

The Press (Christchurch, New Zealand) Terrorism Mastermind

Visiting terrorism expert Michael Stohl says the world is getting safer, not more dangerous.

By Philip Matthews
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Media studies, the short version. In the ground floor entrance of the modernist building that houses the media, communication and journalism programme at the University of Canterbury, someone has tacked up a small grey poster.

Across the top of the poster, the masthead of the Times newspaper. Underneath that, a series of crossed-out topics: Y2K, bird flu, global warming, Sars, terrorism. Two more subjects wait their turn to be taken off history's list: swine flu, the recession. Then the punchline: "Hysteria, it sells". It's the kind of insight that would occur to any undergrad who just spent two or three minutes dipping into Nick Davies' book *Flat Earth News*. Six floors up, Michael Stohl has a much more nuanced view.

Professor and chair of the department of communication at the University of California, Santa Barbara, Stohl has spent the past month as a guest lecturer and researcher at Canterbury. He's been taking students and staff through the academic work he's been engaged in since the 1970s: studies of political communication and terrorism, human rights and failed states. For four decades, he's been picking over the west's most explosive topics.

If you wanted a celebrity endorsement, you could say this: Stohl is the expert that political commentator Noam Chomsky deferred to after September 11, 2001, for his knowledge of how terrorism works. As the US declared a war on terror, Chomsky became fond of quoting Stohl's line that "the threat of the use of force is usually described as coercive diplomacy and not a form of terrorism" even though it involves "the threat and often the use of violence for what would be described as terroristic purposes were it not great powers who were pursuing the very same tactic". In other words, this is the "state terrorism" that has been one of Stohl's areas of interest. In essence, Stohl explains, terrorism is political communication. It exists for audiences and needs the oxygen of media coverage. It is not violence in and of itself but violence that makes a point or airs a grievance. It needs global media. As Stohl says, it was no coincidence that Palestinian terrorism began spreading into Europe in the late 60s and early 70s, exactly when media developed the capacity to broadcast live. Until airliners hit the Twin Towers, the "Black September" attack on the 1972 Olympics in Munich was the world's most widely seen live terror event.

So the way that the media reports and analyses terrorism is crucial. Picking up on an idea from legendary American journalist Walter Lippmann, Stohl is interested in the "framing" of stories: what kind of world do people conjure up in their heads while reading newspaper stories? When it comes to terrorism, what does the frame look like? Who provides it?

Breaking it down to specifics, Stohl and a colleague analysed media coverage before and after the "7/7" bombings that killed 52 commuters in London in 2005. They looked at three American newspapers - the Wall Street Journal, the LA Times and the New York Times. And they looked at three British papers - the Times, the Independent and the Guardian. Each group of three crossed the left- right spectrum. But the differences between the two countries were more marked than differences between conservatives and liberals within each country.

The UK's authority figures and official sources were framing it as a Scotland Yard issue, a domestic crime, and so that's how the papers covered it. The Americans reported it as another instalment in the war on terror, as it was for President Bush and senior officials. No Democrat could be found to disagree with that view. And as news stories are essentially debates among recognised elites, Stohl says, the perspective of a figure like Chomsky doesn't get a look in. "Chomsky's disagreed with a lot of things that have happened in the past decade," Stohl says. "How many times do you think he appears in the mainstream press? Even though they know he's a great quote, he just doesn't get invited. That skews the things people think about."

Stohl sees that American readers were left with a sense of terror as more organised and far-reaching than it really was. Which distorted their view of possible causes and appropriate responses.

"Every bombing in this period was seen as part of this wider story of the war on terror. It was seen as international, all- connected, not having local roots.

"Almost all that we know about terrorism over time is that while there are people who think in those global terms, they generally want to focus on issues that are much more local. Even al Qaeda, which Bush claimed and Dick Cheney still claims is an existential threat that's out to destroy civilisation, has been very clear about their goals."

Those goals: the US out of Saudi Arabia, the destruction of Israel, the of apostate states in the Middle East. Not likely to happen in this or any other lifetime but local and specific goals nonetheless.

Even Stohl's Wikipedia page has him defined as critical of how the Bush administration understood international terror. For Stohl and others, there were eight long years of wrong thinking. Not exactly news to us, but Stohl is good on the how and why of that wrong thinking. Was it opportunistic for Bush and Cheney to paint al Qaeda as more global and more organised than they really were? Stohl: "I think it was opportunistic but that they actually believed what they said. They were opportunistic in the sense that they used it. But I don't think they were lying. They had a view of the world that made it easy to see those connections. They had no respect for the local context so they couldn't distinguish between somebody doing something for some mythical, overarching Islamic crusade as opposed to this group of people not being able to stand this government."

Again, an issue of framing. Because Bush and Cheney sat within a command and control model, they assumed that their enemy occupied the same model. That there were chains of command, generals and lieutenants, a masterplan orchestrated from one point. But the reality of terrorism is closer to crime: there might be convenient relationships and information links, but not necessarily direct influence or control from one group to another.

We see this through history, Stohl says. Go back to the 1960s and 1970s when terrorism broke out simultaneously in Germany, France, Italy, Palestine and elsewhere. Sometimes those groups collaborated and sometimes their goals overlapped, but mostly it was the independent flowering of similar issues in different places. Go back even further, to the European revolutions of 1848, and you see the same thing: nationalist uprisings in one country after another, but not a conspiracy. Stohl's view is that we would do well to see Islamic terror in the same way. That it would be constructive to see terror as crime not war. In this sense, he was encouraged by Barack Obama acting to close the detention centre at Guantanamo Bay within the first few days of his presidency. At Canterbury, Stohl gave a talk about the difference Obama has made. His intention to treat terror as a legal problem is a big part of that.

"I don't think it's trivial to say that we're going to respect the Geneva Conventions henceforth, for example. That's very important in terms of public opinion, both at home and abroad."

But he is less impressed by the new administration's view of terror networks. It doesn't seem to differ from the old one. Bush's defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld talked imaginatively of al Qaeda being in 60 countries. Stohl hasn't seen any statement from Obama to contradict that. The big new terror threat being talked up by some in the west is Somalia's al Shabaab, who are inevitably described as al Qaeda linked. It would be easy to get the sense that the world is a more dangerous place for random western civilians than it has even been before. But there has actually been less change across the decades than we might think, Stohl says.

September 11 is the outlier, the only terror event in which thousands were killed. Stohl thinks it's unlikely that even al Qaeda thought it would be as successful as it was, but even if only those on the planes had died, it would still have been a spectacular strike.

The typical terror event is much smaller. If you take out the spike in terror attacks within Iraq in the years after 2003, you find that most attacks have no fatalities. More than 70 to 80 per cent have zero to one fatality. Most are bombings of property.

While there have been a few high- profile events this decade, there is generally less international terrorism now than there used to be. Stohl says that the peaks would be the late 1960s and the 1980s but even then, within the period 1968 to 2001, there were about 11,000 events worldwide with less than 11,000 dead. In other words, despite the heated rhetoric, the world is generally safer than it used to be. Stohl: "That's a very different perspective to what people think actually happened."

Caption: "Terrorism is political conversation." The remaining tower of New York's World Trade Center dissolves in dust and debris on September 11, 2001. Picture: REUTERS
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