

## **Rhetoric and/as Terrorism: Before and After September 11**

Bennett Lowenthal

The following is a neatening-up of remarks delivered as a panelist discussing the topic “Rhetoric and/as Terrorism: Before and After September 11.” The venue was the Poetry and Linguistics Association (PALA) Conference held in Istanbul in June 2003. The six other panelists were academics and journalists, all working in Turkey.

I have interpolated precious little. Where the following text differs from my actual remarks, it is for the sake of greater illustration.

I thank the panel’s organizer and moderator, Dr. Matthew Gumpert of Bilkent University in Ankara, for his kind invitation to submit the following for publication in the *Journal of American Studies in Turkey*. I sought permission from the U.S. Department of State to do so. Permission was granted. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Government. Any inaccuracies are, however, mine and mine alone.

“...September 11...”

September 11 is a date on a calendar.

“September 11” is a neologism.

Six short “e” vowels. Assonant rhyme. Scansion of the meter is amphibrach hexameter. As a rhetorical unit, it is probably destined for immortality.

That said, the currency of “September 11” (or its prosodically identical twin “September 11<sup>th</sup>”) as a trope may be overtaken – in American usage – by “9/11”. Is this American love for numbers and/or codes? Is it American exceptionalism? (Who cares that most calendars render it “11/9”?) How strong is the tug of the telephone emergency number “9-1-1?” Does the twin appearance of the number “1” in “9/11” conjure the fallen twin towers?

“September 11” is probably by now a figure of speech in most languages across the world. (I have made no attempt to verify that assertion.) However, I am indebted to Dr. Elisabeth Kendall, Professor of Arabic at Oxford and Edinburgh Universities, for a thumbnail assessment of how “September 11” fares as a locution in the Arabic-speaking world. It seems that, as a basic general conclusion, “September 11” and its variants are referred to in the same way in the Arab press as in the Western press: “*Ahadashar aylul*” (11<sup>th</sup> of September) or the “attacks (“*hajamat*”) of September” or, less commonly now, “the disaster (“*karitha*”) of September.”

Admiral Chuichi Nagumo's Carrier Striking Task Force Operations Order No. 1 dated 23 November 1941 referred to "X Day"; it did not mention "Pearl Harbor". The Great Soviet Encyclopedia had an article not on the American Civil War but rather on the "Failed Second American Revolution, 1861-1877."

Should "September 11" or "9/11" begin to be challenged or eclipsed, take note and watch out.

*"...Before and After..."*

Let us relinquish the metaphor of the "watershed?" How can time flow away from time?

If water is to be the substance of our metaphor, then let us better describe "September 11" as a cascade, a waterfall, a cataract.

Even before getting flecked, drenched, or drowned by "September 11," every one was already carrying a notion of terrorism packed inside their heads. Did it get wet?

Let us examine President Bush's initial public statements after "September 11" (i.e. *on* September 11). Here is the very first:

Two planes have crashed into the World Trade Center in an apparent terrorist attack on our country. I have spoken to the Vice President, the Governor of New York, and the Director of the FBI and have ordered that the full resources of the federal government go to help the victims and their families and to conduct a full-scale investigation to hunt down and find those folks who committed this act. Terrorism against our nation will not stand. Now, if you will join me in a minute of silence. God bless the victims, their families, and America.

Leaving aside the reference to God's blessing – which some might consider rhetorically more significant – I would draw attention to the statement's language of law-enforcement. Note the words "FBI" and "investigation" and "find". The statement does not contain the word "war."

How long did it take for the phrase "war on terrorism" to enter the President's public vocabulary with reference to the events of September 11? About eleven hours. At 8:30 pm on the evening of September 11, the President addressed the nation and said, among other things:

America and our friends and allies join with all those who want peace and security in the world to stand together to win the war against terrorism.

Note the use of the definite article. "The" war against terrorism. Not "this" war. Not "a" war. The use of the definite article presupposes the prior existence of the noun specified.

So, who declared war? And how? And when?

Was war declared by the terrorists? That is clearly the position of the President, stated explicitly, for example, in a speech in New York City in June 2003: "Terrorists declared war on the United States of America and war is what they got." One might point to the first World Trade Center bombing or the bombing of the U.S.S. Cole or the 23 February 1998 World Islamic Front tract entitled "Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders," signed by, among others, Shaykh Usamah bin-Muhammed bin-Ladin? (More from this document later.)

Or, alternatively, has there been a "war on terrorism" going on for decades, if not longer?

Can the “war on terrorism” be said to resemble the “war on slavery” or the “war on piracy” from earlier eras?

Were Abolitionists in America engaged in a “war on slavery” and did they use that term? (John Brown remarked: “I have to make war on slavery because only by making war on slavery is it endable.”) Was there in any sense an *international* “war on slavery” that contributed to sovereign nations’ decisions to end the practice, e.g. Cuba and Brazil in the 1880s? Is there *still* a “war on slavery” being waged, for example, in Mauritania and Sudan? Or would some say that precisely what is *lacking* is a “war on slavery?”

