

# CXV – What the 'Struggle' Is All About

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By Butler Shaffer

Ever since our resident emperor announced his War on Terror, I have insisted that this campaign had less to do with confronting terrorism — an effort that would have implicated the United States' use of the practice — than with forcibly resisting the peaceful decentralizing processes that threaten the established institutional order. (See, for example, [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).) Social systems are moving from vertically-structured to horizontally-networked models, a transformation that bodes ill for the political and economic establishment. Some three years ago I suggested naming this conflict the War for the Preservation of Institutional Hierarchies. If a shorter name is preferred, how about the War for the Status Quo?

The Bush administration has finally confirmed my point. Showing the same irresoluteness that kept shifting the rationale for the war against Iraq, the White House has now changed the name of the conflict that was, according to Mr. Bush, to last forever. The War on Terror is now redesignated the Global Struggle Against Extremism! No announcement has been made as to who won the war that was as magisterially ended as it had begun. Nor is there any explanation as to why the administration has deviated from White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card's previous political marketing advice: you don't introduce a new product in August. The War on Terror has been meeting with increased consumer sales resistance, leaving those who trade in death and destruction to come out with new and larger repackaging.

Neither the people of Iraq nor American soldiers will notice any change in their daily lives, of course. The killing and destruction will continue, but under a different rationale. Have you observed how quickly the media and politicians incorporated the new terminology into their public liturgies, substituting the word extremism where terrorism was once employed? Well-trained actors are quick to adjust to script changes.

But does this amount to nothing more than a semantic change, or is a substantive transformation occurring? Terrorism has historically been tied to the use of violence – whether threatened or carried out – in order to intimidate people into meeting certain demands. The Reign of terror during the French Revolution was distinguished by its repeated use of the guillotine to carry out executions. Most Americans are too cowardly to acknowledge that their government engages in the use of terror, but they will at least recognize the interconnectedness of terror and violence.

But what is meant by u201Cextremism,u201D against which the government announces its current u201Cstruggle?u201D One prominent dictionary offers the definition: u201Cexceeding the ordinary, usual, or expectedu201D; with an additional meaning u201Csituated at the farthest possible point from a center.u201D Extremism, in other words, amounts to a pronounced deviation from an established norm or point of reference.

You will note, at once, that neither violence nor destructiveness — which go to the essence of terrorism's meaning — is implicit in the concept u201Cextremism.u201D In terms of destructiveness, Joseph Stalin represented an extreme deviation from ordinary human behavior. If creative genius is being considered, Thomas Edison was likewise an extremist. Without knowing anything more, the concept of u201Cextremismu201D tells us absolutely nothing about the desirability of a particular course of conduct.

But it is just such ambiguity that makes the government's campaign against extremism so terribly dangerous. Who or what will be looked upon as significant deviations from the u201Cordinaryu201D to justify intrusions by the state? And what meaning are we to attach to the government declaring that this is no longer a u201Cwaru201D but a u201Cstruggle?u201D War conjures up systematic violence, although Americans have a penchant for labeling many government programs u201Cwarsu201D: the u201Cwar on poverty,u201D u201Cwar on drugs,u201D or u201Cwar on domestic violenceu201D being but a few. u201CStrugglesu201D are more unclear as to meaning. Who hasn't struggled to lose weight, maintain a household, or learn to operate a computer? A u201Cstruggleu201D sounds less forceful than a u201Cwar,u201D but if the state is involved, is one any less brutal than the other? If we call something by a different name, does it become something different? Did we derive nothing more from George Orwell than being amused by talking farm animals?

Contrary to first impressions, the established order is not simply playing pointless words games at our expense. There is a deeper, singular objective in the u201CWar on Terroru201D that has now morphed into the u201CGlobal Struggle Against Extremism.u201D That purpose lies in the endless challenge to institutionalism posed by the continuing processes of change that are implicit in the life process.

We are social beings who have learned the productive benefits of a division of labor that arises from organizing our energies with one another. Organizations begin as tools to facilitate the cooperation of individuals seeking their mutual self-interests. As long as the organization remains flexible, creative, receptive to change, and respectful of the primacy of the individual interests whose purposes gave it birth, it will likely retain its life-sustaining vibrancy.

Having created successful organizations, however, there is a tendency for those associated with such systems to want to make them permanent. When this occurs, the organization is transformed into an institution and becomes an end in itself, to be protected against the

vicissitudes of change. Social practices that once thrived on spontaneity and resilience, soon become structured and rigid. The continuation of such institutionalizing thinking and practices has led to the collapse of a number of prior civilizations.

An institutionally-dominated society is built on standardized practices, goods and services, and thinking. In order to restrain the inconstant turbulence of an energized, creative, and competitive marketplace, established corporate interests have turned to the state to foster standardized investment and employment policies; standardized products; and standardized advertising and other trade practices. Schools have contributed to the agenda for uniformity with standardized curricula, standardized teaching methods, and standardized testing, all of which combine to produce standardized people with standardized minds ready to take their places in a standardized world.

Entry into various trades and professions is restricted by licensing requirements — created and enforced by those already in the trade or profession — that require adherence to standardized codes of behavior. Thought and speech are subject to standardization requirements: political correctness being but another institutionally-serving tool for enforcing a uniform mindset upon people. Not even the most private forms of behavior are beyond the reach of the standards police, as smokers, fast-food gourmets, and the obese are now discovering.

