

# Heritage Lectures

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## Terrorism and the English Language

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I live on Manhattan Island and vividly recall watching Mohamed Atta fly American Airlines Flight 11 right over my apartment balcony in the East Village on the morning of September 11, 2001. The horror, sadness, and fear of that rotten day quickly unfolded and remain palpable even now.

Yet within a week, some incredibly detached language emerged to describe what happened on 9/11. Consider this message that Verizon left in my voice mail box on September 19: "During this time of crisis, we are asking all customers to review and delete all current and saved messages that are not essential," a nameless female announcer stated. "This request is necessary due to extensive damage that was recently sustained in the World Trade Center district."

Time of crisis? Did a tidal wave cause the "recently sustained" wreckage in Manhattan? Similarly, a company called Tullet & Tokyo Liberty referred to "the disaster that has hit New York and Washington."

The use of the passive voice in these and similar instances suggested that the World Trade Center and Pentagon were smashed by unguided, perhaps natural, forces.

Kinko's was even more elliptical. Shortly after the massacre, the photocopying company placed in its stores some very colorful posters with the Stars and Stripes superimposed upon an outline of the lower 48 states. The graphic also included this regrettable caption: "The Kinko's family extends our condolences and sympathies to all Americans who have been

### Talking Points

- We must counter the incredibly detached language has emerged to describe what happened on 9/11 and the war on terrorism.
- Language can lull Americans to sleep in this new war, or it can keep us on the offensive and our enemies off balance.
- Precise representations of the terrorists, their ideologies, and their victims' lives and deaths will help us to win the war on terrorism.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/research/homelanddefense/hl867.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/research/homelanddefense/hl867.cfm)

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affected by the circumstances in New York City, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania.”

Circumstances? That word describes an electrical blackout, not terrorist bloodshed.

Likewise, I kept hearing that people “died” in the Twin Towers or at the Pentagon. No, people “die” in hospitals, often surrounded by their loved ones while doctors and nurses offer aid and comfort. The innocent people at the World Trade Center, the Defense Department, and that field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, were *killed* in a carefully choreographed act of mass murder.

### A Terrorist By Any Other Name

The more this passive, weak, euphemistic language appeared as the war on terrorism began, the more I thought it was vital to pay close attention to the words, symbols, and images that govern this new and urgent conflict.

The civilized world today faces the most anti-Semitic enemy since Adolf Hitler and Josef Goebbels committed suicide in Berlin nearly 60 years ago. Militant Islam is the most bloodthirsty ideology since the Khmer Rouge eliminated one-third of Cambodia’s people. The big difference, of course, is that Pol Pot had the good manners to keep his killing fields within his own borders, as awful as that was.

Islamofascism is a worldwide phenomenon that already has touched this country and many of our allies. Yet Muslim extremists rarely have armies we can see, fighter jets we can knock from the sky, or an easily identifiable headquarters, such as the Reichs Chancellery of the 1940s or the Kremlin of the Cold War.

While basketball players and their fans battle each other on TV, actresses suffer wardrobe malfunctions, and rap singers scream sweet nothings in our ears, it is very easy to forget that Islamic extremists plot daily to end all of that and more by killing as many of us as possible.

Language can lull Americans to sleep in this new war, or it can keep us on the offensive and our enemies off balance. Here are a few suggestions to keep Americans alert to the dangers Islamic terrorism poses to this country:

1. September 11 was an attack—not just a series of coincidental strokes and heart failures that wiped out so many victims at once.
2. Victims of terrorism do not “die,” nor are they “lost.” They are killed, murdered, or slaughtered.
3. We should be specific about the number of people terrorists kill. “Three thousand” killed on 9/11 sounds like an amorphous blob. The actual number—2,977—forces us to look at these people as individuals with faces, stories, and loved ones who miss them very much.

The precise figures are: 2,749 killed at the World Trade Center, 184 at the Pentagon, and 44 in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Likewise, the Bali disco bombings killed 202 people, mainly Australians. The Madrid train bombings killed 191 men, women, and children.

Somehow, a total of 191 people killed by al-Qaeda’s pals seems more ominous and concrete than a smoothly rounded 200.

4. Terrorists do not simply “threaten” us, nor is homeland security supposed to shield Americans from “future attacks.” All of this is true, but it is more persuasive if we acknowledge what these people have done and hope to do once more—wipe us out.

Representative James Sensenbrenner (R-WI), chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, said this on NBC Nightly News last Sunday: “We need to tighten up our drivers’ license provisions and our immigration laws so that terrorists cannot take advantage of the present system to kill thousands of Americans again.” That is a perfect sound bite. There is no vague talk about “the terrorist threat” or “stopping further attacks.” Sensenbrenner concisely explained exactly what is at risk, and what needs to be thwarted—no more killing of Americans by the thousands again.

5. Quote Islamofascist leaders to remind people of their true intentions. President George W. Bush, Heritage Foundation President Ed Feulner, or Deroy Murdock can talk about how deadly militant Islam is and how seriously we should take this gravely dangerous ideology.

