

## Cerberus to Mind: Media as Sentinel in the Fight against Terrorism

### *Strategic Insights*, Volume V, Issue 5 (May 2006)

by [CAPT Randall G. Bowdish](#)

*Strategic Insights* is a monthly electronic journal produced by the [Center for Contemporary Conflict](#) at the [Naval Postgraduate School](#) in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

For a PDF version of this article, click [here](#).

### Introduction

*And there, a dread sight even for Gods to see, was Cerberus...  
a hideous monster, warder of the Gate of Hades,  
Home of Wailing, jailer-hound of dead folk in the shadowy Gulf of Doom.  
—Quintus Smyrnaeus, Fall of Troy*

According to Greek legend, a vicious, three-headed beast known as Cerberus guarded the entrance to Hades. Cerberus kept the living out and the dead in at the gates to the Underworld.

At the dawn of the 21st Century, Cerberus sleeps at the gates of the global media. All the while, terrorists pass their messages of influence against a mentally unguarded public. Terrorists influence the will of the people through the manipulation of terror, spread through the leverage of the global media. Lest the government turn to the beast of “censorship,” the media must voluntarily take on guardianship at the gates to the mind.

### Terrorism

Like war, the nature of terrorism<sup>[1]</sup> is immutable—it is a deadly contest of wills, shrouded in horror, blood, hatred, friction, chaos, and uncertainty. While terrorism is still violence used for political purpose, its character is quite different from conventional war. It is governed by a different set of principles, where words and images ultimately prevail over bullets, where military forces are often intentionally avoided, where tactical success can result in strategic defeat, or contrarily, where tactical defeat can result in strategic success. Terrorism is more a war for the mind of non-combatants than it is about the death and destruction of the participants. Consequently, it demands a markedly different strategy for defense. It requires an understanding of the complex interactions between the physical and mental realms of human perception.

Two critical changes enable modern-day terrorists to achieve ends far beyond the relatively meager means available to them in terms of weaponry and manpower. The first is the increased lethality, deliverability, and availability of weaponry to terrorists. The second is the tremendous

| Report Documentation Page                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                    |                                     |                                                           | Form Approved<br>OMB No. 0704-0188                  |                                 |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. |                                    |                                     |                                                           |                                                     |                                 |
| 1. REPORT DATE<br><b>MAY 2006</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                    | 2. REPORT TYPE                      |                                                           | 3. DATES COVERED<br><b>00-00-2006 to 00-00-2006</b> |                                 |
| 4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE<br><b>Cerberus to Mind: Media as Sentinel in the Fight against Terrorism</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                    |                                     |                                                           | 5a. CONTRACT NUMBER                                 |                                 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                    |                                     |                                                           | 5b. GRANT NUMBER                                    |                                 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                    |                                     |                                                           | 5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER                          |                                 |
| 6. AUTHOR(S)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                    |                                     |                                                           | 5d. PROJECT NUMBER                                  |                                 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                    |                                     |                                                           | 5e. TASK NUMBER                                     |                                 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                    |                                     |                                                           | 5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER                                |                                 |
| 7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)<br><b>Naval Postgraduate School,Center for Contemporary Conflict,1 University Circle,Monterey,CA,93943</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                    |                                     |                                                           | 8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER            |                                 |
| 9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                    |                                     |                                                           | 10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)                    |                                 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                    |                                     |                                                           | 11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)              |                                 |
| 12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT<br><b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                    |                                     |                                                           |                                                     |                                 |
| 13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                    |                                     |                                                           |                                                     |                                 |
| 14. ABSTRACT                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                    |                                     |                                                           |                                                     |                                 |
| 15. SUBJECT TERMS                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                    |                                     |                                                           |                                                     |                                 |
| 16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                    |                                     | 17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT<br><b>Same as Report (SAR)</b> | 18. NUMBER OF PAGES<br><b>13</b>                    | 19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON |
| a. REPORT<br><b>unclassified</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | b. ABSTRACT<br><b>unclassified</b> | c. THIS PAGE<br><b>unclassified</b> |                                                           |                                                     |                                 |

leverage that results from the synergy of coupling physical acts of violence with the mass media to achieve psychological impact against populations numbering orders of magnitude greater than the immediate participants.

Although each will be discussed in turn, the major thrust of this paper is on defending against the larger, psychological impact of modern global terrorism. Finally, a case will be made for new type of citizen guardian—a “sentinel of the mind”—which must be trained and educated to conduct this critical function.

