

Directions:

1. Show evidence of a close reading.
2. Answer the questions at the end of the text.
3. Write a one-page reflection in your WN.

WAR ON WORDS: Why Obama may be abandoning Bush's favorite phrase.

In another effort to undo the legacy of George W. Bush's presidency, the Obama administration is searching for alternatives to the term "war on terror."

In recent days, Obama's national-security officials have had brainstorming sessions to come up with different ways to describe the U.S. government's efforts to defeat Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan, according to administration sources who asked not to be identified talking about private discussions.

What's being sought is a more precise phrase that can recast the U.S. government's counterterrorism fight in ideological as well as military terms. Obama publicly signaled the new approach this week. When asked about the "war on terror" phrase by CNN's Anderson Cooper, Obama said, "Well you know, I think it is very important for us to recognize that we have a battle or a war against some terrorist organizations ... Words matter in this situation because one of the ways we're going to win this struggle is through the battle of hearts and minds."

Although partly symbolic, the search for new terror terminology reflects an internal government debate that predates the new administration. Critics have long decried the use of the phrase "war on terror" on the grounds that terrorism is a tactic, not an identifiable enemy. Years ago, State and Defense Department officials tried to move away from the phrase "war on terror," proposing instead to call it a "Struggle Against Violent Extremism," or SAVE.

But when word of the suggested change leaked to the media, President Bush displayed his annoyance at the idea during meeting of National Security Council officials. "The president unleashed over this," said one participant in the meeting who asked not to be identified talking about an internal discussion. "He made it perfectly clear that the American public understood what the war on terror was. ... He was clearly irritated about this. That put an end to it."

Indeed, the "war on terror" was one of the signature phrases of the Bush presidency. It was formally declared in Bush's nationally televised speech to Congress on Sept. 20, 2001—his first after the 9/11 terror attacks—when the president cast the government's response in such sweeping terms that, according to critics, it ultimately opened the door for the invasion of Iraq. "Our enemy is a radical network of terrorists and every government that supports them," Bush said then. "Our war on terror begins with Al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated."

After that, Donald Rumsfeld's Defense Department officially adopted the terminology under the banner of "GWOT," or "Global War on Terror." The Pentagon used the GWOT acronym in official publications, strategy documents and memos. It even developed a GWOT "Expeditionary Medal" for soldiers dispatched to designated war zones. (Just last month, in the final days of the Bush administration, the Pentagon expanded eligibility for the GWOT Medal for troops deployed in Morocco and Burkina Faso.)

According to a story published last weekend by The Associated Press, since he took office last month Obama has shied away from the words "war on terror" since he took office. He has made references instead to the "enduring struggle against terrorism and extremism" and to an "ongoing struggle," pledging also to

"go after" extremists and "win this fight." Only once since his inauguration has Obama used Bush's favorite locution, declaring in a speech at the State Department on Jan. 22 that the United States was "confronted by extraordinary, complex and interconnected global challenges: war on terror, sectarian division and the spread of deadly technology." "We're trying to come up with a phrase that better articulates a hopeful message," said one administration official involved in the discussions about terror terminology.

Despite Bush's insistence on sticking with "war on terror," members of his own Homeland Security Department continued to question its use. A year ago, Homeland's Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties prepared a nine-page "official use only" memo, "Terminology to Define the Terrorists," which outlined how the government had solicited recommendations from a "wide variety" of American Muslim leaders and suggesting that U.S. officials be more careful in their use of language describing counterterrorism efforts. The memo did not directly advocate discontinuing the use of the term "war on terror" but rather declared that while the government "should convey the magnitude of the threat we face," it should also "avoid inflating the religious bases and glamorous appeal of the extremist's ideology."

One of the memo's suggestions: labeling Al Qaeda as a "death cult." The memo's authors explained their thinking: "'Cult' is both normative and accurate in that it suggests a pseudo-religious ideology that is outside the mainstream ... Referring to [Osama] bin Laden's movement as 'fringe' or 'outside the mainstream' may also be helpful." The document's contents were subsequently ridiculed by right-wing bloggers, who accused Homeland Security of excessive political correctness.

Juan Zarate, who until last month headed the counterterrorism office of Bush's National Security Council, tells NEWSWEEK that President Bush did start limiting his use of the "war on terror" term in recent years, referring at times to a "war against violent extremists." But Zarate—who used the "war on terror" phrase in a speech as recently as last year—cautioned against going too far in abandoning the old terminology. Doing so, he suggested, could diminish the dangers that U.S. troops face in places like Afghanistan and also send an unintended signal to terror groups that the new administration was going to throttle back antiterrorist efforts on the ground.

The notion of abandoning the "war on terror" label has also been debated among some of America's closest partners in counterterrorism operations. Two years ago, Hilary Benn, then Britain's international development secretary, declared that the term should be abandoned: "We do not use the phrase 'war on terror' because we can't win by military means alone. And because this isn't us against one organized enemy with a clear identity and a coherent set of objectives." Britain's current foreign secretary, David Miliband, recently made similar remarks. A U.K. official said that overuse of the term may have "unintentionally" rallied extremist enemies of the United States and Britain to join forces against the West.

-Newsweek

Write a thesis statement for this article:

Who is the intended audience?