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Comprehensive 'Counter-Narrative Strategy';
Strategic Insights, v. 6, issue 3 (2005 March)

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10945/11132>

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Storytelling and Terrorism: Towards a Comprehensive 'Counter-Narrative Strategy'

Strategic Insights, Volume IV, Issue 3 (March 2005)

by [William D. Casebeer](#) and [James A. Russell](#)

Strategic Insights is a monthly electronic journal produced by the [Center for Contemporary Conflict](#) at the [Naval Postgraduate School](#) in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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Introduction

Scarcely a day goes by without a senior government official commenting on the “war on terror” or the “global war on terrorism,” or with some reference to the “terrorists.” This terminology is also bandied about on popular media outlets—in print and on television and radio. In short, the terminology of “terrorism” has become part and parcel of daily public discourse. The terminology now forms part of the indelible fabric of communications in the globalizing international environment.

The use of this terminology carries with it certain connotations and intuitive images that for the United States public conjure up the painful and searing memories of the September 11 attacks. To be sure, however, these painful memories are interspersed with other, more pleasant thoughts. We recall, for example, the heroism of the New York City firefighters and the passengers on board United Airlines Flight 93 that brought down the third plane en route to Washington. The reports of U.S. military personnel riding on horseback through the valleys and mountains of Afghanistan marshaling troops and calling in air strikes also come vividly to mind as the nation struck back at perpetrators of the attacks.

The point of this discourse is that the attacks of September 11th form part of a narrative—or a story—for the American public that shall exist in some form forever. While the public regarded the attacks as a defining—and a break somehow from the past, the elements of the story making up the September 11th attacks are slowly being pried apart and reconstituted by a variety of different “communities,” including intelligence professionals, academics and the news media. Each of these communities struggles to determine when the story of September 11th actually began. Government and military professionals can recall the changing threat environment in the Persian Gulf following the Khobar Towers attack of July 1996 and the many “lockdowns” that followed in the region as the threat from Al Qaeda gathered momentum. Others take the story of the September 11 attacks back even farther, highlighting the “connected dots” of late 1979 when Islamic radicals took over the American Embassy in Tehran and assaulted the American Embassy in Islamabad—both of which roughly coincided with the assault on the Grand Mosque in Mecca by a Sunni Islamic extremist.^[1] For Al Qaeda, the story of the September 11 attacks arguably goes back even farther—to the time of the Crusades or even earlier. The Al Qaeda

narrative surrounding the September 11th attacks arguably represents a religious and political historiography spanning the centuries.

The “Narrative” of 21st Century Strategy

The story, or narrative, of the September 11 attacks exists on a variety of different levels and has significantly different elements depending on what actors have created the narrative. But if the story is complicated, it indisputably the case that the United States has formulated a dramatic and new set of strategic priorities that flowed from the September 11th attacks. Scholars and students alike can now pore over a corpus of strategy documents that have been helpfully released by the Bush Administration in the last four years that identify “terrorism” as the pre-eminent threatening feature of the discombobulated international environment. The impact of the September 11th attacks on strategy cannot be under-estimated. Before 9/11 combating terrorism was one of only a number of strategic priorities—now it reigns pre-eminent. The nation’s National Military Strategy, for example, matter of factly states that “winning the war on terrorism” now constitutes the top priority for the nation’s military and is the single most important mission around which to structure and organize the nation’s defense policy.

As part of the assumptive backdrop that accompanies the new strategic direction, these documents largely cast the phenomenon of terrorism as being somehow “different” than terrorism of earlier eras—which in this case goes back only 10-15 years. We read darkly worded passages, for example, in the National Security Strategy document that describes the “intersection of radicalism and technology” as the most serious threat facing us in the world today. A common affiliation of the assertion that today’s phenomenon is “new” involves some related points: (1) That today’s adversaries have embraced the idea of mass casualty attacks with no distinction drawn between combatants and non-combatants. Further that these casualties can be caused by any means available—nuclear, chemical, biological and conventional capabilities; (2) The quest for these capabilities is combined with a belief structure that includes little interest in negotiation and which also embraces the use of suicide tactics. Part of the underlying narrative of these assumptions is the strong suspicion that the international system is in fact devolving into the Hobbesian state of nature where life is nasty, brutish and short and where the strong survive and the weak perish.

Interestingly, while the strategy documents make assertions about what we believe to be a generalizable phenomenon, what all students of terrorism realize is that the phenomenon if anything remains diffuse, not easy to define and in general difficult to understand. As a result it is hard to make sweeping generalizations that can form part of our narrative about the new threat. Is the United States at war with the Columbian narco-terrorist group called the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, or FARC) or Peru’s Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso, or SL) or Spain’s Basque Homeland & Liberty (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, or ETA) and the host of other groups identified in the State Department’s annual report? While the United States is militarily engaged to a certain extent against all such organizations, the fact remains that we are most actively engaged in a shooting war with the organization called Al Qaeda that seems to have morphed into what the Joint Operating Concept for Defeating Terrorist Organization calls a “global Islamic insurgency.” This is the document that will be used by all the military departments to build capabilities to prosecute the war on terrorism.

The Defense Department’s planners identify a specific geographic theater of operations that seems to have remarkable confluence with the so-called arc of instability that spans the Maghreb, Middle East, Gulf, Central Asia, and Near East Asia—and also includes part of South America as well. But the most critical part of the so-called “arc” remains in North Africa, the Middle East, the Gulf and Central Asia. This nascent insurgency has a (purportedly) Islamic character, meaning the United States confronts a series of groups that have been spawned in a region boasting complicated political, economic, social and religious circumstance that have been combined by

Ayman Al Zawahiri into a sweeping narrative that forms a backdrop to the social networks that are now arguably driving Al Qaeda organizational structure.[2]

Confronting the Al Qaeda narrative must be a critical mission requirement of any strategy to confront the organization; this requires planners to come to terms with the phenomenon of Islamism or political Islam and to understand how radicalized groups use violence to achieve ends related to the objectives of Islamism. Understanding the narrative leads us to the examination of the writings of Sayyid Qutb, Ayman Zawahiri, Ibn Tamiyya and a host of so-called “dissident” clerics in Saudi Arabia—all of which fall under the rubric of “salafist” Islamic thought. Many commentators refer to the assembled Al Qaeda narrative as an actual ideology that seems centered in the Middle East but which has global appeal to disaffected Muslims.

