TALKING TERRORISM: CAN WE ETHICALLY COMMUNICATE THE THREAT

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ABSTRACT

The way in which the U.S. government communicates threats to the public has been profoundly impacted by the events on and after 9/11. Writers, scholars, and public intellectuals have noted the use of certain terminology by government officials and politicians has contributed to a polarizing debate on the mere existence and severity of threats to the public. Terms not inherent to the English language such as jihad, jihadist, Islamic, Islamist, and al-Qaeda have taken on new definitions and applications in a language and culture to which they are not native.

Does this new paradigm shift in communication and vocabulary help promote an accurate depiction of threats to U.S. soil? Or perhaps reinforce negative stereotypes that can lead to discrimination that disparately impacts Arabs, Muslims, and South Asian communities in both policy and practice?

Clearly defining the actors and methods that pose a potential threat to domestic security is essential to the execution of a targeted and precise law enforcement or intelligence operations. The body of publicly available information of domestic threats posed by violent Islamist extremist groups and actors can be daunting even to most senior analyst or intelligence professional.
Ambiguity in the scale and intention of these foreign persons, groups, and movements only further complicates already dense topics. It is precisely this lack of clarity where the communication of the true threat can be lost. There are layers of legal and ethical safeguards in place in the intelligence collection, analysis, and dissemination process. But what safeguards are in place to examine how we talk about terrorism? Or do we even need such safeguards?

The post 9/11 era has introduced an entirely new vocabulary to both the Intelligence Community and American public, but neither has substantial historical context or record of usage. Social scientists and communication experts both agree that lexicon and usage in the context of terrorism can encourage certain interpretations and discourage others. Words and phrases lead to associations and implications that may or may not be factually accurate. This thesis will analyze the ethical implications of using, defining, and applying this new paradigm of language specifically within the intelligence and national security frameworks. Can the U.S. Intelligence Community accurately and effectively communicate the modern day threats of terrorism without marginalizing ethnic and religious groups?

The obligation of accurately framing and describing threats to the public is a vital component of the ethical obligation of government officials to maintain public trust and safety. The way in which the Intelligence Community communicates the threats must be as evolving and dynamic as the threats we face. Words matter.
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INTRODUCTION

The American public discourse on terrorism has been completely transformed since 9/11.¹ Not since the first Gulf War in the early 1990s had the geography of the Middle East and South Asia received such a penetrating look by American media. And not since the fall of the Shah in 1979 had the tenants of Islam been kitchen table conversations across the United States, and even the world. The transformation of discourse that was taking place on the American main street was also taking place within the intelligence community. However, the transformation within the intelligence community was of a different nature and held significantly different consequences. Today, likely to an unprecedented degree, the way language is used has taken on a crucial role in the description and understanding of modern day terrorism.

Language is subjective. It is used to convey meaning and ideas between people, and each person applies his or her own acculturated ideas to understand the meaning of words and utterances. How should we deal with the challenge of ethically communicating threat in the national security context?

The way in which the U.S. government communicates threats to the public has been profoundly impacted by the events on and after 9/11. Writers, scholars, and public intellectuals have noted the use of certain terminology by government officials

and politicians has contributed to a polarizing debate on the mere existence and severity of threats to the public. Social scientists and communication experts both agree that lexicon and usage in the context of terrorism can encourage certain interpretations and discourage others. Words and phrases lead to associations and implications that may or may not be factually accurate. This paper will review and analyze the modern comprehension, identification, and the normative discourse of national security threats of terrorism to the United States post-9/11. This review and analysis is particularly important because the nature and scope of national security threats, particularly on U.S. soil, appears to have had a troubling increase in recent years. This increase carries with it a greater need government and law enforcement officials to communicate these threats to the American public, both ensuring public safety and articulating protective measures, policies, and principles.

First, an appropriate assessment and measurements of ethical communication need to be determined. This is an interdisciplinary process that involves multiple social sciences. Therefore, a baseline measurement in specific fields needs to be established. This assessment needs to also involve technical data of how “ethics” and “communication” are measured.

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The centrality of publicly available information related to threats is a key part of the post-9/11 environment. The culture of the intelligence community (and national security environment at large) that currently exists is suspended somewhere between the slightly wavering notions of a country waging a war abroad with massive troop deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan and the increasing fervor around publicly foiled terrorist plots in the U.S.³

Negotiating ethical principles in the context of communication of the threat is a modern reality for any targeted state or democracy. The benefits to ethical communication to both internal and external government and security agencies are almost self-fulfilling. Internally, ethical communicational of the threat preserves the integrity of analytic units and personnel by shielding them from hasty claims of political motivation and bias. Additionally, ethical communications deepen the relationship with allied countries. These international relationships and alliances are socially, politically, and economically complex. Thus, to communicate threat in such a way shows transparency, precision accuracy, and ethical values/considerations, further strengthening these international alliances.

Debates over semantics plague Washington, D.C. and most political environments worldwide. A recent Southern Poverty Law Center report issued in the

summer of 2011 states “rarely has the United States seen a more reckless and bare-knuckled campaign to vilify a distinct class of people and compromise their fundamental civil and human rights that the recent rhetoric against Muslims.”

Words do matter, and how threats are communicated have a range of consequences, both positive and negative. Specifically, the debate rages over acts of terrorism committed by those of the Muslim faith. For those who purport to be in firm adherence of the Muslim faith, their acts of terrorism and political violence are especially under the microscope. For example, debates over the usage and application of the term *jihad* have been ongoing almost since the day after the 9/11 attacks. These debates in media, at times, attempted to explore the foundational and historical meaning of the term and its application, but largely failed to do so. One recent example of this trend is the public criticism of the of the White House strategy to “Prevent Violent Extremism” by Council on Foreign Relations Senior Fellow Ed Husain. The author of the opinion piece states that the goal of the “White House's...
new policy paper, it seems, is not to offend Muslims.”\(^7\) This type of critique is in sharp contrast to the offered cover letter of the strategy signed by the President, which underscores that the government is working to prevent all types of extremism that leads to violence.\(^8\) Opposite this critique, the Muslim Public Affairs Council, and a number of other Muslim American groups offered a press release applauding the White House national strategy.\(^9\) The point of highlighting this type of disparity of both position and strategy is to further underscore the point that public opinions on national security policy are deeply entrenched. What government officials see as a viable strategy, outside experts see as a passive (and long overdue) attempt to address a critical national issue.

According to John Collins and Ross Glover, editors of Collateral Language, assembled a series of essays to highlight the political rhetoric used to justify “Americas New War.”\(^10\) The title of book *Collateral Language* is meant to illustrate

\(^7\) Ibid.


that while “language always shapes our lives, the effects of language during war are unique.”\textsuperscript{11}

The understanding of language becomes especially important when thinking through the developments since 9/11.\textsuperscript{12} They point out that a perceptual pattern emerged linking up any person who appeared “as if” they are Middle Eastern.\textsuperscript{13} According to Collins and Glover, “[t]he immediate increase in racially motivated crimes after the bombings demonstrates the significance of these perceptions.”\textsuperscript{14} According to the website for the Civil Rights division at the U.S. Department of Justice: “[we have] placed a priority on prosecuting bias crimes and incidents of discrimination against Muslims, Sikhs, and persons of Arab and South-Asian descent, as well as persons perceived to be members of these groups.”\textsuperscript{15} The FBI, in conjunction with the United States Attorney’s offices, have investigated over 800 incidents since 9/11 involving “violence, threats, vandalism and arson against Arab-Americans, Muslims, Sikhs, South-Asian Americans and other individuals perceived

\textsuperscript{11} Collins and Glover, \textit{Collateral Language}, 1.  
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 6.  
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 5.  
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.  
to be of Middle Eastern origin.”16 These investigations of “telephone, internet, mail, and face-to-face threats; minor assaults as well as assaults with dangerous weapons and assaults resulting in serious injury and death; and vandalism, shootings, arson and bombings directed at homes, businesses, and places of worship.”17 Because this post-9/11 perceptual pattern has been created that links people who are, or are perceived to be, of Middle Eastern descent to terrorism, a rhetorical precedent has also been created. Author, academic, and media analyst Noam Chomsky, who has written extensively about the corrosive effect this rhetorical precedent has had on American society in the post-9/11 era, further underscores the point that the manufacturing consent of language and images of terrorism has a tremendous effect on society.18

This current state of ambiguity, compounded with inflammatory remarks from pundits and political figures, is one that when fed to a massive media campaign can create a volatile mix of public unrest. The need to communicate threat, together with methods and mediums of communicating such threats, comprise threat communication cycle. This communication cycle is only able to exist when an actual threat and the context in which it is framed are mindful of cultural nuance, terminology, and modern


17 Ibid.

social environments. To better understand “Ethical Threat Communication” we need to be aware of several key factors including:

- The scope and nature of the post-9/11 National Security threat.
- The language and discourse of modern terrorism.
- The 9/11 narrative
- How national security threats are currently communicated

Two theories most applicable for making a logical assessment in this realm are emotivism and prescriptivism. In this thesis, I will analyze threat communication using prescriptivist theory. This theory holds that evaluations are essentially imperatives. Since the field of national security intelligence is often plagued by the use of universalized imperatives, prescriptivism is especially relevant as an analytical lens. For example, after 9/11, there has been a rise of universalized imperatives with the labeling of terrorist actors and terrorist acts. In 2003, the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) conducted a series of polls with findings that the likelihood of individuals holding misperceptions regarding the justifications for war in Iraq were directly associated with their consumption of news coming from American corporate media.¹⁹ The findings of this public opinion poll and similar studies and polling

results demonstrate reasonable support for the theory that universal imperatives are present in television mass media and that prescriptivism is an applicable theory here. This thesis will explore this theory in the national security context as defined herein and attempt to determine the degree to which support for such a theory is reasonable and applicable.
CHAPTER 1  
NAVAGATING THE LANDSCAPE

Determining the nature and scope of a national security threat is a difficult challenge. The threat of terrorism to the United States is an issue that occupies more officials in government than ever before in history.¹ National security threats in the twenty-first century take on many forms, including cyber, chemical, biological, and even environmental. The concept of modern threat, defined as acts of terrorism post-9/11 for the purpose of this examination, have been studied extensively by a wide range of experts with diverse backgrounds and areas of scholarship such as Marc Sageman, Robert Mandel, and Amos Guiora. Robert Mandel, asserts that “[i]dentifying and prioritizing foreign threat have always been fundamental to national security, and this is particularly so in an anarchic world.”² The anarchic world that Mandel describes is part of the growth and evolution of foreign threats to U.S. national security. Many of the factors involved in defining and measuring threat seem almost fluid, such as government-wide consensus for defining “threat.”³ The


³ In an opinion post on Salon.com, political blogger Glenn Greenwald presents a comprehensive look at how the New York Times coverage of the massacre linked Muslim terrorists to the attacks. He also discusses a column published by The Washington Post's Jennifer Rubin based on the same conclusion. Greenwald suggests that the papers' use of the word "terrorism" reveals its
post-9/11 challenge of the government today is narrowing the scope of threat perception, determining the true source, assessing the threat, and defining accuracy.

