Manipulative Metaphors in Response to Terrorism

semantic and strategic confusion from mixed metaphors

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Also appeared within Cui Bono: Groupthink vs Thinking the Unthinkable? Reframing the suffocating consensus in response to 7/7 (2005, parts 8 and 9), under the titles Learning from metaphors of "war" and "terrorism": semantic confusion and Learning from alternative metaphors framing terrorism?

Introduction

The importance of metaphor in war has been explored by George Lakoff (Metaphor and War: the metaphor system used to justify war in the Gulf, 1991/2003; Metaphors of Terror, 2001). He makes the strong point that "metaphors can kill" (George Lakoff, Metaphors That Kill: the Nation as Person, and how metaphors frame our perception of war, 19 March 2003).

Metaphors of war

James William Underhill (The Switch: metaphorical representation of the war in Iraq from September 2002 - May 2003) distinguishes from cited examples in The Economist:

- 13 "protometaphors" descriptive of the nature of "war": Defence; Accepting a challenge; Lighting a fire; Unleashing a wild beast; A film; Surgery; Execution; A game; Problem solving; A vehicle; Reaching a destination; A commodity; and Crime fighting. Of these the final three are considered novel.
- 17 phenomena considered themselves to be "war", again as "protometaphors": Propaganda; Trying to alleviate poverty; Trying to eradicate terrorism; Trying to cure disease; Business; Party politics; International politics; Student protest; Cultural competition; Pacifism; Economic planning; Trying to prevent drug traffic; The consolidation of the EU; Making peace; Trying to eradicate tax evasion; Harming the environment; and Social unrest.

It could be most fruitful to apply Underhill's methodology to "terrorism" as opposed to "war". But with respect to eradicating terrorism is war, he argues:

One of the most dangerous consequences of the general acceptance of trying to eradicate terrorism is war as a literal, straightforward expression, is the way it blurs not only the nature of terrorism and war (which is worrying enough) but the way this blurring spreads to (or contaminates) other concepts. Conjointly with war is crimefighting, trying to eradicate terrorism is war has greatly affected the way we conceive such words as "terrorist", "crime", "murder" and "execution"....It must be remembered that the British government has always refused to acknowledge the IRA's struggle as war. The IRA were always "terrorists" for the government.... Either you are a legitimate government maintaining order, or you are one party of a violent power-struggle. A government can't have it both ways. It can't refuse to acknowledge terrorists as forming an army and then engage in a dirty war to crush that organisation. Something of the same desire for both legitimacy and access to illegitimate means to reach their ends can be found in both the British government and the Bush administration. No doubt, it is present in all governments, but the protometaphor trying to eradicate terrorism is war can at times go a long way to extending support for this paradoxical situation and the government's tortuous rhetoric in defending its cause against violent groups.

This analysis points to a basic challenge in presenting what is technically termed "asymmetric warfare", namely a situation in which the two sides are mismatched in their military capacities. For those engaged in the "war on terrorism" it has become vital to avoid framing the "struggle" of the "enemy" as a "war" -- however some may understand jihad or "freedom fighter". As noted above, this then allows their action to be framed as illegitimate -- supposedly justifying a non-legitimate response.

It is curious that by so doing the Nazi initiative of World War II is framed as being "legitimate". It also renders illegitimate the struggle of independence movements engaged in guerrilla warfare -- such the American War of Independence (1775-1783) -- seemingly then to be defined by this device as "terrorism". The action of the World Council of Churches in support of "freedom fighter" action against the regimes of Southern Africa should seemingly also have been labelled as condoning or supporting "terrorism".
One of Underhill's concerns is the manner in which one usage, such as pacifism is war, is inverted into making the peace is war. Something becomes its opposite. As he notes:

The crowning glory of semantic confusion came in the representation of pacifism, the antinvar movement and the making of the peace after the war all in terms of warfare metaphors. That making peace could be seen in terms of waging a war is indeed curious enough in itself. The justification seems to be that making a lasting peace will take the same unswerving determination as a war campaign. Waging the peace is, it would seem, a daunting task that takes guts, resolute courage and skill. But the representation of those forces which resisted immediate engagement in war in Iraq was even more absurd.

Who benefits from such semantic confusion in a world of memetic warfare? (cf Missiles, Missives, Missions and Memetic Warfare: Navigation of strategic interfaces in multidimensional knowledge space, 2001)

Metaphors framing terrorism?

