BE ALERT, NOT ALARMED
Governmental communication of risk in an era of insecurity

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Presented at
The Annual Meeting of the Australian and New Zealand Communication Association
Christchurch, New Zealand
4-7 July 2005
Abstract
Part of the Australian government’s domestic contribution to the global ‘war on terror’ is the ongoing ‘Be Alert, Not Alarmed’ campaign. The $15 million advertising and public relations initiative was intended to inform an increasingly insecure nation of how to report potential terrorist activities to appropriate authorities. The pervasive ambiguity that surrounds this campaign suggests much about the political benefits and effects associated with governmental communication of risk.

Government communication often highlights state reliance on the oppositional discourse of threat and protection. The projection of fearful ‘realities’ are balanced with the state’s evidence of its ability to control the unanticipated. Yet, in this constructed ‘drama of the everyday’, audiences receive no indication of what to ‘be alert’ for, nor why these advertisements are needed if there is nothing to be alarmed about.

Risks are strategically deployed at politically beneficial times to legitimise the actions of incumbent authorities. Government communications strategies are produced to elicit social acceptance of these actions through the presentation of idealised narratives of individuals working within a collective national identity to defeat ‘terror’.

This paper will draw upon the ‘Be Alert, Not Alarmed’ campaign to theorise the effects of risk communication in an era of ‘media-ted’ global insecurity. The discourse of insecurity needs to be understood in light of its social constructed-ness. The control and strategic manipulation of the form, timing and valuing of information is a powerful method of creating a hegemonic discourse. The precarious balance between discourses of threat and control is an indispensable tool to a neo-conservative government intent on enhancing the justifiability of a ‘war on terror’.

Introduction
It is a sad fact that since the terrorist attacks on September 11...we live in a more dangerous world.

Prime Minister John Howard, introduction to National Security Information booklet

Since those dramatic acts of political violence in the United States, the discourse of global insecurity has become so pervasive that the threat of terrorism is now an accepted part of our cultural vernacular. Within this apparently more dangerous world, state authorities have become the accepted mediators of the representation and response to perceived threats of terrorism. In rethinking its national security practices, the Australian government has enlisted the assistance of ‘ordinary Australians’ to provide authorities with information on potential terrorist activity. The 24-hour Australian National Security Hotline acts as a single contact point for Australians to report security issues to police, security or military-trained personnel, who pass the relevant information to state or Commonwealth agencies for assessment and response (Attorney General’s Department, 2004). Special ‘information kits’ were also sent to homes containing a fridge magnet with the National Security Hotline phone numbers, a 20-page booklet about Australia’s emergency procedures and how individuals could increase public safety, and an open letter to Australians from the Prime Minister. In the initial promotions campaign for the hotline—one of the only advertising campaigns that the Prime Minister has directly supervised—Australians were urged to ‘be alert but not alarmed’, and to use suspicion judiciously to stop the threat of terrorism from disrupting the maintenance of Australia’s traditionally free and open society. The ironic promotion of suspicion to maintain
freedom has become a prevalent theme in the Australian government’s communication of political insecurity. Indeed, examination of the production, dissemination and communication of risks is particularly useful in registering what certain cultures present as a threat to ideologies of nation and thus, what actions authorities legitimate to create security.

The implication of the collective nation’s primal fears has become the most prioritised factor in mandating state response to security risks. In the arm wrestle of rational and reflex actions, government communications have reflected the need for individual vigilance—and subsequently for violence—as a truly unified nation’s only option in the ‘war on terror’ (White, 2004). This increasingly personalised representation of national identity has manifested in social understandings of the ‘era of insecurity’ as a need to act instinctively, establishing the right to suspicion through legitimation of personal risk. As Gramsci’s writing on hegemony suggests the maintenance of social order is achieved through the strategic management of understanding of self through national interest (in Lewis, 2002, p. 134). The naturalised hegemony of consensus, thus, neutralises dissent and instils the values, beliefs and cultural meanings of the state into generalised social structures (Lewis, 2002, p. 135). More recently, communication studies have focussed on the currency that differing modes of representation have in producing relationships and understandings between state, the media and government. The Be Alert, Not Alarmed campaign, and the bestowal of everyday paraphernalia as security objects, suggests the ongoing domestication of suspicion. That security can emanate from the domestic procedures and objects of the everyday, like fridge magnets, suggests a re-presentation of the discourse of Australian community, where an ‘era of insecurity’ warrants mistrust being celebrated as a ‘natural’ course of action within a more vigilant nation.

