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The Politics of Threat and Danger
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The Politics of Threat and Danger: Writing the War on Terrorism*

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Abstract
Central to the discursive project that accompanies the prosecution of the global war against terrorism is a powerful and ubiquitous narrative of threat and danger. A critical discourse analysis of this narrative reveals how the language and politics of fear work to construct counter-terrorism and reproduce hegemony. The principal discursive formations of the narrative include: the notion of a new form of 'super-terrorism' or 'catastrophic terrorism'; the supreme emergency engendered by the terrorist threat; and the ubiquity of a highly dangerous enemy within. The primary ideological purpose behind constructing such a powerful narrative of threat and danger is to legitimise and normalise the doctrine of pre-emptive war against foreign enemies, and the simultaneous disciplining of domestic sources of opposition. The politics of fear also function to enforce national unity, (re)construct national identity, disguise the neo-conservative geo-strategic project, and strengthen the institutions of state coercion. However, upon closer examination it becomes clear that the discursive construction of the catastrophic terrorist threat is inherently unstable and susceptible to counter-hegemonic resistance across a range of levels. Ethically, we have a responsibility to resist the politics of fear because not only is it damaging to democratic politics, but it is directly implicated in the widespread human rights abuses of the war on terror seen in Guantànamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, and elsewhere.

Introduction

Central to the discursive project that accompanies the prosecution of the global war against terrorism is a powerful and ubiquitous narrative of threat and danger. In fact, the chief justification for the counter-terrorism effort both internationally and domestically rests on the constant articulation of the vast threat posed by international terrorism. Moreover, there is no doubting the power and pervasiveness of this discourse; the politics of fear have infused recent electoral contests in America, Australia, and Spain, and look set to dominate the forthcoming 2005 British general election. Disturbingly, majorities in America and Britain appear to accept that the extraordinary nature of the present terrorist threat justifies measures which would otherwise be viewed with abhorrence, such as preventive internment, the use of abusive interrogation methods on suspected terrorists, pre-emptive war, vast increases in military spending, and the suspension of *habeas corpus*. These attitudes are reflective of the extent to which the politics of fear have destabilised the moral community and bankrupted the moral vision of universal human rights and social inclusion in favour of a dubious sense of 'national' security.

Apart from its constitution as the new prism though which both domestic and foreign policy is formulated, the discourse of threat and danger has also been normalised across virtually every aspect of social and political life. Polling data indicates that a majority of respondents believe that terrorism poses a genuine and ongoing risk to personal and public safety. Consequently, the reality of the threat posed by terrorism and the necessity of adjustment is now taken for granted in all forms of commercial travel, public gatherings like sporting and cultural events, banking, computing, policing, education, immigration, the media, and entertainment—to name a few. Even in the academy, there are relatively few scholars who do not accept that international terrorism is now the primary security threat facing western states.

Of course, security officials would argue that in the glow of the graphic images of bodies falling like leaves from the Twin Towers and the twisted metal of the Madrid train bombings, the widespread fear of terrorism is nothing more than commonsense. It is undeniable that such seemingly random violence, packaged as media spectacle, creates an initial shock that is difficult to transcend:

> The reporting of innocent travellers killed in the bombing of an airplane is so brutally factual that no possible explanation makes sense; indeed it is so 'real' that it requires no frame, so 'true' that no interpretation is necessary, so 'concrete' that no meaning need be inferred. Its reality appears to belong more to nature than to society. This is discourse so over-whelmed by the 'reality effect' of the facts that the very suggestion that it authenticate itself appears ridiculous.[1]

In essence, the 'reality effect' of terrorist violence induces a level of anxiety that no amount of rationalising can really hope to counteract; the violence appears to 'speak for itself', the threat seems self-evident in the act.

However, the sheer visceral horror of terrorist attacks—even those like the September 11, 2001 attacks—are not, I would argue, sufficient in themselves to explain the scope and depth of the fear and anxiety that now pervades social and political life. After all, acts of political violence are nothing new; in addition, they are always publicly mediated, and the meanings of such events are continuously contested and prone to

alteration over time.[2] More importantly, while there are 'real' dangers in the world—disease, accidents, and violence (among others) all have life and death consequences—, not all dangers are equal and not all risks are interpreted as dangers.[3] The world contains a multiplicity of dangers (so many that we cannot even begin to know all that threatens us), but it is only those that are *interpreted* as threats that society learns to fear. Frequently, as the fear of terrorism illustrates, there is little correspondence between the socially accepted level of threat and the actual risk to individuals: on a statistical scale of risks for example, terrorism actually ranks somewhere around the risk of being killed in a DIY accident or being struck by lightening. In other words, the gap between society's perception of the risk of terrorism and the physical reality is created by a socially constructed 'discourse of danger'[4] that normalises that fear.

There are both ontological and normative reasons why a critical analysis of the current discourse of danger is urgently called for. Ontologically, as a number of important works have reminded us,[5] political reality is a social construct, manufactured through discursive practices and shared systems of meaning. Language does not simply reflect reality, it co-constitutes it. A fully informed understanding of the origins, consequences, and trajectory of the current war on terrorism therefore, would appear largely unattainable in the absence of a critical investigation of the official language of counter-terrorism. Normatively, the enactment of any large-scale project of political violence—such as war or counter-terrorism—requires a significant degree of political and social consensus and consensus is not possible without language. The process of inducing consent and normalising the practice of the war requires the construction of a whole new public discourse that manufactures approval while simultaneously suppressing individual doubts and wider political protest. More than this, power itself is a social phenomenon, constantly in need of legitimation; and language is the medium of legitimation.[6] Thus, the deployment of language by politicians is an exercise of power and domination; such power must always be subjected to rigorous public interrogation and critical examination lest it become abusive. This is never truer than during times of national crisis when the authorities assume enhanced powers to deal with what are perceived to be extraordinary public threats.

The paper is divided into four parts. In the initial section, methodological issues relating to the study are briefly discussed. The second section forms the core of the investigation; it entails a critical discourse analysis of the primary narratives of threat and danger in the official language of the war on terrorism. The third section examines the politics of fear, and explains how the discursive construction of danger functions to construct counter-terrorist political violence and reify state power. The final section explores the possibilities for deconstruction and counter-hegemonic struggle. In the conclusion, I briefly reflect on the ethical imperatives of resisting the politics of fear. The overall argument of the paper is fairly simple: the threat of terrorism is a social and political construction that functions to normalise the war on terrorism while simultaneously reifying state power. At the same time however, the primary discursive constructions at the heart of the threat narrative are inherently unstable and vulnerable to deconstruction. Perhaps the most important argument I wish to make is this: the language of threat is directly implicated in the conspicuous human rights abuses of the war on terrorism. This implies that resistance to the politics of fear is now the ethical duty of all responsible people.

The Analysis of Discourse

The methodological approach I have employed to examine the language of threat and danger in the war on terrorism is known broadly as critical discourse analysis. This approach is at once both a technique for analysing specific texts or speech acts, and a way of understanding the relationship between discourse and social and political phenomena. By engaging in concrete, linguistic textual analysis—that is, by doing systematic analyses of spoken and written language—critical discourse analysis aims to shed light on the links between texts and societal practices and structures, or, the linguistic-discursive dimension of social action.[7]

The approach is based on a number of crucial assumptions. It assumes that discourse is a form of social practice which both makes or constitutes the social world, and is at the same time constituted by other social practices. Discourses both contribute to the shaping of social structures and are also shaped by them; there is a dialectical relationship between the two. Of even greater import, critical discourse analysis assumes that discursive practices are never neutral, but rather they contribute to the creation and reproduction of unequal power relations between social groups. That is, discourses possess a clear ideological character; they are the construction and deployment of 'meaning in the service of power.'[8] Or, more specifically, discourses act as constructions of meaning that contribute to the production, reproduction and transformation of relations of domination in society.[9] Thus, a central aim of critical discourse analysis lies in revealing the means by which language is deployed to maintain power. What makes critical discourse analysis 'critical' is its normative commitment to positive social change.

