

Hugh White

How awful is this threat?

The Age

1 September 2005

P. 15

It has been a strange four years since September 11, 2001. And one of the strangest things has been the growing gap between the way our leaders talk about terrorism, and the way they really think about it.

When our political leaders — government and opposition, state and federal, Australian and foreign — talk about terrorism, they paint a consistent and all too familiar picture. Terrorism, they say, is the biggest challenge we face. It poses a threat greater than the Cold War, threatening the survival of our societies, our values, and our whole international system. We have been thrown into a long struggle from which we will one day emerge victorious, finally defeating the adversary and making our societies safe. This will demand immense sacrifices, and a steely determination to resist the temptation to compromise with the enemy. If we fail, we will be destroyed.

Tony Blair offered the House of Commons this version of the terrorist challenge after July's London bombings. He said, "We are united in our determination that our country will not be defeated by such terror but will defeat it and emerge from this horror with our values, our way of life, our tolerance and our respect for others undiminished."

The problem is, I do not think this is the way that governments really view the problem. Within Western governments, and in the wider circle of informed professional opinion, there is a broad consensus about the terrorism challenge, but it is very different from the public version.

Everyone who works on such issues in the Australian Government would agree that there is a very high risk that small but globally networked groups of Islamic extremists will, over coming years, repeatedly attempt to launch terrorist attacks in Australia and against Australians overseas. Some of those attempts will succeed, killing and injuring many people. This is therefore a major policy issue that demands urgent and sustained attention.

But I think few if any people in government seriously think that terrorism — even nuclear terrorism, appalling though that would be — poses a threat to the existence of our society, to our fundamental values or to our way of life. Few if any seriously think that terrorism poses anything like the dangers that the Cold War once did. No one thinks it is the biggest strategic challenge we face.

No one in Government believes that there is anything much we can do to stop terrorism — there will be no "victory". All we can do is reduce the risk by sustained, painstaking police work — backed by international co-operation, intelligence and border control.

Why is there such a divergence between public presentation and private conviction on such a critical issue? It's not just common or garden-variety political spin, because it afflicts oppositions as well as governments. I think the explanation lies in ourselves — in the curiously potent popular politics of terrorism since 9/11. Politicians (and commentators for that matter) talk about terrorism in what we might call heroic terms because that is how we as publics want them to talk about it.

Since 9/11, terrorism has become the most potent political phenomenon in living memory. The political benefits to leaders who satisfy the public demand for the heroic account of terrorism have been immense. None has been willing to risk getting on the wrong side of this juggernaut by offering an alternative account.

Interestingly enough, George Bush seems to have come closest to trying. Until last month his officials were working on a redefinition of the "war on terror". It seemed that phrase was going to be replaced by cloyingly acronymic Strategy Against Violent Extremism, and emphasis moved from military and coercive to diplomatic and persuasive approaches. But then, it seemed, Bush changed his mind. The politics of being seen to retreat from the war on terror, in which so much has been invested, in Iraq and elsewhere, were just too risky to be contemplated.

But it need not be this way. Consider, for example, the British response to the long, hard years of IRA terrorism in the UK. By patiently explaining their real thinking, British leaders persuaded the electorate that the bombings, brutal though they were, could be and should be endured, even when they took the lives of politicians themselves. Their laconic fortitude is a world away from the wordy heroics of their successors.

And their frankness laid the foundation for an effective policy response. The problem with today's misleadingly heroic account of terrorism is that it forces our leaders into bad policy responses. The invasion of Iraq is perhaps one example. Another is the debate about tougher limits on freedom of speech.

I doubt if anyone in Government seriously believes, on the basis of a robust public policy argument, that the kinds of measures being debated now would significantly cut the risk of terrorist attacks in Australia. I certainly have not seen anyone try to mount such an argument. But the heroic account of terrorism demands the appearance of firm action, and inclines us to see the struggle in ideological terms. In an ideological struggle, such measures might seem to make sense.

We are left to wonder, of course, why September 11 has created such a strong and enduring public demand for the kind of millennial interpretation of the problem of terrorism that has become so deeply entrenched in our political life. In the first shock of the attacks, such responses were understandable enough. But why have they lasted so long? Why have we not long ago started to expect serious, reasonable properly argued policy responses to a serious and enduring problem? I fear the answer may not be flattering to any of us.

Hugh White is a visiting fellow at the Lowy Institute and professor of strategic studies at ANU.