

## Master Narratives in US Contemporary War Discourse: Situating and Constructing Identities of Self and Other

### Abstract

The present paper aims to discuss the discursive strategies of otherization, legitimation, and normalization typically found in extracts from the author's video corpus of US Presidents' selected official statements at the height of actual or potential armed conflicts between the First Gulf War (1990-1991) and the end of the Obama Administration (2016). The underlying working assumption is that, to consolidate asymmetrical power relationships and monitor dissent and/or win domestic consent about the use of force, the US Administration systematically resorts to a relatively restricted inventory of political myths and cultural constructs sustained by strategic storytelling and powerful master narratives, or Intertextual Thematic Formations. The qualitative analysis, informed by a systemic functional, critical discourse approach, is undertaken at both the macro- and micro-levels, with a view to highlighting how master narratives project distinct/conflicting standpoints and socio-institutional roles and identities (e.g. the-President-as-Father-of-the-Nation; the-Community-as-Protector-of-its-Members'-Interests; the-West-as-Civilizer), while feeding the myth of a 'super-empowered' President and ultimately sustaining the ideological square. The final contention is that awareness-raising pedagogical models are needed which work upwards from the bottom of the hierarchical narrative structure, contextualizing the master narrative and linking it to the audience's individual narratives, so that discourse can fulfil its critical function of dismantling potentially manipulative and/or normalizing discourse practices and foster civil society-led, personal counter-narratives that remove stereotyping and oversimplification.

### Keywords

War discourse; Presidential speeches; CDA; otherization; master-/counter-narratives; ITFs.

### 1. Aims and scope

Drawing on existing research into war discourse in a Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth, CDA) perspective (Vasta, 1999, 2004a, 2004b, 2016; Vasta & Martorana, 2018), the present paper aims to discuss **otherization** (e.g. Hall 1997), **legitimation**, and **normalization** strategies in US Presidents' selected official statements from the author's online Contemporary War Discourse video corpus, constructed using the OpenMWS platform (Taibi, 2020, 2022) and descriptor-based annotation and search procedures (Baldry & Thibault, 2008). The corpus relates to recent armed conflicts, from the start of Gulf War I until the publication of the 2015 National Security Strategy defining terrorism as a "continuing, imminent threat" despite Obama's having previously announced his readiness to rescind the President's special powers introduced by G.W. Bush under the Authorization to Use Military Force (AUMF) mandate (see McIntosh 2022).

Cap (2008, p. 22), who relates legitimation to such crucial strategies in conflict discourse as fear appeals and proximization (see Section 4), defines it as "the linguistic enactment of the speaker's right to be obeyed [...], the claim to rightness", while van Leeuwen (2007, p. 92) identifies four discursive forms of legitimation: by *authorization* (issuing from tradition, custom, law, and institutional authority); by *moral evaluation* (with reference to shared value systems); by *rationalization* (applying to the goals, uses and recognized cognitive validity of institutionalized social action); and by *mythopoesis* (exploiting reward-and-punishment narratives); for exemplification of all four forms of legitimation at play in a single section of G.W. Bush's 2002

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*State of the Union Address*, see Vasta 2016, p. 205. Once the social and discursive constructions of ideas and actions are accepted as natural and expected, through repeated narrative practices, they become “normalized”:

Processes of normalization encompass transformations over time and between contexts (recontextualizations), through which ideas previously treated as deviant and controversial appear as increasingly normal elements of public discourse” (Ekström et al. 2022, p. 1).

The main assumption underlying the present study is that powerful institutional agents consider it vital to resort to shared myths and cultural constructs – sustained by **master narratives**, i.e. strategically manufactured, socioculturally-shared representations of ‘reality’ – to justify their use of military force. This is a cultural strategy for legitimacy and social control enabling these agents to monitor dissent and win domestic consent. The discussion below does not examine the manufacturing of fake news/post-truths (e.g. Melchior & Romoli eds. 2018), which presupposes the intentional manipulation of ‘reality’ – as happened, for instance, with the fabrication, and related discursive representation as shared knowledge (Vasta 2004a, viz. pp. 128-132), of the spinned-up information concerning Saddam Hussein’s possession of WMDs. Instead, the analysis focuses on the representation of such ‘reality’ as situated and constructed from different, inherently asymmetrical ideological positions.

Asymmetrical power relationships define the possible socio-discursive actions of the parties involved in their respective contexts. In a CDA perspective, discourse is “a mode of political and ideological practice which [...] constitutes, naturalizes, sustains and changes significations of the world from diverse positions in power relations” (Fairclough 1992, p. 67). Hence for example – as further contended below –, the legitimation and consequent normalization of the Enemy’s/Terrorist’s archetypal identity as the defective Other, clashing with the Western ‘norm’ and threatening the social order (Said 1978; Richardson [2004]2009; Stocchetti 2007).

Against this backdrop, a qualitative, corpus-assisted analysis will investigate how master narratives of Self and Other:

- project distinct or conflicting archetypes and socio-institutional roles (e.g. the-President-as-Father-of-the-Nation; the-Community-as-Protector-of-its-Members’-Interests; The-West-as-Civilizer; the-Evil/Brutal-Dictator/Terrorist-as-the-Villain/the-Very-Worst-of-Human-Nature);
- feed the multi-faceted myth of a ‘super-empowered’, ‘fearless’ President (Jeffords 2012) who will guide the Nation, as Commander-in-Chief, to defeat the fearful Terrorist; and
- ultimately sustain the **ideological square** (van Dijk 2008) by functioning as **strategic narratives**, i.e. narratives intended to persuade an audience to support one or more specific goals or ideological stances.

