

Language of conflict

War on terrorism - Observer special: <http://www.observer.co.uk/waronterrorism>
Guardian Unlimited special: terrorism crisis: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/terrorism>

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Every international crisis throws up its own lexicon, from the chummy phrasings and song-lines of the second world war to the cynical euphemisms of 'collateral damage' or 'ethnic cleansing'. These times are no different. Since the attacks, a number of words have began to stand out. (Interestingly, the events of that date were so huge that they do not yet have an easy shorthand title: no one has tried to coin the phrase Twintowergate, or even offered a basic Black Tuesday; most Americans refer to it as 'that Tuesday', or simply by the date itself: 11 September, 2001.)

Armageddon, apocalypse:

Apparently interchangeable terms normally used to denote the end of the world. Technically, Armageddon actually means the battle between good and evil which will accompany the end of the world, and apocalypse means a vision of that battle.

Asymmetric (or asymmetrical) warfare:

Previously used by military tacticians to mean, mainly, the actions of terrorist groups against superpowers; but changing now to mean also the attempts to fight back.

Ground zero:

The point of impact of a conventional missile or the point of detonation of an atomic device. Ground zero in this case is used to mean the rubble at the bases of where the twin towers stood.

Collateral damage:

Ironically, the term coined during the Gulf war to mean civilian casualties is now being used in its literal sense; numerous articles have used the phrase to denote the concomitant damage to the economy through the effect on shares, airlines, jobs etc.

Out of a clear blue sky:

Title of a popular song from 1950: probably the most overused phrase so far in reportage of the event, having appeared in almost all UK newspapers and many American publications.

Folks:

President George Bush's first gaffe of the crisis, since offered repeatedly by critics as evidence of a lack of sophistication. He used it on the first day when he spoke of his desire to 'hunt down and find these folks...' and compounded the hoedown image by speaking later of 'tinhorn terrorists'. Defenders point out that he is from Texas and that's how they speak. In any case, his performances since, particularly on Thursday, have been Churchillian.

Operation infinite justice:

Short-lived term to denote the US military plan to defeat bin Laden and terrorism. The name has now been dropped because of offensive connotations: 'infinite justice' is something which, to Islam, can only be meted out by Allah. Other operational names - Operation Infinite Reach and Operation Noble Eagle - have been toyed with and dropped.

Crusade:

What President Bush announced on Tuesday. The White House apologised for the term the next day, given that the crusades brought slaughter to thousands of innocent Arabs and Jews.

Jihad:

Technically, this means the struggle to do good, referring to a battle with the conscience over the right course of action at any point in life, menial or significant. It only came to be associated with the idea of a 'holy war' after the crusades.

The stone age:

Where Afghanistan should be bombed back to, according to some US commentators. The phrase was coined by General Curtis LeMay in the Sixties, who offered to 'bomb North Vietnam back to the stone age', and has since been used by the US military in relation to other figures such as Saddam Hussein. No politician has yet used it, probably advisedly.

War:

What we are either at, or not. 'Whatever the technical and legal issues about a declaration of war,' said Tony Blair last week, 'the fact is that we are at war with terrorism.' The fact is we have not been officially at war since 1945. War was never declared over the Falklands, or between America and Vietnam.