The Ideology of Terror: Why We Will Never Win the 'War'

Katie Rose Guest Pryal, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
A few days after the criminal attacks on the World Trade Center, President George W. Bush declared a metaphorical war on terror. The word war was once again applied to a nebulous concept in hopes of rallying support to Bush’s plans. President Johnson’s war on poverty and the war on drugs of Presidents Nixon and Reagan served the same rhetorical purpose. However, Bush’s word choice possesses further significance. Bush declared war on an emotion—“intense fear”—that has always and will always exist (“Terror”). Bush could have named a martial act (i.e., Terrorism) as the theater of his war, but he did not. Perhaps “War on Terror” sounded better. Catchy as it may be, the phrase makes no sense, even to those who find wars-against concepts feasible. Significantly, had Bush declared war on terrorism, a noun that denotes physical acts of violence, then the war would have remained attached to the material world. By declaring war on terror, America’s enemy became ephemeral and eternal. The terror ideological apparatus was born.

Terror was not only the most significant topic of debate in the 2004 presidential election, but it was also the biggest influence on the swing voter. The candidate who most effectively employed the terror ideological apparatus won the election. The “war” against terror is no longer a political endeavor; terror has become a national figure, a celebrity, an autonomous reality beyond any person’s control. Instead, terror controls. In this article, I argue that terror has become the dominant pillar of our society’s ruling ideology. A reading of Louis Althusser suggests that, in this conception, terror can be called an ideological state apparatus (ISA). Althusser explains that ISAs are “realities, which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions” (96). Althusser states, “In the pre-capitalist historical period . . . there was one dominant Ideological State Apparatus, the Church” (102, emphasis in original). He then suggests that, at the time he wrote “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” education “has been installed in the dominant position in mature capitalist social formations” (103, emphasis in original). I maintain that, at the moment that Bush declared war on terror, terror became the dominant ISA in American culture. Althusser explains that ISAs “function massively and predominantly by ideology, but they also function secondarily by repression” (98). The terror ideological apparatus ensures its own perpetuation through both ideology and repression. The force of ideology alienates America’s allies through rampant national egotism and derogates the feminine with an
insistence on a myth of masculine strength. Its repression stifles dissent by means of public and private censorship and compromises our civil liberties in the name of national security. The State perpetuates terror through force, both brute and rhetorical, within and without our borders. In fact, borders have ceased to matter. The ruling ideology presents terror as a universal, eternal Evil and invites those with (fire)power—white, Western, American—to scorch the earth on terror’s heels.

The terror ideological apparatus has created a language to ensure its own survival. All people can cloak themselves with terror's power by employing the language of terror. During the 2004 presidential campaign, Bush used the language of terror well; Senator John Kerry used it poorly. The election results prove that language has become terror’s most valuable commodity. To speak of terror employing its own language is to remain under terror’s control. Furthermore, the language of terror is inescapable so long as we do not recognize that we are using it. The most powerful aspect of the language of terror is the power to name. However, only names that are within the language of terror are acceptable; only they will "stick." Names that reiterate the beliefs of the ruling ideology gain the power of that ideology. For example, the official language of the Bush administration derives its force from terror: the USA PATRIOT Act, Department of Homeland Security, War on Terror. Terror attacks its enemies—those who would cease its expansion—by naming them: feminine/female, weak, un-American, French, unpatriotic, or, at worst, terrorist.

In its original usage, terror referred to official State action. As philosopher Alain Badiou explains, "during the French Revolution the Grand Jacobins of the Committee for Public Safety had no problem declaring themselves ‘terrorists.’ They officially made Terror part of daily business" (144). Terror has now come to represent the violent actions of private actors who oppose the power of the State. For the Bush administration specifically, terrorists are a "nebulous, or at least extremely opaque, group of those who attack and incriminate Americans’ goods and lives" (145). In this conception, terrorists are a vague group of foes that strike from beyond the borders of the American homeland. Use of the word terrorist effectively creates a “we” and a “they,” as ghostly as the “they” may be. However, Bush’s terror campaign is not only directed outward from America’s borders, but also inward, against the American populace. Evocation of terror, the emotion, promotes approval of the administration’s decisions. I do not present a conspiracy theory, but rather recognition of the coup de grace of a once-dubious leader who motivated a nation’s populace to believe in him.

