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# The Generic U.S. Presidential War Narrative: Justifying Military Force and Imagining the Nation

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## The Generic US Presidential War Narrative

JUSTIFYING MILITARY FORCE AND IMAGINING THE NATION

Adam Hodges

### Introduction

In his 1795 essay on perpetual peace, Kant points out that in political systems where power rests with the people and their representatives, “the consent of the citizens is required to decide whether or not war is to be declared” (Kant 1991: 100). In theory, the necessity of obtaining the consent of citizens should help stave off unwarranted uses of the military because, as Kant explains, “it is very natural that they [the citizens] will have great hesitation in embarking on so dangerous an enterprise” (Kant 1991: 100). In other words, and more specific to the American context, given the need for presidents to gain public support for war, citizens and their representatives are supposed to act as a crucial curb to potential abuses of power that might lead to questionable uses of the military. Yet, when a president addresses the nation and makes a case for war—even in the absence of a direct invasion or an egregious threat—consent is typically granted on the part of the citizenry as a whole. Thus, a critical issue that Kant does not discuss is the topic taken up by many discourse scholars interested in war and peace—namely, how presidential rhetoric serves to convince citizens that military force is needed where hesitation and opposition should otherwise prevail. Or, in critical terms, how do presidents discursively manufacture consent for war?

Crucially, narrative plays a key role in justifying war. As Campbell and Jamieson (2008) point out in their study on presidential rhetoric, “The justification [for war] is embodied in a dramatic narrative from which, in turn, an argument is extracted” (224). The analysis that follows focuses on the generic elements of the American presidential war narrative that spans presidencies and conflicts. Each new president draws from this generic schema to narrate the need for the particular military engagement of the moment. The tradition and history bound up in the story about America’s involvement in war instills each new call to arms with a sense of tradition and authority. Each new call also recreates the presidential war narrative in line with current needs, borrowing

from the generic framework and remaking it in light of the current situation. In the process, the presidential war narrative (re)constructs the American national identity. That is, it plays a pivotal role in defining American values and in constituting the “national consciousness” of the “imagined community” of which Anderson (1983) speaks in his treatise on nationalism. Moreover, by drawing upon patriotic imaginings through the rehearsal of a common war narrative, presidential war rhetoric eclipses further debate. Where democracy demands critical consideration and careful weighing of evidence, presidential war rhetoric demands uncritical support. Presented through the (re)production of a widely recognized cultural narrative, presidential justifications for war therefore become difficult for many citizens—and the establishment press—to engage critically. This chapter, therefore, attempts to dissect the presidential war narrative in an effort to open it up to critical inspection.

Data come from speeches and messages delivered by American presidents stretching from Woodrow Wilson’s request to Congress for a declaration of war against Germany in 1917 through George W. Bush’s addresses to the nation at the onset of the invasion of Iraq in 2003. A full timeline of the conflicts and list of these materials is provided in table 3.1; complete transcripts can be found in the online database provided by *The American Presidency Project* at the University of California at Santa Barbara (Woolley and Peters 2010). The materials primarily include addresses delivered directly to the nation, as well as addresses delivered before Congress. They also include written messages to Congress provided by Harry Truman on the situation in Korea and by Lyndon Johnson on the Gulf of Tonkin incident. In addition to addresses delivered to the nation by George W. Bush at the very beginning of the US invasion of Iraq on March 19, 2003, I also include his address to the nation from Cincinnati on October 7, 2002. This latter speech marked a key rhetorical moment in the Bush administration’s case for war against Iraq. The remaining speeches in the corpus come from addresses or messages delivered by presidents at the onset or immediately in the wake of conflicts that require the president to gain public support and congressional approval for military actions.

The delivery of presidential war rhetoric has evolved since the founding of the United States in the eighteenth century. While early presidents often sent written requests to Congress for declarations of war (for example, James Madison’s message to Congress on June 1, 1812), delivering speeches in person to joint sessions of Congress became the norm in the twentieth century. Moreover, given the movement away from formal declarations of war by Congress after the two world wars,<sup>1</sup> plus the ability of modern communication

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<sup>1</sup> War has been officially declared only three other times in addition to World War I and World War II: in 1812 for the War of 1812, in 1846 for the Mexican-American War, and in 1898 for the Spanish-American War.

TABLE 3.1

**US Military Conflicts and Accompanying Presidential Rhetoric Used in the Analysis**

Conflict	President	Date	Speech/message
World War I	Woodrow Wilson	April 2, 1917	Address to a Joint Session of Congress Requesting a Declaration of War against Germany
World War II	Franklin D. Roosevelt	December 8, 1941	Address to Congress Requesting a Declaration of War with Japan
Korea	Harry S. Truman	July 19, 1950a	Radio and Television Address to the American People on the Situation in Korea
		July 19, 1950b	Special Message to the Congress Reporting on the Situation in Korea
Vietnam	Lyndon B. Johnson	August 4, 1964a	Radio and Television Report to the American People Following Renewed Aggression in the Gulf of Tonkin
		August 5, 1964b	Remarks at Syracuse University on the Communist Challenge in Southeast Asia
		August 5, 1964c	Special Message to the Congress on US Policy in Southeast Asia
Grenada	Ronald Reagan	October 27, 1983	Address to the Nation on Events in Lebanon and Grenada
Panama	George H. W. Bush	December 20, 1989	Address to the Nation Announcing United States Military Action in Panama
Persian Gulf	George H. W. Bush	January 16, 1991	Address to the Nation Announcing Allied Military Action in the Persian Gulf
Kosovo	William J. Clinton	March 24, 1999	Address to the Nation on Airstrikes against Serbian Targets in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro)
Afghanistan	George W. Bush	October 7, 2001	Address to the Nation Announcing Strikes against Al Qaida Training Camps and Taliban Military Installations in Afghanistan
Iraq	George W. Bush	October 7, 2002	Address to the Nation on Iraq from Cincinnati, Ohio
		March 17, 2003a	Address to the Nation on Iraq
		March 19, 2003b	Address to the Nation on Iraq

