

ROADS TO WAR: IS THE U.S. TAKING
THE ROAD NEVER TRAVELED?

A Thesis
Presented
to the Faculty of
California State University, Chico

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
Communication Studies

by
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Spring 2014

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DEDICATION

*For my loving family, without whom, none of this
would have been possible.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Completing this thesis project has proven to be both one of the most challenging and rewarding endeavors of my life and I owe a great deal of gratitude to those who have been in my proximity for the past year to absorb some of the highs and lows that have accompanied this process. Throughout my time at Chico State as both an undergraduate and graduate student, I have been intrigued, encouraged, mentored, and inspired as both a scholar and educator by many members of this department's faculty. For that I am thankful.

I would first like to thank Dr. Zach Justus, who graciously agreed to chair my thesis committee. It has been a privilege to work with such an amazing scholar, engaging teacher, and dear friend. At certain points during this stressful process, his intermittent reminders that previous advisees (namely Taure) also struggled and got stuck spending days at a time, stagnantly staring at a screen seemingly without progress, brought me a sort of unethical comfort in times of need. In the time spanning from when I first had Zach as an instructor in the CMST 350 course in rhetoric, where I realized just how satisfying learning and thinking can be, to the CMST 452 Freedom of Speech course where he pushed me to do something a little bit bigger, until now, he has been my greatest source of inspiration and influence as a scholar, educator, and person.

I would also like to thank my committee member Dr. Young Cho. His insights and critical attention to detail have been invaluable to this project. He too has been enormously influential to me as a scholar. He is one of the most deeply contemplative

people I have ever met, who constantly challenged me to question the way I think and see the world around me. In sum, after every one of his lectures, I was left critically thinking just a little bit deeper, and from the time I have been fortunate enough to spend with him, I believe that was his goal.

I would also like to thank my committee member Dr. Aaron Quinn. His expertise in journalism and its intersection with politics offered a valuable perspective from outside the Communication Studies department. Early in the process, his very direct critiques of my thesis proposal and insightful suggestions helped me turn a messy document into something that I am now very proud of.

I would also like to thank my family for their love and support. While I had a rocky start with school, I am glad to have finally been able to give them something to put on the refrigerator. Though, they might need a powerful magnet for this thesis. I have missed them immensely during my time here in Chico, and I look forward to regularly spending time with them again.

Most of all, I owe an immeasurable amount of gratitude to my loving fiancé Lucy. She has taken the brunt of the highs and lows of my thesis and graduate school more than anyone else. During times of immense stress, she did everything possible to absorb some of the burden. At times when I was coldly absent, she was empathetic and warm. She is truly my better half, and this tumultuous span of time has continued to affirm how lucky I am to spend the rest of my life with her.

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores President Barack Obama's rhetorical strategies in his calls for military strikes against the Syrian government. Many scholars have noted the stylistic, substantive, and situational regularities in ways in which presidents sell war to Congress and the public, which is why many have presented war rhetoric as a genre. By taking into account the historical development of American war rhetoric, I employ a generic criticism to provide insight into his rhetorical strategies and how his rhetoric fits with the broader genre. Ultimately, I argue that while his rhetoric was unsuccessful in terms of selling military action, it demonstrated a progressive break from a problematic discourse of romanticized violence.

CHAPTER I

ROADS TO WAR: IS THE U.S. TAKING THE ROAD NEVER TRAVELED?

With few exceptions, the rhetorical path to war has proven to be a one-way street for American presidents. Since the turn to the 20th century, images of savagery and an infallible sense of self-identity have propelled the nation to numerous conflicts in the name of spreading freedom and democracy. The extent to which these explicit outcomes were actually pursued and achieved has varied between situations; nonetheless rhetorical formula for how presidents construct foreign crises and mobilize support for military action has proven to be steadfast. However, when the Syrian government broke international law by attacking its own people with chemical weapons, the current president's call for the use of military force deviated from the rhetorical narrative of his predecessors. Ultimately, the United States turned around on the one-way street.

This thesis explores the rhetorical strategies used by President Barack Obama to sell military strikes against the Syrian government to Congress and the American public. More specifically, the task of this project is to explore how Obama and his administration characterized the chemical weapons attacks against Syrian civilians and the rhetorical strategies he used to call on Congress and the American public to support military response. According to Simons (2007), "Rhetorical analysis serves importantly as a vehicle for understanding rhetorical choices and the strategic considerations giving

rise to them” (p. 184). The context of the Obama administration’s request for military strikes warrants rhetorical analysis for several reasons.

Rationale

First, presidential war rhetoric has proven to be repetitive in form, topoi, and style in recurring political circumstances, which is why scholars consider it a rhetorical genre (Campbell & Jamieson, 2008; Murphy, 2003; Winkler, 2007). Presidents and their administrations have used strikingly similar rhetorical strategies to sell war, which has produced an internal dynamic function. Robert Ivie (2005b), Carol Winkler (2007), and many others have asserted, that the dramatic narrative used by Bush to sell the “Global War on Terror” was not unlike the rhetoric used by his predecessors to sell past wars. However, the rhetorical appeals used by the Obama administration for strikes in Syria diverged from the prevalent war rhetoric genre. Rhetoricians should pay special attention to generic breaks, because it highlights the rationale of the existing generic formula (Hart & Daughton, 2005). As Josh Gunn (2004) asserts:

The function of the generic critic is to bring social forms into conscious awareness by restoring them to their verbal character—by describing them, in language, as iterations of a recurring social form. Although genres are constrained by what appears in texts, it is important to underscore the field of genre is social. (p. 18)

Thus by analyzing how the current President breaks from the traditional genre, this study will provide insight as to the current state of the war rhetoric genre through this recent manifestation. By doing so, I hope to contribute to scholarship on presidential war rhetoric by highlighting the potential for breaking from a problematic war narrative.

Second, although the war in Afghanistan was purposively linked to the 9/11 attacks, the war in Iraq was one of choice. There was no evidence of a realistic imminent

threat to the United States or its allies by Iraq (Packer, 2005; Simons, 2007). Nonetheless, Iraq was equivocally linked to 9/11 to foster support and suppress dissent (Packer, 2005; Simons, 2007). Similarly, to the best of our knowledge, Syria poses little to no immediate threat the United States, making it a war of choice. Humanitarian justifications have been a powerful rhetorical stock for past presidents, especially in selling wars of choice, but are they it still as potent? Thus far, relative to the practical concerns of intervening in Syria, humanitarianism has received very little attention in the sociopolitical sphere in terms of propelling the movement to go to war. This could be in part due to the war-weary and ambivalent public atmosphere consequent of two long and expensive wars, which were unproductive toward the explicitly stated objectives of liberation and democratization. Looking at how the disastrous outcomes of the two previous wars intersect with the current deliberative discourse on Syria could indicate reluctance on behalf of Americans toward military engagement, similar to the reluctance toward war and military action after Vietnam.

Third, as Ivie (2004) and others note, democratic dissent was in large part rendered oxymoronic post-9/11 by the Bush administration. Political elites painted opposition (public, political, and news media alike) as subversive, unpatriotic, and even aiding and abetting terrorists, or as terrorists themselves. Obama sought Congressional authorization for using military force and subsequently their vote was postponed in favor of pursuing diplomatic solutions. Additionally, unlike Bush's "War on Terror," and other presidents before him who received pro-war support from news media, response to Obama's request for action was mixed. Some news agencies demonstrated support, others supported action but not Obama's plan (Fox), others were opposed to any action

(Al Jazeera), and some demonstrating fluctuating opinions (New York Times). For this reason, this study will also explore how agency for democratic dissent has transformed from previous circumstances through Obama's rhetorical approach.

Over the last decade, there has been an enormous amount of scholarly interest directed at the ways in which the Bush administration sold the "Global War on Terror" to Congress and the American public (Osgood & Frank, 2010). Scholars have paid particular attention to the ways the administration used a hyperbolic and melodramatic rhetorical narrative to obscure facts, rational thought, divert attention from evidence by foregrounding a grand mission, and suppressing democratic dissent (Ivie, 2007; Krebs & Lobasz, 2007; Williamson, 2010). Central to this narrative was a good versus evil binary and a rhetoric of American exceptionalism that defined the United States' geopolitical role as to promote "freedom" and "democracy" by fighting tyranny (Simons, 2007). However, these tropes were not unique in Bush's rhetoric, past presidents have featured these rhetorical devices in their war rhetoric for much of the last century (Murphy, 2003). I will continue to bring attention to ways in which American presidents construct foreign crisis and call for military action through an analysis of Barack Obama's response to the chemical weapons attacks in Syria.

Overview of the Study

In order to address these issues in the analysis, it is necessary to first review existing war rhetoric literature to contextualize and inform the present study. First will come a review of scholarship regarding how presidents linguistically construct crisis as the starting point to military engagement. Next I will discuss the function of political

myth and two myths that have been foundational to war rhetoric. Lastly I will review how past American presidents have helped develop the contemporary war narrative used in the “Global War on Terror,” which will aid in analyzing Obama’s call to action.

Chapter III will outline the methodological approach employed by this study to analyze Obama’s rhetorical strategies. Given that a goal of this project is to explicate the ways Obama’s rhetoric interacts with the larger genre of presidential crisis and war rhetoric, this section will begin with an explanation of *genre* and generic criticism from a rhetorical perspective. Next, I will then move into an explanation of the conceptual framework introduced by Denise Bostdorff (1994) to analyze presidential war rhetoric. This framework is informed by Kenneth Burke’s theories of dramatism and identification.

Chapter IV applied this method toward an in-depth investigation of Obama’s rhetorical call for military strikes against Syria. The data set analyzed was comprised of President Obama’s addresses ranging from his first address after the chemical weapons attack until the situation deescalated into a diplomatic solution. Throughout this section, the findings of the present study will be contextualized with examples of past presidential discourses and relevant rhetorical scholarship.

In Chapter V, I will present a discussion of the findings from the analysis. This will begin by briefly answering the research questions that guided this project. Then will come a discussion of how the findings implicate rhetorical theory and democratic thinking. This chapter will conclude with the study’s limitations and suggested directions for future research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Rhetorical Presidency and the Social Construction of Crises

Throughout the history of the United States, presidents and their administrations have had to sell foreign policy decisions to Congress, the press, and the American public, which is especially true of the most severe decisions faced by any political leader—using military force (Campbell & Jamieson, 2008; Entman, 2003, 2004). Unfortunately, as history has shown, they have been exceptionally good at it. Though evidence of these rhetorical efforts can be traced back the American Revolution and before, the strategies of chief executives to achieve political and public sway have become exceptionally systematic and dynamic over the past century, where advances in communication and information created an exigency for political elites to effectively garner the support of the public through the press (Osgood & Frank, 2010). As a product of these military engagements and episodes, a formulaic rhetorical narrative has emerged as the rhetoric for war.

The following sections will outline the rhetorical construction of crisis and the evolution of war rhetoric in order to provide understanding of its present function. Many rhetorical studies would classify the focus of this study as crises rhetoric as opposed to war rhetoric because the president has not declared war. However, because existing scholarship has shown such continuity between calls for military action, whether or not

war was officially declared (Winkler, 2007), I work from the understanding that constructing crisis is an inherent justification for military action. I will proceed by first discussing the rhetorical function of the president in the context of promoting foreign crisis.

Presidential Rhetoric and Foreign Policy

No figure in the American political system plays a more central role than the president in shaping how the public perceives the political world. Denton and Woodward (1990) describe the presidency as “an office, a role, a persona, constructing a position of power, myth, legend, and persuasion. Everything a president does or says has implications and communicates ‘something.’ Every act, word, or phrase becomes a calculated and measured for response” (pp. 199-200). Since the inception of the American three-branch system of government, the institution of the presidency has become more rhetorical in the sense that presidents now communicate to the public with greater frequency in an effort to move public opinion. As Edwards (2003) asserts, “Leading the public is the core of the modern presidency,” which has obscured the lines between campaigning and governing, or as he calls it, “going public” (p. 4).

The president’s significance is amplified in the realm of foreign policy as a result of the constitutional obligations and privileges the position entails. Article II of the Constitution outlines the president’s role as the Commander in Chief of the United States’ military forces, with the responsibility to preserve national security. In relation to foreign policy the president is also responsible for fulfilling the duties of chief diplomat. Along with these obligations comes with access to information about foreign matters unmatched by any other political actor (Bostdorff, 1994; McCrisken, 2003; Schonberg,

2003). The power of the president to fulfill these roles has grown with the nation's rapid transformation from its early isolationist philosophy of foreign involvement to one of intervention (Judis, 2004b). This shift occurred around the turn to the 20th century with the McKinley presidency and the Spanish-American War (Ivie, 1972; Judis, 2004b); and with two World Wars, the Cold War against Communism, the present "Global War on Terrorism," and several other intermittent interventions, the president's centrality to foreign affairs has continued to grow.

Presidents communicate about foreign affairs through public discourse, which serves to shape the social reality of events. People learn about and experience the political world through language, rarely through actual experience (Edelman, 1988). Though both speakers' and audiences' own experiences and histories undoubtedly influence how public discourse is created and interpreted, the language used to describe these situations in large part gives them meaning and constructs a social reality. Bostdorff (1994) explains, "Because of the symbolic nature of our political world, the issues that presidents discuss are not objective, independent entities themselves, but linguistic constructions" (p. 4). Though people, places, and things do indeed materially exist, their meaning comes from the language used to describe them and the situations they are a part of. Stated otherwise, political realities are not just given to the public; they are constructed from a number of different possible definitions (Cole, 1996; Zarefsky, 2004).

Presidents often have the greatest power over how the nation defines foreign affairs (Zarefsky, 1986), stemming both from their concrete constitutional obligations and their symbolic performance of the office (Murphy, 2003), as well as access to public communication their prominence affords them. As Zarefsky (2004) asserts, "The

presidential definition is stipulated, offered as if were natural and uncontroversial, rather than chosen and contestable” (p. 612). In many cases they present their justification for policy in a way that makes it seem commonsensical (Ivie, 1984). Thus, even though the president’s definition of a situation might be, and often is, contested by some members of the public, media, or government, their rhetoric has enormous influence on creating and enacting policy (Stuckey, 2008). They also have the power to select and emphasize what is and what is not of importance to the political world. The following section will review how presidents use their power of definition to promote foreign crises.

Foreign Crises as Rhetorical Constructions

In promoting foreign crises to the public, the presidential power of definition is especially strong (Bostdorff et al., 2008). Here, the term *promote* is appropriate for this context because foreign crises are linguistic constructions that presidents not only shape the meaning of, but in many cases give existence to (Bostdorff, 1994, 2008) by defining a particular situation as both unique and threatening (Edelman, 1977). That is not to say presidents construct crises out of thin air; however, it is often through presidential rhetoric that foreign crises enter public discourse, and that situations are articulated as crises. Given that these situations happen in places and with people that Americans are typically far removed from, presidents have an enormous influence over what should be considered important to the public.

Denise Bostdorff (1994) offers a clear example of how presidents rhetorically construct crises that would otherwise not receive public attention with President Reagan’s intervention in Grenada. Though the coup in Grenada posed little to no immediate threat to the United States, President Reagan’s rhetoric promoted it as a crisis by defining the

situation as threatening. To build public and congressional support for military action, he linked it to a larger and ongoing effort to contain the Cold War communist threat. Thus the “crisis” and justification for action were articulated with the existing goals of containment and preserving freedom and democracy, goals that were congruent with foreign policy rhetoric throughout the Cold War.

