



I

what is terrorism?





the american experience: the agenda of the "war on terror"

President George W. Bush's "War on Terror" publicly began on September 11, 2001.

We think of wars beginning with a cataclysmic event—everything up to that moment could have gone either way until "the moment" occurs that makes a war inevitable. It is that clap of thunder, we believe, that coalesces events into something that we recognize as "war."

The designation that a series of events has become a "war" wonderfully concentrates public and official support behind a situation that had not previously generated unanimity. Henry Cabot Lodge and Congressional Republicans needed the sinking of the *Maine*, Woodrow Wilson needed the *Lusitania*, FDR needed Pearl Harbor.

Bush needed 9/11. The astonishing loss of life that single September morning validated his declaration of war against the Al Qaeda terrorists. But his "War on Terror" encompassed more than the fight against Osama bin Laden and his minions and in many ways it began well before 9/11. Bush declared war against disparate enemies; in his estimation the "War on Terror" was not only properly fought in Afghanistan once the Taliban refused to give up Al Qaeda leaders, but included battles of all kinds—most notably against Saddam Hussein.

In quick order, with everyone watching (but few willing to criticize), the September 11-initiated war became a war to create the new moral order articulated by President Bush and his Vulcans, as author James Mann compellingly defined the administration's foreign policy team of Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, Colin Powell, Richard Armitage, Condoleezza Rice, and Paul Wolfowitz.

The "War on Terror" was more than a response to the terrorists attacks of September 11. The 9/11 cataclysm gave President Bush the opportunity to realize all the Vulcans' unilateralist, interventionist foreign policy goals, by uniting them into one comprehensive, Ur-policy that connected the 9/11 terrorists, weapons of mass destruction (WMD), Iraq, and other "Axis of Evil" countries. As Vice President Dick Cheney declared within days of September 11, "the administration intended to work 'the dark side.'" What that meant, writer Philip Gourevitch chillingly explained in his book *Standard Operating Procedure*, was that "the vice president's legal counsel, David Addington, presided over the production of a series of secret memorandums, which argued against several centuries of American executive practice and constitutional jurisprudence by asserting that the president enjoyed essentially absolute power in wartime, including the authority to sanction torture."¹

Three months after the attacks on the World Trade Center, on the sixtieth anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Bush defined his public conception of terrorism before more than 8,000 sailors and Marines and their families assembled on the vast deck of the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier the USS *Enterprise*. “We’re fighting to protect ourselves and our children from violence and fear. We’re fighting for the security of our people and the success of liberty,” Bush said. “We’re fighting against men without conscience but full of ambition to remake the world in their own brutal images.”²

Bush described these men as “a movement, an ideology that respects no boundary of nationality or decency. . . . They celebrate death, making a mission of murder and a sacrament of suicide.” And he compared the 9/11 “terrorists” to the enemies of World War II: “They have the same will to power, the same disdain for the individual, the same mad global ambitions. And they will be dealt with in just the same way. . . . Like all fascists, the terrorists cannot be appeased; they must be defeated.”³

By linking terrorism to fascism, the terrorist threat to the one posed by World War II, President Bush was suggesting that this current evil was as heinous and as threatening as those two generations ago. And by naming not just the 9/11 conspirators, but a much larger conception of “the enemy” as “terrorists” and naming America’s cause as a “global war against terrorism,” rather than a more limited effort to eradicate Al Qaeda or to capture Osama bin Laden, President Bush attempted to forestall and even pre-empt media and public criticism. The Bush administration succeeded at labeling its foreign policy objectives as part of his “War on Terror,” thus making it very difficult for political opponents or media commentators to challenge the President without coming off as not only “soft” on defense, but as cavalier about the lost American lives of 9/11.

The media responded as directed—and as they always have at the start of a national crisis.⁴ They rallied in support of the President and appropriated his characterization of the situation. At the end of October 2001, the then CNN chairman Walter Isaacson wrote a memo to his staff members that ordered them to balance the broadcast images of civilian devastation in Afghanistan with reminders of the American lives lost at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.⁵ Isaacson suggested language for his anchors, including: “The Pentagon has repeatedly stressed that it is trying to minimize civilian casualties in Afghanistan, even as the Taliban regime continues to harbor terrorists who are connected to the September 11 attacks that claimed thousands of innocent lives in the U.S.” It “seems perverse,” Isaacson said, “to focus too much on the casualties or hardship in Afghanistan.”⁶

Isaacson was wrong. The American public deserved to know more about the casualties and hardship in Afghanistan. The public needed to know more about the meaning and the effect of the President co-opting 9/11 and co-opting the patriotic, broad-based interest in responding through a “War on Terror.” “In the wake of

9/11,” noted *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman, “the Bush administration adopted fear-mongering as a political strategy. Instead of treating the attack as what it was—an atrocity committed by a fundamentally weak, though ruthless adversary—the administration portrayed America as a nation under threat from every direction.”⁷

The reason Americans didn’t understand the politically motivated agenda has a lot to do with how they get their news. Public ignorance of what hid inside Bush’s Trojan horse—his “War on Terror”—had a lot to do with how the US media cover the presidency.⁸

And those problems persist.



are you ready?

Duct tape and plastic. It all came down to that. If you just had enough of each you’d be safe.

In February 2003, before the start of the Iraq war, the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) raised the official national terrorism alert to the Code Orange (high risk) level, citing “recent intelligence reports.” DHS announced that Americans should prepare for another terrorist attack. To get ready, Americans needed to assemble a household disaster supply kit that included duct tape and plastic sheeting to be used to seal a room against radiological, chemical, and/or biological contaminants.⁹

DHS insisted that its new home preparedness tips would increase Americans’ sense of security by giving them ways to keep their families safe.

But the “Duct and Cover” strategy, as it was called on radio talk shows and late-night comedy reports, struck many as the twenty-first-century equivalent of 1960s schoolchildren being asked to shelter from an atomic blast underneath the flimsy protection of their desks. The joke was in the general assessment that Americans could not begin to protect themselves—at least by hardware supplies—against most threats posed by terrorists.

Despite the run on the hardware stores, chemical and bioterrorism researchers noted that plastic sheeting and duct tape were unlikely to help in the case of a biological or chemical attack for two reasons. First, in order for a “safe room” to be effective, one has to be able to get to the room and seal it quickly. “You wouldn’t have time to get that in place,” said Dr. Monica Schoch-Spana, a senior fellow at the Johns Hopkins Center for Civilian Biodefense Strategies, to the *New York Times*.

“You won’t be tipped off that something’s going to happen.” And second, even if doors, windows, and vents in a room were well sealed by duct tape and plastic before an attack, outside air would completely cycle through the room in a matter of hours.¹⁰

Then there were terrorism experts who pointed out that almost all terrorist attacks had occurred outside the United States and were overwhelmingly characterized as conventional bombings.¹¹

A year and a half later those criticisms didn’t stop DHS and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) from relaunching a “revised, updated, and enhanced” version of their *Are You Ready?* pamphlet. Once again, almost three years after September 11, 2001, and a year after the coalition forces failed to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the *Are You Ready?* guide instructed its readers what to do in a chemical attack: “Close doors and windows and turn off all ventilation, including furnaces, air conditioners, vents, and fans; Seek shelter in an internal room and take your disaster supplies kit; Seal the room with duct tape and plastic sheeting; Listen to your radio for instructions from authorities.”¹²

Once again the guide served to remind Americans of the threat of a chemical, biological, or nuclear attack on the United States.¹³ Scientists continued to say that it was uncertain whether individuals could effectively protect themselves from a terror attack. The media noted that even if Americans survived the initial assault, there was no viable local or national policy in place for handling the days and weeks that would follow. And terrorism experts argued that Americans were more likely to be killed driving to the hardware store for duct tape than they were to be killed by a terrorist.

It was not lost on any of these groups that the release of the updated guide came in August 2004, in the midst of a tightly fought re-election campaign for the White House. Four days before the election, on October 29, 2004, the Arab television network Al Jazeera broadcast excerpts from a videotape of Osama bin Laden, and posted transcripts of the speech in Arabic and English on its website: “I am amazed at you,” Al Jazeera quoted bin Laden as saying. “Even though we are in the fourth year after the events of September 11th, Bush is still engaged in distortion, deception and hiding from you the real causes. And thus, the reasons are still there for a repeat of what occurred . . . the wise man doesn’t squander his security, wealth and children for the sake of the liar in the White House.”¹⁴

That evening, after details of the speech were broadcast by American TV networks, *Newsweek* conducted an overnight poll that gave Bush 50 percent of the vote and his Democratic opponent Senator John Kerry 44 percent. A similar poll conducted a week earlier gave the President 48 percent and Kerry 46 percent of the vote.¹⁵

According to Ron Suskind, a Pulitzer Prize-winning former reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*, CIA analysts determined that “bin Laden’s message was clearly designed to assist the President’s reelection.”¹⁶



words and trojan horses

Let’s go back and start at the beginning with the word “terrorism.”

