



LESSONS FROM THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR NARRATIVE



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LIKE many of us, this time last year I found myself listening closely to the remarks made by President Biden on the end of the [war in Afghanistan](#). One of the key themes repeated throughout the President's speech was ending what he referred to as a "[forever war](#)". The President spoke of "endless military deployments" and of a nation "[too long at war](#)". In all, he made [21 references](#) during his speech to the length of time the United States and its allies have been at war since 9/11.

The wars the President was referring to have collectively become known as the War on Terror. But the War on Terror is not just a label or a catchphrase. It is also a narrative that has provided both an explanation

for the appalling events of 11 September 2001 and a justification for the response of the United States and its allies. In "[ending an era of major military operations to remake other countries](#)", President Biden was also ending the narrative that had underpinned them.

Narratives do not merely describe things; they do things, and they have social and political implications.¹ Judged in these terms, the War on Terror narrative was a 'discursive achievement'² – even those who disagreed with it were forced to engage with it. As we look to new challenges posed by the war in Ukraine – where control of the narrative is again proving so important – we would do well to pause and reflect on what we can learn from the War on Terror

“THE WAR ON TERROR IS NOT JUST A LABEL OR A CATCHPHRASE... IT IS A NARRATIVE THAT HAS PROVIDED BOTH AN EXPLANATION FOR THE APPALLING EVENTS OF 11 SEPTEMBER 2001 AND A JUSTIFICATION FOR THE RESPONSE OF THE UNITED STATES AND ITS ALLIES.”

narrative. Three lessons stand out:

LESSON 1: NARRATIVES ARE SHAPED BY THOSE WHO CONTROL ACCESS, CONTEXT, AND CONTENT

It's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that narratives can be formed and shaped by issuing a simple press release or generating a popular internet meme. To have lasting influence, they require the investment of significant resources over a prolonged period and the careful design of content that resonates with target audiences.

The War on Terror narrative was

¹J Potter and M Whetherell, *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour* (Sage, London, 1987), p.6.

²Adam Hodges. *The "War on Terror" narrative*, 23.

just one of many explanations circulating in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. A review of newspaper headlines from the day after the 9/11 attacks shows an assortment of attempts to define and explain the terrible events of the day before. In common with previous terrorist attacks, many newspapers described the events by using variations on the word 'terror'. *The New York Times* led with 'Day of Terror'; *The Washington Post* with 'Terrorists Hijack...'; *The LA Times* with 'Terror Attack'. Others focussed on the perpetrators, *The Enquirer* describing them in a single word: 'Bastards!'. The word 'war' was not universally used.

Despite being just one of many explanations in circulation, the War on Terror narrative nevertheless became the most influential. This was because, of all those providing an explanation of the events, it was the Bush administration who had the greatest influence over access, context, and content – the three components necessary for the control of a public discourse.³

World interest in the events of 9/11 provided the Bush administration with unprecedented access to an influx of journalists. The administration was also able to provide a context to the events of 9/11 by referring to information and intelligence that they had obtained on the perpetrators and their motives. Finally, the administration was able to control the content of the



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“DESCRIBING THE EVENTS OF 9/11 AS ACTS OF WAR, RATHER THAN A CRIME OR TERRORIST ATTACK, HELPED TO DEFINE THE EVENTS AS ATTACKS AGAINST THE WHOLE NATION.”

narrative from the beginning. No other potential narrative setter had this same influence.

Of these three components, the control of content is especially important. The most prominent feature contained in President Bush's narrative was its use of the metaphor (or descriptor) of war. The use of the word 'war' had at least two important effects.

First, describing the events of 9/11 as acts of war, rather than a crime or terrorist attack,

helped to define the events as attacks against the whole nation. It presented the interests of those directly involved in the attacks as universal interests, thereby giving the narrative the authority to represent the nation – a common feature in dominant narratives.⁴

Second, the metaphor of war helped to contrast the 'insiders' (citizens of the United States and the free world) with the 'outsiders' (members of al Qaeda, the Taliban etc) as the enemy – a common feature in narratives used to justify war.⁵

The use of the metaphor of war not only helped the narrative to gain traction, but it also created an expectation for how the acts of 9/11 ought to be dealt with. Michael Howard recognised this feature of the narrative as early as October 2001 during his address at RUSI in which he argued that: “To use, or rather misuse the term ‘war’ is not simply a matter of legality, or pedantic semantics. It has deeper and more dangerous consequences. To declare that

one is ‘at war’ is immediately to create a war psychosis.”

