Towards a Rhetorical Understanding of Modern Terrorism

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This project is an inquiry into the rhetorical nature and dimension of warfare in the twenty-first century. It is my contention that U.S. public policy responses to terrorism that have emerged since September 11th have fundamentally misapprehended the rhetorical nature and function of the terrorist threat. In particular, the assumption that terrorism is exclusively strategic has excluded considerations of the ways in which it functions epideictically.

While there was some sporadic interest in terrorism in communication studies, and specifically in rhetoric of war scholarship, prior to September 2001, there has been no attempt to treat the phenomenon systematically in this field. A number of attempts arose after 9/11, but this scholarship so far falls short of engagement with literature in the field of counterterrorism that might better illuminate the phenomenon of terrorism historically, politically, socially and economically.

For example, Tuman's (2003) Communicating Terror promises to become a standard text in undergraduate courses on war and terrorism in Communication departments. While he offers insightful comments about terrorism as communication, Tuman betrays little evidence of engagement with counterterrorism literature. This lack of engagement limits the author's conceptual framework significantly, which can lead to some troubling misapprehensions. In the chapter on terrorism as a communicative process, for example, Tuman identifies at least eight distinct audiences for the 9/11 attacks—three that he considers major and five others that he presents as secondary. Not once does he mention the audience most frequently cited in counterterrorism literature as the most likely audience of the 9/11 attacks—the Muslim umma, or world community, as imagined by members of al Qaeda.

It is not my goal to construct a definitive conceptual framework for understanding modern terrorism as communication. But I do aim to make small inroads in the direction of such a framework. The escalating phenomenon of suicide terrorism, and its increasing death toll around the world, underlines the necessity of understanding it.

The problem with the American call for a “global war on terrorism”—briefly conceded by the Bush administration's flip-flopping on the terminology just before this conference—is that “war” implies a military campaign against a specific national enemy with two possible outcomes, victory or defeat. Shortly after September 11, British military historian Sir Michael Howard (2002) noted that to declare war on terrorism “is at once to accord [terrorists] a status and dignity that they do not deserve. It confers on them a kind of legitimacy” (p. 13). The declaration of war creates the perception of two somewhat equal belligerents opposing each other in historic confrontation; the language of war evokes the image of vast armies engaged in battle. Such rhetoric confers upon terrorists an international legitimacy as belligerents in a battle against “the world’s only superpower.”
The American call for war on terrorism symbolically empowered the terrorists in precisely the manner they hoped for. The rhetoric also created what Howard (2002) called a “war psychosis” in the American audience. This psychosis is marked by “an immediate expectation, and demand, for spectacular military action against some easily identifiable adversary, preferably a hostile state; action leading to decisive results” (p. 13). As we have seen in both Afghanistan and Iraq, such decisive results have been elusive at best. While one can argue convincingly for the “success” of the campaign in Afghanistan as far as the limited goal of destroying al Qaeda training camps, the Bush attempt at nation-building has had spotty results, and the Taliban has in fact proved far more resilient than expected.²

The case of Iraq is more clear-cut: the quick victory promised even before the war and briefly perceived by mid-2003 has given way to what even many conservatives now recognize as an unmitigated disaster. A 2004 International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) study concluded that the invasion in Iraq, even more than the one in Afghanistan, had become “a potent global recruitment pretext” for al Qaeda and that the invasion “galvanized” al Qaeda while weakening strategic alliances against terrorism, and that aggressive actions by U.S. military forces in Iraq had “perversely inspired insurgent violence there” (Sengupta, 2004, p. 5). While Vice President Dick Cheney bragged that the insurgency was in its “last throes,” news throughout 2005 nevertheless confirmed the IISS conclusions, with reports of escalating attacks on U.S. and Iraqi forces (“Iraq Insurgency,” 2005). The month of July 2005, for example, saw 68 reported attacks on by insurgents against U.S. and coalition forces per day, up from 47 in July of the previous year (Reid, 2005).³ More ominously, Iraq, a secular dictatorship which ruthlessly repressed Islamist insurgents and which had no demonstrable relationship with al Qaeda, has become a breeding and training ground for increasingly militant Islamist insurgents.⁴

Not only has the conflict inspired and attracted Islamist extremists who identify with al Qaeda; these extremists have now had significant influence on the traditionally nationalist and secular Sunnis fighting the occupation, who have increasingly embraced militant Islamist ideologies. Despite the neoconservative insistence that the insurgency is primarily driven by so-called “foreign fighters,” over 90% of the Sunni insurgent forces are Iraqi (Sands, 2005).⁵ The international jihadists led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (who swore allegiance to Osama bin Laden in late 2004 and was in turn christened “the prince of al Qaeda in Iraq”) have gained significant media prominence due to their spectacular kidnappings and videotaped beheadings as well as their astute use of the Internet to spread such videos. But the real danger is that the militant al Qaeda ideology is gaining acceptance among the broader Sunni insurgency.