It’s one of those words, frequently used, by politicians and people on the street alike, that seem to be transparent in their meaning.

Like “human rights.” “obscenity.” “weapons of mass destruction.”

“Terrorism.” That’s about terrorists committing acts of terror.

Right?

For most of us, most of the time, precise definitions of words don’t matter. The points that are being made are conversational, not legal. The ramifications of what is being said over coffee or written via email are casual, not cataclysmic.

But that carelessness about language can sometimes spill over into occasions and venues where precision does matter. A lot.

And sometimes others, usually political “others,” take advantage of our careless understanding and hide agendas within the meaning of words, like Trojan horses. They know that certain words have exact legal meanings that can trigger specific consequences. Governments are loath, for example, to employ the word “genocide” to a crisis because under the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, nations are obligated to prevent and punish genocide wherever it occurs. So governments try to use phrases, such as “acts of genocide,” that have no legal meaning or obligation, but sound alike to an untrained ear. And governments know that certain other words, such as “terrorism,” for example, are imprecise and legally undefined. Those kinds of words can be used freely—with the only consequence being that they may trigger emotional responses in their audience. Just hearing the word “terrorism,” for instance, can cause listeners to be fearful, to be concerned for their own and others’ safety.

Sometimes speakers want their audiences to be scared.

The powerful set the terms of public debate. Media, including independent, privately owned media, usually confirm the political and social agenda of governments. Even when they challenge politicians’ spin on events, the media usually report on what the government says is important. The level of recognition that politicians give to an issue usually matches the level of coverage given to that issue by the media. When the White House suggests that Americans need to fear terrorists, then there are stories online, in print, and on TV about the terrorist threat.

That's why we must think more about "terrorism," the word, before we think about "terrorism," the act. What do we know, or think we know, about "terrorism"? And is our own understanding of that word generally shared by others?

I used to think that words, like butterflies, could be pinned to a page. Sure, they normally flew around and one rarely stopped to define what a word meant in a passing conversation, but I imagined that important words, words that underlay relations between states, for example, were similarly understood by the players involved.

Then I was asked by a UN-sponsored agency to conduct a study of how three different groups of players—government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the media—prioritized human rights. Human rights had become a familiar and essential component of both global communications and international diplomacy; it had found its way, for example, into both the media's assessment of foreign affairs and governments' justifications for their actions. So the agency that hired me wanted to know just how important different groups considered human rights to be. The agency assumed that I would find something like this: governments prioritize human rights fairly low—they are more concerned with the security and economic well-being of their citizens; NGOs prioritize human rights fairly high—they are most concerned with issues of fairness and equity especially of underclasses; and the media, well, they prioritize human rights somewhere in the middle—they are concerned with the most exciting story, and sometimes that happens to be a story about injustice or abuse.

The UN-sponsored agency's assumptions, actually, were pretty much on target. But it turned out that that analysis was not the major take-away of the report that I wrote. What turned out to be the major conclusion was this: those who speak of human rights do not all prioritize human rights in the same manner, nor do they even define "human rights" in the same terms. When pressed, people in all the groups I spoke to could reference the last century and a half of international documents on the subject, but for the purposes of their jobs they had an operating definition of human rights often quite different than that found in the formal documents.

I had expected to find political and cultural distinctions. But I found something different. As I traveled to interview UN and NGO officials, government bureaucrats, policy advisors and former military officers, human rights lawyers, print, broadcast, and online journalists, editors and producers, I discovered that I could anticipate their operating definition of human rights by simply looking at their job titles. Here's what they told me. Let me give you first their job title and then what they said:

- A former wire service reporter in Vietnam and then foreign correspondent for a major newspaper: "Human rights always in my mind means killing—war, torture, and killing."

- A professor of international law at an Ivy League school: “Human rights are related to a particular set of political events—there can be systematic human rights violations of the 1980s Latin American type, and there can be mass human rights violations, such as war crimes like genocide.”
- The executive director of a major human rights organization: “Human rights is the language of duty and communitarianism; we have to move from moral outrage to global responsibility.”
- A senior official at the World Bank: “In the World Bank you have the situation where the bank is governed by its members, and many of them, of course, really don’t want the World Bank to dabble in human rights. The bank in theory is only supposed to make decisions based on economic criteria. So then you have a problem—human rights and money don’t mix.”
- The president of a major foundation: “Human rights has become a rhetoric by which people discuss their values—it may be just hypocrisy, but even so it is a discussion of values.”

You can see how each person’s job began to match up with how each one viewed human rights. Ultimately, the study led to two realizations: each of the different “cultures”—NGOs, governments, the media—was unaware that the others had a different professional interpretation of human rights. As a result, they each misunderstood the language and the underlying values used by the others. And even more importantly, the study documented that there were ramifications to “human rights” being variously defined. What one set of actors defined as “human rights” shaped the responses of those actors to a situation—and as those definitions were different, so were the responses different.

Since I conducted that study, the world has become more sophisticated. Michael Moore’s movies and Jon Stewart’s *The Daily Show*, for example, have made a practice of juxtaposing the comments of multiple speakers on the same subject to expose the various priorities and spin that would otherwise be overlooked. While the technique can be milked for political satire, there is genuine value in the exercise. Even when we think we understand someone else, we may not. We likely will have different reactions to the same issue that may in part be traceable to our different understanding of that issue. We may not understand even though we share a common language, if our definitions are different. We may not understand even though we share a common language, if that other is intentionally trying to deceive us.

“Everyone agrees terrorism is evil—at least when committed by the other side,” noted Professor Ronald Steel. “But it did not pop up yesterday. As a method of warfare it goes back to the dawn of civilization. It is new to Americans because nothing is truly real until it happens to us. To be sure, acts of terrorism against us must be dealt with and, if possible, prevented. But first we have to agree on what

it is and what inspires it. That means recognizing that terrorism is not an enemy in itself, as we thought of the Soviet Union during the cold war."¹⁷



political correctness: can i use the word "terrorist?"

Four days after the London Underground and bus bombings on July 7, 2005 the BBC re-edited its coverage of the attacks "to avoid labeling the perpetrators as 'terrorists.'" Editors changed the word "terrorists" in archived website stories to the more neutral term "bombers,"¹⁸ and in ongoing coverage across BBC's TV, radio, and online news, reporters and presenters began to use the word "bombers" to refer to the attackers.

Opinion exploded around the world. "Only a news organization such as BBC . . . could apply political correctness to terrorist mass murderers," jeered one audience member from Switzerland. "The term is terrorist, not bomber. If you had a loved one that was killed or injured, you would probably understand," mocked another from the United States. "Isn't it time to develop some moral courage and use the word 'terrorist' for terrorists?" scorned a third from the UK.

One of the few positive responses was from an Arab man living in France: "Al-Jazeera are discussing your decision to not use 'terrorist' about the London bombings. I thank you for your choice, because it shows that you are an objective channel [and] a very civilised people . . ."¹⁹

Politicians who speak of terrorism rarely hesitate over their words, rarely suggest that there is debate over the terms or admit to any ambiguities about their use: Such-and-such a person is a terrorist. This event is terrorism. Only by comparing different statements by different speakers, by juxtaposing a statement made today with one made a year ago, or by going back in history and evaluating an event with some historical perspective, does it become apparent that political assessments differ and policies change.

But mainstream media have learned to be circumspect in their usage of the terms "terrorism" and "terrorist."

Before 9/11, a number of media outlets had a policy in place about when their reporters could use the terms "terrorism" and "terrorist." The Associated Press, according to its spokesman Jack Stokes, used a variety of terms and permitted the use of the word "terrorist" for those in non-governmental groups who carry out attacks on the civilian population.²⁰ Other news organizations shunned the words in reference to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, aware of the politicization of the terms, but had no compunctions about using them in other circumstances.

The assistant managing editor, Roger Buoen, of the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, for example, explained in a pre-9/11 statement to his paper's ombudsman that:

Our practice is to stay away from characterizing the subjects of news articles but instead describe their actions, background and identity as fully as possible, allowing readers to come to their own judgments about individuals and organizations. In the case of the term "terrorist," other words—"gunman," "separatist" and "rebel," for example—may be more precise and less likely to be viewed as judgmental. Because of that we often prefer these more specific words.²¹

Six months after September 11, the *Washington Post* wrote formal guidelines into its internal style manual to govern the paper's usage of the words "terrorist" and "terrorism." The guidelines developed in the context of pressure from watchdog groups concerned about the paper's coverage of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Post ombudsman Michael Getler cited the manual extensively in a column written a year and a half later. He quoted the guidelines:

The language we use should be chosen for its ability to inform readers. Terrorism and terrorist can be useful words, but they are labels. Like all labels, they do not convey much hard information. We should rely first on specific facts, not characterizations. Why refer to a "terrorist attack in Tel Aviv" when we can be more informative and precise: "The bombing of a disco frequented by teenagers in Tel Aviv," for example. Our first obligation to readers is to tell them what happened, as precisely as possible.