Control of communication, its dissemination and associated meaning is a long exploited method of generating consent (Lewis, 2002, p. 79). Throughout history, state authorities have manipulated the use of fear for political gain. Bishop and Phillips use the example of Bosnian dictator Enver Hoxha, who staged fake air strikes over Tirana long after the Second World War had ended to continually instil a fearful sense of emergency in his citizens (2002, p. 93) However, the Cold War remains one of the best known and most widely examined periods of government-manipulated communications strategies. The Eisenhower administration redefined America’s propaganda mission, reducing the number of official state channels that openly identified with government policy, while increasing covert information operations both domestically and overseas (Cone, 1998, p. 149). The administration was one of the first to strategically implement the ‘psychological implication’ they recognised in the communication of diplomatic, economic and military policy (Parry-Giles, 1994, p. 264). They differentiated their policies from the ‘propagandistic’ Soviet state by assuming a more positive, patriotic tone and disseminated ‘news’ or ‘information’, rather than the more combative propaganda of the Truman era (Parry-Giles, 1994, p. 264).

In more recent times, the use of public relations has continued to allow state authorities to present policy in the form of ‘community information’. Similarly, the Australian
government described the Be Alert, Not Alarmed campaign as ‘practical and useful information’ (Todd, 2003, p. 10), created as a non-politicised discourse of national importance. Nonetheless, the information contained within the campaign about anti-terrorism policies has shown state determination to frame national security around highly constructed representations of risk. If the existence and distribution of risks are mediated in principle through the influence of arguments, the magnitude of political risks depends on the quality of social processes that bring understanding of risk—that is, its communication and normative processes (Beck, 1992, p. 34). Insecurity is not a physical manifestation of danger but, through risks, a socially produced and communicated form of ideological currency to influence consent. Risks, therefore, are problems constructed by authorities in order to be solved. Governments obtain powerful benefits by representing themselves as the sole, morally justified champion against global threat. It is the production of insecurity that allows risks to perpetuate in a continually beneficial way. The presentation of risks—and their apparent solutions—is a necessary part of a state process that communicates ideals of collective national identity and thus, legitimates particular responses to omnipresent, yet illusory manifestations of insecurity.

At the time of launching the Be Alert, Not Alarmed campaign, officials like Federal Police Commissioner Mick Keelty suggested that Australia would be an ‘inevitable’ target of terrorism (Das, 2002, p. 13). In communicating this sense of present and future risk, the potential for hazard is not just mere statement of fact. Risks contain a theoretical and normative element. The manufacturing of a terrible consequential reality can be enough to create its inevitability or ‘truth’. The production of tangible risks will express a ‘future component’; the anticipation of something that has not happened yet, but is threatening and accordingly, real (Beck, 1992, p. 32). Thus, even as conjectures, risks are threats to the future which develop a ‘practical relevance to preventative actions’ (Beck, 1992, p. 34). In this way, risks can constantly be imagined, implied to be true—and believed by a vast majority of Australians. Interestingly, only one month prior to the launch of the Be Alert, Not Alarmed campaign, a ‘special alert’ of a terrorist attack was relayed to the Australian public by the Howard government, though information was ‘generalised and not specific about possible targets and precise timing’ (Parnell, 2002, p. 1). Nothing eventuated from the special alert; citizens were not given any updated information as to the possible location of the attack, the nature of the attack or who was responsible for the threat. However, it did provide an opportunity for Justice Minister Chris Ellison to use the term ‘be alert but not alarmed’ (Crabb, 2002) and create an atmosphere of apprehension only one month prior to launching a campaign based on reporting suspicious behaviour to protect Australia’s suddenly, believably fragile national security.

