U.S. DEFINITION OF TERRORIST STATES:

A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS AND CRITIQUE

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Paper prepared for delivery at the Forty-Sixth Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association, Panel on *Terrorism, Wars on Terror, and Democratic Process*, Honolulu, Hawaii, March 3, 2005.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine the origins and usages of the U.S. State Department's listing of "state sponsors of terrorism." From a political-language perspective, the listing is discussed as a form of measurement discourse based on categorization. The rhetorical uses of the listing have become pivotal as the U.S. has pursued its "war on terrorism." For domestic purposes, the listing spotlights the nation's most pressing foreign policy concern, creating a symbol that rallies political support but also focuses public anxieties. On the international

level, the listing assigns a negative identity that, along with economic sanctions and other penalties, is meant to isolate and pressure the designated states. The rhetoric associated with the listing has become increasingly harsh since its initiation, with the adoption of such terms as "outlaw nations," "renegade regimes," and President Bush's controversial metaphorical phrase, "axis of evil." Questions are raised as to the utility of this rhetorical strategy in regard to such issues as self-fulfilling prophecy, an imbalance between "sticks and carrots" in American foreign policy, and the possible estrangement of U.S. allies.

Each year the U.S. State Department announces a list of nations it has determined to be "state sponsors of terrorism." This activity began under a law passed in 1979 called the "Export Administration Act." The general purpose of that law was to set out the conditions for controls

over exported goods. In this context, the listing of terrorist states was viewed as a means of linking trade policy with action against the emerging problem of international terrorism. Over time, the terrorist state label has become associated with a number of serious consequences for the designated nations, beyond trade limitations with American companies. These include economic sanctions, denial of foreign aid, penalties under international law, and the threat of military intervention.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the origins and usages of this official listing of terrorist states as an instrument of American policy. Categorization is a critical conceptual act within the policy making process that involves the grouping together of supposedly like people, events, and nations, while separating them from those that are different. Inevitably, categorization is both a pragmatic and a rhetorical process that advances a set of arguments about observed behavior, influences the processing of information, and guides the direction of policy strategy. The State Department listing is viewed here as a certain type of measurement-based discourse. It is prime evidence for the

significance of political language and its diverse uses in defining problems, framing debate, creating political identities, and building consensus. Rather than the "cloudy vagueness" bemoaned by George Orwell (1946) in his writings on "politics and the English language," the discourse of categorization hinges on its seeming exactness, which discourages more complex analysis while distracting attention from the moral ambiguity of public acts of labeling and stigmatization.

In the first section of this paper, I will trace the evolution of the State Department's listing of state sponsors of terrorism, reviewing the formal criteria used in compiling the list as well as its multiple policy uses. Second, I will outline a political language framework and identify the state sponsors listing as a form of "measurement discourse" whose meanings are both explicit and implicit. Third, I will apply this framework in an analysis of the listing as a rhetorical device that violates standards of objective measurement and has been distorted by political perceptions and aims.

"State Sponsors of Terrorism":

Origins and Development of a Policy Construct

When George Bush gave his 2005 State of the Union address, he described Iran as "the world's primary state sponsor of terror, pursuing nuclear weapons while depriving its people of the freedom they seek and deserve." In regard to Syria, the president complained that it continued to harbor terrorists "who seek to destroy every chance of peace in the region." This passage echoed the 2002 State of the Union when Iran, Iraq, and North Korea were denounced collectively as "an axis of evil." These and similar comments by American officials spotlighting nations that support international terrorism are rooted in an official State Department analysis that has become a cornerstone of U.S. global strategy. Yet the official U.S. listing of state sponsors of terrorism did not begin as a high-profile foreign policy project. Instead, we find its origins in a piece of legislation not widely known to those outside the realm of commerce and trade.

