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## Terrorism as Failed Political Communication

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Some terrorist acts are meant to communicate something beyond the violence they cause. They are a form of political communication that should be studied as such. To identify the acts we consider politically communicative, we develop a typology of primary objectives that ranges from strategic goals to such communicative statements as moral condemnation. We examine why, as a form of political communication, terrorist acts typically fail. Terrorism fails as political communication because it is violent; because targeted audiences often have little prior awareness of the group's grievances; because it is sometimes a complex communication; and because governments and media frame issues in a way that sidelines the act's communicative content. In promoting a better understanding of the message, and why it fails, we hope to make this component of terrorism a more robust subject of study for political communication scholars.

*Keywords: terrorism, political communication, communication failure, speech acts, rhetoric*

### Introduction

Orthodox terrorism studies generally focus on the psychological or strategic motivations behind terrorism while the communicative content of any particular terrorist act is ignored. Thus, terrorism is regarded as principally a strategic act with an emphasis on what speech act theory (Searle, 1969) would call its perlocutionary effects. Speech act theory calls the intended point of a message the illocutionary act, the actual impact on the "receiver" is the perlocutionary effect; the intention and the effect are not always aligned.

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The emphasis on terrorism's effects has prevailed in parts of communication as well, particularly among those who study how terrorists use mass media to accomplish their instrumental ends. Arguably, however, insofar as an act is terrorist, it has some communicative content. Therefore, some sociologists (Goodwin, 2006; Tilly, 2004), communication scholars (Hadis, 2007), and rhetoricians (Windt, 2006) have been attentive to the communicative aspects of terrorism, particularly emphasizing audience. What is striking in these treatments, however, is that they generally stop short of identifying any message content meant to be conveyed through the act.

In this article, we propose to build on these prior communication analyses and take them one step further. First, we want to emphasize that acts of terrorism are always political and as such always embedded with some communicative content. In short, whereas illocutionary acts are ordinarily understood as ways of doing things with words (Searle, 1969), as a communicative act, terrorism represents the reverse case: saying something by doing something. Thus, we seek to complete the picture toward which the prior analyses point. We seek to draw out explicitly what the communicative content is. To that end, we develop a typology of primary objectives that ranges in intentionality from mere instrumentality to the morally communicative. We want to move beyond an objectivist interpretation of terrorism, which exclusively understands it by its origins and targets, as opposed to the illocutionary acts it sometimes performs.

Applying speech act theory to terrorist acts can raise a question of intentionality. Manifest intentions, however, are generally decipherable from context alone (Blum & McHugh, 1971; Davidson, 1963; Geertz, 1973; Rubinstein, 1977). When it comes to the most communicative of terrorist acts, we can also look at avowals—at what documented terrorists say they were trying to communicate.

We argue that an approach that focuses on the act, not the actor, can bring to light insights about terrorism that are otherwise missed. Why, for example, terrorist groups focus on instrumental as opposed to communicative forms of terrorism can be explained in terms of the group's contextual objectives. We also explain why, when a terrorist act is intended as a form of political communication, it is likely to fail. Here we draw from rhetoricians of social protest to explain that the failure of terrorism is akin to what Windt (2006) calls the failure of diatribe: One does not convince an audience when one insults and berates, let alone perpetrates physical harm against them.

### **Communicative Action**

One distinction we are trying to make is between terrorist acts that are more instrumental and terrorist acts that are more communicative. Instrumental acts may communicate different meanings to different audiences, without any of those meanings necessarily being an intended communication. On the other hand, it can sometimes happen that an instrumental goal of a terrorist act is precisely to communicate some meaning to some audience.

Habermas (1981) makes a well-known distinction between strategic and communicative action that is helpful in understanding this differentiation, but one that needs to be qualified. For Habermas, strategic action is a subset of instrumental action (Bolton, 2005). Instrumental action is action intended to

achieve a pragmatic goal. Thus, instrumental action follows a means-ends rationality—that is, a rationality concerned with the most efficient means or path to a chosen end. Not all instrumental action involves other people. Much of it, in fact, involves navigating our own individual ways through the physical world. Strategic action is that subset of instrumental action where the chosen goals concern other people and their reactions.

In contrast, communicative action, according to Habermas, intends to achieve mutual understanding. Thus, in contrast to strategic action narrowly, or even instrumental action more generally, communicative action does not follow a means-ends rationality. Instead, it encompasses an epistemic rationality of rhetoric and persuasion that follows what Habermas calls a universal pragmatics.

In the case of terrorism, we do think it useful to distinguish between strategic and communicative action, but, as already noted, the distinction is not always as straightforward as Habermas suggests. After all, achieving understanding with one's enemy may be a step in one's larger strategy. In such case, communicative action is not the end in itself that Habermas posits, but rather a means to some more ultimate end.

