

*Editorial*

# What's in a Name?

## When It Comes to Terrorism and Counterterrorism, a Great Deal

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Long before the dust had cleared in New York and Washington on the evening of September 11, 2001, the president adopted the war metaphor as characterizing the appropriate American response (Bush, 2001a). It was a powerful, popular, and tragically flawed reaction. It was not the first time an American president had spoken of a war on terrorism. President Reagan had done so in 1986, and the phrase had been quite widely used in the late 19th century to describe international efforts to stop assassination attempts by anarchists. In recent memory, other American presidents had declared their own metaphorical wars. President Johnson declared a war on poverty in his 1964 State of the Union Address, and in 1971 President Nixon declared a war on drugs. The fact that none of these wars had reached a successful conclusion by 2001 might have given a more thoughtful leader pause before returning to the phrase.

Many of the inadequacies of the war metaphor are identified in the following report. Another is the difficulty of defining the enemy. This has been true too of the war on drugs. It has never been entirely clear whether the enemy is the production of drugs, the consumption of drugs, or the violence and crime attendant upon the production and consumption of drugs. Each will require a different set of policies. Indeed it is perhaps worth noting that, in the 35 years that the war on drugs has been waged, the only year in which expenditures on drug treatment exceeded those on law enforcement was in the year the war was declared, and that had much to do with the scale of the problems accompanying the returning Vietnam veterans. Ambiguity as to the identity and indeed nature of the adversary has also marked the current war on terrorism. When the president addressed a joint session of Congress and the American people on September 20, 2001, the declaration of war on the tactic of terrorism was expanded to a declaration of war on the emotion of terror (Bush, 2001b).

The point of defensive warfare is to deny the adversary what it is trying to achieve, but a declaration of war on terrorism is conceding the standing the adversary is seeking. So much of what drives terrorists to commit their atrocities is a desire for

status, for glory to redress the humiliation they believe themselves to have suffered. How they are acknowledged by those they wish to influence and to punish matters a great deal to them. It is perhaps worth remembering that, in 1981, ten members of the IRA starved themselves slowly to death in prison, not in an effort to unite the historic 32 counties of Ireland or to expel Britain from Northern Ireland, but in order to win political prisoner status for themselves. It was so important to their sense of themselves that they be considered prisoners of war, rather than ordinary criminals, that they were prepared to starve.

The metaphor a government adopts to characterize a problem will have a serious impact on public expectations and on policies adopted. The report considers three alternatives to the war metaphor. The first is terrorism as crime. This was the prevalent approach in the United States prior to 9/11 and remains the preferred approach throughout Europe today. It implies a very different analysis of and response to the problem of terrorism. Also considered are the epidemiological and the prejudice-reduction metaphors. The report provides a compelling analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of each approach and concludes that they are best employed jointly rather than as alternatives. The difficulty with this eminently sensible conclusion is that the attraction of metaphor, to begin with, is an effort to simplify and to impose a particular interpretation of a problem. Four metaphors, on the other hand, will not resonate in a sound bite or fit on a banner.

There is no doubt in my mind that we need to reframe the conflict with terrorists if we are ever to prevail in the campaign against terrorism. Instead of reaching for a simplifying metaphor, our leaders ought to acknowledge the complexities of the problems we face, and use the opportunities afforded by their position to educate their followers to the realities of the world around them.

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