Red Terrorists, or Red, White and Blue Terrorists?
A Closer Look at How the Word "Terrorism" Was Applied to the Vietnam War

Tatiana Nigh
Agnes Scott College

"Terrorism" has become a familiar term in today's new stories, but is it being used properly? Has it ever? This paper examines elements of U.S. discourse during the Vietnam War to better understand how U.S. officials and media used the term 'terrorist' at the time. One excerpt of the Pentagon Papers is thoroughly examined, along with a conversation between President Lyndon B. Johnson and his national security advisor, and various media sources at the time. The review of these sources concludes that, while the term 'terrorism' was not legally misused in all contexts in the Pentagon Papers, there are instances in which it is misapplied by U.S. officials regarding the Vietnamese resistance. LBJ's conversation with advisor Bundy clearly states the U.S. political agenda to label the Vietnamese as 'terrorists' in order to increase waning domestic support for the invasion of Vietnam. With the President's political motives in mind, this paper concludes that the U.S. intentionally painted the Vietnamese resistance as 'terrorism' whether or not Vietnamese actions technically fulfilled the term. Although the Pentagon Papers admit no such thing, certain actions taken by U.S. military in targeting and killing civilians for political purposes does legally constitute terrorism. Overall, U.S. officials incorrectly applied the word 'terrorism' to the Vietnamese resistance and omitted the word 'terrorism' regarding U.S. actions during the Vietnam War. This calls into further question how the word 'terrorism' is currently being used or omitted by U.S. officials and media today.

In today's charged political climate, the word 'terrorism' is loaded with meaning and implication, largely dependent on who is using the term. Some, like the head of BBC Arabic, Tarik Kafala, argue that this heavy term is overused in media and policy publications without a proper clarification of its contextual definition.[1] Since its inception during the French Revolution in 1794, the word 'terrorism' has been used by various governments in times of war for hundreds of years.[2] Historical context allows theoreticians to examine the use of the word 'terrorism' by various governments in times of conflict to better understand how the term is used today. This paper argues that the word 'terrorism' was applied inaccurately by the U.S. government in various descriptions of the Vietnamese resistance as recorded in the Pentagon Papers during the Vietnam War. For the purposes of this paper, examples from only one document from the published Pentagon Papers will be extensively examined and quoted. Segments of President Lyndon B. Johnson's public statements and a transcript of a phone call between the President and his National Security Advisor, McGeorge Bundy, will also be analyzed. Because of the wide scope of the definitions of 'terrorism', various elements of terrorism and differing definitions from multiple U.S. government agencies are considered. While this paper finds that in many of the examined contexts both the U.S. military and the

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[1] David Shariatmadari, "Is it Time to Stop Using the Word 'Terrorist'?" *The Guardian*, 27 Jan 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/global/commentisfree/

2015/jan/27/is-it-time-to-stop-using-the-word-terrorist.
[2] Ibid.

Vietnamese resistance knowingly engaged in acts of selective and massive terror, it concludes that members of the Vietnamese resistance were more often incorrectly identified as terrorists by U.S. government officials.

While most U.S. history texts and media representations do not identify the Vietnamese resistance to the French invasions as 'terrorism,' the Vietnamese resistance to the U.S. government in the 1960s and 70s was widely referred to as 'terrorism' by U.S. government officials and even by American media.[3] Understanding the differing definitions of terrorism within the international community and between different U.S. governmental agencies is important in considering how the term was used in official U.S. documents during the Vietnam War.

International peace processes by the United Nations and other intergovernmental organizations have been challenged by the lack of a universally accepted definition of 'terrorism.' Extensive studies have been done on the definition of the word 'terrorism,' and only some agreements and common grounds have been reached. According to Schmid's and Jongman's study in 1988, common themes in the various definitions of 'terrorism' include the use of violence or force, the presence of political motivation, fear or terror, threat, and a consideration of the psychological effects and anticipated reactions.[4] Other elements that Schmid and Jongman see regularly in ideas of 'terrorism'

include the targeting of noncombatants, that immediate victims are not the intended targets, the perpetrators are not recognized combatants, 'terrorist' actions violate the rules of war and seek to inspire fear and ideological change instead of direct goals.[5]

