

A Comparison of Narratives on the War on Terror

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Abstract

In October 2005, the then President of the United States George W Bush declared the War on Terror on the pretext of the survival and supremacy of his country, its ideals and its allies. This realist approach to an international security issue has ensued in a war that still does not indicate the dimensions of the 'end game'. It is evident that the war, its justifications, and its ultimate solution lie in analyzing those dynamics which instigated and perpetuated the war, and more importantly, their interpretations. The War on Terror is fought on many fronts today, and this paper has focused on the interpretations of conditions or narratives related to justify this war from the American perspective, and the perceptions of those fighting in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas in Pakistan.

Introduction

The War on Terror (WoT) is “both a set of policies as well as a powerful security narrative that informed the way threat was understood and constructed post 9/11” (Mustapha 2011). This essay will focus on the way security narrative is perpetuated by both the West and certain militant elements in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in Pakistan. I will first outline the foundations of narrative theory and explain what a narrative is, and how it is constructed. I will then illustrate through the use of practical examples how so-called terror experts perpetuated the narrative presented by the American government. Then, there is a comparison of this narrative with the WoT narrative in FATA,

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which is a current battleground for this global war. One primary difference between narratives is that the one persisting from the West is unified. On the battlefield particularly in FATA, there are several narratives running as there is more than one stakeholders. In FATA, the local government and the militants respectively follow independent narratives. This paper, while covering both ground narratives, will focus primarily on the narrative that militants use to justify their actions in the WoT. I aim to highlight that while on opposing sides of battle, both fronts use similar justifications for their actions and by breaking down the narrative, it is possible to see that the War on Terror has aims beyond the ones stated initially. The paper concludes with remarks on the direction of the discourse, particularly with regard change in attitude of the people of FATA related to the War on Terror and its sources.

Narrative Theory

The unit of analysis in narrative theory is the entire narrative, which in this case would be the War on Terror. It understands the narrative as “a concrete story of some aspect of the world, complete with characters, settings, outcomes or projected outcomes and a plot” (Baker 2010). In short, narratives are the tales we not only tell others, but ourselves as well, about the world and they are our main interface with the world.

Narratives can be classified as personal, public, disciplinary and meta-narrative (Baker 2010). Personal narratives are the stories of individuals; they can be our own narrative, or that of an influential individual. Our own personal narrative is our tool of interaction with others. It is the narrative that we exchange with other people in conversations about our feelings and opinions and how we relate to the world. Public narratives are put in place by institutions, such as religions, families or academia. They are built upon personal narratives, however their context is larger and their unit is greater than the individuals involved in the narrative. Disciplinary narratives are about a specific scholarly field, and dictate the direction, ethics, and limitations of the field. Meta-

narratives are “particularly potent narratives that persist over long periods of time and influence the lives of people across a wide range of settings” (Baker, 2010). The WoT is a public and meta-narrative that yields sufficient power to shape global policies and interpretations of the actions of a wide variety of people.

Every coherent narrative, according to narrative theory, has four key components: selective appropriation, causal emplotment, temporality and rationale (Baker 2010). In a narrative, some parts of the story are excluded and other parts are privileged, so as to make the story fit the lens through which narrative constructors would have others see the world (Baker 2010). For example, the Bush administration, through its National Security Strategy in 2006, made it explicitly clear that poverty was not the root cause of terrorism, nor were the US policies towards Israel/Palestine, but a lack of democracy and religious ideologies that justify murder (Mustapha 2011). With regards the narrative being used by militants, certain elements of Islam, like Jihad and an extreme adherence to Sharia Law are highlighted but other elements of the religion that advocate peace and forbidding murder are ignored (Javaid 2011). This idea, of selecting only certain pieces of information and excluding others, is selective appropriation and is the first step towards building a narrative.

Causal emplotment “gives significance to independent instances... emplotment allows us to weigh and explain events rather than just list them, to turn a set of propositions into an intelligible sequence about which we can form an opinion” (Baker 2010). A story or incident is not a part of the narrative unless it is given context within the narrative. The perception of Iraq having weapons of mass destruction was a case of causal emplotment as it was a story created to fit within the narrative of the WoT, that at the time was building a fear of terrorists within the US. In FATA, with regards the WoT, the Islamic concept of Jihad was emplotted by militants to garner support for retaliating against the US invasion in Afghanistan (Fair 2009).

