Who’s Afraid of the Persian Gulf: Locating Fear in the War on Terror

ZOE H. WOOL

ABSTRACT

Much public criticism of the US-led War on Terror builds on the assumption that it is no more than fear mongering and rhetoric. However, events in Iraq and Afghanistan and peoples’ experiences of them cannot be explained away so easily. Through discussion of public discourses that reify the war and those that dismiss, this paper questions the place of fear in the War on Terror. Through ethnographic examples, suggests some implications of accepting the standard critique of the War on Terror in regards to creating a critical anthropology of it.

The title of this paper, with its literary allusion, is intended in part to index a common refrain in criticism of the War on Terror, namely that it is nothing but a kind of literary device, a linguistic trick and a clumsy one at that. While this refrain is articulated by people motivated by political critique and ideals of social justice, people who are against the violence carried out under the rubric of the War on Terror, I argue that it should not, even can not, be a starting point for an anthropological critique.

“Fear mongering and rhetoric,” the main characteristics of the War on Terror according to critics, should not be grounds for its dismissal. Far from it, any analysis of the phenomena that constitute this strange object must attempt to keep it intact. The discursive instantiations of it, the rhetoric (as it is derisively called in critiques), is vitally important but fear mongering is, at best, only part of the story. For example, if we limit the War on Terror to absurd fear talk, how do we sufficiently contextualize the experiences of American soldiers whose actions and images are inextricably linked to this public discourse? Such an analysis—one not aimed at dismissal—is central for an anthropological interrogation of the War on Terror which is underpinned by a critical politics. Such dismissals are reminiscent of Baudrillard’s categorization of the 1990-1 Persian Gulf War as simulacral (1995). Though not as reactionary or controversial, they are similarly problematic; an ob-
fuscation of the materiality of events because of the quality of second order mimesis which characterizes their discursive context and representation.

Here, to illustrate this point, I look at dismissals of the War on Terror in three long standing sources of American public critique; *Harper's*, *The Nation*, and *Mother Jones*. I then offer a different characterization of the kind of talk that these critiques target and finally I briefly juxtapose these with some observations from my preliminary fieldwork at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center (LRMC) which houses the first stop hospital for American (and often other) soldiers and contractors injured in Iraq and Afghanistan. I offer an ethnographic example to illustrate the inextricability of the public discourse of the War on Terror and the experience of soldiers and the import of attending to both the material and discursive aspects of the War on Terror side by side. Given the constraints of this forum, I offer not so much an analysis but a critique of dismissals of the War on Terror as just fear mongering and rhetoric by way of an argument for an anthropological approach to a critical analysis of the War on Terror.

The Critiques

Though each different from the other in significant ways, *Harper's*, *The Nation* and *Mother Jones* are all well known sites for the articulation of leftist political critique in the United States. *The Nation* describes itself as “America’s oldest and most widely read weekly journal of progressive political and cultural news, opinion and analysis,” that “make[s] an earnest effort to bring to the discussion of political and social questions a really critical spirit, and to wage war upon the vices of violence, exaggeration, and misrepresentation by which so much of the political writing of the day is marred” (www.thenation.com/help/).

*Mother Jones* describes itself as “an independent nonprofit whose roots lie in a commitment to social justice implemented through first rate investigative reporting” (www.motherjones.com/about/index.html), and *Harper's* refers to itself simply as “an American journal of literature, politics, culture, and the arts published from 1850” (www.harpers.org/harpers/about), but it is generally leftist and closely associated with the critical style of long time editor Lewis Lapham. All three magazines continually publish critical essays and articles about the Bush administration and, since 2003, the war in Iraq.

The discussion of the War on Terror and its constituent events in these magazines exemplifies the well intentioned critiques rooted in dismissal of the War on Terror on the various grounds discussed above; as just rhetoric and as simply a way to manipulate the public through fear.