Many international situations become crises because of presidents rhetorically constructing them as such, yet many similar situations never become crises (Bostdorff, 1994; Windt, 1990). There are often far worse international crises occurring—in terms of destruction, violence, and loss of human life that are either not constructed as crises, or that receive no attention what so ever. Nonetheless, Reagan constructed the Grenadian coup as a crisis through his rhetorical narrative, which helped him build the perception of a threat to America and materialize his suggested course of action. Richard Cherwitz (1978), in his study of Lyndon Johnson’s articulation of the Tonkin Gulf situation, similarly argued that presidential rhetoric constructs international crisis, and also functions to limit policy alternatives.

As many rhetorical scholars have noted, a constitutive part of the rhetorical crisis formula has proven to be the capacity of an administration to promote events and crises in a way that connects them with historically developed national ideals (Bostdorff, 1994; Krebs & Lobasz, 2007; Murphy, 2003; Osgood & Frank, 2010). For presidents this has often meant producing a rhetoric that unites the populace around an interpretation of a problem and a course of action by framing the situation in a certain way that resonates with the audience. As can be seen in the Grenada example, Reagan defined the crisis through overarching principles of freedom and democracy, and with the perceived threat

of communism. This basic structure has permeated war rhetoric for at least the last century, where an argument is extracted from a dramatic narrative defining America's place in the world. The need to go to war is not typically framed in a way that advocates going to war or engaging in a violent conflict, instead it is typically grounded in a national responsibility for ensuring peace (Ivie, 1974), and presented in a form that celebrates American mythos (Osgood & Frank, 2010).

The American Ethos as a Justificatory Narrative

America's Exceptional Mission

As Robert Ivie (1974) notes, "National images lie at the root of state's definition of crisis situations and play a significant role in the complex process leading to war" (p. 338). These national images are embodied in presidential war rhetoric and function to create a generalized sense of understanding and purpose to the outside world (Ryan, 2000). They illustrate the big picture of American foreign relations and what means should be used to deal with them. Crises, as the beginning or rationale of military engagements, are often communicated to the public through conduits of collectively shared and historically developed national ideals.

Presidents have promoted crisis and justified war by constructing an abstract and mythical narrative of the United States and its respective geopolitical role in the world in order to persuade the public to support their suggested policy. As Murphy (2003) notes, this is done through a rhetorical hybrid that fuses what Aristotle classified as "deliberative discourse, arguments to justify the expediency or practicality of an action, and epideictic rhetoric, appeals that unify the community and amplify its virtues"

(p. 609). This is an ongoing process, where presidents add to the rhetorical narrative of their predecessors. In the pages that follow, I will chart the historical development of the American president's lexicon for constructing crisis and selling war. This will begin by reviewing literature on the political function of myth, and two myths that have been foundational to presidential war rhetoric: American exceptionalism and the myth of a perpetual savage adversary.

Political Myth. Along with the linguistic and social constructionist turn in communication studies, many scholars began to study myth and how it functions socially and politically (Blumenberg, 1985; Geertz, 1983; Malinowski, 1992). Other scholars have explored the way political myth functions in modern secular societies (Bottici, 2007; Bottici & Challand, 2006; Flood, 1996). Edelman defined *myth* (1975) as “prestructured beliefs regarding the nature and the causes of public problems,” which often work to bypass critical thought and rational reasoning (p. 1). In other words, they are a reproduction of societally held beliefs, often about cultural history. “Myth is to ideology what poetry is to reason” (Williamson, 2010, p. 217). Political rhetoric often evokes powerful national myths that influence social thought by tapping into collective memory (Edelman, 1975).

Myths are constitutive of cultures that reproduce them (Burke, 1947).

However, political myths hold epistemic power with the “evocative potential” to obscure reality (Hart, 1997, p. 242). According to Williamson (2010):

Myth is part collective dream, part prophecy, and part rhetorical narcotic. No culture is immune to the addictive seductions of this archetypal narrative form that embodies, perhaps more than any other type of discourse, the power of narrative rationality over *logic*. (p. 216)

In addition, as Stone (2001) asserts, myths “can hold a powerful grip on our psyches because they offer the promise of resolution for scary problems” (p. 137). The use of political myth is a powerful resource in the act of selling war because of its function to simplify the complex and unpalatable problem of real war and its consequences into a “representative anecdote,” or a simplified summary (Burke, 1966, p. 216), which captures and epitomizes a nation’s “collective ethos through a characteristic reliance on allegorical versions of the sacred and the agonistic” (Williamson, 2010, p. 216).

In many ways, political myths paint a collectively accepted narrative of how the world we live in works (Esch, 2010). What follows is a discussion of two myths that have been used extensively as inventive resources for promoting crisis and legitimating war: American exceptionalism and the image of a savage Other. The first refers to the ideal image America has held for itself throughout history, including its geopolitical role. The latter refers to the external, yet transferable enemy that helps define the United States’ role within the world antithetically. This mythical duo has been instrumental in selling American foreign policy, as Esch (2010) states, by providing “moral justification for military violence throughout American history” (p. 365).

American Exceptionalism. The myth of American exceptionalism has been foundational to defining America’s role in the world. Though American exceptionalism has many meanings and uses—both positive and pejorative—for the purpose of this literature review pertaining to war rhetoric, it will suffice to define it as the theory or attitude that America is qualitatively different from other nations (McCartney, 2006, McCrisken, 2003; Rodgers, 2004). This phrase was initially introduced in Alexis de Tocqueville’s (1835) book *Democracy in America*. The notion of exceptionalism comes

from a perception of a heroic historical evolution and unique origins (Edwards, 2011). As Esch (2010) asserts, “The myth of American exceptionalism details America’s ideal image of its place in the world” (p. 366). It perpetuates the understanding of America as “an extraordinary nation with a special role to play in human history” (McCrisken, 2003, p. 1). “As a complex mythic formation,” Ivie (2009) asserts, “American exceptionalism is an enduring yet dynamic assemblage of discontinuities within a narrative of national virtue” (p.15).

American presidents have traditionally subscribed to the basic tenets of American exceptionalism in their public discourse (McCartney, 2004). A clear example of this assertion can be found in inaugural and State of the Union addresses, where presidents frequently and overtly affirm this exceptionalism (Campbell & Jamieson, 2008). The belief that America is unique and exceptional has been foundational to and recurring in presidential rhetoric throughout the history of the nation. As Edwards (2011) asserts, “the rhetoric of American exceptionalism permeates every period of American history” (pp. 1-2).

As a result, we have come to understand America’s historical narrative through a sense of universalism. As McCartney (2004) explains, the “American national identity has been premised upon the belief that the nation's binding principles are rooted in qualities and capacities shared by all people, everywhere” (p. 402). This has led to the widespread assumption among Americans that “America's national interest and the greater good of mankind are one and the same” (McCartney, 2004, p. 402). American’s have been socialized by this assumption to see the United States as infallible in its endeavors around the world, with a sense of moral superiority. The myth of American

exceptionalism, including the notion of universalized aspirations was eventually applied to foreign relations.

Although presidents have consistently adhered to the basic tenants of American exceptionalism, there has been less agreement in terms of how the “chosen nation” should fulfill this role (Edwards, 2011; Judis, 2004a, 2005; McCartney, 2004, 2006; McEvoy-Levy, 2001). Essentially, two different approaches to foreign relations have been evident in the rhetoric of U.S. presidents: leading by example and intervening. From the time America gained independence to the 1890s, American presidents and other politicians endorsed what has been called a “mission of exemplar” (Judis, 2004b; Lipset, 1996; McCartney, 2004; McEvoy-Levy, 2001). During this time, as Judis (2005) asserts, “Most American policymakers believed that the best means to transform the world was by example—by creating what John Winthrop called a ‘city on the hill’ that all nations could emulate” (p. 57). George Washington (1796) was the first to declare that American lead by example, and avoid at all costs intervening in the “foreign world” in any war other than economically (as cited in McCrisken, 2003). In this context, the “foreign world” (18th century Europe) primarily consisted of nations ruled by hereditary monarchies, and citizens were subjects. They had not yet “achieved” what the U.S. had. Thus the logic was that we should do what we can to influence the world around us by exemplifying our exceptional democracy and values without the risk of foreign entities hindering our progress.

Aside from the expansionist tendencies that occurred domestically, this strategy of leading by example structured American foreign relations up until the end of the 19th century, when American’s mission of civilizing the world from afar moved

toward a more active and hands-on approach. Policymakers moved toward a “mission of intervention” to fulfill America’s exceptional duties in the world, which has underwritten foreign relations since (Bostdorff, 1994). Rather than just interacting with the foreign world through commerce, proponents of the interventionist strategy felt it was necessary to speed up America’s political influence as well (Smith, 1995). They felt that part of the U.S.’ exceptional heritage involved a responsibility to lead the world toward progress, especially for those who subscribed to our core values. Similarly to the mission of exemplar strategy, this too was grounded in assumption that America’s values were held as universal, and existed as the envy of the world (Edwards, 2011). Judis (2005) outlined three assumptions that came to constitute the myth of American exceptionalism as it functioned in foreign policy: America is a “chosen” nation; American has a worldly mission to fulfill; and America was involved in a perpetual fight between good and evil, ostensibly on the good side. In what follows, I will discuss the how American presidents have articulated the need for military intervention abroad by tapping in to these assumptions.

American War Rhetoric: An Exceptional Nation & Savage Provocation

A crucial element in defining America’s role in the world and justifying military intervention has been the rhetorical construction of a heroic good versus savage evil binary (Bates, 2004; Campbell & Jamieson, 2008; Esch, 2010; Ivie, 1974, 1980, 1984, 2005a). A major rhetorical assumption that has precipitated the turn toward interventional foreign policy is that America is a peace-loving nation that represents the

forces of good in the world. Oddly enough, this idea of peacebuilding has also been the jumping off point in presidential war rhetoric. As Ivie (1980) notes:

Warfare is characterized as a means of last resort, a necessary evil forced upon a reluctant nation by the aggressive acts of an enemy bent upon the alienation of humankind from their liberties. As a victim of these tyrannical forces of aggression, the nation fights 'just wars' that are 'in self-defense or in collective defense against armed attack' and is thereby exonerated of responsibility for an outbreak of hostilities. (p. 279)

As evidenced by the history of American war rhetoric, justification often occurs through victimage, whether or not the United States was actually attacked. Because of the nation's proprietary relationship with democracy and freedom, an alleged attack against either taking place in any nation friendly to the U.S. offers justification.

President McKinley Sets the Stage. Leading up to the 1898 war with Spain, William McKinley constructed a crisis and sold a war overseas that was one of the earliest examples of an American president using moral superiority and victimage to manufacture public consent for the mission of intervention (Herring, 2010). Graeber (1961) contended that this was a major turning point in American foreign policy from realism to an idealistic democratic mission (p. 6), as McKinley appealed in 1898 for "the cause of humanity and to put an end to the barbarities, bloodshed, starvation, and horrible miseries now existing," against a "barbaric" Spanish enemy (as cited in Ivie, 1980, p. 287). McKinley evoked two different images of savages in his call to action, which would come to be a part of subsequent presidential rhetorics for the remainder of the century. The first type were the helplessly uncivilized people in Cuba and later the Philippines who were victimized by the second interpretation of savagery, which was a brutal and tyrannical Spanish Government.

The public and media were already sold on war as a result of a suspected attack on the *USS Maine*, which McKinley (1898) described as an,

appalling calamity [that] fell upon the people of our country with crushing force, and for a brief time an intense excitement prevailed, which in a community less just and self-controlled than ours might have led to hasty acts of blind resentment. (as cited in Campbell & Jamieson, 2008, p. 106)

Thus it was easier for McKinley to use this direct aggression against the U.S. as a means for declaring war with Spain. He expanded the role to taking away Spain's Pacific possessions, namely by annexing the Philippines, arguing that they could be the beneficiaries of our generosity. Here, McKinley (1898) offers the following reasons as justification:

And one night late it came to me this way—I don't know how it was, but it came: (1) That we could not give them back to Spain—that would be cowardly and dishonorable; (2) that we could not turn them over to France or Germany—our commercial rivals in the Orient—that would be bad business and discreditable; (3) that we could not leave them to themselves—they were unfit for self-government—and they would soon have anarchy and misrule over there worse than Spain's was; and (4) that there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God's grace do the very best we could by them, as our fellow-men for whom Christ also died... (as cited in Ivie, 1972, p. 17)

Though images of a primitive savage were used earlier to describe Native Americans as rhetorical justification for a forceful “civilizing,” McKinley appropriated it to foreign policy. For him, it was not only necessary to liberate them from savage rule, but also to Americanize them as a means of salvation.

In recognizing the proliferation of news media and new information technologies, according to Herring (2010), “William McKinley was among the first U.S. politicians to recognize the growing importance of public opinion in turn-of-the-century foreign policy” (p. 19). McKinley, through the tenets of American exceptionalism,

rationalized American colonization as a favor to them, as he quotes, “The genius of the nation, its freedom, its wisdom, its humanity, its courage, its justice, favored by Divine Providence, will make it equal to every task and the master of every emergency” (as cited in Ivie, 1972, p. 21). He toured the nation speaking to the public, and paid close attention to how journalists received information and how they reported information, which can now be seen as the embryonic stage of the modern press-state relationship (Herring, 2010).

The themes present in his rhetorical strategy endured, with a central overarching theme being America’s new and *exceptional* role as a world power (Herring, 2010). Subsequent conflicts have contributed to the American exceptionalism narrative, while cohering individual episodes into an overarching mission to restore and maintain peace in the world by fighting “evil” as a national duty. This theme has been present in nearly every president’s justification for using military force in foreign countries.

Wilson Continues the Imperial Presidency. Where McKinley left off, Woodrow Wilson continued to build the foundation of war rhetoric and imperialism (Rosenberg, 2010b). Guided by the rhetoric of American exceptionalism employed by McKinley, President Wilson intervened to “help” in Mexico. After the assassination of Francisco Madero, the democratically elected President of Mexico, Wilson felt it was the responsibility of the U.S. to help them overthrow the new dictator General Victoriano Huerta and help them reestablish a democracy. However, according to Judis (2004), “instead of being greeted as liberators, the U.S. forces encountered stiff resistance and inspired riots and demonstrations, uniting Huerta with his political opponents” against an American invader (p. 54). He continues, “Wilson learned the hard way that attempts to

instill U.S.–style constitutional democracy and capitalism through force were destined to fail” (p. 54).

Despite the irony in this statement considering American foreign policy since, back then, imperialism did not connote for Americans the same antagonistic meaning and ethicality it does today. For instance, at that time many Americans considered the philosophical foundation of manifest destiny to be morally laudable and mutually beneficial. President Wilson continued to build the myth of America’s divine role as the leader of the world overseas in World War I. He, and many other presidents felt that the world would be a more free, peaceful, and prosperous place if the rest of the world would simply adopt our morals, values, and political and economic systems (Judis, 2004a). Like McKinley, Wilson also was more involved in strategic communication to the public. He was one of the first presidents in the 20th century to develop and effectively use forms of propaganda such as posters and advertisements to amplify American values and distinguish them from those of our evil German and Ottoman adversaries (Rosenberg, 2010a).

