

Propaganda of the Deed 2008

Understanding the Phenomenon

Neville Bolt, David Betz & Jaz Azari

First Published 2008

© The Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission of the Royal United Services Institute.

Whitehall Report Series

ISSN 1750-9432

Series Editor: Dr Terence McNamee

Most *Whitehall Reports* are available as part of a membership package, or individually at £10.00 plus p&p (£1.00 in the UK/£2.00 overseas). Orders should be sent to the Membership Administrator, RUSI Membership, RUSI, Whitehall, London, SW1A 2ET, UK and cheques made payable to RUSI. Orders can also be made via the website or by quoting credit card details via email to: membership@rusi.org

For more details, visit our website: www.rusi.org

Printed in Great Britain by Stephen Austin & Sons Ltd. for the
Royal United Services Institute, Whitehall, London, SW1A 2ET UK

RUSI is a Registered Charity (No. 210639)

Front cover image:

Aftermath of suicide attack in Baghdad. Photo by Kevin Bromley/US DoD

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of RUSI or any other institution with which the authors are associated.

Comments pertaining to this report are invited and should be forwarded to: Dr Terence McNamee, Royal United Services Institute, Whitehall, London, SW1A 2ET, United Kingdom, or via email to terrym@rusi.org

About the Authors

Neville Bolt is a former television producer and journalist with the BBC, ITV and Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, where he specialised in conflict zones. He subsequently created and directed political communications campaigns with Amnesty International, the Anti-Apartheid Movement, and the Labour Party. He is a member of the Insurgency Research Group in the Department of War Studies, King's College London. His PhD research is on the Propaganda of the Deed in contemporary conflict.

David Betz is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of War Studies, King's College London, where he heads the Insurgency Research Group and is Academic Director of the on-line master's degree, War in the Modern World. He has written widely on issues of the conduct of contemporary warfare, insurgency and counter-insurgency, information warfare and the Revolution in Military Affairs.

Jaz Azari is currently completing the MA War Studies degree at King's College London. She is also a member of the Insurgency Research Group. Prior to studying at King's Ms Azari was a Research Analyst for the US Marine Corps Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning.

The authors wish to thank Dr John Mackinlay and Dr Dominick Donald who read and commented on drafts of this report.

Contents

Introduction	1
1. Propaganda of the Deed 2008: Overview and Background	1
2. Propaganda of the Deed 2008: A New Perspective – a New Problem	2
3. POTD and Counter-Insurgency: Towards a Solution	15
4. Conclusion: The Way Forward and Recommendations	19
Annex A	21

Introduction

The Propaganda of the Deed (POTD) is a little understood phenomenon. In the public imagination it reads simply as terrorism. Its violence seduces some but horrifies and alienates the majority. In the world of policy-making it remains largely divorced from its theoretical context. It belongs to a landscape of violence aimed at states, eliciting a police or military response. Recent manifestations of POTD in New York (2001), Madrid (2004) and London (2005), together with daily atrocities in Iraq and Afghanistan, have brought the deed to the fore of public consciousness throughout the world. They underline the urgency of penetrating this phenomenon in 2008.

1. Propaganda of the Deed 2008: Overview and Background

A landmark conference in January 2008 organised by the Insurgency Research Group of King's College London aimed to re-evaluate POTD's theoretical heritage in the context of contemporary insurgency and counter-insurgency analysis, and to identify new value-added frameworks to advance understanding. This article explores a new definition of Propaganda of the Deed relevant to today's fast-changing political landscape where social and political agendas are interpreted and shaped by global media, particularly television. It further looks at how an innovative counter-insurgency approach might respond to this new concep-

tualisation of POTD. The importance of synthesising perspectives from academics and policy-makers derives from the failure of any single discipline to explain POTD adequately. This phenomenon of collective violence remains for some rooted in nineteenth century revolutionary theory; for others it is almost completely ignored. Current research reveals an unacceptable knowledge gap in this area. In the long term everyone suffers by this neglect.

The West is turning away from 'terrorism' as a way of explaining the post-9/11 security era. Four years after the invasion of Iraq, government officials in Whitehall are

using the word ‘insurgency’ with less caution than before. In terms of doctrine, after years of eschewing the subject the United States is now ahead of the game having completed its new counter-insurgency doctrine under the stewardship of Generals (COIN) Petraeus and Mattis in 2006/7.

The new UK doctrine ‘Countering Insurgency: A Guide for Commanders’ will be published soon. It codifies a British approach to countering insurgency and describes how this has evolved from past experiences. In many respects the intellectual centre of gravity of COIN research which was somewhat more vigorous in the UK prior to the Iraq War has shifted to the United States where it is centred on a tight group of soldier-scholars, many of whom worked on the new doctrine. But on both sides of the Atlantic, officials and doctrine writers know that the 2006/7 insurgency doctrines lack the context of a national structure to address insurgency and that the military are but one aspect of a wider campaign.¹

The Insurgency Research Group brought together experts from the academic, journalistic, security, and government policy disciplines to pool their distinctive insights. Unattributed quotes in the paper are from participants in the meeting. A list of participants is attached as an annex.

2. Propaganda of the Deed 2008: A New Perspective – a New Problem

Propaganda of the Deed is no wanton act of criminal violence. For the purposes of this paper, it is a term depicting an act of violence whose signal and/or extreme nature is intended to create an ideological impact dis-

Conclusions

- POTD is more than an operational technique intended to produce ‘shock and awe’ through the force multiplying effect of fear
- POTD does not equate to a single act of terror – it is not an event, it is part of a process of narrative construction, reinforcement and confirmation through deeds
- Analysis of POTD must move from the military to the political domain
- POTD is a symbolic and rhetorical tool for insurgents in a repertoire of ‘political marketing’ – it encourages the formation of sympathetic support-communities
- Technology shortens timelines between event and broadcast, reducing ‘thinking time’ for media and states alike – this hands the advantage to insurgents
- POTD has shifted from territorial to ‘virtual’ theatres of operation
- Counter-insurgency must harmonise multi-tiered messages within a coherent and consistent strategic narrative

proportionate to the act itself. In the words of anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, the nineteenth century ‘father of terrorism’: ‘we must spread our principles, not with words but with deeds, for this is the most popular, the

¹ Sarah Sewall’s introduction to US Army and USMC, *Counter Insurgency Field Manual* (University of Chicago Press, 2007)

most potent, and the most irresistible form of propaganda'.² For Bakunin 'the desire for destruction is at the same time a creative desire'.³ For the average 'man on the street' that is a difficult idea to grasp. It flies in the face of common sense and gut instinct. It is more natural to react to carnage and destruction as pathological outrage. The closer it approaches, threatening the safety of family and friends, the more viscerally repugnant, indeed the more morally reprehensible it becomes. After all how can anyone with a just grievance fail to argue his/her case through rational processes and tried and tested institutions? Perhaps the average person can explain away the targeted assassination of an oppressive political leader. But the indiscriminate blow-out from a bomb in a public place, that is different. And even if we can countenance that ingrained injustices justify extreme methods, where are, and who draws the boundaries between the rational and irrational within a regime of violence once it takes hold? For the academic and policy-maker, this becomes a minefield of conundra.

Propaganda of the Deed is fraught with contradictions. Indiscriminate violence against civilians is a technique of war intended to cause 'shock and awe'; it is deployed by non-state and state actors alike. Yet historically it is viewed as the tool of the underdog, under-resourced and denied a voice in the political arena. By universal agreement it is an act of terror. Yet POTD is persuasive and seductive, some argue through the siren call of violence itself. To dismiss it with undue haste as mere pathology is to overlook its undisputed success in knitting together often disparate groups within a common, rational cause. It is also to deny its capacity to draw in

its wake constructed stories and memories that pass from generation to generation. These galvanise activist groups, before offering an internally legitimate narrative for their social movement. Nevertheless at its heart sit various tensions.