If one were to have recourse to solid geometry for analogies to social systems, an institutionally-dominated society would resemble a pyramid, with authority centered in the hands of a few at the top, and the bulk of humanity responding to the directions issued vertically and unilaterally. A society characterized by individual liberty, on the other hand, might appear as a sphere. On the surface of a sphere, there are no preferred locations, no positions from which power would be more likely to flow than others. Spherically-based relationships would take the form of interconnected networks, with neither tops nor bottoms.

I have written a great deal about the decentralizing processes of change that are challenging the centralized authority of institutions. In the realm of politics, nationalist and secessionist movements upset the centralizing ambitions of Leviathan; while centrally-directed wars are being countered by amorphous guerilla tactics, insurgencies, and suicide-bombings. Alternative schools and health care practices challenge established education, medical, and pharmaceutical interests. There is an increasing reluctance on the part of some state and local governments to abide by federal mandates. The institutional order is, perhaps, most threatened by what could be called a big bang in the information revolution reignited by Gutenberg. The Internet, cell-phones, iPods, websites and blogsites, are just the more recent tools available not only to institutions, but to individuals desirous of communicating directly with tens of thousands at a time. In these new technologies and systems lie the means by which the vertical is collapsing into the horizontal.

Do you see the threat in all of this to centralized, institutionalized, command-and-control systems? If preserving established interests becomes a societal value, then anything that threatens the status quo is a danger to be opposed. Those who represent the change essential to any vibrant, productive society, must be marginalized before they can be destroyed. History is replete with examples of men and women being labeled u201Ccheretics,u201D u201Dseditionists,u201D u201Dterrorists,u201D u201Dradicals,u201D u201Dcounter-revolutionaries,u201D u201Dpossessed,u201D u201Dtraitors,u201D or u201Dextremists,u201D and then being punished — or killed — for voicing opinions that deviated from a sacred center. Socrates, Jesus, Joan of Arc, Martin Luther, Copernicus, Galileo, Gandhi, and Wilhelm Reich, are just a few names that come to mind. Nor does this list contain the names of other u201Dwitchesu201D and u201Dchereticsu201D hanged or burned at the stake for offending the established order of their day.

There is a decided shift in arbitrariness in moving from u201Dterrorismu201D to u201Dextremismu201D as targets of governmental action. Because most people relate u201Dterroru201D to u201Dviolence,u201D it might be expected that a u201DWar on Terroru201D would focus on coercive, intimidating, or otherwise destructive acts. But u201Dextremism,u201D as I have pointed out, is a much more abstract concept. Like such constitutional phrases as u201Dgeneral welfare,u201D u201Dcommon defense,u201D and u201Ddomestic tranquility,u201D u201Dextremismu201D can become whatever those in power want it to become. This, I believe, is precisely the reason the word is now being introduced to give purpose to the further regimentation of society!

In our vertically-structured world, the institutional order is — by definition — the u201Dcenteru201D from which to measure the substantial deviations that represent u201Dextremism.u201D Because the Internet allows for the open, unrestrained flow of information, it provides a challenge to the centralized control of facts and ideas. Because people's thinking is thus moved away from the center, the Internet will become an u201Dextremistu201D system with which the state must deal. The cliché is already in place: u201Dsince anyone can put anything out on the Internet, how do we know what to believe? u201D That major media outlets have been caught up in their own distorted, exaggerated, and falsified reports, while a president and his advisors routinely lie to the public, it would seem appropriate to suggest that everyone ought to question every bit of information presented to them, whatever the source.

The free flow of information and ideas has always been the principal force for the dispersion of power that defines a free society. If power is to be kept at the center — which is where the established order has always insisted it remain — information must be restricted. State officials will tell you all that they want you to know and that you need to know — which, in their view, amounts to the same thing. The government will expand its means of obtaining information about you — whether from surveillance, spying, computer records, wiretaps, RFID tags, etc. — while keeping information about itself from your

awareness (all in the interest of national security, of course). Censorship, resort to classified information, and appeals to media responsibility will be looked upon as necessary to the maintenance of social order. Computer hackers (i.e., those who do unto the state what the state insists on doing to you); political commentary that deviates from the Republicratic bipartisan center; and organized opposition to any form of the New World Order will become other expressions of extremism.

Politicians and the media will remind us that efforts to preserve the center from outward collapse, and the campaign to defend the status quo from the forces of change, are necessary to save civilization. The terrorist who drives a truckload of explosives into a Baghdad police station will gradually morph into the extremist who defends the medical use of marijuana — a health-care alternative that would be contrary to the interests of a medical establishment with its standardized treatments. The terrorist who attacks a subway will soon become indistinguishable, in the popular mind, from an extremist journalist who reveals the underside of politics in America. Given the eagerness of most Americans to absorb government lies into their definitions of reality, members of the established order may believe their task will be a relatively simple one. The question is whether you and I will remain astute enough to make the clear distinctions upon which a rational life depends.

But it is not civilization that the political order seeks to save in its Global Struggle Against Extremism, but its own privileges of power. For centuries, institutions have been at war with the life processes that thrive in conditions of individual liberty, spontaneity, and creative change. Inquisitions, heresy trials, and the persecution of witches, have proven to be embarrassments to institutionalized systems which, in the end, were unable to fully repress the human spirit. The current establishment's efforts are designed not to preserve civilization, but to petrify it in antiquated forms. As in the earlier cases of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions, the life force will, like a dammed up river, ultimately break through the barriers designed to restrain the energies against which institutions have always fought.

[The Best of Butler Shaffer](#)

