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# The Mass Media, Crime, and Terrorism

David L. Altheide\*

## **Abstract**

*The mass media play a large role in the public perception and acceptance of criminal behavior by the United States of America (USA). Public acceptance of illegal actions by the United States government in the Iraq War, as well as steps taken to combat terrorism, have been influenced by entertainment media content and media logic about crime and fear. The focus of the paper is on the cultural and mass communication contexts that have promoted fear of crime, on the one hand, while also justifying illegal state actions to combat crime — and now terrorism — on the other hand. Propaganda and news management (e.g., the military-media complex and the failure of journalism) contribute to a discourse of fear and symbolic negation of the “other” — as criminal or terrorist — and, in the process, valorize criminal conduct as necessary and heroic.*

## **1. Introduction**

This essay examines how the United States of America (USA) came to violate international law and flaunt brute power, yet have these blatant transgressions accepted by its own citizens, as well as select allies throughout the world. The crisis of our age is about symbolic representations that lead good people to do ‘dirty work’, believe lies, and support unlawful actions that kill thousands of people. My general argument is that this is all a feature of the politics of fear, or decision-makers’ promotion and use of audience beliefs and assumptions about danger, risk and fear in order to achieve certain goals.<sup>1</sup> The problem, in my view, is not the self-righteous power-brokers, who lust for power as a feature of a distorted leadership identity; they have always been with us, and more are lined up to replace the gruesome placeholders. My assumption is that under certain

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\* David L. Altheide is a Regents’ Professor in the School of Justice and Social Inquiry at Arizona State University, where he has taught for 32 years. A sociologist (PhD, University of California, San Diego), who uses qualitative methods, his work has focused on the role of mass media and information technology for social control. His theoretical and methodological statements on the relevance of the mass media for sociological analysis include An Ecology of Communication: Cultural Formats of Control (Aldine de Gruyter, 1995) and Qualitative Media Analysis (Sage, 1996). Another recent book, Creating Fear: News and the Construction of Crisis (Aldine de Gruyter, 2002), focuses on the news media’s constructions of a discourse of fear and the social consequences of this. This book received the 2004 Cooley Award, as the best book for the year in the tradition of symbolic interaction, from the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction. Dr. Altheide also won this award in 1986 for his book, Media Power.

<sup>1</sup> D.L. Altheide, *Terrorism and the Politics of Fear* (Lanham, MD: Alta Mira Press, 2006).

circumstances political power wielders will go as far as they can until established institutional checks halt the transgressions, and/or an outraged citizenry utilizes mass protest or other action to stop the violations. Neither has occurred with any regularity in the United States since the 2001 attacks when the Bush regime enacted a plan that was originally hatched in 1992 by power brokers, who would eventually serve in the Bush administration. The thrust of this plan — the Project for the New American Century (PNAC) — was for the United States to become a hegemonic state and establish an American Empire, an effort that has been shown to be the foundation for the bombing of Iraq and other global incursions by the United States.<sup>2</sup> However, this plan and related documents received very little news coverage, until after the invasion of Iraq. I argue in this paper that government (state) crime goes unchecked when justificatory claims are offered — and accepted — that it is necessary to fight a worse evil, such as crime or terrorism.

The paucity of attention to the PNAC is an example of the general problem of international state crime, which is the institutional failure of journalism and other organizations charged (at least in the United States) with exposing, checking, and calling leaders to account for their actions. Much of the blame rests on the failure of American journalism to fulfill its task, but, like all sociological developments, even this failure is contextualized by a long history of ‘fighting crime’, and doing ‘whatever it takes’ — including usurping civil liberties and violating the law — in order to maintain order and protect it’s citizens. While I wish to place much of the ‘blame’ on the failure of journalism in the United States, this too, must be placed in the context of an expanding media logic that has produced our current media culture. In a broad sense, media culture refers to the character of such institutions as religion, politics, or sports that develops through the use of media logic, which is defined as a form of communication, and the process through which media transmit and communicate information. Elements of this form include the distinctive features of each medium, and the formats used by these media for the organization, the style in which it is presented, the focus or emphasis on

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<sup>2</sup> D. Armstrong, ‘Dick Cheney’s Song of America: Drafting a Plan for Global Dominance’, in *Harper’s Magazine* (October 2002) 76-83; D.L. Altheide, J.N. Grimes, ‘War Programming: the Propaganda Project and the Iraq War’, in 46 *The Sociological Quarterly* (2005) 617-643.

particular characteristics of behavior, and the grammar of media communication.<sup>3</sup> This logic or the rationale, emphasis, and orientation promoted by media production, processes, and messages—tends to be evocative, encapsulated, highly thematic, familiar to audiences, and easy to use. Specifically, when media logic is employed to present and interpret institutional phenomena, the form and content of those institutions are altered. I am suggesting, then, that at least part of our current situation of international lawlessness can be attributed to a pervasive media logic that was quite consistent with entertaining programming about crime and fear, which in turn merged very easily with simplistic scenarios about international bandits, criminals, and evil ones, who threatened us all, and should be dealt with harshly and by whatever methods were necessary to protect us from this source of fear. But this all must be put in context.