**Threat Perception**

The nature and scope of a threat depends on who perceives the threat. For example, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. clearly views al-Qa`ida as posing a threat to the American people. This has been a key reoccurring theme in every National Security Strategy of U.S. since 9/11, which defines our defense and national security priorities. The most recent White House effort aimed at *Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States* forthrightly states that al-Qa`ida and its affiliates have attempted to recruit and radicalize people to terrorism here in the U.S., and part to the strategy to defeating al-Qa`ida is countering it’s violent ideology.⁴

Al-Qa`ida and its affiliates would argue that their attack was a response to attacks by the West upon Muslim peoples and their lands and, therefore, actions such as suicide bombings and other guerilla style attacks are justified.⁵ U.S. national security and defense infrastructure, like the majority of other industrialized countries

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after World War II, was established with the assumption of a clearly defined enemy. In the 2006 book by Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom, *The Starfish and the Spider*, the unstoppable power leaderless organizations is explained. Brafman and Beckstrom describe the structure and functional nature al-Qa`ida from its early inception: While al-Qa`ida as a terrorist organization was expanding and successfully committing acts of terrorism around the world in the 1990s, it remained a largely decentralized organization with limited command and control structure. Due largely to the antiquated national security intelligence infrastructure in the U.S., meticulously detailed in the 9/11 Commission Report, the ability to ‘perceive threat’ from a foreign terrorist organization that seemed more aspirational than operational was a task for which the U.S. was mostly unprepared.

The scope and nature of nation security threats to United States has continued to change and evolve into new forms throughout the decades. As threats evolve, so do the ways the U.S. constructs and depicts the threat image. These images, in a sense, “define the enemy” for the American public. The construction and depiction of the image of “threat” is closely linked. In an article published in 2004 in *Conglomeration, New Media, and the Cultural Production of the “War on Terror,”* James Castonguay takes a unique assessment of post-9/11 imagery associated with

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America’s “war on terror.” According to Castonguay, Jack Valenti, the head of the Motion Picture Association of America, reminded participants at a meeting with government officials of his industry’s goal by saying: “We are not limited to domestic measures. The American entertainment industry has a unique capacity to reach audiences worldwide with important messages.” Valenti’s statement underscores the vast nature of the creation of imagery in the U.S. related to the war on terrorism. Not only were government officials creating their own narratives and images of the enemy to help define our national security goals, but Hollywood was also enlisted to help deliver that message to not just the American public, but the whole world.

The images of the greatest threats to U.S. national security have always been closely related to the images of our designated enemies. The concept of enemy and threat are nearly inextricable. The image of the “Wanted” poster often comes to mind when one thinks of those who pose a threat. In fact, the history of the “Wanted” poster is also linked to the establishment of military intelligence over 90 years ago. In 1919, the “Wanted” poster was first used by the FBI to announce a wanted fugitive

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10 Mandel, Global Threat, 28.

to as many people as possible. Other than the picture of a wanted felon or fugitive, it seems difficult to project threat in a single still image. During the Cold War era, the image of the red Soviet Union flag depicting a hammer and sickle was a nearly universally understood symbol of Communism. However, the actual threats of Cold War era from the Soviet Union were more likely nuclear proliferation, espionage, and an overall arms race, not threats to the U.S. political system. Even simple images can carry with them meaning and inference far beyond any symbol or depiction.

Another infamous symbol associated with threat, war, and terror is, of course, the swastika. Its origins possibly date back to ancient India, but it is most commonly known as the official emblem of the Nazi party. For most of the world, the symbol of the swastika represents the death and destruction that Nazi Germany wrecked throughout Europe. The actual shape of the swastika does not directly stand for Nazi ideology, but it is the common association because it was so closely connected to the horrific actions of Nazi Germany. The swastika was prominently displayed on all Nazi propaganda – much like a logo or brand. Its consistent and ubiquitous use throughout Nazi Germany solidified its connection to Nazi ideology. Similarly to the Soviet flag during the Cold War, the swastika carries with it meaning far beyond its simple shape. Both symbols were ultimately associated with grave threats and acts of terror and oppression.

Accurately capturing the images of threats to the U.S. homeland is indeed a difficult task, and a single such image may not even exist. As a society we resoundingly return to the infamous “Wanted” poster. Our emotions point to the need to create an image in times of duress, whether through words or pictures, that resembles the enemy or threat—which thus constitutes our threat. The dimensions of the “Wanted” poster are loud and clear: that the picture on the poster is someone who should be considered a grave threat. Accurate illustration of threat goes beyond using vocabulary that represents good vs. evil. Rather, it entails creating a depiction in the narrative sense of some type of potential impending physical harm.

Part of depicting a threat involves a play on emotion. Words can indeed generate certain reactions when positioned in certain ways. The image of an enemy allows for the immediate and progressive construction of both offensive and defensive policies as well as operations. The image of an enemy can also greatly increase the rate by which actions are taken. The high stress and high anxiety associated with incidents of post-9/11 terrorism are fuel to illicit responses that are what Mandel says “less likely to take into account the complexity of their environment, more likely to consider fewer policy options, and more likely to choose policy alternatives impulsively.” These are emotional reactions, often not well thought out and rationalized, and play directly into a self-perpetuating cycle of often underdeveloped

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13 Mandel, Global Threat, 29.
national security policies and procedures that seem to besiege many developed countries post 9/11.

The images of the enemy during WWI, WWII, Vietnam, and the Cold War were varied. For WWI, the dominant images in the American public where those of trench war fare, U.S. soldiers in trenches, and large mechanical tanks on the battle field. For WWII, the infamous photos of U.S. troops storming the beaches of Normandy were known universally at the time, along with the striking imagery from Nazi Germany marked so poignantly by the swastika. During the Vietnam War, the images that saturated the American public were those of troops shipping out as well as U.S. troops fighting the Vietcong in the jungles of Vietnam. Also, as mentioned earlier, the images of the Cold War were the dominant images of the former Soviet flag on all types of literature, posters, and billboards. This type of imagery, closely paired with the discourse on war and imminent threat, contributed to the depiction and more narrowly-defined view of the threat of terrorism to the U.S. Mandel asserts that “[d]uring the 1980’s America saw Japan as economic enemy and Soviet Union as political enemy.”14 The post 9/11 era has dwarfed the all economic, political, and social encroachments on the “American way of life” and has elevated the threat from violent Islamic extremists to an unprecedented level. This elevation should not be considered inaccurate, or even debatable, but rather a nuanced development that requires careful study and consideration of long-term implications.

14 Ibid., 35.
Determining the Source of Threat

It is difficult to define what is and is not an actual threat to the U.S. and its interests abroad. It may well be that the answer lies more in art than science; per Mandel, “[t]he great problem is not having a solid comprehension of the dynamics of modern threat.”\textsuperscript{15} And these dynamics begin with the perception of threat as discussed earlier. From there, the dynamics of modern threat include determining its source and making an accurate assessment on the severity, and the measurement of this accuracy will help determine what actions, if any, the government or military should take. Further, how we determine “threat” is influenced by the types of threats that are unique to today’s national security environment.

Even placing aside the question of who actually instigates a national security threat, there is the issue of where the true source of a threat lies. Mandel argues that our threat theory has been stagnant over the past 30 years and is embedded in the Cold War era security context.\textsuperscript{16} Changes in threat comprehension and response are critical to both disrupting and responding to large scale foreign attacks such as Pearl Harbor and 9/11.\textsuperscript{17} To take the example of the 9/11 attacks, Osama Bin Laden and al-Qa’ida leadership were almost immediately determined to be responsible and soon after, brazenly admitted their culpability. However, it is difficult to determine if it is the

\textsuperscript{15} Mandel, \textit{Global Threat}, 2.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 4.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
leadership of this nebulas organization or the foot soldiers who physically execute the attacks that pose a greater threat.\textsuperscript{18} It is also important to acknowledge that rogue states, or “failed-states,” as journalist Fareed Zakaria points out, that provide a safe haven for terrorist organizations pose a serious threat.\textsuperscript{19}

At issue is a conceptual shift in the way threat is understood, communicated, and thus acted on. Leaderless and decentralized organizations are part of the challenge to making this conceptual shift. Additional contributing factors are the complexities associated with “failed-states.” This set of factors, leaderless and decentralized terrorist organization, coupled with a growing list of “failed-states” across the globe, are major contributing factors to the way the U.S. understands, communicates, and responds to nation security threats. Until this conceptual shift in both government and civil society reaches a more serious level of comprehension and maturity, the Cold-War era mentality will continue to play a more dominant role than it should.

\textbf{Cold War Perspective}

Any academic or analytical discussion with American officials or intelligence professionals on the subject of threat inevitably touches on the Cold War practices,

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{18} Many national security experts have documented in great detail the growing rift between the leadership and followers non-state terrorist organization. Author and expert Mac Sageman authored the book “\textit{Leaderless Jihad},” who’s thesis principally supports this point. See also Newsweek article by Jeremy Khan, “The Next Al Qaeda?,” \url{http://www.newsweek.com/2010/02/25/the-next-al-qaeda.html} (accessed March 20, 2011).

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{19} Fareed Zakaria, “\textit{The Failed-State Conundrum},” \url{http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/07/18/AR2010071802734.html} (accessed July, 19 2010).
which, more than any other time period in American history, contributed to the creation of today’s intelligence practices and defense policies. The Cold War era helped define and establish the national security and intelligence infrastructures that exist today. For it was just after the end of World War II that the CIA was established and the Department of Defense created its own military intelligence organization.

