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Terrorism and Its Metaphors

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I.

I want to map out the metaphors of terrorism to critique how they are used in United States political rhetoric. These metaphors and their usage parallel United States history, cold war ideologies, and globalization. Central to this investigation is an analysis of how the hegemonic order appropriates the media and uses such metaphors to manufacture consent for supporting a vaguely defined "war on terror" indefinitely. Metaphors have been called "the dreamwork of language," by Donald Davidson who writes also that "the interpretation of dreams requires collaboration between a dreamer and a waker" (29). But terrorism is not a dream. It is not a metaphor. For as Susan Sontag wrote:

> Real wars are not metaphors. And real wars have a beginning and an end. Even the horrendous, intractable conflict between Israel and Palestine will end one day. But this antiterror war can never end. That is one sign that it is not a war but, rather, a mandate for expanding the use of American power ("Real Battles").

My point is that by identifying the geography of terrorism as it is currently presented in our media, by interpreting these media "dreams" about terrorism, readers might awaken to a more sobering view of terrorism.

II.

Terrorism is a dangerous game. A common perception was that until 9/11, the United States had only witnessed it from a comfortable, televised distance—as a spectator sport. For like poverty, famine, disease and war, terrorism was played in other, less democratic places. One cause of this perception about the geography of terrorism stems from the dominant propaganda model. As Herman and Chomsky report in their study, *Manufacturing Consent*, the media's function is to "inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them [individuals] into the institutional structures of the larger society" but that in this "world of concentrated wealth

and major conflicts of class interests, to fulfill this role requires [the media to participate in] systematic propaganda" (1). What better way to manufacture consent for hegemonic domination than to control the language, its metaphors, and, therefore, the total discourse for thinking about terrorism?

But the power of language in its ability to create or rather to narrow meaning transcends even the media age. Edward Said exposes how the textual tradition of Orientalism both narrow and reinforce itself in stereotypical and racist language as well as in thought about the Middle East. Perhaps in some ways, these earlier textual traditions have helped support the media's easy affixation of "terrorist" to persons from this region. And if a text "acquires a greater authority" than actual experience (Said 272), how much more lasting and therefore potentially harmful are the "texts" of modern media in their narrowing and reifying of terrorism?

The Marxist historian Howard Zinn, who like Sontag has been attacked for his efforts to vocalize the root causes of terrorism, aptly describes the role for public intellectuals and citizens alike when he writes, "to try to explain and understand terrorism is not to justify terrorism. But if you don't try to explain anything, you will never learn anything" (Zinn 16).

With the emergence of a catastrophic historical event such as 9/11, one should hardly be surprised that many want to view terrorism metaphorically and to invoke moral judgment upon what is perceived as a too liberal society or to even align liberal causes with terrorism. Even as the Reagan Administration dragged its feet in dealing with the spreading of AIDS, Pat Buchanan talked about "AIDS and Moral Bankruptcy," while Jerry Falwell declared that "AIDS is God's judgment on a society that does not live by His rules" (*Illness* 149). The difference between AIDS as disease, spread through needles and intimate contact, and terrorism, spread perhaps through a need for revenge or a desire to strike terror into the hearts and minds of one's enemies, seemed to be lost upon the foreign minister of the then apartheid regime in South Africa who declared that, "The terrorists are now coming to us with a weapon more terrible than Marxism: AIDS" (*Illness* 150). Here in one sentence is a rhetoric politicizing a disease as terrorism. Ironically, today's vision of terrorism looks a lot like the Cold War era's campaign to rid the world of Communism. Howard Zinn argues that "Terrorism has replaced

Communism as the rationale for the militarization of the country, for military adventures abroad, and for the suppression of civil liberties at home. It serves the same purpose, serving to create hysteria" (48).

