

## **Fixing the Meaning of 9/11 Hegemony, Coercion, and the Road to War in Iraq**

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*As the costs of the invasion and occupation of Iraq mount, scholars have sought to explain how the United States came to launch this war in the first place. Many have focused on the “inflation” of the Iraq threat, and indeed the Bush administration did frame the national dialogue on Iraq. We maintain, however, that the failure of most leading Democrats to challenge the administration’s case for war in 2002–2003 cannot be explained fully by the bully pulpit, Democrats’ reputation for dovishness, or administration misrepresentations. Rather, we argue that leading Democrats were relatively silent in the run-up to war because they had been “rhetorically coerced,” unable to advance a politically sustainable set of arguments with which to oppose the war. The effective fixing of the meaning of the September 11 attacks in terms of the “War on Terror” substantially circumscribed political debate, and we explain why this discourse became dominant. The Bush administration then capitalized on the existing portrait of Saddam Hussein to bind Iraq tightly into the War on Terror and thereby silence leading Democrats and legitimate the war. The story of the road to war in Iraq is not only one of neoconservative hubris and manipulated intelligence. It is*

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*also the story of how political actors strove effectively after 9/11 to shape the nation's discourse of foreign affairs and of how the resulting dominant narratives structured foreign policy debate. Behind the seemingly natural War on Terror lurk political processes of meaning-making that narrowed the space for contestation over Iraq.*

The occupation of Iraq has unquestionably been bungled and badly. Even many who supported the war initially and, finally, the administration itself have been compelled to openly admit as much. The consequences for U.S. security of this colossal blunder are still much debated. Critics charge that among other things: the invasion and lingering conflict have alienated thousands of young Muslims in the West and across the Muslim world (and thus revitalized the Islamist threat), distracted the U.S. government from the "War on Terror" properly understood, demoralized the Army and perhaps permanently hobbled the National Guard and Reserves, sacrificed political capital that could have been exploited to confront Iran and North Korea more effectively, estranged America's allies, undermined the U.S. claim to legitimate global leadership, and generally harmed the prospects for international cooperation in many areas of common concern.

Given the potential direct and indirect costs of the 2003 Iraq War and the post-invasion chaos, understanding how the United States came to launch a war against Iraq in the first place has not surprisingly risen to the top of the agenda among the George W. Bush administration's many critics. Scholars have offered theoretically informed accounts of the road to war in Iraq and—as many opposed the war in prospect and nearly all in retrospect—to extract lessons for how the United States might avoid such needless and costly wars in the future. These accounts, both scholarly and popular, have emphasized the effects of international unipolarity, the political polarization that supplied incentives to deploy Iraq as a wedge issue, presidents' capacity to speak with unquestioned authority with regard to foreign policy, the administration's embrace of neoconservative ideas about international affairs, its manipulation of classified information, the fracturing of the Democratic opposition, the uncritical stance of the mainstream media, internal and external pressures that led intelligence agencies around the globe to misread and exaggerate Iraq's weapons of mass destruction programs and stocks, and individuals' reasoning errors with regard to risk.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Lawrence Freedman, "War in Iraq: Selling the Threat," *Survival* 46, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 7–50; Chaim Kaufmann, "Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War," *International Security* 29, no. 1 (Summer 2004): 5–48; John Mueller, "Simplicity and Spook: Terrorism and the Dynamics of Threat Exaggeration," *International Studies Perspectives* 6, no. 2 (May 2005): 208–34; Jack Snyder, Robert Shapiro, and Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, "Free Hand Abroad, Divide and Rule at Home,"

These arguments are often persuasive, yet they have not fully captured the crucial forces driving the United States to war. President Bush did frame the national dialogue on Iraq, but we maintain that this cannot be explained adequately by the bully pulpit, Democrats' dovish reputation, the manipulation of intelligence, or the supposed nature of the post-9/11 world. In our view, the failure of most leading Democrats to challenge the core of the administration's case for war in 2002–2003 remains a substantial puzzle. After critically reviewing several conventional wisdoms, we offer an alternative explanation for Democrats' relative silence in the face of the administration's relentless push for war with Iraq.

To be clear, we do not explain here why the United States went to war with Iraq in 2003 in terms of the motives and worldviews of key administration figures. Popular accounts focus on, among others, the influence of a neoconservative cabal and its dreams of autocratic dominoes falling across the region, President Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney's ties to the oil industry, unfinished business for those who had played leading roles in the 1991 Gulf War, and the impact of the September 11 attacks on the administration's tolerance for risk. Motives are important as driving forces of human behavior, but they are often unknown even to the actors themselves and are perhaps in principle unknowable. Our focus here is on how and why the administration succeeded in carrying the nation to war. Had the administration been unable effectively to legitimate the war with Iraq, its motives—whatever they were—could not have come to fruition.

Our argument proceeds in two steps. First, we maintain that the successful legitimization of the Iraq War was made possible by the effective fixing of the meaning of September 11 in terms of the War on Terror. The first half of this article explicates that dominant discourse and explains how and why the administration succeeded in establishing it as “hegemonic.”<sup>2</sup> We locate

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(unpublished ms., Columbia University, September 2006); and Jon Western, *Selling Intervention and War: The Presidency, the Media, and the American Public* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005). On democracy promotion, neoconservatism, and Iraq, see Colin Dueck, “Ideas and Alternatives in American Grand Strategy, 2000–2004,” *Review of International Studies* 30, no. 4 (October 2004): 511–35; Andrew Flibbert, “The Road to Baghdad: Ideas and Intellectuals in Explanations of the Iraq War,” *Security Studies* 15, no. 2 (April–June 2006): 310–52; Francis Fukuyama, “After Neoconservatism,” *New York Times Magazine*, 19 February 2006; Paul T. McCartney, “American Nationalism and U.S. Foreign Policy from September 11 to the Iraq War,” *Political Science Quarterly* 119, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 399–423; Jonathan Monten, “The Roots of the Bush Doctrine: Power, Nationalism, and Democracy in U.S. Strategy,” *International Security* 29, no. 4 (Spring 2005): 112–56; Michael C. Williams, “What Is the National Interest? The Neoconservative Challenge in IR Theory,” *European Journal of International Relations* 11, no. 3 (September 2005): 307–37.

<sup>2</sup> Following Antonio Gramsci and many others, we aver that hegemony by no means renders resistance futile. Utter hegemony is something for which actors may strive but can never fully achieve. Even hegemonic discourses always contain enough contradictory strands to permit contestation. As Stuart Hall puts it, hegemony “should never be mistaken for a finished or settled project. It is . . . always ‘in process’”; maintaining a dominant or hegemonic discourse requires “ceaseless work.” That said, some discourses do establish themselves as dominant, constituting for many an unquestioned “common sense”

the explanation in the conjuncture of discursive traditions, institutional position, rhetorical mode, and historical context. However, none of these is by itself sufficient to explain this outcome. (1) The Bush administration drew on the traditional binaries of U.S. foreign policy discourse in narrating September 11 and the terrorist threat. Yet such traditions are often rich enough to sustain multiple, even opposed, narratives. We identify both conceivable and actually deployed competing narratives that were also well rooted in existing formations but nevertheless failed to carry the day. (2) Bush enjoyed an advantage in the rhetorical competition by virtue of his institutional position. But the rhetorical power of the presidency, though substantial, is not a sufficient explanation: even motivated presidents have failed many times to mobilize publics for their foreign policy goals, proved unable to define and confine public debate, and consequently encountered substantial opposition. (3) Bush's advantage was especially great in this case because he and his aides (as well as like-minded pundits and policy wonks) adopted a rhetoric of identity that imposed high hurdles to dissent. (4) Relatedly, Bush's turn to this rhetorical mode was not merely fortuitous or strategic, but rather responded to the historical moment. The circumstances—coordinated attacks on sites of commercial, institutional, and national power that were quickly represented by the media and perceived by the mass public as directed at the "nation" and as ushering in a "crisis"—gave rise to public expectations for a rhetoric that would make sense of these unprecedented events while reaffirming the political community's ideals.

Second, we argue that the dominant War on Terror discourse hindered the potential Democratic political opposition in the subsequent debate over Iraq. Leading figures who might have been expected to resist the administration's program of regime change and aggressive democratization contested its claims only at the margins. In short, they were the victims of successful "rhetorical coercion"—a strategy that seeks to rhetorically constrain political opponents and maneuver them into public assent to one's preferred terms of debate and ideally to one's policy stance. The established portrait of Saddam Hussein as a second Hitler and as a terrorist, when combined with the implications of the War on Terror, narrowed the scope for sustainable argument in the public debate over Iraq. It further helps explain why a majority of Americans long alleged, on the basis of little evidence, that Saddam Hussein had a finger in the September 11 attacks and why challenging insinuations to that effect was so difficult. The administration's triumph with regard to Iraq was not inevitable, and thus its particular rhetorical strategies—implying an operational relationship between Al Qaeda and Hussein's Iraq, emphasizing the

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and marginalizing alternative understandings. We contend that a particular interpretation of the September 11 attacks—as a crucial, although not the opening, salvo in a global war—did become (relatively) dominant and remained so through the invasion of Iraq. Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso, 1988), 7, 133.

domestic brutality of Hussein's regime even in unrelated discussions about weapons of mass destruction, and confusing warranted suspicions about Iraq's biological and chemical weapons programs and stocks with mere concerns about the possibility of continuing nuclear weapons research—were relevant to the outcome. Yet, even before such claims were made, the consolidation of the War on Terror had already heavily stacked the deck in the administration's favor and against potential opponents.<sup>3</sup>

Much mainstream academic writing has been characterized by a remarkable unreflectiveness about the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. One year later, a diplomatic historian would write in his field's preeminent journal that "no credible nation-state . . . could have decided not to go to war after September 11."<sup>4</sup> We proceed rather from the presumption that September 11, like all political events, did not speak for itself. It required interpretation, and it did not have to lead to a War on Terror. It mattered how it was publicly represented and by whom, how, and whether those representations were contested. And certainly it need not have led to war in Iraq, for that was the product of a carefully constructed linkage between the long-standing Iraqi threat and this new War on Terror.<sup>5</sup> The world we live in after September 11 was by no means inevitable, and alternative worlds could have emerged. While the attacks were very real, the insecurity they generated was necessarily a cultural production.<sup>6</sup>

We grapple in this article with a single unusually important historical case. However, our account of how and why a particular set of articulations, in the face of competing articulations, dominated public debate after the attacks of September 11 is rooted in a more general theoretical story about the conditions under which and the processes through which political actors strive, more or less effectively, for discursive dominance and about how such narratives structure foreign policy debate and choice.<sup>7</sup> We naturally accept many of the basic premises of mainstream constructivist research in international relations. We have been particularly heartened by recent constructivist work exploring how and why new norms emerge and gain

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<sup>3</sup> Thanks to two anonymous reviewers for compelling us to clarify this point.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Kuklick, "The Plumber and the Professor: Or, a Primer on How to Think About the War," *Diplomatic History* 26, no. 4 (Fall 2002): 565.

<sup>5</sup> Constructivist accounts of foreign policy in general and counterterrorism in particular suggest that other states might not have responded to similar attacks in this fashion. See Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); and Katzenstein, "Same War—Different Views: Germany, Japan, and Counterterrorism," *International Organization* 57, no. 4 (Fall 2003): 731–60.

<sup>6</sup> Simon Dalby, "Calling 911: Geopolitics, Security, and America's New War," in *11 September and Its Aftermath: The Geopolitics of Terror*, ed. Stanley D. Brunn (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 65; and Jutta Weldes, Mark Laffey, Hugh Gusterson, and Raymond Duvall, eds., *Cultures of Insecurity: States, Communities, and the Production of Danger* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> This article's focus, however, is primarily empirical. Space constraints prevent us from developing the theoretical argument in detail. For that argument, see Ronald R. Krebs, "Rhetoric, Power, and the Making of U.S. Security Policy," (unpublished ms., University of Minnesota).

adherents.<sup>8</sup> However, in turning to mechanisms of persuasion and education to account for enduring normative change and meaningful socialization,<sup>9</sup> constructivists have sidestepped critical questions regarding the place of power in the production of meaning.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, we seek to foreground the political and power-laden processes of meaning-making that lurk behind the seemingly natural. Organizing discourses not only open political possibilities as constructivists often emphasize, but also discipline and repress, narrowing the space for contestation.<sup>11</sup>

This article proceeds in four main sections. First, we argue that the existing explanations of the administration's successful inflation of the Iraq threat are insufficient. Then, we present contending interpretations of the September 11 terrorist attacks and explain how one became dominant. In the third section, we link this hegemonic understanding of September 11 to subsequent political contestation over Iraq, showing how this in combination with existing representations tied the tongues of leading Democrats. We conclude with brief comments on this article's implicit theoretical agenda and with some thoughts about whether and how things might have turned out otherwise.

### EXISTING ARGUMENTS AND THEIR FLAWS

The war in Iraq and especially the subsequent revelation that its chief justification—the alleged existence of active Iraqi research programs to develop and acquire weapons of mass destruction, particularly nuclear weapons, and of sizable Iraqi chemical and biological weapons stocks—was mistaken has led scholars to accuse the Bush administration of having hyped,

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<sup>8</sup> As subjective ideas become “stable intersubjective understandings”—that is, norms—they crowd out alternatives. In other words, they establish themselves as hegemonic. On the origins of international norms, see among others, Neta Crawford, *Argument and Change in World Politics: Ethics, Decolonization, and Humanitarian Intervention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, “International Norm Dynamics and Political Change,” *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (Fall 1998): 887–917; Martha Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention: Changing Beliefs About the Use of Force* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); and Nina Tannenwald, “Stigmatizing the Bomb: Origins of the Nuclear Taboo,” *International Security* 29, no. 4 (Spring 2005): 5–49.

<sup>9</sup> On international socialization, see Jeffrey T. Checkel, ed., “International Institutions and Socialization in Europe,” *International Organization* 59, no. 4 (Fall 2005). On persuasion, see Crawford, *Argument and Change*; Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention*; Thomas Risse, “‘Let’s Argue!’: Communicative Action in World Politics,” *International Organization* 54, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 1–39. On the centrality of persuasion to the logic of mainstream constructivism, see Martha Finnemore, *National Interests in International Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 141, and passim; Finnemore and Sikkink, “International Norm Dynamics,” 914; and Rodger A. Payne, “Persuasion, Frames and Norm Construction,” *European Journal of International Relations* 7, no. 1 (March 2001): 37–61.

<sup>10</sup> For a similar characterization, see Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, “Power in International Politics,” *International Organization* 59, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 40–41.

<sup>11</sup> See, among others, Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume 1* (New York: Random House, 1978).

or “inflated,” the threat Iraq posed. They claim sufficient evidence was available prior to the onset of combat operations in March 2003 to have cast severe doubt on the administration’s most serious charges, and the war effort won popular assent only because the threat had been so exaggerated. While these accounts highlight factors of substantial import, they are ultimately not satisfying.

