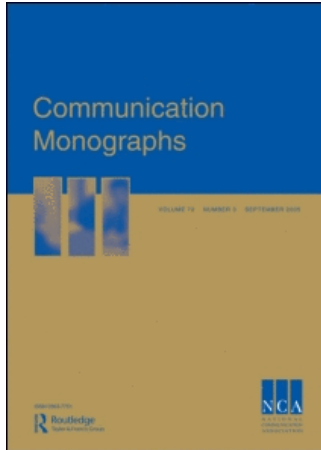


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The Symbolic DNA of Terrorism

Robert C. Rowland & Kirsten Theye

Understanding what causes terrorists to conduct mass-casualty attacks is essential. In this essay, we argue that religious terrorist groups and terrorist groups embracing an ideological/mythic pattern similar to religion that conduct such attacks are motivated by what we label the symbolic DNA of terrorism. Terrorist groups such as al Qaeda perceive that their identity is threatened, and believe that the only way to remove that threat is by reconnecting with their heroic past. The myth provides a narrative that encourages group members to engage in “God’s work” against the oppressor in order to destroy the threat and regain past heroism to achieve a glorious future. In this essay, the symbolic DNA of terrorism is described in detail, with a focus on al Qaeda. We conclude by drawing implications for the Global War on Terror.

Keywords: Terrorism; Myth; Al Qaeda

Terrorism is by its very nature a rhetorical act designed “not to defeat the enemy but to send a message” (Richardson, 2006, p. 4). As terrorism expert J. Michael Waller noted, terrorism “is aimed more at the hearts of the public and the minds of decision makers” than “at the physical victims” (2006b, p. 2). The 9/11 attacks on the United States illustrate this point. They were not designed simply to maximize casualties or to destroy key infrastructure. An attack on a sports stadium or a power station would have achieved those ends. In terms of casualties, far more people would have been killed if the 19 al Qaeda operatives simply had boarded 19 different jumbo jets and blown up the planes simultaneously. The fundamental aim of the 9/11 terrorists was to attack iconic symbols of American power, what Jenkins called in his book about understanding terrorism “the heart of the power and wealth in the Western world” (2003, p. 83; also see Benjamin & Simon, 2002, p. 36; Gunaratna, 2002, pp. 93–94). The attacks were aimed at representations of American capitalism (the twin towers), American military power (the Pentagon), and American political power (either the White House or the Capitol). Osama bin Laden made this point quite clear when he

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commented in an interview published on November 12, 2001, that “The main targets were the symbol of the United States: their economic and military power” (bin Laden, 2005, p. 140).

In attacking representations of American power, al Qaeda sent several messages. To the United States and the West in general, the underlying message was to be very afraid. A secondary goal of the attacks was to induce a US response that would aid al Qaeda’s message in the Islamic world. Lawrence Wright, who recently won the Pulitzer Prize for his book on al Qaeda, put it succinctly, “the first goal is to provoke conflict” (2004, p. 45; see also Lake, 2002; Louw, 2003). Terrorists commonly use this tactic. For example, Jessica Stern wrote that “ Hamas provokes Israel to overreact . . . to mobilize support” (2003, p. 44). Bin Laden has claimed that this was one of the goals of the 9/11 attacks, stating “it was easy for us to provoke this administration and lure it into perdition” (2005, p. 21). Tragically, he has had significant success, since “Every opinion survey of Muslims taken since September 11 shows deepening distrust of the United States” (Rodenbeck, 2005, p. 51; Benjamin & Simon, 2006). Still worse, in several countries, support for bin Laden remains quite high, including 60% in Jordan and 51% in Pakistan (Bernstein, 2005), creating a situation in which “For many younger, radical Jordanians, and the Jordanians are not alone, the notion of jihad has come to seem like a natural part of things, a simmering struggle” (Rosen, 2006, p. 104). It is disquieting that “A group of clerics, the Pakistan Ulema Council . . . [recently gave] Osama bin Laden the title Salfullah, or Sword of Allah” (Perlez, 2007a, p. A6). Similar attitudes are becoming more common in other areas, including Europe. A poll of the Islamic population in Britain found that “13% lionized” and “16% sympathized” with the London subway bombers (Manji, 2006, p. A21).

The fundamentally rhetorical nature of terrorism means that one key to defeating it depends upon undercutting the rhetoric of terrorist organizations. Al Qaeda and associated organizations are not a kind of paramilitary organization that can be destroyed in a military campaign. Rather, al Qaeda is more like a franchise organization than a top-down military organization (Gunaratna, 2002, p. 10), a point Thomas Friedman emphasized when he noted that al Qaeda “has metastasized and become franchised” (2005a, p. A31; Rodenbeck, 2005, p. 54). On this point, Dishman argued that leaders like bin Laden no longer direct the organization, but play “a more inspirational role” (2005, p. 237). According to Bruce Hoffman of the Rand Corporation, al Qaeda “has become more an idea or a concept than an organization” (2004, p. 551). The key to the franchise is the message. Using military force to kill leaders of the organization may destroy parts of the franchise, but it also can spread the message by aiding what Hoffman has labeled the “cycle of terrorist recruitment” (cited in Hanley, 2005, p. A1).

If terrorism is fundamentally rhetorical, understanding the nature of that message and why some find it so appealing that they are willing to sacrifice for it is essential. As Caryl noted, “In order to defeat the terrorists, we have no choice but to understand them” (2005, p. 30). Terrorism scholar Louise Richardson argued that “the best way to contain terrorism is to understand its appeal” (2006, p. xx). In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, *Newsweek International* editor Fareed Zakaria (2001)

asked “Why do they hate us?” Zakaria’s question was insightful, but he did not go far enough. The more fundamental question was not why they hate us, since many millions of people dislike the United States without carrying out terrorist attacks, but what motivates them to willingly sacrifice their lives against us? To many, the behavior of the terrorists seems simply incomprehensible. Roger Cohen reflected this view when he wrote “terrorism remains a mystery. Nobody knows exactly what leads a young Muslim to blow himself up in the name of holy war against the West” (2005, p. IV1). Cohen’s fundamental point was that much more is known about the external rhetoric of terrorism, the message sent to the West by the terrorist act, than is known about the underlying symbolic pattern that leads to the suicide attack. Understanding the underlying symbolic pattern facilitates taking steps to prevent the message from spreading. Ordinary people do not normally strap on suicide vests or fly planes into buildings; it is essential to identify the symbolic transformation that leads to such acts.

In this essay, we argue that the symbolic DNA of the terrorist message is a mythic symbolic pattern that serves as both a persuasive and an epistemic device. Terrorists do not go through some sort of satanic transformation and suddenly become evil-doers. Rather, the most dangerous terrorist groups, including those carrying out mass-casualty attacks against civilian targets, rely on a mythic rhetorical pattern based in religion or an ideological/mythic system similar to religion. This pattern acts as a symbolic schema that legitimizes terrorism, transforming it into sacramental violence. Kenneth Burke labels this creation a terministic compulsion leading to violence (1966, 2003). This pattern is found among terrorists whose religious views are tied to all the major faiths. While our focus is on al Qaeda as an exemplar of the symbolic pattern, all of the religious and ideological/mythic terrorist groups tell a mythic narrative of how the group, whose very identity is threatened with destruction, can regain its strength, protect its culture, and defeat the evil enemy it faces by returning to the heroic virtues that were present at the creation of the group’s identity. To the outside world, the mythic system may appear absurd, but for a community of believers that is “intoxicated only by their ideology” (Richardson, 2006, p. 15), it functions as what Malinowski called a “reality lived” (1954, p. 100), producing transformation into a “divinely inspired army” (Richardson, 2006, p. 150).

The remainder of this essay first explains the theoretical rationale behind the position that religious/ideological terrorists are motivated by a terministic compulsion to use violence to cleanse the world of evil, then outlines the symbolic DNA of terrorism itself, before demonstrating its application to the most important terrorist group operating in the world, al Qaeda, and finally shows how an understanding of the symbolic DNA of terrorism has important implications for preventing the further spread of terrorism.

Terministic Compulsion and Terrorism

This section presents an argument that ideological/religious terrorist groups across the planet, regardless of the particular ideology or religion, share a similar symbolic

system that serves both an epistemic and persuasive function. This system is labeled the symbolic DNA of terrorism. The core theoretical issue is to explain why groups as different as Hindu fundamentalists, Israeli settler groups on the West Bank, and al Qaeda possess the same symbolic DNA.

The place to begin an analysis of the symbolic DNA of terrorism is with a consideration of what motivates terrorist groups to launch attacks, such as suicide bombings or the 9/11 attacks, that are not aimed at a specific tactical objective, but at killing innocent civilians to send a larger message. What makes terrorists believe that violence against innocents is not only allowable, but required? Many radical groups occasionally use violence as a tactical device to attack a government agency or protest a policy. Even in the United States, there have been instances of groups using violence for this purpose. But such attacks are different in kind from suicide bombings and the 9/11 attacks for they are aimed at a particular political objective and not aimed at killing innocent people. Sometimes, an innocent person may be killed, but that is not the aim of the attack. In many cases, the group may take particular pains to avoid killing innocents (Quillen, 2002). This has been the case, for instance, when radical environmental groups have protested development (Kenworthy, 2001; Saunders, 2001).

Mass casualty attacks such as 9/11, the subway bombings in London, and train bombings in Spain are quite different in that their very aim is to kill innocents as a way of sending a message. Such attacks inevitably produce outrage and violate moral principles found in many cultures and faiths against killing innocents. This essay argues that the primary explanation for why ideological/religious terrorists carry out such attacks on innocents is symbolic. The groups are carrying out a terministic compulsion toward violence that comes out of an ideological/mythic system often based in religion that is labeled the symbolic DNA of terrorism.

This analysis is informed by three theoretical traditions that intersect to explain ideological/mythic terrorism: Kenneth Burke's analysis (1966, 1973, 2003) of how symbolic systems function as terministic devices that shape understanding; anthropological analyses, especially those informed by the competing traditions of structuralism and functionalism, that illuminate how myth causes people to carry out the implications of their symbolic systems; and ontological theories of rhetorical genres that are unified around what Campbell and Jamieson labeled an "internal dynamic" (1978, p. 21). In the next section, these approaches are woven together to show how a mythic/ideological system creates a terministic compulsion toward terrorism.