The Export Administration Act of 1979 was a revision of trade legislation that dates back to 1940, the Export Control Act (*Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, 1979). When that original law was rewritten in 1949,

the Cold War dominated Americans' thinking on international affairs, and strong measures were adopted giving the president authority to bar or restrict exports to communist bloc nations. The 1979 Act confirmed the countertrend, first seen in Congressional action in 1969, toward easing the sale of items to communist countries, particularly for those goods freely available from Western Europe, Japan, and other sources. The bill was written in the Banking International Finance Subcommittee with a specific intention of reducing barriers to trade. Committee Chair Adlai E. Stevenson, III, an Illinois Democrat, feared that in being overly concerned with national security, the United States would "shoot itself in the foot" in the area of trade.

Yet even as the menace of communism was subsiding, another kind of threat was gaining strength on the international scene—terrorism. Indeed, the 1970s have been described as "the decade of air terrorism" (Garrison, 2003, p. 48). Considering both European and American airlines, more than 20 hijacking, bombing, and hostage-taking incidents took place. In addition, numerous kidnappings, bombings, and other violent terrorist attacks occurred on the soil of Japan, Austria, Uganda,

Ireland, Lebanon, and other nations (Kronenwetter, 2004). In November of 1979, Iranian students stormed the U.S. Embassy in Teheran taking 50 American hostages and holding them for more than a year. Perhaps most disturbing to American officials was the role that some national governments were choosing to play as supporters of terrorist groups inside other countries as a means of pursuing their foreign policy goals. This practice was not confined to the Middle East but it was this region, owing to the Arab-Israeli conflict and the rise of Islamic extremism, which was of greatest concern (Garrison, 2003).

The Export Administration Act of 1979 reflected the dual desire to expand the market for U.S. goods while maintaining consistency between the nation's trade activity and its international relations. The law reduced the number of exports barred for national security reasons. For this, the Vice-President of one business coalition was grateful, commenting that "it, for the first time, puts significant constraints on the president's use of controls for foreign policy reasons" (*Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, 1979, p. 300). At the same time, however, the law authorized export controls for three types of reasons: the avoidance of shortages of goods

and related price inflation on the domestic market; the protection of national security by restricting availability of goods with potential military uses; and the control of exports for foreign policy reasons. Under this last heading, it fell to the State Department to notify the Congress about states supporting international terrorism prior to any approval of export licenses to these countries by the Secretary of Commerce (U.S. Code, Title 50, Sec. 2405(j)).

Building on the Export Administration Act, the requirement for an annual list of state sponsors of terrorism was created in 1987 by a law governing the reporting requirements of the State Department (U.S. Code, Title 22, Sec. 2656f). Although the criteria for the list are not set down in statute, the elements that determine the selection of nations are largely evident from the required contents of the report (Minnerop, 2004). The focus is on identifying countries that have aided terrorists through:

- Political and financial support
- Diplomatic support
- Provision of sanctuary

- Positions taken in the United Nations and other international bodies

Also to be included in the State Department analysis is information about foreign countries from which the United States has sought cooperation in investigating or prosecuting individuals responsible for terrorist acts against American citizens and interests. A 1996 legislative amendment buttressed this provision by mandating that the Congress be notified about the extent to which governments have cooperated with the United States in "apprehending, convicting, and punishing" terrorists and "preventing" further acts of terrorism (U.S. State Department, 1996). Finally, the operative definition of terrorism on which all provisions depend is given by the State Department as "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents" (U.S. State Department, 2004).

Based on these guidelines, as well as the narrative justifications in annual country reports, the State Department's classification of sponsors of terrorism reveals three main lines of reasoning (Minnerop, 2004). First, the department is concerned about countries that provide direct

and indirect support for international terrorism—whether as an explicit means of foreign policy or by complicity in allowing terrorists to use the nation's territory and resources. Second, the department's assessment seeks to gauge a state's credibility in helping the U.S. combat terrorism. Third, in recent years the department has become concerned about the link between terrorism and the spread of weapons of mass destruction. Any or all of these factors can enter into the designation of a particular state as a sponsor of terrorism. Under the Export Administration Act, once that determination has been made, it cannot be rescinded until a "fundamental change in the leadership and policies of the government of the country concerned," including the cessation of support for terrorism and assurances that the country will not support terrorism in the future (U.S. Code Title 50, Sec. 2405(j)(4)).