Far more persuasive, however, is to let these extremists do the talking.

However, their words are nowhere as commonly known as they should be. For instance, Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri said in their 1998 declaration of war on the United States: “The ruling to kill all Americans and their allies—civilian and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it.”

The late Iranian dictator, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, put it this way in 1980: “Our struggle is not about land or water.... It is about bringing, by force if necessary, the whole of mankind onto the right path.” Ever the comedian, he said this in 1986: “Allah did not create man so that he could have fun. The aim of creation was for mankind to be put to the test through hardship and prayer. An Islamic regime must be serious in every field. There are no jokes in Islam. There is no humor in Islam. There is no fun in Islam. There can be no fun and joy in whatever is serious.”

Asked what he would say to the loved ones of the 202 people killed in the October 2002 Bali nightclub bombings, Abu Bakar Bashir, leader of Indonesia’s radical Jemaah Islamiyah, replied, “My message to the families is, please convert to Islam as soon as possible.”

6. The phrase “weapons of mass destruction” (WMD) has been pounded into meaninglessness. It has been repeated *ad infinitum*. Fairly or unfairly, the absence of warehouses full of anthrax and nerve gas in Iraq has made the whole idea of “WMD” sound synonymous with “L-I-E.”

America’s enemies do not plot the “mass destruction” of empty office buildings or abandoned parking structures. Conversely, they want to see packed office buildings ablaze as their inhabitants scream for mercy. That is why I use the terms “weapons of mass death” and “weapons of mass murder.”

7. When speaking about those who are killed by terrorists, be specific, name them, and tell us about them. Humanize these individuals. They are more than just statistics or stick figures.

I have written 18 articles and produced a Web page, *HUSSEINandTERROR.com*, to demonstrate that Saddam Hussein *did* have ties to terrorism.

(By the way, I call him “Saddam Hussein” or “Hussein.” I never call him “Saddam” any more than I call Joseph Stalin “Joseph” or Adolf Hitler “Adolf.” “Saddam” has a cute, one-name ring to it, like Cher, Gallagher, Liberace, or Sting. Saddam Hussein does not deserve such a term of endearment.)

To show that Saddam Hussein’s support of terrorism cost American lives, I remind people about the aid and comfort he gave to terrorism master Abu Nidal. Among Abu Nidal’s victims in the 1985 bombing of Rome’s airport was John Buonocore, a 20-year-old exchange student from Delaware. Palestinian terrorists fatally shot Buonocore in the back as he checked in for his flight. He was heading home after Christmas to celebrate his father’s 50th birthday.

In another example, those killed by Palestinian homicide bombers subsidized by Saddam Hussein were not all Israeli, which would have been unacceptable enough. Among the 12 or more Americans killed by those Baathist-funded murderers was Abigail Litle, the 14-year-old daughter of a Baptist minister. She was blown away aboard a bus in Haifa on March 5, 2003. Her killer’s family got a check for \$25,000 courtesy of Saddam Hussein as a bonus for their son’s “martyrdom.”

Is all of this designed to press emotional buttons? You bet it is. Americans must remain committed—intellectually and emotionally—to this struggle. There are many ways to engage the American people. No one should hesitate to remind Americans that terrorism kills our countrymen—at home and abroad—and that those whom militant Islam demolishes include promising young people with bright futures, big smiles, and, now, six feet of soil between them and their dreams.

8. Finally, who are we fighting? Militants? Martyrs? Insurgents?

Melinda Bowman of Brief Hill, Pennsylvania, wrote this in a November 24 letter to the editor of the *Wall Street Journal*: “And, by the way, what is all this ‘insurgent’ nonsense? These people kidnap, behead, dismember and disembowel. They are terrorists.” Nicely and accurately put, Ms. Bowman.

Is this a war on *terror*, per se? A war on terrorism? Or is it really a war on Islamo-fascism? It is really the latter, and we should say so.

Jim Guirard runs the TrueSpeak Institute in Washington, D.C. He has thought long and hard about terrorism and the English language. He informed me Tuesday—to my horror—that three years into the war on terrorism, the State Department and the CIA have yet to produce a glossary of the Arabic-language words that Middle Eastern terrorists use, as well as the antonyms for those words. Such a “Thesaurus

of Terrorism” would help us linguistically to turn the war on terrorism upside down.

Why, for instance, do we inadvertently praise our enemies by agreeing that they fight a *jihad* or “holy war?” Why not correctly describe them as soldiers in a *hirabah* or “unholy war?”

### **A Weapon at the Ready**

In closing, I would say that America and the rest of civilization can and must win this new twilight struggle against these bloodthirsty cave-men. We can and we will crush them through espionage, high-tech force, statecraft, and public diplomacy overseas.

Here at home, we can and will vanquish them through eternal vigilance. One of our chief weapons should be something readily available to each and every one of us—the English language.

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