Peace Review 7:3/4 (1995), 313–319

A Word for All Seasons

George Gerbner

As the final days of the summer of 1995 unfolded, a remarkable convergence of events emerged. Bombs found near the Arch de Triomphe prompted French security forces to round up Muslims, deport immigrants, and tighten surveillance. General Abacha of Nigeria staged a fake "coup" to justify a brutal crackdown on his political opponents. And Israel extended the authority of its secret service "to use physical force during intimidation" in response to recent terrorist acts (that the group Hamas called "acts of war" but which were instead regarded as "terrorist," just as had all Palestinian resistance against the Jews before that, and all Jewish resistance to the British before that).

Furthermore, a bomb set by rebels in the capital of Kashmir killed 13 and wounded 25; hostages were taken. A bomb killed the top official and 12 others in the Indian state of Punjab, where Sikh militants seek revenge. A bomb exploded in Tblisi, wounding Georgian head of state Eduard Shevardnadze, who had come to power, marked by terror and torture, in a U.S.-supported coup that overthrew the elected president. Masked gunmen shot down a leading Muslim cleric in Beirut. And the U.S. Consulate in St. Petersburg issued a warning of "a violent attack" that caused tourists to panic and cancel trips. The threat was later called a hoax without indicating what makes such a threat either "real" or a "hoax."

Moreover, the Oklahoma City bombing still gripped our attention. After initially blaming "Muslim terrorists" (and detaining some suspects), the arrests of white Christians provoked a series of "investigative reports" about their tastes in books, movies, and friends, as well as their relatives, neighbors, and army buddies. Attention turned to "militias" of armed hate-groups and other malcontents vaguely associated with these suspects. Militia leaders appeared on national television, reportedly recruiting millions of new adherents, while arguably also mobilizing new opposition against them.

Also, the trial of a Muslim cleric charged with inciting the World Trade Center bombing dragged on, upstaged by Oklahoma City (and of course the O.J. Simpson spectacle). The names of the tragic victims of violence at places like Waco and Ruby Ridge reverberated in the headlines. Trials of overzealous, complacent, or callous government agents further publicized fringe-group grievances, delegitimized government policy, but also fed public paranoia and an acceptance of a new level of repressive legislation.

Finally, the last days of summer also featured the macabre saga of the intellectual serial bomber, tagged by the FBI the "Unabomber." The media became mesmerized by his demand to publish—or still others will perish—a somewhat strange but not unreasonable 35,000 word tract on the devastating effects of science and technology. His threats first paralyzed the Los Angeles

1040-2659/95/030313-07

International Airport, and then succeeded in getting his treatise published in special editions of leading newspapers, giving him more visibility—and space—than any other single person in history. The repercussions will be far-reaching.

Given these events, and given the unprecedented consolidation of media control in the U.S., it should be no surprise that terror, as conventionally defined, claims more media space, time, and attention than any other single topic. The daily barrage of the ubiquitous menace comes to us in isolated pieces that obscure and confuse larger patterns. Understanding those "terrorists" who lash out against unacceptable humiliation or unbearable oppression or even uncontrollable obsessions, or understanding the individual victims of violent acts, permits no easy explanations. But neither should it diminish the urgency of our making far more critical sense of that frightful jig-saw puzzle of terror than the media have so far allowed us.

Terrorism attempts to send a message that intimidates. Real-life acts against some people become symbolic exercises for all, demonstrating who can get away with what against whom. The practice has many names, depending on who uses it and who sends the message.

Rulers use it all the time. Incarcerating, executing, invading, or bombing visible recalcitrants, and staging violent events or bombarding whole populations with entertaining mayhem—these all demonstrate power. Those who control their daily practice call them punishment, deterrents, object lessons, circuses (with gladiators in the arena), or simply staples of news and entertainment.

Another pattern describes those who seek access, to send another message. The stigmatized, demonized, marginalized, the haunted or poor who find other avenues of communication too costly or blocked, especially in an age of mega-media monopoly, can instead ram their message through with a bomb.

When they do, they strike a Faustian bargain. So-called terrorists may gain notoriety and sometimes even attention for their grievance, obsession or cause, but only at the risk of costly reprisals and even higher levels of repression, thus strengthening the very powers they set out to challenge.