Counter-Narratives as an Element of Strategy

According to the current US National Security Strategy, the Global War on Terror is our number one security priority. While billions have been spent prosecuting this war (for example, by attacking state sponsors of terrorism), other aspects have been neglected. Here, we argue that grand counter-terrorism strategy would benefit from a comprehensive consideration of the stories terrorists tell; understanding the narratives which influence the genesis, growth, maturation and transformation of terrorist organizations will enable us to better fashion a strategy for undermining the efficacy of those narratives so as to deter, disrupt and defeat terrorist groups. Such a “counter-narrative strategy” will have multiple components with layered asynchronous effects; while effective counter-stories will be difficult to coordinate and will involve multiple agents of action, their formulation is a necessary part of any comprehensive counter-terrorism effort. Indeed, a failure on our part to come to grips with the narrative dimensions of the war on terrorism is a weakness already exploited by groups such as Al Qaeda; we can fully expect any adaptive adversary to act quickly to fill story gaps and exploit weaknesses in our narrative so as to ensure continued survival. More than giving us another tool with which to confront terrorism, though, narrative considerations also allow us to better deal more generally with the emerging security threat of violent non-state actors and armed groups that are highlighted in the Bush Administration’s strategy documents.

Justifying the need for and exploring the components of a counter-narrative strategy is a task for a book; here, we briefly sketch only the basics, discussing: (1) the psychological aspects of counter-terrorism and why stories will play a critical role in the ecosystem of violence, (2) the essential components of a story, (2) a typology of narratives offered by nascent terrorist groups throughout their development, (3) a simple Aristotelian rhetorical model for evaluating story success, (4) principles to guide the formulation of counter-narratives, and (5) complications and provisos, as well as a consideration of the institutional implications of our position. This summary is intended to provoke thought about new counter-terrorism tools.

Why think that storytelling has anything to do with terrorism and counter-terrorism? Consider the ineliminable psychological aspects of terrorism: there are multiple reasons why people choose to form or join organizations which use indiscriminant violence as a tactic to achieve their political objectives, all of them dealing at some point with *human psychology*. People feel alienated from their surroundings; they are denied political opportunity by the state; the state fails to provide basic necessities; they identify with those who advocate the use of violence; they are angered by excessive state force against political opponents; their essential needs are not being met; they feel deprived relative to peer groups elsewhere; and so on. These have all been offered as “root causes” of contentious politics in general, and terrorism in particular. Our purpose here is not to defend any particular position about root causes (indeed, some of those previously listed have been discredited as theories of terrorism), but instead merely to point out that all these causes have a proximate psychological mechanism—they exert influence by affecting the human mind/brain. If stories are part and parcel of human cognition, we would also then expect

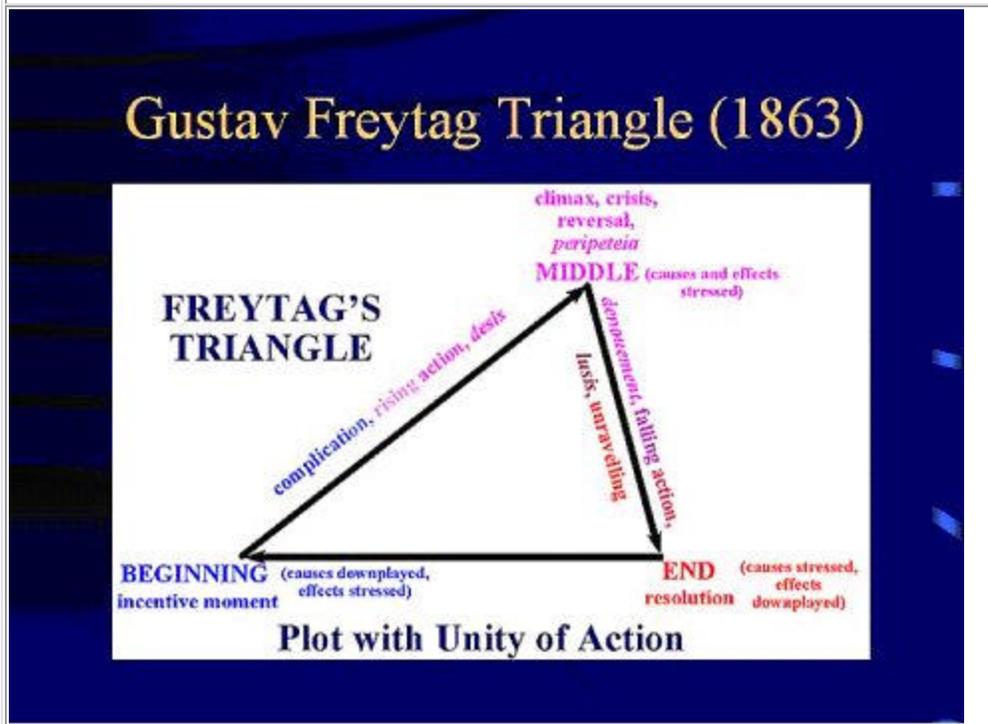
consequently that stories might affect how these causes play out to germinate, grow and sustain terrorism.

What is in a Story?

Discussion of stories and narratives is hampered by the fact that there is no widely accepted definition regarding just what a story is. Indeed, an entire school of thought in literary criticism (“post modernism”) is predicated on the fact that there is no such thing as a necessary and sufficient list of conditions a piece of text must meet so as to be a story (be it verbal, written, merely thought in the mind of a target audience, etc.). We can agree with the postmodernists that defining “story” is difficult without thinking, however, that the concept plays *no* useful purpose. In that sense, the concept “story” is like the concept “game”—there is no list of necessary and sufficient conditions for what it is to be a game, but that does not mean the concept is useless, or that there cannot be “family resemblances” between games that it would be useful to consider.