When adopted by non-state protagonists, POTD can summon support to correct deep-rooted grievance: when applied by governments, it usually undermines state legitimacy revealing a bankruptcy in the state's remit to guarantee law and order. It becomes the last resort of failing authority. This long overdue attempt to re-conceptualise this phenomenon in a twenty-first century context, to search for a more nuanced understanding of motivation, cause and effect coincides with fresh developments in the security environment.

How shall we recognise Propaganda of the Deed when we see it? 'How does POTD manifest itself – by size of 'bang', number of victims, significance of target, frequency of occurrence? The time between the bullet leaving the gun and killing the president? Or a suicide bomb blowing up civilian bystanders when no group claims responsibility? Or even the same Al-Qa'ida group aiming four aircraft in the same half hour at four separate targets? Or can it unfold across 7 days like the Easter Rising of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), the precursor of the IRA?'⁴

The POTD event is usually conveyed to the television-viewing public as a disembodied occurrence, a one-off, albeit *another* hourly, daily or weekly one-off. Sometimes there are many one-offs in a short period of time. British audiences grew familiar in recent decades with Provisional IRA bombing campaigns. But this designation 'cam-

² 'Letters to a Frenchman on the Present Crisis' (1870) <<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/bakunin/works/1870/letter-frenchman.htm>>, accessed on 18 February 2008. See also Paul Brousse (who probably coined the term POTD in an article of that name published in the August 1877 Bulletin of the Jura Federation).

³ (1842) 'La Reaction en Allemagne, fragment, par un Français'.

⁴ Neville Bolt, 'Propaganda of the Deed and the Irish Republican Brotherhood: from the politics of "shock and awe" to the "imagined political community"' *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 153, No 1, 2008), pp. 1–2.

paign' explained little, other than to suggest a cluster of bomb attacks played a part in some assumed systematic plan, the logic of which might only be divined *post facto*. What remained unexplained was the relationship between individual acts and symbolic deeds.

A visual metaphor might be appropriate at this point. Let us assume each act is an island. And islands come in many shapes and sizes, witness the Isle of Wight, Ireland, larger still Australia. But so far they have little coherence or relationship to one another. Yet if we talk of an archipelago, namely a group of islands, like Greece or even more diffuse, Indonesia, then there is some context of attached meaning that unites these disparate islands or events. If a POTD event is more than a lone island, but actually lies within an archipelago, then what connects and makes sense of it and all its neighbours? What is the narrative that runs through the collective?

This paper discusses 1) the historical perspective: whether POTD has emerged as a transformed phenomenon over the past 150 years; 2) insurgent violence as a symbolic language: whether the deed is a brutally nihilistic counterpoint to persuasive verbal propaganda, or just one of many symbolic techniques within one all-encompassing propaganda spectrum; 3) media in a shrinking world: how global television and new information technologies have elevated POTD to a new level of potency, and 4) the state response: whether there is any adequate and appropriate counter-deed, or counter-narrative to resist its progress. It also offers 5) conclusions and recommendations: a definition of POTD relevant to 2008, and a counterinsurgency analysis appropriate to a complex and growing threat. This report aims to explore a definition of Propaganda of the Deed which reflects the changing dynamics of contemporary insurgency.

The Historical Perspective

Propaganda of the Deed is an evolving process in the trajectory of insurgency movements. Each seeks for better or worse to rationalise violence and terror through doctrine. For historical sociologists terror is a component of political persuasion initially employed by the French Revolutionary state. The shift to 'non-state terror' or 'terror from below' places it firmly within the progression of modernism.⁵ Each subsequent sub-state group, each context would leave its indelible mark. Viewed against the *longue durée*, POTD developed from its initial unsystematic, nonetheless effective targeting of state political figure-heads. This became the house style for various nineteenth-century anarchist and socialist theorists and practitioners who favoured the route of instilling 'shock and awe': bombs brought terror to populations and death to state representatives. Violence might mobilise the masses, but it could surely cause the state to collapse as state agencies' over-reaction, fighting force with force, undermined its popular legitimacy. That was the strategy for small groups or even individual action. In the Easter Rising of 1916, the IRB redefined the violent act temporally, employing it as a device for coalescing group identity around timeless nostalgia for a 'fictional' or 'imagined' past and romanticised nationalism. Resolution of grievance could be vested in the community's utopian future. In this long game, if today's heroes failed to overthrow the order of the day, then their children would finish off the job in years to come.⁶

Later, Maoist insurgency adopted a systematic and doctrinal approach to converting then mobilising local, territorially defined populations to subvert the state. This would in the latter half of the twentieth century give way to the notion of the post-Maoist 'virtual battlefield'. Initially deterritorialised groups like the PLO learned how to seize

⁵ Fred Halliday (2004) 'Terrorism in Historical Perspective' (www.opendemocracy.net) accessed 21/4/2008.

⁶ Bolt (2008), *op. cit.*

advantage of a stateless population with an emerging political or nationalist identity and thus mark out a new terrain. Global television audiences grew with the consumer boom of the 1960s and 70s, enjoying a front-row seat to exciting news 'spectacle' delivered into the home. The recognition of the reach and power of this *new* human mass prompted more recent insurgent groups to reach out across sovereign borders with little ambition for nation-state dominance. They preferred the route of global identity politics and transnational power. Such feelings of common identity would converge around landmarks and milestones which gained power in the viewer's imagination. These symbols condensed the shared grievances and aspirations, often outrages and tragedies of people previously unknown to each other. This insurgent ambition could only properly be reflected in the area where the individual's personal cognitive space fused with the virtual ground created by the technological 'universe' of like-minded television viewers, internet- and telephone-users.

What has actually changed? The bomb or bullet remains thus far the operational technique of choice, although the deed may yet go nuclear, biological, chemical, or most likely, radiological. Each incident staged in European or American capitals a century ago initially played out to local publics before being transmitted with short delays through national and international press, then amplifying into popular fiction. The impact was often one of shock. The killing of numerous heads of state including US President McKinley, Russia's Tsar Alexander II, King Umberto of Italy and France's President Carnot was no mean achievement for revolutionaries. Kaiser Wilhelm I of Prussia only

narrowly escaped the assassin's bullet. Indeed the death of his predecessor McKinley prompted President Theodore Roosevelt to launch his own 'War on Terror' to avenge a 'crime against the human race'.⁷ Yet if the bomb and the bullet remain the operational technique of choice, can we say the events of 11 September 2001 were of such enormity, originality and significance that they mark a watershed? Can we legitimately talk of a *post-9/11* era? Or are we witnessing more complex underlying changes still?

Political violence has reached its apogee in the explosion of liberalised media, and the symbiotic relationship with global TV. However it goes further still, since the image never dies in the digital medium of the internet. Two key elements make this possible: the visual image and violence. Theorists have long understood that the visual image far outlives the spoken argument. Moreover with the passage of time visual images gain potency as the more the audience reflects on them, the more meaning they acquire.⁸ Insurgent planners and TV news editors recognise that violence sells: 'if it bleeds, it leads'. Both depend on viewer loyalty to further their aims: television to command viewers' subscriptions or licence fees, or potential as a market for advertisers, insurgents to win control of states or states-of-mind. Today the politically sensitive populations of the Middle Eastern and wider Muslim world are a growth market for broadcasters. Over 700 satellite-stations compete for the Arab market of nearly 300 million people,⁹ a 'noisy' marketplace hosting some 280 Arabic-language satellite channels.¹⁰ A new 'War of Ideas' plays itself out via images and words that are mediated, if not 'mediatised' (actively moulded by media) across global televi-

⁷ Rick Coolsaet, 'Anarchist Outrages' *Le Monde Diplomatique* (September 2004).