When we use these labels, we should do so in ways that are not tendentious. For example, we should not resolve the argument over whether Hamas is a terrorist organization, or a political organization that condones violence, or something else, by slapping a label on Hamas. Instead, we should give readers facts and perhaps quotes from disputing parties about how best to characterize the organization.

The guidance also quotes Foreign Editor David Hoffman:

If the Israelis say they have assassinated a terrorist, we should not embrace their labeling automatically. We may say he was a suspected terrorist, or someone the Israelis considered a terrorist, or someone the Israelis say participated in a terrorist act. In other words, we should always look independently at whether the person has committed an act of terrorism, whether we know sufficient facts to say he has or has not and what the facts are. We should always strive to satisfy our own standards and not let others set standards for us.

Getler then noted: "That last sentence is central to the editing process here. The terrorist label is very powerful and the paper takes care in avoiding language that is preferred by one side or another in the Middle East."²²



why do news standards matter?

In the years following September 11, news outlets have struggled with how to use the “terrorist” label—some media are leery of using the word “terrorist” to describe the perpetrators of acts most members of the public wouldn’t hesitate to label as such. The 9/11 bombers, for example. A no-brainer for calling “terrorists,” right? Not for some media.

Washington Post media columnist Howard Kurtz reported on an internal memo from the British news agency Reuters written after the 9/11 attack by Stephen Jukes, the agency’s global head of news. “One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter,” said Jukes. “Reuters upholds the principle that we do not use the word terrorist.” As he told Kurtz, “To be frank, it adds little to call the attack on the World Trade Center a terrorist attack. . . . We’re there to tell the story. We’re not there to evaluate the moral case.”

In September 2001, when Jukes spoke to Kurtz, Jukes was pilloried by many, especially in the United States, for Reuters’ rejection of the term “terrorists” to identify the World Trade Center bombers. Howard Kurtz, for example, chided him for his (and Reuters’) “value-neutral approach.”²³

But, in hindsight, Reuters’ caution in applying the term was prescient; its caution is now reflected in many newsroom guidelines. Many prominent news outlets have come to agree with Jukes that not only should journalists not take moral positions on the stories they cover, but that using the label “terrorism” or “terrorist” is in effect doing so.

Newsrooms’ hesitation to apply the term “terrorism” across the board remains controversial to audiences, however. There are many who find that judgment too “politically correct” at best and cowardly, perhaps traitorous, at worst. In summer 2007, in response to hostile questions on its editor-in-chief’s blog, Sean Maguire, acting editor for politics and general news, made public the guidelines in Reuters’ internal handbook of standards.

Terrorism—We may refer without attribution to terrorism and counter-terrorism in general but do not refer to specific events as terrorism. Nor do we use the word terrorist without attribution to qualify specific individuals, groups or events. Terrorism and terrorist must be retained when quoting someone in direct speech. When quoting someone in indirect speech, care must be taken with sentence structure to ensure it is entirely clear that they are the source’s words and not a Reuters label. Terrorism and terrorist should not be used as single words in inverted commas (e.g. “terrorist”) or preceded by so-called (e.g. a so-called terrorist attack) since that can be taken to imply that

Reuters is making a value judgment. Use a fuller quote if necessary. Terror as in terror attack or terror cell should be avoided on stylistic grounds.

This is part of a wider and long-standing policy of avoiding the use of emotive terms. Reuters does not label or characterise the subjects of news stories. We aim to report objectively their actions, identity and background. We aim for a dispassionate use of language so that individuals, organisations and governments can make their own judgment on the basis of facts. Seek to use more specific terms like “bomber” or “bombing,” “hijacker” or “hijacking,” “attacker” or “attacks,” “gunman” or “gunmen” etc. It is particularly important not to make unattributed use of the words terrorism and terrorist in national and territorial conflicts and to avoid using those terms in indirect speech in such a context.²⁴

Reuters, like the BBC, the CBC in Canada, and ABC in Australia, have all emphasized that digital media and satellite television have turned formerly local viewers into global ones—word choices are now scrutinized by a larger and more diverse audience.²⁵ Following the criticism of the BBC’s coverage of the 2005 bombings, the BBC’s governors met that September to review its editorial guidelines on the use of the terms, and revisions were issued that December. Rather than retreat from the moderated use of “terrorism,” the new internal guidelines reinforced the value of using it sparingly:

Careful use of the word “terrorist” is essential if the BBC is to maintain its reputation for standards of accuracy and especially impartiality . . . that does not mean we should emasculate our reporting or otherwise avoid conveying the reality and horror of what has occurred; but we should consider the impact our use of language may have on our reputation for objective journalism amongst our many audiences . . . we must be careful not to give the impression that we have come to some kind of implicit—and unwarranted—value judgment.²⁶

The *New York Times*, too, has repeatedly admitted that it tiptoes through the language minefield. “Nothing provokes as much rage as what many perceive to be *The Times*’s policy on the use of ‘terrorist,’ ‘terrorism’ and ‘terror.’ There is no policy, actually, but except in the context of Al Qaeda, or in direct quotations, these words, as explosive as what they describe, show up very rarely,” wrote former public editor Daniel Okrent in the lead to one of his columns. But in his estimation, he wrote, “given the word’s history as a virtual battle flag over the past several years, it would be tendentious for *The Times* to require constant use of it, as some of the paper’s critics are insisting. But there’s something uncomfortably fearful, and inevitably self-defeating, about struggling so hard to avoid it.”²⁷

Terrorism or not terrorism, that is the question. Almost all of the media debate has been focused on whether journalists should use the term at all, not on the question of what it means when they do use it.



so what is "terrorism"?

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”²⁸

To Be Master: Defining “Terrorism” to Support One’s Point of View

The American government has undertaken a public diplomacy effort to educate Americans and the world about its view of terrorism. As part of that effort, the website of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), has put out an annual “Counterterrorism Calendar” in either a handy online interactive form or a downloadable Daily Planner version. Handsomely designed, each calendar marks dates “according to the Gregorian and Islamic calendar, and contains significant dates in terrorism history as well as dates that terrorists may believe are important when planning ‘commemoration-style’ attacks.”

In the Daily Planner version, page-length overviews of major groups on the State Department’s list of terrorist organizations and a page’s-worth of details on major terrorists (“Usama Bin Ladin” has an “Olive” complexion, weighs “160lbs/72kg” and “is left-handed”) are opposite a week’s-worth of dates. Each day has its own “This Day in History” set of facts; for example Monday, February 19, 2007, or 1 Safar, was not just President’s Day in the United States, but was the day in 2001 when the Terrorism Act in the UK was enacted and when Hamas official Mahmud Madani was shot in the West Bank.

Occasional pages offer readers “technical” information. The page opposite the week of February 19, 2007, for instance, gave “Bomb Threat Stand-Off Distances”—a grid of how far one needs to evacuate in case of a bombing, from a pipe bomb to a semi-trailer bomb. Other pages that same year offered information on “Medical Symptoms of Exposure to Nerve Agents” or about the “Indicators of Suspicious Financial Activity” (the first indicator is “Account transactions that are inconsistent with past deposits or withdrawals”). Another page was on Ramadan: “Muslims are banned from fighting other Muslims during Ramadan, but they may engage

in combat with non-Muslims." Several dates during Ramadan are mentioned as being "especially auspicious for a terrorist attack." The CT Calendar, accessible from the Center's homepage, is "oriented primarily to readers in the United States, but we hope that we have also made it useful for citizens of other countries."²⁹

Despite the authority with which the CT Calendar gives its information on individual terrorists, on terrorist groups, and on the acts they might commit, there is in fact no universally agreed-upon legal definition of "terrorism" and no universally agreed-upon list of terrorist groups.³⁰ And any listing of what acts "terrorists" might commit with either conventional or unconventional weapons is certain to be incomplete.

As the mere existence of the CT Calendar demonstrates, the word "terrorism" is not always equally understood by those who use it and those who hear it. "Terrorism" actually is a kind of jargon. Lots of institutions, from governments to the military to international organizations, have developed their own gobbledygook, sometimes to simplify their own bureaucratic paper-shuffling, but at times also to obfuscate their actions to an outside audience. In the lexicon of the United Nations, for example, there is something called "bluespeak," the UN's in-house term for the careful phrasings of their diplomats. So, over the last several decades or so, we have heard generally about "peacekeeping" missions, and learned specifically about "armed humanitarian interventions" in Somalia and "safe havens" in Bosnia.

