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Interpreting 9/11: The Role of Language and Narrative in the Construction of "American" Identity

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ABSTRACT

Following the attacks on September 11, 2001 (that killed approximately three thousand people) the United States began waging war abroad, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians and permanently displacing millions of innocent people. The interpretation of 9/11 as an act of war by the U.S. government and the mainstream news media provided the pretext for military aggression, legitimating war and militarization—on the basis of "national security". This produced conditions for the heroic-narrative of the savior-nation to emerge, expressing itself in the United States' "War on Terror". The idea of the "War on Terror" was introduced in the aftermath of a lingering national trauma—in many ways generated by the government and the mainstream news media. Its repetition allowed it to become physically embodied in the human brain, and thereby, orienting people toward nationalism and the use of violence. This study places identity at the center of the problem, arguing that "American" identity is dependent upon the existence of an enemy-other (negative identity). Drawing upon discoveries in cognitive science and neuroscience permits one to appreciate the role of language and narrative in the construction of identity and the implications it has for both war and peace. Combining this research with a philosophical and religious analysis of the United States captures a trend in the actions, thought, and beliefs that help form the "American" self and its relationship to violence.

KEYWORDS: militarization, nationalism, heroic-narrative, language, identity.

INTRODUCTION

The mainstream interpretation of 9/11 served as the causal basis for the United States to participate in war and increased militarization. To support the imperialist ambitions of those in power, certain narratives were applied, which drew upon religious and philosophical traditions that had previously helped to construct the nation, and thereby, the "American" self.[1]

As a response to the violent attacks the U.S. became involved in wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and multiple military interventions around the world—including Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and Libya. Military spending reached extremely high levels in the absence of any serious threat warranting such an exaggerated expenditure. "The United States has spent more than $7.6 trillion on defense and homeland security since the attacks of September 11, 2001" (National Priorities Project, 2011).

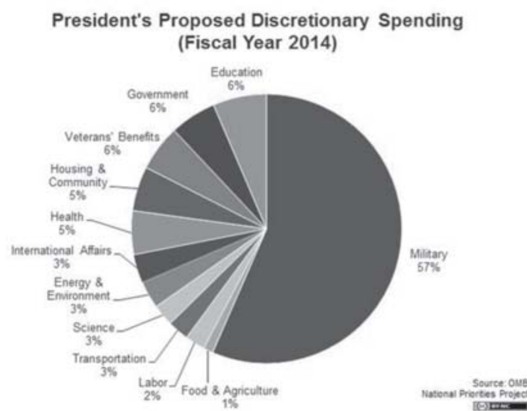
In light of these consequences, some questions naturally emerge: What were the driving forces behind war and militarization? Why did so many people in the U.S. willingly support war and militarization immediately after 9/11? Answers to these questions, and others like them, will be given in the following pages. This paper aims to reveal the connection between "American" identity and war by discussing the various narratives and language involved in the process following the 9/11 attacks.

The U.S. has the largest military in the world, which is spread around the globe, on land and at sea. Its military expenditure far exceeds any other nation on earth (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2010). China is a distant second. Despite having no clear enemy, military spending continues to increase. Moreover, the U.S. continues to possess weapons of mass destruction (WMD)—including chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons. It should be of great concern to all people on earth that the U.S. possesses the most dangerous weapons in the world, is the only country to have ever actually used nuclear weapons, and has a track record of going to war since its very beginning.

The U.S. has "taken military actions abroad, large and small,

250 times, not counting covert actions or the installation of permanent bases. For only 31 years, or 14 percent, of U.S. history have there been no U.S. troops engaged in any significant actions abroad" (Swanson, 2010: 49). Therefore, seeing that the U.S. has no intention of stopping its tradition of attacking and occupying other countries, expanding its empire, and threatening others with war—despite the absence of any danger warranting such behavior—ought to provoke serious questions regarding what is driving militarization and war. Understanding the narratives involved in orienting the U.S. toward violence is significant for the survival of all life on the planet.

FIGURE 1. THE US PRESIDENT'S PROPOSED DISCRETIONARY SPENDING - FISCAL YEAR 2014



Source: (National Priorities Project, 2013)

RESEARCH METHOD

Specific research methodologies are central to this study. The core methodology consists of qualitative research. Under this umbrella a number of methods have been chosen to offer a deeper understanding of the hypothesis. The bulk of the research for this study is based on discourse analysis, narratology, framing theory, and cognitive science. Applying these research methods helps to uncover the processes involved in the construction of "American" identity and the motivations behind war and militarization, particularly after 9/11.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

NATIONALISM AND IDENTITY

One of the most fundamental features of nationalism is grounded in the in-groups opposition to the out-group. The binding emotions that serve to unite the in-group are inhibited from being extended to the out-group—which is conceived with fear and distrust (Hogan, 2009). In fact, opposition to others is so central to nationalism that it often plays a major role in constructing identity itself by "the hardening of psychological boundaries and the fortification of the ego" (Berman, 2010: 34).

The German philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, claimed that "'identity' cannot be clearly thought without 'difference'; and 'difference' requires reference to 'identity'" (Beiser, 1993: 97). Thus, when applied to nationalism the in-group define themselves in contrast to the out-group. This is referred to as *negative identity*. "Negative identity is a phenomenon whereby you define yourself by what you are not" (Berman, 2010: 34). It is *negative* because it is a type of relational identity that is dependent upon its opposition to others (Berman, 2010). Unfortunately, according to Hegel, negative identity is incapable of actually ever telling "you who you *are*, in the affirmative sense. It leaves, in short, an emptiness at the center, such that you always have to be in opposition to something, or even at war with someone or something, in order to feel real" (Berman, 2010: 35).

Carol K. Winkler argues that the recurring labels in the narratives of the nation consist of certain defining cultural terms called *ideographs*. She writes that "Ideographs are collective terms of political allegiance that embody a society's ideals" (Winkler, 2006: 11 – 12). In short, they are the shared values or ideals of the national community. "Freedom, democracy and justice are all examples of ideographs within Western political discourse" (Jackson, Jarvis, Gunning, and Smyth, 2011: 280). Additionally, Winkler writes that ideographs are not restricted to the positive values and ideals shared by society. Similar to negative identity, *negative ideographs* "define the society through negation" (Winkler, 2006: 12). They are labels that are used to condemn unacceptable behaviors. "Tyranny and terrorism" serve as negative ideographs in "Western political discourse" (Jackson, Jarvis, Gunning, and Smyth, 2011: 280). Thus, an ideograph (positive or negative) "is a cultural-bound, abstract term of ordinary political discourse that warrants the use of power in ways the public has normally considered unacceptable" (Winkler, 2006: 15).

If the very identity of the national in-group is dependent upon the existence of an opposing force, then enemies are needed in order to fill the void with mean-

ing. "The other provides the mechanism by which subjects assume their existence" (Hixson, 2008: 6). For this reason, Maalouf notes that "the identity a person lays claim to is often based, in reverse, on that of his enemy" (Maalouf, 2003: 14). Consequently, the national in-group is inclined to search for enemies—real or illusory.

The identity of the national in-group depends on others. Thus, it cannot exist by itself. As a result, it strives to acquire identity through representation—similar to where an individual defines oneself by a label, such as, "American", Korean, Protestant, or Muslim, for example. However, since identity is based upon representation and not reality, the in-group ultimately lacks real identity. This may lead the national in-group to experience what is called *psychic crisis* (Hixson, 2008). The national in-group "must always claim its identity as a subject by attaching itself to an other" (Hixson, 2008: 318). Therefore, since the national in-groups very identity is defined, not only in opposition to the out-group, but also in relation to its existence, it must continually discover new enemies in order to alleviate the psychic crisis. The instability of negative identity inevitably leads to psychic crisis because it is incomplete and lacking.

THE NATION: NARRATIVES

Narratives are essential in maintaining loyalty and obedience to the nation, particularly during times of international conflict. Hogan claims that "nationalism cannot be understood in separation from narrative, which itself cannot be understood in separation from our emotion systems" (Hogan, 2009: 168). There are many different kinds of narratives, but most of them have a general structure and follow a similar process. "A story is a sequence of non-normal, causally related events and actions that emerge from normalcy and return to normalcy" (Hogan, 2009: 15). Aristotle recognized that stories contain three basic components: a beginning, middle, and an end. The real world, however, does not actually contain these components. Our minds often make sense of the complexity of the world by spontaneously incorporating these structures into our lives. For example, before a story begins, the world is interpreted as being in a state of normalcy. It begins with, usually a single cause (our minds simplifying causality), when our minds perceive interference in the assumed normal state of affairs. Emotion plays a significant role in this process (Hogan, 2009). "Our emotion systems tend to simplify causal attribution by reducing multiple causes to a single object, frequently a single agent" (Hogan, 2009: 181) (for example, Osama bin Laden).

Just as there are no true beginnings in the real world, there are also no true endings. "Stories have endings. Social life does not" (Hogan, 2009:184). The emotional connection to the story sustains the narrative. Saying that a story has ended implies that there is no longer anything relevant warranting attention. "As soon as there is no longer anything that inspires or sustains our emotional responses, the story is over" (Hogan, 2009: 184). Causality never stops in the real world, but our emotional attachment to the story disintegrates when we begin to perceive a state of original normalcy (Hogan, 2009: 185).

Hogan claims that a vast amount of research suggests that our semantic understanding is informed by prototypes. As he puts it, if you imagine a bird, you probably don't immediately think of an ostrich even though an ostrich is technically a bird. Instead, you probably think of a prototypical bird, such as, a robin. Likewise, there are also prototypes of stories. These prototypical stories are cross cultural. Hogan identifies three (heroic, romantic, sacrificial) that are commonly found in literature and, more importantly, in nationalism.

Heroic narrative, which is central to this study, is intimately interwoven within nationalism. It is based on an either/or assumption of "good guys" and "bad guys"—"us" versus "them". Hogan points out that "our categorization of people into 'us' and 'them' strongly biases our moral evaluations and emotional responses" (Hogan, 2009: 194). Hence, when the hero is fighting against the enemy we tend to only have the experience of fear when the enemy attacks the in-group that we identify with. Empathy with suffering is confined to the in-group only in heroic narratives.

The most important heroic narrative that is distinct to nationalism is the threat/defense sequence, which is particularly used during war. This narrative is based on the plotline that an attack from the enemy threatens the nation (Hogan, 2009: 199). Hence, the nation (victim) is mobilized to defend itself against the enemy (villain), which results in the triumph of the nation (hero) over its enemy (villain)—usually another country. The nation, which begins as the victim, eventually becomes the hero of the story by defeating the enemy and restoring the moral order. This narrative can also consist of other roles, such as, countries (helpers) that ally with the

nation (Lakoff, 2009).

