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The Faces of Terrorism – “Double Edged Swords”

Double Edged Swords in the Global War on Terror

In his book, The Faces of Terrorism – Social and Psychological Dimensions, Neil J. Smelser identifies several “double edged swords” in the “terrorism complex.” In this assignment, I hope to thoroughly expound on what is exactly meant by the term, shall provide meaningful examples, and thoughtfully expand on the nature of these examples and how they affect the United States and the world in the Global War on Terror (GWOT).

First off, I must explain to the reader the exact meaning of the term “double edged sword.” Entomologically speaking, the term refers to the nature and purpose of the sword itself: it is designed to strike down one’s enemy in conflict. However with a double blade, not only can the steel cut your opponent, but you just as equally. Therefore, a “double edged sword” refers to anything that can be of advantage to you, while at the same moment be a disadvantage to you.

As the term applies to the Global War on Terror, I can provide a few examples, given verbatim as found in the assigned text.

“The advantage the United States enjoys from its overwhelming economic, technological, political, and cultural position in the world versus the counter productive effects of exploiting that advantage in intemperate ways.”

Today, America has evolved and has grown into a great superpower. We are a rich nation, both in terms of business and industry. We are a strong nation (I am not only speaking in terms of military might). We are one of the most *influential* nations in the world. Yet it must be remembered that we must *never* carry our influence, our strength, and our wealth too far and “bully” other nations into submitting to our will. To do so is not solely arrogant, but ignorant; it will convert our worldwide respect into international resentment. This balance of power is vital – enough force to ensure cooperation yet not enough force to serve as a recruiting tool for our enemies. This is a double edged sword.

“The country’s accumulated superiority in waging military attacks on enemies versus the evident limitations of this technology in relation to extremely decentralized and elusive terrorist organizations.”

There are several meanings and interpretations to this statement. At first thought, one would believe that being superior in terms of technology would mean superiority in battle, thus making complete victory a given. However, there are several downfalls to technology.

Our overreliance on technology can be our downfall – what if the mechanics fail? Without our superior advances, our forces would be in a sense blind and naked – a dangerous situation to be in when under enemy fire.

In addition, (as was related to in the book) technology can challenge our advances. Terrorists must rely on other (sometimes more sinister) methods to get the job done. Insurgents lack GPS guided munitions to strike their targets, therefore they must rely on roadside improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to strike out at our armed forces. They lack bases to command and launch offensives from (which are vulnerable to our technologically advanced air/ground strikes), so they rely on sniper nests in mosques (impossible to strike due to fear of religious Muslims lashing back) and mobile mortar attacks launched from automobile trunks. (Park your car, unload the mortar, set it up, fire a few rounds, pack it up, and leave the scene). Such attacks are difficult to respond to, and are exceptionally dangerous and disruptive. Even with our technology, these guerrilla tactics are damaging to our forces in terms of casualties, morale, and public and international opinion. It also raises the morale of the terrorists, and serves as a recruiting tool. This is a double edged sword.

“The evident importance of the play of public opinion and the media in a democratic society versus the role that they play in a sensationalist, win-or-lose approach to terrorism.”

The role of an unregulated press in a democracy was established as being essential at the founding of our current scheme of government and our Constitution. Under the Articles of Amendment, the Bill of Rights, you find in Article I, “Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press...” This inclusion is what separates the United States from many other nations in the world; our ability to express ourselves without fear of repression sets us apart.

And after all, free media in part sets the foundation for our system of government. It keeps the public well informed so that we may make wise choices when we participate in our democracy. Overall, the theory that an unfettered press is beneficial to our nation is a plausible one.

However, the media does have its downsides. For one, it provides publicity for terrorists whenever they strike; The sensational qualities of large buildings collapsing and

thousands dying, car bombs in public places bringing bloodshed to innocent victims, and images of public transit systems being attacked all attract attention; it is human nature to be fascinated by the grotesque. This attraction of the mass public drives the media to broadcast more of the scenes, spreading the terrorist message to hungry "rubbernecks" because it will boost ratings and advertising campaigns for their stations. In the end, the "right of the public to know" becomes a way to increase profits. In the end, it is the people who suffer.

They suffer because the terrorist propaganda is spread into every television and radio set, not to mention electronic and printed means of gaining information (online and kiosk periodicals for example). In addition, this can influence the public opinion in a negative way. As mentioned above, people are attracted to the obscene, therefore those who consume the media will be guaranteed to receive more pessimistic reports than they will positive. Remember my statement about the informed public participates in its government the best?

When the populace fails to receive balanced information, they are no longer "well informed." When the people are no longer knowledgeable about the events that shape their lives, they lose their ability to react to those events, namely wisely participating in government. The balance between the freedom of our press to inform us about the world and our government so that we may change the world and our government is precisely what builds this country, and is exactly what tears it down. This is a double edged sword.

"The advantages of the country's technological know-how in detecting and thwarting terrorists' activities at all stages of their operations versus combining these capabilities with the knowledge of the human and organizational aspects of defending against terrorism."

As for this final double-edged sword, it is very simple to explain, and I shall do so by example.

The September 11th's attacks led to major changes in airport security. It can be highly assured that the metal detectors will detect what they are intended to detect, and that X-Ray machines will see through your luggage. That is a given, they were built to do so, and their mechanics will not permit any other function. However, the people who run the metal detector and monitor the X-Ray machine are fully capable of falling into error.

To counteract this, one must train the TSA agents to be more experienced with the equipment, combining the human and mechanical aspects of airport security. These

must be combined, for what good is a machine without an operator, a car without a driver, a pen without a writer?

Yet even with the trained personnel, humans are humans, and it is human to err. This has the potential to counteract the advances in technology simply because people make mistakes. So we have another double-edged sword – science that has the ability to undo itself.

In closing, the Global War on Terror has many issues to be addressed. Many of our solutions may fix the situation in part, but not in whole due to the fact that sometimes the cure to our disease induces side effects of another; the sword we bludgeon our enemy to death draws our own blood in battle. There is no quick-fix to our tribulations.