⁸ Mason (1989), cited in O'Shaughnessy *Politics and Propaganda: Weapons of Mass Seduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

⁹ Mamoun Fandy, *(Un)Civil War of Words: Media and Politics in the Arab World* (Westport & London: Praeger Security International, 2007), p 1.

¹⁰ Jeremy M Sharp, 'CRS Report for Congress: *The Middle East Television Network: An Overview*' Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 2005), p. 4.

sion, internet, and increasingly mobile telephony networks. A 'complex of social relations, power discourses' infuses these 'mediatised conflicts'.¹¹

That Western states find themselves engaged in a battle of ideas not weapons is still, for many, surprising. In the aftermath of the New York and Washington assaults, the 9/11 Commission still failed to grasp: 'How can a man in a cave outcommunicate the world's leading communications society?'¹² Both the current and former secretaries of defence have voiced the same incredulity:

Robert Gates: ...public relations was invented in the United States, yet we are miserable at communicating to the rest of the world what we are about as a society and a culture, about freedom and democracy, about our policies and our goals. It is just plain embarrassing that *Al-Qa'ida* is better at communicating its message on the internet than America'.¹³

Donald Rumsfeld: Our enemies have skilfully adapted to fighting wars in today's media age, but for the most part we, our country, our government, has not adapted. Consider that the violent extremists have established media relations committees – these are terrorists and they have media relations committees that meet and talk about strategy, not with bullets but with words. They've proven to be highly successful at manipulating the opinion elites of the world. They plan and design their headline-grabbing attacks using every means of communication to intimidate and break the collective will of free people.¹⁴

Yet in the bombing of the Twin Towers (2001), Osama bin Laden understood all too well that deeds were key to information success: 'These young men ... said in deeds in

New York and Washington, speeches that overshadowed all other speeches made everywhere else in the world.'¹⁵ His conviction was rapidly borne out by the increased number of websites for disaffected Muslims in 9/11's aftermath. One survey of the web suggested how persuasive POTD could be. Of 1,500 Islamic websites in 2000, 150 might be termed jihadi. By 2005 those 150 had grown to 4,000.¹⁶ Al-Qa'ida's leadership instinctively grasps the nature of the contemporary operating environment. Bin Laden is a master propagandist who has proven extremely good at the purposeful shaping of the beliefs of others. 'It is obvious', he said, 'that the media war in this century is one of the strongest methods, in fact its ratio may reach 90 per cent of the total preparation for the battles.' In fact, Bin Laden is not the first to recognise this development which has been a long time coming. The media guru Marshall McLuhan said it in a more sophisticated manner forty years ago when he described the Cold War as a state of continuing hostility waged largely by non-military means, most importantly propaganda and political agitation. The Cold War, he said, was a

...war of icons... the eroding of the collective countenance of one's rivals. Ink and photo are supplanting soldiery and tanks. The pen daily becomes mightier than the sword... [The Cold War] is really an electric battle of information and of images that goes far deeper and is more obsessional than the old hot wars of industrial hardware. The 'hot wars' of the past used weapons that knocked off the enemy, one by one. Even ideological warfare in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries proceeded by persuading

¹¹ Simon Cottle, *Mediatised Conflict: Developments in Media and Conflict Studies* (Maidenhead and New York: Open University Press, 2006), p. 28.

¹² Richard Holbrooke cited in 'The 9/11 Commission' (New York & London: WW Norton & Co., 2004), p. 377.

¹³ Landon Lecture delivered at Kansas State University on 26 November 2007 <<http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1199>>.

¹⁴ Donald Rumsfeld, 'New Realities in the Media Age', speech delivered at The Council on Foreign Relations on 17 February 2006 <<http://www.cfr.org/publication/9900/>>.

¹⁵ *The Times*, 14 December 2001.

¹⁶ B Raman, 'From internet to Islamnet: Net-Centric Counter-Terrorism' no. 1584, South Asia Analysis Group (22 October 2005), <www.saag.org/papers16/paper1584.html> last accessed 21/07/07.

individuals to adopt new points of view, one at a time. Electric persuasion by photo and movie works, instead, by dunking entire populations in new imagery.¹⁷

Bin Laden is simply the contemporary commander who has best harnessed 'electric persuasion' to warlike ends.

The Symbolic Value of POTD and the New Problem

So what is new, and why should policy-makers and academics concern themselves with these changes? At the heart of this discussion is the issue of whether Propaganda of the Deed sits in binary opposition to Propaganda of the Word. This means a black and white choice between violent (explicit) and verbal (implicit) persuasion. Alternatively, if POTD becomes merely one of many overlapping techniques within a spectrum of rhetoric, what is it actually trying to say? Is there room for considering POTD as a symbolic rather than destructive act? In this sense it becomes a magnet or lightning conductor, but for shared understanding.

Why Symbols Matter in the Information Age

This is no abstract argument. Today we live in a world where individuals are relentlessly besieged by a surfeit of information. Populations consume information through diverse media. Villagers may share ownership of a single television but nevertheless are plugged into events and lifestyles continents away. Societies which lag in experiencing the benefits of economic development still record some of the highest penetration of mobile telephone use linking them to distant diasporas, for example Somalia. Internet access may be uneven within countries but it still connects the like-minded and similarly

privileged between countries. In short we live in an information age. And driving its information flows are visual images, snapshots for what will become condensed memory. The more dramatic they are, the more attention they attract, and the more long-lasting is their impact. What concerns us is how these visual images are attached to the explosion of the POTD spectacle.

To weigh the importance of symbolic content as a kind of rhetoric, POTD must be considered anew as part of the information age. Rhetoric resonates and persuades using metaphors and symbols, attaching itself to deeply held beliefs in its target audience in a kind of co-production.¹⁸ Since the classical Greeks, the art of rhetoric has recognised that people have a natural predisposition to identify and use information they consider to be true. And that truth is rooted in proof. It may not actually be true but the communicator must persuade the listener that his argument is proven. This process draws on tried-and-tested techniques. Thus familiar symbols are condensed expressions rich with meaning and experience. Their shorthand form makes them user-friendly. They are signposts to guide a clear route of understanding through the world of the viewer/listener already overcrowded with information. Myths draw on the power of narrative and bind the community into a common understanding: old stories can be re-shaped into new with contemporary poignancy; while former heroes can be revitalised by their newly found relevance to changing political landscapes. Days before his death in 1981, IRA hunger-striker Bobby Sands was visited by an Irish priest who read him a poem by Patrick Pearse, orator-leader of the 1916 Easter Rising. 'That's beautiful, that's gorgeous' responded the dying man.¹⁹ Sands would later take his place in the Republican community's memory of

¹⁷ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 370.

¹⁸ O'Shaughnessy (2004) op. cit.

¹⁹ Padraig O'Malley, *Biting at the Grave: The Irish Hunger Strikes and the Politics of Despair* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), p. 63.

insurgent martyrs alongside Pearse. Nearly seventy years before, Pearse had also died for the same cause, but not before likening himself to the sacrificed Jesus Christ on the cross.

