One

THE NEW REIGN OF TERROR:
THE POLITICS OF DEFINING WEAPONS
OF MASS DESTRUCTION AND TERRORISM

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"It was the best of times. It was the worst of times." So begins Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. While he was writing about London and Paris during the turbulent times associated with the rise of the British Industrial Revolution and the French Political Revolution, these lines express the current sentiments of many Americans. Before 11 September 2001, many people thought we were living in the best of times. Baby boomers were relishing in the prospects that through inheritance they would be the beneficiaries of the greatest transfer of wealth in United States history. After 11 September, even more citizens were psychologically shattered when they realized that the terrorist strikes showed that the United States, the most powerful nation on Earth, is still quite vulnerable.

I do not share the sentiment that we are living in the best of times and the worst of times, even though, along with many others, I recognize that the Industrial Age has been one of both mass production and mass destruction. I find it hard to consider these the best of times when many corporate executives are receiving hundreds of times more compensation than their hard working employees and when a new xenophobia has swept the land that makes us suspicious about receiving new immigrants. I think times would be better, if not the best, when universal health care and genuine welfare for the poor and unemployed are available and when we welcome immigrants and celebrate the value of diversity. I also think times were worse, though not the worst possible, when tens of thousands of innocent civilians died from the dropping of a single atomic bomb on Hiroshima and on Nagasaki, Japan, and when famine and disease have devastated entire societies.

As a philosopher, I am professionally inclined to be suspicious of categorical claims. While I do not think these are the best or worst of times, I think these times are ones in which precision in how we describe our global situation are especially crucial. I fear that government is exercising too much control over the terminology used to describe our situation, often resorting to vitriolic rhetoric, and I fear that the media are adopting this terminology too uncritically, generally handling governmental rhetoric with kid gloves. In what follows, I will offer some critical reflections on the use of the terms

"weapons of mass destruction" and about "terrorism" that illustrate problems in what I elsewhere term "the language of war" and undermine giving voice to alternative conceptions associated with "the language of peace."[1]

Albert Einstein, whose scientific work contributed to the development of nuclear weapons and whose subsequent humanitarian efforts called for the elimination of these weapons, is often remembered for his statement, "Everything has changed save our way of thinking and thus we drift toward unparalleled catastrophe." Is the twenty-first century more likely to move toward an unprecedented escalation in violence, terrorism, and war, or toward an equally unprecedented renunciation of violence, terrorism, and war? In my view, a continuation of the patterns of twentieth-century conflict is not likely to be characteristic of the twenty-first century. The different types of weapons of mass destruction developed over the last sixty years and the types of terrorism and war emerging at the beginning of the twenty-first century do suggest how dramatically our capability to inflict violence has changed. How we think about and respond to these developments will have a lot to do with whether we will drift to further unparalleled catastrophes or whether we can steer away from such horrors. The language we use to frame these issues will fundamentally influence how we think about them. Those who control the language, the terminology and the definitions on these issues, will largely control the politics of how we respond.

Beyond its extensive use of euphemism and even outright lies, official discourse imposes itself as legitimate and, thereby, co-opts efforts by critics of war.[2] At a basic level, to mark the institutional character of military behavior, most societies use distinctive words to designate the violent acts of warriors and soldiers. The act we designate as "murder" when performed by an individual, we may re-designate as "justified use of force" when carried out by law enforcement or military personnel. This power of re-designation, which allows for legitimation or condemnation of different actions, manifests how political uses of language precede and support the pursuit of war.

For example, throughout the Cold War, many Americans regarded their government as the "champion of freedom" and the Soviet government as "an evil empire." Since perception and behavior are so closely connected with the way language shapes consciousness, the "right of bestowing names," as Friedrich Wilhlem Nietzsche saw, is a fundamental expression of political power.[3] In the twentieth century, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu elaborated theoretically and empirically on the extent of the symbolic power that language can provide.[4] Leading scholars who have analyzed in detail discourse about war, such as Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, and Haig Bosmajian, contend that language is corrupted in ways that make the cruelty, inhumanity, and horror of war seem justifiable.[5] Language becomes a tool employed by political and military officials to make people accept what ordinarily they would repudiate if the true character were known.

1. Defining Weapons of Mass Destruction

What is meant by "weapons of mass destruction"? They are defined in more than one way, and sometimes one and the same person or agency does so to deceive or confuse those with whom they are communicating. This prospect can be illustrated using the attacks of 11 September 2001.