technologies to allow presidents to speak directly to the nation through radio and television, modern presidents tend to deliver speeches directly to the American public at times of inchoate military conflicts. Even addresses before Congress or a local audience take into account and are aimed at the wider American public to which they are typically broadcast in whole or in part. Thus, the rhetorical act of justifying war is implicated in a national dialogue in the Bakhtinian sense of dialogism (Bakhtin 1981, 1986) where the president responds to and anticipates numerous possible objections to the use of military force. While the distinction between acceptable defensive measures to

protect the nation and overreaching offensive uses of the military is subject to considerable debate, the successful implementation of the presidential war narrative erases any doubt about the situation under consideration.

Below, I first discuss the importance of narrative and outline the generic schema of the presidential war narrative. I then examine the elements of the narrative in detail, drawing examples from presidential speeches. Finally, I end with a general discussion of the role narrative plays in both justifying war and constructing the nation's image of itself.

### **The Power of Narrative and the Generic Presidential War Schema**

The world in which we live is filled with events and happenings; but those events and happenings do not intrinsically contain their own meanings. Rather, we use narrative to imbue events with meaning. Through narrative, we name protagonists, ascribe motivations, and produce explanations. In short, narrative is a potent means for structuring and organizing our perceptual experience. In many ways, as Bruner (1991) discusses, narrative is a much more powerful device for achieving shared understandings than “logical and scientific procedures that can be weeded out by falsification” (3). Part of the power of narrative arises from our “tendency to view narratives as icons of events” (Bauman 1986: 5)—that is, as transparent representations of what happened. Any successful narrative erases the interpretive act that it is by conveying the impression that it simply presents the world “as found” rather than represents it from one among many potential viewpoints. In other words, any rhetorical justification of war by the president effectively constructs a reality rather than simply depicts a preexisting reality that somehow contains its own significance outside the discursive process that gives it meaning. Narrative is the means by which the social construction of reality takes place (Bruner 1991).

A prime means by which narrative limits “the hermeneutic task of making sense of human happenings” is through the use of genre (Bruner 1991: 14). Genres help to situate the *particulars* of narrated events<sup>2</sup> within conventional models or “orienting frameworks” (Hanks 1987: 670) for interpreting those particulars. In other words, a narrator uses a generic precedent to frame a story by mapping the particulars of the narrated events onto that framework. The genre thereby provides “conventional guidelines or schemas” (Bauman 2004: 5) for both the telling and interpretation of a new narrative. While the fit between the generic schema and a particular text is never exact—what Briggs and Bauman (1992) call the *intertextual gap*—the distance can be minimized to render

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<sup>2</sup>Narrative scholars distinguish between *narrated events*, the events that narratives recount, and *narrative events*, the situations in which narratives are told (Jakobson 1971; Bakhtin 1981: 255; Bauman 1986: 2).

“the discourse maximally interpretable” (149). Elements common to the genre may be rehearsed in a manner that aligns the new situated telling with previous renditions of similar narratives in a consistently recognizable manner. Such consistency provides for *generic realism* (Chandler 2007: 67) whereby the narration of events in the current situation fit tightly with generic expectations for how characters should act and how events should unfold. This helps absorb us in the narrative where we fall into a “suspension of disbelief” so that alternative scenarios or interpretations fail to be considered or given adequate play.

The ability of presidents to discursively justify war stems in part from the rehearsal of a common presidential war narrative that builds upon multiple layers of precedent. In previous times of war, former presidents addressed the nation in a similar manner in similar settings marked by similar seals of presidential authority. Whether they spoke to a live audience from podiums adorned with the presidential seal, while sitting behind the presidential desk in the Oval Office, or from the lectern in front of a joint session of Congress, they drew upon the familiar trappings of presidential authority that provided them with “the *delegated power* of the spokesperson” (Bourdieu 1991: 107). With the authority to be heard and listened to, they contextualized the occasion with the degree of solemnity characteristic of the office and the task at hand, and they drew from a familiar cast of characters—familiar imaginings of the American character and the nature of the enemy—and a familiar plot of the nation at war.

Moreover, in narrating the onset of war, the president draws upon shared ethical understandings about the morality of war in certain situations, which derive from the philosophical tradition of Just War Theory. With roots stretching back to Aristotle, Cicero, and Augustine, as well as Thomas Aquinas (1484) in the thirteenth century, and contemporary scholars such as Michael Walzer (2000, 2004), Just War Theory deals with the right to enter into war (*jus ad bellum*), the ethical conduct of war (*jus in bello*), and the ethics of postwar peace agreements (*jus post bellum*). Of particular concern for presidents attempting to garner support for war are the six principles of *jus ad bellum*, which demand that a nation possesses (1) just cause, (2) right intention, (3) proper authority, that it enters into war (4) as a last resort (5) with a reasonable probability of success, and that (6) it uses means proportional to the ends (Mosley 2009; Orend 2005).