The roots of terrorism transcend the modern age, and yet it appears that terrorism has become a signifier of an apocalyptic post-modern condition for "cultural" conservatives to declare war on liberals. Again Jerry Falwell, this time with Pat Robertson's acquiescence, declared on a *700 Club* show on September 13, 2001, that the "abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians … the ACLU, People for the American Way -- all of them who have tried to secularize America -- I point the finger in their face and say: "You helped this [9/11] happen" (Falwell apologizes). In May of 2005, Robertson declared on ABC's *This Week with George Stephanopoulos* that Federal Judges "are a more serious threat to America than Al Qaeda and the Sept. 11 terrorists" (Rose 10). According to King's CNN online article, "Paige calls NEA 'terrorist organization," Education Secretary Rod Paige labeled the National Education Association a "terrorist organization." In 2004 also, *The New York Times* highlighted State Representative Cynthia Davis of Missouri who introduced a bill in the Missouri legislature that would prohibit the discussion of contraceptives in public schools. She compared liberals to the 9/11 hijackers when she said, "It's like when the hijackers took over those four planes on Sept. 11 and took people to a place where they didn't want to go. I think a lot of people feel like liberals have taken our country somewhere we don't want to go" (Banerjee 1).

In May of 2003, The American Civil Liberties Union issued its report *Freedom Under Fire: Dissent in Post-9/11 America* in which Executive Director Romero proclaimed:

> There is a pall over our country. In separate but related attempts to squelch dissent, the government has attacked the patriotism of its critics, police have barricaded and jailed protesters, and the New York Stock Exchange has revoked the press credentials of the most widely watched television network in the Arab world. A chilling message has gone out across America: Dissent if you must, but proceed at your own risk.

The report documents dozens of cases where dissent was met with arrest and prosecution in shopping malls, the streets, protests, campuses, parks, presidential appearances and other events. It is unfortunate when the government begins to legislate rights away, but when the media (which is supposed to serve as the fourth estate and critique these episodes) falls silent, then it also consents to what Chomsky calls the propaganda model. Much of the right wing rhetoric is easily identified and expected, from Ann Coulter wishing Timothy McViegh had blown up the New York Times building to Sean Hannity's misappropriation of the Lord's Prayer in his book title, *Deliver Us From Evil: Defeating Terrorism, Despotism, and Liberalism*. But the kind of censorship that Chomsky refers to is subtler and therefore much more insidious. According to Zinn, "this whole question of 'anti-Americanism' needs to be dissected" (42).

In terms of the apocalyptic vision, the Christian right has no monopoly. Ironically, fundamentalist Christians decry 9/11 as God's wrath even as Osama bin Laden and his Islamic fundamentalists believe they are carrying out God's wrath against a liberal and satanic enemy. For as Robert Ivie points out, "One side's devil is the other side's saving grace in these dueling discourses of good and evil" (183).   In the battle for the metaphors, fundamentalists, on all sides, share the same nightmare fantasy.

III.

Another reason for the perception that America was "safe" from terrorists before 9/11 lies with the ambiguous nature of the definition of terrorism itself. In *The New Doublespeak*, William Lutz describes three elements of verbal maps: the map is only a representation, no map can cover an entire verbal territory that it signifies, and each map mirrors the "mapmaker's point of view" (72). Lutz exemplifies the crux of defining terrorism when he writes, "are those who deliberately set off car bombs to kill civilians 'terrorists' or 'freedom fighters'?" (73).

It seems ironic that the term "terrorist" was born amid a period of revolution and that it was first used to describe one group who dominated another, and then vice versa. The etymology of "terrorist" reveals at once the pliability of the term's usage, even during the period of the French revolution. According to *The Oxford Dictionary of Word Histories*, the Latin verb *terrer,* which means to frighten has "given rise to several

English words. *Terror* is from Old French *terrour*, from Latin *terror*, a base shared by *terrorist* dating from the late 18th century from French *terroriste*. The word was originally applied to supporters of the Jacobins in the French Revolution, who advocated repression and violence in pursuit of democracy and equality" (508). For even as power changed hands, "under a reconstituted Committee of Public Safety (1794) and by the White Terror," it was reported that "many former terrorists were executed" (World Encyclopedia). This pattern of terrorism breeding more terrorism recurs throughout history. It seems significant that the term was first used to describe a revolution born from the masses-- as if the term terrorist is emblazoned with special significance within the Euro-centric socio-cultural memory. Are there collective memories that make the dominant class shudder every time the word *terrorist* is dropped--its signification and meaning tied to images of the bloodthirsty masses pushing the aristocracy towards the guillotines? Perhaps this nascent image undercuts all other images of terror, from 9/11 to lynching, from the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building to the Haymarket rebellion, from the holocaust to the Kent State massacre.