If the above analysis by Underhill were to be applied to terrorism, it is probable that many of the metaphorical usages applied to "war" would be applicable to "terrorism" (if only from the perspective of the terrorist). This would give metaphors of "Terrorism as...":

- defence -- a perception of the impoverished societies in which it arises;
- accepting a challenge -- a perception of those faced with an immeasurably more powerful oppressing force
- lighting a fire -- a perception of those claiming to send a signal of hope
- unleashing a wild beast -- a perception in response to suffocating, self-righteous complacency
- a film -- a perception consistent with movie coverage of such events, possibly for purposes of propaganda, and the enthusiasm that they engender
- surgery -- a perception consistent with targeted assassination for political purposes
- execution -- a perception consistent with targeted assassination for political purposes and revenge
- a game -- a perception of cynical strategists
- problem solving -- a perception of the relevant advantage of use of terrorism as a strategy
- a vehicle -- a perception of the need for a vehicle to carry a message; etc.

Alternative metaphors

There is therefore a case for exploring a range of alternative metaphors defining the emergence of terrorist incidents in order to avoid such locked-in thinking and the operational decisions made in consequence (cf Donald Schon, Generative metaphor: a perspective on problem-setting in social policy, 1979). Alternative metaphors could highlight possible traps to understanding associated with unfavourable forms of groupthink. This approach follows from the much-cited work of Gareth Morgan (Images of Organization, 1986).

Haystack and needle metaphor: One early response by UK Home Secretary, Charles Clarke to tracking the perpetrators of 7/7 used the metaphor of "finding a needle in a haystack" [more]. This metaphor implies a mindset locked into finding the "needle" in order to find the "thread", hopefully still attached to it -- in order to find the "cloth" (al-Qaida) it was being used to "weave" (the al-Qaida strategy). In the case that it might indeed be terrorists of Middle Eastern origin, this metaphor ignores the fact that any "thread" might necessarily be "broken", if it was a "carpet" that was being "woven". The danger of searching for "needles" in this metaphor is that the security services may end up "grasping at straws" -- as well as having a predisposition to "stitching people up" with dubious evidence.

In that "haystack" metaphor, for example, it might be unfortunately concluded that the simplest way of finding the "needle" was simply to burn the "hay" -- which some might conclude was what was now being done to human rights.

Cancer metaphor: As suggested (above) by Thomas L Friedman: "The Al Qaeda threat has metastasized and become franchised. It is no longer vertical, something that we can punch in the face. It is now horizontal, flat and widely distributed, operating through the Internet and tiny cells" [more]. As noted by Donald Schon (above), this metaphor suggests a "surgical" response -- echoed by the "surgical" precision with which Coalition forces describe any attacks they undertake.

Commercial metaphor: Also suggested (above) by Thomas L Friedman: "The Al Qaeda threat has... become franchised. It is no longer vertical, something that we can punch in the face. It is now horizontal, flat and widely distributed, operating through the Internet and tiny cells" [more]. This commercial metaphor has been used by Olivier Roy (Al-Qaida Brand Name Ready for Franchise: the business of terror, Le Monde diplomatique, 1 September 2004). It is also used by Raymond Whitaker and Paul Lashmar (Franchise terrorism: Trying to hit al-Qaeda is like trying to hit jelly' Independent on Sunday, 10 July 2005).

"Franchise terrorism" is now being used to describe the evolution of a loose "al-Qaida" network into an even looser network through which those trained return home to galvanize others and pass on their expertise. This commercial metaphor, as noted above, is ensuring that the highly successful "franchising" of terrorism by "al-Qaida" precludes the detection of any other "brand" as being the "genuine product" -- with a consequent lack of ability to detect the "market share" of the "unbranded" varieties, especially those of local origin. Ironically "al-Qaida" may even be faced with what might be termed "counterfeiting" of its hallmarks by "unfranchised" terrorists..

Meteorological metaphor: Given what is allegedly known of the looseness of organization of "al-Qaida", some have even argued that it might be better framed as an attitude or world view (as in early Christianity, ironically). In this light a "weather" metaphor might, for example, be useful:

- "heat" could model the frustration felt by impoverished Muslims (fruitlessly tracked by surveys and "humint")
"water" could model aspirations for a better life (fruitlessly tracked by profiling individual water droplets, or puddles, especially when in process of evaporation by the heat)

"topography" could model the propitiousness of circumstances (tracked as likely opportunities in time and space for terrorist incidents)

"clouds", potentially forming thunder "storm cells", could model amorphous organizations and their "terror cells" (fruitlessly profiled and individually targeted under their ever changing names and forms)

"wind", potentially driving the "clouds" into topographic features (tracked as fickle changes in movements of opinion), or into a circular motion giving rise to destructive "hurricanes", usefully compared with revolution

"lightning", after build up of an adequate charge, could model a terrorist strike (whose path could be photographed and fruitlessly traced by surveillance technology)

The point of such a metaphor, of what is above all a complex system, is that conventional security approaches are inappropriate to the elimination of "lightning" -- although a weather report can of course be produced with its attendant uncertainties. The challenge of this metaphor for George Bush is that it suggests that "global warming" may also have a psychosocial analogue that could be as dangerous to ignore. From a strategic perspective such metaphors have long featured in more sophisticated classical approaches to martial strategy (cf Miyamoto Musashi. A Book of Five Rings: Go Rin No Sho).