First, some correctly note that presidents in the United States enjoy particular authority with regard to foreign affairs. Thanks to the deference historically accorded the president, Congress’ abdication of its responsibilities with regard to the use of force, and the executive’s control over classified information, it is sometimes argued that presidents’ preferred frames dominate public debate, particularly in foreign policy.<sup>12</sup> Bush exploited his office in reframing the debate over Iraq from one that focused on the viability of containment to one that emphasized Saddam Hussein’s terrorist links and the prospect of an Iraq-facilitated attack on the United States.<sup>13</sup>

However, attributing Bush’s success to his institutional position alone overstates presidents’ power to set the terms of debate (frame) and to lead public opinion (persuade)—even on matters about which they care deeply and even with regard to international politics. The bully pulpit’s influence is often overblown. On a wide range of issues, including national security, presidents have served more as facilitators (who reflect, perhaps intensify, and channel widely held views) than as directors (who lead opinion or impose dominant frames).<sup>14</sup> When presidents “go public,” they can effectively shift policy and shape legislation, but only when their stance is popular.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Kaufmann, “Threat Inflation,” 37–43; and Jon Western, “The War Over Iraq: Selling War to the American Public,” *Security Studies* 14, no. 1 (January–March 2005): 108–109, 117–20.

<sup>13</sup> Kaufmann, “Threat Inflation,” 35–37.

<sup>14</sup> George C. Edwards III, *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). There is some evidence that *popular* presidents can lead public opinion and that when they do other voices—in their administration, among the opposition, and in civil society—have little impact. But the effects also seem to be reasonably small: “Opinion leadership is not quick or easy; the public is not very malleable . . . Intensive efforts over several months by highly popular presidents appear to bring about changes in opinion poll results of only some 5 or 10 percentage points, hardly a tidal wave. On few issues can presidents afford to invest even that much effort.” Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, “Presidential Leadership through Public Opinion,” in *The Presidency and Public Policy Making*, eds. George C. Edwards III, Steven A. Shull, and Norman C. Thomas (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985), 34. See also Edwards III, *On Deaf Ears*, chaps. 2–3; Lawrence R. Jacobs and Robert Y. Shapiro, *Politicians Don’t Pander: Political Manipulation and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); and Richard Sobel, *The Impact of Public Opinion on U.S. Foreign Policy Since Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). For dissenting views, see Jeffrey E. Cohen, *Presidential Responsiveness and Public Policy-Making: The Public and the Policies That Presidents Choose* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); and Keith E. Whittington and Daniel P. Carpenter, “Executive Power in American Institutional Development,” *Perspectives on Politics* 1, no. 3 (September 2003): 498–502, 504–506.

<sup>15</sup> Samuel Kernell, *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1986); and Brandice Canes-Wrone, *Who Leads Whom? Presidents, Policy, and the Public* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

The recent rise of cable television and, arguably, of a generally more independent media has further undercut presidents' already limited capacity to control public debate.<sup>16</sup> Presidents have many times faced substantial opposition and have been compelled to abandon pet projects abroad, both when they have sought to build support for threats and when they have sought to dampen anxiety. The fact that leading Democrats in 2002–2003 typically did not vocally oppose the war is therefore the central puzzle.

Second, and closely related, John Mueller has observed that politicians (and by extension the media) accede to representations of crisis and threat because there is greater "reputational danger" in underplaying risks than in exaggerating them: "Disproved doomsayers can always claim that caution induced by their warnings prevented the predicted calamity from occurring. Disproved Pollyannas have no such convenient refuge."<sup>17</sup> This basic political calculus can explain the long history of threat representations among democratic politicians, and it can particularly account for the weakness of congressional opposition to war. The problem is one of overprediction. If Mueller were right, moves toward war would almost never meet with resistance, yet efforts to construct threats and a sense of crisis have hardly proved universally successful, even when it is the president who leads the charge.<sup>18</sup> In fact, the list of failed recent presidential efforts to build support for particular threats abroad is long, including Ronald Reagan on Lebanon, El Salvador, Grenada, and especially Nicaragua; George H.W. Bush on Haiti; and Bill Clinton on Haiti, Bosnia, Iraq, and Kosovo. With regard to the 2003 Iraq War, some have attributed leading Democrats' relative silence to their experience a decade before when many opposed the first Gulf War only to find themselves on the political short end of the stick when the U.S.-led coalition won an overwhelming victory.<sup>19</sup> While this may have lingered in some minds, the larger lesson was that the public's memory is short. Just five months after the Gulf War concluded, most Americans were unable to recall what position most Democrats had adopted on the war,<sup>20</sup> and President George H.W. Bush proved unable to capitalize on his battlefield and diplomatic triumphs domestically in the following year's presidential election.

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<sup>16</sup> Matthew A. Baum and Samuel Kernell, "Has Cable Ended the Golden Age of Presidential Television?" *American Political Science Review* 93, no. 1 (March 1999): 99–114.

<sup>17</sup> Mueller, "Simplicity and Spook," 226–27. See also Mueller, *Overblown: How Politicians, the Terrorism Industry and Others Stoke National Security Fears* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> Jane Cramer argues that a post-World War II "militarized patriotism" accounts both for the lack of vocal opposition to Bush's drive for war and for the absence of an assertive media, yet this too tends toward overprediction: the many failures of attempts at threat inflation are thus rendered inexplicable. See Cramer, "Militarized Patriotism: Why the U.S. Marketplace of Ideas Failed before the Iraq War," *Security Studies* (this issue).

<sup>19</sup> Jim VandeHei and Juliet Eilperin, "9/11 Changed Equation for Democrats; 1991's Doves Now Back War," *Washington Post*, 6 October 2002.

<sup>20</sup> John Zaller, "Strategic Politicians, Public Opinion, and the Gulf Crisis," in *Taken by Storm: The Media, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy in the Gulf War*, eds. W. Lance Bennett and David L. Paletz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 269.



Third, it is commonly argued that potential Democratic opponents went along with the Iraq War because they did not wish to be accused of being soft on national security. Democrats have been seen as and have seen themselves as being vulnerable to this allegation in recent decades—certainly since the collapse of détente, perhaps dating back to Vietnam or even the “who lost China” debates of the late 1940s. Republicans, in contrast, have “owned” the security issue and thus have enjoyed an advantage when debate occurs on this terrain.<sup>21</sup> While this argument seems intuitive, it overstates Democrats’ reluctance to challenge Republicans on security questions. Recall, for example, the fits that congressional Democrats gave to Reagan over Contra aid in the 1980s, despite his administration’s efforts to paint them as either Soviet sympathizers or their unwitting dupes. Even Reagan, who embodied a muscular Republican foreign policy, apparently did not own national security, as he failed to impose his definition of a Sandinista-led Nicaragua as “another Cuba” on a skeptical public and Congress.<sup>22</sup> Nor did Republican critiques of Clintonian engagement with China have much traction. According to public opinion polls, Republicans have enjoyed greater trust on national security matters, at least until very recently, but that has not always silenced Democrats or ensured a Republican triumph.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, this presumes that Democrats could not have deployed a powerful security argument themselves to counter the drumbeat for war in Iraq. In fact, they might have argued—and some did—that a war in Iraq would serve as a distraction from the central mission of the War on Terror: the campaign against Al Qaeda. We will argue later that this claim was essentially unavailable to most Democrats, but not because Republicans owned national security. Rather, we will demonstrate that the dominant War on Terror discourse worked to bind Iraq into that larger struggle.

Fourth, it is often suggested that the executive branch’s control over the intelligence community, combined with relatively limited congressional oversight, confers informational advantages that the executive can manipulate to its advantage.<sup>24</sup> Mueller has further argued that the public typically harbors “irrational fears about remote dangers,” is often uninformed, and is

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<sup>21</sup> Thanks to Peter Trubowitz for pressing us on this point.

<sup>22</sup> See William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977–1992* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

<sup>23</sup> On the traditional Republican advantage, see the Pew Research Center’s January 2005 Public Agenda poll, at <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?PageID=916>. For very recent changes, see Jackie Calmes, “Battle Weary: Republican Advantage on Issue of National Security Erodes,” *Wall Street Journal*, 1 September 2006.

<sup>24</sup> Kaufmann, “Threat Inflation,” 37–41; Western, *Selling Intervention and War*, chap. 6. Lawrence Freedman argues, however, that the real problem lay with intelligence oversimplified to boost agency influence and relevance. To the extent that there was conscious manipulation, he maintains the administration appears to have “hoodwinked” itself more than it did the country. See Freedman, “War in Iraq,” 39.

easily influenced.<sup>25</sup> That informational asymmetries exist, that they favor the chief executive, and that the manipulation of information occurred in the case of the Iraq War (despite the Bush administration's protestations) is beyond much doubt, yet it is not clear that it was *causally* critical. If Kaufmann is right that there was enough information publicly available to demonstrate that Iraq was not an imminent threat, then the manipulation of intelligence cannot have had the effects he and others have ascribed to it. What becomes puzzling is why the administration's misrepresentations and misleading statements carried the day over the discrepant evidence.<sup>26</sup>

Fifth, many have pointed to the mainstream media's uncritical presentation of the administration's claims as contributing to the skewed public debate.<sup>27</sup> Yet if the press did in fact abdicate its professional obligation as government watchdog, the question is why it did so.<sup>28</sup> In fact, existing studies suggest that the mainstream media is generally more dependent than independent, more mirror of official debates than active participant in them.<sup>29</sup> When the political opposition is vibrant the press can be feisty since it can take political cover: criticism in official circles opens space for coverage of criticism outside Washington. When the political opposition is itself relatively silent, voices not represented in the official debate are ignored or marginalized.<sup>30</sup> The media thus "indexes" high-profile debates, and these dynamics

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<sup>25</sup> Mueller, "Simplicity and Spook," 228. However, public opinion, despite individual ignorance and inconsistency, is collectively rational, and the operative mechanism appears to be elite cuing. This raises serious questions about democratic deliberation and choice, but the problem here was that elites spoke largely with a single voice—highlighting again the relative silence of the Democrats.

<sup>26</sup> Of course Kaufmann may be wrong, and information contradicting the administration's claims may not have existed or may have lacked credibility. On the contemporaneous plausibility of the administration's assessments regarding Iraqi WMD programs, and thus contra Kaufmann, see Robert Jervis, "Reports, Politics, and Intelligence Failures: The Case of Iraq," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29, no. 1 (February 2006): 3–52. It may also be the case that public and elite support for the war was already high even before the administration undertook its campaign of misinformation, and thus this campaign had little impact; see Douglas C. Foyle, "Leading the Public to War? The Influence of American Public Opinion on the Bush Administration's Decision to Go to War in Iraq," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 2004): 289.

<sup>27</sup> Kaufmann, "Threat Inflation," 44–45; and Western, "War over Iraq," 127–28.

<sup>28</sup> This abdication has been well documented in Howard Friel and Richard Falk, *The Record of the Paper: How the New York Times Misreports U.S. Foreign Policy* (London: Verso, 2004); Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Paul Waldman, *The Press Effect: Politicians, Journalists, and the Stories That Shape the Political World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), chap. 6; Michael Massing, *Now They Tell Us: The American Press and Iraq* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2004); Jonathan Mermin, "The Media's Independence Problem," *World Policy Journal* 21, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 67–71; and David Miller, ed., *Tell Me Lies: Propaganda and Media Distortion in the Attack on Iraq* (London: Pluto Press, 2004).

<sup>29</sup> Bernard C. Cohen, *The Press and Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963); Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News* (New York: Pantheon, 1979); and Leon V. Sigal, *Reporters and Officials: The Organization and Politics of Newsmaking* (Lexington: D.C. Heath, 1973).

<sup>30</sup> Alternative media narratives are present most likely early on, before the frame is well established. In the absence of official encouragement, however, they will soon disappear from the scene. See Robert M. Entman, *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

are only exacerbated in times of war.<sup>31</sup> To the extent that journalists do criticize, they do so within the terms of the Washington consensus, focusing on implementation and outcome. The media's relatively uncritical presentation of the administration's case reflected Democrats' inability to advance a united opposition voice that would have warranted sustained coverage. Again, the relative silence of a critical group of leading Democrats calls for explanation.<sup>32</sup>

Sixth, observers have turned to the psychology of risk to explain why threat may be inflated relatively easily in general and how the Iraq threat in particular was made plausible. Human beings tend to overestimate risk, particularly with regard to rare events over which they feel they have no control. The September 11 attacks aggravated this, and Americans saw still far-off concerns (Iraq's acquiring nuclear weapons) and low probability events (Iraq's sharing such weapons with Al Qaeda) as more likely.<sup>33</sup> With decisions made on the basis of possibility rather than probability, the Bush administration's

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<sup>31</sup> For important statements on indexing, see W. Lance Bennett, "Toward a Theory of Press-State Relations in the United States," *Journal of Communication* 40, no. 2 (Spring 1990): 103–25; and W. Lance Bennett, "Gatekeeping and Press-Government Relations: A Multigated Model of News Construction," in *Handbook of Political Communication Research*, ed. Lynda Lee Kaid (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004); Timothy Cook, *Governing with the News: The News Media as a Political Institution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Daniel C. Hallin, *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); and Jonathan Mermin, *Debating War and Peace: Media Coverage of U.S. Intervention in the Post-Vietnam Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). See also Robert W. McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Bartholomew H. Sparrow, *Uncertain Guardians: The News Media as a Political Institution* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). The reasons for indexing include among others: the efficiency of relying on official sources; the predictability and credibility of official sources; the interests of major news corporations; and the journalistic norm of "balance." With regard to the use of force abroad, journalists' concerns about appearing unpatriotic also foster subservience to official narratives. On wartime dynamics, see W. Lance Bennett, "The News About Foreign Policy," in *Taken by Storm: The Media, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy in the Gulf War*, eds. W. Lance Bennett and David L. Paletz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 23; Jamieson and Waldman, *Press Effect*, 12–22; Michael Massing, "The Press: The Enemy Within," *New York Review of Books*, 15 December 2005; and Massing, "The End of News?" *New York Review of Books*, 1 December 2005. John Zaller and Dennis Chiu confirm that indexing is powerful during foreign policy crises, but they also argue that "the press . . . is not wholly a creature of officialdom" and may be either more hawkish or dovish depending on strategic and political circumstances; see Zaller and Chiu, "Government's Little Helper: U.S. Press Coverage of Foreign Policy Crises, 1945–1991," *Political Communication* 13, no. 4 (October–December 1996): 385–405. For other critical views of indexing, alleging that the media has recently become more independent, see Scott L. Althaus, "When News Norms Collide, Follow the Lead: New Evidence for Press Independence," *Political Communication* 20, no. 4 (October–December 2003): 381–414; Edwards III, *On Deaf Ears*, 172–83; and B. Dan Wood and Jeffrey S. Peake, "The Dynamics of Foreign Policy Agenda Setting," *American Political Science Review* 92, no. 1 (March 1998): 173–84.