But that hardly ends the deadly game. The classical theory of terrorism sees an enhanced level of government repression and the consequent erosion of moral authority—especially when other circumstances undermine the existing order's legitimacy—as an opportunity for seizing power. There are enough examples to support all scenarios. In one form or another, and under various labels, terror has been an inescapable instrument of social control. Today, its use depends mostly on media control.

Mainstream media constitute the establishment's cultural arms. Private media relate to public authorities as the Church did to the State in medieval times. Authors and news sources relate to the media as suppliers of raw material. All are symbiotic relationships of mutual dependence and tension.

The controversy about live coverage of terrorism revolves around the issue of control, with public (mostly law-enforcement) authorities, private corporations, and terror sources as the major competitors. Focusing on individual terrorists, responding to their manifestos, publicizing violent unrest, and letting insurgents speak for themselves, all pose risks to the control system, even in the most

democratic countries. When that happens, the state steps in to restore order and settle political scores.

The abduction of one government official and the murder of another in October 1970 gave the Front de Liberation du Quebec the leverage to communicate its manifesto to the Canadian public and the world. This challenge to the state's control of the mainstream media's attention plunged Canada into its worst peacetime crisis. Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau invoked, and Parliament approved, the War Powers Act. Hundreds were arrested, liberties were suspended, and the press was muzzled for over five months.

Bans and other limitations on reporting have likewise resulted from the state's response to the activities of the Red Army Faction (Baader-Meinhof Gang) in Germany, the Red Army in Japan, the Red Brigades in Italy, the Tupamaros in Uruguay, the Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland, separatist groups in Spain and India, and terrorists in Israel and Palestine. Press restrictions have ranged from temporary suspensions of coverage in Canada to the large-scale Prevention of Terrorism Act in the United Kingdom to the strict censorship of apartheid South Africa.

In 1982, the American Broadcasting Company urged news personnel to "remain professionally detached" from events they cover, get advance clearance from the management for interviews with "very important persons," and avoid live broadcasts of terrorist incidents "except in the most compelling circumstances, and then only with the approval of the President of ABC News or a designated Vice President." The statement warns reporters not to allow "terrorists to use or manipulate us for their own ends."

But, at the same time, the policy statement continued, "we cannot regard suppression of such reporting as being justified. To suppress news of terrorism would raise serious questions of credibility on other issues. ('What else are they keeping from us?') To suppress the news would surrender objective reporting to whatever rumors were being circulated. And to suppress the news for whatever reason, good or bad, violates the fundamental principle that governs a free press in a free society."

Other networks hold similar if less clearly articulated positions. "Taste and judgment," non-participation in the event, and resistance to any restraint or delay originating from government are stressed by the National Broadcasting Company (NBC). The Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) standards state: "Because the facts and circumstances of each case vary, there can be no specific self-executing rules for the handling of terrorist/hostage stories. CBS news will continue to apply the normal tests of news judgment and if, as so often they are, these stories are newsworthy, we must continue to give them coverage despite the dangers of 'contagion.' "

The print media, which are traditionally less dependent on government than licensed broadcasters—even more firmly assert the principle of independent private decision making. In September 1976, a group of Croatian nationalists hijacked a passenger jet bound for Chicago, and demanded front page publication of their statement. The *Washington Post*, whose editor once said "We pride ourselves that the President of the United States can't tell us what to put on Page One," published the hijackers' lengthy manifesto on Page One.

The following year Hanafi Muslims seized three buildings in Washington, D.C., killed a radio journalist and took more than 100 hostages. This provoked more discussions about press guidelines. The National News Council urged the press to avoid the dangers of live coverage, and of telephoning terrorists or hostages during the event. Most editors nevertheless continued to oppose written guidelines.

Further controversy about media coverage was stimulated by widely publicized airline hijackings and other hostage takings in the mid-1980s. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger called for a voluntary blackout of all coverage of terrorist activity. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher urged restraints "to starve the terrorist and the hijacker of the oxygen of publicity on which they depend." The Reuters news agency instructed reporters not to write stories about terrorist threats nor to name Reuters or any other agency as having received statements of responsibility for terrorist actions.

