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Aggressive Action: In Search of a Dominant Narrative

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> A photo of that moment is etched for history. The president's hands are folded formally in his lap, his hand turned to hear [Andrew] Card's words. His face has a distant somber, almost frozen, edging on bewilderment. Bush remembers exactly what he was thinking: "They had declared war on us, and I made up my mind at that moment that we are going to war."[1]

The idea of "going to war" seemed obvious enough at first blush. We had been attacked, and we planned to respond in kind. It was that simple. Or was it? Despite the analogies drawn to the attack on Pearl Harbor in December, 1941, the decision to enter a "state of war" after September 11, 2001 was a unique event in American history. Although other American wars are associated with "triggering" events (e.g., the bombardment of Fort Sumter, the sinking of the Battleship Maine, Pearl Harbor, the invasion of Kuwait), none of those past instances occurred in a "narrative vacuum." In each previous case, the road to war had been well paved materially, politically, and psychologically over an extended period of time. The shelling of Fort Sumter by South Carolinian troops was the culmination of events that had unfolded over several months after the election of Lincoln and after many years of heated discussion

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and debate.[2] The public clamor for war with Spain was already several years old when the battleship Maine exploded and sank in Havana in February 1898, but even then two months passed before Congress declared war.[3] The U.S. entry into the First World War is often associated with the loss of American lives when the Lusitania was sank—but nearly two years and a great deal of preparation passed between that event and the declaration of war.[4] Although the attack on Pearl Harbor was a military surprise, it took place in the midst of a debate over plans for mobilizing and ongoing preparations for war that had been building for at least two years.[5] And the extended build-up—psychologically as well as militarily—to the Persian Gulf War was still fresh in our memories as the process was repeated in 2003.[6]

The "war on terror" triggered by the events of 9/11 had no such gestation period. The state of war was declared by President Bush and others without hesitation, but it was also done without any troops or plans in place to confront this particular enemy. As important, it occurred in context of public indifference to and/or ignorance of the threat posed by terrorists. There had been discussions within intellectual communities about possible "blowbacks"[7] and a coming "clash of civilizations."[8] There were also warnings issued in a series of reports by a relatively obscure advisory commission[9] chartered in 1998 by Secretary of Defense William Cohen. But otherwise little attention was given pre-9/11 to establishing a scenario for anything resembling a war on terror. Such matters as terrorist threats remained stories of law enforcement, criminal investigations, and the prosecution of bombers and their co-conspirators. The bombings of the World Trade Center in 1993, of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995, and the exploits of the Unabomber were perceived as the criminal acts of fringe fanatics who would be brought to justice through the normal channels of law and order. Until the morning of 9/11, however, there was no substantial "story line" in the popular press or from the government about a war on terror.

War Narratives and the Shaping of American Culture

Surprisingly little scholarship has focused on the role of narratives in times of war, and most of what we know of this topic is anecdotal (in the broad historical sense) or atheoretical. There are a number of examinations of how different national cultures—winners as well as losers—handled the memory of past wars. Lundberg[10] provides an analysis of the literature that emerged from the American Civil War as well as U.S. involvement in World Wars I and II; Moeller[11] examines the search for a "usable" past

in post-Nazi politics and more recent German literature; and Igarashi[12] focuses on the literature of postwar Japan.

Yet, the American cultural experience with war narratives has received increasing attention in recent years. War narratives have played a central role in American history from the outset of colonization.[13] Today, there is a growing literature documenting the efforts to establish narratives that defined the nation's enemies and the threats they posed. Some of these studies focus on the mass media helping set the public mood for war.[14] Others concentrate on stereotypical images of enemy societies and the threats they posed to the American way of life[15] and how these images pervaded American culture and the narratives of the Cold War.[16]

This expansive and expanding literature on the importance of war narratives in American culture would be of little import outside of academe if not for its potential relevance to issues surrounding the operations of government in the post-9/11 world. The uniqueness of the declared war on terror in terms of both its timing and engagement calls for a greater understanding of how state of war narratives impact on the public administration community. This, in turn, requires a better understanding of the role that narratives in general play in administrative life.

The Centrality of Narratives in Social and Administrative Life

Narratives have taken on considerable importance in the social sciences in recent years. Among sociologists, anthropologists, and social psychologists, the use of discourse analysis[17] has drawn greater attention to narratives used in distinct contexts from daily conversations[18] and interactions in the workplace[19] to physician-patient interactions[20] and celebrity interviews.[21] The new field of narrative psychology[22] has generated a number of studies attempting to deal with the long-standing issues of self identity[23] and human development.[24] Legal scholars are paying greater attention to the role that narratives and storytelling play in the dynamics of litigation and legal reasoning.[25] Political scientists have addressed narratives through the study of political culture and rhetoric (in the form of symbols, ideology, and myths) and public policymaking.[26] The common thread of these and related political science perspectives is the view of narratives as the tools—and reflection—of political power.[27]

Students of public policy have also found the concept of ideological narratives increasingly useful. Some have stressed the important historical role that narratives (in the form of ideologies or "schools of thought") have played in shaping foreign policymaking.[28] The role of narratives in other policy arenas is implied by those who focused on policy

argumentation and policy design.[29] Emery Roe's[30] efforts to apply literary narrative techniques to a range of policy debates in 1994 was the first major effort to focus attention on policy-relevant narratives, and in recent years studies have been published on the role of narratives in such topics as postwar urban policies in the United Kingdom,[31] telecommunications in New Zealand,[32] environmental regulation in Canada and the United States,[33] anti-corruption in China,[34] criminal justice in Britain,[35] and race and ethnicity in the United States.[36]

Work specifically linking narratives with administrative decision making has emerged from the study of "sensemaking" by Karl Weick and his students. Building on his earlier ground-breaking work on the social psychology of organizing, Weick[37] makes narratives an important part of his examination of how people make sense of their environments. He argues that sensemaking precedes interpretation by isolating and focusing on some events among the flow of experience. By focusing on some specific events, outcomes are explained by assigning them to a plausible story to recount what is going on. Sensemaking needs a good story. Thus stories, or narratives, are an important element of how individuals make sense of their environment and how they see themselves operating in that environment. The war on terror provides an opportunity to extend Weick's analysis of sensemaking in organizations to a more general context. The challenges of making sense of administrative life in the post-9/11 world goes beyond understanding the limited and constrained capacity for rational decision making in modern organizations. Nor is it limited to making sense of the bureau pathologies or the distortions and abuses of bureaucratic power.

Making Sense of a State of War

The perspective applied here relies on narratives as more than merely a literary form, a rhetorical instrument of power, or a methodological tool that treats actions as texts. Narratives are fundamental to analyzing human consciousness and understanding—and thus to comprehending human thought and action. Human thought and action do not occur in a mental vacuum, but rather are shaped by (and, in turn, shapes) ongoing processes of narration (i.e., sensemaking) that seem implied by the situation.[38]

We can pursue this perspective in three distinct ways. First, narratives can be approached as causal and controlling factors in social life. Such a position is strongly implied in the political and administrative culture literatures where narratives take on determinative roles by shaping the

realities, values, and premises that form attitudes, decisions, and behaviors. In this view, narratives are assumed to be an autonomous cultural artifact, distinct from any individual and generated by a community within a range of possible options. This is reflected in the cultural theory approach used by Mary Douglas and others,[39] and applied to public administration by Wildavsky[40] and, more recently and elaborately, by Hood.[41]

A second approach treats narratives as dependent variables—as the product of bureaucratic behavior and administrative machinations. In this literature, narratives are not merely the vehicle through which bureaucratic control is exercised, but the context created by and manifest in those narrative structures and the norms and assumptions they represent. This is the "lifeworld" of phenomenologists[42] that has found expression in analyses of the bureaucratization of administrative, political, and social life.[43]

The third—and least developed—approach is to regard narratives as the key intervening variable in social life in general, and administrative life in particular. From this view, narratives are neither sources of external control nor functionalist drivers of the human lifeworld. Rather, they are the internalized media—the sensemaking mechanisms—through which human thought and action take shape. In the general literature, this approach has found its most explicit expression in the work of Dennett.[44] In the study of administrative life, it is the view central to the work of Weick[45] and his colleagues.

Applying that third approach, a central question and challenge of the war on terror for individual public administrators was to make sense of the radically altered environment and their respective places (and roles) in it. In lieu of an established metanarrative—or at least efforts to develop and nurture a state of war narrative that would identify an enemy, end state, and some expectations regarding roles and obligations—what emerges in the consciousness of administrators are "multiple drafts." In Dennett's terms, these drafts represent the continuous revision of narratives through a complex "multitrack" process that occurs in "hundreds of milliseconds" and generates "something *rather like* a narrative stream or sequence" that is subject to "continual editing":

> Contents arise, get revised, contribute to the interpretation of other contents or to the modulation of behavior (verbal and otherwise), and in the process leave their traces in memory, which then eventually decay or get incorporated into or overwritten by later contents, wholly or in part.[46]

In Weick's terms, public administrators are engaged in an ongoing process of "making sense" of the war on terror through state of war narratives drawn from past experiences real and perceived. The challenge we

face is to understand how—and to what effect—those state of war narratives manifest themselves.

Contending State of War Narratives

Of course, it would be absurd to contend that the war on terror occurs in a complete narrative vacuum. State of war narratives are a part of American culture, and public administrators are no less subject to the historical and popular images and myths of war that permeate American culture than are other citizens. A framework for distinguishing among four common state of war narratives[47] was developed based on the transposition of two salient features of such narratives: what they imply about the operational demands and cultural commitments to be expected from American citizens. Operationally, a state of war can call for the full mobilization of our economic and social resources at one extreme or, at the other, a level of mobilization that generates minimal or isolated demands on the nation. In terms of cultural commitment, a state of war can be perceived as requiring a full integration of the war effort's values, norms, and priorities in the national culture or, again at the other extreme, a minimal deference to the cultural demands of war. When combined, the two dimensions provide a framework outlining four major options for the "state of war" narratives.

The substantive form of these narratives on the war on terror were identified by an analysis of speeches and news reports that emanated from politicians and administration officials after the 9/11 tragedy. The narratives identified were about the *war on terror* and the initial response to neither the terrorist attacks on the United States, not the actual invasion of Iraq in March 2003 nor the events that followed. Four narratives were identified: the garrison state narrative, the temporary state narrative, the glass-firewall narrative, and the enemy within narrative.

		Cultural Commitments	
		High	Low
Operational Demands	High	Garrison State Narrative	"Temporary" State Narrative
	Low	Enemy Within Narrative	Glass Firewall Narrative

Figure 1.1   "State of War" Narratives

Briefly, under a garrison state, society is completely and permanently transformed to deal with the present and future threats on national security. Society organizes itself around the constant threat of war—it becomes a "war machine." This narrative can be viewed in its most extreme forms in Orwell's *1984*, and in real life in contemporary North Korea. The concept is attributed to Harold Laswell, who in 1941 wrote of a future in which "specialists on violence are the most powerful group in society."[48] Someone who "hears" the garrison state narrative would agree with statements that reflect permanent changes in our society.

The temporary state reflects the belief that the measures taken during war are necessary but short term. The temporary state narrative reflects the ancient Roman doctrine *inter arma silent leges*—idiomatically: "in time of war, the laws are silent." The silence and or violation of civil liberties are accepted because they are temporary. The belief is that the sooner we eliminate the enemy, the sooner life returns to normal. Someone who "hears" the temporary state narrative would agree that the violation of individual civil liberties is permissible, as long as it is short term.[49]

The glass-firewall narrative reflects two parallel administrative worlds, one civilian and one military, that operate simultaneously and in full view of each other. These parallel worlds are separated by a legal and organizational firewall that protects each from interference the other.[50] During wartime the military expects to "call the shots" without political interference. This narrative would see an individual agreeing with a statement regarding the expertise of the military and their ability to protect us. As civilians we should go on with our lives, comfortable in the knowledge that the military will protect us.

The final narrative requires a high level of personal and cultural commitment and is labeled the "enemy within" to stress its similarity to the McCarthy-era perspective that dominated the late 1940s through the mid-1950s. This narrative emphasizes that the threat to our security emanates from within our borders, as reflected in the Patriot's Act, and that as good Americans we should ferret out disloyal and subversive individuals. The enemy in this war might very well be our own neighbor and therefore we have to keep a watchful eye on one another and report any suspicious activity.[51]

Exit Strategy Narratives

While "state of war narratives" relate to the justification and initial conduct of war efforts, they are hardly unchanging over time. The progress

(or lack thereof) of a war effort will inevitably be reflected in changes in the dominant state of war narrative. Using the framework posited by Dubnick, we can find historical instances in which a conflict initiated under a "temporary state of war" narrative is transformed into a "garrison state" form after it becomes evident that the military campaigns will take years rather than months. For example, as the British mobilized for the First World War in August 1914, the popular image was that it will all be over by Christmas, but it soon became evident that the expectations reflected in that narrative had to be radically altered. This was a lesson put to use by Churchill three decades later when he made certain the British were prepared for a long and sustained conflict. During the American Civil War, Lincoln faced several challenges related to the dominant war narrative. Not only did he face the task of sustaining public support as the conflict wore on, but he needed to do so while adjusting the rationale of the war from one focused primarily on defending the union to a conflict related to emancipation.

But as time passes another closely related set of state of war narratives emerge that address how the conflict might—or ought to—end. Exit strategy narratives are especially important when a conflict lasts much longer than the initial state of war narrative implied and the enemy seems to be winning or at least increasingly intractable.

Analytically, exit strategy narratives can be differentiated along two dimensions: the portrayal of the likelihood of victory (i.e., the war is won/"winnable" or lost/"losable") and the level of public attentiveness.

| | **Level of Public Attentiveness** | |
	High	Low
Won/ winnable	Victory Narrative "mission accomplished"	Long-term commitment narrative "100 years"
Lost/ losable	Quick Withdrawal Narrative Leave in a panic Very visible, abrupt Loss	Gradual Withdrawal Narrative In stages, slow and subtle, the loss is quiet, forgettable

Portrayal of Likelihood of Victory

Figure 1.2   Exit Narratives

Each of these general narrative types provides a picture of how the exit strategy is likely to unfold, and it sets the stage for how various actors approach their tasks. The "victory" narrative provides individuals with a sense that the end is near and positive—and that soon conditions will return to normal (e.g., the famous post-First World War theme of a return to "normalcy"). The "long-term commitment" narrative sets a different tone and outlook for the future, implying that the public should be prepared for a perpetual state of war—even if of a limited type. The "quick withdrawal" narrative prepares the public for the shock of seeming defeat, and in doing so may also prepare the nation for a period of political recriminations, collective self-examination, and (in the longer term) reconciliation. The "gradual withdrawal" narrative, in contrast, sets the stage for an exit that seems tactical and militarily wise—even though the withdrawal itself might be viewed historically as an admission of stalemate or defeat.

Applied to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, a victory narrative was articulated by George W. Bush on May 1, 2003, on the deck of the aircraft carrier the U.S.S Abraham Lincoln. President Bush, looking fit for command as he stepped out of a jet fighter wearing a green flight suit and holding a white helmet, strutted around the aircraft carrier saluting those on the flight deck and shaking hands with those on deck beneath a banner that declared "Mission Accomplished." Although the mission has proven far from accomplished, this victory narrative did not disappear in the years that followed as the situation on the ground deteriorated. Repeated declarations by the administration detailing how well the war effort was going and how well the Iraqi government was handling the job of governing continued as the White House remained in what Bob Woodward would term a "state of denial."[52] In a speech delivered on July 31, 2008, President Bush once again spoke of victory: "We remain a nation at war. Al Qaeda is on the run in Iraq—but the terrorists remain dangerous…We owe our thanks to all those who wear the uniform…and the best way to honor them is to support their mission—and bring them home with victory." John McCain sustained that narrative during his campaign for the presidency, but in accepting the Republican nomination for the presidency he repeatedly referred to a victory in Iraq in aspirational terms and stressed the necessity that the country commits itself to a victorious outcome. This narrative portrays an interpretation of the situation as moving toward a clear and obvious victory that is easily recognized and agreed upon by most Americans.

McCain has also been associated with articulating a "long-term commitment" narrative for the Iraq War, where the situation will play out like the script of the Korean War. We are there for the long haul but eventually the enemy will succumb to the demands for democracy and peace.

We have not lost; rather victory will come, but at some later date. Early in his primary campaign for the GOP nomination, McCain had visualized a "100 year" strategy in a conversation with reporters—an approach that reflected the thinking of military strategists and some in the Bush administration who regarded such an approach as the only viable alternative to outright withdrawal. The conflict had morphed from a conventional war into a situation involving insurgency and sectarian strife bordering on civil war, and many field commanders and military analysts believed the war would go on for years, possibly decades, depending on the resilience of the combatants and the U.S. political will to maintain the fight. The long-term commitment narrative defines the war as an incomplete but eventual victory that requires patience with a long-term but smaller contingent of soldiers at or near the war zone who would not constantly be in harm's way. As in Korea, this would also mean a gradual decrease in the amount of media attention overtime as other issues begin to dominate the political agenda. The war will fade into the background and will be largely ignored by politicians and the unaffected public, all the while sustaining the narrative of, at the least, a partial victory.

