THE REIGN OF BUSH’S TERROR

by

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6 July 2005

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Presented to session on “Terrorism: The US ‘War on Terrorism’,” to the 37th World Congress of the International Institute of Sociology, Stockholm Sweden: Frontiers of Sociology, July 5-9, 2005, Wednesday, July 6, 2005.
THE REIGN OF BUSH’S TERROR

The 9-11-2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, New York City, was a “defining moment,” and not only for George Bush. One can debate whether it was an “act of war,” “asymmetric warfare,” “terrorism,” or a “crime against humanity.” We do know that the Bush administration defined 9/11 as an act of international terrorism and declared a global war on terrorism (GWOT). Terrorists like Osama bin Laden were portrayed as implacable foes that had to be tracked down, fought and destroyed. Of course, these definitions did not go uncontested. Some people defined those involved in the attack as freedom-fighters, heroes and martyrs engaged in a ‘righteous’ struggle against a villainous ‘superpower.’ For example, in a note placed on the Reuters News Service website after 9/11, the editors cautioned their reporters to avoid the use of ‘terrorist’, arguing that “one person’s ‘terrorist’ may be another person’s ‘freedom fighter.’

This paper presents the results of a critical discourse analysis of power and subjection in the Bush regime’s global war on terrorism (GWOT). Its point of departure is the question of the selection of interpretive repertoires. This problem was raised by Jacques Derrida in a dialogue on the significance of “9/11 and Global Terrorism” (Borradori 2003). Among other things, Derrida raises the issues why the prevailing discourse defined the appropriate response to the 911 event as a declaration of a GWOT. There was no enemy in the traditional sense of war, where two states engage in armed conflict. A small network of people, employing modern technology, attacked the greatest power on earth. Why did the Bush regime define these events in these specific terms?
One among the many possible interests behind GWOT was the reelection of President George Bush in 2004. A 2004 CNN exit poll asked voters to respond whether they agreed or not with Bush’s “Decision to go to war in Iraq?” Looking at the poll results in Table 1, one does not need to do a statistical test to see that agreement with the war was positively associated with a vote for Bush.

(Place Table 1 about here)

In reality there is not just one interest behind this choice of terms. The political marketeers at the Bush Whitehouse sized up the situation and seized the opportunity. Since 911, the American people and the world has been subjected to a reign of rhetorical and literal terror. At some level, the tacticians working with Bush understood the rule first enunciated by Foucault to account for the fecundity of the discourse of ‘sexuality’ (1978, p.100). It is the tactical polyvalence of the discourses contained in GWOT—the sheer political utility and multiplicity of possible ways to go and combine, interests that could be served, relations that could be established, political goals that could be achieved, that lead to the selection of this specific articulation of terms. Just to name a few of the more obvious: global—legitimizes US imperial activities anywhere on the planet; war—constitutes Bush as Commander-in-Chief, a new mission for US Department of Defense, troops as heroes; terrorism and terrorists—villainous powers, ambiguous enough to deploy against a variety of obstacles and targets.

As if to underscore the purely tactical use of the terrorist as enemy, Bush invokes bin Laden’s name only once in the 231 speeches analyzed in this study. In striking contrast, the New York Times put a face on a shadowy enemy that could function to legitimate and motivate a GWOT, especially the invasion of Afghanistan. A search of the New York Times archive for articles containing Bin Laden’s name produced 918 articles and 183 headlines from 9-11 to 12-
31-2001. By comparison, a search from Jan 1, 2001 through 9-11, produced 211 articles and 21 headlines containing his name. Osama bin Laden was frequently described as ‘evil,’ ‘extreme,’ and ‘fanatical,’ and as “taunting” Americans and “gloating” about his success. Tom Friedman, the influential New York Times middle-east correspondent, described him as a “Muslim Charles Manson with the organizational skills of Jack Welch” (Friedman 2002a, 2002b).

(Place Chart #1 about here)

As Chart #1 makes abundantly clear in the case of the New York Times, the use of ‘terrorist’ as a vilifier was not original to the Bush regime’s GWOT. In the 1990s there were there had been numerous articles published associating both bin Laden and Saddam with terrorism. What is truly original was the idea of mounting a global war against terrorism in the name of liberal values. GWOT created the conditions necessary for unleashing a new political victimage ritual, with its correlated processes of subjection, idealization of the in-group and vilification of out-groups, one that could fill in the vacuum created by the end of the Cold-War and the Global Struggle to destroy Communism. It provided just the sort of narrative that the Bush regime needed to establish a new American nationalism, move the country in a new direction, and legitimate and motivate radical changes in US domestic and foreign policy.

