

# Wild in the Streets: The Political Economy of Threats and the Production of Fear

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*According to the FBI, there is only one instance in which a terrorist group operating in the United States actually employed a chemical or biological agent. This incident took place in September 1984. The perpetrators were members of the Rajneeshee, a religious cult that established a large community in Wasco County, a rural area east of Portland, Oregon. The Rajneeshees used salmonella typhimurium, which causes salmonellosis or food poisoning, to contaminate restaurant salad bars. An estimated 751 people became ill because of that attack, including about 45 who were hospitalized. There were no fatalities. This is the only bioterrorism incident in which human illness has been verified (Carus, 1998: 9).*

*We estimate that foodborne diseases cause approximately 76 million illnesses, 325,000 hospitalizations, and 5,000 deaths in the United States each year (Mead, et al., 1999).*



## I. Introduction

When the followers of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh attempted to take over the small Oregon town of Antelope in 1984, in order to turn it into a political outpost for their activities, most Americans thought it just another bizarre activity on the part of a religious group already well-known for its eccentricities (Miller, 2001). Although there was a great deal of outrage and amusement about the incident, it seemed too absurd to take seriously. No one used the terms “terrorist” or “biological terrorism” to describe the Rajneeshee’s efforts to contaminate the salad bars of Wasco County. Indeed, not until the 1990s did the case enter the pantheon of what W. Seth Carus called *Bioterrorism and*

*Biocrimes—The Illicit Use of Biological Agents in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. By 2001, Judith Miller and her colleagues at *The New York Times* thought the incident merited an entire chapter in their book *Germ: Biological Weapons and America's Secret War*. So did several other scholarly works (Lederberg, 1999: ch. 10; Tucker, 2000: ch. 8). By 2003, the fear of biological attacks had become so engrained in the public mind that hardware stores were hard put to keep duct tape and plastic sheeting in stock whenever the Federal Government raised the Terrorism Alert Level to orange. Aside from the anthrax-laden letters delivered to various recipients in 2001, however, no actual incidents of biological terrorism were recorded within the United States between 1990 and 2003,<sup>1</sup> even as hundreds of car, truck, plane, boat and suicide bombings resulted in more than 4,000 fatalities around the world. Why, then, has there been so much focus on the release of biological agents?<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, we argue that this paradox grows out of the political economy of terrorism/counter-terrorism (T/C-T): the need to “produce” threats in order to “reproduce” the discourse of T/C-T. We use the term “political economy” not as a form of vulgar economism, which suggests that the defense sector needs threats in order to stay in business but, rather, as a nexus of politics, markets and power, with a history, an ideology, and material manifestations (see, e.g., Drahos with Braithwaite, 2003). Counter-terrorism is more than a response to acts of terrorism; it is an autonomous arena

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<sup>1</sup> The number of hoaxes was, however, quite large. Between October 1998 and October 2001, one scientist counted 120 anthrax hoaxes reported in the U.S. media. See Sperry, 2001. Between September 11 and December 22, 2001, 58 individuals were arrested on charges of making anthrax hoaxes or threats. See Gullo, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Biologicals are only one of the unholy trinity of “weapons of mass destruction” (WMD) along with nuclear and chemical agents (the three are frequently labeled “CBN”). A crude “Google” search of the internet using various combinations and search strategies reveals the following hits: terrorism: 5,290,000 web sites; nuclear terrorism: 316,300; chemical terrorism, 170,500; biological terrorism, 715,000.

of supply that requires a demand to survive and succeed. But the demand for counter-terrorism, and the protection it ostensibly provides, are not automatic; they must be created and sustained. And the division of labor within the counter-terrorist arena means that, like toothpaste, cereal, and SUVs, different products require different sales strategies (Dawson, 2003). Note that we do *not* claim here that there are no dangers, risks, or threats from those who might wish us ill and act on their desires—the events of September 11, 2001 demonstrate that acts of terrorism are real. We do propose, however, that only through a careful examination of the ways language, social relations, and material things are combined into a finished package of danger can we understand the production of fear not as warning but as the creation of terrified and terrorized populations seeking protection from the very state that produces those fears.

We begin the chapter with a general discussion of the relationship between political economy and “discourse.” As we use the term here, a discourse is a set of beliefs, practices, and material manifestations. Counter-terrorism, and its twin, terrorism, constitute such a discourse. The ostensible objective is the protection of the public through the prevention of terrorist incidents. Note, however, that counter-terrorism generates a set of truth claims about terrorism which serves to validate the beliefs, practices, and materiality of the discourse as a whole. But, because the number of actual terrorist incidents *within* the United States has been rather small, and those occurring *outside* of the country are generally regarded as being rather distant, counter-terrorism must find ways to sustain the discourse. It is at this point that political economy appears.

The matter of risk looms large in this discussion: just how great is the threat? This is the focus of the second part of this chapter. Commentators opine that a bioterror

attack is “virtually certain.” What they cannot specify are the five Ws: what, when, where, why, and how? The problem here is that risk estimates rely on a statistical sample composed of some large number of similar, if not identical incidents to specify the “what.” Automobile accidents constitute such a sample; bioterror incidents do not. But even the quantification of risk cannot pinpoint the other four Ws: when, where, why, and how? Vulnerability looms large in this equation—some experience higher levels of risk than others because of a number of differing social and technological factors—but the discourse of counter-terrorism makes no such distinctions.

In the third part of the chapter, we examine how this political economy operates, both historically and materially. Just prior to the launching of war on Iraq, the Department of Homeland Security raised the national Terrorist Threat level from yellow to orange, based on unconfirmed intelligence reports that several shadowy figures might have entered, or might enter, the United States. After several weeks, the threat level was lowered back to yellow although, in the interim, the hysteria generated by these announcements was palpable, as the Secretary of Homeland Security, Tom Ridge, suggested that the public protect itself by purchasing certain widely-available household good, to wit, plastic sheeting and duct tape. The alert was something of a fiasco, but it had its intended effect: creating a demand for state protection against weapons of mass destruction in the hands of Saddam Hussein and others of his ilk. A great deal of money changed hands, so to speak, and trading in counter-terrorist stock was very bullish.

In the final part of the chapter, we propose that one can only understand the political economy of threats and the production of fear manifest in the discourse of T/C-T by considering the latter’s embeddedness within capitalism. Like corporations,

discourses must grow if they are to survive and succeed, and that means the creation of demand. In aggregate, the counter-terrorist “business” surely involves expenditure of more than \$100 billion each year (terrorists, by contrast, could not be spending more than a few tens of millions per year) and offers both great opportunity and profit for those who are able to get a cut of the action. So long as fears can be stoked, there is no need for actual attacks, since no one can know how many were “deterred” by the C/C-T business and all of its activities. The Commies are gone, but terrorists will always be with us.



## **II. The political economy of discourse and the discourse of political economy**

What is a “discourse?” Although the term is generally understood as having to do with language alone, under the influence of Michel Foucault’s writings, discourse has come to mean a set of interlinked statements whose “truth” is confirmed by those statements and the accompanying “substructure.” In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault, speaking of what he called “generalized punishment,” wrote that a “discourse provide[s], in effect, by means of the theory of interests, representations, and signs, by the series and geneses that it reconstitute[s], a sort of power over men...” (Foucault, 1977: 102).

According to Stuart Hall,

A discourse is a group of statements which provide a language for talking about—i.e. a way of representing—a particular kind of knowledge about a topic. When statements about a topic are made within a particular discourse, the discourse makes it possible to construct the topic in a certain way. It also limits the other ways in which the topic can be constructed. A discourse does not consist of one statement but of a several statements working together to form what Michel Foucault calls a “discursive formation.” The statements fit together because any one statement implies a relation to all the others... (Hall, 1995: 201).

Finally, in a rather different vein, Karen Litfin has written that

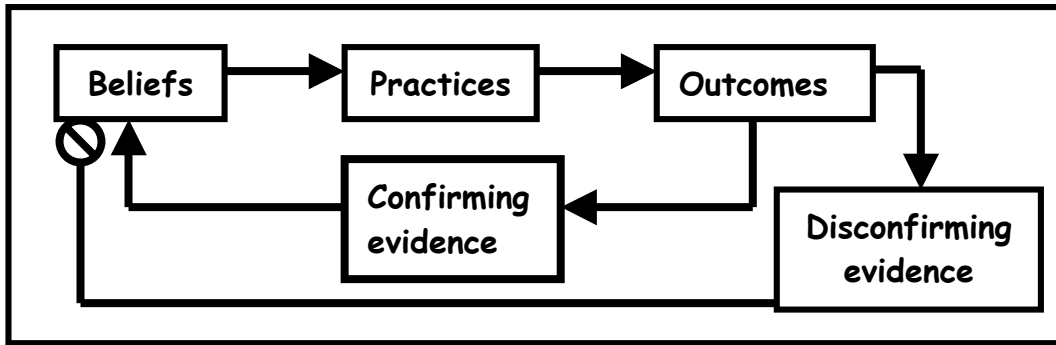
As determinants of what can and cannot be thought, discourses delimit the range of policy options, thereby functioning as precursors to policy options.... The supreme power is the power to delineate the boundaries of thought—an attribute not so much of specific agents as it is of discursive practices (Litfin, 1994: 13).

Litfin is describing here what can be called a “hegemonic” discourse, that is, one not only accepted as a self-validating truth but generally believed by all classes and groups to represent a society’s shared interests (Gramsci, 1971; Gill, 1993).

In order to be regarded as broadly valid, a discourse must be more than simply a self-referential set of interlocking statements; it must also be confirmed repeatedly by material outcomes for which it can claim responsibility (of course, the discourse does not “speak” for itself; it is articulated through “speech acts” by “spokespersons”; Wæver, 1995). The beliefs articulated in a discourse are both ontological and methodological: they make statements about the nature of reality and offer means of shaping that reality. These means, or practices, serve to create and maintain the material results of those practices. In other words, a discourse must explain how prescribed actions or practices result in specified material outcomes. These outcomes, in turn, confirm the “truths” articulated in a discourse’s constitutive statements and reproduced through its practices. When a discourse is dominant, or hegemonic, it is a closed system—there are no points at which contrary data or truths can intervene to invalidate it (Figure 1).