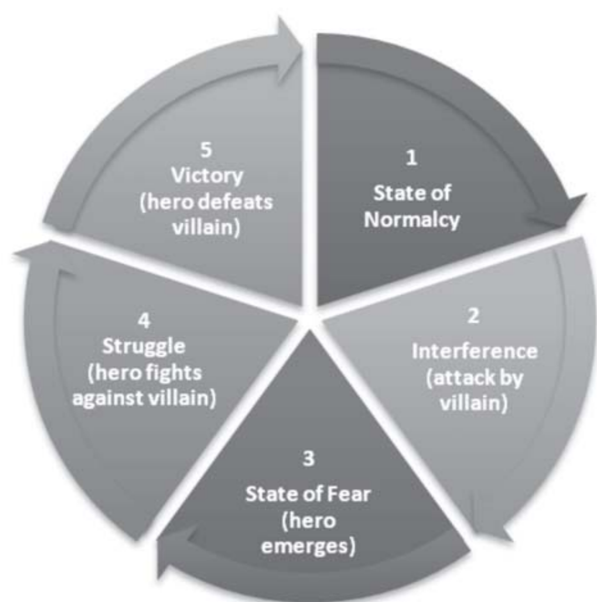


Figure 2. Heroic Narrative Structure

In heroic narratives, the attack by the villain on the victim is not connected to previous events; it is consequential of the disposition of the villain (enemy). In other words, actions by the villain deemed as malevolent do not have a cause, evil is in the enemy's (villains) DNA. The positive virtues and traits embodied by the hero are the opposite of those attributed to the villain (Hogan, 2009). The villains "actions are immoral in themselves, and symptomatic of an underlying immorality of character" (Hogan, 2009: 182). The actions taken by the national in-group are understood to be rational responses to danger, while the actions carried out by the enemies of the national in-group are seen as being intrinsic to their nature. It is perfectly legitimate in heroic narrative to blame the villain for anything. All evil flows from one source—the villain. Of course, true heroes and villains are uncommon in war. It is rarely the case that one side of a conflict has a monopoly on either good or evil. Both sides are capable of displaying altruism and compassion. Similarly, both sides are capable of committing atrocities and engaging in cruelty (Hogan, 2009). Hogan points out that "it may be the case that one side has more justice in its cause than the other, that one side perpetrates more terror than the other—primarily because one side has more power" (Hogan, 2009: 219).

Heroic narratives glorify war. In fact, they present it as something natural and ordinary instead of something extraordinary and horrific. By appealing to notions of bravery, honor, and glory they give it an attraction and mystique that it does not have. In short, it fictionalizes reality (Hogan, 2009).

In *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* Chris Hedges argues that heroic narratives allure people into supporting conflicts. "The world, as we see it in wartime," writes Hedges,"becomes high drama. It is romanticized. A moral purpose is infused into the trivial and the commonplace" (Hedges, 2003: 54). He goes on to talk about how society is absorbed into a seeming real life historical drama: "Life in wartime becomes theater. All are actors. Leaders, against the backdrop of war, look heroic, noble. Pilots who bail out of planes shot down by the enemy and who make their way back home play cameo roles" (Hedges, 2003: 54).

Although narratives are necessary for making sense out of the complexity of situations, they also "have a powerful effect in hiding reality" (Lakoff, 2009: 37). Therefore, it is important to recognize that by reducing the complexity of events and introducing a sense of meaning into life, narratives disregard realities that are contradictory to their plotline (Lakoff, 2009).

RELIGIOUS AND PHILOSOPHICAL ORIGINS OF "AMERICAN" IDENTITY

Ideas from both Christian millennialism and the Enlightenment have constructed a distinct form of nationalism in the U.S., on which "American" identity relies heavily. Both traditions may appear to be at odds with one another at first glance, but upon further investigation a common ideology emerges: utopianism. While Biblical prophecy foretells of the impending apocalypse and the Enlightenment proclaims the belief in incremental human progress, it is perhaps difficult to initially notice the commonality between destruction and development, annihilation and advancement. Put differently, the idea that the world will soon come to an end and the idea that it is gradually improving appears contradictory. If the inevitable destruction of the world is just around the corner then why would anyone try to improve it (Gray, 2007)? Upon further examination, however, the shared ideas soon materialize and coalesce into essentially the same line of thought.

Millennialism, a type of Christian eschatology, is

particularly important. It is based on the literal belief that the Second Coming of Jesus Christ will usher in a utopian world that will last for a thousand years (millennium), concluding in a final judgment of mankind where the righteous will be saved—with the creation of a new heaven and new earth—and the wicked will be damned forever. Above all, millennialism looks to the destruction of the world as a necessary process that must take place before the creation of a new utopia.

The main idea within millennialism is underscored in its framing of history where the forces of good and evil struggle against each other until the forces of good finally prevail. The history of the world, as it is interpreted by millennialists, is linear and guided by divine providence; it is a story containing a beginning and end. Once the hero defeats the villain the moral order is restored. It has all of the fundamental characteristics of a heroic narrative.

The belief that the apocalypse could only be initiated by God was taken for granted as a fundamental fact in the early Christian faith. Eventually, this belief gave way to the idea that the apocalypse, and ultimately a utopian world, could be accomplished by human action (Gray, 2007). The Crusades, for example, were inspired by the belief that the world was soon coming to an end. In fact, the Church taught that recovering the Holy Land (Palestine) for Christianity was a necessary precondition for the return of Christ (Runciman, 1951). Similarly, after the Reformation various Protestant sects, such as the Puritans, came to believe that human effort could hasten the advent of the Second Coming (Gray, 2007). This belief would eventually manifest itself in the savior-nation narrative—where the U.S. would aim to eliminate evil in the world, with declarations, such as, fighting war against terror.

The Enlightenment was born in opposition to religion, particularly the existing Christian understanding of authority that was then well entrenched in Europe. Just as the Reformation questioned the authority of the Catholic Church, the Enlightenment questioned the authority of religion altogether. Rather than relying on the Bible to interpret reality, Enlightenment thinkers embraced rationalist philosophy, mathematics, and natural science as a new authority, which proved to be at odds with many of the teachings in the biblical scriptures.