The generic presidential war narrative contains several common elements, which cohere around a particular topic or theme and build upon one another to form the narrative whole. Below, I outline these five components along with a concise rendition of the narrative in generic terms. Through this generic template, the narrative lays out the justification for war in line with the six tenets of *jus ad bellum*.

### 1. **Precipitating event *casus belli***

An enemy committed a sudden and deliberate act of aggression against us (the United States or an ally) without justification. This act represents a threat to peace, freedom, democracy, and the interests of all humanity.

2. **Implication of and response to the precipitating event**

We are therefore thrust into war against our will. We have no choice but to act militarily. All other options have been exhausted and are no longer practicable. The decision to go to war has been made only after thoughtful, deliberate, and careful consideration. Our military action is defensive in nature in contrast to our enemy's aggressive actions.

3. **Our motives and objectives**

We have no selfish interests, no territorial ambitions. We have no quarrel with the citizens of the country we are fighting, only their government. Our response will be firm and steadfast. Our motives and objectives are to restore peace, to prevent a wider or more devastating war in the future, and to protect freedom, democracy, and the greater good of the world. We act for the good of all humanity.

4. **Identifying Us versus Them**

We stand for and represent peace, freedom, and democracy. We possess legal authority, moral authority, resolve, and unity. In contrast, our enemy rules autocratically by force, practices aggression and deception, and disregards international law and agreements.

5. **Coda**

Although we face a great challenge that requires sacrifice, we will stand together committed to the cause and will prevail in our fight.

Next, I further explicate this generic schema through an examination of how it plays out in specific renditions of the presidential war narrative.

### **Precipitating Event / *Casus Belli***

In their work on narrative, Labov and Waletzky (1967) invoke the concept of a “precipitating event,” which acts as the starting point for a story. Bruner (1991) draws from this notion in his discussion of the way narrative highlights some type of break from the normalcy of everyday life to warrant its “tellability.” Bruner (1991) explains that breaches of the canonical “are often highly conventional and are strongly influenced by narrative traditions. Such breaches are readily recognizable as familiar human plights” (12). One such familiar plight is that of a nation at war, which is readily assimilated into the presidential war narrative where the narrative's precipitating event corresponds with the *casus belli* of a military conflict. As seen in examples (1) through (8), presidents reference a specific date to mark the beginning of the war narrative.

1. Yesterday, December 7, 1941—a date which will live in infamy . . . (Roosevelt 1941)
2. On Sunday, June 25th, Communist forces attacked . . . (Truman 1950a)

3. On August 2 the United States destroyer Maddox was attacked . . .  
(Johnson 1964)
4. On October 12th, a small group in his militia seized . . . (Reagan 1983)
5. Last Friday, Noriega declared . . . (Bush 1989)
6. This conflict started August 2nd when the dictator of Iraq invaded . . .  
(Bush 1991)
7. In 1989 Serbia's leader . . . (Clinton 1999)
8. Since September 11 . . . (Bush 2001)

Reference to a precipitating event establishes the boundary to the narrative realm, dividing the world into a “before” and an “after.” The time within the narrative realm is “human time” rather than merely “clock time” (Ricoeur 1984). As Bruner (1991) explains, “It is time whose significance is given by the meaning assigned to events within its compass” (6). For example, in George W. Bush’s narrative about a “war on terror,” history is split into a pre-9/11 world and a post-9/11 world, as referenced in (8). As I discuss elsewhere (Hodges 2011), this division serves the interpretive function of positioning events after September 2001—such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq—within the rubric of waging a single “war on terror” where Afghanistan and Iraq are seen as “fronts” rather than separate wars. In generic terms, reference to the precipitating event marks the beginning of a discrete war or military campaign.

In the presidential war narrative, the precipitating event invariably takes the form of an “act of aggression” committed by an enemy. According to Just War Theory, “war is only permissible if its purpose is to retaliate against a wrong already committed (for example, to pursue and punish an aggressor)” (Mosely 2009). Thus, the framing of the precipitating event as an “act of aggression” serves to fulfill the first tenet of *jus ad bellum*: just cause. Embedded in the naming of the precipitating event is an evaluation that variously emphasizes that the act came suddenly, without warning, without justification, yet with deliberate intent—descriptors that underscore the aggressive and unwarranted nature of the act. These descriptions can be seen in (9) through (15) where the lexical descriptors are marked in bold.

9. Vessels . . . have been ruthlessly sent to the bottom: **without warning** . . .  
(Wilson 1917)
10. . . . the United States of America was **suddenly** and **deliberately**  
attacked . . . (Roosevelt 1941)
11. That attack came **without provocation** and **without warning**. It was an  
**act of raw aggression, without** a shadow of **justification**. (Truman 1950a)
12. . . . the attack was naked, **deliberate, unprovoked aggression, without** a  
shadow of **justification**. (Truman 1950b)
13. The attacks were **deliberate**. The attacks were **unprovoked**. (Johnson 1964b)
14. **Aggression—deliberate, willful**, and systematic **aggression** . . . (Johnson  
1964b)
15. . . . bring **sudden** terror and suffering to America. (Bush 2002)



Note that these examples come from speeches that mark the onset of major wars—World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq—as opposed to the less involved (in terms of American commitment of forces, time, and lives) military actions of Grenada in 1983, Panama in 1989, the Persian Gulf in 1991, and Kosovo in 1999. In the latter cases, the precipitating event is often further removed from the time of the speech and requires a more elaborate account to explain the need to use military force. For example, the precipitating event for military action in Grenada in 1983 began four years earlier in 1979, according to Ronald Reagan’s narrative seen in (16).

