Contested Narratives, Ambiguous Impacts and Democratic Dilemmas: The Western News Media and the "War on Terror"

Rodney Tiffen

Abstract

Because the essence of terrorism is to produce a psychological impact far greater than its physical impact, the relationship of contemporary international terrorism with the news media has often been called symbiotic, with publicity described as the oxygen on which terrorism lives. Although this view is in many respects true, it over-simplifies a more ambiguous, varied and complex reality, and in any case, the policy options open to Western democratic governments in limiting this 'oxygen' are very limited both normatively and pragmatically. Equally important, but attracting much less scholarly and popular attention, is the news media's role in the problematic politics of counter-terrorism. Here the attraction of heroic narratives to both media and governments – for their own different reasons – creates coincidences of interest. Powerful metaphors such as the war on terror encourage strategies which may be substantially ineffective, perhaps even counter-productive, while politically benefiting the governments adopting them.

Rumsfeld and the Media Battlefield

> The battlefield is not Iraq, in a sense. The battlefield's in the media, in this country (Australia), in our country and all across the world. The terrorists know they can't win a single battle, they know that the only place they can win is if they can outlast the nations that are willing to invest in trying to help that country become a democracy. … They're very clever. They have media committees, the terrorists do, and they're very good at managing the news around the world. And is it hurtful? Yes. Are they good at it? Yes. Are they better at it than we are? You betcha. You betcha they are. But are they going to prevail? No, they're not going to prevail (ABC 2005d).

This statement of Donald Rumsfeld – made at a press conference in Australia in late 2005 – encapsulates a rich mix of convenient falsehoods, dangerous misconceptions, and an essential truth. Firstly the idea of the terrorists' media committees is sheer invention. No evidence of any type has been advanced to establish it. The assertion that the terrorists are better than western democratic governments at managing the news around the world is similarly baseless. It is a common belief of sides locked in conflict that the other side is better at manipulation and image control. Apart from anything else, it ignores the infinitely grander scale on which the West, and Americans in particular, engage in public relations and spin doctoring.

Rumsfeld insinuates two further claims – that the terrorists in Iraq are mindful of media coverage in their actions, and that the media coverage they are getting aids their cause and damages that of western governments. There have certainly been occasions when insurgent action in Iraq has focused on creating an international impact, for example the co-ordinated bombings in Baghdad after the start of Saddam's trial. But it is far more likely that the great bulk of their actions have a local logic and local aims. The way that the western media coverage might be aiding their cause is not specified. There is no charge of misreporting for example. Presumably the idea is that the media's selective focus on violent incidents creates an impression that things are not under control in Iraq.

Rumsfeld advances another politically convenient proposition when he changes the battlefield from what is actually happening on the ground in Iraq to a question of maintaining the West's political will, that the Iraq war will not be determined in Iraq but in the west. It deflects attention from the actual progress of the war, and so transforms issues of strategy and effectiveness into matters simply of political will.

Despite all this, Rumsfield's statement points to one essential truth, one that goes to the heart of terrorism – the media is one of its major battlefields, and, in the contemporary world, terrorism and news coverage are intimately tied together. The essence of terrorism is that it is violence which produces a psychological impact far in excess of its physical impact. In the contemporary world, the news media are centrally implicated in generating this psychological effect, a relationship which Margaret Thatcher captured most graphically and succinctly when she described publicity as the oxygen on which terrorism lives.

Types and Ages of Terrorism

Before examining the contemporary relationship between media and terrorism, it is necessary to define terrorism, to make distinctions between different types of terrorist groups and to consider the nature of the "new" terrorism now confronting democracies.

The labeling of a group as terrorist is always politically charged and contested. Governments seeking to legitimise their own cause and create sympathy for themselves frequently call their enemies terrorists. For decades, for example, the apartheid regime in South Africa called the African National Congress terrorists. The politically loaded label also creates problems in news reporting about how particular groups should be described (Conlan 2005).

Despite the abundance of academic definitions, they unfortunately often do little to discipline usage. Davies (2003, 14) quotes the following leading scholars:

> Walter Laqueur: 'Terrorism constitutes the illegitimate use of force to achieve a political objective when innocent people are targeted'.
>
> Richard A Falk: 'Terrorism … any type of political violence that lacks an adequate moral or legal justification, regardless of whether the actor is a revolutionary group or a government'.
>
> Brian Jenkins: 'Terrorism is the use of force designed to bring about political change'.

These disappointingly flaccid definitions do little to distinguish terrorism from other political violence or even from more conventional military force. Some people emphasise the innocent nature of its victims, that they are largely civilians. But sometimes targets are military, and people do not normally include aerial bombing of civilian populations, such as American bombing of Indochinese populations, as terrorism. Similarly some emphasise the apparently indiscriminate nature of the attacks, but sometimes targets, such as the World Trade Centre and Pentagon, may involve a symbolic dimension, or have a military significance.

For our purposes Clive Williams (see also Wilkinson 2002) comes nearer to capturing the essentials:

> Terrorism is politically motivated violence, directed generally against non-combatants, intended to shock and terrify, to achieve a strategic outcome (2004, 7).

Thus a key defining characteristic is that terrorism has both an immediate physical target – the unfortunate victims of the action – and also a more remote political target – the government or its policies or public support that the terrorists are trying to defeat. It is through the news media that the remote target is reached, and it is their reporting that makes the wider psychological impact and thus the strategic outcome possible.

Not all terrorists are the same. Thus far we have been using the label indiscriminately (as is often done), but before proceeding some distinctions are needed. The most basic distinction is between state terrorism and insurgent terrorism. State terrorism is the use of violence by a state against its own citizens. For example, under the Argentine military junta thousands of dissidents went missing. Their fate was never covered in the state controlled media, although rumours, sometimes fanned by military officials, spread among the victims' families, friends, and political allies. The publicity pattern attending state terrorism is typically very different from insurgent terrorism. State terrorism has through the years caused far more deaths than insurgent terrorism, but partly because it is often committed in secrecy receives far less international media

coverage than insurgent terrorism, which is the principal focus of this article.

