

Naming the War

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Of the many things that were included in the 9/11 Commission's report, perhaps none was more significant in the long run than its criticism of the name the Bush administration has given the war that began on Sept. 11, 2001: the war on terrorism. The report argued that the idea of a struggle against an enemy called "terrorism" was too vague to be meaningful. It argued that the administration should shift away from fighting a "generic" evil and more precisely define the threat - the threat from al Qaeda and a radical ideological movement in the Islamic world that "is gathering and will menace Americans and American interests long after" Osama bin Laden is gone.

The commission made two critical points. First, it asserted there was a war going on. There has been some doubt about this: Some have begun to argue that the Sept. 11 attacks were an isolated incident and that Americans should "get over it." Others have argued that it was primarily a criminal conspiracy and that the legal system should handle it. The commission made the unequivocal argument that it was a war and should be treated as such.

Wars are against enemies, and the commission makes the case that terrorism is not, by itself, a meaningful enemy. Rather, the enemy is -- according to the commission -- al Qaeda, and along with al Qaeda, radical Islam as an ideology. That means that, from the commission's viewpoint, this is a war between the United States and al Qaeda or, alternatively, a war between the United States and radical Islam. Given the gingerly way in which Americans have approached the question of the nature of the enemy, it is striking that the commission honed in on what has been one of the few aspects of delicacy in the Bush administration's approach to war -- completely rejecting the administration's attempt to subsume the war under the general rubric of terrorism.

Terrorism is a military strategy: It is an attempt to defeat an enemy by striking directly against its general population and thereby creating a sense of terror which, it is hoped, will lead the population to move against the government and force it to some sort of political acquiescence or accommodation. During World War II, for example, one of the primary uses of air power was to create terror among the population. The German bombardment of London, British nighttime area bombardment of German cities, American firebombing and atomic bombing of Japanese cities -- all were terror attacks. They were explicitly designed to put the population at risk, in efforts to prompt the enemy's capitulation. It did not work at all against the British; there is debate over what role, if any, it played against the Germans; and it certainly had a massive, if not decisive, effect in the case of the Japanese.

Terror, of course, was not confined to World War II. It has been a frequent feature of warfare.

Many countries have used terror attacks. So have individuals and non-state groups. Timothy McVeigh's attack against the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City was intended to generate some sort of political change. The attacks by the Baader-Meinhof Gang in Germany during the 1970s or the bombings of the Weather Underground in the United States were similarly intended to generate political change. That McVeigh, Ulriche Meinhoff and Mark Rudd had not the slightest idea of what they were trying to achieve nor of the relationship between their attacks and their strategy -- such as it was -- speaks to their own serious limitations. It says nothing about the potential uses of terror attacks in warfare, nor to the fact that terror attacks can be effective, given

a clear strategy, planning and execution. Governments can be forced to change strategy when their populations are placed at risk.

This is the conceptual problem with terrorism: Like any sort of warfare, it can be successful or not, depending on circumstances. However, terrorism in some form or another is among the most accessible types of warfare. What we mean by this is that while it is difficult for a handful of ideologues to secure a navy and impose a blockade, it is not impossible for a handful of people to carry out some limited attacks against a population, if it is no greater than firing a bullet into someone's kneecap or hijacking a plane. Terrorism provides a unique opportunity for small, non-state groups to wage war.

Historically, most of these non-state groups have consisted either of mental or emotional defectives or of individuals whose cause was so hopeless the act of terrorism could at best be considered a form of bloody theater rather than as a serious threat. It is extremely difficult to take the Basque separatist group ETA seriously in the sense of expecting that their attacks against the population will lead to a desired political evolution. It was certainly impossible to imagine how Rudd, Meinhoff or McVeigh possibly could have thought any strategic goal could have been reached through the use of terror attacks.

The general use of terror attacks by non-state actors has involved people like this. The concept of terrorism, as it developed since the 1960s, has focused not on terror as a potentially viable military strategy, but as an inherently non-state activity. This is a serious historical error. But a more serious error followed from this: If terrorism is something non-state actors use, and non-state actors tend in general to be imbeciles, posturers or lost causes looking for attention, then terrorism is no longer a serious military tool in the hands of strategists. It is, instead, a form of social and personal dysfunction, and therefore need not be taken seriously.

It was the secular Palestinian movement after 1967 that adopted the use of isolated counterpopulation attacks most effectively. Apart from attacks against Israel and Israelis, where no significant political shift was expected, terrorism was directed against allies of Israel, such as the United States. The strategy there -- not unlike the strategy in Iraq today -- was to impose costs for Israeli allies that would surpass the benefits of alliance. In this case, terror attacks had a definite goal -- to change the relationship between Israel and its allies. But the movement was hurt in several ways. First, the Israelis struck back. Second, many Arab countries, including Jordan and Saudi Arabia, worked actively against the Palestinian radicals. Finally, the Palestinians were engaged in an ongoing struggle in which the terrorist attacks became more focused on defining the relations among competing Palestinian factions than on any strategic political goal.