16. In 1979 trouble came to Grenada . . . (Reagan 1983)

Over the course of several concise lines, Reagan then recounts a series of events between that initial precipitating event and the more immediate *casus belli* in the days prior to the military action, presented in (17).

17. On October 12th [1983], a small group of his militia seized . . .  
(Reagan 1983)

Likewise, in Bill Clinton’s address to the nation in 1999 on airstrikes against Serbia, he provides a condensed history lesson that begins in 1989, as illustrated in (18).

18. In 1989, Serbia’s leader, Slobodan Milosevic . . . (Clinton 1999)

Clinton then takes listeners up to the present actions that constitute the more immediate *casus belli* presented in (19).

19. Now they’ve started moving from village to village, shelling and torching . . . (Clinton 1999)

Cases such as these make use of a two-part precipitating event to set up the war narrative. Alone, and without more grounding for an audience who may not be familiar with the history of the region being discussed, the more immediate precipitating event could easily fail to answer the question, “so what?” That is, as Labov and Waletzky (1967) point out, narrative must not only tell what happened but convey why it is worth telling. With regard to the presidential war narrative, the president must convey why the story is worth telling in a way that leads to the public’s support for the commitment of American forces in a military venture. Delivering the mini-history lesson that begins with a more remote precipitating event provides context for instilling the immediate precipitating event with a sense of import and urgency. It also helps the narrator answer the question “why now?” by laying the ground upon which the figure of the immediate precipitating event can be contrasted.

Answering “why now?” can make use of an ultimatum to construct a striking figure against the (back)ground of the status quo up to that point. This may come in the form of a warning issued to an enemy that may also be backed

by the institutional authority of the United Nations. This can be seen in (20) and (21).

20. Saddam was warned over and over again to comply with the will of the United Nations: Leave Kuwait, or be driven out. Saddam has arrogantly rejected all warnings. (Bush 1991)
21. More than 2 weeks ago, I gave Taliban leaders a series of clear and specific demands. . . . None of these demands were met. And now the Taliban will pay a price. (Bush 2001)

In (20), George H. W. Bush provides an answer to “why now?” after five months had passed between the invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein and Bush’s launch of the American-led war against Iraq in January 1991. Here, Bush invokes Saddam Hussein’s rejection of UN Security Council resolutions and accompanying warnings that such a violation of international law would result in military action. Likewise, George W. Bush issued a pointed ultimatum to Afghanistan’s Taliban government before the US invasion of that country in 2001, as alluded to in (21). From a critical perspective, the genuineness of such ultimatums in seeking to solve the issue without military involvement is highly dubious. That is, the issuance of a final ultimatum does more to manufacture consent with a domestic audience than to act as a serious diplomatic gesture to prevent war. Yet, in terms of the former, it provides a dramatic means for achieving its aims.

### **Implication of and Response to the Precipitating Event**

The next major section of the presidential war narrative deals with the implication of and response to the precipitating event as *casus belli*. Across the board, the precipitating event is positioned as an offensive act of aggression committed by an enemy with the implication that the United States is thrust into war as a matter of self-defense with no choice but to respond militarily. Importantly, this defensive posture holds regardless of the type of situation. Even in US military ventures that could be construed as more “offensive,” the actions are narrated as defensive in nature. In fact, the importance of constructing actions as defensive becomes all the more important in cases when public opinion is more sharply divided over which side of the line (offensive or defensive) proposed actions fall. For example, the discursive work done by Franklin D. Roosevelt in his speech after Pearl Harbor pales in comparison to the work done by George W. Bush to lay the groundwork for the invasion of Iraq. In the latter case, critics described the action as a “war of choice” and questioned its defensive nature. As Dunmire (2009) discusses, the Bush Doctrine, which laid the groundwork for the invasion of Iraq, effectively appropriated the terminology of “preemptive” actions—recognized as legitimate actions of self-defense in accord with Just

War Theory and international law<sup>3</sup>—as cover for a policy of “preventive” attacks (see also, Dunmire, this volume). In contrast, depicting the US entrance into World War II in terms of self-defense faced much less resistance among the public. Roosevelt’s request to Congress for a declaration of war consisted of a mere 506 words compared to Bush’s speech of 3,327 words in Cincinnati on October 7, 2002,<sup>4</sup> a key rhetorical moment in the administration’s push for war. In sum, the ideas of *jus ad bellum*—that is, the right to go to war—guide the rhetorical process all presidents follow in justifying military actions. Whether a war is primarily defensive in actual fact,<sup>5</sup> the presidential war narrative must discursively present it as such to fulfill the *jus ad bellum* principles of just cause and right intention. This means positioning the war as defensive in nature through use of the lexeme “defense,” as seen in (22) through (26).

22. . . . I have directed that all measures be taken for our **defense**. (Roosevelt 1941)
23. The free nations face a worldwide threat. It must be met with a worldwide **defense**. (Truman 1950a)
24. . . . **defense** of peace in southeast Asia. (Johnson 1964a)
25. . . . in **defense** of their fellow citizens, in **defense** of democracy. (Bush 1989)
26. . . . we will meet the responsibility of **defending** human liberty against violence and aggression. (Bush 2002)

It also involves emphasizing that the war has been thrust or forced upon us so there is no choice but to go to war, as illustrated in (27) through (31).