For all of these continuing refinements, the group of countries included on the official state sponsors listing has changed little over time (Nichols, 2003; Minnerop, 2004). Countries put on the list in 1979 were Iraq, Libya, South Yemen and Syria. Iran was included in 1980, Cuba in 1982, North Korea in 1988, and Sudan in 1993. Iraq left the list in 1982,

then rejoined it in 1990. South Yemen was removed in 1990 because of its merger with North Yemen, an unlisted country. No changes to the listing have occurred since 1993, other than the brief listing of Afghanistan during 2001 before the Taliban regime was ousted. With national elections now completed, Iraq is viewed as a probable departure from the list when the next compilation of state sponsors is announced in 2005.

If the listing itself has remained stable, the consequences of membership have not. When the Export Administration Act was renewed in 1985, it came to light that the Carter and Reagan administrations had sent few reports notifying Congress about the export of goods with military potential to countries such as Iran (*Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, 1986). Congress responded with an outright ban on military exports to the list of terrorist states. In addition, following a spate of legislation in several areas since 1990, the nations designated by the State Department have become subject to prohibitions of economic assistance, the imposition of restrictions on financial and other kinds of interactions with American companies and individuals, and the loss of

legal immunity from civil litigation in U.S. courts (Minnerop, 2004). Last but not least, following the invasion of Iraq, combined with an onslaught of tough talk by the president and his advisers about the unacceptable behavior of terrorist states, the nations on the State Department list must face the real, if vaguely articulated, threat of military action by the U.S. and its (willing) allies.

Currently, the official list of countries supporting international terrorism is published in the *Federal Register* and as part of the State Department's annual *Patterns of Global Terrorism*. The latter is available in hard copy from the U.S. Government Printing Office and on-line through the State Department's web site. The listing makes up only part of the contents of *Patterns of Global Terrorism*, which also chronicles terrorist incidents for the year—a statistic later found to be seriously undercounted in the 2003 report (Krueger and Laitin, 2004)—and provides information on terrorist groups and "Foreign Terrorist Organizations." When *Patterns of Global Terrorism* is released, those in government and the media take note. Over the years, articles about the listing have appeared in the *New York Times* (Shenon, 1998), *Los Angeles*

Times (Chen, 2004), *USA Today* (Nichols, 2003), and *BBC News* (1999). Complementing this coverage is extensive commentary on a variety of American and foreign web sites sponsored by news organizations, think tanks, special interest groups, and other observers. Once an obscure, partly ignored, provision buried in U.S trade law, the listing has now emerged into the full glare of publicity. It does not overstate the case to say that it has come be recognized as a fulcrum of U.S. foreign policy making and a singular point of interest for America's friends and foes alike.

A Political Language Framework

The study of language and politics is concerned with the distinctive uses, forms, and consequences of verbal constructions when employed for "political" purposes. The origins of the field are often associated with Orwell, who called attention to the ways in which official language can be used to disguise the realities of government power. This "propagandistic" function remains central for researchers, although the

topic of political language is a much broader one today with contributions from several disciplines.

Anthropologists have written about language as a key dimension of power relations and leadership, particularly in fulfillment of the institutionalized political roles that exist across a range of societies (Parkin, 1984). The uses of oratory for confirming a speaker's authority, making public demands, and curbing dissidence were an early subject of anthropological analysis. More recent work stresses an orator's need to connect with his or her audience in terms of themes that readily evoke shared values and interests. Even the pithiest expressions can be a vehicle for communicating complex political formulations. Both "deliberative" and "hortatory" rhetoric have been recognized in analyses of political speech. The former is argument built on logic and fact, while the latter puts forward a viewpoint to be accepted unquestioningly on the authority of the speaker, or the people and ideas that leader is perceived to represent.

