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The Word on Terrorism Threat as Terrorism Threat

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Abstract: The author discusses terrorism (and terms associated with it), considering the social rhetoric surrounding the terms as well as other potential meanings. The constraints of the words used to define these terms of terror are considered.

In the United States (US), various bureaucratic entities such as the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the Department of Homeland Security, federal and state intelligence fusion centers, police and fire departments, and emergency medical services are all on the lookout for the terrorism threat. At issue are people and things that may combine to constitute an attack with nuclear, chemical, biological, radiological, cyber, and conventional weapons, as well as weapons improvised from materiel never intended for an attack at all—e.g., box cutters, agricultural fertilizer, and sports-utility vehicles. Here the prophylactic notions of preventing the proliferation of so-called dual-usage materiel or the entry into the US of persons presenting a clear and present danger are exposed as charade—as a significant threat from any materiel or person constrained only by one's imagination.

Yet the very perception of threat is founded on information processing tactics and strategies applied to sensations and concepts that together constitute language. Language may correspond or refer to actual objects and/or cohere in a narrative that has pragmatic consequences for the bearer of language. Language may be analyzed by single words, phrases, sentences, and ever larger groupings all qualified by approaches to articulation. As language goes, so goes the world threatened by terrorism as we perceive it. Unfortunately, language, as well as various emperors, may be wearing no clothes.

Take the term terrorism. It is used in many ways, often having little to do with an emotional experience of terror antecedent or consequent to a threat of violence or violent behavior. More often, terrorism is applied to the use of violence for political or ideological purposes by people who somehow do not have the right to be violent against targets who are somehow undeserving of violence.

However, does one ever not have the right to be violent? This right would seem to vary depending on one's definition and valuation of the varieties of the political and ideological in isolation, as social currency, and as a foundation or not of law. The controversy of terrorism as either a criminal or security problem masks the actuality of terrorism as possessing the highest moral and ethical essence, as being socially deviant not by its negative valuation but by its positive valuation.

And is anyone ever innocent? Perhaps this innocence is contingent on one's degrees of separation from offensive behavior and that one's right to have a risk-free, just, or self-centered life. Even infants may grow up to be counterterrorist responders or taxpayers supporting counterterrorism. Women are already counterterrorist warriors. The aged already vote to support counterterrorist policy. And then, there's Original Sin, succumbing to temptation, and immoral and unethical calculation dressed up as compromise by the conscious and unconscious.

In fact, all terrorism may be is a term of social rhetoric masking the ongoing conflict within, between, and among people for power. In other words, we may all be terrorists and terrorist victims directly or by

1

proxy at different points in our lives as we engage in the quest for success. This conclusion, if accepted, by no means obviates the need for and implementation of antiterrorist and counterterrorist capabilities. It may lead to clearer thinking about what we all are really up against, including the consequence that the sanctifying mantras impelling terrorism and compelling resistance to it are tools of bamboozlement. But even clearer thinking might lead the powers that be—like Marlon Bran as Kurtz in Apocalypse Now directed by Francis Ford Coppola (1979)—to rasp with crystal sanity "Horror….horror has a face and you must make a friend of horror…..The horror….the horror…."

Take the term suicide, as in the threat of terrorism through suicide. One often hears the narrative that suicidal terrorism violates at least some major religious ideologies—e.g., Judeo-Christian and Islamic. This narrative is based not only on the killing of alleged innocents described above but also on the alleged sacrilege of suicide itself. However, there are alternatives interpretations. Perhaps, one does not have the right to take one's own life because of unbearable physical or psychological pain. But if one has fought the good fight and has taken as much or even more than one can and ends one's life by violence believed to make the world better, what and where is the prohibitive logos? And if one goes immediately to making the world better through violence, as opposed to being locked in mortal combat with pain for as long as one possibly can, should one be even further praised than rather damned or damned with praise?

If, instead, taking one's life is self-sacrifice, isn't there good where evil resided? There is self-sacrifice to save another's life or another's life of shame and exploitation. There is self-sacrifice to create a future that one will not experience, but one's family, friends, and descendants may. So are not some suicidal terrorists saints? And is our treatment of saints shameful, hypocritical, and reminiscent of the Grand Inquisitor section of Dostoyevsky's The Brothers Karamazov? The Inquisitor is religious authority entrusted with being a brother's keeper, the keeper of religious faith and doctrine, and a sanctified scourge of vice. Yet he has turned the Word of Jesus, love, into hate and torture and arrests Jesus when He returns to walk the earth. The counterterrorist becomes terrorist through the original terrorist's projective identification?

Take the terms terrorist organization and network. At one time, it might have been accurate and useful to arrange static wiring diagrams of individuals each with specific operational and support functions. Much as with organized crime in the US during the heyday of what has been termed The Mafia, each wiring diagram would come complete with a name like the Purple Gang, Murder Incorporated, or the Gambino family. But today? With the interaction of ever evolving human nature with ever changing information technology and telecommunications in a cauldron of historical moments, the terrorist world can best be characterized by (1) continuous dynamics yielding multiple identities, selves, and motives within and among people approaching the death of the Subject as agent; (2) waxing and waning connections between people often unwitting, unknown, and vicarious;, and (3) a world of probabilistics with and without determinism and causality that can only partially be captured by profiles and narratives. In a perverse trade-off of evil for clarity, counterterrorist authorities might secretly wish that the enemy be Fallen Angels as easily identified as the inhabitants of Pandemonium in John Milton's Paradise Lost (1667).

Contemplating on the writings of philosophers such as Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein, one might conclude that the meaning of the words of language is dependent on anything but an objective truth. Much as with Russell's famous example of "The current king of France is bald" (stemming from the "On Denoting" in the 1905 volume of Mind), we find true meaning in that which is not true. Much as with Wittgenstein's concept of language games in Philosophical Investigations (G.E.M. Anscombe's

2

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

English translation, 1953), the meaning of words is not fixed, is guided by rules which we cannot completely know, and is situated within various social activities. Much as with any descriptor, be it terrorist or pacifist or schizophrenic, words construct worlds, set up traps, and serve up blinders. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God" (John 1:1). "Say the word and you'll be free. Say the word and be like me. Say the word I'm thinking of. Have you heard the word is love?" (The Beatles, "The Word," Rubber Soul, 1965). How ironic that although much has been said and written about terrorism, the Word employed to identify and challenge the threat may be the greatest threat of all. (Comments may be sent to bloomr@erau.edu)

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3