Secondly, terrorist groups differ enormously in their sophistication about dealings with the media. While the IRA seemed to understand British media well, a Pakistani secessionist group, or for example, Chechen terrorists in Russia, do not seem to have any precise understanding of Western media, which play no direct role in their tactical thinking.

Terrorism goes back millennia, but the capacity and centrality of the media are crucial to its contemporary political impact. Terrorism pre-dated the media, and existed in contexts where the media were primitive or not very relevant. According to Schmid and de Graaf, it was the Russian revolutionaries of the late 1870s who first developed a theory of terrorism, perhaps taking their inspiration from the state terrorism practiced by the Czars (1982, 13).

But the media played a contributing role in the emergence of the first contemporary era of international terrorism. By international terrorism is meant 'terrorism committed by nationals of one country, or by members of nationalist groups or organisations, against governments, institutions, or people in another country' (Schelling 1991, 18), and many analysts see this era beginning from around 1970. Several factors came together at this time – increasing Palestinian organisation and militancy; the rise of terrorist groups in some developed countries, especially in the defeated axis powers of World War II – Japan (the New Red Army), Italy (the Red Brigades) and Germany (the Baader-Meinhoff Gang); increasing links between groups in different countries; an increasing capacity to operate on an international scale; plus finally an increasing skill at penetrating the weak points of mobile western societies, in particular airplanes.

One of the many factors in this apparent surge of terrorism was the media and especially the rise of satellite television. The bulk of incidents receiving the heaviest coverage involved sieges and hijackings in which the welfare of the hostages was a central concern of media coverage. Possibly the landmark event that begins this period was the hijacking of three aircraft by pro-Palestinian groups and taking them to Dawson's Field in Jordan in September 1970, eventually resulting in the exchange of some prisoners for the hostages (Davies 2002). The media coverage almost certainly put more pressure on the Western governments to place a higher priority on the safety of the hostages than their determination not to negotiate with terrorists.

The most spectacular event of this early period involved Palestinians taking Israeli hostages during the 1972 Munich Olympic Games. It was precisely because the world's media were concentrated at Munich that meant the action received saturation coverage crossing national boundaries, and so was more politically effective.

Several analysts (Ramakrishna and Tan 2002, 6) have argued convincingly

that we are now confronted with a new era of international terrorism. While there are of course continuities with past terrorism – it is still a means for a weaker party to pursue asymmetric warfare and still ruthlessly indifferent to its victims – several new characteristics and changes of emphasis and scale are also apparent. The new terrorism involves much greater lethality, while continuing to exploit the increasing scale and capacities of the media. With 3097 fatalities, the September 11, 2001 attacks were by a very long distance the most deadly terrorist incidents in the contemporary era. They were also the most televised.

The new terrorism also has an unmistakably religious dimension. The Islamic restorationism of Al-Qaida is not primarily fighting for the liberation of occupied territory, but rather its aims are much more abstract and global – and can never be achieved. "The global jihad has no coherent vision for the future and thus no plan of action to bring it about" (Devji 2005). "Like Nazism it is an ideology that thrives on its intoxicating incoherence" (Halliday 2004). Likewise its indifference to human life, and its determination to make its mark by taking civilian life on such a large scale mark it out from earlier insurgent terrorists. The centrality of suicide bombers – although again not new, but seemingly on a much larger scale than before – brings its own awful impact – "the quality of fear produced by an opponent whose desire to kill you is greater than his own will to live". Suicide bombings accounted for 48 per cent of those killed in terrorist attacks between 1980 and 2003, even though they made up only three per cent of the attacks (Carryl 2005).

A final characteristic of the new terrorism is its combination of a networked organisational structure with an appeal to a broader constituency of sympathisers dispersed around the world. While the core Al-Qaida organisation is tightly controlled, disciplined and secretive, even more dangerous is that it appeals to many others beyond its direct organisational control. Although global television plays a role in this, also important is the new medium of the internet. Terrorism scholar Gabriel Weimann (2006) found that the 40 organisations designated as active terrorist groups by the US State Department now maintain 4300 websites, and argued that the internet allows terrorists cheap, anonymous, international coordination and an opportunity to deliver their propaganda directly, independently of the news media.

There can be little doubt that the global challenge of terrorism in the contemporary world is unique, and that the politics of terrorism and counter-terrorism will be a continuing part of our political and media landscapes.

Terrorism and the Media – a Symbiotic Relationship

The upsurge of international terrorist actions from 1970 on soon brought an increase in commentary on the media's alleged role. In many cases this was

based on a general antipathy to the media among politically conservative circles (Clutterbuck 1981), and reflected in Rumsfeld's 2005 statement quoted at the beginning. The most popular proposition, almost to the point of becoming a cliché, was that the media and terrorists enjoyed a symbiotic relationship (Farnen 1996; Wilkinson 1997).

Like many terms in social scientific analysis, the word "symbiotic" comes from the physical sciences, to capture how media and terrorists feed off each other. A terrorist incident makes dramatic news which increases media circulation, and the saturation media coverage spreads the terrorist's message. Such a proposition has a superficial credibility, but in several important ways it is misleading.

Terrorists and journalists detest each other. Although a symbiotic relationship does not necessarily signify positive support, to the extent that either group produces positive consequences for the other it is not the result of any mutual sympathy. Nor is it the result of any direct relationship. There is rarely, if ever, any trading or co-operative communication between them. Overwhelmingly journalists view terrorists as murderers, terrorists see journalists as decadent or members of the enemy.

While it may be that media consumption goes up during and following terrorist incidents, no evidence has ever been produced to show that journalists orient their coverage to produce this result, or that they view the occurrence of a terrorist incident with any relish. Nor are they often guilty of irresponsibly sensationalising incidents. One study (Picard and Adams 1991) found that reporters' accounts actually tended to be more descriptive and objective, while it was politicians who supplied the stronger rhetoric.