In terms of studying the role and use of language, there are two levels at which critical discourse analysis functions. First, it engages directly with specific texts in an effort to discover how discursive practices operate linguistically within those texts. Second, because individual text analysis is not sufficient on its own to shed light on the relationship between discourse and social processes, critical discourse analysis adds a wider interdisciplinary perspective which combines textual and social analysis.[10] In essence, critical discourse analysis involves carefully reading a specific text—such as a speech, interview, radio address or report—and subjecting it to a series of analytical questions: What assumptions, beliefs and values underlie the language in the text? How does the grammar, syntax and sentence construction reinforce the meanings and effects of the discursive constructions contained in the text? What are the histories and embedded meanings of the important words in the text? What patterns can be observed in the language, and how do different parts of the text relate to each other? What knowledge or practices are normalised by the language in the text? How does the language create, reinforce or challenge power relations in society? Finding answers to these questions goes some way towards understanding how discourses work to construct social processes and structures in ways that reproduce power relations.

In my analysis of the language of the 'war on terrorism' I chose to focus mainly on the speeches, interviews and public addresses given by senior members of the Bush administration.[11] I examined over 100 speeches, interviews, radio broadcasts and reports to Congress between September 11, 2001 and January 31, 2004; these texts were a representative sample of more than 6,000 such texts on the subject of America's 'war on

terrorism' for that period. I began by examining all the important speeches that garnered major public attention or were of great symbolic importance, such as the September 11, 2001 and September 20, 2001 addresses to the American people, the State of the Union addresses, and anniversary and commemorative speeches. Lastly, I tried to ensure a selection of different speakers, from the president to senior ambassadors, as well as texts from the entire period.

Writing Threat and Danger[12]

The overall discourse of the war on terrorism comprises a vast corpus of texts (speeches, laws, reports, policy documents, operating manuals, memos, letters, emails, and websites— among others), and draws on a great many assumptions, beliefs, myths, tropes and narratives. It also involves a great many discursive constructions, formations, and strategies; the war on terrorism is a vast and highly complex political and social discourse. In this respect, the following critical discourse analysis can only provide a brief survey of some of the primary means by which the official language of the war on terrorism seeks to normalize and institutionalize the Bush administration's construction of the terrorist threat; a more in-depth treatment of the overall discourse can be found elsewhere.[13]

The social and political construction of national threat has a long genealogy in American politics.[14] For example, in the early days of settlement, government officials scripted the first of what would become a number of 'red scares'.[15] In this narrative, Native Americans—'red' Indians—threatened the spread of progressive civilisation along the western frontier; consequently, they had to be exterminated or quarantined (preventively detained) in reservations. A second 'red scare' was invoked during the widespread industrial unrest that overtook American industry from the 1890s to the early 1920s; in this case, the infamous 1919-20 Palmer Raids were used to arrest and deport thousands of foreigners suspected of being radicals. The most recent 'red scare' began in the 1950s, when communism was constructed as a catastrophic threat to the American way of life. The McCarthy hearings epitomised the depth of the hysterical fear of the 'enemy within'. In between the red scares, the two world wars allowed fears of the 'enemy living among us' to encompass people of German, Italian and Japanese extraction: 'Loose Lips Sink Ships' was the Advertising Council's warning in the 1940s.[16] Since the end of the cold war, American officials have discursively constructed a series of new dangers: the threat of 'rogue states' like Libya, Panama, Iran, North Korea, and Iraq; the threats posed by the illicit drug trade; and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The discourse of the dangers of (Islamic) terrorism—what we may well call the 'green scare'—is only the latest in a long line of social fears and moral panics written by the authorities.

In fact, the present fear of terrorism did not begin on September 11, 2001; it began in the early 1980s when officials started to apply the term 'terrorism' to acts of violence that they had previously labelled hijackings, bombings, assassinations, kidnappings, and sabotage. As a result of this reclassification, it appeared there was a new plague of terrorist violence. The media quickly adopted the same language, and news stories about terrorism soon became a staple of television and print media news. The fear of spectacular terrorist atrocities also made its way into hundreds of movies, television

programmes and works of popular fiction: from Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre's *The Fifth Horseman* and Nelson DeMille's *Cathedral*, to movies like *Black Sunday*, the public was primed to expect sudden horrific death at the hands of crazed terrorists. Not surprisingly, by 1987 surveys in America revealed that 68-80 percent of the public regarded terrorism as a 'serious' or 'extreme' threat—despite only 17 deaths attributable to terrorist activities that year.[17] Today's anxiety therefore rests on decades of public fear that was deliberately encouraged by the authorities, and which is continually experienced in the virtual dangers seen in *24*, *Spooks*, XXX, *The Sum of All Fears*, *The Peacemaker*, *True Lies*, and countless other movies, television programmes, and popular novels. Anthropologically speaking, terrorism has emerged as one of western society's strongest taboos; and the threatening terrorist is actually the cultural projection of the tabooed 'wild man' figure of the western imagination.[18] This then, is the context for the discursive construction of the terrorist threat at the heart of the war on terrorism.

In the official language of counter-terrorism, it is possible to identify three main rhetorical themes that discursively construct the terrorist threat: the notion of a new form of 'super-terrorism' or 'catastrophic terrorism'; the supreme emergency engendered by the terrorist threat; and the ubiquity of a highly dangerous enemy that lurks within western society. For the sake of clarity, some words in the texts of official speeches have been highlighted to indicate the basis of claims and analyses.

The 'New' Super-Terrorism

The initial construction of the terrorist threat involved fixing the attacks of September 11, 2001 as the start of a whole '*new* age of terror'—the dawning of 'a *new* era' of terrorist violence which contained 'unprecedented dangers'. Vice President Dick Cheney constructs a powerful image of the new age: 'Today, we are not just looking at *a new era* in national security policy, we are actually living through it. The exact nature of *the new dangers* revealed themselves on September 11, 2001, with the murder of 3,000 innocent, unsuspecting men, women and children right here at home'.[19] John Ashcroft called it a new 'reign of terror'.[20] What Cheney and Ashcroft are doing is attaching significance and meaning to the attacks that goes far beyond their physical and psychological impacts: these were not just acts of dissident violence; they were a dawning, a rupture in time. They were events of metaphysical proportions. This rhetorical association between the dawn of the new age and the threats posed by terrorists is deliberate and specifically designed to script a discourse of danger. Moreover, it is only possible by severing all links between this act of terrorism and the countless others preceding it—by decontextualising it from previous attacks. In a sense, '9/11' was discursively constructed without a pre-history and now stands alone as a defining act of cruelty and evil ('infamy').

Related to their significance as the harbinger of a new age of terror, the discourse goes on to reconstruct them as the start of an era of 'super-terrorism' or 'catastrophic terrorism' where terrorists use weapons of mass destruction to try and kill not just thousands of innocent people, but millions. As Cheney contends, the threat of terrorism is supremely catastrophic:

The attack on our country forced us to come to grips with the possibility that the next time terrorists strike, they may well […] direct *chemical agents or diseases* at our population, or attempt to detonate a *nuclear weapon* in one of our cities.

[N]o *rational person* can doubt that terrorists would use such weapons of mass murder the moment they are able to do so.

[W]e are dealing with terrorists […] who are willing to sacrifice their own lives in order to *kill millions* of others.'[21]

This language is clearly and unambiguously designed to generate maximum fear. The visions presented are apocalyptic, reflecting the most terrifying of Hollywood movies: the detonation of a nuclear bomb in a city, or the release of a deadly chemical or biological agent—resulting in millions dead (it is reflective of *The Sum of All Fears*, *12 Monkeys*, or *Outbreak*). It is important to note how the discourse employs the vision of a city devastated by a nuclear attack, without openly acknowledging that the source of that vision is the only atomic attack on a city in history (Hiroshima)—committed by America itself. The language constructs a terrifying fear while consigning the source of the fear to historical amnesia. As if this is not enough to induce paralysing terror, Cheney then makes it seem a perfectly reasonable fear to have; any 'rational person' should fear a terrorist-induced nuclear holocaust.