POWER AND SUBJECTION

Political leaders exercise power over others by engaging in rhetorical acts and ritual practices that move people to collective action. Central to these activities are political victimage rituals and the rhetorical practices of subjection, the constitution of villainous and heroic power subjects (Blain 1988; 1994; 2005a). Victimage rituals are public events that provide political actors with a platform on which to vilify and attack opponents and glorify
heroic struggle. Defining 911 as a terrorist act and the appropriate response as GWOT is a powerful rhetorical means to vilify opponents, and legitimate and motivate acts of political violence and domination.

The approach to power and subjection employed in this study combines the thinking of Michel Foucault and Kenneth Burke. Foucault’s concept of subjection refers to the power relations and cultural practices that produce us as subjects. Kenneth Burke’s approach to power and discourse can be merged with Foucault’s because they share a common ‘strategic’ conception of how discourse functions. Foucault argued that knowledge and power are joined in discourse and these discourses produce material effects. Similarly, Burke argued that the rhetorical use of symbols has the power to produce effects. Leaders can move us to action by persuading us to identify with ultimate struggles of good against evil, right against wrong. Identification is a dramatic process that has the power to motivate people to support or oppose politicians or programs, participate in movements, and fight and die in wars. As Burke shows us in the case of Nazi discourse, rhetoric can be an instrument of domination. Politicians know how to use discourse to produce ritual scapegoating or “congregation through segregation.”

The ultimate moment of identification is victimage—the personification and ritual destruction of those powers that threaten the survival of a community.

In a combined Burkean and Foucauldian perspective, GWOT can be viewed as an attempt to maintain a mode of domination by enacting a gigantic political victimage ritual. Since US hegemony embodies the normative ideal of freedom, the 911 attack could be defined as a threat to freedom and the survival of ‘civilization as we know it.’ The military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq can be viewed as ritual acts in which Bush and his followers engage in
rhetorical and literal acts of political violence against their ‘terrorist’ adversaries in name of security and freedom.

Foucault’s concept of subjection can be merged with Burke’s concept of victimage ritual in the following way. Victimage rhetoric is melodramatic in the sense that it differentiates the field of actors into heroes and villains, enemies and allies, proponents and opponents. Two rhetorical tactics constitute this mode of subjection. The first is vilification. The opponent must be vilified as a killer of the ideals of a liberal social order (i.e., freedom, security). The use of ‘innocent’ victims (e.g., women and children, civilians) to articulate the “truth” of an opponents’ villainy is the primary rhetorical means to vilify an opponent. These attacks are designed to provoke anxieties, anger, and moral outrage in those addressed. Bush rhetoric focused on the Taliban’s attacks on women; Saddam was personified as an evil tyrant who employed torture and WMD against his own people.

The second rhetorical tactic in subjection through victimage ritual is idealization of heroic acts of struggle against the villains or ‘bad guys.” Moral outrage must be transformed into action. Something has to be done. This shift is accomplished through a reversal in power perspectives. In the first move, the listener is called upon to identify with a villain who exercises power over an innocent and vulnerable victim, or is threatening to do so. As we shall see, Bush vilifies terrorists as enemies of the ideals of security and freedom. At the same time, he must also deal with the second aspect of subjection. Those addressed must be goaded into fighting and killing the enemy. Bush must appeal to those addressed to identify with an ethical incitement to political action. Americans are rhetorically constituted as moral agents who must support the troops and confront the enemies of freedom by engaging in a fight to the death against evil. He indicts his opponents as immoral power subjects – terrorists, and then incites...
the public and the troops to engage in violent political action by empowering them as moral agents.

In sum, then, an effective discourse of subjection must accomplish two things:

1) **Constitute a knowledge of the field of power struggle** — argue the truth of a problem, injustice, or danger in a persuasive way, hence the vilification of opponents as malevolent power subjects; 2) **Constitute an ethic of political action** — argue for solutions in an activating way, including the heroization of activists as moral agents and ‘positive’ power subjects.

GWOT does all of this and more. It constitutes a number of power subjects: terrorists as villains, Bush as Commander-in-Chief, troops as heroes, and the public as patriots.

Before proceeding, one final point needs to be made. One of the most striking features of GWOT discourse is the concept of terrorists as enemies of freedom, and that the motivation behind GWOT is to liberate people from a terrorist or tyrannical sovereignty. This is a tricky business. It draws attention to the need in liberal societies, especially those with empires, to clearly differentiate the legitimate use of military and police ‘force’ from illegitimate forms of political violence. The liberal nation-state was constituted through civil war, revolutionary violence, and terrorism (see Blain 2005b). Since the French revolution, the political concept of terrorism has served that function. The loglogic of GWOT discourse is that terrorism is a threat to security. Since security is the necessary precondition for freedom, then terrorism is a threat to freedom – the ultimate principle of a liberal social order.

**GENEALOGICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS**

Foucault’s approach to the study of power and subjection was clearly inspired by Nietzsche’s genealogy of ‘punishment (Nietzsche 1967; Foucault 1970, 1977; Butler 1997). Genealogy is an interpretive strategy Nietzsche invented to unravel the European power/morals
complex as a mode of subjection. In Foucault’s hands genealogy became a way to write “the history of the present”—a diagnostic tool that foregrounds the cultural practices that have constituted us as subjects. The genealogist asks: How do practices and self-interpretations emerge? How was their emergence linked to power struggles? How has the interpretation of a practice changed over time? What is it doing to the quality of our lives? How do practices limit and constrain, or enable and advance freedom? The use of genealogy is based on a critical choice, to make power relations a central concern.

“Genealogy,” Foucault (1977, p. 148) argued, “seeks to reestablish the various systems of subjection: not the anticipatory power of meaning, but the hazardous play of dominations.” The genealogist does not seek to establish a general theory or merely describe the abstract features of members’ everyday practices, but to destabilize “truths” and “subjections” by tracing their history (e.g., ‘sexuality’, or in this case, ‘terrorism’). The history of practices and interpretations is shaped by power struggles and the agonistic clash of actors’ strategies. Therefore, the genealogist must describe the emergence and descent of practices.

The chess-game analogy is useful. A genealogy describes the arrangement of forces at play in a contest, the possible moves and counter-moves at crucial moments in the game, and the effects of making specific moves. Power is exercised by structuring the field of possible counter-actions. Checkmate and domination are achieved through blocking any possible counter-move on the part of the opponent. This kind of battle, as we shall see, can shift practices and interpretations in novel and surprising directions.

Foucault’s genealogy of liberal government has spawned a growing literature directly relevant to GWOT (Foucault 2000, also Rose 1999; Barry et al. 1996; Gordon 1991). This line of inquiry is specifically concerned with the discursive practices that shape our subjectivity.
Liberalism, these analysts argue, is not just an ideological fiction hiding the truth of capitalist exploitation, but an effective strategy of political power—a way of thinking about and ‘governing’ ourselves. In liberal discourse ‘freedom’ depends on self-regulation of a specific kind. One must exercise it, fight for it and even die for it. Government’s role is to create the conditions that make this kind of ‘responsibility’ possible. One of those conditions, some argue, is the political regime of security and freedom, patriotism and military service. Terrorism is represented as a direct threat to that regime—the basis of civilization as we know it.

Genealogical discourse analysis seeks by systematic, empirical means to describe how speech acts and literary texts vary as a function of power relations. A genealogical analysis describes the agonistic clash of opponent’s subjectifying strategies, their moves and counter-moves, and the way changes resulting from these actions generate new interpretations and opportunities for counter-action. For example, Bush states that "Terrorists want chaos and destruction." The use of "want" indicates that the opponent’s subjectivity is being characterized. Taking account of GWOT’s tactical polyvalence and the way terrorism is opposed to liberalism, Chart #1 models some of its possible uses in varying political contexts.

(Place Chart #1 about here)

Discourse analysis involves the identification of actors’ situated use of membership categorization devices. MCDs are collections of familiar terms, such as ‘terrorist’ or ‘coalition forces,’ that members of a culture employ to describe actors’ motives and activities (Silverman 1993, pp. 80-84). Victimage rhetoric employs a melodrama MCD that categorizes actors as victims and villains, heroes and enemies, and spectators. Actors construct villainous and heroic subjects by mobilizing antonyms known to the audience, such as civilized / terrorist,
freedom / tyranny, rational / extremist, peace loving / murderous and savage. The adversary’s motives and actions are described in terms of the negative poles of the antonym, the heroes’ in terms of the positive. The opponent is identified with the negative. In other words, power struggles are waged in antonymical terms, the antagonists struggling to make themselves synonymous with the positive and their opponents synonymous with the negative. The particular antonyms deployed depend on activists’ knowledge, and variations in social, cultural, and historical contexts. Once identified, they can be displayed in tables of values.