The claim is often made that media coverage gives terrorists legitimacy or promotes sympathy for their cause. There is little to support these propositions. The content of news coverage of terrorist outrages is overwhelmingly negative. The focus is on the suffering caused by the attack, on the plight of the victims and sympathy for them, with very little on the terrorists' cause except in the most abbreviated and formulaic terms. If the cause is mentioned more extensively, it is usually denounced.

While the idea that terrorist actions bring any type of positive coverage in the Western media is wrong, a different proposition – that media coverage strengthens an image of the terrorists' power, or the dangers they pose – is more plausible and relevant. It is however another leap of logic to argue that this has a contagion effect, encouraging more terrorist incidents (Picard 1991). However, to the extent that producing a sense of shock and vulnerability – rather than support or sympathy – is their aim then saturation news coverage may help. In this sense publicity does provide the terrorists with oxygen.

Reducing the Oxygen? Regulating Media Coverage of Terrorism

When Margaret Thatcher first used the phrase in 1985 it was in the context of urging that democracies "must find ways to starve the terrorists and hijackers of the oxygen of publicity" (Picard 1991, 50). She was reflecting a widespread but usually imprecise view in conservative circles about the irresponsibility or culpability of the media. Yet even if the goal of starvation is accepted it is far from clear what policy prescriptions could follow. How can governments deny this oxygen to terrorist groups? One needs to consider also the costs of censorship (Schmid and de Graaf 1982, 172). One approach is to make distinctions on the basis of time:

1. Coverage of incidents that have already occurred.
2. Coverage of incidents in progress
3. Coverage of warnings

Terrorist actions can be divided into immediate and continuing (Davies 2002). When a continuing incident is actually in progress – for example a siege – the safety of those caught up in it is paramount. Probably most observers agree that temporary censorship for the duration of the incident, leaving the authorities to handle tactics in the way they think best, would be accepted even by most journalists. Nothing should be done to inflame the situation or interfere with actions designed to end it. Such censorship or preferably co-operative self-censorship would be strictly temporary.

In relatively short-term incidents that last a matter of hours or days, such self-restraint is simpler than when they go for weeks or months. There was some criticism of the American TV networks, each seeking competitive advantage, during the TWA hijacking in 1985 (Weimann and Winn 1994). The great weight of evidence suggests media responsibility however. For example, hundreds of American and Canadian journalists in late 1979 voluntarily kept secret for two months that six American officials who had not been in the embassy compound when Iranian Islamic militants stormed it were still at large in Tehran and were then secretly shielded by the Canadian embassy. This secrecy allowed them to be later spirited out of the country without the Iranian government finding them (Berlin 2006).

On the other hand, censorship of incidents that are already completed would almost never be justified. There are pragmatic arguments for this, as it would be impossible to stop information getting out. The iron law of censorship is that the authorities lose credibility and that rumour becomes increasingly potent. Given the degree of public cynicism already evident in western societies, any attempt to censor information on terrorist incidents would be not only wrong

in principle, but counter-productive in its effects.

The most difficult issue concerns censorship of possible future incidents. Before the Pan Am aircraft was shot down over Lockerbie in 1988, several diplomats and others had received warnings based on intelligence that there could be an imminent threat to an American flight over the Atlantic. As a result some of these people changed their flights and lived, while others, who had not been warned, died. There is a clear issue of injustice here, but also dilemmas. If the warning had been publicised it would have caused chaos, and if all such warnings were publicised, hoaxes could almost paralyse the travel industry at any time.

Moreover the danger of false alarms is very high. A bizarre incident occurred in December 2003 when CIA analysts forced 30 flights to be cancelled and raised the US terror alert from yellow to orange because they thought that al-Qaida was sending hidden messages through the headlines of the Arabic television news channel al-Jazeera. They thought they had decoded messages that gave dates, flight numbers and geographic coordinates for targets in the US. Eighteen months later, Homeland Security chief Tom Ridge conceded that the intelligence analysis was "bizarre, unique, unorthodox, unprecedented" (Younge 2005a).

There are policy dilemmas here, but the more important point is to realise just how limited any policy solutions to the role of the news media and the politics of terrorism can be. In the 1980s the Thatcher Government set out to ban interviews with IRA members (O'Carroll 2005). Whatever the rights and wrongs of this – presumably an attempt to deny terrorists any legitimacy or capacity to humanise their cause – it is an extremely minor aspect of the public impact of media reporting of terrorism. In the face of terrorist attacks, such as the July 2005 bombings in London, censorship is completely impractical as well as undesirable. No politically feasible degree of control of the news media could stop their shock impact.

The Media and the "War on Terror"

> Conservatives saw the savagery of 9/11 and the attacks and prepared for war; liberals saw the savagery of the 9/11 attacks and wanted to prepare indictments and offer therapy and understanding for our attackers. In the wake of 9/11, conservatives believed it was time to unleash the might and power of the United States military against the Taliban; in the wake of 9/11, liberals believed it was time to submit a petition … Conservatives saw what happened to us on 9/11 and said "We will defeat our enemies". Liberals saw what happened to us and said "We must understand our enemies" (Dionne 2005a)

Karl Rove, George W Bush's chief political strategist and spin doctor, exhibited

the partisan nature of anti-terrorist politics at its crudest in this 2005 speech. The effect of western media reporting of terrorism has been long debated, with some of those asserting its symbiotic role also picturing the media as a force subversive of western governments. However there has been little scholarly attention to the role of the media in the politics of counter-terrorism.

As Rove's statement so amply demonstrates, even in the face of awful external threats, the quest for partisan advantage rarely stops. Immediately after the tragedy of the September 11 attacks, normal partisan politics was temporarily suspended. However, the government of the day is often an immediate beneficiary in political terms, as the public rallies around the flag (Baum 2003). Patriotic sentiments helped to produce a strong surge in President Bush's approval ratings, which only some years later went into a slow but eventually very substantial decline. Nevertheless the threat of terrorism remains a residual political resource on which the Bush Administration can draw. One investigation discovered thirteen "coincidences" where political news adverse to the Administration had been followed by the announcement of a "terror event" (Ackland 2005a).