A series of consultations and conferences including media representatives, the Justice and State Departments, the American Bar Association, and Congressional committees failed to produce agreement on guidelines. A survey on terrorism and the press in the American Newspaper Publishers Association (ANPA) trade paper {*Presstime*} (August 1986) observed that "some news executives on the terrorism speaking circuit joke about the 'cottage industry' that has grown up around the topic," and concluded that no uniform standard could be formulated or enforced.

Robert J. Picard has observed, in his study of the news coverage of terrorist incidents, that while all mainstream media support the social order in which they exist, commercial media have a special clientele in the business community that subsidizes them through advertising. Their independence from government control is thus a commercial necessity, although the media will voluntarily adhere to the government's perspective when it agrees—as it often does—with its own.

Dan Hallin's and Paolo Mancini's comparative study of American and Italian political structures and television news policies has shown that the narrative conventions of American journalism stem from its relative independence from party control, and its greater dependence on broad marketing appeal. That dependence makes reporting ideologically monolithic. It inhibits the intellectual debate and political ideas characteristic of the Italian press. Instead, it encourages the U.S. media to focus on visual events, contests, and conflicts.

Italian journalists, on the other hand, are linked to political parties. They focus on ideological distinctions and address relatively differentiated and politically sophisticated groups. Italian television news presents a range of alternative interpretations and treats viewers more as participants than as spectators in political conflict.

The U.S. media are drawn to isolated individual and insurgent threats, and to outrageous power abuses that will most likely mobilize support for preserving or restoring the existing order. Much less do they focus on repression, torture, and violent uses of power as established policy, especially if it comprises the policy of their own establishment or one of its clients.

Little attention was paid to perhaps the most bloody terror campaign of the

post-World War II era: the purge of an estimated 300,000 "communist sympathizers" by Indonesian General Suharto, who then became (and still is) a more dependable client than his predecessor.

A million people can die in Rwanda, but the bombing of a Bosnian village will draw more press attention, and demands for more bombings and more intervention. No such attention focuses on Afghanistan or Angola, where former U.S. Cold-War clients terrorize the population. Terror gets only sporadically covered, if at all, when it occurs in Sri Lanka, Sierra Leone, Liberia, or Burundi, where at least 100,000 people — both Hutu and Tutsi — have been massacred.

While the physical casualties of highly publicized terrorist acts have been relatively few, the political and military uses have been far-reaching. Less than 1 percent of all casualties of international terrorism are American, but they have provoked U.S. military actions that include the forced downing of an Egyptian airliner, the bombing of Tripoli (based on claims of Libyan terrorism the government knew were not true), and the (post-Gulf War) bombing of Baghdad (based on allegations that Iraqis may have plotted an attempted assassination of ex-president George Bush while he visited Kuwait).

Michael Milburn's study of network news showed how it routinely omits any causal explanation for terrorist acts other than implications that terrorists are mentally unstable. The impression conveyed, therefore, was that "you can't negotiate with crazy people." Typically isolated from their historical and social roots, denied any legitimacy for their conditions or their causes, and portrayed as unpredictable and irrational—if not insane, those labeled terrorists symbolize a menace that rational and humane means cannot reach or control. The reporting isolates acts and people from meaningful contexts, setting them up merely for stigmatization.

Stigma conveys a mark of disgrace that evokes horrible behavior. Labeling some people as barbarians makes it easier to respond to them merely with brute force. Calling them aggressors justifies the aggression taken against them: thus upholding the dictum that "aggression must not pay." Classifying some people as criminals allows officials to deal with them in ways that would otherwise be viewed as criminal themselves. Proclaiming them as enemies legitimizes their being attacked and killed in retaliation. Naming some people as insane makes it possible to suspend the rules of rationality and decency toward them. Labeling a person or group as terrorist then rationalizes our terrorizing them.

From the genocidal "ethnic cleansing" of the native North Americans to the West's most tenacious system of slavery, terror has played a central role in U.S. national development. Wholesale lynching persisted through the 1930's, the Ku Klux Klan still lives, and people of color still lose their lives to home-grown terrorism.

In 1956, the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission was established "to protect the Sovereignty of the State of Mississippi, and her sister states, from encroachment thereon by the federal government" through any means, including, if "deemed necessary and proper," murder. Other "means" included planting newspaper articles linking Martin Luther King, Jr. to the Communist Party. In the *Jackson Daily News*, the Commission planted another, front-page story that claimed that "Mississippi authorities have learned that the apparently

endless 'freedom' rides into Mississippi and the Southwest were planned in Havana, Cuba, last winter by officials of the Soviet Union."