This construction of a new world of unimaginable violence (that also seems to echo biblical visions of the last days) is not a one-off example of over-zealous rhetoric; it is actually a common refrain among officials. For example, Paul Wolfowitz reinforces the normalcy of the vision when he states: 'If they had the capability to *kill millions of innocent civilians*, do any of us believe they would hesitate to do so?'[22] The form of this language is a rhetorical challenge that traps the listener in its logic because the answer appears self-evident: after all, if terrorists were willing to kill thousands in the WTC attacks, then logically they would kill more than this if they could. The question and its context supply its own unequivocal answer and circumvent the emergence of any alternative possibilities. In this manner, it normalises the terror. Colin Powell then constructs the vision of a race against time: 'Even as I speak, terrorists are planning appalling crimes and *trying to get their hands on weapons of mass destruction*'.[23] This lends an aura of inevitability to the danger: the plans are under way, only the means are missing. In this language we hear an echo of the popular terrorist movie script: the devilish plot is in motion and the heroes are racing against time to save the world. Importantly, this discourse appropriates and amplifies the academic discourse of 'super-terrorism' or 'catastrophic terrorism' that was popular well before September 11, 2001.[24] A number of academics and so-called terrorism 'experts' have warned of such attacks using chemical, biological or nuclear weapons for decades, and although the WTC attacks did not involve any weapons of mass destruction, it was still taken as a vindication of their warnings.

In a discursive variation, this threat of 'super-terrorism' is from a very early stage conflated with and discursively linked to the threat of 'weapons of mass destruction' and the 'rogue states' who might give them to the terrorists. As Powell puts it, the threat lies in the 'potentially catastrophic *combination of a rogue regime, weapons of mass destruction and terrorists*'.[25] This unholy trinity offers an even more terrifying spectre

than simply 'super-terrorism': terrorists are no longer lone dissidents scattered across the world, instead, they have the resources and capabilities of rogue states with which to enact their evil purposes. One of the most powerful articulations of this construction comes in George W. Bush's State of the Union address where he first mentions the 'axis of evil' (the embodiment of the alliance between terrorists and 'rogue regimes'):

> States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. *They could provide these arms to terrorists*, giving them the means to match their hatred.

> Thousands of dangerous killers, schooled in the methods of murder, often supported by outlaw regimes, are now spread throughout the world *like ticking time bombs*, set to go off without warning.

> I will not wait on events, while dangers gather. I will not stand by, as peril draws closer and closer. *The United States of America will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons*.[26]

Bush begins by constructing an alliance between terrorists and certain regimes that appears natural and unquestionable. He states categorically that he knows that there are thousands of terrorists supported by 'outlaw regimes' spread throughout the world and that terrorists and regimes are actively seeking weapons of mass destruction. This is simply a fact. Interestingly, and as if we wouldn't notice, by the end of the speech the initial terrorist element of the construction is left out and forgotten; what we are left with is 'the world's most dangerous regimes' threatening to deploy 'the world's most dangerous weapons'. The logic of the language has brought us to exactly the place Bush intended: in order to deal with the threat of 'catastrophic terrorism', we must act against 'rogue regimes'—especially those identified as belonging to the 'axis of evil'.

The rhetorical strategy of making terrorists and 'rogue states' synonymous is an ingenious discursive slight of hand. In the first instance, it allows America to re-target its military from a war against a tiny group of individual dissidents scattered across the globe (an unwinnable and unglamorous war) to a number of territorially defined states who also happen to be the target of American foreign policy designs. In effect, it transforms the war against terrorism from a largely hidden and unspectacular intelligence gathering and criminal apprehension programme, to a flag-waving public display of awesome military firepower that rebuilds the American military's dented self-confidence. Of greater concern, it simultaneously assists the pursuit of geo-strategic objectives in crucial regions such as the Middle East under the banner of counter-terrorism.[27]

Constructing the Supreme Emergency

In international law, the notion of 'supreme emergency' denotes a situation where the very existence of the state is under threat; that is, where the national security, foreign policy and economy of the state is at risk. Under such circumstances, states are permitted to take any measures deemed necessary for their survival—including pre-emptive war, the suspension of constitutional rights, preventive detention, or any other extraordinary

measure. Thus, it gives a government immense power and freedom of action if they can construct their crisis as being so severe that it constitutes a 'supreme emergency'.

There is no question that the architects of the 'war on terrorism' have discursively constructed the terrorist threat as constituting a 'supreme emergency'. Powell, for example, stated that terrorism was a 'threat to *civilization*' and a 'threat to the very essence of what you do'.[28] Bush often describes terrorism as a 'threat to our *way of life*',[29] and a threat to 'the peace of the world'.[30] The notion of a 'threat to our way of life' is actually a well-worn cold war expression that serves two functions. First, it vastly inflates the danger and constructs the magnitude of the threat: instead of a tiny group of dissidents with resources that do not even begin to rival that of the world's smallest countries, it implies they are as powerful as the Soviet empire once was thought to be with its tens of thousands of nuclear missiles and its massive conventional army. Astonishingly, it implies the terrorists could do what the Soviet Union failed to achieve over 40 years of trying. Second, it discursively links the terrorist threat to a popular narrative in American politics, namely, the long struggle against international communism. During the cold war, one of the most common rhetorical refrains was that agents of communism—both within and without the American homeland—threatened 'the American way of life'.

The discourse also establishes the temporal dimensions of the threat. Ashcroft, for example, states that: 'Terrorism is *a clear and present danger* to Americans today'.[31] The phrase 'clear and present danger' implies that it is obvious to everyone that a danger exists—it is 'clear' to all who can see—and that it is 'present', which could mean it is temporarily present (now), or spatially present (here). It is also an echo of the language used against communists during America's early 'red scares'. Emotionally, the phrase resonates powerfully because it echoes earlier moments of peril in the nation's history: the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Vietnam War. It is also fixed in popular culture as the title of a Tom Clancy book and movie of the same name. As the language reverberates through our collective consciousness, we recognise that we are living through a moment of genuine peril. Cofer Black, Spokesman Coordinator for Counter-terrorism, expands the danger even further: 'The threat of international terrorism *knows no boundaries*'.[32] This is the logical conclusion of the language: it is in fact, an infinite threat; it is a 'super-supreme emergency'.

An example of the way in which the threat is typically constructed in official speeches can be seen in President Bush's Press Conference on 11 October, 2001, exactly a month after the WTC attacks. In the process of one short speech and a Q & A with the press, Bush uses the word 'threat' 14 times—in addition to references to 'danger', 'weapons of mass destruction', 'chemical weapons' and 'biological weapons'. More than simply trying to overwhelm the listener with the imminence of danger, the text is also notable for the use of specific rhetorical strategies. For example, in his opening statement Bush assures: 'Americans tonight can know that while *the threat is ongoing*, we are taking every possible step to protect our country from danger. *Your government is doing everything we can* to recover from these attacks, and to try to prevent others.' This is a familiar discursive device in politics where the speaker simultaneously provokes and allays anxiety. This reinforcement of the threat followed by a comforting reassurance occurs numerous times. Then Bush reinforces the threat/reassurance rhetorical format by providing a concrete example of how the government received a threat and then acted strongly and appropriately to counter it:

> And let me give you one example of a specific threat we received. […] We received knowledge that perhaps an al Qaeda operative was prepared to *use a crop duster to spray a biological weapon or a chemical weapon on American people*. And so we responded. We contacted every crop-dust location, airports from which crop dusters leave, we notified crop duster manufactures to a potential threat. We knew full well that in order for a crop duster to become a weapon of mass destruction would require a retrofitting, and so we talked to machine shops around where crop dusters are located. We took strong and appropriate action. And we will do so any time we receive a credible threat.

Critically, in explaining how responsible and appropriate the government is being in protecting the American people from these 'ongoing threats', Bush simultaneously ratchets up the level of fear by invoking an image of crop dusters (a symbol of rural life, quiet agriculture and the production life-giving nourishment) raining down biological and chemical weapons on the American people. It is a terrifying spectre: an instrument of progress, a life-affirming application of technology (and the opposite of a military plane, for example) transformed into a weapon of mass destruction.

These contradictions—creating terror and reassurance at the same time—are given even greater power by the symbolic act of hiding the Vice President in a secure bunker every time a threat is issued. A reporter questions Bush about it:

> Question: Mr. President, you've tried very hard to assure Americans that the country is safe, and yet your own Vice President has spent most of this week in a secure location. Can you explain why that is, and also how long that will last?

> The President: […] We take very seriously the notion of the continuity of government. It's a responsibility we share, to make sure that under situations such as this, when there are possible threats facing our government, that we separate ourselves, for the sake of continuity of our government.