27. I advise that the Congress . . . formally accept the status of belligerent which has thus been thrust upon [the United States] . . . (Wilson 1917)
28. We enter this war only where we are clearly forced into it because there are no other means of defending our rights. (Wilson 1917)
29. I believe our government has a responsibility to go to the aid of its citizens, if their right to life and liberty is threatened. (Reagan 1983)
30. These countries had hoped the use of force could be avoided. Regrettably, we now believe that only force will make him leave. (Bush 1991)
31. We did not ask for this present challenge, but we accept it. (Bush 2002)

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<sup>3</sup>Notably, Article 51 of Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter ensures the “inherent right of individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations” (Charter of the United Nations 1945).

<sup>4</sup>It is no coincidence that this date falls on the one year anniversary of the invasion of Afghanistan. The scheduling of the speech on this date acts as another way human time enters into the significance of the narrating event.

<sup>5</sup>Of course, characterizing the nature of military action (i.e., as defensive or offensive) is anything but clear-cut; and I do not mean to convey otherwise. To the contrary, I wish to underscore the inherent ambiguity in such determinations and emphasize, with Campbell and Jamieson (2008), that considerable “divisions of opinion arise over the line to be drawn between appropriate actions in defense of the nation and offensive use of the nation’s military capabilities” (219).

This discursive move strategically shifts agency, and hence responsibility for the outbreak of hostilities, to the enemy. As seen in (27), this shift in agency can be accomplished through the use of passive voice so that *war has been thrust upon us*. By contrast, any actions that the United States may have done to contribute to the conflict are erased. Even the arguably more offensive uses of the nation's military in the cases of Grenada in (29) and Iraq in (31) are presented as defensive responses to acts of aggression carried out by enemies who initiated the conflicts. Furthermore, the agentic military actions that are taken by the United States are presented as moves of last resort, another crucial principle of *jus ad bellum*—that is, as actions taken only after all other options have been exhausted and are no longer practicable, as illustrated in (32) through (35).

32. I took this action only after reaching the conclusion that every other avenue was closed . . . (Bush 1989)
33. Now the 28 countries with forces in the Gulf area have exhausted all reasonable efforts . . . have no choice but to drive Saddam from Kuwait by force. (Bush 1991)
34. The United States, together with the United Nations, exhausted every means at our disposal to bring this crisis to a peaceful end. (Bush 1991)
35. Over the last few months we have done everything we possibly could to solve this problem peacefully. (Clinton 1999)

In one of their five key characteristics of war rhetoric, Campbell and Jamieson (2008) point out that “every element in it proclaims that the momentous decision to resort to force is deliberate, the product of thoughtful consideration” (221). The exhortations that war comes only as a last resort seen here are often accompanied by explicit commentary about the difficulty of making the final decision to engage American forces and the solemn responsibility it entails, as demonstrated in (36) through (39).

36. With a profound sense of the solemn and even tragical character of the step I am taking and of the grave responsibilities which it involves . . . (Wilson 1917)
37. It is a solemn responsibility to have to order even limited military action (Johnson1964a)
38. No President can easily commit our sons and daughters to war. (Bush 1991)
39. Do our interests in Kosovo justify the dangers to our Armed Forces? I've thought long and hard about that question. (Clinton 1999)

Thus, appeals to the nation for support of war underline the deliberative process taken by the president and, crucially, position that deliberative process as having already taken place. Placing the deliberative process in the past, rather than leaving it open to continued public debate and consideration, allows the

president to assume the “extraordinary, even near-dictatorial powers” (Campbell and Jamieson 2008: 243) associated with the office of commander-in-chief. If met with dissent or public skepticism, the issuance of a call to arms would be doomed to failure. Thus, the president overcomes the public’s hesitation by using the narrative to emphasize the principles of just cause, right intention, and last resort.

### **America’s Motives and Objectives**

In the third major section of the presidential war narrative, the president outlines the motives and objectives of the nation’s response to the enemy’s act of aggression. Not only does this work to further allay concerns that the use of force is conducted without right intention, but it also begins to lay out a common set of values that define the national character. To these ends, one or more points may be emphasized. First, whereas objectionable uses of the military involve conquest or territorial expansion, the president emphasizes that the United States has no selfish interests or territorial ambitions, as seen in (40) through (43).

- 40. We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no dominion. (Wilson 1917)
- 41. I wish to state that the United States has no territorial ambitions . . . (Truman 1950b)
- 42. We have no military, political or territorial ambitions in the area. (Johnson 1964c)
- 43. We have no ambition in Iraq except to remove a threat and restore control of that country to its own people. (Bush 2003b)

Instead, underlying America’s motives is a stated desire for peace; and war is therefore waged in the service of peace, as in (44) through (48).

- 44. . . . to fight thus for the ultimate peace of the world . . . (Wilson 1917)
- 45. . . . restore peace and security . . . (Truman 1950a)
- 46. . . . peace is the only purpose of the course that America pursues. (Johnson 1964b)
- 47. . . . the pursuit of peace (Reagan 1983)
- 48. . . . advancing the cause of peace. (Clinton 1999)

Moreover, accompanying the discourse of peace are the discourses of freedom and democracy, seen in (49) through (55).

- 49. The world must be made safe for democracy. (Wilson 1917)
- 50. This is not just a jungle war, but a struggle for freedom . . . (Johnson 1964c)

51. . . . keep freedom and maintain peace. (Reagan 1983)
52. . . . an affront to mankind and a challenge to the freedom of all. (Bush 1991)
53. . . . to save innocent lives and preserve peace, freedom, and stability in Europe. (Clinton 1999)
54. We defend not only our precious freedoms but also the freedom of people everywhere . . . (Bush 2001)
55. Now as before, we will secure our Nation, protect our freedom, and help others to find freedom of their own. (Bush 2002)

The concepts of peace, freedom, and democracy are sufficiently vague and positively valued so that they constitute a set of core values that all Americans agree upon.<sup>6</sup> When a call to war is presented as a fight for peace, freedom, and democracy, objections to war on those very terms would call into question the desire for peace or the value of freedom and democracy. Thus, regardless of the specific details of the impending conflict, the narrative presents the fight in general terms to which Americans would find little objection.