"Political linguistics" is devoted to analyzing the structure and content of public discourse. Language and politics are portrayed as

inextricable human activities in this field. As Chilton (2004, p. 6) puts it, "political activity does not exist without the use of language. It is true…that other behaviours are involved and, in particular, physical coercion. But the doing of politics is predominantly constituted in language." An adherent of cognitive linguistics, Lakoff (2002) stresses the significance of processes of categorization in organizing political thought. He describes a hierarchical principle according to which core areas of belief are shaped by the creation of a dominant classification, which is then supported by a series of stereotypes, prototypes, exceptions, and examples consistent with the general construction.

The major figure in political scientists' work on political language is Edelman (1964, 1971, 1988, 1993). Drawing on foundational research about language within linguistics, anthropology, and social psychology, Edelman (1964) stressed the manipulation of symbols by political actors and the "employment of language to sanctify action" (p. 114). Political language can be used to mobilize an audience or render it quiescent by means of verbal cues whose efficacy remains largely unconscious. Abstraction is a characteristic mode of political discourse that enables the

speaker to direct attention to the "remote and the symbolic" while suggesting a common understanding that avoids factual complexity. Like Orwell, Edelman argued that political language is often an instrument for concealing the true nature of government activity. Edelman (1988) was among the first scholars to discuss the role that language plays in the policy making process by creating frames of meaning that identify the existence of problems, define their nature and causes, and supply acceptable solutions (see, also, Rochefort and Cobb, 1994). Numbers of citizens acquire their awareness of these situations on the basis of the frames so created for them.

To summarize, although the jargon and particular research interests differ according to discipline, the study of political language has yielded a number of common insights that are relevant to the analysis in this paper. These include the tendency toward reduction of complexity, appeals to authority, reliance on symbols, and the making of arguments in moral and emotional terms when presented for a mass audience. Also important is the creation of conceptual categories that serve to explain political reality and to structure thinking about related topics and cases.

Entering into the domain of global affairs, we find a number of special concerns and inflections in the use of political language. When foreign threats are perceived, a host of fears arise among national leaders that inspire self-legitimizing language, particularly in situations involving justification of a policy of aggression (Chilton, 2004). Metaphors of urgency and proximity, historical analogy, and moral outrage are all common ingredients in this type of rhetorical discourse.

In his work *The Discourse on Terrorism*, Gold-Biss (1994) provides a critical linguistic analysis of the tendency toward demonization that became manifest in discussions of terrorism as this subject gained prominence among Americans during the 1970s and 1980s. This orientation is linked to a denial of the "context and history" of political violence, including a lack of recognition of its roots in international politics and local conflicts and injustices. Rather than helping to explain the new dynamics being faced by the United States in the Middle East and elsewhere, Gold-Biss maintains, the term "terrorism" has obfuscated the issue by becoming an undifferentiated symbol for a global threat to Western civilization. And the strategic response of "counter-terrorism," a

"fantastic construct of virtue," only further objectifies the peril, encouraging a military-technical, instead of political, solution for the problem (Gold-Biss, 1994, chap. 1).

Of course, the intensity of the United States' concern with international terrorism increased exponentially with the attack of 9/11, as did official rhetoric on the subject. Silberstein (2002) analyzes the changes in political language that were produced by this event. Of particular interest is the discourse that helped construct the nation's response as a declaration of "war on terrorism." Speaking about the attack, the president frequently employed a technique of "convergence by divergence" in which he contrasted the positive traits, values, and actions of Americans as a national community with an evil enemy outside the bounds of decent humanity. Not only did this powerful rhetoric rally the public, it strengthened the president's position vis à vis the Congress in preparation for seeking support from that body for decisive foreign policy action in the days ahead. Finally, the president broadened this conflict into the grandest possible polarity, calling it "the world's fight. This is civilization's fight" (Silberstein, 2002, p. 13).

Identification of "state sponsors of terrorism" as a special category of nations is illustrative of a rhetorical frame that can be called "measurement discourse." By measurement discourse, I mean language that packages information, arguments, and proposed actions in specifically calibrated terms. The purpose is to create a vocabulary of precision and compartmentalization. Sometimes quantitative speech is articulated to document statements of a more general linguistic character. Thus, the State Department each year relies on its tabulation of terrorist incidents as a central part of its portrayal of the status of global terrorism. The Department of Homeland Security has sought to persuade the American people to understand the risk of domestic terrorism by means of a color-coded scheme with five ranked positions from "low" to "severe." So familiar has the Administration's use of measurement discourse become in its framing of anti-terrorist policies and actions that a virtual collective gasp escaped from the news media in October of 2003 when a leaked memo by Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld admitted: "Today, we lack metrics to know if we are winning or losing the global war on terror" (quoted in Krueger and Laitin, 2004, p. 13).