A good first hack, then, at a theory of stories comes from the 19th century German writer Gustav Freytag. Freytag believed that narratives followed a general pattern: there was some beginning, a problem presents itself that leads to a climax, which resolves itself into an ending. A coherent unified story could thus be as short as three sentences (consisting of setup, climax, resolution), such as “John was hungry. He went to the store and bought a sandwich. It was delicious.” Of course, this *particular* story is not very interesting or compelling, but it nonetheless *is* a coherent narrative. This “Freytag Triangle,” depicted below, captures the general structure of a story[3]: (See [Figure 1.](#))

Figure 1: Freytag Triangle



Contemporary literary theorist Patrick Hogan amplifies on the basic Freytag structure, pointing out that most plots involve an agent (normally, a *hero* or protagonist) striving to achieve some goal (usually despite the machinations of an antagonist, or *villain*)—there is a person (or group of persons) and a series of events driven by their attempts to achieve some objective. This familiar

analysis is supported by the study of mythology (recall Joseph Campbell's analysis of the structure of most famous legends from antiquity, which involve striving on the part of a hero, a test of some kind, and a return to the point of departure with new knowledge and greater self-understanding),^[4] and by consideration of most forms of story telling, be they oral, written, traditional, or contemporary.^[5]

Stories and Human Psychology

Using this working “theory of story,” we can gain insight into why stories are so important for structuring human thought. First, note that stories often are rich in metaphors and analogies; metaphors, in turn, affect our most basic attitudes toward the world. For example, suppose we think of “Islamic fundamentalism” as a disease; a simple narrative about fundamentalist Islam might be: “We want world communities to respect human rights. Fundamentalist Muslims disrespect some of those rights. We can prevent them from doing more harm by taking action now.” This implies a whole series of things I ‘ought’ to do in reaction to fundamentalism (combat its spread, focus on this “public health problem” by inoculating people against it, consider those who try to spread it as ‘evil agents up to no good’—or at the very least, as modern day “Typhoid Marys,” etc.).^[6]

Reasoning by metaphor and analogy, a research program explored by Mark Johnson, George Lakoff, Giles Fauconnier, and Mark Turner, argues that our most complex mental tasks are usually carried out not by the “classical mechanics” of rational actor theory (where stories really have no place), but rather by a set of analogy making and metaphor mapping abilities that form the core of human cognition.^[7] Exploration into the “story -telling mind” is a research program that combines metaphor and analogy into an examination of the powerful grip narrative has on human cognition; narratives can restructure our mental spaces in ways that profoundly affect our reasoning ability and, ultimately, what we make of the world. Think of the grip that the “Jihad versus McWorld”^[8] narrative has on Al Qaeda and how this affects the way they think about the future.^[9] As Mark Turner notes, “Story is a basic principle of mind. Most of our experience, our knowledge, and our thinking is organized as stories.”^[10]

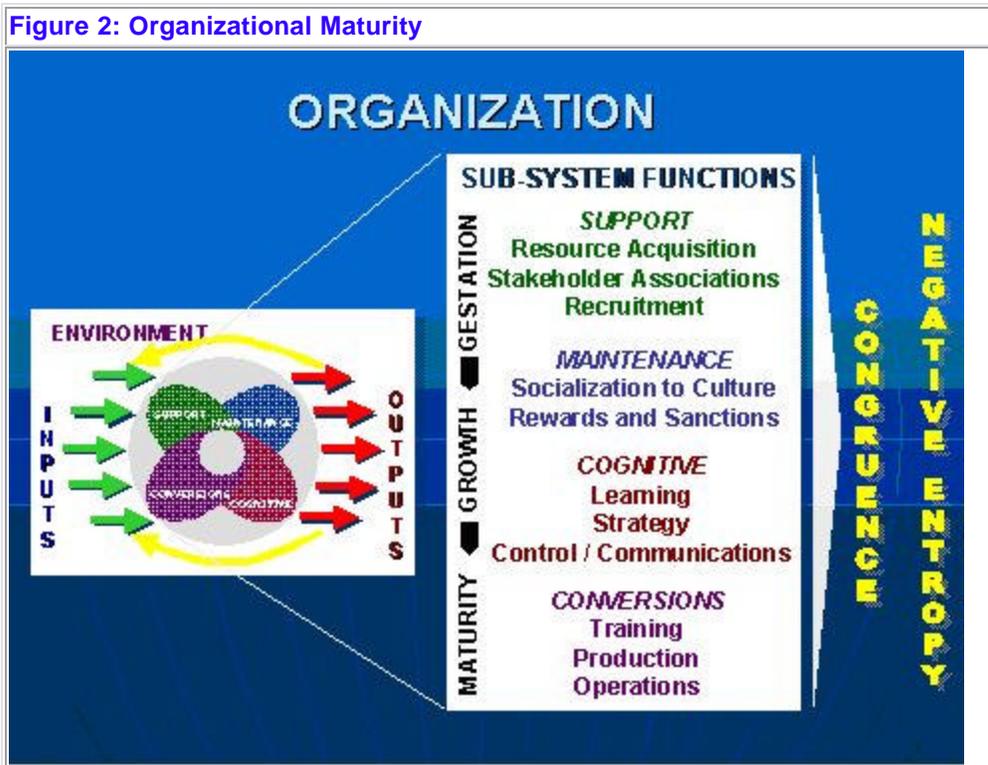
But even if making stories foundational to thought seems a stretch, there's *ample* evidence that stories influence our ability to recall events, motivate people to act, modulate our emotional reactions to events, cue certain heuristics and biases, structure our problem-solving capabilities, and ultimately perhaps even constitute our very identity.^[11] Any of these aspects of narrative would be fascinating and important to examine in detail.