The traditional threat target during the Cold War was primarily one opposing government and its political ideology. This clarity of threat and intellectual motive provided a consistent and manageable threat pattern, despite a turbulent national security environment. As intelligence analyst David More writes in a paper for National Defense Intelligence College (NDIC) the conundrums’ of this shifting environment demand fresh critical reasoning:

[T]he world in which intelligence analysts work has changed dramatically over the 67 years since the beginning of the Second World War. Adversaries have shifted from large armies arrayed on battlefields to individuals lurking in the shadows or in plain sight. Further, plagues and pandemics, as well as floods and famines, pose threats not only to national stability but even to human existence…Our times demand fresh, critical reasoning on the part of those tasked to assess and warn about threats as well as those tasked to act on those threats.  

In the one superpower scenario of the Cold War, an entire defense apparatus and intelligence infrastructure was established to defend against the then communist threat. In 1949, supplements to the National Security Act of 1947 created the Central Intelligence Agency and also consolidated the national defense structure into one

cabinet-level department with a single secretary reporting to the President.21 This infrastructure of both intelligence and defense in the post World War II period were shaped, almost exclusively, by the recently mitigated threat that Nazi Germany posed at the time. This singular focus of the threat of an opponent carried over well into the start of the Cold War.

**Post-Cold War Paradigm**

The failed states threat scenario, on the other hand, presents a completely different landscape and operating picture. Fast forward to the post-9/11 era and a threat environment consisting of designated terrorist groups operating in largely lawless parts of world seemed to dominate the United States world view. In a now famous headline featured on the cover of Newsweek in October of 2001, only a few weeks after the 9/11 attacks, asked “why do they hate us?”22 In the article, Fareed Zakaria analyzed the political, economic, and cultural landscape of the Middle East and South East Asia from the perspective of national security threat. His conclusion was that complicating factors in the areas of governance, religion, and the cultural concept of idealism were all far lacking the developments the rest of the world had

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endured in the previous decades. These multiple layers of political, economic, and cultural factors are difficult enough to grasp for a single country or region, but in the new post-9/11 threat environment they are now part of an evolving global environment. This new environment challenges not only the way the U.S. perceives national security threats, but how we respond as well.

Post-Cold War threat sources assume several fundamental differences from threat sources during the Cold War. The primary Cold War threat focus remained political-ideological for over nearly three decades. In contrast, post-Cold War threat sources choose tactic and attacked based on more cultural-religious divides. In the post-Cold War era, according to Mandel, “emerging threats have been typically covert, dispersed, decentralized, adaptable, and fluid, with threat sources relatively difficult to identify, monitor, and target, contain, and destroy, and with theses sources’ past actions not necessarily a sound guide to their future behavior.”

Examples of state and non-state actors that exemplify this characterization are the modern day countries of Somalia and Yemen, and non-state actors such as al-Qa’ida and Hezbollah. The post-Cold War era presents a menu of complexities that are neither formal nor clearly defined. This fundamental shift is most shockingly apparent in the attacks of 9/11 and

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25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., 11.
in the progression of terrorism related incidents since. This post-Cold War shift in the nature and origin of threat was indeed not an abrupt one, but rather a gradual shift fueled by population shifts, growing international conflict, and, most notably, the escalation of violent Islamic extremism.27 Mandel claims that “[a]t the level of threat recognition, the end if the Cold War also meant a shift in intelligence’s stock and trade from puzzles or questions that could be answered definitively given the necessary information to mysteries or questions that cannot be answered with certainty no matter what information is received.”28 Madel’s statement underscores the fact that improving the sources and methods of national security intelligence practice alone are not absolute safeguards. Rather, a more complete reform from Cold War style operations is needed.

A side-by-side comparison of Cold War threat vs. post-Cold War threat highlights the vast magnitude by which potential threats in the U.S. have multiplied and evolved.29 For example, when assessing threat during the Cold War, the primary rival superpower was the Soviet Union. However, in today’s post-Cold War era no one rival superpower remains. There is, instead, an array of rogue states, transnational


29 Mandel, Global Threat, 12.
terrorists, criminals, and so on.\textsuperscript{30} Transnational terrorists and rogue states have consumed much of the government’s discourse related to national security in the years following 9/11.\textsuperscript{31} The effect of trans-national terrorism has come to a full state of maturity for Western governments, and the ambiguity of real or perceived threat is now a matter of exploiting every lead to the point of exhaustion. The differences between one superpower and many rogue actors presents a cultural and ideological shift in the way U.S. defense policy and national security strategy had been developed and implemented.

\textbf{Threat Assessment}

The post-Cold War era, combined with post-9/11 security environment, has irrevocably changed our threat analysis and response, and this has happened in a number of ways. The post-9/11 intelligence environment has been mockingly scrutinized in recent years for the over emphasis to “connect the dots.”\textsuperscript{32} The most recent example is the attempted bombing of a Northwest airline flight by a Nigerian national who had an explosive device sewn into his underwear on December 25, 2009. A Newsweek article described the incident as “[p]ossibly the worst terrorist strike

\textsuperscript{30} Mandel, \textit{Global Threat}, 12.


against the U.S. since 9/11 was averted only by luck and the bravery of other passengers and the airplane's crew.” This was a frightening thought to many members of Congress and senior Administration officials.33 After the failed attempt, the specific failure of “dots” to connect or pieces in intelligence reporting to properly analyze was made apparent. Approximately one month before the incident, the alleged perpetrator’s father, a wealthy banker, visited the U.S. Embassy in Nigeria to express concern that his son had fallen into the company of Yemeni-based extremists. News reporting also indicated that the National Security Agency had intercepted intelligence that al-Qa’ida in Yemen was planning an attack against the United States using a Nigerian national.34 In addition to these two key facts, the alleged perpetrator was also denied a visa to the United Kingdom, but maintained a multiple-entry visa to the United States. This case resulted in a thwarted plot, but from the perspective of successfully “connecting the dots”, it was a complete failure.

Just prior to the Northwest airline incident, a mass shooting took place on a military base in Fort Hood, Texas. The sole shooter was U.S. Army Major and psychiatrist Nidal Hasan. After the shooting, an investigation by the Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee concluded that “the Army and FBI [missed] warning signs and [failed] to exchange information that could have prevented


34 Ibid.
the massacre.” In this example “dots” were not connected. In fact, information between the FBI and the Army should have been shared, but was not for largely bureaucratic reasons, the Committee found. These two examples of the Fort Hood shooting and thwarted bombing of a U.S. airliner are telling of the fragility of national security intelligence. Even the most minor and seemingly obscure piece of information can have a global impact.

The complexities of modern terrorism are many, but a key issue related to the post-Cold War era is knowing how to classify or label modern threats. Authors Mona Harb and Reinoud Leenders conclude that “caricaturing one’s opponent in terms that justify or call for its elimination is as old and common as political conflict itself. Yet few notions have provoked as much disagreement as that of ‘terrorism’.” Modern terrorism is indeed a unique phenomenon, but as the Harb and Leenders point out, some fundamental issues such as caricaturing of opponents or threats to security still abound. Labeling a person, organization, or group as a ‘terrorist’ carries with certain legal, diplomatic, and military ramifications. The Department of State and the Department of Treasury have extensive criteria behind the factors for such a


36 Ibid.

designation, as well as the consequences to such a designation. These criteria are a legal designation and apply to the entire U.S. Government:

Legal Criteria for Designation under Section 219 of the Immigration Nationality Act as amended:

1. It must be a foreign organization.


3. The organization’s terrorist activity or terrorism must threaten the security of U.S. nationals or the national security (national defense, foreign relations, or the economic interests) of the United States.

As this criterion demonstrates, organizations or groups meeting these distinctions are considered a threat to “U.S. nationals or national security” in some form or fashion and are thus labeled accordingly.

Specifically related to post-9/11 examination, Harb and Leenders say that “by the rediscovery of the notion in the post-9/11 ‘war on terrorism,’ discursive battles have been fought as intensely as military ones, with all contestants and their sympathizers rejecting and placing their mutual characterizations at the core of their

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disputes.” The ‘discursive battles’ they describe are essentially the debates marked by analytical reasoning that come with labeling, or classification decisions such as this. With non-state actors and groups designated as terrorist organizations, such as al-Qa’ida and Hezbollah, we begin to understand to designate certain groups, but this need does not fully address the subjective nature of our understanding of such a designation.

Overall, global security threats are today “more varied in nature, more numerous in terms of the countries able to project them, above all more capable of being delivered from one side of the globe to another, than at any time in history.”

Since the conventional wisdom has been turned upside down about the nature and source of threats, we continue struggle to deal with the looming threat of violent Islamist extremism. The new American foe is often network based, trans-national, highly flexible and able to adapt to vastly different social, political, and economic environments. The challenge that is made clear in this new environment is that the American national security enterprise must remain equally nimble and adaptive.

The national security enterprise has undergone massive reorganization since the attacks on 9/11, and along with the reorganization has come a steep increase in the

40 Harb and Leenders, “Know Thy Enemy,” 174-175.


42 Mandel, Global Threat, 15.
private sector firms and professionals who support this enterprise. This massive government reorganization, the largest since the creation of the Department of Defense in 1947, has come about for the better or worse and seems to be here to stay. The national security enterprise has also seen new management and focus by the Obama administration, but the past strategies of the Cold War seem to still permeate our post-9/11 national security strategy.

Defense against all threats, whether terrorist or otherwise, is an essential part of the American national security doctrine. This defense however must be up to meeting the onslaught of challenges in the post-9/11 environment. Mandel states that “[t]hanks to its inability to cover the ambiguous and diversified range of post-Cold War threats and its outmoded Cold War threat focus, the West ironically possesses the greatest preparedness for exactly the kinds of threat that are least likely to occur today—ones calling for applying conventional military force in direct coercive confrontations.” This inability for the United States to adapt to post-Cold War threat is one of the core reasons behind the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). In addition to the creation of the DHS, another post-Cold War and post 9/11 attempt to

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45 Mandel, Global Threat, 47.
adapt to modern threat is the creation of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. The labors to adjust both the authorities and operations of the national security enterprise in the months and years after 9/11 remain in an almost perpetual state of evolution and configuration. This perpetual state was ushered in largely by the work of the 9/11 Commission Report and continues today in a series of congressional oversight bodies and panels. A final definitive judgment remains to be rendered on the effectiveness of this organization. It is unclear whether our defense and intelligence officials and our policy makers will depart from conventional schools of thought and adapt to the new and evolving national security threats. During the Cold War, intelligence assessments could be made based on Soviet troop movements and capacity, but the post-Cold War intelligence era provides few, if any, conventional fixtures for permanent and long term collection and analysis. The lack of such fixtures further complicates the degree to which the essential systems and functions of collection and analysis can contribute to higher degree of accuracy that is within both scope and context of the most current social and cultural factors.

**The Role of Accuracy**

The question that both the American public and American policymakers seem to ask most often in relation to the production of national security intelligence analysis falls in the category of accuracy. The question is simply: “is the information

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(intelligence) accurate?” This is a question that the American public has heard repeated over and over in the months and years after the 9/11 attacks. On the accuracy of intelligence and National Intelligence Estimates, Hastedt claims that “accuracy is an intuitively appealing standard, lending itself to an easy-to-convey scoreboard counting method to assess the performance of the Intelligence Community (IC), and offering the promise of identifying the possibly errant behavior of those to whom blame can be attached.”

This most simple human desire to attribute culpability and sanctions in the wake of some type of offense is not only true in interpersonal relations, but in the functions of governments as well.

The concept of accuracy may seem intuitive in matters of national security intelligence, but like other professions, its practitioners are just as susceptible to error. In a study conducted by the Center for the Study of Intelligence, experimental psychologists examined the relationship between the amount of information available to the intelligence analysts, the accuracy of judgments they make based on this information, and the experts' confidence in the accuracy of these judgments. Key findings from this research are: Once an experienced analyst has the minimum information necessary to make an informed judgment, obtaining additional information generally does not improve the accuracy of his or her estimates.

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Additional information does, however, lead the analyst to become more confident in the judgment, to the point of overconfidence. Additionally, experienced analysts have an imperfect understanding of what information they actually use in making judgments. They are unaware of the extent to which their judgments are determined by a few dominant factors, rather than by the systematic integration of all available information. Analysts actually use much less of the available information than they think they do.\textsuperscript{49} This combination of factors can, in certain circumstances contribute to environment in which a lack of information processing coupled with hastened judgments can not only significantly diminish the degree of accuracy, but also contribute to an environment lacking the firm rigors of intelligence analysis.

On the issue of accuracy in intelligence estimates, Hastedt notes “in many ways accuracy is a flawed standard for judging intelligence estimates.”\textsuperscript{50} Hastedt argues that the use of accuracy raises the question of how accurate one must be and what is an acceptable level of accuracy. Hastedt points out that accuracy is suspect because of the after-the-fact nature of the evaluative process.\textsuperscript{51} This concept of accuracy further complicates how to assess national security threats.

The modern developments of terrorism and the perceived rise of post-9/11 violent Islamist extremism lead the practitioners of national security intelligence,


\textsuperscript{50} Hastedt, “Intelligence Estimates,” 104.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 105.
academics, and thought leaders who study these developments to mostly agree that new, sophisticated, and emerging frameworks are needed to advance the understanding of and response to post-9/11 threats. Commenting on the issue of intelligence failures, Dr. Tamas Meszerics and Dr. Levente Littvay, both professors at Central European University in Budapest, Hungary note that “[i]n major historical cases, telling apart the otherwise conceptually distinct tasking from collection failure, or both from analytic failure and dissemination failure, has proven to be rather difficult.”52 The vantage point from which the authors provide this quote is through the lens of major intelligence failures. Meszerics and Littvay accurately point out a perspective that the new millennium in the United States started with two major intelligence failures, the 9/11 attacks and the absence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.53 This vantage point which they depict serves as significant starting point from which a subsequent decade of intelligence and national security and defense issues defined a period in time mostly unseen since the end of WWII.

The nature of threats to the U.S. has changed radically from the Cold War to the post-Cold War period. The days of predictability of the enemy and its capabilities and next moves are virtually gone. The new era of intelligence collection on cutting edge mediums has barely arrived and is already evolving. The new post-9/11 security


53 Ibid., 135-136.
The threat has indeed changed, and Western intelligence frameworks have changed, but imbedding threat awareness, analysis, and response into a permanent culture is a task that remains. The way we talk about national security threats shapes how we understand them. The definitions, measurements, and lexicon of modern terrorism and national security threats occupy a large space in the public sphere of discourse. American government officials and media pundits play a leading and defining role in this discourse. The coupling of modern terrorism and national security threat paradigms has played a formative role shaping our thoughts and ideas on these issues. The post 9/11 decade has significantly influenced not only the public discourse in this area, but the academic, political, and economic prisms through which public safety and security are evaluated.

The degree to which a range of post 9/11 social and cultural factors have influenced our daily lives is often overlooked. Occasional reminders come into play when for example people are traveling and undergo so some new and enhanced security screening procedure at our nation’s airports, or perhaps in less subtle ways.

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like the USA Patriot Act measures that are in place when we open new a checking account at a local bank for example. These measures, either in the form for of tangible security for air travel, or regularity forms in banking and fiancé are intended to protect Americans and their way of life.
CHAPTER 2
LANGUAGE AND DISCOURSE

Understanding language is a matter of course within context. Former United States Senator, President of San Francisco State Universality, and English professor at the University of Wisconsin, S.I. Hayakwa is well known for his work in linguists and semantics. In 1949 he published *Language in Thought and Action* which was the first of its kind examination of modern language and its uses. Hayakwa draws many relevant points that assist in an examination of language post 9/11, but of particular note is Hayakawa’s depiction that words carry different meanings depending on a person’s perspective. “It would be startling indeed if the word ‘justice’, for example, were to have the same meaning to each of the nine justices of the United States Supreme Court; then we should get nothing but unanimous decisions.”\(^1\) If we accept this principle of meaning variation within context, we also accept the principle that context has significant revelance. The context of modern terrorism and its resultanting public perception are nothing short of being in a complete state of evolution (and, at many times, confusion). Words - the way we use them and the way we understand them when spoken by others - shape our beliefs, prejudices, ideals, and aspirations.\(^2\) Words constitute the moral and intellectual atmosphere in which we live and which


\(^2\) Ibid., 11.
coexists within the national security intelligence architecture. This type of coexistence, according to Hayakawa, is a *semantic environment.*

In a book published a few years after 9/11 entitled *Collateral Language,* authors John Collins and Ross Glover assembled a collection of essays to what they state as “expose the tyranny of political rhetoric used to justify America’s New War.”

The authors claim that American political leaders and mainstream media outlets attempted to generate public support for wars in Afghanistan and Iraq through the expression of powerful ideas and language to invoke emotional support. According these authors, the effects of language during wartime are unique, and even more so with *War on Terrorism* post 9/11. Vocabulary related to government agencies and subject matters can often be highly specialized and require particular understanding of definitions and their applications. Similarly to the transformation in American public discourse on terrorism post-9/11, a more specialized understanding and definition for terrorism is needed, but as the Collins and Glovers suggest, this type of understanding and definition are largely in limbo.

After the attacks of 9/11, there began to be an emergence of a new vocabulary with a unique tone and tenor that meshed a historical political-military lexicon with descriptions of the presumed culprits behind the attacks. Because the crimes of 9/11

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3 Ibid.

were perpetrated within the last decade, the time for serious research and analysis is just beginning. This, however, is not to be confused with the work of criminal and intelligence investigations, which have been nearly continuous since September 12, 2001. The work of intelligence involves making value judgments in writing at every stage of both the intelligence and policy cycles. While the language and lexicon of these value judgments continues to evolve, we must continue to take into serious consideration that multiple readers of intelligence products can take away meanings that were never intended.\(^5\) We need to escape the narrow debate of what specific words are correct to describe modern terrorism and instead ensure that threats are articulated in a manner that captures the events and puts them into the proper context.  

**Language and Persuasion**

Language, both written and spoken, can be a powerful tool for persuasion. One of the most striking examples of this is the language used by Hitler’s Germany. According to Collins and Glover, “[u]sing the language of unification distributed through sophisticated propaganda techniques, Hitler managed to turn many of his nation’s people into racist murderers.\(^6\) In a more positive example, the rhetorical skills of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. are widely held to have been the driving force for

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\(^5\) Hayakawa, *Language in Thought*, 40. “As it is, however, we are all too likely to have automatic, or signal, reactions to certain words and read into people’s remarks meanings that were never intended.”

\(^6\) Collins and Glover, *Collateral Language*, 3.
change during the American Civil Rights movement. His famous “I have a Dream”
speech is studied by students and rhetoricians extensively as having been a milestone
for not only the Civil Rights movement, but also for American history. King’s speech
shows that powerful words can create social movements capable of changing the social
and political landscape of an entire generation.

In its spoken form, language can have a tremendous psychological impact on
the respondent. Manuel Velasquez, et al, discuss the psychological impact of verbal
commands despite objections of conscience.7 The authors investigate the moral
question associated with verbal exchanges that can generate unethical behavior from
ordinarily descent people. In their article, they examine the Milgram experiment,
named after Yale Psychologist Stanley Milgram and his ground-breaking work on
obedience after the start of the trial of German Nazi war criminal. The authors point
out that, “Milgram concluded that when people are ordered to do something by
someone they view in authority, most will obey even when doing so violates their
consciences.”8 The authors conclude that the role of language for persuasion,
manipulation, and behavioral influence was clear. The hold that: “[i]n view of the
Milgram experiments, the Nazi crimes are not difficult to understand. Milgram himself

7 Manuel Velasquez et al., “Conscience and Authority,” Issues in Ethics V1, no. 2 (Winter
1988), Under Santa Clara University, Markkula Center for Applied Ethics,
8 Ibid.
suggested that one of the major factors accounting for the Holocaust was the ready propensity of human beings to obey authorities even when obedience is wrong.”

There are many lessons that can be taken from the Milgram experiment, but most import to note for this context, as the authors did, is that in the post-WWII period a transformation of the understanding of the influence of language was taking place. Similarly, as noted earlier in this paper, the transformation of discourse that was taking place on the American main street post-9/11 was also taking place within the national security environment and would be studied for decades after.