Symbolic practices are rarely deterministic, a point that has been evident in the evolution of rhetorical theory and practice toward ever greater pluralism. Even in well-defined rhetorical situations there are generally many possible symbolic responses (Vatz, 1973). One exception to this principle can be found in narrowly defined situational genres, in which "a constellation of forms . . . recurs in each of its members" (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978, p. 20). That constellation of forms is "required" by situational and purposive factors that "create expectations which constrain rhetorical responses" and together form the "internal dynamic" unifying

the genre (pp. 21, 22). Miller (1984) and Rowland (1991) have made similar arguments about what Rowland labels “ontological genres.”

One way of understanding the rhetoric of terrorism is as an ontological genre unified around an internal dynamic. In that view, the symbolic DNA of ideological/religious terrorism can be traced to the similar internal dynamic found in the symbol use of each group. One difficulty with this approach is that only in very rare occasions is the combination of situation and purpose so constraining that form and content are dictated by the generic norms (Rowland, 1991, p. 141), a conclusion recognized even by Campbell and Jamieson, who argue that “constellations of elements rarely fuse into unique and indivisible wholes” (1978, p. 22). And even in the case of narrow genres such as the eulogy and inaugural, there is room for considerable rhetorical variation (pp. 20, 21, 22–23). To make matters more difficult, the rhetoric of terrorism cannot be understood as a situational genre. Terrorist groups clearly respond to a sense of grievance, but so do groups that reject terrorism in favor of political action. Clearly, only a very small percentage of groups seeking change choose mass-casualty terrorist attacks on civilians as an appropriate response.

If the symbolic DNA of terrorism is not tied to a situation and purpose, then an entirely different type of internal dynamic must be identified. This suggests that the symbolic DNA of terrorism is best understood as what might be called an epistemic genre in which the three symbolic characteristics that we identify explain the person’s place in the world, provide a sense of reborn identity, identify a villain to be fought, and link the individual to a transcendent purpose that can be achieved through violence. The genre is not based in a situation, but, rather, it creates a new situation for those who embrace it. The genre is epistemic in that it serves as a complete worldview, what Frye calls an “encyclopedic myth” (1973, p. 36), that explains the world as threatened by evil and defines actions, largely violence, to both cleanse the world of that evil and achieve transcendence, usually via martyrdom. In an ontological genre, the situation dictates the symbolic action. By contrast, in an epistemic genre, the symbolic system radically redefines the world, producing a new situation for those who believe in it. In the case of the symbolic DNA of terrorism, that new situation justifies mass casualty attacks on innocents. Only groups with such a symbolic DNA will see terrorism against innocents as justifiable. Absent that DNA, the groups involved would choose another means. The key to our argument is to understand how ideological/religious myths can create a terministic compulsion for terrorist (and other) actions.

In a variety of works, Kenneth Burke wrote about the way that symbolic systems shape human understanding of the world. He noted, for instance, that “any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality,” but also implicitly a deflection and selection of that reality (1966, p. 45, emphasis in original). In most situations, humans possess a variety of what Burke called “terministic screens,” that they use to explain the world. Burke wrote:

We *must* use terministic screens, since we can’t say anything without the use of terms; whatever terms we use, they necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of

screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention to one field rather than another. Within that field there can be different screens, each with its ways of directing the attention and shaping the range of observations implicit in the given terminology. (1966, p. 50, emphasis in original)

At first glance, the existence of “an endless catalogue” of symbolic screens, comprising “as many different world views . . . as there are people” (1966, p. 52), would seem to doom any attempt to identify the symbolic DNA of terrorism. If there are as many worldviews (and therefore as many terministic screens) as there are people, it will not be possible to identify underlying symbolic factors motivating terrorism. Moreover, given the multiplicity of terministic screens that Burke described, the entire idea of a terministic compulsion to commit terrorism would seem to be far-fetched.

And yet Burke also noted in relation to what he labels the “entelechiial principle” or the “principle of perfection” that in some cases there is a “perfectionist tendency for men to attempt” to carry out the “implications” found in a “given terminology” (1966, p. 19) in order that it reach its “*perfect fulfillment*” (Burke, 2003, p. 125, emphasis in original). He went on to argue that a “terministic compulsion” to “carry out . . . terministic possibilities” will operate even if that terminology “happen[s] also to contain the risks of destroying the world” (1966, p. 19). Rueckert explained that the “motive of perfection” is “intrinsic to symbols” creating a “compulsion to complete things” “often . . . without regard for the consequences of the end result” (1982, p. 264). On the dangers of entelechiial extension, Lindsay (1999) argued, for example, that what he called psychotic entelechy led directly to the Branch Davidian disaster. However, Burke was not always so deterministic in discussing how terminologies shape understanding and action. For example, in *The Rhetoric of Religion*, he referred in relation to theology to the power of terminologies to act “somewhat as goads, however vague” (1970, p. vi). It would seem that in most situations people pick and choose among a host of symbolic descriptions of the world or are “goaded” in some vague way to a particular worldview. As Nelson explained in a discussion of Burke, humans can “choose the terms we speak to fill out the pattern, a pattern whose differences allow for virtually infinite play” (1989, p. 170), what Gusfield called the “plural possibilities of interpretation” (1989, p. 36). However, because of entelechy, there are circumstances in which humans are motivated by “compulsions supplied by their own terminologies” (Lindsay, 1999, p. 282) to use a symbolic screen as a totalistic device for understanding and controlling the world. The “perfection principle” pushes them to use that device, even if the result is disastrous or the murder of innocents. Burke’s comment that the “entelechiial principle is an important motivational ingredient in system-building types of insanity” (2003, p. 132) is a powerful statement of this point. If there is an identifiable symbolic DNA of terrorism that serves as an epistemic genre, it must fall into the last category.

The issue then is to discover the factors that create the “terministic compulsion” to carry out the implications of some types of symbol system, but not others. On this topic, there is consensus. The perfectionist tendency to carry out the implications of

a terminology is most evident in mythic and ideological worldviews that serve ontological, epistemic, and transcendent functions (Rowland & Frank, 2002).

Mythic/ideological symbol systems are especially powerful because they serve as totalistic devices for explaining the world, providing a sense of identity, and putting the individual in touch with the transcendent. A myth is a fundamental story, what Doty referred to as a “special” or “big” story “touching not just the everyday but sacred or specially marked topics” (1986, p. 8) in a society. A myth in this sense is not a false story, but is a true story that is “believed in one sense or another by the people who tell it” (Rowland & Frank, 2002, p. 26). Because myths tell stories of the actions of heroes who are larger than life, often operating in special places possessing great symbolic power, such as heaven, hell, or Jerusalem, at times that are endowed with great meaning, such as the beginning or ending of a culture or a time of great crisis (Eliade, 1963; Rowland, 1990), they provide a sense of “transcendent grounding for any society” (Rowland & Frank, 2002, p. 26). Although not all myths are religious, in a sense they all are sacred for they take us out of the here and now to a place and time where transcendent deeds may be done and an ultimate truth discovered. It is for this reason that powerful “social movements, which must motivate millions of people to act, are nearly always mythic” (p. 27); a sense of the sacred is needed to motivate mass action. Even the most secular of mass movements, Marxism, had at its core the myth of a worker’s paradise to come (Halle, 1965).

Ideology serves a different function and possesses a different form from myth. Although many different approaches to ideology are possible, this essay refers to a symbolic system defining the world as it is and as it should be. Mullins referred to ideology as a “logically coherent system of symbols . . . [that explains] one’s social condition” and contains “a program of collective action for the maintenance, alteration or transformation of society” (1972, p. 510). Ideological systems serve two crucial functions. They serve a crucial epistemic function by providing a cognitive map of the world as it is and as it should be (Rowland & Frank, 2002, p. 25) and therefore “fill the void of uncertainty with beliefs” (Connolly, 1967, p. 2). Similarly, McGee wrote that ideology is a “political language . . . with the capacity to dictate decision and control public belief and behavior” (1980, p. 5). Ideologies also serve an ontological role by providing a strong sense of identity that binds “the community together” (Apter, 1964, pp. 18, 21).

Ideologies and myths are often combined in a mythic/ideological system in which “ideology describes the society and our role within it; the myth provides the transcendent justification for both” (Rowland & Frank, 2002, p. 28). In relation to the symbolic DNA of terrorism, mythic/ideological systems are especially important because the combination of the myth and the ideology can create the “terministic compulsion” to carry out the implications of the system, rather than to choose among a host of terministic screens for describing, understanding, and acting in the world. Essentially, the myth provides the transcendent justification for taking the ideology to the end of the line.

One way to emphasize the power of mythic/ideological systems in shaping terministic extension is by considering the competing approaches of functionalism,

largely associated with Bronislaw Malinowski, and the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss. In anthropology and myth studies, functionalism and structuralism are usually considered to be radically opposed theories (Doty, 1986, p. 199). Functionalists are concerned with the way that myths function as “expressing or guiding particular social institutions” (p. 199), while structuralists are concerned with “how myths operate in men’s minds without their being aware of the fact” (Lévi-Strauss, 1969, p. 12). What has not been recognized previously is that these two approaches are complementary in explaining why humans sometimes feel a “terministic compulsion” to carry out the implications of a terminology.

According to Malinowski, a myth “is not merely a story told but a reality lived” that satisfies “deep religious wants, moral cravings, [and] social submissions,” “expresses, enhances, and codifies belief,” and “safeguards and enforces morality” (1954, pp. 100, 101). In this way, myth “is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force” that serves as a “pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom” (p. 101). In other words, myth both enacts ideology and also provides a “sacred story” that “governs our faith and controls our conduct” (p. 100), or in Burke’s terms causes us to carry out the implications of our terminology.

