true believer, 5) the betrayer true believer, 6) the psychotic true believer, and 7) the fledgling true believer.** These types are based upon the research and experience of members of both the law enforcement and the intelligence communities.

The Unwavering True Believer

This individual is the hard core true believer. He is motivated by deeply held beliefs that are quite rigid and viewed by him as completely justified. If the belief is based upon religion, such as Islam or Christianity, he will almost certainly believe he is the agent of his god and the killing he participates in is sanctioned by his god. For a number of years he will have studied the religious books of his faith, and will commit to memory certain phrases and passages that justify his suicidal-homicidal intent. Contradictory passages in his religious books are ignored, and his tightly held rationalizations are not open to debate or questioning. In fact, critical thinking is

LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE

LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE

forbidden, and may be an obvious clue to him that the person he is talking to is an “unbeliever” and should be killed. Absolute belief in the righteousness of his cause, and the means by which it is carried out, is held in high regard, and is a measure of commitment to his cause.

The unwavering true believer is very narcissistic: he has a deeply held sense of his own perfection. His narcissism, however, is not the typical western version of arrogance and abrasiveness. He is quietly certain of his destiny. He has an internalized, larger than life vision of who he is and the destined role he is to play in the life-or-death drama that is unfolding before him. His thinking operates on the principle of purpose rather than cause. For example, floods or earthquakes are not caused by changes in the weather or shifts in the earth’s tectonic plates; but are, instead, for the purpose of eliminating certain lands or peoples. At a most primitive level he may receive directions from his own dreams. He draws sustenance from his internal beliefs and images, and does not consciously need external sources of gratification (money, power, or sex). His visible symbols of authority (dress, posture) are usually understated, and he may be quite ascetic: he has learned to do without worldly comforts to practice self discipline or further the development of his spirituality.

The unwavering true believer may appear to be paranoid: he may entertain an irrational fear of imminent assault, or believe that others are aggressing against him when they are not. This internal psychological operation, based upon his ability to attribute to others his own aggression, allows him to kill others without ambivalence, since his violence is always defensive in his own mind.

He often sees himself as a warrior, and in his hypermasculine world, women function only as reproductive vehicles and caretakers of the next generation of warriors. Sexual activity for pleasure and affection is condemned. Women are generally not to be trusted, and their erotic appeal—rather than the man’s sexual aggression—must be contained and controlled at all costs.

LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE

LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE

He is likely to have superior intelligence, and may have accumulated certain advanced degrees. Despite his academic successes, he shuns worldly possessions and is highly critical of those who use their education to further their access to worldly goods. His life is one of sacrifice, and he often has severed relations with his family. They may also have rejected him. He will, instead, assume the role of a benevolent father figure, and his followers become his substitute family.

The unwavering true believer's condemnation of those who do not believe is simple, absolute, and complete. He will demean the interviewer as an "unbeliever" in silence, and look for ways in which his criticism is justified by the interviewer's behavior. He may watch with great vigilance, but little fanfare, the interviewer's manners and customs, searching for telltale signs of his gullibility and ignorance. He will assume the interviewer has no knowledge of his cause or mission, and displays of this lack of knowledge will amuse him and further elevate his own sense of specialness and perfection.

Although he ascribes to the homicidal-suicidal strategy in the furtherance of his cause, if he has attained a certain amount of power and influence through his charisma, he may command that others die so that he remains in a position of leadership. The selfishness of this decision will not be acknowledged, but will be justified as a more potent means of furthering his beliefs.

Needs/Sensitivities. He has few needs, and will unlikely be a source of accurate information or intelligence. He will want or need little in the way of creature comforts. He will want access to his religious books. There is little likelihood of a psychiatric or psychological diagnosis other than a personality disorder. He has learned to contain and control emotion, unless he wants to use it deliberately to intimidate his adversary, the interviewer. He will not need, or depend upon, attachments or bonds to other believers. This type can be most easily identified because of the tenacity of his beliefs, and the efforts others expend to listen to him. He will be

LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE

LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE

elevated to a position of leadership, and may be viewed by others as blessed with a certain specialness or religious role without the commensurate formal education. Older individuals of this type recognize that acts of homicidal and suicidal violence are most likely to be carried out by the young males, and these men are the focus of their recruitment efforts.