The Good War & the Analogical Referent. These tactics for mobilizing public consent were consistent through World War II, where Franklin D. Roosevelt rallied support to fight wars on both European and Pacific fronts (Stoler, 2010). Like the attack on the *USS Maine* that helped mobilized the public to support McKinley’s war with Spain, situational events such as the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the German Nazi party invading its neighboring countries helped the President boost public support as he sold the war (Stoler, 2010). Though opponents of F.D.R. advocated for America to return to its isolationist approach to foreign policy, others felt that it was crucial to keep

experience in the White House during a time of crisis by electing Roosevelt to his third term (Hauser, 1999).

Americans understand this war, as opposed to some later conflicts, as a justified and provoked war, where America helped accomplish an enormous task in the name of humanity (Bostdorff & Goldzwig, 2005). The humanitarian aspect was amplified by the horrifying discovery of the widespread genocide committed by our German enemy. As a result this event, known popularly as “The Good War,” became the apex of American morality. Nearly all presidents since have referenced it in their own calls for military action. As David Noon (2004) asserts:

As the mythic summit of national virtue, World War II has emerged even more profoundly since the end of the Cold War as a reservoir of social memory into which current events, detached from the routine flow of history, may be siphoned off and blessed with gravity and epic meaning. (p. 341)

This event became the pinnacle stock of invention for presidents to come. From then on, almost regardless of situation and context, war rhetorics were associated to World War II, often as a continuation of America’s grand mission. Some have questioned the ethicality of this rhetorical strategy. As noted earlier by Campbell and Jamieson (2008) war rhetoric often involves the strategic misrepresentation of situations, and one example of this can be seen in the abundant analogical references to WWII. As Stoler (2010) notes:

it set the stage for a consistent misuse and abuse of analogies to the World War II years by every president since Roosevelt in their efforts to win public support for their own policies and for continued public myopia regarding the rest of the world. (p. 87)

This war was constructed to be the centerpiece of an overarching master narrative—or grand mission—of the United States to serve as a beacon of peace and democracy with an

innate and eternal responsibly to destroy enemies who threaten this mission and American values.

The Cold War Strategies: Exemplar

and Intervention. World War II was understood as an event that freed many nations from the clutches of evil and barbarism. President Harry Truman sought to continue this fight by thwarting communism, which was promoted as the new threatening entity. After World War II had ended, the public was left war-weary as a result of two World Wars in a single generation (Schulzinger, 2010). Despite this feeling of hesitancy, as Zinn (2003) states, the “Truman administration worked to create an atmosphere of crisis and Cold War” (p. 425). Zinn continues, “In a series of moves abroad and at home, it established a climate of fear—a hysteria about communism—which would steeply escalate the military budget and stimulate the economy with war related orders” (Zinn, 2003, p. 425).

The provocation or threat posed by communists was especially compelling because it was constructed as an invisible enemy—a spreadable contagion in a sense (Ivie, 2007; Schulzinger, 2010; Zinn, 2003). Part of the rhetorical war narrative used by Truman, and subsequent Cold War presidents, emphasized containment and preemption (Ivie, 1987, 2007; Zinn, 2003). Concomitantly, the mission of intervention abroad worked to stop the spread of communism while the mission of exemplar functioned domestically to police any “un-American” tendencies. In 1950, Truman signed National Security Council Report 68 formalizing the United States’ priority of thwarting communism, as Robert Ivie (2007) states:

According to this formative articulation of US security doctrine, America confronted an ‘implacable ... slave state’ adamantly opposed to freedom and ruled by ‘evil men.’ This evil enemy was a communist ‘monolith held together by the iron curtain around it and the iron bars within it.’ (p. 38)

According to Ivie (2005) “Truman conjured a powerful cold war spell by representing the Soviet savage in terms of fire, flood and red fever to convey the threatening image of a communist epidemic and impending disaster for the free world” (p. 58). Here Truman exemplifies this objective that would come to be known as The Truman Doctrine:

the free peoples of the world look to us for support in maintaining their freedoms. If we falter in our leadership, we may endanger the peace of the world—and we shall surely endanger the welfare of our own nation. (as cited in McCrisken, 2003, p. 22)

In the early years of the Cold War, Truman set the themes of presidential war rhetoric for the next two decades by developing the idea of a communist enemy that is antithetical to American values such as “freedom,” “democracy,” and “peace” (Schulzinger, 2010). Liberation, peace, democracy remained central themes in the discourse of American foreign policy through the subsequent conflicts in Korean and Vietnam, which were both part of the larger Cold War fight against communism (Ivie, 1980; Murphy, 2003).

In contrast to the sense of nostalgia evoked by reference to WWII, the rhetorical fuel for entering Vietnam functioned in a different way, emphasizing early Cold War “images of savagery” (Berman, 1982; Ivie, 1987). The villainous Other became the Soviet Union fueled communists in North Korea (Young, 2010) and North Vietnam (Pach, 2010) that in both cases invaded their southern counterparts. Future Cold War presidents would continue to use the binary notion of protecting freedom from the communist contagion as a means of propelling policy. According to Judis (2005), “During the early cold war, many American officials, stunned by the Soviet Union’s

acquisition of the bomb and its domination of Eastern Europe, succumbed to a view of the Soviet Union as the demonic center of a seam-less world conspiracy” (p. 59).

However, Kennedy managed to temporarily break from the Manichean binary of good versus evil through humanizing dialogue. As Ivie (2007) found, “Rather than succumbing to the prevailing demonology in a moment of extreme crisis, President Kennedy and Chairman Khrushchev together opted to finesse the rhetorical divide between their two countries” (p. 38). While they cooled the growing threat of nuclear confrontation, it was not the result of coming to a consensus or resolving their ideological differences. Instead, their interactions worked to synchronize conflicting accounts of events. During this time, both countries remained competitive rivals, but without projecting evil on to one another. As Ivie notes, “From a communication standpoint, we might say that they engaged one another in a dynamic process of rhetorical invention in order to accommodate conflicting perspectives” (2007, p. 39). Key to this model of diplomacy is the emphasis on conflicting perspectives as opposed to conflicted people.

As the Cold War continued, Vietnam would present a new situation that made it more difficult for presidents to clearly define and demonize an enemy, because for the first time in American history, journalists reported from the actual conflict zones. Rather than the sanitized and glorified accounts of war that were the norm during WWII, the public’s perception of war became influenced by images and footage of actual war (Pach, 2010). Here Stuckey (1992) outlines this important distinction:

In memory and Saturday afternoon movies, World War II has been emptied of potentially controversial content and moral ambiguity; it stands as a national symbol of a ‘good’ war, when all the villains were on the other side, and Americans fought a clearly delineated foreign enemy, not one another. (p. 246)

With the live footage and advances in communication technology of Vietnam, the public was exposed to images of dead soldiers and civilians on a daily basis. Photojournalism demonstrated a new capacity to shape the meaning of war and activate dissent. Iconic images of the war entered American pop culture. A notable example can be seen in Nick Ut's (1972) photo titled *Accidental Napalm*, which depicted a little girl running naked in excruciating pain after being exposed to napalm (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007). This new idea of what would come to be known as "collateral damage" created a new sense of contempt with war and the government's role in waging it (Pach, 2010; Zinn, 2003). The public was exposed to the reality that American forces often killed civilians. This was further complicated by the war resulting in a costly quagmire and controversy surrounding the war. Vietnam became the ultimate symbol of public war-weariness, what Henry Kissinger (1969) would later term Vietnam Syndrome.

Policymakers after the Cold War were forced to find a new rationale for deploying the United States' military (Cole, 1999). When George H.W. Bush sold the first war in Iraq, instead of referencing the wars that took place before him, he worked against the synecdochal linking to previous conflicts, contesting the applicability of Vietnam and the collective guilt surrounding it (Williamson, 2010). Bill Clinton became the first President in the atomic age who was unable to take advantage of the Cold War meta-narrative to justify foreign policy and crises. Although he still received political support from Congress, news media frequently advanced oppositional frames to his calls for action in Haiti and Bosnia (Kuypers, 1997). The lack of inventive stock and overall lack of public enthusiasm for war experienced by both Presidents Bush and Clinton would soon be replenished during the presidency of George W. Bush (Simons, 2007).

“Global War on Terror” to Present

While the G. W. Bush administration was met with opposition to its first attempt to invade Iraq, this wish would soon reach fruition; as Simons (2007) explains, “For most Americans the 9/11 bombings were a tragedy; for neoconservatives bent on invading Iraq they were also an opportunity” (p. 337). On this day, 19 hijackers from different Middle Eastern and North African countries shocked the world as they executed the most catastrophic attack against Americans to date (Kellner, 2004), and for the first time unsettled the Nations’ comfortable sense of invincibility (Zinn, 2003). According to Gerard Hauser (2008), the 9/11 terrorist attacks “changed geopolitical reality for the United States, making it aware of its vulnerability to paramilitary aggression and catching it in a web of fear and anger” (p. 440). Consequently, this led to the Bush administration’s grim venture—referred to as the “Global War on Terror” (GWOT). With very few exceptions, American citizens, media, and politicians—liberal and conservative alike—demonstrated their unwavering support for this new policy, which was induced by a wave of nationalism guised as patriotism (Zinn, 2003). Although the United States’ concern with global terrorism existed decades before the GWOT (Kellner, 2004), the threat has solidified a reinvigorated *sin qua non*-status in American foreign policy since.

Bush (2001) informed that on 9/11 “enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country.” In this same vein, the dormant American mythos of exceptionalism and the fight between good and evil was rejuvenated into a new mission of intervention. Along with it came a resurgence of orientalism and domestic racism with the conflation of Islam with terrorism (Kumar, 2010). According to Gause (2005),

President Bush emphasized that this country faces a “‘generational challenge’ to instill democracy in the Arab world” (p.62). Bush and his administration argued that democratizing the Arab region would improve national security and spread our values, which would in turn halt the development of anti-American terrorism (Gause, 2005).

According to Simons (2007), these events gave the Bush administration agency for “a hyperbolic, decontextualized account of what had occurred, akin to cowboy westerns and children’s fables” (p. 185). Like leaders before him, Bush evoked the collectively shared nostalgia of World War II through constant analogical connections to sell the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (Noon, 2004). In an address from the USS Abraham Lincoln, here Bush (2003) connects the modern service men and women with veterans of World War II, “the character of our military through history—the daring of Normandy, the fierce courage of Iwo Jima, the decency and idealism that turned enemies into allies—is fully present in this generation.” This excerpt also demonstrates the peace-loving character of Americans. In the following address a couple of weeks after 9/11, he also connects the enemy that orchestrated these attacks with the enemies America fought against in World War II:

We have seen their kind before. They're the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century. By sacrificing human life to serve their radical visions, by abandoning every value except the will to power, they follow in the path of fascism, Nazism and totalitarianism. And they will follow that path all the way to where it ends in history's unmarked grave of discarded lies. (Bush, 2003)

Here Bush is comparing the terrorists responsible for 9/11 to the Nazi enemy of World War II. It also makes a clear bifurcation between the sides of the conflict. Rather than leaving a communicative space to consider the practicalities of fighting a “War on Terrorism,” this comparison helps to circumvent complicated details by channeling the

tremendous emotions attached to the tragedy of 9/11 into a nostalgic picture of war. Bush often engaged in similar epideictic style rhetoric, which was strategically vague and full of loaded terminology (Bostdorff, 2003, 2011).

To review, American presidents possess a remarkable capacity to give existence to and shape the meaning of foreign crises for the public. This ability has proven to be especially dynamic as a means of justifying the use of military force abroad. Though their use of this privilege has varied by president and the unique circumstances they faced, a pattern has emerged in this rhetorical process, which often involves promoting a threat as a means of acquiring support for both their interpretation of a problem as well as the solution they propose (Kiewe, 1994).

At the turn to the 20th century, a paradigmatic shift from the mission of exemplar to intervention redefined America's role in foreign affairs. The myth of American exceptionalism was reconfigured to define America's role in the world, the threats it faces, and the means to handle these threats. Proponents of this new mission felt that the world would better off if America became more directly active as an agent of change. This new responsibility also meant combatting those who stood in the way of this progress, despite America's professed desire for peace.

Ultimately, this contributed to a justificatory discourse of war comprised of dramatic binaries of good versus evil and civilization versus savagery with the "Global War on Terror" as its most recent manifestation. And this mode of interpretation has become engrained in the American psyche leading to war Robert Ivie (2005a) describes as "a culture of war." For the last decade, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and overarching "Global War on Terror" (GWOT) have provoked scholars across multiple

disciplines, including but not limited to communication, sociology, history, public policy, and political science, to carefully consider the ways in which modern Presidents such as George W. Bush and their administrations have sold wars, military interventions, and foreign occupations to the public (Osgood & Frank, 2010).

The “Global War on Terror” presented a vivid example of the American war narrative, perhaps with embellished forms of the mechanisms used in the past. This event also provided a clear confirmation of the concerns voiced by rhetorical scholars about the dangerous and undemocratic tendencies that emerge during times of war (Winkler, 2006). However, although particular attention has been paid to the rhetorical strategies of selling the GWOT, Bush was merely following the path paved by his predecessors over the past century in manipulating the press to manufacture public consent, while systematically suppressing political and public dissent (Osgood & Frank, 2010). Now that a theoretical and historical background of presidential war rhetoric has been established, in the next chapter I will turn to a discussion of the methodology used for this study.

CHAPTER III

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A purpose of rhetorical criticism is to examine and explain discourse in order to better understand how it functions in our lives. As humans, we understand language in relation to other language; similarly, rhetorical critics use communication theory to analyze how discourse relates to other discourse. By doing so, as Denise Bostdorff (1994) asserts, “rhetorical critics make judgments about the identifying characteristics of a piece of discourse, its key persuasive functions, the ethicality of its appeals, its linguistic roots in earlier rhetoric,” and other significant insights (p. 11). In order to understand the rhetorical strategies used by President Barack Obama to call for military strikes in Syria, this study will situate his speeches within the body of similar war rhetoric.

As many scholars have noted, presidential rhetoric should be considered as a *genre*, that is, a sort or type of rhetorical form that is recurring (Murphy, 2003). Because presidential war rhetoric is a recurrent form of discourse, sharing “substantive, stylistic, and situational characteristics” (Campbell & Jamieson, 1974, p. 20), this critique will analyze Obama’s call for military action by situating it within the larger genre of foreign crisis and war rhetoric. In the following sections, I will offer an overview of how rhetorical scholars have conceptualized genre and developed generic criticism as a method. This will lead to an explanation of how the method will be applied for this study.

Genre

The intersection of rhetoric with form and genre is nearly as old as rhetoric itself, beginning with Aristotle's distinctions between forensic, deliberative, and epideictic forms of discourse outlined in the *Rhetoric*. At a basic level, *genre* refers to a classification by type or sort, such as the distinction made by Aristotle when he classified speech acts by purpose and context. While these early delineations are still influential in rhetorical theory and criticism, for the last half-century, many scholars have worked to resolve what they saw as limitations to both trends in rhetorical criticism and this specific method.

