

Notes on 11 September 2001

1 To my American friends. I can only guess how *you* as Americans are feeling after yesterday. We as mere spectators are shocked to a degree and can only send sympathy. But also we feel concern for the world. How will the President and the State Department respond?

2 It is almost trivial to speak of discourse analysis in the circumstances. But remember--what happens next will be the outcome of talk and text (cabinet meetings, public statements, media representations, individual utterances...), and the text and talk will be governed by cognitive and interactive habits. Under stress pre-wired patterns of thought come into their own. Policies and the orders to execute them are linguistic acts with psychological, social and ethical underpinings. These we can at least try to be aware of as potential impediments to just and effective response.

2.1 Context

Commentators have expressed surprise that US intelligence did not foresee the attack. Why not? The intifada has been raging, Palestinian anger mounting, and American policy in the Middle East increasingly criticised. Iraq is bombed almost daily by British and American planes. The extent to which the US is perceived as a regional and global perpetrator of economic and political injustice is simply ignored. One does not have to defend inhuman actions, one certainly does not need to claim the Palestinians are the perpetrators, to make the point that numerous groups around the world, but particularly in the Middle East, are being handed the materials to concoct their own scripts of self-legitimation.

Consider too the conjuncture with the promotion of national missile defense. The disavowed word "national" is used advisedly here--national in motive and intention it surely is. The perceived aim--to construct an impenetrable protective shell around the continental United States. The perceived motive--to have a free hand for American action world-wide.

And consider the reach of globalization, which is perceived as sheer americanisation. The pivots are money military might and money, symbolised by the Pentangle and the twin Towers of the center of world trade.

Ignoring these largely semiotic facts makes the "intelligence" gathered irrelevant. Actually, semiotics is just a fancy term for sensible humane political intelligence and understanding.

2.2 More context

How do American policymakers now make sense of the crisis? The context of conceptualisation has clear historical components. Some of these are being invoked overtly, others surely are covertly present in a historical chain of text and talk.

Strikes at the American symbolic heartland--the president's residence--took place in 1812. "America invulnerable" has been a constant in policy ever since (cf. Chace and Carr 1988). In conscious historical memory, Pearl Harbor is salient--and almost instantaneously invoked, for its similarities and its differences, on September 11 2001.

For Brits, there is mythologization of the Blitz, and for the US ambassador in London, the story of Brits and Americans standing shoulder to shoulder in World War II.

Equally of interest, in my view, is the following. In 1946 the question What to do about the Communists? became answerable when Kennan formulated policy in language that used a set of cognitive (metaphorical) structures which cohered with concepts of national security, and with (i) fundamental human conceptualisation of secure spaces, (ii) fundamental human fears about the penetration of secure spaces, and (iii) the virtually paranoid belief in the ubiquity of threat (evil). Cuba is perhaps the most salient consciously shared memory of penetration of America's sphere and threat to the American soil. September 11, 2001 must be the most terrifying of breaches. How it is conceptualised, coped with psychologically and politically, not just by the US but by the rest of us, is crucial.

2.3 Understanding the attackers' script

This will probably be sidelined, though some International Relations theory does say we should not. The point is, those in the "West" have no clear grasp they are confident of. This is dangerous; it is analogous to the incomprehension of the Soviet Union at the end of WWII, but more hazardous. Kennan, the State Department, the national Security Council, Rand Corporation and others gave us the communist threat, containment and deterrence. These concepts cannot now be crudely re-applied *mutatis mutandis* in the new world situation.

It would be naïve to think the workings of the attackers' mind/discourse can be easily surmised and simply stated. But let us hazard a few suggestions. Metonymic thinking, and processes of culture-relative symbolisation are involved. One thing, one detail of a script or frame stands for a whole complex gestalt. The White House stands for America--in the perception of both Americans and potential attackers. Metonymic thinking is probably central to all forms of terrorist thinking and self-legitimation. Suppose you believe that your culture, land and wealth are under threat from American companies, American consumer products, American globalized entertainment--you cannot attack the individual agents of implementation, so you attack something that is metonymically liked, that "symbolises", stands for these implementing agents that you perceive to harm you economically, psychologically and territorially. New York, Manhattan stands for American culture, money, global financial reach. The World Trade Centre not only stands (on the skyline) for New York, it stands for the intangible tentacles of money and culture. As for American military power, you cannot attack American bases, aircraft, ships, vehicles, so you attack a building that stands for it. You are not attacking the world trade centre and the pentagon (just) because you hope to physically eliminate the controlling centres of power.