Under certain circumstances communities become delineated, detached and politicised in relation to their surrounding majorities, as in the case of global diasporas, or in relation to minorities in states where they are the dominant group. This notion draws on research into nationalism and identity politics.²⁰ It identifies three components that create a 'fiction' of 'imagined political community': it should be 'limited' in its size, 'sovereign' since freedom is sought through the nation-state, and a 'community' evoking 'comradeship...a fraternity...[going forth] willingly to die for such limited imaginings'.²¹ Whilst this may apply to territorialised populations, deterritorialised political movements with little or no apparent ambition to govern states, inevitably present a dilemma. The *imagined community* becomes increasingly abstract, linked through symbolic points of mutual identity in the individual's imagination. And this *imagined community* increasingly finds a *virtual* home through the proliferation of global television and in the case of Islam, of Muslim majorities and minorities linked by technology and faith.²² Olivier Roy, for instance, has traced the development of a 'virtual *Umma*', a geographically disparate community linked via the internet which

...is the perfect place for [Muslim] individuals to express themselves while claiming to belong to a community to whose enactment they contribute, rather than being passive members of it.²³

Can POTD claim to be Political Marketing?

Insurgents are in the business of selling their political message. POTD is one way of getting noticed, attracting recruits, goading the state, and destabilising the status quo. Non-state political groups, like nation-states before them, attempt to root their legitimacy in an historical narrative which they have carefully crafted and internalised in and through successive generations of actors and phases of discourse. This narrative is more than fuzzy romance. It is the essence of the organisation. It sets the rules of engagement for internal struggle over ideological orthodoxy and operational direction. Narrative offers coherence and consistency for sympathisers. How, where and when the narrative unfolds in the future, what direction it will take, is determined by this control. Similarly in the corporate sector of global brands trigger-ready litigation lawyers protect the brand from incursion or hijack. Why? Because the brand is vested with the collective meaning, philosophy, history and audience recognition of the product or producer. Brand symbols imbued with levels of meaning 'capture an idea of reputation' which becomes more significant in a world where 'we are witnessing the general collapse of tradition and deference'.²⁴ Political marketing and consumer advertising are hewn from the same stone since, as Tony Schwartz pointed out, '(P)eople tend to read ads for products they already own'.²⁵ So the consumer responds best to messages which 'attach to something that is already in him'.²⁶ Schwartz himself had demonstrated this through his own 'Daisy spot', a TV commercial for Lyndon Johnson's presidential campaign targeted at Republican rival Barry Goldwater. A military

²⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London & New York: Verso, 1983), p. 7.

²¹ See Annex A.

²² Faisal Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity* (London: Hurst, 2005).

²³ Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Umma* (London: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 183.

²⁴ Will Hutton, *Twenty Five Visions: The Future of Brands* (London: Macmillan Business/Interbrand, 2000), p. 12.

²⁵ Tony Schwartz, *The Responsive Chord* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1972), p. 92.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

voice counted down as a small girl pulled the petals off a flower, one by one. As the zero-count arrived the image of the girl gave way to a nuclear explosion. The closing voiceover suggested only Johnson could prevent the inevitability of this outcome. Significantly neither Goldwater nor his policy voting record was ever mentioned. The controversial ad ran only once. But such was the impact on TV viewers that the Republican challenger was permanently tarred as a war-monger. However without the residual suspicion in the minds of the voting population, this commercial would have found little leverage. POTD too is a form of political marketing because targets are selected for their easy recognition and symbolic impact, amplifying their ability to resonate meaning to an audience. In recent years this audience has become the global consumer of digitised media.

Can POTD Control the Response?

Political communication aims to control the content of its message and the precision of its delivery, both for efficacy and economy of effort. If it cannot then it is merely akin to throwing mud at walls and hoping some sticks. Despite a paucity of policy detail, New Labour's ascent to power in the UK in 1997 was nevertheless built on a message. Its focus-group strategist Philip Gould defined the message as 'the rationale that underpins your campaign...this rationale is the most important thing to get right in a campaign'.²⁷ In the case of Islamist extremist POTD, the key to its attraction appears to be the underpinning message of an existential threat to a way of life enjoyed by Muslims. Al-Qa'ida's strategic narrative is very straightforward, consisting essentially of three points:

- Islam is under general attack by the West, led by the United States
- The acts of Al-Qa'ida are a religiously just and defensive response to this

attack

- Good Muslims everywhere should, therefore, support them

The genius of this narrative is its simplicity and (whatever its logical and factual merits) its resonance with sacred Islamic texts. Any of these points may be exploded as twisted, absurd, or both; taken together they constitute a bogus mythology of a movement which is thirsty for grievances upon which to rest its extremist political demands. But many people believe them, which serves as a case in point that strategic narratives need not be rational to be effective. By creating an overarching framework of simple understanding flexible enough to be customised according to local community or circumstance, it meets an underlying need.

But in doing so it has to address two key problems. Firstly, consumer advertisers and political focus-group pollsters have long aimed to focus their 'attack' on niche markets and demographic sub-groups (but still with only limited success). This 'more bang for your buck' analysis rationalises the high cost of investment and attempts to obviate traditional waste from scatter-gun marketing. It would appear as though Islamist extremist POTD still suffers the vagaries of scatter-gun marketing through conventional mass media, but that it is increasingly offset by niche targeting through Islamist internet sites and own-controlled broadcast, or more accurately narrowcast outlets. Secondly, this kind of focus facilitates refining a message more attuned to the demands of that particular niche as an iterative process. At least, costly market researchers can gauge the response to products in the marketplace, and make changes to the product if needs be. But how should POTD, seen as a marketing campaign or product launch of extreme and blunt proportions, measure its impact and future sales? Especially when the very image of the deed is abhorrent to many or most,

²⁷ Philip Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution: How the Modernisers Saved the Labour Party* (London: Abacus, 1998), p. 294.

even in disaffected communities. So assuming Propaganda of the Deed is a rational act, a symbolic, communicative campaign, expressing a heart-felt grievance, how can it not only locate its audience but enlist its support throughout a dynamic, iterative process?

Recent research²⁸ analysed the effect of symbols and images of Islamic-related violence on British Muslim groups of mixed age and gender, in propaganda videos. These included 1) an Iranian bridegroom turning into a suicide bomber, in a pop-promo format; 2) rock-throwing Palestinian children machine-gunned by a cyborg-like Israeli soldier, in an animation format; 3) a speech by Al-Qa'ida number two Ayman Al-Zawahiri, and; 4) the 'martyrdom' video of 7/7 bomber Sidique Khan. Audience responses revealed an 'understanding (rather than sympathy) of how and why such materials have impact', and observed particularly amongst young men, the recognition that jihadi calls 'could be perceived as legitimate'.²⁹ These videos underlined the importance of the martyrdom effect of the material,³⁰ supporting a *Populus/Times* opinion poll (2006) which reported '13% of British Muslims believe that the four suicide bombers of July 7, 2005 should be regarded as "martyrs" while 7% said that attacks on UK civilians could be justified in some circumstances'.³¹ This echoes the words of Daniel Pearl's British executioner Omar Sheikh who was drawn to the cause by the sight of Bosnian Muslim victims recorded on videotape. Young women who rejected the violence of the sample videotape footage nevertheless sympathised with the protagonists as victims. Interestingly it was the genre and style of certain videos that failed to clear the cultural thresholds of the focus groups of British Muslims, often being the source of

amusement for their lack of sophistication. What was not tested was POTD material demonstrating insurgent acts of destruction or the brutalised victims of such deeds.

The research lends credence to the theory that some Western Muslims are essentially self-radicalising through a process of small-group socialisation fed by images from the Western media which Islamist propaganda tends to confirm and reinforce rather than initiate. There is a growing belief in the fundamental Islamist proposition that there is a real war against Islam being waged under the guise of the War on Terror. The authors of the study are cautious about their findings yet do suggest that there is a worrying consolidation of the 'meta-narrative of Muslims as a unitary grouping self-defined as victims of Western aggression.'

POTD: 'I don't like Mondays'?