The Western utopian project of the Enlightenment is based on the idea that the unification of human knowledge and the advancement of science would eventually liberate mankind and ultimately lead to a more peaceful, rational world. All social phenomena and conflicts in life, it was believed, could be rationally understood, and thereby, solved (Dietrich and Sutzl, 2006). This pursuit for utopia—the perfection of human society—"is a by product of Christianity"(Gray, 2007). "Enlightenment utopianism, in a word, was the transformation of Christian eschatology into the belief in the perfectibility of man—heaven on earth, as it were. This would be the Second Coming, the defeat of ignorance and evil (= sin) by means of reliable knowledge, science and technology in particular" (Berman, 2010: 184).

The Enlightenment quest of attaining universal truth is the foundation of modernity, which is "characterized by Newtonian physics, Cartesian reductionism, the nation state of Thomas Hobbes, and the capitalist world system" (Dietrich and Sutzl, 2006: 283). The anticipation of an ideal society, achieved by the progression of Reason (science), has shaped modern thought. "The assumed validity of Enlightenment principles logically implied their universalization. If truth was universally valid, knowledge should be made universally known" (Pfaff, 2010: 20). The quest for the total unification of knowledge is a hegemonic endeavor. Thus, Enlightenment ideology spread around the world through colonialism and to this day still remains the dominant way of organizing society and understanding life. U.S. foreign policy is built upon the foundations of this hegemonic universalism, which aims to recreate the world in the image of the U.S.

Hegel's idealist philosophy is based on the idea of progress, whereby he argues that ideas are the basis of true reality. He proclaims that "Reason is the law of the world and that, therefore, in world history, things have come about rationally" (Hegel, 1997: 11). History, according to Hegel, is driven by a dialectical process that progressively develops intelligence and Mind, or what he calls Spirit (Geist). In other words, it is ideas that are developed. For example, contradictory ideas, a thesis and an antithesis, resolve themselves to form a new situation or improved idea, the synthesis. Spirit rejects realization of itself, in order to attain a new and better self-consciousness. Thus, in history, Spirit comes to know its *Idea*. In Hegel's words, "God and the nature of His will

are one and the same; these we call, philosophically, the Idea" (Hegel, 1997: 21). This dialectical process continues until Spirit reaches an absolute oneness and realization of itself. Only when this point is reached, where all internal contradictions are resolved, will this cycle come to an end. The nation-state, Hegel believed, is the positive actualization of this freedom, and freedom is instituted in the state through a constitution. Passions and desires are ordered in a rational way by the *Idea* of freedom and consequently recognized objectively in the world (Hegel, 1997).

For Hegel, history is the progressive actualization of the *Idea* of freedom. The aim of history, he claimed, is to achieve freedom. It is a rational process in which the Idea of freedom becomes gradually realized by manifesting itself in the world. It is able to come into the world because human beings are autonomous. He argues that no other creatures on earth possess such rational faculties as humans. Our autonomy allows us to act freely (Hegel, 1997).

According to Hegel, "divine Providence, presides over the events of the world," by which it comes to realize "its own aim, that is, the absolute, rational, final purpose of the world. Reason is Thought determining itself in absolute freedom" (Hegel, 1997: 15). "Man", says Hegel, gradually becomes less alienated from himself throughout history by the realization of freedom. Hegel traces the history of the *Idea* of freedom beginning with the Orient where he argues that, in countries such as China and India, freedom was limited to only one person, namely the despot. The masses of people did not yet realize their freedom, only the despot was autonomous. As history advanced further, the *Idea* of freedom was raised to a higher self-consciousness with the Greeks and Romans. They exhibited the first social consciousness of freedom by realizing that not one, but some people were free. However, being free depended upon chance; one must be born into freedom. Freedom was not yet seen as an inherent human characteristic. Finally, Hegel believed, the realization came to Germany that all people are free. Hegel saw Christianity as the catalyst for the consciousness of freedom, because Christianity recognizes all humans as fundamentally free (Hegel, 1997). Hegel blends elements of the Enlightenment and Christianity into his philosophy, which set the foundations for the "Western assumption" that history "moves toward an intelligible conclusion, a belief derived from Western religious eschatology" (Pfaff, 2010: 86).

The notion that freedom is progressing is central to Western culture in general, and the U.S. in particular. Hegelian concepts are implicitly present within U.S. foreign policy and greatly impact "American" identity. For example, the "American" Revolution opposed the rule of the monarchy, creating a country espousing freedom, but denying freedom to African "Americans" (slavery). Many U.S. citizens view the history of the U.S. as a gradual process of freedom being realized (for example, the abolition of slavery, women rights, gay rights, et cetera). And this premise is the starting point for the narrative of the savior-nation. Indeed, the belief persists today that the U.S. is "the primary agent of God's activity in history" (Berman, 2010: 40).

The very idea of perfection is a human construction. Any achievement can be determined as imperfect by simply appealing to new or different conceptions of perfection. Gray writes that "a project is utopian if there are no circumstances under which it can be realized" (Gray, 2007). Thus, the idea that all evil can be eliminated in the world is utopian because it is an impossible project. However, the danger regarding utopianism is found in the beliefs that the future will necessarily be better than the past, that history inevitably moves toward a perfect society where all conflict is resolved, and that using violence is the only way of achieving peace.

