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The War of Words

On Being Able to Describe the Conceivable and the Possible

The decision to define the events of September 11 as an act of war calling for a response in kind had far-reaching implications for the way in which the mass media portrayed the developments that followed. Events and deeds that journalists should have reserved the right to articulate themselves were put into their mouths pre-articulated.

The struggle to define what we all had seen on our television screens began immediately. Was it a crime or a declaration of war? A criminal act of terrorism or an attack on the United States? There was an instinctive, visceral association with the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941 – in other words a declaration of war. Not to mention the overwhelming visual images, the devastation reminiscent of a battlefield, the military precision of the operation and the political symbolism of the target.

Something that looks like an act of war can easily be misinterpreted and thus turn into just that, even if a number of fundamental considerations suggest that it is quite another phenomenon. Or, to put it more tentatively – a phenomenon that could just as well be characterized differently, awaken other associations, prompt alternative responses and give rise to contrasting narratives.

Whether the U.S. government enjoyed the political latitude to define the attack in non-military terms is another question altogether. It would have been difficult to respond to an act of terrorism whose blatant intent was to provoke war – whose camouflage clad and submachine gun touting ideologues openly incited bloodshed – without a very large measure of political courage and leadership. And sure enough, the semantic contest had scarcely begun before the outcome was no longer in question. Colin Powell's initial comments referred to tracking down the "perpetrators" and "bringing them to justice", thereby suggesting that the atrocity was a crime to be dealt with by means of a worldwide police action. But President Bush's address to the nation the very same night described the need to "win the war on terrorism", and Powell fell in line at his press conference the next day: "Acts of war have been committed against the American people and we will respond accordingly."

A deliberate choice of words marked a deliberate choice of strategy. ¹

The choice to define the event as an act of war was immediately translated into rhetoric and propaganda. What kind of war should it be portrayed as? Who was pitted against whom – and what? In what terms should the upcoming military operations be shrouded and justified? Mr. Bush's pivotal speech to a joint session of Congress on September 20 characterized the imminent "war on

terror" in terms that avoided all detail and limitation while leaving the door open to any escalation: "The course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain. Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them."²

Thus a terminological framework was established, which was far from self-evident but within which virtually all journalism after September 11 would come to operate. The vocabulary of armed conflict became imperative before the war had even started – much less an enemy identified or a battlefield chosen. Whether it came to headlines, editorials or news reporting, the word "war" was now the guiding principle. In due order, the 24-hour TV news channels switched their banners from "Attack on America" to "The War on Terrorism" to "America at War". Deadly anthrax letters and repeated but unspecified terrorism alerts by government agencies only reinforced the atmosphere of war.

Sometimes our words determine our thinking and not the other way around. If we call something a war, we are likely to think war even if what we call a war could as well be called a "police action". Say the word "war" and you suddenly find yourself in the company of troops, weapons, bombs, fronts, territories, allies, traitors, civilian victims ("collateral damage"), states of emergency and military tribunals. "America at War" proclaims CNN. "The war on terror" states the President in the White House. "The war on terror", editorial desks all over the world begin thinking and planning.

As said, this was neither a given way to think, nor a given framework for journalism – primarily because "the war on terror" may not be a war at all, or at any rate not a war that can be won or concluded militarily. Terrorism is essentially a product of ideas, not of armies. It has its main bases in the heads of unknown individuals – not in some known geographical spots on earth. War cannot subdue the mind that planned the bombing of the Oklahoma City Federal Building in 1995. Nor can it defuse the brain of the disgruntled individual (most likely an American) who mailed letters with anthrax in the aftermath of September 11. Nor can it tame the monster spawned by religious and political fanaticism, whether it be individual or collective and whether it emanate from Afghanistan or the United States.

The decision to define the events of September 11 as an act of war calling for a response in kind had far-reaching implications for the way in which the mass media portrayed the developments that followed. As if by the wave of a wand, the commitment to avenge the attack on the World Trade Center turned into a war against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, which – no matter how hated and disgusting – could hardly be said to be identical with terrorism. Not even Al-Qaeda and terrorism are interchangeable concepts. Even if you accepted the argument that the Taliban regime had to be removed from power in order to eliminate Al-Qaeda's bases and bring the perpetrators to justice, it was quite apparent that "terrorism" had thereby not been defeated. Once the decision had been made to characterize the fight against terrorism as a war, it was bound to be a war that had to be pursued against new targets and new enemies. It was also a decision that legitimized the need for wartime legislation, military tribunals and the classification of people into friend or foe. As British military historian Michael Howard points out, such nomenclature also elevates terrorists to the category of official adversaries entitled to protections like the Geneva Convention: "To declare war on terrorists or, even more illiterately, on terrorism is at once to accord terrorists a status and dignity that they seek and that they do not deserve."³

Historian Paul Schroeder argues that the parallel with Pearl Harbor is not only worthless and superficial, but misleading. A more telling analogy is the spark that kindled World War I, the assassination of the successor to the Hapsburg throne in the summer of 1914. In both cases, small and isolated actors resorted to a powerfully symbolic act of terror in hopes of provoking a superior opponent to engage in a war that it neither wished for nor ultimately was expected to win.

To the war of 1914 we by now have the answers, to the war of 2001 by far not. Schroeder writes: "In retrospect, it might have been wiser to treat the attack from the outset as a horrible criminal action (which it also was) that had to be answered by a major international police action against the criminals (which the current operation also is), *but without declaring war on terrorism and thereby giving an inflated importance to both the threat and the perpetrators.*"⁴

In short, words and definitions that started off as debatable postulates for depicting and assessing September 11 and its ramifications came to form the overall framework within which the news was reported and analyzed. Events and deeds that journalists should have reserved the right to articulate themselves were put into their mouths pre-articulated. "The war against terrorism" became a war that journalists bought unseen, a war that at the outset may not have been a war at all, but when it became a war turned out to be another war than the war they thought they had bought.