Narratives are temporal and occur in a particular time and space. They derive meaning from events that happen in the physical proximity of the site where the narration is happening, and a particular point in history. The temporal nature of narratives is important for their cohesion and coherence (Baker 2010). While an Iraqi invasion was on the books of America for quite a while (pre 9/11), the Bush administration took advantage of the current climate of fear, and the narrative of the WoT to justify their invasion in Iraq (Altheide 66). In FATA, fundamentalist extremism, corruption, sectarian divide and political instability was the norm before 9/11, but the societies could function without the militant involvement. However, after the US invasion of Afghanistan, militants used the region's lack of infrastructure and population's religious beliefs as a justification to establish control in the region (Javaid 2011).

The maxim of rationality reveals that events or ideas do not necessarily make sense on their own, but when compared in relation to other events, they together make a coherent narrative. Rationality adds context to an event that can be framed to fit into a narrative, e.g. the concept of martyrdom is held differently in the narrative of Islamic jihad from the one portrayed through the WoT, and the persecution of Christians in the first century (Baker 2010).

Terror 'Experts'

Terror experts are those academics from the western world whose work focuses on terror studies. There were very few terror experts if any, until the 70's. Terror experts and theorists are by and large focused on counterinsurgency doctrines, and are "ideologically committed and practically engaged in supporting western state power" (Miller and Mills 2009). In their study of terror experts and the media, David Miller and Tom Mills believe that ideologically, terrorism knowledge is not a neutral expertise. They argue that knowledge on terrorism as procured by the west has been created to "reflect the priorities and values of certain social interests" (Miller and Mills 2009).

Miller and Mills introduced the term “invisible college” (Miller and Mills 2009) to mean a communication network of these so called experts to form an elite group to be able to dominate the literature that comes of the terror studies. They argue that this in-group is a “nexus” of interests connecting academia with military intelligence, government agencies, the security industry and the media. This invisible college is also termed as the “military industrial complex” or the “military-industrial-academic complex” (Miller and Mills 2009). Therein lies a conflict of interest, because the knowledge and expertise coming out of terrorism studies as a discipline is tainted by all the institutions and structures of power that have had a hand in creating it, i.e. the military, security agencies, and the media. Terror experts play an ideological and practical role in reproducing power relations, they do not simply study and write about terrorism in “political and social vacuum” (Miller and Mills 2009).

Expert knowledge, when it comes to terrorism is embedded and integrated into powerful institutions, such as the police, military, intelligence agencies, the security industry and the media. Terror expertise then does not only imply information gathering and dissemination, but also information management (Miller and Mills 2009). Miller and Mills identified academic experts by searching the Social Science Citation Index for articles who contained the key word “terrorism” between the years of 1970 and 2007. They narrowed down their list by looking at 135 authors, who had written five or more peer reviewed articles. They also reviewed 105 most cited articles, and also included 99 individuals who were cited most. The total pool of experts they then had was 212 academics, out of a total of 412 self-proclaimed terrorism experts (including journalists, authors and media personalities). Their research found that 42 per cent of experts were at that time, or had been previously members of state institutions such as the government, intelligence or security services, the military or the police. 67per cent were currently, or had been members of private-think tanks or research institutions that had known objectives and biases, and 33 per cent were currently or had been employed by

private security or intelligence services. 30 of the most prominent (i.e. used in the media) experts were members of private think tanks that received government and corporate findings, which showed a problem of conflict of interest. Although half the experts currently or had previously held tenure and institutions of higher education, only 19 of them were given attention publicly. Only 6 of the top hundred experts appeared in Miller and Mills's list of most cited scholars. The most prolific and famous terrorism expert, Rohan Gunaratna (famous and prolific in media's view and information dissemination in general) did not even appear on the list of top academic scholars, as he had not written enough scholarly material on the subject.

