

# Misreading the Label: The “War” Against Radical Islam

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*Labels count. While the old wisdom that judging books by their covers is a business fraught by error, covers do sway buyers. In the business of finding labels for political consumption, the grabbing slogan is fundamental.*

The political salesmen and women know this, which explains the often clinical resort to such terms as a “war” on anything that comes to mind. A “war” on a concept is patent nonsense – there are no such things as wars against diseases, ideas, or drugs – but they are still sold as such, the mobilising cry for a public in need of a catchy narrative.

The “war” on radical Islam is no different from that of previous, ill-fated constructions about fighting intangibles, and here, the usually judicious avoidance of such logically flawed terms took something of a dive with the remarks of French Prime Minister Manuel Valls. It may well have been a genuine rhetorical moment of weakness – furious and bloodied by three days of killing in Paris, France had to find some response that was strong, eschewing weakness.

Hence, the following remarks by Valls at Evry on Saturday. “We are war – not a war against religion, not a war against a civilization, but to defend our values, which are universal.”

What then, of the nature of this war? “It is a war against terrorism, against jihadism, against radical Islam, against everything that is aimed at breaking fraternity, freedom and solidarity.”

The supporters have been forthcoming, eager to get on the train of history against an unspecific aim or concept. Emotionalism has been the grand substitute. Former US Senator Joseph Lieberman, in endorsing the French position, suggested that “the civilized nations of the world must acknowledge that we are at war with violent Islamic extremism and that as long as these extremists continue to recruit, attack and expand territorially, the civilized world will continue to lose and the number and frequency of attacks like those in France will increase” (*Wall Street Journal*, Jan 12).[1]

Such is the ease of declaring wars in cavalier fashion, ignoring causality and replacing it with an infantile prescription: they do it, because they don’t like us. But it is even more cavalier that the target is non-specific, being the sort of crude pamphleteering that earned Samuel P. Huntington a good number of sales for the flawed premises of *The Clash of Civilizations* (1993). Farewelling the Cold War, for Huntington, suggested the next phase: wars between rivalling centres of power, framed rather neatly by the language of civilization. The rattled pundits are following suit, if some years later, taking note of Islam, in particular.

Given that cultures exist, not in silos, but in webs and networks of exchange and

appropriation; given that a homogenous civilization is, of its own accord, impossible, “wars” on Islamic terrorism seem dangerously frivolous. Not that it troubles the canonical high-priests such as Bernard- Henri Lévy and an assortment of American commentators thrilled by newfound French assertiveness in the hyperbole of a “Churchillian moment” (*Haaretz*, Jan 10).[2]

The pitfalls of the previous grand error – that of the “War on terror” – would have been in the minds of those in the Obama administration. Attorney General Eric Holder, for that reason, decided to evade the issue and stick to the status quo, which is as savage as any “war” on the radicals. Indeed, with ongoing air-strikes against Islamic State positions, drone strikes on an assortment of targets in the Middle East and Pakistan, the Obama administration was never one to shirk the chance to kill radicals on the Islamic hit list, or those who fell within its designation classification.

In Holder’s words in response to a question from George Stephanopoulos on ABC’s *This Week* regarding the French prime minister’s statement, “we are at war with those who would commit terrorist attacks and who would corrupt the Islamic faith in the way that they do, to try to justify their terrorist actions. So that’s who we are at war with, and we are determined to take the fight to them, not to prevent them from engaging these kind of activities.”

The perceived failure to join in the proclaimed armed crusade against radical Islam – at least in the rhetorical sense – has produced a somewhat different reaction from those who have customarily seen the French as habitual “cheese eating surrender monkeys”. Now, it is Paris taking the lead in bellicosity and belligerence, eager for summaries and sound bites. Has this left the United States looking meek and refrained?

Rush Limbaugh was one such individual thinking so, keen to do the battering rounds on his show against the administration for having both failed to be conspicuous at the Paris march, or involved in terms of open commitments. For Limbaugh, Obama was playing the one card he truly knew: that of narcissism. “Forty-some-odd people and Obama’s going to be part of that? There’s no way. He’s not gonna subject himself. He’s not going to put himself in a group where he is seen as one of many, many equals.”[3]

More to the point, Limbaugh saw Obama’s refusal to endorse an unvarnished full frontal commitment against Islamic radicalism as a sign of his pietism towards Islam proper. “It was Obama who said at the UN, ‘The future must not belong to those who slander the prophet.’ I mean, it makes total sense he wouldn’t show up to this thing.”

Other outlets have similarly seen Obama’s actions over the Paris attacks as those of “pathetic disengagement” suggesting a lack of direction. A rambling David Limbaugh on *CNS news* (Jan 13) could only see a president of “confused” world view, one probably attributed to his “upbringing”. Professing to be a Christian, he could hardly seem to understand the nature posed by Islamists. Holder’s response to embracing Vall’s declaration was a disgraceful and feckless demurral.

Long time Democrat commentator Dough Schoen has also thrown in his lot with the simple world view, taking issue with Obama’s perceived sense of moral distortion. “We are at war with radical Islam. And President Obama needs to say it”. According to Schoen, “President Obama morally abdicated his place as the leader of the free world” on Sunday (*Fox News*, Jan 12).[4]

Interestingly enough, in refusing to send an official to the march, the President may have unwittingly seen the hypocrisy of it all, marching in solidarity for the values of a perceived free world, one rich in free speech, along with leaders avidly against the very idea. That would suggest less narcissism than the cynicism this entire effort needs to be treated with. Beware such universal credos – they sound awfully similar to the enemy supposedly being fought.

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#### Notes

- [1] <http://www.wsj.com/articles/joseph-lieberman-a-global-war-on-radical-islam-1421106699>
- [2] <http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-1.636383>
- [3] [http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2015/01/12/obama\\_holder\\_refuse\\_to\\_join\\_unity\\_rally\\_-\\_reject\\_call\\_to\\_join\\_the\\_war\\_against\\_radical\\_islam](http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2015/01/12/obama_holder_refuse_to_join_unity_rally_-_reject_call_to_join_the_war_against_radical_islam)
- [4] <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2015/01/12/obama-awol-in-paris-message-to-america--allies-is-dont-care/>

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