<sup>32</sup> The rhetorical dynamics explored later in the paper may also have operated *directly* on the press, contributing to the lack of tough-minded investigative journalism. Had a vocal Democratic opposition emerged, however, editors' fears of losing advertising and sales would presumably have been alleviated.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Slovic, *The Perception of Risk* (London: Earthscan, 2000); Cass R. Sunstein, "Terrorism and Probability Neglect," *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty* 26, no. 2/3 (March 2003): 121–36; and Leonie Huddy, Stanley Feldman, Gallya Lahav, and Charles Taber, "Fear and Terrorism: Psychological Reactions to 9/11," in *Framing Terrorism: The News Media, the Government, and the Public*, eds. Pippa Norris, Montague Kern, and Marion Just (New York: Routledge, 2003).

case for invading Iraq seemed strong.<sup>34</sup> However, this account is not supported by data. The American public resisted the administration's stepped-up campaign in the fall of 2002 to build support for the war. As late as the month before the war, a clear majority of Americans said the United States should not attack Iraq without the United Nations' imprimatur, suggesting that they distinguished to some meaningful extent between possibility and probability.<sup>35</sup>

The existing claims about threat inflation and the Iraq War highlight important dynamics, but they are incomplete. They are rooted in theoretical arguments that tend toward over-prediction and many point back to a critical under-explained question: why did most leading Democrats either support the administration or at best offer a modest critique? Any adequate account of how the Iraq threat was successfully "sold" must be based upon a more general argument that can explain both the dogs that bark (when the assertion of a national security threat successfully takes hold) and those that do not (when such assertions fail to hold sway). They must explain why and how actual or at least conceivable arguments to the contrary are marginalized (or not) and why and when a vibrant political opposition coalesces (or not). This is equally true of inflated and uninflated threats, at least in regimes that permit a modicum of political contestation.

The very notion of threat inflation implies that how political actors represent circumstances is critical. Yet the causal mechanisms in the accounts reviewed above are distinctly non-rhetorical, focusing seemingly on everything but the language employed in the construction of consent. We argue that to understand how the Iraq War was made possible one should explore the legacy of the September 11 attacks on U.S. political discourse in conjunction with other genealogical elements. September 11 figures in existing accounts largely as a political resource cynically deployed by the Bush administration to create the impression that the Iraqi regime was somehow responsible for the attacks and thus to facilitate the pursuit of an agenda it (or at least hawks in its ranks) had harbored all along.<sup>36</sup> Supporters of the Iraq War certainly did associate the Hussein regime with the attacks, but this was made possible by the way in which September 11 was represented and its meaning fixed in place. The next section examines the interpretations of

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<sup>34</sup> Diego Gambetta, "Reason and Terror: Has 9/11 Made It Hard to Think Straight?" *Boston Review* 29, no. 2 (April–May 2004); Ronald R. Krebs, "Selling the Market Short? The Marketplace of Ideas and the Iraq War," *International Security* 29, no. 4 (Spring 2005): 200–01.

<sup>35</sup> Steven Kull, Clay Ramsay, and Evan Lewis, "Misperceptions, the Media and the Iraq War," *Political Science Quarterly* 118, no. 4 (Winter 2003–04): 569–98.

<sup>36</sup> See Freedman, "War in Iraq," 18–20; and Kaufmann, "Threat Inflation," 16–19, 46. Others, however, argue that the attacks appear to have led principal administration figures to rethink the nature of international threats in general and specifically those posed by Iraq; see Robert Jervis, "Understanding the Bush Doctrine," *Political Science Quarterly* 118, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 365–88; and Ron Susskind, *The One Percent Doctrine: Deep Inside America's Pursuit of Its Enemies Since 9/11* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006).

the September 11 attacks that competed in the U.S. public sphere, and it offers a theoretically grounded explanation for why one swiftly dominated the debate and ultimately came to seem natural. Only by revealing the processes through which that representation was made to appear obvious can the road to war in Iraq be properly understood.

### LEGITIMATING THE WAR ON TERROR

The conventional wisdom has been that September 11 “changed everything.” “History begins today,” Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage recalled telling Pakistan’s intelligence chief on September 11, 2001.<sup>37</sup> The attacks ostensibly revealed a world in which state power was severely attenuated, in which the threat of mass-casualty terrorism suddenly became very real, and in which the ethical distinction between preemption and prevention seemed outmoded. This interpretation of September 11 privileged and thus underpinned numerous domestic and foreign policy initiatives, for established policies had to prove their continued relevance. It in fact presumed that what was old was inherently flawed and what was new was necessarily an appropriate adjustment to new realities. The result was a U.S. foreign policy that was far more assertive (if not aggressive), militarized, and unilateral in tone and in substance.

Yet neither the policies nor the legitimating discourse was in fact radically new.<sup>38</sup> Universes of rhetorical commonplaces—the basic linguistic units out of which representations are constructed—are in the short to medium run relatively stable.<sup>39</sup> Faced with an event that demanded an interpretive response, U.S. foreign policy elites unsurprisingly fell back on older tropes to represent this singular event.<sup>40</sup> Multiple interpretations of the attacks remained possible, however, and these strove for hegemony in the public sphere. Nevertheless,

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<sup>37</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/taliban/interviews/armitage.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Many historians have noted that neither the administration’s disdain for international institutions, nor its promotion of democracy, nor even its “vindicationist” approach was original to the Bush administration. On continuity in U.S. foreign policy, see John Lewis Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); David M. Kennedy, “What ‘W’ Owes to ‘WW,’” *Atlantic Monthly*, March 2005; Melvyn P. Leffler, “Think Again: Bush’s Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 144 (September/October 2004): 22–24; McCartney, “American Nationalism;” and Montan, “Roots of the Bush Doctrine.”

<sup>39</sup> Ronald R. Krebs and Patrick T. Jackson, “Twisting Tongues and Twisting Arms: The Power of Political Rhetoric,” *European Journal of International Relations* 13, no. 1 (March 2007): 35–66. See also Patrick T. Jackson, *Civilizing the Enemy: German Reconstruction and the Invention of the West* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006); and John Shotter, *Cultural Politics of Everyday Life: Social Constructionism, Rhetoric, and Knowing of the Third Kind* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).

<sup>40</sup> Much of the discussion that follows focuses on the representations advanced by President Bush and other administration figures. This is not to suggest that persons outside the government—in think tanks, on opinion pages, or even on talk radio—were irrelevant. It is just the opposite. They were not only essential to the reproduction of the dominant discourse, but they also sometimes inspired officials, providing them with soon-to-be standard formulations. However, such efforts garnered more attention

one interpretation—that favored by the Bush administration—emerged as dominant. This section seeks to answer three questions: What was the nature of that dominant narrative? What were the alternatives, and how were they marginalized? Why did the administration's preferred narrative dominate the public's understanding of September 11?

The administration's narrative has been widely noted and need not be belabored. Within days of September 11, Bush and his advisers consistently portrayed the attacks as the latest stage in a terrorist "war" on "America" and its "values." Deploying a series of binaries, they contrasted the goodness and virtue of America with the "evil" of its terrorist adversaries, the freedom that Americans prized with the despotism that its enemies represented. As Bush put it, two days after the attacks:

Civilized people around the world denounce the evildoers who devised and executed these terrible attacks. Justice demands that those who helped or harbored the terrorists be punished—and punished severely. The enormity of their evil demands it. We will use all the resources of the United States and our cooperating friends and allies to pursue those responsible for this evil, until justice is done.

In February 2002 Bush was even more blunt: "[The war against terror is] as simple as that. It's good versus evil, and freedom is under attack."<sup>41</sup> Such "evil" cannot be negotiated or reasoned with; violence must be met with violence; and a War on Terror was proclaimed.<sup>42</sup>

The United States was thus cast in the role of victim, utterly blameless for the perpetrated outrage: the horrific attacks were in no way a response to its deeds and misdeeds abroad. This claim was central to several strands of argument. Some depicted September 11 as part of the backlash against globalization directed against Americans, the embodiments of the neoliberal economic and social order. Others emphasized that anti-Americanism reflects frustration with the lack of responsive government at home, and others portrayed the United States as the latest in a long line of scapegoats for the decline of Islamic civilization. Still others suggested that the root cause was

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when embraced by bureaucrats and certainly the president. Tracing processes of transmission is extremely labor-intensive and would not, we think, add much to our central arguments.

<sup>41</sup> Proclamation 7462: National Day of Prayer and Remembrance for the Victims of the Terrorist Attacks on September 11, 2001, 13 September 2001, *Public Papers of the President* (hereafter cited as *PPP*), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws>; George W. Bush, Speech to the Republican Party of Alaska, Anchorage, AK, 16 February 2002, *PPP*.

<sup>42</sup> For analyses, see Denise M. Bostdorff, "George W. Bush's Post-September 11 Rhetoric of Covenant Renewal: Upholding the Faith of the Greatest Generation," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89, no. 4 (November 2003): 293–319; John Hutcheson, David Domke, Andre Billeaudeau, and Philip Garland, "U.S. National Identity, Political Elites, and a Patriotic Press Following September 11," *Political Communication* 21, no. 1 (January–March 2004): 27–50; Richard Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics, and Counter-Terrorism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005); and Sandra Silberstein, *War of Words: Language, Politics and 9/11* (London: Routledge, 2004).

the civil war being waged over Arab and Muslim identity and that the attacks sought to provoke an overreaction from the United States so as to further the goal of Islamic revolution.<sup>43</sup> At the core of these contending accounts lies a common narrative element: “we” were attacked because of “who we are,” not because of “what we have done.”

This narrative soon proved dominant. In reportage, national identity discourse—including the invocation of core American values and the demonization of the enemy—overshadowed all others in the ensuing weeks.<sup>44</sup> The administration’s political opponents rallied behind not only the president’s policies, but his rhetoric. Until well into 2002, “there was barely a peep” in Congress, as “everyone along Pennsylvania Avenue [marched] seemingly in lockstep agreement with administration policy. Patriotism dominated the scene.” “Save for a few criticisms of [Bush’s] offhand remarks about a ‘crusade’ and wanting Osama bin Laden ‘dead or alive,’” one scholar observes, “no significant domestic public criticism of [Bush’s] discourse about evil was voiced.” When leading Democrats spoke up, they advanced, well within the terms of the War on Terror, only modest critiques of its conduct—“war on terror: enhanced edition,” Nicholas Lemann called it—not sweeping reconsiderations of the implicit strategic vision. Public opinion surveys over the coming years questioned not whether the United States should engage in a War on Terror, but rather how that war might be most effectively waged, thereby presuming its appropriateness as an organizing discourse. As Ian Lustick concludes, “The War on Terror has thus achieved the status of a background narrative.” In short, as Lemann observed in September 2002, the War on Terror “has entered the language so fully, and framed the way people think about how the United States is reacting to the September 11th attacks so completely, that the idea that declaring and waging war on terror was not the sole, inevitable, logical consequences of the attacks just isn’t in circulation.”<sup>45</sup> Even five years after the attacks, many self-identified progressives continued to criticize the Bush administration’s approach on this terrain, re-inscribing the War on Terror as the defining discourse of the age.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> See, respectively, Michael Mousseau, “Market Civilization and Its Clash with Terror,” *International Security* 27, no. 3 (Winter 2002/03): 5–29; Fouad Ajami, “The Uneasy Imperium: Pax Americana in the Middle East,” in *How Did This Happen? Terrorism and the New War*, eds. James F. Hoge Jr. and Gideon Rose (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001); Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? The Clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (New York: Perennial, 2003); and Michael Scott Doran, “Somebody Else’s Civil War: Ideology, Rage, and the Assault on America,” in *How Did This Happen?*

<sup>44</sup> See the following content analyses: Kevin Coe, David Domke, Erica Graham, Sue Lockett John, and Victor Pickard, “No Shades of Gray: The Binary Discourse of George W. Bush and an Echoing Press,” *Journal of Communication* 54, no. 2 (June 2004): 234–52; and Hutcheson et al., “U.S. National Identity.”

<sup>45</sup> Stephen Hess and Marvin Kalb, eds., *The Media and the War on Terrorism* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), 237; Bostdorff, “George W. Bush’s Post-September 11 Rhetoric,” 293; Ian Lustick, *Trapped in the War on Terror* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 15–18, quote at 17; and Nicholas Lemann, “The War on What?” *New Yorker* 78, no. 27, 16 September 2002.

<sup>46</sup> Peter Beinart, *The Good Fight: Why Liberals—and Only Liberals—Can Win the War on Terror and Make America Great Again* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006); and Will Marshall, ed., *With All Our Might: A*

The most prominent alternative suggested the opposite: “we” were attacked because of “what we have done.” What was the United States accused of doing? It had financially and politically assisted repressive regimes across the Arab and Muslim world. It had given Israel unquestioned political support and implicitly sanctioned its occupation of Palestinian territory. It had, by spreading neoliberal economic policies, threatened traditional ways of life, generated economic dependency, and promoted a race to the environmental bottom. The immediate turn to a militarized response, the War on Terror, highlighted the U.S. capitalist regime’s impulse for imperialist expansion.<sup>47</sup> On September 11 the United States reaped what it had sowed.

These various voices (mostly but not exclusively from the Left)<sup>48</sup> not only charged the United States with a litany of misdeeds, but suggested a far less flattering portrait of the nation. They implied that America had been attacked not only because of “what we have done,” but also because of what our actions revealed about “who we are.” The attacks were represented as a wake-up call for Americans to change their ways of acting in the world. This alternative agreed with the administration’s portrait of American values, but it questioned whether Americans had been true to their virtuous heritage and ideals or whether they had been undone by weakness and hypocrisy. This narrative sufficiently penetrated the debate that many responded to its claims, and in March 2003 the U.S. House of Representatives, perhaps in a nod to such lines of criticism, called on President Bush to proclaim a national day of “humility, prayer, and fasting” so that Americans, engaged in “a war on terrorism” and “a campaign to . . . liberate the people of Iraq,” might “better recognize our own faults and shortcomings and . . . learn how we can do better in our everyday activities.”<sup>49</sup> Overall, however, this alternative narrative made little headway beyond those predisposed to it from the start: opinion remained steady between 2001 and 2004 in denying that U.S. wrongdoing abroad was primarily responsible for the September 11 attacks.<sup>50</sup>

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*Progressive Strategy for Defeating Jihadism and Defending Liberty* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006). See also Tony Judt, “Bush’s Useful Idiots,” *London Review of Books* 28, no. 18 (21 September 2006); Tony Smith, “It’s Uphill for the Democrats,” *Washington Post*, 11 March 2007.

<sup>47</sup> For such arguments, see David Barsamian, “The United States Is a Leading Terrorist State: An Interview with Noam Chomsky,” *Monthly Review* 53, no. 6 (November 2001): 10–19; Phil Scraton, ed., *Beyond September 11: An Anthology of Dissent* (London: Pluto Press, 2002); and Katrina Vanden Heuvel, ed., *A Just Response: The Nation on Terrorism, Democracy, and September 11, 2001* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2002).

<sup>48</sup> From the religious Right, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson paralleled this rhetoric in blaming September 11 on corruption at home: the embrace of a godless life and sexual deviance. For them as well, Americans were suffering because of what they had done and because of who they are.