## The Real Weapon

*One might say that the physical seem little more than the wooden hilt, while the moral factors are the precious metal, the real weapon, the finely-honed blade.*  
— Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*

In terms of lethality, a terrorist attack with a Weapon of Mass Destruction (WMD) is a worst-case nightmare for any world leader. Technological refinements enable such weapons to be manufactured in ever-smaller packages, to the point where a single person can act as a delivery system. Offsetting the increased lethality and deliverability of such weapons is the tight control nation-states hold on them. Obviously, it is absolutely critical that such weapons remain scarce on the black market and unavailable to terrorists. On the other side of the spectrum are the widely available commercial products that can be modified for violent use. The innovative use of readily available civilian products in nefarious ways, such as aircraft as human-guided missiles, fertilizer bombs, or pesticides as chemical agents, can be just as effective as their military equivalents.

The important features of a weapon go beyond its yield, however, to second order *effects* of weapons, through either detonation or threat. Whether weapons are sophisticated, high-tech, weapons of mass *destruction* or simple, low-tech terrorizing weapons of mass *persuasion*, the ultimate measure of effectiveness is the effect it has on the minds of the targeted population. Within this context, the cutting edge of the sword of terrorism is not the physical means of death and destruction—rather, it is terror brought on through vicarious threat, and that resides in the mind.

Terror is the king of emotions, trumping all others when beckoned, mustering all bodily assets to deal with survival threats. In terms that Clausewitz would appreciate, the emotion of fear is the finely honed-blade. While world leaders may worry about lethality in terms of WMD, the thought of being at the wrong end of a blade as a beheading victim might be more terrorizing to an individual. Lethality must include a qualitative measure of terror intensity as well as a quantitative one. Weapons of mass destruction—nukes, gas, and bugs—provoke fear both in terms of the high number of deaths to a large population within an area of detonation, but also in the horrific nature of the pain and suffering associated with it.

Beheadings, on the other hand, can instill as much fear in spite of the singular nature of each attack. These two extreme cases differ greatly in lethality, that is, the potential number of deaths they can achieve—the first can affect millions, while the second only one person at a time. But it is not only the horrifying nature of death that instills terror; it must also present at least some remote threat to the individual.

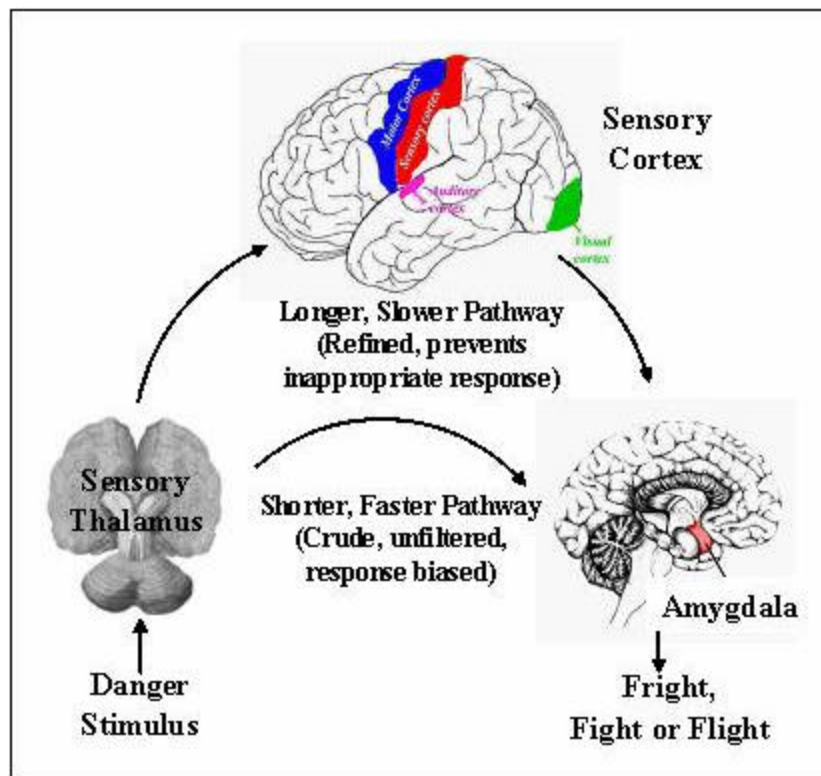
## Fear and Terror

*No passion so effectively robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear.*  
—Edmund Burke

Defined as “intense, overpowering fear,” terror is genetically hard-wired into our brains as a self-survival mechanism against danger. It is the ultimate coercing lever when the object is to compel an enemy to do one’s will.[2] The key to understanding terrorism lies in understanding the psychological mechanisms through which fear-inducing weapons work on their targeted populations.