The critique that the War on Terror is nothing but discursive hot air is perhaps most clearly articulated in *Harper's*. For example Lewis Lapham has often written in his Notebook, a space in each issue devoted to his insightful critical essays, that the War on Terror is a war on an abstract noun, it is an “unwinnable war against an unknown enemy” and is, in
essence, a rhetorical (as opposed to military or policy) strategy (see Lapham 2002; 2004). The focus of critique on hyperbole and rhetoric is also a staple of other Harper's pieces such as Michael Howard’s “Stumbling into Battle,” which argues that it is a semantic mistake to call the War on Terror a war (2002), and David Samuel’s “On Message: A Theater of War at the Pentagon Press Briefings (2002), which equates the War on Terror with the discursive production of the US Government and press, and not to material violence.

Ian Williams, in The Nation, argues that the War on Terror (a phrase he contains securely within scare quotes) is bunk because it employs a definition of terrorism that is too flexible and he implies that if it were forced to conform to the definition of terrorism recently crafted by the UN, it would cease to exist.

In terms of the ubiquity of the simulacra style dismissal of the War on Terror as non-referential and “just rhetoric” one might also note the popularity of books which catalogue the linguistic missteps and contradictions of President Bush and members of his administration such as Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber’s Weapons of Mass Deception: The Uses of Propaganda in Bush’s War on Iraq (2003), which champions the Orwellian idea of doublespeak, arguing that the real world, and the real intentions of those influential people in it, are camouflaged by a net of euphemisms and metaphors. This “camouflage” effect is, as many discourse analysts have been painstakingly pointing out for decades, inevitable. It is simply not possible to cleanse language of all the tastes with which history has imbued it and speak a plain language that reflects a word it has had no hand in constructing. Furthermore, as Howard Zinn points out, even the Truman administration’s humanitarian argument for joining the WWII masked America’s economic and perhaps even imperialistic interests around the globe (2003:137-147).

While the War on Terror may be implausible, perhaps even logically impossible, it nevertheless is. Railing against its perversity does little to allow us to understand it and obfuscates the actions carried out under its rubric.

These kinds of articles attempt to separate entirely the ground wars (in both Iraq and Afghanistan) from the rhetorical ones. I certainly do not advocate that we take the connections between the rhetoric of the War on Terror and the violence in Iraq and Afghanistan at face value. Rather I contend that a dismissal of the linkages, a segregation of the discursive and the material, offers us very limited insight or ground for critique. It ignores the ways in which these discourses do impact the lives of those drawn into them. A critical anthropological approach to the War on Terror ought not to be concerned exclusively with the veracity or disingenuousness of presidential proclamations but with the impact of these proclamations, their material and experiential, as well as discursive, fallout.

In addition to these critiques of the War on Terror as just rhetoric we also see the argument that this rhetoric is crafted specifically to make people afraid. This was a well worn argument in The Nation’s commentary on the 2004 election. As William Greider put it, “under the banner of the war on terror” the Bush administration was seen to be fomenting public fear of terrorist attacks in order to gain political advantage and public mandates (2004). In these arguments, the War on Terror is presented as nothing more than
a kind of PR tactic, one that should be simply dismissed. A number of other contributors to The Nation made similar arguments, including Paul Rogat Loeb’s Hope in a Time of Fear (2004), Nancy Chang’s The War on Dissent (2004), Eric Alterman’s Al, We Hardly Knew Ye (2004), and Judd Legum and David Sirota’s The Republicans Politicize Terror (2004). Similarly, in a comment on the 2003 Bush policy document “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America” in Mother Jones, Gitlin and Packer argue that Bush will mobilize the fear of the people to achieve his imperial ambitions and that the content of the policy document matters less than the fact of it, as it represents a doctrine of American Exceptionalism that ensures public consent because “Americans know fear now, so fear is what he [Bush] will mobilize” (2003:34).

There is clearly an alarmist thread to much of the Bush administration’s pre-election discourse. These critiques challenge this and also take on an urgent importance in relation to the dehumanizing racism implicit (and often explicit) in much of it. And they may serve an important purpose in bringing a critical awareness to readers. Still, it is well worth problematizing the implications of the kind of critical shorthand they exemplify.

