

# The name game

In late April and early May, the blogosphere was in an uproar over two documents circulated by the National Counterterrorism Center, which is charged with strategic coordination among federal agencies of the war against terrorism. “The Words That Work” and “Terminology to Define the Terrorists” urged government officials and U.S. diplomats to avoid “Islamism” and “Islamist,” “jihadism” and “jihadist,” and “mujahadeen” to describe groups like al-Qaeda and their program. Doing so, the documents suggested, could “unintentionally legitimize terrorism.” “Never use the terms ‘jihadist’ or ‘mujahadeen’... to describe the terrorists,” the argument went. “A mujahad, a holy warrior, is a positive characterization in the context of a just war.”

Twenty-four years in Washington having immunized me against surprise when Uncle Sam does something stupid, I didn’t feel personally rebuked by this admonition to verbal chastity, despite having used the naughty J-word in “Faith, Reason, and the War Against Jihadism” (then perched on the Foreign Affairs and Catholic Booksellers Association bestseller lists). My obstinacy was subsequently reinforced by a Muslim interlocutor, who described the entire exercise as “complete lunacy” on the part of the governmental agencies involved:

“Muslims are big boys and girls and understand these matters much better than anyone in the United States government. The term ‘Islamofascism’ originated with Muslims, ‘jihadist’ is used negatively all the time by Muslims, and ‘mujahadeen’ is not a term of honor when it is abused by terrorists ...The real insanity in this is the idea that the State Department is making its policy recommendations on the basis of amateur social psychology. Jihadists are not created by (the) U.S. (government’s) vocabulary ... The point should not be to try to get Muslims to like the U.S. by using some kind of ameliorative vocabulary, but to convey to the Muslim masses that the U.S. knows who the enemy is, will punish them, and will support moderate Muslims who also hate the enemy.”

In “Faith, Reason, and the War Against Jihadism,” I criticized the administration’s failures in public diplomacy, so I’m not insensitive to the necessity of making our case for the war against jihadist terrorism – which is, among other things, the war for an Islam capable of living peacefully with social and political modernity – in

appropriate terms. Years of reading the great Lebanese-born scholar Fouad Ajami have also taught me to be mindful of what Ajami calls the “pathologies” of the Arab Islamic world, including a hyper-sensitivity rooted in a profound sense of failure. So yes, by all means, let’s make our case in the most persuasive language possible.

But let’s not distort the truth in the process. Let’s not assume that those who shape the debate within the Muslim world are dolts. And let’s not transplant the worst habits of the interreligious dialogue industry – like the habit of avoiding hard issues – to the sphere of U.S. foreign policy.

The NCTC and the State Department might do well to reflect on Benedict XVI’s remarks to leaders of other world religions in Washington in April:

“Dear friends, in our attempt to discover points of commonality, perhaps we have shied away from the responsibility to discuss our differences with calmness and clarity. While always uniting our hearts and minds in the call for peace, we must also listen attentively to the voice of truth. In this way, our dialogue will not stop at identifying a common set of values, but [will] go on to probe their ultimate foundation. We have no reason to fear, for the truth unveils to us the essential relationship between the world and God.”

Improving U.S. public diplomacy in this war of competing ideas about the just society must be a priority of the next administration. The false counsel in “The Words That Work” and “Terminology to Define the Terrorists,” which reflect the views of Muslims identified with the interreligious dialogue industry, suggests the need for a major course correction, with the government finding itself more thoughtful Muslim counselors, less given to pandering in the face of wickedness. As Benedict XVI insists, real dialogue begins with the hard questions – and names things for what they are.

George Weigel is Distinguished Senior Fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C.