A simplified diagram[3] of the fear process is shown in [Figure 1](#). Sensory inputs are sent to the thalamus. From the thalamus the signal splits. First, unfiltered signals arrive directly at the amygdala. The amygdala, as the evolutionary and memory-induced warehouse of fear, makes a quick, rough, first order determination as to whether the signal is associated with danger. If so, it initiates a series of physiological responses that prepare the body to meet or avoid the threat. Meanwhile, the thalamus also forwards the same inputs to the sensory cortex, for a more deliberate and detailed evaluation. The cortically-processed sensory inputs then arrive at the amygdala (with a time delay relative to the direct inputs from the thalamus), either providing corroboration or invalidation of the threat.

**Figure 1: The Fear Process**



It is important to note that the evolutionarily developed mechanism of fear was, and in most cases, still is, completely appropriate for participants in, and direct observers of, danger. However, terrorists seek to elicit fear and terror not only from the physical victims of violence, but from a wider media audience, as well. In fact, it is the wider media audience that is the real target. In this sense, terror is principally an indirect means of coercion, in that physical acts of violence are orchestrated more for their strategic, psychological effect on an audience at large rather than the tactical, physical action against the victims themselves.[4]

## **Terror and the Media**

*Democratic nations must try to find ways to starve the terrorist and the hijacker of the oxygen of publicity on which they depend.*  
— Margaret Thatcher

There is ample evidence to conclude that television news about terrorism, more so than the print media, instills fear into viewers.<sup>[5]</sup> Media audiences vicariously share in danger through graphic images and accompanying stories of terror that prey on the crude, unfiltered, emotional pathway rather than the more reasoned, refined pathway that includes the sensory cortex, as is the case of the print media. This results from the way news is packaged for commercial purposes. Television news of terrorism is intentionally bundled in terms of fear in order to draw and maintain the attention of a maximum number of viewers.<sup>[6]</sup> Viewers see a hyped-up, fear-inducing story of terror, out of context of their own situational risk associated with the threat as a result of “framing.”

Framing, or pre-persuasion, is one of the four stratagems of influence.<sup>[7]</sup> According to David L. Altheide, frames provide “the focus, a parameter or boundary, for discussing a particular event. Frames focus on what will be discussed, how it will be discussed, and, above all, how it will not be discussed.”<sup>[8]</sup> In terms of influence, persuasion, and propaganda, frames can serve a darker purpose, as evidenced in Dr. Kelton Rhoads’ definition of a frame as “a psychological device that offers a perspective and manipulates salience in order to influence subsequent judgment.”<sup>[9]</sup> Although terrorists and the media have decidedly different ends, they both depend upon frames to achieve them. While terrorists prefer a propagandist’s style of framing, the less malevolent media or “problem” frame, focused on gaining and maintaining viewer-ship, nonetheless suffices.

Altheide suggests that selling news through problem framing has resulted in a “discourse of fear” between the news media, formal agents of social control, and the public, artificially raising perceptions of danger and risk beyond what is warranted. These periodic doses of improperly framed fear have resulted in an American society that is more anxious and fearful than any in its history, while at the same time experiencing a record level of life expectancy (77.3 years as of 2002).<sup>[10]</sup>

A proper contextual framing of terrorism would be to relate it to the overall level of risk audiences are subjected to in the course of their daily lives. For example, the terrorist acts on September 11, 2001, resulted in 2,926 certified deaths.<sup>[11]</sup> Almost *six times* more people were *murdered* in the United States—there were 17,382 homicides in 2001—than died during 9/11.<sup>[12]</sup> The 9/11 terrorist attacks resulted in the formation of the Department of Homeland Security with an initial budget of \$19.5 billion. In 2002, the number of U.S. citizens killed in terrorist attacks around the world decreased to 26—one one-hundredth of the previous year’s total. Yet, the FY 2003 Department of Homeland Security budget increased to \$37.7 billion, almost doubling in the course of a year.<sup>[13]</sup> The point here is not to diminish the threat of terrorism, particularly the devastating potential of WMD, but merely to put it into its appropriate context.

For the viewer, perception is reality. Although the absence of relevant framing results in a perceived, rather than real, threat to the audience, it is enough to suit the needs of terrorists as an instrument of terrorism. As Thomas Schelling<sup>[14]</sup> points out:

It is the *threat* of damage, or of more damage to come, that can make someone yield or comply. It is the latent violence that can influence someone’s choice—violence that can still be withheld or inflicted. The threat of pain tries to structure one’s motives, while brute force tries to overcome his strength. Whether it is sheer terroristic violence to induce an irrational response, or cool premeditated violence to persuade somebody that you mean it and you may do it again, it is not the pain and damage itself but its influence on somebody’s behavior that matters.