As the War on Terror narrative developed, the Bush administration used other techniques to shape the content of the narrative. For example, President Bush's famous 1 May 2003 speech delivered on the back of USS Abraham Lincoln used a technique termed by Bruner as “historical causal entitlement”.⁶ This technique seeks to link events by describing them in parallel chronological progression, as the following two excerpts illustrate:

Excerpt 1. (Bush 1 May 2003)

1. The battle of Iraq is one victory in a war on terror
2. that began on September the 11th 2001
3. and still goes on

Excerpt 2. (Bush 1 May 2003)

1. In the battle of Afghanistan
2. we destroyed the Taliban,
3. many terrorists,
4. and the camps where they trained⁷

The effect of this technique is to introduce into the narrative the idea that 9/11 provides the *causus belli* for the wars initiated in both Afghanistan and Iraq. President Bush used the same technique in multiple speeches throughout 2003 and subsequently used the technique to link the war in Afghanistan to the war against ISIS in the Middle East.⁸

The War on Terror narrative also commonly treats the enemies of the US as ‘linked antagonists’⁹ – another technique common in war narratives. For example, the common use by President Bush of the word ‘terrorism’ or ‘terrorist’ each time that Iraq or al Qaeda were mentioned implies a degree of equivalence between the two.¹⁰

The above observations are not a criticism of the Bush administration's rhetoric. Rather, they help us to understand how the War on Terror narrative became so powerful. They help to explain why the use of the framework of war came to

³T.A. van Dijk. *Critical Discourse Analysis, in The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (eds D. Schiffrin, D. Tannen and H. E. Hamilton), Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Malden, Massachusetts, USA. 2005, 356.

⁴A Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory* (Macmillan, London, 1979), 190-193 quoted in Vivienne Jabri *Discourses on Violence* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1996), 97.

⁵Vivienne Jabri *Discourses on Violence*. Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1996, 7.

⁶Bruner, Jerome. 1991. ‘The narrative Construction of Reality’. *Critical Inquiry* 18: 1-24.

⁷President George W Bush Announcement of the End of Major Combat Operations in Iraq from the USS Abraham Lincoln off the coast of San Diego, CA quoted in Adam Hodges. *The “War on Terror” narrative*, 68.

⁸See, for example, President Bush's 16 April 2016 speech in Saint Louis.

⁹Adam Hodges. *The “War on Terror” narrative*, 64.

¹⁰Adam Hodges. *The “War on Terror” narrative*, 73.

dominate the way that both the acts of terror and the policy response would be discussed. Even those who disagreed with the choice of rhetoric were forced to engage with it and, hence, affirm it.

The first lesson that the Global War on Terror narrative teaches us is that control of a narrative requires prolonged control of access, context and, especially, content. All too often we assume we can shape narratives, when the reality is that our poor access, lack of understanding of context and inability to control content means our efforts have little effect.

LESSON 2: NARRATIVES WORK BOTH WAYS

A second lesson we can draw from the last 20 years is that powerful narratives can gain a momentum of their own, empowering (and constraining) those who follow.

Such was the power of the War on Terror narrative that it continued to influence the public discourse even after President Bush left office. Although President

Obama explicitly sought to reject the phrase War on Terror¹¹, there are plenty of examples in his early speeches where he conceptualises the problem of terrorism in military terms. For example, in his inaugural address he stated that: “Our nation is at war, against a far-reaching network of violence and hatred.”¹² He also regularly used the same sound bites as President Bush, phrases such as ‘central front’ and ‘struggle against terrorism and extremism’¹³ leading Sarfo and Krampa to suggest that the phrase War on Terror which “defined the presidency of George Bush...was inherited and further refined by President Obama”.¹⁴

As the US approached the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, the Obama administration published its own updated counter terrorist strategy. In keeping with the language of President Obama’s speeches on terrorism, the phrase ‘War on Terror’ is notable by its absence. Indeed the 2011 strategy claims that the US is not at “war with the tactic of terrorism”.¹⁵ Nevertheless, as with President Obama’s speeches, clear echoes of the narrative remain. For example,

the introduction explains that: “The United States deliberately uses the word ‘war’ to describe our relentless campaign against al-Qa’ida.”¹⁶

Echoes of the War on Terror narrative can also be heard in the speeches of President Trump. During his 2018 State of the Union address President Trump described his intent to “extinguish ISIS from the face of the Earth” promising to “continue our fight until ISIS is defeated”. In the same speech, he returns to Bush’s metaphor of ‘acts of war’ and to the debate about whether to categorise terrorist events as criminal acts with his use of the phrase: “Terrorists are not merely criminals. They are unlawful enemy combatants.”¹⁷

The War on Terror narrative had staying power. It empowered and, at times, constrained several administrations.