In effect, the answer to the question is the production of even more fear: the government that you trust to keep you safe is actually at risk—even the Vice President does not feel safe, so how are ordinary people going to feel safe?

Finally, there is a less than subtle attempt to remake and reconstruct normal life by introducing an element of terror into everyday activities:

> The American people, obviously, if they see something that is suspicious, something out of *the norm* that looks suspicious, they ought to take comfort in knowing our government is doing everything we possibly can.

> We are getting back to *normal*. We're doing so with a new sense of awareness. And the warning that went out today helped heighten that sense of awareness.

> Well, Ann, you know, if you find a person that you've never seen before getting in a crop duster that doesn't belong to you—(laughter)—report it. (Laughter.) If you see suspicious people lurking around petrochemical plants, report it to law enforcement. I mean, *people need to be logical*.

> And so I would urge my fellow Americans, obviously, if they see something suspicious, *abnormal*, something that looks threatening, report it to local law enforcement.[33]

Significantly, there is no real explanation of what might be 'out of the norm' or what might constitute something 'suspicious'; instead, the listeners are told that it should be 'obvious' and are urged to be 'logical', as if this is an entirely reasonable request. This is a way of normalising a terrified society and maintaining a never ending emotional roller coaster of fear and reassurance. In this manner, the language constructs a ubiquitous and endless emergency in which the state must be relied upon (apart from when it too cowers in a bunker) to safeguard the nation.

The Dangerous Terrorist Enemy Within

As if the new world of terror created by the authorities was not enough to spread panic throughout the community, officials then go to great lengths to explain how these same terrorists (who are eager to kill millions of innocent civilians and who possess weapons of mass destruction or who have allied with states that possess such weapons) are actually highly sophisticated, cunning, and extremely dangerous killers living among us. In a series of constructions which sit uneasily with their simultaneous depiction as cowards, crazed fanatics, evildoers, and faceless villains, the terrorists are made out to be formidable and frightening foes.

Of course, there would be no advantage for officials to admit that terrorists are ordinary people and frequently incompetent. Instead, the authorities make terrorists out to be incredibly sophisticated and fearsome agents—super-terrorists, as it were. For example, Ashcroft stated that the September 11 attacks proved that 'terrorism is the activity of *expertly organized, highly coordinated* and *well financed* organizations and networks'.[34] In the same speech, he suggests that these terrorists 'can kill thousands of Americans in a single day' (as if they are that skilled and can do it anytime they choose), they can mount 'sophisticated terrorists operations', and they have the '*capacity* to inflict damage on the citizens and facilities' of the United States. Bush echoes this assessment: 'Our enemies are *resourceful*, and they are *incredibly ruthless*'.[35] The objective is to construct a formidable enemy who is so fearsome that only an extraordinary effort will defeat them. Again, it is a common discursive strategy: during the cold war, American intelligence deliberately over-estimated Soviet capabilities in order to maintain an extremely high level of threat that justified massive defence spending. The CIA also exaggerated the threat posed by Iraq in the run-up to both the 1991 and 2003 Gulf Wars.

There is a second aspect to the construction of the danger terrorists pose. Officials stress that in addition to their undoubted skills and abilities, the terrorists are also a vast army of agents spread right across the globe—much like the huge network of Soviet agents that operated around the world during the cold war. Soon after September 11, 2001, for example, Bush revealed: '*There are thousands of these terrorists in more than 60 countries*. They […] hide in countries around the world'.[36] Given the proximity to the attacks, this was a terrifying scenario: after all, if only 19 hijackers could cause such massive destruction, how much more death and mayhem could 'thousands' of ruthless terrorists cause? A short time later, Bush raises the level of threat even higher by suggesting that 'There are al Qaeda organizations in, roughly, 68 countries'.[37] In one of the more detailed articulations of the threat posed by these ubiquitous terrorists, Bush

constructs a narrative which could have come directly from the pages of a popular spy novel, such as Nelson DeMille's *The Charm School*:

> Most of the 19 men who hijacked planes on September the 11th were trained in Afghanistan's camps, and so were tens of thousands of others. *Thousands of dangerous killers*, schooled in the methods of murder, often supported by outlaw regimes, are now spread throughout the world *like ticking time bombs*, set to go off without warning. […] A terrorist underworld […] operates in remote jungles and deserts, and hides in the centers of large cities.[38]

Here we have a series of images straight out of popular fiction: 'ticking time bombs' (they were called 'sleepers' during the cold war) just waiting for that phone call to activate them; tens of thousands of agents 'schooled in the methods of murder'; and a vast 'terrorist underworld' of secret codes, tradecraft, plots and conspiracies that stretches right around the world.

Interestingly, in the 1970s and 1980s, western security agencies created and encouraged a popular mythology surrounding Ilich Ramirez Sanchez, a.k.a. 'Carlos the Jackal' (the name itself is an integral part of the myth), which suggested he was a kind of super-terrorist of exceptional cunning and skills who was personally involved in virtually every major terrorist incident in western Europe at this time. Many works of popular fiction and movies were modelled on his story, such as Robert Ludlum's *The Bourne Identity* and Nelson DeMille's *The Lion's Game*. In actuality, as investigator David Yallop discovered, Carlos was rather incompetent and relied on good fortune and the incompetence of the security services for many of his escapes and successful operations.[39] The case of the Unabomber is similarly instructive: despite the fact his 'embarrassingly ineffectual' letter bombs resulted in only three fatalities over nearly two decades of trying (hardly even comparable to some convenience store robberies), law enforcement officials (and the media) constructed him as a major terrorist of mythical proportions and spent over $50 million trying to apprehend him.[40] At the same time, these discursive constructions of mythical individual super-terrorists were frequently subsumed into a much larger myth of a global Soviet conspiracy during the cold war, where all international terrorism was directed by Moscow and communist agents lurked everywhere waiting for an opportunity to strike. Carlos the Jackal was popularly believed to have been trained in Moscow, for example. Claire Sterling's book *The Terror Network* (1981) was the formative work in the promulgation of this myth, and was highly praised by Ronald Reagan, Alexander Haig, William Casey and other senior American officials. It was only later it was discovered that Sterling's work was based on deliberate CIA disinformation.[41] Today, as we can see in the language of American and British officials, a similar myth is currently being constructed around Islamic terrorism: every terrorist attack is said to be the work of al Qaeda; they are thought to be operating at will in virtually every country; they are considered to be highly trained and sophisticated; they are, according the authorities, the super-terrorists of the terrorist underworld.

As if the threat could not be greater (tens of thousands of highly trained killers lurking everywhere, plotting to deploy weapons of mass destruction in our cities in an insane attempt to kill millions of us and end our way of life), the final curtain of fear is drawn across our terrified imaginations: the threat is not confined to enemies outside the borders of the community, it is already inside—it resides within. As Bush put it, there is a

need to 'give law enforcement the additional tools it needs to track down *terror here at home*'.[42] This language is designed to reinforce the idea that 'the home', a place of comfort and security, has been invaded and infected by the scourge of terrorism. Ashcroft constructs it even more forcefully:

> The men and women of justice and law enforcement are called on to combat a terrorist threat that is both immediate and vast; *a threat that resides here, at home*, but whose supporters, patrons and sympathizers form a multinational network of evil. The attacks of September 11 were acts of terrorism against America orchestrated and carried out by individuals *living within our borders*. […] *They live in our communities*—plotting, planning and waiting to kill Americans again.[43]

Again, there is a reference to the 'home' being violated. This is deliberately emotive language, as the threat to the home touches upon some of our deepest cultural insecurities. In the same speech, Ashcroft articulates the implications of constructing this dangerous 'enemy within':

> To date, our anti-terrorism offensive has arrested or detained nearly 1,000 individuals as part of the September 11 terrorism investigation. Those who violated the law remain in custody. Taking suspected terrorists in violation of the law off the streets and keeping them locked up is our clear strategy to prevent terrorism within our borders. […] The federal government cannot fight this reign of terror alone. Every American must help us defend our nation against this enemy.[44]

There are two clear logics here. First, the 'enemy within' (anyone suspected of being linked to terrorism) must be quarantined and isolated from the general population—taken off the streets and locked up—and second, every true American must join the fight to secure the '*home*land'. In this way, the language normalises both the preventive detention of thousands of suspected Muslims and the creation of informant-based systems like the Responsible Cooperators Program and the Terrorism Information and Prevention System program (TIPS). In short, just like the American 'red scares' of the past, the discourse of danger is deployed to create social fear, enforce social discipline, mute dissent and increase the powers of the national security state. Writing a dangerous enemy that lives among the community makes it easier to make policies that serve a wider range of goals than just counter-terrorism.