The current administration would have the American populace believe that national fear is necessary for national safety. Take, for example, the linguistic function of the color-coded terror alert system. With the system, the Bush administration deploys the language of terror against its own people. The system arguably does nothing to help America prevent terrorist attacks. It merely spreads panic. If panic—fear—is congruent with terror, then Bush is guilty of spreading of terror. Now, consider the diabolical benefits of spreading panic. A fearful American populace is more willing to put its (blind) faith in its executive. In this way, the terror ideological apparatus supports the ideology of the ruling powers. Terror provides Bush complete discretion to make decisions without regard to democratic process. As Robert L. Ivie describes, "it is tragically ironic to conjure up a rhetorical spell against democracy’s evil enemies as an excuse for abating, abandoning, or indefinitely suspending the actual practice of democracy” (182). However, Bush is not the sole culprit. The terror ISA sustains the ruling ideology, not the specific executive in office. The terror ISA supports any executive, or any group, endowed with power: corporations, media conglomerates, or the government. Through the operation of its language within America, such as the color-coded terror alerts, terror has become an independent rhetorical force that works in aid of incumbent power. Manipulation of the legitimate fear of the American populace—fear of more terrorist attacks similar to those of September 11, 2001—generates a faith in the decisionmaking of any
group of people who, we hope, have the power to protect us.

The belief, or faith, that the American populace has held in their president since September 11, 2001, is not unrelated to the fundamentalist Christian faith that influences Bush’s decision-making. Bush and his supporters have incorporated fundamentalist Christianity into the ruling ideology. Religion, therefore, is necessarily a means by which the terror ideological apparatus functions. Religious fervor has infiltrated Bush’s political rhetoric. For example, on September 16, 2001, Bush called the war on terror a “crusade” (Suskind). Thoughtful observers will note that while the American war is a crusade, the war of the “Islamist” terrorists is a jihad. Both sides claim to be fighting a holy war. Bush’s fundamentalist militant Christianity reflects the fundamentalist militant Islam espoused by the terrorists he is supposedly fighting. This similarity has not gone unobserved. Journalist Ron Suskind interviewed Bruce Bartlett, a member of the administrations of Reagan and President George H. W. Bush. Bartlett, “a self-described libertarian Republican,” discussed Bush’s religious fanaticism with Suskind:

I think a light has gone off for people who’ve spent time up close to Bush: that this instinct he’s always talking about is this sort of weird, Messianic idea of what he thinks God has told him to do. . . . This is why George W. Bush is so clear-eyed about Al Qaeda and the Islamic fundamentalist enemy. He believes you have to kill them all. They can’t be persuaded, that they’re extremists, driven by a dark vision. He understands them because he’s just like them.

American warmongering and the terrorism of Al Qaeda are flip sides of the same uncompromising, nihilistic coin. The Bush administration’s war on terror terrorizes the American populace and the rest of the world. In this way, terror begets itself. “War on terror” has become simply “terror,” subsumed in the terror ISA. The war itself supports the ruling ideology. Badiou, in comparing Al Qaeda and “the foundations of the American superpower,” writes, “these two belong to the same world, that—nihilistic—of money, of blind power, of cynical rivalry, of the hidden gold of primary resources, of total scorn for people’s everyday lives, and of the arrogance of a self-certitude based on the void” (158). Ivie observes, “This reinforced and self-sustaining pretext for perpetrating violence against civilians for political purposes in the name of a higher cause is terrorism, per se, redux and reduplicated by the US and its willing allies” (181). The pretext is the terror ISA itself: a perceived exigency of terrorism that creates a presumption of perpetual war.