While the victims of terrorism suffer the violent blow, the audience is made to feel the *threat* of more violence to come, if they do not yield to the demands of the terrorists. The physical targets

of terrorists are general in that they symbolize, or are representative of, the observers—the adversary’s population or powerful institutions—but are random within that population to connect individuals and subgroups to the immediate victims. For example, if victims of the physical violence happen to be personnel in the Pentagon, then defense personnel within the larger military population may feel some measure of threat through identification, projection and association. Moreover, as the Pentagon is an icon of military power and defense, its impotence to thwart the attack plants doubt in the general population’s confidence in the military’s ability to defend them.

Use of the media as an instrument of fear dissemination is problematic for terrorists, however. The media is a blunt, rather than precision delivery vehicle. Very different message objectives must be satisfied against multiple targets in the form of the four modern estates (the people, government, military, and media), further divided by whether they are supporting, neutral or the enemy. A notional targeting matrix, shown in [Table 1](#), illustrates the difficulty terrorists face in accomplishing an act of violence against the enemy in the physical realm that subsequently meets their psychological objectives against such a diverse audience.

**Table 1: Terrorism Target Matrix**

| Media                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | People                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Government                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Military                                                                                                                                                                         |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Opposition</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Disseminate <b>fear-instilling visuals</b> and <b>facts/myths</b> with “<b>cause</b>”</li> <li>Provoke false <b>balance</b> in reporting</li> <li>Question government <b>policy, legitimacy, security</b></li> </ul>                                                                                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Identification</b> with victims</li> <li>Invoke <b>fear/anxiety</b> to achieve <b>cognitive dissonance</b></li> <li>Question / <b>change</b> government <b>policy</b> in accordance with <b>terrorist ends</b></li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Change policy</b> in consonance with <b>terrorist ends</b></li> <li><b>Collapse</b> (political or economic)</li> <li>Invoke <b>repressive internal policy</b></li> <li>Order tactical <b>reprisals</b></li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Question policy</b></li> <li><b>Undermine morale</b></li> <li><b>Antagonize to commit atrocities / repress own populace</b></li> </ul> |
| <b>Neutral</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Disseminate atrocity <b>visuals</b> and <b>facts/myths</b> that <b>gain support</b> or,</li> <li>Disseminate <b>fearful</b> media that deters support and <b>maintains neutrality</b></li> <li>Invoke <b>sympathetic</b> bias (freedom fighters)</li> <li>Question opposition <b>policy, legitimacy,</b></li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Identification</b> with “freedom fighters”</li> <li>Swing from <b>neutral to supporting</b></li> <li>At least, <b>maintain neutrality</b></li> </ul>                                                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Swing from <b>neutral to supporting</b></li> <li><b>Pressure</b> opposition to change <b>policy</b></li> <li>At least, <b>maintain neutrality</b></li> </ul>                                                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Swing from <b>neutral to supporting</b></li> <li>At least, <b>maintain neutrality</b></li> </ul>                                          |

|                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>security</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Disseminate <b>cause</b></li> </ul>                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Support</b>                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                    |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Disseminate visuals and facts/myths that maintain <b>support</b></li> <li>Maintain <b>cause</b></li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Identification</b> with "freedom fighters"</li> <li>Maintain &amp; <b>export political support</b></li> <li><b>Donate resources</b></li> <li>Pressure Government to <b>change policy</b></li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Maintain support</b></li> </ul> Pressure opposition government to <b>change policy</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Defect</b></li> <li><b>Steal military supplies</b></li> <li><b>Train and equip terrorists</b></li> </ul> |

The media plays a large, if unintended, role in the transfer of direct, appropriate fear to indirect, potentially inappropriate fear. Although a symbiotic relationship exists between terrorists and the media, it is the media and not the terrorists who have the final say on what makes the news. There are minimum and maximum thresholds of violence, along with a host of other factors, which terrorist acts must meet to make the news. Not every terrorist act is considered newsworthy. On the other hand, some acts of terrorism are so heinous and grotesque that the media intentionally filters out harmful and tasteless stories and images from the public (such as beheadings in western culture). Concurrent with a terrorist's intent to influence a population, the media has a related goal in that it must influence observers to pay attention in order to maintain market share that translates to commercial income.

David Manning White provides a glimpse into who makes the final determination of whether a story is newsworthy or not. This decision-making function is known as "gatekeeping." Gatekeepers are the decision-makers within news organizations who determine what is going to appear in the news and how it will appear. Gatekeepers may consist of a single editor or a series of key editors, and in some cases, may extend to an entire news organization.

It is the functional role of gatekeepers to act as decisive figures and key powerbrokers in the news selection process.

Journalists use an informal set of criteria established by an editorial hierarchy to select news. Galtung and Ruge[15] identified 12 factors, shown in [Table 2](#), that gatekeepers informally use in their determination of newsworthiness. When terrorism is looked at through the prism of newsworthiness, the symbiotic relationship between terror and the media is clearly evident. Several of these criteria are particularly important not only to the newsworthiness of an act of terror, but also to the psychological effects that terrorists seek to achieve.