Now that we have a basic understanding of what narratives are, and have reason to believe they are influential in acts of human cognition salient to terrorist group formation, we can examine the role stories play across the life cycle of terrorist organizations.

Narratives and Terrorist Organization Life Cycles

Like other organizations, terrorist organizations move through life cycles: a genesis point; maturity and consolidation and; eventually transform (by dying, being co-opted by the state, morphing into a peaceful non-state actor, etc.). As Thomas and Casebeer^[12] have pointed out, different organizational structures will develop during this life-cycle, with some being more important than others depending on where the organization is in its development; as Martha Crenshaw has noted, during maturity terrorist organizations will develop survival as a goal, and this organizational consideration can help us understand why they take some of the actions they do. The life cycle concept follows naturally from thinking of the conditions which give rise to terrorism: there is an environment conducive to the formation of violent non-state actors (VNSA hereafter). These environments are typified by failures in governance, pre-existing identity cleavages, resource scarcity and deprivation, and lack of political opportunity. When these “push” factors

result in the genesis of a potential VNSA (usually at the behest of a foundational “identity entrepreneur”), the stage is set for the growth and maturation of a nascent organization. At maturity, a VNSA will have developed a suite of functions it must implement if it is to maintain its existence as an organization; these include ‘support’ (get resources, cultivate stakeholder relations, etc.), ‘maintenance’ (sanctioning defectors from the organization, rewarding loyal service, etc.), ‘cognitive’ (planning, learning and control, etc.) and ‘conversion’ (production of terrorist acts, provision of social services to the community, etc.) processes. A mature organization that is functioning well will have smooth “fit” between these processes (this is called “congruence”) and will also have ‘stores of fat’ waiting in the wings in case the inputs from the environment turn sour or can no longer support the organization (these stores constitute what is called “negative entropy”). The following schematic summarizes this understanding (see [Figure 2](#)):



For present purposes, it is important to note the multiple critical roles narratives play throughout this life cycle. During genesis/gestation, stories (1) provide *incentives for recruitment*, particularly by providing justice frames which serve to mobilize discontent, (2) help *justify the need* for an organization to the community in which it will be embedded, and to first-round stakeholders, (3) *reinforce pre-existing identities* friendly to the nascent organization, (4) *create necessary identities* where none exist, (5) *set the stage for further growth* of the organization, (6) *solidify founding members into leadership roles*, and (7) *define the possible space of actions* as the organization blossoms.

During growth, narratives do all this and also (1) *reinforce role-specific obligations* so as to ensure group members continue to accomplish their functions, (2) *provide “fire walls”* against attempts to discredit foundational myths, (3) *articulate ideological niches* for the organization, and (4) *make salient to organization members the environmental conditions* conducive to organizational growth.

During maturity, in addition, stories will (1) be *linked into the command and control system* of the organization for tweaking and updating, (2) *serve as insulation* against environmental change, (3) *actively support operations* by motivating organizational members and channeling organizational thought down pre-set canals useful for the group, (4) *be used as "top cover"* to allow the organization to adapt, change goals, or otherwise modify structure and function so as to ensure continued survival.

During transformation, narratives will (1) *smooth the transition* to new organizational forms, (2) help *ease the organization into a different set of stakeholder relationships*, (3) provide the *foundation for the revived identities* which will be used in whatever new form the organization adopts, and (4) serve to *demobilize* those portions of the organization which have served their purpose or are no longer needed.

These purposes deserve elaboration and explanation. No doubt empirical examples come to mind for many of them. A thorough defense would require inductive justification, but for now mere intuitive plausibility must do.

A Narrative Typology

While the diversity of purposes served by stories in terrorist organizations makes a typology of stories difficult, there are still useful camps into which the stories can be grouped. For instance, foundational myths can be *transactional* or *transcendental*. Transactional/pragmatic foundational myths emphasize transactional or instrumental considerations: if you join our terrorist organization, our use of violence will enable you to achieve certain materially realizable individual and collective goals (together we will make money; together we will found a new state; together we will change an unjust practice). Transcendental foundational myths emphasize otherworldly goals that it is not plausible to expect to see realized or that reject worldly manifestation altogether (together we will find paradise in God's bosom, together we will convert every soul in the world to scientology). Both can be used in concert, of course. Al Qaeda's foundational myth involves elements of both: transactional pragmatic goals and transcendental religious goals.

What is the basic structure of some of these stories and narratives? In his paper "Terror's Mask: Insurgency Within Islam," political scientist Michael Vlahos identifies four elements of Al Qaeda-style narrative tropes: (1) a heroic journey and a mythic figure, (2) the rhythm of history captured as epic struggle and story, (3) the commanded charge of renewal, and (4) history revealed through and enjoined through mystic literary form.^[13]

According to Vlahos, the foundational mythic figure for Islam is (of course) Muhammad. Bin Laden, then, taps into this theme when he portrays himself as following in the footsteps of Muhammad; he too is making a heroic journey, struggling against great odds, in a way that makes him almost as mythic in stature (and hence all the posters and stickers praising him in places like Pakistan or Afghanistan). Part of the reason why he is mythic is because of the second element: bin Laden argues that he is part of a grand struggle against Western imperialism and decadence. His actions are part of a *story* that is linked to the very fabric of Muslim history (and given the fact that this history was in actual fact laced with Orientalism and colonialism, it's no surprise that charges of *neo-Orientalism* and *neo-colonialism* stick so easily). The third aspect of the story is important: it is only by struggling against these dark forces that one can be *renewed*. To fail to struggle is to *fail* to play your part in a narrative that ends with Islam triumphing over the infidel West. Finally, owing to the fourth element, the story contains built in "insulation" from temporary tactical successes on the part of occupying forces: the mystical element of the narrative (especially its otherworldly component involving things like rewards in the afterlife's paradise) means that temporal success won't necessarily 'defuse' the logic of the story...resistance can and should continue even if the security situation improves in the short

term (although brute facts about human psychology may undermine the effectiveness of that story in the long run in the face of improvements in the procurement of basic needs).