Bush is comfortable in the role of advocate for war. Of the candidates for the office of president in 2004, he was most skilled at deploying the “war on terror” and the terror ideological apparatus as a political tool. Bush has claimed the language of the terror ISA and thereby claimed its power. When Bush named the invasion of Iraq as part of the war on terror, he thereby justified the invasion. The war on terror will justify almost anything, including an unlawful pre-emptive assault on another sovereign state. However, a close examination of Bush’s war rhetoric reveals a fundamental contradiction in his classification of the type of war we appear to be fighting. On one hand, Bush claims that the war on terror, which includes the invasion of Iraq, is a conventional war—a war between sovereign states. As political analyst Fareed Zakaria noted, the conformation of the war on terror with World War II (the most recent congressional declaration of war), a concept pushed by the United States armed forces and the Bush administration, is “a powerful interpretation because, if accepted, it gives the administration a virtual carte blanche. All errors are forgiven . . . all excesses dwarfed by the overarching conflict. Iraq may have been badly handled, but it is just one front in a many-fronted war” (27). On the other hand, Bush said in the presidential debate of September 30, 2004, that America “is facing a group of folks that will strike anywhere” (“The First Bush-Kerry”). Bush cannot have his war both ways; there cannot be “fronts” in the war on terror if the enemies are “folks” and “will strike anywhere.” The Bush administration elides the differences between
these contradictory positions and attempts to apply both at once, choosing whichever interpretation of the war on terror—conventional or not—suits the position that it is currently pushing. A conventional war excuses errors. An unconventional one against a nameless and faceless enemy justifies pre-emptive strike. What the Bush administration, the 9/11 Commission, and the rest of America’s ruling powers advocate for America’s military strategy is not a conventional war at all. Rather, these groups promote further terror.

The 9/11 Commission Report, in its section on a “Global Strategy,” declares that “the enemy is not just ‘terrorism,’ some generic evil” (National Commission 362). Rather, the “evil” is more specific, according to the Commission: “Islamist terrorism” (362). The report describes how “Islamist” terrorists view the United States: “[T]o them America is the font of all evil, the ‘head of the snake,’ and it must be converted or destroyed” (362). So how should America respond? The Commission writes, “It is a not a position with which Americans can bargain or negotiate. With it there is no common ground—not even respect for life—on which to begin a dialogue. It can only be destroyed, or utterly isolated” (362). With this language, the Commission unintentionally reveals the similarities between American warmongering and “Islamist terrorism” that Badiou, Ivie, and Suskind have all observed. The administration regards the terrorists as “evil”; the terrorists believe that America is “the font of all evil.” The terrorists believe that America must be “converted or destroyed”; the Commission states that the terrorists must “be destroyed, or utterly isolated.” For the 9/11 Commission, the only way to end terror is to wage the “war on terror.” The 9/11 Commission advocates the spread of terror in order to stop the spread of terror.

During the presidential and vice presidential debates of fall 2004, the rhetoric employed by all four candidates highlighted the web that the language of terror had wrapped around the campaign. The candidates spoke about the war on terror and the invasion of Iraq. Bush’s rhetoric is notable because he did not speak of any conceivable end to American military action. In the first few minutes of the first debate, Bush laid out his plan for the war on terror. He said that America must “constantly stay on the offensive and at the same time spread liberty” (“The First Bush-Kerry”). Within this statement are Bush’s two reasons why America should remain at perpetual war. First, America must keep attacking in order to prevent being attacked. Second, Americans have a moral imperative to install governments in our own image around the world. During the debate, Bush repeatedly argued that the best way to protect the American homeland against terrorist acts is to perpetually maintain an offensive military position. In Bush’s opinion, like that of most football coaches, the best defense is a good offense. However, unlike football, terrorism and the struggle to prevent it do not compose a game with two well-defined teams. Bush said that in order to protect America, “You better have a president that chases these people down before they can hurt us again.” The very vagueness of his language—“these people”—reveals the elusiveness of his target. With no end of war, there can be no end of terror: the terror perpetrated by America upon people and nations it names as its “enemies.”