So much is obvious. Less obvious is the possibility of other psychological levels of symbolisation involved. The Tower as an ancient symbol of power and arrogance. Five-sided forts are militarily ancient; five-pointed stars have supposedly magical properties in certain semiotic systems. (M. Casaubon *Credulity & Incred.* (1672) 71 By certain *pentacula*, and seals and characters to fence themselves and to make themselves invisible against all kinds of arms and musquet bullets. W. G. S. *Excurs. Vill. Curate* 128 Had I but shown him the pentangle of Solomon..., how the fiend

would have howled at me in vain.) This is risky territory. But consider: the pentangle of Solomon, the state of Israel and the metonymy, surely at work in this crisis, whereby Israel is linked to the United States.

Note also that "The Pentagon did so and so, says so and so" involves a common metonymy in which the building stands for the people and the organisation that work there. Of course, bombing the building will kill the people in it and damage the organisation, but is there some mental process by which harm can be denied because you can think "I am just attacking a symbol" (metonymy)?

There is much more, of far greater importance than all this, that we in the West do not begin to understand, whether through psychological, political, cultural or discourse analysis. In particular we do not understand the conceptualisation and discourse of holy war, *jihad*, *intifada*, and most crucially the discourse and conceptualisation of self-sacrifice and the suicide mission.

3 American response: Discourse-conceptual strategies

Ordinary Americans and policy makers will reach for pre-existing discourses/conceptualisations. Here are some of the probable patterns of thought and talk.

3.1 Categorize the Crisis

Essentially, the process is one of metaphorical mapping from source to target domain.

3.1.1 It's a war. Media headlines, comment by reporters, and reported comment of ordinary people use phrases like: "it's a declaration of war on America". If the crisis is conceptualised as a war, the entailments are: there is a *state* waging war against us, we must defend the US against that state, we must retaliate against that state, we must use military power... The premise (source domain) can be unfounded. But the pressure to adopt this frame of thought can force its adoption and lead to militarisation, false identification of targets, provocation of states (e.g. in the Arab world), escalation of war.

3.1.2 It's World War II. Historical analogy. Common in foreign policy thinking, because it seems to have a rationale, but basically metaphorical. Thus Saddam Hussein was Hitler. The analogy for the September 11 attack is Pearl Harbor, but more "symbolic". In general, the September attack announces a World War II analogue. If the crisis is so conceptualised, the entailments are: we must not appease (a strong strain in American foreign policy principles), we must stand by our allies the British (conversely), somebody is Hitler (and if so anti-Jewish and anti-Israel?), the patriotic blitz mentality will prevail...

3.2 More discourse/conceptual strategies

3.2.1 Polarise. America represents "The West", "The Free World" (this is the Cold War expression), "Free Democracies" (the more recent phrase, adopted by the British prime minister). The conceptual process restores the bi-polar geopolitical map, familiar to American strategists, and anyway cognitively "natural", since a war prototypically has just two sides. There is a ready-made script for bi-polar conflicts. It is also a metonymic process--whereby one element (the USA) stands for another entity--a supposed collectivity labelled "free democracies", whose real-world referent, however, is not determinate.