**Paranoia for a safer world: The ‘Be Alert, Not Alarmed’ Campaign**

On its first day of operation, the national security hotline attracted more than 500 callers (Devine, 2003). Some suggested the number as an early indication of how paranoid Australian citizens had become (Wakim, 2003). Nonetheless, the Howard government urged Australians to use any newfound fears prudently; the suggested proposal being that a collective nation working together could stop terrorism, rather than encourage paranoia.
or racial discrimination. Thus, in producing the Be Alert, Not Alarmed television campaign, images tested amongst focus groups showed a smiling Muslim girl, indigenous children and traditional images of Australian life such as summer cricket and barbecues, interspersed with images of the army, customs personnel and sniffer dogs working at an airport (Morris, 2002). Some of the original footage of SAS troops storming houses and police look-outs on the Sydney Harbour Bridge was cut after concern over the alarming tone of the images (Morris, 2002). However the campaign booklet, Let’s Look Out for Australia begins by stating that ‘terrorism has changed the world and security may never return to the relaxed levels most of us grew up with’ (Attorney General’s Department, 2003, p. 5).

It is the ambiguity and the abstract appeals to a national audience that make this campaign of most interest to communications scholars. The risks presented within the campaign are developed within a framework of insecurity—which means that they are as abstract as the imagination will allow. Insecurity becomes almost literary in the construction of this adult idealistic nightmare, complete with plotline, characters and dramatic narrative. Risks are empowered through authority figures’ staging of the horrific consequences that ambiguous ‘bad’ characters could unleash onto the clearly defined, freedom loving ‘good’ characters. It is this assumption of fear and the suggested inevitability of terror that allows John Howard to espouse the need to ‘take the necessary steps to protect ourselves’ (Attorney General’s Department, 2003, p. 1). These steps, however, are not detailed in a way that makes security seem like a matter of tangible or practical safety procedures. The brochure describes emergency services’ preparedness for attacks as diverse as car bombings to biological warfare. Yet terrorism experts quoted within the brochure cannot enlighten Australians as to what activities terrorism might entail, the likelihood of serious terrorist attacks in Australia or whether there are in fact, any known terrorists operating within the country. While most of the experts are justified in suggesting that terrorism takes many forms and thus, ‘there is no definite list of what to look out for’ (Attorney General’s Department, 2003, p. 4), citizens may be forgiven for asking, ‘alert to what?’

Apart from generalised advice such as ‘Keep yourself informed’ and ‘Keep an eye out for anything suspicious’ (Attorney General’s Department, 2003, p. 7), Australians must rely on personal experience and judgement as to determine the people or activities that may be suspicious enough to report to authorities. Lists of possible suspicious behaviour including, ‘a lifestyle that doesn’t add up’, ‘false or multiple identities’ and ‘unusual purchases of fertiliser’ are so abstract, improbable or obvious that suspicious activity could conversely be detected in the minutiae of everyday living or be non-existent, depending on individual paranoia. For this reason, Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) terrorism analyst Aldo Borgu has suggested that the campaign is not sophisticated enough to inhibit large-scale, organised terrorist groups that do not leave such overt displays of their intentions (in Cole, 2004, p. 2). Instead defence policy has reacted to new ideas of insecurity by concentrating on older styles of ‘securitisation’ through military intervention and state control (Cole, 2004, p. 2).
Risk communication associated with terrorism has thus created a framework of oppositional discourses where dramatic narratives of threat and chaos are balanced precariously with the protection and moral absolutism that the state represents. It is within these accepted sources of ‘rationality’, that most citizens take their understanding, definition and representation of risk (Beck, 1992, p. 35). Similarly, the tone of the campaign is one of rationality and control: ‘Australians can be confident that the government is doing everything it can do to prevent the possibility of a terrorist attack (Attorney General’s Department, 2003, p. 3). Directed by the reassuring presence of a popular Australian morning television presenter, the government and associated security organisations are presented as the soothing, paternalistic guide through the frightening terrorist phantasm that creates vulnerability amongst Australian citizens. The campaign never acknowledges the role that state policy has had in instigating the political direction of domestic and globalised security. Terrorism is communicated as an abstract evil, rather than a complex situation of political relationships and actions that governments determine and regulate. In this context the campaign can re-establish the simplistic good and evil roles of political actors:

Terrorists hate the values and way of free peoples and societies such as Australia. These terrorists would not stop targeting us even if we had a different approach to the issue of Iraq (Attorney General’s Department, 2004).

Thus, the underlying message of the government in communicating risk is ‘trust us’—but be suspicious of everyone else. In this context, communities are retained as an important aspect of Australian life, but their existence is now marked with the proviso that the nation’s ‘laid back nature’ (Attorney General’s Department, 2003, p. 1) is coupled with ‘healthy’ suspicion. Thus, domestic first aid information is coupled with ‘cut out and keep’ national security cards with the hotline number printed for safe keeping. The proposal of putting the card in one’s wallet implies that the continual reminder of fear will become a part of everyday life within this less relaxed society.

Initial response to the hotline reflected an ‘embarrassed’ acceptance of paranoia. Despite the discomfort many respondents felt by ‘dobbing people in’ (Devine, 2003), media reportage illustrated that many respondents felt that the discourses of the ‘era of insecurity’ warranted a change in the apparently ‘laid back’ Australian attitude:

I can’t help but feel, what’s the harm if some of us get a touch too paranoid and grab some innocent…I’d rather put up with that than have those same ‘vigilantes’ stand back, too polite to intervene, as some crazy parks a car bomb outside a shopping centre (Morrell, 2003, p. 23).

In this way, risk positions create dependencies where affected parties feel incompetent to execute their own sovereignty (Beck, 1992, p. 52). In this context, even if a person’s response to state policy is critical, the possibility of risk creates a resignation to the fact of the institutional or political nexus. While the affliction of hazards was once determined by one’s class in hierarchical society, the people now affected by risks are not always impoverished and often live in societies of mass consumption (Beck, 1992, p. 54). Within an industrialised culture of risk, citizens are often well educated and informed—but they are afraid. Communities organise themselves because they feel threatened by the possibility of a ‘test of their realistic-pessimistic visions’ (Beck, 1992, p. 52). Security
from risk thus contains both positive and negative freedoms (Goodman, 2004). Action to address these risks is often double-sided—in order to secure freedom, we must be insecure; limits are placed on who we can trust and what behaviour is safe. The contradictory effects of having to be alert, but not alarmed are, as Goodman (2004) suggests:

Bounded freedom—a contradiction in terms—defining the formal political realm against contending political visions and meanings. The freedom to create new political possibilities is denied and permanent watchfulness is required.

Power relations of a completely new type can thus be created by varying the definition and causes of risk. As suspicion is so openly left to individual interpretation, mistrust aimed towards those who do not embody traditional Australian values or—ethnic identity—could be mistaken for ‘alertness’. The government’s appeal for information relies on subjective discretion as more obvious examples of suspicious activity would arguably be reported to authorities by responsible citizens regardless of the campaign. The effects of a phone call to the national security hotline would therefore be a matter for further investigation by security or intelligence personnel. While a telephone call to the hotline becomes a very serious matter, this is an incongruous aspect of the ‘community building’ tone and focus of the campaign. However, if a caller’s information appears credible, the police and even the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) can be called to investigate. Many questions about this process are left unanswered or ambiguous in the campaign information booklet, such as concerns of privacy and the extent of the power ASIO has to investigate otherwise innocent people. We as citizens are meant to trust in the process and all-knowing rationality of greater authorities. Just as the transnational and hybrid nature of terrorism ‘de-bounds’ risk perceptions, state discourse also reinforces its hegemony through the bounding of trust within accepted norms of nationhood (Beck, 2002, p. 44).