The politics of counter-terrorism can not just be taken for granted. It is far from clear what the most effective policies will be in minimising future threats from terrorism. In the public framing of responses to terrorist atrocities and the fears arising from them, the normal interplay of political interests and strategies and the media's own priorities of newsworthiness and susceptibility to the news generating actions of governments have their own dynamics. In turn, these mean – as in all areas of policy-making – that domestic political rewards to not always flow to the substantially optimal solutions.

Five days after the deadly attacks of September 11, President George Bush proclaimed: "This is a new kind of evil, and we understand, and the American people are now beginning to understand, this crusade, this war on terrorism, is going to take a while …" (Raban 2005).

The declaration of war – even putting to one side the unfortunate use of the word crusade – is clearer than the nature of the war. Certainly there is substance in the phrase. Most obviously, there have been major military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. In addition, according to CNN (2005), in the four years of the "war on terror", the United States has detained more than 83,000 foreigners, and still has 14,500 detainees, mostly in Iraq. A Congressional Research Service Report said that as of April 2006, Congress had appropriated a total of $368 billion for spending on aspects of the war on terror (Belasco 2006). Similarly in Australia, the budget for the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) increased almost five times in five years – from $69 million in 2001-02 to $341 million in 2006-07 (Lynch and Williams 2006, 30).

Nevertheless how is this state of "war" to be understood? Is it merely a metaphor like the American Government's so-called war on drugs, or is it in some sense analogous to a conventional war? Like "real" war, it involves death and violence and an external enemy committed to trying to destroy western powers. The stakes are very high. As Gerard Henderson aptly comments, mistakes by intelligence agencies and political leaders could result in fatalities for which they will be held responsible. However, the nature of the war was at issue in the following exchange between Henderson and leading lawyer Robert Toner (ABC 2005c):

> Gerard Henderson: To say we're not at war dismisses Osama bin Laden and his associates who say we are at war …
>
> Robert Toner: We're not in a warlike situation. And to portray it that way is to amplify fear within the community unnecessarily. And it will also distract from the calm reflection as to what ought properly to be done. … Really, truly to draw any comparison between what's happening at the moment in relation to resisting acts of terrorism around the world and in Australia in particular with what was happening in 1939 to 1945 in Europe and the Pacific is patently absurd.
>
> Gerard Henderson: But the terrorists say we're at war. That's the point.
>
> Robert Toner: Oh yeah. Goodo!

The "war against terrorism" is an understandable, but also a dangerous label. Politicians and the media prefer moral simplicity to empirical complexity. Value-laden labels permit powerful rhetoric without the constraints of empirical discipline. Bruce Ackerman (2002) goes so far as to say that "It would help us see the 'war on terrorism' for what it is: an extravagant metaphor blocking responsible thought about a serious problem".

It is pertinent to counterpoint the contrasts between conventional war and the war on terrorism. In conventional war, casualties are on a huge scale. On the other hand, the metaphor of war vastly exaggerates the extent of death and damage caused by terrorism. According to the US Center for Disease Control, the odds of dying in a terrorist attack are about 1 in 88,000, whereas the odds of dying from falling off a ladder are about one in 10,000 (Friedman 2005). According to the US Government's National Centre for Counter-Terrorism (Hartcher 2005d), the number of deaths due to terrorism globally were 838 in 2000, 4563 in 2001, 2760 in 2002, 2366 in 2003, 5071 in 2004 and 6031 to November 2005. (The figure for 2001 includes the 9/11 attacks, while the last years include deaths from what are defined as terrorist incidents in Iraq.) In contrast in 2005, it is estimated 3.1 million people died from HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS 2005). While a strictly actuarial approach is not appropriate, given the dramatic nature of the deaths, and the wish to instill terror, it is important

to always bear in mind that "the fears terror has generated dwarf the deaths it has caused" (Krygier 2005).

Conventional wars involve front lines as both sides battle to capture territory (Kaldor 2005), a scenario that seemed to inform President George Bush's statement a few days after the London bombing: "We're fighting the enemy in Iraq and Afghanistan and across the world so we do not have to face them here at home" (Dionne 2005b). Apart from being grossly insensitive to the people of London, it is misleading about what might affect the capacity of terrorists to launch an attack directly on the United States, as if there are a series of dominos which must fall in turn.

Conventional wars are won and lost in decisive military showdowns, decided by the ability to inflict punishment on the enemy, to destroy their capacity to fight either by killing them or destroying their arsenals with superior weaponry, resources and military tactics. In conventional wars, strong enemy states are the source of the problem, while in terrorism some analysts (Rotberg 2002) are arguing that failed states and weak states are the breeding grounds of contemporary terrorism. Terrorists cannot be militarily defeated unless new recruitment can be stopped. You do not deter a suicide bomber by threatening capital punishment. The President's statement, as with so many of the statements of the American and Australian governments, also raises issues about the military strategies deployed to combat terrorism. For example, United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan, the CIA and MI5 analysts all seem to think that that war has heightened rather than reduced the international risks of terrorism:

> The US-led invasion of Iraq has turned the country into a new hub of terrorism worse than Afghanistan under the Taliban, United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan has said (Anon 2005).

> (The CIA says Iraq may prove to be an even more effective training ground for Islamic extremists than Afghanistan was in Al Qaeda's early days) because it is serving as a real-world laboratory for urban combat. … The officials said it made clear that the war was likely to produce a dangerous legacy by dispersing to other countries Iraqi and foreign combatants more adept and better organized than they were before the conflict (Jehl 2005).

> Iraq has become 'a dominant issue' for Islamic extremists in Britain, MI5 has admitted (Evans 2005).

Conventional wars involve the mobilisation of a country's military and in total war of its population and economic resources. In contrast, "To a far greater degree than in major wars – when citizens are mobilized on the front or behind the lines – most of the inhabitants and citizens of the world are reduced to mere

spectators in the current wars on terror and by terror'' (Halliday 2004).

> 'What did you do in the War on Terror, Daddy?'
>
> 'I was in the front line, son. I was where the action was'.
>
> 'The Marines?'
>
> 'Marketing' (Samuel 2005).