Miller and Mills move forward and analyze the extent to which these experts challenged the United States' narrative of the WoT. The narrative, according to Miller and Mills is as follows; the US and her allies have declared war with a global organization al Qaida, which is waging a non-political war against the West, its culture and way of life. The terrorists are irrational, and motivated by religious dogmas and hatred. They can strike at anytime and anywhere, and can create a situation of heightened fear that calls for heightened security. Therefore, terrorists should be dealt with through military actions abroad and repressive policies should be employed domestically to get rid of the constant terrorist threat, before they strike again. 73 per cent of the top terrorist experts did not challenge this narrative but actually embraced it and assisted in its perpetuation. 26 per cent challenged part of the narrative; the terrorist and terrorist threat were the same as defined in the state narrative, however military action was not seen as the ideal course of action in such a situation. Only one expert, Noam Chomsky was identified as a Critical Expert who rejected the narrative and intended to break the cycle of the discursive discourse of the War on Terror (Miller and Mills 2009).

The discourse of the WoT has been managed and controlled largely by the United States and the West in general, as Miller and Mills illustrate. The war itself however is global in nature, and there are several narratives and a few counter narratives as well.

With reference to FATA, the narrative is two-fold. There are two different stories being told, by two different parties, namely the government and the militants on the ground. The militant narrative is essentially the main counter-narrative, which explains the actions of that party which is overtly contradicting the American narrative.

Pakistan became directly involved in the War on Terror on the September 21, 2001 when American President George W Bush gave his “With us or against us” (CNN 2001) speech. In the speech Bush declared to the world that nations were either on the side of the US or the terrorists and there was no other option. Pakistan, previously one of the few nations in the world that recognized the (now labeled terrorist) Taliban government in Afghanistan was forced to change its policy and retract any support for them. The primary issue for Pakistan lies in managing its porous border with Afghanistan, as militants, being flushed from Afghanistan as per Operation Enduring Freedom, was finding safe havens in the mountainous FATA terrain. These same militants, unable to retaliate in Afghanistan, turned Pakistan into the next battleground during the War on Terror. It was because Pakistan was automatically seen as an enemy because it supported the US (Rogers 2004).

This drastic change in policy has caused great strife in Pakistan, which is the global WoT’s chosen battleground. Being unable to detangle itself from foreign commitments and from its use of local militia to assist in regional military involvement, Pakistan’s narrative is a confused ramble where blame is placed elsewhere and little solutions are offered. According to Fasihuddin, the government holds that “the nation should be told about the real causes; the war on terror is not our war; this battle should be fought with tooth and nail; the government has failed to prevent terrorist attacks and should therefore resign immediately; and the Indo-Israeli nexus is actively involved in destabilizing Pakistan” (Fasihuddin 2011).

The Pakistani government and military has historically used non-state sponsored militia to fight its battles on its border with India and Afghanistan respectively. The under-investment in the region is often framed as a problem of limited resources but it has been in the government's best interest not to invest properly in FATA so as to maintain the status quo and to be able to call upon them to fight the nation's battles. The status quo was disturbed with the influx of militants into the region and today the government is in the sticky situation of admitting its egregious actions in the past and at the same time hoping to win the trust of the locals in allowing them to be back to their land. The relationship between Pakistan and FATA is then not one just based on the limitation of resources, but rather one of "will and sustained state preference" (Fair Testimony presented before the House Foreign Affairs Committee 2008).

For militants, the War on Terror is a war against their culture and traditions. This war was perpetuated by constant foreign presence in their own territory, first by the Soviets, and now by the Americans. The current battle against America holds its roots in the Soviet Afghan war, where militants were encouraged by the United States. Today, the militants feel cheated as once the Soviets were eliminated from Afghanistan, the US abandoned the region, leaving the militants with little direction. In addition, America is used as a symbol of vulgarity and exploitation (Javaid 2011). Militant action towards the Pakistani government and armed forces has two fold justifications. First of all, after President George W Bush's 'With us or against us' speech, Pakistan chose the "with us" stance- thus any move by the Pakistani government or armed forces is seen as a collaborative effort with the US government and Army (Fair 2009). Furthermore, the involvement of the Pakistani Army in FATA, which began particularly with military operations in South Waziristan Agency, is seen as a grievous error on behalf of the Army by militants, and locals in FATA (Javaid 2011). This particular element of the narrative must be placed in spatial and temporal contexts. FATA is a region in Pakistan that holds a unique constitutional status; it is federally administered, and also semi- autonomous. Before the military

Tigah

operation in South Waziristan Agency, the area had not encountered any military presence within its borders. The actions of the Army in the region were a break in convention and added to the animosity towards the perceived pro-American Pakistani government.

Each narrative mentioned in this paper so far has gone through stages of changes, but none more so than the narrative that civilians living in FATA ascribe to. After the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan, the control in the region by the mujahedeen was security for the locals. The mujahedeen put an end to criminal activities that ran rampant in FATA during the years of war. However, once there was relative stability in the region, the same force that had ensured security for the neglected people, who, took advantage of the power vacuum and reinstated control by coercion.

The system of governance in FATA works with a bureaucratically placed Political Agent as the Chief Administrator, who is answerable to the people through a channel of tribal elders, called *Maliks*. Historically, because of the egalitarian nature of Pashtun societies, *Maliks* were respected elders who were equal among their men, answerable to them and responsible for their actions. The Taliban recognized that to create instability this system needed to be infiltrated. They created a power vacuum by targeting *Maliks* and killed over 300 in a short span of two years. They then filled the power vacuum with their own rule and by corrupting the previous, however erroneously functioning administrative system (Haider 2009).

Although opposing in nature, both the American narrative and the militant narrative have common aims. The discourse of the War on Terror on both sides has allowed advancements of aims that lie outside its narrative and has been perpetuated by experts in the field. The Western experts differ to those present on ground in FATA. These experts are part of an invisible college, which works as a network of academics, military intelligence and state actors, who all have their own ideological aims concerning the War on

Terror. In FATA, experts consist of militants, tribal elders and Political Agents. Expert knowledge is disseminated into the real world through several streams. In West, the main stream is the media whereas in FATA the main source of information dissemination is the communal *Hujra* (a public forum) or the *Jirga* (an informal court system) ruled by tribal elders. While this section highlights the ways in which so called terrorism experts and academics help perpetuate the war on terror discourse, the next section will focus on the media's and militant *Hujra/Jirga's* role in this regard.

Narrative Dissemination

The War on Terror was in part made possible “through the dissemination of specific interpretations of representational practices,” (Shepherd 2008). Before discussing the various propaganda tools used to supplement the narrative of the War on Terror, it is important to look at an important rhetoric tool that was employed to assist in framing the debate on the war on terror.

Al Sumait et al hold that “rhetorical positioning helped to establish a binary interpretation of the events” (Al Sumait et al 2009) that lead up to the War on Terror, and which is continuing to perpetuate it. The binary interpretation they are referring to is the idea of there being two distinct paths, choices and sides in the debate. As then British Prime Minister Tony Blair stated, (in response to the London bombings of 2007) “This mass terrorism is the new evil in our world. And we, the democracies of the world, must come together to defeat it and eradicate it” (Al Sumait et al 2009), the binary here being the one between terrorism and democracy.

Binaries are important because they are an essential component of our human psychology. They shape our social interaction by “setting implicit or explicit social boundaries, compelling linguistic and cognitive comparisons between elements, and, most importantly, proscribing unacceptable concepts such as ideas, actions, personas and cultures” (Al Sumait

et al 2009). Another important binary in the War on Terror was George W Bush's statement in 2001; "You're either with us or against us in the fight against terror" (Al Sumait et al 2009).

Militant binaries include the demarcation between the infidel west and the Islamic east (Fair 2009), and the idea that the Pakistani government and the US government are one and the same, and they are fighting for the same aim, whereas the militants are working towards Pakistan's true aims (Javaid 2011). Binaries in discourse limit the commentary and analysis that can be done on the topic under inspection, as they do not allow for any critical framework. By pitting democracy against terrorism, the WoT narrative creates an artificial dichotomy and if anyone critically attempts to overcome it, he would be labeled a terrorist sympathizer. This use of binaries has been one technique to gain legitimacy for the War on Terror, largely employed by the framers (the US government, and the militants).

The first propaganda tool employed by the western media was getting on the bandwagon of government's support as opposed to government's critique. The bandwagon effect cannot be defined as an attempt "to show that everyone, most people, many people, or any large collectivized group of people, like our school, our company or our neighborhood thinks in a particular, singular and uniform way" (Ryan and Switzer 2009). The media assisted the government in making it appear that all patriotic, good, god fearing Americans supported the invasion of Afghanistan, that it was a necessary action, and that it was America's duty to bring freedom and democracy into the rest of the world (Ryan and Switzer 2009).

The militants used the same technique in FATA. It was every Muslim's duty to fight for his brother and to preserve the original Islamic values and resist the corruption being brought in from the West (Fair 2009).

The second tactic employed by the media was the transference of positive attributes. This technique holds that the media

attempted to associate positive elements to situations that had potentially negative implications. The first step was to claim the lives lost on September 11th as heroes, not victims. It shifted the rhetoric from shock and sorrow to patriotism (Ryan and Switzer 2009). Political and military leaders received the same treatment; they were also touted as heroes and as such their actions were legitimized and accepted. This was a concerted effort between both the State and the media. President Bush solidified his position as a hero during his first statement post 9/11 where he used the phrase “evil terrorists” for five times, and then framed the War on Terror as one between good and evil, and that the USA was performing its duty to rid the world of evil doers (Ryan and Switzer 2009). Once again, the same tactic was used in FATA where those killed were referred to as martyrs, and those defending the military or the Americans were termed infidels, whose murder was justifiable.

The third tactic the media used to further propagate the War on Terror narrative was the transference of negative attributes to those individuals who spoke against the war. France, Russia and Germany, three notable nations opposed the war in Iraq was demonized as appeasers or co-conspirators in the Western media. Anyone who did not support the war whole-heartedly was termed a traitor or a terrorist (Ryan and Switzer 2009). Once again, this same tool is evident in FATA where those seen as moderates, or opposes to militant control were labeled dishonorable, which is an extreme personal insult in tribal culture (FATA Research Center 2011).

The final propaganda tool that I will discuss in this paper is the concept of manifest destiny. Manifest destiny can be defined as the “deterministic invocation of God (or any kind of faith), destiny, fate, natural processes, or universal design, to lend support to an argument; removal of accountability for an idea or issue from individuals and attribution of responsibility to deterministic “greater forces”” (Ryan and Switzer 2009).

George Bush's attempt to get support for the war in Iraq included the rhetoric that it was the West's destiny to protect future generations of the world. The media did the same when it portrayed 9/11 as an attack on America, excluding victims of other nations in the narrative, and thus reasoning that this was America's problem and it was its own destiny to solve it (Ryan and Switzer 2009). The militants apply the same concept when they use suicide bombers to carry out attacks. They also argue that it is their burden to endure hardships currently for the greater good (establishing a fundamentalist Islamic state) in future. By attributing the war to a greater power and cause, the discourse of the War on Terror makes it difficult to see through the cracks and see interests at play, because it then becomes a crusade, which is not a selfish act, but a duty to further God's mission.

Conclusion

In this paper I set out to explain the ways in which the narrative of the War on Terror was disseminated to the public to legitimize and authorize the War on Terror in both America, and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas in Pakistan. Using narrative theory as my theoretical starting point, I highlighted the pervasiveness of narratives in the political realm. Narratives may begin at the political level, however, to garner public acclaim and support for the narratives, certain tactics must be used. For progress and greater understanding of what actually is at play, as opposed to just what those in the power nexus would have us believe, there is a need for counter-discourse that critically examines the policies, information, and analysis coming from the War on Terror.

There is an essential requirement for counter-narratives on both ends. It is important to note that the same tools used to perpetuate the current narratives can be utilized to paint a different, more accurate and ultimately more conducive picture and the damage caused by this war, on the international level, as well as on the battlegrounds can be minimized. The media in the United States is a powerful tool that currently is assisting in

perpetuating the current western War on Terror narrative. It is also essential that academics break free from the military-academia nexus and carry out research that showcases alternative, yet still true realities on the ground.

In FATA the militant narrative is allowed to flourish due to militant power and control in the region. It is important to highlight that the current position of militant power is decreasing in some agencies, and the narrative of this war is changing. Due to the selective appropriation of religious dogmas, militants had established control in the region. However, with the influx of alternative forms of information dissemination as well as a political realization in the awakening of facing increasing violence, there is an attempt to change local perspective on the War on Terror (FATA Research Center 2011).

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