<sup>49</sup> The House resolution, however, implied a focus on individual rather than collective failings and certainly never suggested that terrorist attacks or the Iraqi threat had their roots in Americans’ behavior or U.S. foreign policy. H. Res. 153, 108th Cong., 27 March 2003.

<sup>50</sup> For opinion data, see Andrew Kohut et al., “News Audiences Increasingly Politicized,” (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2004).



Both the administration and its opponents rooted their interpretations of September 11 in older rhetorical forms. Both, invoking the language of good and evil, drew upon the religiosity and exceptionalism that have long been central themes in U.S. political discourse. Sustainable rhetoric requires that speakers make use of existing discursive formations, and how these were reworked merits investigation. Since all could draw upon these hoary tropes, however, we suggest a conjunctural explanation that joins them to historical context, rhetorical mode, and institutional position. Claims advanced by national leaders are, we argue, more contestable in principle when wrapped in a pragmatic rhetoric than when offered in a rhetoric of identity. The September 11 attacks opened a space for rhetoric in the latter mode, placing Bush's preferred interpretation in a particularly advantageous rhetorical position.

### Foreign Policy in the Garden of Good and Evil

After September 11, the Bush administration portrayed America's adversaries as the country's antithesis: evil (rather than good), despotic (rather than free), and forces of instability (rather than stability). It thus embraced a representational strategy common in the history of U.S. foreign policy.<sup>51</sup> The tradition of "prophetic dualism," according to Philip Wander, "divides the world into two camps. . . . Conflict between them is resolved only through the total victory of one side over another. Since no guarantee exists that good will triumph, there is no middle ground. Hence neutrality may be treated as a delusion, compromise appeasement, and negotiation a call for surrender."<sup>52</sup> Evil thus takes the shape of the "alien invader" coming from outside the nation's borders.<sup>53</sup>

The notion of an always ongoing war between good and evil is, Walter Lippmann long ago observed, "one of the great American superstitions,"<sup>54</sup> and it had been applied to terrorism, domestic and transnational, well

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<sup>51</sup> Observers rightly noted that this ironically paralleled Osama bin Laden's rhetoric: see Phil Graham, Thomas Keenan, and Anne-Maree Dowd, "A Call to Arms at the End of History: A Discourse-Historical Analysis of George W. Bush's Declaration of War on Terror," *Discourse & Society* 15, no. 2–3 (May 2004): 199–221; and Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion After September 11* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), chap. 2.

<sup>52</sup> Philip Wander, "The Rhetoric of American Foreign Policy," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70, no. 4 (November 1984): 342. On U.S. foreign policy discourse, see also H.W. Brands, "The Idea of the National Interest," *Diplomatic History* 23, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 239–61; Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Deeds Done in Words: Presidential Rhetoric and the Genres of Governance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), chap. 6; David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); and Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World Since 1776* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

<sup>53</sup> Andrew Delbanco, *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995).

<sup>54</sup> Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), 7. See also Theodore Otto Windt Jr., "The Presidency and Speeches on International Crises: Repeating the Rhetorical Past," *Speaker and Gavel* 11, no. 1 (1973): 6–14.

before September 11. After the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, President Clinton characterized the adversary as a force which “just as surely as fascism and communism, would spread darkness over light, disintegration over integration, chaos over community.” Three years later, Clinton sounded a similar note after the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya; America, he claimed, “is and will remain a target of terrorists precisely because we are leaders; because we act to advance peace, democracy and basic human values.”<sup>55</sup> The language of evil has been ubiquitous in Bush’s speech since September 11.<sup>56</sup> The ethicist Peter Singer has noted that Bush has been “America’s most prominent moralist. No other president in living memory has spoken so often about good and evil, right and wrong.”<sup>57</sup> President Bush and the echoing press reinforced this image of the terrorist as evil-doer by explicitly comparing Osama bin Laden to Adolf Hitler, and like-minded journalists characterized the former’s agenda as “Islamofascism,” thus implying further parallels between Nazi Germany and Al Qaeda.<sup>58</sup>

What does identifying an act or an actor as evil suggest? Evil, particularly when used as a noun, implies a force that operates almost independent of human agents. It is to be sensed, but not fully grasped or understood. As Lance Morrow puts it, “Evil prowls at the margins of our rationality.” A “malignant mastery,” evil does not follow orders, it issues them.<sup>59</sup> In a Christian political culture which sees itself as uniquely blessed by God, it is hardly surprising that the villains of the moment would be portrayed as the personification of evil and of Satan’s meddling in the world. One may not reason or negotiate with evil. One may not tolerate its presence, nor may one reconcile oneself to it. One cannot be content to contend with Satan’s representatives, as Jacob did with the angel. One may seek only to eradicate evil in a potentially apocalyptic struggle. The power of Bush’s post-September 11 rhetoric derived in part from the way in which it effectively tapped into this tradition.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Bill Clinton, Remarks at the University of Connecticut, 15 October 1995, *PPP*; Bill Clinton, Oklahoma Bombing Memorial Prayer Service Address, 23 April 1995, *PPP*; Bill Clinton, Address to the Nation on Military Action Against Terrorist Sites in Afghanistan and Sudan, 20 August 1998, *PPP*.

<sup>56</sup> Between September 2001 and February 2006, no less than 381 of Bush’s addresses employed the language of “evil,” based on a search of *PPP*. On religious imagery and the prophetic tradition in Clinton’s rhetoric on terrorism as well, see Carol K. Winkler, *In the Name of Terrorism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005).

<sup>57</sup> Peter Singer, *The President of Good & Evil: The Ethics of George W. Bush* (New York: Dutton, 2004), 1–2.

<sup>58</sup> David Hoogland Noon, “Operation Enduring Analogy: World War II, the War on Terror, and the Uses of Historical Memory,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 7, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 352–53.

<sup>59</sup> Lance Morrow, *Evil: An Investigation* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 110–11, 37.

<sup>60</sup> Although Bush sought to downplay the religious aspects of the conflict, his speeches were replete with biblical allusions that served to invest the political with transcendent meaning and to transform political adversaries into enemies of God. See David Domke, *God Willing? Political Fundamentalism in the White House, The “War on Terror,” And the Echoing Press* (London: Pluto Press, 2004); Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*, 29–32; and Singer, *President of Good & Evil*.

Bush's penchant for moralistic binaries seemingly departed from a more recent hesitance to label events, acts, and people evil. In the late 1970s, Susan Sontag suggested that contemporary Americans had lost "the religious or philosophical language to talk intelligently about evil."<sup>61</sup> By the 1990s, evil seemed a relic of bygone days—not a philosophical conundrum to be confronted or a force to be feared, but something to be spoofed, as in the absurd figure of Dr. Evil of the Austin Powers movies. Andrew Delbanco went so far in the mid-1990s as to proclaim "the death of Satan" in an American culture dominated by secular rationality. "The old religious metaphors," he acknowledged, "are not entirely gone. . . . But by and large they have been reduced to mere speech tics." Roger Shattuck charged that a certain tolerance of and even respect for metaphysical evil was the twentieth century's true and unfortunate legacy. Jeffrey Russell, surveying the history of the devil, concludes that "the flat, materialistic assumptions of contemporary Western society have effectively censored concern with radical evil."<sup>62</sup>

However, the response to September 11, and particularly the way in which Bush's rhetoric resonated across the political spectrum, suggests that these observers had misjudged how far talk of evil had been driven underground if at all. Evil may have receded from elite American discourse, but it has over the past century become unusually firmly rooted in popular American culture, alongside the rise of evangelical Christianity, particularly the variant sometimes disparaged as "fundamentalism."<sup>63</sup> These conservative Christians, including premillennial evangelical Protestants, embrace a "supernaturalist" view of history: history does not simply unfold, but follows the course of a divine providential play culminating in the dramatic reversal of events that is the apocalypse.<sup>64</sup> Thus they have sought to identify historical moments as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy and to identify historical

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<sup>61</sup> President Ronald Reagan, however, did not shy away from such language: he famously characterized the Soviet Union as "an evil empire" and as "the focus of evil in the modern world" in 1983. Yet, the responses were also revealing. Conservative ideologues hailed Reagan for his moral bravery, but many more in the United States and abroad disparaged him for having complicated arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union. In fact, one historian observes, "Widespread criticism of his 'evil empire' speech apparently shook him: although his view of the Soviet system did not change, Reagan was careful, after that point, to use more restrained language in characterizing it." John Lewis Gaddis, *Russia, the Soviet Union, and the United States: An Interpretive History*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990), 325.

<sup>62</sup> Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1978), 85; Morrow, *Evil*, 11–12; Delbanco, *Death of Satan*, 11, 229; Roger Shattuck, "When Evil Is 'Cool,'" *Atlantic Monthly*, January 1999; and Jeffrey Burton Russell, *The Prince of Darkness: Radical Evil and the Power of Good in History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 274. See also Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena* (London: Verso, 1993).

<sup>63</sup> On the rise and diversity of evangelical Christianity in the United States, see Robert H. Krapohl and Charles H. Lippy, *The Evangelicals: A Historical, Thematic, and Biographical Guide* (Westport: Greenwood, 1999); and Mark A. Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

<sup>64</sup> R. Scott Appleby, "History in the Fundamentalist Imagination," *Journal of American History* 89, no. 2 (September 2002): 498–511.

actors with key figures in the apocalypse narrative.<sup>65</sup> For evangelical Christians, in particular, evil is a palpable presence in the world, and Satan's minions can and must be identified. Evangelical Christians are hardly small in number—some 30 percent of all Americans (over half of all Protestants) characterize themselves as evangelicals, making them the single largest religious group<sup>66</sup>—but even more impressive has been their cultural impact beyond the community of self-identified evangelicals. In part for this reason, Satan remains alive and well in American popular discourse: public opinion surveys since the 1990s have routinely found that anywhere between 60 and often 75 percent of Americans “believe in” the devil or Satan—withstanding scholarly claims that belief in the devil, and even serious engagement with the problem of fundamental evil, have declined dramatically since the Enlightenment.<sup>67</sup>

Bush's identification of the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks as evil—and even more that there was an evil force lurking all around—resonated with an American public increasingly drawn, if not always consciously, into the orbit of evangelical discourse. This representation of September 11 thus drew upon a strain in U.S. political culture that had in recent decades been reinvigorated by the resurgence of premillennial evangelism. It enjoyed a further rhetorical advantage in that it appeared to compel opponents to do the unthinkable—support the War on Terror or make common cause with evil. Advocates of realpolitik, such as former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, occasionally openly criticized Bush's talk of terrorist evil-doers as simplistic; yet even as Brzezinski argued that a political agenda underlay the contemporary terrorist threat, he nonetheless felt obligated to reassure readers that he did believe terrorism was morally reprehensible and, yes, evil.<sup>68</sup>

The War on Terror was further constituted by a second key rhetorical move linking the prosecution of a war against evil terrorists to the promotion of political freedom, democracy, and free markets. Terrorists were represented not just as evil but as a particular kind of evil—as figures of repression and intolerance, as reincarnations of interwar fascism and Cold War totalitarianism in Islamist garb. This was first introduced into official rhetoric soon after the attacks. In his September 20 address to Congress, Bush contrasted

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<sup>65</sup> Robert C. Fuller, *Naming the Antichrist: The History of an American Obsession* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994).

<sup>66</sup> Andrew Kohut et al., “Evenly Divided and Increasingly Polarized: 2004 Political Landscape,” (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2003), 65–68.

<sup>67</sup> See among others, Harris Interactive poll, 14 December 2005, 26 February 2003, 13 September 2000; Newsweek poll, 15 May 2004; Fox Broadcasting Company poll, 13 October 2003; New York Times/CBS News poll, 20 October 1999. All available through Polling the Nations. <http://poll.orsub.com>. On the latter concern, see Delbanco, *Death of Satan*; Russell, *Prince of Darkness*.

<sup>68</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Confronting Anti-American Grievances,” *New York Times*, 1 September 2002.

the freedom that Americans prized with the despotism that her enemies represented: the terrorists, Bush declared, “hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other. . . . This is the world’s fight. This is civilization’s fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom.” Over the course of 2002, Bush regularly returned to this theme in his public addresses. As he put it at West Point in June, “our enemies are totalitarians, holding a creed of power with no place for human dignity. Now, as then [during the Cold War], they seek to impose a joyless conformity, to control every life and all of life.”<sup>69</sup> Not only were these particular terrorists opponents of liberal freedoms, but all terrorists were by virtue of their chosen means the inherent enemies of democratic values. Fear displaced slavery as the opposite of freedom, and terrorists, by seeking to sow fear, were democracy’s sworn enemies: “Freedom and fear are at war.”<sup>70</sup> There was nothing necessary about this articulation, for freedom and terror are not naturally opposed. Terrorism—defined as “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against innocents”<sup>71</sup>—has historically been a common tactic of uniformed state militaries and insurgent forces across the political spectrum.

This articulation worked in three ways to cement the place of the neo-conservative project in domestic political debate. First, it suggested that at stake in the War on Terror was something even more fundamental than the lives of American citizens: the survival of democracy at home. It prepared the nation for the costs that might well be involved in the invasion of a state sponsor that was more competent, more rationally organized, and better equipped than the Taliban’s Afghanistan. While many neocons thought the Iraqi army would fold quickly, this rhetorical move hedged against the possibility that a war to overthrow Saddam’s regime would exact substantial American blood and treasure: a price could hardly be placed on defending the democracy for which thousands had died on September 11, 2001. Thus was the American public primed for the costs that an aggressive campaign of democracy promotion might entail.

Second, references to contemporary adversaries as totalitarians conjured up Nazi Germany and the communist Soviet Union (thus World War II and the Cold War), imagined as times of unchallenged national consensus around unquestionably virtuous and ultimately victorious political projects. These wars, so went the usual narrative, had not been won by addressing the root

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<sup>69</sup> George W. Bush, Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the United States Response to the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 20 September 2001, *PPP*; George W. Bush, Commencement Address at the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York, 1 June 2002, *PPP*.

<sup>70</sup> George W. Bush, Address Before a Joint Session of Congress, 20 September 2001, *PPP*; George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, 2002), 7. On this score, the administration’s rhetoric has been remarkably consistent: see George W. Bush, *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, 2006).

<sup>71</sup> Bush, *National Security Strategy*, 5.

causes of Nazi grievances or by satisfying legitimate Soviet security concerns, but rather by calling evil by its name, by engaging in stiff-backed resistance, and by mobilizing America's great resources in the service of a noble cause. Such allusions worked to undermine dissent by placing critics on the losing side of historical battles. Had you listened to these doves in the past, Bush implied, the United States would have snatched defeat from the jaws of victory. Contemporary terrorists and their state sponsors must be dispatched with similar vigor and a similarly hard-nosed stance.