Moreover, the values of peace, freedom, and democracy are presented as universal values; and the United States is therefore positioned as representing the interests of the world as a whole and not just its own interests. Note the references, for example, to “the world” in (49), to “mankind” in (52), and to “people everywhere” in (54). The threat is therefore not just a threat to the United States but to the entire world. This makes the war at hand all the more urgent and pressing.

In addition, with the United States said to be fighting for the universal interests of everyone around the world, this can also include the citizens of the nation against which the United States is fighting, as demonstrated in (56) through (59).

56. We have no quarrel with the German people. We have no feeling towards them but one of sympathy and friendship. It was not upon their impulse that their government acted in entering this war. (Wilson 1917)
57. We have no argument with the people of Iraq. Indeed, for the innocents caught in this conflict, I pray for their safety. Our goal is not the conquest of Iraq. It is the liberation of Kuwait. (Bush 1991)
58. The United States of America is a friend to the Afghan people, and we are the friends of almost a billion worldwide who practice the Islamic faith. (Bush 2001)
59. We come to Iraq with respect for its citizens, for their great civilization, and for the religious faiths they practice. (Bush 2002)

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<sup>6</sup>One could also think of these as “god-terms” (Burke 1945) or “ideographs” (McGee 1980).

This discursive befriending of the people against which one is about to wage war creates a distinction between the citizens of that nation—for example, “the German people” as in (56) or Iraqis as in (59)—and the government of that nation, which is typically embodied in the personage of a dictator (e.g., Adolph Hitler or Saddam Hussein). Importantly, this rhetorical move adheres to and reinforces the logic of the narrative in which the United States is said to be fighting for universal values. According to the presidential war narrative, the people of the nation the United States is fighting are threatened by their own government just as Americans are so threatened since universal values—and not solely American national security—are under attack. Within the framework of the narrative, the United States is positioned as a benevolent actor with everyone’s best interests in mind. In this way, nationalistic interests can be couched inside “the claim that these actions are within the general moral order, and hence not justified only by partisan, self-serving grounds” (van Dijk 1998: 258). The motives and objectives are therefore presented as pure and untainted by selfish interests.

### Identifying Us versus Them

The protagonist and antagonist in any given conflict are, in generic terms, quite similar from one rendition of the presidential war narrative to another. Although some versions of the narrative devote a particular section to explicitly define the enemy, the binary opposition between Us and Them nevertheless permeates the narrative from beginning to end. Making use of the common process of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation discussed by van Dijk (1998: 267) and represented by the “ideological square” (depicted in table 3.2), presidents construct images of the American nation and its enemy through both explicit and implicit characterizations and evaluations embedded in the narrative. Since the suppression or de-emphasis of information that is negative about Us and positive about Them (the bottom line of the ideological square) typically manifests itself through absence rather than presence in discourse, I focus here on the top line of the ideological square where We are discursively positioned in positive terms and They in negative terms.

All wars require an antagonist with attributes and values antithetical to those of the protagonist. Statements about attributes and values possessed by

TABLE 3.2

#### Representing Us and Them Using the “Ideological Square”

	Us	Them
<i>Express/emphasize information that is:</i>	positive	negative
<i>Suppress/de-emphasize information that is:</i>	negative	positive

Us therefore implicate a set of oppositional ones possessed by Them, and vice versa. Table 3.3 summarizes the attributes, values, and activities characteristic of Us and Them in the presidential war narrative.

The distinction between the democratic nature of Us and the autocratic nature of Them is made explicit through references to the enemy's leader as "dictator" or "tyrant." The imagery associated with such lexical descriptors emphasizes the authoritarian nature of the enemy; but it also works to embody the enemy in a single personage—for example, Hitler, Noriega, Saddam, among others. This attributes individual agency to that person, and thereby works to endow the enemy as a whole with intentional states embodied in the consciousness of an individual actor. As Bruner (1991: 7) points out, the assignment of intentional states to protagonists underlies much of the explanatory power of narrative. As seen in the earlier discussion of (27) through (31), positioning the enemy as an intentional actor with agency works to assign responsibility to the enemy for the outbreak of war. This simultaneously absolves Us from having contributed to the outbreak of war, and thereby allows for a defensive posture in response to the enemy's "aggression—deliberate, willful, and systematic aggression" (Lyndon Johnson, excerpt 14).