Additionally, written language can be employed to persuade, and serves as the primary vehicle of communication in the national security context. Written language in the intelligence community serves as the conduit for assessments, analyses, and reports. The intelligence process survives on the collection, analysis, and dissemination of what is perceived to be pertinent information. In the forward to a book on national security writing, editor Jan Goldman expands on the importance of written communication in the nation security environment by stating:

Intelligence relies on transmitting information to those who will link it to additional information or immediately forward it to someone who will put that information into context or action. Only then does it become intelligence. Writing is the raison d'être of the intelligence professional. It is the primary basis of collecting, analyzing, and producing intelligence. Effective writing

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9 Ibid.
equips the intelligence professional with the communication and thinking skills needed to be successful.\textsuperscript{10}

To understand the interconnectedness of intelligence and national security writing with the usage of applied terminology and rhetoric in the post 9/11 context, we need to look no further than the daily volume of national security intelligence reporting. In this context, the true influence of language and transformational nature this discourse are most evident.

Rhetoric can be employed in various ways. Rhetoric, as defined by Merriam-Webster Dictionary, is the art of speaking or writing effectively.\textsuperscript{11} Rhetoric is at the core of national security intelligence because the information it gathers is supposed to convince (or dissuade) the appropriate audience that something poses a threat. Aristotle held that rhetoric in its most basic form included three components: \textit{logos}, \textit{ethos}, and \textit{pathos}. Logos draws on reason or logic, and it often depends on the use of deductive or inductive reasoning. An example of logos could be a Congressional study arguing either for or against a national security position. Many examples of logos were on display in the lead up to the war in Iraq with the intelligence reports


claiming that Iraq held weapons of mass destruction. Ethos is an ethical appeal and is based on the character, credibility, or reliability of the writer. An example of ethos in this context is that of a political figure making statements in a certain capacity (i.e. the President speaking from the position of Commander and Chief). The ethos position was most recently on display with statements from President Obama on military U.S. and NATO intervention into the political instability and humanitarian crisis in Libya. Lastly, pathos is an emotional appeal and appeals to an audience's needs, values, and emotional sensibilities. An example of pathos would be the emotional appeal of a traditional political campaign speech. In a campaign speech the candidate is trying to appeal to voters’ needs and values, thus proving his or her ability to best represent the constituency. All three elements of rhetoric can be used independently or all together to collectively influence a position or previously held assumption. This functional understanding of applied rhetoric which we gain from Aristotle in the context of modern terrorism and national security intelligence is a critical component to the evaluate ethical threat communication.

According to Hayakawa, an interesting dynamic exists whereby there is not necessarily a connection between a symbol created by language and that which is

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13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.
symbolized. Thus, if language can construct a symbol, this may be independent of that which is represented. Whereas, in Modernist/Platonic thinking, a word or image directly relates to its referent, and, accordingly, we know through our reason what the referent is. The intelligence cycle is comprised of various stages of evaluation and refinement with strong reinforcement from modern society. The most skilled practitioner or analyst may unwittingly draw on language supportive of ideologies that may be far from accurate. Society is shaped by semantic influences and the national security environment is as well.

The field of national security intelligence is coded with a complex vocabulary all its own. This field uses a unique array of acronyms and technical terms, which are often used publicly in news, media, and general information sources as well as in controlled or classified government sources. However, since the meanings of words are subjective, it is easy for the general public to misunderstand the government’s use of such terms. This is because our society is rooted in Platonic principles. There is a general belief in objectivism, and this belief hinders us from really understanding that language and meaning are subjective. The ultimate challenge is what we as a society

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assume to be the case (objective language) really does not exist and is actually the opposite (subjective language).

**The Case for Ethics**

How does this relate to modern terrorism? Or to the national security intelligence field that is supposed to protect us from modern terrorism? The dynamics of modern terrorism and national security intelligence are both of the subjective nature. The reason for the discussion of *ethical subjectivism* is to underscore that these issues include moral matters. They are not purely action and reaction, but include a series of moral judgments made both by the perpetuators of terrorist acts as well as those charged with defending them. In the words of philosopher David Hume, morality is a matter of sentiment rather than fact.\(^{18}\) To apply this analysis author of the *Elements of Moral Philosophy*, James Rachels provides two practical stages.

The first is *Simple Subjectivism*. “When a person says that something is morally good or bad, this means that he or she approves of that thing, or disapproves of it, and nothing more.”\(^ {19}\) This theory is simple and uncomplicated, and provides a basic template to analyze many of the statements and expressions around modern terrorism and the field of national security intelligence. The problem with this theory is that we sometimes make incorrect or inaccurate statements, so how does simple

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\(^{19}\) Ibid.
subjectivism deal with this? The problem is that it doesn’t. You can disagree with a person’s feelings or statements, but you can’t take them away from people. Thus simple subjectivism might be a great fit for many applications, but not our current examination of the language of modern terrorism and national security intelligence.

The second stage, Emotivism. According the Mary Gore Forrester, author of Modern Language, “the oldest of the nondescriptivist theories of the meaning of evaluative terms is emotivism.”20 Developed primarily by American Philosopher Charles L. Stevenson (1908-1979), Emotivism was one of the most influential theories of ethics in the 20th centenary.21 Similarly to the growth and expansion of the Emotivist theory, the national security intelligence enterprise has ballooned since the attacks on 9/11.22 The purpose of stating both the influence of a theory of ethics, and social and policy implications, is to demonstrate that what we are making a statement that is either true or false depending on the perspective of listener. The purpose of the utterance, typically, is only to convey information to the listener.23

Relevance of the Discourse

20 Mary Gore Forrester, Modern Language (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 96.

21 Rachels, The Elements of Moral, 36.


23 Rachels, The Elements of Moral, 36.
Language used in all parts of the intelligence cycle carries with it a significant amount of importance, or deference. The business of assessing threats related to terrorism in the post-9/11 intelligence environment is not only extremely difficult and under great scrutiny, but this process carries with it the near inseparable association of the acts of violence perpetrated by persons who claim to be strict adherence of the Muslim faith. According to the federal judge and prolific writer Richard Posner, “[i]ntelligence is not prophecy but information that is often incomplete or erroneous and assessment that often is speculative, failures of prediction are a constant rather than being a function of the details of the table of organization.”\footnote{Richard A. Posner, \textit{Countering Terrorism: Blurred Focus, Halting Steps} (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 22.} After 9/11, the concept of terrorism in western countries correlates with an almost immediate mental connection to the Islamic faith and its adherents across the globe. One example of such data comes from a September 7, 2003 poll conducted by ABC News.\footnote{ABC News Poll with Analysis by David Morris. “Unease Over Islam Poll: Critical Views of Muslim Faith Growing Among Americans,” \url{http://abcnews.go.com/sections/us/World/sept11_islampoll_030911.html} (accessed 1 August 2011).} This result of this telephonic poll titled “Unease of Islam,” essentially says the broad unfamiliarity with the religion of Islam has given way to a sense of suspicion which has risen sharply since 9/11. This association made by average citizens and non-security professionals is a telling sign of the tremendous impact of symbolism related
to modern terrorism. In the national security business the language of intelligence has helped define symbols of terrorism. Hayakawa appropriately notes that “of all forms of symbolism, language is the most highly developed, most subtle, and most complicated.” 26 Better understanding the extent of this complication will lead to improvements in national security intelligence products, and a more compressive understanding by the American public as well.

The national security intelligence agencies within the U.S. government that are involved with policy formulation and implementation are predisposed to create, by the nature of a direct relationship with the collection and analysis of both open-source and classified intelligence, a relationship rooted in language. The function of inferred language, while closely connected to human behavior and interaction as seen in the Milgram study noted earlier, takes on an increasingly decisive role in the national security context whereby the lexicon and language of intelligence establishes the policies, programs, and procedures for sizable national security enterprise.

This chapter demonstrates that language in the national security context has a wide range of applicable analysis including but not limited to ethical, narrative, and contextual. Building from historical lessons in the first chapter we see that analysis of this area of language is indeed useful to improve the baseline knowledge of national security professionals and practitioners. This improvement in baseline knowledge of

26 Hayakawa, Language in Thought, 16.
national security professionals and practitioners should therefore translate into improved communications both inside the functions of government as well as to the general public.
CHAPTER 3
THREAT COMMUNICATION

Communications is a critical function of government. It also supports the complex needs of the national security establishment. Throughout this paper, an analysis of applied ethics in relation to the communications of the national security threat of terrorism has been examined in several relevant categories. The way in which threat is communicated is influenced by how we think about the meaning of threat, the use of language, and how threat is a main part of the 9/11 narrative. Communication of threat is not left to a single actor, but both government and media participate in communicating threat. This leaves the viewing public to decide for themselves the legitimacy or credibility of the communicator. In the post-9/11 era existing methods of communication are increasingly problematic as the scope and nature of the national security threat of terrorism continues to evolve.

Many aspects of communications are involved in the daily practice of U.S. national security and defense. These features include communications strategies used by the media and U.S. government. There are many mediums of communication in the national security environment, but of particular interest here is the convergence of national security threat, government response, and subsequent communication to the American public. On September 12, 2001, the political discourse defining the U.S. homeland and the “War on Terrorism” was at its inception. Author and Professor Sandra Silberstein used the term “trajectory” to describe the culmination of events
immediately following the attack on the World Trade Center leading to the wars that followed. The linguist trajectory of those events began at that single point of attack.¹

**Government Communications**

Today, when the description of an international incident of terrorism takes place, political leaders in the age of new media are quick to make public statements that attempt to accomplish two primary goals. The first goal is ensuring public safety and the second goal is to directly address governmental actions. The latter objective entails accurately describing an act of terrorism and communicating the facts in a manner as advised (or, in most cases, prescribed) by intelligence and national security officials. This portion of communication is a critical part of this process and is based on information of both open-source and classified information that government leaders will use to issue statements. This combination of incident communication and national security situation assessment leads directly to the communication of known threats.