In its technical, geopolitical sense, **strategic communication** is communication designed to “influence the attitudes and opinions of targeted audiences to shape their behaviour in order to advance interests or policies, or to achieve objectives” (Farwell 2012, pp. xviii-xix). In Islamist extremism (Halverson et al. 2011, p. 180), such goals are the three Rs: RESIST (foreign invaders and enemies-within); REBUKE (discredit ‘apostate’ Muslim leaders who support foreign invaders, viz. the US); RENEW (the Caliphate). In the Western Coalition’s discourse, the main goal is persuading public opinion about the legitimacy, necessity, and/or inevitability of military intervention to ‘bring the enemy to justice’, thereby spreading morality, freedom, and democracy while enabling ‘regular life’ to resume.

On these premises, master narratives – especially those relying on polar constructs (rationality/irrationality; distance/proximity; sameness/difference) – foster persuasion and legitimation by reinforcing the emotional chain linking personal narratives (or individual stories) to

the master narrative(s) as, for example, when *fear* is called into play as a justification for ‘our’ military action (e.g. to avert an imminent threat, or clear and present danger), or when the myth of the noble sacrifice of ‘our’ troops and related archetypes of the hero/crusader/martyr are integrated in personal narratives of liberation (from fear, threat to personal and national security, or danger to the American way of life). Before analyzing selected extracts, some characterization of the key theoretical constructs governing the main participants’ identity construction is in order.

## 2. Master narratives and the ideological complex/square

**Master narratives** are akin to what Jay Lemke (1988, pp. 30 & 32) calls **Intertextual Thematic Formations** (henceforth, ITFs), that is “common systems of semantic relations to speak of the same things in the same manner”. In Halverson et al.’s definition (2011, p. 7), a master narrative is “a narrative that is deeply embedded in a culture, provides a pattern for cultural life and social structure, and creates a framework for communication about what people are expected to do in certain situations” – here, what they are supposed to do is resolve conflict. Though instantiated in and through a system of cultural scripts (i.e. organized forms of everyday knowledge, like those governing text genres) and related verbal and non-verbal **linguaging** practices (Cortese 2001), master narratives/ITFs are not a simple inventory of fixed frames and schemata to interpret the world – i.e. “stable knowledge structure[s] in long-term memory stor[ing] information of entities and events from past experiences and [...] activated as a conceptual basis for guiding the listener’s inference” (Pelclová & Lu 2018, p. 7), or, in Goffman’s terms, enabling the audience “to locate, perceive, identify, and label events and occurrences” in discourse (Goffman 1974: 21). Rather, master narratives/ITFs are embedded in a dynamic and inherently asymmetric sociocultural context. Thus, different discursive/epistemic communities engage dialectically to construct heteroglossic relations of alliance and opposition (Lemke 1988, pp. 40, 48 *et passim*) to impose ‘new’ (anti- or counter-) narratives (Bamberg 2004) over dominant (or master) narratives, by shaping and creating alternative frames and contexts for interpretation.

In the final analysis, “it is in narrative that people’s individuality is expressed [...] because the purpose of narrating is precisely the creation of an autonomous, unique Self in discourse” (Johnstone 1996: 56). Master narratives depend on context to link the individual to the community: they provide discourse patterns for, and are further stabilized by, the individual narratives that reiterate them. Thus, in the long run, master narratives tend to be perceived as **ideological common sense**, i.e., in Fairclough’s definition (1989, p. 84), “common sense [which is naturalized and legitimated in order] to sustain unequal relations of power”. This process is akin to what Hodges (2008, p. 501) terms the **politics of recontextualization**, whereby powerful agents manage to “favourably position one representation over another, to instil their own recontextualization with such value that it becomes **common sense**”. Borrowing Cortese’s words (2001, p. 213), in this particular context common sense translates into “intertextually consolidated *clichés* legitimating [Western] colonialist ideology on account of rational superiority” and associating the Orient with a permanent state of lack or deficiency.

Like all narratives, master narratives rely on story forms (e.g. noble sacrifice, betrayal, enemy-within, invasion, rescue etc.) and archetypes which, by identifying “standard characters [...] that] unlock motives and operate as shorthand terms for [specific] situations” (Halverson et al. 2011, p. 187), can be used to understand the narrative’s argumentative structure:

Our ability to make language meaningful is the work of storytelling, an ability that allows us to recognize and make meaningful patterns of words, phrases, and inflections; to make and recognize common story forms and archetypes [e.g. those of the prophet and the pagan, or of true believers and infidels, often placed in binary oppositions]; and to be responsive to those patterns when they are communicated to us in fragments (Halverston et al. 2011, p. 12).

This process corresponds to what Betz (2008) calls “vertical integration”. In his model (adapted in Figure 1), “vertical integration is the process whereby a long-standing cultural embedded narrative or story system integrates a less-developed and previously unrelated story or story system, often of a local event, into itself” (Ruston & Halverson 2014, pp. 119-120).