Legal definitions of terrorism can differ even between U.S. government agencies. Some definitions exclude a government of being able to commit acts of terror, others require that the combatants not be affiliated with any military group; some exclude political assassination, other intentionally list it; some exonerate all parties during times of declared war, others mark that terrorist incidents increase during war-time. For example, in the Annual Country Reports on Terrorism, a report submitted by the U.S. Department of State to Congress, a more broad definition of 'terrorism' is used to maximize the committee's understanding of potential threats. 'Terrorism' is defined as "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents."[6] The FBI's definition of terrorism as outlined by the U.S. Department of Justice reads: "International terrorism involves violent acts or acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or any state [...] These acts appear to be intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population, influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion, or affect the conduct of a government by assassination or kidnapping."[7] This paper

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[3] "Pentagon Papers," National Archives, accessed 12 October 2017, https://www.archives.gov/research/pentagon-papers.

[4] "Terrorism: Concepts, Causes and Conflict Resolution," Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University, *Defense Threat Reduction Agency*, (Fort Belvoir, Virginia, January 2003) http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/dtra/terrorism_concepts.pdf, 6-11.

[5] Ibid.

[6] "Patterns of Global Terrorism 2003," *U.S. Department of State*, April 2004, https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/31932.pdf, xii.

[7] "Terrorism in the United States 1999: Thirty Years of Terrorism," *U.S. Department of Justice: Federal Bureau of Investigation,* 1999, file:///home/chronos/u-abb8be8feff15799ae86c5f8dfc92b2b776584f3/Downloads/terror99.pdf.

considers the wide scope of the definitions of 'terrorism' when evaluating its use by U.S. government officials in the Pentagon Papers.

Scholarly research and debate has taken place regarding communist intentions to engage in acts of terror during the Vietnam War. Hoàng Văn Chí, a Vietnamese scholar and member of the French Socialist Party during the 1930's, describes the "first wave of terror" from the communist authorities in his work *From Colonialism to Communism*.[8] He lists a series of "regular tortures" against North Vietnamese peasants to force complaints against General Võ Nguyên Giáp that began in 1953, and says that the communists planned to exonerate themselves from these activities by hiring "hard-core peasants who could not easily be identified with the party."[9] Contrarily, William J. Duiker, a former professor of East Asian History at Pennsylvania State University, concludes in his book *Vietnam: Nation in Revolution* that the Vietnamese resistance did not have plans to implement violent military tactics after the Geneva Convention in 1954, but that they aimed to achieve their political goals through political maneuvers.[10] According to Duiker, it was not until after 1959, after years of oppression from Diem's regime that the communist party committed to a more active militant role.[11] Similar to the scholarly debate on who first began using 'acts of terror,' Diem's regime or the Communist resistance, this paper finds government documents and transcripts from Vietnamese officials to also hold contrasting accounts.

The Pentagon Papers contain forty-one documents outlining various aspects of government dialogue and decisions during the Vietnam War.[12] For the purposes of this paper, only one document from the published Pentagon Papers, "Evolution of the War: Origins of the Insurgency", will be extensively examined and quoted. Examples of the correct use, misuse, and ambiguous use of the term "terrorism" are evident in each of the documents that make up the Pentagon Papers. However, it is important to note that the term 'terrorism' is used and misused in various circumstances within even one document of the Pentagon Papers.

Part IV. A. 5 of the Pentagon Papers, entitled "Evolution of the War: Origins of the Insurgency", covers 1954-1960 and was organized by the Vietnam Task Force of the Office of the Secretary of Defense.[13] In this 373 page document, I found that the term "terrorism" is used nine times; "terrorist(s)" is used fifteen times; and "terror" (as applied to politically motivated violence, not an synonym for 'fear') on its own or in other forms (like the word 'terroristically') is used twenty-six times.