The national security environment uses several key components in communicating threats. First, the intelligence community, made up of the seventeen agencies and organizations that work both independently and collaboratively, gather the intelligence necessary to conduct foreign relations and national security activities (executive branch). They then brief members of congress by committee (legislative branch) and apprise state and local law enforcement officials of potential collection or

look-out needs. Lastly, they alert the public. The national security intelligence cycle is made of up a spectrum of methods - archives, templates, and sequence - to communicate their respective messages of threat.²

The intelligence community has a long history of active use of its archives. These archives include previously released documents, reports, analysis, and subject-specific materials released through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. For example, the CIA public website publishes historical and recent declassified information. Most telling, however, are the archives used in the intelligence community for “lessons learned” from the Cold War era. A trademark of American bureaucracy is to continue looking for repetition in the way things were done in the past to avoid creating redundancy, and archives are key to this.

Templates can have many functions in our everyday lives, and play a consistent role in both the production of news media and national security intelligence analysis. The primary role of a template is to establish a defined set of parameters, or criteria, by which to apply a set of facts. Templates are essentially a way to help produce standard reporting practices or products for nearly any body of information regardless of complexity and variation. Templates are comprised of a set number of categories or criteria which control and shape the way in which the information that passes through it is interpreted. In the national security context, templates are used to logically gather

² Andrew Hoskins and Ben O'Loughlin, War and Media: The Emergence of Diffused War (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010), 106.
various pieces of information into a coherent product to be used by appropriate practitioners for defense, security, and communications purposes.

The traditional intelligence cycle consists of (1) planning and direction, (2) collection, (3) processing, (4) analysis and production, and (5) dissemination.3 While these components create the basic framework for communication threat, narrative creation completes the intelligence cycle. An important part of the analytic and production framework is the need to raise critical intelligence that meets a certain threshold of “warning” to policy making officials. Before the intelligence cycle even begins with a plan, there is usually a type of “prime” or acculturation that precedes an event or story. Priming influences people before they even begin to develop a plan for collection and analysis. This essentially sets the tone for the intelligence cycle. This dynamic helps drive the reader (intelligence officer) to look for information that will make a clearer delivery. Priming adds a complex and problematic element to this process because it can create the illusion of a threat that may not exist.

The environment in which national security threat communication takes place starts within the intelligence community. This environment is where potential threat takes shape by framing the situation within the appropriate context. At the heart of the assessment as to whether threats can be communicated adequately is a friction

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3 Central Intelligence Agency, “The Intelligence Cycle,”
related to the means and purposes of national security policies and institutions.\textsuperscript{4} The conflict lies most centrally in the frame and scope applied to perceived threats, most notably those that take a violent Islamist extremist form.

There are numerous reasons that clearly communicating a threat adequately is a complex endeavor for government agencies. Not taking appropriate steps to do so would seem to undermine the national security intelligence production process – whose primary function is to inform policy makers with timely and accurate information.\textsuperscript{5} Another growing area of concern is the presentation of threat information with the assumption that policy makers accurately perceive the threat.\textsuperscript{6} In most cases, members of Congress have little if any formal training or substantive knowledge in the area of national security intelligence. The attacks of 9/11 ushered in a new era of national security reform, and a new perspective on terrorism that was well documented by the bipartisan committee that published the 9/11 Commission Report. The increased rate at which the threat of terrorism has been on display since 9/11, coupled with uncertainty of predicting potential future acts of terrorism, make it incredibly difficult


for policy makers to accurately respond to perceived threats. This is often the case with regular changes in leadership and senior management.

The current post-Cold War intelligence environment remains in a state of near constant flux, and intelligence briefings on international or regional data often fall short of providing a complete picture. One of the more challenging aspects of this problem set are the deficiencies associated with anticipating the ripple effects associated with terrorist acts. These ripple effects can include the limited potential for law enforcement and emergency service response in many areas of the country, such as Washington, D.C. In a recent *Washington Post* article on the state of preparedness for a terrorist attack on the city’s metro system, experts said that the deterred effect of creating a new anti-terrorism unit is limited. This shows us that at the local, state, federal, and even international levels the difficulties of threat communications are pervasive.

**Media Communications**

The media plays a crucial role in communicating threat to the public. Coverage of terrorism has been amplified to an unprecedented level. The media coverage of 9/11 and coverage of terrorism and national security topics since then has successfully created a new dimension in the field of journalism. This new dimension

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8 Ibid.
has been an awaking for both the journalists covering these unfolding events and for the American public. According to Hoskins and O’Loughlin, “[t]his also extended to a new insecurity within journalism, unsure how to act as a buffer between terror events and it’s intimately connected audiences, while being the chief conduit for those terror events.”9 This form of cognitive dissonance that media professionals experienced, and continue to experience, is not in fact unique to the profession of journalism, but rather one of the interesting byproducts that the era of modern terrorism has produced.

The news cycle generally has several distinct phases. The key phase in this regard is the one that occurs before an actual event unfolds, which is the period for priming or delivering speculation in anticipation of an event or occurrence. An event is actually transpiring, on the other hand, is considered live or “breaking” news and information after the event is generally considered a report or a read out of the facts that transpired. This cycle plays an interesting role in the threat communication both in public and in classified government channels. A similar dynamic to the news sequence mentioned above transpires in national security intelligence cycle.

Interestingly, television employs the same vehicle for threat communication as the intelligence community. In fact, the evolution of television news has not only revolutionized human to human connection, but has become a powerful force for shaping, framing, and defining events through the ability to instantly archive and

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9 Hoskins and O’Loughlin, War and Media, 15.
become accessible through multimedia. According to Hoskins and O’Loughlin:

“The success of a terrorist operation depends almost entirely on the amount of publicity it receives. This is one of the main reasons for the shift from rural guerilla to urban terror in the 1960’s; for in the cities the terrorist could always count on the presence of journalists and TV cameras and consequently a large audience”

Similarly, TV broadcasts’ use of archives is an integral part of framing an issue for the viewing audience, and akin to the intelligence cycle, television wants to remind its audience of all past elements of relevance.

Modern media has expanded the threat cycle dramatically. It has created a new, insatiable appetite for news and information, especially in Western countries. During the Cold War in the mid-late 1980s, the news cycle progressed at a manageable rate to correlate with the viewing public’s demand. The beginning of operation Desert Storm/Desert Shield in the early 1990s gave news outlets the opportunity to report on a conflict that was being viewed on an international level. The perceived “threat” to regional security and stability was the Saddam regime’s advancing forces

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into neighboring state Kuwait. This threat was greatly magnified by dramatic news coverage that included live shots from journalists that were embedded with advancing troops. In this situation, several factors were at play. First, it was the first major international conflict post-Cold War. Second, the perceived threat was dramatically magnified by the 24-hour cable news along with the massive sensory impact of war. The sights, sounds, emotions of war were being broadcast in live streaming feed to living rooms around the world. The third interesting note about the first Gulf War was its position on a historical timeline. The “dot-com” bubble just started to inflate in the early 1990s and Western countries, especially the U.S., were completely taken by the advent of the internet. This desire and hunger for new mediums of information, 24-hour streaming news, and the growth of the internet at the same time that a perceived threat to the security and stability of the Middle East was taking shape left a discernable impression in the conscious and subconscious perception of threat.

The interesting feature of modern terrorism is just how much it is dependent on media coverage. Unlike a car thief or bank robber who presumably would prefer no attention to his or her crimes, the existence of terrorists feed upon the existence of media coverage for the cause and actions almost completely irrelevant of the success, or failure, of their campaigns of fear and violence. Hoskins and O’Loughlin claim that “[n]ews modulates terror by often simultaneously amplifying and containing
It has been proven in crisis after crisis that terrorism and television coverage do have a natural affinity for one another. The immediacy and seeming reality of television coverage act as a launching pad for terror globally. Note that in television coverage there is a distinction between terrorism and terror. For example, a scene of terror, such as a horrific car accident or massive fire, may invoke fear and horror but not because of a specific intention of terrorizing. Disasters and events - both manmade and natural- are capable of instilling fear and terror in anyone who witnesses such events, even via television. Television is a part of life, and not just in the U.S., but globally. Images and sound for history books are captured and seen on TV, but along with this venue, almost unavoidably TV coverage from near its inception was knowingly and forcibly assaulted by persons and groups intent on projecting hate, intolerance, and violence to the global viewing audience. As Hoskins and O’Loughlin point out, “[the function of television in accentuating and assuaging terror is inextricable from its wholesale consumption and construction of time(s) and set out this relationship in what follows”.

This modern inextricability is of the foundational challenges of threat communication that is likely to remain with us as the new age of media continues to flourish.

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14 Hoskins and O’Loughlin, War and Media, 14.

15 Ibid., 25.

16 Ibid.
Due to its ubiquity, it seems that television news is currently the most convenient medium for reporting events and situations as they occur. However, the dynamic of a medium such as television for communication can become problematic when the context of threat or perceived threat is applied. The application or discussion of threat can be official or unofficial government sources, public events transpiring, or even certain legal documents being filed. The reason for this potential problem or conflict is what authors Collins and Glover call “manufactured consent.”

Manufactured consent in the post-9/11 era includes the array of public speeches, government reports, congressional hearings, and media reporting that support specific positions or policies. Collins and Glover claim that “a central project of any political rhetoric is to develop support from people…and the more control the state has over the language a population hears and the images it sees, the easier it is to develop “democratic” consent.” This point further proves that language, even when vague in nature, can still play a significant part to influence how people perceive certain domestic and international events. At points in our everyday lives we can be influenced by language without even knowing it. This conscious and subconscious role that language plays as a determinate factor that shapes our perceptions of people, places, and events is central is the discussion of threat communication. With

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17 Collins and Glover, Collateral Language, 3.

18 Ibid.
appropriate acknowledgement of this fact, a more nuanced and weighted approach to the communication of national security threat information can be formed.

The images seen on TV in the months and years since the 9/11 attacks are part of the current perception and imagery created around modern terrorism. It is through this window of post 9/11 emotional and psychological trauma that the use and function of language becomes such a critical component of the perceptions the American people have of modern terrorism. The post-9/11 security environment is unique in many ways, but one in particular is the distinctive coupling of national security matters with function television media. This distinct union is not only inseparable in the post-9/11 era, but one from which the manufacturing of consent and expression of attitudes of government policies and procedures are on full display.