Regardless of its infamous birth, terrorism is a term at once burdened with metaphors. It is used as a metaphor to describe relationships and to construct analogies that are largely divorced from the realm of its initial usage. As for concrete definitions, there appear to be as many denotations as there are sources of "authority" in making the definitions. For example, both *The Oxford Companion to American Law,* and the Federal Bureau of Investigation's website begin their "definitions" by saying, "There is no generally agreed upon definition of 'terrorism.'"

The Patriot Act updated FBI definitions to include nuclear, chemical and biological weapons as well as a range of other amendments, aimed "to deter and punish terrorist acts in the United States and around the world, to enhance law enforcement investigatory tools, and for other purposes" (United States, *Patriot Act,* 272). The American Civil Liberties Union writes of the Patriot Act that "with great haste and secrecy and in the name of the 'war on terrorism,' Congress passed legislation that gives the Executive Branch sweeping new powers … with little debate by Members of Congress, most of whom did not even read the bill" (ACLU). But the passing of legislation did not necessarily clarify the meaning at all. According to *The Oxford*

Companion to United States History, "defining terrorists proved difficult, however, and critics pointed out that organizations and individuals could be placed on a terrorist list using secret evidence and with no judicial review. The precise numbers and names of aliens and organizations that fell under suspicion remained shrouded in secrecy" (Rosenberg).

Certainly we can all agree with basic provisional statements concerning violent acts or acts dangerous to human life with any number of weapons, foreign or domestic. Perhaps the only point of clarification after all is that "the official definitions of terrorism are virtually the same as the definitions of counter-terror…But Counter-terror is official US policy, and it plainly will not do to say that the US is officially committed to terrorism" (Chomsky, *Hegemony* 189).

IV.

The "war on terror" is perhaps the principle metaphor used by the Bush Administration to disguise US terrorism as acceptable state policy. This type of campaign works within the public imagination because war metaphors seem to neatly and naturally solve the mysteries and chaos of terrorism. It becomes easier to bomb civilian populations because they are not people, but "states" who are "harboring" terrorists. According to the Patriot Act, harboring terrorists can mean giving a donation to a charity that uses the funds for a terrorist's activities, being related to a terrorist through blood or marriage, and of course by not denouncing a terrorist when you know one.

Rosenberg, in her *Oxford Companion to U.S. History* article "War on Terrorism" writes, "Although the phrase 'war on terrorism' did not come into widespread usage before September 11, its roots can be found in the previous two decades" (Rosenberg). She refers to the common goal of defeating the Soviets in Afghanistan that the U.S. government and its network of Islamic fundamentalist fighters shared. Yet Chomsky reports that the Reagan Administration issued its own "war on terror" in particular towards countries in Central America. For example, he reports that "Nicaragua had to be subjected to a campaign of international terrorism that left the country in ruins" and that "by the mid-1980s, the US-backed state terrorist campaigns had created societies…[in which] in the words of a leading Church-based Salvadoran human rights organization, the

population had 'internalized acceptance' of 'the daily and frequent use of violent means' and 'the frequent appearance of tortured bodies'"(*Hegemony* 9). Likewise, the Bush II Administration's post-9/11 "new kind of 'war' necessitated new rules" (Rosenberg). In her attempt to wring the current "war on terror" from its metaphorical life, Sontag advised "when a president of the United States declares war on cancer or poverty or drugs, we know that 'war' is a metaphor. Does anyone think that this war - the war that America has declared on terrorism - is a metaphor? But it is, and one with powerful consequences" (Sontag "Real Battles"). And of course this new kind of war, with its own rules that only those who make the rules can define, has its benefits for the war makers and rule makers. As Zinn points out: "The advantage of this strategy of expanding the war and winning the 'war on terrorism' is that it gives the government a perpetual war and a perpetual atmosphere of repression. And it generates perpetual profits for corporations. But it's going to make the world a far more unstable and dangerous place" (28).