Mississippi was not alone in using the Red Menace for repression. Barely did the wartime anti-fascist alliance defeat the Nazi terror when the Truman Doctrine declared an exhausted and ruined Soviet Union the great new global menace, and launched an era of Cold War paranoia, purges, witch-hunts, hot wars in Asia, and an arms race that eventually bankrupted the Soviets and saddled Americans with moral crises and a crushing national debt.

Nazi terror itself, sustained by anti-Communist hysteria and racist ideology, produced the bureaucratized technological extermination of millions of civilian "enemies"—Jews, Gypsies, Poles, Russians, and, of course, Communists and other resisters, on an unprecedented scale of efficiency and barbarity. The German firm I.G. Farben, owned in part by General Motors, profited not only from using the Holocaust's slave labor but also from manufacturing the Zyklon B gas used eventually to exterminate these workers and other scapegoats.

The terror bombing of Coventry and Dresden paved the way for Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a quantum-jump in the extension of political rather than strictly military applications of the latest technology of mass extermination to civilian populations. Hundreds of thousands of lives were taken not—since they were already on the brink of capitulation—to defeat the Japanese but rather—among other things—to prevent the Soviet entry into the Pacific conflict and to demonstrate U.S. military-industrial terror, and our willingness to use it—then and in the future.

More bloodthirsty eras than the present may have occurred but nothing in the past compares to the scientific, rationalized, bureaucratized, hi-tech administration of terror in our time. We are awash in a tide of violent representations the world has never seen before. The massive invasion of colorful mayhem into the homes and cultural life of ever larger areas of the world can hardly be escaped.

U.S. television presents violence in an average of 5 scenes per hour in prime time, including at least 3 entertaining murders per night, and over 20 scenes of violence in Saturday morning children's programs. Much of it is sugar-coated with humor, which makes the pill of power, with its disproportionate burden on women, minorities, and the stigmatized, disabled, old and poor, easier to absorb. The movies of the day follow the same trend. With theatrical distribution dominated by a few chains, local moviegoers have less and less to choose from. Escalating the body count seems to be one way to get attention from a public punch-drunk on global mayhem.

For example, "Robocop's" first rampage for law and order in 1987 killed 32 people. The 1990 "Robocop 2," targeted a 12-year-old "drug lord," among others, and slaughtered 81 people. The sick film "Death Wish" claimed 9 victims in 1974, while its revised 1988 version shows the "bleeding heart liberal"-turned-vigilante killing 52 people. "Rambo: First Blood" rambled through Southeast Asia in 1985, leaving 62 corpses. In the 1988 "Rambo III," our hero visits Afghanistan to kill another 106. Godfather I produced 12 corpses, Godfather II put away 18, and Godfather III killed no less than 53. The daredevil cop in "Die Hard" saved the day in 1988 with a modest 18 dead. Two years later,

"Die Hard 2" has him thwarting a plot to rescue "the biggest drug dealer in the world," coincidentally a Central American dictator to be tried in a U.S. court. It takes only 264 corpses to do the job.

The mayhem we see bears little relationship to what happens in the real world. Media portrayals exaggerate individual violence and terrorism while ignoring the vastly greater state violence and terrorism. Media coverage not only diverts attention from greater sources of violence, it also uses terror images to cultivate a sense of insecurity and mistrust toward those who are not the greatest danger. Those images are politically exploitable and socially narcotizing.

In the final analysis, the systematic uses of terrorism are projections not merely of state power but of concentrated media power and a global marketing system that have drifted beyond democratic reach. We've distorted the meaning of terrorism, allowing it to be used to describe almost anything except what actually threatens or produces the most, actual terror. The word must be given back its real meaning. And a citizen movement must begin to demand the dismantling of our increasingly monolithic media system so that we can take back some control over the cultural environment in which we grow up, live, and learn.

George Gerbner is the founder and chair of the Cultural Environment Movement, and the Dean Emeritus of the Annenburg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. *Correspondence*: P.O. Box 31847, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104 USA.