Thus, in contrast to Habermas, we want to allow the possibility of communication also as a means to an end and not exclusively as an end in itself. In that case, it might be a terrorist's goal to right some wrong, in part, by getting an enemy to realize the enormity of the wrong via a terrorist act. Similarly, we do not want to preclude the alternate possibility that terrorist action might be largely instrumental, concerned, for example, with disrupting governability.

In the case of terrorism as a communicative act, can we really tell the intention from the act itself? Yes and no. Although some, like Durkheim (1951), make it seem that inferring the intentions of others is a great mystery, they overlook the hierarchy of intentions in all action. It may be that someone's ultimate intention in some act eludes us, but we generally know from the context what the person's surface intentions are. In fact, being social animals, it could not be otherwise. Our cooperative efforts could not succeed if we could not depend on our knowledge of how each party to an enterprise is likely to perform. We could not even identify behavior as aggression if we could not infer intentionality. And, in fact, even to label an act as terrorism already infers intent. On the other hand, the meaning of communicative terrorist acts is not always obvious, which is why terrorists themselves in addition often actually say what their intended meaning was. As we will go on to argue, it is sometimes the discord between the communicative content of acts and the accompanying rhetorical justification that causes terrorism to fail as political communication.

As noted in the introduction, the focus on terrorism even among communication scholars has been on the perlocutionary as opposed to the illocutionary force of terrorist acts. The distinction between perlocutionary and illocutionary acts goes back to Austin's (1975) articulation and Searle's (1969) popularization of speech act theory. According to speech act theory, speech acts can be understood as having three analytically separate levels of action. The locutionary act is the utterance itself in whatever language it is uttered. The illocutionary act is the kind of speech act performed thereby, such as stating, requesting, commanding, condemning, and so forth. The perlocutionary act is the effect of such

illocutionary acts on their audience(s): understanding, compiling, obeying, repenting, and so forth. It is the illocutionary act that describes or identifies an actual *doing*—a doing that is done with words.

Our argument in this article is that illocutionary and perlocutionary force can be applied as a framework to analyze the communicative content of terrorist acts. The distinction between the act performed and the effect it has still holds if the communication is carried through action. A terrorist act, for example, may be meant to signal a condemnation—the illocutionary force of the act. The perlocutionary force, the effect of the act, however, might range from the repentance the act sought to resentment, indignation, or outrage that were not its intended results. To focus only on the perlocutionary effect, as so much research does, is to neglect the potentially informative illocutionary content.

### **The Missing Message**

The literature's neglect of illocutionary force begins at the level of definitions. Although there certainly is no consensus on what terrorism is (Goodwin, 2006), where terrorism is not defined purely in terms of its violent means (Black, 2004; Hoffman, 1998; Tilly, 2004; U.S. State Department, 2004), it tends to be defined in terms of its effect or perlocutionary force (e.g., Bergesen & Lizardo, 2004; Ganor, 1998). According to Turk (1982), for example, terrorism is "designed to deter political opposition by maximizing fear" (p. 119). Carr (2003) similarly defines terrorism as a kind of "warfare deliberately waged against civilians with the purpose of destroying their will" (p. 6). Deterring opposition, maximizing fear, and destroying civilian will are perlocutionary effects that can be accomplished without communicative content.

The apparent inability to reach a consensus definition of terrorism should not deter us. Rather, it is possible to work without a definition, employing instead paradigm cases. As Putnam (1973) argued in the case of natural kinds, we often understand meaning not via definitions, but by paradigm examples to which specific cases come close. Casuistry works on the same paradigmatic principle (Jonsen & Toulmin, 1988). Wittgenstein (1953) argued similarly that, in the case of practices such as games, we understand what we are talking about not by specification of necessary and sufficient criteria but by appeal to paradigms that share, at most, family resemblances. Similarly, there are paradigmatic acts that the vast majority of people agrees are terrorism, even if no one can formulate a generally acceptable definition of the term.

The lack of research on illocutionary content continues beyond definitions. Thus, even when the literature calls attention to terrorism's illocutionary force, it overlooks what the illocutionary content is. Consider, for example, one of the most recent and best treatments of the rhetoric and symbolism of terrorism, Tuman's (2010) *Communicating Terror: The Rhetorical Dimensions of Terrorism*. Both the title and subtitle lead us to expect something about the communicative content of terrorist acts. Tuman also dedicates two chapters to terrorism as a "communication process with rhetorical dimensions." He has a sophisticated take on the communicative process operating in connection with terrorism that we think is correct. His argument is that meaning is embedded in acts of terrorism, just as it is in all acts. Its symbolic content places it within a discursive framework, but its meaning is always mediated by "official

discourse with particular emphasis on the public address of government leaders or that of terrorists" (p. 42).

It is, however, on the government-mediated interpretation of terrorist acts that Tuman focuses, which he argues allows the terrorists' intended meaning to slip away. We agree that, through public discourse and rhetorical construction of terrorism, the original meaning easily gets lost. But that very point implies that there is something that does get lost—the terrorists' intended meaning of the act. Tuman neglects to tell us what that is.

