Rhetoric goes to war: The evolution of the United States of America's narrative of the "War On Terror"

Cezar M. Ornatowski

> The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that a statesman and commander have to make is to establish… the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.
> — Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*.

1. Introduction: Rhetoric and war

As the art of persuasion and argument, rhetoric has traditionally been considered in contrast to violent conflict, with persuasion, or, in Kenneth Burke's terms, symbolic inducement, the preferable alternative to the contest of arms. Rhetoric scholars appear to have, by and large, avoided the subject of war, both for ideological and pragmatic reasons: one does not want to sound as if one approved of war and it is not easy to gain access to the kind of contexts and information that would make for well-informed discussion of war and rhetoric. Yet, in the following discussion I intend to suggest that war and conflict ought to be of concern to rhetoric scholars because, one, they have been central to the human experience and, two, it is in the relationship between rhetoric and conflict or war that what Stephen Cimbala referred to as the "basic values of civilized life" have, especially in recent decades, been forged.[1]

Throughout history, wars have played center stage in politics.[2] War, as Ronald Reid has suggested, is both "an identifiable historical situation" and a "distinctive rhetorical situation", one that "calls forth many rhetorical endeavors addressed to various audiences and propounding various points of view".[3] Wars, as Cimbala has argued, "are political creatures. They are fought for political reasons, pushed forward with political passions, and terminated

---

[1] Stephen J. Cimbala, *The politics of warfare: Great powers in the twentieth century*, (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).

[2] William Ury, *Getting to peace: Transforming conflict at home, at work, and in the world*, (New York: Viking, 1999).

[3] Ronald F. Reid, "New England rhetoric and the French war, 1754-1760: A case study in the rhetoric of war", *Communication Monographs* 43, 4 (1976): 259-286, 259.

with political rationales for victory and surrender".[4] War is the ultimate expression of political conflict. It does not mark the limit of politics; rather, it may be regarded as politics (to extend von Clausewitz's famous quip about diplomacy) by other means. "State policy", Clausewitz has suggested, "is the womb in which war is developed, in which its outlines lie hidden in a rudimentary state…".[5] Hence, according to Clausewitz:

> The leading outlines of a war are always determined by the Cabinet, that is… by a political, not a military, organ… War is an instrument of policy; it must necessarily bear its character; it must measure with its scale; the conduct of war, in its great features, is therefore policy itself, which takes up a sword in place of a pen...[6]

Therefore, Clausewitz continues, the "political (and, I will argue rhetorical) element" in war lies not so much in the details of strategy or tactics as "in the formation of a plan for a whole war, of a campaign, and often even for a battle…".[7]

In the following discussion, I suggest that the relationship between "the pen and the sword" is contained in what is perhaps the master rhetorical genre of war and conflict, the genre that contains and articulates the "leading outlines" of any conflict: the war narrative. At its most basic rhetorical level, the war narrative defines the reasons for war, the identity of the opposing sides, the stakes in the conflict, the ends to be pursued, as well as, implicitly or explicitly, the conduct, means, and duration of the conflict. Not every articulation of the "war narrative" necessarily contains all of these elements (in this sense, the war narrative is an ideal rhetorical type), but they are present, in one way or another, in most public discourses that accompany conflict and war. I use the development of the United States of America's narrative of the "War On Terror" in the wake of the attacks of 9/11 as an illustration.

2. The war narrative: The political rhetoric of war

Every war has a narrative.[8] Wars are grounded in narratives; they originate,

---

[4] Cimbala, *The politics of warfare,* 2.

[5] Quoted in Sir Basil Liddell Hart and Adrian Liddell Hart, eds., *The sword and the pen: Selections from the world's greatest military writings* (New York: Crowell, 1976): 151.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] I acknowledge my debt to Steven Martens, a graduate student in my Homeland Security 690 "Ideology, discourse, and conflict" seminar at San Diego State University in Fall 2008, who first drew my attention to the strategic importance of war narratives

evolve and end in accordance with their narratives. Michael Vlahos sees the war narrative as doing three things: providing the "organising framework for policy", representing a "war logic" grounded in an "existential vision", and serving as "the anointed rhetorical handbook for how the war is to be argued and described".[9] Not of least importance, for the soldiers who actually do the fighting and for the civilians on the "home front", the war narrative serves the purpose of morale building. "In war", argues Vlahos, "narrative is much more than just a story". It is "the foundation of all strategy, upon which all else — policy, rhetoric, and action — is built". War narratives, Vlahos suggests, "need to be identified and critically examined on their own terms, for they can illuminate the inner nature of the war itself".[10]

The development and evolution of war narratives offers insights into the nature — including political and rhetorical nature — of conflicts past and present. Their major *topoi* — the identification of the parties to the conflict, the definition of its nature, a statement of the stakes involved and the desired ends, along with an identification of means and duration — dominate public representations of, debates about, and accounts of war and conflict and express a standard "emplotment" or script according to which conflicts are conducted, played out, recounted, and remembered.[11] In this sense, the war narrative makes war come into being, perpetuates it, and often transforms it within what Maurice Charland has called a "discursively constituted history".[12] Within such a history, the war narrative ultimately becomes a critical element in the shaping of collective identities and destinies.

The evolution of the United States of America's narrative of the conflict that had been known — until it was discarded by the Obama Administration — as the "War On Terror" (WOT) provides a current example of the evolution of a war narrative. While all conflicts involve psychological elements related to mobilisation, shaping of public perceptions, and

---

and whose paper began with exactly these words.

[9] Michael Vlahos, "The long war: A self-fulfilling prophecy of protracted conflict — and defeat", *The National Interest on line*, (5 September 2006): http://www.nationalinterest.org/Article.aspx?id=11982. (Accessed 20 March 2010).

[10] *Ibid*.

[11] Joseph Tuman notes that media often frame social and personal situations in terms of conflict or confrontation, while in literary studies works of fiction are often analyzed in terms of their central "conflict". "Both fiction and non-fiction need friction", Tuman concludes. Joseph S. Tuman, *Communicating terror: The rhetorical dimensions of terrorism* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2010): 167.

[12] Maurice Charland, "Constitutive rhetoric: The case of the *peuple Quebecois*", *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73 (1987): 133-150. Examples of accounts of war that fly in the face of public narratives are provided among others by Paul Fussell in *Wartime: Understanding and behavior in the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

influencing both domestic and enemy morale, the attacks of 11 September 2001 marked, according to some observers, the beginning of a new kind of conflict — a "war of ideas", according to the title of Walid Phares's well-known book — in which words and images became central in a way that transcended, thanks to the Internet and other media of instant global communication, their role in past conflicts, including the Cold War.[13]

3. The evolution of the United States of America's narrative of the "War On Terror"

In his initial address to the nation in the aftermath of the attacks of 11 September 2001, the United States of America's President George W. Bush defined the response of the United States of America as fundamentally a police operation aimed at bringing the perpetrators to justice: "The search is underway for those who are behind these evil acts", the President stated. "I've directed the full resources of our intelligence and law enforcement communities to find those responsible and to bring them to justice".[14] However, toward the end of the same speech, Bush also used the term "war against terrorism", which implied a different and broader sort of operation, one directed not only against specific individuals but also against a tactic: "America and our friends and allies join with all those who want peace and security in the world, and we stand together to win the war against terrorism".[15] The mention of "allies" and the definition of the (collective) cause as "peace and security in the world" broadened the potential parameters of the operation, while its duration was left open by the assertion that "America has stood enemies before and will do so this time", which, through an implied analogy with America's previous wars, suggested a much extended time frame.

Nine days later, in an address to a joint session of Congress, the President defined the adversary as the "enemies of freedom" embodied in a "loose collection of terrorist organisations" scattered over sixty countries.[16] Amid references to World War II and battles against fascism and totalitarianism, the scope of the conflict was broadened ("Our war begins with

---

[13] Michael J. Waller, *Fighting the war of ideas like a real war* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for World Politics, 2007).

[14] George W. Bush, "Address to the Nation" (11 September 2001): http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911addresstothenation.htm. (Accessed 15 April 2010).

[15] *Ibid*.

[16] George W. Bush, "Address to a joint session of Congress following 9/11 attacks": http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911jointsessionspeech.htm. (Accessed 15 April 2010).

al-Qaida, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated") and its time frame extended (a "lengthy campaign, unlike any other we have every seen").[17] Days later, the name of the operation, "Operation Infinite Justice", was changed to "Operation Enduring Freedom" because the United States of America's policymakers realised that in Islam such final "justice" can only be provided by God[18] and the last thing the United States of America wanted was to be seen as believing that it is acting in the name of God (especially after President Bush's unfortunate initial use of the term "crusade").

The enemy as well as the terms of the struggle were redefined still further in Bush's 2002 "Axis of evil" state of the Union address, in which Bush mentioned Iran, Iraq, North Korea, and groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and Islamic Jihad, and suggested that "States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, aiming to threaten the peace of the world".[19] Ryan Crocker, the President's special envoy to the Middle East at the time of the 9/11 attacks and later The United States of America's ambassador to Baghdad, remembers that after the speech his Iranian counterpart, with whom he was working in what appeared like perfect harmony to reestablish a civil government in Afghanistan under Hamid Karzai, was offended by the President's remarks and became less willing than before to work with the United States of America. The offending element was the implication that the "war against terrorism" also potentially involved confrontations with specific States. Vlahos criticized Bush's speech for its "metamorphosis" of a "terrorist" enemy into "an evil league of enemy powers", which at "one rhetorical stroke" made the "War On Terror" "equal to the most protean of US struggles".[20] The speech also extended the time frame of the conflict, potentially into infinity: "Our war on terror is well begun, but it is only begun. This campaign may not be finished on our watch — yet it must be and it will be waged on our watch".[21]

By 2006, the "Global War On Terror" (better known at the time by its acronym GWOT) became the Global Struggle Against Violent Extremism (G-SAVE). The reason for changing "war" to "struggle" was the recognition that this "war" was not just a clash of arms that could be "won" on the battlefield alone. On 29 September 2006, in an address to the Reserve Officers Association in Washington, D.C., Bush redefined the scope of the "struggle"

---

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] David J. Rusin, "Government policies stifle talk of Islam": http://islamist-watch.org/1229/government-policies-stifle-talk-of-islam. (Accessed 15 April 2010).

[19] George W. Bush, "2002 state of the Union address delivered 29 January 2002": http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/stateoftheunion2002.htm. (Accessed 15 April 2010).

[20] Vlahos, *The National Interest*.

[21] Bush, "2002 state of the Union address".

when he began a speech with "I want to speak to you today about the struggle between moderation and extremism that is unfolding across the broader Middle East". He also referred to the struggle as "ideological" and suggested that the extremists "are at war against us because they hate everything we stand for — and we stand for freedom".[22] The speech redefined the conflict as primarily ideological and redrew its contours: from America and its allies against a geographically circumscribed or religiously characterised adversary to moderation *vs.* extremism, in the Middle East as well as elsewhere. Soon, however, the term "struggle" was also abandoned when it was realized that "struggle" may be interpreted in Arabic as "jihad".

David Zarefsky has suggested that "to choose a definition is to plead a cause",[23] while Denise Bostdorff and Steven Golzwig have argued that "an issue's definition sets up boundaries in which subsequent discussion of the issue takes place".[24] "The definition of an issue as a 'crisis'", Bosdorff and Goldzwig note, "has particular implications and encourages the urgent consideration of possibly extreme measures to bring the crisis to an end".[25] The war narrative is in effect a set of definitions that together constitute a strategic framework for articulating and prosecuting conflict or war. Douglas Kellner cites British historian Sir Michael Howard's criticism of the Bush administration's characterisation of America's post-9/11 campaign as a "war", since it gave unwarranted legitimacy to what should have been simply described as a criminal act and created unrealistic expectation of both the conduct of the operations and "victory".[26]

The realisation that the narrative encapsulated in the phrase "War On Terror" failed to help the United States of America win either the conflict on the ground or the "hearts and minds" of critical audiences outside the United States of America prompted a search for new formulations. A 2008 Department of Homeland Security memorandum entitled "Terminology to define the terrorists" directed at United States of America's senior government officials and diplomats explicitly acknowledged that "Words

---

[22] George W. Bush, "The path of war: Address to the Reserve Officers Association, Washington, D.C. (29 September 2006): http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com /speeches/09.29.06.html. (Accessed 15 April 2010).

[23] David Zarefsky, *President Johnson's War on Poverty* (University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1986): 8.

[24] Denise Bostdorff and Steven Golzwig, "Idealism and pragmatism in American foreign policy rhetoric: The case of John Kennedy and Vietnam", *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 24, 3 (1994): http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/goldzwig.htm. (Accessed 7 April 2010).

[25] *Ibid.*

[26] Douglas Kellner, "Bushspeak and the politics of lying: Presidential rhetoric in the 'War on Terror'", *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 37, 4 (2007): http://chantrill.net/Kellner_Bush_and_politics_of_lying.pdf. (Accessed 7 April 2010). Howard's speech was available as of 15 April 2010 at: http://thisislondon.com.

matter" (especially, the memorandum emphasised, in an age "where a statement can cross continents in a matter of seconds")[27] and that the terminology used by the United States of America's government officials "must accurately identify the nature of the challenges that face our generation".[28] The reference to "generation" was intended to transcend particular cultures, religions, ideologies, or regions. At the same time, the memorandum suggested, this terminology should be "strategic" in marginalising the potential appeal of terrorism and extremism by avoiding glamorising their ideology or tactics through grandiose statements that make them seem more important and a larger threat than they are. Some of the specific recommendations included avoiding statements that imply that the conflict is religious, being mindful that words have a history and a context and resonate differently with various audiences, avoiding labeling diverse groups that exploit Islam for political purposes as a single enemy, emphasising the cult-like aspects of terrorist groups, emphasising the successful integration of American and Western Muslims into democratic society, and "emphasising the positive" by talking about what the United States of America and her allies stand for in addition to what they are against. In effect, the memorandum called for an attempt to articulate a common vision for the future behind which "this generation" of humankind can unite.

The Muslim experts and leaders allegedly consulted by the Department of Homeland Security suggested that the current struggle be redefined as "A Global Struggle for Security and Progress".[29] The memorandum, while not endorsing this specific designation, suggested that the United States of America's public diplomacy emphasize that the "civilized world" is facing a global challenge that transcends geography, culture, and religion and that the struggle is for "security" and "progress" — values that all people, especially those living in chaotic environments with little hope for economic or social advancement, might find appealing.

At the same time, the Extremist Messaging Branch of the United States of America's National Counterterrorism Center developed a set of specific guidelines for describing the "enemy" in the context of the conflict. The guidelines suggest not engaging in ideological debate with terrorist messages (which gives them legitimacy), being as accurate as possible about the threat and the terrorists' motives (not exaggerating it and thus compromising credibility), not invoking Islam ("we should treat (the al-Qaida network) as an illegitimate political organisation, both terrorist and criminal"),

---

[27] "Terminology to define the terrorists: Recommendations from American Muslims", United States of America's Department of Homeland Security (January 2008): 2. http://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/misc/126.pdf. (Accessed 30 April 2010).

[28] *Ibid*. 1.

[29] For security reasons, the identities of the consultants have not been revealed.

using the term "totalitarian" to describe the enemy (thus what they want should be described as a "global totalitarian state" not the "caliphate", which to some Muslims may have legitimate historical associations), and avoiding potentially controversial foreign terms (such as "jihad") that may become intellectual traps.[30]

The Obama administration has embraced both approaches to modifying the United States of America's war narrative: on the one hand, appealing to a global audience and to universal values and, on the other hand, attempting to isolate and marginalise the "enemy". In a speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington in August 2009, John Brennan, President Obama's Assistant for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism, outlined the Obama administration's approach as founded on two key moments: the recognition that "how you define a problem shapes how you address it" and emphasizing not just "what we are against" but also and especially "what we are for — the opportunity, liberties, prosperity, and common aspirations we share with the world".[31] The term "war on terror" was thus dropped, as was the adjective "global" and the noun "jihadist". Instead, the United States of America was described as being at war with al-Qaida (defined as a "death cult") and its "violent extremist allies who seek to carry on al-Qaida's murderous agenda".[32] In his *Inaugural Address*, Barack Obama described the "enemy" simply as "a far-reaching network of violence and hatred".[33] The campaign (not "war") against extremism has been refocussed on promoting "universal values", as well as, one the ground, addressing "upstream factors — the conditions that help fuel violent extremism".[34]

4. Conclusion: War narrative in the era of global power

The war narrative provides a broad frame for domestic and foreign public discourse about and representations of a conflict and thus a foundation for the political rhetoric of war, including the speeches of politicians, propaganda, and public diplomacy. It serves to mobilise popular support and

---

[30] "Words that work and words that don't", Counter Terrorism Communications Center 2, 10 (14 March 2008): http://documents.scribd.com/docs/q0jdlrtjgl9jegyxhyp.pdf. (Accessed 15 October 2009).

[31] John O. Brennan, "A new approach to safeguarding Americans", Center for Strategic and International Studies (6 August 2009): 4. http://whitehouse.gov/the press office/Remarks-by-John-Brennan-at-the-Center-for-Strategic-and-International-Studies. (Accessed 15 September 2009).

[32] *Ibid*. 5.

[33] Barack Hussein Obama, *Inaugural Address*, 20 January 2009: http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/inaugural-address. (Accessed 15 April 2010).

[34] Brennan, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 5.

justify war in public opinion (both domestic and international). In wartime, the rhetorical framing embodied in the war narrative provides a way of conceptualising as well as potentially mastering the strategic situation. The war narrative also has operational implications; a totalisation of conflict embodied in such descriptives as "life and death struggle" or "better dead than red" precludes compromise and make the conflict a struggle to the last street and house. In this way, the war narrative establishes a direct relationship between political rhetoric and military action, in effect between rhetoric and history as the latter plays out, among its other major sites, "in the trenches".

War, as Mary Kaldor points out, is intimately connected to the evolution of the modern state.[35] Kaldor cites Charles Tilly to the effect that "States made war and war made the State".[36] Moreover, in the contemporary "globalising" world states are transforming in a variety of ways that are "bound up with changes in… forms of warfare".[37] The so-called "new wars" (of which the "War On Terror" is a paradigmatic example) are based not on confrontation between states but involve, at least on one end, non-state actors, often loose coalitions of diverse forces motivated by a common purpose or underpinned by an ideology (political or religious). Such coalitions — militant movements, insurgencies, guerilla and revolutionary groups — are often held together by shared narratives of struggle and conflict; for such actors the war narrative not only serves the purpose of political mobilisation but also constitutes the central unifying and identity-bestowing "myth". As the 21st century conflicts tend toward being increasingly identity driven, the war narrative (or some variation of it) appears to be gaining center stage as one of the major genres of global political rhetoric.

Especially with the post-Cold War shift in strategic emphasis among major military powers from "hard" to "soft" power,[38] the war (or conflict) narrative has become both a vital element of national political and military strategy and a central aspect of the projection of power, especially for a global power such as the United States of America. As the evolution of the United States of America's post-9/11 war narrative shows, in the age of global communication, global power is projected through increasingly universal vocabularies of value, at once attempting to appeal to both domestic and global audiences and reflecting an understanding of and concern with both local and global cultural, historical, and political environment. This evolution appears to confirm Cimbala's thesis that in recent decades "War (at least as

---

[35] Mary Kaldor, "Beyond militarism, arms races, and arms control", Social Science Research Council (2003): www.ssrc.org.

[36] *Ibid.*

[37] *Ibid.*

[38] See also Craig Hayden, *The rhetoric of soft power: Public diplomacy in global contexts. Lexington studies in political communication* (New York: Lexington, 2012).

articulated through the war narrative) has become coterminous with the struggle to define basic values of civilised life", albeit by the "most uncivilised means".[39] Such a development raises a provocative rhetorical (and political) problem: in an increasingly "global" and interconnected world and with the capability to project power on a global scale, yet in the face of fundamental historical, cultural, and linguistic divisions and conflicts, what might be the "positive terms" and "universal values" that might constitute the narrative that articulates a comprehensive and appealing, shared, and, finally, conflict-free vision for humankind?

The Author: Cezar M. Ornatowski is a Professor in the Department of Rhetoric and Writing Studies, at San Diego State University, California, United States of America.

---

[39] Cimbala, *The politics of warfare,* 8.