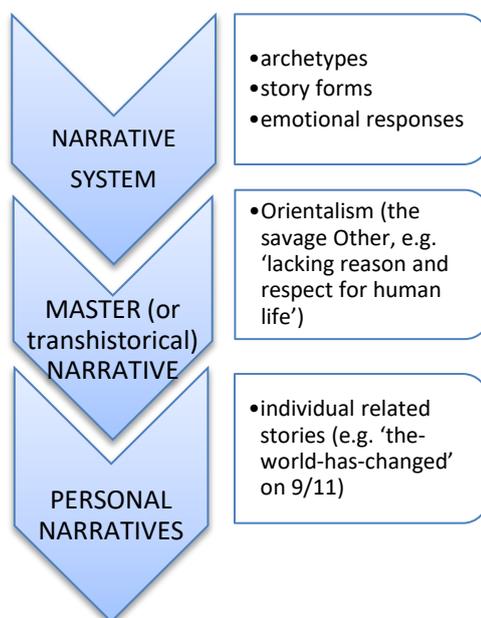


Figure 1. Adaptation of Betz's (2008) vertical integration model

In a bottom-up reading of the model, individual related stories build up to form a narrative (e.g. the individual stories about the 9/11 attacks sustain ‘the-world-has-changed’ narrative; see Witkowska & Zagratzki eds. 2014); this is further linked to master (or transhistorical) narratives deeply embedded in a particular culture – here, the master narrative based on Orientalism, which is “not knowledge of the Orient but a projection of the Occident” (Said 1978, p. 95; see also Bhabha's (1994, p. 145) notion of the “production of nation as narration” and Benhabib 2002, p. 9). Orientalism is, in short, the West's ethnocentric, partial and stereotyped narration of the Orient and the savage Other as lacking reason and respect for human life. Such an ideologically-biased narration of the Orient is ontologized and normalized, – i.e. socially constructed as ‘real’ and ‘routinized’ – through psychological processes like egotism and reification, until it comes to be taken as being the Orient itself, while the originally unreal nature of the narration is completely forgotten.

As Section 3.1 clarifies, Orientalism legitimizes and sustains a narrative system in which the rational Western leader protects his fellow country people from a brutal, irrational Eastern dictator. In short, master narratives and related narrative systems, with their archetypes, story forms and emotional responses, provide the socio-narrative glue to keep the community together, maintain social order, and, in this case, support the Western Coalition's war effort.

Incidentally, it must be pointed out that, in conflict situations, cross-cultural miscommunication and failed attempts at negotiation may also depend on what Thomas (1983) calls **sociopragmatic failure**, which is caused by different cultural values (e.g. directness/indirectness) like those opposing a problem-oriented negotiator to a relationship-oriented one (Vasta 1999, pp. 120-142; Ting-Toomey 1985, pp. 81-82). This clash is referable to the distinction, drawn by Edward T. Hall (1976, pp. 85-103), between **low-context (or individualistic) cultures** – like the US – and **high-context (or collectivistic) cultures** (the Middle-Eastern/Arab world), even though such a distinction is better

regarded as a continuum because i) the boundaries of a culture are never watertight; and ii) the narrower the perspective, the more evident the distinction.

Naturally, ideological manipulation in the ‘readings’ and exploitation of master narratives is a standard practice to facilitate the accomplishment of strategic goals, as is the case when, in the political debate, anti- or counter-narratives are sustained giving rise to what Hodge & Kress (1993, p. 157) call an **ideological complex**: this is “a deeply contradictory set of versions of reality whose contradictions are intrinsic to their function, i.e., to manage [...] the competing interests [the locutor is] trying to satisfy.” The competing interests to be managed and reconciled are, on the one hand, the US government’s or the Allied Coalition’s interest to remove a brutal dictator while appeasing domestic public opinion opposed to the cruelty of war: one way out of this inherent contradiction is framing ‘our’ war, always called a *military operation* or *action* except when referring to the War on Terror (see Vasta 2004a, 2016; Vasta & Martorana 2018), as a ‘de-humanized’, technology-driven and manageable event. This is revealed in discourse by such neologisms and euphemisms as *smart bombs* and *surgical strikes*, or by the expression *civilian casualties* (i.e. ‘barbaric’ deaths caused by the enemy) as opposed to *collateral damage* (i.e. ‘unavoidable’ deaths caused by us). Hodge & Kress (1993) note a similar contradiction in President G.H. Bush’s attempt to justify the 1991 Gulf War by referring to [America’s] *decency* and [America’s] *courage* to signify different types of virtue, those related to peace and those appropriate to war, respectively. “America’s decency”, they maintain, “is given the priority” in order to stress the taken-for-granted ideological, not only military, success of the operation and “to reach a range of audiences in a number of coalitions, inside America and outside, [...] who needed to be reassured that this was a just war” (Hodge & Kress 1993, p. 156).

Such polarized, deeply culturally embedded narratives of ‘us’ and ‘them’ rely on **othering/otherization**, i.e., the process of “constructing, or imagining a demonized image of ‘them’, or the Other, which supports an idealized image of ‘us’, or the Self” (Holliday 2011, p. 69). As discussed at length elsewhere (Vasta & Caldas-Coulthard 2009, p. 3),

situated identity performance will then be both centripetal – instantiated through alignment and membership strategies for in-grouping within a given social community and/or for resisting change – and centrifugal – for affirming one’s own individuality within that community, or for identifying ‘strangers’. In both cases, doing identity work – in discourse as situated and mediated action [...] – will inevitably bear the traces of the ideological tensions between competing worldviews and value systems [...] – a crucial issue in the language-and/as-power debate.