In contrast to Malinowski, Lévi-Strauss rejected the functionalist view that myths serve as social charters and instead emphasizes their cognitive structure, famously arguing “that the kind of logic which is used by mythical thought is as rigorous as that of modern science,” and that “the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction” (1972, pp. 193–194). Kurzweill described Lévi-Strauss as concerned with conducting a “kind of cultural psychoanalysis” aimed at “unveiling of the structures” in mythology, in order to reveal the “structural order which ‘directs’ all social variables” (1980, pp. 19–24), an approach quite similar to our project of seeking the underlying symbolic DNA of ideological/mythic terrorism. While Lévi-Strauss’s view of myth is radically different than that of Malinowski, on one point the two theorists are agreed, that myths are not merely stories told by humans, but in some sense operate to shape human understanding. Doty referred to this aspect of structuralism as “the constraints of the mythical structures themselves” (1986, p. 201). An example of the power of exposing “mythical structures” can be found in McGuire’s insightful application of Lévi-Strauss in order to expose the underlying symbolic forms in *Mein Kampf* (1977). The larger point is that the symbolic structures in myth are particularly potent forces for producing a “terministic compulsion” to think and act in a particular way. For Malinowski, that force comes from their role as sacred charters of social institutions. For Lévi-Strauss, the force comes from underlying structures present in a myth system that provide a “logical model” (1972, p. 193) for resolving “the primary conflicts of human existence” (Doty, 1986, p. 200). The point is not to resolve the conflict between Malinowski and Lévi-Strauss, but to note that even radically opposed mythic theorists agree on the power of the form for creating a terministic compulsion to carry out the symbolic implications inherent in the mythic/ideological system.

To this point, this essay has argued that the power of mythic/ideological systems to create a terministic compulsion to carry out the implications of a symbolic system

can explain why terrorist groups across the planet tell similar stories and possess similar worldviews, what we label the symbolic DNA of terrorism. In essence, that symbolic DNA acts as an epistemic genre that defines the world as in need of redemption and prescribes terrorism as a means of cleansing it of evil. What has not yet been offered is the explanation of what makes the mythic/ideological system of religious/ideological terrorists so much more dangerous than other religious/ideological mythic systems. Mythic/ideological systems are found in every culture and only rarely serve as the justification for terrorism against civilians. Identifying the particular characteristics of the symbolic DNA of terrorism that leads to this violence is essential.

The Symbolic DNA of Terrorism

This essay argues that the symbolic DNA of terrorism can be found in the acronym DNA itself. Religious terrorist groups and groups that embrace an ideological/mythic pattern similar to religion that carry out mass casualty attacks are motivated by a mythic worldview containing three elements: a sense that their identity and very existence has been *Denied* and is threatened with annihilation by some group, a complete *Negation* of the identity of those who present the threat, and *Affirmation* of a new identity through a foundational myth associated with the origin of the group or a millennial myth about a perfect future to come. This pattern, the figurative DNA of the group, serves as an epistemic genre and creates the terministic compulsion to sacrifice innocent lives. For the religious terrorist, there are no innocents among the Others who threaten the identity and existence of the group. Thus, terrorist acts that kill members of that group are not murder, but sacramental violence to cleanse the world of evil.

The remainder of this section describes in general terms the symbolic DNA of terrorism based on research in a variety of disciplines including political science, history, anthropology, sociology, and rhetorical studies. This research suggests that the pattern identified is evident in the symbolic practices of religious and ideological/mythic terrorist groups across the world, including Islamic groups such as al Qaeda, Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah, Hindu nationalist groups, the Nazis and contemporary neo-Nazis, radical settler groups on the West Bank in Israel, the underground organization (the Irgun) that Menachem Begin led against the British prior to the creation of the Israeli state, and radical white supremacist groups, such as Christian Identity. Although the individual elements in the symbolic DNA of terrorism have been recognized previously in the actions and rhetoric of these groups, the overall pattern, the similarities among the groups, and the way the pattern creates a terministic compulsion toward violence have not been understood previously.

Religious Terrorism

The starting point for understanding the symbolic DNA in terrorism is the distinction between religious and secular terrorist groups. The claim is not that all

terrorist groups are motivated by the pattern described. As noted earlier, there are some groups that embrace a purely secular message (the Weather Underground for example), but use terrorism as a political statement. Usually, such groups use terrorism as a limited tactic and make efforts to avoid or at least minimize innocent casualties. The symbolic practices of religious terrorists and of groups that embrace an ideological/mythic system similar to religion are particularly important to understand because their worldview makes them especially dangerous, the “most likely” groups to use Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) “in pursuit of their messianic or apocalyptic visions” (Hudson, 1999, p. 62). As Stern notes, “Religious terrorist groups are more violent than their secular counterparts and are probably more likely to use weapons of mass destruction” (2003, p. xxii). Moreover, since “the early 1990s, a trend can be seen: the emergence of religious fundamentalist and new religious groups espousing the rhetoric of mass-destruction terrorism” (Hudson, 1999, p. 1). Unfortunately, “there has been an extraordinary growth” in such groups (Richardson, 2006, p. 61).

Why is religious terrorism so dangerous? The answer is that terrorists willing to sacrifice large numbers of innocent people must be motivated by a sense of serving a higher power via terrorism, a sense of doing god’s will. It is common for politicians and the media to treat terrorist groups as a kind of real-world version of Dr. Evil. As Jenkins noted, the mass media often argue that “terrorists are insane, crazy, or acting solely out of love of murder and destruction” (2003, pp. 67–68). In reality, religious terrorist groups see themselves as doing god’s will (Gunaratna, 2002, p. 93; Juergensmeyer, 2002, p. 29; Kronenwetter, 2004, p. 39). Jessica Stern, who interviewed terrorists from around the world, emphasized this point when she noted that “religious terrorists know themselves to be perfectly good” (2003, p. xxviii). It is because they view their cause as holy that they are willing to both sacrifice their own lives and take so many others with them. This also explains why religious terrorists are more dangerous than nonreligious terrorists. Richardson explained the “lack of restraint” of religious terrorists, “If one’s audience is God, then one does not need to worry about alienating him” (2006, p. 61). Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, National Security Council staff members during the Clinton administration, made this point clear in relation to 9/11, which they argued was seen by the 19 hijackers as the “performance of a sacrament, one intended to restore to the universe a moral order that had been corrupted by the enemies of Islam and their Muslim collaborators” (2002, p. 40). For religious terrorists, any action, including mass murder, can be justified if it takes the group closer to their holy objective.

The sense of doing god’s will, of fulfilling a transcendent goal through violence, is at the core of mass casualty terrorism. Groups motivated by pragmatic goals rarely carry out such attacks both because of human revulsion about the heinous nature of such acts and also because doing so inevitably produces outrage and backlash (Quillen, 2002). Terrorist groups organized around an ideological/mythic system similar to religion, although not explicitly religious, can be as dangerous as the explicitly religious groups, precisely because their mythic system tells them that they are metaphorically, if not literally, doing god’s will. Communism was a secular

worldview, but it possessed an ideological/mythic system that was used by Stalin among others to justify murder as serving a transcendent function (Rowland & Frank, 2002, p. 26; Ulam, 1965, p. 383). A similar point can be made about terrorist groups, such as the Tamil Tigers, which are not primarily based in religion, but in an ideological/mythic system that provides a transcendent justification for violence (Roberts, 2005) similar to that present for religious terrorist groups.

Our argument is similar to that of Ricigliano and Allen, distinguishing between nationalist-driven, resource-driven, and ideological terrorists (2006, p. 92) and arguing that “terrorist groups that represent the fundamental threat to the United States are ideologically motivated” (p. 93). The position is extended by explaining that it is the sense of sacred mission that makes such terrorists so dangerous and noting that nationalist terrorists, who possess that same sense of mission may be enormously dangerous.

While there is a broad consensus among terrorism scholars (Hudson, 1999; Richardson, 2006; Stern, 2003) that religious terrorist groups are more dangerous than secular groups, there is not universal agreement on this point. Notably, Robert Pape has argued that “there is little connection between suicide terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism, or any one of the world’s religions” and that “what nearly all suicide terrorist attacks have in common is a specific secular and strategic goal: to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists consider to be their homeland” (2005, p. 4). At one level, Pape is clearly correct. As we will argue in a moment, the underlying force behind the sense of denial felt by terrorists is not religion, but the sense that their culture and identity are threatened with annihilation. In that way Pape’s argument is broadly consistent with the one we develop here. What Pape does not recognize is that while religion is “not the root cause” (p. 5), it, or an ideological/mythic system similar to religion, is the key factor that creates the sense of total justification for the attacks, the sense that the terrorist feels that he/she is doing good, not evil, that in turn functions to create the terministic compulsion to violence. Pape himself noted that “religious *difference* . . . makes it easier for terrorist leaders to portray the conflict in zero-sum terms, demonize the opponent, and gain legitimacy for martyrdom from the local community” (p. 80, emphasis in original). He added that “religious difference . . . significantly increases the risk that a nationalist rebellion . . . will escalate to the use of suicide terrorism” (p. 80). This escalation occurs because the religious myth imparts a sacredness to the cause of defending the homeland and transforms the terrorist act from mere violence into sacramental violence.

It is also important to recall that apparently secular terrorist groups may possess an ideological/mythic system that fulfills for them the same function as religion does for the explicitly religious terrorist groups. Pape admitted that many recent terrorist acts have been carried out by explicitly religious groups (2005, p. 178), noted that “the fact that al-Qaeda does indeed recruit Islamic fundamentalists from a number of countries lends plausibility to the religious explanation” (p. 162), and emphasized the importance of al Qaeda’s “mobilization appeals,” which of course are explicitly based in religious myth, but argued that the fact that the “leading instigators of suicide

attacks are Tamil Tigers,” a Marxist-Leninist group “adamantly opposed to religion” (p. 4), is proof that religion is not the “root cause” of terrorism (p. 5). Contrary to Pape, the Tamil Tiger case is consistent with the argument developed here. In an insightful essay, anthropologist Michael Roberts explained how the group tapped into what he calls their divine potency (2005). While the Tamil Tigers are clearly not a traditional religious terrorist group, they rely on a “strategic use of rituals” that tap into “images” possessing “divine power and marvelous potency” in support of their “holy aim” which is to free the “Motherland Tamililiam” (pp. 494, 495, 496). The link between ideology and myth is clear. The Tamil Tigers may not be an explicitly religious terrorist group, but they do possess an ideological/mythic system that fulfills the same function as religion. Roberts also noted that the Tamil Tigers “mobilize both the Hindu majority and a significant Christian minority . . . via modalities that are deeply rooted in the lifestyles and religious practices of Tamils” (p. 493). Clearly, the Tamil Tigers rely on religion to a much greater degree than is usually recognized in support of an ideological/mythic system that justifies their cause as holy.

The crucial point is that the sense of doing god’s will in defense of the sacred homeland that is felt by both religious and ideological/mythic terrorist groups requires an underlying myth. The myth provides the transcendent justification for the terrorism by putting the terrorists in touch with divine purpose and therefore creates a terministic compulsion toward violence. The key force that makes ideological/mythic terrorists so dangerous is the sense of doing holy work. Usually, the sense of doing god’s work comes out of a religious system, but there are cases where a secular myth, what Kenneth Burke called “secular analogues” to “theological principles” (1970, p. 2), serves the same function.