The naming of a figurehead to personify the enemy also allows for the discursive move seen earlier in (56) through (59) where a subtle distinction is created between the government and the people of the nation against which the United States fights. This differentiation further highlights the autocratic nature of Them whereby the enemy rules over and hence works against the best interests of its own citizens. The image of an autocratic enemy that oppresses its own people reinforces the enemy's position as a threat not just to Our values but to universal values shared by all humanity. By implication, the United States takes on the role of defender of those universal values—peace, freedom, and democracy. These values are aligned with both US national security and the good of all humanity so that by fighting to defend itself the United States

TABLE 3.3

**Characteristics of the Us versus Them Binary in the Presidential War Narrative**

Us	Them
Free, civilized, democratic nation	Autocratic nation ruled by dictator/tyrant
Stand for peace, freedom, democracy, good of all	Stand for own selfish interests and ambitions
Defenders of universal values	Aggressors that threaten universal values
Engage in self-defense	Engage in aggression
Follow rule of law	Practice deception
Enforce international agreements	Break international agreements
Possess legal authority	Lack legal authority
Possess moral authority	Lack moral authority
Possess unity	Lack unity



in turn defends the universal interests of the world. This benevolence—which encompasses the moral and ethical duties to act with proportionality in line with *jus ad bellum*—stands in stark contrast to the malevolence of the enemy that practices aggression in pursuit of its own selfish ambitions and threatens Americans, its own people, and humanity as a whole. Moreover, emphasizing the democratic nature of Us and the autocratic nature of Them works to legitimate Our proper authority to wage war and delegitimize Their authority to do so, another key aspect of *jus ad bellum*.

In addition, the threat from the enemy initially manifests itself through what are described as deceptive practices, as in (60) through (63).

60. Cunningly contrived plans of deception or aggression . . . (Wilson 1917)
61. . . . the Japanese Government has deliberately sought to deceive the United States by false statements. (Roosevelt 1941)
62. Grenada, we were told, was a friendly island paradise for tourism. Well, it wasn't. It was a Soviet-Cuban colony, being readied as a major military bastion to export terror and undermine democracy. (Reagan 1983)
63. The entire world has witnessed Iraq's 11-year history of defiance, deception, and bad faith. (Bush 2002)

Whereas defenders of universal values follow the rule of law, the deception practiced by the enemy is carried out to circumvent international agreements and commitments, illustrated in (64) through (68).

64. International law . . . the German Government has swept aside . . . (Wilson 1917)
65. . . . with no heed to the resolution of the Security Council of the United Nations. (Truman 1950b)
66. The agreements of 1954 and 1962 were also signed by the government of North Viet-Nam. . . . That government of North Viet-Nam is now willfully and systematically violating those agreements of both 1954 and 1962. (Johnson 1964b)
67. Serbia stationed 40,000 troops in and around Kosovo in preparation for a major offensive—and in clear violation of the commitments they had made. (Clinton 1999)
68. Eleven years ago, as a condition for ending the Persian Gulf war, the Iraqi regime was required to destroy its weapons of mass destruction, to cease all development of such weapons, and to stop all support for terrorist groups. The Iraqi regime has violated all of those obligations. (Bush 2002)

By emphasizing the United Nations resolutions or other international agreements that the enemy violates, the presidential war narrative invokes a legal basis for America's military action. As a nation said to value the rule of law, the

United States therefore possesses legal authority to act as an enforcer of international law. Moral authority accompanies this legal authority as the narrative positions the United States in line with *jus ad bellum* and its own treaty commitments with its allies.

Central to the overarching Us versus Them binary featured in table 3.3 is the aggregation of attributes on each side of the divide so that these sets of attributes come into semiotic alignment. “The notion of semiotic alignment can be traced to Claude Lévi-Strauss’s discussion of analogical relationships which generate systems of meaning within culture” (Chandler 2007: 101). Through analogical thought, a set of differences between one set of binary oppositions (e.g., raw vs. cooked) can be mapped onto the differences between another set of binary oppositions (e.g., nature vs. culture). Such alignments result in homologous oppositions so that, for example, *raw is to cooked as nature is to culture* (Lévi-Strauss 1969; compare also to Irvine and Gal’s 2000 notion of *fractal recursivity*). In the scheme presented in table 3.3, each positive attribute of Us not only opposes a negative attribute of Them but also aligns with a cluster of other positive attributes that come to be associated with one another. Thus, reference to a democratic nation aligns with the values of peace, freedom, and democracy which in turn align with universal values. That democratic nations are associated with the rule of law implies adherence to international agreements and *jus ad bellum*; in turn, the use of military force is necessarily associated with self-defense, legal authority, and moral authority. Invoking one of these characteristics of Us implicates the others. Likewise, on the other side of the divide, numerous attributes align together to form an image of Them so that invoking one characteristic (e.g., autocratic ruler) indexes other characteristics in the cluster (e.g., self-serving uses of military force).

In Lévi-Straussian terms, such alignments result in a series of homologous oppositions so that, for example, *democratic nation is to autocratic nation as self-defense is to aggression*—or, *Us is to Them as universal values are to selfish interests*. The oppositions continue in this way to form composite images of Us and Them. These images provide the generic basis for the characters in the presidential war narrative. In this way, the enemies from different American wars appear nearly identical in generic terms. Any differences between America’s various past enemies are viewed as superficial variations on an underlying structural theme. This allows, for example, George W. Bush to convey in his “war on terror” narrative the idea that fascists, Nazis, and Communists are interchangeable with one another and spawn today’s terrorists as their “heirs” and “successors” (Hodges 2011).

Semioticians like Jakobson (1990: 165) warn that “we should be aware of allowing separate dichotomies to slip into unquestioned alignments” (Chandler 2007: 103). Although possessing legal authority is the antithesis of lacking legal authority, it does not necessarily follow that the former invariably aligns

with Us while the latter always aligns with Them—and so on and so forth for the other homologous oppositions that result from the alignments in the binary. Yet within the presidential war narrative, such clusters of attributes invariably align and result in stock images of Us and Them. These taken-for-granted identities become part of the generic expectations of the narrative, and renditions of the narrative that adhere to these expectations instill the case for war with generic realism that adds to its persuasive power. Put another way, the discursive positioning of such attributes as “natural” and necessarily aligned rather than constructed and contingently linked makes them difficult to deconstruct at the very moment when inchoate war demands critical dissection of the issues presented to the nation in presidential war rhetoric. In sum, the process of creating the Us versus Them binary is one of the most potent means by which the presidential war narrative lays the groundwork for justifying war because it draws from deep-seated images ingrained in the national mythology.