First, weapons of mass destruction need to be defined. Typically, weapons of mass destruction refer to nuclear, chemical, and biological means for killing large numbers of people.[6] This definition correlates with developments in the history of warfare. Nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons have all been used in war. Nuclear weapons were used at the close of World War II. Chemical weapons were used in World War I. Biological weapons have been in use in warfare for over two millennia. Several significant treaties have also been ratified that ban the use or even the production and stockpiling of weapons of mass destruction. The United Nations and many countries, for example, have called for bans against such weapons, even terming them genocidal; some philosophers have made similar judgments as well.[7]

Second, the target of weapons of mass destruction needs to be specified. Generally, civilians or noncombatants are the targets of weapons of mass destruction. The possibility remains that, instead of targeting civilians, weapons of mass destruction can have military or political targets. For example, the United States Pentagon would qualify as a military target, while the United States White House would qualify as a political target. Regardless, one intention of those who use such weapons typically is to strike terror into the population, even if they also wish to inflict death and destruction on military or political targets.

As one proceeds, clarity in discussions about weapons of mass destruction continues to be elusive. In many discussions, nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons are no longer considered the only possible weapons of mass destruction. At one extreme, you will discover that in some police jurisdictions weapons of mass destruction are defined legally as ones that potentially can kill two or more people. At the other extreme, a single weapon of mass destruction can be conceived that would kill all life on the planet. Fortunately, such "doomsday" weapons so far remain in the realm of science fiction. Between these extremes, social and political scientists generally use a much higher actual or potential death toll in their definitions than two people and much less than all persons. Often, a figure of 1,000 or more deaths is used. In this case, a weapon of mass destruction would be a nuclear, chemical, or biological weapon that has killed or could kill a thousand or more people. When nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons are used, they sometimes only kill a few persons or even no one. Regardless, for people to use them, with whatever level of destruction that ensues, a means must be available to deliver them to their targets.

Having made these observations, I now return to the use of commercial aircraft on 11 September 2001 to attack the New York City World Trade Center. These attacks illustrate the difficulty of anticipating all the means that people can employ to strike terror or to function as weapons of mass destruction. While the attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon took over 3,000 lives, some analysts deny that commercial aircraft, even when used as weapons to kill thousands, are technically weapons of mass destruction. On the contrary, I contend that these attacks underscore the variety of delivery systems possible. The commercial aircraft involved in these attacks carried large quantities of fuel, and gasoline is a chemical. I conclude that the attack on the World Trade Center represents a use of a weapon of mass destruction that meets the criteria of having a nuclear, chemical, or biological composition, a civilian target, and a death tool in excess of one thousand people. Perhaps the most usual aspect of this instance of the use of a weapon of mass destruction is that the chemical agent and the delivery system were hijacked.

Government officials accuse terrorist groups of developing and even using weapons of mass destruction, and some regard the attacks of 11 September as ones involving such weapons. In this context, what may need examination is not so much what is said as what is not said. I am not merely referring to the unwillingness of government officials to consider that the attacks on Afghanistan since 7 October 2001 could be regarded as the pursuit of revenge.[8] I am referring to the unwillingness to consider past, current, and future United States military action in relation to the same definition of what constitutes a weapon of mass destruction.

Fundamentally, weapons of mass destruction are instruments of terror. As moral philosophers have noted (Robert Holmes, in particular), subnational groups and governments can resort to the use of weapons of terror. Wars generally kill far more people than do what are generally termed terrorist attacks. Principles of just war forbid the intentional killing of noncombatants. Especially since the obliteration bombing (strategic bombing) in Europe and against Japan at the close of World War II, cities and their civilian populations have become targets. So, one of the more important ethical lessons about weapons of mass destruction is that they can be (and have been) used by individuals and by governments. In this regard, the difference is not so much one of kind as of degree. The end is the same in the terrorist acts of individuals and governments; the goal is to cause fear among civilians by doing violence to them or threatening them with violence.

Given the range of linguistic use, the term "weapons of mass destruction" needs some special philosophical analysis. When we refer to weapons of mass destruction, we are drawing on a condemnatory connotation. We need to highlight the prospect for, and reality of, special pleading in using this term. For example, the United States presented its use of nuclear weapons in World War II as a means to end the war and save lives, yet the United States

condemns as weapons of mass destruction ones with far less destructive capability when they are being developed by "rogue" states or terrorist groups that are perceived as a military threat. Perhaps, the time has come for us to realize that we should condemn most violence, terrorism, and war, regardless of whether we term their instruments as weapons of mass destruction.