Conventional wars involve temporary periods of sacrifice and abnormality, and typically end in a decisive victory or defeat, after which normality returns. In the war on terrorism, there is no prospect of victory in the short-term. The accuracy of the analogy is also pertinent to whether governments should be given wartime powers in relation to security, judicial process and free speech. Are the wartime restrictions on traditional liberties, as Miranda Devine and many others have invoked World War II to justify, appropriate for the war on terror? One difference is the amorphous nature of the enemy. Related to this is another. There is not likely to be a definite end to the war on terror. As Andrew Lynch (2005a) points out, although the government talks of the "exceptional" nature of the present situation, "they are even more likely to say that the world changed on 9/11", so that the old exception will become the new norm.

Australia's Counter-Terrorism Legislation

Both media and politicians find dramatic moral rhetoric more compelling and rewarding than complex and ambiguous empirical realities. Similarly legislative action is more publicly visible than administrative actions. The public focus on such legislation gives the government the political initiative in an area where they are likely to have public support, while putting the opposition in a defensive and difficult position especially if there are reservations about what is being proposed. The mix of motives is often impossible to discern precisely in practice, but the full complexity of anti-terrorist politics in a democracy was on display in Australia in November 2005.

For the first 101 years of its existence, the Federation of Australia managed to exist without anti-terrorist legislation. The first bills were introduced in March 2002, setting off a flurry of activity. In the five years between September 2001 and September 2006, the Commonwealth made "37 new laws directly dealing with counter-terrorism – an average of one new law every seven weeks … There has been so much law over such a short time – much of it broadening and amending what was passed just months earlier – as to render the overall impact impenetrable for the interested citizen" (Lynch and Williams 2006, 10).

Most actions associated with terrorism are of course violent, and therefore anyway would constitute a crime. However it can be argued that there are

valid reasons for having special legislation. In a federation such as Australia, the problem of terrorism requires a uniform national approach rather than variations between states. Moreover, even though conspiring to commit a violent crime is itself a crime, it could be argued that there should be more emphasis on prevention and deterrence in combating terrorism than with normal crimes. Finally while crime is typically committed by individuals or small gangs, terrorism is a highly organised activity, and so there should be scope for control measures to move against its organisational dimensions.

After 2002 a list of proscribed and banned terrorist organisations was drawn up (Rimmer et al. 2005), while the powers of ASIO were further expanded in June 2003 "after fifteen months of sometimes bitter debate" (Williams and Saul 2005). Since then another five laws have further modified ASIO's counter-terrorism powers (Lynch and Williams 2006, 34). In September 2005, after gaining a majority in both Houses, Prime Minister Howard announced further changes to Australia's counter-terrorism laws. After winning the in-principle agreement of the state premiers, the Anti-Terrorism Bill (No 2) 2005 was to be introduced into parliament when it resumed sitting in November.

On Tuesday November 2, the Government introduced its legislation into the House of Representatives, proposing a drastic increase in police powers over suspected terrorists. This was the beginning of what was already scheduled to be a tumultuous week in Parliament, with the other widely anticipated legislation to be introduced being the government's new workplace relations bill, a radical re-writing of industrial relations regulations. The Government had already spent an unprecedented $50 million advertising the virtues of this move, but opinion polls show it remained unpopular. Indeed the polls had a neat symmetry – on industrial relations, 29% were satisfied and 60% dissatisfied with Howard's performance while on terrorism, 62% were satisfied and 30% dissatisfied (Hartcher 2005c).

At midday on Wednesday, just before the scheduled introduction of the momentous industrial legislation, Prime Minister Howard called a midday press conference, in which he said that intelligence just received revealed a serious terrorist threat. As a result, the existing legislation (already in operation) would need urgent amendment. Labor had been briefed on the change and agreed to support it. The Senate, which was to reconvene the following Monday, was recalled – at great expense and inconvenience – for a special sitting on Thursday.

The Prime Minister was not asked a question about industrial relations (Hartcher 2005a), and in all subsequent media coverage terrorism trumped workplace relations. The issue where the government enjoyed majority popular support displaced the one where it was unpopular.

According to Attorney-General Philip Ruddock, "Authorities needed to be able to act if there was information about a potential terrorist act but where you didn't know the detail as to where and when it might occur" (Allard and Levett 2005). This involved changing "the" to "a", so that it was no longer necessary to identify a particular terrorist act (Grattan 2005a).

Tellingly, despite "the broad Liberal-Labor bipartisanship and Commonwealth-State collaboration" (Kelly 2005), the action was greeted with a large degree of skepticism about the government's motives. Shanahan and Walters (2005) reported that the police were unhappy with the announcement, and that there were splits between the government, ASIO and police forces over how to best handle the intelligence. Hartcher (2005b) said the Prime Minister had used a megaphone to give suspected terrorists notice of raids, while security expert David Wright-Neville also criticised him for tipping off the terrorists, and said a counter-terrorism operation had been under way for some time (Lopez 2005).

Later in the week, the new counter-terrorism legislation was also passed by the House of Representatives, with the support of both major parties. This was despite concern among party members on both sides about the benchmarks for proscribing a terrorist organisation, and worries about the dangerous vagueness of the sedition provisions. Unlike other sections of the legislation, the section on sedition has no sunset clause. It was being widened with greater punishments introduced, even though, as leading lawyer Ian Barker (2005) pointed out, there has been no trial for sedition in Australia since 1949.

It was the sedition provisions which proved the most long-running problem for the Government. The Liberal Party's most prominent backbencher, Malcom Turnbull, commented on television that the sedition provisions in the bill are not "ideally drafted". Without making any promise about actual revisions – and in fact still staunchly defending them (Ruddock 2005b), Ruddock promised to review them next year (Nicholson and Munro 2005). Labor's spokeswoman Nicola Roxon pointed out that it's hardly sensible to pass a flawed provision while at the same time agreeing to revisit it almost immediately (Grattan 2005b). In late November, a Senate Committee, with a Government chair and bipartisan composition, and although given almost no time to consider the legislation, recommended several changes including a review of the Sedition provisions (Nicholson 2005; Grattan 2005c), but the Government over-rode the concerns and pushed the legislation through.