## **2. The Making of the Public Perceptions about Crime and War**

Perhaps a quick review of recent US actions with terrorism will help illustrate the problem before I discuss the context of crime fighting that preceded the much-celebrated ‘war on terror’. I suggest that the lack of outrage by US citizens about their government’s heinous treatment of citizens in other countries is partly due to the symbolic linkage with crime, criminals, and prison inmates in the United States.<sup>4</sup> This scholarly narrative includes cogent analysis of how public support for rehabilitation and treatment programs in prisons has all but vanished.<sup>5</sup> Numerous studies show that, on the one hand, ‘suspects’ and prison inmates often are treated brutally by state agents, while on the other hand, mass media audiences receive very little valid information about the courts or prison systems in the United States.<sup>6</sup> The United States has blatantly violated laws, engaged in the murder of tens of thousands of people, and compromised the

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<sup>3</sup> D.L. Altheide, R.P. Snow, *Media Logic* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1979); R.P. Snow, *Creating Media Culture* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> J. Irwin, *Scenes* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1977); Id., *Prisons in Turmoil* (Boston: Little Brown, 1980), Id., *The Jail: Managing the Underclass in American Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Id., *The Felon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). See also G.M. Sykes, *The Society of Captives: a Study of Maximum Security Prison* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1958).

<sup>5</sup> G. Cavender, ‘Media and Crime Policy: A Reconsideration of David Garland’s The Culture of Control’, in *Punishment and Society* (2004) 335-348.

<sup>6</sup> R. Surette, *Media, Crime and Criminal Justice: Images and Realities* (Belmont, CA: West/Wadsworth, 1998).

sovereignty of numerous countries, which have not ‘officially’ been invaded. I refer to not only the Iraq War, but also the torture and mistreatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and other prisons in Iraq,<sup>7</sup> bombing Pakistan (January, 2006) in a failed attempt to kill an al Qaeda suspect, but actually killed a reported 18 civilians, and kidnapping citizens from foreign nations, e.g., Italy.

Public perceptions about crime and war are very much informed by propaganda and news reports about relevant acts, and particularly how the injured parties are framed and presented—whether as injured human beings or as sub-human ‘animals’ or ‘the other’, who deserve their fate. The discourse and language used is very important in this regard. For example, a preliminary analysis by a graduate seminar<sup>8</sup> of a sample of news reports about the Pakistan bombing suggests that the US accounts<sup>9</sup> tended to be justifications for the attack, rather than excuses, or suggesting that mistakes were made. Mainly military sources are used in the reports. Faulty ‘intelligence’ is blamed for killing civilians in this ‘well planned’ attack, yet the ‘compound’ that was attacked by the missile-firing drone was claimed to be an area sympathetic to al Qaeda; the US came up ‘empty-handed’ and ‘missed the mark’ and this could have ‘political consequences’. Thus, things went wrong, and that was why the ‘wrong people were killed’, but as a counter terror official stated, ‘you’ve got to take that shot’.<sup>10</sup> This coverage was quite different from some foreign reports, particularly an editorial that appeared in the *Pakistan Observer* on 15 January:

What makes the latest gory incident more abhorrent is that at least 18 Pakistani citizens, including eight women and five innocent children, were torn into pieces by the deadly missiles. This is nothing but sheer terrorism. As per US version, some foreign elements, especially Ayman al-Zawahiri, were the real target of the aggression. However, even if there were some foreign figures, the saner approach would have been to pass on the information to Pakistani authorities to carry out necessary operation against them.

We could not find one US source that referred to the firing of 10 missiles as ‘terrorism’.

Regarding the kidnappings of foreigners, in June 2005 Italian prosecutors in Milan issued arrest warrants for 13 CIA agents (expanded to 22 in December 2005) who, under

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<sup>7</sup> A. Higgins, ‘Red Cross Report Reveals Abuse Widespread’, *The Daily Texan*, 11 May 2004, on line at [www.dailytexanonline.com/media/paper410/news/2004/05/11/WorldNation/Red-Cross.Report.Reveals.Abuse.Widespread-680390.shtml](http://www.dailytexanonline.com/media/paper410/news/2004/05/11/WorldNation/Red-Cross.Report.Reveals.Abuse.Widespread-680390.shtml) (visited on 22 March 2006).

<sup>8</sup> JUS 588—Justice and the Mass Media, Spring, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> M. Scott and M.L. Stanford, ‘Accounts’, in *33 American Sociological Review* (1968) 46-62.

<sup>10</sup> *Newsweek*, 23 January 2006, at 6.

the policy of ‘rendition’, kidnapped a religious leader from the streets of Milan in 2003 and took him to Egypt where he was reportedly tortured, released, and then recaptured. The conspiracy and plans directed by the CIA were easily confirmed when cell phone calls were traced to US agency offices in Langley (McClellan), VA and elsewhere. The ‘cell’ trail was so obvious that further analysis may suggest that the conspirators wanted to be tracked to the CIA:

In the papers, [Italian] Judge Nobili wrote that she was persuaded of the Americans' involvement in part because of evidence that their cellphones were “all interacting with one another” at the time and scene of the abduction. ...the American agents used their Italian cellphones at the precise moment Mr. Nasr was abducted; they kept the phones switched on for hours at a time, making it easier to track their movements; and they dialed many phone numbers in the United States, most of them in northern Virginia, including at least one number at agency headquarters. The police said they were able to retrace nearly every step the American operatives made during the nine days they were in Milan for the operation. They identified the suspects by examining all cellphones in use near the abduction, and then tracing the web of calls placed. Investigators said they were able to trace several calls by Americans on the road from Milan to Aviano, the joint American-Italian air base north of Venice.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the clear-cut violations of international law, the Berlusconi government has not sanctioned the case. According to one report:

Berlusconi said this week that although he did not believe the CIA had kidnapped Abu Omar, he thought such an operation was completely justifiable. ‘You can’t tackle terrorism with a law book in your hand’, Berlusconi said. ‘If they fight with a sword, you have to defend yourself with a sword.... When hundreds of thousands of lives are at risk, countries have to use the secret methods and arms available to them to defend those lives’.