Kerry was not afraid to question American policy in Iraq. During the presidential campaign, he tried to step out of the approved cant that dominated the unquestioning media and Bush’s political rhetoric, but he could not escape the language of terror. When Kerry attempted to create rhetorical space for himself within the terror ISA, he made no attempt to free himself from the web. Rather, he tried to put the language of terror to use in arguing against American warmongering—against the spread of terror. But terror’s language will never abolish terror. When Kerry spoke of America’s military actions, he said that Bush invaded Iraq “without a plan to win the peace” (“The First Bush-Kerry”). In response to Kerry’s criticism of his policy with Iraq, Bush accused Kerry of unpatriotic speech. He said, “If you say wrong war, wrong time, wrong place—what message does that send to our troops?” Bush equated support of the members of the United States military with support of the invasion of Iraq. Under this equation, questioning the war is
questioning the servicepeople in Iraq. In response, Kerry said, “It is vital not to confuse the war with the warriors.” Kerry searched for a way to speak his position employing the language of terror. He was doomed to failure. The terror ISA stifles any dissent, spoken in its own language, that would bring about the end of terror.

The terror ISA, through repression, silences language contrary to its interests. This censorship is both official and unofficial and serves two functions. First, the censorship restrains discourse, such as criticism of the president or discussion of human lives lost in war. Second, the censorship disseminates a discourse opposing that which is censored, such as, “war is good.” The April 30, 2004, episode of the ABC news magazine Nightline consisted of Ted Koppel reading the names of all the United States military personnel killed in Iraq. The Sinclair Broadcast Group, one of the largest television distributors in the country and a distributor of the ABC Television Network, posted a statement on its Web site. The statement was meant to explain why Sinclair chose not to broadcast the April 30 edition of Nightline. A close reading of Sinclair’s statement reveals that the corporation acted as a part of the terror ideological apparatus, as a private censor determined to perpetuate the spread of terror through support of American warmongering. Sinclair’s statement regarding Nightline reads, “Despite the denial by a spokesperson for the show, the action appears to be motivated by a political agenda designed to undermine the efforts of the United States in Iraq” (Sinclair, “Statement”). In this sentence, Sinclair reveals that its decision not to broadcast the episode was made without any consideration of the words of Nightline’s spokesperson. The spokesperson’s denials of the perceived antiwar intent had no effect on Sinclair’s decision. A thoughtful reader might question how the reading of the names of the dead would undermine the war “efforts.” Sinclair must have assumed that with its attention focused on the death toll, the American populace might withdraw its support of the war. A corollary of this argument states that only by blinding the American populace to the death toll can support for the war be maintained. Sinclair assumes that Americans do not understand that war presupposes death. Therefore, Sinclair censored the death toll. Sinclair’s statement continues, “While Sinclair would support an honest effort to honor the memory of these brave soldiers, we do not believe that is what ‘Nightline’ is doing.” No dishonesty could be found in the content of the broadcast; after all, the names read were real and confirmed dead. The dishonesty that Sinclair refers to must have arisen from Nightline’s intent. Sinclair believes that Nightline was dishonest because underneath this tribute to dead soldiers must have been a counterargument to war. Sinclair reveals that it has been ensnared by the language of terror; it assumes that warmongering honors soldiers and that blind, unquestioning support of the war “supports our troops.”

Sinclair’s deed constitutes unofficial censorship because Sinclair judged Nightline’s intentions on behalf of the American people. Sinclair prevented the viewing public from having the opportunity to make its own judgment. In its defense, Sinclair writes, “Mr. Koppel and ‘Nightline’ are hiding behind this so-called tribute in an effort to highlight only one aspect of the war effort and in doing so to influence public opinion against the military action in Iraq” (“Statement”). With this sentence, Sinclair acknowledges the factual basis of the Nightline report—the numbers and names of the dead—and reveals that its quarrel with the broadcast is the intent of Nightline and Koppel. Through unofficial censorship, Sinclair reveals its politics: it believes that the invasion of Iraq is a good thing and should be supported. Of course it does; after all, as a media conglomerate and a member of the ruling power, it is invested financially in the perpetuation of terror. Its company profile indicates that Sinclair’s news franchise airs local news in 31 markets across the United States (Sinclair, “Company Profile”). News organizations thrive on conflict; they thrive on terror. Sinclair fails to recognize that the death toll in Iraq needs “highlighting” because it has been erased from public consciousness. Within the terror ideological apparatus, the American death toll is taboo. Nonsupport of the “war on terror” is
negative—worse, dangerous—and must be stifled.1 In a final attempt to justify this censorship, Sinclair writes,