Closely related to Vlahos's ideas about the essential elements of the Islamic fundamentalist narrative is sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer's theory of "cosmic war."^[14] Juergensmeyer suggests that religious tropes are more likely to play a narrative role if the confrontation between two groups can be characterized as a cosmic struggle or battle. This is most likely in the following circumstances:

1. If the struggle is perceived as a defense of basic identity and dignity.
2. If losing the struggle would be unthinkable.
3. If the struggle is "blocked" and cannot be won in real time or in real terms.^[15]

To amplify: in cases where the struggle is over extremely basic questions of identity and where basic human rights are at stake; if losing the struggle seems Armageddon-like (e.g., you would tell a very bad story if your resistance failed); and if the struggle is perceived as being hopeless in concrete terms (e.g., it is impossible to see how we could beat the occupiers using traditional "force-on-force" confrontations), then it is very likely that the struggle can more easily be framed in religious and robustly metaphysical terms as a "cosmic" struggle, in which case recruitment into organizations becomes easier for certain target populations (those predisposed to accept transcendental foundational myths).

There are no doubt multiple narrative structures at play in terrorism, but hopefully this brief survey has motivated the idea that breaking them up into different types can help us better understand how we can render inert the role they play in terrorist organizational growth. How do we go about countering these stories?

Towards A Counter-Narrative Strategy(ies)

To address this practical question, we will first discuss counter-narrative strategies in generic terms, and then offer guidance that is more concrete. Important generic principles for counter-narrative strategy will include: competing myth creation, foundational myth deconstruction, creation of alternative exemplars, metaphor shifts, identity gerrymandering, and structural disruption.

Myth creation involves the weaving together of the narrative elements of a story with facts about past and present situations to create an emotionally compelling background that very often directly influences the susceptibility of a population to manipulation by "myth mongers." The fanatical devotion shown by al Qaeda operatives stems in large part not from any rational deliberative process but rather from the success Osama bin Laden and others have had in fashioning a coherent and appealing foundational myth. The events of September 11 can be thought of as the punch line of a chapter in an epic that sets "the warriors of God" against an "infidel West." This myth did not propagate itself via rational actor channels, but instead was indoctrinated via a multi pronged effort on the part of fundamentalist strains of Islam (such as Saudi Arabia's Wahhabis). Successful myth creation may very well leverage heuristics and biases cognitive scientists tell us are present in human cognition; they certainly takes advantage of the availability heuristic, as this heuristic probably undergirds human propensity to form stereotypes.

Myth creation usually involves the effective use of narrative. As we formulate an "affective strategy," we should keep the elements of a narrative in mind, for it is only by disrupting the story

that you can interfere with myth creation. Good stories need protagonists, antagonists, tests for the protagonist, a promise of redemption, and a supporting cast of characters (at the very least). Disrupting al Qaeda's foundational myth may involve undermining the belief that we are the antagonists in the narrative bin Laden is constructing. Therefore, either we can undermine the foundational myth being used to drive VNSA development, or we can construct an alternative myth that is a "better story" than the one being offered by the myth mongers. Examples of myth creation in action in fiction include the stories told by the rulers of Plato's ideal city (the "Republic") that were designed to motivate members of the different classes,[\[16\]](#) and in fact the foundational myths that supported the violent actions of *both* the Hutus and the Tutsis during the Rwandan massacres of 1994.[\[17\]](#)

For a more benign example, consider the conscious mythmaking that has taken place in Israel, such as the "transformation of the 1920 defense of a new Jewish settlement in Tel Hai into a national myth," turning a defeat into a symbol of national revival.[\[18\]](#)

Closely related to myth making is the strategy of creating alternative exemplars. Members of an at risk population often become at risk because of a failure to identify with a member of a *non violent* non state actor or a member of the *government or occupying power*. VNSA "identity entrepreneurs" can exploit existing ethnic, racial, economic, or social political differences by elevating someone who shares the same characteristics as the exploited class to a position of prestige or power. Members of the at risk group then come to identify with that exemplar and may feel compelled to adopt the violent strategies advocated by the exemplar's VNSA. Creating alternative exemplars that share the salient characteristics who nonetheless do *not* advocate violence or who can show the way towards a non-violent solution to the issues that are fueling VNSA emergence can go a long way towards interrupting the VNSA life cycle. Alternative exemplar creation may involve symbolic acts on the part of the government that tap those elements of "hot" emotion-laden cognition and heuristics and biases mentioned earlier. An example of the alternative exemplar creation strategy in action is the praise and warm endorsement heaped upon John Garang, the leader of the Sudanese guerrilla faction of the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA), during his visit to Washington just before Christmas of 1995; such endorsement was critical for the recruitment and logistics boost the SPLA received that enabled Garang's forces to recapture crucial cities in southern Sudan soon thereafter.[\[19\]](#) In this case, we encouraged the growth of a VNSA by cultivating an exemplar saliently different from the leaders of the Sudanese regime.

An alternate affective strategy includes fomenting a metaphor shift that affects the way in which at risk populations or members of a VNSA frame their actions. Given the power of metaphor to shape human thought, it should come as no surprise that shifting metaphors people use to frame worldviews and guide decisions could cause a change in their reasoning about the situation. For example, to convince someone that "cluster of cells" is a more appropriate metaphor for an unborn embryo than "young human" may very well change their stand on the issue of abortion.[\[20\]](#) Shifting metaphors requires making connections between the way people presently view a situation or issue and the way you would like them to frame the situation or issue.[\[21\]](#) The common refrain, "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter," is a simple example of metaphor shift; if you can make the charge of "you are not a freedom fighter" (or "you are not actually crusading on behalf of true Muslims") stick, you go a long way toward defusing certain narratives.[\[22\]](#) Even the patriotic revolutionaries participating in the Boston Tea Party were viewed as criminals and dangerous insurrectionists by many of their fellow colonialists.

