1 *Narrating national security*

In the winter of 2007, as Americans grew increasingly weary of a protracted and seemingly unwinnable war in Iraq, President George W. Bush bucked the political winds and, rather than bring the troops home, called for dispatching more forces, a "surge." This would be a last-ditch effort to bring order to Iraq, which had known little peace since US forces had invaded the country and toppled Saddam Hussein's regime four years before. But, while the military struggled to dominate the battlefield in Iraq, Bush faced a rhetorical insurgency at home. This was not a surge, many Democrats warned, but a dangerous "escalation." Failing to back the surge was tantamount to capitulating to "Jihadist Joe," one Republican congressman memorably charged. Democratic opponents countered that resisting the surge was the surest way to save "GI Joe." Where the administration saw controllable "sectarian strife," many Democrats saw an unmanageable "civil war."[1] There was a lot at stake in these rhetorical battles. Both sides believed that, with their patience wearing thin, Americans wanted nothing to do with someone else's "civil war." Sectarian or civil "strife," though, seemed like a law-and-order problem, just the sort of thing that well-meaning outsiders could help to quash.

Such familiar rhetorical contests shape the course of politics, even in matters of national security. That is hardly news to politicians the world over, who spend untold sums on staff and consultants to help them craft their messages. It would not surprise generations of scholars across the humanities and social sciences who have labored to reveal language's inner workings and contradictions, its relationship to human cognition and experience, and its deep structures, and to catalog the techniques of rhetorical mastery. Yet, it would come as news to many scholars of politics, especially of foreign policy and international

[1] Indeed, so did the CIA, in a classified November 2006 report: see Gordon and Trainor 2012, 295.

relations, who often dismiss "mere" rhetoric as posturing and as unworthy of analysis. This book sides with the politicians – not because the world of politics is a genteel debating society, whose participants politely puzzle over the central issues of the day, but because it is not. In politics, language is a crucial medium, means, locus, and object of contest. It neither competes with nor complements power politics: it *is* power politics.[2] Through language, actors exercise influence over others' behavior. Through language, political subjects are produced and social relations defined.[3]

This book rests on three related premises. First, that the largest questions of national security require leaders to engage public audiences and thus to legitimate, or provide public justification for, the policies they prefer. Second, that not all conceivable policies can be legitimated in the public sphere, and that which cannot be legitimated cannot be pursued over the long haul. Third, that international developments are a key ground for legitimation, but that those events do not speak for themselves; much of the politics of national security revolves around a competition over their meaning. From these premises, it follows that students of security affairs should devote attention to how debate is structured, to how the bases and boundaries of legitimation are set and reworked, and to the impact on the policies states pursue.

That intellectual agenda leads to the concept of "narrative." It is through narrative that human beings order disordered experience and impart meaning to themselves and their world. Insofar as any grand strategy rests on a coherent portrait of the global environment, it rests on narrative. Most students of national security and foreign affairs would acknowledge narratives' existence and even their ubiquity, but far fewer would grant that these narratives matter – in the sense of having a substantial impact on policy. They would argue that states have little choice but to adapt themselves to the dictates of an unforgiving international system, that narratives are the product of events whose meaning is clear to all, or that a narrative's dominance simply reflects the interests of powerful groups and leaders. While there are exceptions, hailing especially from the critical wing of the discipline,

[2] Bially Mattern 2009.
[3] On interactive and constitutive forms of power, see Barnett and Duvall 2005.

the putative mainstream generally denies that narrative is a powerful force shaping either national security debate or policy outcomes.

This book challenges that commonly held view. Debates over national security are in fact often underpinned by dominant narratives that weave present challenges, past failures and triumphs, and potential futures into a coherent tale, with well-defined characters and plot lines. It is thanks to these powerful narratives that the implications of global events seem clear. It is thanks to these powerful narratives that the international system seems to issue dictates. The Cold War consensus that allegedly gripped US foreign policy from the late 1940s through the Vietnam War was a dominant narrative that made sense of the world for Americans and arguably led to missed opportunities to moderate superpower rivalry. The War on Terror was more than a slogan: it was shorthand for a post-9/11 narrative that not only placed that day's horrific events in a meaningful context, but also set the terms of national security debate in the United States for the next decade. Critics who wished to be taken seriously beyond niche audiences had to ground their arguments in these narratives, which had given rise to the policies they found objectionable. Dominant narratives of national security establish the common-sense givens of debate, set the boundaries of the legitimate, limit what political actors inside and outside the halls of power can publicly justify, and resist efforts to remake the landscape of legitimation.[4] Dominant narratives thereby shape the national security policies that states pursue.