Television viewers have instant accessibility to images and discourse surrounding threats of terrorist nature. The collection of footage related to terrorism is simplistic in construct and displays a narrow selection of images from 9/11, Iraq, Afghanistan, Osama Bin Laden, and miscellaneous terrorists whose faces are generally recognized as being associated with terror. Footage and imagery include men depicted as culturally South Asian or in Arab clothing doing some type of “training”, such as shooting guns, walking balance beams, and running through tires. These limited projections are continuous parts of the news media penetrate our senses and invoke associations to threats of terrorism, resulting in more permanent impressions on our memory. The sights and sounds delivered in the days and months
after 9/11 is part of an emotional trauma for not only Americans, but also for the global community of citizens. An established memory of images and sounds conjure up near immediate certitude of the imminent threat.

Another challenging concept about threats of terrorism communicated through television news is that this medium is a unilateral interaction. The same information is broadcast in the relatively identical fashion over dozens of channels with only cosmetic changes from channel to channel. Hoskins and O’Loughlin assert that “[t]he medium serves the purpose of the advocates of terror and the War on Terror through endless juxtaposition and repetition, sustaining visual and oral linkages between temporally and geographically separate events. As such, television news is increasingly part of, and thus constitutive of, those events.”19 The medium of television is an incredibly important, almost essential means of communication in many parts of the world, but this medium is increasingly acting as an unknowing linchpin for the strategic goals and objectives of the perpetrators of modern terrorism.

There have been volumes written on the portrayal of specific events in TV news and print media. It is a widely held American view that in the age of 24-hour cable news, the demand for information, reporting, and sound bites is so great that the news intake is literally and figuratively insatiable.20 The question of whether we

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20 Ibid., 87.
ethically communicate the threat presents a new challenge in this news cycle. When placed together, growth of the intelligence community after 9/11 and the massive craving of public media consumption create a new environment in which information, facts, and statements by government officials can easily be distorted and manipulated. “A television style of relentless immediacy prohibits reflection on the themes represented, in the process reinforcing assumptions and mythologizing institutions (the presidency, counter-terror agents, terror networks) already familiar to news and political discourses surrounding the War on Terror.”21 This set of dynamics presents a unique combination of social and institutional factors that in the post 9/11 era creates both the challenge and opportunity of improved national security threat communication.

After the attacks on 9/11, the media sought to inform the viewing public about a religion it was largely unaware of, Islam, and its adherents, Muslims.22 ABC news, CNN, and other major cable outlets began running a series of in-depth programs aimed at giving the American audience an “inside look” into the religion. One of the more noted programs is a series by Christiane Amanpour, a CNN international affairs correspondent who undertook a series a in-depth episodes devoted to developing an more comprehensive view of Islam, Muslims, and their interactions in everyday life.

21 Hoskins and O’Loughlin, War and Media, 160.
22 Silberstein, War of Words, 149.
At the same time these public programs were broadcast to inform the American public a similar campaign was being waged within the intelligence community. As mentioned earlier, tasked with informing policy makers, intelligence professionals began the massive undertaking of informing their customers on the growing and evolving subject of violent Islamist groups and actors.

Positioning in communications and media is critical. The order in which news is reported, the time period it is aired, who is communicating the information, and what is reinforcing it are all important factors. These are important elements of message delivery and acceptance. When a security or intelligence official speaks or reports on an emerging conflict or increased tensions in the U.S. or abroad, this person speaks from an inherent position of authority. So communications to policymakers, the public, or even law enforcement officials come with implicit trust in the speaker because of the federal agency logo or title associated with the information. In 

*Television and Terror* Hoskins and O’Loughlin present the case they call the “CNN effect.” In the lead up to the war in Iraq, they analyze the CNN coverage and draw a distinct example of positioning from a posture of authority in public media: “Having taken the perspective of the U.S. government and security services throughout their coverage, CNN then constructs a *logic of equivalence* in the agents these authorities face that draws together the ‘threat’ of Iraqi military, terrorists, and anti-war
protestors.”23 This example of logic of equivalence is also true in national and international events not directly associated with national security intelligence matters. One example of such an event is federal government handling of the response to the financial crisis of 2008. On one hand the federal government response needed to secure financial markets and convey strength in the economic outlook of the U.S. economy, while on the other hand pursue persons and companies who took advantage of market vulnerabilities. The communications cycle during the financial crisis in many ways mirrors the a number of national security events. Specifically, the lead up to the 2003 war in Iraq played out almost daily on nearly every major American media outlet: “2003 Iraq war demonstrates how television coverage can act to reproduce the framing and assumptions of political discourses advanced by elected officials.”24 The framing and assumptions of political discourse in the post 9/11 era are indeed reflective of the national political climate to some degree, and in the case of national security threat communication this reflection can play a significant part in strengthening or weakening certain assumptions.

Television, specifically, is an incredibly powerful medium for communication. It can be used for a wide range of communications, including as Hoskins & O’Loughlin state: “In relation to the spread of terrorism and terror in the twenty-first


24 Ibid., 98.
century, television had become weaponised.\textsuperscript{25}  Why is television news such an influential part of communicating threat? Part of the reason may be that nearly all news segments attempt to discuss or draw from similar events from recent history to make parallels, thereby presenting widest frame of reference for the perceived threat that may be transpiring. For newscasters and commentators to make loose connections and draw parallels to other seemingly similar events can be problematic because no two events in history are the same; and in the case or terrorist incidents, motivations, methods, and outcomes vary so widely that drawing parallels to other seemingly similar events in history may only serve to give the viewer an incorrect historical context for the events transpiring. The framing of threat, specifically modern terrorism associated with violent Islamist extremist groups, by newscasters or pundits can lead to potentially inaccurate and unintentionally deceiving correlations of true security threat and over-inflated hysteria around innocuous cultural, religious, or political acts.

\textbf{Communicator’s Legitimacy}

Legitimacy is a core issue related to threat framing, definition, and communication. Information sources are under constant criticism in both the worlds of media and national security intelligence. Information feeds into the cycles of national security intelligence and news media from a wide variety of methods and modes. In the field of national security intelligence, “collection” by any means, whether human

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 101.
intelligence, signals intelligence, open-source, etc., must withstand the stringent oversight of source legitimacy.\textsuperscript{26} Similarly, in news media, there is a code of ethics that governs those working in the profession of journalism. The legitimacy of the information is critical to its consumption in both fields, with the ultimate goal of shaping a body of information and making a significant contribution to its analysis.

The need to define source legitimacy, whether in the national security intelligence context or news media application, carries a subjective set of standards to determine quality of information. The understanding of legitimacy gets muddled when what one person considers legitimate may not be the same as another person (this is the subjective problem). It is in this fashion that the communication of threat is impacted. The legitimacy of information, its source, and style and method of communication is central to effective message delivery. Thus, perceptions of information for use in national security intelligence and news media both maintain a critical reliance on information legitimacy and subsequent usage for delivery.

Ethics & Communication Dilemma

The process of threat communication in both the classified channels of government and the public outlets of television news share many similar practices for processing information. Both national security intelligence and television news share the use of templates for nearly all reporting and analysis. Templates in both contexts

share common goals, such as information clarity, impact relevance, and uniform
delivery model. Information or intelligence is introduced in both mediums, then
applied to templates, processed, and delivered. When similar information is processed,
whether it is national security intelligence or television news, the required procedural
elements of information processing remain vulnerable to the misconceptions of
context, frame, and actual threat. The reason for this vulnerability is largely due to the
subjective nature of the content and application.

With regard to the theory of emotivism, Mary Gore Forrester, author of *Moral
Language* tells us that according to a newer form of the theory that “evaluations are
expressions of attitudes, not toward particular objects, acts, and persons as such, but
rather of attitudes toward them held in virtue of certain characteristics they possess.”
In the approaches to communications discussed above, this application of theory,
emotivism is a valuable window through which to view television media. The key
feature that makes emotivism apply to television media is the element of evaluation
that it takes with various shows, news commentary, and similar programming. When
we watch TV every day we are constantly making evaluations about what we see and
hear whether we approve of the information or news reporting we hear. These feelings
we have about news and information we see on TV, the approval or disapproval of

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those opinions and actions are mere feelings, and not true evaluations.28 These types of reactions or feeling are neither true nor false, but only mere expressions of attitude at that moment and time.29

The sequence of information dissemination is a critical part of the delivery for successful and effective communication. In his book Mass Media, Mass Propaganda, author Anthony DiMaggio establishes the relationship between news narrative and the influence over the viewing public. The main reason that sequence of information is so important is that the order in which information is assembled and aligned is essentially the construction of information context. As DiMaggio points out, this sequence is likely representative of the world view of the news reporter, editor, or media institution.30 The construction of context together with the historical connection of information from archives applied in inflexible templates results in TV news or national security intelligence that is out of context and improperly framed. And in the case of national security intelligence, the greater result is then the inability to accurately communicate threat.

The current culture of threat communication has three primary problem areas. The first is oversupply of information and commentary on terrorism, terrorists, and

\[\text{\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 96-97.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.}\]

national security defense against terrorists and terrorism. The ongoing stream and hours and hours of TV interviews with current and former officials, along with op-eds, magazine articles, newspaper headlines, talk radio programs all devote time to the topic of terrorism in a fairly schizophrenic and uneducated fashion. Stunned by the severity of the attacks and loss of American lives on 9/11, the focus on terrorism as been a dominant theme in government and media since that September morning. The oversupply of information related to modern terrorism is two sided, both in great demand by the American public and of great supply by the newly created national security enterprise created after the attacks.

The second problem is a lack of centrality for public information related to threat, terrorism, and national security. While the reorganization of the intelligence community and the creation of the DHS are mostly regarded as positive attempts to better secure the homeland and protect U.S. interest abroad, the roles and responsibilities for safety and security are indistinct at best to the average citizen. There still remain seventeen different agencies and organizations who are members of the intelligence community, and the role of the Director of National Intelligence, while defined, is still in the awkward position of directing the actions of agencies whose budgets and personnel are independently controlled. The new Director of National

31 Silberstein, War of Words, 1-38.
Intelligence and newly created National Counterterrorism Center have not maintained a steady repository for public inquiries on national security matters, nor have they attempted to do so. Rather, many of the new levels in the national security environment have contributed to the confusion of which agency and director speaks for the whole of government.