Was there ever a “war on piracy?” If not, then what caused pirates to disappear from the high seas? Was it sufficient that maritime powers signed the Declaration of Paris in 1856 to the effect that “privateering is and remains abolished,” or did the invention of the steamship do the trick? Moreover, similar to slavery, can we say that the “war on piracy” is actually over, considering the risks to shipping even today in, say, the Straits of Malacca. (Or the risks posed to manufacturers of entertainment and pharmaceuticals by “pirates”?)

Is there a “war on terrorism” in the sense that there is (was?) the “war on poverty” (President Johnson, 1964) or the “war on drugs” (President Nixon, 1972)?

The possibility of analogy among slavery and piracy and poverty and drugs and terrorism suggests to me that the “war on terrorism” remains keenly metaphorical.

“The Cold War,” as a figure of speech, began as a metaphor. From the late 1940s to 1991 that metaphor covered an astonishing range of activity, all over the world. After 1991, though, can we not say that it has lost its rhetorical quality of metaphor? It is now a perfectly adequate historical designator. It is no more metaphoric than, say, the War of the Roses or the War of Jenkins’ Ear.

The “war on terrorism” is not (yet) the “War on Terrorism.”

*“...Rhetoric and/as Terrorism...”*

It struck me that in course of our PALA Conference discussion, both panelists and audiences seemed exclusively focused on examining the terrorism rhetoric of government officials, most notably, of course, the President of the United States. Perhaps if we had had more time, we could have taken a look at the terrorism rhetoric of terrorists. For example, instead of a protracted discussion of the subliminality (or lack thereof) contained in the President’s use (subsequently retracted and regretted) of the metaphor “crusade,” perhaps we could have considered the unretracted and unregretted rhetoric of the aforementioned “Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders.”

The Arabian Peninsula has never – since Allah made it flat, created its desert, and encircled it with seas – been stormed by any forces like the crusader armies spreading in it like locusts, eating its riches and wiping out its plantations. All this is happening at a time in which nations are attacking Muslims like people fighting over a plate of food...The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies – civilians and military – is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy Mosque [Mecca] from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim... We—with Allah’s help—call on every Muslim who believes in Allah and wishes to be rewarded to comply with Allah’s order to kill the Americans and plunder their money wherever and whenever they find it.

If a primary purpose of rhetoric is exhortation, then who is exhorting a “war *of* terrorism” and who is exhorting a “war *on* terrorism?”

Some would argue, in a certain discourse, that war = terrorism. In the discourse that arguably matters most – international law – this is not so. War is deemed legal in some circumstances, per the United Nations Charter. Terrorism, however, is deemed criminal in all instances. Terrorism is defined and criminalized both at the national level (e.g. Title 22 of the United States Code) and at the international level in various United Nations multilateral treaties and conventions, e.g. those relating to aviation and shipping (1963, 1970, 1971, 1988), Diplomatic Agents (1973), Taking of Hostages (1979), Suppression of Terrorist Bombings (1997), and Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism (1999).

According to Article 5 of the 1997 Convention:

...criminal acts within the scope of this Convention, in particular where they are intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons, are under no circumstances justifiable by considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or other similar nature...

Meanwhile, Article 19 of the 1997 Convention notes that:

the activities undertaken by military forces of a State in the exercise of their official duties, inasmuch as they are governed by other rules of international law, are not governed by this Convention.

Lest I have gone too far and appear to be presenting myself as two things I absolutely am not – a lawyer and an international lawyer – allow me then simply to offer the opinion that in the “war on terrorism” it is crucial that terrorism continue to be both legally defined and publicly felt as something in the domain of the criminal, with no chance of osmosis into the domain of the legitimate.

Since I have now wound up in a discourse landscape that is a bit dry, dotted with words like “convention” and “treaty” and “article,” I sense it would be best if I ended soon. I beg your indulgence for one last story about an “article,” however, before I end.

In its youth, the United States of America fought the collectively-named Barbary Wars, covering the Tripolitan War of 1801-1805 and the war with Algiers in 1815. In the aftermath of “September 11,” these wars have not been seized upon for rhetorical purposes, either by supporters or opponents of recent American foreign policy.

One can perhaps imagine hesitation among Americans to buff up distant memories of American ships shelling Muslim capitals and offloading American Marines onto Muslim shores.

One can also perhaps imagine the other side’s fears of negative PR, were it forced to reconstitute a historical defense for the rights to tribute and ransom money for kidnapped sailors. There might, however, be one additional factor. Perhaps those who seek to ascribe a deep-seated religious motivation to the “war on terrorism” would prefer not to draw attention to Article XI of the Treaty of Tripoli.

In June 1797, a Treaty of Peace and Friendship with the North African state of Tripoli was unanimously approved by the U.S. Senate and subsequently signed by President Adams. The treaty was soon broken; the ruler of Tripoli, in 1800, upset that promised American tribute payments were late, began again to attack U.S. shipping.

Although the Treaty of Tripoli was obscure and its life short, nevertheless its Article XI achieved long-lasting notoriety. Article XI reads:

As the Government of the United States of America is not founded in any sense on the Christian religion – as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion or

tranquility of Musselmen [Muslims]—and as the said states have never entered into any war or act of hostility against any Mahometan nation, it is declared by the parties, that no pretext arising from religious opinions shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries.