

Five Years After 9/11: Drop the War Metaphor

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Language matters, because it can determine how we think and act.

For a few hours after the towers fell on 9/11, administration spokesmen referred to the event as a "crime." Indeed, Colin Powell argued within the administration that it be treated as a crime. This would have involved international crime-fighting techniques: checking banks accounts, wire-tapping, recruiting spies and informants, engaging in diplomacy, cooperating with intelligence agencies in other governments, and if necessary, engaging in limited "police actions" with military force. Indeed, such methods have been the most successful so far in dealing with terrorism.

But the crime frame did not prevail in the Bush administration. Instead, a war metaphor was chosen: the "War on Terror." Literal not metaphorical wars are conducted against armies of other nations. They end when the armies are defeated militarily and a peace treaty is signed. Terror is an emotional state. It is in us. It is not an army. And you can't defeat it militarily and you can't sign a peace treaty with it.

The war metaphor was chosen for political reasons. First and foremost, it was chosen for the domestic political reasons. The war metaphor defined war as the only way to defend the nation. From within the war metaphor, being against war as a response was to be unpatriotic, to be against defending the nation. The war metaphor put progressives on the defensive. Once the war metaphor took hold, any refusal to grant the president full authority to conduct the war would open progressives in Congress to the charge of being unpatriotic, unwilling to defend America, defeatist. And once the military went into battle, the war metaphor created a new reality that reinforced the metaphor.

Once adopted, the war metaphor allowed the president to assume war powers, which made him politically immune from serious criticism and gave him extraordinary domestic power to carry the agenda of the radical right: Power to shift money and resources away from social needs and to the military and related industries. Power to override environmental safeguards on the grounds of military need. Power to set up a domestic surveillance system to spy on our citizens and to intimidate political enemies. Power over political discussion, since war trumps all other topics. In short, power to reshape America to the vision of the radical right with no end date.

In addition, the war metaphor was used as justification for the invasion of Iraq, which Bush had planned for since his first week in office. Frank Luntz, the right-wing language expert, recommended referring to the Iraq war as part of the "War on Terror" even when it was known that Saddam Hussein had nothing to do with 9/11 and indeed saw Osama bin Laden as an enemy. Fox News used "War on Terror" as a headline when showing film clips from Iraq. Remember "Weapons of Mass Destruction?" They were invented by the Bush administration to strike terror into the hearts of Americans and to justify the invasion. Remember that the Iraq War was advocated before 9/11 and promoted as early as 1997 by the members of the Project for the New American Century, who later came to dominate in the Bush administration. Why?

The right-wing strategy was to use the American military to achieve economic and strategic goals in the Middle East: to gain control of the second largest oil reserve in the world; to place military bases right in the heart of the Middle East for the sake of economic and political intimidation; to open up Middle East markets and economic opportunities for American corporations; and to place American culture and a controllable government in the heart of the Middle East. The justification

was 9/11 to identify the Iraq invasion as part of the "War on Terror" and claim that it is necessary in order to protect America and spread democracy.

What has been the result?

Domestically, the "War on Terror" has been a major success for the radical right. Bush has been returned to office and the radical right controls all branches of our government. They are realizing their goals. Social programs are being gutted. Deregulation and privatization are thriving. Even highways are being privatized. Taxpayers' money is being transferred to the ultra-rich making them richer. Two right-wing justices have been appointed to the Supreme Court and right-wing judges are taking over courts all over America. The environment continues to be plundered. Domestic surveillance is in place. Corporate profits have doubled while wage levels have declined. Oil profits are astronomical. And the radical rights social agenda is taking hold. The "culture war" is being won on many fronts. And it is still widely accepted that we are fighting a "War on Terror." The metaphor is still in place. We are still taking off our shoes at the airports, and now we cannot take bottled water on the planes. Terror is being propped up.

But while the radical right has done well on the domestic front, America and Americans have fared less well both at home and abroad.

What was the moral of 9/11?

To Osama bin Laden, the moral was simple: American power can be used against America itself. This moral has defined the post 9/11 world: the more America uses military force in the Middle East, the more damage is done to America and Americans.

The more Americans kill and terrorize Muslims, the more we recruit Muslims to become terrorists and fight against us.

The war in Iraq was over in 2003 when the US forces defeated Saddam's army. Then the American occupation began an occupation by insufficient troops ill-suited to be occupiers, especially in a country on the brink of a civil war, where neither side wants us there.

The number of lives lost on 9/11 is currently listed as 2973. As of this writing 2662 Americans have been sent to their deaths in Iraq, a Muslim country that did not attack us. At the current rate, within months more Americans will have been sent to their deaths by Bush than were murdered at the hands of bin Laden.

9/11 was a crime a crime against humanity and terrorism is best dealt with as crime on an international level.

It is time to toss the war metaphor into the garbage can.

The war metaphor is still intimidating progressives. To come out against "staying the course" is to be called unpatriotic, weak, and defeatist. To say, "no, we're just as strong, but we're smarter" is to keep and reinforce the war metaphor, which the conservatives have a patent on.

It is time for progressives to jettison the war metaphor itself. It is time to tell some truths that progressives have been holding back on. What has worked in stopping terrorism is just what has worked in stopping international crime like the recent police work in England. What has failed is the war approach, which just recruits more terrorists. In Iraq, the war was over when we defeated Saddam's army. Then the occupation began. Our troops are dying because they are not trained to be occupiers in hostile territory on the cusp of a civil war.

Bush is an occupation president, not a war president, and his war powers should be immediately rescinded. Rep. Lynn Woolsey's resolution to do just that (H.R. 5875) should be taken seriously

and made the subject of national debate.

I am suggesting a conscious discussion of the war metaphor as a metaphor. The very discussion would require the nation to think of it as a metaphor, and allow the nation to take seriously the truth of our presence in Iraq as an occupation that must be ended. You don't win or lose an occupation; you just exit as gracefully as possible.

Openly discussing the war metaphor as a metaphor would allow the case to be made that terrorism is most effectively treated as a crime like wiping out a crime syndicate not as an occasion for sending over a hundred thousand troops and doing massive bombing that only recruits more terrorists.

Finally, openly discussing the war metaphor as a metaphor would raise the question of the domestic effect of giving the president war powers, and the fact that the Bush administration has shamelessly exploited 9/11 to achieve the political goals of the radical right with all the disasters that has brought to our country. It would allow us to name right-wing ideology, to spell it out, look at its effects, and to see what awful things it has done, is doing, and threatens to keep on doing. The blame for what has gone wrong in Iraq, in New Orleans, in our economy, and throughout the country at large should be placed squarely where it belongs on right-wing ideology that calls itself "conservative" but mocks real American values.

Metaphors cannot be seen or touched, but they create massive effects, and political intimidation is one such effect. It is time for political courage and political realism. It is time to end the political intimidation of the war metaphor and the terror it has loosed on America.

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