The modern conception of progress is the consequence of Christian millennialism and Enlightenment philosophy, which aims to achieve utopian ends by eliminating all evil in the world. Today, this utopian project manifests itself in militarization and war, driven by "American" identity, which is dependent upon certain narratives about the nation. "Progress via technology, the notion that the evil of the world can and will be eradicated by means of reason and applied science, is ultimately Christian eschatology in modern dress" (Berman, 2012: 81). Hegel took up these utopian ideas and conceived history as a dialectical process that ultimately moves towards perfection. The U.S. as the savior-nation aims to perfect society using sophisticated weaponry and advanced technology. It has become increasingly clear that the United States' preferred method for achieving a peaceful world is to impose its own image upon others.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

INTERPRETING 9/11: FRAMING THE HEROIC NARRATIVE

The violent events of 9/11 and the following continuous representation of it as a national trauma had a tremendous impact within the U.S., introducing a powerful uneasy sentiment of fear and vulnerability. And to this day, the memory of 9/11 continues to evoke strong impulses toward bellicose nationalism. It is important to highlight that "violent events never simply 'speak for themselves', even if their meaning may seem self-evident. Instead, they acquire their meaning through processes of interpretation that are usually organized and driven by powerful social actors with their own interests" (Jackson, Jarvis, Gunning, and Smyth, 2011: 62). More to the point, the government and mainstream news media were instrumental in constructing the meaning of 9/11, which had serious implications for the U.S. and the world.

After the attacks, "September 11 was quickly consecrated as the equivalent of a national holy day, and the nation was summoned to mourn the victims" (Wolin, 2010: 5). In the minds of many "Americans" the infamous date of September 11, 2001 is the beginning of a story, a heroic narrative where the forces of good struggle against the forces of evil. Immediately following the attacks, George W. Bush addressed the nation—in a televised speech from the Oval Office in the White House—attributing sinister motives to the antagonists. In his words: "America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world" (Bush, 2001a). "The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon emerged as the starting point for the Bush narrative" (2006, Winkler: 167). As it will be revealed in the following pages, Bush was drawing upon concepts from Christian millennialism and the Enlightenment. The narrative that emerged has its roots in a broader narrative of Progress and good versus evil.

Thus, the story began to take shape by first identifying the reasons behind the violence. According to the Bush administration, the 9/11 attacks stemmed from the enemies hatred of freedom—the U.S. being the perfect exemplar of liberty in the world. Since *freedom* is an ideograph of "American" culture, the attacks were, in effect, understood as gross violations of "American" identity and the shared idealized values ("American" values) that constitute the national community.

The Bush administration quickly labeled the terrorist threat as *new* despite decades of domestic and foreign terrorism directed against U.S. citizens and interests. The idealized values of "American" culture and even the lives of its citizens were at risk of being destroyed by this new existential threat. Civilization as we know it hung vulnerably in the balance (Jackson, Jarvis, Gunning, and Smyth, 2011). It is alleged that this new type of terrorism is comparable or even more dangerous than past threats, such as, "the threat of fascism during World War II and the threat of Communism during the Cold War" (Jackson, 2005: 182).

In order to construct the heroic narrative, the Whitehouse needed to strip the enemy of all positive human characteristics and potential goodness. The barbarity of this new type of enemy was repeatedly communicated to the public by both the Bush administration and the mainstream media. As a result, the enemy confronting the U.S. has been imagined as a *new* type of threat; a *new* type of terrorism is believed to have suddenly emerged, creating a *new* world filled with insecurity and danger, which warrants a *new* type of response.

Jackson, Jarvis, Gunning, and Smyth observe the construction of this new type of enemy, as well as the necessary foundational structure of the heroic narrative, based on the good (hero) versus evil (villain) paradigm:

> *Those responsible for 9/11 were branded evil, cowardly, savage, and inhuman, and their actions were the result of a psychological deviance that was unrelated to politics or history. And, because language tends to function in a binary manner, the victims and those associated with them were implicitly scripted as good, heroic, civilized and innocent (Jackson, Jarvis, Gunning, and Smyth, 2011: 63).*

Hence, through negative identity or by the application of a negative ideograph "Americans" defined themselves in contrast to the "terrorists." After 9/11, negating the opposite of what "Americans" believed they are not functioned to affirm their own identity. For example, it was asserted that the terrorists hate freedom, democracy, and do not value life. This implicitly implies that "Americans" are lovers of freedom, pro-democratic, and that they value life (Jackson, Jarvis, Gunning, and Smyth, 2011). "Labeling something or someone as 'terrorist', in other words, not only condemns the actions of the 'other', it

also, importantly, helps to construct the identity of the 'self'" (Jackson, Jarvis, Gunning, and Smyth, 2011: 68).

Unlike U.S. enemies of the past, it was claimed that the new terrorists were unconventional in their violent tactics and difficult to locate (Winkler, 2006: 163). They were said to be living both among us, within our communities, and outside of the U.S. (Jackson, Jarvis, Gunning, and Smyth, 2011). This aspect of the narrative is based on the idea that there is a "ubiquitous and highly dangerous enemy who resides within western societies" (Jackson, 2005: 182). This notion creates fear and distrust within society. One's own neighbor is even viewed with suspicion. This is particularly damaging to those who are part of the *suspect community*—"communities that have come to be viewed with widespread suspicion by virtue of their ethnic or cultural background" (Jackson, Jarvis, Gunning, and Smyth, 2011: 287). Muslims (or anyone perceived as Muslim or Arab) became part of the *suspect community* after 9/11. "Muslims around the world have suffered violence, stereotyping and suspicion because of the perceived link between Islam and terrorism" (Jackson, Jarvis, Gunning, and Smyth, 2011: 263).

So-called "sleeper cells" were alleged to be hiding within the U.S. whose members were eagerly waiting for their orders to viciously attack innocent people and "American" interests. Furthermore, President Bush described the enemy in bestial and monstrous terms: "The enemy hides in caves. They lurch in the shadows of the world. They will strike and kill innocent citizens without any conscience, because they have no conscience" (Bush, 2004a). In another speech he again warns of the anonymity of the adversary. "We face a new kind of enemy. This enemy hides in caves and plots in shadows, and then emerges to strike and kill in cold blood in our cities and communities" (Bush, 2005). All of this served to emphasize "American" identity. "By marking out whom and what 'we' should fear, these depictions also tell us who and what 'we' are" (Jackson, Jarvis, Gunning, and Smyth, 2011: 67).