There are circumstances in which the forms of the term 'terrorism' appear to be used with their correct legal and political definitions. The following quote describes forms of violence used against civilians to apply pressure to the United States' planted government in Saigon, which directly fits the definitions of 'terrorism' as outlined above by both the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Department of Justice. In quoting the work of former CIA member George A. Carver, the report reads:

> The terror was directed not only against officials but against all whose operations were essential to the functioning of organized political society, school

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[8] Hoàng Văn Chí, *From Colonialism to Communism: A Case History of North Vietnam*, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1964), 90-93.
[9] Ibid., 92.
[10] William J. Duiker, *Vietnam: Nation in Revolution*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1983) 53-55.
[11] Ibid., 54.

[12] "Pentagon Papers."
[13] "Evolution of the War: Origins of the Insurgency in South Vietnam, 1954–1960," The Pentagon Papers, Gravel Edition, Volume 1, Chapter 5, *National Archives*, https://nara-media-001.s3.amazonaws.com/arcmedia/research/pentagon-papers/Pentagon-Papers-Part-IV-A-5.pdf.

teachers, health workers, agricultural officials, etc. The scale and scope of this terrorist and insurrectionary activity mounted slowly and steadily. [14]

However, other uses of the term seem to contradict the definitions of 'terrorism' as outlined by the U.S. Departments of State and Justice. One instance is incompatibly described as both a combat and terrorist incident, where those killed were military combatants of both the U.S. military and the Army of Vietnam.

> On 8 July 1959, the United States armed forces sustained the first combat deaths in the war: two U.S. servicemen were killed by a terrorist bomb inside a U.S. compound at Bien Hoa. Other Viet Cong terrorist activities mounted to new levels of intensity. In the fall of 1959, as recounted above, communist guerrillas began to attack openly units of the Army of Vietnam, and to occupy province and district capitals for short periods. [15]

Another portion of "Evolution of the War: Origins of the Insurgency" suggests that the U.S. government anticipated that the Vietnamese resistance would turn to 'terrorism' if the communists did not win the election scheduled for July 1956[16]:

> Yet, as early as November, 1954, a National Estimate projected the likelihood that if -- contrary to expectations -- the communists should be denied a victory by political means on or before July 1956, they would turn to violent means, using their remaining

apparatus in the south for terrorism and guerrilla action and reinforcing it by infiltration.[17]

While the Geneva Accords were only signed in July of 1954, this segment of the Pentagon Papers suggests that in November, just four months later, the U.S. government (by means of a non-descript "National Estimate") predicted that the communists "would turn to violent means."[18]

Not only did official U.S. government documents use the term 'terrorism' outside of its legal and policy-based definitions in their reports, but government officials used the term in presenting the Vietnam War to the American public on multiple occasions.[19] On June 16th, 1966, President Lyndon B. Johnson described the war in Vietnam to the Pacification and Development Programs in Vietnam: "This is a war against misery and want, against insecurity and terrorism, and for better education, health, and welfare for the people of Vietnam."[20] His description of the Vietnam War as a war against 'terrorism' was a calculated political move, one suggested to him by his National Security Advisor, McGeorge Bundy. In a telephone conversation between Bundy and President Johnson on May 24th, 1964, Bundy suggests to President Johnson that if the war was "dramatized" as "Americans against terror", the public outlook of the war might be changed: "If we really dramatized this as Americans against terror and Americans keeping their commitment, and Americans

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[14] Ibid., 155.

[15] Ibid., 242.

[16] Marvin E. Gettleman, Jane Franklin, Marilyn B. Young and H. Bruce Franklin, eds., *Vietnam and America: The Most Comprehensive Documented History of the Vietnam War*, (New York: Grove Press 1995), 74.

[17] "Evolution of the War: Origins of the Insurgency in South Vietnam, 1954–1960," 280.

[18]Ibid.

[19] Lyndon B. Johnson, "Address on Vietnam Before the National Legislative Conference, San Antonio,

Texas," *The American Presidency Project*, 29 September 1967, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=28460; "President Johnson on the Vietnam War", C-SPAN, recorded 7 April 1965, https://www.c-span.org/video/?153274-1/reel-america-president-lyndon-johnson-vietnam-war-1965&start=61.

