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## The Terrorists

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**Abstract:** The debates surrounding American national security following September 11 have created a charged and polarizing environment. Unfortunately, they have also almost uniformly misframed the issue by defining the war as one against "terrorism" or "the terrorists" instead of an identifiable enemy, which itself poses a much greater threat to America than terrorist attacks.

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**G**eorge Orwell was not the first to point out that the words we use to describe war and peace in political dialogue is important, but his notion of doublespeak – euphemisms used by the government in order to sanitize their true meaning – has proved a lasting contribution to political discourse and critique. More recently, George Lakoff's best seller *Don't Think of an Elephant* also caused many to take pause in examining the central connection between linguistics and political debate, as Lakoff argues that he who "frames" the debate will necessarily enter it with a stronger hand. With this in mind, it's quite revealing, and perhaps troubling, to think about how Americans, and the Western press in general, engages in debate over terrorism and national security since 9/11.

## "The War on Terror"

Before the Department of Defense introduced the newest addition to the American Lexicon on National Security, "The Long War" – or "The New War," according to President Bush in his May 27 speech at West Point – the catch phrase for policy wonks and Joe Average alike was "The War on Terror". Some poked fun at the idea of yet another war on a common noun given the United States' track record on winning common noun wars such as the war on poverty or the war on drugs, but few stopped to comment on the complete absurdity of declaring war on Terror.

For the most part, the press tended to overlook or perhaps forgive the poorly named "War on Terror" and instead referred to Washington's "War on Terrorism". Although this was an important step in refocusing the war against an emotion, it overlooked the fact that terrorism is a tactic, not an enemy. Even though The War on Bombing would seem like a strange policy directive in which to fundamentally reorganize national security, this is exactly the type of strategic thinking that spread far beyond Washington, like brushfire, with "Terrorism" often altered to "the terrorists" in speeches, debates, interviews, and media reports.

So what, then, is the problem with The War on The Terrorists ?

The problem, in a nutshell, is the. As any non-native speaker of English knows, choosing between the definite article "the" and indefinite article "a" or "an" can cause years of anxiety ; as any native listener knows, changing this one word can vastly alter the meaning of a sentence. "The" implies the assumption of a shared understanding of the noun being modified. When Person

A writes a letter to Person B stating "I read the book," the nuance is that both Person A and B are thinking of the same book – what it looks like, who it's by, and what it's about. If Person A were to write "I read a book," on the other hand, there is no assumption of shared image – and consequentially a need for Person A to explain which type of book, by which author, about what topic. The indefinite article "the" carries a strong connotation of imagery, or more specifically, an assumption of shared imagery.

Many have argued that A War on Terrorism – or its derivate, The Terrorists who conduct the terrorism – is ill advised. Few have noted that just by framing the debate as one regarding "the" terrorists as opposed to "a" terrorist (Osama Bin Laden), "a group of terrorists" (al-Qaeda) or even a more expansive movement such as "international fundamentalist Islamic Terror Groups," we engage in a debate with a number of dangerous assumptions that we are most likely not even conscience of. When President Bush addresses the nation and argues that we need to find, fight, and destroy the terrorists, his language implies that the listener shares an image of what "the terrorist" looks like, what "the terrorist" thinks, and by extension, what drives "the terrorist" to conduct terrorism. This is reinforced by his frequent use of the pronoun "they". In a way, it assumes that "the terrorists" are a pre-defined group, a group that was born that way and will die that way, negating the reality that terrorism is a tactic used by a wide range of people for a number of reasons, and that a terrorist is born when somebody decides to commit an act of terrorism – calculated violence aimed at inciting fear in a public or government in order to further a political cause – not when the population of Afghanistan, Iraq, or Saudi Arabia, for example, rises.

The danger with the language of "the terrorists" is that we talk ourselves into believing that terrorist cells, groups, or organizations have a certain characteristic (beyond the tactic they choose to employ) that binds them together as a cohesive community. This false and often times racist assumption does more damage to American ideals, American policy, and American image abroad than any string of terrorist attacks possibly could. Which is not only misguided, but also dangerous ; before September 11, Timothy McVeigh was the most deadly terrorist in American history, and when people describe The War on Terrorism and The Terrorists today, few conjure the image of McVeigh's face.

Unfortunately, to the dismay of political linguists like Lakoff and to the disgrace of both the left and right, a culture of fear surrounding "the" terrorists has permeated America following September 11. Examples from the media are overwhelming ; the text of a liberal leaning political cartoon printed in *The Washington Post* in May depicting an American talking on the phone while being watched by the NSA, FBI, and CIA is "what was it again that the terrorists hate ? Oh yeah, our freedom". Pop culture is just as guilty. Dakota Fanning was remembered as playing an

adorably believable character in Steven Spielberg's 2005 *War of the Worlds*; when the aliens begin their attack on the Jersey suburb, her first of many screams is (adorably believably) "is it the terrorists?" In short, the problem with "the" terrorists is not limited to the Heritage Foundation or the White House Office of Communications. The problem with "the" terrorists is a problem that nearly all Americans suffer from.

To their own detriment. Particularly since it's impossible to engage in a fair and rational debate on a topic of such importance if our words betray our very real vulnerability. Even if Bush's rhetoric has largely shifted to immigration and "securing our borders," the changes in the White House following the recent shuffling of posts seems to be much more based in changes of style than substance, and given Bush's refusal to accept Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld's resignation, even these changes have not spread in meaningful ways to American defense policy. Whether you support speaking softly and carrying a big stick, speaking loudly and carrying a big stick, or speaking in either way while not carrying a stick, it's vitally important to speak clearly in any and all of the above situations.