Othering rests and nourishes itself on stereotyping, i.e. the obliteration of individual traits and motives in favour of massification and unrealistic views of cultures as unified wholes, and may be associated with a tendency to yield to social pressures towards uniformity and opinion-sharing in order to fit in. Othering may also derive from what cognitive psychologists call ‘overestimation bias’, one of the defensive manoeuvres used to preserve order and stability and resolve cognitive dissonance, i.e. “the mental conflict that occurs when beliefs or assumptions are contradicted by new information [...] and that] is relieved by one of several defensive manoeuvres: reject[ing], explain[ing] away, or avoid[ing] the new information; persuad[ing oneself] that no conflict really exists; reconcil[ing] the differences; or resort[ing] to any other defensive means of preserving stability or order in [one’s] conceptions of the world and of [oneself]” ([https:// www.britannica.com/science/cognitive-dissonance](https://www.britannica.com/science/cognitive-dissonance)). The defensive manoeuvres to resolve cognitive dissonance include the discursive manipulation of controversial, New/unshared information (e.g. Saddam’s possession of WMDs), which is presented as Given/shared to reassure public opinion that the war is justified (see Vasta 2004a, pp. 128-132).

In discourse, the exacerbation of differences inherent in otherization nourishes, *inter alia*, in-group cohesion and the *clash-of-civilizations master narrative*, which is a pervasive and longstanding

oversimplification (or *topos*, i.e. a “useful shortcut appealing to existing, widely shared knowledge and conceptions”, Wodak [2015]2021, p. 75) of the multifarious historical and sociopolitical complexities of a West at war with a stigmatized East, conceived of as radically other and associated with a permanent state of lack of moral or rational power, which is instead the prerogative of the group of ‘we’. Such a master narrative has become constitutive especially of discourses on the War on Terror – first defined by G.W. Bush in Congress on Sept. 20, 2001 as a legitimate response to the 9/11 attacks –, based on what van Dijk (2008, p. 130) calls an **ideological square**, i.e. an in-group/out-group polarization which “emphasizes Our good things and Their bad things, and de-emphasizes (mitigates, or even hides) Our bad things and Their good things”. In Mazid’s view (2008, p. 438), “the ideological square parallels the *shield* and *weapon* uses of language, especially through euphemism and dysphemism [...], and the classical Arabic concept of *beautifying* the ugly and *uglifying* the beautiful.”

The ideological square works in all conflicting contexts and in both directions because it draws on archetypes placed in binary oppositions. So, for example, in Western discourse, the ideological square opposes the “axis of evil” – a soundbite coined by G.W. Bush in his 2002 *State of the Union Address* to indicate Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as states sponsoring terrorism and trying to develop WMDs – to *the collective will of the* [+civilized/+good] *world* (in G.W. Bush’s *Announcement of the start of Operation Enduring Freedom*, Oct. 7, 2001), also referred to, during the First Gulf War, as *the coalition of the willing*. The following sections exemplify how specific master narratives/ITFs pivoting on the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ ideological square come to project, in and through discourse, distinct or conflicting archetypes and socio-institutional roles and identities for the participants involved.

### 3.1. Master narratives about the Other: demonization and reification of the enemy

The Western Coalition’s narration of the motives and purposes of the conflict fulfils a well-consolidated legitimacy and social control function (Cap 2017, p. 9), which is usually achieved by framing the enemy as the dangerous Other and by favouring reified, dysphemistic uses of language (e.g., in Extract 1, “a regime [instead of ‘government’] that has something to hide from the civilized world”) to emphasize difference and hinder communication with out-groupers (Al-Harbi 2009), thus reiterating the discourse of threat:

- (1) 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 something to hide from the civilized world**. States like this, and their terrorist allies, constitute an **axis of evil**, arming to **threaten the peace of the world**. (G.W. Bush, *State of the Union Address*, Jan. 29, 2002).

As a rule, the terrorists are framed as a relatively homogeneous out-group embroiled in extremism, violence, and hatred against ‘our’ liberal, peaceful and democratic way of life. More specifically, narratives of the Other as a threat, exploiting the classic Orientalist archetype of the Arab lacking rationality, equate Saddam Hussein to a mad dog, or “Hitler revisited”, or “murderous tyrant” (see Extracts 2 and 3), while Osama Bin Laden is defined, in Barack Obama’s words (see Extract 4), as a “mass murderer of Muslims”:

- (2) Summary executions, routine torture... **Hitler revisited**. America will not stand aside. **The world will not allow the strong to swallow up the weak**. [...] And that’s what we’re dealing with! We’re dealing with **Hitler revisited**, a **totalitarianism** and a **brutality** that is naked and unprecedented in modern times! And that must not stand! We cannot talk about compromise. (G.H. Bush, *Frontline Documentary*, Jan. 28, 1997).

- (3) Iraq's weapons of mass destruction are controlled by a **murderous tyrant** who [...] holds an unrelenting **hostility** toward the United States. [...] Terror cells and outlaw regimes building weapons of mass destruction are different faces of the same **evil**. (G.W. Bush, *Speech at The Cincinnati Museum Center*, Oct. 7, 2002).
- (4) [...] The US **is not – and never will be – at war with Islam**. I've made clear, just as President Bush did shortly after 9/11, that **our war is not against Islam**. Bin Laden was not a Muslim leader; **he was a mass murderer of Muslims**. Indeed, Al Qaeda has slaughtered scores of Muslims in many countries, including our own. So, his demise should be welcomed by all who believe in peace and human dignity. (B. Obama, *Announcement of Osama Bin Laden's death*, May 2, 2011).