Approaches. The interviewer should learn as much as possible about the unwavering true believer's perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes before the interview, and then adopt the student's stance: "I want to learn from you and understand your beliefs." He may remain silent, but over time, if interest is genuine, he may begin to talk. Tirades—intense and angry emotional expressions against his enemies—may occur, should be tolerated, and recordings of such events may yield factual admissions when carefully studied. Attempts to compliment him and bolster his ego should be done carefully or he will quickly recognize the manipulation. If there are cultural differences, they should be generally acknowledged as "new things to be learned" by the interviewer. Confrontation and threat will typically not work, and will only solidify his silence.

The Affiliative True Believer

This individual is generally anxious and quite dependent on others. He has joined the group to become a part of the movement or cause, and is primarily a follower. He will often bond intensely to the leadership, and like a plant, he needs an external energy source. He will tend to idealize others—put them on a pedestal—and typically has a history of feeling disappointed and damaged by people he has looked up to in his past. He responds in a very strong, positive, and emotional manner to older individuals who are nurturing and authoritative.

The affiliative true believer is often still emotionally close to his family, although like the unwavering true believer, he may feel angry toward them. He may have been the "black sheep" among his brothers and sisters. His intelligence is probably average, and he is prone to feeling

LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE

LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE

depressed when removed from his group of brothers. He needs careful handling and direction when carrying out a homicidal-suicidal mission, but is likely an easy recruit due to his dependency needs and desires to belong. Often his history is marked by periods of sadness with suicidal thoughts, and the latter desires to kill himself have been redefined as a source of pride in his training for martyrdom by his handler. Such thoughts of death are bolstered by grandiose fantasies of joining other martyrs in an idealized place where he is also guaranteed sexual bliss.

Needs/Sensitivities. He needs many friends and at least one authority figure. He is likely to suffer from anxiety and depression when his desires to be part of a group are thwarted, or when he is removed from those he is emotionally dependent upon. His so-called extremist beliefs are nowhere near as solidified as the unwavering true believer, and take second place to his emotional needs.

Approaches. A warm, affectional, yet dominant approach is best, done by an older male figure who is familiar with the family dynamics and culture of the individual. Much time with this type will yield a bond, and one interviewer should consistently visit with this individual to stimulate the relationship. When an emotional connection is made, his beliefs can be easily influenced since they are secondary to his desires to be attached to others. He also may be quite willing to join a larger, more powerful group.

The Opportunistic True Believer

This individual is also filled with self importance like the unwavering true believer, but he has joined to enhance his wealth, power, control, property, dominance over subordinates, and other “narcissistic supplies.” Although he appears quite autonomous, he is actually very dependent on others for their attention and admiration. In extreme cases, he wants to be worshiped, and is always on the lookout for the follower and the admirer to exploit. He can form

LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE

LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE

attachments to others, but not as intensively as the affiliative type.

For this individual, the cause is himself. He is not particularly interested in violence, and does not want to sacrifice his life. The beliefs which drive the mission of his group are secondary to his opportunistic desires. They will be easily abandoned. He may be quite charismatic, and is eager to be the center of attention. Intelligence varies widely depending upon his education and background, but values are not important in any deep or abiding sense. He is willing to alter them given changes in the opportunities presented to him. His roles in the group will vary, from handling minor players to financial management where he controls the money.

Needs/Sensitivities. He needs attention and admiration, and is dependent on others to provide these. He will become sullen and angry when such “narcissistic supplies” are not provided to him. He will have unmet desires that can be identified (more money or self-importance, for example) and used to recruit him. He may want certain things provided to his family. There is unlikely to be a psychiatric disorder other than a personality disorder.

Approaches. Flattery can be used in a more direct way to let him know that his attributes are clearly seen by others. A younger interviewer, eager to learn from him, can be a source of these accolades. Much time and attention should be spent to understand his personal history and its relationship to his present circumstance, with a keen eye to identifying his unmet desires. He also may conceal feelings of being betrayed or cheated by other members of his group, usually those above him in the hierarchy. He may respond to direct offers.

The Criminal True Believer

This is the “berserker”⁶ of the group. In milder variations, he will have a checkered

⁶Berserkers were members of the ancient Viking communities who were used as bodyguards and warriors when needed.

LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE

LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE

criminal history of both violent and nonviolent offenses. He may have been a gang member or a street thug. In severe cases, he will be a psychopath who takes great pleasure in violence and frightens the other members of the group. He is also a sensation-seeker, and will carry out the most risky acts against the enemy. He is typically not completely trusted by other group members due to his impulsive behaviors (e.g., explosiveness, stealing), and has the shortest lifespan in the organization: he is either forcefully removed from or killed by the group due to his unpredictable behavior.

The criminal true believer is actually a misnomer: he doesn't have any true beliefs, does not waste time thinking—or memorizing religious texts—and is only interested in action. He wants to engage in “jihad” and is happiest when he is in battle. He will be fearless in combat, and will take risks which astound his enemy, always believing in his own invincibility. He is not interested, however, in personal suicide to further the cause. He would rather just kill others.

He is emotionally detached, and does not form bonds. He takes pride in being a loner and prefers to be alone. This will make other members of the group uncomfortable. He spends time in solitary very well. He is opportunistic like the third type (opportunistic true believer), but his focus is always short term gratification: food, sex, drugs, alcohol, or pleasure through the dominance of another. He does not have long term goals, and does not reflect on his past.

He will often be used by the leaders for internal discipline within the group, and may know the darkest secrets of other members, which he can use against them. He will be recruited for his muscle, and in terrorist activity will be brought in at the last minute for these purposes, since intelligence and discipline will suffer if he is around too long.

Needs/Sensitivities. Gratifying his short-term desires can be sufficient reason for him to betray others. He is chronically angry. He does not foresee the long term consequences of his actions, therefore his post-offense planning is very poor. His Achilles' heel is his sense of being

LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE

LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE

invincible, especially in battle. He will take physical risks that put himself in extreme jeopardy.

Approaches. Short term threats are unlikely to work, although he may have historically betrayed others for money, drugs, excitement, and power. He is the most dangerous of all the types for both reactive, emotional violence, and more planned, unemotional violence. Physical security is paramount when interviewing him. He will not establish a relationship with any emotional meaning, therefore time spent trying to do this is wasted. He will attack or betray anyone if the price is right. He typically will be one of the most physically muscular of the group, and younger in age than most. Positive incentives that focus on his creature comforts work best.

The Betrayer True Believer

This individual isn't particularly wedded to a belief or a mission, but he does know whom he hates and whom he wants to betray. It is a negative belief structure, where the emotional focus is a desire to get back at someone who has hurt him or someone close to him. He feels victimized by past events in his life, and is typically quite passive. He is angry, but keeps this well hidden from others, while he plans acts of aggression to be carried out indirectly. He is an ideological assassin. He loves duping or conning others. He is afraid of direct aggression, however, since it may stimulate a direct attack on himself. Psychiatrically this is referred to as a "passive-aggressive" personality. His sense of being betrayed is likely very old, not tied to any particular current situation, and rooted in his early relationships within his family (e.g., an alcoholic father who was physically abusive and very frightening). He may initially present as both arrogant and condescending, but as time is spent with him, his inadequacies and low self esteem become more apparent. He is an impostor.

Needs/Sensitivities. Although he is angry, he is scared of others' direct aggression, but he expects it. He will be easily intimidated, but will look for ways to defeat others indirectly.

LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE

LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE

Approaches. The initial approach should be an appeal to this individual's fragile narcissism. Look for ways to admire him, and mirror back to him his passive-aggressive style of relating. Identify ways in which he has been betrayed by others in his past, and try to empathically understand his anger. Be careful to not injure his self-esteem, which despite his arrogance, is quite fragile. This is the most difficult type to identify, and he may, at first, be misidentified as another type, such as an opportunistic true believer. Be wary of his manipulations to betray the interviewer.

The Psychotic True Believer

This individual, if seen by a psychiatrist or psychologist, would be diagnosed with a major mental disorder. Such disorders typically manifest in severe abnormalities of perception, thinking, or mood. Symptoms may include auditory or visual hallucinations (hearing or seeing things that aren't there) or delusions (fixed and false beliefs that are often paranoid or persecutory). There are dozens of psychiatric diagnoses for these disorders, but common ones in this setting would include various types of schizophrenia or bipolar disorder (what used to be called manic-depression). Psychiatric disorders occur in a certain portion of the population throughout the world, regardless of race, ethnicity, or nationality. Schizophrenia, for example, affects about 1% of the world's population and is largely inherited.