[20] "On This Day in History: June," LBJ Presidential Library, accessed 7 November 2017, http://www.lbjlibrary.net/collections/on-this-day-in-history/june.html.

who have only peace as their object [...] you might change the temper of it some."[21]

This conversation between LBJ and Bundy highlights the political motivation of the U.S. government in branding the Vietnamese resistance as 'terrorism'. By painting the presence of American military in Vietnam as a noble advance against communist 'terrorism', LBJ and his administration hoped to gain support from the American public for their efforts in Vietnam. The wide range of uses of the word 'terrorism' within "Evolution of the War: Origins of the Insurgency," some of which contradict the legal definitions of 'terrorism' (as outlined by the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Department of Justice), illustrate that U.S. officials were not concerned with using the term 'terrorism' according to its legal definition. According to this phone call between President Johnson and Bundy, U.S. officials were more concerned with using the word 'terrorism' to garner domestic support for their presence in Vietnam.

The casual use of 'terrorism' was not only used by U.S. officials in government documents and public statements, it was also used by U.S. media.[22] On July 10th, 1959, the *New York Times* reported that "a small band of terrorists [...] attacked an American Army billet". The article claims that the timing of the attack is "part of a global plan" to undermine American activity after the U.S. opposes communism in Berlin, Quemoy and Matsu. Despite the controversy of whether killing soldiers in a billet is considered terrorism, the article refers to the perpetrators of the attack as 'terrorists' twice.[23]

The descriptions of violence committed by the Vietnamese resistance, at times against Vietnamese civilians, show that at least some of the incidents referred to as acts of terror by U.S. officials and U.S. media do fit the international ideas of terrorism and the U.S. government's definitions of terrorism. Individuals within the the Communist movement in Vietnam did admit to some terrorist activity in public statements. In a statement to other members of the communist party in 1956, Vietnamese General Võ Nguyên Giáp admitted that the party "attacked on too large a front and, seeing enemies everywhere, resorted to terror, which became far too widespread."[24] While certain uses of the term 'terrorism' in the Pentagon Papers are vague, problematic, or straightforwardly incorrect according to legal definitions of terrorism, there is little doubt that the Vietnamese forces did engage in acts of terror at certain points of the Vietnam War.

In his work "The Vietnamese Communist Movement Revisited," published in 1979, Vietnamese scholar and former professor at Cornell University, Kim Khánh Huỳnh describes the differences between 'selective terrorism' and 'massive terrorism' as used by the Communist movement in Vietnam:

> [Communist terrorism] is considered as a highly refined political weapon designed to fester unseen from within, to soften resistance to the enemy that can be seen and set the stage for the complete collapse of the target against which it is directed. "Selective terrorism"- killing a corrupted village chief in one place, public warnings to the village sheriff in another

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[21] "Telephone Conversation Between President Johnson and the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) Washington, May 27, 1964, 11:24 a.m." U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, Accessed 7 November 2017. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v27/d53.

[22] Peter Groses, "M'Namara Called Terrorist Target," *New York Times*, 11 May 1964, ProQuest Historical

Newspapers; "Terrorist Kill 25 During Voting: Vietcong Incidents Reported in 21 of 43 Provinces Polling Places Blasted Attacks", *New York Times,* 04 September 1967, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

[23] "Atrocity in Vietnam," *New York Times*, 10 July 1959, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

[24] "Evolution of the War: Origins of the Insurgency in South Vietnam, 1954–1960," 11

place, etc. - according to this view, is designed to create social tensions to set the stage for political exploitation and propaganda. Also, when the situation requires, massive terrorism would replace selective terrorism. For examples of communist political violence, those who hold this view bring to mind the incidents of the 1940s, 1950s and the so-called "Hue Massacre."[25]

The Hue Massacre describes the occupation of the city of Hue by the National Liberation Front (NLF) during the Tet Offensive in 1968.[26] American reports estimate that the Communist resistance in Hue killed approximately 2,810 civilians who were suspected of supporting the American troops.[27] Supporters of American interference in Vietnam used the Hue Massacre as an example "of the inevitable bloodbath of a Communist victory."[28]