It was communicated to the public that in the past the enemy was clearly defined and the extent of the threat to the nation was understood. As a result, those in charge prepared to confront it accordingly. With the end of the Cold War, it was argued, the U.S. became complacent, overconfident, and ill-prepared to deal with the new evils that were emerging in the 21st century. "The Bush narrative held that the 9/11 scene jolted America out of its misguided comfort garnered from the Cold War victory" (Winkler, 2006: 166). In other words, military spending and the national defense strategy had previously been directed at confronting the threat of enemy states and a rival superpower (Soviet Union), not stateless "enemy combatants".

Interpreting the 9/11 terrorist attacks as an "act of war", rather than as a tragic criminal offense, "prepared the public to accept an immediate expansion of presidential powers and prerogatives" (Winkler, 2006: 168). The mainstream medias' comparison of 9/11 to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor during WWII (the only time a foreign country has successfully attacked U.S. territory on a large scale) "helped to confirm this militarized understanding of events" (Jackson, Jarvis, Gunning, and Smyth, 2011: 63) and provided the needed justification the Whitehouse sought to attack Afghanistan—and later, to a lesser degree, Iraq. Consequently, the Bush administration declared a "War on Terrorism"—also referred to as the "War on Terror".[2] Choosing this open-ended label permitted for the interpretation of a war with no end, lasting indefinitely.

Hogan observes that the violent events of 9/11 could have been interpreted differently. "It would have been perfectly possible for the government and the news media to present it as a massive criminal act that required such extensive planning that it would be unlikely to be repeated in the near future" (Hogan, 2009: 107). In fact, the 9/11 attacks were initially referred to as "murder"(Jackson, Jarvis, Gunning, and Smyth, 2011) and "crime" before being changed to "war" (Lakoff, 2009). Lakoff argues that the crime frame is actually proven to be more effective in countering terrorism because the "terrorists would be seen as criminals, not as heroic soldiers, by those they claim to represent" (Lakoff, 2009: 125).

Since the Bush administration decided to use the war frame in its interpretation of 9/11, an atmosphere of fear needed to be recreated—a state of constant anxiety—in order to justify its decision. Hogan argues that, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the repetition of the violent images of the attacks and the constant warnings of potential dangerous and catastrophic scenarios served to enhance the unity of the national in-group, orienting people toward accepting the war frame. He writes:

> *...we were faced with a continual barrage of new warnings and an astonishing aggrandizement of Osama bin Laden and*

al Qaeda. In the weeks and months after the bombings, we not only saw the images of the towers collapsing again and again, we heard that our water supply would be infected with smallpox, that our nuclear plants would be used against us in the same way as the airplanes, that another attack by air would soon hit another major city" (Hogan, 2009: 107).

Hogan claims that there are three consequences of *fear* in the context of a national trauma. Fear unifies the in-group, dehumanizes the out-group, and causes us to desire protection—usually by trusting the in-group and distrusting the out-group. Thus, the repetition of fear served to build recognition of belonging to the victim-nation, emphasizing similarity and shared experience between in-group members. Likewise, fear allowed for the members of the national in-group to suppress any positive attitudes they may have had for the welfare of those in the out-group. Hogan points out that "this is why we repeatedly heard cries to 'nuke the Arabs' after September 11" (Hogan, 2009: 108). Lastly, members of the in-group become more inclined to embrace the leadership of the national in-group authority under conditions of fear. After 9/11 "Americans" expected the U.S. government to protect them and refused to believe that the events would be used by the government to manipulate the public into supporting policies that they would not ordinarily support in the absence of fear, during times of peace. Consequently, they rallied behind those in power in a patriotic display of blind allegiance. The historian, Howard Zinn, claims that if people had a better understanding of history they" would understand how often fear has been used as a way of getting people to act against their own interests to work up hysteria and to get people to do terrible things to other people, because they've been made afraid" (Zinn, 2006).

It has been demonstrated by neuroscience that ideas have a greater effect on the brain when they occur during moments of trauma and through repetition. "A misleading and destructive idea can be introduced under conditions of trauma and then repeated so often that it is forever in your synapses" (Lakoff, 2009: 125). The Bush administration carefully chose its language in interpreting the events of 9/11. Those in power understand how the brain works and aim to manipulate it. "Synapses in the brain change most readily and dramatically under conditions of trauma, and 9/11 was a national trauma of the first order" (Lakoff, 2009: 125).

According to Lakoff:

Neuroscience tells us that ideas are physically instantiated as part of our brains and that changes occur at the synapses. Such synaptic changes, called long-term potentiation, occur under two conditions–trauma (where there is especially strong neural firing) and repetition (where neural firing recurs). September 11 was a national trauma, and the "war on terror" was introduced under conditions of trauma, then repeated over and over for years. The result was that the metaphorical idea became physically instantiated in the brains of most Americans (Lakoff, 2009: 128).

The linguistic choice, "War on Terror", has important political advantages for governments—essentially benefitting the power-elites. Those in positions of power understand that it is important to control language and frame the debate in ways that sustain and augment their power. George Lakoff, in his book *Whose Freedom: The Battle Over America's Most Important Idea*, discusses the political significance of the Bush administration framing the attacks on 9/11 as an "act of war." According to Lakoff, "declaring a war on terror against an elusive and amorphous enemy gave President Bush special war powers that could be extended and used indefinitely, even against American citizens" (Lakoff, 2006: 11). President Obama continues to maintain those powers, even expanding them in some cases. The "War on Terror" is, in effect, an endless war.

"Terrorism is not an armed enemy. It is a concept naming a *special way of fighting*," it is simply a fighting tactic (Garbo, 2009: 59). How can war be declared on a tactic? Again, Lakoff writes that "terror is an emotional state. It is in us. It is not an army. You can't defeat it militarily and you can't sign a peace treaty with it" (Lakoff, 2009: 126).

Lakoff argues that the "War on Terror" label "was used by the Bush administration as a ploy to get virtually unlimited war powers—and further domestic influence—for the president". Moreover, using the war frame "defined war as the only way to defend the nation" (Lakoff, 2009: 126). Hence, anyone opposing war and militarization could easily be branded as unpatriotic (Lakoff, 2009), insufficiently "American", or even accused of being sympathetic with the enemy—which amounts to

aiding and abetting evil forces that hate freedom and seek to slaughter innocent people.

The Bush administration continued framing the heroic narrative by presenting the world—including U.S. citizens—with a false choice. Realizing that people in the U.S. were completely unaware of the motivations of the 9/11 attackers, the Whitehouse took full advantage of a vulnerable and ill-informed "American" public, and the president declared, "You're either with us or against us in the fight against terror"(Bush, 2001b). This forced U.S. citizens to embrace the singular identity of the national in-group and intimidatingly urged other countries to consent to the destined international leadership role of the United States of America in the unfolding heroic narrative.

The implications of this new language were obvious. Anyone who opposed the foreign or domestic policies of the Bush administration was regarded as an enemy of the U.S. In a time of national hysteria, "Americans" were reluctant to speak out against the government or question its policies. No one wanted to be equated with the enemy. Of course, the enemy had already been defined by this new language. It was repeated constantly that the terrorists had attacked the twin towers and the Pentagon because they hated freedom, democracy, and everything good about the U.S. and western civilization. And, as it has been presented already, the repetition of language can have a physical impact on the human brain—orienting it towards a certain discourse. Therefore, to not side with the U.S. government was to become an ally with the likes of so-called freedom and democracy hating Muslim extremists who reveled in the mass murder of innocent people. This type of language was propagated by the Bush administration and the mainstream media.

THE MEDIA AFTER 9/11

The news media relies on news frames to convey a particular interpretation of reality to their audiences. "News media frames refer to the interpretive structures that journalists employ to help their audiences locate an event within a broader context of historical, political, social and normative dynamics" (Jackson, Jarvis, Gunning, and Smyth, 2011: 54). These news frames can consist of "concepts, phrases, narratives and images" that are already embedded physically in the brain (Lakoff, 2009), and thereby, familiar to the audience. Cognitive bias plays an important part in how the audience interprets events. "Once information is encoded into memory in terms of one set of concepts, it is unlikely to be retrieved and interpreted in terms of other, alternative sets presented at a particular point in time" (Wilson, 2001: 406).

The mainstream media in the U.S. has traditionally served to enhance nationalism in times of crisis. Most media outlets claim neutrality in their reporting or insist that they report the "truth." This strategy conceals the narrow perspective that the media *chooses* to depict. Events can always be interpreted in multiple ways. The claim that media can be neutral or even "true" fails to recognize that all reporting is a specific way—out of many ways—of how to interpret and represent reality. Hogan argues that the "news media almost invariably present the news from the perspective of the nation, thus from the perspective of national interests" (Hogan, 2009: 72 – 73).

Hogan observes the symbiotic relationship between nationalism and U.S. media outlets:

> *American news media report stories that involve Americans, that bear on the American economy, and so forth. As such, they serve to make the national category highly salient. At the same time, the national organization of news reporting gives national categorization a sense of normalcy or naturalness. News appears to be national by its nature (Hogan, 2009: 73).*

Therefore, recognition that media always presents a particular interpretation of events, among many other interpretations, and that events are often interpreted through the lens of nationalism provides the basis for understanding the media's interpretation of the violent attacks on 9/11.

The mainstream media was instrumental in helping the government co-construct an atmosphere of fear and paranoia, conducive for the heroic narrative to develop. Preserving a state of vulnerability functioned to heighten emotional responses and reinforced the essential criteria for the beginning of the narrative to take shape, namely, that the violent attacks by the villain had upset the state of normalcy. This was accomplished by repeatedly broadcasting the violent images of the attacks on the Twin Towers, live coverage of speeches by President Bush and others in the administration, describing the freedom-hating evil enemy, and with Homeland Security's subsequent introduction of the color coded terrorism threat

assessment chart that informed the public to the level of potential danger on an almost daily basis. Once it had been sufficiently perceived that the state of normalcy had been disrupted by the villain, the hero could enter the stage to fight against the enemy, eventually triumphing over the villain, and thereby, restoring normalcy and the moral order. The U.S., as the traditional savior-nation, inevitably emerged as the hero of the narrative. This understanding of the events "helped to co-construct our contemporary social world by giving meaning to a set of events and a sense of legitimacy to the response" (Jackson, Jarvis, Gunning, and Smyth, 2011: 66).