Third, with freedom and terror as the conjoined central rhetorical pivot, the path was cleared for a foreign policy based on "moral clarity" and aggressive democratization, starting with the "rogue states," typified by North Korea and Iraq. These regimes were represented as autocratic, rapacious, and brutal (that is, extremely unfree); disrespectful of international law and custom (that is, outside the community of civilized nations); proliferators of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and missile technologies (that is, threatening by traditional standards of security); and sponsors of terrorism (that is, threatening by new standards of security). Most fundamentally, such states "reject basic human values and hate the United States and everything for which it stands"—that is, freedom.<sup>72</sup> The only solution was to bring freedom to them. The War on Terror gave this democratization project a new urgency, so that standing as a democratic city upon a hill did not seem sufficient.

Addressing the nation employing a rhetoric of identity, President Bush and his advisers set the terms of debate in the months after September 2001. Neither their announcement of a Global War on Terror nor their articulation of this to the protection of freedom in the United States and around the globe proved particularly controversial, at least among leading American politicians.<sup>73</sup> This was not inevitable: Al Qaeda and like-minded forces might have been identified as enemies of the United States without the declaration of a war, without the declaration of a War on Terror writ large, and without the articulation of the War on Terror to the defense of democracy.

### Jeremiah and the Devil Within

The rhetoric of the opposition, however, was equally well grounded in the evangelical eschatology that has long suffused U.S. foreign policy debate. This alternative also saw evil at work in the day's events, but an evil that lurked as much within as without. Americans after September 11 were thus to inquire whether they had somehow brought the tragedy upon themselves through

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<sup>72</sup> The 2002 *National Security Strategy* prominently excluded Iran, the third and most powerful member of the axis of evil.

<sup>73</sup> Two other elements of the *National Security Strategy*—the doctrine of preemption and the priority of continued U.S. primacy—did attract more criticism. Space constraints prevent us from explaining this outcome.

their own folly and greed. Rather than launch a war, the opposition suggested that Americans should devote their energies to defensive measures that would protect them against future attacks and to policy reforms that would address the violence's fundamental causes. The terrorist criminals themselves would be brought to justice through a coordinated transnational law enforcement campaign.

Such talk drew upon another rhetorical genre with roots in the American past, dating back to colonial New England: the jeremiad. Like the haranguing biblical prophet from which it took its name, the jeremiad suggested that those who attacked the community were doing God's will, punishing it for its collective transgressions, and it called on the audience to repent and expurgate the devil within.<sup>74</sup> Typically in a more secular form, the elements and structure of the jeremiad have been identified in substantive discourses from the Puritan era through the present, and Ronald Reagan in particular rose to national prominence in the 1970s by adopting its rhetoric.<sup>75</sup> When critics of the Bush administration suggested that the attacks of September 11 represented blowback, they were advancing an interpretation that might have been expected to resonate. A Manichaean narrative did not, therefore, dominate because it was better rooted in America's rhetorical traditions: the jeremiad could make as plausible a claim to authenticity.

Rhetors who employ the jeremiad face an uphill battle. Its style is at odds with basic psychological tendencies, such as the "fundamental attribution error," which suggests that people explain their own less-savory actions situationally and those of others dispositionally. This genre also walks a fine line between upholding the status quo and advocating change. Reinforcing communal values, even as it upbraids the audience for violating them, the jeremiad reproduces the dominant discourse while calling for reform, and policy change, even that which leaves the social order intact, does not come easily.<sup>76</sup>

Yet there is also reason to think that the jeremiad should enjoy its greatest efficacy in times of crisis. Schemas change only infrequently, but they are most likely to change under duress: when discrepant information is strong and salient, when it presents itself en masse, and when the costs of maintaining the existing belief system come to seem excessive. The post-September 11 left wing jeremiad did not call for a complete rethinking of

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<sup>74</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978). On the jeremiad as a rhetorical genre, see also Ronald H. Carpenter, "The Historical Jeremiad as Rhetorical Genre," in *Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action*, eds. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (Falls Church: Speech Communication Association, 1978); and John M. Murphy, "A Time of Shame and Sorrow: Robert F. Kennedy and the American Jeremiad," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 76, no. 4 (November 1990): 401–14.

<sup>75</sup> James Arnt Aune, *Selling the Free Market: The Rhetoric of Economic Correctness* (New York: Guilford Press, 2001), 123–26.

<sup>76</sup> On the limits of the jeremiad as a rhetoric of reform, see Murphy, "A Time of Shame and Sorrow."

American identity, but for greater adherence to traditional American values.<sup>77</sup> It demanded policy change that exceeded merely incremental moves, but it did not challenge the terms of the dominant discourse. Crisis would appear to be among the conditions of possibility for such change.<sup>78</sup> It was precisely the scale of the September 11 attacks then that might counterfactually have made possible the jeremiad's success. It does not seem plausible that simply "the enormity of the civilian loss of life" doomed the leftist jeremiad.<sup>79</sup>

### A Conjunctural Explanation: Crisis, Rhetorical Mode, and Institutional Position

The puzzle thus remains: why did these protestations on the Left not make much headway? Why did hardly any figures of national prominence take issue with the dominant discourse, encapsulated in the War on Terror? The answer, we suggest, lies in the conjuncture of the situation, the rhetorical mode it encouraged, and the national leader's institutional position.

The mode in which a speaker proceeds is at least in part a product of the situation that he or she confronts.<sup>80</sup> Nothing compelled Bush to represent the events of September 11 precisely as he did, but he could not have remained silent in the face of what was widely and immediately perceived, seemingly in an unmediated fashion, as an attack on the homeland.<sup>81</sup> No national leader could have blithely ignored the attacks of September 11, nor was it sustainable to represent them as routine threats to the political order—certainly not in the United States, in which terrorist attacks in general have

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<sup>77</sup> Many realists also suggested that U.S. foreign policy, especially in the Middle East, had laid the groundwork for the September 11 attacks. In their view, however, the solution lay not in more consistent democracy promotion and in less support for repressive authoritarian allies, but in a less ideological foreign policy that was more humble, more constrained, and more tightly linked to America's strategic interests—much as candidate Bush had suggested during the 2000 presidential campaign. See, for instance, John J. Mearsheimer, "Hearts and Minds," *National Interest*, no. 69 (Fall 2002): 13–16; and Benjamin Schwarz and Christopher Layne, "A New Grand Strategy," *Atlantic Monthly*, 289, no. 1 (January 2002): 36–42.

<sup>78</sup> For a related argument, see Jeffrey W. Legro, *Rethinking the World: Great Power Strategies and International Order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

<sup>79</sup> Contra Bostdorff, "George W. Bush's Post-September 11 Rhetoric," 298.

<sup>80</sup> The selected frame might also be the product of the speaker's purpose, nature, or characteristics, as well as the message's form or medium. See William J. Benoit, "Beyond Genre Theory: The Genesis of Rhetorical Action," *Communication Monographs* 67, no. 2 (June 2000): 178–92.

<sup>81</sup> The attacks of September 11 were according to the dominant discourse attacks on the nation-state, but this should hardly be treated as unproblematic or natural. These events could have been represented differently: for example, as attacks on the central symbols of the neoliberal empire, as crimes against humanity, or as crimes against innocents (and to a more limited extent they were as the last two). Thus it would be productive to explore how existing discursive formations structured the response to the attacks, rendering alternatives nearly inconceivable and ensuring that such representations received little play in practice. Such an analysis is worthy of an article all its own.



been rare and in which attacks on that scale were unprecedented.<sup>82</sup> What was needed was a rhetoric that would make sense of these shocking events, identify the perpetrators, explain what they wanted, reaffirm the nation's ideals, and reassure the public that security would be restored. The rhetoric of crisis is consequently the rhetoric of identity, providing the occasion for re-narrations of national self-conceptions: it only secondarily seeks to articulate a rational policy response.<sup>83</sup>

Such rhetoric falls into the mode that scholars of communication, elaborating on Aristotle, have classified as epideictic, or demonstrative. In *The Art of Rhetoric*, Aristotle loosely defines this as an often ceremonial, even ritualistic, rhetorical form marked particularly by attributions of nobility and baseness, by themes of praise and blame—as opposed to the pragmatic justifications of deliberative rhetoric and the justice-oriented themes of forensic rhetoric.<sup>84</sup> Intrigued by Aristotle's too-brief and unsatisfying observations, contemporary students of rhetoric have argued that the epideictic is employed “to explain a social world,” to make sense of some “confusing or troubling” event, person, or object “in terms of the audience's key values and beliefs.” Epideictic rhetoric is then the rhetorical mode through which meaning is imparted and circumstances defined: only secondarily does it seek to articulate a rational policy response.<sup>85</sup> It is also a rhetoric of identity, invoking the community's shared values and affirming the elements that bind community, but also seeking to shape these values and to educate the community and its members so that they may imagine and participate in a vibrant public and civic debate.<sup>86</sup> Epideictic rhetoric has received relatively little attention, but its definitional function renders it potentially extraordinarily powerful. In deploying epideictic rhetoric, actors fix meanings, creating the foundation upon which later deliberative argumentation proceeds and structuring those later debates.<sup>87</sup>

For a public whose narrative of national invulnerability had withstood even the perils of the nuclear age, the attacks of September 11 came as an incalculable shock. President Bush and other officials responded by constructing a narrative that explained the day's horrendous events to a shaken

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<sup>82</sup> When events, even horrific ones, are represented as routine, the consequences for social and political discourse and organization are minimized. See Baruch Kimmerling, *The Interrupted System: Israeli Civilians in War and Routine Times* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1985).

<sup>83</sup> Celeste M. Condit, “The Functions of Epideictic: The Boston Massacre Orations as Exemplar,” *Communication Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (Fall 1985): 284–99. See also Bonnie J. Dow, “The Function of Epideictic and Deliberative Strategies in Presidential Crisis Rhetoric,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 53, no. 3 (Summer 1989): 294–310; and Richard A. Cherwitz and Kenneth S. Zagacki, “Consummatory Versus Justificatory Crisis Rhetoric,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 50, no. 4 (Fall 1986): 307–24.

<sup>84</sup> Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, trans. H.C. Lawson-Tancred (London: Penguin, 1991), 104–10.

<sup>85</sup> Condit, “Functions of Epideictic,” 288.

<sup>86</sup> See esp. Gerard A. Hauser, “Aristotle on Epideictic: The Formation of Public Morality,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 5–23.

<sup>87</sup> For more on the implications of various rhetorical modes for debates on national security, see Krebs, “Rhetoric, Power, and the Making of U.S. Security Policy.”

public, by employing the epideictic mode. They identified for the domestic audience the *dramatis personae* (villain, victim), their chief characteristics (tyrannical, fascistic, evil; free, tolerant, good), and the motivation for the murderous action (hatred) and for the response (righteousness). Relatively little attention was paid in representations of the War on Terror to considerations of pragmatism (What are the net costs of military action, as opposed to other policy instruments?) or justice (What laws have the terrorists violated? For what crime might they be prosecuted? How can they be held legally accountable?). The rhetoric reflected “symbolic reassurance,” not a mastery of policy detail.<sup>88</sup> These official sources were of course hardly the only contributors to the production of the War on Terror, and indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the attacks President Bush and his inner circle were inarticulate. Yet over the succeeding days and weeks, they asserted themselves as the chief authors of the dominant narrative, and the media hardly deviated from the official line.<sup>89</sup> The result was “a prose of solidarity rather than a prose of information.”<sup>90</sup> The Bush administration expended its rhetorical energies primarily on articulating a vision of America and of the values it holds dear.

How speakers speak (what rhetorical mode they employ) shapes the opportunity structure confronting potential opponents. When argument proceeds in the deliberative mode, opponents might seek to undermine a particular policy with superior evidence or logic. This mode is inherently “unruly” because it addresses itself to means, not ends, and the former are typically plentiful, and because it normatively prizes debate.<sup>91</sup> When argument proceeds in the epideictic mode, refutation of the speaker’s defining frame would accentuate division and disagreement, countering the rhetoric’s core mission of unifying the community. Such challenge is beyond the pale: “in epideictic, such a focus on partial interests is anathema. When speakers violate this rule, audience members feel a sense of misuse of the occasion.”<sup>92</sup> After September 11, the epideictic turn made it hard for Democrats to advance and sustain a coherent hegemonic project of their own with which to counter the

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<sup>88</sup> John M. Murphy, “‘Our Mission and Our Moment’: George W. Bush and September 11th,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 6, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 607–32; and Craig Allen Smith, “President Bush’s Enthymeme of Evil: The Amalgamation of 9/11, Iraq, and Moral Values,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 49, no. 1 (September 2005): 32–47.

<sup>89</sup> Michelle C. Bligh, Jeffrey C. Kohles, and James R. Meindl, “Charisma Under Crisis: Presidential Leadership, Rhetoric, and Media Responses Before and After the September 11th Terrorist Attacks,” *The Leadership Quarterly* 15 (2004): 211–39; Coe et al., “No Shades of Gray”; and Hutcheson et al., “U.S. National Identity.”

<sup>90</sup> Michael Schudson, “What’s Unusual About Covering Politics as Usual,” in *Journalism after September 11*, eds. Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan (London: Routledge, 2002), 41.

<sup>91</sup> Roderick P. Hart and Courtney L. Dillard, “Deliberative Genre,” in *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, ed. Thomas O. Sloane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 209–10.

<sup>92</sup> Condit, “Functions of Epideictic,” 289. This was also reflected in a public sentiment that decried even the appearance of partisanship; see David Corn, “The Democrats’ Dilemma,” in *A Just Response: The Nation on Terrorism, Democracy, and September 11, 2001*, ed. Katrina Vanden Heuvel (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2002), 47–49.

administration's newfound sense of purpose: they acceded to and played an active part in the production and reproduction of the War on Terror.

However, this was not the only epideictic option. The most prominently articulated alternative, rhetorically structured as a jeremiad, was equally epideictic. Why did leading political opponents not embrace these arguments? Situation and rhetorical mode must be married to institutional position. When national leaders speak in the epideictic mode, the obstacles facing potential dissenters are even more imposing. Given the very nature of epideictic rhetoric, only a limited number of speakers are authorized to speak on the community's behalf as its designated agents of identity production and communal definition. Having multiple speakers rhetorically weaving the social fabric would undermine the very purpose for which they had been authorized: to knit the ruptured strands (whether back together or simply differently), to unify the community, and to stabilize the discourse. "There is but one national voice in the country," wrote Woodrow Wilson, "and that is the voice of the President." In the United States, the national chief executive is charged with speaking for and constituting the nation.<sup>93</sup> To challenge that leader's epideictic claims is implicitly to undermine that function and thus to challenge his very authority. It is, even more dauntingly, to interpellate oneself into the president's role as the nation's king, prophet, and priest<sup>94</sup>—a tall order indeed and one that few politicians can successfully pull off.<sup>95</sup> After the attacks of September 11, prominent national politicians could in principle have formulated a critique in epideictic terms, but it is hardly surprising that they toed the president's line, accepting his representation of September 11 and his "justification" for the War on Terror.