Categorization is a particular form of measurement discourse that classifies the items under discussion according to a schema selected by the speaker. In the language of measurement, it establishes a "variable" that purports to reflect definitive similarities and differences. Under a proper system of categorization, all items must be classifiable and no item should belong to more than a single category. Whether in research design or in political rhetoric, categorization is a basic, yet fateful, choice that divides the world into parts for the sake of analysis and action.

The literature of cognitive psychology further substantiates the conceptual significance of categorization. According to one text, "without categories we would be unable to make sense of our experience or to profit from it" (Medin and Ross, 1996, p. 369). Yet categorization is dangerous when categories are incorrect or overly broad or overly simplified. Experimental evidence shows that a poor system of categories can lead to misperceptions about the nature of reality. In social situations, it also has implications for the behavior and perceptions of those being categorized.

Drawing on this brief review of political language concepts and findings, I now turn to my assessment of the listing of state sponsors of terrorism as a rhetorical construct.

The State Department Listing as Political Rhetoric

The State Department puts forward its annual listing of state sponsors of terrorism as the culmination of rational fact-finding and analysis. Produced at the behest of Congress and disseminated via the federal government's official printing office, the listing has the full semblance of an objective, truthful, and definitive guide to the global environment for use by American policy makers and other world leaders. As Secretary of State Colin Powell asserted when releasing the 2001 report, "The cold, hard facts presented here compel the world's continued vigilance and concerted action" (U.S. State Department, 2004).

Yet it is important to recognize the role that such an image of impartiality plays in the listing's effectiveness as political rhetoric. As Edelman (1993) observes, any official categorization scheme derives its power from "the assumption that the common classifications and the

cause-effect relationships they imply are objective and self-evident" (p. 233). In fact, a review of the listing's development over recent years reveals marked inconsistencies, as well as insensitivity to changes within the listed nations, that contradict this quality of objectivity. The question may be approached from two perspectives: nations that are included on the list, and nations that are omitted.

So far, Libya continues to maintain a place on the list despite significant shifts in the nation's policies and behavior over several years (Chen, 2004). Libya expelled the Abu Nidal group in 1999, it paid compensation to the families of the victims of Pan Am Flight 103, and it abandoned its weapons of mass destruction program while allowing full international inspections for verification. President Bush responded by lifting most trade sanctions against Libya, but the U.S. still is unwilling to negate Libya's classification as a state sponsor of terrorism. The main reasons for Cuba's inclusion on the list have to do with its support for terrorist groups and providing safe haven for hijackers of U.S. planes in the 1970s and 1980s. By 1998, however, the Council on Foreign Relations had concluded that Cuba no longer constituted any threat to

U.S. national security (Minnerop, 2004). As witnessed in the latest State of the Union Address, the Bush Administration is currently targeting Syria for special public opprobrium. Syria has supported Palestinian terror groups, developed chemical weapons, and reportedly provided covert assistance to Iraqi insurgents. Yet even in regard to Syria, mitigating factors may be said to exist. The State Department does not accuse Syria of any direct involvement in acts of terrorism that have taken place since the mid-1980s (Schenker, 2000). Meanwhile, Syria has cooperated with the U.S. in the hunt for al Qaeda, and it backed the U.N. resolution calling for Iraq to disarm (Cienski, 2003).