Unfortunately, extremist beliefs, especially of a religious nature, may fit easily into a mentally ill individual's delusions: for example, believing that a certain leader is a prophet of God, or is, in fact, an incarnation of God. Delusions are fixed and false, just as literal translations of religious texts can be the absolute truth in the mind of the true believer, despite their falsity. If a mentally ill individual believes he is a prophet, and auditory hallucinations command him to kill unbelievers, he may carry out this task with a certainty and vigor that other true believers can only

LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE

LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE

wish for.

In stressful situations like combat or captivity, however, the mentally ill individual will decompensate—he begins to fall apart. Fanatical religious beliefs become fantastic and bizarre, voices he hears begin to turn on him and persecute him directly, his mood swings become more rapid and dramatic, he begins to disregard personal hygiene, and he behaves in ways that provoke anxiety in others (smearing feces, talking to his voices). When this occurs, his so-called brothers will typically tease him and reject him from the group. The more criminal and antisocial members of the group will exploit him, such as stealing his food or clothing.

Needs/Sensitivities. The psychotic true believer has many, including his fear of others, his inability to cope with even moderate stress, and his unpredictable behavior. Unfortunately, he is a poor source of credible information, since it is likely to be distorted and mixed in with his delusions and hallucinations. This can be very difficult to sort out in an interview situation. He will yearn for safety if he is being exploited by others, and may respond to caretaking that is quite basic: food, shelter, clothing, and safety from others.

Approaches. Isolate from others and psychiatrically treat, either in a hospital or on an outpatient basis. Gratitude for the treatment may eventually yield an alliance with the interviewer and the revealing of credible information. Most major mental disorders will respond to medical treatment administered by an appropriate health care professional. Even if an individual is severely mentally ill, he still has a capacity to form an emotional bond with the interviewer.

The Fledgling True Believer

This final type focuses on the child or adolescent who may eventually become one of the other six types of violent true believers. The term “fledgling” refers to an immature or inexperienced person. Although the research on child development is vast, it appears that the

LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE

LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE

fledgling true believer takes shape in two ways: through personal suffering and/or indoctrination.

The personal suffering may be manifest in a history of physical abuse or neglect within the family, or the family's suffering through personal loss or economic deprivation inflicted upon them by others. In both cases, the child learns to hate, and the target of that hatred will be taught by the parents, school teachers, religious leaders, or other childhood friends. If the source of the suffering is one of the parents, children are easily convinced that another person or institution is actually to blame. Children will protect their parents at all costs.

Indoctrination can range from mild social pressure from parents and teachers to learn certain "facts" that represent the reality of the world, to intensive programming or brainwashing, often taking on the characteristics of a cult, where physical deprivation, isolation, peer group pressure, a charismatic leader, a reward system, and the devaluation of an identified enemy are constantly used to instill hatred for a people or a country the child has never seen. This is a less deeply conditioned route to violent true belief than personal suffering, and therefore is more amenable to change as the child grows up and is exposed to alternative perspectives and ways of life.

Needs/Sensitivities. The fledgling true believer is still a child. Even though his beliefs appear complete and absolute, they are not, and he is vulnerable to all the desires of children and adolescents: a need for safety, security, stimulation, love, and attention. His typical outlook for the future will be saturated with his own inflated sense of power and control, yet his daily behavior may be quite impulsive and not a product of careful thought. He may entertain many private fantasies that will not be easily revealed, yet are reinforced by his handlers in the community: for example, his martyrdom will make him a hero, and his family will be taken care of after he dies. Peer pressure is the most powerful during adolescence, and he will want to join the group that has the most prestige among his peers.

LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE

LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE

Approaches. He or she needs adult attention, supervision, and control. If the child has personally suffered, there may be a diagnosed traumatic disorder or depression, and mental health care is necessary. If the child is a product of indoctrination, continuous exposure over time to other sources of gratification and views of the world may work. One authoritative and caring adult, who is willing to spend time with the child and develop a bond, will be the most useful approach to gain the child's trust and perhaps gather useful information.

Summary

Seven proposed types of violent true believer have been described based upon law enforcement and intelligence experience. No typology is complete, and these types may be subject to change based upon new information. Other needs/sensitivities and interview approaches may be identified in the future. The author can be reached via e mail at

and comments are welcome.

b6
b7C

LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE