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CONSTRUCTION OF THE WAR ON TERROR:
AN ANALYSIS OF COUNTERTERRORISM POLICIES UNDER
CLINTON, BUSH, AND OBAMA**

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AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE WAR ON TERROR: AN ANALYSIS OF COUNTERTERRORISM POLICIES UNDER CLINTON, BUSH, AND OBAMA¹

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1 This report is based on a Master thesis, entitled “An Exceptional Narrative: A Constructivist Analysis of US Counterterrorism Policies.”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, galvanized the articulation of a comprehensive counterterrorism policy framework in the Middle East; however, this articulation reflected underlying trends developing throughout the William J. Clinton Administration in the 1990s. In this respect, the 9/11 terror attacks represent a critical juncture, enabling the construction of the “War on Terror.” The George W. Bush Administration’s narrative of the attacks and the subsequent policy choices resonated profoundly with the American people due to the Cold War rhetorical template that itself was deeply in notions of American Exceptionalism.

The belief in the exceptional nature of the American experiment is deeply rooted in American culture, myths, and norms. American exceptionalism represents three unique but complimentary ideas that America is God’s “chosen nation,” has a unique mission to spread its values, and is a force for good against evil. This political myth greatly influences the creation and construction of foreign policy, leading to a missionary zeal in which America patrols the worlds desserts and jungles.



(L to R) Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and William J. Clinton meeting to discuss the Haiti earthquake of 2010.

The bipolar hegemonic order constrained this missionary zeal after World War II, but after the collapse of the USSR, America grew into a new role. Under the Clinton Administration counterterrorism shifted away from a law enforcement approach, landing squarely into a national security mindset. As the terrorism threat continued to come into focus, Clinton and his administrators pursued sanctions, multilateral efforts, and increasingly militarized operations as retaliatory to terror attacks. As the decade continued, the Clinton Administration adopted and translated the language of the Cold War to terrorism.

The Bush Administration drew from and expanded the Clinton Administration’s rhetoric in order to define 9/11 to a nation reeling from shock. With its definition unchallenged, the “War on Terror” became the policy response. Not only did US forces invade both Afghanistan and Iraq less than two years after 9/11, but the US military presence worldwide greatly increased under the umbrella of the “War on Terror.” By the end of the Bush Administration in 2008, US troops were in more than 60 countries.

The defining narrative of 9/11 deeply affected President Barack Obama. Even though Obama opposed the Iraq War, he was a true believer in the “War on Terror,” supporting and expanding the military operations in Afghanistan as well as US troop presence to 75 countries, 15 more than under the Bush Administration. Obama recycled the “War on Terror” phrase, but this change was mainly cosmetic as other rhetorical flourishes and policy remained untouched.

All three administrations based their rhetoric on the American Exceptionalism myth, conveying notions of America’s chosen mission to destroy evil. The rhetoric grounded in the Exceptionalism myth led to the adoption of very specific counterterrorism policies that focused on military operations and painted

terrorism broadly. The combination of American Exceptionalism and the “War on Terror” led to a de-politicization of terrorism and made a counter-narrative almost impossible to take hold. The sustainability of the rhetoric and policies that drive the “War on Terror” seems unshakeable.

As the Donald J. Trump Administration prepares to take office in January, many in the US believe that President-elect Trump represents change across the board on a variety of issues. In regards to counterterrorism, this remains less clear. ISIS has dominated Trump’s attention on counterterrorism policies, but with US forces in 75 countries, counterterrorism policies do not stop with ISIS. Trump and his team resemble the previous three administrations with a tendency towards conflation, viewing all insurgency and terrorist acts as part of the good versus evil fight of the “War on Terror,” de-politicizing the very different reasons and histories that have led to terrorism in Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Nigeria, and more. Learning from the past administration’s policies, this paper suggests that the next administration resists the urge to view terrorism as an existential threat to the US, refusing to elevate the “War on Terror” to the status of the Cold War and World War II. Furthermore, the Trump Administration should understand the grievances, context, and goals of the individual terrorist and insurgent movements plaguing the globe. As the “War on Terror” has shown, terrorism cannot be fought purely by military means, but rather needs a comprehensive approach, including negotiation, that solves the underlying issues fueling violence. The future Trump Administration must follow in the footsteps of Clinton, Bush, and Obama, and refrain from explaining terrorism as an “Islam” or “Muslim” problem. Most importantly, the Trump Administration should avoid thinking about counterterrorism through the Exceptionalism lens that perpetuates military action above other policies. Early signs from the future administration do not bode well for the above recommendations, and the next four years seem poised for more of the same in regards to US counterterrorism policies.

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explain both the origins and the continuity of dominant counterterrorism (CT) policies that emerged under the George W. Bush Administration in response to the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks (9/11). The paper, firstly, examines the notion of American Exceptionalism as a defining political myth that affects foreign policy. Next, the post-Cold War security environment under President William J. Clinton is examined as a foundation and precursor to the Bush Administration policies. The paper then details the Bush Administration's response both in policy and rhetoric to 9/11, a moment in which actors were less constrained due to the rising crisis. After looking at the Bush Administration, the paper analyzes the endurance of certain CT policies under President Barack Obama and his administration. Next, the paper turns to the notion of American Exceptionalism to explain both the emergence and the endurance of the CT policies. The paper then turns to the next administration—that of Donald J. Trump—assessing the security environment and offering several recommendations. Finally, a brief conclusion is offered.

Keywords: counterterrorism, foreign policy, Middle East, President Barack Obama, President George W. Bush, President William J. Clinton

INTRODUCTION

Almost 15 years after the devastating terrorist attack on Sept. 11, 2001, its legacy endures and shapes foreign policy in a definitive way. The “War on Terror” emerged as the dominant narrative following 9/11, delineating a specific set of policy responses following the crisis. The “crisis of terrorism” presented by the 9/11 attacks represented a point of departure from the past, even though President George W. Bush turned to past rhetoric in order to define and frame the changing realities. This past rhetoric had its origins in the Manichean², bipolar frame constructed and utilized throughout the Cold War.

The post-Cold War environment of the William J. Clinton presidency led to the disappearance of the dominant frame of American foreign policy for the past 45 years, and left Clinton and his principals scrambling to construct a new narrative to interpret and reinterpret America’s place in the world. Clinton’s initial efforts of constructing a new narrative floundered, but as terrorism evolved, the threat caught the attention of the administration. Even before 9/11, military options against, in response, and to prevent terrorism showed favor in Washington policy circles, as exemplified by the Clinton Administration’s “Operation Infinite Reach.”³ As this “war” narrative began to take hold, the discourse limited the policy response to the military realm. Under the Clinton Administration, these responses remained limited in scale to mainly a tactical level, while this developing policy and rhetoric set a precedent for the Bush II and Barack Obama administrations to follow after the 9/11 attacks.

Bush’s “War on Terror” narrative greatly expanded both the rhetoric and the subsequent scope of US military actions against terrorists, invading both Afghanistan in retaliation and Iraq preemptively. Furthermore, Bush conducted preemptive operations outside the official sphere of armed conflict, especially in Pakistan, Africa, and the Philippines. Building upon Bush’s response after the 9/11, Obama expanded the use of drones and special forces in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia, even while combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq were drawing to a “close.” This represented the continued favor of the “Global War on Terror,” characterized by military and intelligence operations, as the preeminent policy response against terrorists. Despite robust US counterterrorism (CT) policies in the decade following 9/11, terrorist groups



The North Tower of the World Trade Center collapses after being struck by an airliner hijacked by Al Qaeda terrorists, Sept. 11, 2001 (Wikimedia Commons).

2 Dualistic philosophy which pits good against evil, making the moral choice of action obvious.

3 This operation deployed cruise missiles to destroy alleged terrorist targets in Sudan and Afghanistan in 1998, after the 1998 Nairobi and Dar Es Salaam embassy attacks.

proliferated, particularly in the Middle East and Africa. However, the defining narrative in Washington continued and remains that America finds itself locked in a real “war” against terrorism and that this war can be won.

Against this backdrop arises a research question: How and why did dominant, contemporary CT policies emerge and endure following the 9/11 attacks during the Bush presidency and beyond? The hypothesis is that the specific Cold War rhetoric adopted by the Bush Administration after 9/11 limited the response to purely military means, and this discourse is grounded in untouchable American values, especially the notion of American Exceptionalism. As a result, the Obama Administration could not or would not change the narrative frame and therefore military responses to terrorism continue to be the primary policy response by Washington.

In this paper, I explore how the dominant narrative to US CT policies emerged by examining the role of ideas, norms, narratives, myths, and culture. Particularly, the idea of American Exceptionalism will be crucial in order to answer the research question. Exceptionalism leads to the construction of a specific template, or mindset, such as that adopted during the Cold War and then modified for the War on Terror. I will structure the paper by firstly exploring and defining the concept of American Exceptionalism and its origins. Next, I will look at the Clinton Administration as a prologue to 9/11, translating specific Cold War narratives to counterterrorism. Following the Clinton Administration, an analysis of the Bush Administration’s policy and rhetorical response to 9/11 will be analyzed. I then look at the Obama Administration’s continuation of the “War on Terror” framework established by his predecessor. The paper then turns to an exposition of the main argument that American Exceptionalism intimately informed the construction of the “War on Terror.” In the second to last section, the paper assesses the CT environment for the Trump Administration and advances several succinct recommendations for the incoming team. Finally, a brief conclusion is offered.

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM: DEFINED

American Exceptionalism represents a fundamental origin myth for the United States that acts as a schema in which events and actions come to be interpreted. Invisibility, ubiquity, and a powerful sense of resonance comprise the key components of a political myth, such as this one, by which a group constructs significance vis-à-vis the myth. Over time, certain words act as “lexical triggers” that act to “encode” the myth to the uninitiated to ensure the myth remains invisible but omnipresent in the public.⁴ Political myths, therefore, act “to interpret” and define a problem as well as to legitimate solutions. The primacy and uniqueness of America has long been an assumption, even before the founding of the nation, and this myth

4 Esch, Joanne. “Legitimizing the ‘War on Terror’: Political Myth in Official-Level Rhetoric.” *Political Psychology* 31, no. 3 (2010): 357-91.

has been transformed and articulated over time.⁵ Moreover, the American Exceptionalism myth has infused US foreign policy and the frameworks it has constructed around both threat and response.⁶

The origin of the term “American Exceptionalism” can be traced to the French writer Alexis de Tocqueville (*Democracy in America*, 1835), originally used to describe America’s lack of nobility.⁷ However, Tocqueville did touch upon the uniquely religious nature of “Anglo-American civilization.”⁸ Puritan John Winthrop’s famous sermon “City upon a Hill” (also known as “A Model of Christian Charity,” 1630) offered contemporary content that the myth has drawn upon.¹⁰ The Puritan origins of the country constructed a pervasive moral component for the exceptionalism myth, in which explicit religious connotations combine with “enlightenment ideals of reason, individualism, and liberty.”¹¹ Ultimately, the American Exceptionalism myth has come to encompass three main, intertwined ideas in respect to the US and the American people. The first part of the myth reflects America as a nation chosen by God¹², a “new Jerusalem” on Earth. Secondly, as God’s chosen nation, America has a calling or mission in which to expand its ideals and values of democracy and freedom. Finally, America acts as a unique force of good in the world against evil.¹³ This political myth has affected foreign policy in two different ways since the founding of the nation. As a young nation, America favored isolationist foreign policy, reflecting “exemplary exceptionalism.” However, as the nation grew stronger, American foreign policy experienced a substantive shift towards a “missionary exceptionalism,” reflected in more interventionist policies.¹⁴ In this respect, a religious responsibility drives America’s understanding of foreign policy, its armed forces



French diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville helped to define the myth of American Exceptionalism in *Democracy in America* (1835) (Wikimedia Commons).

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- 5 Tyrrell, Ian. “American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History.” *The American Historical Review* 96, no. 4 (1991): 1031-1055.
 - 6 Jackson, Richard. “Culture, Identity, and Hegemony: Continuity and Change in US Counterterrorism Policy from Bush to Obama.” *International Politics* 48 (2011): 390-411
 - 7 Esch, Joanne. “Legitimizing the ‘War on Terror’: Political Myth in Official-Level Rhetoric.” *Political Psychology* 31, no. 3 (2010): 357-91.
 - 8 Tiryakian, Edward A. “American Religious Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 527. (1993): 40-54
 - 10 Winthrop, John. “City Upon a Hill.” Mt. Holyoke, 1630.
 - 11 Rojecki, Andrew. “Rhetorical Alchemy: American Exceptionalism and the War on Terror.” *Political Communication* 25 (2008): 67-88.
 - 12 Another, less popular, version of the myth shows the US chosen by Nature, not God.
 - 13 Esch, Joanne. “Legitimizing the ‘War on Terror’: Political Myth in Official-Level Rhetoric.” *Political Psychology* 31, no. 3 (2010): 357-91.
 - 14 Restad, Hide Eliassen. “Old Paradigms in History Die Hard in Political Science: US Foreign Policy and American Exceptionalism.” *American Political Thought* 1, no. 1 (2012): 53-76.

patrolling remote areas around the world against evil and barbarism.¹⁵ The exceptionalism myth, today, constructs a situation in which American values are synonymous with “universal values,” and the US acts as an innocent and heroic defender of these values selflessly for the world.¹⁶

CLINTON, THE COLD WAR, AND THE ORIGINS OF COUNTERTERRORISM

As World War II reached its dramatic conclusion, the US and the USSR faced off on the geopolitical chessboard as the world’s only two superpowers, while a devastated Europe dug out. President Harry Truman inherited this tense, dangerous, and uncertain geopolitical situation, and he needed both a comprehensive frame and policy to rally support for this new political reality. Truman sought a frame that would simultaneously maximize public support and permeate partisan politics in Washington, DC, and throughout the nation.¹⁷ In order to effectively accomplish these two goals, Truman needed to “scare the hell” out of the American people by portraying the nation under threat. In the portrayal of the USSR threat to the nation, the rhetoric invoked the narrative of the USSR as an existential threat that did not just threaten American lives but also the American way of life. The Manichean frame that was chosen further revealed a world in which democracy faced off against a communist menace, a “pervasive ideological threat” which formed an ideological cleavage so vast that every nation must choose a side.¹⁸

As Truman and subsequent Cold War presidents framed and continued to frame the Cold War as an existential threat, national security naturally rose in importance as a “unifying concept” and a commanding idea that ubiquitously drives everything.¹⁹ Policymakers, in turn, obsessed and fixated over war analogies, relying on a “mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms that after long usage seem solid canonical and binding to a nation.”²⁰

The end product of the Cold War was a comprehensive frame in which the US and the American people stood in stark contrast with the USSR and the Soviet people. A vast and dangerous ideological battle between freedom and democracy on the one hand and communism and totalitarianism on the other hand informed both domestic and foreign politics for more than half a century. Cold War presidents invoked this discursive frame whenever necessary to justify a policy.²¹ Ultimately, this led the construction of the American identity vis-à-vis the USSR in practically every sphere of life.²² The Cold War narrative

15 Holmes, Stephen. *The Matador’s Cape: America’s Reckless Response to 9/11*. 1st ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

16 Jackson, Richard. “Culture, Identity, and Hegemony: Continuity and Change in US Counterterrorism Policy from Bush to Obama.” *International Politics* 48 (2011): 390–411.

17 Widmaier, Wesley W. “Constructing Foreign Policy Crises: Interpretive Leadership in the Cold War and War on Terrorism.” *International Studies Quarterly* 51 (2007): 779–94.

18 Ibid.

19 Olson, Kathryn M. “Democratic Enlargement’s Value Hierarchy and Rhetorical Forms: An Analysis of Clinton’s Use of a Post-Cold War Symbolic Frame to Justify Military Interventions.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (2004).

20 Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. Pg. 250

21 Rojecki, Andrew. “Rhetorical Alchemy: American Exceptionalism and the War on Terror.” *Political Communication* 25 (2008): 67–88.