From the above cases, one would have to conclude that the standards for removal from the State Department listing are inflexible and absolute, that historical, indirect, even suspected links to terrorism are sufficient to elicit lasting censure by the U.S. Rewards for states that are moving in the right direction seem few and limited. Yet significant counterexamples exist (see, e.g., Kalis, 2001; Gareau, 204; Robinson, 2002). Pakistan is widely seen as having condoned terrorist acts in India and Kashmir since the late 1990s, some involving American citizens and

interests. Yet Pakistan has not gained a place on the official listing apparently because of diplomatic reasons, including, most recently, the U.S. need for a local base in its struggle against the Taliban in Afghanistan. Iraq was removed from the State Department listing in February of 1982 not because of any meaningful disassociation from terrorism by Saddam Hussein, but because the U.S. had decided to back Iraq in its war with Iran.

What this pattern reveals is that the criteria for making up the listing of state sponsors of terrorism are variable, strict under some circumstances, forgiving under others. Sometimes the underlying reason in the decision to list or not to list is rooted in overriding foreign policy objectives. Sometimes the decision reflects domestic political pressure—from anti-Cuba, pro-Israel, and other lobby groups. Even some State Department insiders involved in its preparation believe the list "could become an even better tool if it were more honest" (Robinson, 2002). One scholar of international terrorism has described the situation succinctly: "The designation of state sponsors of terrorism suffers from

one serious weakness. The process of selecting which countries should be placed on the list is inherently political" (Kalis, 2001, p. 84).

In fact, such criticism is mild compared to other complaints that the State Department is guilty of a blatant double standard in compiling a listing of state sponsors of terrorism without examining U.S. actions in this area (see, e.g., Gareau, 2004). So it is that linguist qua political analyst Noam Chomsky (2002) cites the United States' record of involvement with political violence in Central America (see, also, Soskal, 1987), as well as its provision of sanctuary for foreign political and military figures associated with repressive right-wing regimes (Chomsky, 2004). But the State Department's definition for its listing does not consider acts of terrorism committed by governments against their own citizens, thus diverting attention from American support of dictatorships and other foreign governments that have violated human rights (Gareau, 2004).

Having considered the shortcomings of the State Department listing as objective description, it becomes necessary to explore its rhetorical dimensions. Such a listing has dual symbolic import. First, it

creates a symbolic identity and assigns it to the designated nations. Henceforth, we are to think about the members of the listing as a group, not as individual entities. The identity these nations share in common, so the implicit argument runs, outweighs whatever else may distinguish them one from another. And, as attitudes and fears about international terrorism worsen due to signal events like 9/11, the meaning of the collective identity degrades accordingly. "State sponsor of terrorism" is a "symbol word" that, like "communist," discourages analytical thought (Green, 1987, p. 164). The analysis has already been done by those who compiled the list.

Second, the State Department listing puts before the American public a symbol meant to aggregate, in concrete form, the Administration's most pressing foreign policy concerns. The listing has been referenced, in part, in several "State of the Union" addresses. Delivered in prime time to a TV audience approximating 40 million viewers, the "State of the Union" is a particularly powerful vehicle for communicating with the American public. To the extent that the listing and its surrounding rhetoric have been persuasive, they function as a

"condensation symbol" stimulating powerful emotions, anxieties, and patriotic sentiments (Edelman, 1964). The accentuation of a looming external threat in this way has the potential to unify, but also terrify, the public, which is left with a lingering image of inexorable international menace.

The demonization element becomes plain enough when we survey the catch phrases adopted by a series of Administrations in referring to members of the State Department listing. Among these terms are "outlaw nation," "backlash state," "renegade regime" (Minnerop, 2003). Although the term "rogue state" originated in the Clinton years, that Administration dropped it at one point in favor of the less inflammatory "states of concern." However, the current Bush Administration reverted to the harsher usage, defining the rogue state concept as follows:

> they brutalize their own people and squander their national resources for the personal gain of the rulers; display no regard for international law, threaten their neighbors, and callously violate international treaties to which they are a party; are

> determined to acquire weapons of mass destruction along with other advanced military technology, to be used as threats or offensively to achieve the aggressive designs of these regimes; sponsor terrorism around the globe; and reject basic human values and hate the United States and everything for which it stands. (quoted in Minnerop, 2004, p. 8)

Thus is sketched a tableau of good (us) versus evil (them) as the template for understanding contemporary international affairs. Edelman's (1993) observation about the political function of categorization is relevant here: "What seems to be an objective term for describing people or actions is an ideological weapon" (p. 241).