**Table 2: Key Factors in the Newsworthiness of Terrorism**

| <b>Newsworthiness Factor</b>                                                      | <b>Media Impact</b>                                                         | <b>Terrorism Relevance</b>                                                             |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Frequency:</b> the time span needed for the event to unfold itself and acquire | The more similar the frequency of the event is to the frequency of the news | Terror events must re-occur periodically to overcome the degradation of fear over time |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                            |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| meaning.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | medium, the more probable that it will be recorded as news by that news medium.                                                                           | and to revisit the desired end state.                                                                                                                      |
| <b>Threshold:</b> the level an event must pass to be recorded. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Amplitude: the magnitude of the event.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                  | An event must be of sufficient amplitude to be recorded. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The bigger the event, the bigger the headline.</li> </ul> | Terror events must meet a minimum threshold to be considered newsworthy.                                                                                   |
| <b>Clarity:</b> one or a limited number of meanings in what is received.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | The more clear and less ambiguous the event, the more the event will be recorded.                                                                         | The clearer the act of violence and its reason, the more likely it will be recorded.                                                                       |
| <b>Meaningfulness:</b> some measure of ethnocentrism will be operative; there has to be cultural proximity and relevance.                                                                                                                                                                                                                | The more meaningful the event, the more likely it will be recorded as worth listening to.                                                                 | The greater the cultural proximity and relevance, the greater the fear.                                                                                    |
| <b>Consonance:</b> the 'expectation,' cognitive interpretation in terms of what one 'predicts' and what one 'wants.' <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More commonly understood today as "Cognitive Dissonance"—the psychological discomfort felt as a discrepancy between what one knows/believes, and new information.</li> </ul> | The more consonant the event is with the mental image of what one expects to find, the more probable it will be recorded as worth listening to.           | The more terrorists are able to disrupt current beliefs, the greater their chances of influencing opinion toward their cause and away from the status quo. |
| <b>Unexpectedness:</b> events must be unexpected or rare, within the context of meaningfulness and consonance (above), to receive attention.                                                                                                                                                                                             | The more unexpected the event, the more probable that it will be recorded as worth listening to.                                                          | The greater the unpredictability, the greater the fear. Scarcity must be such that events aren't "routine," yet also meet <i>frequency</i> requirements.   |
| <b>Continuity:</b> the event has been covered and continues to be covered partly to justify its being covered in the first place, partly because of inertia in the system and partly because what was unexpected has now also become familiar.                                                                                           | If an event has been previously recorded, it is more likely it will continue to be recorded, even if the amplitude is reduced.                            | Subsequent acts of terror, even if they are of less magnitude, are more likely to be covered.                                                              |
| <b>Composition:</b> changes in thresholds occur for new events in order to 'balance' coverage.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | The more an even has been recorded, the more probable that a very different kind of event will be recorded the next time.                                 | High frequency acts of terror can achieve saturation, making it more likely other events will be covered.                                                  |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                               |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Elite nations:</b> the actions of elite nations are more consequential than the activities of others.                                                                                                                                  | The more the event concerns elite nations, the more probable it will become a news item.                                                      | Elite nations make better targets. The greater the nation, the more consequential the effect. |
| <b>Elite persons:</b> the actions of elite persons are more consequential than the activities of others.                                                                                                                                  | The more the event concerns elite people, the more probable it will become a news item.                                                       | The more elite the assassination victim, the greater the effect.                              |
| <b>Personification:</b> news has a tendency to present events as sentences where there is a subject, a named person or collectively consisting of a persons, and the event is then seen as a consequence of this person or these persons. | The more the event can be seen in personal terms, as due to the action of specific individuals, the more probable it will become a news item. | The greater the personification, the greater the newsworthiness.                              |
| <b>Negativity:</b> negative news will be preferred to positive news.                                                                                                                                                                      | The more negative the event in its consequences, the more probable it will become a news item.                                                | The more devastating the attack, the more likely it will be covered.                          |

While Galtung's and Ruge's rubric only discusses lower thresholds, upper thresholds exist as well. As previously discussed, some images resulting from acts of terrorism may be so disturbing that journalists censor them on their own initiative. Renee and Brian Kratzer conducted a study of gatekeeper upper thresholds that resulted in self-censorship of disturbing images associated with the terrorist attack on 9/11.<sup>[16]</sup> They found that 16 of 20 newspapers with circulations greater than 75,000 chose not to publish disturbing pictures of people jumping to their deaths from the Twin Towers.