Berlusconi was speaking to a group of foreign journalists that did not include representatives of U.S. newspapers. He said he did not think there was ‘any basis in the [Milan] case’.<sup>12</sup>

countries have to use the secret methods and arms available to them to defend those lives’, is consistent with the US reaction to the attacks of 9/11, but most importantly for this essay, this was also consistent with a long agenda about fighting crime. These efforts enabled governments for several decades to foster fear

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<sup>11</sup> S. Grey, D. Van Natta, ‘Thirteen With the C.I.A. Sought by Italy in a Kidnapping’, *The New York Times*, on line at [www.nytimes.com/2005/06/25/international/europe/25milan.html?th&emc=th](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/25/international/europe/25milan.html?th&emc=th) (visited on 22 March 2006); T. Wilkinson, ‘Court Widens Net for 22 CIA Agents to EU; Italian Prosecutors Seek To Try the Operatives in the 2003 Abduction of an Imam on a Milan Street. The Warrants Expand the Hunt to 25 Nations’, *The Los Angeles Times*, 24 December 2005, at 3.

<sup>12</sup> Wilkinson, *supra* note 11.

as in ‘fear of crime’, but more importantly, promote a discourse of fear, which may be defined as the pervasive communication, symbolic awareness, and expectation that danger and risk are a central feature of everyday life. Despite a declining crime rate for more than two decades, the fear narrative — mixed with crime-control and more recently, terrorism control — is responsible for the massive incarceration movement in the United States, which has more than 2 million Americans behind bars, and an additional 4 million persons under some kind of state control (e.g., probation, home arrest, etc.).

### **A. Promoting Fear via the Mass Media**

Much of this fear has been produced by a popular culture with an insatiable appetite for more audiences (e.g., ‘clients’). The diet, of course, is entertainment, with a large dose of fear. Aside from occasional snacks of military incursions, natural disasters, and sports and political spectacles<sup>13</sup> (e.g., Superbowls, Princess Di’s and President Reagan’s funerals), audiences have been served super-sized portions of crime and crime fighting. This has contributed to a massive fear of crime, but also of almost any outsider group or ‘other’, including immigrants, people with diseases, and many types of troubled children.

Much of this discourse of fear has been fueled by formal agents of social control (FASC), who serve, on the one hand, as ‘news sources’ for daily newspaper and TV reports, while on the other hand, are promoted as the saviors, protectors, and eradicators of the sources of fear. Thus, entertainment, fear, and social control have helped join the interests and narrative of popular culture with an expansive social control industry.

A host of ‘reality TV’ programs promotes crime and crime control, largely because they are very inexpensive to produce, while providing the fear related content spawned by entertainment logic.<sup>14</sup>

What is the world portrayed on the cop shows? Popular studies professors have occasionally undertaken the onerous task of watching hours of television in order to assess the portrayal of law enforcement. They have consistently found that, apart from a brief period in the late 1960s and early 1970s in which police (along with other government officials) were often portrayed as corrupt or inept, police work tends to be portrayed in the most heroic terms. The researchers have found that the constitutional rights of suspects are very rarely observed, and indeed, that unilateral, blatantly unconstitutional police behavior is glorified. Constitutional rights are

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<sup>13</sup> D. Kellner, ‘Media Propaganda and Spectacle in the War on Iraq: a Critique of U.S. Broadcasting Networks’, 4 *Cultural Studies & Critical Methodologies* (2004) 329-338.

<sup>14</sup> M. Fishman, G. Cavander, *Entertaining Crime: Television Reality Programs* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1998).

painted as bureaucratic technicalities that hinder the police from getting the bad guy. The bad guy is usually painted as deserving whatever he gets. Miraculously, the police misconduct never seems to harm the innocent.<sup>15</sup>

The audiences are the beneficiaries of this help, the victims of the criminal forces, as well as the voters, who continue to support and elect politicians and agents, who represent organizations, tactics, and very importantly, narratives of control. Their work and worldviews, with exceptions, are constantly supported, funded, and sanctioned even at the expense of violations of civil liberties, police homicide, and massive misfeasance, malfeasance, and nonfeasance.<sup>16</sup>

Following decades of treating criminals (e.g., drug dealers, street criminals, child-molesters, mentally ill and homeless people, etc.) as the ‘other’, or sub-human outsiders, audiences-as-voters became accustomed to the usurpation of law by agents of social control. Citizens were well socialized into letting the protectors have their way with the body politic. After all, TV and movie heroes, (e.g., Clint Eastwood’s ‘Dirty Harry’) tended to be roguish individuals, acting alone and with moral outrage against evil.<sup>17</sup> Many of the modern morality plays were practiced, produced, and polished for audience effect; the aim was entertainment, but the result was often confusing fiction with reality. After all, many TV characters and movie stars became spokespersons for various occupations and professions (e.g., police--Jack Webb and ‘Dragnet’, journalists—Ed Asner). Then there were the 9/11 attacks. Politicians marshaled critical symbols and icons joining terrorism with Iraq, the Muslim faith, and a vast number of non-Western nations to strategically promote fear and use of audience beliefs and assumptions about danger, risk and fear in order to achieve certain goals, including expanding domestic social control. But the mass media helped.