The demonization of the opponent is part of the armory of war discourse (and, more generally, of political confrontation) and should therefore come as no surprise. More specifically, the terrorists are identified as shadowy or faceless figures definable mainly through gratuitous cruelty and lack of moral principles, or by religious fanaticism and betrayal of the Islamic faith:

- (5) The terrorists practice a **fringe form of Islamic extremism** that has been rejected by Muslim scholars and the vast majority of Muslim clerics; the terrorists are **traitors to their own faith**, trying, in effect, to hijack Islam itself. **The enemy of America is not our many Muslim friends. It is not our many Arab friends**. Our enemy is a **radical network of terrorists** and every government that supports them. (G.W. Bush, *Speech to Congress*, Sept. 20, 2001).

And since the word "Islamic" typically tends to carry a negative discourse prosody by often being simplistically associated with "terrorist", recent Presidential discourse (see Extracts 4 & 5 above and Extract 6 below) draws a clear distinction between Muslims and Islam, or Muslims/Arabs and terrorists:

- (6) The threat has shifted and evolved from the one that came to our shores on 9/11. [...] **Deranged or alienated individuals** – often U.S. citizens or legal residents – can do enormous damage, particularly when inspired by larger notions of violent jihad. [...] Most, though not all, of the terrorism we faced is fueled by a common ideology – **a belief by some extremists that Islam is in conflict with the United States and the West**, and that violence against Western targets, including civilians, is justified in pursuit of a larger cause. Of course, this ideology is based on a lie, for **the United States is not at war with Islam**. And this ideology is rejected by **the vast majority of Muslims, who are the most frequent victims of terrorist attacks**. (B. Obama, *Remarks at the National Defense University*, May 23, 2013).

Here, President Obama – presumably banking on his Administration's success in getting rid of Osama Bin Laden – tries to counter the master narrative of Al Qaeda as a powerful non-state organization with that of the terrorists as a network of "deranged or alienated individuals", ultimately underscoring the master narrative of the Other's disorder/irrationality/immorality as opposed to the narration of the US's orderly, rationally engineered and morally justified war effort: this is no longer "a boundless 'global War on Terror', but rather [...] a series of **persistent, targeted** efforts to dismantle **specific** networks of violent extremists that threaten America" (B. Obama, *Remarks at the National Defense University*, May 23, 2013). And despite being called a 'network' or an 'organization', the terrorists are framed as nothing but disorganized guerrillas with no vision, a category shaped to capture the Other's uncivilized, non-institutionalized nature and implicitly evoke, by contrast, everything that the Self is:

- (7) **ISIL is a terrorist organization**, pure and simple. **And it has no vision other than the slaughter of all who stand in its way** [...]. I know many Americans are concerned about

these threats. Tonight, I want you to know that **the United States of America is meeting them with strength and resolve.** (B. Obama, *Address to the Nation on the ISIL Threat*, Sept. 10, 2014).

The de-humanization, or even reification, of the terrorist-Other is a constant in the Presidential statements under examination, a strategy which reaches its climax in the metaphorical representation of the enemy as a cowardly animal, hiding in its den, which will be brought to justice by America-as-Civilizer:

- (8) Initially the terrorists may **burrow deeper into caves and other entrenched hiding places.** Our military action is also designed to [...] **drive them out** and bring them to justice. (G.W. Bush, *Announcement of Operation Enduring Freedom*, Oct. 7, 2001).
- (9) They **take refuge** in **remote** tribal regions. They **hide** in caves and walled compounds. They train in **empty** deserts and **rugged** mountains. In some of these places – such as parts of Somalia and Yemen – the state only has the most tenuous reach into the territory. In other cases, the state lacks the capacity or will to take action. (B. Obama, *Remarks at the National Defense University*, May 23, 2013).

What is also particularly interesting to note in discussing the discursive construction of the Other's identity is the careful distinction, reiterated as a soundbite in virtually all the Presidential speeches under examination, between the tyrant/murderer/terrorist and ordinary Muslims/Iraqis/you, the people, to which the analysis will now turn.

### 3.2. Master narratives about the Other: sameness/difference

If the war is presented as being not against Islam, but as against the murderous tyrant or the terrorist organization alone, then the oppressed peoples living under totalitarian or fundamentalist regimes should be, and indeed *are* treated as distinct participants in discourse: as stated in a recurrent soundbite (see Extracts 10, 11 & 12 below), 'our quarrel is not with [the people] but with [their brutal dictator]':

- (10) At every opportunity I have said to the people of Iraq that **our quarrel was not with them but instead with their leadership and above all with Saddam Hussein.** This remains the case. **You, the people of Iraq, are not our enemy.** We do not seek your destruction. (G.H. Bush, *TV Address on the end of offensive combat operations in the Gulf*, Feb. 27, 1991).
- (11) **We have no quarrel with them** [the Iraqi people]. [...] The hard fact is that so long as Saddam Hussein remains in power, he threatens the well-being of his people, the peace of his region, the security of the world. (W. Clinton, *TV Address on the start of Operation Desert Fox*, Dec. 16, 1998).
- (12) The United States **has no quarrel with the Iraqi people.** They have suffered too long in silent captivity. Liberty for the Iraqi people is a great moral cause and a great strategic goal. The people of Iraq deserve it. The security of all nations requires it. (G.W. Bush, *Address at the UN General Assembly*, Sept. 12, 2002).

Indeed, Iraqi civilians are discursively constructed as potential allies (especially in Extracts 10 & 11, also see Vasta 1999, pp. 147-149 and Vasta 2016, p. 212) and, as such, directly addressed through free direct speech as 'you' (see Extracts 10, 13, 14 & 15), a strategy of solidarity which Fairclough calls **synthetic personalization**, i.e. "the simulation of private, face-to-face discourse in public mass-audience discourse" (Fairclough 1992, p. 98) consisting in "opening frontiers between the private and the institutional [...] to simulate the meanings and forms of 'friendliness'" (Fairclough 1996, p. 74):

- (13) And tonight, I have a message for the **brave and oppressed** people of Iraq: **your enemy is not surrounding your country – your enemy is ruling your country**. And the day he and his regime are removed from power will be the day of your liberation. (G.W. Bush, *State of the Union Address*, Jan. 28, 2003).
- (14) Many Iraqis can hear me tonight in a translated radio broadcast, and I have a message for them. If we **must** begin a **military campaign**, it will be directed **against the lawless men who rule your country and not against you** [...]. In a free Iraq there will be no more wars of aggression against your neighbors, no more poison factories, no more executions of dissidents, no more torture chambers and rape rooms. The tyrant will soon be gone. **The day of your liberation is near**. (G.W. Bush, *Gulf War II ultimatum speech*, March 18, 2003).
- (15) I'd like to **speak directly to young people** across the Muslim world. **You** come from a great tradition that stands for **education, not ignorance; innovation, not destruction; the dignity of life, not murder**. **Those** who call you away from this path **are betraying this tradition, not defending it**. (B. Obama, *Address to the UN General Assembly*, Sept. 24, 2014).

In Extract 15, President Obama enacts two parallel narratives in the ideological square, one for allying with the Muslim young people who respect their great tradition, and one for opposing other [+radicalized] Muslims who betray that tradition and lead the Muslim world astray.

Previously, G.W. Bush, both in his *Speech to Congress* on Sept. 20, 2001 (see Extract 5 in Section 3.1. above) and in his remarks on the Global War on Terror in 2006 (see Extract 16 below), had given a similar, more complex picture of the ideological square by explicitly positing a conflict between 'our Muslim/Arab friends' and 'the [+good/brave/courageous] Iraqi soldiers and civilians', on the one hand, and 'the [+bad] terrorists', on the other:

- (16) Iraqis are fighting bravely – and many have given their lives in the battle for freedom for their country. And by their courage and sacrifice, **the Iraqi soldiers and civilians** have shown that they **want to live in freedom** – and they're not going to let **the terrorists take away their opportunity to live in a free society**. (G.W. Bush, *Remarks on the Global War on Terror*, April 10, 2006).

Of course, terrorism is systematically framed with reference to uncertainty about the mysterious, disquieting identity of "the dangerous other living as an ordinary person next door, an unsuspected 'enemy within' even more dangerous because of his apparent invisibility [and normality]" (Ekström et al. 2022, p. 6). Protecting against such a fluid, yet relatively homogeneous out-group of hostile, non-conforming, threatening 'them' – 'lone wolves', 'disorganized' guerrillas and non-state actors waging an asymmetrical war which has occasionally been fought, in the U.S. camp, without Congressional approval or oversight – the in-group of 'us' will inevitably emphasize unity and solidarity, proclaim non-fear and stamina in response to acts of terrorism, and endorse the master narrative of the-West-(and America, in particular)as-Civilizer.

#### 4. Master narratives about "US": the President as a father-like, fearless figure

Among the positive archetypes feeding the America-as-Civilizer master narrative, the most successful one in keeping the community of us together is, without doubt, that of the 'super-empowered', 'fearless' President (Jeffords 2012) who ensures the security of his people at home – the threat having become domestic after 9/11 – even though occasionally limiting their personal freedom. Such was the case in 2006, when the Senate voted to renew the controversial *Patriot Act*, which, in President G.W. Bush's brief comment given in New Delhi on March 2, 2006, allegedly serves to 'defend [US] citizens against a ruthless enemy [i.e. the Terrorist]', but which ultimately restricts civil liberties and increases social control, e.g. by holding suspects without due process, abolishing Miranda rights, imposing ID checks and denying *habeas corpus*.

As Commander-in-Chief, the President is expected to uphold American values and guide the Nation to ‘vanquish from the earth those who offer only hate and destruction’ (see Extract 17):

- (17) **As Commander-in-chief, my highest priority is the security of the American people.** [...] Thanks to our military and counterterrorism professionals, America is safer [...]. **This is American leadership at its best: we stand with people who fight for their freedom, and we rally other nations on behalf of our common security and common humanity** [...]. America, our endless blessings bestow an enduring burden. [...]. That is the difference we make in the world. And our own safety, our own security, depends upon our willingness to do what it takes to defend this nation and uphold the values that we stand for. **Timeless ideals that will endure long after those who offer only hate and destruction have been vanquished from the Earth.** (B. Obama, *Address to the Nation on the ISIL Threat*, Sept. 10, 2014).

The archetype of the President as a father-like, fearless figure, speaking the language of right and wrong which realizes in discourse the ideological square, is particularly evident, as is to be expected in the light of the specific context of situation, in G.W. Bush’s address to West Point Military Academy graduates. Here, **proximization**, a strategy mainly based on fear appeals aiming to “evoke closeness of the external threat to solicit legitimization of preventive measures” (Cap 2017, p. 16), is revealed in the “construal of a gathering ideological clash between the ‘home values’ of the discourse space central entities [the selves, or inside-deictic-centre entities] and the alien, antagonistic [outside-deictic-centre] values” (Cap 2017, p. 17):

- (18) There can be no neutrality between **justice and cruelty**, between **the innocent and the guilty**. We are in a **conflict between good and evil**, and America will call evil by its name. By confronting **evil and lawless regimes**, we do not create a problem, we reveal a problem. **And we will lead the world in opposing it.** (G.W. Bush, *Graduation exercise of the US Military Academy*, West Point, New York, June 1, 2002).