Mohsen (1987) likewise recognizes a communicative element in terrorism, which he calls "the rhetorical use of violence" (p. 56). For Mohsen, terrorism is an attempt on the part of terrorists to communicate and persuade. He goes on to write, "terrorism could be defined as the process of delivering a message through the use of symbolic acts, in the form of violence, to create a change on the part of receiver's political behavior" (p. 57). Mohsen's emphasis on change, however, returns to a perlocutionary focus. We certainly agree that terrorism is often a message delivered by symbolic acts, but Mohsen again does not tell us what the message is.

Crelinsten (2002) goes so far as to speak of terrorist violence as language born of asymmetrical power relations.

When we say that violence is the language of the inarticulate, what we mean is that violence is a form of communication used by those who cannot express what they feel in words or written tracts and publications, so they "act it out" in violent ways. So, violence by the state or non-state actor can be conceived as a form of communication that coexists with other forms of communication, sometimes used in concert with them and sometimes used in their stead. (p. 77)

Yet, for all his emphasis on terrorism as a form of communication, Crelinsten still ends with a focus other than the illocutionary force of the acts. In particular, he shifts his attention to how terrorism interacts with other forms of social and political communication and away from what is specifically being communicated through a terrorist act.

In other ways as well, the attention of communication scholars has been diverted from the messages that terrorists are trying to convey. Much communication scholarship has focused on the way in which the media, by publicizing terrorist acts, have become instrumental to the terrorists' ends (Bockstette, 2009; Gerbner & Signorielli, 1988; Picard, 1993). Schmid and de Graaf (1982) focus on media treatment and say that terrorists choose soft targets with the intention of using the media to achieve publicity.

This choice of soft targets is a result of the fact that today's rulers are often so well protected that other victims have to be chosen. In a military sense, this type of terrorism is an indirect strategy. But that, in our view, is not the main reason why innocent people are victimized. The reason is rather that, the voice of innocent people is sometimes capable of producing a stronger echo among the population. . . . The point

we wish to make is that the choice of victims made by insurgent terrorists is in the first instance a function of their publicity value, of their communication potential. (p. 179)

The suggestion of Schmid and de Graaf is that publicity and public relations are the primary ends of terrorism. These ends may well be important to terrorists. They are, however, perlocutionary, instrumental effects rather than any particular communicative content.

Nacos (2007) argues similarly that, intentionally or not, the media lend a certain legitimacy to terrorists just by covering them. According to her, terrorists pursue four "very specific media-dependent objectives" (p. 20). They want "the attention and awareness of various audiences"; "recognition of their motives"; "respect and sympathy"; and status as a political player to be reckoned with (p. 20).

With regard to recognition of motives, Nacos begins to approach illocutionary content. Nacos says the terrorists want their targets to ask, "Why did they attack us?" That question in itself is admittedly still a perlocutionary effect, but it is at least a perlocutionary effect of a linguistic nature. With such a question in play, we have the beginnings of a conversation.

With Laqueur (1977), too, we begin to get communicative content. Specifically, Laqueur argues that terrorists are seeking to demonstrate something, a demonstration being an illocutionary act. To effect such demonstration, Laqueur argues, terrorists attack targets of maximum symbolic value.

The symbols of state are particularly important, but perhaps even more are those referring to the normative structures and relationships that constitute the supporting framework of society. By showing the weakness of this framework, the insurgents demonstrate not only their own strength and the weakness of the incumbents but also the inability of the society to provide support for its members in a time of crisis. (p. 14)

According to Laqueur, then, terrorist acts signal the weakness of a dominant group's institutions and their inability to protect group members while simultaneously signaling the strength of the terrorists.

Taking a different approach, Hadis (2007) also is concerned with terrorism's communicative content. For Hadis, however, that content is directed primarily toward in-group members. Specifically, Hadis argues, terrorism serves to demonstrate the power of the terrorist group to its constituency, and thereby to form and reinforce the in-group mythology. In relation to the out-group, however, Hadis continues to leave terrorism with its perlocutionary effects, forcing "wrongdoers" to change their ways.

It is with Richardson (2006) that we finally hear of terrorism as a fully illocutionary act. Along with recognition and renown (perlocutionary effects), Richardson speaks of terrorism as often embodying revenge. Revenge is an illocutionary act with a definite but complex meaning: It implies that a harm has been perpetrated; that the harm was morally wrong; and by the vengeful act, justice is being served.

Goodwin (2006) takes us one step further with his theory of "categorical terrorism." By categorical terrorism Goodwin means terrorism targeted against categories of people "without regard to

their individual identities or roles" (p. 231). At the same time, he points out that terrorists do not "indiscriminately target just *any* civilians or noncombatants" (p. 236); instead, they attack what Goodwin calls "complicitous civilians," who the terrorists think share some responsibility for their government's actions. Goodwin acknowledges that who these complicitous civilians are is a matter of complex social judgment. Thus, he says, if a terrorist group considers the United States a representative democracy, it might consider all U.S. citizens to be complicitous in the wrongs perpetrated against those the terrorists represent. Alternatively, if the United States is not regarded as fully democratic, the complicitous might be narrowed to just the more affluent and influential in society.