The quick withdrawal narrative applied to the Iraq War finds the troops withdrawing in the face of a dysfunctional Iraqi government engaged in a civil war and an admission that perhaps it was unwise for the United States to have been there in the first place. Among major American political actors, only a few have articulated this narrative—most notably Governor Bill Richardson during his run for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2007. "Our troops have done everything they were asked to do with courage and professionalism, but they cannot win someone else's civil war," Richardson wrote in a September 8, 2007 Op-Ed piece for the *Washington Post*. "So long as American troops are in Iraq, reconciliation among Iraqi factions is postponed. Leaving forces there enables the Iraqis to delay taking the necessary steps to end the violence. And it prevents us from using diplomacy to bring in other nations to help stabilize and rebuild the country."[53] Unfortunately for Richardson's presidential aspirations, this narrative was not widely endorsed. Instead, a less-nuanced version of the narrative became associated with a "defeatist" perspective and played out in the press and among opposition politicians as a prescription for a military debacle, reminiscent of the ignominious withdrawal of the United States from Vietnam. The end of American involvement in Vietnam is widely seen by many Americans as a narrative of embarrassment and failure—an utterly useless and costly war. The withdrawal from Vietnam has frequently been framed as a political defeat, not a military defeat, and quick withdrawal narratives such as that articulated by Richardson have suffered as a result.

The gradual withdrawal narrative has proven more effective for opponents of the Iraq War. In this narrative the troops are withdrawn from harm's way slowly and come home within a reasonable time frame that will protect American lives while giving the Iraqi government an opportunity to stand on its own militarily and politically. The prospect of a long-term commitment or the spectacle of an embarrassing "defeat" are minimized under this scenario, and the extended timeline means reduced attention from the media as public attention fades into the background. This narrative was central to the three major Democrats in the recent presidential primaries (Obama, Clinton, and Edwards) and remained a core narrative in the Obama campaign in the fall of 2008. It is a narrative that eventually took hold in the lame duck White House as President Bush—who had previously steadfastly refused to accept any timetable for bringing U.S. troops home—agreed with Iraq's Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to consider a "general time horizon" for a U.S. departure—that is, a phased withdrawal. Maliki understood the challenge this shift in narrative posed for Bush when he told the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* in July, 2008, that the "Americans have had trouble agreeing to a concrete timetable for withdrawal, because they feel it would appear tantamount to an admission of defeat."[54]

Discussion

In previous U.S. wars, a central narrative had been a critical element in developing support and direction for the war effort. This is not the case with the war on terror. The United States declared the war on terror with no established or emergent "state of war narrative." This had proven to be a critical element in the conduct of past wars and yet this historical condition did not exist with the war on terror.

What was absent in the case of the war on terror was an established or emergent narrative generated from the political center with the intent of signaling a coherent response during a time of war. And what is seen now, as the country grapples with ending the war on terror as it is being played out in Iraq, is competing narratives that attempt to define political players as winners or losers in the struggle.

We identified four narratives surrounding the operation of the war on terror. We have portrayed narratives describing our involvement in this war on terror according to how extensive the operational demands are and how intense the cultural commitments.

And, as Iraq is one of the more invasive representations of the war on terror, we have also identified four narratives that surround the exit strategy that might accompany the withdrawal of our troops from Iraq. The

narratives are delineated by their insistence on defining the excursion as a "win" or a "loss," and to what extent the general public is cognizant of the situation. Both sets of narratives emerge from the political centers of the debate about the war on terror and our disengagement from Iraq as part of that war on terror.

Human thought and action does not occur in a mental vacuum, but rather is shaped by (and, in turn, shapes) ongoing narratives that accompany political action. The narratives compete for dominance as competing story lines jockey for public attention. These stories provide a guidepost for citizens as they interpret and evaluate the war on terror. Making sense of the war and the exit from a war draws heavily on these narratives as they manifest themselves in the public consciousness.

Notes

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9. Known by various names—initially the National Security Study Group, then the Hart-Rudman Commission (after its co-chairs), and most recently and formally the U.S. Commission on National Security for the 21st Century—it issued its first report in 1999, a second in 2000, and a lengthy final report less than a year later. See Gary Hart, Warren B. Rudman, Anne Armstrong, et al., *New World Coming: American Security in the 21st Century—Major Themes and Implications: The Phase I Report on the Emerging Global Security Environment for the First Quarter of the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: The United States

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22. For an overview of narrative psychology and related writings, see http://web.lemoyne.edu/~hevern/narpsych.html.

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