One might object to this schema. After all, if the beliefs and practices associated with a discourse actually lead to the specified material outcomes, does that not “prove” that the propositions offered by the discourse are “true” and accurately describe reality? And, contrarily, if the outcomes are other than those predicted, does this not disconfirm

**Figure 1: The structure of a discourse**



the discourse’s propositions? These questions confuse things on two counts. First, simple causality cannot account for social processes, which are always complex and overdetermined. Moreover, very different beliefs and practices can lead to identical outcomes, while different outcomes can be the result of identical beliefs and practices.<sup>3</sup> Second, because discourse is impervious to contrary evidence—and it does not succumb as does science in Kuhn’s (1962) “paradigm shift”—it cannot be disproved. It is always possible to interpret data in such a way as to confirm the propositions. As we shall see, the matter of concern in this paper—bioterrorism—is made more complicated by the absence of the outcomes specified by the discourse, in addition to misspecifications internal to the discourse. This is not a new problem: public support for civil defense during the Cold War was repeatedly undermined by the absence of evidence that it was possible to survive a nuclear attack (Grossman, 2001). This did not prevent the purveyors of the discourse from repeatedly offering civil defense as a “solution” to the nuclear dilemma.

Because a discourse includes elements of materiality, it is also closely linked to

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<sup>3</sup> For example, nuclear deterrence during the Cold War may have “worked” either because of fear of retaliation, beliefs about their disutility in war, or norms about the morality of using them, or all three.

political economy. Foucault tended to shy away from discussions of political economy, although a reading of *Discipline and Punish*, for example, makes clear that the “carceral” was very much bound up with an “economy of power” and an “apparatus of production” (Foucault, 1977: 304, 308; see also Hall, 1995: 204). These concepts relate, of course, to the production of normalized and disciplined society which, in Marxist terms, have to do with both relations of production and social relations: Order, in other words. Mitchell Dean, in his analysis of neo-liberal governmentality, makes clear how freedom, discipline, and order are all imbricated with the market in modern capitalist societies. As he puts it,

[N]eo-liberalism ceases to be a government of society in that it no longer conceives its task in terms of a division between state and society or of a public sector opposed to a private one. The ideal here is to bridge these older divisions so that the structures and values of the market are folded back onto what were formerly areas of public provision and to reconfigure the latter as a series of quasi-markets in services and expertise (Dean, 1999: 171-72).

As we use the term here, our conceptualization of political economy goes beyond conventional liberal economism about supply, demand, and markets. “Political economy” involves the specific power-based relationships between politics and economics that lead to Order and Discipline and also reproduce those conditions. Our concerns are not only “who gets what, where, and when,” in Harold Lasswell’s (1936) classic formulation, but also who decides who gets what, which parties have used their influence and wealth to shape the environment in which those decisions get made, and how the power of both individuals and the discourses they proffer are reinforced through the shaping of that environment (Drahos, with Braithwaite, 2003). Economic matters are present within political economy, of course, but they act as indicators of the “economy of power” rather than any actual description of power relations within that economy. Thus,

we ask not only “how many rolls of duct tape and plastic sheeting have been sold?” but also “how do duct tape and plastic sheeting come to be a means of constructing and maintaining a particular social order?” The political economy of a discourse therefore involves the production of truth claims in ways that help to generate specified outcomes and develop the material base. The expansion of that materiality, in turn, funnels resources into that political economy and helps to reproduce the discourse.<sup>4</sup>

Let us be more specific: counter-terrorism and terrorism constitute a discourse of the kind we describe above. “Terrorism” has many definitions.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the absence of a clear definition enhances the utility of the concept, for anything which involves destabilization of the normalized order of society can come under its rubric, including the destruction of skyscrapers, the detonating of car bombs, the defacing of SUVs, and the defamation of individuals and groups (see, e.g., Finz, 2003: A-1). By contrast, military attacks by one state on another, or by a government against an internal or external opposition group, do not constitute “terrorism” because the target of the action is usually accused of attempting to destabilize the normalized order of society, whether national or international. There is, of course, a history and a genealogy of the apparent expansion of

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<sup>4</sup> Note that this is not the same as arguing that the material base determines the social superstructure. The three elements in discourse—beliefs, practices, outcomes—are co-determining.

<sup>5</sup> All who write about terrorism make an effort to define the term and find it difficult to do so, especially inasmuch as there are over 100 distinct uses recorded in the literature. The superfluity of definitions may be more a reflection of the epistemologies and proclivities of the individual author, and the genealogy of the term than the refusal of “terrorists” themselves to conduct their practices in a specified fashion. Some try to finesse the problem as has Harvey W. Kushner, by suggesting they know terrorism when they see it: “Nowadays, a considerable number of books devoted to terrorism spend an inordinate amount of time discussing how difficult it is to define the concept. Guess what? Readers are usually left more confused than before they started. The authors who contributed to this book did not become bogged down in a morass of verbiage in trying to craft the universal definition of terrorism. They chose instead to discuss terrorism without detailed discussions about the problem with the problem definition” (Kushner, 1998: vii).

the concepts of “terror” and “terrorism,” but space precludes an exploration of the terms’ past (Lipschutz, 1999).

The discourse of “counter-terrorism” cannot exist without “terrorism.” An essential element of this discourse is the belief that the natural tendency of the world is toward chaos and that the forces of evil and disorder lurk everywhere, both within and without. This “truth” is articulated in the oft-repeated claim that “the world is a dangerous place.” Military force can eliminate some of the dangers “out there,” but they are ill-suited to management and discipline, as is evident in Afghanistan and Iraq. Counter-terrorism constitutes a particular form of deployment of state power against those who seek to upset the social order by means other than strict military ones. It is a form of “police,” as Foucault described it, not the organized forces of the “thin blue line” but, rather, something along the lines of the German *Polizeiwissenschaft*, which involved, among other things, “the maintenance of order and discipline” as well as the welfare and comfort of the citizen (Foucault, 2003: 262). Consequently, labeling oppositional elements as “terrorists,” whatever their politics and methods, serves two functions. First, it invokes protection, or counter-terrorism, which includes a broad range of practices, as the appropriate means of response. Second, it alerts citizens to the omnipresence of danger, not only outside of society but also within it.