It should come as no surprise that a "war on terror" waged by the United States against those who harbor terrorists would be highly selective in targeting the enemy (Iraq instead of Saudi Arabia), and that it would also enjoy the metaphoric revival of a "just" war. The language of this war replays Qualye's pronouncement about how Gulf War I was a "just" war, as was the case in Bush II's own linguistic misadventure when he initially called the "war on terror" a "crusade." In order to strongly make the case for a just war, which invokes religious apocalyptic themes, it is necessary to develop a rhetoric that constructs terrorism as the ultimate evil. To effectively sell its own jihad abroad, the Bush administration needed to manufacture the image of the Taliban and later Saddam Hussein as satanic regimes. Furthermore, the "dialectic of rival religious visions transforms the act of killing civilians and/or destroying life-sustaining infrastructures into a necessary and legitimate consequence of exercising righteous force over a demonic antagonist" (Ivie 183). *Crusade*, *just war*, *war on terror,* are all metaphors for the kind of response to terrorism that seeks to hide potential domestic and international human rights abuses while at the same time establishing control over the dominant infrastructures and peoples who are called to support that response.

As the manufacturing of consent depends upon controlling the dream images of a culture through the media, Afghanistan, the Palestinians, Iraq, Iran, North Korea and possibly Syria (but not Saudi Arabia, Turkey, or Israel) become identified as evil empires. Ivie argues that the Bush administration effectively silenced debate, and lowered the international standards by which a war may be declared by focusing upon the rhetoric of painting the enemy as evil. If enough pressure can be brought to bear for a long enough time that a growing consensus will accept moralistic axioms rather than hard evidence, then it is possible to do whatever one argues is necessary to rid the world of that evil. But world public opinion never supported unilateral action by the United States and, as Chomsky reports, "80 percent of respondents in Europe regarded the US as the greatest threat to world peace," and in Latin America, "where there is the longest experience of US violence, support was the least, scarcely detectable" (*Hegemony* 41,108).

But if the Bush administration were going to advance its crusade against the Middle Eastern evil empires, and if they just needed a critical mass of public opinion domestically to succeed, they had much to help them in the form of a consenting media, which had perhaps indoctrinated itself through years of orientalist stereotypes. For example, even after the war in Iraq was declared over, even with the "failure of intense efforts to discover WMD, a third of the [US] population believed that US forces had found WMD and more than 20 percent believed Iraq had used them during the war" (*Hegemony* 19). How could the propaganda machine work so effectively in spite of factual information to the contrary? Because of the countless stereotypical images in print and broadcast media, terrorists are synonymous with Middle Eastern peoples, in particular Muslims. Being associated with the Middle East guarantees the potentiality of being a terrorist while being a terrorist from some other social demographic, for example Christian fundamentalists bombing abortion clinics, racists dressed in white robes and lynching blacks, or even military units gone mad in the desert cells of Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo, means that one's acts are less visible. It means that stereotypes are deeply ingrained and reinforced in the day-to-day mass media.

The "war on terror" is strongly associated with a nesting of metaphors. These crusades, just wars, axes of evils all work in tandem like a many-headed hydra. And still

there are other metaphors for terrorism. In the article, "Regarding others: Habermas and Derrida on terrorism," Corbett reveals that while Jurgen Habermas considers terrorism as "the effect of a carcinogenic disregard for the pain of others," Jacques Derrida reflects on the metonymy of 9/11 which "substitutes a date for the traumatic deaths of thousands of people" (Corbett). As cancer or trauma, terrorism is described in terms of disease. Jean Baudrillard, writing in *Harper's Magazine*, described terrorism as "a good illustration of chaos theory: an initial shock provoking unforeseeable consequences" (17). He writes that, "Terrorists, like viruses, are everywhere"(14). Thus, terrorism, like a 21st Century plague, is a revolutionary kind of cultural disease where the polemical dialectic of religious fundamentalism attempts to usurp post-modern, post-industrial information-age humanism. Habermas further identifies terrorism in terms of an "anti-modern not pre-modern" religious fundamentalism. According to Habermas, "political terrorists fuelled by religious fundamentalism don't misunderstand modern values; they reject them" (Corbett). Baudrillard might also agree that in a sense "terrorism is a clash of triumphant globalization at war with itself" for as Habermas more clearly points out, "violent fundamentalism arises because modern societies have failed to inspire alternatives that compensate for the loss of traditional ways of life" (Baudrillard 14; Corbett). One example according to Derrida would be that while "maintaining its ties with its American 'protector,' 'client,' and 'boss', [Saudi Arabia] fuels all the hotbeds of Arab Islamic Fanaticism if not terrorism in the world" (Corbett).