2. Defining Terrorism

Assessment of terrorism presents even greater difficulties than those connected with the assessment of weapons of mass destruction. Not surprisingly, commentators have written more on terrorism during the last year than they wrote over several previous decades. This general tendency repeats within philosophy as well. Between 1940 and 2001, *Philosophers Index* cites about 140 references on terrorism and terrorists. Since 11 September 2001, dozens of references have been indexed.[9] I want to provide just a little conceptual and historical clarity in defining terrorism, using primarily pre-11 September 2001 sources since they do not include the emotional and political dimensions of so many post-11 September 2001 treatments.

"Terror" is a broader term than terrorism. Terrorism is designed to influence political behavior by the using or threatening violence. In this regard, David E. Johnson defines terrorism as "The strategy of employing violence or the threat of violence to escalate people's fears to achieve or keep political power." He continues, "Ordinarily, terrorist acts are thought to be different from military operations, but that distinction is not always clear"; both "treat victims as a means."[10] Robert Holmes echoes this point when he observes, "governments or armies can terrorize as well: 'What makes a terrorist a terrorist is the means . . . not the ends.'"[11]

In this regard, even when people think about terrorism, they generally fail to recognize that it has these two major forms, which can be parsed in several ways. "Enforcement terror" is a reign of terror committed by an incumbent power (for example, the balance of terror during the Cold War), while "agitational terror" is a siege of terror committed by an insurgent power (for example, purportedly al-Qaeda relative to the attacks of 11 September). Most citizens and political analysts focus on insurgent over incumbent terrorism. In part, institutionalized forms have less news value and are more dangerous and difficult to report. States seem more predictable and rational, while members of insurgent groups appear to be more irrational and to act in a more random manner.

All this fits nicely with a villain view of evil. Most Americans now support increased surveillance of individuals already in, or trying to enter, the United States who are Arab or Muslim. The media aided government in fostering this reaction by quickly simplifying the attacks into an individual villain—Osama bin Laden. The United States, which used to charge the Soviets

with the cult of personality, has long tended to have a villain of the decade. Previous villains include Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Mao Tse-Tung, Fidel Castro, Ho Chi Minh, Moammar al-Qaddafi, Seyyed Ruhollah Khomeini, and Saddam Hussein. After 11 September 2001, Osama bin Laden became the embodiment of evil and THE threat to the United States, until we could not catch him. Then, as the United States war on terrorism continued, Hussein recaptured top billing as the World Enemy Number 1 of freedom-loving Americans. Forget that evil is far too extensive to be personified in one person. Forget that discourse about "good vs. evil" is more characteristic of Manichaeanism than the Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions. The fallaciousness of the popular response should be obvious to anyone who has studied critical thinking. Stereotyping of Arabs and Muslims as terrorists is an unfortunate, but far too common, "hasty generalization." Worse still is the willingness to subject such individuals to a type of "ethnic profiling" that makes "racial profiling," by comparison, almost appear less unacceptable.[12] To those too quick to point a finger of blame, Holmes observes:

> Terrorism is misleadingly represented as a struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. Any people desperate enough are capable of engaging in it. Any government unscrupulous enough, [is] capable of using it.[13]

In his survey of the scholarly literature, David C. Rapoport notes that over 100 definitions of terrorism can be found in the scholarly literature, and he connects its first use with the French Revolution.[14] He states:

> Terrorism was seen as an indispensable tool to establish a democratic order, and the term "terrorism" initially referred to government acts. Thus, the *Oxford English Dictionary* says the term originated in 1795, meaning either "government by intimidation" or "a (government) policy intended to strike with terror those against whom it is adopted."[15]

While Maximilien Robespierre had little or nothing to do with the organization of the original Reign of Terror, he was responsible for enlarging its scope. During its last six weeks, 1,284 persons were beheaded; then, on 28 July 1794 so were Robespierre and twenty-one of his lieutenants. During the Reign of Terror, which lasted from September 1793–July 1794, 20,000 people were executed. I will contrast this Reign of Terror with the one we are entering, and I am not so much referring to the acts of terrorism of 11 September as I am the United States war on terrorism that followed. The number of persons who died during the initial Reign of Terror is far fewer than the number who die in most civil and international wars.