In January 2002, President Bush stated the following in reference to the countries of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea:

> States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction,

> these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic. (Bush, 2002)

With this utterance, the Administration moved from symbol to metaphor in its discussion of the topic of state sponsors of terrorism. A metaphor not only makes a comparison, it can add meaning beyond what a literal description of something would convey (Zashin and Chapman, 1974, pp. 296-297). In this instance, the term "axis" performs the function of historical analogy by evoking America's enemy of W.W.II, the axis powers of Germany, Italy, and Japan (Klare, 2002). This association also serves to communicate the gravity of the threat the president wants to underscore. At the same time, the term "axis" implies a kind of coalition, alliance, or conspiracy among states, one heightening the danger these nations could pose individually (Klare, 2002). Following the speech, the misleading

nature of the president's rhetoric prompted criticism from journalists and political pundits. No matter. The statement made for powerful political theatre on the night of the president's address. In reality, the "axis" metaphor was a fitting extension of the moralistic foreign policy frame that President Bush had advanced since first taking office. Conceding the resonance of the president's phrase and its potency as a new political label, one political comedian later joked that Libya, China, and Syria, feeling snubbed by their omission from the Axis of Evil, had announced their formation of the "Axis of Just as Evil" (Marlatt, 2002).

An Israeli group has argued that "the American list is the best and most efficient instrument available today for creating a jointly organized international struggle against states which sponsor terrorism. The United States has assumed a difficult and complex role which should have been assumed by an international agency" (Ganor, 1998). Whether or not one agrees with this appraisal of the merit of America's annual state sponsor listing, the point is well taken that the U.S. has used the listing enterprise to occupy an international rhetorical vacuum of sorts. Through the

creation of the list, the U.S. has pronounced itself the ultimate international authority on terrorism, an act which supports its project of hegemony, or supremacy, on the world scene (Minnerop, 2004, p. 3). A related discursive benefit of the list is its implicit argumentation about what constitutes illegitimate (terrorist) versus legitimate (counterterrorist) acts of political violence (Gold-Biss, 1994, p. 152). It is telling that, in carrying out this supranational rhetorical effort, the U.S. State Department seeks breadth only in the dissemination of its findings on terrorism, not their formulation.

The rhetorical discourse associated with the State Department listing is far from mere window dressing for the foreign policy uses of that listing under existing law. The rhetoric is being used as a means for extending the listing's ramifications beyond legislative intent. Since 9/11, officials have cited the threat posed by rogue states in justifying America's withdrawal from the ABM Treaty and in formulating a New National Security Strategy (Minnerop, 2003). Encompassed by the latter is the controversial doctrine of pre-emptive military action against impending perils. In short, the American discourse of stigmatizing labels

has tuned into the stepping stone for a bold reinterpretation of international law that seeks to modify the very principle of national sovereignty (Minnerop, 2003, pp. 158-171).

The problem of self-fulfilling prophecy is amply documented in the literature of cognitive psychology (Medin and Ross, 1996). We participate in producing what we expect from a situation simply because we do expect it. The Bush Administration strategy of pre-emptive intervention threatens to elevate self-fulfilling prophecy to national policy, intertwining rhetoric and action to the point where the potential risk of hostilities justifies their commencement. Beliefs are tenacious, and it is human nature to search for information that supports preconceptions (Medin and Ross, 1996, p. 15). In this light, the failure of intelligence that led the U.S. into war against Iraq because of weapons of mass destruction was also a failure of imagination. For the Bush Administration, it was apparently unthinkable that Iraq's intentions and capabilities could be anything other than what our rhetoric had declared them to be. As this paper is being written, dramatic events are unfolding in Lebanon following the assassination of former prime minister Rafik

Hariri. Responsibility for the bombing of Hariri's motorcade is highly unclear, yet the U.S. acted swiftly on its suspicion that the Syrian government was at fault by recalling the American ambassador from Damascus. Only time will tell if this was a justified response or a reflexive denunciation of Syria by the U.S., consistent with, and predisposed by, the construct of the State Department listing.