From there, Goodwin departs from any concern with message to explore the costs and benefits of categorical terrorism. His focus on complicity forcefully suggests a definite illocutionary act: condemnation. The direct perlocutionary effect of that condemnation is to communicate to otherwise complacent civilians their complicity in the wrong being condemned. Such condemnation we regard as the most meaningful content a terrorist act can convey.

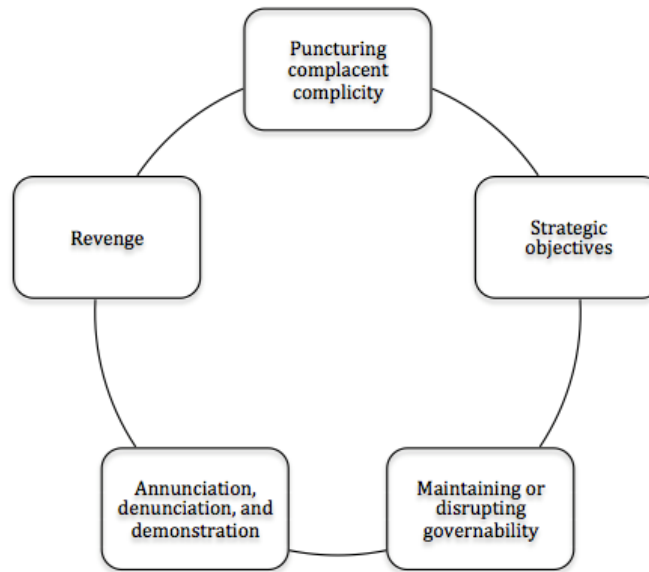
### **Terrorism's Communicative Content**

If at least some terrorist acts are intentionally communicative, then there must be concepts or ideas that a group wishes to convey—a core message content planned in advance, woven into the tactics used, and aimed at particular audiences (Rada, 1985; Richards, 2004). In viewing some terrorist acts as intentionally communicative, we suggest that certain terrorist acts have the express purpose of communicating some core message content. In this section, we are interested in what that message content may be. As we turn to examples of terrorist acts, we will use both the act itself and in some cases the accompanying rhetoric of terrorist actors to contextualize the illocutionary content.

To better disentangle communicative and noncommunicative terrorist motives, we introduce a typology for a general interpretation of terrorism that encompasses a range of both strategic and communicative objectives. We do not suggest that these objectives are mutually exclusive; one and the same terrorist act, as we demonstrate below, can serve both strategic and communicative objectives.

We present the typology in Figure 1; it is in the form of a circle to avoid the impression that these categories are in some way cumulative.





**Figure 1. Primary objectives of terrorist acts.**

### ***Strategic Objectives***

It is possible that some terrorist acts are motivated primarily by instrumental or strategic objectives. Even they, however, to the extent that they are terroristic, are executed in a way that communicates some symbolic content. Two immediate examples are the Irgun's bombing of the King David Hotel in 1946 and the kidnapping of Israeli athletes by Black September at the 1972 Olympics in Munich. Although the Irgun bombing followed a British raid on the Jewish Agency, the primary motive of the attack was not revenge but the strategic destruction of the British Mandate office, housed in one wing of the King David Hotel. Although considerable casualties resulted, terror as such seems not to have been the Irgun's intent. In fact, given the Irgun's claim to have issued a warning to evacuate the hotel, it seems clear that destruction, not terror, was the intent. At the same time, however, the bombing was an important blow against one of the most important symbols of British occupation. Therefore, in addition to being strategic, it also falls within the category of announcement, denunciation, and demonstration.

Similarly, terror may not have been what primarily motivated Black September, a Palestinian paramilitary group, to take Israeli athletes hostage at the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich. The primary motive may have been to work out a quid pro quo release of Palestinian prisoners. Such an objective could have been instrumental, or purely perlocutionary. Still, why select the Olympic Games, that grandest of international spectacles? Surely communicative motives were present here as well: public demonstration of power and the denunciation of Israel and its policies. So again, in that case, the act would fit the more communicative category of announcement, denunciation, and demonstration.

### ***Maintaining or Disrupting Governability***

Although still primarily instrumental, acts that create states of ungovernability also carry a degree of discursiveness. As noted in the Schmid and de Graaf (1982) passage quoted earlier, by disrupting the established order, these acts convey to the existing or occupying government its inability to maintain control and simultaneously communicate to the citizenry a lack of governmental protection. Historically, the iconic form this disruption has taken is the improvised explosive device (IED). The first recorded instance of an IED was a car bomb that exploded on September 16, 1920. It was planted in a horse-drawn carriage on Wall Street by Italian American anarchists under the leadership of Luigi Galleani. The intention was to disrupt both the civil and economic order associated with the capitalist system. The Stern gang in British-occupied Palestine also used car bombing to create a state of ungovernability. On January 12, 1947, for example, Stern gang members in Haifa drove a truck loaded with explosives into a British police station.