### The Narrative's Coda

Finally, war rhetoric characteristically exhorts the audience “to unanimity of purpose and total commitment” (Campbell and Jamieson 2008: 221). Such exhortations are particularly salient in the coda of the presidential war narrative. Here, the president underscores the challenges faced in the war and emphasizes America’s resolve to persevere amid those challenges, as demonstrated in (69) and (70).

69. The hard facts of the present situation require relentless determination and firm action. (Truman 1950b)
70. We will not waver; we will not tire; we will not falter; and we will not fail. Peace and freedom will prevail. Thank you. May God continue to bless America. (Bush 2001)

A large component of this resolve stems from the discursive projection of unity among an otherwise diverse polity. In times of war, differences within the nation—whether racial, ethnic, religious, economic, or political (including dissenting voices opposed to war)—are backgrounded while the common element of shared citizenship is foregrounded. In other words, an *adequation* is achieved whereby “potentially salient differences are set aside in favor of perceived or asserted similarities that are taken to be more situationally relevant” (Bucholtz and Hall 2004: 383). The “united we stand” slogan in the aftermath of 9/11 is one example of the way semiotic resources are employed to achieve adequation and unity. Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan exemplify this type of discursive work done in the presidential war narrative as seen in (71) and (72).

71. There are no parties and there is no partisanship when our peace or the peace of the world is imperiled by aggressors in any part of the world. We are one nation united and indivisible. (Johnson 1964b)
72. In this city, where political strife is so much a part of our lives, I've seen Democratic leaders in the Congress join their Republican colleagues, send a message to the world that we're all Americans before we're anything else, and when our country is threatened, we stand shoulder to shoulder in support of our men and women in the Armed Forces. (Reagan 1983)

In short, the coda ends the narrative by looking ahead to the future—namely, a future where America's resolve, unity, and commitment allow it to persevere amid the challenges it faces. The success that is projected works to fulfill the requirement of *jus ad bellum* that war should be waged only when there is a reasonable probability of success. It also works to mobilize the polity in an effort to ensure success. The coda thereby places a final exclamation point on the president's call to arms and bridges “the gap between the moment of time at the end of the narrative proper and the present” context in which the narrative is told (Labov 1972: 365).

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have illustrated the generic elements that comprise the common narrative told by American presidents at the onset of military ventures to win public consent for war. By drawing examples from presidential speeches spanning from Woodrow Wilson's call for entry into World War I through George W. Bush's marketing of the war in Iraq, we can see how the generic schema of the presidential war narrative frames entry into any conflict in a remarkably similar manner. Notably, the use of this generic schema not only works to justify war in line with *jus ad bellum*, but the cumulative rehearsals of the narrative across presidencies and conflicts also works to continually reconstruct America's national identity as an enduring image from one generation to the next. The formation of the “imagined community” of the nation-state—itself a cultural artifact, in Anderson's (1983: 4) terms—results from such ongoing cultural projects.

In justifying war to the American public, presidents effectively imagine the national community and lay out a set of understandings that Americans have about themselves and their nation's place in the world. Although such national imaginings are not unique to presidential rhetoric during wartime, war rhetoric does provide particularly penetrating insight into the identity of Us when it is viewed in sharp contrast to the foil of Them. In the narrative, We are presented as a benevolent, peace-loving nation ready to defend the interests of humanity as a whole. In contrast, They represent autocratic regimes that engage in acts of

aggression for self-serving interests that threaten universal values of peace, freedom, and democracy.

Certainly, the idealization of Us invoked by such imaginings presents a positive image of right action and civic duty. Yet within the bounds of the presidential war narrative, these idealizations work to position American actions as beyond questioning, and obscure the various motives and complex array of issues in international affairs that lead nations to take up arms against one another. The American use of military force is invariably positioned as “self-defense” regardless of the nature of such actions in actual fact. Moreover, the wartime distinction between Us and Them exaggerates difference to the point that the resulting schismogenesis (Bateson 1972) necessitates conflict and thereby precludes any further attempt to productively communicate—whether within the group as part of the democratic process of deliberation or without in terms of diplomatic action. The presidential war narrative paves the way for war, not diplomacy, and it lends itself to rote patriotic fervor rather than nuanced consideration of the issues and consequences of war.

As it draws from powerful images in the national mythology, any implementation of the presidential war narrative erases doubt about the justness of the situation under consideration. As a result, citizens—the citizens that Kant describes as the stopgap to illicit or overreaching uses of the nation’s military—face a difficult task if they rely on presidential pronouncements (and uncritical amplification of those pronouncements in the media) to accurately judge the need for war. The recent implementation of the generic presidential war schema by George W. Bush to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq underscores the crucial role rhetoric plays in manufacturing consent for war where uncritical acceptance overcomes warranted hesitation. Although Kant didn’t account for the power of discourse to impact this process, discourse scholars are well positioned to contribute to its examination. In my mind, a primary task for scholars and citizens alike is to develop the critical tools and ethos needed “to question over and over again what is postulated as self-evident” and “to dissipate what is familiar and accepted” (Foucault and Kritzman 1988: 265) so that discourses of peace can better compete with discourses of war in democratic practice.

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