This does not mean that attacks against social targets are, somehow, imaginary. Since the destruction of the World Trade Center, many more than one hundred car, truck, and suicide bombs have been detonated around the world, with concomitant injury and death.<sup>6</sup> But all of these have taken place *outside* of the United States, and it is the

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<sup>6</sup> According to one report, 87% of the 776 attacks against U.S. interests between 1998 and 2002 involved bombs (Parker 2003).

individual's lived experience that, most often, is the basis of one's assessment of risk.<sup>7</sup> In the absence of repeated exposure to a stimulus, the effect of operant conditioning weakens. It must be periodically reinforced in order to maintain its effect. For counter-terrorism to function as "police" and generate continued public support in the absence of material evidence (i.e., actual attacks), it must, as part of the discourse, create materiality where none exists, as we shall see, below.

The political economy of counter-terrorism is based on two elements. First, through its economy of power, the discourse creates public demand for counter-terrorist services, which are supplied through the material infrastructure: policing, intelligence-gather, espionage, reports, press conferences, alerts, etc. In the United States, these result in state expenditures of tens of billions of dollars per year and also help to create a rather substantial private sector engaged in providing all kinds of protective services. Second, the existence of this substantial material base serves to confirm the need for counter-terrorism, even in the absence of actual attacks, through both media and state publicity associated with counter-terrorist activities. Examples of this are U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft's tour in defense of the Patriot Act as well as periodic practice drills by those authorities who would respond in the event of an actual attack (Lichtblau, 2003a).



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<sup>7</sup> The problem of risk assessment is a complicated one. Most risk analysis assumes "rational action" in response to quantified risk data. For example, although the risk of injury or death is much higher from auto than air travel, people generally regard the latter as more dangerous. But most people drive all the time without experiencing an auto accident. They fly much less often and have only a limited experiential basis on which to assess the risks of flight. What they know comes mostly from media reports about plane crashes.

### **III. No one is safe, and no one is beyond suspicion**

Given the paucity of bioterror attacks, how can the counter-terrorism discourse be maintained? Why invoke biological terrorism when the statistical risk of such an attack would seem to be quite small? It has been common practice to invoke Aum Shinrikyo's release of chemical agents in the Tokyo subway in 1995 to illustrate the threat of biological agents (Cohen, 1999: xii), but this citation is quite misleading. In point of fact, there are no risk data for biological attacks and, in the absence of a statistical base, it is impossible to estimate how likely one is to occur. Moreover, because such attacks would not occur at random, risk assessment is not a reliable means of estimating the threat. Vulnerability plays a role in terms of risk, too, but given the large number of "soft" targets, there is no way to predict which might be most attractive. Crowds are often described as especially vulnerable—for example, the police in Livermore, California are worried about their parades (Hallissy, 2003)—but not all crowds are equal. And there is more to be gained by attacking elite targets than plebian ones.

The absence of risk data does not mean there is no risk, only that the magnitude of the risk is unknown. Those who are wise in the ways of the world often point out that "the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." Or, as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld put it in a press conference in Brussels in June 2002:

There are no knowns. There are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns—that is to say, there are things that we now know we don't know but there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we do not know we don't know. So when we do the best we can and we pull all this information together, and we then say well that's basically what we see as the situation, that is really only the known knowns and the known unknowns. And each year we discover a few more of those unknown unknowns (Rumsfeld, 2002).

In the absence of evidence, therefore, there is a compelling logic for producing “truths” that account for the failure to confirm hypotheses. As can be seen from the (so far) absent weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, one can never prove that they did not once exist, which also implies that they might still exist, albeit in some place elsewhere than Iraq.

An alternative approach to estimating the risk of biological terrorism is to look at capabilities: who could manufacture such agents? Here, we run into the problem of too much data and too many suspects (see Figures 1 and 2). According to the authors of a study prepared at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government,

How and why is the underlying capacity of non-state actors to master the technical challenges of NBC acquisition and use increasing? The first reason is that the basic science behind these weapons is being learned by more people, better than ever before. In the United States alone, the number of people receiving bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral degrees in science and engineering fields more than doubled between 1966 and 1994.... Over the same time period, the number of B.S. degrees awarded in biology increased by 122 percent, and the number of Ph.Ds grew by 144 percent; more than 60,000 advanced degrees were granted in biology each year by 1994... (Falkenrath, Newman and Thayer, 1998: 171-72).

And, they continue

An even more important gauge of the ability of non-state actors to build and use weapons of mass destruction is the increasing level of knowledge available even in high school science courses, not to mention undergraduate or graduate-level courses, as well as the sophistication of the laboratory and analytical tools, from computers to laboratory-scale fermentation equipment, that are now routinely available (id., p. 173).

### **Figures 1 and 2 about here**

There is no evidence available to indicate, however, that American high school students have begun to manufacture biological agents at any scale. They are, nevertheless, all

potential suspects should such an agent be released on any mass scale. Do *you* have a biology degree?



#### **IV. When the dog barks, when the bee stings, when I'm feeling sad**

The discourse of counter-terrorism represents, in other words, the articulation and implementation of a political economy of threats whose primary product is fear. And just as corporations must grow in order to remain competitive, so must the discourse of counter-terrorism. Over time, a “yellow alert” no longer stands for a condition of “elevated” threat but becomes the normal state of affairs. Fear dies down and the viability of the discourse itself comes under threat. No one notices the dog that doesn't bark, even if it might be there. But how are sleeping dogs made to bark?