One defense of America's "rogue state" rhetoric and policy might be to insist that the technique has worked. Pressure on nations belonging to the list has been ratcheted up to the point that positive change has occurred, as in Libya's renunciation of international terrorism and WMD. Yet other signs indicate that the rhetoric has backfired. North Korea has rushed ahead with its nuclear weapons program, in part because leaders there believed this was the best way to guard against a U.S. attack (Bender, 2005). Iran and Syria have just announced a "united front" against the common pressures they face (read "American hostility"), thereby converting the infamous "axis" metaphor into something of a reality (Watson, 2005). A recent column in *The Financial Times* concluded that America's unilateral policies and aggressive rhetoric are

resulting in its exclusion from the building of new international institutions and alliances around the globe (Lind, 2005). Increasingly, it seems, we no longer are, in Madeleine Albright's phrase, the world's "indispensable nation."

Nor have America's European allies steadfastly followed its rhetorical leads (Minnerop, 2003, pp. 155-157). Germany chose not to adopt the "rogue state" term. France was very critical of the "axis of evil" phrase; even the British preferred "major states of concern." Significantly, a group of European nations is now offering resistance to America's formal designation of Hezbollah, the Lebanon-based Shiite group, as a terrorist organization (Weisman, 2005). The reason is not any naivete about Hezbollah's past military operations, only a recognition of the organization's multifaceted nature, including its role in providing social services and its participation in representative government in Lebanon. The issue, then, is not whether terrorism should be a paramount concern, but the proper use of carrots and sticks in combating it. Whatever the stakes and stances of different parties in this deliberation, the role of political rhetoric in striking this balance is lost on no one.

Conclusion

In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (1998), the first Harry Potter novel by J. K. Rowling, there is a chapter called "The Sorting Hat." The sorting hat is the magical entity that assigns students to the various "houses" that make up Hogwarts School. Based on a mystical understanding of each student's true nature, the hat divines its choices—Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, Slytherin, and (the noble) Gryffindor. As any reader of the series knows, the assignment could hardly be more consequential, shaping as it does relationships, experiences, and other aspects of personal destiny for years to come.

The U.S. State Department's listing of state sponsors of terrorism is one of the great sorting hats of American foreign policy, partly mysterious and profoundly influential in shaping the narrative of American international relations. My purpose in this paper has been neither to downplay the problem of terrorist violence, which is real, nor to suggest a stance of moral relativism for the U.S. within world affairs.

Rather, it is to ask what rhetorical usages are associated with America's state sponsor listing, both domestically and internationally, and to highlight concerns about the impact of these usages on national interests and credibility.

The State Department listing has been presented as an example of a measurement-based policy tool and rhetorical form. Consistent with this theme, one conceivable improvement would be to adjust the current measurement technique so that it is more sensitive to the available data. Thus, the State Department could replace its inflexible single category of "state sponsors of international terrorism" with a graded scale corresponding to a more flexible system of penalties (Robinson, 2002). Category or scale, any measurement-based policy mechanism must also be accompanied by ongoing scrutiny of the accuracy of information, the validity of generalizations, and the application of the schema under amorphous circumstances. None of these nuances, however, is congruent with the sweeping rhetoric on terrorism that has found official favor during recent years.

More broadly, the issue is what the U.S. gains by encouraging a perspective on terrorism as an undifferentiated concept, a problem to be abstracted from the political, economic, and social details of the environments in which it has emerged Gold-Biss (1994). Has this orientation given the American public an understanding of why terrorist movements arise and flourish, sometimes with a distinctly anti-American ideology? Has it provided a firm foundation for leadership by the U.S. within the international community? In linguistic terms, the listing of state sponsors of terrorism helps to "reify" terrorism as an object of action and discourse (Green, 1987). Might there be benefits at this stage in the "war on terror" from an active "de-reification" of the concept, one that restores some of its complexity and contradictions? Plainly, these are more than just rhetorical questions.

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