But the Communist resistance was not the only party to engage in both selective and massive acts of terror. More famous and more controversial than the Hue Massacre is the My Lai Massacre of 1968.[29] Details of the My Lai Massacre were originally covered up, and some even blamed the Communist party for the death of over 400 civilians in a matter of hours in My Lai.[30] Eventually coming to light and even going to court in the United States, it was eventually disclosed that the annihilation of My Lai was ordered by U.S. military officials and completed by U.S. Army soldiers.[31] While mostly described as a 'massacre' rather than an act of terror, the My

Lai Massacre partially fits the U.S. Department of State's definition for terrorism. It was "premeditated, politically motivated violence" that was "perpetrated against noncombatant targets". The only criteria it does not meet: it was performed by a national military, instead of "by subnational groups or clandestine agents." According to the broad and imprecise way that 'terrorism' is used in the Pentagon Papers to describe actions by the NLF and Communist resistance, 'terrorists' can also be applied to the American soldiers who murdered civilians at My Lai. If the Hue Massacre amounts to massive terrorism, the My Lai Massacre does as well.

But even before the My Lai Massacre, U.S. actions in Vietnam were being described as 'terrorism'. In 1965, Comrade Minister Nguyen Minh-Tien described American involvement in Vietnam as "acts of terror" to his fellow Communist members:

> Beyond this, [the Americans] terrorized the masses very gruesomely. The masses could not forever bear such acts of terror, therefore they rose up to fight the aggressors....At first only political battles were conducted – but with political battle alone, one cannot fight against terror. The Americans, as well as their South Vietnamese lackeys, have continued to kill the people.[32]

Nguyen Minh-Tien's description here implies that the Communist movement adopted tactics to match their "aggressors" and that they felt forced to escalate their

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[25] Kim Khánh Huỳnh, "The Vietnamese Communist Movement Revisited", *Southeast Asian Affairs*, (1976), 449-450.
[26] David L. Anderson, The Columbia Guide to the Vietnam War (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 97-99.
[27] Ibid., 99.
[28] Marilyn Young, The Vietnam Wars: 1945-1990 (New York: Harper Collins Publisher, 1991), 217.
[29]Anderson, 98.

[30] "Nation: On the Other Side: Terror As Policy," *Time Magazine*, 5 December 1969 Accessed 12 October 2017. http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171, 901626,00.html?promoid=googlep.
[31] Anderson, 98.
[32] "Memorandum of a Meeting of Minister Erich Mielke with Nguyen Minh Tien on 13 December 1965," Wilson Center Digital Archive. Accessed 7 November 2017. http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/1207 19

activities from "political battles" to a "fight against terror." However, the U.S. administration also claims that they adopted extreme techniques during the Vietnam War to match the Vietnamese in their "organization and operational tactics, especially terrorism":

> With a few notable exceptions, U.S. officials and experts at the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, at the State Department, at the Rand Corporation and other think tanks decided that the communists' secret lay in their organization and operational tactics, especially terrorism. Therefore, appropriate counter-measures should be developed to meet with this threat….This what-is-good-enough-for-them-is-good-enough-for-us mentality was reflected in the U.S. and South Vietnam's conscious but crude and devastating imitation of what was supposed to be the Viet Cong's organizational techniques.[33]

Whether the Vietnamese or U.S. forces were the first to use 'acts of terror' in Vietnam has inspired some academic research. In his work "Towards a New Moral History of the Vietnam War?" Kendrick Oliver, historian and professor at the University of Southampton, assesses the "chronologies of the insurgency" between 1955-1960, and concludes that Diem's regime, planted by the U.S. government, began the use of "terror programmes" to quell the Vietnamese resistance.[34] He lists "policies of the Diem regime" that hold "a disposition towards the violent elimination of opposition" and says that "most authoritative chronologies of the insurgency now register the government's counter-revolutionary terror programmes as having actually preceded the adoption of a

systematic assassination policy by communist party cadres."[35]

Other examples of American 'terrorism' in Vietnam have been recorded. Huỳnh, having earlier described the use of 'selective terrorism' by the Vietnamese, also describes 'selective terrorism' as used by U.S. forces. Huỳnh specifically cites the Phoenix programme "which sought through "selective terrorism" to destroy the NFL infrastructure".[36]

Historian Mark W. McLeod of the University of Delaware records several examples of U.S. Special Forces using terrorist tactics to "obtain compliance."