**Geological metaphor:** Another set of possible metaphors for terrorism derives from geology: an "earthquake" or a "volcano". Both are sudden, difficult to predict, events. In both cases they correspond to a relief of stress, the first in relation to tectonic forces and the second in relation to pressure of underground magma. These usefully point to the "underground" nature of movements of opinion giving rise to terrorist incidents.

**Fire metaphor:** In a description of George Bush's second inaugural address Sidney Blumenthal (A military in extremis, 27 January 2005) pointed out that the speech was aflame with images of destruction and vengeance.

The terrorist attack of Sept. 11, 2001, appeared as a "day of fire," a trope combining the Dies Irae of the Roman Catholic Mass ("The day of wrath, that day which will reduce the world to ashes") with the Book of Revelation ("lake of fire"). Bush never mentioned Iraq, but he spoke of fighting fire with fire. "We have lit a fire as well -- a fire in the minds of men. It warms those who feel its power, it burns those who fight its progress, and one day this untamed fire of freedom will reach the darkest corners of our world." The phrase "a fire in the minds of men" is a quote from Dostoevski's The Possessed, and Dostoevski meant it to describe the fanaticism of nihilistic terrorists. Bush twisted the reference to confute "freedom" with retribution that "burns" our enemies with "untamed" fury.

**Jelly metaphor:** As noted in passing above, the incident of 7/7 has led to the suggestion that al-Qa'ida is like a "jelly" (cf Raymond Whitaker and Paul Lashmar (Franchise terrorism: 'Trying to hit al-Qa'ida is like trying to hit jelly' Independent on Sunday, 10 July 2005)

**Cowboy metaphor:** The use of a pack of playing cards of the "most wanted" terrorists [more] was an early way of framing the challenge for Coalition of the Willing. This is typical of antiquated, "good guy / bad guy", cowboy thinking. The unambiguous "black-or-white" distinction extolled by the Bush regime ("you are either with us or against us") is strongly supported in the USA by the emerging literary market for "Christian fiction" of which Douglas Kennedy (Selling the rapture, The Guardian, 9 July 2005) indicates:

This is a worldview in which all doubts and dilemmas are solved through either divine intervention and/or the acceptance of God's radiant love.... In the brave new world of modern Christian literature, doubters are either those who haven't yet embraced God's light, or hardened secularists who are, by and large, corrupt and venal.... There is right and there is wrong. There is good and there is evil. And as in any western, the good guys always wear the white hats.

The metaphor is consistent with the mindset which isolates (and possibly eliminates) stallions to deprive a herd of wild horses of a leader -- before they are domesticated. It is also consistent with understandings of how to "herd cattle" through well-placed fear inducers -- channelling them as required. This may be a challenge to understandings of the role of leadership in a democracy.

**Chemical radical metaphor:** A different metaphor has emerged in the aftermath of 7/7, namely the concern that born-and-bred UK citizens are being "radicalized" as noted by Richard Norton-Tyler (Security services face worst scenario, The Guardian, 13 July 2005):

What concerns the security services is that the four bombers appear to have been "radicalised" in Britain, not indoctrinated in training camps and religious schools in the Middle East. How young men apparently from stable backgrounds - as well as from broken or unstable families - are attracted to commit such atrocities has concerned MI5 and the Home Office for a long time....Security sources said yesterday that ministers would have to look again at radical clerics who can encourage extremism and influence young men disillusioned with western culture.

In chemistry, **radicals** (often referred to as free radicals) are atomic or molecular species with unpaired electrons (therefore electrically charged, rather than neutral) or an otherwise open shell configuration. These unpaired electrons are usually highly reactive, so radicals are likely to take part in a wide variety of chemical reactions. The formation of radicals requires covalent bonds to be broken through a process that requires significant amounts of energy. It could be argued that socio-political "radicalization" is a somewhat analogous process through which conventional psychosocial bonds are broken as a result of the energy differential associated with perceived social disparities and iniquities.
The metaphor then suggests that, to avoid activation of a range of psychosocial processes and engagement in them, radicalization should be inhibited, notably by controlling catalysts of dissidence (such as "radical clerics"). It sets the stage for the criminalizing of dissidence (cf William Norman Grigg. Criminalizing Dissent. New American, 1999). The resulting neutral apathy and indifference, framed as desirable, highlights the challenge of mainstream voter apathy (cf Andrea Lynn, 9/11 Day of terror a ‘call to arms’ for political dissent, scholars say, 2003).