The very term *IED* was coined by the British in the 1970s to refer to what is perhaps the most famous use of the devices by the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA). Following the Bloody Sunday firing by British soldiers on unarmed Northern Irish protestors, the Provisional IRA initially used IEDs to disrupt British rule. The explicit strategy is stated in their 1977 training manual, *The Green Book*.

The strategy is a war of attrition against enemy personnel which is aimed at causing as many casualties and deaths as possible so as to create a demand from their people at home for their withdrawal...To make the Six Counties as at present and for the past several years un-governable except by colonial military rule. (Irish Republican Army, 1977; see Wikipedia, 2015, para. 37)

The IRA purportedly taught the use of IEDs to Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Murphy, 2005), who in turn had at least a knowledge exchange with the Taliban. For their part, the Taliban have also used roadside bombs, mines, and other IEDs to make parts of Afghanistan ungovernable.

### ***Climate of Fear***

Although still a method of maintaining or disrupting governability, the use of terrorism to create a climate of fear (see Barbalet, 1995) is important and singular enough to deserve its own section, particularly because it is the motivation we most commonly associate with terrorism. The concept of a climate of fear belongs to a whole category of phenomena known as *emotional climates* (De Rivera & Páez, 2007). Emotional climates "refer to predominant collective emotions perceived as shared by members of social groups, such as national, communities, or ethnic minorities" (Páez, Espinosa, & Bobowik, 2012, p. 113). As the designation implies, a climate of fear refers to a collective sense of prevailing threat or danger in a population or subpopulation. Fomenting a climate of fear can be used to destabilize a government, as in the case of the World War II terror bombings. Although indiscriminate strategic bombing was utilized by both Ally and Axis forces, beginning with the German Luftwaffe assault on Poland, the function on both sides was to destroy not only infrastructure but citizen morale (Parker, 2005). The Stern gang likewise did more than just try to disrupt British governance; it also attempted to

create a climate of fear among Palestinians. For example, it conducted assassinations, issued death threats, and bombed trains. It was also a party to the massacre at the Palestinian village of Dir Yassin.

Conversely, a climate of fear also can be an instrument of state terror, used to preserve governability. Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua, the Shah of Iran, and military juntas throughout Latin America have all resorted to torture, disappearances, and on-site killings of civilians to repress opposition through fear. In some cases, as in the near-genocidal counterinsurgency during El Salvador's civil war, the communicative content of the intended fear was emphasized by carving crosses on the faces and breasts of those espousing Catholic liberation theology (Porpora, 1980). More recent cases include the desperate targeting of civilians by Muammar Gaddafi in Libya and Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

### ***Announcement, Denunciation, and Demonstration***

The previous section described how terrorism can signal denunciation of an enemy. It can also be a strategic objective for a terrorist group to announce its existence and its cause, perhaps also demonstrating its ability to be a problem for the targeted society. Announcement and demonstration are illocutionary acts, which, as noted, does not preclude their being also of a strategic nature.

Nacos (2007) offers the July 7, 2005, attack on the London transit system as an example of "attention and awareness" seeking, one of the four media-dependent objectives she identifies. The attack perpetrated by four British Muslims with ties to Al Qaeda, she says, was planned to coincide with the G8 Summit meeting in Scotland and succeeded in eclipsing the news about the Summit. This sort of media coverage, intentionally or not, lends a certain legitimacy to terrorists just by covering them. It is not necessarily legitimacy, however, that terrorists seek, but a recognition that they, and their cause, need to be taken into account. Therefore, often in the context of repeated terrorist actions over extended periods of time, terrorists simply may be saying, "We are still here, the issue has not been resolved, something must be done."

### ***Revenge***

The next two categories in our typology are revenge and puncturing complacent complicity. Although both involve moral condemnation, the latter is considerably more subtle. Moral condemnation rhetorically reframes the past in a moral register that positions the targets of attack as perpetrators of a wrong. Simple revenge is the more direct form, based on a primitive and fairly universal understanding of justice as rendering just reprisal. It is supposed that when a wrong has been done, what is deserved is retribution, the "eye for an eye" that communicates the lesson that one cannot get away with such acts. Revenge is not just any harm delivered to a foe, but one that is to be understood as connected to and merited by the foe's previous action. It is in the harm's message of justice done and balance restored that revenge constitutes moral condemnation. It is also for that reason that for revenge to be truly communicated, it must be clear either in itself or by an explicit assumption of responsibility who delivered the blow.

Examples abound of terrorist actions motivated by revenge. According to an Associated Press report on the Oklahoma City bombing, Timothy McVeigh explained his attack on the federal building as motivated to avenge government sieges at Waco and Ruby Ridge (Thompson, 2001). Similarly, according to at least one of the terrorists, revenge was at the heart of the actions taken in the London transit attack.