All discourses possess an historical context, and so does that of T/C-T. Over time, both actions and actors are categorized within this discourse as signifiers for particular events and identities that set in train a series of already fixed, yet malleable responses. This process is organized and articulated by those who participate in the construction and reconstruction of the discourse, but it is reinforced through public response to the discourse, triggered by certain signifiers. For example, *alert*, *Middle Eastern*, *Islamic*, *illegal*, and *terrorist* are signifiers within the discourse of T/C-T, whose articulation

invokes the discourse and all that is associated with it. Recognition of these signifiers also suggests the validity of the discourse through the “facts” that have been established by particular historic events, actors, beliefs and practices. Two such incidents illustrate this argument.

On 30 December 2002, the Federal Bureau of Investigation alerted all U.S. law enforcement agencies to be on the lookout for five Middle Eastern men who were “believed” to have illegally crossed the Canadian border “sometime around” 24 December. The bulletin read: “Although the FBI has no specific information that these individuals are connected to any potential terrorist activities, based upon information developed in the course of ongoing investigations, the FBI would like to locate and question these persons” (Lewis, 2002). Invoking the long history of its “Most Wanted List,” the FBI posted what it “believed” to be the names, ages and photographs of the men on its website, requesting assistance from both police departments and the public across the nation. The “all points bulletin” was directed by President George Bush who stated, “we need to know why they have been smuggled into the country, what they’re doing in the country.” The chief spokesperson of the New York City’s police department, Michael O’Looney, immediately announced that police have “increased their counter-terrorist efforts,” and security was stepped up at “icon sites” around the country (Lichtblau, 2003b).

But the vagueness of the “counter-terrorist effort” and “potential terrorist activities” generated mass anxieties. Where were these five mysterious suspects who could attack at any given moment? How could they elude capture? The “Big FBI Story”, as CNN newscaster Paula Zahn reported on 30 December, became a sensational

terrorist possibility as New Year's Eve approached. The suspects were popping up everywhere and yet nowhere, creating alarms of possible vulnerability (Cheney and Malarek, 2003).

And then, as quickly as it began, the story was over. Nothing happened on New Year's Eve. On 3 January 2003, FBI spokesman Ed Cogswell announced, "there is no border-crossing information that would say they're here...and to say they came in from Canada is pure speculation" (id.). Four days later, the *New York Times* reported that the FBI discontinued the search for the five suspects of "bad information" from a "jailed tipster"<sup>8</sup> who sought to "ingratiate" himself with the authorities.<sup>9</sup> The *Times* noted that the FBI nonetheless defended the alert because Canadian border crossings and New Year's attacks are serious realities, illustrated by Al Qaeda's millennium attempt to bomb LAX, foiled by the perpetrator's capture near Seattle in 1999. The Bureau also issued the following statement: "Based on all the information we had, we thought it was necessary to put these photos out there and err on the side of caution. In today's climate, if something had happened and we hadn't done anything, what would the public reaction have been" (FBI official quoted in Lichtblau, 2003b)? So was the terrorist threat real or was it as one Royal Canadian Mountie suggested, "a slow week at the White House" (Cheney and Malarek, 2003)?

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<sup>8</sup> The tipster was detained informant Michael John Hamdani. Hamdani was arrested in Canada in October 2002 for fraud charges where Canadian officials found fake passports, immigration documents and counterfeit traveler's checks (UPI, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> The bad information included false identification of one of the suspects. Mustafa Khan Owasi, a Pakistani jeweler in Lahore claimed he never visited the US and his name is Mohammed Asghar (Cheney and Malarek 2003; United Press International 2003). *The New York Times* reported similar false identification of Mustafa Khan Owasi, but did not acknowledge another name for the misidentified suspect (Lichtblau 2003b).

Media reports during the first week of February 2003 dabbled in potential terrorist activity, even as the chatter level about the impending war in Iraq was rising. On 6 February, US intelligence analysts reported a “recent upsurge in possible terrorist threats” and alerted law enforcement to look for “potential Al Qaeda attacks in coming weeks, possibly timed for end of Muslim Hajj pilgrimage or war in Iraq” (Lichtblau and Johnston, 2003a). On 7 February 2003, Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge, Attorney General John Ashcroft and FBI Director Robert Mueller declared a nationwide “Orange Alert.” Based on “specific intelligence received and analyzed by the full intelligence community,” and “corroborated by multiple intelligence sources,” they reported, “Joint Terrorism Task Forces have been working 24 hours a day following up on information we *may* have received.” The “specific intelligence,” as Ashcroft told a press conference that day, was an “increased likelihood” that there would be an attack “in or around the end of Hajj.” He “emphasized planning for attacks” on “soft targets,” perhaps apartment buildings or hotels, stated that the recent bombings in Bali, Indonesia and Kenya “demonstrated continued willingness of Al Qaeda to strike peaceful, innocent civilians,” and cited the recent arrests in London “where chemical ricin was discovered...[which] demonstrated Al Qaeda’s interest in carrying out chemical, biological and radiological attacks” (CNN, 2003a; see also *New York Times*, 2003).

