

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

Public Diplomacy and the Importance of Careful Labeling ^[1]

Worldcasting was reminded this week of why the word "labeling" should be used with the greatest of care in the practice of public diplomacy.

One example was the trip to Turkey by Pope Benedict XVI, during which he sought to calm Muslim rage over his earlier quotation from a medieval text that labeled Islam a violent religion. It was also the week that NBC News decided to label the violence in Iraq as a "civil war," not simply a "war."

It was also suggested this week that word "war" itself was a bad choice to label what is going on in Iraq. Professor Martha Crenshaw of Wesleyan University says the Bush administration made a tactical error when it framed Afghanistan and Iraq as part of the "global war on terror."

Speaking at a counter-terrorism event at Washington DC's National Press Club, Professor Crenshaw maintained that the "war" metaphor "implies there is an identifiable enemy, and in war one side wins and the other side loses." She asserted that President Bush boxed himself into a corner with the "war" label, and the word "war" contributed in part to the (Republicans) losses in the mid-term elections." She continued, "By declaring it a war, you have to declare a victory at some point. Remove tyranny and replace it with democracy worldwide. Very ambitious and victory is probably a long way off."

Social psychologist Clark McCauley of Bryn Mawr College agreed, asserting that it would have been better to refer to terrorist acts as a "crime," with its individual criminal acts accountable to the criminal justice system. "This would undercut the Bin Ladens who want to be known as 'warriors,'" he said. "When you're talking about war you're talking about unlimited priorities where all others take a back seat. While it's good to mobilize all the forces in war, the bad thing is that it's very difficult to maintain that. The criminal justice system puts you in a frame where you have a long continuing response to a long continuing problem. We're not fighting an army, but rather fighting a well organized criminal gang. Interpol may be a better model than NATO."

Jerrold Post, professor of social psychiatry at the George Washington University, labeled the terrorism problem "a psychological epidemic and virus of extremism. Children are being inoculated with this virus of hatred and heroism... the new media spreads the psychological dilemma. Leaders do not have face-to-face contact with their group. They are urging Muslim Internet professionals to disseminate news and information through e-mail lists, discussion groups, and Web sites." He said U.S. government efforts at public diplomacy must work to combat terrorist efforts to reach hearts and minds.

Panelist Jeffrey Victoroff, neuropsychiatrist at the University of Southern California, said the influx of Muslims into Western Europe "is a reverse of the crusade, and poses a terrible threat to the West. There has been a poorly-conceived response to that threat. But there is research

that inter-group relationships can be modified. So my hypothesis is that terrorism can be reduced if you invest in modifying these terrible group relationships (between Muslims and non-Muslims)." Dr. Victoroff concluded, "We are in a very long conflict, and unless we win their hearts and minds in Western Europe, they will come and hurt us over here."

Moderator Dr. Arie Kruglanski of the University of Maryland summarized by saying that "convincing the enemy that terrorism doesn't work is easier said than done. Terrorists have considerable staying power with success on the ground." He cited the examples of Hezbollah and Hamas in conflicts, and terrorism in Iraq. Dr. Kruglanski continued that terrorists think the West is "vulnerable, and tends to run out of steam... and war leads to collateral damage," from which terrorists gain the active support of the population affected. "To the U.S., the UK, and Israel, war is a natural response to aggression. The states are equipped to do this, with their sophisticated machines, with their advanced technology. The U.S. response to 9/11 was to convince the perpetrators that terrorism doesn't work, to undermine their ideology."

The panel discussion was sponsored by START, the Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Response to Terrorism.

Perhaps James Baker's Iraq Study Group, scheduled to issue its report within days, will have looked carefully at the option of handling the insurgency as a police action, through the criminal justice system, introducing Interpol into the equation. It could be worth a try.