I and thousands like me are forsaking everything for what we believe. Our drive and motivation doesn't come from tangible commodities that this world has to offer. Our religion is Islam, obedience to the one true God and following the footsteps of the final prophet messenger. Your democratically-elected governments continuously perpetuate atrocities against my people all over the world. And your support of them makes you directly responsible, just as I am directly responsible for protecting and avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters. Until we feel security you will be our targets and until you stop the bombing, gassing, imprisonment and torture of my people we will not stop this fight. We are at war and I am a soldier. Now you too will taste the reality of this situation. ("London Bomber," 2005, paras. 5–11)

Several things are going on in the above passage. Although certainly the terrorist is speaking about the puncturing of complicity, his emphasis also is on retaliation. Justice is framed as reprisal for previous and ongoing wrongdoing, and further action is promised under the banner of revenge.

The above case illustrates a point we made earlier—that sometimes the accompanying rhetoric from the terrorist is necessary for interpreting the act. Without it, the illocutionary force of the act may not get through to its intended audience. Bringing London's transit system to a halt and the ensuing fear for commuters could be seen as an attempt at disrupting governability, and revenge may not be clear. Again, it is this dissonance or mixed message that contributes to terrorism as failed political communication.

### ***Puncturing Complacent Complicity***

As mentioned, in the London bomber's quest for revenge, there is a desire as well to puncture complacent complicity. What do we mean by this designation? Simple revenge is directed at actors who already know that they have done something to the retaliating party. Simple revenge is thus generally understood as such even if its legitimacy is not granted.

It can happen, however, that those who have done wrong are in denial about the wrong or are otherwise oblivious to their responsibility for it. This obliviousness is most typical in the case of collective actions where the members of a society authorize their leaders to act without taking any further responsibility for what those leaders do. As Thoreau recognized, merely by conducting business as usual in a society, one enables and perpetuates the collective sins of that society. It was for that reason Thoreau penned his essay on civil disobedience and spent a night in jail. Those who consider themselves victims of the society's transgressions, however, are likely to be less passive. Part of what they may morally condemn is the complacent complicity of ordinary citizens who feel no compunction or responsibility for what their government is doing to others.

Making those ordinary citizens the target of attack is, then, an essential part of the point. The illocutionary act here is the accusation to the target citizenry that they are complicit in their government's actions, while the intended perlocutionary effect is the puncturing of this type of complacency. As the Muslim terrorists quoted above say in effect, "you putatively innocent civilians are being attacked because you are not innocent, and in fact have attacked us first; you have an obligation to do something."

Most notoriously, it was ostensibly an effort to puncture the complacent complicity of Americans that motivated the 2001 September 11 attack on the World Trade Center by Osama Bin Laden and his Al Qaeda organization. Certainly, the Twin Towers were a symbol of U.S. might and the American way of life. Their destruction was meant to deliver a message.

What Bin Laden says suggests an intention to puncture just this complacent complicity. "Why are we fighting and opposing you?" Bin Laden asks in his open letter "To the Americans" (Lawrence, 2005). The answer, he says, "is very simple: Because you attacked us and continue to attack us. You attacked us in Palestine" (ibid., p. 162). He then lists various ways in which the United States supported the Israeli oppression of the Palestinian people. Bin Laden continues:

You attacked us in Somalia, you supported the Russian atrocities against us in Chechnya, the India oppression against us in Kashmir, and the Jewish aggression against us in Lebanon. Under your supervision, consent, and orders the governments of our countries, which act as your collaborators, attack us on a daily basis. (ibid., p. 163)

There follows another list. How, though, does Bin Laden justify an attack on civilians? As follows:

You may then dispute that all the above does not justify aggression against civilians, for crimes they did not commit and offenses in which they did not participate: This argument contradicts your continuous repetition that America is the land of freedom, and freedoms leaders in this world. If this is so, the American people are the ones who chose their government through their own free will; a choice which stems from their agreement to its policies. Thus the American people have chosen. . . . The American people are the ones who pay the taxes which fund the planes that bomb us in Afghanistan, the tanks that strike and destroy our homes in Palestine, the armies which occupy our lands in the Arabian Gulf, and the fleets which ensure the blockade of Iraq. . . . This is why the American people cannot be innocent of all the crimes committed by the Americans and Jews against us. . . . Thus, if we are attacked, then we have the right to strike back. (ibid., p. 165)

What Bin Laden articulates here is an account of collective responsibility very much convergent with Thoreau's. Although we support neither the act nor Bin Laden's justification, the attack on U.S. civilian institutions is framed as a communication to the American people, a communication that condemns them as complacently complicit in the actions of their government. If so, the act cannot be really understood without considering this communicative component.