Over the weekend Defence Minister Robert Hill announced the need for further changes in the law to give more flexibility to Defence Force troops to respond to terrorist threats within Australia. Greens Senator Kerry Nettle immediately led the attack saying that they already possessed such powers. The Government replied that it was simply trying to streamline the procedures for

doing so. But in weekend reporting, there was a strong strain of cynicism that the Government was dramatising and recycling anti-terrorism measures for its own purposes.

The atmospherics surrounding the issue dramatically changed on Monday morning (ABC 2005c) with raids conducted by more than 400 police resulting in 16 arrests in Melbourne and Sydney. One of the accused was shot while resisting arrest. Victorian Police Commissioner Christine Nixon said the police had prevented a major terrorist attack, which New South Wales Police Commissioner Ken Moroney said was in the final stages of preparation. The shock of a plot on Australian soil, the drama of it being foiled by police, focused the threat sharply. Former ASIO director, Denis Richardson, had said four years earlier it was inevitable that a terrorist attack against a target in Australia would occur one day and preventative measures would long be needed, but this was the first dramatic demonstration that the threat was real and potentially imminent.

State officials said the changes to the criminal code had been useful. Many hailed the arrests as vindication of the government's actions of the previous week. Matt Price (2005) and several other commentators said that critics of the Prime Minister now had egg on their face.

However – although now moved more to the margins of media coverage – there was still substantial questioning of the Government's moves. Kerry O'Brien asked the Prime Minister whether it was true that police forces had first asked for the amendment 18 months earlier, and wondered why it had been so long delayed, and then introduced so dramatically (ABC 2005b). Legal scholar Andrew Lynch (2005b) and legal commentator Richard Ackland (2005b) questioned whether the amendment had been necessary. Ackland pointed out that the principal clause already said "a" and the amendment was only to the next sub-section, which had to be read only in relation to the principal. He quoted Malcolm Turnbull who said in parliament "this amendment is done out of an abundance of caution". Moreover, the prosecutors in Melbourne confirmed that their case was not relying on the amendments. "The press conference and the urgent legislative change remains what it always was – a piece of pantomime with no bearing on securing the conviction of anyone charged this week" (Ackland 2005b). Peter Hartcher (2005d) argued the arrests suggested that current provisions were adequate, and that the Government had not made a case for the new anti-terrorism Act.

At the height of these anti-terrorism controversies in Australia, the November 10 feature page of the *Sydney Morning Herald* juxtaposed two contrasting articles. In the first, Professor Hugh White (2005b) talked about the need to "regain our equilibrium in the face of a threat" which we must live with for a considerable time. He argued against "the apocalyptic anxieties of those who claim terrorism

threatens the existence of our society. Terrorists may dream that a meaningless crime might help create a global fundamentalist caliphate. There is no reason for us to share this fantasy. It can only encourage them". In contrast, *Herald* staff columnist Miranda Devine (2005) argued that when a democracy is threatened, some freedoms are always sacrificed. She cited England's restrictions on normal liberties during World War II, and concluded that "most Australians – Muslim or otherwise – would rather give the police a few more powers than be blown up on a bus on the way to work".

This exchange encapsulates both the submerged debate about the nature of the war on terror and the connection between restrictions on traditional judicial rights and victory over terrorism. No doubt Miranda Devine is right that most Australians would prefer these restrictions to being blown up in a bus. Similarly most Australians would prefer to have all their teeth pulled out than be killed in a bus explosion. But that does not mean that such dentistry will effectively deter a bus explosion. The trade offs one has to make, and the connections between policy measures and future security, cannot simply be assumed. In contrast, political analyst Timothy Garton Ash (2005), observing the fourth anniversary of September 11, especially deplored the measures which both "make us at once less free and less safe". He concluded "The erosion of liberty. Four words sum up four years".

The Media-State Alliance and the Heroic Narrative

Differences over the nature of the war on terror parallel differences over the best strategies with which to combat the threat. On the one side stand those echoing Cicero's advice in imperial Rome, "Let them hate as long as they fear". Contemporary terrorism expert Ralph Peters thus puts the view that America "must not waste an inordinate amount of effort trying to win unwinnable hearts and minds". Rather America must not shrink from using its "raw power" and that its "responses to terrorist acts should make the world gasp" (Ramakrishna and Tan 2002, 19). On the other hand are those who think that effective counter-measures are closer to a policing than to a military exercise, and that stopping future recruitment is as important as breaking existing networks.

In the contemporary democratic politics surrounding counter-terrorism, domestic political forces and the nature of media coverage favour the more muscular responses. The media are part of the constellation of forces that favour what Professor Hugh White (2005a) called the heroic narrative in responding to terrorism. He contrasted the way those in government talked privately about terrorism and the public presentation of it. All in government acknowledged that "there is a very high risk that small but globally networked groups of Islamic extremists will, over coming years, repeatedly attempt to launch terrorist attacks

in Australia". What Australia can do to reduce this is limited but real: "There will be no 'victory'. All we can do is reduce the risk by sustained, painstaking police work – backed by international co-operation, intelligence and border control".

Moreover, the types of action the government is publicly parading will have little impact on the risks: "I doubt if anyone in Government seriously believes … that the kind of measures now being debated would significantly cut the risks of terrorist attacks in Australia". "But the heroic account of terrorism demands the appearance of firm action, and inclines us to see the struggle in ideological terms". This suggests a counter-productive political dynamic, a disequilibrium in the policy climate, which in the short run can benefit the government of the day, and the media play their role in promoting the frenzied atmosphere, but in the long run will inhibit rather than promote an effective response.

Similar dynamics can be seen in other English-speaking democracies. A columnist for *The Times* of London, Matthew Parris (2005), dissected what he saw as "the enormous, insidious and mostly unconscious pressure that exists to talk up, rather than talk down, the efficacy of al-Qaeda". He identified four forces that do this: the news media ("Al-Qaeda is a 'narrative' and a gripping one"); the government ("leadership is made easier if there is a visible, tangible threat", "Us versus Them is the narrative a politician is most at home with"); the security services ("flattered in their work by the headlines") and the terrorists (where a reputation for fearsomeness and sophistication is a boon to self-esteem and efforts to recruitment).