It is important to note that a gatekeeper's decision to select an event as newsworthy has tremendous implications—what may have been known previously by only a few will potentially be known by millions to billions. More importantly, it also has the potential to frighten and influence their attitudes and behavior. This tremendous power and leverage mark gatekeepers as the center of gravity<sup>[17]</sup> of the “terrorism” process.

## Cognitive Dissonance and Fear Appeals

*With most men, unbelief in one thing springs from blind belief in another.*  
—Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742-1799)

Fear itself is only part of the psychological instrument of terrorism, however. While there may be some terrorists who derive some perverse pleasure from maintaining a society hostage to a state of fear, fear serves a larger purpose as a means to a political end. Fear is primarily the emotional attention-getter. Terrorists use fear as a sword aimed at one's belief system as it relates to their political ends.

Cognitive Dissonance is a psychological state of discomfort that results when a person's belief system is conflicted. The aim of the terrorist is to induce enough fear and anxiety (resulting from the vicarious observation of acts of terrorism through the media) to cause people to question their own belief system in light of the terrorist's demands. For example, if the political goal of the terrorist movement is to rid a region of Western presence, then the aim is to get a critical mass<sup>[18]</sup> of people to question whether that presence is necessary, given the new information of American lives lost as a result.

Another psychological construct, the concept of *fear appeal*, also helps to explain how terrorism sometimes succeeds and oftentimes fails. A fear appeal is a persuasive message “designed to scare people by describing the terrible things that will happen to them if they do not do what the message recommends.”<sup>[19]</sup> It consists of two parts—a *threat*, or fear-inducing stimuli, and *efficacy*, the recommended response’s potential for threat reduction. People respond to fear appeals in one of two ways. They may focus on the threat in response to and in order to cope with their fear, known as *fear control*. Or, they may respond to the danger, referred to as *danger control*. Danger control processes are largely rational, cognitive evaluations of susceptibility to the threat, its severity, and one’s ability to carry out the recommended response. Fear control processes are principally emotional responses that oftentimes occur outside of conscious awareness. It is the perceived efficacy that determines whether danger control or fear control processes are initiated, while perceived threat determines the intensity of these responses.<sup>[20]</sup>

The important point is that fear appeals that initiate the danger control process at a high level of perceived danger coupled to a high level of perceived efficacy normally result in high message acceptance—that is, conformance to the desired attitude or behavior.<sup>[21]</sup> This suggests that for the terrorist, there is a critical coupling requirement of the violent act to the psychological message. An understanding of the terrorist demand, that it can be affected, and that the violence is perceived as a real danger to the individual is necessary in order to maximize attitudinal and behavioral shifts that meet the terrorist group’s ends. However, when a person perceives that a serious threat cannot be prevented, either due to response ineffectiveness or an inability to perform the recommended action, then fear control processes dominate, often resulting in conscious or unconscious denial of the threat or reactance against the message. This suggests that a major psychological defense mechanism against terrorism is minimization of message efficacy, or in simpler terms, limited publication of terrorist demands in terms that an audience can affect.<sup>[22]</sup> In a free society, however, this is problematic, as the open media constitutes the instrument of message dissemination.

## Sentinels of the Mind

*There are but two powers in the world. The sword and the mind. In the long run the sword is always beaten by the mind.*  
—Napoleon Bonaparte

This raises the obvious question as to who has the responsibility to protect the people from the psychological element of a terrorist attack. As the preceding discussion showed, the media, not the government or military, are the *ipso facto* “sentinels of the mind” against global terrorism. This presents a perplexing problem for free, open societies on two counts. First, terrorism, as a tactic, can bypass a nation’s normal means of resistance (the military) altogether, instead, directly influencing the will of the populace through agents ill-trained and educated to function in that role. Second, a democratic government that honors freedom of speech as a fundamental right cannot censure the news without at least partially compromising the very right it seeks to protect.

As mentioned previously, media gatekeepers are the center of gravity when it comes to global terrorism. They represent “the few” with control of information and images used to potentially influence the attitudes and behaviors of “the many.” It is suggested that educating gatekeepers, along with celebrities who might also become inadvertent dupes for terrorist messages, holds the greatest promise in defense against the larger, psychological sword of terrorism. Additionally, given the potential of the media as a “weapon of mass persuasion,” a form of the Hippocratic oath for journalists is also recommended.

The government should focus on educating the public and the media, editors in particular, on the harmful effects of fear appeals. Simply avoiding the coupling of acts of terrorism with terrorist demands can minimize the amount of message acceptance. Secondly, the media should be

aware of the connection between newsworthiness and its relevance to terrorism. Understanding terrorism from a newsworthiness perspective may cause journalists to pause in their mental calculus of whether the potential harm done to the nation outweighs a sensational story. If nothing else, it may influence the way they report a story, such as in the context of appropriate framing.