22 Olson, Kathryn M. “Democratic Enlargement’s Value Hierarchy and Rhetorical Forms: An Analysis of Clinton’s Use of a Post-Cold War Symbolic Frame to Justify Military Interventions.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (2004).

profoundly influenced the American sense of self and gave all Americans a sense of purpose.²³ The Cold War narrative provided a powerful moral compass, and at its climatic end, the US lost a powerful defining force for itself, an enemy.

Clinton came into a completely revolutionized White House as the first president elected after the Cold War. The dramatic dissolution of a rival—the USSR—left the US as the world’s sole superpower, poised for hegemony. Clinton had no precedent or guiding foreign policy framework in the first post-Cold War presidency.²⁴ Without the specter of the USSR looming, controlling allies with very different needs in a distinctly new era proved challenging. Unsurprisingly, dealing with enemies and rivals proved to be even more difficult as the interpretive lens utilized for the past 50 years crumbled. Previous guiding policies for allies during the Cold War, such as the “realist bargain” or the “liberal bargain” lacked meaning in the new environment.²⁵ The US not only had difficulty defining relationships with allies and foes but also had difficulty in defining a profound sense of self without the USSR.²⁶ As this dominant frame disappeared rapidly, unanticipated by Washington experts, policymakers scrambled for a frame to define the new decade and the new century.²⁷ As the decade wore on, terrorism grew in prominence, scale, and regularity, offering Clinton a new chance at defining the main villain to global peace.²⁸

When Clinton assumed the presidency, he did not find a blank slate in regards to CT policies, but rather encountered a history of policies from different eras with varied effectiveness. In the international sphere, a comprehensive definition of terrorism remained, and remains, elusive, preventing cooperation among nations toward a more unified policy. Instead, various conventions dealing with specific aspects of terrorism have been drafted, signed, and ratified by most countries under the auspices of the UN.²⁹ Other international CT efforts included intelligence sharing among countries, the development of sanction regimes, and CT training sessions for certain allied countries.³⁰ The US developed a variety of “coercive measures” including designating state sponsors of terrorism and terrorist organization, directing military strikes, and the development of a sanction regime.³¹ The Export Administration Act of 1979 authorized sanctions against state sponsors of terrorism, which at various times included Cuba, Libya, Sudan, Syria, Iran, Iraq, and North Korea.³² The 1989 Anti-Terrorism and Arms Export amendment augmented the

23 Holmes, Stephen. *The Matador’s Cape: America’s Reckless Response to 9/11*. 1st ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

24 Brinkley, Douglas. “Democratic Enlargement: The Clinton Doctrine.” *Foreign Policy*, no. 106 (1997): 110–27.

25 Ikenberry, John G. “American Grand Strategy in the Age of Terror.” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 43, no. 4 (2001): 19–34.

26 Lazar, Annita, and Michelle Lazar. “The Discourse of the New World Order: ‘Out-Casting’ the Double Face of Threat.” *Discourse and Society* 15 (2004): 223–42.

27 Olson, Kathryn M. “Democratic Enlargement’s Value Hierarchy and Rhetorical Forms: An Analysis of Clinton’s Use of a Post-Cold War Symbolic Frame to Justify Military Interventions.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (2004).

28 Ibid.

29 Donohue, L. “In the Name of National Security: US Counterterrorist Measures, 1960–2000.” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 13, no. 3 (2001): 15–60.

30 Badey, Thomas J. “US Counterterrorism: Change in Approach, Continuity in Policy.” *Contemporary Security Policy* 27, no. 2 (2006): 308–24.

31 Donohue, L. “In the Name of National Security: US Counterterrorist Measures, 1960–2000.” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 13, no. 3 (2001): 15–60.

32 Badey, Thomas J. “US Counterterrorism: Change in Approach, Continuity in Policy.” *Contemporary Security Policy* 27, no. 2 (2006): 308–24.

1979 Act to further prevent terrorists from seeking state sponsorship and punish states that sponsor terrorism.³³ The 1986 Libya attack during the President Ronald Reagan presidency represents the most coercive action taken against terrorism before the Clinton Administration.³⁴

Despite coercive measures, especially the 1986 retaliatory attack on Libya, law enforcement remained the most utilized tool to fight terrorism. The Reagan National Security Directive 207 delegated responsibility to an interagency working group under the National Security Council (NSC) umbrella. Reflecting the prominence of law enforcement, the FBI was the lead agency domestically,³⁵ whereas the US Department of State was the lead agency abroad.³⁶ However, during the 1990s as the terrorist threat further materialized, principals increasingly defined terrorism as a threat to the homeland. The changing definition of the threat led to an expanding role for the US Department of Defense and the military, especially abroad, undermining State's lead.³⁷

The Clinton Administration faced a variety of terrorist attacks, both domestic and abroad, leading to new developments in CT policies and the bolstering of existing policies. In response to the 1993 World Trade Center (WTC) Bombing, the 1995 Murrah Federal Building bombing in Oklahoma City, and attacks on embassies and government property abroad,³⁸ the Clinton Administration continued to develop a CT strategy. Drawing from past policies, Clinton developed a four-point strategy after the 1993 WTC attack, focusing on economic isolation, multilateral cooperation, increased resource allocation, and retaliation.³⁹ Clinton utilized the Export Administration Act of 1979 to punish state sponsors of terrorism. In regards to multilateral cooperation, Clinton turned to the G8 and the UN as major instruments to push greater international cooperation against terrorism. Throughout his presidency, Clinton gradually increased the CT budget for a variety of different agencies, including the FBI, CIA, defense department, and the Federal Aviation Administration.⁴⁰



The US Embassy in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, after the Aug. 7, 1998, Al Qaeda suicide bomb attack (Wikimedia Commons).

33 Donohue, L. "In the Name of National Security: US Counterterrorist Measures, 1960-2000." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 13, no. 3 (2001): 15-60.

34 Kosnik, Mark E. "The Military Response to Terrorism." *Naval War College Review* 53, no. 2 (2000).

35 The FAA was the lead agency except for hijackings and air-related threats.

36 Waugh Jr., William L., and Richard T. Sylvester. "Organizing the War on Terrorism." *Public Administration Review* 62 (2002): 145-53.

37 Crenshaw, Martha. "Counterterrorism Policy and the Political Process." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 24, no. 5 (2001): 329-37.

38 Terrorists attacked two buildings linked to the US military in Riyadh and Dhahran in 1995 and 1996, in 1998 Al Qaeda bombed American embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam, and the 2000 USS Cole attack off the Yemeni coast.

39 Badey, Thomas J. "US Counterterrorism: Change in Approach, Continuity in Policy." *Contemporary Security Policy* 27, no. 2 (2006): 308-24.

40 Ibid.

As the decade wore on, these basic tenets were supplemented by laws, policies, and Presidential Decision Directives (PDDs). In 1995 the administration's focus on terrorism continued to pick up steam, and Clinton issued his first PDD with a focus on CT, PDD 39, which stated the US should "deter, defeat, and respond vigorously to all terrorist attacks on our territory and against our citizens."⁴¹ The 1996 Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act passed in the wake of the Murrah Federal Building bombing, allocated a billion additional dollars in funds to "deter terrorism, provide justice for victims, (and) provide for an effective death penalty."⁴² In 1998, Clinton issued two more PDD on CT, PDD 62 and 63. These two directives outlined areas of critical infrastructure to protect and created the position of National Coordinator for Security, Infrastructure Protection, and Counterterrorism, elevating Richard Clarke from head of the Counterterrorism Security Group (CSG) to National Coordinator. Furthermore, PDD 62 and 63 squarely framed CT in the realm of national security.⁴³ In light of this changing context, Clinton responded to the 1998 embassy bombings by orchestrating an aggressive operation aimed at crippling the Osama Bin Laden/Al Qaeda network called "Operation Infinite Reach." On Aug. 20, 1998 US ships stationed off the shores of Sudan and Afghanistan launched 70 Tomahawk cruise missiles at Al Qaeda training camps in Khost, Afghanistan, and a pharmaceutical factory suspected to be manufacturing chemical weapons in Khartoum, Sudan.⁴⁴

Changing policies reflected changing rhetoric by the Clinton Administration, as terrorism increasingly began to be viewed as an existential threat against the American way of life.⁴⁵ Particularly in 1998, the Clinton Administration constructed a new discourse in order to frame the terrorist threat to the American people, beginning to translate Cold War rhetoric to the new threat in order to unite the nation. Clinton and his principals dusted off two Cold War tropes, framing terrorists as the antithesis to both freedom and democracy. Clinton claimed that "groups associated with him [Bin Laden] ... share a hatred for democracy," and that "this will be a long, ongoing struggle between freedom and fanaticism."⁴⁶ He further characterized terrorists as "fanatics and killers who wrap murder in the cloak of righteousness."⁴⁷ The discourse constructed a dichotomy in which the US and its values were starkly juxtaposed with terrorism. This dichotomy worked in two complementary ways, by which the enemy is constructed and then vilified. Furthermore, defining an enemy helps to define one's own moral codes and values as the antithesis to the enemy. America in this discourse aligns with freedom and democracy, while the terrorists, in contrast, align with "hate" and "fanaticism." Vilification supplements enemy construction by painting the enemy as cruel and degenerate barbarians who embody evil. This rhetoric further adds to the developing discourse of good and evil in regards to terrorism in which CT takes on a spiritual or religious context.⁴⁸

41 Clinton, Bill. "Presidential Decision Directive 39." Washington, DC: Federation of American Scientists, 1995.

42 Dole, Robert. Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996, 1996.

43 National Commission on Terrorist Attacks. *9/11 Commission Report*. 1st ed. Washington, DC: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004.

44 Kosnik, Mark E. "The Military Response to Terrorism." *Naval War College Review* 53, no. 2 (2000).

45 Crenshaw, Martha. "Counterterrorism Policy and the Political Process." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 24, no. 5 (2001): 329-37.

46 Clinton, Bill. "Clinton Statement in Full on US Military Strikes on Afghanistan and Sudan." *BBC News*, August 26, 1998.

47 Ibid.

48 Lazar, Annita, and Michelle Lazar. "The Discourse of the New World Order: 'Out-Casting' the Double Face of Threat." *Discourse and Society* 15 (2004): 223-42.

BUSH AND 9/11

The terrorist attack that “shook the world” began on a sleepy September morning. Almost simultaneously four commercial airliners departing from three airports in Boston, Newark, and Washington, DC, were hijacked by a total of 19 attackers. Team leader Mohamed Atta crashed the first plane, American Airlines flight 11, into the north tower of the WTC complex at 8:47 a.m. Less than twenty minutes later, Al Qaeda hijackers flew United Airlines flight 175 into the south tower of the WTC complex. Soon after impact, the twin towers collapsed. Then, at 9:39 a.m., American Airlines flight 77 crashed into the Pentagon, outside of Washington, DC. Finally, at 10:03 a.m., the fourth hijacked airplane crashed into a field in Pennsylvania after passengers appeared to resist the hijacking attempt. The deadliest terrorist attack in history left approximately 3,000 dead across three states, attacking sites of American economic and military power.⁴⁹

The magnitude and scale of the coordinated mass casualty attack redefined the terrorist threat in its entirety. Prior to 9/11, acts of terrorism killed 1,000 Americans total; however, in one day the number of Americans killed by terrorists more than tripled.⁵⁰ The attacks constituted a planned “decapitation” strike against the government, as most CT scholars firmly believe that the fourth plane was targeting either the Capitol or the White House. The nature of the threat had magnified in dramatic fashion, leading the Bush Administration to adopt drastically altered beliefs about terrorism after 9/11. Despite substantial warnings from the Clinton Administration, the Bush Administration in its first few months paid less attention to the terrorist threat and the Bin Laden network, downgrading the status of Richard Clarke, the National Coordinator for CT, before he asked to be moved by National Security Advisor (NSA) Condoleezza Rice.⁵¹ After 9/11, the terrorism crisis came into focus for the Bush Administration, as key policymakers and principals in the administration recognized the unique, unprecedented challenge of terrorism.⁵² Bush and his principals faced the crisis with greater decision-making capacity, and the unrivaled ability to make wide-ranging, long term policies not only in regards to CT policies but also foreign policy in general.⁵³

49 Holmes, Stephen. “Al Qaeda, September 11, 2001.” In *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pgs. 131-133.

50 Hoffman, Bruce. “Rethinking Terrorism and Counterterrorism Since 9/11.” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 25 (2002): 303-16.

51 National Commission on Terrorist Attacks. *9/11 Commission Report*. 1st ed. Washington, DC: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004.

52 Collier, Ruth Berins, and David Collier. “Framework: Critical Junctures and Historical Legacies.” In *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, The Labor Movement, and Regime Dynamics in Latin America*, 28-39. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991.

53 Capoccia, Giovanni, and R. Daniel Kelemen. “The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism.” *World Politics* 59, no. 3 (2007): 341-69.

After the shock and horror of the 9/11 attacks, Bush turned toward past rhetoric as inspiration to create the comprehensive discourse that would help to construct the CT policy response to the attacks. On the day of the attacks, Bush began constructing a frame in order, firstly, to define the event and, secondly, to allow the public to understand the administration's definition of the attack. As the events continued to unfold in the hours and days after the attack, it became clear that the administration defined the event as an existential attack on the country and as an act of war.⁵⁴ In the wake of the attack at a memorial service on 9/11, Bush reflected on the morning events, stating "our way of life, our very freedom came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist attacks."⁵⁵

By immediately framing the 9/11 attacks as an existential threat against the American way of life, Bush accomplished several things. Firstly, he inflated the terrorist threat to the threat of nuclear annihilation that overshadowed practically the entire Cold War.⁵⁶ Secondly, this type of language elevated the "ideology" of terrorism into the pantheon of prior totalitarian ideologies, such as fascism and communism. By conflating terrorism with fascism and communism, two ideologies defeated in war, the Bush Administration suggested that terrorism also could be defeated by military action, just like fascism in World War II and communism in the Cold War.⁵⁷

This initial message only grew stronger as the administration continued to construct an effective narrative. The concept of "evil," and the effective framing of the attacks as evil, greatly contributed to the effectiveness of not only the discourse but also the subsequent policies suggested by the administration. On the day of the attack, Bush solemnly stated that "thousands of lives were suddenly ended by evil, despicable acts of terror. Today our nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature. The search is underway for those who were behind these evil acts."⁵⁸ At his Sept. 20, 2001, speech, Bush drove home his point claiming, "the enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country."⁵⁹



The US responds to 9/11 within a few weeks—US Marines in Afghanistan, December 2001 (Wikimedia Commons).

54 Murphy, John M. "'Our Mission and Our Moment': George W. Bush and September 11th." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 6, no. 4 (2003): 607–32.

55 Bush, George W. "National Day of Prayer and Remembrance Service." White House, September 14, 2001.

56 The USSR first successfully tested a nuclear weapon on August 29, 1949.

57 Cole, David. "The New McCarthyism: Repeating History in the War on Terrorism." *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* 38 (2003).

58 Bush, George W. "Address to the Nation on the September 11 Attacks." White House, September 11, 2001.

59 Bush, George W. "Address to the Joint Session of the 107th Congress." White House, September 20, 2001.

The Bush Administration's rhetoric was incredibly effective, and no other definition or frame threatened the administration's official narrative. The Manichean language of moral binaries, painting the world as a struggle between good and evil, and the reflection on past American triumphs in the Cold War and World War II quickly and deeply resonated with the population.⁶⁰ As Bush described 9/11 as an act of evil and the terrorists as evil-doers, the listener understood that the US possessed the exact opposite properties and characteristics. The binary language framed the US as morally good compared to the evil of the terrorists. By further framing CT as "civilization's fight,"⁶¹ the listener again understood that in contrast to the humanity and civilization of the US, the terrorists were barbarians and their acts barbaric.⁶²

The Bush Administration defined the 9/11 attacks broadly in order to cast as wide of a net as possible and not limit any potential responses to the attacks.⁶³ As soon as the key principals in the Bush Administration met to discuss the events, several prominent members of the Cabinet, including Bush, pointed toward Iraq and Saddam Hussein. Though in the immediate rhetorical response, Bush avoided mention of Saddam Hussein and Iraq, he stated as early as Sept. 20, 2001⁶⁴ that "our War on Terror begins with Al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not stop until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated."⁶⁵ In the official rhetoric, the administration linked every terrorist group with the culprits of the 9/11 attack, making little to no distinction between "terrorist" struggles in domestic conflicts and the Al Qaeda network. In fact, the term, "War on Terror" makes it impossible to distinguish between various terrorist groups because the umbrella terminology compels action toward all those who commit acts of terror.⁶⁶ The administration purposefully defined the terrorist threat broadly in order to logically conduct not only the Iraq War but also increase troop presence worldwide. The broad definition of the attack made the wide-ranging CT policies of the Bush Administration possible, whereas a narrow definition, limited to Al Qaeda, would have prevented the War on Terror becoming global in scope. As a result of the early framing of the 9/11 attacks, the Bush Administration capitalized on the situation of national panic and threat inflation at a time when alternative narratives could not take hold. If he waited to define the attacks broadly, the ultimate CT policies of the administration, particularly the controversial Iraq War, may not have enjoyed such widespread, bi-partisan support.⁶⁷

60 Murphy, John M. "'Our Mission and Our Moment': George W. Bush and September 11th." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 6, no. 4 (2003): 607-32.

61 Bush, George W. "Address to the Nation on the September 11 Attacks." White House, September 11, 2001.

62 Esch, Joanne. "Legitimizing the 'War on Terror': Political Myth in Official-Level Rhetoric." *Political Psychology* 31, no. 3 (2010): 357-91.

63 Kellner, Douglas. "Bushspeak and the Politics of Lying: Presidential Rhetoric in the 'War on Terror.'" *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2007): 622-45.

64 National Commission on Terrorist Attacks. *9/11 Commission Report*. 1st ed. Washington, DC: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004.

65 Bush, George W. "Address to the Joint Session of the 107th Congress." White House, September 20, 2001.

66 Holmes, Stephen. *The Matador's Cape: America's Reckless Response to 9/11*. 1st ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

67 Ibid.

Furthermore, by framing the attacks as “evil,” the Bush Administration signaled that the terror threat cannot be contained, managed, or deterred⁶⁸—“evil,” after all, cannot be arrested or interdicted.⁶⁹ As Bush stated in 2005, “we’re not facing a set of grievances that can be soothed and addressed. We’re facing a radical ideology with inalterable objectives.”⁷⁰ This type of language, as a result, suggests that the only way to alleviate the threat of terrorism is to eliminate it. Evil cannot be bargained with. The terrorists hate the US because of its intrinsic values, way of life, and freedom, and the US cannot change its values, way of life, or people—therefore, as long as the evil terrorists exist, the citizens are under attack. War appears to be the only action that can logically follow from the discourse of the Bush Administration. Any other CT policies, paired with the above rhetoric, would seem wholly inappropriate.⁷¹

Due to the construction of the comprehensive “Global War on Terror” discourse outlined above by the Bush Administration, policymakers following 9/11 attacks had numerous possibilities to implement not only in regards to Al Qaeda and Afghanistan but also across the entire Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and beyond. Immediately following the attacks, Bush issued an ultimatum to the Taliban in Afghanistan to give Osama Bin Laden to the US government. The Taliban resisted pressure from both the US and Pakistan and rejected the ultimatum, supporting Bin Laden and Al Qaeda in the aftermath of 9/11. The administration and its allies immediately put in motion invasion plans to dislodge the Taliban from government and capture Al Qaeda operatives.⁷² The Taliban government was toppled in early December, less than two months after operations began.⁷³ By spring 2002, the majority of Al Qaeda operatives were believed to have died in combat or fled into the neighboring tribal areas of Pakistan.⁷⁴

Then, during the 2002 State of the Union address, Bush shifted away from Afghanistan and Al Qaeda, re-focusing the nation’s attention on tyrants and rogue states, referring to Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as the “axis of evil.”⁷⁵ Similar rhetorical flourishes were used to describe Saddam Hussein and Iraq as were seen in the wake of the 9/11 attack to describe Bin Laden and Al Qaeda, and they marked the Hussein regime for destruction. The 2002 NSS similarly poised the nation for action against Iraq, priming the public with ideas of the necessity for preventative war due to the Iraq regime’s stockpile of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), unilateralism in the face of uncooperative allies, and US hegemony.⁷⁶ Furthermore, Bush asserted time and again that the administration would “make no distinction between

68 Desch, Michael C. “America’s Liberal Illiberalism.” *International Security* 32, no. 3 (2008): 7–43.

69 Cole, David. “The New McCarthyism: Repeating History in the War on Terrorism.” *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* 38 (2003).

70 Bush, George W. “Remarks on the War on Terror in Norfolk, Virginia.” Norfolk, Virginia: The American Presidency Project, October 28, 2005.

71 Kellner, Douglas. “Bushspeak and the Politics of Lying: Presidential Rhetoric in the ‘War on Terror.’” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2007): 622–45.

72 National Commission on Terrorist Attacks. *9/11 Commission Report*. 1st ed. Washington, DC: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004.

73 Lindsay, James M. “George W. Bush, Barack Obama and the Future of US Global Leadership.” *International Affairs* 37, no. 4 (2011): 765–79.

74 National Commission on Terrorist Attacks. *9/11 Commission Report*. 1st ed. Washington, DC: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004.

75 Bush, George W. “State of the Union Address to the 107th Congress.” Washington, DC: White House, January 29, 2002.

76 Bush, George W. “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America.” Washington, DC: US Government, 2002.

the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them.”⁷⁷ Although this rhetoric resembled Clinton’s (and several principals in the Clinton Administration pined for another Iraq invasion in the 1990s), the unique period following the 9/11 attacks allowed Bush to place Iraq in the crosshairs of the Global War on Terror.⁷⁸ Less than a month after the invasion in March 2003, Baghdad fell to US troops and the “coalition of the willing.”⁷⁹ Yet in the years following the invasion, the Bush Administration’s disdain for nation building and its unpreparedness for the next steps after the fall of Saddam Hussein’s reign led the country and region into chaos and sectarian violence.⁸⁰

Other battlegrounds in the Global War on Terror included Pakistan, Africa, the Caucasus, and the Philippines. In Pakistan, in particular, the Bush Administration began to use drone strikes in order to target terrorists and militants outside of the theater of active combat. These drone strikes increased in prominence as the Global War on Terror wore on, and, as seen in the next section, they became the “centerpiece” of the Obama Administration.⁸¹ Under Bush, Africa also rose to prominence as a strategic area in the Global War on Terror, starting with the opening of the Camp Lemonier base in Djibouti in 2002. The administration subsequently opened 15 other bases throughout Africa to combat jihadism. The administration paid particular attention to radical developments in the Sahel, the Sudan, and the Horn of Africa, and soon after the establishment of Camp Lemonier, Bush officials created the Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) and Operation Enduring Freedom–Trans Sahara as part of the state department’s Trans-Sahel Initiative.⁸² In 2007, Bush established US Africa Command (AFRICOM), “to promote a stable and secure African environment in support of US foreign policy.”⁸³ In the Caucasus, US forces supported governments against local Islamic insurgencies, bringing the region firmly within the Global War on Terror framework. In the Philippines, Special Operation Forces (SOF) deployed to help President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo deal with Islamic insurgent group, Abu Sayyaf, opening a “second front” on the Global War on Terror as early as 2001. By 2008, the US had troops, including special operations forces, in 60 countries, including 20 so-called “high priority” countries.⁸⁴ Furthermore, servicemen and women serving in 67 countries became eligible for the Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary Medal, established by Bush as the Iraq War began in 2003.⁸⁵

77 Bush, George W. “Address to the Nation on the September 11 Attacks.” White House, September 11, 2001.

78 Leffler, Melvyn P. “9/11 in Retrospect: George W. Bush’s Grand Strategy, Reconsidered.” *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 5 (2011): 33–44.

79 Lindsay, James M. “George W. Bush, Barack Obama and the Future of US Global Leadership.” *International Affairs* 37, no. 4 (2011): 765–79.

80 Holmes, Stephen. “Al Qaeda, September 11, 2001.” In *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

81 Ofek, Hillel. “The Tortured Logic of Obama’s Drone War.” *The New Atlantis*, no. 27 (2010): 35–44.

82 Ryan, Maria. “‘War in Countries We Are Not at War With’: The ‘War on Terror’ on the Periphery from Bush to Obama.” *International Politics* 48 (2011): 364–89.

83 “Mission Statement.” *United States Africa Command*, 2007.

84 *International Politics* 48 (2011): 364–89.

85 Zalman, Amy, and Jonathan Clarke. “The Global War on Terror: A Narrative in Need of a Rewrite.” *Ethics and International Affairs* 23, no. 2 (2009): 101–13.

THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION: CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

Barack Obama, even as a presidential candidate, tried to distinguish himself from the Bush Administration by focusing on a desire to change the “War on Terror” narrative.⁸⁶ In 2009, he stated in an interview with Al Arabiya that “the language we use matters,”⁸⁷ and President Obama has eschewed terminology such as the “War on Terror,” “jihadism,” and “radical Islam.”⁸⁸ Obama attacked the former president as failing to understand the true nature of terrorist threat, and his administration trashed the favorite rhetorical flourishes of the Bush Administration. CT policies therefore seemed poised for a changing narrative.⁸⁹ His famous 2009 speech in Cairo, Egypt, called for a “reset” between the US and the Muslim world, reiterating his desire to change the official narrative away from the Bush Administration’s “War on Terror.”⁹⁰

However, despite his moderation of the most inflammatory discourse of Bush, Obama has, to a large extent, adopted similar rhetoric. Though unused in official discourse, the “War on Terror” as a narrative has not disappeared or been replaced; rather, it remains as the key lens through which to view US CT policies.⁹¹ As early as 2009, after the failed Christmas Day plot, Obama bluntly stated that “we are at war.”⁹² In his 2009 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Obama advanced the idea of a “good war”⁹³ and furthered this conception in a speech at West Point of war against the “evil [that] exists in the world.”⁹⁴ The rhetorical shift seemed superficial as Obama continued with the narrative that “our nation is at war against a far-reaching network of violence and hatred.”⁹⁵ While not accepting the exact phrase, Obama essentially accepted the “War on Terror” narrative and its accompanying assumptions.⁹⁶

Obama has always been a “true believer” in regards to the CT response after 9/11. As early as 2002, while still a state senator opposing the Iraq War, he stated in the same speech that he “supported this administration’s pledge to hunt down and root out those who would slaughter innocents in the name of intolerance.”⁹⁷ The Bush Administration’s construction of the comprehensive discourse greatly affected Obama, and Obama continued to view the 9/11 attacks in a similar way to key Bush Administration

86 Lindsay, James M. “George W. Bush, Barack Obama and the Future of US Global Leadership.” *International Affairs* 37, no. 4 (2011): 765-79.

87 “Obama Tells Al Arabiya Peace Talks Should Resume,” *Al Arabiya*. 2009. Dubai.

88 Gottlieb, Stuart. “War on Terror: Obama Softened the Language, but Hardened Muslim Hearts.” *Christian Science Monitor*. October 14, 2010.

89 McKrisken, Trevor. “Ten Years On: Obama’s War on Terrorism.” *International Affairs* 87, no. 4 (2011): 781-801.

90 Mullin, Corinna. “The US Discourse on Political Islam: Is Obama’s a Truly Post ‘War on Terror’ Administration?” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 4, no. 2 (2011): 263-81.

91 Gilmore, Jonathan. “A Kinder, Gentler Counterterrorism: Counterinsurgency, Human Security, and the War on Terror.” *Security Dialogue* 42, no. 1 (2011): 21-37.

92 Obama, Barack. “Remarks by the President on Strengthening Intelligence and Aviation Security.” Washington, DC: White House, January 7, 2010.

93 Mullin, Corinna. “The US Discourse on Political Islam: Is Obama’s a Truly Post ‘War on Terror’ Administration?” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 4, no. 2 (2011): 263-81.

94 Obama, Barack. “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan.” West Point, New York: White House, 2009.

95 Obama, Barack. “President Barack Obama’s Inaugural Address.” Washington, DC: White House, January 21, 2009.

96 McKrisken, Trevor. “Ten Years On: Obama’s War on Terrorism.” *International Affairs* 87, no. 4 (2011): 781-801.

97 Obama, Barack. “Transcript: Obama’s Speech Against The Iraq War.” *NPR*. October 2, 2002.

principals. The core narratives developed under Bush have been institutionalized and internalized by the public, including Obama and his administration.⁹⁸ The fundamental assumption that terrorism constitutes an existential threat to America has become hallowed. Obama described the terrorist threat today in comparison to past threats, stating “today’s dangers are different, though no less grave. The power to destroy life on a catastrophic scale now risks falling into the hands of terrorists.”⁹⁹ Obama bought into the belief that terrorism, like the Cold War, represented an existential threat.¹⁰⁰ Belief in the existential nature of the terrorist threat, coupled with the idea that the US is engaged in a real war, led to the necessary continuation and maintenance of the vast majority of Bush Administration policies in regards to the Global War on Terror.

In 2008, while running for the presidency, Obama criticized the Bush Administration for failing to go after Al Qaeda leadership.¹⁰¹ He pointed to the Iraq War as a distraction within the larger War on Terror and promised to shift attention away from Iraq and toward Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan., expanding these theaters.¹⁰² Despite his disdain for the Iraq effort, and his belief from the beginning of the Iraq War as a misstep in US CT policy, Obama fundamentally bought into the Global War on Terror.¹⁰³ Ultimately, the Iraq War drew to a close under the Obama Administration, and the last troops¹⁰⁴ withdrew in December 2011.¹⁰⁵



A Predator drone launches a Hellfire missile in 2010 (Wikimedia Commons).

Outside of Iraq, the Global War on Terror continued and expanded with John Brennan, Director of the CIA, noting that Obama’s CT policies remarkably resembled “Bush’s third term.” The Obama Administration immediately kept several key Bush principals in place, including Robert Gates as US Secretary of Defense, Gen. David Petraeus as the head on US Central Command (CENTCOM), and Gen. Stanley McChrystal as head combat operation in Afghanistan.¹⁰⁶ With some of the same advisors in place, Obama opted for a surge strategy in order to regain control of the situation in Afghanistan in which the Taliban continued to cause problems for the ineffective and corrupt government in Kabul led by Hamid Karzai. Obama announced the deployment of 30,000 more US troops to the International Security

98 Jackson, Richard, and M. McDonald. “Constructivism, US Foreign Policy, and Counterterrorism.” In *Obama and the World: New Directions in US Foreign Policy*. New York: Routledge, 2014.

99 Obama, Barack. “A New Strategy for a New World.” Washington, DC: White House, July 15, 2008.

100 Lindsay, James M. “George W. Bush, Barack Obama and the Future of US Global Leadership.” *International Affairs* 37, no. 4 (2011): 765-79.

101 Ofek, Hillel. “The Tortured Logic of Obama’s Drone War.” *The New Atlantis*, no. 27 (2010): 35-44.

102 Pious, Richard M. “Prerogative Power in the Obama Administration: Continuity and Change in the War on Terrorism.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (2011).

103 McKrisken, Trevor. “Ten Years On: Obama’s War on Terrorism.” *International Affairs* 87, no. 4 (2011): 781-801.

104 US troops returned to Iraq in 2014 in an advisory role to the Iraqi Army against ISIS.

105 Lindsay, James M. “George W. Bush, Barack Obama and the Future of US Global Leadership.” *International Affairs* 37, no. 4 (2011): 765-79.

106 Pious, Richard M. “Prerogative Power in the Obama Administration: Continuity and Change in the War on Terrorism.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (2011).

Assistance Force (ISAF) coalition in Afghanistan on Dec. 1, 2009,¹⁰⁷ Thus, the Obama Administration made good on its campaign promise to expand the Afghanistan front, and it eventually announced that its proposed drawdown will slow in order to avoid a similar situation experienced in Iraq¹⁰⁸, announcing that 8,400 troops will remain until at least the beginning of 2017.¹⁰⁹

Outside of Iraq and Afghanistan, Obama expanded drone strikes firmly into Yemen and Somalia, while increasing the scope and scale of the strikes in Pakistan. Key Obama principals embraced the expanded drone program, with one official calling it “the only game in town.” Drone strikes drive foreign policy concerns and considerations in Pakistan, and drone strikes are no longer limited to just Waziristan or the Federal Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).¹¹⁰ Similar to the Bush Administration, Obama expanded operations in the Global War on Terror, particularly in regards to Africa as resources continue to flow into AFRICOM.¹¹¹ In this respect, Obama has continued with the policy of incorporating local insurgencies into the larger War on Terror logic.¹¹² By the end of Obama’s first term in office, the number of countries in which the US had a military presence had increased to 75 from 60 at the end of the Bush Administration, creating a so-called new normal.¹¹³

As Obama recognized the power of language and promised a reboot on the War on Terror, many proclaimed a new era and the end of the Global War on Terror. In the aftermath of his election, expectations for a profound change in narrative and policy emerged. As the Obama Administration continued, however, the “profound” change never came, much to the chagrin of supporters and to the delight of critics. Scholars deemed the change that did occur as cosmetic and many, if not most, of the CT policies established under Bush endured.¹¹⁴ Ultimately, outside of Iraq and the “War on Terror” phrase, Obama supported the direction of US CT policies, and worked to further institutionalize and normalize many practices, setting a bi-partisan precedent. As mentioned above, he bought into the fundamental assumptions that terrorism represented an existential threat and that the US was at war.

The internalization of core narratives during the War on Terror greatly affected Obama’s thinking. Even in 2002, while making his famous anti-Iraq War speech, Obama resembled an actor moved by the tragic 9/11 events and the Bush Administration’s framing of those events. As examined above, Bush recycled core beliefs of the War on Terror narrative from previous Cold War narratives, which after 9/11 quickly defined the new mindset. These ideas had lingered, tacitly accepted, in the Clinton Administration, but they lacked a profoundness in the absence of a crisis or a true villain. The powerful narrative which

107 Mullin, Corinna. “The US Discourse on Political Islam: Is Obama’s a Truly Post ‘War on Terror’ Administration?” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 4, no. 2 (2011): 263–81.

108 Iraq, following the withdrawal of US troops has been plagued by violence, led by the Islamic State.

109 Landler, Mark. “Obama Says He Will Keep More Troops in Afghanistan Than Planned.” *The New York Times*. July 6, 2016.

110 Becker, Jo, and Scott Shane. “Secret ‘Kill List’ Proves a Test of Obama’s Principles and Will.” *The New York Times*. May 29, 2012.

111 Ryan, Maria. “‘War in Countries We Are Not at War With’: The ‘War on Terror’ on the Periphery from Bush to Obama.” *International Politics* 48 (2011): 364–89.

112 Zalman, Amy, and Jonathan Clarke. “The Global War on Terror: A Narrative in Need of a Rewrite.” *Ethics and International Affairs* 23, no. 2 (2009): 101–13.

113 Murray, Nancy. “Obama and the Global War on Terror.” *Race and Class* 53, no. 2 (2011): 84–93.

114 Zalman, Amy, and Jonathan Clarke. “The Global War on Terror: A Narrative in Need of a Rewrite.” *Ethics and International Affairs* 23, no. 2 (2009): 101–13.

Bush used to construct a comprehensive discourse to define the 9/11 attacks and the American CT response cross-cut the entire population, and Obama accepted these ideas due to their fundamental appeal to the American psyche. The structure of the narrative and the individual ideas that formed the narrative of the War on Terror “make alternative ... designs substantially less likely to triumph.”¹¹⁵ After the crisis, actors internalized this narrative so much that agents will only change when benefits outweigh not only costs but also “investments in past arrangements.”¹¹⁶ Previous emotional and cognitive investment in the War on Terror discourse constrain policymakers in the present day, including Obama and his administration.¹¹⁷

In this respect, future policymakers and so-called “norm entrepreneurs” wishing to change CT policies must contend with the legacy of 9/11.¹¹⁸ As seen, this narrative, with its origins in the Cold War, is highly resilient and malleable, as resurrected by the Bush Administration after 9/11. The narrative in this respect represents a template which policymakers and administrators apply to adversaries in order to justify military action. The USSR occupied the adversary slot during the Cold War. Today, terrorists, however loosely defined by US politicians, occupy the adversary spot in the narrative. The narrative endures because it is profoundly appealing to the US population and because it is difficult to usurp, particularly without a crisis that might completely shatter this cognitive framework.¹¹⁹ More likely, another group will come to occupy the central adversary position in the rhetorical template when or if the Global War on Terror dissolves. But in light of the current global security environment, it seems unlikely that the War on Terror narrative will dissolve anytime soon, meaning that the next administration, and likely several administrations after that, will abide by the Global War on Terror narrative.¹²⁰

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE WAR ON TERROR

The three administrations examined embedded notions of American Exceptionalism in their rhetoric and each president performed his role by legitimating CT policies through the regular and repeated invocation of the American Exceptionalism myth.¹²¹ Even before the War on Terror discourse developed under the Bush Administration, key principals in the Clinton Administration stated the myth, including US Secretary of State Madeline Albright: “We are the indispensable nation. We stand tall. We see further into the future.”¹²² Clinton also stated that the US bears a “special obligation” to lead against “forces which just as surely as fascism and communism would spread darkness over light, disintegration over integration,

115 Fioretos, Orfeo. “Historical Institutionalism in International Relations.” *International Organization* 65, no. 2 (2011): 367–99.

116 Ibid.

117 Capoccia, Giovanni, and R. Daniel Kelemen. “The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism.” *World Politics* 59, no. 3 (2007): 341–69.

118 Jackson, Richard, and M. McDonald. “Constructivism, US Foreign Policy, and Counterterrorism.” In *Obama and the World: New Directions in US Foreign Policy*. New York: Routledge, 2014.

119 Rojecki, Andrew. “Rhetorical Alchemy: American Exceptionalism and the War on Terror.” *Political Communication* 25 (2008): 67–88.

120 Jackson, Richard. “Culture, Identity, and Hegemony: Continuity and Change in US Counterterrorism Policy from Bush to Obama.” *International Politics* 48 (2011): 390–411.

121 Ibid.

122 Herbert, Bob. “In America; War Games.” *The New York Times*, February 22, 1998.

and chaos over community.¹²³ Bush legitimized his policies through the invocation of exceptionalist rhetoric, calling the US “the beacon for freedom in the world” and saying that the US has “a responsibility to promote freedom.”¹²⁴ Furthermore, in his 2003 State of the Union address, Bush highlighted the American Exceptionalism myth by stating America’s uniqueness is its ability to “exercise power without conquest” and “sacrifice for the liberty of strangers.”¹²⁵ Obama has described the US as the “last, best hope of Earth.”¹²⁶ Furthermore, he analyzed American Exceptionalism as “need(ing) not [to] sacrifice our security for our values ... That’s what makes the United States of America different as a nation.”¹²⁷ On a different occasion, when defining American leadership at the “crossroads of history,” Obama stated that “the eyes of all people in all nations are once again upon us, watching to see what we do with this moment, waiting for us to lead.”¹²⁸ These examples show that the unifying myth among all three administrations is clearly the notion of American Exceptionalism and that all three administrations have been profoundly influenced by their perceptions of the US as a “shining city on the hill.”¹²⁹

Moreover, each administration embedded in their CT rhetoric the broader language of American Exceptionalism, essentially stating that a divine power has chosen the US for a mission to defeat evil. Framing CT policies in broad and heroic terms necessarily leads to a military response. Enemies of the US, in this exceptionalist narrative, are defined as immoral and evil. This Manichean mindset leads to the automatic and necessary construction of “great” threats which has the US playing and re-playing its role as the “chosen nation” over time and space, the one that will rise up against these threats.¹³⁰ Thus is created the militarized culture in which the War on Terror becomes possible.