Jargon used to be what insiders used to communicate complicated ideas to each other. Jargon has become a way to gloss over the intolerable and unspeakable. We have become familiar with hearing about "collateral damage" when what is meant is that civilians were killed, "surgical strikes" when what is meant is that a target was completely obliterated, and "renditions" when what is meant is that terrorist suspects were captured and clandestinely shipped to another country for interrogation and torture. We've come to learn about "sleep management," which sounds like a way to handle insomnia, but is a form of torture that deprives a prisoner of sleep for a hundred hours or so. Then there's "water-boarding," which is not something that one does while wearing a Hawaiian shirt, and "stress positions," which are not a rigorous form of yoga.

These bits of jargon are euphemisms—a way to speak abstractly about situations that are not at all abstract, and a way to give a certain veneer of disinterestedness and neutrality to what can be a far from neutral policy.

It's a brave new world of spin. Jargon allows its users to take a word and have it mean something else—something that suits the user of the jargon. Sometimes both the speaker and the listener know the meaning, and the use of jargon is an inside joke of sorts. Sometimes the point of jargon is to confuse the listener.

"Terrorism" is that latter kind of "confusing" jargon. When you hear politicians or journalists use the word "terrorism," stop and think about what they are really saying.

“Terrorism” and “terrorist” often have little “real” meaning—they are instead political epithets. When used, they can confuse more than illuminate a political event or environment—especially because politicians and media only rarely explain that “terrorism” is a contested concept and that the language used to make the moral case on terrorism is typically loaded. A month and a half before September 11, 2001, reporter Cameron Barr of the *Christian Science Monitor* wrote that “perhaps no word in modern political usage is more controversial than ‘terrorism.’ The United Nations spent 17 years trying to come up with a universally accepted definition, and failed.”³¹ One study discovered 109 different definitions of the word.³²

What is contested about the definition? The international community has not been able to reach agreement on a common definition of “terrorism” for two main reasons.

First, some governments have had little interest in closely defining it, preferring either to keep the definition vague or to only proscribe certain actions. Is terrorism the act only of “non-state actors”—in other words, the terrorists aren’t part of a government in power? Or can “states” practice terrorism? Some nations have committed acts that have been considered the moral equivalent of terrorism—the American dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki is often cited as a case where a government deliberately targeted a civilian population. Other states have sponsored terrorism abroad or given safe haven to external groups that commit terrorist acts abroad such as the Taliban Afghan government’s support for Al Qaeda. Many international analysts are loath to lump “state” terrorism, which they believe is generally driven by foreign policy concerns, together with the terrorism conducted by “non-state” groups that have entirely different motivations. This, then, is a point of contention in the definition.

A second issue is that many governments are flatly unwilling to define terrorism at all because they are concerned with how a formal definition would reflect on the legitimacy of self-proclaimed wars of national liberation.³³ “In some countries, the word [terrorist] has become almost synonymous with ‘political opponent,’” William Schulz, executive director of Amnesty International, has said. “The Chinese, for example, consider peaceful Tibetan Buddhists vicious terrorists; Robert Mugabe regards the democratic opposition in Zimbabwe in a similar vein.”³⁴ In fact when governments claim that an individual or a group has engaged in terrorism it can be an attempt by that government to try and stake out the moral high ground for itself.

The political definition of terrorism directs both government policy on terrorism and how government sells its policy to its citizens. The definition of terrorism leads inexorably to the packaging of it. Three questions loom large:

- 1 Is terrorism a tactic or an ideology?
- 2 Is an act of terror a “crime” or an “an act of war”?

- 3 Much terrorism crosses nation-state lines. Can outside states forcibly, preemptively intrude in a country to stop what they think is terrorism?

Let us take those questions one by one.

1 The Definition Matters

The argument for terrorism as a “tactic”

Historically, experts from think tanks and universities have focused on tactics as the defining element of terrorism. Focusing on tactics and means allows for a culturally neutral conversation about terrorism and the ways to confront it. “Terrorism is not a movement, terrorism is not a state, terrorism is a tactic,” affirmed British academic and former foreign correspondent Anatol Lieven.³⁵

On one hand, “Terrorism” is a method of engaging an enemy, one of a long list of tactics that includes such familiar military practices as land-mining a territory, strategic bombing or guerrilla warfare, as the NCTC Daily Planner outlines. But what sets terrorism apart from even other forms of political violence such as guerrilla warfare are three key factors:

- 1 Terrorism deliberately targets civilians.
- 2 The victims and the intended audience of a terrorist act are not the same.
- 3 The psychological impact of a terrorist act is intended to be greater than the physical damage caused. The goal of terrorism is to send a message, not defeat the enemy.³⁶

Let me repeat that last point. The goal of terrorism is to send a message, not defeat the enemy. Wars have historically been about gaining territory. Terrorism is about getting the public’s attention. It is that last factor that has changed the post-9/11 world. On September 11, the entire world, through the marvels of both old and new media, became eyewitness to the deaths of 3,000 people.³⁷ After September 11, “terrorism” was no longer some rather ordinary event that killed a few random people with quiet and depressing regularity in such places as Northern Ireland or Indonesia or Israel. Terrorism could now be catastrophic—and be part of the active conversation across the globe.

The whole world could be sent a message.³⁸

Terrorism as a technique—the deliberate targeting of civilians—is a violation of every religious tradition as well as a violation of both domestic and international law—some crimes of terrorism are so serious that they are considered international

crimes: piracy, aggression, torture, war crimes, genocide, crimes against humanity.³⁹ But historian Walter Laqueur, who fled the Nazis and lost his parents to the Holocaust, noted in his book *Terrorism* that "it is not the magnitude of the terrorist operation that counts, but the publicity." The terrorist is inseparable from his or her beholder.⁴⁰

Laqueur and others note that terrorism is more than simple violence which requires only two parties, the perpetrator and the victim. Terrorism needs a third party; it needs an audience. That understanding of terrorism and terrorists crosses professional bounds. Reporter Melvin Maddocks has argued, "A terrorist without an audience is inconceivable."⁴¹ And Rand terrorism expert Brian Michael Jenkins famously wrote: "Terrorism is theater."

What sets terrorism apart from other violence is this: terrorism consists of acts carried out in a dramatic way to attract publicity and create an atmosphere of alarm that goes far beyond the actual victims. Indeed, the identity of the victims is often secondary or irrelevant to the terrorists who aim their violence at the people watching.⁴²

In the wake of September 11, media outlets in the United States noted that while terrorism had long been part of the international news repertoire, the coverage of the World Trade Center bombing had brought terrorism to the country in a way that even the Oklahoma City bombing had not. The planes that struck the Twin Towers in New York City, the media capital of the world, were timed so that when the second plane hit, every news program on the planet that wanted to could have run the pictures from the cameras already trained on them. And the TV cameras were still running live images when first one, then the other building imploded, with all the loss of life that their collapse implied. Terrorism live, terrorism conducted explicitly so the whole world could watch was different than an act where the intent was simply to destroy something or someone. It was clear that Al Qaeda wanted the world to watch. The tactics of catastrophic terrorism and the technology that allowed media to cover the breaking story live fed the terrorists' agenda of attracting global attention. It wasn't just the deaths of thousands that terrified us, it was that those deaths were packaged so that we all became witnesses to them.

"Terrorism isn't about violence," insisted Baroness O'Neill, a crossbench member of the House of Lords and a former professor of philosophy at Cambridge. "Yes, most terrorists use violence but what it's ultimately about is terror, intimidation. We talk about the victims of terror and we mean that, whether on 11 September or some other time, the real victims of terror are the people who have survived and who are intimidated in one way or another."⁴³

We all are the victims of terror.

The argument for terrorism as an “ideology”

Post-9/11 a number of media outlets took it upon themselves to give their audiences a hasty education in the history of terror. Most of these efforts focused on the *actions* of terrorists in the past, rather than on the way in which terrorists throughout history have *publicized* their actions. “The word originated during the French Revolution when enemies of the state were guillotined in the Reign of Terror,” reporter Jim Auchmutey reminded the readers of the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*. “Those hellhounds called terrorists . . . are let loose on the people,’ ‘British politician Edmund Burke wrote in one of the earliest usages cited by the Oxford English Dictionary.’”⁴⁴

But what few media early made clear was that the “terroristes” of the French Revolution weren’t the insurgents of their day, they weren’t the rebels—they were the government. Finally, in the fall of 2007, historian François Furstenberg bluntly educated Americans in a *New York Times* op-ed:

If the French Terror had a slogan, it was that attributed to the great orator Louis de Saint-Just: “No liberty for the enemies of liberty.” Saint-Just’s pithy phrase (like President Bush’s variant, “We must not let foreign enemies use the forums of liberty to destroy liberty itself”) could serve as the very antithesis of the Western liberal tradition.

On this principle, the Terror demonized its political opponents, imprisoned suspected enemies without trial and eventually sent thousands to the guillotine. All of these actions emerged from the Jacobin worldview that the enemies of liberty deserved no rights.

Though it has been a topic of much attention in recent years, the origin of the term “terrorist” has gone largely unnoticed by politicians and pundits alike. The word was an invention of the French Revolution, and it referred not to those who hate freedom, nor to non-state actors, nor of course to “Islamofascism.”