This research begs further questions. 1) Symbolic language or not, was the overarching message of Islam under threat of attack insufficient to radicalise and mobilise these focus groups (assuming unbeknownst to the researchers, none was previously radicalised or became so afterwards)? 2) Or was it merely the cultural language employed on the sample videotapes that was too alien and dissonant to be persuasive? In the hands of a culturally attuned British or European filmmaker working in contemporary western idioms, might the message have found its target? Therefore if cultural barriers get in the way of mobilisation, how does POTD ever bridge the divide? 3) When groups engage in transnational warfare of words and ideas, are the barriers of state-national culture, institutions and mores so overwhelming that only the marginal and inevitable few will ever be

²⁸ Paul Baines and Nicholas O'Shaughnessy, *Muslim Voices: The British Muslim Response to Islamist Video-Polemic: An Exploratory Study*, Cranfield University School of Management Research Paper series RP 3/06 (December 2006).

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 1.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 2.

³¹ Baines and O'Shaughnessy, *op cit*, p. 5.

won over?³² The point here is to what extent POTD can ever be anything other than a blunt instrument, and whether marginalised populations are drawn to POTD, like moths to the flame of violence, only when finally bereft of any perceived alternative. Ultimately this becomes a critical point for any definition of POTD: how far is the deed a targeted missile, or are randomness and unintended consequence factored into the original intent of the protagonist?

Political scientists consistently anticipate rational actors operating within rational strategies of cause and effect. In 1979 American teenager Brenda Ann Spencer shot ten staff and children of a San Diego school. When finally apprehended she declared her reason: 'I don't like Mondays' – a discontinuity that has since entered popular culture. But rational or no, it at least calls into question what passes through the mind of today's POTD planner. The contemporary POTD may be a phenomenon created by actors without a strategic plan. Alternatively their plan may seek to maximise the immediate impact of the act and claim the benefit of any ripple factor. For instance the strike against the Twin Towers (2001) was obviously a well-planned, highly deliberate act. Commentators looked on in awe: Al-Qa'ida's success reportedly fused 'all available modern means to this highly symbolic weapon'. Their invention was to 'appropriate all the arms of dominant power. Money and financial speculation, information technologies and aeronautics, the production of spectacle and media networks: they have assimilated

all of modernity and globalization, while maintaining their aim to destroy it'.³³ However what the planners did not and could not expect was that both towers would collapse. And the full symbolic impact for the global television audience ultimately lay in the complete humbling of a US capitalism momentarily reduced to dust and panic. This suggests an insurgent wait-and-see strategy that recognises in the complexity and confusion of the global broadcast and communications space, the controlled message is long beyond anyone's complete control.

Again a visual metaphor may be helpful. Information and targeted messages pinball their way around the mediascape, scoring points here and setting off cascades of bells and whistles there. In other words, there is the deed and its second and third order repercussions. The process is not entirely random. As the trajectory of a pinball can be affected by bumping the machine and by manipulation of the flippers so too can the POTD be somewhat altered, halted, or accelerated. Because of the architecture of social media small groups are able to manage the POTD in ways that serve their political ends through the manipulation of discussion forums and comments pages as well as the generation of counter-analyses. The global insurgents have recognised this fact. For instance, in June 2007 the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF) announced a media campaign the declared purpose of which was to counter the messages against the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) put out by Arab and Western media agencies and to stop the

³² An alarming aspect of the conflict called the War on Terror is the tendency on both sides to appeal to moral principle as a guide and justification for action. In this respect the conflict bears a resemblance to the Thirty Years' War which, for all its ferocity and horror, was fought over something intangible. At stake were the rules for intra-European conflict. Before the Thirty Years' War the control of strategy and of the conduct of war lay in the appeal to moral principle; after it the codification and acceptance of legal rules and restraints among the rulers of Europe (notably that sovereigns would not interfere in the internal affairs of the states of other sovereigns) superseded appeals to moral authority. See Philip Windsor, *Strategic Thinking: An Introduction and Farewell* (London: Lynne Reiner, 2002), pp. 14–15. This is what gives the Thirty Years' War its special historical significance. The current conflict, if it too is essentially about establishing a new rule set, may be as momentous, ferocious and horrific.

³³ Jean Baudrillard 'The Spirit of Terrorism', *Le Monde*, 14 November 2001 (transl. Rachel Blou) <<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/ baudrillard/ baudrillard-the-spirit-of-terrorism.html>>.

increasing military campaign against the ISI by Sunni organisations in Iraq. In a message titled 'The Battar Media Raid: How to Participate? How to Help? What Is My Role?' the campaign's goals and methods, including infiltrating non-Islamic forums for the purpose of posting pro-ISI propaganda were described:

What we expect from you brothers and sisters is for the [Islamist] forum to be like beehives during the raid... [whereby] one person takes part in distributing [material]... another generates links... one person writes an article... while another writes a poem... People must feel and notice that the forums have changed radically during this blessed raid... beloved [raid participants], the raid is dependent on you... The raid demands of you many things... such as expertise, especially in the following areas: seeking religious knowledge, montage, translation into any language, uploading material onto various types of websites, web design, graphic design, journal and publication design, and hacking and security. If you have expertise in any of these [fields], contact the GIMF representative on any of the forums. If, however, you do not possess this expertise... there are other matters you can [promote]: for example, posting matters related to the raid in most [jihad] forums... posting [material] in non-jihad forums, posting in non-Islamic forums such as music forums, youth forums, sports forums, and others'.³⁴

In this respect the tendency of Western media relations to focus the bulk of their attention to the first ninety minutes of a story is counterproductive to the extent that it overshadows the importance of the subsequent ninety days or, indeed, ninety years. The stateless insurgent builds this semi-randomness and long timescale into his plans; by and large, the state-based counter-insurgent still does not.

POTD and Media in a Shrinking World

What differentiates today's Propaganda of the Deed from its nineteenth-century precursors are the effects of the post-1980s' liberalisation in global communications. The intensity of consumer demand means this exploding mediascape has grown too porous to staunch ever-increasing flows of information. So has POTD come full circle? Once POTD had to shout to gain attention, when information distribution was controlled by states and select entrepreneurs. Now POTD must shout even louder precisely because of the proliferation of state and private distribution channels. Have television and the web in effect reduced POTD to nothing more than an uncontrolled act of 'shock and awe'? It is not so simple as first appears.

*'The commodity that the media actually trade in is audience attention'*³⁵

Media are losing control of the information flows in their own industries. This plays to the advantage of insurgents who adapt their methods accordingly. News organisations are trapped in a competition to deliver audiences; at the same time, they are caught in shrinking time and space. Reporting stories in real-time through twenty-four hour television news stations places them on an ever-shrinking timeline between event and broadcast. This timeline is governed by a number of factors. 1) The commoditisation of news and factual programming into a form of quasi entertainment creates viewer appetite. 2) The 'tabloidisation' of information means the most dramatic content rises to the top of the news running order, while the medium continues its 'race to the bottom'. 3) The ubiquity and standardisation of formatted programming across television networks

³⁴ Translated excerpts from the message were made available on the website of the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI). See, 'Global Islamic Media Front Instructs Islamists to Infiltrate Popular Non-Islamic Forums to Spread Pro-Islamic State Propaganda' MEMRI Special Dispatches Series 1621 (14 June 2007), <<http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP162107>>.

³⁵ Jean Seaton, *Carnage and the Media* (London: Penguin/Allen Lane, 2005), p. 251.

around the world means the underlying, tabloid visual grammar is shorthanded and homogenised, thus readily understood by any viewer. 4) The proliferation of state and commercial TV stations increases competition for the dramatic image and increases market-access for groups engaged in POTD. 5) The availability of low-cost technology means POTD group activity can be relayed through 'in house' units of insurgents who record and edit attacks before making them available either on internet insurgency sites or via the web to global TV stations. 6) The emergence of the recent phenomenon of mobile phone users photographing or recording moving images before mailing these indiscriminately within minutes of an event to TV networks. 7) The self publishing innovation of 'citizen journalists', the ordinary man-on-the-street, who shoots incidents before uploading to social network internet sites such as *YouTube*.