An underlying assumption of this project is that war must be understood as a communicative event that helps people make meaning of the world. War is not simply (and perhaps not even primarily) about geopolitics or economics. Acts of war have always been laden with symbolism, and scholarly (as well as both military and journalistic) accounts of warfare have been attuned to communicative functions of warfare since Thucydides.

Rapaport’s (2002, 2004) typology of modern terrorism distinguishes modern and premodern terrorism based on two significant differences. First, premodern terrorism, such as the acts committed by the Sons of Liberty and the Ku Klux Klan, mostly operated through the medium of the mob. Assailants outnumbered their victims: premodern terror was an act of the group against individuals. The KKK approached its victims as a faceless mob, wrapped in sheets, not only to hide their
identities (which were in many cases quite well known), but also to present the appearance of collective action in the name of the social group rather than a gang of individuals. Modern terrorist acts, however, are invariably the acts of individual or small groups of individuals against the larger society. Rapaport notes that there is a technological basis for this shift in tactics: the invention of dynamite by Alfred Nobel in 1866.

The second feature distinguishing modern terrorism from its predecessors is that premodern terrorism did not explain itself strategically. Premodern terrorists never bothered to justify their tactics as a form of guerilla warfare. Modern terrorism, by contrast, is conceived explicitly as an act of communication—"propaganda by the deed." Schmid (2004) notes that dynamite was not the only technological backdrop to modern terrorism; the other was the invention of the rotating press in 1881, which led to the rise of modern mass media. Schmid cites Kropotkin, who saw violent actions as communicative performances: "By actions which compel general attention," Kropotkin held, "the new idea seeps into people's minds and wins converts. One such act may, in a few days, make more propaganda than a thousand pamphlets. Above all, it awakens the spirit of revolt." (in Schmid, 2004, p. 205).

For Rapaport (2004), the strategy refined by modern terrorists throughout the twentieth century centered around one goal: to provoke an indiscriminate overreaction on the part of the authorities. The ability to cause such an overreaction is the primary measure of their success. Rapaport identifies four "waves" of modern terrorism: the anarchist wave, the anticolonial wave, the new left wave and the religious wave. He notes changes in tactics over time: the main tactic of the anarchist wave was theatrical use of political assassination; for the anticolonial wave there were military attacks on the police; in the new left wave hijackings and kidnappings are the dominant tactics; and the chief tactical innovation of the religious wave is the suicide bomb or "martyrdom operation." Interestingly, the valence of the term "terrorist" shifts dramatically through these waves: In the first wave, the term had positive valence, so much so that when Vera Zasulich shot but did not kill a Russian police commander who was known for torturing political prisoners on January 24, 1878, she threw down her weapon and announced her reason for not finishing the job: "I am a terrorist, not a killer" (in Rapaport, 2004, p. 50). In the anticolonial wave it was a negative term; the turning point is the failure of the self-identified Zionist terrorist Lehi contrasted to the success of the self-described "freedom fighters" who formed Irgun. The term is embraced again by new left terrorists, including the PLO, but religious terrorists reject the term, instead embracing the claim that it is their enemies who engage in (state) terrorism while their actions are justified responses to that terrorism.

Rapaport (2004) also notes the varying success of these waves, pointing out that the anarchists' actions were counterproductive, but the anticolonial terrorists were extremely successful in achieving their goals, including the French withdrawal from Algeria and the establishment of independent states in Israel, Cyprus and Ireland. The new left wave was mostly unsuccessful (with notable exceptions). And, while it is too early to evaluate the religious wave definitively, one can make the assertion that it has been profoundly successful in many ways. The 1983 suicide attack on a Marine barracks in Lebanon led U.S. troops to pull out; while Reagan (1990) talked tough in response to the attack, he has admitted that the U.S. withdrawal was a result of the terrorist actions. The September 11th attacks were extremely effective at catalyzing a global Islamist insurgency and at drawing the U.S. into a quagmire in Iraq while at the same time provoking a withdrawal of troops...
from "the land of the two holy places" (see Hedges, 2003). Pape's (2005) rational choice study of suicide terrorism found that, quite simply, suicide terrorism works. Terrorist have learned that it is an effective strategy. Issues such as religion play a secondary role; the primary role is played by rational choice.

While I find Rapaport's (2004) typology useful, I would propose that, similar to the break between premodern and modern forms of terrorism, a break can be seen in the shift between the third and fourth waves. While I would like to avoid vocabulary suggesting that the break marks a turn towards "postmodern" terrorism, I would suggest that this break is significant, marked by the adoption of suicide bombing and by a shift in organizational structure. Rapaport roots the shift from premodern to modern terrorism in technological change—the invention of dynamite and the rise of the press. Likewise, I would root the rise of fourth wave terrorism in two relevant technical advances—the suicide bomb and the rise of the network society.