The discourse data employed in this study are 231 of Bush’s weekly, radio speeches, January 2001–June 2006, downloaded from [www.WhiteHouse.gov](http://www.WhiteHouse.gov). There are regular, reflecting subtle shifts in tactics, condensed, and exercise a direct influence over topics discussed by journalists in the following weekly news cycle. The speeches were located in the file sequentially, 1-231, and coded for key vilfications and idealizations in political context. This allows for a test of the genealogical expectation that discourse shifts depending on the actor’s tactical and strategic situation. Six political contexts were differentiated: Pre-911 (January –September 11, 2001, 33 speeches), Afghan War (October 2001- September 2002, 53 speeches), Pre-Iraq Attack (September 2002 – March 2003, 27 speeches, Iraq War (March 2003 – December 2003, 42 speeches, and Post-Election (November 04 – June 2005, 34 speeches). These speeches were indexed and coded employing (a text retrieval program (*WordCruncher* 2004) and statistically analyzed employing the current edition of SPSSX (2005).

**RESULTS**

Tables 2-4 and Charts 3-4 document the relentless ‘reign’ of rhetorical terror that the American people and the rest of the world have been subjected to since 911. Table 2
establishes the cast of villains constituted by GWOT. As expected, the distribution of vilifications corresponds to changes in political context and tactical situations. Its striking that while the Afghan war was raging, Bush does not refer to bin Laden once in his radio speeches. He focuses his attacks on the Taliban. Saddam is vilified in 24 speeches during the Iraq war, more frequently as a tyrant than as a terrorist (pre- and war periods collapsed). He was a threat because he might provide WMD to terrorists. Al Qaeda is frequently brought up during the Iraq war. The Baathists and Zarqawi (alleged leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq) are added to the list of villains as the Iraq war proceeds.

(Place Table #2 about here)

The shifting correlations of liberal (freedom and security) and terror terms in Bush’s radio speeches are presented in Tables #3 and #4. The percentage of radio speeches mentioning terror remains very constant, around 60% of speeches in the five political contexts since 911 (Table #3). The three key ‘liberal’ terms (freedom X security X terrorism), appear in the same speeches with increasing regularity through the 2004 election is won. They are frequently used in the same speech after the Iraq war starts and during the 2004 Presidential election cycle (40% of the speeches).

(Place Table #3 about here)

Table #4 shows how the specific correlations of security, freedom, and terror, change as the political contexts change. The first statistically significant correlation is between security and terror during the pre-Iraq war build up to the Iraq war ($\tau = .42, p > .05$). Once the Iraq war begins, the correlation of terms gets tighter. They are strongest during the 2004 election cycle ($\tau = .62 - .69, p. values > .01$).

(Place Table #4 about here)
Chart #3 describes the mean frequency of the key terms (total number of terms in context / number of speeches in context). As indicated above, security and terror are frequently emphasized in the pre-Iraq context. Terrorism and freedom are associated most frequently during the Iraq war. Terrorism is used most frequently across all contexts except during the Iraq war, when freedom is deployed more frequent. This use of terror escalates in the use of ‘terrorism’ during the 2004 election context.

Bush’s June 28, 2005 Iraq address to the nation confirms these patterns. Terror, freedom and security are invoked repeatedly. In a 40 paragraph, 28 minute speech, terror is invoked 32 times (terror = 8; terrorism = 1; terrorists = 23). Security is used 17 times. Freedom is used 34 times (free = 13; freedom = 21). Chart #4 graphically represents the distribution of these terms. Terror is invoked more frequently at the beginning of the speech. Security, especially in the context of Iraq, is most frequently used in the middle. At the end of the speech, freedom dominates. In the context of discussing what is at stake in the Iraq war, Bush articulates all three terms:

The lesson of this [Iraq war] experience is clear: The terrorists can kill the innocent, but they cannot stop the advance of freedom. The only way our enemies can succeed is if we forget the lessons of September the 11th, if we abandon the Iraqi people to men like Zarqawi, and if we yield the future of the Middle East to men like Bin Laden. For the sake of our nation's security, this will not happen on my watch.

CONCLUSIONS
In brief, the analysis presented leads to one main conclusion and a number of criticisms. GWOT is a new militaristic and imperial mode of power and subjection. The threat of terrorism functions to legitimate domination and motivate military violence.