We understand that our decision in this matter may be questioned by some. Before you judge our decision, however, we would ask that you first question Mr. Koppel as to why he chose to read the names of 523 troops killed in combat in Iraq, rather than the names of the thousands of private citizens killed in terrorist attacks since and including the events of September 11, 2001. (“Statement”)

These words presume that the death toll in Iraq is justified by the far greater number of people killed on September 11, 2001, and in other acts deemed “terrorist.” By giving the specific number of servicepeople killed in Iraq, Sinclair seeks to show how paltry it is in comparison to the “thousands” of victims of terrorism. In other words, Sinclair attempts to diminish the significance of the death toll in Iraq. Moreover, this death-for-death mentality is a symptom of the terror ISA: killing requires more killing. Terror requires more terror.

American warmongering and the terror ISA shaped what qualities were valuable in a presidential candidate. Terror defined what was presidential: toughness, masculinity, machismo. One of the most politically effective incidences of naming during the 2004 presidential campaign was the application of the phrase girlie-man to Kerry. This phrase has lodged itself firmly in the language of terror. Arnold Schwarzenegger, macho-man par excellence, governor of California and former Terminator, introduced girlie-man into the language of the campaign.2 The name stuck because the terrorized American populace believed that toughness and manliness would protect them from further terrorist attacks. In a September column for the New York Times, “How Kerry Became a Girlie-Man,” journalist Frank Rich ostensibly critiques the rhetoric of masculinity that was central to the presidential campaign.3 The column presents an example of the inexorability of the language of terror; even as Rich criticizes the candidates’ macho flexing contest, he posits that Kerry is more manly, a “man’s man,” and Bush is “the deserter and the wimp.” He criticizes the contest yet crowns the winner. Rich, like Kerry, attempted to use terror’s language to criticize the terror ISA. Like Kerry, he failed.

Rich begins the article with a bold statement: “Only in an election year ruled by fiction could a sissy who used Daddy’s connections to escape Vietnam turn an actual war hero into a girlie-man.” With this sentence, Rich makes many claims. First, he argues that the election year is “ruled by fiction.” Second, he argues that there is a Truth, a nonfiction, that exists. Last, he argues that the American populace should seek this nonfiction and prefer it over the fiction. Rich claims that Kerry is an “actual,” or True, “war hero.” Furthermore, Kerry’s status as a True war hero should be given value. The fiction entails a reversal of positions: Kerry (the war hero) is a girlie-man and Bush (the sissy) is a tough guy. Rich blames Bush for the creation of this fiction; it was “brilliantly engineered by the president of the United States.” Bush has led us away from Truth. Rich states that although Kerry is a True war hero, he has, via Bush’s false rhetoric, been turned into a girlie-man.

Implicit in the phrase girlie-man is a devaluation of the feminine. Sissy and girlie-man devalue the feminine because embedded in the language is the notion that to be girlie, or feminine, is to be weak, a bad leader, unpresidential. Although Rich criticized the application of the phrase girlie-man to Kerry, he did not criticize the phrase itself and the location from which it derives its political value. Rather, he argues that Bush, not Kerry, is the true girlie-man, because Bush lacks military heroism. Rich does not question the cultural significance of the sexist phrase. If a woman were a war hero, would she be girlie or manly? What would we, as a society, want her to be? Rich purports to criticize the macho contest of the campaign. He writes, “In a time of fear, the only battle that matters is the broad-stroked cultural mano a mano over who’s most macho.” He correctly identifies that fear, or terror, has created the macho contest in the first place. Rich contrasts the macho debate with the debate over health-
care policy. He writes, “the real point [of the Republican National Convention] was less to soften the president’s Draconian image on abortion than to harden his manly bona fides.” Rich acknowledges that Bush hides behind manliness in order to avoid criticism of his stance on what is traditionally a women’s issue, abortion. Rich implies that abortion is a more valid topic for political debate than manliness. However, Rich does not follow through with a critique of the manliness debate. Rather, he steps into the ring and uses the military records of both men to show that Kerry should be the winner of the masculinity contest.