Black (1965), and later Campbell and Jamieson (1974), stressed a need to address the theoretical blind spots and limitations with the neo-Aristotelian critical paradigm that became dominant in the early 1900s. According to Edwin Black (1965), "the neo-Aristotelians ignore the impact of the discourse on rhetorical conventions, its capacity for disposing an audience to expect certain kinds of justification in later discourses that they encounter, even on different subjects" (p. 35). Black felt the neo-Aristotelian approach lacked a crucial historical element comprised of recurring forms and rhetorical traditions. It needed to take into account the many other situational factors and contingencies, such as environment, that constrain rhetorical action. Additionally, because of the neo-Aristotelian emphasis on singular speech acts, there lacked a capability "for a comparative or evolutionary approach" to rhetorical criticism (Campbell & Jamieson, 1974, p. 13). Rhetoric is concerned with ideas and praxis within the realm of public life in an ongoing process. Therefore, it is imperative to take into account the

historical roots of rhetorical acts. That is to say, critics should recognize that past rhetoric impacts present rhetoric especially in recurring circumstances.

Genre is a class of messages having important structural and substantive similarities and that, as a class, creates special expectations in an audience, which develops through subsequent repetitive use (Black, 1992; Hart & Daughton, 2005). However, while instances of similar styles, tropes, and content can be found in a wide variety of discourses, a genre exists when similar combinations or “constellations” are identified. As Campbell and Jamieson (1974) assert,

A genre is a group of acts unified by a constellation of forms that recurs in each of its members. These forms, *in isolation*, appear in other discourses. What is distinctive about the acts in a genre is the recurrence of the forms together in constellation. (p. 20)

Political speech genres such as inaugural and State of the Union addresses, or calling for military action in the case of this study, are over time molded into a particular rhetorical structure that becomes commonplace with rhetors and audiences. Rhetorical genres come into existence to accomplish particular functions in certain situations and endure so long as it “remains a functional response to exigencies” (Campbell & Jamieson, 2008, p. 221). According to Gunn (2012), “A genre is not merely the label for a text, but the signature of an affective apparatus that both presumes and produces bodies-in-feeling” (p. 364). By the nature of their role, political actors face similar circumstances as their predecessors, thus “given the emphasis on routine,” Murphy (2003) asserts, “a generic perspective is particularly useful when dealing with institutions.” Given that “an institution such as the presidency must accomplish recurrent rhetorical tasks, including committing the nation to military action” (p. 608).

Generic Criticism & Situational Theory

The purpose of generic criticism is to understand the significance of a recurring constellation of rhetorical elements, but also recognize breaks from these generic forms. By approaching these acts from a generic perspective, a critic seeks to chart and explain regularities and irregularities in rhetorical discourses for the societal truths they may reveal (Hart & Daughton, 2005, p. 117). Campbell and Jamieson (1974) offer a useful interpretation from their seminal work *Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action*, which has been seen as foundational to generic studies:

The critic who classifies a rhetorical artifact as generically akin to a class of similar artifacts has identified an act isolated in time. Recurrence of a combination of forms into a generically identifiable form over time suggests that certain constants in human action are manifest rhetorically. One may argue that recurrence arises out of comparable rhetorical situations, out of the influence of conventions on the responses of rhetors, out of universal and cultural archetypes ingrained in human consciousness, out of fundamental human needs, or out of a finite number of historical options or commonplaces. Whatever the explanation, the existence of the recurrent provides insight into the human condition. (p. 26-27)

Rhetorical criticism for much of the last century has understood genres as inherently related to situations (Black, 1965; Campbell & Jamieson, 1974; Simmons & Aghazarian, 1986), though the degree to which situations influence and constrain rhetorical acts has been heavily debated and contested as Campbell and Jamieson note in the latter half of the preceding passage.

Some scholars, especially in earlier applications of generic criticism, felt that situations required a certain rhetorical response from a limited pool of choices. Black (1965), for instance, advocated generic criticism on the premises that “there is a limited number of situations in which a rhetor can find [themselves]” and “there is a limited number of ways in which a rhetor can and will respond rhetorically to any given situational type”

(p. 133-34). Similarly, Lloyd Bitzer (1968) argued with his theory of the rhetorical situation that certain situations, or a “complex of persons, events, objects, and relations,” present an “exigence” that dictates particular responses. This demand-response vocabulary also influenced Campbell and Jamieson’s (1974) interpretation of situations relationship with genre, as they to felt rhetors were in some ways limited by situation.

While Campbell and Jamieson’s understanding of rhetorical genres as “constellations” which are situationally grounded has been insightful and influential for generic criticism, Miller (1984) and Simmons and Aghazarian (1986) emphasized a need for a nuanced intellection of situation and its influence on rhetorical choice, maintaining the strategies used by rhetors were not always required in the objective sense by situations. As Miller (1984) notes:

What recurs cannot be a material configuration of objects, events, and people, nor can it be a subjective configuration, a ‘perception,’ for these, too, are unique from moment to moment and person to person. Recurrence is an intersubjective phenomenon, a social occurrence, and cannot be understood on materialist terms. (p. 156)

Rather than a “rhetorical situation” dictating a particular response, as Bitzer hypothesized, Simmons and Aghazarian (1986) in concurrence with Miller (1984), argued that “there is usually more than one way of coping with situational demands and more than one way of construing those demands of interpreting them to others” (Simmons & Aghazarian, 1986, p. 8). This study will adopt this more recent conception of genre that acknowledges the constraints placed on rhetors by historically developed generic expectations, while recognizing that these constraints to not necessarily dictate the their available means of responding to exigencies.

A Generic Perspective Toward War Rhetoric

War Rhetoric as a Genre

As has been established throughout the literature review, people do not come to understand political events through actual experience, they learn about them through communication about the events. This is especially true of foreign crises, where presidential rhetoric plays a critical role in constructing social reality for their audience. As Hodges (2013) explains, “Any rhetorical justification of war by the president effectively constructs a reality rather than simply depicts a preexisting reality that somehow contains its own significance outside the discursive processes that gives it meaning. Narrative is the means by which the social construction of reality takes place” (p. 51). While virtually every president who has called for military intervention abroad has faced their own challenges based upon the political climate of their presidency, the situational, stylistic, and substantive elements embodied by this narrative have shown continuity spanning administrations and foreign crises (Bostdorff, 1994; Campbell & Jamieson, 2008; Hodges, 2013; Winkler, 2007).

Many rhetorical studies have recognized a historical recurrence of situational, substantive, and stylistic elements in crisis and war rhetoric, which is why in the 1980s and 1990s, the field presented it as a genre (Murphy, 2003; Winkler, 2007). The rhetorical continuity embodied by different presidents has rendered crisis and war discourse at times predictable (Winkler, 2007). Some scholars such as Goodnight (1986) and Dow (1989) have questioned the continued relevance of the generic consideration given the evolved nature of warfare (i.e. conventional war, preemptive war, to fighting terrorist insurgencies). However, Winkler (2007) found that despite situational

exigencies, presidential rhetoric has complied with the conventional expectations of war discourse even in nuanced conflict formats. Robert Ivie (1980) indicated continuity in war discourse by identifying a recurrent topoi of savagery in war rhetoric, where presidents seek to unite the public against a foreign savage threat to justify the use of military force (see also Ivie, 1974, 1984, 1987, 2005b, 2007).

Though rhetorical critics have examined crisis and war rhetoric in different ways with different foci, they have come to corresponding conclusions about its basic structure and function. Campbell and Jamieson (2008) outline five central characteristics of presidential war rhetoric that have been steadfast throughout history:

(1) every element in it proclaims that the momentous decision to resort to force is deliberate, the product of thoughtful consideration; (2) forceful intervention is justified through a chronicle narrative from which argumentative claims are drawn; (3) the audience is exhorted to unanimity of purpose and total commitment; (4) the rhetoric not only justifies the use of force, but also seeks to legitimize presidential assumption of the extraordinary powers for the commander in chief; and, as a function of these characteristics, (5) strategic misrepresentations play an unusually significant role in its appeals. (p. 221)

Spanning political environments and situations, recurring elements and a cyclical pattern have emerged in how they use rhetoric to justify military intervention to Congress, the press, and the public. It involves drawing upon national identity while unifying the public around a common enemy, and in the process, obscuring detail that would deter public support through an equivocal narrative (Bostdorff, 1994; Ivie, 1974; Campbell & Jamieson, 2008).

As Burke (1966) famously notes, as humans we create, use, and misuse symbols. Thus rhetorical critics should seek to unravel some of this misdirection. In the specific context of war rhetoric, Robert Ivie (1974) similarly argues that rhetorical

criticism “should function as an instrument of life, especially through the critical analysis of war discourse” (p. 338). He continues that future research should seek to understand the persuasive strategies and cultural patterns that lead to violent altercations abroad. This study will work towards these ends.

Data Set and Method

Data Set

For the last century American presidents have portrayed crisis situations with mythical narratives guided by the tenants of American exceptionalism. In this thesis I explore the rhetorical strategies used by President Obama to call for military strikes against the Syrian government. The aim of this project is to elucidate how his rhetorical discourse adheres to and diverges from the larger presidential war rhetoric genre. This incident provides a clear example of the President calling for military action abroad. The review of previous presidential war rhetoric provides the rationale and grounds for an “evolutionary or comparative” approach to discourse analysis. To accomplish this task, I analyze President Obama’s addresses ranging from August 31, 2013 to late September 2013 through a conceptual framework developed by Kenneth Burke and applied to presidential crisis rhetoric by Denise Bostdorff (1994).

Method

Denise Bostdorff (1994) provides the following method for analyzing presidential war rhetoric, which highlights the portrayal of a crisis situation, the central actor’s rhetorical style, and the appeals they make to identify with the values and interests of the audience. I will use these elements of situation, style, and identificational appeals

to answer the following questions: How did Barack Obama portray the chemical weapons attacks in Syria as a crisis (situation)? Which rhetorical strategies, tropes, and themes did Obama emphasize to describe the central actors (style)? And how did the President encourage members of the public to identify with him and his policies (identificational appeals)? An analysis through these concepts, which come from Kenneth Burke's theory of dramatism, also allows the critic to compare one president's discourse to other presidents across situations. Thus I will situate Barack Obama's recent call for military action within the body of extant research to the answer the larger question: how does his rhetoric fit within the larger war rhetoric genre?

Several studies have employed these concepts in various forms and combinations to analyze the genre of war rhetoric. Bostdorff (1994) will serve as an exemplar to the present study in her application of the three together in this order. Though Denise Bostdorff's (1994) research was greatly influenced by the work of Kenneth Burke who saw *motive* as a primary object of study, her analyses purported to explain *how* presidents rhetorically portrayed foreign crises in a particular way, as opposed to *why* they did so. Likewise, the present study will work toward this end of examining the rhetorical messages that were sent to the public, as opposed to a psychoanalytic focus that is interested in why it was sent. This study will apply this conceptual framework to analyze Barack Obama's call for military action in the context of Syria to better understand how the war rhetoric genre has maintained, evolved, and/or changed from what has been indicated of the genre in previous research.

Situation. An essential part of understanding human events is recognizing the situations out of which they arose. The way a situation is characterized by a rhetor can

change the meaning and interpretation of an event entirely (Bostdorff, 1994).

Interpretation is contingent upon situational information such as the actors involved, what they did and why, the context in which it took place, and potential future implications.

Responding appropriately to an event is justified through this information, as the situation contextualizes action. Scholars spanning academic disciplines understand situational accounts as essential to their research (Bostdorff, 1994). Likewise, rhetorical critics are interested in how situations are portrayed by rhetors as a means of shaping social reality for audiences.

This analysis of presidential war rhetoric will account for situations through examining how Barack Obama portrayed the situation. Kenneth Burke (1945) offers a useful framework for analyzing the rhetorical construction of situations in what he terms the *dramatistic pentad*, stemming from his understanding of human action as part of an ongoing drama. He argued that in order to analyze the rhetor's portrayal of rhetorical situations, critics must explicate the dramatic structure (or representative anecdote) of their discourse. As implied by the name, the pentad is used to break a rhetorical situation down into five anecdotal principles or constituent elements, comprised of the words used to describe the event:

1. Act (What took place?)
2. Actor or Agent (Who performed the act?)
3. Agency (By what means was the act performed?)
4. Purpose (What was the purpose or goal of the act?)
5. Scene (What was the background, context, or place of the act?)

Like a journalist's recounting of a news event, these questions address the who?, when?, where why?, and how? By answering these questions the critic is able to provide a synopsis of how the rhetor portrayed the situation to their audience. Breaking discourse

down in to these elements also enables a critic to compare the discourse of a president with other presidential discourses by looking at individual pentadic elements and how they are combined.

The second step for the critic involves searching for terminological ratios or relationships within the discourse. In other words, were certain aspects or combinations of aspects of the situation emphasized or omitted? Ascertaining the pentadic ratios helps the critic uncover which terms were given the greatest attention by the rhetor (Herrick, 2009).

Style. In the simplest of terms, *style* refers to how something is said. For the purposes of rhetorical criticism, style, or *elucutio*, refers to persuasive habits or tendencies of the speaker, including the tropes, metaphors, schemes, decoration, or embellishment, they typically use to in their discourse (Bostdorff, 1994). Burke (1984) states, “In its simplest manifestation, style is ingratiation. It is an attempt to gain favor by the hypnotic or suggestive process of ‘saying the right thing’” (p. 50). Unlike invention, which addresses what will be said (also related to situation), style pertains to artistic dimensions of how an idea is communicated, or lack there of. Nonetheless, even when a speech act might be considered plain or lacking style, that too communicates something to the audience and influences their interpretation of the message.

As Burke (1945) contends, style is the way rhetors adhere to personal and societal values in their discourse. He relates style in this sense to the speaker’s attitude, in that by analyzing the speaker’s style the critic can tap into the rhetor’s attitude toward the subject. Here, Bostdorff (1994) offers an exemplifies Burke’s point, “A speaker who prizes reason above all else...consistently might make appeals based on logic and employ

that language of rationality” (p. 19). Hart and Daughton (2005) say that the development of a style can happen both consciously and unconsciously. Whether or not style is intentional or representative of the speaker’s attitude, the use of these stylistic devices shapes how ideas are embodied in discourse. For instance, an idea presented plainly and logically might not evoke the same emotional effects as if it were presented with a grandiose style rich with myth and metaphors.

To analyze style, critics look for certain rhetorical tendencies and emphases embodied by a speaker. According to Burke (1984a), critics should pay special attention to the speaker’s terms associated with actor, and adjectives used to describe the actor. He feels that this can offer insight to how the speaker is predisposed to act toward their subject. Bostdorff (1994) applied style in this way to her study of presidential war rhetoric to offer insight to the ways presidents rhetorically promote foreign crises. She found that while there were similarities in styles used to construct crises, the styles evolved with the role of the presidency.

Identificational Appeals. To analyze how presidents construct foreign crises from a rhetorical perspective, it is necessary to recognize that their “messages are addressed to someone,” and “that [their] discourse persuasively appeals, overtly or covertly, to some audience” (Bostdorff, 1994, p. 21). For this, Kenneth Burke urges us to look at how a message makes use of *identification*, a central concept for his understanding of rhetoric, which he explored throughout his 1945 book *Rhetoric of Motives*. As he claims, “You persuade a man [sic] insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude idea, identifying your ways with his” (1984, p.55). Whereas rhetoric was traditionally perceived as persuasion, Burke asserted

that identification was the prerequisite for persuasion and that this was a fundamental term for understanding rhetoric. When someone is attempting to persuade someone else, the speaker is trying to get the receiver of the message to identify with him or her, which takes place when their “common interests are dramatized for them” (Hart & Daughton, 2005, p. 275).

According to Murphy (2003), “To identify with someone is to transform identity; we become different as a result of sharing our substance, sharing identity, with another. If discourse enters into identity, then the audience is a rhetorical effect” (p. 620). Through discourse the rhetor aims to demonstrate that they are “substantially one” or “consubstantial” with their audience (Burke, 1950). These appeals range, as Burke tells us, from the politician addressing an audience of farmers, who says, ‘I was a farm boy myself,’ through the mysteries of social status, to the mystic’s devout identification with the source of all being” (1950, p. xiv). Similar, yet recent, examples demonstrating this wide range might include Mitt Romney’s declaration that he likes lakes, trees, and cars to a Michiganian audience, to George W. Bush’s invocation that we are God’s chosen nation against a demonic evil. In sum, identification permeates political discourse.

As Herrick (2009) states, “By recognizing and building on our consubstantiality, identification among people—and thus healing from the wound of our separation—becomes a rhetorical possibility” (p. 226). People are not naturally unified in their interests and rhetoric is the means by which unification is achieved. The purpose of rhetoric then, in the eyes of Burke, should be bringing people together by removing human alienation, and ultimately toward eliminating war (Herrick, 2009). Despite these

aspirations, rhetoric and identification—though they have been used for progressive change—have also been used extensively to initiate and perpetuate war.

Towards these ends identification is used concomitantly for both unification and division. Burke (1972, 1973) outlines three essential types of identificational appeals: antithetical, implicit, and explicit. Antithetical appeals, which have proven to be constitutive of war rhetoric, are those where the speaker encourages the audience to unite with them against a common enemy (i.e. the Manichaeian binaries of good versus evil, with the U.S. presumably comprising the good team). Implicit appeals are those in which a rhetor indirectly refers to the collective. The most common use of implicit identification, according to Burke is through the use of we, as in “we are at war” (Bostdorff, 1994). Though academics studying war rhetoric, politicians sending troops to war, and the rest of the American public is obviously not going to pick up a gun to go to the actual scene of the conflict like members of the military, “we” in this sense includes all Americans and implies common stake. Lastly, explicit identification refers to a clear and obvious attempt by a rhetor to communicate that they are of the same substance with the audience (i.e. a president claiming he *also* grew up on a farm to an audience of farmers).

In the following chapter this conceptual framework focusing on the rhetorical construction of the *situation*, the actor’s *style*, and three forms of *identificational appeals* is employed to analyze Barack Obama’s rhetoric to understand both its function and how it relates to the broader genre of presidential war rhetoric.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS

Background

Since March of 2011, Syria has been embroiled in a brutal civil war between President Bashar al Assad's regime, supported by their foreign allies Russia and Iran, and insurgent forces fighting to depose the Assad regime. The situation has been further complicated by the disjointedness of the anti-government insurgents, many of whom have attacked each other. The conflict has continued since then with neither side appearing to have an upper hand and with no likely end in sight. This has become one of the worst humanitarian crises in recent history. The United Nations reported thus far: over 110,000 Syrians have lost their lives, over 2.3 million Syrians have sought refuge in neighboring countries, and millions of others are displaced within Syria's borders in dire need of humanitarian assistance (Blanchard, Humud, & Nikitin, 2014). In many of these war-torn cities, people are without access to water, food, shelter, and medical aid. There have also been accusations that the Syrian government is perpetuating this as tactical attrition by disrupting attempts to deliver aid.

The United States has provided the largest amount of humanitarian support to the Syrian people to date, totaling \$1.3 billion (Blanchard, Humud, & Nikitin, 2014). The topic of providing military support in various forms, ranging from arming Syrian rebels

to using U.S. military force, has been a contentious topic in Congressional debate. Additionally, because of the opposition's infighting between some anti-government forces and groups affiliated with Al Qaeda, namely the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), many have been especially hesitant to equip the opposition with weapons that could be potentially used against the United States and its allies (Blanchard, Humud, & Nikitin, 2014). Furthermore, others have raised concerns about the potential of extremist groups taking advantage of the power vacuum potentially consequent of Assad's departure. President Barack Obama had resisted military involvement since the civil war started in 2011; however, under constant pressure for a lack of action, in a press conference in August of 2012, Obama asserted that the breaking point for intervention would be the Syrian government's preparation, movement, or use of chemical weapons against the people of Syria. In his words:

We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized...That would change my equation. (Obama, 2012)

Push came to shove with reports rang out of a chemical weapons attack that took place in the suburbs of Damascus.

On August 21, 2013, reports circulated that a chemical weapons attack had taken place just outside of the Syrian capital, Damascus. The initial reports claimed that hundreds of Syrian civilians had been killed in an attack allegedly orchestrated by Syrian President Bashar al Assad and his governmental forces. The events were described as "a massacre of the innocent" (Telegraph, 2013), a "horrible tragedy" (Al Jazeera, 2013), a "horrific attack" (CBS News, 2013), with "toddlers convulsing" (BBC, 2013), "lines of bodies" (Wall Street Journal), arriving with "their pupils dilated, cold limbs, and foam in

their mouths” (Daily Mail, 2013), and that Syrian doctors believed the culprit was sarin gas (BBC, 2013; Daily Mail, 2013).

The textual accounts of the attacks were accompanied by shocking images and videos, often so disturbing that they came with explicit content warnings. The graphic footage depicted men, women, children, and even infants, gasping for air with paralyzed lungs as they convulsed and died. One video featured a mother clutching her dead children (Huffington Post, 2013). Others included images and clips of warehouses and streets lined with dead and dying bodies (Al Jazeera, 2013). Tragically, the initial reports of hundreds dead became well over a thousand. Later a United Nations investigative report confirmed that sarin gas, a toxic nerve agent, was used on civilians (United Nations, 2013).

In response, as many Presidents have done before him, on August 31, 2013, President Barack Obama called for military action in an address—this time in response to Syria. On September 10th he formally addressed the public. After walking down the ornate hall in the East Room of the White House to the podium, he opened with the same eminent greeting as his predecessors, “My fellow Americans.” However, his rhetorical call to action was markedly different. He spoke plainly and rationally relative to the more dramatized approaches taken by presidents in the past. Although he referred to previous wars that tap into American ethos, namely World War I and II, he did so logically as opposed to appealing to nostalgia. The facts and details of the attacks in Syria were not obscured by mythical tropes. There was no mention of good versus evil. American exceptionalism was repurposed with a democratic inflection. Rather than evoking the

unilateral power of the Commander in Chief, he made his case indicating that this was his own judgment and he wanted the decision to be considered by Congress.

However, what is even more unusual is that to the time of this analysis the United States has not gone through with military action. On September 10th the President announced to the public that in light of some “encouraging signs” and “constructive talks,” he asked members of Congress to postpone the vote to authorize the military strikes to allow more time for a diplomatic solution to be pursued:

However, over the last few days, we’ve seen some encouraging signs. In part because of the credible threat of U.S. military action, as well as constructive talks that I had with President Putin, the Russian government has indicated a willingness to join with the international community in pushing Assad to give up his chemical weapons. The Assad regime has now admitted that it has these weapons, and even said they’d join the Chemical Weapons Convention, which prohibits their use.” (Obama, 2013e)

Russian President Vladimir Putin and his administration, one of Assad’s allies, agreed to work with the international community to pressure Assad’s Regime to join the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). On September 14th, the Syrian government joined the CWC and agreed to relinquish all of its chemical weapons to be destroyed, a stock pile estimated by the Congressional Research Service (CRS) to be more than 1,000 metric tons (Nikitin, Kerr, & Feickert, 2013). Since then the plan for removal outlined by U.N. Security Council Resolution 2118 is being carried out under the supervision of multinational forces.

To analyze Obama’s call to action from a rhetorical perspective, I will employ a conceptual framework developed by Denise Bostdorff (1994) to explore Obama’s promotion of the crisis situation, his style in doing so, and his use of identificational appeals. First, using the five elements of Kenneth Burke’s dramatisic pentad–act,

agency, actor, scene, and purpose—this chapter will proceed with an examination of how President Obama portrayed the situation of crisis in Syria as the foundation of his call for military action. To follow I will account for Obama’s rhetorical style by focusing on the ways he describes the central actors in his discourse. This chapter will conclude by discussing how Obama makes use of identification. More specifically, I will look at how Obama makes appeals through identification: antithetically, implicitly, and explicitly.

Situation

Crisis situations involve real events with material consequences. Nonetheless, presidents provide their interpretations of this reality through their discourse as opposed to an objective account of events. This has proven to be a powerful resource of sense making for the public (Bostdorff, 1994). Their ways of characterizing worldly phenomena, such as foreign crises, are powerfully influential in how the public understands the world around them. This analysis will begin with an examination Barack Obama’s rhetorical construction of the crisis situation in Syria, as Burke recommends, by ascertaining the representative anecdote of how Obama portrayed the situation. This anecdote is essentially a summary constructed of Burke’s pentadic elements including: 1) *act* (what took place) 2), *actor* (the person who has or will perform the act), 3), the *agency* or means by which the act took place, 4) the *purpose* of the act, and 5) the *scene* (the context or background of the act). President Obama’s rhetorical portrayal of the situation was fairly consistent throughout his discourse. The following is a paraphrased representative anecdote of how Obama constructed the situation, reasoning that:

Because the Syrian government murdered its own citizens with chemical weapons (scene), the United States—or “we”—(actor) should take military action against

Syrian regime targets (act) with limited air strikes (agency) to enforce international law, degrade Assad's chemical weapons capabilities, send a global message, protect the Syrian people, support oppositional forces, and ensure national security (purposes). (2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2013e)

Act

In his initial addresses, Barack Obama outlined the essential action of military airstrikes against strategic Syrian regime targets. The specific action requested by Obama was retaliatory and deterrent air strikes, to be executed with limited scope and duration. Both of these conditions, which also describe the agency or means of action, were repeatedly emphasized. In anticipation that these actions and means would be construed with prior, and largely unpopular military commitments, Obama made it very clear in all of his addresses that his plan did not include committing troops to direct combat roles or a continuous occupation. He countered that he would “not put American boots on the ground in Syria” in “open-ended action like Iraq or Afghanistan,” nor would he “pursue a prolonged air campaign like Libya or Kosovo;” in contrast, “This would be a targeted strike to achieve a clear objective” (Obama, 2013f).

In further deviation from many of his predecessors, President Obama expressed an additional condition of means, in that he would seek Congressional authorization for military strikes. In nearly all of his addresses pertaining to the situation in Syria, he explained that while he had the authority as Commander in Chief to act without approval, he is “the leader of the world's oldest constitutional democracy,” and that a decision as grave as military engagement should be debated by Congress (Obama, 2013b, 2013e). In the past, some Presidents exercised their privilege of Commander in Chief while implying that this right is granted by Congress and validated by the

Constitution, which was the case with President Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis (Bostdorff, 1994). However, Obama directly sought approval from Congress.

Actor

In his rhetoric, he spoke of several actors and differentiated between them by characterizing their roles as unique. Obama referred to the actor predominantly as “we,” though he also referred to the “United States,” and to himself as “I” and by his position as president and Commander in Chief. In virtually all of his discourse, the proportional choice of terms for actor were remarkably consistent, referring most to “we,” then “I,” and lastly the “United States” and “America.” While on the surface, these terms for actors seem consistent with other presidents, such as Kennedy and Johnson (Bostdorff, 1994), a closer analysis revealed that Obama distinguished between the roles of different actors. Where some presidents used “we,” “our,” and “I” more or less interchangeably, it seemed that there was a purpose for each actor term throughout his discourse. He explained that the collective United States, or “we” had a responsibility to act with military strikes because of the grave nature of the scene.

Agency

The agency, which described the action or act, is the conditions of the limited military strikes against Syria with Congressional approval for the course of action. The emphasis on careful democratic deliberation was repeated throughout his discourse even after he announced the postponement of a Congressional vote to use force. However, before this he made it especially clear that the use of force would be the product of careful discussion about our options for strikes.

Purpose

His discourse emphasized both local and global justifications for military strikes. On a local level pertaining to the Syrian regime, he articulated both punitive and preventive purposes. He contended that without any action, the “Assad regime will see no reason to stop using chemical weapons” (Obama, 2013f), and he will continue to use them to kill large numbers of Syrian civilians. Therefore the missile strikes would show him that what he did will have serious consequences as opposed to mere verbal vituperation. However, he also stressed the importance of degrading the Syrian regime’s capability of carrying out future attacks. Furthermore, the unstable and chaotic sociopolitical climate in Syria posed a serious risk of the alleged stockpiles of chemical weapons falling into the hands of extremist groups, only to be used against the United States and its allies. He moved beyond the individual deed into a discussion of global implications that could manifest if responsive action was not taken. Whereas some presidents in the past implicitly stated the purpose of military action abstractly in relation to the threat, for example to “preserve freedom,” Obama outlined unequivocal goals and a plan to accomplish them. Throughout Barack Obama’s addresses, he illustrated a situation that necessitated action on both pragmatic and moral grounds.

This logical purpose was also applied on a global scale in that a clear message needed to be sent to the world regarding the use of chemical weapons. Throughout many of his speeches, Obama characterized his purpose with a slippery slope style argument, that if others see the ban of chemical weapons erode or soften, they would also likely acquire and use them without hesitation (Obama, 2013b, 2013e, 2013h.). This purpose was reminiscent of George W. Bush’s constructed threat of Saddam Hussein possessing

weapons of mass destruction. Despite the fact that the actual possession and use of chemical weapons has been confirmed in Syria, there has not been any real indication that they would be used elsewhere or by any groups other than the Syrian Regime.

Additionally, Obama's purpose, except for a few mentions, ignores the fact that chemical weapons have accounted for over a thousand deaths while over 100,000 Syrians have been killed by conventional means. To be clear, it is my position that using chemical weapons is vicious and a cause for great concern, as is any form of intentional mass murder political or otherwise. However, after more than three years of a brutal civil war that has incurred enormous human atrocities, the purposive logic of acting based on the recent sarin gas attack seems to construct either an arbitrary pretext or a means of backing up the President's red line threat. Nonetheless, the threatening scene Obama constructed was intrinsically linked to the purpose of the suggested action.

Scene

The President described a scene of inhumane violence and destruction orchestrated by the Syrian government led by Bashar al Assad. Obama's rhetoric portrayed the attack as a massacre of thousands of innocent civilians, including hundreds of children, which he emphasized (2013b). This report was congruent with graphic media portrayals of pain, suffering, and death. Ten days after the attacks in his initial address in the White House Rose Garden, he informed the public and Congress that "The United States presented a powerful case that the Syrian government was responsible for the attack on its own people," citing American intelligence that showed Assad's regime "preparing to use chemical weapons, launching rockets in the highly populated suburbs of Damascus, and acknowledging that a chemical weapons attack took place" (Obama,

2013b). He reified his claim further with phrases such as “the world watched” or “as the world can plainly see,” leaving little room for alternative interpretations of what took place.