A growing climate of existential 'vulnerability and fear' experienced by Western nation-states increases the pressure this shrinking timeline can apply. Political elites stand accused of a failure of leadership and decision-making. They over-indulge in moral relativism and create confusion in the minds of the public over what to believe.³⁶ By compressing time between POTD taking place and its appearance on mediated outlets, valuable thinking time is reduced for news editors.³⁷ Yet this time is crucial to establishing the veracity of the source; if news-editors are to preserve the trust of the end-user, that vital component of the broadcaster-audience relationship, they must continue to resist the pressure to transmit breaking stories despite concerns about the accuracy of their information. Failure to do so will only undermine the credibility of the organisation's brand already under attack from 'unbranded' material freely available from independent or rogue sources. However the laws of competi-

tion soon cut in. As one journalist put it: 'If you don't or they don't fill that space, rumour, conjecture, and innuendo fill it as well as those who have aggressive intent'. Many broadcasters perceive consumer hunger for content as the salient force in today's information society. Audiences, we are reminded, want 'truth' and if the journalistic beacon brands of 'truth' – like the BBC – do not provide it fast enough, fickle viewers will take their business elsewhere. News editors vacillate between the scylla of veracity and authenticity, and the charybdis of losing audience share to their commercial competition. Significantly this only increases the opportunity of the insurgent to exploit the uncertainty gap in the security marketplace. Hence the conundrum.

The point here is that for exponents of POTD, the act has entered a new domain where sometimes messages are controlled in their production and disseminated by insurgents' own video units and satellite TV channels. But sometimes, mass technology consumers use telephone and web-sites to transmit 'news', increasingly cutting out the editorial middle-man on the TV news-desk. Only the original act and its accompanying message remain initially fully under control of the insurgent. But within minutes these are distributed by independent vectors and the pinball-randomisation begins. Thus the same event produces two broad streams of propaganda, the deliberate and the semi-random – the controlled and the semi-controlled. Crucially the insurgent can shape both. He can shape the random element by continually returning to it, casting and recasting it for his audience in a constant iterative process.

Where Fact Meets Fiction

Whether the salient force driving contemporary information consumption is for journalistic reporting grounded in 'truth', or per-

³⁶ Frank Furedi, *Invitation to Terror* (London & New York: Continuum, 2007).

³⁷ Broadcast TV, internet news, images and texts to mobile phones.

haps more likely, for an appetite for any graphic or dramatic content is a moot point. A video of Nick Berg's beheading attracted 15 million downloads from websites.³⁸ Similarly *YouTube* proudly announces that over 16 million have watched its feature containing topless photographs of the singer Britney Spears.³⁹ In the virtual space both 'events' fall prey to a culture where reality is played out as entertainment. In this world the boundaries between truth and fiction merge, taking on a different meaning.

So too do time and space merge. By linking distant places and communities into the here and now individuals are offered the opportunity to feel part of multiple, indeed divergent collectives, simultaneously. Nineteenth century societies were no stranger to this development. In the nineteenth century industrialised printing and incipient media empires bridged gaps of distance and differentiation in the same way as railways and telegraphs conquered the classic military constraints of time and space. But now individuals observe apparently other like-minded individuals reacting in real-time to the same event, and in the same way, thus reinforcing subjective attitudes. Just as audiences view POTD events, so the perpetrators of such violence need not wait too long to see these audiences and their representatives react, both positively and negatively.

The New Face of POTD

The contours of some new understanding of POTD 2008 are beginning to emerge. We may propose: 1) It is not limited to a single event. After all an event may now last minutes, hours, days, weeks, years. And the reason it endures is because each bomb, each mass killing, resonates internally within an archipelago of violent moments which reference each other, creating meaning and

momentum, and a sense of historical narrative. 2) These events communicate across communities using symbols and images that are readily understood, triggering deep-seated grievances, shaping identity politics and mobilising new recruits. 3) Insurgents embrace the media, recognising its need for audience attention. The bigger the bang, the more attention it commands. 4) POTD events create random and deliberate consequences. 'Unintended consequences' are no longer a by-product of poor planning. Beyond the control of the insurgent, they become accepted, 'intended', part and parcel of the media communications strategy. This ought to be the red flag for media relations/information operations specialists because if we are correct, it amounts, in a nutshell, to saying 'embrace chaos'. What in practical terms does this mean when the rubber hits the road, they would rightly ask. To which we would suggest there is something to be said for an exchange of philosophical views in the ministries of defence of the world between specialists in media relations and their colleagues in the meteorology department.

³⁸ Akil Awan, 'Radicalisation on the Internet? The Virtual Propagation of the Jihadist Media and its Effects', *RUSI Journal* (Vol.152, No.3, June 2007), pp. 76–81.

³⁹ <<http://www.youtube.com/>> last accessed 7/02/2008.

3. POTD and Counter-Insurgency: Towards a Solution

The Insurgency Research Group conference 2008 examined POTD in the local and regional operations theatres of Iraq and Afghanistan. If the message, not the bullet, has become the real weapon of choice, how, if at all, are states engaging with the new warfare? We have argued that POTD takes full advantage of its symbiotic relationship with global media. It creates a dramatic act of political violence which works on different levels, addressing different audiences. Initially it shocks its victims and immediate populations. Rapidly it provokes state governments in the full glare of watching cameras. And as governments are drawn into violent retaliation, they undermine their own credibility and ability to preserve the security and *ordinariness* of daily life by resorting to *extraordinary* strategies. Primarily the argument here is that the force of the deed is its ability to *resonate*, not just shock or provoke, and through resonance to attach itself to underlying grievances in populations, ultimately mobilising and expanding these new-found constituencies. How does this new conceptualisation impact operations theatres?

The Strategic Overview

Adept at dealing with contact battle, British forces in Afghanistan have realised the need to come to terms with a 'strategic makeover' in the face of a new threat. This transformation is informed by key principles: 1) insurgents conduct 'influence operations' and the counter-insurgency must be political but supported by the military; 2) 'not to attack or respond to a terrorist act is as much an influence operation as the decision to take action' (experience of the Indian Army in Kashmir operations demonstrated that in the absence of a clear-cut, identifiable enemy, it was better to walk away and not jeopardise hard-won community relations); 3) the 'anthropo-

logical' approach must inform the strategy – understanding local, complex historical, social, political dimensions is critical; 4) the local must be situated in the regional, so commanders must be cognisant of the roles and relationships of the operational theatre with neighbouring countries. However this represents a major shift in political and military thinking which currently awaits a bureaucratic analysis, adoption and promotion still sorely lacking. Before civil servants and officials feel secure in backing radical initiatives they will always assess their ability to sell them to their paymasters. If the ground has not been clearly delineated by consensus, bureaucratic resistance will restrain progress. Thus 'strategy is effectively absent'.