Denial, Negation, and Affirmation in Religious Terrorism

What leads some groups to embrace a vision of the holy that justifies mass casualty terrorist acts? The symbolic DNA of terrorism begins with a sense that identity has been *Denied* and the very existence of the group is threatened. This Denial of identity motivates group members to both seek a new identity and attack the Others they see as blameworthy. The second component is *Negation* of the Other. Total negation of the Other allows violence to be viewed as serving a transcendent purpose, rather than as murder. The third component of the terrorist narrative is a mythic narrative, usually a myth of return, that provides an *Affirmation* of a new/old identity. That myth of return both affirms the new/old identity and puts the group in touch with the symbolic power associated with the time of origins. In some cases, a millennial myth serves a similar function.

The starting point for understanding the symbolic DNA of terrorism is with threats to the identity of the group. Experts often talk about terrorism as a response to bad economic or social conditions. This view is partly correct in that bad conditions often produce anger and upset. But bad conditions do not by themselves generally lead to terrorism. It is for this reason as we noted earlier that terrorism cannot be understood as simply a situation-based ontological genre. There was enormous poverty across this nation during the Depression, but little or no terrorism. A great deal of research

makes it clear that poverty per se is not a cause of terrorism. For example, Alan Krueger and Jitka Maleckova found that there is little or no connection between poverty and terrorism and that many terrorists are both well educated and from middle or upper class families (2003; see also Caryl, 2005, p. 30; Dalrymple, 2005, pp. 17, 18). However, when poor conditions are combined with threats to identity, the group may be ripe for a myth that provides a new sense of identity, identifies a villain to be fought, and justifies violence.

Members of terrorist groups believe that they are denied respect and that the very existence of their group may be threatened. Based on interviews with religious terrorists across the globe, Stern wrote that they “start out feeling humiliated, enraged that they are viewed by some Other as second class. They take on new identities as martyrs on behalf of a purported spiritual cause” (2003, pp. 281–282; see also Crenshaw, 1989, p. 18). She added that “leaders exploit feelings of alienation and humiliation to create holy warriors” (p. 3). Experts on al Qaeda and Muslim terrorist organizations point to the same threat. Caryl referenced the “sense of humiliation” felt by male suicide bombers (2005, p. 30), Khouri identified the “core problem” as “mass degradation and alienation” (2005), and Trofimov warned that terrorists often perceive a feeling of “precipitous, humiliating decline of their civilization” (2005, p. xvi). Similarly, Pape (2005, p. 23) argued that suicide bombing is “mainly a response to foreign occupation” and the sense that the occupiers are villainous and oppressive and threaten the very existence of the group. The intelligence community has recognized this point. The National Intelligence Estimate released in September 2006 cited “humiliation, and a sense of powerlessness” as a key cause “fueling the spread of the [jihadist] movement” (2006, p. A6).

For Begin and the Irgun, the threat to identity was the Holocaust (Rowland, 1985). In the introduction to his memoir of the underground, *The Revolt*, Begin wrote,

We had to hate first and foremost the horrifying, age-old, inexcusable utter *defencelessness* of our Jewish people, wandering through millennia, through a cruel world, to the majority of whose inhabitants the defencelessness of the Jews was a standing invitation to massacre them. We had to hate the humiliating disgrace of the homelessness of our people. (1951, p. xii, emphasis in original)

Later in *The Revolt*, Begin wrote that in the Holocaust “It was not only the Nazis and their friends who regarded the Jews as germs to be destroyed. The whole world, which calls itself ‘enlightened’ began to get used to the idea that perhaps the Jew is not as other human beings” (1951, p. 36). A similar sense of denied identity can be found in the response of radical Palestinian groups to first the Nekba (dispersion of Palestinians following the creation of Israel) and later living under Israeli occupation (Rowland & Frank, 2002). Hindu nationalist groups clearly felt their identity threatened by the power of Islamic groups in India, a threat that often was expressed as a fear of emasculation (Roy & Rowland, 2003). This feeling of emasculation is common among religious terrorist groups. Stern noted, “Often, the slogans seem to mask wounded masculinity” (2003, p. xix).

The feeling of absolute denial leads religious terrorists to Negation of the Other. In turn, the sense that those who have caused the humiliation are evil both explains the nature of the struggle and provides a justification for violence. In the terrorist worldview “good is pitted against evil and . . . their adversaries are to blame for all their woes” (Richardson, 2006, p. 41). The rhetoric of radical Palestinian groups, the Nazis, Hindu nationalist groups, Begin and the Irgun, as well as Arafat and the PLO, and other terrorist organizations is strikingly similar in characterizing their opponents as fundamentally evil. For example, in “A Message from the Commander-in-Chief of the Irgun to the Diaspora,” Begin said that the “despotic [British] government [of Palestine] . . . bears the responsibility for the annihilation of millions of our brethren” (1946, p. 11). In the same work, he referred to “British perfidy” and “British oppressors,” who “helped hurl them [Jews killed in the Holocaust] into the abyss” (pp. 11–12) and had the goal of “condemn[ing Jews] . . . both in the Diaspora and in Zion to extinction, annihilation, or eternal enslavement” (pp. 11, 12). The Irgun’s negation of the British was so strong that in many statements they referred to Nazi or Nazo-British. Similarly extreme examples of negation have been found in the symbolic practices of other ideological/mythic terrorist groups. For example, Roy and Rowland found that in the narrative of the Hindu nationalist groups “all evils are projected from the Hindu people onto the Muslim minority” which functions “as the perfect villain” (2003, p. 241). Precisely the same point could be made about other religious terrorists.

One consequence of this negation is that terrorists see themselves as “members of a heroic community of generous people fighting a war against evil” (Donatella Della Porta, cited in Hudson, 1999, p. 39). In the case of the Irgun, for example, Begin referred to members of the underground organization as the “fighting family” in whose “ears echoed the rattle of the death-trucks of Europe” and who fought for “Freedom or death” (1951, pp. 46, 73). Wright explained that “Polarization is to be encouraged, radical simplicity being essential for religious warfare” (2004, p. 45). The logic of what David Brooks has called the “mythological” mindset (2006, p. A27) defines a world which is “divided neatly between good and evil, victim and oppressor. Uncertainty and ambivalence, always painful to experience, are banished. There is no room for the other side’s point of view” (Stern, 2003, p. 282). The ultimate result of the negation is that religious terrorists “dehumanize their adversaries to a degree that they become capable of murder” (p. xxviii). For example, Begin justified assaults on Arab villages as “reprisals” against “concentrations of rioters and their offensive bases” and concluded that “attack is the only effective defence” (1951, pp. 337, 338, 344).

The third component in the symbolic DNA of religious terrorism is Affirmation of a new/old identity. This affirmation provides the symbolic answer to the sense of denied and threatened identity and affirms the necessity of attacking the Others who negate the identity. The “secret of this story” according to Friedman is the “conversion” it produces (2005b, p. A21). One of the most important sources for explaining how myth can be used to affirm identity, provide a symbolic answer to a sense of denial, and justify total negation of the Other can be found in the work of

Mircea Eliade. Over several decades, Eliade outlined the power of myths that link the present day to a time of origins. He argued that myth “supplies models for human behavior and . . . give[s] meaning and value to life” (1963, p. 2) by narrating “sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the ‘beginnings’” (p. 5). In this view, myth “is always an account of a ‘creation,’” a creation which “*establishes* the World and makes it what it is today” (1963, p. 6, emphasis in original). People turn to such myths of return in order “to find a meaning and a transhistorical justification for historical events” (Eliade, 1954, p. 147).

Terrorist groups rely on myths of return to affirm a new/old identity that answers the sense of denied identity that they feel. Through the myth they depict themselves as heroic and their enemies as evil, as a means of “satisfying the inherently human longing for a clear identity and a definite purpose in life, creating a seductive state of bliss” (Stern, 2003, p. 137). Terrorism enacted to carry out the myth also affirms identity because it “announces that the power of the group is equal or superior to that of the state” (Juergensmeyer, 2002, p. 33). By living the myth, “The weak become strong” (Stern, 2003, p. 282).

A clear example of this pattern is evident in the rhetoric of the Irgun. Begin spoke of fighters in the Irgun as regaining strength through return to Israel. Early in *The Revolt*, he wrote, “The revolt sprang from the earth. The ancient Greek story of Antaeus and the strength he drew from contact with Mother Earth, is a legend. The renewed strength which came to us . . . from contact with the soil of our ancient land, is no legend but a fact” (1951, p. 40). According to Begin, the “miracle of Return” (p. 47) to the soil of ancient Israel and to the heroism of the Maccabees produced “the miracle of Revival. Within a generation there developed within the Jewish people the strength to take up arms, to rise against alien rule, to throw off the yoke of oppression” (p. 373). Through revolt “the entire world learned that a new generation has arisen in Israel, a generation which draws superhuman strength from the mother land, hallowed from ancient days with the blood of the brave and the holy” (Begin, 1946, p. 11).

Many similar examples could be cited. Radical Palestinian groups often define themselves as similar to figures at the time of Mohammed or draw comparisons to Saladin, a pattern echoed to a lesser degree by more secular groups such as Fatah (Rowland & Frank, 2002). Hitler called for Germany to return to the virtues of ancient Aryan heroes, and radical Hindu nationalist groups call for a return to the heroism of ancient Hindu warriors (Burke, 1973; Roy & Rowland, 2003). Theye (2004) identified a comparable mythic structure in the rhetoric of a Peruvian underground organization, Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru (MRTA). And although they did not label the pattern a myth of return, Apple and Messner identified a similar myth in the rhetoric of white supremacists in the United States as exemplified in the Christian Identity movement (2001, pp. 206–227). The essential point is that all of these groups find a contemporary identity by returning to a period of origin for the group.