Complacent complicity may be punctured without its simultaneously being an act of revenge. Arguably falling in this category are the “direct action campaigns” of groups such as the Animal Liberation Front and the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), which include the intentional destruction of animal testing labs; intimidation of scientists, pharmaceutical executives, and their families; and endangering the safety of loggers. It is not revenge these groups are seeking, because they have not been personally wronged. Rather, they are trying to puncture the complacent complicity of workers and the broader public in the violation of the earth or animal rights. The element of moral condemnation is evident in, for example, ELF’s admonition to Boise Cascade after the group attacked the logging company’s regional headquarters in Monmouth, Oregon: “Let this be a lesson to all greedy multinational corporations who don’t respect their ecosystems. The elves are watching” (Rosebraugh, 2004, p. 94). Arguably, it was also a case of moral condemnation without revenge when an extreme antiabortionist shot and killed Dr. George Tiller, a practitioner of late-term abortions, while he was serving as an usher in church (Stumpe & Davey, 2009).

### **Why Terrorism Fails as a Form of Political Communication**

If war is politics by other means, the same can be said of terrorism. When terrorist acts are meant to be communicative, they represent a form of political communication. Terrorism as political communication does not *always* fail. One reason it does not always or totally fail is because, as a communication, terrorism is complex, dynamic, and addressed to multiple audiences. One major audience, as Hadis (2007) observes, is the larger in-group from which the terrorism arises. Terrorist acts can reinforce in-group mythology and narratives and in this way, as in the case of ISIS, serve as a recruiting tool. It also may be that when audiences begin to wonder whether terrorists are freedom fighters, as in the debate about the National Liberation Front in 1950s Algeria, the terrorist’s communication has been successful to some extent. Similarly, some people see Palestinian acts of terrorism as a legitimate response to Israel’s occupation of their land.

Our focus, however, is on those cases, more frequent, in which terrorism does fail as political communication. To understand terrorism as failed political communication, we first need to go back to Habermas’ (1981) distinction between strategic and communicative action. According to Habermas, communicative action, even when there is a strategic goal, is aimed at and depends on mutual understanding. When that understanding fails, so does the communication.

Why, in the case of terrorism, does mutual understanding routinely fail? There are several reasons, the first coming out of the rhetorical literature on social protest. Whereas communication is routinely thought to be linguistic, terrorism belongs to those symbolic acts that express thought without language. Rhetoricians of social protest address such confrontational discourse as a dimension of political communication and, more importantly, consider why this approach is often marked by failure. In particular, as a symbolic act, terrorism belongs to what Cathcart (2006) and Scott and Smith (2006) speak of as the “rhetoric of confrontation” and Windt (2006) of diatribe as “the last resort of protest.” Both the rhetoric of confrontation generally and diatribe in particular operate within a “moral arena” (Cathcart, 2006, p. 95) in which each side sees itself locked in a Manichean struggle. In this context, confrontation is a “symbolic display” (p. 96) or, as Cathcart further puts it, “a dramatization created by the forced juxtaposing of two agents, one standing for the evil, erroneous system, and the other

upholding the new or 'perfect' order" (p. 101). As such, what confrontation calls for is "a moral response appropriate to the moral accusation communicated by the act of confrontation" (p. 101).

If, as we suggest, communicative terrorism is just such an act of moral confrontation, then it fails to communicate for much the same reason as Windt (2006) says diatribe fails. According to Windt, diatribe is the opposite of ordinary persuasive communication. In ordinary communication, ethos or credibility are established "by drawing upon the beliefs of the audience . . . by not offending traditional beliefs or feelings" (p. 63). The diatribe rejects this strategy as moral compromise. Instead, Windt says, the major purpose of diatribe is to shock, and to shock by advancing a countermorality that positions the audience as morally culpable. To accept that message as sent, however, the audience needs to accept that it is, in fact, morally culpable. As Windt observes, however, lambasting an audience and trashing its values is not the best way to convince an audience of anything.

The same is true with terrorism. As a political communication, terrorism is an act of moral confrontation that demands moral response. As we have demonstrated, as a communicative act terrorism is often meant to signal retribution for a prior moral offense or a more general moral condemnation. To accept the message, the audience must accept that it is not only morally culpable but so culpable as deserving of violent response.

Violence is not an effective teacher. There is a natural reluctance to accept rebuke in any form, however gently it is presented. When that rebuke takes the form of violence, it is much easier to regard it as malicious and unjustified. When communicating one's grievances this way, one's voice is inevitably delegitimized and any valid content all but lost. After being targeted by terrorists, for example, the complacently complicit do not suddenly recognize themselves as such.

The oppositional logic of terrorism as a rhetorical form is only part of the reason that it fails; other factors come in to play. The more complex the embedded message, the more likely the communication to fail. Thus, acts aimed at puncturing complacent complicity are more likely than acts of revenge or reprisal to be misunderstood. Even reprisal however, is often misunderstood as such, particularly when reprisals are traded back and forth ad infinitum, as in the case of the Palestinians and Israelis. In such cases, each out-group's act of terror appears more as a new provocation rather than a response to the in-group's earlier act of terror, which was itself a response to the out-group's previous act of terror.