- What is wrong with polarisation? The entity "free democracies" cannot be simply determined, nor can its complement set. It risks recycling old (Cold War) scripts that will be dysfunctional. It buys into manichaeian irrationality.
- 3.2.2 Rally round the flag. No need to comment on this... The Senators meeting President Bush on 12 September are reported to have "spontaneously" broken into "God Bless America". Presidential speeches will seek to stimulate patriotic feeling. This is doubtless humanly understandable and necessary: its dangers are that its conceptual corollaries are: militarization, polarization, revenge scripts.
 - 3.2.3 Take Revenge. Warnings have already been made against adopting "an eye for an eye" legitimations of military response. The dangers are that this is a pre-existing script, requires no detailed ethical justification for many people i.e. it is itself regarded by many as ethically axiomatic), responds to "gut" feelings. Further, it can be bolstered by rationalisations taken from International Relations discourse/concepts--specifically Realism, the doctrine according to which expression of power is what maintains international order. Supported in popular discourse by phraseology: "force is the only thing they respect".
 - 3.2.4 The global policeman, and the outlaw script. These are already perceptible in public discourse. They are old Cold War metaphors, in which the US is supposed to be the sole arbiter and enforcer of global law and order, because it is the sole superpower. The cultural roots of the outlaw script make it powerful domestically. America is the sheriff, the terrorist concept assimilates easily to the wild west outlaw concept. If America is a policeman, or the sheriff, the entailments are: there is someone breaking the law, who must be chased and caught. In the language of the wild west used by Bush in his early post-crisis speeches--"we must hunt down those folks responsible". Then "punishment" must be inflicted.
 - 3.2.5 Evil. Some discourse presupposes an entity labelled "Evil", or the "forces of Evil". Maybe this is conceptually linked in American domestic discourses to various religious discourses/concepts.
 - 3.2.6 I leave on one side aside categorisations such as "it's world war III", "it's the end of the world" and "it's a James Bond movie", potent as these scripts might be for certain individuals and groups.
 - 3.2.7 Find a target. This is the most serious problem. Since there is no evident perpetrator at the beginning of the crisis, effort will be put into asserting that there is an identifiable, unitary enemy. The preference will be for that enemy to be a state. All the scripts and concepts likely to be mobilised posit some perpetrating agent or agents. The pressure to identify specific real-world referents is enormous; the credibility of the presidency depends on it.. There will be a two-track discursive solution to this problem. One well-tried discursive route is: like the communist after World War II, the terrorist is one whose centre is everywhere and whose periphery is nowhere. The enemy will be imagined is lurking everywhere. That schema entails the "tightening" internal security checks. The other, and extremely dangerous, conceptual strategy is another essentially metonymic mental and discursive move. President Bush already on 12 September stated that the US would **"make no distinction between the terrorists who commit these acts and those who harbor them"**. This is a discourse move of the utmost significance, one that seems designed to adjust conceptualisations. It was repeated by several spokespersons, including Colin Powell, during the day of 12 September.

If the premise is the metonymic mapping of **perpetrator** onto **person(s) harbouring the perpetrator** (the latter notion awkwardly lexicalised during the discourse as "harborer"), then the entailments are very serious. Given the militarization, the container, and other scripts likely to work together, "harbourers" can be targeted because they are identified with the perpetrators. It is likely that Afghanistan's hosting of Osama bin Laden is at issue here. Discursive effort will be put into establishing bin Laden as the perpetrator, whatever the evidence. It is of course possible that some state could in fact be protecting, promoting and sponsoring attacks. The serious point here, is that even if evidence for such connections is not at hand, the metonymic semiotic is powerful enough, given other factors (such as policymakers' perception of an urgent need to satisfy public feeling) to drive retaliatory attacks on some superficially plausible target. There is a record of this type of thinking leading incorrect identification of targets. Proportionality would be overridden. The political and military consequences could be disastrous.

3.3 Close the container

In my view the CONTAINER schema (its elements are inside, outside, centre, periphery) is the fundamental conceptual source for "national security". (On such schemata, see Johnson, *The Body in the Mind*, etc.) The human mind is possibly prewired for spatial relations (up-down, trajectory, contained spaces); in any case territorial enclosure is embedded historically in the discourse of communities, and metaphorized in the defence doctrines of nation states, and in the discourses of national sovereignty. For a couple of decades some scholars have pointed to the irrelevance of thinking based on the notion of the impenetrable shell of defence. Yet (national) missile defense is the continuing and potent manifestation of this type of discourse/conceptualisation.

The discursive knee-jerk will be to close the container ("tighten security"). If the state and its security are a container, the entailments are: close the container, seal routes of entry (and maybe exit), establish a "roof" to defend against missiles, establish internal surveillance to defend against subversion and undermining. This logic, involving billions of dollars of expenditure on research, an inestimable cost in ill-will, has led to an unaccomplished and possibly unaccomplishable quest for a defense "shield". The September 11 attack made this logic, as so far implemented, totally beside the point. Nonetheless, it is probable, such is the cognitive strength of the container schema, that policymakers will simply seek to stop the gaps, by seeking to install low-level anti-aircraft detection and defense systems for key installations. This already the case for some buildings.

Why this line of thought will lead to unworkable policy? The technology of fool-proof and complete anti-missile and anti-aircraft defense is in doubt. The "holes" in the container uncountable and unforeseeable. There would be endless expenditure--and it should be noted contracts for the military-industrial complex, which, it can still be argued, drive the entire vicious circle. More importantly, it leaves untouched the problem of political causation--what drives people to select the US as a target in the first place. Indeed, it would ratchet the up the mechanism of provocation by reinforcing the perception that America is seeking further invulnerable dominance. It would leave the search for political and economic solutions low on the priority list.

Paul Chilton
12 September 2001