That return is often both in terms of time and place. Thus, for example, the Irgun called for the creation of an Israeli state in all of the land that had once been ancient Israel and Hindu nationalist groups assaulted and destroyed the Babri Mosque claiming that it was the birth site of the Hindu god, Lord Rama (Roy & Rowland, 2003, pp. 227–228). It is because myths of return are about time, place, and identity that they serve persuasive and epistemic functions. They describe the threat to the homeland, reinforce the negation of the Other, and sketch a mythic solution. Such stories can serve as powerful recruiting devices. As Stern noted, “Ancient history . . . can be a powerful weapon in extremists’ hands, including in their efforts to expand national boundaries and to seek redemption” (2003, p. 85). In the Islamic world, an appeal to the “golden age” of Islam, including the period immediately following the death of the Prophet, is particularly powerful. The 9/11 Commission wrote, “Many Muslims look back at the century after the revelations to the Prophet Mohammed as a golden age.” They added, “Nostalgia for Islam’s past glory remains a powerful force” (National Commission, 2004, p. 50). The power of this story, however, is not based in mere nostalgia. Richardson explained, “By invoking Islam’s gloried past, they both dramatize the humiliation of the present situation and hold out a vision for a proud future” (2006, p. 67). Doing so serves both a transcendent and an epistemic function.

There is a distinct theory of present/past/future in terrorist myths of return. In the present, the group is threatened by destruction because they have forsaken the virtues of their heroic past. The 9/11 Commission noted that “The extreme Islamist version of history blames the decline from Islam’s golden age on the rulers and people who turned away from the true path of their religion” (National Commission, 2004, p. 50). Thus, a return to the heroism of the past offers the group a chance to achieve redemption. A message common to all the groups we have mentioned might be summarized: “Once we have returned to the virtues of the past, we will cast the invader out of our land and re-establish the Golden Age.” The overall equation is simple. In the present their very existence is threatened and their identity denied. In the future, they can be redeemed and a utopian society created (or recreated), but only if they return to the virtues of their heroic past.

While critics have noted the presence of myths of return in the symbolic practices of a number of terrorist groups, they have not recognized previously the crucial relationship between the myth and the sense of denial that it overcomes and negation that it justifies. The myth answers the sense of denied identity by providing a new/old identity that is strong, not weak. And it justifies the absolute negation of the Other because they threaten both the heroes of the myth of return and those members of the group who have not yet affirmed the new identity.

By itself, a myth of return is not enough to define the rhetoric of terrorism. Myths of return are very common and are told by many groups that do not embrace terrorism. For example, foundational political myths in the United States, including stories of the Founding Fathers and the frontier, are clearly myths of return. Any number of rhetorical critics have written in detail about the importance of these myths of return. To take only two recent examples, in analyses of the rhetoric of President George W. Bush after 9/11, John M. Murphy noted how the president

“invoked the authority of the founders and the Constitution” (2003, p. 613), and Denise M. Bostdorff observed that President Bush “encouraged Americans to renew the national covenant” (2003, p. 301). Many other examples of myths of return that have no relationship to terrorism also could be cited. In fact, there is a strong argument that myths of return are the most common form of mythic rhetoric.

While almost all significant religious and ideological/mythic terrorists groups operating in the world today affirm their identity through a myth of return, such affirmation can be done through other mythic systems. In particular, a terrorist group could affirm identity and justify terrorism against the Other through a millennial or apocalyptic myth that promised to create a transcendent new age through enacting the myth. As noted earlier, the “terror” in the Soviet Union was justified by just such a system.

One of the most important apocalyptic myth system operating in the world today can be found undergirding the belief system of extremist Christian racist groups in the United States, groups that have “stockpiled cyanide with the aim of poisoning major city water supplies” in order to bring “down the U.S. ‘Zionist occupied’ government” and replace “it with a Christian one” (Stern, 2003, p. xiv). According to Jessica Stern, who conducted in-depth interviews with the number two person in the group, Kerry Noble, and other group members, these “alienated individuals” (p. 9) “believed that ridding the world of Jews, blacks, and sinners would facilitate the Apocalypse and the Messiah’s return” (p. xiv). She quoted Noble, who “outside the cult . . . felt weak and repeatedly humiliated” (p. 19) as saying, “The major cities to us were like Sodom and Gomorrah, like the Tower of Babel.” He added that “all those who refused the word of the Lord . . . were the enemy. And so they would have to die” (pp. xiv, xv). The symbolic DNA of terrorism is clearly evident in Stern’s description of the group. While less prevalent than myths of return, apocalyptic or millennial myths can be just as dangerous in justifying violence against innocents.

The symbolic DNA that we have described provides the justification for terrorism. Through what Crenshaw has labeled “cognitive restructuring” (quoted in Della Porta, 1995, p. 129) and we call an epistemic genre, even the most “reprehensible conduct is presented as honorable” (Della Porta, 1995, p. 129). In this worldview “any action—even a heinous crime—is justified” (Stern, 2003, p. 282). From within the mythic system, terrorism isn’t an act of war or a crime. Rather, “terrorism plays a sacramental role, dramatizing a religious conflict by giving it an apocalyptic backdrop” (Wright, 2004, p. 45). According to Stern, “The point of religious terrorism is to purify the world” of corruption “through murder” (pp. xix, xxix). As a consequence, “religious terrorists . . . know with absolute certainty that they’re doing good” because “God is on their side” (pp. 26, 282).

To this point, this essay has focused on identifying the symbolic DNA of terrorism based on previous research, especially rhetorical studies of terrorist groups and broadly sociological studies of the membership of religious/ideological terrorist groups. While the symbolic DNA of terrorism is evident in all of the groups (and research) discussed, only in the case of the Irgun has the pattern been laid out based on primary sources. Clearly, additional textual support would be helpful.

At this point, a brief case study concerning the recent defection of Maajid Nawaz from the British radical Islamic group, Hizb ut-Tahrir, where formerly he was a high-ranking member, can be used to illustrate the explanatory power of the pattern identified above. Nawaz joined the group in his late teens as a response to feelings of “institutional racism”, of lacking a “voice and identity” (Nawaz, 2007c, p. 8). One event more than any other created these feelings: “The Bosnian genocide struck a chord like no other. Here were white European Muslims being identified solely as Muslims and being slaughtered for it” (p. 8). Clearly, Nawaz felt that his identity had been denied and that the very existence of Muslims was threatened. He explained that the “Jihadism” of the group “combined” “Wahhabism and Islamism” in response to “Western sponsored oppression in the Arab world” (Nawaz, 2007d). In reaction to the sense of radical denial, he embraced an ideology that negated the Other. As he explained, “My premature politicized mind was ripe to receive an ideology that advocated a black and white solution to the problems I had grown up with” (Nawaz, 2007c, p. 8). The group “polarized the relationships between the Muslims and the non-Muslims” and was “prepared to kill millions of people to expand” (Nawaz, cited in Watson, 2007).

The ideology of the group, however, did more than negate the other. Nawaz clearly found a new identity in Hizb ut-Tahrir, a group which called for the creation of “an Islamic super-state ruled by Shariah” and governed by the Caliphate (Watson, 2007). By embracing this myth of return, Nawaz found an identity in which “Religion had been merged with politics in such a way that we worshipped God through our political activities” (2007c, p. 8). According to Nawaz, “The result was producing young men and women who were prepared to give up everything for the sake of a political ideology and go to a religious paradise. I had finally discovered who I was” (2007c, p. 8). In addition to providing a strong sense of identity, the affirmation of the myth also provided an ideological/mythic schema, what he labeled “politically inspired theological interpretations” (Nawaz, 2007a), that served as “a mentality, a psyche that can allow a state . . . to kill people in the cause of an ideology” (Nawaz, 2007b). His conclusion was that even though Hizb ut-Tahrir explicitly opposed violence, “They’ve laid down the foundations for a theory that can then be used by jihadists and developed upon by jihadists. And that is where there is a danger” (Nawaz, 2007b). Jane Perlez of *The New York Times* summarized the power of the mythic/ideological system of Hizb ut-Tahrir, writing that while “the group condemns violence, Mr. Nawaz said buried in the literature is an ideology that inevitably leads to violence” (2007b, p. A3). It is difficult to imagine a more perfect illustration of the way that the symbolic DNA of terrorism creates a terministic compulsion toward violence.

In the next section, we use a detailed analysis of the symbolic DNA of al Qaeda to show how ideological/mythic terrorists use the symbolic pattern we have described as an epistemic genre. Given the role that al Qaeda has played in terrorist attacks not only in the United States, but across the globe, and the ongoing Global War on Terror, which at least in the beginning was focused on the group, it is sensible to test our thesis with an extended analysis of its symbol use.

The Symbolic DNA of Al Qaeda

Osama bin Laden, the most important leader of a terrorist group in the last half century, achieved this status, not just with bombs or bullets, but more fundamentally with rhetoric. His rhetoric motivated what he called the “Nineteen Students” (2005, pp. 143–157) to commit horrendous murder that functioned as “propaganda of the deed” . . . designed for maximal symbolic impact” (Louw, 2003, p. 211). The driving force that made his rhetoric resonate with many in the Islamic world was a mythic worldview in which the identity and existence of the Islamic world was under attack, by the crusader West and their allies. This threat could be overcome by returning to the power and heroism present at the origin of Islam.

The sense of denied identity is evident in his rhetoric. At the core of bin Laden’s narrative is a description of Islam as under siege from what he often calls the “Crusader-Jewish alliance,” which has “insulted the pride of our *umma* [world Islamic community] and sullied its honor, as well as polluting its holy places” (bin Laden, 2005, p. 7). In other cases, he goes still farther back in time to find a model for those he sees as enemies of the Islamic world. For example, in a discussion of Israeli treatment of the Palestinians he said, “History knows that one who kills children, even if rarely, is a follower of Pharaoh” (p. 147). In another case, he labeled President George W. Bush as “the pharaoh of the age” (p. 174).

Clearly, however, his dominant model for those he sees as enemies is the crusader. When writing about crusaders, bin Laden means the United States, other largely Christian nations in the West, Israel, and international organizations such as the United Nations. In discussing the war in Afghanistan after 9/11, bin Laden stated that “this is a war, which, like previous wars, is reviving the Crusades. Richard the Lionheart, Barbarossa from Germany, and Louis from France—the case is similar today, when they all immediately went forward the day Bush lifted the cross.” He also labeled what the interviewer called the “Clash of Civilizations,” a reference to Samuel Huntington’s thesis that the West and Islam are in fundamental conflict (Huntington, 1993), as “a very clear matter, proven in the Qur’an and the traditions of the prophet” (bin Laden, 2005, pp. 124, 127–128). The term “Crusader” is clearly more than a figurative metaphor; it is bin Laden’s way of linking the contemporary era to the assault on Islam in the Middle Ages, a point he also made in reference to the “Clash of Civilizations.” In a message concerning the war in Iraq, he stated that “the West’s occupation of our country is old, yet new, and that the confrontation and conflict between us and them started centuries ago” (p. 271). The story of Islam under siege from Crusaders and Zionists is at the core of al Qaeda. Stern noted that “Most importantly, camps are used to inculcate ‘the story’ into young men’s heads. The story is about an evil enemy who, in the words of [Ayman] Zawahiri, is waging a ‘new Crusade’ against the lands of Islam” (2003, p. 261).