The mass media promotes terrorism by stressing fear and an uncertain future. Major changes in US foreign and domestic policy essentially went unreported and unchallenged

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<sup>15</sup> S. Bandes, J. Beerman, ‘Lawyering Up’, in *Green Bag* 2, available on line at [tarlton.law.utexas.edu/lpop/etext/bandes.htm#7](http://tarlton.law.utexas.edu/lpop/etext/bandes.htm#7) (visited on 17 March 2006).

<sup>16</sup> J.D. Douglas, J.M. Johnson, *Official Deviance: Readings in Malfeasance, Misfeasance, and Other Forms of Corruption* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1977); J.D. Black, *The Manners and Customs of the Police* (New York: Academic Press, 1980); D.D. Perlmutter, *Policing the Media: Street Cops and Public Perceptions of Law Enforcement* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications: 2000); P.K. Manning, *Policing Contingencies* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> Surette, *supra* note 6.



by the dominant news organizations. Notwithstanding the long relationship in the United States between fear and crime, the role of the mass media in promoting fear has become more pronounced since the United States ‘discovered’ international terrorism on 11 September 2001. Political decision-makers quickly adjusted propaganda passages, prepared as part of the PNAC, to emphasize domestic support for the new US role in leading the world.<sup>18</sup>

### **B. The Hidden Symbolism of Propaganda**

Propaganda of any event is tied to the historical and social context as well as basic structural arrangements. Propaganda thus reveals certain symbolic foundations for meaning and identity in social life. Crisis provides opportunities for heads of state to present themselves as leaders and to dramatically define the situation as tragic, but hopeful and to bring out the ‘resolve’ of national character. Symbolic interaction theory suggests that identity and meaning are socially constructed by applying familiar experiences and routines to specific situations.<sup>19</sup> Thus, continuity and novelty are linked in meaningful ways. The great theorist Hans Gerth, who was familiar with the brilliant Nazi propaganda efforts in World War II, discussed the context of national conflicts and propaganda during the ‘cold war’ in the 1950s:

Loyalty to a national state is implemented by means of public educational systems. . . Since the territory dominated by the nation is typically larger than that dominated by, say, the blood or religion, modern nationalism has had to rely more on mass education and propaganda.<sup>20</sup>

In noting that leadership is challenged and demonstrated by joining the power of large organizations with occupational, professional, religious and club associations, Gerth stressed that ‘[i]n order to avoid unexpected and unwanted results, social and political administrations require a deep and extensive understanding of the total equilibrium of the

<sup>18</sup> Altheide and Grimes, *supra* note 2.

<sup>19</sup> R.S. Perinbanayagam, ‘The Definition of the Situation: An Analysis of the Ethnomethodological and Dramaturgical View’, in 14 *Sociological Quarterly* (1974) 521-541; K. Cerulo et al., ‘Technological Ties That Bind: Media Generated Primary Groups’, in 19 *Communication Research* (1992) 109-129; K. Cerulo, ‘Identity Construction: New Issues, New Directions’, in 23 *Annual Review of Sociology* (1997:) 385-409; D. Altheide, ‘Identity and the Definition of the Situation in a Mass Mediated Context’, in 23 *Symbolic Interaction* (2000) 1-27; J.A. Holstein, G.F. Gubrium, *The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> H. Gerth, ‘Crisis Management of Social Structures: Planning, Propaganda and Societal Morale’, in 5 *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* (1992), at 338.

given social structure.’<sup>21</sup> In the final analysis, Gerth<sup>22</sup> emphasized that ‘[p]ropaganda, however, can be fully understood only if we recognize its most significant purpose, namely, to define the level of reality on which people think, discuss, and act.’

Like many analyses of propaganda, Gerth’s experience with World War II was tied to propaganda as representation, as media content that was distinctive from non-propaganda and other realms of everyday life. But communication formats that link experience with meaning are part of everyday life. As McDonald<sup>23</sup> provocatively notes:

Formats are complex and multidimensional. They include a constellation of people, activities, and the implements important to them, as well as the kinds of discourses and relations that result. . . . The formats of technology and power are intimately connected because formats structure social fields of behavior--the possibilities for human perception and relationships. These techno-formats blur and redefine the boundaries between public and private self in the learning process.