Suicide attacks, of course, have a long history that goes back at least to the Crusades, when the Knights Templar destroyed one of their own ships in order to bring ten times as many Muslims down with them (Brown, 2003). The Jewish Zealots and the Islamic Hashishim also are considered precursors to the modern suicide bomber (Pape, 2005). But the most direct precursors were the Moro juramentados who fought in the Philippines, described by the New York Times as:

A fanatical native who has excited himself into a determination to devote a brief remainder of his life to the killing of those whom he regards as enemies. He expects to be killed himself, and always is, but he also expects that if he manages to destroy from one to a dozen infidels before his desperate rush is stopped an eternity of specially selected bliss, to begin at once, will be his reward. In other words, the 'juramentado' is a mad beast of an extremely dangerous sort, to shoot whom on sight is every man's recognized right. ("Topics of the Times," 1903, p. 8)

A more recent precursor to the modern suicide terrorist is of course the Japanese kamikaze pilots in World War II. These attacks were planned and coordinated by Japanese military strategists who felt it was the only way to prevent the American occupation of Japan. Kamikaze "human torpedos" were motivated by a fiercely nationalistic rhetoric and an almost religious devotion to the emperor of Japan. Japanese Lieutenant Torashiro Kawabe explained, "We believed that our spiritual convictions and moral strength could balance your material and scientific advantages. We did not consider our attacks to be 'suicide.' [The suicide pilot] died happy in the conviction that his death was a step towards the final victory" (in Pape, 2005, p. 37).

Kamikaze attacks have in common with modern suicide bombers both a military and cost-benefit analysis and a spiritual worldview as justification. Modern suicide attacks, with some exceptions, are part of a deliberate and planned strategy to coerce certain behaviors from democratic countries perceived as occupying forces. I would argue that modern suicide terrorism differs fundamentally from its predecessors in one crucial sense—the rhetorical dimension. There is an epideictic dimension to contemporary suicide terrorism that has so far gone unexamined in counterterrorism literature. Suicide terrorism today is thoroughly ritualized. Many have noted that modern suicide terrorists are not just motivated by tactical and political concerns, but also by concerns of prestige and honor—the classic topoi of epideictic rhetoric (see, e.g., O'Brien, 1986). Juergensmeyer (2000) similarly looks at terrorism as a means of legitimation, specifically analyzing this process through a
dramatistic lens. Instances of terrorist violence are “constructed events: they are mind-numbing, mesmerizing, theater” undertaken not to achieve a strategic goal but to make a symbolic statement.... Such explosive scenarios are not tactics directed toward an immediate, earthly, or strategic goal, but dramatic events intended to impress for their symbolic significance. As such, they can be analyzed as one would any other symbol, ritual, or sacred drama. (pp. 122–123)

Acts of terrorism dramatically demonstrate both the strength of the terrorist and the weakness of the enemy.

But there is also an aesthetic dimension to modern suicide terrorism that is generally unacknowledged. In fact, this dimension is approached with revulsion—witness the reaction to Stockhausen’s comments calling 9/11 the “greatest work of art for the cosmos” (see “Attacks Called,” 2001, p. E3). This dimension is heavily influenced by the history of warfare since the rise of fascism, and particularly since the Gulf War of 1991. Italian futurist Marinett’s statement that “war is beautiful,” rightfully blamed as a precursor to Italian fascism, reflected his belief that “art, in fact, can be nothing but violence, cruelty, and injustice” (in Nicholls, 1995, p. 86). The late twentieth century experience with warfare and its representation on television has confirmed the reverse: violence, cruelty and injustice, in fact, can be nothing but art. The portrayal of the attack on Iraq in 1991 as a “fireworks display” and a “Nintendo game” emphasized the spectacular beauty of war’s destruction while effacing its brutal human costs. In order to understand the fundamental significance of suicidal Islamist terrorism in the twenty-first century, we must be attuned to the way in which terrorist violence likewise manifests itself as purely aesthetic. For terrorists and their sympathizers, the September 11th attacks, like the 1991 Persian Gulf War for most Americans, was represented as nothing but art. “I cannot describe how joyful I felt,” wrote Maher Zuhdi in Egypt’s Al-Arabi. “Of course, I didn’t rejoice over the victims, because we must not gloat over the dead, but I rejoiced because the honor of the U.S. has become a floor rag” (trans. in “Terror in America,” 2005). The deaths of the people in the towers figure in al Qaeda’s discourse only as punctuation to a gesture whose purpose is completely epideictic. Even American audiences who sat transfixed in front of the television screen’s endlessly playing video of the attacks were having a profound aesthetic experience. 15