**Root metaphor:** Terrorism, as expressed through the "perverted and poisonous doctrines of Islamic extremism" may be framed as purely evil by associating it with an "evil tree" metaphor. Thus Tony Blair launched a campaign on 13 July 2005, calling for international cooperation, "to pull up this evil ideology by its roots" [more]. For the religious, like Blair, such a tree is typically understood as an esoteric "Tree of Evil" -- more appropriately understood as the biblical of "Tree of Knowledge" of "Good and Evil" (cf Genesis 2:9: In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil). Within this metaphorical frame, the strategic objective becomes one of "rooting out" or "uprooting" evil which, at least in biblical terms, is curiously joined to good within the same Tree of Knowledge -- standing as a complement to the biblical "Tree of Life". There is seemingly no separate Tree of Evil to be uprooted [more]. As an operation to separate Siamese twins, this is no easy framing for a strategy. There is also the even more challenging understanding that it is the nature of the Tree of Knowledge to integrate the seemingly incommensurable perspectives of the Abrahamic and other religions -- perspectives that encourage each to define the other as "evil".

One commentator illustrates the danger of this metaphor as applied to the "rooting out" undertaken so surgically by the Coalition of the Willing in Iraq: "In trying to root out a couple of weeds, we set the entire garden alight." [more] If the medical metaphor of cancer-like metastasis is used to describe the transformation of terrorism, then from a surgical point of view any future effort at "rooting out" -- whether applied to terrorism, evil or extremism (as repeatedly advocated by Tony Blair) -- may well be disastrously inappropriate.

**Chemical solution metaphor:** Another chemical metaphor that is descriptive of the emergence of terrorism is that of a "supersaturated solution". This is consistent with the observation that frustration results to a peak amongst ordinary Muslims in the light of the contradictions in western policies in the Middle East -- and the disparities that arise from them. A small change, or trigger, may then provoke a rapid "crystallization" into an action taking terrorist form.

A variant of this metaphor would be that of the process of effervescence typical of gassified water. Under certain conditions, possibly resulting from a chemical reaction, the gas forms into bubbles. Individual bubbles might then be understood as radicalized individuals or proto-terrorists. The danger is that security and intelligence services focus on the particular bubbles emerging at a particular moment and not on the condition of the fluid from which many bubbles may subsequently emerge.

**Log-jam or silver bullet metaphor:** In effect major terrorist incidents may well result from the motivating power of an attitude, or an idea -- whilst intelligence services endeavour desperately to imply that this idea is effectively embodied in a single individual as a leader -- who could be "taken out" to make the structure collapse. The question is then implicitly framed in terms of the key "log" to free the "jam", or the design of a "silver bullet" to eliminate the evil leader. The strategic assumption is made that eliminating those key individuals will eliminate the attitude. For a society supposedly based on "universal" Christian values -- and a long history of highly-honoured martyrdom -- this is a totally ironic failure to believe in the power of an idea to motivate individual martyrs (or "suicide bombers") in support of their truth.

The above metaphors all provide ways of framing the action of terrorists opposed to the declared strategy of the Coalition of the Willing. The latter strategy has also been framed through its own metaphor -- "spreading" democracy or freedom. The term spreading is however more commonly associated with material substances, notably those well-known to a president and a cattle ranching background. The questionable implication is that a non-material value can be appropriately treated in the same manner. The comparison with "spreading manure", and the mindset and equipment required, has not been lost on some commentators [more more more].

Especially problematic in any such "spreading" is the spread of arms, fundamental to the American concept of democracy, as articulated by the Second Amendment to the US Constitution -- also reflected in the constitutions of individual states of the USA (cf Arming Civil Society Worldwide: Getting democracy to work in the emergent American Empire? 2003). To the extent that "democracy and freedom" have become code for "Christian values" within the leadership of the Coalition of the Willing, the use of "spreading" in that connection is especially unfortunate.

**Conclusion**

The strategic assumptions built around current use of such metaphors have been proven to be totally inadequate to the situation -- despite their potential (cf Developing a Metaphorical Language for the Future, 1994; Metaphoric Revolution: in quest of a manifesto for governance through metaphor, 1988). This is confirmed by the conclusion of the formal investigation of the intelligence community's response to "al-Qaida" and WMD as a classic example of "intelligence failure" resulting from groupthink (see above). **Who benefits** from such metaphorical confusion -- and impoverishment? (cf In Quest of Uncommon Ground: Beyond impoverished metaphor and the impotence of words of power, 1997).

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