Writing the Counter-narrative: Fighting Message with Message

How should the counter-narrative be constructed? Some staff officers argue for a multi-tiered set of narratives which sit within one overarching framework or supra-narrative requiring each component to be consistent with the next. Yet there is inherent friction in the process. The intervention force suffers the disadvantage of a local knowledge deficit. The insurgent understands the individual resonance of Propaganda of the Deed, shaping the narrative to local communities, but significantly from the bottom-up not top-down. And it is at the grass-roots level that critical but minute shifts in understandings and loyalties sense and adapt to the changing dynamics and fortunes of conflict. This knowledge deficit is compounded by the support role which coalition forces must uphold, militating against an over-enthusiastic spearheading of the propaganda initiative. If national governments are to resist the long-term assault on their rule, their legitimacy depends on their ability to exercise

independent sovereign authority. On the other hand in Afghanistan it is the very nature of power relations that separates Kabul – geographically and tribally – from the rest of the country. It is striking that Arab media picked up Iraq's Anbar Awakening before foreign observers, and will have been a more trustworthy medium for the dissemination of that message. The structure and organisation of societies such as Afghanistan also calls for a dialogue between coalition forces, NGOs and agencies at community level in villages, towns and cities whose agenda will be driven by the people's self-interest and the fundamental desire for security. But the answers to the two key questions – 'how long will the coalition forces be around?' and 'which is going to be the winning side?' are problematic with the second hanging on the first, and the first being as likely to be determined by Western governments' electorates, or their perception of those electorates' wishes, as by the 'far enemy', who may not figure at all in the final judgement.

Meanwhile 'the narrative provides the canvas upon which events will be painted' and this narrative must be backed by consistent momentum. Thus analysis of the political-military campaign echoes Gould's earlier strategy⁴⁰ of democratic electoral campaigning: 'Gaining momentum means dominating the news agenda, entering the news cycle at the earliest possible time, and repeatedly re-entering it, with stories and initiatives that ensure the subsequent news coverage is set on your terms'. This is about turning defence into attack. 'You must always rebut a political attack if leaving it unanswered will harm you. And you must do it instantly, within minutes at best, within hours at worst, and with a defence supported by facts'. News spreads fast through informal networks in Afghanistan and Iraq. Countering POTD means being alert to instantaneous response – legitimate and credible figureheads calling family and friends to staunch the flow of dis-

information, denying insurgents the opportunity of commanding the discourse terrain. Effectively this secures the narrative operational theatre. Next the message of the insurgent must be undermined. But its basis must be fact and accuracy. In Iraq 'a unit responded to an attack by flying in Iraqi media, contacting local Sunni and Shia authorities to speak to their followers, calling defence attaches in countries affected by the attack to prevent the spread of domestic disinformation, and visiting local hospitals to speak with hospital staff'. And why hospitals? Because POTD assaults force their way onto the Richter scale of media by the volume of casualties, and insurgents repeatedly attempt to control and adversely manipulate this source of 'evidence'. Instead of focusing on the event itself which leaves the field open to continued re-interpretation of the underlying motivation, the victims and the misery of their families wrought in violence, must become the story in the counter-narrative. This suffering is then reattached to the perpetrators of extreme violence, singled out wherever possible as individuals, indeed self-interested criminals, thus detached from any legitimising ideology. David Galula famously wrote:

The asymmetrical situation has important effects on propaganda. The insurgent, having no responsibility, is free to use every trick; if necessary, he can lie, cheat, exaggerate. He is not obliged to prove; he is judged by what he promises, not by what he does. Consequently, propaganda is a powerful weapon for him. With no positive policy but with good propaganda, the insurgent may still win.

The counterinsurgent is tied to his responsibilities and to his past, and for him, facts speak louder than words. He is judged on what he does, not on what he says. If he lies, cheats, exaggerates, and does not prove, he may achieve some temporary successes, but at the price of being discredited for good. And he cannot cheat much unless his political structures are monolithic, for the legitimate opposition in his own camp would soon dis-

⁴⁰ Op. cit. pp. 294–5.

close his every psychological manoeuvre. For him, propaganda can be no more than a secondary weapon, valuable only if intended to inform and not to fool. A counterinsurgent can seldom cover bad or nonexistent policy with propaganda.⁴¹

There is much wisdom in what Galula said and with respect to the injunction that the counter-insurgent must not lie (lest he cause long-term pain to his credibility for short-term gain), ought to be regarded as something akin to a scientific law. However, in another respect he is wrong. The insurgent can be judged by what he does as well as what he says. The delta between the two is the target of the counter-insurgent propagandist. In crude terms, the 'bad guys' need to stand up and be counted. The 'insurgency' is all too often conceptualised, abstracted, rendering it amorphous, and blurring the discourse. In fact these are real events involving real people. Separate these and you disaggregate the ethnic, religious and political components. In Iraq and Afghanistan power politics and resource competition can often be revealed by separating the ideological from the theological, the Sunni-based from the Shia-based.

*'Over half the actual battle takes place in the media'*⁴²

It is tempting to conclude the deployment of multi-tiered messaging resembles manoeuvre operations. A command-intent sets the framework for devolved command and control to react to fast-moving changes on the ground. But what drives the entire enterprise is the recognition that today's war is one of strategic communications. Moreover, it should be recognised that there is a distinctly attritional element to the media battle. While from time to time there may be opportunities to dislocate the enemy's information campaign with some clever stroke, by

and large the dominant characteristic of battle in the media-space is the dogged diverting, diluting and refuting of the other side's messages with messages of one's own day in and day out. Here we see the perspicacity of McLuhan's choice of words in describing his 'war of icons' as the erosion of the collective countenance of one's opponent. This becomes even more urgent as the focus widens to embrace a global picture of POTD events. Returning to our archipelago analogy, we may liken this to Indonesia with its 17,000 islands within a half dozen main clusters. The onus now moves to making sense of these divergent incidents of global insurgency. Their effect fans out across numerous and often apparently disconnected diasporas, and their host populations. We have proposed shaping multiple, targeted messages in Afghanistan and Iraq to address specific local and regional constituency agendas but within a consistent and coherent whole. Likewise we now require targeted messages that address different communities in other countries including the UK with their different concerns. How ideas are disseminated in 'bottom-up' as well as 'top-down' social processes, demands further investigation. In the end all messages must be harmonised into an holistic narrative architecture.

Can States use POTD? The State Conundrum

POTD is a symbolic act of political collective violence whose true impact supersedes the force of its military spectacle, and derives from its ability to communicate and disseminate a message. But because POTD's very essence is concerned with undermining the authority and legitimacy of the state, and this weakness can be amplified if the state retaliates in kind, then the state inevitably fights with one hand tied behind its back. Advocates of soft power argue that a war of

⁴¹ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York, NY: Praeger, 2005), pp.14–15.

⁴² Ayman al-Zawahiri (*Al-Qa'ida*).

ideas may only draw on words. This unbalances the equation. Insurgents may use words, ideas *and violence* but the state is barred from anything other than words.

Perhaps this misrepresents the picture. States command superior human and capital resources which can be mobilised to the security, political and developmental effort then targeted at disenfranchised populations. The state always remains in the dominant role. To portray it as a Goliath struck-down by David is ill-advised. Here we must differentiate between the UK, USA, Europe and Afghanistan. It is particularly in territories and societies where the state exists largely as an integer in the international system of sovereignty that this superiority of power begins to crumble. Where the state has never exercised monopoly control over legitimate violence nor promoted institutions of representation promoting rights and benefits of the individual citizen, it is found wanting and weakened in the face of the insurgent.

So can any state ever legitimately resort to the use of POTD? It is argued, by definition categorically not. States are excluded from deploying it. This in effect is the beauty of POTD that as soon as the state resorts to it, it alienates its support base, further fuelling the insurgency. But is that always the case? States, even democracies, can and do regularly adopt POTD as a technique of symbolic action. It should not be dismissed merely as the knee-jerk response of authoritarian state-terror. A commander participating in the conference, who had recently returned from Iraq, related how US/Iraqi forces recently dropped a 500 pound bomb on a house holding Al-Qa'ida fighters. This strike clearly had a tactical-level purpose – namely, the removal of the insurgents once and for all from the operations theatre. Yet its scale and drama were such that press and media were invited to interpret a deeper, more meaningful intent. How far this spectacle resonated

with the Sunni Arab population, within a relentless drip feed of state-sponsored POTD, and consequently how that contributed to the Anbar Awakening, remains unexplored.