The reality of a social order grounded in media logic<sup>24</sup> is constituted by shared understanding of communication formats and symbolic meanings conveyed increasingly by visual media that blur the lines between fantasy, news and reality:

A mimetic war is a battle of imitation and representation, in which the relationship of who we are and who they are is played out along a wide spectrum of familiarity and friendliness, indifference and tolerance, estrangement and hostility. It can result in appreciation or denigration, accommodation or separation, assimilation or extermination. It draws physical boundaries between peoples, as well as metaphysical boundaries between life and the most radical other of life, death. It separates human from god. It builds the fence that makes good neighbors; it builds the wall that confines a whole people. And it sanctions just about every kind of violence.<sup>25</sup>

The importance of media formats in the communication process is apparent in the rise of the military-media complex that followed the decline of the Soviet Union and played a major role in the emergence of nationalism.<sup>26</sup> It was not until the 1960s that TV surpassed print media as a cultural force. The military-media complex is a feature of programming in an entertainment era dominated by popular culture and communication forms that

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, at 342.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, at 347.

<sup>23</sup> J.H. McDonald, ‘Te(k)nowledge: Technology, Education, and the New Student Subject’, in 4 *Science as Culture* (1994) 537-564.

<sup>24</sup> Altheide and Snow, *supra* note 3; D.L. Altheide, *An Ecology of Communication: Cultural Formats of Control* (Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter, 1995).

<sup>25</sup> J. Der Derian, ‘The War of Networks’, 5 *Theory and Event* (2002), on line at [muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory\\_and\\_event/v005/5.4derderian.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v005/5.4derderian.html) (visited on 17 March 2006).

<sup>26</sup> D.L. Altheide, ‘The Military-Media Complex’, in 13 *Newsletter of the Sociology of Culture* (1999) 1 ff.

share sophisticated information technology promoting visual media and evocative content. Der Derian<sup>27</sup> noted that ‘the first and most likely the last battles of the counter/terror war are going to be waged on global networks that reach much more widely and deeply into our everyday lives’, but this development turned on shared media logic between nightly newscasts and military planners. With an expanding revenue base, the emergence of the concept as well as actual ‘target audiences’, and sophisticated marketing techniques, the mass media, and especially television, flexed its technology and discovered that not only did visuals sell products, but they also conveyed powerful messages about social issues, e.g., Civil Rights, that could sell products. A flood of information technology — from CDs to cable to VCRs to the internet — produced a popular culture inspired by entertainment forms and the visual image. These technological and organizational changes influenced the renewed convergence of military and the mass media.

The symbolic boundaries drawn by decades of war coverage with ‘Middle Eastern’<sup>28</sup> foes were reconfigured as the crashing towers of the World Trade Center. The background work had been done by the military-media complex that produced the Gulf War.<sup>29</sup> Coalition formation, ‘surgical strikes’ and bomb-site videos were seen in briefings, news reports, movies and commercials.

The communal reaction involved drawing on national experiences of fear, consumption, and the role of national leadership in molding a response that would also constitute and justify future actions and relationships between nations, state control and citizens.<sup>30</sup> As Shapiro noted:

[T]he Euro-American approach to war and peace sees sovereignty as an expansive, cooperative venture. Cooperation is no longer constituted as merely an alliance against a common threat; it is enacted as a continuing preparation for engagement with what are regarded as disruptive modes of violence (threats to “peace”) within sovereign territories. The new venture requires, in the words of one analyst, whose observation fits the current

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<sup>27</sup> Der Derian, *supra* note 25.

<sup>28</sup> W.C. Adams, *Television coverage of the Middle East* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Pub. Corp., 1981); Id., *Television Coverage of International Affairs* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Pub. Co., 1982).

<sup>29</sup> D.L. Altheide, ‘Postjournalism: Journalism Is Dead, Long Live Journalism’, in Meryl and Nicholas Hewitt (eds), *Controlling Broadcasting: Access Policy and Practice in North America and Europe* (Aldridge, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994) 134-170; D. Kellner, *The Persian Gulf TV War*, Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1992; C. Gattone, ‘Media and Politics in the Information Age’, in 10 *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* (1996) 193-202.

<sup>30</sup> Kellner, *supra* note 13.

attack on Afghanistan, “a coalition of war and humanitarianism”, where politics is deployed in the form of humanitarian war.<sup>31</sup>

While the military-media complex familiarized audiences with coalitions against evil, the collective response to the terror attacks was framed as a communal patriotic experience that provided opportunities to ‘come together’ and be ‘united’. Numerous messages also appealed to a nostalgic past about US moral and military dominance, authentic life styles, traditional values, (e.g., family, respect), as well as institutions of social control (e.g., police, fire departments, and military). A big part of this history, as noted above, was fear of crime.

A history of numerous ‘crises’ and fears involving crime, violence, and uncertainty was important for public definitions of the situation after 9/11. A major source of insecurity was a pervasive fear that was promoted in news reports, popular culture, and politicians’ mantras about the ‘cure’ for what ails America.<sup>32</sup>

The attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001 were defined in the news media and popular culture as an assault on American culture. News media and popular culture depictions of the US reaction to terror attacks reflects a culture and collective identities steeped in marketing, popular culture, consumerism, and fear. Within a few years this attacks would be used over and over again to justify the CIA’s kidnapping people throughout the world as part of the ‘extreme rendition’ program, detaining American citizens without charge, prisoner abuse, and illegal surveillance activities of American citizens. Moreover, virtually anyone who challenged such activities would be hit with a salvo of rhetorical charges ranging from ‘siding with the enemy’, to ‘Democratic (party) politicking’.