Discourses are more than just words or texts however; they are also actions and material practices which act as symbols and message transmitters. In constructing the 'war on terrorism', American officials engaged in a constant display of actions designed to reinforce the language of threat. For example, during times of national alert, it is well-known that Vice President Cheney is always taken to a secure bunker so the continuity of government can be maintained in case of an attack on the President. This kind of action sends a powerful subliminal message that the government really believes it is in danger of being decapitated, and that even the most powerful people in the country are not safe from terrorists. Other powerful discursive actions seen so far in the war on terrorism include: the grounding of passenger flights to America; the placement of armed sky marshals on passenger planes; the flying of jet fighters over major cities during heightened alert; the massive steel and concrete barricades erected around public

buildings; military operations where tanks and other heavy equipment are displayed around airports or at other public venues; large-scale public health exercises that simulate a WMD attack on an urban area; massive public safety campaigns for trains; government websites that encourage the building of sealed rooms and the hoarding of essential supplies; and the institutionalisation of a national terrorist warning system based on the colours red, orange, yellow, blue and green (where red signifies extreme risk of terrorist attack and green signifies low risk). These are very powerful discursive actions that reinforce the seriousness of the threat and send an unambiguous message: if the government takes this kind of action, then the threat must indeed be 'real' as no government would expend these kinds of resources on a 'fake' or imaginary threat. The use of the colour coded warning system is particularly insidious, because the subliminal message of danger is reinforced at every intersection, reflected in the glow of the traffic lights.

The Politics of Threat and Danger

The primary function of the terrorist threat narrative is to socially construct the counter-violence of the war on terrorism. An increasing number of studies have demonstrated how discourses of fear and threat to the community are an essential element in constructing large-scale political violence, particularly war which requires widespread social support.[45] The process of threat creation has been a noticeable feature of every civil war in the last decade. In the Balkans, Slobodan Milosevic convinced the Serbian people that their culture, their way of life, and their very existence was under threat from Croats and Bosnians; this led many to join the war to defend the Serb nation and many more to acquiesce or support it tacitly.[46] In effect, the fear and sense of threat generated in these societies was sufficient to motivate ordinary people to engage in or support pre-emptive military attacks on their perceived enemies. A similar process has occurred in the 'war on terrorism': the construction of fear and a powerful sense of danger have justified pre-emptive attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq, being widely supported by a terrified population.

The politics of fear has another vital political function: constructing and sustaining collective identity. It is well known that individuals unify in the face of an external danger in an instinctual psychological reflex. For sizeable and diverse collectivities such as states, the existence of abiding and multiple exogenous threats is indispensable for bolstering the unity of the 'imagined community'. While neo-realist scholars believe that the international system is by definition dangerous and threatening—providing all states with a pre-existing and permanent external danger—constructivists have shown how state practices actually constitute or create this situation of anarchy through their interaction.[47] External threats do not necessarily exist independently of states; rather, states deliberately construct them for the purposes of disciplining the domestic sphere. Creating and maintaining a perennial 'discourse of danger' therefore, is a key function of foreign policy, designed to enforce inside/outside, self/other boundaries and thereby construct or 'write' collective identity.[48] Typically, states construct external threats by positing a rival state (the 'evil' Soviet empire, for example), an opposing ideology (fascism, communism or Islamic fundamentalism), or

'national security' issues such as weapons proliferation, rogue states, illicit drugs, and terrorism.

In addition to constructing counter-terrorist violence and enforcing collective identity, there are other reasons authorities value the creation of social anxiety and moral panics. In the first place, it can be an effective means of de-legitimising dissent and muting criticism. In an atmosphere of national peril, the appeal for unity takes on greater moral force and voicing disagreement can be seen as an act of disloyalty. In many cases, the creation of widespread moral panics can lead to ordinary citizens acting as the primary agents of censure themselves, both in terms of self-censorship (choosing to withhold their own doubts and disagreements in public discourse) and the censorship of others (expressing disapproval when confronted with dissenting or 'disloyal' opinions in others). There have been countless cases of this phenomenon in America since the 'war on terrorism' began, from the sacking of injudicious talk show hosts, to the public burning of *Dixie Chicks* CDs and the banning of 'unpatriotic' t-shirts worn by high school students.

Related to this, there are a great many vested interests among government agencies in maintaining a sense of national peril; the security agencies in particular—police, FBI, CIA, NSA, Department of Homeland Security, MI5 and MI6 in Britain—receive increased resources and enjoy an elevated status in times of national danger. As Senator Arthur Vandeburg advised President Truman, if you really want all the weapons and taxes to pay for a long war against communism, then you had better 'scare hell out of the American people'.[49] In the 'war on terrorism', all of the national security institutions—the military, law enforcement agencies, emergency response agencies and intelligence organisations—have received massive extra funding directly because of the fear of terrorist attacks. In America, more than half of the federal budget for FY 2004 was devoted to national defence, with the Pentagon receiving $399 billion and spending on homeland security more than doubling from $18 billion to $38 billion.[50] With agencies like the CIA costing around $30 billion per year, the sums involved are truly vast. In Britain, MI5 has recently been given a 50 percent increase in its budget to £300 million per year and is set to increase its personnel numbers to the highest level since World War II.[51] In addition to these public bodies, there are also private sector interests in the maintenance of social fear; private security providers have benefited greatly from the state of anxiety about terrorism and the sector is thriving with sales of security equipment topping $50 billion per annum in the last few years.[52] There are direct material benefits for a great many government actors—as well as prestige and standing—in maintaining an elevated level of public fear.

Another function of social fear is the distraction of the public from more complex and pressing social ills. Actually, some fears are better than others for politicians, because some fears—such as the fear of being without health care or employment—are not amenable to quick-fix solutions and carry the risk of policy failure. The fear of terrorism on the other hand, is perfect for the authorities because it is ubiquitous, catastrophic, opaque (reliant on government control of secret information) and rooted in deep cultural anxieties. Moreover, there is little risk for the authorities of being seen to fail; every terrorist attack can simply be construed as another reason to expend even greater resources in dealing with the threat—rather than as a failure of current policies. As a consequence, more pressing and more complex threats to individual safety, such as crime,

gun control, poverty, workplace safety and health (to name a few), can remain relatively neglected while the government spends hundreds of billions of dollars on the more pressing threat of terrorism. A suffocating smokescreen of fear is required for this strategy to work successfully. When it does, it also allows for the diversion of scarce resources into ideologically driven political projects, such as National Missile Defence, military expansion, and cutting welfare programmes.

Lastly, fear creates calls for retaliation and punishment. Studies have shown that the more fearful people are of crime, for example, the more punitive they require the authorities to be towards criminals.[53] The atmosphere of retribution gives the authorities greater freedom to use coercive and repressive strategies and to exercise 'raw power'. This is the principle currently at work in the construction of the 'war on terrorism': create enough fear and anxiety about the threat posed by terrorism and people will fully support a massive campaign of punitive violence against terrorists and the states that support them. They will also accept limitations on their own human rights and civil liberties as part of the cost of punishing terrorists. In part, the Iraqi prisoner abuse scandal was caused by the dread of the terrifying terrorist 'other'; being the object of such fear (and hatred) led directly to harsher treatment. It is also the reason there has been a massive increase in the incidence of hate crimes against Muslims and people of Arab appearance in America and Britain; the moral panic constructed by the authorities has turned Muslims into the feared (and hated) 'other'.

Deconstructing the Discourse of Fear

There is no doubting the power of the current discourse of threat and danger; it appears to hold hegemonic sway over both public and private discourse. However, I would argue that the primary discursive constructions at the heart of the threat narrative are actually inherently unstable and vulnerable to deconstruction across a range of levels. A first strategy of deconstruction lies in revealing the underlying political purposes of the discourse, as I have attempted to do in the paper so far: revealing the hegemonic forces at work in the public language of counter-terrorism helps to de-invest it of its assumed moral authority. A second strategy involves marshalling counter-evidence and counter-arguments that contradict the primary narratives or provide alternative accounts. In this regard, there are a great many areas in which the central discursive constructions are vulnerable. While not comprehensive in any stretch of the imagination, the following arguments provide a powerful rebuttal to the continuous public reproduction of the terrorist threat.