Though depending on the type of address—whether a weekly update or a formal speech—his substantive emphases varied in volume and proportion. Obama offered more contextual description with his formal address specifically to the public. For instance, in his address to the nation on September 10th, Obama offered more historical context for an unfamiliar audience by explaining that the conflict in Syria was a less successful episode of the revolutions taking place in the Middle East and North Africa as part of the larger Arab Spring. Whereas many of the nations in this region were able to successfully depose tyrannical dictators and other oppressive forms of government, with revolutions varying in duration and bloodshed, Syria’s conflict has endured catastrophically since March of 2011. Like many of these uprisings, he argued that the conflict in Syria began “as a series of peaceful protests against the repressive regime of Bashar al-Assad [that] has turned into a brutal civil war” (Obama, 2013f). Since its start, over 100,000 people had been killed and millions more have fled to neighboring countries. But he clarified that he had resisted calls for involving the military in someone else’s civil war, after a decade of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, instead providing only humanitarian support, and training and support for moderate factions of the Syrian opposition.

He declared his posture toward the situation in Syria “changed on August 21st, when Assad’s government gassed to death over a thousand people, including hundreds of children” (Obama, 2013f). Despite the fact that the death toll of the Syrian

civil war had well breached 100,000 by the time of the attacks, he pronounced them as exceptionally egregious on account of the chemical weapons used. This assertion was frequently validated through an explanation of the illegality of using them, referring to the international ban that stemmed from the World Wars. He took significant time explaining not only that the use of chemical weapons was illegal but also *why* they are illegal. This is the reason, Obama explained, that the United States and most of the world have agreed to criminalize the use of chemical weapons as a war crime as a result of the historical devastation they have caused. Therefore the Syrian government's use of chemical weapons presented a clear violation of international law, but it also characterized an immanent future threat to the Syrian people, Syria's neighbors, the United States, and the rest of the world. In addition to Obama's speeches directed at the American public, this scene was also communicated in publicized remarks with foreign leaders and press (Obama, 201d, 2013g, 2013h).

Two dominant situational elements were *scene* and *purpose* as the former dictated the latter. They were also dominant in terms of what President Obama spent the most of each speech discussing. The gruesome scene invoked a mix of sympathy and anger that created a moral necessity to act. This moral obligation was also tied to the United States as an actor in the sense that to keep our national identity intact required action.

In sum, President Obama called for military strikes against the Assad-led Syrian government, which comprised his *act*. There were two primary *actors* in his discourse. One was President Obama as both president and Commander in Chief. The second and most frequently referred to was "we" as in the Americans, Congress, and the

military. The means of carrying out the strikes, or *agency*, was through limited missile strikes against strategic targets, with an additional condition of means being congressional authorization. The purpose of this action and agency would be to both punish Assad and prevent future chemical weapons attacks. All of this was in response to the gruesome scene of the chemical weapons attacks that took place August 21st, 2013 in Syria. The scene was described as horrific, with scores of dead bodies, including children.

Style

In the vernacular sense of the word, *style* refers to a manner or way of doing something. With public oratory, style is often attributed to the “persuasive habits” a speaker exhibits in their talk (Hart, 1984). Style can also be ascertained from the patterned ways that rhetors adhere to values in their speaking. For example, if a speaker places the most emphasis on logical reasoning—whether intentionally or unintentionally, sincerely or deceptively—they might be perceived as having a rational disposition. To address the stylistic component of rhetoric in this analysis, I will adopt a Burkean focus concerned with how Obama describes the central actor in his discourse, as he contends that the ways a rhetor characterizes themselves, (and their constituents), as an actor is often indicative of how the rhetor will be perceived. As Bostdorff (1994) explains, to accomplish this, the critic should “identify the terms that correspond with actor; examine adjectives that describe the actor, or words that depict the manner of the actor, or how the actor acted;” and explore the relationships among these descriptors (p. 19).

The Ethos of the Collective

In his portrayal of the Syrian crisis, President Obama spoke of several actors in his speeches. As noted in the previous section Obama used “we” to refer to the United States but also to signify the legislative branch. He also frequently referred to himself as an actor with “I,” or by his position as both the president and Commander in Chief. However, “we” was the central actor in the vast majority of his addresses, which most often referred to the collective United States and its respective role in the world, which was also true of Kennedy’s and Carter’s crisis rhetoric (Bostdorff, 1994). Like most of his predecessors, President Obama characterized the United States as a moral peace-loving nation with a responsibility to provide international support to the global community. In the lead up to war, many past presidents have described the strength and sheer power of the country through its military might. This often meant defining America’s ethos and mission through mythical binaries of good versus evil, ostensibly with the United States as the force of good. In contrast, Obama veered toward a less dramatic rhetorical path. This path saw our strength in our capacity to use our democratic process to make rationale and prudent decisions that would uphold our values and ensure international security. He contended, “we lead with the belief that right makes might—not the other way around” (2013b).

Themes of American exceptionalism were alive and well in how Obama described the nation as the collective actor. However, it was ameliorated with a nuanced democratic essence, reminiscent of the pre-20th century mission of exemplar, where America’s role to make the world a better place consisted of perfecting our institutions domestically to provide a blueprint for the world to follow. Obama asserted that he has

“long believed that our power is rooted not just in our military might, but in our example as a government of the people, by the people, and for the people” (2013b). This was consistent with Robert Ivie’s analysis of Obama’s 2009 address on war in Afghanistan delivered at West Point, where he found that Obama’s exceptional vision of the United States was infused with “an ethic of pragmatism” and that his “posture of rhetorical prudence marked the new president’s departure from the previous president’s crusade” (2011, p. 730, see also Obama, 2009).

Obama also challenged in some respects the underlying assumptions of the interventionist approach to foreign policy—while still calling for intervention. Even before taking office, he argued that we did not only need to end wars like Afghanistan and Iraq, but that we needed to transform the mindset that got us there in the first place (Ivie & Giner, 2009b). This mindset consisted of imperialistic foreign policy powered by the U.S. military. Instead, like Jimmy Carter, Obama depicted the United States as a more mature, rational, and prudential body with a more pluralistic view of the world:

And the American people have the good sense to know we cannot resolve the underlying conflict in Syria with our military. In that part of the world, there are ancient sectarian differences, and the hopes of the Arab Spring have unleashed forces of change that are going to take many years to resolve. And that's why we're not contemplating putting our troops in the middle of someone else's war. (2013b)

He acknowledged that America is trying to move away from its militarized mentality to a more practical one that acknowledges historical complications. This did not mean abandoning the use of force all together by any means, but that force would no longer define our national identity and inform our understanding of “helping.” By his suggested course of action for Syria, and in-line with previous statements, the use of force would

instead be used more precise and deliberate, whether this revision has actually materialized is beyond the scope of this analysis.

As past presidents have illustrated, the war metaphor, such as the “War on Terrorism,” has been a foundational tool for justifying military action. It has also promoted a mythic and ethnocentric understanding of America’s place in the world. Conversely, President Obama supplanted the rhetoric of war—which often implies an enemy that is innately evil—for a historical and legal logic as the foundation of his argument:

In World War I, American GIs were among the many thousands killed by deadly gas in the trenches of Europe. In World War II, the Nazis used gas to inflict the horror of the Holocaust. Because these weapons can kill on a mass scale, with no distinction between soldier and infant, the civilized world has spent a century working to ban them. And in 1997, the United States Senate overwhelmingly approved an international agreement prohibiting the use of chemical weapons, now joined by 189 governments that represent 98 percent of humanity. (Obama, 2013f)

Here in one of his very few references to the World Wars, Obama explains that the use of chemical weapons is a violation of international law, accordingly the Assad’s regime committed a crime. These are not American laws and values to be imposed upon the world, they are laws that “98 percent” of the world has agreed to obey. As mentioned in the literature review, the World Wars have been pervasive in presidential war rhetoric, where they are often conflated with a present crisis into a larger American mission, feeding from the nostalgia they evoke. Instead, Obama used the “Good Wars” as a historical rationale for the ban on chemical weapons, implicating the Syrian government’s action as a crime, rather than typifying them as a continuation of Hitler’s evil as part of the WWII axis powers. We are not at war with a perpetual and equivocally constructed enemy, we are dealing with an isolated act, and actor, with the purpose of

setting a precedent. The United States exceptional duty is rhetorically transposed to judging action to uphold peace, like a court of law.

Despite Obama's profession that our national mission and role in the world should shift away from perpetual war to building peace through diplomacy, he also conceded that certain situations would require the United States to move beyond diplomatic solutions. This included those that posed a threat to national security, which Obama implicitly expanded to mean international security. Our nuanced diplomatic mission of exemplar, in other words, also meant that we had a moral responsibility to intervene at times. After exhausting diplomatic solutions, Obama argued that Syria's use of chemical weapons to kill men, women, and children posed such a situation where we had a legal and moral obligation to act:

we are the United States of America, and we cannot and must not turn a blind eye to what happened in Damascus. Out of the ashes of world war, we built an international order and enforced the rules that gave it meaning. And we did so because we believe that the rights of individuals to live in peace and dignity depends on the responsibilities of nations. We aren't perfect, but this nation more than any other has been willing to meet those responsibilities. (2013b)

Obama explained our national aim to conclude wars must not prevent us from ensuring (inter)national security. The purpose of the strikes against Syria's government was to uphold law and order by punishing those who disregard it, because what threatened our neighbors posed a threat to us, as we are an interconnected and interdependent community. By admitting that we are not perfect—a claim that ruffled feathers for some no doubt—Obama placed the United States as *part* of the global community rather than exalting the United States to sit on top of it. Hegemonic dominance and the

universalization of U.S. values were transfigured in his rhetoric by a moral duty to uphold international law and shared values.

The Democratic Leader

Obama strategically referred to “I,” as opposed to past presidents who have used it interchangeably with the collective “us” or “we.” Throughout his addresses, he referred to his role as president and Commander in Chief. Both of these roles the President discussed were demystified and infused with a strong sense of pragmatism and restraint. Embodying the role of the military’s Commander in Chief, Obama had resisted military action in an effort to end the culture of violent diplomacy and the mindset that our values should be universally appropriated by force. Yet after his “red line” was crossed with the chemical weapon’s attacks, and amid growing pressure, especially from Congressional war hawks led by Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham, Obama called for missile strikes against Syrian government targets.

Obama took possession of his decision to act militarily, and means of execution, frequently claiming, “That is my judgment as Commander in Chief.” By doing this he bifurcated his personae, with this side appearing to be a strong leader who stands by his threats and is not afraid to fight. Many of the President’s political opponents have accused him of being a weak and indecisive leader on account of his hesitancy to engage the military and in his efforts to reduce military spending in the national budget.

He also described himself as the “President of the world’s oldest democracy,” and it seemed the later role took foregrounded the former. This was likely in response to the concern illustrated by popular, political, and academic press that with time, American

presidents have accumulated more and more power to act unilaterally. President Obama spoke directly to this in his address to the public on September 10th:

That's my judgment as Commander in Chief. But I'm also the President of the world's oldest constitutional democracy. So even though I possess the authority to order military strikes, I believed it was right, in the absence of a direct or imminent threat to our security, to take this debate to Congress. I believe our democracy is stronger when the President acts with the support of Congress. And I believe that America acts more effectively abroad when we stand together. (2013f)

In the past, many presidents have made a similar sounding argument, but with important differences. Periodically, presidents have made “claims of prerogative power,” where they contended to have the authority, granted by the constitution, to institute policy unilaterally in the name of national security (Bostdorff, 1994). This was the case with many presidents including but not limited to: Kennedy, Truman, Nixon, Reagan, and both G. H. Bush and G.W. Bush. For instance, Kennedy legitimized action in the Cuban Missile Crisis under the “authority entrusted by me by the Constitution as endorsed by the resolution of Congress” (as cited in Bostdorff, 1994, p. 42). Obama argued it was necessary to break from the growing trend of presidents acting unilaterally to put American soldiers in harm's way by making the decision democratically:

This is especially true after a decade that put more and more war-making power in the hands of the President, and more and more burdens on the shoulders of our troops, while sidelining the people's representatives from the critical decisions about when we use force. (2013f)

In this excerpt, which immediately followed the previous one, he decentralized the power of the president, nodding to previous presidents who, as many scholars have noted, have contributed to a higher degree of presidential wartime power. Obama portrayed the prerogative of presidential power as something that should be reserved and restrained for exceptional circumstances. It should not be used as a way to bypass the deliberative

branch of government. Additionally, this excerpt indicated his intention to distance himself at least rhetorically, his mode of operating, and the plan he advocated from Bush's unilateral actions and failed diplomacy. Methodologically and stylistically, Obama's public appeals for military strikes in Syria deviated drastically from past appeals to go to war, and particularly the appeals used by the Bush administration to sell the "Global War on Terror."

Oddly, however, while Obama infused democratic themes on a national level, he contradicted his democratized decision-making idiom when he explained that he was willing to go ahead with military strikes without the consent of the U.N. Security Council. He asserted that he was "confident in the case our government has made without waiting for U.N. inspectors," continuing that he was "comfortable going forward without the approval of a United Nations Security Council that, so far, has been completely paralyzed and unwilling to hold Assad accountable" (2013b). He characterized the United Nations Security Council as "paralyzed," and unable to accomplish their investigation, which was similar to Bush's characterization of the U.N. while they were searching for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. He cited the accumulated evidence from a variety of sources was reason enough to act alone, or unilaterally. This sentiment changed in later addresses where he stated "we" would give the U.N. more time to complete its reports.

Throughout his discourse, Obama stylistically evoked a nuanced version of American exceptionalism in his calls for strikes in Syria. This version characterized the U.S. as law-abiding and upholding in an interdependent global community. He emphasized themes of peacebuilding to supplant the pervasive war metaphors, despite the fact that he was calling for violent military action. Nonetheless, he did so with a

pragmatic and legal undertone that stripped his rhetoric of some of the melodramatic good versus evil myth and metaphor. He also attempted to differentiate himself from his predecessor by describing himself in democratic terms, valuing deliberation to facilitate prudential decision-making.

Identificational Appeals

According to Denise Bostdorff (1994), “To examine foreign crises from a rhetorical perspective, researchers must recognize that a president’s public messages are addressed to someone, that his [sic] discourse persuasively appeals overtly or covertly to some audience” (p. 21). This assertion stems from Burke’s notion of *identification*, which he contends is essential for persuasion. When a rhetor makes use of identificational appeals, they are working to demonstrate shared substance with the audience, or what he termed *consubstantiality*. Stated otherwise, in order for persuasion to occur, the speaker must demonstrate their shared interests with their audience. Depending on the type of address, secondary audiences might include foreign allies and foes and their respective publics. Burke outlines three main types of identificational appeals that speakers typically employ to align their interests with the audience’s, including: antithetical, implicit, and explicit. Proceeding in this order in the section that follows I will examine how President Obama made use of these three types of appeals in his rhetoric.

Antithetical Appeals

Antithetical appeals are those in which a rhetor encourages an audience to unite against a particular enemy through demonizing and decivilizing mechanisms. Myth is often a central element in this type of appeal, because it embodies the principles and

values of the audience, personifying them in a fight of good versus evil (Bostdorff, 1994). The entity that represents good in the mythical conflict is defined by its polar opposite, for there to be a good, then there must be a source of evil. For instance, during the Cold War, communism was considered a source of evil that was constructed as antithetical to American values. In Bush's (2002a) State of the Union address during recent GWOT the image of the multiple alleged evil enemies were conflated into an "axis of evil" as an antithetical device. Bush repurposed the "axis of evil" terminology from the West's adversary during World War II, the "axis powers" consisting of Germany, Japan, and Italy. By labeling Iran, Iraq, and North Korea the "axis of evil," Bush implied that these were entities coordinated in their evil doing, despite the fact that they were not.

Antithetical appeals work to construct this binary. As Robert Hariman (2003) contends,

The phrase is a distorted representation that appeals to ignorance and arrogance in order to expand the speaker's political power while reducing public accountability. Evil must be fought, it seems, with strong executive power willing to use force, cloaked in secrecy, and not without recourse to nefarious methods. (p. 511-512).

Though they exist in many other rhetorical contexts and dictions, this type of appeal has proven to be a driving rhetorical force to mobilize public support for military action.

Like many other presidents, Obama used antithetical appeals to gain the public's support for himself and his proposed military strikes against the Syrian regime. However, relative to other presidents such as Kennedy, Nixon, Reagan, and G.W. Bush, this was not the predominant identificational strategy he employed, nor was it employed in the same way. More commonly, presidents have portrayed an abstract diabolical enemy with ideological motive for their acts of aggression toward the United States or its allies. These enemies were often metonymically linked to economic, political, and/or

religious philosophies, such as communism, fascism, or most recently Islamic fundamentalism, which constructed an image of an enemy that was antithetical and incompatible to our values and way of life. This mode of symbolic action has proven to be instrumental in mobilizing support for military violence because, as our understanding of political myth tells us, it circumvents ration and reason. Conversely, President Obama's rhetoric made few explicit mentions of an enemy and offered even fewer descriptive tropes to characterize the enemy. Instead he focused on victimage and the criminal actors of the Assad regime in his antithetical appeals.

Victimage. Obama condemned the Syrian government's actions on moral grounds frequently through victimage. As part of the disturbing scene, this was the central form of antithetical identification in his discourse, where he focused on the inhumane means of civilian slaughter. As he explained, "well over 1,000 people were murdered. Several hundred of them were children—young boys and girls gassed to death by their own government" (2013b). In his address to the nation on September 10th he described the imagery of the brutal aftermath of the attacks as a "massacre" that was "sickening," with "men, women, children lying in rows, killed by poison gas...others foaming at the mouth, gasping for breath," and "A father clutching his dead children, imploring them to get up and walk" (2013f). Obama's rhetoric evoked sympathy as a means to incite anger.

He even encouraged public and political audiences to watch the footage for themselves, which was hyperlinked on the White House website next to his addresses pertaining to Syria (2013b). Expectedly, this seemingly raw footage was far more disturbing than verbal description or news coverage. It embodied Obama's description

but also showed several different scenes of the attacks, presumably in different areas of Ghouta, a suburban district of Damascus where the attacks occurred. The footage made the suffering real for those who watched it. The amateur feel of the video, as if from a cell phone camera in many cases, authenticated the evidence of the scene. The trauma and panic consequent of the attack was nonverbally communicated by the shaking picture, which also makes the viewer feel as if they were voyeuristically watching reality unfold.

On numerous occasions in the past, presidents have typified the distant other with two different versions of the savage. One is the savage and evil enemy who is bent on our destruction and who despises our values. Conversely, another form of savage has also been used to justify military intervention; this type of savage is a victim of the former savage's abusive rule and perceived backward way of life. In other words, the second type of savage, who is often depicted in both verbal and visual rhetoric, is longing for a rescuer to save and civilize them and teach them our values (Cloud, 2004). In the past, American presidents have provided salvation in the form of Americanization and democratization. However, this is not present in Obama's victimage of Syrians.

Instead Obama describes the Syrians as civilized people that want relief from a violent dictatorial rule. He humanized their country in mentioning their hospitals, neighborhoods, and other institutions that Americans would see at home. Despite the fact that Syria is, or was, one of the most developed countries in its region and is historically responsible for much of modern civilization, for many Americans who might picture it as part of a desolate and desert Middle East and North Africa, this may have augmented their mental image of the region. Obama explained that the majority of the Syrian

people—and the Syrian opposition we work with—just want to live in peace, with dignity and freedom (2013f). This did not necessarily mean our particular brand of freedom or democracy (or hopefully our notion of peace), which he made clear by asserting we would not depose another dictator outright to install a democracy, as we all saw how disastrously that played out in Iraq. Rather than saving them from a backwards culture, Obama was very literal in communicating that we need to save them from being gassed to death and not involve ourselves in their politics.

Criminal Regime. With less frequency, Obama's antithetical appeals were directed at Assad's governmental forces. He described the Syrian government as dictatorial, murderous, inhumane, dangerous, and lawless. Though, most often these descriptive words were implied through the victimization of the Syrian people. It was also usually grounded in the criminality of Assad's actions as opposed to ideological rationale. For instance, in the lead up to the second Iraq War, George W. Bush (2002b), declared, "Saddam Hussein is a homicidal dictator who is addicted to weapons of mass destruction." Here Bush is characterizing the way Hussein is and also insinuating a degree of motive and purpose. Obama more often would implicate the Assad regime of war crimes through describing the gruesome scene of innocents suffering and by citing international law.

As noted in an earlier section, President Obama condemned the chemical weapons attacks as an international crime committed by Bashar al Assad's regime forces. It was frequently reinforced that this was not an American law, but international law upheld by a vast majority of the world's nations. Obama claimed Assad's government

“gassed to death over a thousand people, including hundreds of children” (2013f). He continued:

On that terrible night, the world saw in gruesome detail the terrible nature of chemical weapons, and why the overwhelming majority of humanity has declared them off-limits—a crime against humanity, and a violation of the laws of war. (Obama, 2013f)

He spoke in a prosecutorial style to unite the audiences against Assad’s regime. This was in stark contrast to the sermonic or prophetic style of other presidents, who frequently evoked mythical and religious themes of a divine mission to fight against evil. Obama cited evidence for this claim from a variety of sources ranging from the video footage, to United States and international intelligence, to U.N. reports. Instead of illustrating a perpetual enemy with an innate compulsion to collect dangerous weapons for the purpose of inflicting terror and suffering, Obama referred more to the confirmed material attacks as problematic and criminal, and that therefore Assad’s regime should be punished and their chemical weapons capabilities eliminated.

Despite Obama’s strong and consistent emphasis on the scene of the attack and central purpose for responding with strikes, he deemphasized explanation of Assad’s purpose in the majority of his addresses. The most he said of Assad’s rationale was that the attacks occurred in an area with a high population of anti-government forces, though this was only in passing reference. This may have been because Assad’s stated purpose could create an unintended identification with fighting terrorists, which in turn happened anyway. For example, in an interview with Fox and Friends on September 3, 2013 in regard to arming Syrian opposition, Brian Kilmeade told Senator McCain that he had a problem with supporting people who yell “Allahu Akbar” after a kill in combat,

simplistically conflating Muslims with terrorists. McCain then derided him and explained that it was analogous with Christians thanking god. Nonetheless, the concern of willingly arming Islamic extremists has in sense created a cognitive dissonance for some considering military action. In response to previous accusations of human rights abuses, Assad insisted his military was only fighting terrorists, namely Al Qaeda and other extremist groups, to keep them from overthrowing the Syrian government. He also accused international actors, including the West, of covertly supporting these terrorists as a means of political interference and hegemonic influence.

Obama's rhetoric circumvented this association by focusing on the material aggressions committed by the Assad regime and the future implications of doing nothing. The "attack on human dignity" presented a danger not only to our national security, but also could deflate the seriousness of the global prohibition on using chemical weapons in combat. He also argued that the Assad regime's flagrant violation of the law posed a series risk to international security, especially to the countries along Syria's borders. Therefore military strikes would purport specifically to punish the Assad regime to send them a message and set an international precedent to deter future use.

Implicit Appeals

In addition to Obama's use of antithesis, his discourse also functioned implicitly to identify with his audience. This form of identification occurs when a speaker implies consubstantiality less directly, often through the use of inclusive terms that correspond to actor such as "we," "our," the United States. Likewise, as his most frequent form of implicit appeal, Obama's invocation of "we" connoted a sense of shared accountability for responding to the chemical weapons attacks. The use of the word "we"

in his speech implied that everyone, including himself, members of Congress, and citizens alike were accountable. Here he referred to “we” ambiguously to evoke a sense of mobilizing guilt within the audience. Because “we,” as in the U.S. public and government, saw innocent Syrian civilians brutally murdered with chemical weapons, “we cannot turn a blind eye” and the “we cannot ignore this kind of brutality” (2013c). Obama asked, “What message will we send if a dictator can gas hundreds of children to death in plain sight and pay no price?” (2013b). Therefore by doing nothing, he is implying that “we,” as in the United States, almost become complicit in the crime, or at least complacent with it. This sense of guilt could also be applied to an international audience, though less directly.

While there have been a wide variety of interpretations of the situation in Syria and equally as many iterations of what should be done in response to the chemical weapons attacks, there is less variability in the way people feel about gassing civilians to death. War hawks and pacifists alike are morally appalled by the human rights abuses in Syria, regardless of their political particularities. This strategy appeals to this commonly held position toward civilian slaughter as leverage to channel the audience to identify with the President’s suggested reaction as a moral obligation.

Obama also blurred the lines between the accountability of civilians and the government in claiming, “We cannot raise our children in a world where we will not follow through on the things we say, the accords we sign, the values that define us” (2013b). This use of “we” invokes a similar sense of guilt and responsibility implicitly, but it also personifies the proposed policy by infusing familial themes. Not only would

our political values be compromised, but also our personal values and our role as parents would be called into question.

As second form of implicit appeal, Obama invoked “we” to identify with other government actors. This use of “we” was democratically framed, and spoke to and about the decision makers in Congress. Many of whom have and continue to accuse Obama of being uncooperative politically and acting unilaterally to an unprecedented extent, reaching further than other American president. However, as previously noted, early on Obama announced he would seek authorization for military strikes from the “American people’s representatives in Congress” (2013b). He continued that his administration would be cooperative with Congress by supplying all members with reports pertaining to what happened in Syria and why it implicates national security. While he has the authority to act without authorization from Congress, as he claimed, “our action will be more effective” when we work together (2013b). “We should have this debate,” he claimed, “because the issues are too big for business as usual. And this morning, John Boehner, Harry Reid, Nancy Pelosi and Mitch McConnell agreed that this is the right thing to do for our democracy” (2013b).

This implicit strategy of identification accomplished several key functions. First, it responded directly to calls that the President is uncooperative and acts unilaterally in policy making. Other presidents have bent and broken constitutional guidelines to use military force, and have even cited the constitution in the process. Instead Obama called on Congress to be part of the democratic decision making process, despite the fact he does not have to legally. He also informs that he has disregarded suggestions to not put the decision through Congress. However, it seemed like this tactic was more suited for

placating the public as opposed to actually appeasing Congressional critics, given that presidential rhetoric is likely more influential in shaping the public's perceptions of political reality, as they do not regularly interact with the President.

Second, Obama taps into the general public's understanding of Congress as a partisan institution, full of members who are unwilling to work together. He strategically parted from the "business as usual" condition, exalting himself above it, and placing the onus on Congress to break from it as well and prove their efficacy. He called on members of "both parties...to consider that some things are more important than partisan differences or the politics of the moment" (2013b). Obama anticipates criticism from opponents, but to cut the legs out from under it by appearing to be the bigger person. The audience then anticipates Congress' criticisms, but is primed to interpret it. By calling on both parties to be cooperative for a change, Obama refocused the spotlight on Congress.

Third, by deferring the decision to Congress and in turn making them accountable by highlighting their partisan tendencies, Obama rhetorically dilutes his personal accountability by spreading it to Congress. By doing so, he diverted some of the attention from himself and lowered expectations for expedient action. Not acting then could be construed as "business as usual" in the Congressional quagmire. In turn, perceptions of Obama's indecisiveness and weak authority would be reframed through his unequivocal assertion that we should strike Syria. If his solution to the crisis in Syria passed through Congressional debate, it would then become *our* solution. Shared ownership would also likely mean shared blame if the solution failed or ended poorly. Critics might not levy as harsh a censure if they took part in the decision.

Fourth, Obama implicitly tried to convey shared substance with Congressional war hawks, though this was less rhetorically effective. Many of them, notably Senators McCain and Graham, chided that Obama's indecisiveness and the limited military scope of action would prove ineffective and produce insufficient results. This plan would also irritate pacifists and isolationists who have advocated against interfering militarily in the region. In other words, Obama's suggested course of limited and punitive military strikes likely put him between a rock and a hard place with the aforementioned critics on either side. It seemed like Obama's bluff was called with the red line threat to the Syrian government. He managed the dissonance between the rhetoric of peacebuilding and honoring his word (threat) by calling for strikes but sending the decision right into gridlock while an alternative diplomatic solution could be pursued. If it was his administration's intention to actually go through with the strikes, it was a poorly constructed argument that failed to achieve its objective. However, if it was his intention to stall or circumvent the actual use of force, he also diminished the credibility of his threats.

Explicit Appeals

Explicit appeals are those in which a rhetor overtly identifies shared substance with their audience. For Burke, the central goal of identification in rhetoric is to bring people together who are naturally separated and alienated, which he contends is inherent of the human condition. This function was pivotal to President Obama's explicit identificational strategy, which directly responded to the concerns of the American public, unenthused with the last decade of war. Obama also frequently addressed these

concerns when he posed hypothetical critical questions, which he would subsequently answer.

A central theme in the President's explicit appeals was the public's contempt for another long and expensive episode of war. Leading up to the 2008 election, a central tenet of his campaign platform of "change" comprised bringing the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to a close (Ivie & Giner, 2009a). In his calls for strikes in Syria he anticipated the connection and worked to dismantle the comparison. In a cyclical pattern, Obama began by showing that he shared a particular concern, and he then offered a rebuttal to the concern. He claimed, "I know well that we are weary of war" (2013b). Then in an address to the public, he explained, "I know that after the terrible toll of Iraq and Afghanistan, the idea of any military action, no matter how limited, is not going to be popular. After all, I've spent four and a half years working to end wars, not to start them." (2013f). Despite the fact that Obama was calling for military action, he continued to illustrate his devotion to the objective of reducing it. He also identified with those who "want all of us in Washington—especially [Obama]—to concentrate on the task of building our nation here at home: putting people back to work, educating our kids, growing our middle class" (2013f). In response to the concerns, he asserted, "It's no wonder, then, that you're asking hard questions. So let me answer some of the most important questions that I've heard from members of Congress, and that I've read in letters that you've sent to me" (2013f).

Obama proceeded with several questions allegedly from real people and provided his own answers. These included: "Is this a slippery slope to another war?" "Is it worth acting if we don't take out Assad?" Is there a danger of retaliation? "Why should

we get involved at all in a place that's so complicated, and where...those who come after Assad may be enemies of human rights?" All of these questions—whether real or not—were lobe-type questions, which allowed the President to address the major underlying concerns with acting in Syria. They essentially allowed him to reiterate all of his purpose and conditions in a succinct and coherent fashion. During the “Global War on Terror,” this type of critical questioning received hostile treatment, where the Bush administration, with support from certain media agencies, accused critics of being against the cause, supporting the enemy, being unpatriotic, and even being unsupportive of the troops.