Elite news management and propaganda by the military-media complex produced terrorism scenarios that reflected in national agendas and everyday life. On the one hand, mass media symbolic constructions of victims and terrorism contributed to a ‘national experience’ oriented to communal values and reaffirmation of cultural narratives. Citizens were asked to give, buy, and support. On the other hand, these powerful

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<sup>31</sup> M.J. Shapiro, ‘Wanted, Dead or Alive’, in *5 Theory and Event* (2002), on line at [muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory\\_and\\_event/v005/shapiro.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v005/shapiro.html) (visited on 17 March 2006).

<sup>32</sup> M.J. Shapiro, *Reading the Postmodern Polity: Political Theory as Textual Practice* (Minneapolis, MN: Un. of Minnesota Press, 1992).

symbolic definitions supported open-ended commensurate increases in military and police authority, while expanding governmental surveillance and diminishing civil liberties. Opinion polls indicated that American citizens accepted reduced civil liberties because the ‘world has changed’. It is as though ‘pre 9/11’ civil liberties were there to protect citizens, but ‘post 9/11’ civil liberties could endanger citizens. Indeed, political bluster about engaging in ‘first strikes’ against sovereign countries suggests that ‘risk policing’ will be proactive.<sup>33</sup>

While research shows that the news media’s use of the word ‘terrorism’ drastically increased after 9/11, the use of this term is tied to a long-standing linkage of fear and victimization with crime and insecurity.<sup>34</sup> As it was suggested,<sup>35</sup> terrorism is constructed as an indication that law alone is not enough to provide security.

The law is being replaced by other steering mechanisms. Force is being implemented according to a new model. Interventions are taking place against undesirable behaviours that do not constitute crimes and on the basis of a different objective than ensuring that people act in accordance with the law. The security mentality has ruptured the law; or, more correctly, the law has been undermined from two directions, from above and below. It may seem absurd that a single area of policy should cover everything from truancy and drug sales to acts of terror.<sup>36</sup>

### 3. News and the Discourse of Fear

The common thread for most scholarly and popular analysis of fear in American society is crime and victimization. Social constructionist approaches to the study of social problems and emergent social movements stress how mass media accounts of crime, violence, and victimization are simplistic and often de-contextualize rather complex events in order to reflect narratives that demonize and offer simplistic explanations<sup>37</sup> that often involve state intervention, while adding to the growing list of victims.

The discourse of fear has been constructed through news and popular culture accounts. The main focus of the discourse of fear in the United States for the last thirty years or so

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<sup>33</sup> R.V. Ericson, K.D. Haggerty, *Policing the Risk Society* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

<sup>34</sup> D.L. Altheide, ‘Mass Media, Crime and the Discourse of Fear’, in Gabrio Forti and Marta Bertolino (eds), *La Televisione del Crimine* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2005) 287-306.

<sup>35</sup> M. Hornqvist, ‘The Birth of Public Order Policy’, in 46 *Race and Class* (2004) 30-52.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, at 37.

<sup>37</sup> R.V. Ericson et al., *Representing Order: Crime, Law and Justice in the News Media* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991); J. Best (ed.), *Images of Issues* (Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter, 1995); Id., *Random Violence: How We Talk about New Crimes and New Victims* (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 1999); Fishman and Cavender, *supra* note 14.

has been crime. News reports about crime and fear have contributed to the approach taken by many social scientists in studying how crime is linked with fear. Numerous researchers link crime, the mass media, and fear.<sup>38</sup> There is also an impressive literature on crime, victimization, and fear.<sup>39</sup> Other researchers have examined the nature and consequences of fear in connection with crime, but also in relationship to political symbols and theories of social control.<sup>40</sup>

Crime and terrorism discourses are artfully produced. The most pervasive aspect of this ‘victim’ perspective is crime. Giroux argues that a sense of urgency prevails such that time itself is speeded up, in what he refers to as ‘emergency time’:

Emergency time defines community against its democratic possibilities, detaching it from those conditions that prepare citizens to deliberate collectively about the future and the role they must play in creating and shaping it.<sup>41</sup>

Criminal victimization, including numerous crime myths (e.g., predators, stranger-danger, random violence, etc.)<sup>42</sup> contributed to the cultural foundation of the politics of fear, particularly the belief that we were all actual or potential victims and needed to be protected from the source of fear—criminals or terrorists.<sup>43</sup> Politicians and state control

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<sup>38</sup>G. Pearson, *Hooligan: a History of Respectable Fears* (London: Macmillan, 1993); R.V. Ericson (ed.), *Crime and the Media* (Brookfield, VT: Dartmouth University Press, 1995); K.F. Ferraro, *Fear of Crime: Interpreting Victimization Risk* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995); C.A. Garland, *The Context of Fear as an Indication of Healthy Community Investment: 80 Low-Income Neighborhoods in Los Angeles* (University of California, Irvine, 1997); T. Chiricos et al., ‘Crime, News and Fear of Crime: Toward an Identification of Audience Effects’, in 44 *Social Problems* (1997) 342-357; P. Shirlow, R. Pain, ‘The Geographies and Politics of Fear’, in 80 *Capital and Class* (2003) 15-26.

<sup>39</sup> J. Baer, J.W. Chambliss, ‘Generating Fear: The Politics of Crime Reporting’, in 27 *Crime, Law and Social Change* (1997) 87-107; M. Warr, ‘Dangerous Situations: Social Context and Fear of Victimization’, in 68 *Social Forces* (1990) 891-907; Id., ‘Altruistic Fear of Victimization in Households’, in 73 *Social Science Quarterly* (1992) 723-736; Ferraro, *supra* note 38; Chiricos et al., *supra* note 38.