This manipulation of signifiers created anxiety, alarm and a demand for counter-terrorist activity. An Orange Alert indicates a “high risk of terrorist attacks,” and requires that counteractions, precautions and protective measures be taken by federal, state and local authorities, as well as the “general public” (White House, 2003). At the time the alert was issued, Ridge assured the press and public that relevant “information” was

being provided to all “local and state law enforcement officials, federal agencies, members of Congress, governors, state homeland security advisers, and mayors” as well as “fire, emergency, health and public safety personnel” (CNN, 2003a).

Reactions varied:

National alert spurred extra patrols on Minnesota’s northern border, increased Coast Guard stops along both coasts and added more eyes at theme parks in Florida and California...

Massachusetts announced stepped up patrols at Logan International Airport, subways and in the waters off the Atlantic Coast...

New York Governor, George Pataki said specialized units of state police and the National Guard were activated...extra security at bridges, tunnels, airports, subways and many public buildings...

Security was increased at the San Onofre [California] nuclear facility...

And National Grid, the company that owns Massachusetts Electricity and energy providers in New York, New Hampshire and Rhode Island “asked employees to be extra vigilant” (CNN, 2003b).

But what was the public expected to do? Ashcroft and Ridge counseled Americans to “remain aware and remain alert.” For what? Where? When? Ridge’s response focused on responsibility and protective duty.

The thought occurred to me, traveling to join my colleagues for this public announcement, that when I step across the threshold of the front door at night I’m not sure I’m seen as the secretary of the Department of Homeland Security; I’m a husband and a father, a parent and a spouse. And I know a lot of parents and spouses are saying, ‘Well, what should we do? What does this mean for us?’ And all I would say to you as a parent and a spouse is, take the time now to get informed (CNN, 2003b).

Was that all? What kind of attack? What should we *do*?<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Sandman and Lanard, 2003, in which the authors analyze five polled responses to the advice: the mocking response, the fearful/dependent response, the numb/counter-dependent response, the political response, and the skeptical/distrustful response.

Planning was the key for an event whose form, timing, location and severity were unknown. To assuage growing levels of concern and frustration, the White House and the Department of Homeland Security released “disaster plans,” or “guides,” specifying how to respond during particular terrorist threats and “what to do” in this heightened terror alert (White House, 2003; CNN 2003b, 2003c). The guides listed a series of “what to do” in all sorts of disaster situations but the focal points were biological and chemical threats (see below). The following instructions were issued:

### **How to prepare for a biological or chemical attack--**

\*Assemble a disaster supply kit and be sure to include:

- battery powered commercial radio with extra batteries
- non-perishable food and drinking water
- roll of duct tape and scissors
- plastic for doors, windows and vents for the room in which you will shelter in place—this should be an internal room where you can block out air that may contain hazardous chemical or biological agents. To save time during an emergency, sheeting should be pre-measured and cut for each opening.

### **What to do during a chemical or biological attack—**

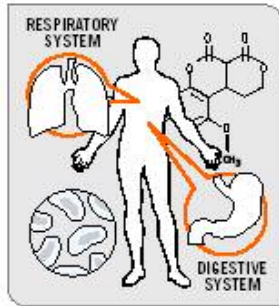
\*Listen to your radio for instruction from authorities such as whether to remain inside or to evacuate.

\*If you are instructed to remain in your home, the building where you are, or other shelter during a chemical or biological attack:

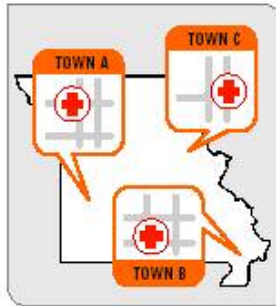
- turn off ventilation, including furnaces, air conditioners, vents and fans
- seek shelter in an internal room, preferably one without windows- seal room with duct tape and plastic sheeting- ten square feet of floor space per person will provide sufficient air to prevent carbon dioxide build-up for up to five hours (White House, 2003; CNN 2003b, 2003c).

But over the three days following the Orange Alert, uncertainty and fear were further heightened by more government warnings. During a television interview Ridge assured the public that “the terrorism alert issued last week was ‘the most significant’ since the 2001 attacks....The threat is real...,” he affirmed, “[and] we believe the threat has

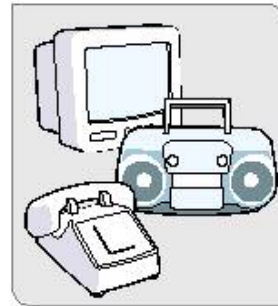
BE INFORMED  
**BIOLOGICAL THREAT**



1. A biological attack is the release of germs or other biological substances. Many agents must be inhaled, enter through a cut in the skin or be eaten to make you sick. Some biological agents can cause contagious diseases, others do not.



2. A biological attack may or may not be immediately obvious. While it is possible that you will see signs of a biological attack it is perhaps more likely that local health care workers will report a pattern of unusual illness.



3. You will probably learn of the danger through an emergency radio or TV broadcast.



4. If you become aware of an unusual or suspicious release of an unknown substance nearby, it doesn't hurt to protect yourself.



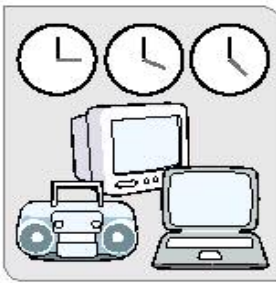
5. Get away from the substance as quickly as possible.



6. Cover your mouth and nose with layers of fabric that can filter the air but still allow breathing.



7. Wash with soap and water and contact authorities.



8. In the event of a biological attack, public health officials may not immediately be able to provide information on what you should do. However, you should watch TV, listen to the radio, or check the Internet for official news as it becomes available.