The facticity of the story is not the crucial issue. In actuality, a persuasive case can be made that “Western political control over Muslims has actually receded steadily since the 1920s” (Rodenbeck, 2006, p. 4), at least until recent military interventions in the region. What is at issue, however, is the perception that Islam is under siege from

the West. And bin Laden has been very successful in fueling that perception with a mythic perspective that explains the state of Islam in the world. Unfortunately, President Bush added credibility to bin Laden's worldview, when in a statement following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, he warned Americans that "this crusade, this war on terrorism, is going to take awhile," a statement that caused an uproar around the world, especially in the Middle East (Ford, 2001, p. 12).

Bin Laden often discusses the terrible actions of the new Crusaders, citing "the destruction and slaughter being meted out to Muslims in Chechnya today and Bosnia yesterday" (2005, p. 17), as well as the "massacres that have taken place in Tajikistan, Burma, Kashmir, Assam, the Philippines, Fatani, Ogaden, Somalia, Eritrea" and elsewhere (p. 25). On another occasion, he claimed that "America escalated its campaign against the Muslim world in its entirety aiming to get rid of Islam itself" (p. 39). Strikingly, however, he labeled "the occupation of Saudi Arabia" as the "greatest disaster to befall the Muslims since the death of the Prophet Muhammad" (p. 25). In purely pragmatic terms, this statement seems odd, since the United States occupied no holy sites, killed no Saudi citizens, and in fact sacrificed to protect Saudi Arabia against Iraqi aggression in the Gulf War. But in mythic terms, bin Laden's point makes perfect sense, because Saudi Arabia "is the cornerstone of the Islamic world, place of revelation, source of the Prophetic mission" (p. 25).

There is a strongly moralistic element in bin Laden's hatred of the West. In a statement "To the Americans," released on October 6, 2002, he focused not only on American foreign policy, but also on morality. For example, he criticized the United States as a "nation that permits acts of immorality" and even mentioned "President Clinton's immoral act committed in the official Oval" office (2005, p. 167).

The other enemies in the al Qaeda myth are those who aid the Crusader-Jewish alliance. Bin Laden consistently labels governments in the Arab world and international institutions as corrupt. For example, in December 1998, he attacked governments in the Arab world for not supporting the Palestinian cause, arguing that "global unbelief has crystallized in the land of Canaan, in Egypt, with their collaborators from among the rulers of the region, the rulers of Arabs, who have laughed at our *umma* for more than half a century" (2005, p. 74). In a statement illustrating how a feeling of emasculation is often a motive for those who create a myth of return, he argued that "the virility of the rulers in this region has been stolen, and they think people are women" (p. 90).

There is also a strongly psychological dimension to this assault on Islam. Bin Laden clearly feels that the Islamic world is threatened by both physical and psychological oppression. For example, in a message that can be dated only to 1995 or 1996, he cited the "degradation and corruption to which our Islamic *umma* has sunk" and the "febleness and cowardice . . . in the face of the enemy" (2005, p. 15). It is revealing that in a tape made prior to the 9/11 attacks, one of the hijackers, Hamza Alghamadi, referred to being "humiliated" in a world where "the tooth of the enemy will stretch from Jerusalem to Mecca" (cited in Slackman, 2006a, p. A3). The sense of absolute Denial, both in terms of identity and in a perceived threat to the existence of the Islamic world, is evident in bin Laden's many statements.

The response to this sense of Denial is absolute Negation of the Other, the oppressor or the ally of the oppressor. It has already been noted how bin Laden labels the United States and the West as crusader states or the pharaoh of the age. Given that worldview, terrorism is viewed as inherently defensive in confronting the Crusader-Jewish alliance. Writing immediately after the 9/11 attacks, he argued that "What America is tasting today is but a fraction of what we have tasted for decades" (2005, p. 104). In an interview on the al-Jazeera television network, he justified the 9/11 attacks, stating "Those who kill our women and our innocent, we kill their women and innocent, until they stop doing so" (p. 119). Later he stated that "The events [of 9/11] . . . are merely a response to the continuous injustice inflicted upon our sons in Palestine, Iraq, Somalia, southern Sudan, and other places, like Kashmir. The matter concerns the entire *umma*" (pp. 148–149). The 9/11 attacks were "blessed strikes" that were designed "to teach a harsh lesson to those arrogant people who think that freedom only has meaning for the white race, and that other people should be humiliated and subservient" (p. 150).

Given the total negation of the West, it should not be surprising that bin Laden sees no compromise with the crusaders. He said there "can be no dialogue with the occupiers except with weapons" (2005, p. 217). In their analysis of Israeli and Palestinian rhetoric, Rowland and Frank (2002) noted the tendency of people operating within a mythic system toward entelechial extension of their worldview. Something similar is going on with bin Laden: If one views the other side as crusaders, or the pharaoh, or the "New Rome" (2005, pp. 213–232), there can be no compromise and no alternative except violence. In this respect, the views of bin Laden and the Bush administration are mirror images of each other.

When bin Laden proposed "a long-term truce with you [the United States] on the basis of fair conditions that we respect" (bin Laden, 2006), he in fact meant complete Western withdrawal not only from "Iraq and Afghanistan," but from any economic, political, or military participation in the Islamic world. The "fair conditions" also would require the elimination of Israel. Absent this withdrawal, he promised further operations that will "take revenge as we did on 11 September" (2006). The ultimate "lessons" that Americans should draw were not to "be deluded by your power and modern weapons. Although they win some battles, they lose the war" (2006).

Why has this disaster descended on the Islamic world? Bin Laden's answer is typical of the terrorist myth. While it is the Crusader-Jewish alliance that is oppressing the *umma*, the ultimate blame falls on those who have failed "to rule in accordance with God's law" (2005, p. 28), those who have turned away from the way of Islam. For example, bin Laden stated in early 2003 that "our *umma* possesses enormous powers, sufficient to rescue Palestine and the rest of the Muslim lands. However, these powers have been fettered and we must work to release them. For our *umma* has been promised victory. If it has been delayed, that is only because of our sins and our failure to help God" (p. 190). The answer is clearly to return to the strength of Islam: "Our remedy is in the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet" (p. 92).

Bin Laden offers Affirmation through the creation of a new/old identity via a myth of return that focuses on both place and time as essential to recovering heroic power.

In terms of place, he writes and speaks again and again of how “Crusader-Jewish” forces threaten “the two Holy Sanctuaries” and “the Holy City of Jerusalem” (2005, pp. 9, 10). These places are important primarily as sites of symbolic power because of their role in the origin myth of Islam. By focusing on them, bin Laden taps into the origin myth. His answer to the oppression and humiliation felt by Muslims in the world today is a return to the greatness and power of the Islamic golden age. In a 1995–1996 statement, he clearly linked a return to heroism with a return to faith, quoting from a “noble Prophetic saying” that “God decrees humiliation for you and will not remove it until you return to your religion” (p. 18). By returning to the virtues of the time of the Prophet or of the Islamic golden age, “the entire Muslim world” can “imbibe” the “faithful spirit of strength” (p. 48). In a statement on April 9, 2001, bin Laden clearly expressed the relationship between the present, past, and future, when he called for teaching that “there is no pride or victory except in *jihād* for the sake of God, by which the first generation [of Muslims] overcame this sense of estrangement and exile in the world [by becoming Muslims], and by which the later generations are victorious and are able to overcome their own estrangement” (p. 97, brackets in original). Shortly after the 9/11 attacks, he stated “our concern is that our *umma* unites either under the Words of the Book of God or His Prophet, and that this nation should establish the righteous caliphate of our *umma* which has been prophesied by our Prophet” (p. 121). Writing in 2004, he said that the solution “lies in adhering to the religion of God by which God granted us pride in the past centuries” (p. 229). This story is at the core of the appeal of al Qaeda worldwide. The 9/11 Commission wrote, “Seizing on symbols of Islam’s past greatness, he promises to restore pride to people who consider themselves the victims of successive foreign masters. He uses cultural and religious allusions to the holy Qur’an and some of its interpreters” (National Commission, 2004, p. 48).

Notably, bin Laden also linked the conflict in Iraq to an heroic Islamic past, addressing a message to the “descendants of Salah al-Din” and labeling the Iraqi people the “descendants of the great knights who brought Islam as far east as China” (2005, pp. 207, 208). Later, he labeled insurgents in Iraq as “the soldiers of God, you are the arrows of Islam and you are the first line of defense for this *umma* today” (p. 210). Similarly, Bin Laden’s chief aid, Ayman al-Zawahiri, has focused on regaining lands lost to Islam hundreds of years ago. For example, he and other Islamic radicals often talk about the glories of the lost Al Andalus, a reference to the part of Spain that was captured by Muslim armies in 711. In late 2001, Zawahiri commented “We will not accept that the tragedy of Al Andalus will be repeated in Palestine” (quoted in Wright, 2004, p. 47).

One key function of bin Laden’s myth of return is to provide a new/old heroic identity. He wrote repeatedly of the heroism of the *mujahidin* and of the “lions of the holy law, you guardians of the religion” (2005, p. 158). He labeled the 19 9/11 attackers as ordinary students who became great heroes because they were willing to give “up everything for the sake of ‘There is no god but God,’” by which he meant defending Islam. Against these great heroes, bin Laden said that the “American government” is “powerless” (pp. 154, 155). What is the source of their strength?

His answer is quite straightforward. Their strength came from the fact that “we are following our Prophet’s mission” (p. 141). Later, he claimed that the 9/11 attackers “poured out the water of life” in “a brave and beautiful operation . . . destroying the idols of America” and taking “a great step towards unification of the Muslims under the word of God and establishing the rightly guided Caliphate” (p. 194).