<sup>40</sup> K. Moehle, E.E. Levitt, ‘The History of the Concepts of Fear and Anxiety’, in C.E. Walker (ed.), *Clinical Psychology: Historical and Research Foundations* (New York: Plenum Press, 1991)159-182; B. Massumi, *The Politics of Everyday Fear* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) F. Furedi, *Culture of Fear: Risk-taking and the Morality of Low Expectation* (London: Cassell, 1997); Garland, *supra* note 38; W.G. Naphy, P. Roberts, *Fear in Early Modern Society* (Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 1997); K.K. Russell, *The Color of Crime: Racial Hoaxes, White Fear, Black Protectionism, Police Harassment, and Other Macroaggressions*. (New York: New York University Press, 1998) B. Glassner, *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1999); D.L. Altheide, *Creating Fear: News and the Construction of Crisis* (Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter, 2002).

<sup>41</sup> H.A. Giroux, *The Abandoned Generation: Democracy Beyond the Culture of Fear* (New York; Houndmills, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) at 8.

<sup>42</sup> Best (1999), *supra* note 38.

<sup>43</sup> D. Garland, *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

agencies, working with news media as ‘news sources’, have done much to capitalize on this concern and to promote a sense of insecurity and reliance on formal agents of social control — and related businesses — to provide surveillance, protection, revenge and punishment to protect us, to save us.<sup>44</sup> Hornqvist suggests that a security perspective overrules mere law, especially as numerous instances of deviance and violations are perceived to be threatening social order.

First, the central factor is not what acts an individual may have committed, but rather which group an individual may belong to. Is he a drug addict? Is she an activist? Refugee? Muslim? Arab? . . . Second, according to security logic, it is not the behaviour itself that is of interest, but rather what this might be perceived as indicating: does it mean that the individual constitutes a risk? . . . Finally, an intervention against an individual or group need not be preceded by any court determination. Instead, a decision made by an individual civil servant is sufficient. The intervention constitutes an administrative measure based on a general assessment of risk, with the question of guilt being only one of many factors weighed in the decision.<sup>45</sup>

Fear, crime, terrorism, and victimization are experienced and known vicariously through the mass media by audience members. Information technology, entertainment programming and perspectives are incorporated into a media logic that is part of the everyday life of audience members.

News formats, or the way of selecting, organizing and presenting information, shape audience assumptions and preferences for certain kinds of information. The mass media are important in shaping public agendas by influencing what people think about, and how events and issues are packaged and presented. Certain news forms have been developed as packages or ‘frames’ for transforming some experience into reports that will be recognized and accepted by the audience as ‘news’. Previous research has shown how the ‘problem frame’ was encouraged by communication formats and in turn has promoted the use of ‘fear’ throughout American society.<sup>46</sup>

The major impact of the discourse of fear is to promote a sense of disorder and a belief that ‘things are out of control’. Ferraro<sup>47</sup> suggests that fear reproduces itself, or becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Social life can become more hostile when social actors define their situations as ‘fearful’ and engage in speech communities through the discourse of

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<sup>44</sup> Ericson, *supra* note 37 ; R. Surette, *Media, Crime, and Criminal Justice: Images and Realities* (Pacific Grove, Calif.: Brooks/Cole Pub. Co, 1992) ; Chiricos et al., *supra* note 38.

<sup>45</sup> Hornqvist, *supra* note 35, at 39.

<sup>46</sup> D.L. Altheide, ‘The News Media, The Problem Frame, and the Production of Fear’, in 38 *The Sociological Quarterly* (1997) 646-668.

<sup>47</sup> Ferraro, *supra* note 38.

fear. And people come to share an identity as competent ‘fear realists’ as family members, friends, neighbors and colleagues socially construct their effective environments with fear. Behavior becomes constrained, community activism may focus more on ‘block watch’ programs and quasi-vigilantism, and we continue to avoid ‘downtowns’, and many parts of our social world because of ‘what everyone knows’. In short, the discourse of fear incorporates crime reflexively; the agents, targets and character of fear are constituted through the processes that communicate fear.

Numerous public opinion polls indicated that audiences were influenced by news media reports about the attacks as well as the interpretations of the causes, the culprits, and ultimately, the support for various US military actions. For example, one study of the perceptions and knowledge of audiences, and their primary source of news found that gross misperceptions of key facts were related to support of the war with Iraq. Misperceptions were operationalized as stating that clear evidence was found linking Iraq to Al-Qaeda, that weapons of mass destruction had been found, and that world opinion favored the Iraq War. Many of these misperceptions were related to following news reports, particularly with the Fox news. The authors conclude:

From the perspective of democratic process, the findings of this study are cause for concern . . . What is worrisome is that it appears that the President has the capacity to lead members of the public to assume false beliefs in support of his position . . . In the case of the Iraq War, among those who did not hold false beliefs, only a small minority supported the decision to go to war. . . It also appears that the media cannot necessarily be counted on to play the critical role of doggedly challenging the administration.<sup>48</sup>