In the first place, it is possible to demonstrate that the actual risk posed by terrorism to personal and public safety is actually minute: in statistical terms the risk of being killed in a terrorist attack ranks somewhere near the risk of being killed by DIY accidents, lightning strikes, or bee stings.[54] Certainly, it does not even begin to compare America's annual death toll from gun violence: since 1965 close to a million Americans have died from gunshot wounds, and in 2000 a total of 28,117 people died in weapons-related incidents—more than 10,000 of whom were murdered.[55] Even in 2001, America's worst year on record, the casualties from terrorism were still vastly outnumbered by deaths from automobile accidents and pedestrian deaths, alcohol and tobacco-related illnesses, suicides, and a great many diseases like influenza, cancer, rabies, and liver

disease. At a global level, the estimated 1,000-7,000 yearly deaths from terrorism pales into insignificance next to the 40,000 people who die every *day* from hunger, the 500,000 people who are killed every year by light weapons, the 2 million who are killed around the world in automobile accidents, and the millions who die annually from diseases like influenza (3.9 million annual deaths), HIV-AIDS (2.9 million annual deaths), diarrhoeal (2.1 million annual deaths), and tuberculosis (1.7 million annual deaths).[56] The United Nations recently estimated that 150,000 people die every year from increased diseases caused by global warming; Dr David King, Britain's chief scientist has suggested that global warming is really a much greater threat to humanity than terrorism.[57] In Britain, around 5,000 people a year die in the NHS from MRSA caused by the lack of hygiene.

A study of the location and nature of terrorist attacks themselves further confirms the view that terrorism actually poses a negligible risk to the personal safety of Americans or Europeans—among others. In geographical terms, the vast majority of terrorist attacks occur in a very small number of countries—Israel, Russia, Colombia, Kashmir, Algeria, Afghanistan, and since May 2003, Iraq. Terrorism, in other words, is almost always associated with a relatively small number of ongoing political conflicts; the vast majority of the world's 200 or so states experience little or no terrorism at all. The nature of terrorist attacks reveals a similar kind of picture: proportionally, most terrorist violence is directed at property rather than persons and the majority of attacks involve few or no fatalities at all. For example, of the 50 terrorist incidents reported for the entire Latin American region in 2003, 41 of them were bombings of an American-owned oil pipeline in Colombia.[58] Significantly, of the more than 10,000 terrorist incidents between 1968 and 1998, fewer than a dozen involved more than 100 fatalities.[59] Overall, the number of terrorist attacks world-wide has been stable or falling for some time.[60] The random mass casualty terrorism that we are constantly told to expect is actually extremely rare. This is because, as one terrorism expert put it, 'terrorists want a lot of people watching, not a lot of people dead'.[61] Mass casualties are often counter-productive to terrorist aims—they alienate their supporters and can provoke harsh reprisals from the authorities—, as well as being unnecessary—a phoned in bomb threat is usually sufficient to cause widespread panic. In reality, most terrorist violence is directed at symbolic targets; its aim is to create a media spectacle in order to communicate some kind of political message. It is instrumental violence, or 'propaganda of the deed'.

There are also counter-arguments about whether there really is a 'new' form of 'catastrophic terrorism', and whether terrorists really would as a matter of course, employ weapons of mass destruction. A number of academics have put forward reasons for thinking the vast majority of terrorists unlikely to ever use such weapons.[62] Apart from the difficulties of obtaining and deploying such weapons (they are notoriously unstable and unpredictable), there are real dangers that such attacks would be counter productive, would undermine support and distort the terrorist's political message, and would probably invite overwhelming retaliation. Terrorists are rational actors and are acutely aware of these dangers. Interviews with senior al Qaeda figures for example, reveal that they rejected using WMD on September 11, 2001 for precisely these kinds of reasons. From this perspective, it is a massive (and deliberate) over-inflation of the threat. In truth, even nation-states with all their resources would find it extremely difficult to achieve what these terrorists are supposed to be capable of. The only country to have ever

detonated an atomic weapon in a city—America at Hiroshima—failed to kill 'millions' of innocent people.

Most revealing in this regard, the Gilmore Commission in 1999, a Clinton-appointed advisory panel that was assembled to investigate the threat of weapons of mass destruction falling into the hands of terrorists concluded in its final report that 'rogue states would hesitate to entrust such weapons to terrorists because of the likelihood that such a group's actions might be unpredictable even to the point of using the weapon against its sponsor'; in addition, they would be reluctant to use such weapons themselves due to 'the prospect of significant reprisals'.[63] This is a perspective shared by no small number of scholars: it is too risky for any state to entrust unaccountable groups of dissidents and terrorists with such weapons. Condoleeza Rice, a key figure in the Bush administration, appears to have shared this view when she was a practising academic: in 2000 she wrote that there was no need to panic about rogue states because 'if they do acquire WMD—their weapons will be unusable because any attempt to use them will bring national obliteration'.[64]

The discursive construction of thousands of highly sophisticated al Qaeda operatives around the world just waiting to strike can also be deconstructed as nothing more than myth-making. As described above, individual terrorists almost never reach the level of cunning and sophistication that officials ascribe to them. Information gathered since September 11, 2001 reveals that the characterisation of the al Qaeda terrorists as brilliant professionals—the so-called 'superman scenario'—is misconstrued. In fact, they made a great many amateurish errors and only avoided detection and interception through profound failures in the American intelligence system.[65] Moreover, in relation to the mythology now surrounding al Qaeda, it has been convincingly shown that the idea of a global Islamic terrorist organisation similar to the mafia, with Osama bin Laden at the head, is a fiction that was first advocated by the US Justice Department in the aftermath of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. To the extent that al Qaeda operated a number of camps on the fringes of the Islamist movement in Afghanistan in the 1990s, this rudimentary level of organisation was destroyed in December 2001 with the fall of the Taliban regime.[66] While there are extremist Islamic groups operating locally and autonomously in countries like Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Indonesia, Algeria, Egypt, The Philippines, and Yemen, they are for the most part fighting over locally-defined issues; the idea that they are unified in a global struggle against modernity and western values is a highly Eurocentric and misleading exaggeration. It is designed to construct a global Islamic conspiracy of sinister proportions, and is directly comparable to the cold war mythology of a global communist conspiracy that was also a deliberate obfuscation.

Finally, even the most cursory knowledge of previous terrorist groups reveals that they have never truly threatened a state, or democracy, or freedom, or the way of life of an entire people; nor have they ever threatened the peace of the world or the existence of any civilisation. This is so much demagoguery. On the other hand, there are numerous examples where the reaction of the authorities to terrorist attacks has endangered democracy and freedom by withdrawing civil and political rights, and where the state's eagerness to suppress dissidents has led to miscarriages of justice and human rights abuses by the security forces. In reality, it is not terrorism that threatens the essence of our societies—terrorists are tiny groups of desperate people able to do little more than

commit symbolic acts of violence—but rather state-led counter-terrorism and the dangers of over-reaction.

Conclusion

The discourse of fear is one of the central constructions of the war on terrorism. Its main result is a society living in a state of 'ontological hysteria'—a nation constantly anticipating the next attack, just 'waiting for terror'.[67]. The suffocating power of the counter-terrorism project derives in large part from its ability to project a reality of ubiquitous and impending danger. And yet, as I have demonstrated, the discursive construction of the catastrophic terrorist threat is inherently unstable and susceptible to counter-hegemonic resistance. If the terrorist threat is a social construction, there is no reason why it cannot be deconstructed.

From an ethical perspective, there are compelling reasons for actively resisting and working to dismantle the discourse of threat and danger. In the first place, as a great many studies have shown, the social construction of the global terrorist threat has functioned to provide a discursive smokescreen for the pursuit of expansionist imperial policies, such as opening up new regions to American markets and influence, the expansion of a global military presence, the disciplining of potential rivals, and the strategic control of future oil supplies—among others.[68] In effect, the terrorist threat presently fulfils the same ideological and discursive functions that the communist threat played during the cold war.