These problems are compounded by still others. Participants in a dialogue must attend to the dialogue in order for communication to take place. We are better at understanding communications that come from within and that follow the rules of our own culture (Hofstede, 1983; Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1973). Terrorism comes from outside and from contexts that are little understood by the intended audience. Acts of terror often tend to be communications across geography, culture and ideology (Crelinstin, 2002), which interact in a way that leaves the ultimate receiver without the context to understand or interpret the message. It is not necessarily physical distance that matters here but awareness of what one's government is doing elsewhere.

Without this context, the communication sent is in need of interpretation. Interpretation itself is a privileged act; those who have hegemonic control interpret situations in a way that best serves their interests. The mass media and the government on the receiving end of a terrorist act are the agents that typically decode such acts by prioritizing certain interpretations over other possible versions. Governments—and in the United States, particularly the president—generally provide the default frame in terms of which terrorist acts are understood (Entman, 1993, 2003; Gitlin, 2003; Tuman, 2010).

Governments have a vested interest in reading terrorist acts in ways that privilege their own interests and ideologies over those of the terrorists. The media, in turn, tend to favor the explanations of the home government. According to the indexing model of press-state relations, the press will dissent from an administration's framing only if it finds some dissension within the ranks of elite opinion (Bennett, 1990). According to Entman's (2003, 2004) newer cascade model, after the Cold War, the U.S. press has become more willing to challenge administration framing even in the absence of elite dissension, but only, as in the case of the Abu Ghraib scandals, where government actions seem markedly to contradict U.S. character (Porpora, Nikolaev, Hagemann May, & Jenkins, 2013). Because terrorist attacks do not involve any such contradictions, the government's frame is likely to prevail.

These various threats to the success of terrorist communication can be observed in the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center and the U.S. Pentagon. In addition to other possible reasons, Al Qaeda's September 11 act of terrorism failed because it was violent; because the American people had little awareness of the group's grievances; because it was a complex communication; and because the U.S. government effectively framed the issue in a way that totally sidelined what Osama Bin Laden ostensibly meant to communicate. The September 11 attack was not just violent, it was experienced by a traumatized U.S. public as abhorrent, meaningless violence. As suggested, that violence made a poor teacher. To the American people it seemed utterly gratuitous. Most Americans had never heard of Al Qaeda and had no idea about the group's grievances.

Further, the attack's embedded communicative content—puncturing complacent complicity—is the most complex in our typology, demanding more understanding from its audience than mere revenge. September 11 was thus precisely a case, in which to be successful, the communicative act needed to be accompanied by actual discursive rhetoric. Yet most Americans still have never heard Bin Laden's own rationale, quoted earlier, for the September 11 attacks. Americans' understanding has instead been principally formed by President George W. Bush's September 11 speech and his reiterations thereafter that the attack was launched by "evil-doers" who simply sought to strike against the "greatest beacon of freedom and opportunity in the world" ("Text of Bush's Address," 2001).

Even beyond Bush's September 11 speech, the Bush administration's frame continued to carry the day. The major rhetorical device used was what has been called the paranoid style of politics (see Hofstadter, 1966; Porpora, et al., 2013), which in this case emphasized an apocalyptic scenario ending with an entire U.S. city up in smoke (Smith, 2005). The press did little to counter the administration's frame (Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2007). The few U.S. voices, like that of Barack Obama's former pastor Jeremiah Wright, who saw September 11 as America's "chickens coming home to roost," were definitively marginalized. In the end, few Americans received the message Bin Laden said he was trying to send—that



Americans were complacently complicit in the oppression of Muslims throughout the world. If it was Al Qaeda's intent to force Americans to rethink U.S. foreign policy, the communication can only be described as failed.

### Conclusion

Examining terrorism as more than just an act of violence expands our repertoire of understanding and response. It allows us to see past the illegitimate violence to the possibly legitimate message behind it. In his book, *Talking to Terrorists*, Mark Perry emphasizes the importance of understanding such acts as political communication:

Jeff Aronson . . . put it this way: "We have to come to terms with a disturbing and blunt truth and finally face it—that after 9/11 a segment of our planet celebrated. We cannot simply pass it off; we cannot ignore it. We have to face it." We cannot simply condemn that celebration as the work of people who "do not share our values." We must find out why they celebrated. (Perry, 2010, p. 213)

Acknowledging such a point is not to justify terrorism, and we emphasize that we do not think that terrorism is ever justified. However, recognizing terror as a communicative act signals us that something may have been communicated to which we should attend. It can help us overcome ethnocentrism to understand a geographically and/or culturally disparate group. If violence is understood only as violence, then violent retribution seems the only appropriate response. Understanding any act of terrorism through a communicative lens allows for a more dynamic and nuanced response.

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