9. At the time of a declared biological emergency be suspicious, but do not automatically assume that any illness is the result of the attack. Symptoms of many common illnesses may overlap. Use common sense, practice good hygiene and cleanliness to avoid spreading germs, and seek medical advice.

substantially increased in the last couple of weeks.” Pressed to hand the public *something*, the Bush administration and Ridge proceeded to speak for the planning documents, recommending “that people keep a supply of duct tape and plastic sheeting in their homes to seal off windows in the event of a chemical or biological attack” (Shennon, 2003). The Administration’s announcements were supported by a growing number of media reports and speculations. The FBI was searching, yet again, for a *Middle Eastern* man (this time defined as Pakistani) who was “part of the decision to raise the alert level” though the FBI had “no specific information that the man is connected to any potential terrorist activities,” hospitals were receiving reports of possible cyanide attacks, and the federal government had found connections between terrorism and a possible war in Iraq (CNN, 2003; Johnston, 2003a; Kelley, 2003).

With this, the new objects of protection, and arguably obsession, became duct tape and plastic. With nothing else to do, it seemed completely rational that “Duct Tape Sales Rise Amid Terror Fears” (Meserve, 2003) and that New York residents might “consider temporary relocation to motels in New Jersey” (Kleinfield, 2003). Why did the administration suggested duct tape and plastic? Would duct tape and plastic really protect you in a biological or chemical attack? Why did people actually buy it? Among the many articles written after the government’s endorsement of of duct tape and plastic as given, one from the *New York Times* stands out: “Protective Devices; Duct Tape and Plastic Sheeting Can Offer Solace, if Not Real Security” (Chang and Miller, 2003).

On the one hand, it seemed ridiculous to purchase the products because they would not protect you. Randall J. Larsen, director of the non-profit Anser Institute for Homeland Security in Arlington, VA, thought that “If it lowers your blood pressure, go

ahead and do it, but do everything else first ... I don't think there's enough information out there for people to be locking themselves in airtight rooms.” Dr. Monica Schoch-Spana, a senior fellow at the Johns Hopkins Center for Civilian Biodefense Strategies, explained that the utility of a “safe room” would be nil in a biological attack: “You won't be tipped off that something's going to happen ... you wouldn't have time to get that in place” (Chang and Miller, 2003; see also Leland, 2003).

On the other hand, the American Red Cross, ahead of the game, had recommended duct tape and plastic for an emergency safety kit “for a decade.” David Paulison, a U.S. Fire Administrator in the greater Washington DC area, advised the purchase of duct tape, plastic and other emergency items because of the growing concerns of “Al Qaeda’s interest in acquiring weapons of mass destruction” and believed that because “aid after an attack could be hard to come by,” during “the first 48 to 72 hours of an emergency, many Americans will likely have to look after themselves.” Dr. John H. Sorensen, scientist from Oak Ridge National Laboratory and co-author of the provocatively-titled “Will Duct Tape and Plastic Really Work?” written in 2001 for the Federal Emergency Management Agency averred “We think that from a purely engineering standpoint, they are effective...every little bit helps. What we don't know a lot about is how good people are at putting them up.” The article continued that

Though there is no direct evidence that a room sealed with duct tape and plastic would increase the chances of survival, experiments have indicated that chemical warfare agents take at least several hours to seep through such a seal. Some real-home trials found that sealing doors, windows and vents reduced airflow into the room by up to two-thirds. Even then, however, outside air completely cycled through the room within hours ... in the tests, some people were able to seal rooms in a few minutes; others took nearly 40 minutes.

For those not sure about their abilities, companies like the Regional Environmental Hazard Containment Corporation (based near Washington, DC but, possibly, an Israeli

company) would sell you inflatable plastic “safe rooms” for \$3,200 to \$5,000. Lester Lewis, a company executive, assured the *New York Times* that not only were they “getting more inquiries” they even had “sold some” (Meserve, 2003).



The mutual production and reproduction of the discourse continued. To justify the advice of seemingly useless protection, media reports focused on CIA Director George Tenet’s announcement that Osama bin Laden’s most recent taped message was “similar” to previous statements made in 2001, and those were followed by “deadly terrorist strikes against American and other targets overseas” (Johnston, 2003b).<sup>11</sup> The arrest of two *Pakistani* men at the Canadian border who had in their possession “a container with perhaps a half a pound of a white powder and tools described as being consistent with those used in bomb-making, including wire cutters and Casio digital watches” was also widely reported (Humphreys and Bell, 2003). Security continued to heighten and people continued to buy and debate about duct tape despite the fact that there was a greater “risk of dying in a car accident while driving to buy duct tape” than “dying because you lacked duct tape” (Easterbrook, 2003). Now there were homeland security kits, containing 100 feet of plastic sheeting and a 60-yard roll of duct tape could

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<sup>11</sup> See Berkowitz, 2003 for a discussion about why intercepted communications are difficult to analyze.

be bought on eBay for \$15 plus \$15.80 for shipping and handling (Selingo, 2003).

American counter-terrorist efforts had successfully helped create “Panic City, USA” and inducted the public into reproducing the discourse (McGory, 2003).