Rich does not question why the wimp/soldier dichotomy is so highly valued in America, especially under the terror ideological apparatus. Instead of questioning why we should care who is a war hero, he states that the Vietnam records of the candidates are relevant because of the war in Iraq. Implicit in this argument is institutionalized sexism. A female presidential candidate in 2004 would have had little or no opportunity to distinguish herself as a war hero. According to Rich’s logic, she would be as unqualified to lead the United States as Bush. Perhaps this fight is not really about military records, but rather, who is lying and who is telling the Truth. Rich often refers to Kerry’s military record as True: Kerry is “an actual war hero” and he has an “actual history on the field of battle” (emphasis added). The last paragraph of the column purports to lead us to the light of Truth: “The truth is that Kerry was a man’s man not just when he volunteered to fight in a losing war but when he came home and forthrightly fought against it” (emphasis added). Rich argues on one hand that Kerry should stop competing with Bush in macho contests devised by Bush. On the other hand, Rich writes that Kerry should be “man enough to stand up for that past.” The two arguments are at odds throughout the piece: Kerry should not enter the macho fight; Kerry is the more manly of the candidates. Rich’s column aptly demonstrates how ineffectual it is to use the language of terror to criticize terror. He attempted to criticize the “fear” that has led the American populace away from true political questions and into the realm of the manliness contest, but he was sucked into the contest too.

Kerry was not only feminized by the Bush campaign; he was demonized as well. This instance of naming presents the greatest ethical dilemma of all. In a cover article for the New York Times in September 2004, political journalists Sanger and Halbfinger presented words from a campaign speech by Vice President Dick Cheney: “Stepping up the battle over national security, Vice President Dick Cheney warned on Tuesday that the country would be at risk of a terror attack if it made ‘the wrong choice’ in November.” Cheney said, “It’s absolutely essential that eight weeks from today, on Nov. 2, we make the right choice … because if we make the wrong choice then the danger is that we’ll get hit again and we’ll be hit in a way that will be devastating from the standpoint of the United States.”

With this statement, Cheney aligned Kerry with the terrorists, our nation’s supposed enemy. Cheney named Kerry a “terrorist.” The implications of Cheney’s words are severe. This act of naming was unethical, far beyond the ordinary political mudslinging. The American populace gave the first Bush administration the power to name who is a terrorist (e.g., the USA PATRIOT Act) in the interest of public safety. The consequences of being named a terrorist are dire (e.g., the invasion of Iraq and the detainees at Guantanamo Bay). If the current administration uses the power of naming to transform Bush’s opponent in the presidential election into a terrorist, then that power has been abused. Cheney’s act of naming was a discursive assassination of Kerry. Cheney used the force of our nation to destroy a member of our populace, and in turn, to destroy the democratic process. Ivie writes, “Sheer enemies speak of one another as evil; democratic adversaries speak of one another as wrong, mistaken, and even stupid. Thus, democracy is lost when the agonistic Other is rendered rhetorically into a diabolical enemy” (190). By naming Kerry a terrorist, the “diabolical enemy,” Cheney tried to demolish our democratic system.