> Like the NLF, Special Forces groups resorted to coercion or terror to obtain compliance when necessary. Wilfred Burchett reports that pro-NLF highlanders told him that Special Forces operatives threatened their villages with forcible relocation to be carried out by the ARVN if they did not join the program. And William Rust confirms that Special Forces teams sometimes used the "stick" of ARVN if the "carrot" of material and social benefits proved ineffective. Condominas also reported cases of torture inflicted by Special Forces operatives on Mnong Gar highlanders to punish them for communicating with relatives in NLF-controlled zones.[37]

In "Evolution of the War: Origins of the Insurgency", U.S. officials do not refer to their own terrorist activities, but they do record that the NLF refer to their "terror operations": "On July 20, 1962, the anniversary of the Geneva Accords, the NLF issued a declaration that: [...] The South Vietnam authority that is, government must end its terror operations."[38] In the same

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[33] Huỳnh, 450.

[34] Oliver, Kendrick. "Towards a New Moral History of the Vietnam War?" *The Historical Journal* vol. 47, no. 3 (2004), 757–774.

[35] Ibid., 766.

[36] Huỳnh, 448.

[37] McLeod, Mark W. "Indigenous Peoples and the Vietnamese Revolution, 1930-1975," *Journal of World History* 10, no. 2 (1999), 379.

[38] "Evolution of the War: Origins of the Insurgency in South Vietnam, 1954–1960," 164.

document, the NLF are also recorded, in response to the Phu Loi Massacre, as describing Saigon's administration as a "regime of terror and massacre set up by Ngo Dinh Diem in the south of our country at the behest of the U.S. imperialists."[39]

President Johnson and his administration attempted to paint American interference in Vietnam as Americans fighting terror, and, in some ways, they were successful. The use of 'terrorism' in the Pentagon Papers, as examined in "Evolution of the War: Origins of the Insurgency", shows a casual (but prominent) use of the term 'terrorist' to describe the Vietnamese resistance with a disregard for legal meaning(s) of the term. Despite "Evolution of the War: Origins of the Insurgency" not using 'acts of terror' to describe the American military's actions in Vietnam, the actions of U.S. forces in Vietnam have been called into question and even described as forms of terrorism by the NLF (during the Vietnam War) and by historians and scholars since the Vietnam War.

The debated definitions of the term 'terrorism', especially during times of war, make the use of the term to describe the NLF or the U.S. forces potentially problematic. However, while both the U.S. and the Communist fighters engaged in acts of terror, U.S. terrorism in Vietnam is underrepresented in the Pentagon Papers and U.S. media. In contrast, descriptions of Vietnamese terrorism are very common and are even inaccurately applied by U.S. officials in the Pentagon Papers. Since both the U.S. and the Vietnamese claim to use acts of terror in response to the other's violence, further research should be conducted by historians to establish the chronology of violence and decision making throughout the 1950's and 1960's in Vietnam.

The use of the terms "terrorist" and "terrorism" as applied, publicly and confidentially, correctly and incorrectly, by the United States to the Vietnamese resistance impacted American citizens perspectives of the Vietnamese people and the war in Vietnam. A word such as 'terrorism' carries a lot of power. It should be used sparingly, intentionally, and responsibly by all citizens, but by government officials especially. The casual and inaccurate use of this term by U.S. government officials is concerning. How has this impacted our current understanding of what it means to be a 'terrorist'?

The word 'terrorism,' despite the uncertainties surrounding its definition, continues to be used (and perhaps misused) today. This is why policy makers and members of the media call for a change in the terms we use to describe people who embody government opposition.[40] The dialogue surrounding the use of the words 'terrorist' and 'terrorism' in recent years suggests that we have not learned from our mistakes in Vietnam (and many other places) as we continue to use the word 'terrorism' to describe many different political activities.

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[39] Ibid., 219.

[40] David Shariatmadari.