**Creating communities and schisms of consent: Intended and unconscious effects of risk communications**

Before the latest Australian federal elections, Opposition leader Mark Latham requested changes to the new instalment of the National Security campaign to eliminate any political benefit the Coalition would receive from the advertisements. The extra $4.5 million injected into the campaign, coupled with Coalition’s emphatic ‘Who do you trust?’ election theme was a powerful appeal to the nation’s sense of security (Coleman, 2004, p. 2). Despite the initial appeal for the advertisements to run at lower intensity, Mark Latham was reluctant to dispute the powerful discourse of insecurity when questioned by the media. He eventually relented saying it would be ‘against national interest’ to diminish the campaign (Hickman & Sinclair, 2004, p. 8). Thus, in September 2004, on the third anniversary of the September 11 political attacks and the eve of the Australian Federal elections, the next phase of the hotline’s information campaign began. Believing that the community had become too complacent about terrorism, John Howard launched the Help Protect Australia from Terrorism advertising initiative (Time to be alert, 2004). The more sober campaign shed the Be Alert, Not Alarmed catch-cry, as well as the fridge magnets and brochures. Instead the campaign focussed on the possible
terrorist attacks on transportation. Posters were placed conspicuously at train stations, airports and bus terminals depicting Australia as composed of fragments of images of infrastructure. A televised advertisement featured a voiceover tersely suggesting that the smallest amount of information could be part of a much larger terrorist plot to attack Australia. Thus ‘ordinary’ Australians should work as a nation to remain safe: ‘Police and security agencies are working hard, but you could help them complete the picture’ (Attorney General’s Department, 2004).

The idea of an ‘ordinary’ individual being able to thwart global terror is a powerful appeal to patriotic—and somewhat nostalgic—ideals of freedom. These feelings of patriotic liberty are encompassed within idealised and over-simplified communities where ‘we are all assumed to belong to families, live in neighbourhoods, go to work and hold the same ideas about being ordinary’ (Tilley, 2004, p. 39). These collectivities of accepted normality are thus situated to discriminate more easily against what is not ‘normal’. In a similar fashion, the Let’s Look Out for Australia information brochure appeals to this sense of homogenous nationalism manifested through state capability. The benefit of public vigilance is legitimised through the use of ‘real life stories’, telling how terrorist plots were thwarted through public alertness. However, the stories are situated in London and Israel—countries historically proven to be targets of terrorist attack. The only story involving a potential threat to Australian security seemed more likely as a case of money laundering than a terrorist plot. Nonetheless, this narrative of the individual working within a collective national identity provides a sense of privilege and moral absolutism with which to justify militarised political action.

The state often positions itself as the caretaker of universal morality, democratic idealism and national identity. Nations such as The United States and United Kingdom have recently formed a ‘coalition of the willing’ to announce themselves as the very bastions of freedom (Schifferes, 2003). However this ‘collective’ positioning has many oppositional effects. For one nation to be positioned as ‘free’, it has to be held in opposition to a chosen ‘Other’. Democracy itself needs to be protected from the outpouring of hatred and difference with which these ‘Other’ nations threaten to pollute peaceful nations. The idea that ‘rogue states’ hate everything that rational citizens stand for prevents engagement with the complex situations that allow insecurity to be produced. Thus the very fact of a nation’s difference is communicated as reason enough for the forceful intervention upon its culture in order to endow it with Western ideas of freedom. Ghassan Hage (2004) discusses the dissemination of discourses of national superiority as ‘Phallic Democracy’; the democracy that we show ‘Others’ to display how much of a ‘bigger and better one we have’. Recent political responses to insecurity have shown that the more those principles of democracy are undermined, the more Western democracy is shown as a superior system. Democracy is thus, ‘something to have, rather than something we live’ and defensive mechanisms are communicated as the only way to defend ‘the good life’ (Hage, 2004). This sense of privileged collectivity, where one nation’s democracy is better than another’s, also helps to provide an acceptance of military response and its consequences, including death, destruction and even torture (Best, 2004). In a ‘phallic democracy’, ironic voids are created where the state can
suspend its own notions of democracy and law to forcefully impose these very notions on another culture (Hage, 2004).