Manipulation (we mean nothing necessarily nefarious by this term...ethical issues in counter-narrative strategy are another fascinating topic altogether) of existing identities (be they national, tribal, ethnic, etc.) is another affective strategy.[\[23\]](#) This does not necessarily require creating new foundational myths or alternate exemplars; instead, skillful use of existing cleavages can decrease a VNSA's stock of negative entropy. This is the "flip side" of the identity entrepreneur's efforts that are often part of the genesis and growth of VNSA. For example, the Masaai warriors

in Tanzania have skillfully manipulated existing identity cleavages so as to elevate the *warrior* aspect of Masaai culture over other aspects (*pastoral herder* or *Tanzanian citizen*). This involved the creation of camps for young Masaai; following their circumcision ritual, Masaai males attend the camp, learn compelling stories, and become engaged in foundational myths about ancient Masaai warriors while cultivating their hunting and combat skills. The Tanzanian government, if it wished, could exploit *other* aspects of Masaai history, including the fact that their lineage includes an important pastoral element, so as to de-emphasize the violent aspects of Masaai culture to ensure they remain a peaceful non-state actor.[24]

For an Islamic example, consider Bassam Tibi's position that moderate members of the Islamic faith (especially Sufis) could best confront malignant forms of fundamentalism by emphasizing strands in Islamic narrative history that highlight very different exemplars. As he says:

...I am a Sufi, but in my mind I subscribe to *aql*/reason, and in this I follow the Islamic rationalism of *Ibn Rushd*/Averroes. Moreover, I read Islamic scripture, as any other, in the light of history, a practice I learned from the work of the great Islamic philosopher of history *Ibn Khaldun*. The Islamic source most pertinent to [my] intellectual framework is the ideal of *al-madina al-fadila*/the perfect state, as outlined in the great thought of the Islamic political philosopher *al-Farabi*. *Al-Farabi's* "perfect state" has a rational, that is, secular order and is best administered by a reason-oriented philosopher...A combination of these Islamic sources, the Sufi love of *Ibn 'Arabi*, the reason-based orientation of *Ibn Rushd*, the historicizing thought of *Ibn Khaldun*, and *al-Farabi's* secular concept of order, seem to me the best combination of cornerstones for an Islamic enlightenment.[25]

To get yet more concrete, consider the elements of typical narratives offered by Islamic insurgents. For Vlahos, those included a heroic journey and mythic figure, an epic historical struggle, a charge of renewal, and a mystic interpretation of history. Any action (*including a speech act*...merely saying things differently might be enough in many cases!) we can take that would decrease the probability that bin Laden could be interpreted as a hero, that diminishes the likelihood that we could be cast as the antagonist in a historical struggle, that makes it seem less likely "resisting" us would lead to Islamic renewal, or that diminishes bin Laden's ability to sell a *mythical* interpretation of the struggle, would be effective at defusing the power of the story. For example, part of the reason why Brigadier General David Petraeus's 101st Airborne was so successful in northern Iraq has to do with the careful manner in which they have carried out police raids, going so far as to rebuild house doors busted down even when those doors were on houses suspected of containing things like insurgent weapons. This has done much to disarm the "justice frames" at play in the story-sphere there.[26]

Or consider Juergensmeyer's list (is the struggle over basic identity?, is losing the struggle unthinkable?, and can the struggle not be won in real terms?). Are there actions we can take, or speech acts we can engage in, that lessen the threat our presence poses to Islamic identity? Can we assure the populations of a country or region we are occupying that successful occupation would not imply the destruction of cherished values? Can we engage in "cultural confidence building measures" that ensure target populations they can achieve many of their goals even within the context of occupation or reconstruction? These actions may be as simple as avoiding certain terms in our speech (such as "crusade"), while other actions required to see a story through may be quite complicated.

Of course, in many cases the *tactical* success achieved by taking action we know full well may feed a malignant narrative may nonetheless justify them. But even then, we should be aware of the impact our actions are having on the "telling of stories" in the backstreets and communities of at-risk populations so that we can, where possible, mitigate any negative upshot.

A Simple Evaluative Mechanism: Aristotle's Rhetorical Model

In practice, effective counter-narrative strategy will require understanding the components and content of the story being told so we can predict how they will influence the action of a target audience. In other words, we need a sophisticated understanding of “strategic rhetoric.” This is difficult to come by. Nonetheless, even well worn and simple models of this process, such as that offered by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle in his *Rhetoric*, can be very useful for structuring our thinking. Aristotle would have us evaluate three components of a narrative relative to a target audience: (1) what is the *ethos* of the speaker/deliverer?, (2) what is the *logos* of the message being delivered?, and (3) does the message contain appropriate appeals to *pathos*? Consideration of *ethos* would emphasize the need for us to establish credible channels of communication, fronted by actors who have the character and reputation required to ensure receipt and belief of the message. “You have bad *ethos*” is merely another way of saying “You won’t be believed by the target audience because they don’t think *you are believable*.” Consideration of *logos* involves the rational elements of the narrative: is it logical? Is it consistent enough to be believed? Does it contain (from the target’s perspective) non-sequiters and forms of reasoning not normally used day-to-day? Finally, *pathos* deals with the emotional content of the story. Does the story cue appropriate affective and emotive systems in the human brain? Does it appeal to emotion in a way that engages the whole person and that increases the chances the story will actually motivate action?

Thomas Coakley summarizes the Aristotelian model in his paper on the Peruvian counter-terrorism experience:

Ethos: these are appeals the speaker makes to the audience to establish credibility. Essentially, *ethos* is what a speaker uses—implicitly or explicitly—to ensure that the audience can trust him or her. An example in advertising is an athlete endorsing an athletic product. In war, examples include a history of adherence to LOAC and an assertiveness of willpower.