Second, the discourse of threat and danger is cynically employed to de-legitimise domestic dissent and expanding state power through the reassertion of the national security state. Successive reports by Amnesty International have noted that this is occurring all over the world: the war on terror is being used to repress opponents in dozens of countries.[69] In this regard, the politics of fear are proving highly damaging to democratic politics and the functioning of civil society. The corrosive effects of the discourse are plainly obvious: anti-globalisation protesters, academics, postmodernists, liberals, pro-choice activists, environmentalists and gay liberationists in America have been accused of being aligned with the evil of terrorism and of undermining the nation's struggle against terrorism;[70] arms trade protesters are arrested under anti-terrorism legislation in Britain; blacklists of 'disloyal' professors, university departments, journalists, writers and commentators are posted on the internet and smear campaigns are launched against them; anti-administration voices are kept away from speaking at public events or in the media; and political opponents of government policy are accused of being traitors. The overall effect of this process is the narrowing of the discursive space for political debate and the suppression of civil society.

However, the most compelling reason for opposing the discourse of threat and danger is that it is directly implicated in the very worst of the abuses of the global counter-terrorism effort—from the mass murder of Taliban prisoners during Operation Enduring Freedom, to the illegal rendition of terrorist suspects and the ongoing murder, torture, and inhumane treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, Baghram air-force base, Abu Ghraib prison, and countless other detention facilities around the world.[71] Recent studies have convincingly demonstrated that these large-scale and systematic abuses of human rights, far from being aberrant or in any way exceptional, have instead

been normalised and institutionalised in the day-to-day prosecution of the war on terrorism.[72]

More importantly, the studies clearly demonstrate that the abuses were the direct result of the creation of a supreme and ubiquitous terrorist threat. For example, the extreme forms of shackling seen in the photos of the initial Guantanamo Bay prisoners (in some cases, bound and shackled to gurneys, detainees were wheeled to interrogations) were justified on the grounds that these were such dangerous individuals that they had to be restrained in this fashion for the safety of those guarding them.[73] Earlier, President Bush's Military Order of November 13, 2001 proclaimed that detainees in the war on terrorism were not entitled to protection under the Geneva Conventions and would be tried under special military commissions because:

> Individuals acting alone and in concert involved in international terrorism possess both the capability and the intention to undertake further terrorist attacks against the United States that, *if not detected and prevented, will cause mass deaths, mass injuries, and massive destruction of property*, and *may place at risk the continuity of the operations of the United States Government.* […] Having fully considered the magnitude of the potential deaths, injuries, and property destruction that would result from potential acts of terrorism against the United States, and the probability that such acts will occur, I have determined that *an extraordinary emergency exists* for national defence purposes…[74] (emphasis added.)

Later, in dozens of letters and memos regarding the treatment of prisoners, senior officials argue that 'the interrogation of such unlawful combatants in a manner *beyond that which may be applied to a prisoner of war* who is subject to the protections of the Geneva Conventions'[75] (emphasis added) will be allowable because:

> al Qaeda has other sleeper cells within the United States that may be planning… to develop and *deploy chemical, biological and nuclear weapons of mass destruction*. Under these circumstances, a detainee may possess information that could enable the United States to prevent *attacks that potentially could equal or surpass the September 11 attacks in their magnitude*. Clearly, any harm that might occur during an interrogation would pale to insignificance compared to the harm avoided by preventing such an attack, which could take *hundreds or thousands of lives*.[76] (emphasis added.)

Apart from revealing how far the public language of the war on terrorism has permeated the institutions of government and state security, what these excerpts clearly demonstrate is how the discursive construction of the terrorist threat has been deployed to justify and normalise the systematic and institutional abuse of human rights.

In sum, the discourse of threat and danger is proving to be highly damaging to both our moral values and our political life; in the process, individuals are being violated, abused, and killed. We are implicated in this monstrosity as citizens, and fail in our academic responsibilities, if we remain silent and do not act. As Campbell has expressed it, 'to live ethically, we must think and act politically.'[77] For this reason, we have an ethical duty to resist the politics of fear, to counter and oppose it at every opportunity, and to continually interrogate the exercise of state power currently masquerading as the war on terrorism.

Notes

[1] J. Zulaika and W. Douglass, *Terror and Taboo: The Follies, Fables, and Faces of Terrorism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), p. 5.

[2] The contested meanings of the attack on Pearl Harbor in American culture—its competing historical lessons, its shifting symbolism, and its appropriation by elites for framing contemporary events such as the September 11, 2001 attacks—is a poignant case in point. See E. Rosenberg, *A Date Which Will Live: Pearl Harbor in American Memory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

[3] D. Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, Revised edition, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 2.

[4] *Ibid*.

[5] See A. Wendt, 'Anarchy is What States Make of it', *International Organization* 46 (1992), pp. 391-425; Campbell, *Writing Security*.

[6] M. Wight, *Power Politics*, edited by H. Bull and C. Holbraad, (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1978); see also A. Hurrell, '"There are no Rules" (George W. Bush): International Order after September 11', *International Relations* 16, vol.2 (2002), pp. 185-204.

[7] M. Jorgensen and L. Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (London: Sage, 2002), pp. 60-71.

[8] N. Fairclough, *Media Discourse* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), p. 14.

[9] N. Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), p. 87.

[10] *Ibid*.

[11] The reason for focusing on these particular texts and not the documents of law enforcement officials or the content of websites, for example, is that these speeches represent the source of the discourse. The 'war on terrorism' is an elite led project and these elites have provided the primary justifications and overall vision.

[12] While this study focuses solely on the Bush administration's construction of the terrorist threat, preliminary investigations of the Blair government's articulation of counter-terrorism reveal that the same narrative themes and discursive constructions are present in British political discourse.

[13] See R. Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counter-Terrorism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

[14] For example, in a growing literature, Emily Rosenberg details how events like 'Custer's Last Stand', the battle of the Alamo, and the attack on the *Maine* were discursively constructed as threats in order to legitimize the Indian wars and the wars against Mexico and Spain. See Rosenberg, *A Date Which Will Live*, pp. 11-15.

[15] See D. Cole, *Enemy Aliens: Double Standards and Constitutional Freedoms in the War on Terrorism* (New York: The New Press, 2003).

[16] N. Snow, *Information War: American Propaganda, Free Speech and Opinion Control since 9-11* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), p. 93.

[17] Zulaika and Douglass, *Terror and Taboo*, p. 6; see also S. Livingston, *The Terrorism Spectacle* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), pp. 1-2.

[18] See Zulaika and Douglass, *Terror and Taboo*.

[19] D. Cheney, Vice-President, Remarks to the American Society of News Editors, The Fairmont Hotel, New Orleans, April 9, 2003.

[20] J. Ashcroft, Attorney General, Prepared Remarks for the US Mayors Conference October 25, 2001.

[21] Cheney, Remarks to the American Society of News Editors, 9 April, 2003.

[22] P. Wolfowitz, Deputy Secretary of Defense, Prepared Testimony: 'Building a Military for the 21st Century', To the Senate Armed Services Committee, October 4, 2001.

[23] C. Powell, Secretary of State, Release of the 2002 'Patterns of Global Terrorism' Annual Report, US Department of State, Washington DC, April 30, 2003.

[24] See for example, A. Carter, J., Deutch and P. Zelikow, 'Catastrophic Terrorism', *Foreign Affairs*, 77, vol.6 (1998), pp.80-94; R. Falkenrath, *America's Achilles' Heel: Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Terrorism and Covert Attack* (London: MIT Press, 4th ed., 2001); L. Freedman, ed., 2002. *Superterrorism: Policy Responses* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); W. Laqueur, 1999. *The New Terrorism: Fanaticism and the Arms of Mass Destruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); G. Schweitzer, *Superterrorism: Assassins, Mobsters, and Weapons of Mass Destruction* (London: Plenum Press, 1999); J. Stern, *The Ultimate Terrorists* (London: Harvard University Press, 1999).

[25] Powell, Release of the 2002 'Patterns of Global Terrorism' Annual Report, April 30, 2003.

[26] G. W. Bush, The President's State of the Union Address, January 29, 2002.

[27] See C. Boggs, ed., *Masters of War: Militarism and Blowback in the Era of American Empire* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003); A. Callinicos, *The New Mandarins of American Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003); R. Mahajan, *Full Spectrum Dominance: U.S. Power in Iraq and Beyond* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003).