Prior to the attacks, the contention that the World Trade Center was an aesthetic spectacle, through a supremely ugly one, was entirely uncontroversial. In fact, one would be hard pressed to find any discussion of Manhattan architecture or urban aesthetics that didn’t mention the Towers that were once called “the first buildings of the 21st century” (Collins, 1972, p. SM12). In 1972, Mumford declared the building a “sheer disaster.” The urban critic considered skyscrapers to be “outmoded concepts” whose only purpose was “advertisement and publicity” and predicted that “the Trade Center’s fate is to be ripped down as nonsensical” (in Collins, 1972, p. SM12). And in 1966, New York Times architecture critic Huxtable saw the building as a giant aesthetic risk: “The trade-center towers could be the start of a new skyscraper age or the biggest tombstones in the world.” When the buildings were literally transformed into the two biggest tombstones in the world, people resisted analysis of the aesthetic dimension of their destruction. But such analysis is imperative for a more complete understanding of Islamist suicide terrorism.
Notes

1. The *New York Times* reported in late July that administration officials though the phrase “global war on terror,” or GWOT, had “outlived its usefulness” and that the new terminology would call for a “global struggle against violent extremism” (GSAVE) (Schmitt & Shanker, 2005, p. A7).

2. Attacks on U.S. forces continue regularly in Afghanistan despite the story’s general lack of visibility in the media; see, for example, “Twenty Marines” (2005). Former CIA official Michael Scheuer argues that the Taliban withdrawal in 2002 was a strategic ploy rather than evidence of defeat or surrender (see also Bergner, 2003 and Renfrew, 2004).

3. This figure does not seem to include attacks on Iraqi police and civilians suspected of “collaborating” with the occupation government. The first week of August 2005 saw the “single deadliest” roadside bombing, which killed 14 U.S. Marines (“Twenty Marines,” 2005).

4. A CIA National Intelligence Council report published in January 2005 noted that the intervention in Iraq was breeding a new generation of “professionalized” terrorists, providing a “training ground, a recruitment ground, the opportunity for enhancing technical skills” (Priest, 2005, p. A1, see also Bender, 2005; Jehl, 2005, p. A10).

5. Major General Joseph Taluto, who leads the U.S. 42nd Infantry Division in Iraq, claims that there is a “small core of foreign fighters,” and notes that “99.9 percent” of captured insurgents have been Iraqis (in Sands, 2005).

6. The critical manifesto of the first wave of modern terrorism is Sergei Nachaev’s *Catechism of a Revolutionary* (1868). See also Prawdin (1961).

7. The “neatness” of Rapaport’s typology is forced, and while the model is useful for perceiving certain general trends, it is terribly inaccurate in terms of specifics. For example, Rapaport claims that America’s first “global war on terrorism” was launched by President Theodore Roosevelt in September 1901—exactly 100 years before President Bush launched a war on terrorism. While this has a pleasant symmetry, it is simply inaccurate both historically and rhetorically. I could find the phrases “war on terror” and “war on terrorism” used only once in the *Times* before 1934—in 1881 (see “War on Terrorism,” 1881, p. 1).

8. Earlier reports of Zionist activities in Palestine clearly identify Zionist actions as “terrorism”, the *New York Times*, for example, reported in 1914: “Allegations based on documentary evidence are made that alleged Zionists are carrying out a campaign of terrorism” (“Says the Zionists,” 1914, p. C3).

9. See Reagan (1990): “The price we had to pay in Beruit was so great, the tragedy at the barracks was so enormous...we had to pull out.... We couldn’t stay there and run the risk of another suicide attack on Marines” (p. 465).

10. I do not agree with Pape (2005) that rational choice is the only way to understand suicide terrorism; in fact, I would argue that looking at terrorism exclusively from a rational choice or strategic perspective has been a failure.

11. In this essay I will only address the first of these developments; my analysis of al Qaeda and the rise of the network society will be taken up elsewhere.

12. The final mass suicide of 960 Zealots and Sicarii in 66 BCE, while coded in terms of religiously mandated martyrdom, was not a suicide attack so much as an attempt to prevent further harm to the individual members of the group (see Pape, 2005, p. 34).

13. The leading spokesman for this form of attack was Vice Admiral Takijiro Onishi.
14. Counterterrorism scholars have paid attention to this dimension occasionally, but without the benefit of an understanding of the rhetorical tradition.

15. To recognize the aesthetic power of an event is not to endorse it or to deny its horror. Horror is, in fact, an aesthetic experience. I am also still working on this concept, but it seems to me crucial to articulate not only an aesthetic dimension of the terrorist act as pure form but also the portrayal of such events as “entertainment” (e.g., descriptions of 9/11 as “like a movie”).

16. This phrase, which Collins notes was popular enough to be included in Port Authority advertising, is especially ironic given that the buildings were among the first destroyed in the 21st century.

References


Twenty Marines from Ohio battalion killed this week in Iraq. (2005, July 17). *Associated Press*.