Such arguments propose a homogenous public, one which is susceptible to hyperbolic, even absurd, rhetoric, and which may succumb to primal fears which such rhetoric fans. Furthermore, as the model of transitivity established in these pieces is “George W. Bush is making the public afraid”, they locate all intention and agency in the person of President Bush, thus simultaneously dismissing the discourse of the War on Terror and imbuing it with a kind of incantatory power against which “the public” is all but helpless. They also omit elements of the discourse they target, elements that are integral to critical anthropological interrogation or the War on Terror. I now look briefly at some of these omissions and then offer a brief ethnographic example to illustrate such a possibility.

The Source

In much of the carefully crafted US Administration talk on the War on Terror there is an emphasis on continued risk usually framed in terms of continued calls for “vigilance” and “alertness.” Critiques of such talk as fear mongering are far from off the mark. But the message is not simply to be afraid, to cower and to consent: There are constant invocations of American style democracy, and extolling of American’s strengths and righteousness, all of which comes alongside the exhortations of vigilance which may or may not result in fear.

In presidential addresses in particular, we are typically offered profound praise book ended by caveats. For example, in his 2004 State of the Union Address, Bush mixes mentions of continued terrorist threats with characterizations of various lofty achievements. He says: “American servicemen and women are deployed across the world in the war on terror. By bringing hope to the oppressed, and delivering justice to the violent, they are making America more secure” (Bush 2004).
He thus proclaims the American service men and women as the purveyors of hope and justice, while simultaneously, in the use of the present progressive “making” and the qualifier “more,” implying the ongoing need for the protection of America, due to an ongoing threat.

Later in the same address, he says:

We can go forward with confidence and resolve, or we can turn back to the dangerous illusion that terrorists are not plotting and outlaw regimes are no threat to us….We’ve not come all this way—through tragedy, and trial and war—only to falter and leave our work unfinished. Americans are rising to the tasks of history (Bush 2004).

Here he invokes a continued threat by calling a denial of imminent violence “a dangerous illusion,” and then sounds a note of pride and triumph, saying that Americans are “rising to the tasks of history.”

In his 2003 State of the Union Address, after a lengthy enumeration of alleged threats posed by Saddam Hussein, Bush says:

Americans are a resolute people who have risen to every test of our time. Adversity has revealed the character of our country, to the world and to ourselves. America is a strong nation, and honorable in the use of our strength (Bush 2003).

Again the description of various mortal threats is tempered with statements of national strength and faith. While addresses such as these clearly put forward a message of continuous threat, they also convey a kind of patriotic invincibility. Critics are certainly right to point out that in virtually all talk about the War on Terror, the violent menace of terrorism is constantly reinvigorated. But also present is this particular brand of pride and patriotism. And, as we might read from the proliferation of things like bumper stickers and songs, the Habermasian public conjured up in the critiques of the War on Terror is much more involved in admonishing its members to display a proper patriotism than to be afraid.

What’s more, in both Presidential addresses and leftist critiques, the War on Terror and material events such as 9/11 and military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan are of a piece, minimally as context for each other, maximally as part of the same object. For example, no matter how hard critics may try to separate the rhetoric of the War on Terror from events in Iraq, they remain linked, one conjures the other. A recognition of such linkages certainly need not be an acceptance or validation of them, but one cannot disassociate the material from the discursive. For better or, more likely, worse the rhetoric of War on Terror, including its calls to vigilance and patriotism, fear and pride, are connected to the violent materialities in Iraq and Afghanistan.