Nonetheless, these collective notions of national identity and security are in themselves insecure because their representation is unstable. As Gramsci has suggested, the negotiation of values and behaviours implies processes of cajollement, persuasion and threat on the one hand, and resistance, engagement and incorporation on the other (in Lewis, 2002, p. 135). Anderson’s work furthers this assumption in a broader analysis of culture and the media by suggesting that the system of imagining and mediating nation as subject to state control can also be destabilised through the dislocating effects of this very system (Anderson, 1991, p. 65). Thus, reliance on the continued assertion of a particular representation—such as the assertion of traditional Australian values—makes these collective modes of identity also a form of insecurity (Best, 2004). ‘Schisms’ are created when the representation of risk within official communication ‘battles’ with the lived experience of insecurity to create differing meanings. The same discourse that was meant to garner consent can just as easily create dissent. As Lewis has suggested, multiple actors fight to determine the meanings and intentions inherent in the language of contemporary culture, including the state, mass media, interest groups and individuals (2000, p. 106). Within these ‘language wars’, key terms such as freedom, security and risk become highly charged with signified meaning, subject to confliction and subsequently dissociating with their tentative grip on signification (Lewis, 2000, p. 105). Thus in the engagement of meaning and representation, while the creation of general ideas of collective national response remains prevalent in state communications, this consent is always tainted with various forms of dissent (Best, 2004).

The initial Be Alert, Not Alarmed campaign drew responses ranging from apathy to apprehension and subsequently, scathing attack. While some letters to the editor dismissed it as simply another part of the government’s ‘daily obfuscations, transparent lies and brutal denials’ (Scott, 2003, p. 10), former Brisbane Lord Mayor Jim Soorley was so incensed at what he saw as ‘propaganda’ that he spearheaded a ‘return to sender’ campaign (Morris, 2003, p. 2). Newspaper reports estimated that 150,000 anti-terror kits were sent back to the steps of Parliament House after Soorley’s televised appeals (Countdown to war, 2003, p. 9). Such was the intensity of public and media reaction that postal workers in Queensland threatened to strike over concern that such avid response to the campaign would result in ‘reverse terrorism’. Special handling measures were introduced to ensure returned kits were not contaminated (Terror kit strike averted, 2003, p. 10). The initial campaign was also the victim of many jocular remarks about the need for anti-terror strategies that involved ‘ordinary Australians’. Australian comedy news program, CNNNN launched the ‘national security oven mitt’ in response to the campaign. Satirising the government campaign’s message and the use of domestic objects for security, CNNNN suggested that ‘if things don’t fit, check your mitt’. Under the slogan ‘Ok, be alarmed’, the show’s terrorism hotline, 1900-PANIC-TIME, the campaign also gave advice about interrogating a neighbour without breaking the Geneva Convention (CNNNN website, 2004). But perhaps the most pertinent indicator of the campaign’s success was response to the hotline itself, which fell short of original expectations. The hotline number was organised to handle up to two thousand calls an
hour, or up to 336,000 calls a week (Cumming, 2002). By the end of its first week of operation the hotline had only received 2615 calls—less than 16 calls an hour (Marriner, 2003). The assertion of traditional euphemisms of security and nation do not always create consent. State authority often benefits from creating demand for the avoidance of risks which are open to interpretation, causally designable and infinitely reproducible (Beck, 1992, p. 56). While these Gramscian ‘manoeuvres’ of hegemonic discourse allow the binary of public information and public relations to remain unresolved, this binary itself creates instability in the manifestation of state authority through the effects of dissent.