In the United States, former Secretary of State Zbignew Brzezinski (2005) has criticised George Bush's invocation of the Cold War struggle against communism as analogous to the struggle against the murderous ideology of Islamic radicalism (with several variants on the label, such as Islamofascism). "His case is that the terrorist challenge is global in scope, 'evil' in nature, ruthless towards it foes, and eager to control every aspect of life and thought". He then argues that the battle against terrorism demands nothing "less than a complete victory". Brzezinski criticises nearly all aspects of the analogy, notes how it elevates Osama bin Laden to the ranks of Lenin and Mao, and in particular zeroes in on the possible unintended consequences on Muslim sentiment of the constant reiteration of some form of Islam, even a perverted one, as the enemy.

A more radical critic, Mary Kaldor (2005), also focuses on how US leaders "are caught up in a narrative of their own making, which resonates well with the American public with the help of the American media". One negative external effect is that "the American pursuit of a moral crusade reinforces the insurgents' notion of a global jihad". But most importantly it leads to military actions which are strategically self-defeating in the longer term: "The more that American

behaviour exacerbates the sense of insecurity and humiliation, the more the insurgency grows and the more those that promulgate an idea of war of the west against Islam gain the upper hand". Or as Timothy Garton Ash (2005) has argued, that the United States has over 100,000 troops acting as an occupying power in the heart of the Islamic world "is exactly what al-Qaida-type terrorists want: that democracies should overreact, reveal their "true" oppressive face, and therefore win more recruits to the suicide bombers' cause". Or as the head of the International Crisis Group thinktank, Gareth Evans, said: "The net result of the war on terror is more war and more terror. Look at Iraq: the least plausible reason for going to war – terrorism – has been its most harrowing consequence" (Younge 2005b).

Conclusion – the Theatre of Anti-Terrorist Politics

Weimann and Winn (1994), writing about media oriented terrorist strategies, talked of the theatre of terror. In some senses the making of anti-terrorist policies is also theatre. It always has symbolic as well as substantial elements. News coverage of terrorist actions does not increase the sympathy of western publics for the terrorists, or the legitimacy of their cause. It may serve the terrorists' purposes by increasing the sense of threat and fear, but there are no feasible policy actions that western democratic governments could take to remove this impact. The media's major impact may be less as a force subverting western governments, than one sometimes acting in tacit alliance with their political interests. The media are among the elements that by dramatising the problem of terrorism may fan the forces of over-reaction. The moral polarisation of war on terror rhetoric seems to inhibit strategic flexibility. If media coverage benefits terrorism, it does so not in terms of increasing sympathy for them, but in abetting strategies of dubious effectiveness based upon heroic narratives.

References

ABC. 2005a. 'Howard defends anti-terror changes', Interview with Kerry O'Brien, *7.30 Report,* 7 November.
_____. 2005b. 'Raid foils terrorist attacks', *ABC News,* 8 November.
_____. 2005c. 'Anti-terrorism laws: safety measure or political gameplay?', *The World Today,* 11 November.
_____. 2005d. 'Rumsfeld resolved to stay the distance in Iraq', *PM,* 18 November.
Ackerman, Bruce. 2002. 'Don't Panic', *London Review of Books* 24 (3) 7 February.
Ackland, Richard. 2005a. 'More sins of spin from grim duo', *Sydney Morning Herald,* 4 November.
_____. 2005b. 'Indefinite or not, charges could be laid', *Sydney Morning Herald,* 11 November.
Allard, Tom, and Connie Levett. 2005. 'Net closes on new terror suspects', *Sydney Morning Herald,* 14 November.
Anon 2005. 'Terrorism in Iraq boosted by war: Annan', *The Age*, 6 September.

Ash, Timothy Garton. 2005. 'The forward march of liberty has been halted – even reversed', *The Guardian,* 17 November.

Barker, Ian. 2005. 'Sedition law should be made redundant', *Sydney Morning Herald,* 14 November.

Baum, Matthew. 2003. *Soft News Goes to War. Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy in the New Media Age.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Belasco, Amy. 2006. 'The cost of Iraq, Afghanistan and other global war on terror operations since 9/11', *CRS Report for Congress.*

Berlin, Michael J. 2006. 'A secret the media kept', *Washington Post*, 21 July.

Brzezinski, Zbignew. 2005. 'Do these two have anything in common?', *Washington Post*, 4 December.

Caryl, Christian. 2005. 'Why They Do It" *New York Review of Books* 52 (14) 22 September.

Clutterbuck, Richard. 1981. *The Media and Political Violence.* London: Macmillan.

Conlan, Tara. 2005. 'BBC warns staff over "terrorism"' *The Guardian*, 16 December.

CNN. 2005. 'War on terror could fill stadium with detainees', 16 November.

Davies, Barry. 2003. *Terrorism. Inside a World Phenomenon.* London: Virgin.

Devine, Miranda. 2005. 'A reality check for the wise and good', *Sydney Morning Herald,* 10 November.

Devji, Faisal. 2005. 'Spectral brothers: al-Qaida's world wide web' *Open Democracy,* 19 August. Available at www.openDemocracy.net.

Dionne Jr, EJ. 2005a. 'The New McCarthyism', *Washington Post,* 28 June.

_____. 2005b. 'The War's Realists', *Washington Post*, 12 July.

Evans, Michael. 2005. 'MI5 analysts admit link between Iraq war and bombings', *The Times,* 28 July.

Farnen, Russell. F 1996. 'Terrorism and the Mass Media: A Systematic Analysis of a Symbiotic Process'. In *Terrorism,* ed., Conor Gearty. Dartmouth: Aldershot.

Friedman, Benjamin. 2005. 'Think Again: Homeland Security', *Foreign Policy* July/August.

Grattan, Michelle. 2005a. 'True test is just around the corner', *The Age,* 3 November.