Two questions follow. First, how and when have particular narratives of national security become dominant, and how and when have these dominant narratives come undone? Second, what impact has the emergence of narratives as dominant, and their subsequent fall from that powerful perch, had on national security policy? The first question is this book's primary focus, but some will understandably wonder why they should pay much attention to the rise and fall of dominant narratives. They observe the narrative to and fro, but they see the chief drivers of policy lying elsewhere. Attention to the second question should relieve some of their skepticism.

[4] The phenomenon of contest within relatively settled narratives, and of the politics entailed in patrolling those sacrosanct boundaries, has been well explored. I have done so myself in Krebs 2006. Within international relations, see, among many others, Barnett 1998; Campbell 1998; Kornprobst 2008; Weldes 1999.

There are two intuitive answers to the first question – the puzzle of narrative dominance – but both are unsatisfying. First, untrammeled agency: charismatic, well-funded, or institutionally empowered individuals are well positioned to shape the nation's security narratives. Such individuals, especially politicians, know all too well the power of dominant narratives, sometimes because they have fallen victim to them. Consequently, and despite politicians' reputation for short time horizons, they often devote substantial resources to what Stuart Hall termed "hegemonic projects," which aspire to "the remaking of common sense."[5] The Republican Tea Party darling Senator Ted Cruz has declared that "the essential battle is the meta-battle of framing the narrative," because, as he summarizes Sun Tzu, battles are won by "choosing the terrain on which [they] will be fought."[6] No surprise then that the purveyors of rhetorical silver bullets have long done a fast business inside the halls of power.[7] But this agent-centered account captures only a very partial truth. Politicians know how rarely their hegemonic projects come to fruition. Even holders of the presidential "bully pulpit" in the United States have learned, through bitter experience, of its limits. Equally important, elites, even brilliant and authoritative orators, do not stand outside or transcend social structures that they then manipulate at will.

Second, international events' plain, unmediated meaning: some interpretations just make sense, others simply do not fit the facts. But the seeming "brute facts" of the domestic and international environment – material resources, geographical assets, demographic trends, sedimented social constructions – seem less fixed if one takes the long view. Moreover, such an account has things backwards: alleged facts acquire meaning only when people weave them into coherent stories. Nor can we confidently ascribe narrative dominance simply to the speaker's fortunate place in historical time, to her good luck in facing a favorable configuration of forces. Stephen Skowronek suggests that this is what makes even otherwise ordinary politicians seem like great orators and

[5] Hall 1988, 8. Scholars across subfields have sometimes recognized this. In American politics, see Green 1987; Skowronek 2008, ch. 1; Smith 2007b. In comparative politics, see Scott 1990; Wedeen 1999. In international relations, see Barnett 1999; Ish-Shalom 2011; Williams 2007, and, from a very different perspective, Kaufmann 2004.

[6] Jeffrey Toobin, "The Absolutist," *The New Yorker*, 30 June 2014.

[7] In the United States, see, for instance, from the Left, Lakoff 2004; from the Right, Luntz 2006.

leaders.[8] But rhetorical brilliance cannot be a product of structure alone: many an opportunity goes unseized.