A number of criticisms can be advanced against the Bush regimes ‘reign’ of rhetorical terror. The terrorist threat may or may not be a political hoax employed to perpetrate a fraud on the world (Adam 2004; Becket 2004). No matter, it has been a rhetorically effective tactic. It has been effective with just enough people to legitimate revolutionary changes in US foreign and domestic policy. GWOT discourse deploys victims selectively to vilify opponents, and legitimate and motivate high-tech homicide bombing and more state sponsored terrorism (Gareau 2005). The Bush regime and its domestic allies use “Support the troops” rhetoric to silence dissent as well as cut off any open discussion of the huge toll in human lives that result from their policies and actions.

And finally, the rhetoric of terrorism conceals the underlying power relations at play in GWOT, the militarism (Mann 2002; Johnson 2004), the imperialism (Khalidi 2004; Tariq 2004), and the close ties between the Bush regime and the Saudi regime (Unger 2004; Philips 2004; Vidal 2002). US military strategy has been fundamentally altered in favor of a new doctrine of Pre-emption (NSS 2002). Bush regime uses GWOT to justify violating international laws relating to the treatment of war prisoners, allowing torture and indefinite detention (Cole 2004). Domestically, it has been used to push through a draconian new Patriot Act to insure homeland security that authorizes an intensification of police surveillance of private citizens and organizations, threatening many of the constitutional freedoms that Americans enjoy (Parenti 2004).
REFERENCES CITED

Three-part television series.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Sample</th>
<th>Bush Voters</th>
<th>Kerry Voters</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>94%</td>
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</table>

Table #2:
Number of Radio Speeches Vilifying Actors As Terrorist in Political Context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actors</th>
<th>Afghan War</th>
<th>Iraq War</th>
<th>2004 Election</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tr>
<td>Al Qaeda</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taliban</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palestinians</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saddam*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baathists</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zarqawi</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bin Laden</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Saddam = tyrant, dictator
Table #3:

Number (%) Radio Speeches Containing Freedom, Security, and Terror in Political Context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context (Total)</th>
<th>Terror</th>
<th>3 Terms</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-911 (33)</td>
<td>1 (.03%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghan War (53)</td>
<td>36 (64%)</td>
<td>10 (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Iraq (27)</td>
<td>17 (63%)</td>
<td>5 (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq War (42)</td>
<td>24 (57%)</td>
<td>17 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004 Election (42)</td>
<td>27 (64%)</td>
<td>17 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Election (34)</td>
<td>20 (59%)</td>
<td>10 (29%)</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Table #4:

Kendall’s *Tau* Correlation Coefficients of Key Terms in Radio Speeches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Free / Secur</th>
<th>Free / Terr</th>
<th>Secu / Terr</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre 911</td>
<td>-.256</td>
<td>-.117</td>
<td>.289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghan War</td>
<td>-.006</td>
<td>.065</td>
<td>.234</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pre Iraq</td>
<td>-.036</td>
<td>.104</td>
<td>.421*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iraq War</td>
<td>.461**</td>
<td>.461**</td>
<td>.417**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004 Election</td>
<td>.619**</td>
<td>.689**</td>
<td>.660**</td>
</tr>
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</table>

* 0.05 LEVEL (2-TAILED)

** 0.01 LEVEL (2-TAILED)
Chart #1: BACKGROUND OF ‘TERROR’
Number of NYT Articles Containing Name & Terror, 1/96 – 12/03
Chart #2:
GWOT Discourses in Policy Contexts

*Policy Context*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourses</th>
<th>Domestic</th>
<th>Foreign</th>
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<tr>
<td>War</td>
<td>[patriots vs. traitors]</td>
<td>[coalition vs. terrorists]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>[defend security / freedom]</td>
<td>[extend security / freedom]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chart 3: Mean Frequency of Key Terms in Radio Speeches In Political Context

![Chart showing the mean frequency of key terms in radio speeches in political context. The chart compares the frequency of terms such as FREEDOM, SECURITY, and TERROR across different periods: PRE-911, AFGHAN WAR, PRE-IRAQ ATTACK, IRAQ WAR, and 2004 ELECTION. The y-axis represents the frequency ranging from 0 to 4.5. The x-axis represents the periods mentioned above. The data points are marked with specific frequencies for each term in each period.]
Chart 4: Number of Key Terms in Bush Iraq Address to Nation, 6-26-05

- Freedom
- Security
- Terror