Terrorist acts served an important psychological function in confronting threats to identity. For bin Laden the answer was *jihad* because “the walls of oppression and humiliation cannot be demolished except in rain of bullets” (quoted in National Commission, 2004, pp. 50–51). On this sense of humiliation, Stern quoted Ayman al-Zawahiri, Bin Laden’s second in command, as saying that “the new world order is ‘humiliating’ to Muslims” (2003, p. xviii). In contrast, “Violence . . . restores the dignity of humiliated youth” (p. 264). Bin Laden himself said “You fight, so you exist” (2005, p. 231), a comment that echoed Menachem Begin’s admonition, “We fight, therefore we are” (1951, p. 26). In bin Laden’s view, terrorism is a transformative act that has “wiped disgrace and submissiveness off the forehead of the nation” (2005, p. 51).

By returning to the time of the origin of Islam, bin Laden and al Qaeda believe that the *umma* can defeat the new crusaders. He wrote in October 2001 that “God has struck America at its Achilles heel” and then added that “So when God Almighty granted success to one of the vanguard groups of Islam, He opened the way for them to destroy America utterly” (2005, p. 104). Of course, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, despite their horror, hardly produced “utter” destruction. But bin Laden’s overstatement is perfectly understandable when viewed from the context of a myth where he sees his followers as heroes doing god’s will. Given bin Laden’s description of the power of the heroes in the al Qaeda myth of return, it was inevitable that he would emphasize the enormity of their actions. Great heroes must do great deeds.

In fact, a common theme in bin Laden’s rhetoric is that victory for al Qaeda is inevitable. For example, in a December 1998 interview on al-Jazeera, he stated “We believe that America is much weaker than Russia, and we have learned from our brothers who fought in the *jihad* in Somalia of the incredible weakness and cowardice of the American soldier” (2005, p. 82). In October 2002, he confidently predicted that “you [the United States] will lose this Crusade Bush began, just like the other previous Crusades in which you were humiliated at the hands of the *mujahidin*, fleeing to your home in great silence and disgrace” (2005, p. 172). A few months later, he stated “O you people, don’t let America and its army frighten you for by God we have struck them and defeated them time and again. They are the most cowardly people in battle” (p. 191). Astonishingly, he even claimed the battle of Tora Bora as a victory (p. 192). Bin Laden’s many assertions that victory was inevitable seem somewhat bizarre. He continued to make such statements while hiding somewhere in the border region of Pakistan or Afghanistan. But in mythic terms, the statements are understandable. Victory over the Crusaders is assured as long as the heroic *mujahidin* remain committed to values at the heart of the al Qaeda myth of return.

Conclusion

The analysis of the symbolic DNA of al Qaeda is enormously disturbing. The group sees themselves as god's holy shock troops fighting against an oppressor who threatens their existence and identity as a people. They believe that they are doing god's will and that any action can be justified in attacking the oppressors and their allies. In this worldview, absent their heroic actions, their nation and culture may be destroyed. However, through a return to the heroism found at the origin of Islam, Islamic civilization may be redeemed. Bin Laden's narrative serves several crucial functions. By providing a worldview explaining the current status of Islam and providing a narrative map to a future of great power and glory, it serves an important epistemic function. At the same time, the narrative provides a clear sense of identity and puts followers in touch with divine purpose.

Underestimating the power of bin Laden's narrative would be foolish. The al Qaeda myth of return clearly has great resonance both as a recruiting device and as a worldview for those who have accepted it. The 19 hijackers believed so strongly in the narrative that they were willing to sacrifice their own lives for the cause and the hope of heavenly reward. People adhering to such a story will do anything for the cause, creating a "love of martyrdom" and a "lethal ideology" (Bennet, 2005, p. WK1).

The primary focus of this story is on an audience within the Islamic world and not in the West. The narrative only makes sense to those who operate within it. To a Western audience, the discussion of a renewed Caliphate or of the United States as a crusader state will appear ludicrous. After all, the United States has intervened several times, notably in Kosovo, Bosnia, and the first Gulf War, to protect Islamic nations. For most people in the West, the Crusades are a barely remembered event from a history class, not a key to understanding the modern world. The terrorist actions of al Qaeda clearly sent a message to the United States and the other nations of the West, but the al Qaeda narrative was internally directed within the Islamic world. As scholar of Islamic law Noah Feldman noted, bin Laden's "words, as much as his deeds, aim to convince others to embrace his view of the world and act accordingly," but his "obscene" message "could be accepted" only by "people who shared his premises" (2006a, p. 12). Unfortunately, as we observed earlier, the al Qaeda narrative has had considerable resonance. Thomas Friedman recently quoted Mamoun Fandy, the director of the Middle East Program at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, that "Arab nationalist media like Al Jazeera 'practically tell bin Laden and his followers Bravo'" (2007, p. A21), a point echoed by former CIA operations officer, Melissa Boyle Mahle who referred to al Qaeda as "an ideology-driven global insurgency on the march" (2006, p. WK13).

The analysis of the symbolic DNA of al Qaeda and other ideological/mythic terrorist groups suggests several important implications for understanding and confronting terrorism. One unfortunate truth is that those who are fully committed to such a mythic worldview are, in the short run at least, essentially unreachable, except through violence. In the long term, as will be argued later, mythic evolution may occur (as it did for Begin and Nawaz, for example), but in the short term those

who embrace the al Qaeda myth of return or any similar story are not persuadable. The case of Nawaz is revealing. He eventually recognized the dangers present in the epistemic genre of Hizb-ut-Tahrir, but only after he was held in an Egyptian prison for several years and had the time to discover the “sheer breadth of scholastic disagreement” about Islam, a discovery that led him to conclude that “what I had been propagating was far from the true Islam” (Nawaz, 2007c, p. 8). As his example indicates, over time the worldview of terrorist groups can evolve in ways that alter the symbolic DNA of terrorism and eliminates the terministic compulsion toward violence. Unfortunately, that result is unlikely in the short term, precisely because the worldview is so strongly held. Thus, in cases of short-term danger, there may be no alternative but to use force against terrorist groups.

The equally unfortunate truth is that use of military power against terrorist groups has every potential to aid their recruiting. In fact, there is a grave danger that offensive operations will create an entire culture of terrorism. The problem as Stern has observed is that “whenever we respond with violence of any kind, we assist the terrorists in mobilizing recruits” (2003, p. 289). This point has been recognized by the American military (Shanker, 2005), which noted in a strategy document on the war on terror “the negative impact military actions can have” (Shanker, 2006, p. A11). On this point, the National Intelligence Estimate released in September 2006 argued that the “Iraq conflict has become the cause célèbre for jihadists, breeding a deep resentment of U.S. involvement in the Muslim world and cultivating supporters for the global jihadist movement” (2006, p. A6). In response, the new counterinsurgency strategy of the military recognizes that “Using substantial force increases the risk of collateral damage and mistakes and increases the opportunity for insurgent propaganda” (Gordon, 2006, p. A19). It is for this reason that “The more force used, the less effective it is” (p. A19).

At the same time, there is danger that any withdrawal will be perceived as a sign of weakness and that terrorists will capitalize by creating a myth of heroic response. This problem occurred previously when Israel withdrew from Lebanon and in the process enormously increase the prestige of Hezbollah (Rubin, 2005). Hezbollah’s resistance to the Israeli attack on and subsequent withdrawal from Lebanon in summer 2006 emphasized this point (Worth, 2006). Clearly bin Laden has attempted to exploit this capacity in myth by claiming that victory for al Qaeda is inevitable over the “weak” Americans. For example, in a winter 2006 tape, bin Laden “shows strength by taking credit for America’s humiliation in Iraq” (Benjamin & Simon, 2006, p. A23). Thus, force must be used selectively, but also consistently and withdrawal must not provide the terrorists with any mythic victories.

Understanding the rhetorical and mythic nature of terrorism is also important for distinguishing those groups that significantly threaten the United States and those that do not. The word “terrorist” is often used quite broadly. Some even have labeled environmentalists or the National Education Association (NEA) as terrorists (King, 2004). For example, Cynthia Coombs, the co-author of an encyclopedia about terrorism, recently referred to the Earth and Animal Liberation Fronts as examples of “‘leaderless’ militant movements” (cited in Hanley, 2005, p. A5) and a radical

environmentalist was sentenced to nine years in prison for arson attacks that were aimed only at damaging property and not at harming people (Yardley, 2007). In such cases, "terrorist" is essentially a figurative metaphor that is used to denigrate a group or individual. The problem in such broad usage is that it is quite unlikely that the NEA or even radical environmentalists will conduct mass-casualty terrorist attacks. While there are secular terrorist groups that utilize violence, religious terrorism based in the symbolic DNA identified previously is far more dangerous.

The presence of a symbol system defined by perceived Denial of identity, total Negation of the Other, and Affirmation of a new/old identity is a strong indication that the group might commit mass casualty terrorism. Each of the three components is important. This sense that their identity and potentially their very existence have been threatened motivates the search for a mythic answer and justifies Negation of the Other. It is the Affirmation of a new/old identity that provides the model for heroic action. As noted earlier, both the mythic system and terrorist acts themselves provide an answer to the sense of humiliation.

The degree to which the group is committed to the myth as a means of understanding the world strongly will influence their actions. In general, the stronger the commitment to the myth as a means of understanding the world, the more likely the group will view terrorism as a holy act as opposed to a political tactic. This point is most obvious in the somewhat different approaches to myth found in religious and more secular Palestinian groups. While both religious Palestinian groups, such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and more secular groups, such as Fatah, have relied on myths of return, clearly the pattern has had greater resonance for the religious groups. For example, Rowland and Frank noted that the "symbolic map drawn by Hamas was rooted in sacred myth" (2002, p. 236), making compromise with Israel impossible. Arafat's more secular approach made some compromise possible, an option that the mythic system of Hamas did not allow since they believed that "Palestine is sacred space owned by Allah" (p. 236). The difference in commitment to the myth of return to an Islamic golden age of the religious and more secular Palestinian groups also influenced their view of terrorism. While Arafat sometimes "used Hamas as the bad cop to his good cop" by threatening "Israel with terrorism" (p. 276), essentially using terrorism as a tactic in his negotiation with Israel and the West, Hamas approached terrorism as a form of "service of Allah," of "myth taken to the literal end of the line" (p. 237). Clearly, groups that are committed to a myth of return as in Malinowski's sense a reality lived (and that possess the other components of the symbolic DNA of terrorism) are more likely to view terrorism as sacramental violence and less likely to view it as a tactic than are groups that are not fully committed to the myth of return.