A critique of the War on Terror which says that the War on Terror is a literary trick and can just be debunked or that it is nothing but tactic for fomenting fear, will always fall short of the complexities of its object and will not reflect the integrity, contrived though it may be, of rhetorical and material realities.
Landstuhl Regional Medical Center

Just one part of the War on Terror that such critiques do efface, one which has been central to my dissertation research, is the experience of soldiers deployed to fight it. In a month of preliminary fieldwork at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center (LRMC), I spent some of my time with soldiers who had been to Iraq and Afghanistan. Fear, perhaps not surprisingly, was not a part of their framing of their actions. The War on Terror was rarely evoked directly, though it could be and was in certain opportune moments. “The war,” always in the singular, was used to refer collectively to both the engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as on some occasions when it referred more directly to the “war on terror” such as when donations for were made in the name of those fighting it.

The many television sets in the hospital and various buildings on the base were almost always tuned to CNN, or occasionally Fox news, both of which frequently spoke about the “war on terror.” The Stars and Stripes (the military paper read by most people on the base) also reports on “war on terror.” Yet, the enlisted soldiers, those whose actions are, in the Government rhetoric, most concretely and literally fighting the War on Terror, don’t often talk about the “war on terror,” more often explaining their actions in terms of their own life narratives. And yet, they are drawn into it in ways beyond their participation in the violence done in its name. An example illustrates the ways in which this can happen.

Two of the soldiers I spent some time with at LRMC were Romanians who had been in Afghanistan as part of the NATO forces there. One of them, Vlad (a pseudonym), had lost a leg and sustained severe burns when his tank was hit by an Improvised Explosive Device. Doctors from Walter Reed Army Medical Center (among other things, the Army’s premier prosthetics facility) paid a visit to LRMC and came to check on Vlad’s progress and to make adjustments to the prosthesis. On the occasion of this visit, Vlad’s picture was taken for the Stars and Stripes during a physiotherapy session. When I visited him the following day, I mentioned that I had seen his picture in the paper and jokingly told him he looked much better in person. He told me that he was annoyed that they had taken the picture. His explanation of his annoyance suggested that what bothered him wasn’t the fact of the picture or its use. It was the transformation of his physiotherapy into an optimistic and self congratulatory event, a transformation that was effected by the presence of the doctors from Walter Reed and journalists from the Stars and Stripes. This transformation rewrote his experience, which he defined as a savvy career choice made reluctantly in a difficult economic situation, as part of an American narrative of benevolence and righteousness. This was compounded by the fact that the images of “warriors” and “heroes” associated with Walter Reed, typical of the pride and patriotism found in government discourse about the War on Terror, bare precious little resemblance to Vlad’s own image of his condition and prospects.

Thus Vlad’s experience is drawn into the discourse of the War on Terror, intimately connecting the embodied facts of his life with a rhetoric not of fear but of historic justice and patriotism. In a moment such as this, the War on Terror cannot be circumscribed as
‘just talk’ or dismissed as meaningless rhetoric. It reaches beyond the podium and the press scrum and lays its hands on lives which make no claim to it.

Conclusion

No matter how much we wish that the absurdity and hypocrisy of the rhetoric of the War on Terror could be dismissed, and the whole kit and caboodle along with it, the complexities of the situation of this object we call the War on Terror do not allow such a dismissal. While such arguments are sophisticated, persuasive, and often satisfy the deep and unreachable itch aggravated by the anger and frustration felt by many, they contain a number of untenable presuppositions that, if left undisturbed, lead to a kind of cascade failure in constructing a critical anthropological project of the War on Terror. If we take seriously the events as well as the discourse, we cannot posit fear as the main force behind its continuation. If we want to critique the War on Terror, we must approach it as an object, not disassemble it into convenient constituent parts.

References

Alterman, Eric

Baudrillard, Jean

Bush, George W.

Chang, Nancy

Gitlan, Todd and George Packer

Grieder, William

Howard, Michael

Lapham, Lewis
Legum, Judd and David Sirota  

Loeb, Paul Rogat  

Ramption, Sheldon and John Stauber  

Samuel, David  

Williams, Ian  

Zinn, Howard  

Author contact information:  
Zoë H. Wool  
Department of Anthropology  
University of Toronto  
19 Russell Street  
Toronto, ON, Canada  
M5S 2S2