The third problem is the absence of effective public affairs strategies by national security and intelligence agencies. In the eyes of many in the American public, as well as many members of Congress who opposed the case for going war, this set of actions has created more than ample shadow of doubt. Recovering from this major set-back and working to improve the image of our various intelligence agencies will take more than the election of a new administration or the redesigning of our public websites. A public affairs strategy on threat needs to be straightforward and focused. The example of the DHS alert system served at an initial attempt in this area to “communicate the threat” and it was truly a first of its kind.\(^{33}\) That alert system (recently removed) is evidence that a nimble system of threat communication is needed, and not relying on one mechanism or medium is critical.\(^{34}\)

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Realities of threat, and the communication of such realities by both government officials and perceived persons of authority meet at the critical convergence where threat is framed and defined, and policy making and operations plans begin to take shape. According to Hoskins and O’Loughlin, “[t]he issue at hand, then, is to understand how it is that different perceptions of reality emerge, for only then can we see why different perceptions of security, threat, and terror exist.”\textsuperscript{35} The subjective nature of threat after 9/11 is not isolated, but rather part of a broader global trend of violent extremism of both the religious and nonreligious nature. From the philosophical point of view this global trend has no true absolute value, but instead is purely subjective, and also part of the larger philosophical view of subjectivism.\textsuperscript{36} When national security threats have been described through a media outlet or through government officials, the evaluations made are not merely evaluations of approval or disapproval, but the underlying sense is an expression of attitude, thus underscoring the emotivist application.\textsuperscript{36} This subjective nature of both post-9/11 national security threats and the way in which they are defined, described, and discussed are seemingly expressions of attitude—emotivism. However, again, our society is fairly grounded in Modernist/Platonic thought. So, these images may be subjective, but people still

\textsuperscript{35} Hoskins and O’Loughlin, \textit{War and Media}, 163.

\textsuperscript{36} Forrester, \textit{Modern Language}, 96-101.
believe that they can point to a “truth” that we can all know. And therein lies the problem.
CONCLUSION

Communications, in the national security and intelligence context, is far too subjective to draw a narrow application of ethical standards. After reviewing a number of ethical theories, it has become clear that the aim of ethical language in the context national security and modern terrorism is such that objective standards cannot apply.

The 9/11 attacks have become the de facto framework for nearly an entire body of national security intelligence analysis and threat warning. The intelligence failures and subsequent lessons learned in the past decade have now become the metric against which every granular piece of intelligence is held against for exhausting comparison and probability. Part of the measurement also includes appraisal for similarity or intent of even the most remote reflection to the 9/11 attacks, al-Qa`ida, or a similar permutation.

The 9/11 attacks shined a spotlight on gaping holes and deficiencies in the intelligence community. The subsequent policy decisions to correct these holes and deficiencies established two key deliberation points to all future intelligence analysis.

The first point being analysis of each new piece of intelligence collection with the consideration that the information no matter how seemingly irrelevant could be part of a larger threat enterprise, and treated with new sense of interconnectivity to a larger and more ominous threat environment.
Second, not only a renewed concentration on new and emerging national security intelligence, but the almost draconian view that every piece of new and emerging intelligence is somehow related to al-Qa‘da and another potential 9/11 caliber attack.

Given the fact that the events of 9/11 were among the most traumatic events in U.S. history they shaped perceptions and emotions of the American public to a degree that few other events have. As professor and former CIA official Paul Pillar notes in a recent article “[i]t is not an exaggeration to say that the thoughts of most Americans about terrorism and counterterrorism revolve almost entirely around 9/11.”37 He goes on in the article to note that most Americans believe a “war on terror” began with 9/11, notwithstanding all the terrorism and efforts to counter it before that one event.38 The point that the pure raw emotion of the events has given way to series of unexpected or unanticipated human reactions is often an underappreciated point when analyzing the impact on vocabulary and overall public comprehension. On this point Pillar states that “trauma and emotion are not generally conducive to good understanding of any topic, terrorism included, and it should not be surprising that Americans’ trauma-driven attitudes and beliefs about terrorism are misplaced or inaccurate in important respects.”39 It is precisely this point of comprehension surrounded by trauma,

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38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.
emotion that the normal processes of logical reasoning and communications become skewed and even distorted.

Throughout the intelligence process selective decisions are routinely, and mandatorily, made about the scope and severity of various threats. There currently exists a structured preference to align new or emerging threats into the pre-established frameworks of al-Qa`ida. This should not be labeled as negative bias or somehow disparate application of analysis, but rather the harsh reality of the relative immaturity and lack of shear historical perspective from which to gauge modern terrorism and national security threat. By historical standards, the decade after which the events of 9/11 occurred is an extremely short amount of time. Decades after WWII, Vietnam, and the Cold War historians and academics from all disciplines continue to review and analyze documents and historical accounts from those periods in history while still discovering new or previously undiscovered historical facts that could give way to new avenues of academic research. This type of academic research is a critical component to growing and developing the methodology of our national security infrastructure and programs.

The ethical convergence that law professor and author Amos Guiora points to should not be limited to media depictions of terrorist and victim (action/actor) and recounting of tragic events, but rather is should look ahead to what might happen to
present a skilled estimation or warning. It is at this point that the ethics of journalism meets the craft of warning intelligence, and it is there that communication to the viewing public is not only a static recantation, but also a tempered caution of potential peril.

In order to be able to ethically communicate threats the organizational culture of the intelligence community must be set up to do so. Currently, the culture is set up in two very separate but distinct areas: foreign and domestic.

The principle agency responsible for domestic national security intelligence is the FBI and in the foreign domain the CIA. Domestic national security intelligence collection and analysis conducted by the FBI falls within the venue of the criminal justice system, which presents a unique challenge of communicating threats to stakeholders. Whether to members of congress or the American public, it is the inherent need to do so in a criminal justice context. This dynamic ultimately leads to arrests and prosecution, with the end goal being successful prosecution. According to Posner, “[t]he cultural difference between criminal investigation and national security intelligence is related to the difficulty of developing good performance measures for intelligence work”. Standards of performance vary widely, even within the

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domestic context of the DHS and the FBI. As they also vary widely in the international context as well between the metrics of measurement for analysts at the CIA and State Department for example. The U.S. Agency for International Development also has an intelligence arm. While all these agencies indeed serve different principles with varying needs, there continues to be confusion both strategically and in the sense of organizational culture of the threats as they emerge, evolve, and potentially inflict harm.

New options for measurement need to be created. The Cold War methodology of counting military machines and troops no longer exists, and so a dynamic measurement framework that pushes the envelope of evolving threats is essential. An evolution in the methodology of national security intelligence analysis has certainly taken place in the years since 9/11, but it seems that this progress has not evolved at the pace which domestic terrorist plots have grown. Intelligence analysis is intended to provide policy makers with the necessary body of information to make both policy determinations and prescriptions. When the intelligence cycle both directly and indirectly contributes to the policy process it is imperative that issues are framed without any ambiguity or bias position. At the heart of this issue is whether the intelligence community can factually and accurately report on domestic or international incidents on national security significance.
The modern developments of terrorism are indeed complex and require a large scale effort to comprehend, decipher, and catalog. But how, if at all, does this help in the area of prevention of these violent and fear inflicting acts? One of the gaping holes that remain is the calculated inability to identify what are substantial knowledge gaps in foreign countries, cultures, and the new globalized world of interconnectivity that dominates the field of national security intelligence. According to Meszerics and Littvay organizations downplay the import of deep uncertainties in the external world and the significance of generic biases in human cognition. A recent example of this level of uncertainty was at play by senior national security officials in the U.S. leading up to the calls for reform and unfolding political revolution in Egypt. Meszerics and Littvay state that “[a]s practitioners fail to point out, intelligence analysis is much less an individual cognitive exercise than an academic work in general.”

Cementing the intelligence community in a new post-Cold War framework is not the answer to all national security issues. Rather, establishing a series malleable measures to increase accountability, challenge presumptions and conventional thought, and learn from historical patterns are keys to building an innovative foundation in

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44 Meszerics, “Pseudo-Wisdom,” 140.
national security. “In order for checks-and-balances to function with democratic threat targets, government threat assessment needs to rest more explicitly on hard evidence, and acceptance of the resulting severity analysis needs to rely more on the quality of such threat information than on the past record or reputation of those assessing threat.”

This emerging environment holds the answer to the ethical communication of threats and the shared global understand of safety and security.

In the narrow context applied in this paper a failure to ethically communicate threat mirrors case criteria of analytic intelligence failures where the major problem is one of comprehension, estimation, evaluation, and prediction. Failure is ascribed to one of these distinct areas because broad attribution of missing or invalid information would be overly simplistic and leave no critical lesson from which to improve. The need to flush out subsets and conceptual elements of national security intelligence cycle intake and production phases can help expose the suspected underlying problems of our established intellectual capacity of threat related to violent Islamist extremism post 9/11.

The body of publicly available information of domestic threats posed by violent Islamic extremist groups and actors can be daunting even to most senior analyst or

45 Mandel, Global Threat, 92.
47 Ibid.
intelligence professional. Ambiguity in the scale and intention of these foreign persons, groups, and movements only further complicates already dense topics. It is preciously this lack of clarity where the communication of the true threat can be lost.

The post 9/11 era has introduced an entirely new vocabulary to both the Intelligence Community and American public, but neither has substantial historical context or record of usage. Social scientists and communication experts both agree that lexicon and usage in the context of terrorism can encourage certain interpretations and discourage others. Words and phrases lead to associations and implications that may or may not be factually accurate. The importance of accurate, nuanced, and articulate communication in the area of national security is of critical importance in the post 9/11 generation.

The way in which the U.S. government communicates threats to the public has been profoundly impacted by the events on and after 9/11. Clearly defining the actors and methods that pose a potential threat to domestic security is essential to the execution of a targeted and precise law enforcement or intelligence operations. The obligation of accurately framing and describing threats to the public has evolved into a field that at times is plagued by the bureaucratic and political factors that often constrain government officials. This cognitive dissonance of the actions and awareness modern terrorism remains part of the American public landscape at the moment, but as past generations of war and conflict have proven, history will be one of
our strongest allies for the comprehension and articulation of events. The history of
the post 9/11 decade will also, without question, shed light on future events and the
evolution of national security and Homeland Security continues to grow and evolve.

The obligation of accurately framing and describing threats to the public is a vital
component of the ethical obligation of government officials to maintain public trust
and safety. The way in which the Intelligence Community communicates the threats
must be as evolving and dynamic as the threats we face. Words matter.