One narrower criticism of the War on Terror did have a greater impact on the national debate. Critics charged that the administration's characterization of its campaign against Al Qaeda and like-minded organizations, including state sponsors, as a war had led the United States to embrace a militarized policy poorly suited to the threats facing the nation. In war, the military is the primary responsible agency and armed force the primary policy tool, but combating terrorism requires international coordination and persuasion to gather intelligence on terrorist cells, to sustain cooperation on terrorist financing, to capture terrorist leaders, and to address terrorism's root causes. Moreover, the metaphor of war legitimizes one's terrorist adversaries, granting them the dignity of equality with nation-states and its members the status of soldiers. "An open-ended war," James Fallows further points out, "is an open-ended invitation to defeat." Finally, the rhetoric of war situates polities

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<sup>93</sup> Campbell and Jamieson, *Deeds Done in Words*, 5–6, quote at 13.

<sup>94</sup> Michael Novak, *Choosing Our King: Powerful Symbols in Presidential Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1974).

<sup>95</sup> John M. Murphy, "Epideictic and Deliberative Strategies in Opposition to War: The Paradox of Honor and Expediency," *Communication Studies* 43, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 65–78.

in a crisis, handing terrorists a psychological victory. Critics instead variously counseled the Bush administration to declare victory, to brand terrorism a crime and prosecute terrorists accordingly, and to forge international coalitions targeting terrorist sanctuaries and financing.<sup>96</sup> It is worth noting, however, how little of the larger discourse this emendation questions. It still represents the United States as a blameless victim. It still leaves open the possibility, or even probability, that the perpetrators are as consumed by evil as the president has claimed, for there are criminals who appear incapable of rehabilitation and must be either executed or permanently incarcerated. These elements shared with the War on Terror permitted this argument to receive play in mainstream, if still largely elite, circles in contrast to the jeremiad. Such discordant notes surfaced only occasionally. By 2006 even many critics had conceded, as did Michael Howard, that “however much academic pedants and international lawyers may object, it will go on being ‘war’ so far as the media are concerned, and so for the general public as well.”<sup>97</sup>

### Addressing Alternative Arguments

Must we turn to this conjuncture to explain the dominance of the War on Terror? Some might find it unsurprising that the political mainstream settled on this language after the September 11 terrorist attacks and that such rhetoric triumphed over its more critical competitors. One might argue such a response is only natural: all leaders would represent the adversary and the conflict this way. Moreover, given the tendency of populaces to “rally ’round the flag” in times of crisis, such self-affirming rhetorics are expected to prove victorious in the agora.<sup>98</sup>

Our response to this important objection is threefold. First, the “rally ’round the flag” is generally understood to refer to an evanescent boost in public approval that redounds to the benefit of political leaders in the wake of dramatic international events. It is well-established that such rallies are short-lived, and the rally effect has been measured largely in terms of approval ratings (public opinion). It is thus less clear whether it can be extended to the production of (less fleeting) discursive dominance, the subject of our study. More important, underlying the rally is a desire for identity stability in times of uncertainty and doubt. This psychological insight would appear linked as well to the demand for epideictic rhetoric in times of perceived crisis.

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<sup>96</sup> See among others, Bruce Ackerman, “This Is Not a War,” *Yale Law Journal* 113, no. 8 (June 2004): 1869–78; James Fallows, “Declaring Victory,” *Atlantic Monthly*, September 2006; Philip B. Heymann, *Terrorism, Freedom, and Security: Winning Without War* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), chap. 2; Michael Howard, “What’s In a Name?” *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 1 (January/February 2002): 8–13; and Paul R. Pillar, *Terrorism and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2001), 1–10, 97–110.

<sup>97</sup> Michael Howard, “A Long War?” *Survival* 48, no. 4 (Winter 2006–2007): 9.

<sup>98</sup> Many thanks to Robert Art and David Edelstein for challenging us along these lines.

Second, even if all people would have “rallied” under such circumstances, it is by no means obvious that they would have rallied in the same way: the terms in which policy is legitimated have important consequences. The distinction between Self and Other, and the definition of Self by contrast to some Other, is common,<sup>99</sup> and social psychologists contend that it is hard-wired.<sup>100</sup> But how do we characterize the Other—civilized or barbaric? fundamentally good, yet flawed or misguided, or irrevocably evil? secular or religious? fascist, autocratic, or democratic? liberal or illiberal? We argue that how we rally, how we represent the Other, is of great import for subsequent political contest. Such representations vary across national contexts: that U.S. leaders turn so readily to the language of good and evil in representing their country’s allies and adversaries has long been noted by and has long been a source of puzzlement among Europeans who dismiss Americans as simplistic. Stanley Hoffmann suggests that thanks to the country’s founding and its resulting political culture, Americans, when faced with irresolvable conflict, “must paint a gruesome picture of the enemy that makes him more diabolical, more effective, more powerful, more insidious than he is. For were the foe anything less, the shame of violence could not be removed.”<sup>101</sup> There is individual agency at work here as well: Bush’s steady reliance on evil as a central trope has been seen as unusual, even by the standards of U.S. presidents, and most would have been surprised if Al Gore, had he been elected president in 2000, had represented the post-9/11 adversary and framed his agenda in similar terms.

Finally, we have acknowledged that the jeremiad’s prospects in rhetorical contest are often bleak, but neither its marginalization nor its failure is foreordained. In fact, such self-flagellating rhetoric has at times become a major strain in policy debates and has even become dominant. William Callahan has recently drawn attention to the prominence of humiliation in the rhetoric of foreign policy from the seventeenth century through the present, in which the emphasis lies on self-criticism and reflection rather than the perfidy of a foreign Other.<sup>102</sup> For example, in the interwar period, many politicians in both Britain and France empathized with German moves to jettison the Treaty of Versailles, depicted such revisionism as an understandable response to an overly severe arrangement imposed by the Allies and blamed themselves for German hostility. The French ambassador to Brussels conceded that France’s

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<sup>99</sup> See Campbell, *Writing Security*; and Anne Norton, *Reflections on Political Identity* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993 [1988]).

<sup>100</sup> Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, “The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior,” in *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, eds. Stephen Worchel and William G. Austin (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1986).

<sup>101</sup> Stanley Hoffmann, *Gulliver’s Troubles, or the Setting of American Foreign Policy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 186.

<sup>102</sup> William A. Callahan, “War, Shame, and Time: Pastoral Governance and National Identity in England and America,” *International Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (June 2006): 395–419.

“narrow and unintelligent nationalism” was responsible for Hitler’s rise.<sup>103</sup> The rhetoric of guilt was even more palpable in interwar Britain where many embraced “meaculpism,” even after 1933. Lord Lothian, who had helped draft the treaty, was applauded when he characterized the new Nazi regime as “the product of our own conduct in trying to exact impossible reparations and in requiring her [Germany] to be disarmed while her neighbors were armed to the teeth for fifteen years.”<sup>104</sup> That France and Britain would seek to appease a resurgent Germany was in many ways overdetermined, yet this policy was rendered socially sustainable through the rhetoric of the jeremiad.<sup>105</sup>

Rhetoric reminiscent of the jeremiad also surrounded the French withdrawal from Algeria. By some accounts, France’s abandonment of its empire cannot be explained by military difficulties, casualty levels, or economic drain. Rather the French population lost the will to use all means necessary to hold on to Algeria, in large part because of the “moralist critique” which centered on the brutal tactics employed by French counterinsurgency forces and especially on the danger continued imperial rule posed to France’s democratic order. Proponents of withdrawal alleged that French democracy was deservedly in jeopardy due to the country’s misguided colonial ventures. Neither the French population nor the authorities tolerated loyalist terrorism in metropolitan France, but they recognized that it was a legacy of French colonialism.<sup>106</sup> As the influential editor and intellectual Jean-Marie Domenach wrote at the time, “The war in Algeria will last as long as Frenchmen refuse to satisfy the aspirations of the Algerian people; and as long as the war lasts the Algerian situation will continue to breed fascism.”<sup>107</sup>

The jeremiad may be employed to sustain foreign policies not only of passivity and retrenchment, but also of assertiveness and expansion. For instance, much of the argumentative structure of the U.S. strategy document whose logic underpinned the militarization of the Cold War, NSC 68, took

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<sup>103</sup> Anthony Adamthwaite, *Grandeur and Misery: France’s Bid for Power in Europe, 1914–1940* (London: Arnold, 1995), 187–88.

<sup>104</sup> Jon Jacobson, *Locarno Diplomacy: Germany and the West, 1925–1929* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 15 and passim; Martin Gilbert, *The Roots of Appeasement* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), 22–31, 56–67, 138–50, quote at 44.

<sup>105</sup> We do not mean to suggest that French and British leaders really accorded much legitimacy to German grievances. They may have, but it is also possible that this was “mere rhetoric,” masking other motives. What matters for our purposes is that jeremiad-like rhetoric was employed and proved sustainable.

<sup>106</sup> Gil Merom, *How Democracies Lose Small Wars: State, Society, and the Failures of France in Algeria, Israel in Lebanon, and the United States in Vietnam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), chaps. 7–9; Paul Clay Sorum, *Intellectuals and Decolonization in France* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), chap. 5.

<sup>107</sup> Jean-Marie Domenach, “Democratic Paralysis in France,” *Foreign Affairs* 37, no. 1 (October 1958): 38–39.

the shape of a jeremiad.<sup>108</sup> The problem, the authors of NSC 68 maintained, lay not with America's "fundamental purpose," but with the lack of will that the country had of late displayed in failing to pursue that purpose with sufficient vigor. The Soviet Union's increasingly advantageous power position and the political momentum it enjoyed did not imply that America's core values were bankrupt. In fact, NSC 68 held that, "the system of values which [sic] animates our society—the principles of freedom, tolerance, the importance of the individual, and the supremacy of reason over will—are more valid and vital than the ideology which is the fuel of Soviet dynamism. . . [and can] powerful[ly] appeal to millions who now seek or find in authoritarianism a refuge from anxieties, bafflement, and insecurity." Rather, the document represented recent setbacks as a reflection of Americans' most elemental values taken to a distorted and unrecognizable extreme, of Americans' having fallen off the proper path: "the excesses of a permanently open mind wishfully waiting for evidence that evil design may become noble purpose, the excess of faith becoming prejudice, the excess of tolerance degenerating into indulgence of conspiracy, and the excess of resorting to suppression when more moderate measures are not only more appropriate but more effective." When combined with a narrative on the nature of the adversary and the superpower confrontation, the upshot was that "a more rapid build-up of political, economic, and military strength and thereby of confidence in the free world than is now contemplated is the only course which is consistent with progress toward achieving our fundamental purpose."<sup>109</sup> A jeremiad thus gave rise to what would become known as the Cold War consensus.

### EXTENDING THE WAR ON TERROR TO IRAQ

Epidictic rhetoric defines situations and fixes meaning, but it cannot sustain policy over the long haul. It creates the foundation upon which later deliberative argumentation proceeds,<sup>110</sup> but it is not the rhetoric of policy debate. Policy must eventually be defended on other, typically pragmatic, grounds. In fact, as the Bush administration worked to frame Iraq as a "gathering storm," it argued primarily in a deliberative mode: it maintained that Iraq either had acquired or would soon acquire weapons of mass destruction, particularly nuclear weapons, that this development would spark intolerable instability

<sup>108</sup> William Kristol and Robert Kagan's case for a "neo-Reaganite foreign policy" of greatness was also rhetorically structured as a jeremiad. See William Kristol and Robert Kagan, "Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 4 (July/August 1996): 18–32.

<sup>109</sup> "NSC 68: United States Objectives and Programs for National Security," 14 April 1950, in Thomas Etzold and John Lewis Gaddis, eds., *Containment: Documents on American Policy and Strategy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), quotes at 402–403, 432. A very brief discussion of this document as a jeremiad appears in Campbell, *Writing Security*, 32–33.

<sup>110</sup> Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969).

in a region of strategic significance, and that Iraq might share the bomb with terrorists who could not be deterred. At least in principle, pragmatic justifications can be countered, and the Bush administration's arguments could therefore have faced substantial opposition. Yet many leading Democrats passed up this opportunity to challenge the administration's central claims. Why? We argue that the dominance of the War on Terror narrowed the space for debate over foreign policy and led many Democrats to hold their tongues. The established terms of debate after September 11 had repercussions that extended well beyond those first months after the World Trade Center fell. Moreover, challenging the war in Iraq required challenging a portrait of Saddam Hussein as evil and as a terrorist, terms in which he had long been cast. A large and critical group of Democrats whose national profiles might have bolstered the opposition to war shied away from criticizing the popular president leading the War on Terror. While a handful jumped enthusiastically on the Iraq bandwagon, many others quietly favored invasion or at most criticized unilateral action. Countering the president's clarion call was seen as unsustainable in the post-9/11 rhetorical environment.<sup>111</sup>

Some conservatives began calling for the invasion of Iraq immediately after the September 11 attacks,<sup>112</sup> but the president's own rhetoric was notably restrained until the 2002 State of the Union. Following that address, in which Bush famously (some would say, notoriously) characterized Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as an "axis of evil," the president's depiction of Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi regime remained consistent.<sup>113</sup> Hussein supported terrorism, sought and possessed weapons of mass destruction, killed and tortured "his own people," and could not be trusted. As Bush put it in the State of the Union:

Iraq continues to flaunt its hostility toward America and to support terror. The Iraqi regime has plotted to develop anthrax, and nerve gas, and nuclear weapons for over a decade. This is a regime that has already used poison gas to murder thousands of its own citizens—leaving the bodies of mothers huddled over their dead children. This is a regime that agreed to international inspections—then kicked out the inspectors. This is a regime that has something to hide from the civilized world.<sup>114</sup>

In the months that followed, Bush and other leading administration figures repeated and reinforced this portrait of Iraq and its regime. In the late summer

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<sup>111</sup> Many have suggested that the timing of the resolution's introduction and vote—before the midterm elections—played a critical role as well, and that seems quite likely. See among others, Western, *Selling Intervention and War*.

<sup>112</sup> See for example, William Safire, "The Ultimate Enemy," *New York Times*, 24 September 2001.

<sup>113</sup> This conclusion is based on a careful reading of every presidential address related to Iraq between September 2001 and March 2003, located in *PPP*.