Pathos: these are appeals the speaker makes to the audience’s emotions. An example of this would be an advertisement for tires that emphasizes safety by portraying an infant cradled within the circle of the tire. In war, *pathos* might be displayed by showing the “average” guy on the adversary’s side that the US position is better.

Logos: these are appeals to facts. More doctors recommend toothpaste X than any other brand. In war, there is no greater logic than firepower, but as insurgencies demonstrated throughout the 20th Century, firepower (*logos*) alone will not win wars, and will win very few arguments.[\[27\]](#)

Some of these Aristotelian considerations will be affected by structural elements of the story (Is the story coherent? Is it simple enough to be processed? Can it be remembered? Is it easy to transmit? If believed, will it motivate appropriate action?)[\[28\]](#); others will be affected by content (Does the narrative resonate with target audiences? Is the protagonist of the story a member of the target audience’s in-group? Is the antagonist of the story a member of a hated out-group?).[\[29\]](#)

Needless to say, ascertaining how these issues interact to ensure success in counter-narrative efforts is a complex process. In general, though, consideration of these ideas leads us to this non-exhaustive list of basic strategic principles for the formulation and application of counter-narrative strategy, some of which we have already briefly discussed.

Narrative “Strategic Principles,” and Some Complications

We believe effective counter-narrative strategy will be guided by at least these strategic principles:

1) *Target audience characteristics are critical.* Formulating a narrative without understanding the culture of the population you wish to influence is a recipe for ineffectiveness at best and in the worst of cases can backfire altogether.

2) *Darwinian competitiveness counts.* Stories will be more likely to be received and understood if they are fit for the environment in which they are expected to flourish. Some basic considerations include whether or not stories take advantage of heuristics and biases (for example, memorable events will be easier for a target audience to recall; hence, memorable events should form the skeleton of a story).

3) *Aristotle is better than nothing.* Considerations of ethos, logos and pathos are simplistic. But they are better than not bothering to evaluate the storyline at all. Relative to a target population, an “E/L/P analysis” can provide a baseline for predicting and controlling narrative flow over the course of a conflict.

4) *There are two important story sets: the ones our adversary is telling, and the one being told implicitly and explicitly by us.* Terrorist organizations have instrumental incentives to “get out the story”—this is a necessary part of their continued survival and enables their goal achievement. We need to consider not only whether our story is being told well, but also how both our actions and storytelling affect the plausibility of the stories they are introducing into the environment. To do this well requires getting inside the “narrative OODA-loop” of our adversary.

5) *Tactical success may require overriding strategic story considerations.* While grand counter-terrorism strategy will require counter-narrative considerations for success, it may very well be that strategic story considerations will be overridden in many circumstances by demands for tactical or short-term success. Understanding this tension will nonetheless enable us to build stories that will be only minimally affected by such reversals.

6) *Stories with firewalls are better than stories without defenses.* Our narratives need to come equipped with an immune system. Some stories are more resilient than others to changes in the environment; the best of stories will make sense come what may...to use Karl Popper’s language, it will fail to be falsified. We should think about what we can do to firewall our stories to prevent their destruction or cooptation.

7) *Adaptability and flexibility are important.* The story environment is fluid; our stories should be too. While it would undermine our ethos to change stories often, our logos may demand that we do so at times. Anticipating this, we should create grand narratives that have some built-in adaptability and flexibility. Protagonists and antagonists change. Basic plot lines shift. Culmination points move.

Application of these strategic principles for story formulation will be difficult. At any given time, there will be myriad target audiences. We can expect their reactions to be shaped dynamically. For example, a grand narrative that was perfectly plausible before Abu Ghraib may be rendered perfectly inert afterwards. A few critical slips by key public representatives may entrench an antagonistic narrative, leaving us no choice but to abandon a counter-narrative put in place to combat it. Understanding the temporal mechanics and dynamics of story flow will be a messy, learn-as-you-go business. Recognizing this fact, however, and considering what impact this has for our plans, programs and policies, is far superior to the alternative of letting our adversaries occupy the narrative high ground.[\[30\]](#)

Institutional Implications

Doing the things just discussed requires (at the least): an awareness of the characteristics of target audiences, knowledge of the narratives and stories at play in their culture, a model of how

our actions will interact with the characteristics of those narratives to produce certain results (even the relatively mundane Aristotelian model just discussed is a fine place to start) and a willingness to then coordinate actions inter-governmentally so that we present a unified narrative front to the target audience.

The organizations and processes needed to do this successfully are not (alas) in place. Cultural intelligence is only now getting off the ground. Awareness of the cultural and societal impact of occupation is being enhanced systematically relatively late in the game. It is not obvious where in the government's national security apparatus "narrative unification" and "story consistency checks" would take place (presumably at high levels such as within the National Security Council, or high-level working groups within the State Department). Given extant concerns about the misuse of psychological operations, and the public relations disaster of previous efforts in this direction (such as the proposed but hastily shelved "Office of Strategic Influence" in the Pentagon), this lack of institutional inertia is perhaps understandable. Even so, we are slowly coming to realize the importance of counter-narrative strategies, as last month's Defense Science Board[31] report on "Strategic Communications" makes abundantly clear with its strong final recommendation (*italics in original*):

The Task Force recommends that the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy and the Joint Chiefs of Staff ensure that all military plans and operations have appropriate strategic communication components, ensure collaboration with the Department of State's diplomatic missions and with theater security cooperation plans; and extend U.S. STRATCOM's and U.S. SOCOM's Information Operations responsibilities to include DoD support for public diplomacy. The Department should triple current resources (personnel & funding) available to combatant commanders for DoD support to public diplomacy and reallocate Information Operations funding within U.S. STRATCOM for expanded support for strategic communication programs.[32]

Conclusion

Having in place effective counter-narrative strategies will not be a panacea. Nonetheless, if military force is to play the appropriate role in our national security strategy and the "Global War on Terror," we need a more comprehensive understanding of how a failure to tell good stories can lead to an increased risk of insurgencies, violent social movements, and terrorist action. While this paper has been far too brief to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between stories, identity, and violent action, we hope it has at least made plausible the case that we need to think much more carefully about the relationship between this rhetorical Clausewitzian trinity and state power. A grand counter-terrorism strategy that actually produces the results we desire rides on such a subtle psychologically informed understanding of narratives and terror.