The discourse of fear now includes terrorism as well as victimization and crime. Terrorism and fear have been joined through victimization. Crime established a solid baseline in its association with fear, and it continues to grow, but it is terrorism that now occupies the most news space. The primary reason for this, as noted above in the discussion of news sources, is that government officials dominate the sources relied on by journalists. When journalists rely heavily on government and military officials to not only discuss an immediate war or military campaign, but also for information about the security of the country, rationale for more surveillance of citizens, and comments about related domestic and international issues, then the body politic is symbolically cultivated

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<sup>48</sup> S. Kull et al., ‘Misperceptions, the Media, and the Iraq War’, in 118 *Political Science Quarterly* (2002) 569-598, at 596-597.



to plant more reports and symbols about the politics of fear. This is particularly true during periods of war, such as the ongoing war with Iraq. Messages that the war on terrorism, the importance of homeland security, including periodic elevated 'terror alerts' will not end soon, lead journalists to turn to administration news sources for information about the most recent casualties, operations, reactions to counter-attacks, as well as the omnipresent reports about soldiers, who have perished and those who are still in peril. In this sense, news updates from authoritative sources quickly merge with orchestrated propaganda efforts.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The politics of fear with a national or international justification is more symbolically compelling than 'mere crime in the streets', yet it draws on crime-control-fear practices.<sup>49</sup> The President of the United States has brazenly broken the law against unauthorized 'wire-tapping' of citizens in order to keep US citizens safe from terrorists. As I noted at the outset of this essay, it is not surprising that Mr. Bush or any other President might attempt such illegal behavior; rather, in my view, the issue is why so many people defend the actions, including congressional rulers, and according to public opinion polls, the majority of US citizens.

Control, safety and freedom increasingly are socially constructed by the mass media. Many logics, discourses, and practices that were initially associated with crime are now extended to terrorism. Fear is perceived as crime and terrorism, while police and military forces are symbolically joined as protectors. As we have seen with physical checks, drug tests, and expanded surveillance, control and surveillance techniques and logics travel from 'controlled populations', (e.g., prison inmates), to the 'rest of us', (e.g., public schools, employers).<sup>50</sup> Accompanying heightened terror alerts are routine frisks, intrusive surveillance, and the pervasive voyeuristic camera, scanning the environment for all suspicious activity. The practice of physically checking prison visitors has now been extended to airports and many public buildings. The key point about physical

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<sup>49</sup> D. Garland, *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

<sup>50</sup> M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

security, surveillance,<sup>51</sup> and body checking is to communicate the format of control to people as objects rather than subjects; they are objects to authorities, mere bodies that can be electronically surveilled, asked to disrobe, patted down, felt up, and unveiled like produce in a grocery store:

They seek to reduce individuals to objects rather than involving them as subjects. The element of direct, physical coercion is either open or poorly concealed and there is no further goal than that of either neutralising the threat or making it manageable.<sup>52</sup>

Crime control efforts have benefited from new legislation (e.g., the Patriot Act) and the interpretation of older crime-related guidelines. One example is two-decade-old legislation that permitted the state to hold ‘material witnesses’ without charge if they are believed to have information about other crimes being investigated.<sup>53</sup> Since 9/11, this law has been reinterpreted to be used against suspected terrorists, their accomplices, or for that matter, anyone who might have relevant information. Now opposed by congressmen across party lines, the law has been ‘stretched’ beyond its intent to be used, essentially, as a ‘preventive detention’ law, which is anathema to civil liberties in the United States, although several countries use it. While the Justice Department claims that only about 50 people have been detained — some for more than 30 days — little specific information was forthcoming. One man who was detained, Mr. Abdullah al Kidd, a former football player from the University of Idaho, was suspected and arrested because he purchased an airplane ticket to Saudi Arabia, where he was to pursue a doctorate in religious studies. His marriage and life fell apart when he was held without charge for 16 days in 3 states, and then placed on 14 months court supervision. The government later acknowledged that it had mistakenly claimed that the ticket was for ‘one way’ and not roundtrip.<sup>54</sup>

Mr. al Kidd’s experience is similar to millions of current and former prison inmates, whose identity has been reconstructed by state officials acting with the blessing of

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<sup>51</sup> W.G. Staples, *Everyday Surveillance: Vigilance and Visibility in Postmodern Life* (Lanham, Md., Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000).

<sup>52</sup> Hornqvist, *supra* note 35, at 41.

<sup>53</sup> A.Liptak, ‘New Scrutiny for Law on Detaining Witnesses’, *The New York Times*, available on line at [www.nytimes.com/2006/03/22/politics/22witness.html?th&emc=th](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/22/politics/22witness.html?th&emc=th) (visited on 22 March 2006).

<sup>54</sup> ‘I call it social assassination, really’, Mr. al Kidd said. ‘It’s just basically taken me out of a lot of opportunities and placed me into a small box. I’m not doing anything my heart actually desires’. . . a lawyer with the A.C.L.U.’s Immigrants’ Rights Project, which represents Mr. al Kidd, said his client’s case ‘crystallizes the question of whether we as a nation are going to allow preventive detention.’ [Another attorney noted] ‘The most confident prediction you can make. . . is that after the next attack, a preventive detention statute will be proposed. (*Ibidem*).

frightened citizens, who in turn are seeking protection from real and imagined criminals, terrorists, and any “other” that is part of the script being played out in a mass mediated production of the politics of fear.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Altheide, *supra* note 1.