<sup>114</sup> George W. Bush, Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, 29 January 2002, *PPP*.



and early fall of 2002, as the administration launched an aggressive campaign to sway public opinion, three additional elements were grafted on to the basic narrative. First, previously acceptable risks with regard to Iraqi weapons programs were no longer tolerable in the wake of September 11.<sup>115</sup> Second, Iraq was a “grave and growing” danger. Third, Saddam Hussein hated (and was not merely hostile to) America and its values. Through the start of major combat operations, the administration did not waver from these core arguments.<sup>116</sup>

Many have noted how administration figures slyly and repeatedly mentioned Iraq in the same breath as the September 11 attacks, thus implying an operational link with Al Qaeda where there was none,<sup>117</sup> but the administration’s rhetoric, widely reflected in media coverage,<sup>118</sup> forged more durable bonds between the Iraqi regime, Saddam Hussein, and the War on Terror. By regularly referring to Iraq as a member of the axis of evil, Bush and key administration spokespeople suggested that the Iraqi regime and its president were on the same moral plane as the terrorists and probably were themselves terrorists. By emphasizing that the Iraqi regime killed its own citizens, the administration elided any distinction between the state terror in which Iraq had engaged and the international terrorism to which the United States had been subjected. By maintaining that the Iraqi regime had “something to hide from the civilized world,” Bush placed it in the realm of barbarism, where Al Qaeda prominently resided. By emphasizing Saddam Hussein’s unyielding hatred of the United States and its values, Bush and others suggested a common agenda with Islamist terrorists. By continuously focusing on Saddam Hussein, rather than on Iraq or even its regime, Bush suggested a further parallel with Osama bin Laden; their organizations merely reflected their leaders’ political programs and personal pathologies in contrast to democracies in which law, not personal whim, ruled. The link between the Iraqi regime and Al Qaeda was established not just through the blunt tactics of continual misrepresentation and exaggeration that have been widely noted, but perhaps more through these subtle rhetorical deployments that capitalized on the relatively settled meaning of September 11, reflected in the dominant discourse of the War on Terror.

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<sup>115</sup> This was the essence of Cheney’s “one percent doctrine”: see Susskind, *One Percent Doctrine*.

<sup>116</sup> For typical examples, see George W. Bush, “Iraqi Regime Danger to America is ‘Grave and Growing,’” 5 October 2002, *PPP*; George W. Bush, Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, 28 January 2003, *PPP*; and George W. Bush, Address to the Nation on Iraq, 17 March 2003, *PPP*. See also Paul Wolfowitz, “On Iraq,” 16 October 2002. <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/2002/s20021016-depsecdef.html>; and Donald Rumsfeld, Testimony Before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, 19 September 2002. <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/2002/s20020919-secdef2.html>.

<sup>117</sup> See among others, Freedman, “War in Iraq,” 18–20; and Kaufmann, “Threat Inflation,” 16–19.

<sup>118</sup> Amy Gershkoff and Shana Kushner, “Shaping Public Opinion: The 9/11-Iraq Connection in the Bush Administration’s Rhetoric,” *Perspectives on Politics* 3, no. 3 (September 2005): 525–37.

Part of the reason for the Bush administration's success in fashioning a link between Iraq and the War on Terror lies in the very nature of discourse on terrorism. Terrorism threatens the very logic of inside/outside that sustains the modern nation-state, and states consequently respond by asserting anew their territorial identity, reimposing a geopolitics of identity and difference, and emphasizing the primacy of territorial defense.<sup>119</sup> As Americans daily reproduced this statist counterterrorist discourse, it seemed natural to posit close links between Al Qaeda and a state sponsor, as the administration regularly insinuated. Not any state could have been reasonably inserted into that role, but Iraq was a prime candidate, largely because it had already been well established in U.S. politics that Saddam Hussein and his regime were demonstrably evil and terroristic.<sup>120</sup>

The rhetorical treatment of Saddam Hussein and Iraq in the decade after the first Gulf War further helps explain why the essential terms of the administration's frame went largely uncontested. As early as October 1990, President George H. W. Bush depicted Saddam Hussein as "Hitler revisited," and he regularly suggested that Hussein was as great a threat as Hitler, that the invasion of Kuwait was akin to Hitler's invasion of Poland, and that the world's failure to respond forcefully to Hussein's aggression would equal British and French appeasement at Munich in 1938.<sup>121</sup> "In most of the West," Lance Morrow notes, "Hitler is the 20th century's term for [the] Great Satan," and to invoke Hitler is to evoke "evil's icon."<sup>122</sup> This characterization of Saddam Hussein was echoed in the press, and in January 1991 nearly as many West Virginians identified Saddam Hussein as the most evil statesman of the twentieth century (36 percent) as named Hitler (43 percent).<sup>123</sup> Like Hitler, Saddam was not only brutal but evil: his appetite for fearsome weapons was insatiable, and he was an inveterate aggressor who could be neither permanently contained nor appeased.

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<sup>119</sup> Mat Coleman, "The Naming of 'Terrorism' and 'Evil Outlaws': Geopolitical Place-Making after 11 September," in *11 September and Its Aftermath: The Geopolitics of Terror*, ed. Stanley D. Brunn (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 88–93. See also Robert Keohane, "The Globalization of Informal Violence, Theories of World Politics, and 'the Liberalism of Fear,'" in *Understanding September 11*, eds. Craig Calhoun, Paul Price, and Ashley Timmer (New York: Social Science Research Council/New Press, 2002).

<sup>120</sup> Moreover, other conceivable candidates—such as Afghanistan and Sudan—were not sufficiently state-like to sustain allegations that they had facilitated the attacks' remarkable coordination. Thanks to Bud Duvall for this observation.

<sup>121</sup> This stance was particularly ironic because until the invasion of Kuwait the George H.W. Bush administration had sought to appease Iraq. See among many others, George H.W. Bush, Remarks, Fundraising Luncheon for Gubernatorial Candidate Clayton Williams (Dallas, TX), 15 October 1990, *PPP*; George H.W. Bush, Remarks, Republican Fundraising Breakfast (Burlington, VT), 23 October 1990, *PPP*; George H.W. Bush, Remarks, Republican Party Fundraising Breakfast (Burlington, MA), 1 November 1990, *PPP*; George H.W. Bush, Remarks, Republican Campaign Rally (Albuquerque, NM), 3 November 1990, *PPP*.

<sup>122</sup> This is of course not to deny that other leaders—Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, among others—have competed for that dubious honor. Lance Morrow, "Evil," *Time*, 10 June 1991; and Morrow, *Evil*, 137–38.

<sup>123</sup> West Virginia Poll, 23 January 1991. Available through Polling the Nations. <http://poll.orspub.com>.

Rhetoric equating Saddam Hussein with Adolf Hitler and Baathist Iraq with Nazi Germany did not taper off much during the 1990s. In 1998 Clinton's secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, called Saddam Hussein "the most evil man the world has seen since Hitler,"<sup>124</sup> and this portrait of Iraq's president had become so well entrenched that in "person on the street" interviews conducted that same year, citizens based their analysis of Iraq on the Hitler analogy.<sup>125</sup> Hussein's credentials as a figure of imposing evil and as a Middle Eastern Hitler were thus well established by the time Bush included his regime in the axis of evil. In issuing an ultimatum to Iraq in March 2003, Bush invoked past Western errors and alluded to Hitler: "In the 20th century, some chose to appease murderous dictators . . . In this century . . . a policy of appeasement could bring destruction of a kind never before seen on this Earth."<sup>126</sup> Representing Saddam Hussein as a pathetic petty tyrant, as one who aspired to be Hitler but lacked the competence or the resources, was theoretically available to anti-war forces, but it flew in the face of a decade-old discourse that had treated Iraq as a serious threat to national security, on a par with Nazi Germany.

The second rhetorical engine driving the case for war was that Saddam Hussein and his regime were terrorists, and this also found support in the rhetoric of the Clinton administration. Eschewing the Hitler analogy himself, Clinton argued from the beginning of his presidency that Saddam was responsible for acts of terrorism. After discovering an Iraqi plot to assassinate former President Bush, Clinton authorized missile strikes against Iraqi intelligence assets, announcing that "Saddam Hussein has demonstrated repeatedly that he will resort to terrorism or aggression if left unchecked."<sup>127</sup> Whether this was an appropriate use of the terrorism label or not, it was widely repeated by administration figures and in the press throughout the Clinton years. American newspapers openly speculated that Iraq had a hand in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, and Iraq was fingered for other potential and actual terrorist activity at home and abroad.<sup>128</sup> The image of Saddam Hussein as a terrorist had struck sufficiently deep roots that George

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<sup>124</sup> James Bennet, "Clinton Sets Out to Revive Support for Stand on Iraq," *New York Times*, 20 February 1998. See also Patrick O'Driscoll, "Administration Sticking to Its Hard Line," *USA Today*, 20 February 1998.

<sup>125</sup> Jodi Wilgoren, "Around the U.S., Cynicism and a Showing of Support," *New York Times*, 17 December 1998.

<sup>126</sup> George W. Bush, Address to the Nation on Iraq, 17 March 2003, *PPP*.

<sup>127</sup> Bill Clinton, Address to the Nation on the Strike on Iraqi Intelligence Headquarters, 26 June 1993, *PPP*. See also Bill Clinton, Remarks Announcing a Missile Strike on Iraq and an Exchange With Reporters, 3 September 1996, *PPP*.

<sup>128</sup> See William J. Broad and Judith Miller, "Germ Defense Plan in Peril as Its Flaws Are Revealed," *New York Times*, 7 August 1998; Steven Erlanger, "Republicans Back Clinton on the Use of Force on Iraqis," *New York Times*, 27 January 1998; Charles M. Sennott, "Terrorism Specialists See Links to Iraq in Trade Center Bombing," *Boston Globe*, 17 January 1995; Charles M. Sennott, "Blast Probers Say Trail Leading to Iraq," *Boston Globe*, 10 February 1995; and Tim Weiner, "Attack Is Aimed at the Heart of Iraq's Spy Network," *New York Times*, 27 June 1993.

W. Bush could credibly accuse him of “harboring terrorists and the instruments of terror, the instruments of mass death and destruction.”<sup>129</sup> Like the barbaric terrorists, his regime had no place in the family of civilized nations, and morality imposed no constraints upon it.

This rhetorical history left Americans well disposed to see Saddam Hussein as capable of committing or at least supporting the most nefarious acts, and thus the administration’s rhetorical efforts to link his regime to the horrific attacks of September 11 tilled a fertile soil and swiftly brought forth fruit. Bush’s representations of Hussein were by no means irrelevant—the seeds required active cultivation to pierce the surface—but linking Iraq to the War on Terror was hardly an imposing task.<sup>130</sup> This articulation was essential in undercutting Democrats who might have otherwise opposed war with Iraq. As Bush put it, “you can’t distinguish between Al Qaida and Saddam when you talk about the war on terror . . . because they’re both equally as bad and equally as evil and equally as destructive.”<sup>131</sup> One cannot negotiate with unquestionable evil, one can only wage war against it. Thus the United States was compelled to invade Saddam Hussein’s Iraq.<sup>132</sup> Given the dominance of the War on Terror discourse, opponents of war with Iraq had few rhetorical resources with which to challenge these “logical” steps leading down the path to war.

Opposition to the war among Democrats was muted. True, Democrats in the Senate only narrowly authorized military force against Iraq, voting 27–21 for Joint Resolution 114, and Democrats in the House of Representatives voted down the resolution, 81–126. But nearly all leading Democratic figures and particularly the front runners for the presidential nomination did support the war in its essence, even if some took issue with the details.<sup>133</sup> At the leadership level, by the summer of 2002 there was “broad bipartisan support

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<sup>129</sup> George W. Bush, “The Iraqi Threat,” (Cincinnati, OH), 7 October 2002, *PPP*.

<sup>130</sup> Scott L. Althaus and Devon M. Liggio, “When Osama Became Saddam: Origins and Consequences of the Change in America’s Public Enemy #1,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 37, no. 4 (October 2004): 795–99; Foyle, “Leading the Public to War?” See also A. Trevor Thrall, “A Bear in the Woods? Threat Framing and the Marketplace of Values,” *Security Studies* (this issue); Western, *Selling Intervention and War*. This argument focusing on the public’s predispositions seems to us complementary, rather than competing. Long-standing representations of Saddam Hussein and of the Iraqi threat not only shaped the public’s perceptions, but also—and we would argue equally importantly—shaped debate in the run-up to the 2003 war.

<sup>131</sup> George W. Bush, Remarks Prior to Discussions with President Alvaro Uribe of Colombia and an Exchange With Reporters, 25 September 2002, *PPP*.

<sup>132</sup> A final noteworthy element is that Congress had overwhelmingly approved the Iraq Liberation Act in October 1998, and Clinton himself had publicly endorsed regime change as a U.S. objective the following month. Afterwards, senior Clinton administration figures regularly billed U.S. policy toward Iraq as “containment plus”—that is, plus regime change. They did not support using force, or at least U.S. forces, to achieve this end, and many were skeptical of the Iraqi exiles. This move also narrowed the rhetorical space available to potential Democratic opponents in 2002–2003, since many had voted in 1998 in favor of a declaratory policy of regime change, even if the accompanying financial support was paltry.

<sup>133</sup> Gary R. Hess, “Presidents and the Congressional War Resolutions of 1991 and 2002,” *Political Science Quarterly* 121, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 106–11; Western, *Selling Intervention and War*.

for ousting” Saddam Hussein by “a military invasion if other options fail.” In other words, by the summer before the war, the question of the Iraqi regime’s removal was not if, but when and how, even among Democrats.<sup>134</sup> Party leaders made it “very hard,” according to Senator Dianne Feinstein, for lower-ranking Democrats to speak out against the war. A “rift” reportedly emerged between the party leadership and prospective presidential candidates on the one hand and rank-and-file Democrats on the other, and the rift was even greater between Beltway Democrats and the core Democratic constituency outside Washington. Opponents of the war, both inside and outside Congress, were placed “on the defensive.”<sup>135</sup>

Part of the reason for this critical group’s public acquiescence to the invasion of Iraq lies in the rhetorical obstacles erected after September 11. The establishment of the War on Terror as the organizing discourse in foreign policy, in combination with the existing portrait of Saddam Hussein as evil and as a terrorist, deprived leading Democrats of socially sustainable arguments with which to oppose the administration. In short, these Democrats were “rhetorically coerced”: they had been left without access to the rhetorical materials needed to craft an acceptable rebuttal.<sup>136</sup> What they could do—and what they did—was raise questions about the timing and circumstances of an invasion. The boundaries of sustainable rhetoric had been narrowed after September 11, limiting the space for vocal opposition.

What arguments did Democrats offer, and why could they make at best limited headway in post-9/11 politics? First, a small number of Democrats, some quite prominent in the party, opposed an invasion of Iraq from the very beginning, arguing that the status quo was tolerable and sustainable.<sup>137</sup> Senator Edward Kennedy maintained that “there are realistic alternatives between doing nothing and declaring unilateral or immediate war. War should be a last resort, not the first response.” He, along with Senator Robert Byrd, accused the administration of pushing for war so as to divert the nation’s attention from the faltering economy and the rash of corporate corruption scandals with ties to the White House. These Democrats did not argue that Saddam Hussein was not a threat or that he could be turned aside with sweet reasonableness. Rather, they suggested that containment, combined

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<sup>134</sup> James Dao, “Call in Congress for Full Airing of Iraq Policy,” *New York Times*, 18 July 2002.

<sup>135</sup> Jim VandeHei, “Louder War Talk, and Muffled Dissent: Party Leaders Make Opposition Difficult, Wary Democrats Say,” *Washington Post*, 25 September 2002; James Traub, “The Things They Carry,” *New York Times Magazine*, 4 January 2004; and VandeHei and Eilperin, “9/11 Changed Equation.”