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3. See the website of [Barbara McManus](#), a teacher of literary theory, at her website about Freytag for more detail. We are indebted to Dr. McManus for allowing us to use her Freytag Triangle graphic.
4. See Patrick Colm Hogan, *The Mind and Its Stories: Narrative Universals and Human Emotion* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
5. For an interesting (and—rightly so—extremely controversial!) take on the role of narrative in "The Arab Mind," see Raphael Patai's book of the same name, *The Arab Mind* (Farmington Hills, MI: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1983, revised edition).
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12. Maj. Troy S. Thomas, USAF and Maj. William D. Casebeer, USAF, "[Violent Non-State Actors: Countering Dynamic Systems](#)," *Strategic Insights*, Volume III, Issue 3 (March 2004) and Maj. Troy S. Thomas, USAF and Maj. William D. Casebeer, USAF, "[Deterring Violent Non-State Actors in the New Millenium](#)," *Strategic Insights*, Volume I, Issue 10 (December 2002), as well as their *Violent Systems*, *Op. Cit.* A few paragraphs from this INSS paper are used in this article.

13. Michael Vlahos, [Terror's Mask: Insurgency Within Islam](#), Occasional Paper, Joint Warfare Analysis Department, Applied Physics Laboratory, Johns Hopkins University, May 2002. Again, note the similarity to parts of Campbell's corpus.

14. Critically, this is one of the characterizations of Islam that Qureshi and Sells object to in the first essay in their edited collection, *Ibid.*

15. See especially chapter eight of his *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence, 3rd Edition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

16. See Book Four, Plato's *Republic*, as translated by Robin Waterfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

17. For more about these myths, see Ryszard Kapuscinski's *The Shadow of the Sun* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001). Owing to the (mostly fabricated!) "early history" of the region, the Tutsis were viewed as being pastoral patrons (read: rulers) who preside over their clients (read: slaves), the Hutu agriculturalists. Under colonial rule by both the Germans and the Belgians, this foundational myth was reinforced, with separate identity cards being issued for both peoples. The Belgians even went so far as to argue that the Tutsi were, racially speaking, more closely related to white people, and were hence a superior race, putting in place a quite different but nonetheless related foundational myth. Needless to say, these myths played a large part in the violence that erupted in 1994. For more, see the background paper from [Africa Action](#), "Talking about 'Tribe': Moving from Stereotypes to Analysis," November, 1997.

18. See Yael Zerubavel's *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995). Quoted text is from the back cover.

19. See Bill Berkeley, *The Graves are Not Yet Full: Race, Tribe and Power in the Heart of Africa* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 224-25.

20. See Paul Churchland's "Toward a Cognitive Neurobiology of the Moral Virtues," as reprinted in Branquinho's (ed.) *The Foundations of Cognitive Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). See also William Casebeer's "The Neural Mechanisms of Moral Cognition," *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 4, 2003 and chapter five of William Casebeer, *Natural Ethical Facts: Evolution, Connectionism, and Moral Cognition* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

21. See Fauconnier and Turner, *Ibid.*, for more advice here regarding how to enable these "frame shifts."

22. Consider, for instance, the conceptual shift that occurs in members of the Israeli army when they start thinking about Palestinian teenagers as being an enemy rather than a peer. See chapter 5 of Eyal Ben-Ari's *Mastering Soldiers: Conflict, Emotions, and the Enemy in an Israeli Military Unit* (New York, Berghahn Books, 1998).

23. Daniel Byman has an excellent discussion of this process in his book *Keeping the Peace: Lasting Solutions to Ethnic Conflicts* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), pp. 100–124.

24. Various interviews by Casebeer, Masai nationals in Tanzania , June 2002. For more background on Tanzania 's history, as well as detail on the Rwandan situation, see also Taisier Ali and Robert Matthews (eds.), *Civil Wars in Africa: Roots and Resolution* (Montreal, Quebec: McGill Queen's University Press, 1999).

25. *The Challenge of Fundamentalism*, p. xv (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998).

26. Author Casebeer's oral interview, *Council on Foreign Relations* teleconference. The idea of "justice frames," and framing processes in general, is closely related and probably constitutes a subspecies of narrative strategy. The social movement literature is replete with articles about framing; for a good introduction as applied to Islamic terrorists, see chapter five of Mohammed M. Hafez's excellent *Why Muslims: Repression and Resistance in the Islamic World* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2003).

27. CAPT Thomas Coakley, USAF, "The Argument against Terror: The Peruvian Experience, Globalization, and US Policy," *Institute for National Security Studies* research paper, 2003. Available from the author by e-mail at Thomas.coakley@usafa.af.mil.

28. Indeed, some structure and content of stories may cause narratives to act as primary reinforcers—that is, just like food, drugs, or sex. A fascinating neurobiological exploration of this process of successful "cultural messaging" is being carried out by Casebeer, and neuroscientists such as Read Montague, the director of the Baylor College of Medicine's Human Neuroimaging Laboratory. Innovative new techniques such as 'hyperscanning' allow the study of social cognition *in vitro* at the neural level using functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging.

29. It may very well be that some aspects of narrative are evaluated in exactly the same way that theories in the sciences are evaluated: according to their simplicity, output power, explanatory power, justificatory power, coherence, breadth, clarity and psychological plausibility.

30. For evidence of narrative strategies in action in groups with terrorist affiliations, see, e.g., Avi Jorisch's *Beacon of Hatred: Inside Hizballah's Al-Manar Television* (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2004).

31. [Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication](#), Defense Science Board (Washington, DC: Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics, September 2004.) The report is well worth reading in its entirety.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 17.