Terrorism, therefore, seemed to be a tool in the hands of the strategically helpless. Some began and ended in hopeless confusion, succeeding in shedding blood for no purpose. However, the Palestinians who took terrorism as a tactic to the global stage themselves lost their strategic bearings by the 1980s, when it was no longer clear what they were trying to accomplish with some of their operations. Terrorism ceased to be regarded as a military option for nation-states, and it never was quite taken seriously as an effective strategic option for non-state actors. It became a form of moral derangement in the hands of the hopelessly confused and the strategically handicapped. It became a tool of losers.

Al Qaeda uses terrorism. This group pursues counterpopulation operations designed to generate political evolutions that benefit its goals. By calling the war against al Qaeda a war on terrorism, the Bush administration committed two massive mistakes.

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First, it lumped al Qaeda in with Mark Rudd and ETA. The latter two are not serious; the former is very serious. Both use the same tactics, but one has a strategic mission. In using this label, it became much more difficult for the administration itself to take al Qaeda seriously. How can you take something seriously that is part of such a collection of dunderheads? The Bush administration underestimated its enemy -- always dangerous in war.

Second, it confused the question of who the enemy was. If the war is against terrorism, then everyone who uses terrorism is the enemy. That's a lot of groups -- including on occasion, the United States. If one is waging a war against terrorism, one is at war against a tactic, not a personifiable enemy. Alternatively, the war must be waged against hundreds or thousands of enemy groups. The concept of terrorism is a wonderful way to get lost.

The most important problem is that if al Qaeda is simply part of a broader spectrum of groups using terror operations, then the unique strategic interests of al Qaeda disappear. Al Qaeda has clear strategic goals: It wants to foment a rising in the Islamic world that will topple one or more governments, and replace them with regimes around which the reborn caliphate can be based. The Sept. 11 attacks were designed to trigger that rising. That has not happened, but al Qaeda is still there.

By ignoring the strategic goals of the attacks -- and this is critically important -- the Bush administration lost its ability to measure success in the war. The issue is not merely whether al Qaeda has lost the ability to carry out terrorist attacks; the more important question is whether al Qaeda has achieved its strategic goals through the use of terrorist attacks. The answer to that is an emphatic no. Al Qaeda not only has not come close to achieving its goal, but has actually moved to a weaker position since 9/11 -- having lost its Afghan base and having had Saudi Arabia turn against it. By focusing on the tactic -- terrorism -- rather than on the strategy, the Bush administration has actually managed to confuse the issue so much that its own successes are invisible. The terror tactics remain, but al Qaeda's strategic goal is as far away as ever.

The administration has confused not only the situation but itself at all levels by focusing on terrorism in general. It not only lost its ability to measure strategic progress in the war, but also failed to understand the unique characteristics of al Qaeda. In fairness, this has been a failure going back to the Clinton administration, but the hangover remains. The term "terrorism" reminds everyone of hippies running wild and Palestinians attacking Olympic Games. It loses the particular significance of al Qaeda -- its unique intellectual and strategic coherence. It makes al Qaeda appear dumber than it is and causes miscalculation on the part of the United States.

It is interesting to remember why the Bush administration chose the name for the war that it did. Part of it had to do, of course, with the tendency of terrorism experts to treat al Qaeda as part of their domain. But the more important part had to do with not wanting to think in terms of a war against Islam -- radical or otherwise. From the beginning, the administration has not wanted to emphasize the connection between al Qaeda and Islam. Rather, it has tried to treat al Qaeda as an Islamic aberration. It was easier to do so by linking it with terrorism in some generic sense than by linking it with Islam.

The administration needed Islamic countries to participate in its coalition. It did not want to appear in any way to be at war with any brand or style of Islam. In fighting al Qaeda, it was much easier to be at war with terrorism than with Islam. Stated differently, the administration was afraid that it would lose control of the war's definition if it focused on al Qaeda's Islamic links rather than on its terrorist tactics. It did not want pogroms against Muslims in the United States, and it sought to manage its relations with Islamic states very carefully.

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The selection of the term "war on terror" was, therefore, not accidental. It has been merely very confusing. It is this very confusion that the 9/11 Commission has pointed out. You cannot be at war with a type of military operation; you have to be at war with a military actor -- and in this case, the actor has been an organization that is part of a broader element of radical Islam -- which is, in turn, fighting for dominance in the Islamic world in general. That makes it a more important war, a more dangerous war and a much more complex one than merely a war against terrorism.

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