**Conclusion**

Often seemingly small scale ‘information campaigns’ such as Be Alert, Not Alarmed, reflect the way state, media and community engage to imagine, contest and ultimately, communicate the ideologies of nation. In this ‘era of insecurity’, communication technologies have helped sustain networks of meaning (Best, 2004). More research into political communication and its manifestation in the relationship between government, the media and the larger community is warranted. Ian Ward controversially categorised Australian governmental communications as inhabiting a ‘PR state’, in recognition of the need for legitimate study into the blurred boundaries between information and ‘party propaganda’ (2003, p. 3). The strategic manipulation of communication techniques is not a new method of generating consent. But the increasing use of public relations has provided communications scholars with a more transparent view of the techniques employed to manufacture consent. The ‘problem’ with government information is in its very presentation as information. Government communication of information is as strategically positioned and manipulated as any other form of public relations. The constructed-ness of the way that officials communicate to the media and the larger community needs to be more elucidated—especially when the domestic exploitation of insecurity increasingly has global political consequences.

While governments are expected by their constituents to generate security measures in response to the physical manifestations of insecurity, state policy must reflect responsibility for the consequences of these responses. Despite the emphasis on becoming more vigilant about national security, government officials are adamant that we sustain our relaxed Aussie nature. Yet, risk discourse does affect the way we live; our sense of insecurity and paranoia are suddenly heightened and the values of egalitarianism, fair trial and logical rationality are sidelined in our action towards invisible threat. Actions motivated by fear for the future interrupt our sense of logical dissent because vulnerability increases dependence on the ‘accepted experts’ often represented by the state.

As the effectiveness of security only depends on how much insecurity exists, state engagement with protectionist policy has focussed on ideas of gated nations, suspicious friendliness and the moral universalism of authority figures (Goodman, 2004). The production of insecurity also means that those who defend their nations against it have a universalising sense of moral absolutism, immune from rational challenge. That is, there is no room for other political opinion or criticism in the face of war; a united nation in the
face of an unknown evil (Armitage, 2002, p. 39). The discourse of freedom becomes inextricably linked with the discourse of war. As Wood suggests: ‘Evil-doers are everywhere, the war is universal and unending; this is indeed a new type of war, a war that is an end in itself’ (Wood, 2003, p. 150). Through this absolutism, states can indulge their imposition of judicial and political viewpoints on other cultures. Thus, force is no longer a matter of physical force, but the ideological coercion of social beliefs through representation.

In a society dominated by risk and political uncertainty, exceptional situations of political violence threaten to become the norm and the measure of global political response. ‘Securitisation’ has come to the point where a major environmental disaster such as the Asian tsunamis can be assessed by Western powers in terms of the potential to create ‘a breeding ground for Islamic Radicalism’ (Allard, 2005). Former US Secretary of State Colin Powell certainly suggested that a failure to re-build South-East Asia could result in disaster victims turning to extremism (Allard, 2005). In this sense even assistance in the face of tragedy is conditional of the state’s complete and permanent mindset for war and vigilance of risk. It means the complete and total restructure of global, economic, political and military rights and resources (Armitage, 2002, p. 35). With the magnitude of risk being as such, civilisation will permanently be under threat. If we continue to organise the imaginings of democracy on ‘convenient fictions of identity’ and the discourses of invisible threat, democracy can no longer transgress the limitations of geography and history that successful globalised political engagement allows (Best, 2004). The consequences for a state that has total security and mobilised terror as its ideology and method of response to political or cultural complexities becomes a state in which the difference between terror and politics threatens to become indistinguishable.

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Be Alert


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