A terroriste was, in its original meaning, a Jacobin leader who ruled France during la Terreur.⁴⁵

What mattered, in Furstenberg’s estimation, was how completely the Jacobin leaders dominated the political conversation in France. Those who opposed their way of thinking had to be destroyed—intellectually and physically. Alternative ideologies were anathema to those government “terroristes.” The effect was to create not just a tyranny of ideology, but a terrorism of ideology. The Jacobin leaders didn’t bother with fancy packaging of their ideas. The selling point was that it was fatal to dissent.

Following “le Terreur,” other political groups adopted the terminology. Geoff Nunberg, on NPR’s *Fresh Air*, traced the meanings through time:

For the next 150 years, the word "terrorism" led a double life. A justified political strategy to some; an abomination to others. The Russian revolutionaries who assassinated Czar Alexander II in 1881 used the word proudly. And in 1905, Jack London described terrorism as a powerful weapon in the hands of labor, though he warned against harming innocent people. . . . By the mid 20th century, terrorism was becoming associated more with movements of national liberation than with radical groups and the word was starting to acquire its universal stigma . . . most of the Third World movements that resorted to political violence in the 1950s and 1960s didn't call themselves terrorists. They preferred terms like freedom fighters or guerrillas or mujahaddin. Terrorism became a condemnation, a word used only by the colonial powers. That's the point when news organizations like Reuters started to become circumspect about using the word to describe groups like the IRA and the African National Congress. It seemed to be picking sides and perhaps a little imprudent, particularly when you consider that former terrorists like Nelson Mandela and Menachem Begin had ended their careers as winners of the Nobel [Peace] Prize.

By the 1980s, terrorism was being widely applied to all manners of political violence . . . [and] the word "terrorism" had acquired a kind of talismanic force, as if refusing to describe something as terrorism was the next thing to apologizing for it.⁴⁶

By the end of the twentieth century, therefore, "terrorism" had already been long identified as an ideology synonymous with "evil," and was dissociated from any specific beliefs or goals. The scale and the inhuman impunity of the September 11 attack only served to solidify that sense held by many that what defined "terrorists" was their crazed, single-minded commitment to a generic ideology of hate and fear. In a speech in Washington in August 2004, US National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice articulated the Bush administration's understanding of the post-9/11 world:

Since the beginning of the war on terror, the President has recognized that the war on terror is as much a conflict of visions as a conflict of arms. One terrorist put it succinctly. He said, "You love life, we love death." True victory will come not merely when the terrorists are defeated by force, but when the ideology of death and hatred is overcome by the appeal of life and hope, and when lies are replaced by truth.⁴⁷

The choice of the tactics used by "terrorists" was seen to be of secondary importance to the terrorists' dogma of "death and hatred." The world aligned up according to who shared that doctrine and who didn't. The clash of civilizations, the "conflict of visions," the us-versus-them attitude that President Bush had challenged the world with in the weeks following the World Trade Center attack remained: "You're either with us or against us in the fight against terror."⁴⁸ The Bush administration "sold" its policies to the world by defining its position in opposition to that of the generic "terrorists": You can't agree with the terrorist's belief system, so you must come on board with us.

Indeed, even late in the fall of 2007, on the homepage of the White House's website a prominent box outlined the President's policy in the "Global War on Terror": "President Bush's top priority is the safety and security of the American people. Though America and its allies are safer since 9/11, we are not yet safe. We have important challenges ahead as we wage a long-term battle not just against terrorists, but against the ideology that supports their agenda."⁴⁹

And the problem with defining "terrorism" as an ideology is?

"Terrorism" is often used both intentionally and unintentionally to muddle distinct causes and acts into one singular problem. In Rice's definition of terrorism as an ideology there were no distinctions made among any terrorist individuals, groups, or states. That's a problem. When terrorists are talked about as a monolithic enemy rather than as distinctive actors looking to achieve specific political ends, when terrorists are portrayed as brainwashed religious fanatics not as rational political actors, terrorism seems inexplicable.⁵⁰ Terrorists must be defined narrowly if there's any hope of understanding them.

This is a key consequence for defining all terrorism as an ideology dedicated to death and hatred. When a government, say, calls someone or some group a "terrorist" the government has limited how it and others can deal with that person or group. Governments don't—or can't, in political terms—negotiate with terrorists; nor do accused terrorists have any incentive to negotiate if all their actions are declared to be war crimes. Further, if governments claim that the accused are not only "terrorists" but are evil, they make it difficult for any players in the civilized community of nations to engage with them. And even attempts to explain the "terrorists'" possible motivations "may be viewed as tacit acceptance of what is judged to be pernicious and reprehensible," as Sean Anderson and Stephen Sloan, authors of the *Historical Dictionary of Terrorism*, have noted.⁵¹

But those consequences may be desirable—a government may want an individual or group to be isolated from the world community. If an individual or group is seen and treated as a pariah, then the government making that claim is advantaged. "If one party can successfully attach the label terrorist to its opponent, then it has indirectly persuaded others to adopt its moral viewpoint," Rand's public policy expert Brian Michael Jenkins noted.⁵² And there are other reasons for a government to emphasize the ideological fervor of terrorists. Doing so helps to legitimate an at least equal, but opposite, moral fervor on the side of the "good guys"—a "crusade" as the President briefly called his "War on Terror."⁵³

But such didactic language causes terrorism experts to tear their hair out. When Bush and Blair spoke about terror as the "evil in plain sight," experts argue, it played

directly into Al Qaeda's agenda.⁵⁴ "Apocalyptic language is the language on which fundamentalism prospers. It is rooted," noted British academic Jacqueline Rose, "in a fear; but it also thrives on the prospect of annihilation. So we have to think very carefully about what we're doing by using this vocabulary."⁵⁵

Clearly the Bush administration thought about it. Much of the force of President Bush's sales pitch came from his use of strident, almost apocalyptic, terms. This is what he said in Washington in the fall of 2006:

The terrorists who attacked us on September the 11th, 2001, are men without conscience—but they're not madmen. They kill in the name of a clear and focused ideology, a set of beliefs that are evil, but not insane. These al Qaeda terrorists and those who share their ideology are violent Sunni extremists. They're driven by a radical and perverted vision of Islam that rejects tolerance, crushes all dissent, and justifies the murder of innocent men, women and children in the pursuit of political power. They hope to establish a violent political utopia across the Middle East, which they call a "Caliphate"—where all would be ruled according to their hateful ideology. Osama bin Laden has called the 9/11 attacks—in his words—"a great step towards the unity of Muslims and establishing the Righteous . . . [Caliphate]."⁵⁶

The words the President used to describe the terrorists' motivations—"evil," "violent," "perverted," "hateful"—may be the truth, at least as most define those words. But what President Bush was doing in this speech was framing a broad swathe of terrorist groups in ways that demonized them as one collective enemy—"men without a conscience . . . beliefs that are evil"—which effectively precluded any American actions not directed at absolute victory over terrorism writ large.⁵⁷

"Far from trying to educate the public, U.S. leaders played to their fears," observed Louise Richardson, dean of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. "Rather than attempting to put the terrible atrocity of 9/11 into perspective, it fanned the outrage. Rather than countenance the possibility that certain of its actions might have fueled resentment toward it, it divided the world into good and evil, and those who were not with the United States were with the terrorists."⁵⁸

The irony, as a number of observers have noted, is that Bush and Blair used the same cosmic, divisive terms as Osama bin Laden. In a public roundtable discussion hosted by the *London Review of Books*, Jacqueline Rose asked her colleagues: "If I just give you a few quotations I want you to guess who says which one. 'A wind of change is blowing to remove evil from the peninsula.' 'The ways of the wicked will not prosper.' 'Those who promote evil will be defeated.' 'Out of terror will come good.' 'The shadow of evil will be followed by good in the world.' 'We will either be defeated or we will defeat.' Now the point is that one of those is Osama bin Laden, one of them is Tony Blair and one of them is Ariel Sharon, and they share a vocabulary."⁵⁹

Terrorist recruitment is changing, and when politicians use polarizing, ideological language, those who already feel marginalized may become further radicalized. “Officials worldwide have been preoccupied for more than two years by a fear of terror groups consisting of ‘self-starters’—men who become radicalized on their own and decide to conduct operations without the support of an extremist network, or with only tenuous connections,” noted the *Chicago Tribune* in a 2006 article. “Instead of taking orders from al-Qaida leaders, these terrorists act on what they believe is al-Qaida’s behalf. Although bin Laden has always seen the incitement of terrorism as one of his primary roles, al-Qaida has been viewed for the past couple of years as more of a global ideology than an actual terror network. The March 11, 2004 synchronized bombings of trains at the height of rush hour in Madrid, attacks that left 192 people dead, were generally viewed as the first significant such assault.”⁶⁰

“Which is the greater threat: terrorism, or our reaction against it?” asked political scientist John Mueller. “A threat that is real but likely to prove to be of limited scope has been massively, perhaps even fancifully, inflated to produce widespread and unjustified anxiety.”⁶¹ Those fears were founded on the new kind of terrorism brought to American shores, but they were stoked by the choices that the Bush administration made to emphasize ideology over tactics and heightened by an emotionally charged political rhetoric.