The United States Civil War claimed hundreds of thousands, and Napoleon, who ended the French Revolution, was responsible for more than twenty times the number of deaths as the Committee of Public Safety. In *Origin of Inequality*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau had already addressed the way such events perverted language while taking human lives:

> The most decent people learned to consider it one of their duties to kill their fellow men. Men were seen massacring one another by the thousands without knowing why. More murders were committed in a single day of combat and more horrors in the capture of a single city than were committed in the state of nature during entire centuries over the entire face of the Earth.[16]

Holmes observes, "Once one accepts the premise that violence is a permissible means by which to pursue ends . . . one only needs to accustom people to overcome their natural revulsion to killing."[17]

In the two hundred and fifty years following Rousseau's remarks, governments have not changed much in relation to the practice of large-scale slaughter. What has changed is that the weaker now mimic the strong, though on a smaller scale. Rapaport observes, "Rebels characterized every government that oppressed them as terrorist no matter what tactics it employed; governments returned the compliment, deeming every rebel who used violence a terrorist." The media, Rapoport noted, corrupted or confused language even further, deliberately refusing to use terms consistently, apparently to avoid being seen as blatantly partisan.[18] Since 11 September 2001, the United States media has adopted a new pro-government linguistic partisanship. With both government and media largely using the same terminology and definitions, the politics of how we will respond to terrorism is firmly under the control of the establishment.

Putting the emerging war on terrorism into perspective, we need to remind ourselves that, from the obliteration bombing in Europe during World War II through the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, governments have used terror and in the process have killed hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians. So, quantitatively, if citizens of the world reflect on the most ominous sources of threat, governments should top their list. Still, none of these facts justify the acts of violence perpetrated on 11 September 2001, but neither do they justify the United States invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. In examining the issues, we must hold fast to our moral perspective. Whether we are referring to the conventional and atomic bombings that concluded World War II, the terrorists attacks of 11 September, or the United States response to these attacks, we have what Holmes terms, "acts of terrorism, employing massive, indiscriminate violence against mostly innocent persons."[19]

If a rose is a rose, a terrorist act is a terrorist act. Concerning the morality of terrorism, Holmes contends that terrorism is not less moral than war:

> The killing of children does not become less reprehensible because done
> from a plane, by soldiers trained in warfare and acting under orders from
> a duly elected leader than when done clandestinely by men acting on
> their own or in concert with a few conspirators.[20]

I would add, from a moral perspective, differences in degree are also significant.

3. Overcoming the New Reign of Terror

Some treaties and agreements exist that aim to prevent the production, stocking piling, deployment, and use of weapons of mass destruction. While supposedly aiming for the elimination of such weapons, government agencies sometimes also set up procedures designed to thwart attacks, which use weapons of mass destruction. One of the tasks of the new Office of Homeland Security, created in the United States following the attacks of 11 September 2001, is to protect Americans from terrorist attacks, including ones that might employ weapons of mass destruction. Whether such efforts can be effective or whether they will be merely quixotic remains to be seen.

All attempts to protect populations from existing weapons of mass destruction face formidable challenges. Once delivered to their targets, little help is possible for the immediate victims. Admittedly, some measures are possible for populations significantly downwind from nuclear fallout or airborne chemical and biological agents. The best prospect for protection involves the eradication of such weapons. Since human beings know how to produce these weapons, eliminating them does not prevent their reintroduction. What Jonathan Schell noted about nuclear weapons is also true for chemical and biological weapons—for all weapons. The materials needed for their production and delivery remain, and the knowledge of how to produce them. Philosophers have gone one step further in their assessments. The obstacles are more than physical and epistemological; they are also moral. For this reason, some of the most important work in preventing catastrophic use of weapons of mass destruction may not be what is being done by scientists and politicians but what can be done by moralists.

The United States' response to the 11 September attacks has continued to rely on the strategy of using more traditional military hardware against an enemy. This strategy ignores that this "enemy" is not a state, a government, or even an army and that this "enemy" lacks both a centralized territory and a single hierarchy of command. Matthew Cannon notes:

> Terrorism, like environmental problems, does not stop at the borders of
> a nation-state, but instead depends on a network that crosses borders and
> defies national jurisdictions. Responding to terrorism requires an international effort.[21]

An international effort is needed because:

> Terrorism is transnational and feeds off the inability of sovereign nation-states to monitor their cross-border networks. The nation-state is a blunt tool, poorly equipped to respond to a long-term war against terrorism;[22]

For this reason, Cannon concludes,

> Instead of continually fighting the symptoms of terror, the process of building relationships that cross borders and communities is essential to addressing misconceptions that feed terror.[23]

Philosophers and others have recognized that if we are to avoid devastating wars, especially ones involving weapons of mass destruction, we must first change our attitudes toward one another, especially toward what we regard as alien cultures. We can come to regard diversity in the expression of cultural and religious traditions and economic and political systems, along with the diversity of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation, as making up the harmonies and melodies that together create the song of humanity. In this regard, Holmes suggests we "try to understand terrorists," observing, "they are not subhuman monsters, to be fought with blood and iron and all the righteous fury that civilized people can muster"; instead, "the imperative is to find nonviolent ways of dealing with the problems of injustice, poverty, and oppression that are typically at the root of their actions."[24] He continues:

> We do know that resort to war and violence for all of recorded history has not worked. It has not brought either peace or justice to the world. Nonviolence worked in India with [Mahatma] Gandhi, in the U[nited] S[tates] with [Martin Luther] King [Jr.] and in Scandinavia against the Nazis during World War II. No one can foresee what the results might be if a country like the U.S. were to spend $300 billion a year in research on techniques of nonviolent resistance and on training people in their use.[25]

I wish to end with a few questions, observations, and suggestions. First, here are my questions. Will terrorism be eradicated during the twenty-first century? Will the war against terrorism spawn a new and larger generation of terrorists who continue to find dramatic ways to show the vulnerability of the United States and its allies? What measures will be taken in the effort to fight terrorism? What impact will these measures have on innocent citizens abroad and on civil liberties at home? What will be the future of war? Will the war against terrorism end any pretense of trying to abide by principles of just war? Will the United States go so far as to carry out first-strike nuclear at-

tacks against nations or subnational groups that do not yet even possess, let alone that have not yet used, weapons of mass destruction?

Here are my observations. While we do not know the answers to the questions I have raised, we do know some of the lessons of 11 September 2001 and its aftermath. On the one hand, while we can inflict great harm, we cannot prevent harm—even great harm—from being inflicted on us. On the other hand, a war against terrorism may continue a cycle of escalating violence and terror against others and ourselves.

Finally, here are a few suggestions. Despite our lack of answers, let us break the silence and continue to fight injustice. Let us not initiate violence or resort to violence to fight violence. Let us not remain silent when government and media suggest all Americans speak in a single voice. Let us not leave unchallenged a new Reign of Terror in which our government, while mouthing concerns for democratic values and global justice, threatens the initial use of nuclear weapons in our version of holy war.

NOTES

1. William C. Gay, "The Language of War and Peace," *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace, and Conflict*, vol. 2, ed. Lester Kurtz (San Diego: Academic Press, 1999), pp. 303–312.

2. Ibid.

3. Frederich Nietzsche, *The Geneology of Morals*; and *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956).

4. Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

5. Aldous Huxley, "Words and Behaviour," *The Olive Tree* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1937), pp. 84–103; George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, In Front of Your Nose: 1945–1950*, vol. 4, eds. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), pp. 127–140; and Haig A. Bosmajian, *The Language of Oppression* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1974).

6. William C. Gay, "Weapons of Mass Destruction," *Global Studies Encyclopedia*, eds. Ivan I. Mazour, Alexander Nikolaevich Chumakov, and William C. Gay, (Moscow: Raduga, 2003), pp. 533—538.

7. William C. Gay and Ronald E. Santoni, "Philosophy and Genocide." *Encyclopedia of Genocide*, ed. Israel W. Charny. (Oxford, UK: ABC-CLIO Publishers, 2000), pp. 459–460.

8. Cf. Joseph C. Kunkel, "Differing with Bush on Afghanistan," *Concerned Philosophers for Peace Newsletter*, 21:1–2 (2001), pp. 4–6.

9. *Philosophers Index*, http://www.philinfo.org/ (accessed 27 May 2006).

10. David E. Johnson, "Terrorism," *An Encyclopedia of War and Ethics*, ed. Donald A. Wells (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishers, 1996), pp. 454 and 455 respectively.

11. Robert Holmes, "Terrorism and Violence: A Moral Perspective," *Issues in War and Peace: Philosophical Inquiries*, eds. Joseph C. Kunkel and Kenneth H. Klein (Wolfeboro, N.H.: Longwood Academic, 1989), p. 116.

12. William C. Gay, "Xenophobia and Revenge: Morally Pretentious Backlashes to September 11th," *Concerned Philosophers For Peace Newsletter*, 21:1–2 (2001), pp. 2–4.

13. Holmes, "Terrorism and Violence," p. 118.

14. David C. Rapoport, "Terrorism," *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace, and Conflict*, vol. 3, ed. Lester Kurtz (San Diego: Academic Press, 1999), p. 498.

15. Ibid., p. 499.

16. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Origin of Inequality*,Classics of Moral and Political Theory, ed. Michael L. Morgan, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1996), p. 882.

17. Holmes, "Terrorism and Violence," p. 121.

18. Rapoport, "Terrorism," pp. 499–500.

19. Holmes, "Terrorism and Violence," p. 117.

20. Ibid., p. 118.

21. Matthew Cannon, "Terrorism, Prevention of," *Global Studies Encyclopedia*, pp. 503–507, quote from p. 503.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Holmes, "Terrorism and Violence," p. 124.

25. Ibid., pp. 125–126.