The “Axis of Evil” speech—President George W. Bush delivers the 2002 State of the Union address (Wikimedia Commons).

The exceptionalism myth typically leads to the out-of-hand dismissal of all adversaries as evil. This means that the US “depoliticize(s)” the violence of terrorists, automatically pointing to their evilness (not their political beliefs) as both the cause and effect of their action.¹³² Because the de-politicization of terrorist acts allows the US to blame terrorists’ actions on their evilness, immorality, and barbarism, there is no need

123 Clinton, Bill. “Remarks at a Freedom House Breakfast, October 6, 1995.” Washington, DC: White House, October 6, 1995.

124 Woodward, Bob. *Plan of Attack*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004. Pg. 88.

125 Bush, George W. “State of the Union Address to the 108th Congress.” Washington, DC: White House, January 28, 2003.

126 Obama, Barack. “Remarks of Senator Barack Obama to Chicago Global Affairs Council.” Chicago, Illinois: Chicago Global Affairs Council, April 23, 2007.

127 Obama, Barack. “Remarks by the President on National Security.” Washington, DC: White House, May 21, 2009.

128 Obama, Barack. “Transcript: President Obama’s Speech to a Joint Session of Congress.” *CBS News*, July 14, 2009.

129 John Quincy Adams in Desch, Michael C. “America’s Liberal Illiberalism.” *International Security* 32, no. 3 (2008): 7–43.

130 Lazar, Annita, and Michelle Lazar. “The Discourse of the New World Order: ‘Out-Casting’ the Double Face of Threat.” *Discourse and Society* 15 (2004): 223–42.

132 Ibid.

to examine the US's policies because in this narrative those policies are not the cause of the violence.¹³³ Therefore, policymakers and citizens alike can ignore US policies in the Middle East, say, that terrorists cite as reasons for attacks, such as the continued stationing of troops in Saudi Arabia. Additionally, by embedding the War on Terror discourse into the larger American Exceptionalism political myth, which reflects untouchable, cherished, and bi-partisan American values, counter-narratives cannot take hold. For a critic to question the fundamental assumptions present in the War on Terror discourse would be synonymous to challenging the very origins of the steadfast values that define America.¹³⁴ American exceptionalism explains how the rhetoric of CT policies emerged before and particularly after 9/11 and how this rhetoric has endured for almost 15 years after the 9/11 attacks.

LOOKING FORWARD: THE NEXT ADMINISTRATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Donald J. Trump Administration faces a difficult security challenge with terrorism and insurgency rampant in many parts of the globe, even as the US-backed coalition seems poised to push ISIS out of Raqqa, Syria, and Mosul, Iraq, in the coming months. The most pressing issues for the next administration will revolve around the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Assuming continued success against ISIS, the Trump Administration will face the immediate crisis of quelling sectarian violence in a deeply divided Iraq. If sectarian violence endures, another Sunni insurgency, fueling terrorist acts, could easily take shape once again in Iraq. In the aftermath of an assumed coalition victory against ISIS, Trump and his principals must deal with the problem of a de facto Kurdish state in northern Iraq and a strengthened Kurdish identity across northern Syria and southern Turkey. Ankara will likely block any political reality that strengthens the Kurds, which may fuel political violence in the region, with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan decrying Kurdish violence as terrorism.

The Trump Administration will then have to deal with the potential of violence among coalition allies. In Syria, the strengthening position of the Assad regime may force rebels toward terrorism and extremism. In Yemen, the civil-proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia has given Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) more operational capacity by distracting government forces and regional powers. As the war endures, AQAP's position will likely strengthen and will threaten the US and allies in the region; however, it is not clear whether AQAP has the capacity or capability to attack Europe or the US directly.

Furthermore, Trump will have to deal with a revitalized and strengthened insurgency in Afghanistan that continues to undermine the perpetually weak and ineffective central government in Kabul. His administration will have to decide whether US and, to some extent, NATO troops will continue to play a role in Afghanistan against the Taliban past 2017, the withdrawal date set by Obama. Looking beyond the Middle East, a number of countries in Africa, particularly in the Sahel and Horn of Africa, have active terrorist groups and insurgencies. The Trump Administration must decide whether to expand the US roles in these conflicts, particularly if situations there deteriorate and regional allies clamor for a more active US approach in these conflicts.

133 Rojecki, Andrew. "Rhetorical Alchemy: American Exceptionalism and the War on Terror." *Political Communication* 25 (2008): 67-88.

134 Ibid.

More so than any incoming administration in recent years, the Trump Administration presents a number of unknowns in regards to foreign policy. Even though Trump, as a candidate, positioned himself as an isolationist, the way he advocated for aggressive action against ISIS suggests several possibilities. Firstly, similar to the Bush Administration, Trump might not eschew unilateral action and probably will not wait for allies and coalitions to coalesce before acting.

Secondly, he seems to view terrorism as an existential threat to the American people and the American way of life, and as a candidate, he strongly advocated military action, primarily, to deal with the ISIS threat abroad. In fact, he wooed supporters with his “strong-man” approach, and those supporters will likely hold him to his promise of aggressive action against terrorists both at home and abroad. Lastly, Trump and his principals appear to believe profoundly in the American Exceptionalism myth, believing the US is a nation chosen for greatness. It remains to be seen how his 2016 campaign slogan “Make America Great Again” will play out in the foreign policy and, more specifically, the CT realms, but early signs point to an aggressive and militant zeal toward fighting terrorism, somewhat similar to the three prior administrations, and in particular Bush II.



American Exceptionalism redux? A supporter holds up a “Make America Great Again” sign at a Donald J. Trump political rally in 2016 (Wikimedia Commons).

In light of these facts, and in the context of this paper’s arguments, I propose four specific recommendations to the Trump Administration. Firstly, to be successful in CT, context should be brought to each individual conflict and terrorist group. If a group pledges allegiance or has links to ISIS or Al Qaeda, the motives should be investigated rather than taken at face value. Often times a terrorist group “joins” with ISIS or Al Qaeda to garner support and attention for their own conflict through the exploitation of the Al Qaeda or ISIS brand. Most terrorist groups have origins in the unique political, economic, or cultural reality on the ground, and the new administration should acknowledge and formulate its policies based on this reality. Secondly, the future administration should not view terrorism as an existential threat. The viewpoint that terrorism represents an existential threat has led to the massive expansion of US military presence worldwide, fighting every terrorist or insurgent. If terrorism is an existential threat, the US will only be safe when every terrorist is dead, which is an unrealistic goal. Rather, the Trump Administration should concentrate on mitigation, prevention, and problem-solving. Problem-solving means supporting political solutions, such as negotiating, when terrorists and insurgencies have legitimate political grievances, which often is the case. Thirdly, the next administration should resist blaming terrorism on the religion of Islam and on Muslims and Muslim culture, which is not true and which is dangerous. History has shown that all societies, cultures, and religions are susceptible to terrorism, and it is certainly not a strategy peculiar to one religion or culture. Finally, American Exceptionalism and the rhetoric of the “War on Terror” is not an appropriate lens to view CT policy because this myth and its subsequent narratives narrow policy options exclusively to the military realm.

CONCLUSION

This paper traced CT ideas through the administrations of Clinton, Bush, and Obama in order to offer a comprehensive explanation of the means and mechanisms that led to the emergence and endurance of the “War on Terror.” In order to answer the research question, the paper firstly outlined the concept of “American Exceptionalism.” Next, the paper situated the three presidential administrations, analyzing change and continuity in rhetoric and policy across the Clinton, Bush II, and Obama. The paper then turned to the notion of American Exceptionalism to answer how and why the War on Terror narrative, a descendent of this enduring myth, developed and resonated across three administrations. Finally, the paper evaluated the CT landscape for the next administration and offered four specific recommendations about how to tackle terrorism to the Trump Administration.

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