In spite of this rhetoric, which skirts the razor-thin edge of a new orientalism, Habermas, Derrida, and Baudrillard at least attempt to provide a measure of discourse that opens and extends the debate. But the rhetoric of the religious right and the Bush administration seeks to reinforce a "pretext for perpetrating violence against civilians for political purposes in the name of a higher cause" (Ivie 181). It is no wonder that extremely narrow-minded and simplified explanations for traumatic events abound. And yet, poverty grows in our country and abroad like a quiet and terrible disease. As Zinn reports, "another very important issue is that the war has obscured the fact that many people in this country are still in need" (37). In contrast to the shocking death by terrorism, death by poverty is quiet and invisible. For as Mahatma Gandhi once said, "poverty is the worst form of violence" (Attenborough, *Gandhi*). According to *Utne*, the

number one censored story of 2004 reported that "the top 1 percent of the U.S. population now owns about a third of the country's wealth, and the Bush Administration passed legislation to accelerate the divide domestically" (14). The eighth censored story reported that the "Bush administration has been trying to keep the work of vice President Cheney's energy Task Force a secret…[because]the task force had maps of Iraqi oilfields, pipelines, and refineries that, at the very least, point to planned exploitation of Iraq's natural resources well before 9/11" (Sheff 15). There are no pronouncements from mainstream media because it would mean somehow that there is something wrong with capitalism. If capitalism fails in the land of plenty, in the land of upright moral responsibility and Christian compassion, then where else can pilgrims escape to? The mythology of escaping is deeply imbedded in the American psyche –elementary school students are taught to believe that Puritans came to the "New World" to escape persecution, which overlooks the persecution of the Native Americans–to sanctify committing the first acts of terrorism as a nascent country. But this was done under a different kind of terrorism, called progress.

Part of the United States' self-conception is as a "privileged" entity, one that is immune from foreign enemies who hate the US because of its many "freedoms." If one were to base understanding of the history of terrorism in the US upon the official timeline of terrorism posted on the U.S. Army website, then terrorism did not happen in the United States until 1961 when the first U.S plane was hijacked. In fact, only a half dozen domestic terrorist attacks are listed, including 9/11, so that the United States appears to be safe while the dozens of reports for attacks occurring in the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Latin America reinforce the media picture of the rest of the world as less civilized, dangerous, and far away (United States *Timeline*). This propaganda also reinforces the idea that people living in developing nations have little reason to expect exemption from the misfortunes of terrorism because theirs is the terrain upon which terrible things happen; floods, wars, poverty, disasters, terrorism. In contrast, the United States is both the land of opportunity and the land of freedom. This mentality fuelled the Cold War and the US foreign policy of intervention across the globe in the post-WW2 era, in its efforts to combat communism and bring democracy and capitalism to the world. Communism was a disease, a threat, and it held an Asian or Russian face. Though Russia was as

European and "western" as England, it was called the "east" so it could be further distanced in our national mental topography. These pools of thinking, however illogical, serve as fuel for the new consent factory of terrorism.

V.

Writing in a Marxist vein, Robert Ivie comments that how the "specter of mass destruction—a kind of democratic hell of egalitarian violence—signifies terrorism's global reach, insinuates its cultural ubiquity, and ensures its political utility" (181). Does terrorism's global ascendancy simply provide capital with another tool for its hegemony? Is that how communism functioned for capital in the past? Howard Zinn explains:

> The word 'communism' was used to justify the most egregious violations of human rights. So much that went on during the Cold War was justified in the name of fighting Communism, leading to the deaths of millions of people in Southeast Asia and hundreds of thousands of people in Central America … In 1954, the United States overthrew the government in Guatemala, which was not Communist but which was expropriating the United Fruit Company. In 1973, the government in Chile was overthrown in the name of fighting Communism. The government was not Communist, but it was not serving the interests of Anaconda Copper and ITT (49).

It has been argued that in one sense terrorism is globalization warring within itself and this seems to reinforce Zinn's idea that terrorism has indeed provided capital with a new order of militarization. In his critique of a William Safire column praising the CIA's role in Central America, William Lutz points out that the CIA backed military leaders killed over 100,000 people in Guatemala, but that "for Mr. Safire, that's just the price to be paid for fighting Communism, a price that includes 100,000 dead men, women, and children" (213). How can a definition of terrorism leave out the consequences of a foreign policy which commits horrendous acts of large-scale violence? How can the nation's defense website host a timeline of terror that not only erases slavery, lynching, suppression of labor, and other domestic events, but neglects to provide justice for the victims of the campaign of terror that is US backed aggression?

VI.

The "war on terror" fosters useful but hopeless fantasies about ridding the world once and for all from terrorists. Its implied teleology promises that one day we won't have to worry about planes hitting buildings, in America at least, because all of those enemies will be dead, captured and jailed. It falsely and most dangerously promises that the long-term way this will happen is when the barbaric and unchristian countries, which have harbored these enemies, are finally transformed into nascent democracies, just like in the US. Perhaps in some way 9/11 might still serve as a sobering reality that "America no longer enjoyed a special arrangement with Providence, preserved by the virtue of its inhabitants and the grace of its geography from the provocations of death, chance, kings and desperate men" (Lapham, "Res Republica" 9).

Writing about AIDS, Susan Sontag referred to the notion that when an apocalyptic vision can be seen as an "ordinary horizon of expectation," then our sense of humanity is experiencing "unparalleled violence" (*Illness* 181). It is this kind of banal violence that undercuts our media experience and thus our constructions of reality with regards to terrorism. But the "violence" can only be imagined. In the new media-controlled wars, the "war itself is waged as much as possible at a distance" because "mainstream media are not in the business of making people feel queasy about the struggles for which they are being mobilized, much less of disseminating propaganda against waging war" (Sontag, *Regarding* 65). Through the media barrage of "official" imagery that constitutes the "war on terror," we participate in the manufactured dream that these images are not about the "civilized" world. Sontag warns that sympathy with those who suffer from "war and murderous politics" may be inappropriate for what is needed instead is awareness:

> on how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and [how we] may—in ways we might prefer not to imagine—be linked to their suffering, as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others. (*Regarding* 102-03).

But because of "self-censorship, as well as censorship imposed by the media," the news images from the "war on terror" appear devoid of any awareness at all of the pain

of others (Sontag, *Regarding* 65). In fact, if 9/11 is metonymic for the deaths of thousands, then wielding it as a banner for revenge helps shroud any chance of reality from seeping in. And reality is the only antidote for terrorism and its metaphors.

Lapham writes about his reading of a book called the *Psychology of War* where a distinction is made between sensory and mythic perceptions of wars (*Mythography* 7). He cites the past experiences of American voters: "The critical and commercial failure of the wars in Korea and Vietnam demonstrated the unwillingness of the American people to regard themselves as imperialists, also their distaste for wars conducted in the sensory theaters of operations" (*Mythography* 7). What this means for the propaganda machine of the "war on terror" is that even now, Americans are feeling less patriotic as a whole about the war in Iraq, never mind a potential strike into Iran, or North Korea. There is only so much evil-fighting to go around and as the economic gap widens in this country, "the failure of the capitalist system to solve fundamental problems will become more evident" (Zinn 119). At least one can hope so, for as Chomsky points out there are "two trajectories in current history: one aiming at hegemony, acting rationally within a lunatic doctrinal framework as it threatens survival; the other dedicated to the belief that 'another world is possible'" (*Hegemony* 236).

Said warns that before we can truly address the historical wrongs that orientalism has created through history, we will need to "see the humanistic values in Orientalism, by its scope, experiences, and structures, [that it] has all but eliminated" (285). Perhaps even before that, we need to translate our compassion into action for:

> to be truly safe, to have our own space, requires us to move from an economy of violence, from violence as retribution, toward an understanding that we are not special victims of violence…The first step in renouncing violence is to regard the pain of others as somehow equal to our own, and thus come to see violence anywhere as a harm to ourselves (Corbett).

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