Finally, the end of the cycle arrived. The success of “getting through the week” enabled the Bush administration to reduce the alert level back to yellow on 27 February, warning, however, that Americans needed to “continue to be defiant and alert.” Ashcroft and Ridge both declared that “Al Qaeda will wait until it believes Americans are less vigilant and less prepared before it will strike again” (Lumpkin, 2003). Not long after, the United States officially began its invasion of Iraq, citing as one of its reasons linkages between the regime of Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda, and the possibility that the former might give weapons of mass destruction to the latter.

But vigilance is the cost of freedom. On 5 September 2003, the FBI issued a global alert seeking information on four Muslim, Middle Eastern individuals “after intelligence corroborated by multiple sources, including foreign governments and law enforcement officials, indicated they might be plotting new attacks against the United States.” As usual, these warnings were couched in conditional and non-specific terms: “Federal law enforcement officials...have no evidence any are in the United States, but because they have all used false names and travel documents in the past, the possibility cannot be ruled out.” The same officials, “speaking on condition of anonymity, cautioned that it was unclear if the four men were working together” and “There was no information they were involved in a specific terrorist operation” (Anderson, 2003). But perhaps recognizing that ridicule did not support their cause in February 2003, the government did not raise the national terror threat level from yellow to orange.



## VI. Follow the money

How, in this atmosphere of threat levels and constant chatter, can counter-terrorism operate effectively? Why should anyone believe warnings of the “inevitability” of biological terrorism? An informative leaf can be taken from the American experience with Cold War strategic nuclear planning. As Andrew Grossman points out in his study of civil defense during the 1940s and 1950s,

Information pertaining to nuclear war depended on complicated, abstract, *theoretical* modeling drawn largely from economic science. These formal models were used by civilian and military planners in their development of war-fighting scenarios. However, *since there was no baseline for nuclear war*, formal nuclear war-fighting models were, more often than not, an amalgam of two ontologies: an abstract hypothetical “reality” and the tangible reality of conventional warfare—specifically World War II (Grossman, 2001:4; first italics in original; second added).

He also writes that

When planners within the Truman administration reflected on the key role of the domestic population and its essential support for postwar U.S. grand strategy, they made almost no distinction between planning for a real war and planning for a Cold War. The central state’s apparatuses for external and internal security worked together to investigate potential and real saboteurs and “fifth columnists” who might be preparing the country for a surprise attack (id., p. 12).

One could say that these two processes constituted the organization of a discourse that posited the inevitability of nuclear war, as depicted by the models, and required the *selling* of the need for constant mobilization of the population, threatened not only from external enemies but also internal ones.

Grossman argues that the state's proffering of this type of discourse is, at least in part, a consequence of the tension between democracy at home and threats from abroad. Democracy and liberalism cannot be allowed to stand in the way of national security and emergency planning. In a "state of emergency" (or "state of exception," as Carl Schmitt put it attacking the Weimer Republic in the 1920s) security must come first. As Grossman frames the argument of the national authorities, "When state survival is measured against liberal constitutional protection of the individual, individual rights, and political parties, state survival supercedes all constitutional protection" (Grossman, 2001: 111). The agencies of the state must, therefore, overplay potential threats in order to receive public approval for its anti-liberal actions and they maintain its legitimacy by claiming that these actions are essential to national survival.

Although Grossman's analysis seems on the mark, it offers only half of the story, as it were, and says nothing about political economy. There are two reasons for this omission. First, during most of the Truman Administration, the defense budget was rather small, especially in comparison to wartime expenditures. Not until the outbreak of the Korean War did defense spending rise from about \$12 billion to \$50 billion, much of which went for rearmament in Europe rather than the fighting in Asia. Second, in the late 1940s, the state's legitimacy was not as tightly linked to the economy as it is today. Keynesianism was only beginning to be institutionalized and the market did not play the dominant social and cultural roles that it has come to occupy over the last two decades. Nor was the defense sector a structural support for the national economy that it has since come to be. There was, to be sure, a "political economy" at work, but it was not yet completely a "capitalist tool," so to speak.

Today, the legitimacy of the state is both more complex and more fragile. The attacks on Washington and New York were aimed at symbols of the Homeland, and did not seek to destroy the Homeland itself. But the Homeland has come to represent global capitalism as well as America's presence abroad (more people are exposed to the United States' commercial products and institutions than to its military power, although that might change in the future). The attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center thus struck at the heart of the American state, which is the protector not only of domestic society but also global capitalism. The state cannot simply defend the economic system through military means: there are too many vulnerable targets and attempting to do so would confirm widespread cynicism about whose interests the government seeks to protect. It must, therefore, generate the conditions that make it possible to protect capitalism in the course of protecting society. Hence, the never-ending "War on Terrorism."

It is either ironic or inevitable, therefore, that capitalist huckstering becomes the mode through which the manufacture of discourse, production of danger, and peddling of fear take place. After all, products promising to deal with the most mundane threats to everyday life are bought, guilelessly, all the time. Bad breath? Foot odor? Unstylish auto? Better be safe than sorry! Still, there's a limit to what even American consumers will believe, and Madison Avenue has yet to find a way to fully commodify disaster (aside from made for TV movies). *Caveat emptor!*

# SEEKING INFORMATION

## War on Terrorism



**THESE INDIVIDUALS SHOULD BE CONSIDERED  
ARMED  
AND DANGEROUS**

**IF YOU HAVE ANY INFORMATION CONCERNING THESE  
INDIVIDUALS, PLEASE CONTACT YOUR LOCAL FBI  
OFFICE, THE NEAREST AMERICAN EMBASSY OR  
CONSULATE, OR SUBMIT A TIP THROUGH FBI.GOV.**

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