In summation, Obama made extensive use of identificational in his calls for military action in Syria. However, his antithetical appeals functioned differently than what is typical of the war rhetoric genre. Instead of constructing an evil enemy opposed to our way of life, Obama reframed the enemy with a rule of law metaphor. Using implicit and explicit strategies, Obama also identified with an audience that was weary of war from the recent “Global War on Terror” and not looking to support a new intervention.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The task of this project was to explore the rhetorical function of Barack Obama's call for military strikes in Syria. Three essential questions guided my research and structured my analysis: How did Barack Obama portray the chemical weapons attacks in Syria as a crisis (situation)? Which rhetorical strategies, tropes, and themes did he emphasize to describe the central actors (style)? And how did the President encourage his audiences to identify him and his policies (identificational appeals)? These questions culminated in the larger question: how does his rhetoric fit within the larger war rhetoric genre?

In respect to the first question, the President portrayed a grave situation in Syria where the Assad regime allegedly killed well over 1,000 civilians with chemical weapons. In graphic detail, he described the men, women, and children whom fell victim to what he characterized as an assault on human dignity. In addition to this moral warrant, Obama also classified the attacks as a serious violation of international law. Therefore, in his initial addresses, he called for limited military strikes against strategic targets as a punitive and preventive measure.

To the second question, Obama's rhetorical style could be characterized as a mix of idealistic and pragmatic. He was idealistic in the sense that he reframed American exceptionalism with the beliefs and values of his audience regarding the nation's role in

the world. Obama also championed the United States as exceptional, but also insisted that this required the nation to exemplify these principles with virtue to revitalize global perceptions and appreciation of our leadership. His idealistic rhetorical style was also marked with pragmatic purpose. Instead of vaguely stating objectives, he was more precise in his plan and what goals it purported to accomplish.

To the third question, the President encouraged his audience to identify with his handling of the crisis situation through antithetical, implicit and explicit identificational appeals. Through victimization and criminalization, he urged the audience to unite with him against Assad's actions. He implied a moral accountability to respond to Assad's actions to affirm who we are as a nation and what we stand for. Obama also demonstrated consubstantiality with his audience explicitly by addressing the audience's critical concerns and questions. From these short summaries we move to the larger question concerned with how Obama's portrayal fits with the larger crisis rhetoric genre.

A *genre*, as Campbell and Jamieson (1974) define, is "a group of acts unified by a constellation of forms that recurs in each of its members (p. 20). Genres often emerge out of recurrent situations and create a set of expectations among audience members. Obama's rhetoric fit within the established crisis rhetoric genre, but with important departures. Returning to the five historical characteristics of war rhetoric outlined by Campbell and Jamieson (2008) in the literature review, Obama's rhetoric: 1) treated the decision to use military force as a product of careful thought and deliberation; 2) the argument for intervention was justified through a situational narrative; 3) he used

identificational appeals to unify the audience around his suggested action and purpose. However, in his addresses he did not attempt to 4) “legitimize [the] presidential assumption of the extraordinary powers for the commander in chief,” nor did this analysis find that he 5) strategically misrepresented the situation in his appeals to a large extent (p. 221).

Throughout history, many American presidents have evoked the power of Commander in Chief during times of crisis to deploy the United States military. Consequently the power this entails has accumulatively grown stronger with each attempt to exercise it. Though Barack Obama has made executive orders during his time in office that constitute a similar unilateralism for different ends, this was not the case with his calls for the use of military force in Syria. Conversely, he addressed both of his roles of president and the leader of the armed forces and seemed to place greater import to the former. Obama stated that while he could use force without Congressional authorization, he would in fact put the decision to Congress.

Lastly, though it is impossible to know what President Obama’s personal political strategy really was, strategic misrepresentations of events were not abundant. Most of his claims were evidenced, either through the U.N. or U.S. intelligence reports, not that either is incapable of misrepresentation; nonetheless, for the most part, Obama’s use of the evidence seemed clear and straightforward. One exception to this assertion could be the embellished likelihood that the Syrian government’s use of chemical weapons posed a real threat to the United States. Though this was actually rectified by Obama in his discourse when he explained that the extent to which Syria posed a direct threat to the U.S. was low.

Obama's Continuation of the Genre

In his promotion of the crisis in Syria, President Obama demonstrated a degree of continuity with prior presidents both stylistically and substantively in promoting a foreign crisis as unique and threatening. Vilification and victimization have proven to be essential to this process. Likewise, through the use of antithetical identification Obama vilified the actions of Bashar al Assad's government and constructed a victim in need of saving. Humanitarian justifications have proven to be a staple in American war rhetoric, which goes hand and hand with the American exceptional(ist) assumption that America is a peace-loving nation that uses military force only as a last resort. Even subsequent to wars, when public morale toward the prospect of a new conflict is stale, presidents have often articulated their calls for military action from this war-weary perspective to identify with their audience. Thus any time the United States uses force the choice is framed as a provocation, as if it were not a choice at all.

This has led to a peacebuilding through violence doctrine that has pervaded America war rhetoric from the beginning. This was also the case with Obama's call for military strikes, but what constitutes this war weariness in action? Obama's rhetoric exemplified this tradition in his calls for "limited" military action against Syria. His insistence that these would be small and limited strikes is congruent with other political promises that involved violent humanitarianism. I work from the perspective that humanitarianism and military violence are in most cases oxymoronic. What Obama omitted from his discourse is the basic reality that missiles, even those blessed with humanitarian hopes and intentions, often kill the humans they purport to save.

Obama's Break from the Genre

While President Obama demonstrated rhetorical continuity with the historically developed war rhetoric genre in a number of ways, he also made significant departures. Congruent with other analyses, this close examination of Obama's rhetoric suggests he exemplified a deliberative style with a pragmatic purpose. He spoke with a democratic and realistic political vocabulary that, in contrast to many of his predecessors, opened a plausible space for criticism and dissent.

Obama's rhetoric cohered with many of the historical tenants of American exceptionalism, but he offered a version infused with themes of democratic pragmatism and realism. While he defined America's place in the world in moral terms, he reverted, at least rhetorically, to a hybrid mission of exemplar and invention philosophy. His call for the use of military force obviously negated the early lead by example mission that was antithetical to intervention; instead he posited that certain occasions would inevitably call for the use of force. However, the lead by example mentality was combined with intervention, essentially arguing that it was necessary for the United States to practice what it preaches. Obama's (re)appropriation of American exceptionalism also deemphasized some of the mythical foundations of innocence and superiority marking all of our actions, contending that the United States is not perfect.

Myth and other rhetorical conventions that equivocate both the nature of crisis situations and suggested solutions to them were deemphasized in Obama's rhetoric. In particular, the President moved from the Us versus Them rhetoric that has pervaded the American war narrative to a condemnation of committing offences to universal laws. Recently, in the most vivid and robust reincarnation of the us-them theme, George W.

Bush's "Global War on Terror" rhetoric after 9/11 induced a new sense of national (in)security and justified many undemocratic actions in the name of "democracy" and "freedom." For Bush and many others before him, the us versus them mentality was manifest in a binary of good versus evil.

The good versus evil myth in political rhetoric often contributes to an oversimplification of what separates humans (Ivie & Giner, 2007), whether that be within or between nations, cultures, or any other demarcations. Evilness attests to motives and irreconcilable differences between itself and good. For people who are considered evil, it is perceived that they *do* evil because they *are* evil. However, this kind of circular logic circumvents any real or productive discourse to alleviate the divisive sources of alienation. These melodramatic tendencies of crisis rhetoric also tend to lead to a narrower frame of debate. As James Arnt Aune (2003) contends, "Responses to evil actions, however, are more likely to be effective when one is willing to confront honestly the causes of those actions" (p. 521). The good versus evil rhetoric instead has functioned in the past to strategically obscure or completely ignore the actual sources of problematic actions. This is particularly the case when tending to the actual sources of problems is strategically inconvenient or potentially incriminating.

In any fight of good versus evil, both sides presume to be on the good team. Neither side identifies as the evil side, as might be the case in action movies or comic books. Therefore publicly labeling entities as "evil" also functions to alienate and antagonize unfriendly nations, often transforming aloof nations in to actual adversaries. A case in point, as Aune (2003) notes, George W. Bush's denoting an "axis of evil" became

problematic when “it was read by the notoriously paranoid leader of North Korea, Kim Jong Il, as signaling a possible attack by the United States” (p. 518).

However, Obama refrained from the melodramatic vocabulary of good versus evil, which Aune (2003) argues, “is inherently corrosive of democratic politics” (p. 518), in favor of emphasizing rule of law themes. By this logic, it is not an enemy that hates Americans or our allies. It is not an innately evil enemy that hates democracy and freedom, nor are they bent on destroying proponents of these values. Instead Obama moves from the idea of evil, which precipitates a mindset fear, to focusing on the actions committed by Assad’s regime.

In regard of both victims and adversaries, Obama offered a humanizing discourse that reframed situations apart from inherency and inevitability. Victims are not victimized because they are members of a backward culture that is unable or unwilling to join the rest of modern humanity. They are victim to abusive actions. Instead of the enemy existing as a perpetual enemy, they are rhetorically constructed as the abuser. In other words, their *chosen* actions are the problem, not the culture or groups they were born into. By replacing the war against evil metaphor with the rule of law metaphor, Obama is principally moving toward a demonology of violence as opposed to demonizing evil people.

Implications

Should Obama’s call for military action be seen as a rhetorical failure or as a successful road to a diplomatic solution? This question is interesting but is perhaps unanswerable and less germane than the question of: why does a change in a problematic

rhetorical genre matter even when problematic praxis persist? The answer is that regardless of rhetorical motive or rationale, prominent and widely disseminated rhetorics—such as that of the president—influence our ways of seeing and evaluating the world. Despite the best or worst intentions of rhetorical action, people will be influenced by what was said and it will likely influence the way they understand past, present, and future phenomena.

Thus if myth is a “rhetorical narcotic,” as Williamson (2011) states, calling for military strikes in less hyperbolic and mythical language provides a more sober view of using military force and the consequences it entails. Similarly to the introduction of live journalistic footage and images during the Vietnam War, disintegrating the Manichaeic good versus evil binary from the United States’ foreign affairs idiom should facilitate a more realistic look at the consequences of fighting fire with fire. This also has a greater potential to open the door for alternative solutions based in communication and international cooperation such as the one reached in Syria, as well as a space for prudential deliberation domestically.

Any political decision as dire as using military force should be heavily scrutinized and criticized, both politically and publicly. Thus the presentation of such a proposition should function to allow it or even welcome criticism and dissenting opinion. In the time between the chemical weapons attacks in Ghouta until the diplomatic solution to destroy Syria’s chemical weapons was reached, there has been no noticeable questioning of patriotism or condemnation of dissenting opinion. In fact, in many of Obama’s several addresses, he very explicitly engaged in dialogue with real criticisms that were voiced in popular and academic literature (2013b, 2013c, 2013f). As Robert

Ivie (2004, 2007, 2009) and Herbert Simons (2007) assert, this agency for deliberation and embracement of dissent is absolutely essential for a functioning democracy.

Limitations

While this research contributed insight towards a modern conception of the war rhetoric as a genre there were a few limitations. First, the exclusive focal point of this research was on presidential rhetoric, thus the data sample consisted primarily of Barack Obama's call for military strikes. This thesis did not explore the discourse of other members of his administration such as of Department of State Secretary John Kerry or Department of Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel. Given the centrality of former General Colin Powell and others to mobilizing support for the Bush administration, including the discourse of Kerry, Hagel, and others related to the administration could have facilitated an exploration of the potential existence of a larger strategy to the calls for action in Syria.

Second, the narrow scope of the data sample for this project excluded Obama's earlier foreign policy rhetoric. Many previous studies exploring the genre of presidential war rhetoric have taken a wider vantage point, focusing on multiple events across a presidency. Perhaps, looking at a wider range of Obama's rhetoric could have provided a more a more holistic interpretation of his rhetorical style and how it has changed.

Lastly, this crisis situation is different from others in the past because there was not a clear or eminent threat to the United States, nor did the President articulate one. Though I maintain the position that any call for military violence should continue to

constitute war rhetoric, it could have been useful to seek more literature examining situations that were more analogous with this one—or put differently, situations where the justification was primarily humanitarian or punitive rather than articulated as self-defense.

Future Research

Early into his presidency, Barack Obama continued many of the problematic practices Bush initiated after 9/11, while producing some new ones of his own. However, at least linguistically, he has shifted away from the idiom of good versus evil. While the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq carried on longer and were more resemblant to Bush's unpopular approach to foreign policy than Obama promised would be the case, the language used to describe these circumstances has changed. It could have been that fixing his predecessor's macabre concoction would be about as realistic as fixing a failed soufflé. Likewise, appropriating a new and fresh approach to a misguided and broken situation would also likely be ill fated. Following this assumption, because rhetorical genres produce an internal dynamic that primes an audience to expect a particular response to crises, future research could explore the questions of: how do generic expectations affect a rhetor's capacity to break from the rhetorical genre established by previous rhetors? And how would a new president create a consubstantial message, while breaking from the expectations of the war rhetoric?

According to Burke (1984), it is often necessary to incrementally “introduce new principles while theoretically remaining faithful to old principles” (p. 218). Many of Obama's rhetorical shifts have led some to label him an apologist in regards to foreign

relations. Others have characterized his as more restrained and prudential than his predecessor. Even after the diplomatic solution was reached between the international community and Assad's regime, Obama claimed that it was in part because of his threat to use military force. Thus, he is in part reverting back to the mentality of leading with a big stick. Instead of trying to save face after his bluff was called, Obama could have put more emphasis on cooperation and coordination with the international community, as opposed to replacing one threat with another. Future research could explore Burke's hypothesis further by analyzing the rhetorical evolution of presidents through the span of their presidency. Towards these ends, Obama's presidency will provide an excellent example for this kind of analysis because of the robust shift from the "Global War on Terror" rhetoric as it has deescalated since 2008.

For much of his presidency, Obama has adhered to a neoliberal foreign policy doctrine while camouflaging it as more principled, nimbler, and more effective. He has also at times treated international law with rhetorical adherence, but with behavioral indifference. So perhaps as new situations present themselves, we will see if Obama's rhetorical vision comes to fruition, or if it proves to be romantic but empty talk that results in more of the same. Future research could explore how this talk plays out.

Conclusion

In conclusion, President Obama's call for military action in Syria provides a useful context for understanding the present state of the American war culture. Since the turn to the 20th century, the myth of American exceptionalism has fueled a mission of intervention that has justified inhumane violence and undemocratic behavior under the

guise of providing freedom and democracy. The rhetorical foundation for this mission has been finessed by presidents since McKinley, and continues to be finessed rather than abandoned by President Obama. Yet, Obama provided a transitional discourse from the dramatic fear inducing construction of evil to a rhetoric that provides a space for deliberation and dissent. One rhetorical episode featuring some of the “change” a president was to provide does not mean the death of a problematic rhetorical tradition that has often led to war. However, for those who value nonviolent solutions to international problems as the ultimate objective, it should be considered a step in the right direction.

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