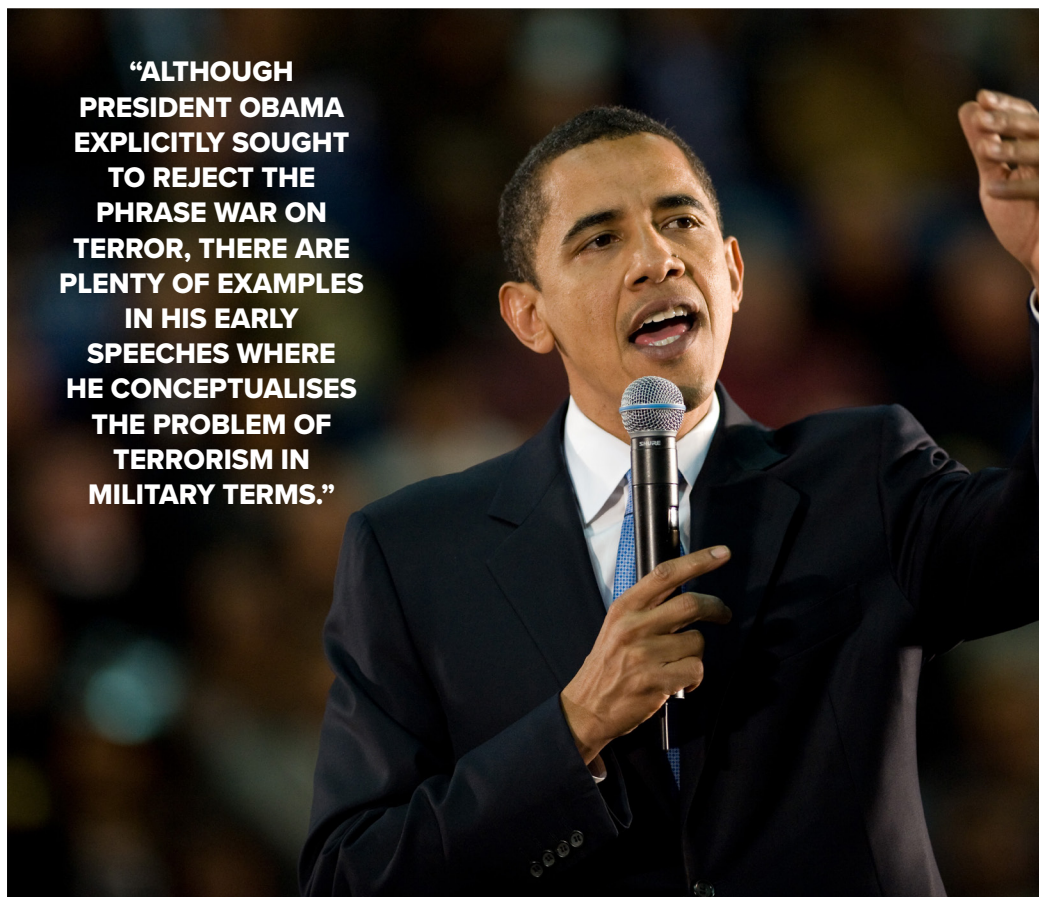
The second lesson that the Global War on Terror narrative teaches us is that narratives can empower and constrain political and military actors long after

they were originally conceived. They can be equally as difficult to dislodge as to instil.

LESSON 3: NARRATIVES ARE POWERFUL WHEN ALIGNED WITH LEGISLATION, POLICY AND ACTIONS

A third lesson we can draw is that effective narratives match words with legislation, policy and action. Embedding narratives in legislation and policy gives their authors at least two of Weber’s three types of legitimacy: a rational/legal legitimacy underpinned by legislation and policy, together with a charismatic/rhetorical legitimacy emanating from stirring speeches.¹⁸

Much of the language included in the War on Terror narrative is enshrined in the most important legislation passed in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. On 14 September 2001, the United States congress passed S.J.Res-23: the ‘[Authorization for Use of Military Force](#)’ (AUMF) against terrorists, which was subsequently signed by President Bush on 18 September 2001. The AUMF was a ground-breaking



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¹¹See for example, President Obama’s National Security Address of 23 May 2013.