Likewise slow-motion footage of targeted missiles played and replayed on worldwide television during the 1991 Gulf War was nothing if not POTD. It celebrated the narrative of political power through a vision of 'awe' – hi-technological, military and economic achievement. Did these images only alienate, or is it actually feasible they won over new recruits to the coalition and liberal cause? Alternatively, even if the audience was 'shocked' was it necessarily simply alienated? At the less dramatic end of the spectrum, how should we view the Blair government's decision to surround Heathrow airport (2003) with tanks, 450 troops, 1,700 additional police and a Nimrod circling London?⁴³ This was clearly POTD. Through show of military strength, it aimed to send out signals to reassure a domestic population, rather than threaten insurgent-activists and sympathisers. On this occasion state violence remained implicit.

By contrast it was explicit when NATO forces attacked Taliban operations chiefs with Hellfire missiles launched from *Predator* RPVs. Yet the failure to broadcast this assault was troubling. It revealed an entrenched failure of understanding amongst planners. What insurgents intuitively appreciate is that fulfilling military objectives is only part of the battle. The key is to demonstrate to the eyes of the world, on camera, that 'your guys' are not only winning but that your cause is just and irresistible. This remains a contest for the narrative and symbolic space. But we return to the dilemma outlined earlier. Had the Taliban strike been recorded for transmission or broadcast live, what would have been its effect? We may assume it might have played positively to broader constituent

⁴³ BBC News, 'Ministers to make Heathrow statement', 13 February 2003.
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/2755663.stm> – accessed 10 February 2008.

cies 'back home' supporting the Coalition forces through tax-pounds (and dollars), but negatively to many in their Muslim communities in Dewsbury and Bradford who would read it as further evidence of a Western war on Islam. This is a far cry from the Taliban assault on Kabul's Serena Hotel, a symbolic target of Western values. By singling out this widely known health-and-fitness venue for visiting female aid and security workers, it resonated a symbolic, ideological critique of values to those same disenchanted few in Dewsbury and Bradford, and indeed the many within Kabul's host-population. So too

did the Taliban's strike against troops at a passing-out parade under the gaze of President Karzai in early May 2008 demonstrate the inherent weakness of the Afghan government in its own capital, despite the armed presence of NATO troops and the historic difficulties faced by the Taliban in penetrating Kabul. Within minutes pictures of this propaganda triumph for the insurgent were flying through the ether of the global mediascape. These two incidents alone are proof-positive of the state conundrum in the battle for narrative space.

4. Conclusion: The Way Forward and Recommendations

In summary, Propaganda of the Deed performs 1) operationally in order to shock for attention; 2) tactically to engage the state-enemy and provoke retaliation; 3) communicatively to attach itself to underlying grievances; 4) strategically to expand its constituency and polarise it from a government that has met violence with violence and thus further delegitimised its authority. However the instant transmission of events in ever shrinking delivery times via television, internet and telephony often invites the wrong analysis. A deed is not homogeneous. Instead it is important to recognise that the same deed sends out different messages and divergent objectives, simultaneously to potentially multiple audiences.

We recommend that policy-makers distinguish individual components of an all too easily conflated single conflict. Thus we note a deed committed in Afghanistan may target: 1) the balance of power within a local political economy, where actors compete for power and resources; 2) hierarchical politics, where the attack seeks to influence or control without subverting the *sovereign state*: some actors aspire to share in the benefits

that accrue to sovereign members of the international community, especially their high volumes of foreign aid; 3) ethnic and tribal identity politics that reach beyond Afghanistan's ill-defined borders: sometimes these politics impact immediate neighbours, sometimes more distant communities along the Pakistan-Iran lateral axis, and the north-south axis of the Central Asian corridor; 4) ideological politics on the scale of an intra-state project of dismantling the sovereign status quo and bringing about a neo-Taliban, Islamic order; 5) conversely, ideological politics within a supra-state project with its separate agenda of creating a transnational, global *umma* embraced by Al-Qa'ida and its derivatives. This notional deed may play into any of the above categories whether the perpetrator represents the Taliban or Al-Qa'ida, with their distinct but occasionally overlapping programmes.

Consequently we recommend policy-makers with their more nuanced sensitivity to European societies, resist overarching aggregation when surveying diverse communities. As we have argued above, a deed committed in the UK will find some resonance

somewhere in the UK population because of structural inequalities rooted in domestic, minority communities. These communities may already be alienated by marginalised living standards, reduced job opportunities, racially and religiously motivated discrimination, and basic issues of identity. What we do not yet know is, to what degree if at all, this sense of injustice reverberates and resonates outwards from the UK to other populations in majority Muslim states or Muslim diasporas. How far were French North African, German Turkish, or Spanish Moroccan communities with their distinctive personalities and provenance, influenced by London's 7/7 deeds? Whilst we are willing to accept the notion of a geographical *imaginary* such as the global *umma*, what we have yet to penetrate are the relationships and understandings which bind its constituent communities here in Europe.

Indeed the Insurgency Research Group recommends that future research agendas investigate: 1) where the operational objective ends and the message campaign begins; 2) how internal regimes of violence affect the shaping of messages within insurgent groups, and; 3) why certain deeds find sympathy with target populations while other similar atrocities alienate their very chosen

constituency? These are perennial questions that challenge our understanding of insurgency in its many guises around the world. However they are made all the more pressing by today's confrontation with the extreme manifestations of political Islam.

Meanwhile the current priority for the counter-insurgency narrative remains 1) to identify and delineate separate conflicts which to date have been conflated into the perception of a single war; 2) to hone particular messages which address each of these, and to recognise that some subsequently may be inherently contradictory; and 3) to reconcile all contradictions into a single harmonious framework, a meta- or strategic narrative that seeks to overcome the deep-felt resentment shared by many communities and societies to aspects of the Western liberal project. Only by shaping a matrix of relationships between parallel but often divergent communicators and their communications is there any chance of framing an overarching grand strategic narrative. Coherence and consistency are all. Such a narrative will need to encompass differing sets of values, uneven stages of development, and persuade disparate populations around the world of the justice of its cause. This remains the fundamental test in the war of words and ideas.

Annex A: Conference panelists and participants.**PANELISTS**

Brigadier Dickie Davies	HQ Land Forces
Professor Nicholas O'Shaughnessy	Queen Mary's College London
Nik Gowing	BBC World

PARTICIPANTS

Brigadier (ret.) Gavin Bulloch	Land Warfare Centre
Colonel Peter Davies	Defence Academy JSCSC
Dr Dominick Donald	Aegis Research and Intelligence
Professor Theo Farrell	King's College London, Insurgency Research Group
Dr Amanat Hussain	President e-Worldwide Group
Mr George Lawrence	MA War Studies, King's College London
Mr Shuvra Mahmud	BBC Monitoring
Dr John Mackinlay	King's College London, Insurgency Research Group
Colonel H.R. McMaster	IISS
Dr Terence McNamee	RUSI
Dr Jeff Michaels	Royal Air Force College
Mr Saqeb Mueen	RUSI
Dr Andrew Mumford	BISA
Mr Alexander Nicoll	IISS
Dr Ben O' Loughlin	New Political Communication Unit, Royal Holloway College
Ms Gemma O'Neill	BBC Monitoring
Mr Mark Phillips	Team for Shadow Defence Minister
Mr Samir Puri	Defence Analyst, RAND Europe
Mr Paul Smyth	RUSI
Mr Timothy Stevens	MA War Studies, King's College London
Mr Nicholas Walton	BBC Radio

We are particularly grateful to the conference panelists, noted above.