Journalists bear a heavy responsibility to their constituents. They control a powerful instrument that, when used appropriately, informs a citizenry with accurate, reliable information needed to function in an open society. Journalists also act as a watchdog against oppression and a voice for the otherwise voiceless. But, the media can also be used as an instrument for malevolent purposes, whether intentional or inadvertent. Words and images can be used to hurt and manipulate people. In this sense, journalists should have a “Hippocratic” obligation to minimize harm.

Journalistic standards of ethics, while not universal in their content, already exist in many areas of the media. While almost all journalistic standards include a responsibility to report truthfully and accurately, surprisingly few overtly list a responsibility to “minimize harm.” One such code of ethics that does, from the Society of Professional Journalists, is shown in [Table 3.\[23\]](#)

**Table 3: Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists**

|                                 |                                                                                                           |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Seek Truth and Report It</b> | Journalists should be honest, fair, and courageous in gathering, reporting, and interpreting information. |
| <b>Minimize Harm</b>            | Ethical journalists treat sources, subjects, and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect.         |
| <b>Act Independently</b>        | Journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know.           |
| <b>Be Accountable</b>           | Journalists are accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers, and each other.                         |

By minimizing harm, the Society includes the following guidance:

- *Show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage. Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects.*
- *Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief.*
- *Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance.*
- *Recognize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than do public officials and others who seek power, influence or attention. Only an overriding public need can justify intrusion into anyone's privacy.*
- *Show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity.*

The government has a constitutional mandate to protect the people, but not necessarily at the expense of their fundamental rights as citizens. In the context of the psychological aspects of terrorism, the government is faced with the paradox of defending freedom through censorship. Given that American journalists are by and large rational, patriotic citizens in their own right, this paradox can be avoided altogether if journalists can be persuaded to self-censor psychologically damaging aspects of terrorism. They already self-censor grotesque, distasteful images as a matter of conscience and economics. When confronted with the potential damage done to the nation and its citizens, most will readily follow the “minimize harm” creed. For those that do not, an educated public along with an otherwise enlightened media, can provide feedback in several

forms sure to get their attention. Public outrage and lost viewership, along with journalistic professional exposure as “dupes,” are powerful, self-regulating byproducts of an educated public and media.

Within the spirit of minimizing harm and an acknowledgement of the media as a powerful instrument, a social obligation of journalists as a sort of new-age curator emerges. While the media doesn't necessarily have the tools to mentally heal people, they have a role in preventing psychic harm as they alone guard access to global media.<sup>[24]</sup> In a sense, they act as a psychological prophylactic against damaging images and words. As societal guardians of the mind, the media maintains its non-combatant status, while still fulfilling its social contract to its constituents in reporting the news in a responsible fashion that minimizes harm.

## Conclusion

It is wishful thinking of the worst kind to think that mere adherence to journalistic guidelines will make terrorism go away. Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest said it perfectly, “war means fightin’, and fightin’ means killin’.” Fundamentally, there is no substitute for violence in war as it is the very phenomenon that defines it.

Hard-core, ideologically committed terrorists will not quit, and no amount of persuasion will change that. They simply have to be eliminated. The military and government agencies have largely done well to date in physically protecting the American people from the terrorists. They have built a layered defense consisting of counterterrorism (“rooting out” and killing hard-core terrorists far from American shores) and antiterrorism (making it hard for terrorists to enter America, hardening likely targets, and if they do gain entry, arresting them before they act) provisions.

However, the military and government have not been as effective in avoiding counterterrorist action prone to psychological manipulation through propaganda. In the same fashion that violent images of terror against our own are used as a psychological instrument, so too are images of action against the terrorists themselves. Worse are images of collateral damage to women, children, and innocent bystanders. The “how” of counter-terrorism must always be looked at from the psychological potential of images used as propaganda, as well as the physical effectiveness of action against the terrorists.

From an antiterrorism perspective, the people's perception of physical protection is important, but once a terrorist attack is successful, the government and military are not in control of the means to psychologically protect the people. Whether one calls it spin-doctoring, counter-propaganda or information warfare, the government does not control the final output from the instrument of dissemination, the media. Nor are they capable of maintaining the tempo of modern-day 24/7 global broadcasting. The government and the military in a free and open society are simply not equipped, nor is it advisable, for them to function in this role.

Terrorism is a thinking man's war that requires greater awareness and participation from the people—not just the military and government agencies. On the one hand, it is important to educate the people about terrorism so that they may be on the lookout for suspicious activity and on guard against falling prey to manipulation. On the other hand, the war against terrorism requires the addition of an altogether new class of defense—“sentinels of the mind”—to protect the means of mass persuasion against malevolent use by terrorists. It requires a knowledgeable media that understands the awesome power of their instrument and accepts responsibility for its effects. It places special responsibility on editors as gatekeepers to carefully weigh the necessity and benefit of accurate and truthful reporting against the harm it can achieve. These new guardians, willing or not, hold the key to guarding the public against terrorism. Awaken, Cerberus.