And the advantage of defining “terrorism” as an ideology is?

There are, of course, advantages to considering the ideology of terrorism as its defining element. One advantage is that doing so can help distinguish terrorism from organized crime, which is generally driven by financial or material benefit—although there are many who consider violent drug traffickers such as the Medellín cartel and their counterparts in Afghanistan and eastern China to be terrorists.

Others define terrorism in ideological terms because, like Irish politician Conor Cruise O’Brien, they believe terrorism can only occur in a democratic state.⁶² In a democratic state, opponents of the government can work within the political process. If actors choose to use violence instead of the ballot box, they are terrorists. By that argument members of the IRA were terrorists because they had political options open to them in Northern Ireland but decided not to use them, while members of the ANC, who were fighting the apartheid regime in South Africa, were not terrorists (even though President P. W. Botha called them so) because blacks were excluded from the political process.

But claiming that kind of division not only forces one to ignore the fact that the ANC committed acts that killed innocents, but strains the consideration of other

global cases even more. “I don’t think that [approach is] very helpful,” Harvard professor Louise Richardson has noted, “because in a sense it means that the Basque ETA in Spain were *not* terrorists when they blew up tourists under Franco, but *were* terrorists when they continued to blow up tourists under the democratic regime.”⁶³

Emphasizing tactics prompts a more “neutral” consideration of events, while emphasizing ideology stresses any divisions without offering ways to bridge them. Focusing on tactics helps keep moral valuations out of the condemnation of given acts. Focusing on ideology actively raises the question of when violence can be “justified.”⁶⁴ There might very well be general agreement that members of the French Resistance were justified in attacking the Nazis in Paris, but defending violence can get very sticky, Harvard terrorism expert Jessica Stern has cautioned. “Every terrorist I have interviewed has told me he is certain his ends are just . . . the justness of terrorists’ ends is inherently subjective. If we focus on the means, we run into a lot less trouble.”⁶⁵

For those reasons, many of the terrorism experts are perfectly happy to put the question of whether violence is ever justified off to the side of the debate. Everyone can get caught up in it, and everyone can get tripped up by it because there is no agreement about it.

Who has the right to say what is just? The US military learned this lesson when it tried to sell the initial phase of the post-9/11 war against the Taliban by calling it “Operation Infinite Justice.” It quickly shelved the name in favor of “Operation Enduring Freedom” when Muslim Americans protested that only Allah renders infinite justice.

2 Is an Act of Terror a “Crime” or an “Act of War”?

We have reached a critical moment in the war on terror. Sorry, let me rephrase that, we have reached a critical moment in our efforts to counter the terrorist threat. No. We are at an important juncture in the continuing process of countering Islamism . . . no . . . Islamic militancy . . . er . . . modern Muslim radicalism . . . Al Qaeda . . . no, make that Al Qaeda-inspired violence . . . er . . . on second thoughts . . .

What are we fighting? Who are we fighting against?

“The semantics of the post-9/11 era have never been easy,” as Jason Burke, author of *Al Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam*, wrote in a column in the *Observer* shortly before the sixth anniversary of September 11. “The battle fought to ensure a language that more or less accurately describes the phenomenon that we have seen

emerging in recent years . . . is far from over . . . but as language often determines thoughts and, thus, policies, it is an essential process . . . It is a counterterrorist effort as valuable as any other.”⁶⁶

The terms used to describe the “War on Terror” were set early on by President George W. Bush, and repeated—sometimes blindly, sometimes with caveats—by media. Then, three years after announcing his “War,” the President revisited the terminology. On August 6, 2004, he spoke to 7,000 members of the media attending the “Unity: Journalists of Color” convention in downtown Washington, DC. In response to a question from the floor asking “What is the mission at this point” for the American forces in Iraq, the President tried to define his declared “War on Terror”: “We actually misnamed the ‘war on terror,’ ” he said. “It ought to be the—the struggle against ideological extremists who do not believe in free societies, who happen to use terror as a weapon, to try to shake the conscious [*sic*] of the free world.”⁶⁷ “Or, if you prefer to abbreviate,” as reporter Dana Milbank of the *Washington Post* noted in his article covering the speech, “SAIEWDNBIFSWHTUTAAWTTTSTCOTFW.”⁶⁸

While people all over the world guffawed at this new Bushism, others noted that there was real news embedded in this longer and unwieldy moniker—the Bush administration was beginning to take at least passing note of the many legal experts and most of the international community who were unhappy with the use of the word “war.”⁶⁹

Most commentators rightly link the language used in the debate on terrorism to the policy about terrorism.⁷⁰ Redefining terms has the power to shift not only the focus of the debate but the response to questions that arise. Think about my human rights study, outlined above. If human rights is about “war, torture and killing” as my journalist said, then no one’s going to pay much attention to the struggle waged about Pakistan’s sweatshops. If human rights is about “duty and communitarianism” as my activist said, then it is unlikely that bankers are going to feel that they need to get professionally engaged in an Amnesty International letter campaign. Defining one’s terms matters. So when the Bush administration briefly attempted in 2005 to rename the conflict the “Global Struggle against Violent Extremism” or when many in the US armed forces came to call the effort a “global counterinsurgency,” political and military opportunities changed. David Kilcullen, an Australian lieutenant colonel “on loan” to the US government, put the reason for the US military’s attempt to shift the name simply: a terrorist is “a kook in a room” who is beyond persuasion, an insurgent “has a mass base whose support can be won or lost through politics.”⁷¹

One of the few to make an early comment on the President’s choice of words was Anne-Marie Slaughter, the dean of the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University. “From a legal perspective, the difference between calling what has happened war and calling it terrorism is considerable,” she wrote in the

Washington Post the Sunday after 9/11. “Terrorism is a matter for the courts and prosecutors. War is up to our military forces. But which best describes what we face now?”⁷² So that was one question—a definitional one. But as Slaughter, a lawyer, recognized, some definitions come with consequences. And the differences between calling something a “war” and calling it “terrorism” have legal consequences.

“I’ve increasingly come not to just dislike, but to fear that expression,” said Peter Goldsmith, Attorney General of England and Wales from 2001 to 2007. “If you talk about a people as engaged in a ‘War on Terror’ you risk not only dignifying their cause, you risk treating them as soldiers and not as criminals.” He continued:

[As] a legal diagnosis . . . a “War on Terror” justifies two things: first of all it justifies detaining people until this amorphous war comes to an end—and who is going to say when it has? When do you determine when a war on a tactic has come to an end? Because “terror” is not a person. It’s not a country. It’s not even a group—“a war on al Qaeda.” It’s war on a tactic. And secondly, because it is said to be a “war” . . . the decisions about how to conduct the war are for the executive (i.e. the president) to determine.⁷³

One key problem with the phrase “War on Terror” is that it *does* have specific legal meaning distinct from its rhetorical power. “By literalizing its ‘war’ on terror,” agreed Human Rights Watch director Kenneth Roth, “the Bush administration has broken down the distinction between what is permissible in times of peace and what can be condoned during a war.”⁷⁴

So the President’s phrase, which to many Americans in September 2001 seemed a stirring statement of the commitment the United States would bring to its confrontation with the terrorists, actually went far beyond a rhetorical call to arms to become a blueprint for an American military engagement first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq.

That’s where the problems started to arise, because as analyst Grenville Byford explained in his famous 2002 article in *Foreign Affairs* magazine, there’s one more very, very simple problem with the phrase. A “War on Terror” is not a militarily realistic option:

Wars have typically been fought against proper nouns (Germany, say) for the good reason that proper nouns can surrender and promise not to do it again. Wars against common nouns (poverty, crime, drugs) have been less successful. Such opponents never give up. The war on terrorism, unfortunately, falls into the second category.⁷⁵

One can easily see why calling something a “war” so armed forces could get involved would be attractive—especially because the executive branch of government—the

President—retains much of the control of those operations. But calling something a “war” that’s not winnable seems a very short-term strategy. Sooner or later, you’re going to get caught out.

And there were additional complaints about the phrase—these in keeping with the concerns expressed about terrorism as an ideology. If you call something a “War on Terror” and are sufficiently vague about just who the terrorists are—such that many Muslims the world over feel themselves to be that “enemy”—it’s hard to convince some of that group that you actually want them on your side. But defining terrorism as a tactic leaves more opportunity to create alliances—all you have to do is find a connection around mutual distaste for terrorist acts.

This was the shift that the UK has tried to negotiate. In December 2006, with Prime Minister Tony Blair still in power, the British Foreign Office told cabinet ministers to drop the phrase “War on Terror.” In fact, neither Blair nor Margaret Beckett, Blair’s Foreign Secretary, had used the term “War on Terror” in a formal speech since June 2006. In the aftermath of the London bombing on July 7, 2005, British intelligence became increasingly concerned about the radicalization of British Muslims, not only about the existence of terrorists “over there” somewhere. The use of “extreme” terms such as “War on Terror” allowed militants at home and abroad, British intelligence believed, to use the sense of war and the “clash of civilizations” to recruit supporters.⁷⁶ “The whole aim of terrorism is to get us to overreact,” observed Harvard expert Jessica Stern.⁷⁷

After that July 2005 attack, the distinctions between American and British approaches to terrorism widened. Whereas the Americans continued to speak about a “war” that would defeat the aberrant ideology of terrorists, the British began talking about the “crimes” that were committed and the need to discover “shared values” with the communities in which terrorists operate. When, in December 2006, the Foreign Office phased out the use of the phrase “War on Terror,” its explanation, according to a spokesperson, was that “We tend to emphasise upholding shared values as a means to counter terrorists.”⁷⁸ Months later, after Gordon Brown became prime minister in 2007, and after the failed terrorist attacks in Glasgow and London, Brown said the words “Muslim” or “Islam” were to be avoided as well. Noted Home Secretary Jacqui Smith, “Let us be clear—terrorists are criminals, whose victims come from all walks of life, communities and religions. Terrorists attack the values shared by all law-abiding citizens. As a Government, as communities, as individuals, we need to ensure that the message of the terrorists is rejected.”⁷⁹ This new approach rejected the knee-jerk reaction to respond to terrorism with force, and instead committed to a process, that, in Louise Richardson’s words, “is more intangible, is likely to take a long time to produce results, appears to reward those close to the terrorists, and insufficiently repudiates the evil of the atrocity.”⁸⁰ It is, however, the only method of confronting terrorists likely to achieve a measure of success.

You can see how the British government eventually came around to selecting that method. But it's equally clear why, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, such a moderated approach had little appeal. That approach would have hardly achieved all of the foreign policy goals of President Bush—and those of Prime Minister Blair who joined him. Aggressive military action, as was befitting in a “war,” seemed the obvious choice. It was only after that method essentially failed to halt terrorism, after the war in Iraq became so bloody, and after Brown became prime minister, that considering a terrorist act to be a crime, not a battle in a larger war, became, for Britain at least, a more politically palatable step.

Shortly after the 2007 Glasgow and London attacks, the Brown government began to put resources into community policing, where crime prevention is based on authorities and citizens sharing an interest in the security and the health of their neighborhoods. By Brown's emphasizing the criminality of terrorism, as David Rieff has noted, “he effectively changed the terms (and temperature) of the British debate: he redefined a world historical threat as a manageable danger.”⁸¹ The “War on Terror” had led the Bush administration to focus on military responses and a search for victory and surrender. The language of warfare argues the need for immediate combat and an all-out effort. The language of crime raises images of police, law, the courts and a deliberative legal process that results in a verdict of guilt or innocence. Focusing on crime opened a way for the British authorities to consider solutions that would be unacceptable against an “enemy.” Emphasizing crime allows local authorities to play a larger role and gives communities the responsibility for the terrorism in their midst: How do they stop those terrorists? How do they break the cycle of terrorism?

But on the other side of the Atlantic, in the United States, little changed during the second four years of the George W. Bush administration. By 2008, only months before the presidential election, the administration had tinkered with the language the State Department and other federal officials used to refer to terrorists, but expressed no significant second thoughts on the “War on Terror” itself. In a report circulated by Homeland Security, federal officials were counseled not to use the terms “jihadists,” “mujahedeen” and “Islamofascism.” Using such words, the report said, results in “unintentionally portraying terrorists, who lack moral and religious legitimacy, as brave fighters, legitimate soldiers or spokesmen for ordinary Muslims.” Another similar document, titled *Words That Work and Words That Don't: A Guide to Counterterrorism Communication*, written by the Extremist Messaging Branch of the NCTC, observed “Don't compromise our credibility” by using language that “may ascribe benign motives to terrorists.” Noted the Associated Press, which obtained the documents, “At least at the top level, it appears to have made an impact. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who once frequently referred to ‘jihad’ in her public remarks, does not appear to have used the word . . . since last September.”⁸²

The two US documents mirrored those government memos that circulated in Britain and the European Union the year before, following protests from local Muslim communities about the way in which the “War on Terror” was being represented and recognition from the intelligence services that using such terminology actually damaged counterterrorism efforts. But the Bush administration, unlike its European counterparts, did not reappraise either the phrase “War on Terror” or its fundamental assessment of the war—even after the government and military’s packaging of the conflict had been repeatedly exposed. First there was the revelation of the WMD intelligence failures in Iraq. Then there were repeated challenges that the war was being misrepresented: as *Nightline* anchor Terry Moran wondered in a live shot with a reporter in Baghdad following the 2006 attack on the Golden Dome mosque in Iraq: “Kimberly, I’m going to go out—back to what this Army spokesman is saying when he says that the Army does not sense that the people of Iraq have any heightened sense of ‘unsecurity,’ as he called it. I mean, how can somebody say that with what is going on there? Do you get the sense that he was saying what he had been told to say on orders from above?”⁸³ And then there was the *New York Times* exposé in April 2008 of the Pentagon’s six-year campaign to cultivate several dozen military analysts as “surrogates” to deliver the administration’s “themes and messages” on terrorism during literally tens of thousands US television and radio appearances.⁸⁴

Although in the latter case the Pentagon announced after the *New York Times*’ disclosures that it was suspending its private high-level briefings for the retired military analysts, the Bush White House admitted no failures and stayed on message. A spokesman for the State Department had already declared that there was no question of dropping the phrase “War on Terror”: “It’s the President’s phrase, and that’s good enough for us.”⁸⁵

3 Is Pre-emption an Acceptable Method of Stopping Terrorism?

How many terrorists are there in the world?

At last count, there were 325,000 on the American master list put together from reports supplied by the CIA, the FBI, the National Security Agency (NSA), and other international agencies.

But, actually, the number may not be exactly 325,000 terrorists. Officials have admitted that the same person may appear on different lists under different spellings or aliases, so the number may be closer to 200,000. And those on the master list are not actually all “terrorists,” but rather “international terrorism suspects or people who allegedly aid them.”⁸⁶ But there *might* be 325,000 terrorists out there. Or more. Who really knows?

Yet just knowing that there are terrorists out there—or suspected or alleged terrorists out there—raises the question of what governments should do about them. How do you stop terrorists?

On August 14, 2004, US Vice President Richard Cheney, on the campaign re-election trail in Nevada, bluntly stated the White House's assessment of what needed to be done in the "Global War on Terror":

Today we face an enemy every bit as determined to destroy us as the Axis powers in World War II, or the Soviet Union during the Cold War. . . . [A]s we saw on the morning of 9/11, this enemy is perfectly prepared to slaughter anyone—man, woman, or child—who stands in the way. This is not an enemy we can reason with, or negotiate with, or appease. This is, to put it quite simply, an enemy that we must destroy. . . . September 11th showed us, as surely as anything can, that we must act against gathering dangers—not wait to be attacked. That awful day left some 3,000 of our fellow citizens dead, and everything we have learned since tells us the terrorists would do worse if they could, that they will use chemical, biological, or even nuclear weapons against us if they can.⁸⁷

Cheney, one of the Bush administration's key architects of the "War on Terror," was the most impassioned defender of the White House's broad doctrine of pre-emption—a policy well beyond a doctrine of self-defense. Cheney and President Bush's comparison of the "War on Terror" to World War II and the Cold War made the case that the "war" must be won by any means necessary—to fail to do so would be to repeat the mistakes of the nations that tried to appease Hitler in the 1930s.⁸⁸ "History teaches that underestimating the words of evil and ambitious men is a terrible mistake," said President Bush in a major speech from Washington in late 2006 in which he reasserted the doctrine of pre-emption.

In the early 1900s, an exiled lawyer in Europe published a pamphlet called "What Is To Be Done?"—in which he laid out his plan to launch a communist revolution in Russia. The world did not heed Lenin's words, and paid a terrible price. The Soviet Empire he established killed tens of millions, and brought the world to the brink of thermonuclear war. In the 1920s, a failed Austrian painter published a book in which he explained his intention to build an Aryan super-state in Germany and take revenge on Europe and eradicate the Jews. The world ignored Hitler's words, and paid a terrible price. His Nazi regime killed millions in the gas chambers, and set the world aflame in war, before it was finally defeated at a terrible cost in lives.

Bin Laden and his terrorist allies have made their intentions as clear as Lenin and Hitler before them. The question is: Will we listen? Will we pay attention to what these evil men say? America and our coalition partners have made our choice. We're taking the words of the enemy seriously. We're on the offensive, and we will not rest, we will not retreat, and we will not withdraw from the fight, until this threat to civilization has been removed.⁸⁹

Cheney in his campaign address and Bush in his speech over two years later underscored the terrorist targeting of innocent civilians, the great numbers of those killed, and above all, the ultimate security of America: If the terrorists are “determined to destroy us,” “we” need to not just react but to take the “offensive” to stop terrorists’ “threat to civilization.” Pre-emption, in short, was a military necessity when nations were faced with the horror of a new Hitler or Lenin who could marshal the destructive power of weapons of mass destruction.

In the face of biological, chemical, or nuclear weapons, pre-emption could appear as a reasonable strategy and a war against Iraq could be justified and sold. As President Bush’s carrier speech on May 1, 2003 defended the decision to go to war: “The liberation of Iraq is a crucial advance in the campaign against terror. We’ve removed an ally of al Qaeda, and cut off a source of terrorist funding. And this much is certain: No terrorist network will gain weapons of mass destruction from the Iraqi regime, because the regime is no more.”⁹⁰ Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge underlined that argument when he moved the US terror alert up to Orange later that same month. Ridge noted that, while there was no specific threat against the US that had prompted the heightened status, “weapons of mass destruction, including those containing chemical, biological or radiological agents or materials, cannot be discounted.”⁹¹

The endgame argument seemed compelling—only a few questioned the line of reasoning. One who did was Louise Richardson, who in early 2002 observed that “four [now five] people have died of anthrax and we have 285 million people in this country terrified. The fact that 20,000 people will die of flu this year is having much less impact. This demonstrates that terrorism is a very effective tactic of the weak against the strong, and shows that it’s here to stay—precisely because it is such an effective tactic in sowing fear.”⁹²

The doctrine of pre-emption became politically viable because of that fear. It did not gain the equivalent moral authority, however, as a policy founded on strict self-defense. Other Western world leaders, in fact, not only rejected the necessity of a pre-emptive doctrine, but argued that implementation of the doctrine would itself upset the rule of law. And following the inability of troops in Iraq to find the weapons of mass destruction that were used as part of the rationale for going to war, talk against the doctrine of pre-emption grew blunt. At the opening of the UN General Assembly session in 2004, Secretary General Kofi Annan said that “unilateralism and the doctrine of pre-emption represented ‘a fundamental challenge’ to the principles on which world peace and stability have rested since 1945, and threatened to set precedents resulting in a proliferation of the ‘lawless use of force, with or without justification.’” French President Jacques Chirac argued similarly: “In an open world, no one can live in isolation, no one can act alone in the name of all, and no one can accept the anarchy of a society without rules.” Multilateralism, said Chirac, is the “guarantee of legitimacy and democracy in matters regarding the use of force.”⁹³

In an ideal world, the American President's role in times of international crisis is to establish the parameters of that crisis, to shape and direct the understanding of events, and to give dimension to the issues at stake. With luck, the President can propose action that is in proportion and that appeals to "the better angels of our nature," as President Abraham Lincoln hoped for in his first inaugural address on the eve of the American Civil War.

But most of the world argued that the pre-emptive war proposed and initiated by the Bush administration was neither in proportion to terrorists' threats nor appealed to "the better angels of our nature"—especially when the grounds were based on false evidence. "On Wednesday, President Bush finally got around to acknowledging that there was no connection between Saddam Hussein and the terrorist attacks of Sept 11, 2001," said a *New York Times* lead editorial in September 2003. "White House aides will tell you that Mr. Bush never made that charge directly. And that is so. But polls show that lots of Americans believe in the link. That is at least in part because the president's aides have left the implication burning." Why was that implication left "burning"? "Recent polls suggest that the American public is not as enthusiastic about making sacrifices to help the Iraqis as about making sacrifices to protect the United States against terrorism. The temptation to hint at a connection with Sept. 11 that did not exist must have been tremendous."⁹⁴

Commentators in the press noted that not every terrorist attack can be prevented, but a nation's reactions to those that occur should be controlled. Pre-emption, which had started out as an argument for neutralizing terrorists before they could act, had been ultimately employed against a state that, while led by a dictator later tried and executed for crimes against humanity, was neither allied to the 9/11 terrorists nor had stocks of weapons of mass destruction. Pre-emption upset the moral imperative to avoid civilian casualties; Iraqi civilians had been killed by the thousands. Although Secretary of State Colin Powell had early argued that terrorists could only be attacked from "the highest moral plane," what little moral authority had attended the Americans because of their suffering the September 11 attacks, dissipated with Iraq, with Abu Ghraib, with Haditha, and with Guantánamo.⁹⁵ Other editorials, leader articles, and opinion pieces noted that the Bush administration had further undermined its moral authority by implying terrorist connections where none existed. And the Pentagon's cool rejection of civilian deaths in the theaters of operation further infuriated the watching world. "We know for a fact that these were legitimate military targets in that area that were struck," asserted Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld after an attack in Afghanistan that according to the international medical relief agency Médecins Sans Frontières killed at least 80, including women and children. Said Rumsfeld: "We know that there was terrific traditional, consistent planning to ensure that only these targets were struck. We know there were no off-target hits, so there were no collateral damage worries in this series of strikes."⁹⁶ Such statements in

the face of outside observers' testimony seemed to be arrogant spin, at best, and most likely outright falsehoods.

As the war in Iraq worsened through 2006, the American ally in the Iraq war, Prime Minister Blair, began backpedaling, putting distance between his government and the Bush administration. Blair, who had literally and figuratively stood beside President Bush in support of pre-emption, belatedly argued that it wasn't 9/11 and Iraq, but the war in Kosovo and the 1997 collapse of the Asian markets which had taught him "that the rule book of international politics has been torn up." Challenges such as global warming and mass migration, he said, "can only be tackled together. And they require a pre-emptive not simply reactive response." Blair's tardy attempts to find a global foundation for a pre-emption doctrine were taken as spin. As the lead of a story in the conservative *Daily Telegraph* had it: "Tony Blair last night challenged the world to unite around a policy of 'progressive pre-emption' as he sought to shore up his legacy by linking the invasion of Iraq to a range of problems, from global warming and poverty to immigration."⁹⁷

The political packaging of the doctrine of pre-emption, of the war in Iraq, and of the "War on Terror" itself, had come undone.



what have we learned about terrorism?

Well, we've learned that there is no agreed-upon definition of terrorism. Although most would feel comfortable saying something like "Terrorism is the use of force involving the killing of civilians to advance a political cause," the word "terrorism" continues to have many meanings. "Terrorism" is a word trundled out to refer to heinous events as well as to damn political opponents. "Terrorists" can refer to the perpetrators of acts that receive legal condemnation as well as be used to smear quite disparate players whose behavior is rumored rather than confirmed.

Media have come to be painfully aware of the term "terrorism," but still do little to clarify what those who use it (including they themselves) mean when they do. In my early human rights study, I realized that different operating definitions of human rights changed the responses of individuals and institutions to given humanitarian crises. So too have different operating definitions of terrorism affected how governments and media have managed the politics of terrorism. How one frames the threat of terrorism suggests the possible ways to solve it. President Bush detailed a frightening world and promised to keep Americans secure by going on a global offensive. Prime Minister Brown argued

that terrorism was criminal behavior, and as such could be controlled in part by community policing.

To speak about “terrorism” is to speak about contested turf. The three core questions of this first chapter—Is terrorism a tactic or an ideology? Is the way to fight “terrorism” through declaring a “war” on it? Should governments try to pre-emptively destroy terrorists?—introduce core debates about terrorism. These debates informed American and British government policy and President Bush and Prime Ministers Blair and Brown’s selling of their policies.

What we know from these questions is that politicians and the media have come to emphasize one or another of the elements of that simple 16-word explanation: “Terrorism is the use of force involving the killing of civilians to advance a political cause.” Sometimes there’s an emphasis on the “killing” and other times on the “political cause.” Sometimes there’s a focus on the “civilian” victims, other times on the intended audience for whom the cause has been “advanced.”

What we also know is that how post-9/11 governments initially played “terrorism” to look strong and decisive has proven in many cases to be counter-productive—both politically to those governments, and strategically in their attempts to defeat terrorism. As events unfolded, officials’ packaging of news and policy became apparent: *The Emperor Has No Clothes*.

The next two chapters will take a look at how American and British politics have affected the coverage of terrorism. How has the American and British governments’ attention to terrorism influenced reporting on terrorism? It turns out while some assumptions about how media cover terrorism are correct, there are many surprises when the coverage is systematically looked at.

Journalism—in print, on air, online—always seems so transparent. The words and pictures are out there for us all to see. But we rarely take the time to consider the choices that are made—the language that is selected, the voices that are heard, the images that are used, the stories that are told. Whose stories are these? Why are we hearing those and not another’s? Why do we see what we see? And most of all, why does it all matter?

The balance of this book will explain why.