¹²President Obama Election Night Victory Speech 4 November 2008.

¹³President Obama Address to State Department employees, 22 January 2009 quoted in Adam Hodges. *The ‘War on Terror’ Narrative*, 158.

¹⁴Emmanuel Sarfo and Ewuresei Agyeiwaa Krampa. *Language at War: a Critical Discourse Analysis by Speeches of Bush and Obama on War and Terrorism*. Grim Verlag (2016).

¹⁵US National Strategy for Combatting Terrorism, February 2011, 2.

¹⁶ibid.

¹⁷President Donald J Trump. *State of the Union Address*. 30 Jan 2018.

¹⁸Max Weber first described the three types of legitimate rule in an essay published in *Preussische Jahrbücher* 187, 1-2, 1922.

¹⁹Christopher Woody. ‘Congress may repeal the post-9/11 act the US military used to justify the fight against ISIS’ *Business Insider*. Retrieved 1915 12 January 2018.



piece of legislation giving the President the power to target non-state actors and states that used or supported terrorists.¹⁹

A brief comparison of the [AUMF](#) with President Bush's 12 September statement to the press illustrates the similarity of the language [see table 1 below].

Under Presidents Bush and Obama, the AUMF was invoked more than 30 times to deploy US military forces to multiple countries including Afghanistan,

Table 1. Comparison of language contained in Bush (12/901) with AUMF

BUSH (12 SEPT 2001) Vs AUMF	
"...deliberate and deadly attacks which were carried out yesterday against our country"	"...recent attacks launched against the United States"
"acts of terror"	"acts of international terrorism"
"...all our resources to conquer this enemy"	"all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks"
"they were acts of war"	"Consistent with section 8(a)(1) of the War Powers Resolution, the Congress declares that this section is intended to constitute specific statutory authorization within the meaning of section 5(b) of the War Powers Resolution."
"This is an enemy that thinks its harbours are safe."	"...authorized to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons... or harbored such organizations or persons."
"freedom and democracy are under attack"	"exercise its rights to self-defense and to protect United States citizens both at home and abroad"

the Philippines, Georgia, Yemen, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somali and Iraq. Legislation and military action were consistent with the rhetoric. As well as influencing legislation, the language of the War on Terror narrative is also common in policy documents. The US National Strategies for Combating Terrorism published during the Bush administration include multiple references to the War on Terror narrative. For example, the first paragraph in the introduction to the February 2003 National Strategy for Combating Terrorism repeated President Bush's assertion

that the "terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001... were acts of war against the United States".²⁰ It goes on to use the phrase War on Terror multiple times and to argue that: "The enemy is not one person. It is not a single political regime...The enemy is terrorism."²¹ The language in the updated 2006 strategy is near identical with multiple references to the 'War on Terror' and references to the attacks of 9/11 being 'acts of war'.²² The War on Terror narrative therefore influenced both legislation and policy, which in turn underpinned and legitimised military and other government activity. Words were backed up with action which served to reinforce the strength of the War on Terror narrative.

The third lesson that the Global War on Terror narrative teaches us is that narratives become powerful when they are aligned with legislation, policy and actions. Words must be matched by deeds. Rhetoric aligned with policy. Very often, we make the mistake of thinking of narratives as media statements or lines to take. To be truly impactful and long lasting they must be aligned with actions and consistent with legislation and policy.

CONCLUSION

It's become fashionable in the British Army to talk about controlling the narrative. The power of the War on Terror narrative illustrates why this aspiration is important. Whether one agrees with it or not, it's impossible to deny its influence. As we look to new challenges posed by the war in Ukraine – where control of the narrative is again proving so vital – we would do well to pause and reflect on what we can learn from the War on Terror narrative.

As President Biden's speech on the end of the war in Afghanistan reminded us, generating new narratives, and changing established ones, is not easy. To do so requires resources. It requires frequent access to audiences, often over a long period of time. It requires the allocation of the tools needed to understand and explain the context of events, together with the motives and interests of audiences. And it requires the ability to create and control content and deliver actions that are consistent with, and underpinned by, legislation and cross government policy.

²⁰US Nation Strategy for Combating Terrorism, February 2003, 1.

²¹ibid.

²²US National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, February 2006, 3.