## About the Author

Captain Randall G. Bowdish, USN, is a faculty member at the USMC Command and Staff College. His sea duty included tours as Commanding Officer, USS SIMPSON (FFG 56), Executive Officer, USS HAWES (FFG 53), Material Officer, Destroyer Squadron 35, Engineer Officer, USS HAROLD E. HOLT (FF 1073) and Damage Control Assistant in USS RATHBURN (FF 1057). He served ashore on the Joint Staff, Navy Staff, and Space and Naval Warfare Systems Command. He was a Federal Executive Fellow at the RAND Corporation and served as a Legislative Fellow in the Office of Congressman Ike Skelton (D-MO). Captain Bowdish graduated from the Naval War College in 1995 and the Naval Postgraduate School in 1988, where he earned a Master of Science in Electrical Engineering. He earned a B.A in Psychology at the University of Nebraska in 1981.

For more insights into contemporary international security issues, see our [Strategic Insights](#) home page.

To have new issues of *Strategic Insights* delivered to your Inbox at the beginning of each month, email [ccc@nps.edu](mailto:ccc@nps.edu) with subject line "Subscribe." There is no charge, and your address will be used for no other purpose.

## References

1. The United States Government defines terrorism as "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by sub-national groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience," in Title 22 of the *United States Code*, Section 2656f(d).
2. The object of war, as defined by Clausewitz.
3. Adaptation from Figure 6-13, Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain* (New York: Touchstone, 1998), 164.
4. Of course, terrorists often assassinate key adversarial leaders, as a way to not only achieve strategic psychological effects, but diminish local means of resistance, as well. This is not a new phenomenon. The original assassins belonged to a secret Islamic order originating in the 11th century who believed it was a religious duty to harass and murder their enemies. Their murderous ways caused widespread terror in the Muslim world until the order was brought to an end by invading Mongols and Crusaders. For more on the Assassins, see Bernard Lewis, *The Assassins* (New York: Basic Books, 1968).
5. Pippa Norris, Montague Kern, and Marion Just, eds., *Framing Terrorism: The News Media, the Government, and the Public* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 255-278.
6. David L. Altheide, *Creating Fear: News and the Construction of Crisis* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 2002), 49.
7. The four stratagems of influence consist of pre-persuasion, source credibility, focused message, and control of emotions. For more on propaganda and the stratagems of influence, see Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson, *Age of Propaganda* (New York: W. H. Freeman and Company, 2001), 51.
8. Altheide, *Op. Cit.*, 45.

9. See "[What's in a Frame](#)," *WorkingPsychology.com*.
10. [Deaths: Final Data for 2002, National Vital Statistics Reports 53](#), No. 5, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, October 12, 2004, 2.
11. [Deaths: Injuries, 2001, National Vital Statistics Reports 52](#), No. 21, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, June 2, 2004, 1.
12. A Homicide comparison provides a better frame of reference than other causes of death due both to its violent nature and the victim's utter lack of situational control. For example, Americans were *14 times* (42,443 deaths in 2001) more likely to die in an auto accident. However, people willingly accept the risk due to the perception of control when behind the steering wheel. See Altheide, *Op. Cit.*, 3-4.
13. See President George W. Bush, [Securing the Homeland, Strengthening the Nation](#), Department of Homeland Security.
14. Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 5.
15. J. Galtung and M. Ruge, "The structure of foreign news: The presentation of the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus crises in four foreign newspapers," *Journal of Peace Research* 1, 1965, 64-90.
16. Renee and Brian Kratzer, *Photography Editors as Gatekeepers: Choosing Between Publishing or Self-Censoring Disturbing Images of 9/11*. Paper presented to the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Visual Communication Division, Miami Beach Convention, 2002.
17. Clausewitz defined the center of gravity as "the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends."
18. For an understanding of message diffusion within a society, see Philip Ball, *Critical Mass* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux), 2004.
19. Kim Witte, "[Putting the Fear Back into Fear Appeals](#)," *Communication Monographs* 59, December 1992, 329-349.
20. [Ibid.](#) This is the defining character of the Extended Parallel Process Model (EPPM), proposed by Witte.
21. [Ibid.](#)
22. [Ibid.](#)
23. See the *Society of Professional Journalists* website at [SPJ.org](#).
24. The internet is another matter altogether. Internet sources, in the main, do not hold the same credibility as the global media by virtue of professional journalism's adherence to standards and accountability.