This book's answer to the puzzle of narrative dominance knits together three elements: the rhetorical demands of the environment; the material, normative, and institutional power speakers bring to bear; and the rhetorical modes they adopt. A dominant narrative of national security is a realized hegemonic project. It is a social fact, not an object of active political challenge. During such routine times, there is political contest, sometimes even intense, but it usually takes place within the terms of the dominant narrative. Occasional efforts to shape the nation's security narrative are then likely to fall short. During unsettled times, in contrast, multiple narratives legitimately circulate in the public sphere, and political contest is less bounded. Such critical junctures are openings for narrative projects that aim to lay the foundation for subsequent argumentation. When authoritative speakers – notably, the president in the US context – seize that opportunity and express themselves in the rhetoric of storytelling, they shift debate back into a relatively settled narrative zone. In this account, developed theoretically and explored empirically in Part I, structural openings intersect with both authority (derived from institutional position) and human agency (via rhetorical mode) to shape the narrative landscape.

To explain when dominant narratives endure and when they collapse, I turn to this same basket of factors – structural context, narrative authority, and rhetorical strategy. A common view is that entrenched institutions, ideas, and discourses persist, even in the face of evidence that they are inefficient or unwarranted; they give way only after a shocking failure, which overwhelms the forces of inertia. In Part II, I argue, against this conventional wisdom, that even substantial failures work against narrative change in the security arena: a faltering military campaign impedes challenge to the dominant security narrative, while encouraging narrow policy criticism that reproduces the narrative. Equally surprising, victory in war and coercive diplomacy makes narrative change possible. These counterintuitive conclusions follow from the dynamics of narrative authority, in combination with political incentives and identity: battlefield setbacks erode presidential authority, creating an opening for the

[8] Skowronek 1997.

political opposition, while notable successes bolster the authority of their "owners," within and outside government. Although potentially applicable beyond the United States, the theoretical framework is tailored to the US context, and the book's empirical focus, reviewed in greater detail at the end of this chapter, is on major debates in US national security from the 1930s through the 2000s.

Consider once more the debate over the "surge" of US forces into Iraq. Lingering puzzles and previously occluded questions now glide into view. It becomes clear that supporters and opponents of the surge occupied some of the same narrative terrain: they agreed that the United States was engaged in a war not of its own choosing, but forced upon it by ideologically driven terrorists, who had struck without cause at America and its freedom on 9/11. Yet this was not the only way to understand what had transpired, who the protagonists were, and what moved them. As I show in Chapter 4, there were plausible competing narratives of the attacks and the post-9/11 world, and neither the ostensible facts of global politics nor the power of the bully pulpit can alone explain why this particular narrative triumphed over those alternatives. More persuasive is the conjuncture of an unsettled narrative situation, George W. Bush's presidential authority, and his predominantly storytelling rhetoric. This dominant Terror narrative shaped the policies pursued by the United States in the name of national security after 9/11 – from extraordinary rendition to Guantanamo to the Iraq War. Six years later, Bush again sought to exploit his bully pulpit, this time to silence contending accounts of the Iraq War's progress and prospects. However, during this more routine time in which the Terror narrative structured political debate, the administration's characterization of recent events in Iraq as "civil strife" did not become an accepted common sense, and "civil war" was equally common and legitimate in public discourse. Yet, the Iraq War's shortcomings did not fatally undermine the underlying Terror narrative. Just the opposite: when the Democrats launched an assault on the Iraq War – as a distraction from the War on Terror properly understood – they shored up the legitimating narrative.

Dominant national security narratives are hardly a peculiarly American phenomenon. Consider the civilizing mission of liberal empire, the Nazi obsession with "living space," the Gaullist vision of restoring French grandeur, the Communist faith in capitalist aggression and imperialism, the Iranian Revolutionary regime's Great and Little Satans, and the Israelis' conviction that they have "no partner for

peace." These shorthand expressions encapsulate rich narratives that offer portraits of the protagonists, scene, and action of a global drama and that, at least for a time, constituted the nearly unquestioned foundation for policy deliberations in their respective nations. Scholars have devoted the lion's share of their attention to the more routine, explicitly debated instrumental and normative considerations that enter into the making of national security policy. Policy's often unspoken narrative underpinnings have received far less attention. Yet, they are arguably more important.

This book is not the first word on these under-explored questions. Nor will it be the last. It builds on an earlier linguistic turn in the study of foreign policy and threat construction,[9] on work in the field of international relations that has placed narrative at its analytical center,[10] and on theorizing about rhetoric and narrative from far-removed disciplines. It is part of a growing and vibrant literature on legitimation and the making of foreign policy.[11] But it makes a unique contribution – in its synthetic theoretical framework, its conceptualization of rhetorical mode and specifically storytelling, the diversity of its methods, and the breadth of its empirics, exploring the dynamics of national security narrative in the United States over 70 years.

Language, narrative, and the politics of national security

There is no shortage of claims about politics' essence. It is often said that power, interests, or ideas – to invoke a common scheme – are the stuff of politics. Yet, language, too, Aristotle suggested, lies at its core. Man's nature as a political animal is deeply intertwined with his distinctive capacity for speech, which "serves to indicate what is useful and what is harmful, and so also what is just and what is unjust." Other animals communicate. Many species act in accord with basic ethical principles. But only humans give voice to the moral sense; only they

[9] Among many others, see Campbell 1998; Doty 1996; Fierke 1998; Weldes 1999.
[10] See, most notably, Banerjee 1998; Barnett 1999; Bially Mattern 2005; Edkins 2003; Kaufman 2009; Lynch 1999a; Ringmar 1996; Snyder 2015; Williams 2007, ch. 4. See also, on narratives of war's origins, Suganami 1996, 1997a, 1997b, 1999.
[11] Although they do not all use the term, see especially Barnett 1998; Bukovansky 2002; Goddard 2009; Goddard and Krebs 2015; Jackson 2006; Nexon 2009; Williams 2007. For a related sociological text, see Smith 2005b.

articulate, reason about, and debate good and evil, noble and ignoble, beneficial and harmful.[12] Human beings express ideas through language and other forms of symbolic communication. They cannot recognize their common and competing interests, and they cannot forge coalitions, except through the articulation of ideas. They cannot direct power, nor can they interpret its exercise, in the absence of language. It is true that habit governs vast zones of social life, including to some extent the political realm.[13] But, as Nelson Goodman observes: "We can have words without a world, but no world without words or other symbols."[14]

Contestation is the lifeblood of politics, but it is never unstructured. As Jenny Edkins notes: "For language to work at a particular time and in a particular context . . . [t]here has to be some provisional agreement, accepted ideology or central authority structure that will halt the fluidity of terms and make language meaningful."[15] Some premises are unquestioned. They often go unspoken because they strike participants and observers as common sense. But they are the product of human agency.[16] Roland Barthes was especially aware, and resentful, "of the 'naturalness' with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history," and he devoted himself to demystifying this naturalness, to revealing the history and politics that lie beneath.[17] Whether one calls it myth (like Barthes) or ideology, the effect is the same: to produce the social order as inevitable and timeless, to conceal its contingent origins, and to replace fundamental political contest with a technology of governance.[18] Disputed propositions are most powerful when they become indisputable norms.

[12] Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1253a7, as interpreted by and cited in Chilton 2004, 5.
[13] Hopf 2010, and relatedly, Pouliot 2008. [14] Goodman 1978, 6.
[15] Edkins 2003, 7.
[16] A wide range of scholarly traditions, despite differences in epistemological orientation and substantive concern, would endorse this proposition, including Schattschneider's classic insights into agenda-setting, sociological accounts of political competition over the "definition of the situation," Bourdieu's *habitus* that structures the everyday cultural forms through which subjects express themselves, Laclau's writings on the establishment and disruption of *doxa*, Foucault's genealogies of institutional and disciplinary discourses, and so on. This is also a point of intersection with research on the impact of elite framing and cuing on mass political attitudes.
[17] Barthes 1972, 11 and passim. See also McAlister 2005.
[18] Edkins 1999, 5–11.

"Truths," Nietzsche wrote, "are illusions which one has forgotten *are* illusions."[19] What strikes people as undoubtedly true shapes both what ends they pursue in the political sphere and how they pursue those ends.

No wonder, then, that political actors do not seek merely to purchase or compel others' assent to specific policies. They also aim to shape the linguistic axes that define the scope and substance of political debate. They seek not only to fit their programs into the prevailing language, but to fix the terms in which debate is conducted, policy legitimated, and events interpreted. How political actors attain discursive dominance was the central concern of Antonio Gramsci, who saw the advantage it bequeathed. Michel Foucault similarly observed that "discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized." Or, on a lighter note, Lewis Carroll has Humpty Dumpty insist to Alice that the essential question is not "whether you can make words mean different things," but rather "which is to be master."[20]

Political discourse is not just the realm of cost-benefit analysis or even dueling values. It is also, and I would venture to say more deeply, the realm of narrative. Narrative is a scholarly mode of analysis and presentation.[21] But it is also ubiquitous in the real world of politics.[22] Politicians tell stories, expertly or clumsily, to evoke an emotional response – to unsettle and confuse or to restore order and reassure. They may relate stories in great detail, with all the trimmings, or they may tell radically truncated stories, alluding to them via code.[23] People are "storytelling animal[s]."[24]

[19] Quoted in Stern 1978, 70.
[20] Gramsci 1992; Foucault 1984, 110; Carroll 1954, 185.
[21] See, for instance, Bates *et al.* 1998; George and Bennett 2005; Klotz and Lynch 2007, 45–51; Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003.
[22] See Bially Mattern 2005; Patterson and Monroe 1998; Ringmar 1996; Shenhav 2005, 2006; Somers and Gibson 1994. See also Snyder 2015.
[23] I use the terms "story" and "narrative" interchangeably. Some use "narrative" for those tales that purport to represent facts and reserve "story" for those that are openly fictional (e.g. Gabriel 2000, 28–29). Others decompose all narratives into *what* is depicted – content or "story" – and *how* it is depicted – form or "discourse" (e.g. Chatman 1975, 295).
[24] MacIntyre 1981, 201. On *homo narrans*, see Fisher 1984.

The impulse to narrative is universal, across humankind and human history. Narratives are essential to how human beings make meaning, to how they make sense of, and order, messy experience.[25] Scientists have documented how little the human mind tolerates disorder and how readily it imposes an interpretive and specifically a narrative framework on disparate pieces of data.[26] Children very early, perhaps even naturally, organize their life experiences into narratives. There is now much evidence that narratives shape how people group ideas, what they remember, and what solutions they find most attractive.[27] Narratives also help us cope with the uncertain and unexpected, for, as Jerome Bruner puts it, they even "conventionalize the common forms of human mishap into genres."[28] By defining reality, narratives do not stand opposed to reason, but rather make rational decision-making possible. They are the vehicle through which human beings formulate understandings of self and other (identity) and of what self and other want (interest). And because narratives are always composed for some audience – because they are "irreducibly social" – so too are interests, which are not the stable properties of atomistic actors, but vary according to the story being told.[29] This is not some abstruse scholarly insight: as David Brooks has written in the *New York Times*, "unlike other animals, people do have a drive to seek coherence and meaning. We have a need to tell ourselves stories that explain it all. We use these stories to supply the metaphysics, without which life seems pointless and empty."[30] Stories are powerful both when they seem absurd to outsiders – as in tales of alien abduction[31] – and when they seem

[25] On narrative as "a panglobal fact of culture," see White 1981, 1. See also Barthes 1975, 237; Hutto 2007; Kermode 1981, 79–80; Nash 1990; Turner 1980, 167.
[26] On the human penchant for imposing cognitive order, see Gilovich 1991, esp. 9–28; Kruglanski 2004; Perlovsky 2009; Sorrentino and Roney 2000. Thanks to Chris Federico and Jason Plaks for guidance.
[27] For relevant psychological findings, see Bruner 1990; Gerrig and Egidi 2003; László 2008, 37–38; Schank and Abelson 1995. For experimental evidence from other fields, see, among others, Berinsky and Kinder 2006; Jones and Song 2013; Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth 2011; Shanahan, McBeth, and Hathaway 2011. For a review, see Hammack and Pilecki 2012.
[28] Bruner 2002, 31.
[29] McGee and Nelson 1985; Ringmar 1996, ch. 3. See also Charland 1987; Habermas 1984, 136.
[30] Brooks, "The Rush to Therapy," *New York Times*, 10 November 2009. See also Lakoff 2008.
[31] Clancy 2005.