The President also resorts to the rhetoric of the “imperial presidency” (Jeffords 2012, p. 75), promoting what is known as the “politics of fear” (Altheide 2006, p. 19): i.e. banking on the nation’s mounting state of fear and uncertainty, which his Administration had greatly favoured, G.W. Bush constructs himself as ‘the Decider’ and as the nation’s father figure who protects and defends the American people against fear, ultimately discouraging criticism and the emergence of anti-narratives, very often by using anecdotes to link personal narratives to the master narrative of the unfrightened [usually male] hero and his family’s generosity and stamina.

- (19) **I know many Americans feel fear** today [...]. In the months ahead, **our patience will be one of our strengths** – [...] patience in all the sacrifices that may come. Today those **sacrifices are being made by members of our armed forces** who now defend us so far from home, and **by their proud and worried families**. [...] They represent **the best of our country**, and **we are grateful**. [...] I recently received a touching letter [...] from a fourth-grade girl with a father in the military. “As much as I don’t want my dad to fight,” she wrote, “I’m willing to give him to you.” **This is a precious gift.** The greatest she could give. **This young girl knows what America is all about.** (G.W. Bush, *Announcement of Operation Enduring Freedom*, Oct. 7, 2001).

This is particularly evident in Extract 16, where collective fear is exorcised through the heart-tugging personal narrative of selfless heroism and wartime resilience – here that of a little girl prepared to ‘give’ her father to the Nation: besides functioning as a social glue, the personal anecdote acts as a yardstick for defining the archetypal national identity of the good American, strengthening what Reese & Buchalew (1995) call the **Control Frame**: by constructing the mythical identity of the troops as “the best of our country” – or “the Nation’s finest”, as many a President have repeatedly

called them –, to whom we, as ordinary citizens, should pay tribute and be “grateful”, the Control Frame implicitly equates dissenters with third-class citizens (inferior because unpatriotic) and thus leads to a delegitimation, or at least marginalization, of the anti-war position (see Hackett & Zhao, 1994, viz. pp. 511-513). Additionally, linking individual stories to the transhistorical, master narrative of the military hero’s ‘coronation’ while diverting attention from the cause of, and rationale for the war, fosters social order and boosts national unity among compliant citizens who are not supposed to question or criticize their government’s actions; moreover, the master narrative’s narcotizing effect at work here sustains the strategic narrative of war-as-a-morally-corrective-measure, which elevates the struggle to a moral crusade: this entails the “privilege to fight freedom’s fight” (see below, Extract 20), while appealing to “a special American role in the world [...], a potent ‘City on the Hill’ myth [which] has attributed to the United States a unique moral stature to lead the world in action and example” (Reese & Buckalew 1995, p. 56):

- (20) Our war on terror is well begun, but it is only begun. [...] History has called America and our allies to action, and it is both our **responsibility** and our **privilege to fight freedom’s fight**. (G.W. Bush, *State of the Union Address*, Jan. 29, 2002).

Ultimately, military intervention is conceptually grounded in the morality of helping others, imbued with Orientalism, and discursively constructed, by analogy with the Cold War narrative, as a civilizing battle to bring the enemy to justice and spread freedom and democracy:

- (21) Today’s war on terror is **like the Cold War**. It is an **ideological struggle with an enemy that despises freedom and pursues totalitarian aims**. [...] And so I said we were going to stay on the offense two ways: one, **hunt down the enemy and bring them to justice**, and take threats seriously; and two, **spread freedom**. (G.W. Bush, *Remarks on the Global War on Terror*, April 10, 2006, emphasis added).

And oppressed Iraqis freed from their brutal dictator find themselves on the ideological square’s good side (i.e. the right side of history), in-grouped within an “inclusive ‘we’ [encompassing] all citizens united against criminal terrorists” (Ekström et al. 2022, p. 10) to defend and preserve the orderly, civilized world of the Western Coalition:

- (22) You will not have to fear the rule of Saddam Hussein ever again. **All Iraqis who take the side of freedom have taken the winning side. The goals of our coalition are the same as your goals** – sovereignty for your country, dignity for your great culture, and for every Iraqi citizen, the opportunity for a better life. In the history of Iraq, **a dark and painful era is over**. A hopeful day has arrived. **All Iraqis can now come together and reject violence** and build a new Iraq. (G.W. Bush, *Statement upon the capture of Saddam Hussein*, Dec. 14, 2003).

The strategic goal of restoring order over disorder is thus achieved with recourse to narrative strategies to construct cohesive communities of fearless in-groups and fearful/terrifying out-groups, arranged contrastively within the framework of the ideological square. So, ‘fear of’ – most typically, of the ‘unknown’, ‘ungraspable’ or ‘unmanageable’ – is one of the basic defining features of the unterrified/heroic-Self-versus-the-terrifying-Other paradigm. Furthermore, the construction of the ‘unterrified’ Self substantiates the appeal for unification behind the legitimating power source, i.e. the President as a reassuring father figure who can restore order by solemnly pledging, as George W. Bush did in his speech at Ellis Island on the first anniversary of 9/11, that “we will not relent until justice is done and our nation is secure” – which, in the Bush Doctrine, amounted to launching pre-emptive military strikes against any nation (viz. the “axis of evil”) thought to be providing terrorists with weapons of mass destruction.