<sup>136</sup> Space constraints prevent us from presenting the theoretical logic of rhetorical coercion in greater detail. For more on this mechanism, see Ronald R. Krebs, *Fighting for Rights: Military Service and the Politics of Citizenship* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006); and Krebs and Jackson, “Twisting Tongues and Twisting Arms.”

<sup>137</sup> The most prominent among these early opponents—Senators Robert Byrd, Carl Levin, and Edward Kennedy—are the exceptions that prove the rule: old lions of the party, they could speak freely because they held secure seats and no longer harbored aspirations for national office.

with a continued inspections regime, remained an adequate response to an Iraq that had been weakened by a decade of economic sanctions.<sup>138</sup> Former Clinton deputy William Galston similarly argued, “We should contain Hussein, deter him and bring him down the way we brought down the Evil Empire that threatened our existence for half a century—through economic, diplomatic, military and moral pressure, not force of arms.”<sup>139</sup> By invoking the Cold War, Galston cleverly suggested that evil need not be destroyed or conquered. Yet such a view of evil could no longer be sustained after September 11.<sup>140</sup> The discourse of the War on Terror, to which Democrats had acceded and in whose reproduction they continued to participate, implied that evil could not be tolerated, nor could Democrats challenge the long-standing charge, made first by a fellow Democrat, that Saddam Hussein supported terrorism. If the evil of transnational terrorism could be eliminated only through the application of military force—that is, war—and if Saddam Hussein was in fact a fellow terrorist, then there was little reason not to apply those same means to Iraq in pursuit of the consensus goal of regime change.

Second, other Democrats suggested that the costs of a war would be prohibitive and that the United States had higher priorities on which to expend resources. Senator Mark Dayton claimed that “we know that the United States would defeat Iraq and depose Saddam Hussein. But we don’t know the cost in bloodshed, destruction and subsequent occupation. And we don’t know the consequences of violating our national principle of not starting wars.” Former Vice President Al Gore likewise challenged the administration’s priorities, arguing that an invasion of Iraq would jeopardize the campaign against the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks and undermine U.S. global leadership; the United States needed to focus on ensuring the safety of nuclear materials in the former Soviet Union and on rooting out Al Qaeda. A minority of congressional Democrats challenged the administration’s claim that Iraq was in fact a “grave and growing danger,” maintaining

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<sup>138</sup> “Senate to Debate Iraq Resolution; Key Democrats Have Doubts, but Measure on Track for Passage,” *Washington Post*, 4 October 2002. This was apparently the view before the war among many military officers: see Thomas E. Ricks, “Some Top Military Brass Favor Status Quo in Iraq,” *Washington Post*, 28 July 2002. For an academic endorsement of containment, even of a nuclear-armed Iraq, see John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “An Unnecessary War,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 134 (January-February 2003): 50–59.

<sup>139</sup> William A. Galston, “Why a First Strike Will Surely Backfire,” *Washington Post*, 16 June 2002.

<sup>140</sup> The two other members of the axis of evil have escaped similar punishment—at least for now. Many have speculated that Iraq was targeted first because it was low-hanging fruit, and there is some evidence that the Bush administration has given serious consideration to bombing strikes against Iran; North Korea, widely believed to already have crude nuclear weapons within striking distance of Seoul and Tokyo, is the hardest nut to crack. After September 11, labeling another state evil or terrorist did not necessitate military intervention, but it did make it awfully hard to oppose military action. We cannot know what would have happened if the administration had sought first to make the case for war against Iran or North Korea.

instead that Iraq posed a continuing threat, not an immediate and imminent threat.<sup>141</sup>

Yet the administration's rebuttals were compelling in the post-9/11 public sphere, for reasons that should now be clear. While it sought to some extent to respond by adducing evidence that the Iraqi threat was in fact pressing,<sup>142</sup> it also contended that the criterion of imminence that critics had applied was irrelevant and that the argument revealed how little its political opponents grasped the realities of the threats facing the United States. In its 2002 *National Security Strategy*, the administration had argued that imminence was outmoded as a criterion for war. September 11 had proved that one could not wait until forces gathered at the border. While the administration did insist that the costs of invasion and reconstruction would be far lower than the critics forecast,<sup>143</sup> the articulation of Iraq to the War on Terror put potential critics in the uncomfortable position of having to argue that they would sacrifice national security for the sake of a few dollars. Finally, attempts to insert space between Iraq and the War on Terror, along the lines Gore had suggested, failed to comprehend how firmly the two were now linked in public discourse.<sup>144</sup>

In the post-September 11 rhetorical space, Democratic politicians who might normally have helped lead a vigorous opposition to the invasion held their tongues. This was less because they had been persuaded of the Bush administration's logic and factual claims than because the fixing of the War on Terror as the dominant discourse after September 11 had deprived them of winning arguments, of socially sustainable avenues of reply.<sup>145</sup> They were the victims of successful rhetorical coercion. Recognizing that their justifications for opposing the war were unlikely to gain rhetorical traction, many Democrats either jumped on the administration's bandwagon or offered a more modest critique. Democrats could and did argue that violating Iraq's national sovereignty, as opposed to the pursuit of non-state actors like Al Qaeda, required the imprimatur of the United Nations and the support of

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<sup>141</sup> For representative examples, see Rep. Dennis Kucinich, *Congressional Record*, 3 October 2002, H7010–H7016; Sen. Robert Byrd, *Congressional Record*, 8 October 2002, S10075; Sen. Ron Wyden, *Congressional Record*, 8 October 2002, S10098.

<sup>142</sup> George W. Bush, President Discusses Growing Danger Posed by Saddam Hussein's Regime, 14 September 2002, *PPP*; George W. Bush, Radio Address by the President to the Nation, 28 September 2002, *PPP*.

<sup>143</sup> Neela Banerjee, "Can Oil Pay for Iraq's Rebuilding? The U.S. Hopes So," *New York Times*, 2 March 2003; Patrick E. Tyler, "Panel Faults Bush on War Costs and Risks," *New York Times*, 12 March 2003.

<sup>144</sup> Until recently, a stable majority of Americans saw Iraq as a critical if not the central front in the War on Terror. By the summer of 2006, however, a slim majority denied any such connection. See Carl Hulse and Marjorie Connelly, "Poll Shows a Shift in Opinion on Iraq War," *New York Times*, 23 August 2006.

<sup>145</sup> Jon Western similarly, if briefly, suggests that Bush's framing of the war "boxed in" opponents. *Selling Intervention and War*, 197–98.

the international community.<sup>146</sup> This argument carried much weight with the American public: just a month before the invasion began, a clear majority of Americans opposed going to war without UN sanction.<sup>147</sup> But this was necessarily a far weaker form of argument that already conceded the administration's most fundamental points. Nor was it particularly constraining to the Bush administration, which co-opted such selective multilateralist critiques by recasting the issue: would the United Nations uphold its own previously articulated commitment to shut down Iraqi WMD and ballistic missile programs?<sup>148</sup> The administration also correctly predicted that Americans' objections to a unilateral course of action would fall away once the war began. Over the long run, the administration thought their view of the war would be shaped by the success and/or the cost of the operation, not the lack of UN approval.

Democratic politicians undoubtedly possessed varied reasons for withholding vigorous criticism of the administration's plans for war in Iraq. We do not have access to internal memos that might lay out the logic behind these politicians' policy choices, and even these documents might very well be strategically framed, undermining their value for revealing true motives. Since we cannot establish here what motives were in fact paramount—and probably no research can definitively—our purpose has been more modest: to establish the plausibility of an account centered on rhetorical coercion. Rhetorical coercion, we believe, is an essential piece of the story, even in straightforward accounts of anticipated political punishment for opposing the war. Had arguments against removing Saddam Hussein from power by military means been socially sustainable, opposition to the war would not have been politically costly. The combination of existing representations (Iraq as personified in Saddam, Saddam as Hitler revisited and as a terrorist) and the post-9/11 War on Terror narrowed the space for sustainable political debate. To have opposed the war in Iraq would have seemed to toss in the towel in the unquestioned War on Terror and to have opposed the pursuit of the War on Terror because of a dispute over the (unilateral military) means seemed, given the all-too-concrete costs of the September 11 attacks, to misplace one's priorities.

## CONCLUSION

As the war in Iraq festers, as the numbers of wounded and killed American and Iraqi soldiers and civilians climb ever upward, as America's foreign policy elite searches desperately for a way to extricate the United States from

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<sup>146</sup> This might be seen as "technocratic liberalism," reworking the "technocratic realism" that had opposed the "prophetic dualism" of the Cold War consensus. On these rhetorics, see Wander, "Rhetoric of American Foreign Policy."

<sup>147</sup> Kull, Ramsay, and Lewis, "Misperceptions, the Media and the Iraq War," 569–70.

<sup>148</sup> Western, *Selling Intervention and War*, 201–206.



the morass without sparking a region-wide conflagration, as the prospect of an Iraq Syndrome looms (paralleling that which followed the Vietnam War), making sense of how this situation arose and was legitimated is necessarily of great import. For those who think they understand how the United States became embroiled in Iraq—through a combination of ideology, institutional prerogatives, deception, and psychological pathology—this article seeks to demonstrate what a constructivist perspective may contribute to our comprehension of the implications of September 11 and the road to war in Iraq.

This paper has a theoretical and disciplinary agenda as well—albeit one that has been relegated to secondary standing in this article framed around a singular, substantively important empirical puzzle. As the scholarly literature over the origins of the Iraq War reveals, talk unquestionably matters in the making of foreign policy. Real political actors, often better than scholars of international relations, understand the benefits that accrue to those who can rework the underlying narratives that structure debates over strategy and security policy. Presidents have consequently launched extended rhetorical campaigns to establish their own preferred narrative as preeminent. Despite the advantages of the oval office, even those acknowledged as great communicators—Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan, for example—were often stymied as they sought to redefine the terms in which Americans conceived of security problems. Yet conversations over national security are sometimes marked by zones of unquestioned agreement. Legions of historians have held forth on the Cold War consensus that gripped U.S. foreign and domestic policy until it unraveled during and after the Vietnam War. Few Americans doubted the need for a ceaseless War on Terror in the months and years after the September 11 attacks. The larger puzzle to which this paper speaks is why and when do national leaders, their political opponents, and civil society groups deeply shape debates over national security, and why do their rhetorical efforts sometimes have seemingly little impact. A “hegemonic project,” as the cultural theorist Stuart Hall defines it, aspires to “the remaking of common sense.”<sup>149</sup> How can we explain the fate of contending hegemonic projects, as some near but never entirely attain that aspiration and as others make little headway toward it?

This is not a question into which the most prominent approaches in international relations and foreign policy have yielded much insight to date. Structural realism, which derives foreign policy from international systemic imperatives, is insensitive to domestic politics in general and to the rhetorical dimensions of foreign policy in particular. Approaches that break open the black box of the state have more promise, but we have argued they are incomplete without attention to the social processes that legitimate policy alternatives. While conventional constructivists have explored of late how

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<sup>149</sup> Hall, *Hard Road*, 8.

certain ideas and principles become dominant, they have revealed a liberal orientation in their turn to mechanisms of persuasion and education, which are blind to the productive and disciplinary power of discourse. It seems to be widely agreed that the Bush administration's capacity to control the terms of the debate over Iraq was of critical importance to the outcome, but we have argued that this rhetorical contest cannot be straightforwardly explained by material power or institutional position alone. Drawing on research by contemporary scholars of communication, we have suggested—in a necessarily brief sketch, given the empirical focus of this article—a theoretical account of how and when articulations become dominant and how and when they might be effectively resisted.

Equally important, we argue that these dominant discourses deeply shape political contestation and policy outcomes. The administration's successful campaign to bring the United States into war with Iraq hinged on a post-9/11 rhetorical environment dominated by the War on Terror. In this context, and given the characterizations of Saddam Hussein and Iraq prominent in U.S. political rhetoric since the first Gulf War, the link between Al Qaeda and Iraq that would buttress the invasion was eminently sustainable. The burden of proof fell on those who denied that Iraq was a central front in the War on Terror. Potential opponents were rhetorically hemmed in, unable to offer a powerful case against the administration's aggressive policy.

The foregoing argument conveys an air of inevitability regarding the outcome of the Bush administration's push for war with Iraq. Indeed, in the moment, during the debates of fall 2002 and winter/spring 2003, there was little Democrats could have done to have waylaid a Bush administration determined to launch a war. But, viewed through a longer time frame, the outcome was far from inevitable. The Bush administration need not have cast the perpetrators and planners of September 11 as evildoers, and it need not have called for an expansive War on Terror—even if it had opted for a militarized response. The administration certainly had much discretion about how broad or narrow a War on Terror it would pursue. Democrats might have given voice to an alternative to the War on Terror, accepting the short-run political costs that resistance would have entailed in favor of the long-run flexibility that it might have afforded. Once Democrats assented to the War on Terror, however, the rhetorical resources available to them in the run-up to war in Iraq were meager indeed. At that point, preventing the march to war may well have been impossible, but leading Democrats might nevertheless have taken a braver stance. When the war turned sour, a consistent Democratic opposition would have profited. Instead, during the 2004 presidential primaries, nearly all the Democratic candidates were compelled endlessly to explain why they now opposed a war they had earlier authorized. Their arguments were often reasonable, but they came off as tortured. Had Senator John Kerry voted initially against the war, he might now be sitting in the White House. Accepting such political gambles, however, would have

required leading Democrats to have long time horizons and to be risk acceptant, which politicians often do not and are not. We have argued that the political opposition faced an unenviable set of circumstances after September 11 that impeded, but certainly did not fully eliminate, its capacity to oppose either the War on Terror or the war in Iraq.

The War on Terror need not always be with us. Discourse is always subject to challenge and is always laced through with contradictions. Hegemonies may be disrupted, creating space for political change. As contradictions accumulate, the space for resistance grows as well. The stubborn lack of progress with regard to security or development in Iraq, the climbing casualties among civilians and soldiers alike, and the regular revelations regarding the manipulation of prewar intelligence caused Bush's approval rating to plummet and led to a stunning Democratic victory in the 2006 midterm elections. Increasingly Americans endorsed the view that the war was not justified in the first place and even if it was, the United States was now doing more harm than good and should withdraw. While criticism of the war has grown immensely, it has too often been divorced from any criticism of the War on Terror. The failures of Iraq have opened a space for resistance to this dominant discourse, but Democrats have, for the most part, remained trapped within the War on Terror.<sup>150</sup> Challenging hegemonic understandings is never easy, but it is essential if alternative policies are to be not only envisioned but socially and politically sustained.

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<sup>150</sup> It is striking, however, that questions about the War on Terror finally began to penetrate the mainstream in 2006. See Fallows, "Declaring Victory"; Lustick, *Trapped in the War on Terror*; Mueller, *Overblown*; and Max Rodenbeck, "How Terrible Is It?" *New York Review of Books* 53, no. 19, 30 November 2006. For specific suggestions about what an opposition hegemonic project would look like well beyond the War on Terror, see George Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate: The Essential Guide for Progressives* (New York: Chelsea Green, 2004); and Michael Tomasky, "Party in Search of a Notion," *American Prospect*, May 2006.