The presence of Negation is especially important. The total Negation of the other leads to the dehumanization that is a necessary precondition for mass casualty terrorism. Religious terrorists do not believe that the people they kill are innocent victims. Rather, they view the victims as agents of the oppressor, a worldview that justifies even the most heinous acts. The most important difference between the myths of return of terrorist groups and other foundational myths of return is that the terrorist myth responds to a sense of alienation and humiliation with total

Negation of the Other. Other foundational myths of return affirm identity based on a return to a time of origins, but do not negate all other people as totally evil. Stories of the Founding Fathers in the United States, for instance, do not include a total negation of the British. As a consequence, the story affirms identity, without risk that it will encourage terrorist action. Precisely the same point could be made about mainstream religious groups. Baptists, Orthodox Jews, and many other religious groups rely on myths, but the absence of Denial and Negation in their rhetoric makes it quite unlikely that they will resort to terrorism. In contrast, by negating the Other, the terrorist myth leads to dehumanization and violence. The presence of total Negation of the Other in the symbolic DNA of any terrorist group is an especially important indication that the group would be likely to carry out attacks on civilian targets.

Although the focus here has been on terrorist groups, this analysis might be extended to other groups (or nations) to support the claim that groups embracing a symbolic structure similar to that found in ideological/mythic terrorists are more likely than others to view violence against innocents as justified in situations beyond terrorism, such as war. For example, in a recent insightful study of the ideology of terrorism in American discourse, Winkler observes that American presidents generally “ignore the enemy’s declared purposes,” a stance that “has served to dehumanize the terrorists, rendering them more deserving of US punishment” (2006, p. 199). Winkler notes that presidents relied on a “Cold War narrative” in which the nation “as a divinely inspired entity, is responsible for defending freedom and democracy from the forces of growing evil around the globe” (p. 205). The similarities to the symbolic pattern identified earlier are evident. At the same time, she also notes that after some statements “that reinforced the clash of civilizations hypothesis” (p. 183), the Bush administration eventually “framed its opponents as Islamic fundamentalists” (p. 187) who “were blaspheming the Muslim religion” (p. 186).

Winkler’s (2006) analysis suggests that when the elements of symbolic DNA common to ideological/mythic terrorists groups were most fully present in American political rhetoric that the United States resorted to war. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11 Americans faced alienation and felt fear. In this period, the administration negated the Other through the dehumanization strategy described by Winkler. And as noted earlier, Bush tapped into an American myth of return as a way of generating support. A strong argument could be made that present in the justification of both the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq was a symbolic DNA similar to that described here. There are two very important differences, however, between the narratives of the Bush administration and al Qaeda. The Bush narrative did not negate all Muslims, only fundamentalists. Nor was there as strong a commitment to mythic return as in the al Qaeda narrative. The point is not to defend the Bush administration. Far from it, as has been made clear, American policy has helped bin Laden recruit followers and in many other ways been counterproductive. It is certainly not great praise to say that the absence of total negation and the failure to fully commit to myth diminished the chance of a real war of civilizations.

The combination of Denial, Negation, and Affirmation as a “constellation” of symbolic characteristics in an epistemic genre makes ideological/religious terrorist groups so dangerous. Many groups and nations cite religious justifications for their actions, including acts of violence. At the same time, religious values are cited by those opposing war. Thus, it is not religion or myth by itself that leads to terrorism or war. However, when a sense of denied identity is combined with negation of the Other and the affirmation of a new/old identity through a mythic system, a symbolic pattern is present that justifies violence as doing god’s will. The combination of all three characteristics makes ideological/mythic terrorist groups so dangerous. As noted earlier, such groups sometimes include nation states, notably Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, during the terror.

The foregoing should make clear the fundamental role of rhetoric in confronting terrorism. The most important goal must be to undercut the terrorist story. If we undercut their story, they will not be able to recruit and “Without recruits they cannot grow,” creating a situation in which terrorists will be “isolated from their communities” (Richardson, 2006, p. 215). In a healthy society people do not put on suicide belts and blow up civilian targets. People do that only when they think their identity is threatened, that they are doing God’s work, and that the Other they confront is evil. Understanding this point is essential, given the enormous pool of alienated people of all faiths and creeds on this planet. On this point, Hoffman emphasized that limiting the capacity of terrorists to recruit was the most important effort by arguing that “we don’t have enough bullets given all the enemies we are creating” (quoted in Sander, 2006, p. A6). Porteous made a similar point by arguing that “the battle for hearts and minds is what will decide the outcome of this escalating conflict” (2006). The ultimate conclusion as Stern has argued is that the West needs “to take public relations and public education as seriously as the terrorists do” (2003, p. 293), a conclusion Hoffman echoed when he stated that it is essential “to develop more effective initiatives to counter the messages of radicalism and hate promulgated with great fervor by the jihadists” (2004, p. 557).

Clearly, al Qaeda understands the importance of rhetoric. Ayman al-Zawahiri stated in 2005 that “We are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media” (Shane & Mazzetti, 2006, p. A8). To this point, the rhetorical war against al Qaeda and terrorism “has failed either to undermine him [bin Laden] effectively or to speak persuasively to the Muslim public” (Rodenbeck, 2006, p. 4), a conclusion echoed by Waller who labels “U.S. efforts to persuade the rest of the world” as a “disaster” (2003, p. 2).

How can terrorists and potential terrorists be confronted via rhetoric? The key is clearly to undercut each part of the message. Several principles are apparent. Initially, because a sense of lost dignity plays a key role in the terrorist myth, it is enormously important to demonstrate respect for other cultures (Pyszcznski, Solomon, & Greenburg, 2003, p. 175). Actions that show disrespect are particularly dangerous because they create anger and a sense of hopelessness, what Cruickshank calls a “sense of besiegement” (2006, p. A25) and Slackman labels “a sense that Muslims are being victimized” (2006b, p. A7). One great tragedy of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo is that

they provided bin Laden with perfect anecdotes to illustrate his narrative of modern-day crusaders attacking the *umma* and consequently encouraged “very large” numbers of people “to join terrorist groups” (Richardson, 2006, p. 208).

Because of the key role that a sense of humiliation plays in motivating terrorists, including al Qaeda, messages which could reinforce this feeling must be avoided. J. Michael Waller, an insightful terrorism analyst, has argued that “Ridicule is a powerful weapon of warfare” that should be used to undercut the message of terrorist groups (2006a, p. 10), a conclusion that apparently influenced the Department of Defense to release a video ridiculing Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, at that time the leader of al Qaeda in Iraq (Chivers, 2006). While Waller is correct about the potential of ridicule to discredit terrorist groups, that can occur only if the ridicule is internally created within the society in which the terrorist group acts. If there is any sense that the ridicule is external, there is a grave danger that the message will reinforce the sense of humiliation at the core of terrorist recruiting. For this reason Waller’s suggestion that the United States support efforts to ridicule terrorist groups is misguided.

Second, creating a counter narrative that undercuts the perceived threat to identity and demonstrates that the West is not in fact carrying out a crusade against Islam is essential. The single most effective thing that the United States did in the years after 9/11 to confront al Qaeda was tsunami relief in 2005, which according to a Pentagon analysis “did more to counter terrorist ideology than any attack mission” (Shanker, 2006, p. A11). This relief both directly aided people who happened to be Muslims, but of equal importance functioned as a form of symbolic action showing that the “Great Satan” was not the enemy of Islam. Thus, one effective way to confront the terrorist myth is to use every effort to send the message that the West is not conducting a war against Islam. Such efforts would undermine the negation at the heart of the terrorist myth. Tsunami relief not only demonstrated that the United States was not fighting a war against Islam, but demonstrated the humanity of the ordinary Americans who provided the aid, thereby undercutting the al Qaeda narrative.

While some neoconservatives view the fight with al Qaeda as symptomatic of something broader, a war of civilizations, such rhetoric is self-defeating because it supports the al Qaeda narrative. Rather than viewing a battle against Islamic fundamentalism as a war of civilizations, it would make far more sense to depict the Global War on Terror as fundamentally a police action (Rodenbeck, 2005, p. 55) in which limited and precisely focused force is used against members of al Qaeda, an organization which has killed far more Muslims than any other group. The real key to defeating al Qaeda is to create a counterstory (Benjamin & Simon, 2006), which deprives “violent radical Islam of its claim to legitimacy” (Bacevich, 2005, p. A21).

One option for that counterstory is a forward-looking narrative describing a better future that can be achieved through cooperation between the West and the Islamic world. A narrative (and policies supporting it) that offered not American domination, but a path to a better society via cooperation, would be a powerful

means of undercutting the al Qaeda myth. The answer to a myth of return may be a future-oriented myth of a new golden age to come.

Finally, confronting the al Qaeda myth of return is critical. While myths cannot be refuted, they can be “rectified” by telling competing myths or redefining the myth of origin. Rowland and Frank (2002) have written about the process of mythic rectification in which alternative versions of the basic mythic story are presented. In the Islamic world, one way of effectively fighting al Qaeda’s myth of return would be to support alternative versions of Islam, versions that oppose the killing of innocents and embrace justice for all. Stern was emphasizing the importance of mythic rectification when she wrote that the West “should encourage the condemnation of extremist interpretations of religion by peace-loving practitioners” (2003, p. 296), a point echoed by Applebaum, who argued that “we need to monitor the intellectual and theological struggle for the soul of Islam and we need to help the moderates win” (2005, p. 7b). Pyszcznski et al. made a similar point, arguing that “The Koran could certainly be quoted to support such moderate views” (2003, p. 176; see also Goldstone, 2002, p. 156). Ultimately, “the only way to cut off the international jihadi movement at the root is for Muslims to conclude that their own religious tradition does not countenance the deviations of recent years” (Feldman, 2006a, p. 12). Fortunately, a substantial religious tradition in Islam exists that condemns terrorism (Feldman, 2006b, pp. 55–56). Nawaz was citing this tradition in order to rectify Islam when he broke from Hizb ut-Tahrir and argued that “the very scriptures and principles used by the Party to make its analysis do not actually support its call” (2007a). As this example indicates, rectification must come from inside the Islamic world, but the West can support those who present the rectified myth.

The most dangerous religious terrorists across the planet tell stories possessing a similar symbolic DNA. They claim that the identity and very existence of the group are under assault, that the Other who is doing this is absolutely evil, and that the answer can be found through a symbolic return to the heroism found at the time of the origin of the group. The key to defeating terrorism is to undermine these stories.

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