_____. 2005b. 'Act of sedition from Turnbull puts Ruddock on the spot', *Sydney Morning Herald,* 6 November.

_____. 2005c. 'Wrong way, go back, but on they press', *The Age,* 29 November.

Halliday, Fred. 2004. 'Terrorism in historical perspective', *Open Democracy,* 22 April. Available at www.openDemocracy.net.

Hartcher, Peter. 2005a. 'Howard deflects nation's gaze away from the ball', *Sydney Morning Herald,* 3 November.

_____. 2005b. 'Dramatic proof that laws are adequate and the rest is just atmospherics', *Sydney Morning Herald,* 9 November.

_____. 2005c. 'Workplace law revolt puts Beazley in driving seat', *Sydney Morning Herald,* 22 November.

_____. 2005d. 'War has reached a deadly stalemate', *Sydney Morning Herald, 25* November.

Jehl, Douglas. 2005. 'Iraq may be prime place for training of militants, CIA report concludes', *New York Times,* 22 June.

Kaldor, Mary. 2005. 'Iraq: the wrong war', *Open Democracy,* 9 June.

Kelly, Paul. 2005. 'New laws need to strike right balance', *The Australian,* 9 November.

Krygier, Martin. 2005. 'Are our protectors really protecting us?', *The Age,* 31 August.

Lopez, Elisabeth. 2005. 'PM ridicules conspiracy theory', *The Age,* 3 November.

Lynch, Andrew. 2005a. 'Does Australia need an emergency constitution for the way we live now? Reconciling counter-terrorism with constitutionalism', Seminar, Sydney University.

_____. 2005b. 'Laws enough for clear and present danger', *Sydney Morning Herald,* 2 November.

Lynch, Andrew, and George Williams. 2006. *What Price Security? Taking Stock of Australia's Anti-Terror Laws.* Sydney, Briefings, University of New South Wales Press.

Nicholson, Brendan. 2005. 'Lib Senators blast PM's law', *The Age,* 29 November.

Nicholson, Brendan, and Ian Munro. 2005. 'Do not expect arrests yet, says PM', *The Age,* 4 November.

O'Carroll, Lisa. 2005. 'The truth behind Real Lives', *The Guardian*, 12 December.

Parris, Matthew. 2005. 'I name the four powers who are behind the al-Qaeda conspiracy', *The Times*, 23 July.

Picard, Robert. 1991. 'News Coverage as the Contagion of Terrorism: Dangerous Charges Backed by Dubious Evidence'. In *Media Coverage of Terrorism*, eds., Odasuo Alali and Kenoye Kelvin Eke. London: Sage.

Picard, Robert, and Paul D. Adams. 1991. 'Characterisations of Acts and Perpetrators of Political Violence in Three Elite US Daily Newspapers'. In *Media Coverage of Terrorism* , eds., Odasuo Alali and Kenoye Kelvin Eke. London: Sage.

Price, Matt. 2005. 'Egg on faces, head to toe', *The Australian,* 9 November.

Raban, Jonathan. 2005. 'September 11: The view from the West', *New York Review of Books* V52, N14, 22 September.

Ramakrishna, Kumar, and Andrew Tan. 2002. 'The New Terrorism: Diagnosis and Prescriptions'. In *The New Terrorism. Anatomy, Trends and Counter-Strategies,* eds., Andrew Tan and Kumar Ramakrishna. Singapore: Eastern Universities Press.

Rimmer, Sue Harris, et al. 'Anti-Terrorism Bill No 2. 2005', Parliament of Australia, Department of Parliamentary Affairs, 18 November..

Rotberg, Robert I. 2002. 'Failed states in a world of terror', *Foreign Affairs* 81 (4): 127-140

Rumsfeld, Donald. H 2006. 'New Realities in the Media Age: A conversation with Donald Rumsfeld', NY, Council on Foreign Relations, 17 February. Available at http://www.cfr. org/publication/9900.

Ruddock, Philip. 2005. 'There is no threat to freedom of speech', *Sydney Morning Herald,* 14 November.

Samuel, Martin. 2005. 'Treason or just a PR stunt', *The Times,* 11 August.

Schelling, Tom. 1991. 'What purpose can international terrorism serve?'. In *Violence, Terrorism and Justice,* eds., R.G. Frey and C.W. Morris. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Schmid, Alex P., and Janny de Graaf. 1982. *Violence as Communication. Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media.* London: Sage Publications.

Shanahan, Denis, and Patrick Walters. 2005. 'Security anger over PM's terror threat alert', *The Australian,* 5 November.

UNAIDS Epidemic Update. 2005 'Global Summary of the AIDS Epidemic, December 2005'. Available at http://www.unaids.org/Epi2005/doc/report_pdf.html.

Weimann, Gabriel. 2006. *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, the New Challenges.* United States Institute of Peace Press.

Weimann, Gabriel, and Conrad Winn. 1994. *The Theatre of Terror: The Mass Media and International Terrorism.* New York: Longman Publishing.

White, Hugh. 2005a. 'How awful is this threat?', *The Age,* 1 September.

_____. 2005b. 'With a terrorist threat out in the open, it is time to confront the causes', *Sydney Morning Herald,* 10 November.

Wilkinson, Paul. 1997. 'The media and Terrorism: A Reassessment', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 4 (2).

_____. 2002. *Terrorism versus Democracy. The Liberal State Response.* London: Frank Cass.

Williams, Clive. 2004. *Terrorism Explained. The Facts about Terrorism and Terrorist Groups.* Sydney, NSW: New Holland.

Williams, George. 2006. 'What Price Security?', The Saturday Essay, *The Age,* 23 March.

Williams, George, and Ben Saul. 2005. 'ASIO: Will the PM welcome a compromise this time around?', *Australian Policy Online,* 24 May. Available at www.apo.org.au.

Younge, Gary. 2005a. 'CIA blunder on al-Jazeera "terror messages"', *The Guardian,* 29 June.

_____. 2005b. 'Blair's blowback', *The Guardian*, 11 July.