The notion of “giving power” here is complicated. Most legislators explicitly voted to give the
Bush administration the authority to decide who is a terrorist. However, this power was also given implicitly by those of the American populace who did not protest the infringement of rights implicit in the USA PATRIOT Act. However, this lack of protest is just the type of democratic dissent that terror stifles. In a time of "war," when the executive has carte blanche, there is no line between the current administration saying "you ought not to vote for our opponent" (because a vote for our opponent is a vote for the terrorists) and "you must not vote for our opponent" (because if you support our opponent then you are a terrorist too). With his statement, Cheney used the language of terror to transform one half of our two-party system into our "enemy." Only one viable candidate remained. Moreover, casting a vote for the wrong candidate—Kerry—was tantamount to treason. Kerry became a form of human dissent that terror needed to stifle. The language of terror wrapped Kerry in its web and killed any possibility of victory on November 2. He was too weak and feminine to be an effective "war president." He lacked the "faith" of Bush to make decisions on the fly, without research—to shoot from the hip. He criticized the unilateral invasion of Iraq and was named an opponent of freedom. After all, as Ivie notes, "When evil stalks the civilized world, the pre-emption of tyrants and terrorists is a defense of freedom, not a distraction or a war of aggression" (189). Kerry could not win the election using the language of terror to criticize Bush or the "war on terror." He needed to reframe the debate, as Ivie suggests. Kerry, and those who wish to criticize current policy, must seek agency through revision of the national dialogue on terror.

Ivie presents a way to disassemble the terror ideological apparatus "to privilege the presumption of peace consistent with democratic values, to shift the burden of proof back to the advocates of war" (189). He suggests "a basic shift in perspective." In Ivie's terms, the "rhetoric of evil" has pre-empted democracy. A return to democracy may be achieved by "insisting on the primacy of democracy [which] entails a wholly different order of priorities than the prevailing accent on evil" (189). "Most immediately, the US could opt out of reciprocating terror and could reduce the incentive for international terrorism by turning its attention directly to the sources of alienation and despair" (197). This perspective is shared by a former religious advisor to Bush, Jim Wallis, an evangelical pastor and the leader of the Sojourners, a faith-based social justice organization. In December 2000, Wallis advised Bush that the way to understand the struggles of poor people is "to listen to the poor and those who live and work with poor people" (Suskind). This language appeared in the president's first inaugural address: "[M]any in our country do not know the pain of poverty, but we can listen to those who do." A little over a year later, Wallis and Bush met again. Wallis said to the president, "Unless we drain the swamp of injustice in which the mosquitoes of terrorism breed, we'll never defeat the threat of terrorism" (Suskind). Unfortunately, this knowledge of the roots of terrorism is either not shared by or was discarded by the Bush administration, which, like others groups in power, relies on terror to maintain its domination.

Can we reframe the debate and thereby escape the hold of the terror ideological apparatus? How do we find the language to dismantle the cycle of terrorism? We cannot escape the language of terror if we do not recognize that we are using it. Recognition of the hold that terror has on our media, on our government, and on our own tongues is the first step toward breaking free of the terror ISA. Speaking against terror requires great courage; after all, Americans are legitimately afraid of events such as the bombing of the World Trade Center. Butler suggests that individual linguistic agency may be recovered via "the saying of the unspeakable," which "become[s] part of the very offense that must be committed in order to expand the domain of linguistic survival" (41). We must open new contexts. We must not allow ourselves to be trapped by the frame of the dialogue on terror that currently saturates our politics and our media. We must speak, as Butler suggests, "on the border of the unsayable" in order "to expose the vacillating boundaries of legitimacy in speech" (41). We must not allow our speech or actions to be trapped by terror. Roosevelt's formulation stated that we have
nothing to fear but fear itself. Today, we can see that he was right.

Notes

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1. This stifling of the major news outlets might help explain the increased popularity in “fake news,” such as Jon Stewart’s The Daily Show. Within the parameters of comedy, those who critique the “war on terror” are permitted to be more truthful than those who present “real” news. See Warren St. John, “The Week That Wasn’t.”

2. Although the term girlie-man was created by the television satire show Saturday Night Live as a means to mock men who fixated on masculinity (and worshipped Arnold Schwarzenegger), in this presidential campaign, the phrase bore serious political weight.

3. The tough-guy image has remained important even after Bush’s re-election. See, for example, Bush at a summit in Chile rescuing his own Secret Service agent from Chilean security guards on November 21, 2004.

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