[28] C. Powell, Remarks by the Secretary of State to the National Foreign Policy Conference for Leaders of Nongovernmental Organisations (NGO), Loy Henderson Conference Room, U.S. Department of State, Washington, D.C., October 26, 2001.

[29] G. W. Bush, Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People, September 20, 2001.

[30] G. W. Bush, The President's State of the Union Address, January 29, 2002.

[31] J. Ashcroft, Attorney General, Testimony to House Committee on the Judiciary, September 24, 2001.

[32] C. Black, Spokesman Coordinator for Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State, Press Conference for 2002 Annual Report 'Patterns of Global Terrorism', Washington, D.C., April 30, 2003.

[33] G. W. Bush, Press Conference, The East Room, Washington, DC, October 11, 2001.

[34] Ashcroft, Testimony to House Committee on the Judiciary, September 24, 2001.

[35] G. W. Bush, Presidential Remarks to U.S. Attorneys Conference, Dwight David Eisenhower Office Building, November 29, 2001.

[36] Bush, Address to Congress and the American People, September 20, 2001.

[37] Bush, Press Conference, October 11, 2001.

[38] Bush, State of the Union Address, January 29, 2002.

[39] David Yallop, *To the Ends of the earth: The Hunt for the Jackal* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993).

[40] Zulaika and Douglass, *Terror and Taboo*, pp. 92-94.

[41] Zulaika and Douglass, *Terror and Taboo*, p. 14.

[42] Bush, Address to Congress and the American People, September 20, 2001.

[43] Ashcroft, Remarks for the US Mayors Conference, October 25, 2001.

[44] Ashcroft, Remarks for the US Mayors Conference, October 25, 2001.

[45] See G. Bowman, 'Xenophobia, fantasy and the nation: the logic of ethnic violence in former Yugoslavia', in V. Goddard, J. Llobera and C. Shore, eds., *Anthropology of Europe: Identity and boundaries in conflict*, 1994, available at: http://www.ukc.ac.uk/anthropology/staff/glenn/Goldsmit.html; V. Jabri, D*iscourses on Violence: Conflict Analysis Reconsidered* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1996); R. Jackson, 'The Social Construction of Internal War', in R. Jackson, ed., *(Re)Constructing Cultures of Violence and Peace* (New York: Rodopi, 2004); S. Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War* (London: Cornell University Press, 2001); D. MacDonald, *Balkan Holocaust? Serbian and Croatian Victim-Centred Propaganda and the War in Yugoslavia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002); F. Wilmer, *The Social Construction of Man, the State, and War: Identity, Conflict, and Violence in the Former Yugoslavia* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002).

[46] Similarly, the Hutu-dominated Rwandan government was able to convince a large proportion of the Hutu population in 1994 that the Tutsi-dominated RPF was coming to slaughter them all; in the climate of fear and intimidation that followed, 800,000 people were slaughtered in 100 days, many by ordinary people.

[47] See Wendt, 'Anarchy is What States Make of it'.

[48] Campbell, *Writing Security*.

[49] Quoted in Z. Sardar and M. Davies, *Why do People Hate America?* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2002), pp. 183-84.

[50] W. Hartung, 'The Hidden Costs of War', A Report Commissioned by Howard S. Brembeck and the Fourth Freedom Forum, 14 February 2003, URL: http://www.fourthfreedom.org/php/t-si-index.php?hinc=Hartung_report.hinc, accessed 29 August, 2003.

[51] M. Evans, 'Idealists Rush to join MI5's Army of Spies', *The Times* (London), March 2, 2004.

[52] See Zulaika and Douglass, *Terror and Taboo*, p. 9.

[53] B. Glassner, *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans are Afraid of the Wrong Things* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), p. 72.

[54] J. Barker, *The No-Nonsense Guide to Terrorism* (Oxford: New Internationalist Publications, 2002), p. 37.

[55] M. North, 'Dangers of the Armed Response at Home', in P. Scraton, ed., *Beyond September 11: An Anthology of Dissent* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), p. 162.

[56] P. Hough, *Understanding Global Security* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 155.

[57] M. Lynas, 'Essay: The Sixth Mass Extinction', *New Statesman*, 23 February, 2004.

[58] W. Pfaff, 'Scaring America Half to Death', *International Herald Tribune*, 8 May, 2003.

[59] B. Jenkins, 'Will Terrorists go Nuclear? A Reappraisal', in H. Kushner, ed., *The Future of Terrorism: Violence in the New Millennium* (London: Sage, 1998), pp. 244-45.

[60] While the absolute number of terrorist attacks has remained stable, they have increased in lethality in the past decade—each attack kills more people than in the past.

[61] Jenkins, 'Will Terrorists go Nuclear?', p. 230.

[62] See Jenkins, 'Will Terrorists go Nuclear?'; E. Sprinzak, 'The Great Superterrorism Scare', *Foreign Policy*, Fall, 112 (1998), pp. 110-124; C. Townshend, *Terrorism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[63] Quoted in D. Hiro, *War Without End: The Rise of Islamist Terrorism and Global Response* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 391.

[64] Quoted in Callinicos, *The New Mandarins of American Power*, p. 44.

[65] S. Hersh, *Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib* (London: Penguin, 2004), pp. 73-103.

[66] On these points, see J. Burke, *Al-Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2003); Hiro, *War Without End*; P. Bergen, *Holy War Inc: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2001); K. El Fadl, ed., *Shattered Illusions: Analyzing the War on Terrorism* (Bristol: Amal Press, 2002).

[67] Zulaika and Douglass, *Terror and Taboo*.

[68] See C. Boggs, ed., *Masters of War: Militarism and Blowback in the Era of American Empire* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003); N. Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance* (London: Penguin Books, 2003); Callinicos, *The New Mandarins of American Power*; El Fadl, *Shattered Illusions*; R. Mahajan, *Full Spectrum Dominance: U.S. Power in Iraq and Beyond* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003).

[69] See Amnesty International, 2004. *Amnesty International Report 2004* (2004), available online at: http://web.amnesty.org/report2004/index-eng.

[70] See D. Campbell, 'Time is Broken: The Return of the Past in the Response to September 11', *Theory & Event*, 5, vol. 4 (2002).

[71] Reports from senior US military officials, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and human rights groups now confirm that prisoners in American detention centres were the victims of: casual and serious beatings (including with a broomstick and pistol-whipping); prolonged hooding; sleep deprivation and exposure to bright lights and loud music; prolonged restraint in painful positions; keeping prisoners naked and bound for days at a time; the denial of medical treatment to wounded prisoners, including one who had been shot; the pouring of phosphoric acid over prisoners' genitals; unleashing attack dogs on naked prisoners; pouring cold water on naked detainees; the sodomy of prisoners with chemical lights and broomsticks; rape and its threat; other forms of sexual humiliation and ritual domination; mutilation of corpses; and even murder (dozens of suspicious deaths in custody are under investigation). See The Depositions: The Prisoners Speak, Sworn Statements by Abu Grhaib Detainees; Report of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on the Treatment by the Coalition Forces of Prisoners of War and Other Protected Persons by the Geneva Conventions in Iraq During Arrest, Internment and Interrogation, February 2004; The Taguba Report; The Schlesinger Report; and the Fay/Jones Report in M. Danner, *Torture and Truth: America, Abu Ghraib, and the War on Terror* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2004);

[72] See Cole, *Enemy Aliens*; Danner, *Torture and Truth*; Hersh, *Chain of Command*; D. Rose, *Guantanamo: America's War on Human Rights* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004).

[73] Rose, *Guantanamo*, p. 2.

[74] Military Order of November 13, 2001, Detention, Treatment, and Trial of Certain Non-Citizens in the War Against Terrorism, in Danner, *Torture and Truth*, pp. 78-82.

[75] Pentagon Working Group Report, April 4, 2003, in Danner, *Torture and Truth*, p. 188.

[76] Memo: Jay S. Bybee to Alberto Gonzales, August 1, 2002, in Danner, *Torture and Truth*, pp. 150-51.

[77] David Campbell, 'Why Fight: Humanitarianism, Principles and Post-Structuralism', *Millennium* 27 vol.3, (1998), p. 519.