Could journalists have been more successful in upholding the right to use their own words to describe the world after September 11? I fear not. As I fear governments of the world could not. From the very start, the most powerful state and the most influential media of the world struck an emotional and political tone that rejected all dissonance. To borrow a concept from Swedish author Lars Gustafsson, the American "privilege to formulate the problem" ("problemformuleringsprivilegiet") was very strong and was very strongly pushed. While putting together its "broad" coalition against terrorism, Washington encountered virtually no demands for participation, input or discussion.

Perhaps we're finally beginning to perceive the perils of having swallowed this war hook, line and sinker. Not all of us, of course. The finger pointing is still going on against those who objected to that "war on terrorism" that became a war against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and that now promises/threatens to become a global war with ever-expanding targets, and thus a war with no end in sight and with unknown long-term consequences. It is true that the Taliban regime went down faster and seemingly with less resistance than many critics had believed, but it does not necessarily follow that "terrorism" was thereby either crushed or significantly weakened.⁵

One already observable effect of this vaguely defined military conflict is an indefinite state of war, entailing wartime laws, wartime budgets and wartime arms buildup. Another consequence is the increased leeway for other nations to brand their opponents as terrorists and consequently as legitimate military targets. In particular, this means leeway for Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon to redefine the West Bank and Gaza as hotbeds of terrorism and thus use whatever military methods deemed necessary to dismantle the last vestiges of Palestinian autonomy and the Oslo peace process. The Bush Administration, which initially supported the demand for a Palestinian state in order to strengthen the anti-Taliban coalition, became ever-more acquiescing to missile attacks on Palestinian institutions, tank-led raids on Palestinian

villages and "precision bombing" of Palestinian leaders (with the customary collateral damage).

There lies in this lies perhaps the biggest challenge to journalism after September 11. Will journalists muster the strength to compete with the world's only superpower about the words by which the acts and deeds of this very superpower should be described and interpreted? Will they have the power to chronicle the "war on terrorism" in terms that render alternative "formulations of the problem" objectively possible and politically relevant?

The difficulty of such an undertaking is highlighted by the fact that the war in Afghanistan now appears to have been the most controlled and closed military campaign in the history of the United States. With unprecedented proficiency, Washington prevented journalists from having direct access to fighting American troops. With unprecedented efficiency, the Pentagon, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the military command mastered the channels of official information. The access to low-level unofficial sources was effectively barred. All information (and disinformation) was filtered down from the top, while very little leaked out at the bottom. Newspapers that were somehow able to publish unofficial material could brace themselves for "a torrent of abuse" from the Pentagon.⁶

While Truth is no doubt an elusive journalistic ideal, and Truth about War the most elusive of them all, the task of journalists this time is not only to strive, as best as they can, for true accounts of a war, but of a war at that where it remains unclear who the enemy is, where the battlefield is and what the ultimate objectives are.

I happen to believe that our narratives of the world play a role in determining what the world will be. To me, journalism is the freedom to many narratives, many narratives of how the world is and thus of what the world might be. The narrative that has to a large extent been shaping our world since September 11 is not the only conceivable one, nor the only possible one.

What henceforth will be regarded as conceivable or possible will of course mainly depend on other things than journalism, but will nevertheless to some extent depend on the willingness, ability and freedom of journalists to tell the world in their own words.

In any case, this is a freedom that journalism must endeavour to preserve, cherish and practice.

¹ "Seemingly random choices of words reflect, in fact, profound differences over how the United States will approach what may be a protracted, and certainly a very dangerous, struggle." – "A Strange War", Elliot A. Cohen, Professor of Strategic Studies at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, *The National Interest*, Thanksgiving 2001.

² An article by James Fallows in the December issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* describes the effort that went into crafting the speech. Bush assistant Michael Gerson recounts how the address had been constructed around a series of simple rhetorical questions and answers, since "Americans lacked some very basic information about the nature of the forces against us." Questions such as "Who attacked our country?", "Why do they hate us?", "How will we fight and win this war?" all underscored the determination of the Administration to define post-September 11 in terms of a wartime scenario.

³ "What's In A Name?", *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2002. Howard's incisive criticism of the "misuse" of the word war goes beyond legalistic or semantic arguments to consideration of the "deeper and more dangerous consequences" – "To declare that one is at

war is immediately to create a war psychosis that may be totally counterproductive for the objective being sought. It arouses an immediate expectation, and demand, for spectacular military action against some easily identifiable adversary, preferably a hostile state – action leading to decisive results."

One paradox stemming from the American declaration of war was the controversy about how to deal with captured Taliban soldiers and Al-Qaeda members. While Powell – the man who had been the least inclined to view September 11 as an act of war – wanted to treat the detainees as POWs, Bush preferred to regard them as suspected criminals despite his unwavering military fervor (*Washington Times*, January 26). "They don't wear uniforms. They don't come in as representatives of the army of a state and satisfy the requirements that are in the Geneva Convention", explained Vice-president Dick Cheney on ABC's *This Week* (January 27).

- ⁴ "The Risks of Victory", *The National Interest*, Winter 2001/02. Italics by G.R.
- ⁵ "Our war on terror is well begun, but it is only begun", declared Mr. Bush in his State of the Union address on January 29.
- ⁶ This information appeared in an article by Neil Hickey: "Access Denied. The Pentagon's War Reporting Rules are the Toughest Ever," *Columbia Journalism Review* (January/February 2002). The expression in quotation marks comes from Somin Li, foreign editor of the *Los Angeles Times*.

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