On a completely different note, acknowledging the changed source of the threat, the non-traditional nature of the conflict, the “heartbreaking tragedies” (viz. civilian casualties) caused by the US being in a permanent state of war, and, last but not least, the ‘civilizing’ function of “our democracy”, Barack Obama reverses the archetype of the super-empowered President and calls on Congress and the American people to repeal the *Authorization to Use Military Force* (AUMF) mandate introduced by G.W. Bush in 2001, which is, however, still in force to date (McIntosh 2022, p. 575):

(23) The use of force must be seen as part of a larger discussion we need to have about a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy – because for all the focus on the use of force, force alone cannot make us safe. [...] **Unless we discipline our thinking, our definitions, our actions, we may** be drawn into more wars we don’t need to fight or **continue to grant Presidents unbound powers more suited for traditional armed conflicts between nation states**. So, I look forward to engaging Congress and the American people in efforts to refine, and ultimately repeal, the AUMF’s mandate. [...] Our systematic effort to dismantle terrorist organizations must continue. **But this war, like all wars, must end.** That’s what history advises. That’s what our democracy demands. (B. Obama, *Remarks at the National Defense University*, May 23, 2013).

Here, the master narrative of the President-as-a-father-like figure remains, but the myth of the super-empowered President (in its storytelling function of grounding or corroborating the use of force) is delegitimized, or better ‘unhinged’ from that narrative, and used to project an essentially anti-war position – clear evidence for the diachronic, dynamic, and adaptive nature of master narratives. This aspect is exemplified in the shift from the Bush administration’s insistence, in the aftermath of the Twin Towers attack, that the war would be over when the US could “declare victory on its own terms” (G.W. Bush, Remarks before Joint Session of Congress, Sept. 20, 2001), to the Obama administration’s claim that “this war, like all wars, must end”.

## 5. Closing Remarks

It is well established (e.g. Halliday & Matthiessen 1999) that meanings are continually created, recreated, extended and changed, and that “stories are resources not just for the development and presentation of a self as a psychological entity, but as someone located within a social and cultural world” (Schiffrin 1996, p. 169). Crucial socio-political events – like the decision to go to war – resonate within different orders of discourse and produce different layers, or instancial constructions of meaning, in the form of text(s), conceived of as different versions of the ‘same’ event (e.g. Hodge & Kress 1993; Butt et al. 2004). If the present analysis has achieved its intended purpose, it will firstly have shown that placing archetypes in binary oppositions and legitimizing narratives opposing two, and only two, extreme camps amounts to imposing a reassuring oversimplification of a highly complex world, which would otherwise be unbearably frightening, “threatening, unknown, ambiguous, different and often unfair, so much so that it becomes the duty of [...] all of ‘us’ – whichever ‘us’ you be – to rid the world of ‘them’ by force [...]” (Goodall 2009, quoted in Halverston et al. 2011, p. 22). CDA plays a crucial role in efforts to recognize and transcend these binary oppositions and unveil discourse fallacies and manipulations.

Secondly, by adopting a diachronic, corpus-assisted approach, the analysis has illustrated how master narratives develop over long periods of time, building up a rhetorical vision which is deeply ingrained in a culture and which works as an orienting framework for its members, not only to make sense of their personal narratives, but, more importantly, to make decisions affecting their and other people’s lives. It is precisely in this perspective that a sociosemiotic, CDA-informed approach to discourse as “mediated action” (i.e. the study of the actions people take with texts and other cultural tools and the social consequences these actions have, see Norris & Jones 2005) is better suited than

others to investigate the power of language as ideology (Hodge & Kress 1993) and the discursive construction of the identity of the Self as narrator (Schiffrin 1996). And if academia, as an educational agency, has a role to play in this matter, this role consists in providing young people with the tools to develop a meta-narrative to challenge and strategically counter the manipulative uses of master narratives (Bamberg 2004; Hackett & Zhao 1994). In other words, academia has to provide the young with

a better core narrative with which to organize their own lives as well as the lives and political activities of others in their communities. It is our job to provide them with what Kenneth Burke calls “equipment for living” and that includes theories and methods capable of helping them make sense of everyday life in our hypermediated and highly contested world (Goodall 2016, pp. 14-15).

This can only be done by fostering awareness-raising pedagogical models which work from the bottom end of the hierarchical narrative structure, i.e. from “where the master narratives are invoked in rhetorical acts – or *arguments* – that make them relevant to the personal narratives of the audience” (Halverson et al. 2011, p. 196). In the final analysis, as Butt et al. (2004) convincingly argue, grammar is “the first covert operation of war” and discourse as action is an institutional tool for maintaining internal order: “the illusion of the powerlessness of language in construing reality, quite paradoxically, becomes the greatest source of its power: it becomes the most powerful instrument for the maintenance of ideology” (Hasan 1988, quoted in Lukin 2019, p. 1). Fortunately, as President Obama made clear in addressing the threat posed by terrorism other than on the battlefield, language can and must also serve to construct a “more attractive and compelling” counter-narrative to dismantle ideology and radicalization:

It is not going to be enough to defeat ISIL in the battlefield. We have to prevent it from radicalizing, recruiting and inspiring others to violence in the first place. And this means defeating their ideology. **Ideologies are not defeated with guns, they’re defeated by better ideas – a more attractive and compelling vision.** (B. Obama, *Statement at the UN General Assembly*, Sept. 29, 2015).

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