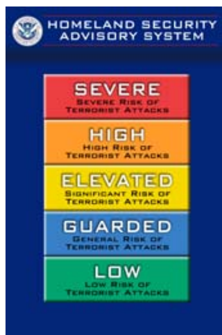


Figure 3. The US Department of Homeland Security's advisory system (Wired, 2013)

The political philosopher Sheldon Wolin interprets the media's response to 9/11 in this way:

> *On cue to 9/11 the media—television, radio, and newspapers—acted in unison, fell into line, even knew instinctively what the line and their role should be. What followed may have been the modern media's greatest production, its contribution to what was promptly—and darkly—described as a 'new world.' There vivid representations of the destruction of the Twin Towers, accompanied by interpretations that were unwavering and unquestioning, served a didactic end of fixing the images of American vulnerability while at the same time testing the potential for cultural control (Wolin, 2010: 5).*

However, the media also needed to tap into the vein of "American" identity in order to restore the public's faith in the nation—erasing any doubt that the 9/11 events might have created about the exceptionality and character of "America" as a nation. Thus, the challenge was to maintain a feeling of temporary uncertainty and vulnerability while reassuring the national community of its greatness—that Providence still favored the nation. Since the very beginning, "Americans" have believed that the U.S. is a special nation, the most rational, unlike any other, that it is the pinnacle of freedom and that by Providence the savior-nation was given a position of power so that it may spread freedom and progress to the ends of the earth (manifest destiny).

Just as the heroic-nation had overcome all obstacles and vanquished all previous enemies, it would likewise prevail in the "War on Terror". Since the forces of good always triumph against the forces of evil in heroic narratives, the U.S., an inherently "good" nation, was destined to triumph against its inherently evil adversary. In a sense, the ending was already clear.

The success of the 9/11 attacks, however, put a temporary impediment in the perceived impenetrability and immortality of the nation. The belief that the nation was at the forefront in the inevitable progression toward a utopian world was momentarily called into question. If "America" was so great, then how could it be attacked successfully? And, why would anyone want to attack such a great nation? Psychic crisis within the U.S. hit a record high. The media, together with the government, set out to alleviate the psychic crisis by giving the "American" public what it wanted—an inherently evil enemy to fill the void in negative identity and provide the nationalist narrative of a nation guided by Providence, which had nurtured the national community since the very beginning of its construction. "9/11, horrible as it was, was from another angle literally manna from heaven, giving the nation Meaning again with a capital M" (Berman, 2010: 55).

The media played a major role in framing 9/11. Drawing upon past heroic narratives, already activated by the Whitehouse, the media began to sensationalize the tragic event, turning it into a modern day real-life drama. Out of the dust and ashes of the crumbled buildings at ground zero emerged a president surrounded by cheering firemen, policemen, and rescue workers who shouted "USA, USA, USA!" He yelled back to the crowd through a megaphone that the United States would seek revenge for what had happened, proclaiming that "the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon" (Bush, 2001c). Indeed, the president's statement was foreshadowing the subsequent shift from the heroic narrative based on the threat/defense sequence to the heroic narrative of the savior-nation. The crowd was overcome emotionally with national pride and burst into

enthusiastic applause, shouting "USA!" ever more loudly. "The media produced not only an iconography of terror but a fearful public receptive to being led, first by hailing a leader, the mayor of New York, Rudolf Giuliani, and then by following one, the president of the United States, George W. Bush" (Wolin, 2010: 5).

Meanwhile, all of the major television news networks replayed the footage over and over, accompanied by discussions of the terrorists' hatred of freedom, implanting the violent images and motives of the enemy firmly into the neural circuitry of the brains of the viewers. This invoked even stronger feelings of nationalism amongst the population. "When a particular narrative of terrorism is regularly repeated by influential figures, such as media elites, it can become embedded within social and political life and gain widespread currency as the truth" (Jackson, Jarvis, Gunning, and Smyth, 2011: 55). In other words, the repetition of the idea that the terrorists hate freedom eventually led to the acceptance of this explanation as a *commonsense* interpretation of the motives behind the enemy's attacks. This understanding of the events opened up the door for policy options that may not have ever been considered if the motivations of the attackers had been interpreted differently. Also, the repetition of the dominant narratives by the media enhanced the singular identity of the national in-group by "encouraging audiences to identify with certain characters in a story whilst rejecting others" (Jackson, Jarvis, Gunning, and Smyth, 2011: 55). This can lead members of the national in-group to sympathize with 9/11 victims, for example, or attack perceived members of the out-group or anyone believed to be responsible for the attacks (Jackson, Jarvis, Gunning, and Smyth, 2011). Furthermore, the media's repetition of dominant narratives demarcated the parameters of understanding, which provided a template for how future events could be interpreted. This consequently filtered out alternative interpretations and responses. Finally, in order to serve their own interests, corporate and political elites took advantage of the media's repetition of the dominant narratives—which already provided a framework of understanding for U.S. citizens (Jackson, Jarvis, Gunning, and Smyth, 2011).

The media catered to this nationalist craving by always displaying the "American" flag on the screen and putting on various people who praised the president for his remarks. All of the major television news channels, radio programs, and print media were filled with patriotic rhetoric, steeped in national pride. "Flag lapel pins, icons of eagles, talons bared, and the pronouns *we* and *our* permeated not just Fox network but also CNN, CBS, NBC, and ABC" (Hixson, 2008: 292).

The media, and the government via the media, broadcasted to the "American" public that the nation was wounded, but not defeated, reassuring that the U.S. would endure the attacks and remain strong and devoted to destroying the enemy, in order to defend "freedom". Bush tried to comfort the nation saying, "America has stood down enemies before, and we will do so this time" (Bush, 2001a).

When it was decided that Al Qaeda was responsible for the attacks, the media quickly framed the discussion around the question "Why do they hate us?" *"They"* usually implied Muslims in general. Without allowing for an open debate or alternative responses, the media fell behind Whitehouse officials in promoting the absurd government line that "*they*" hate freedom and democracy. This propaganda ignores the dark history of western powers in the Middle East, fails to mention the U.S. support for brutal dictators, the Mujahedeen, the overthrow of democratically elected leaders, and so on. Those who challenged this assumption made by the media were frequently accused of being anti-"American," sympathetic to the enemy, or marginalized as out of touch with reality. This was done with the aim of discrediting alternative interpretations of 9/11. "Framing 9/11 as an unprovoked terrorist assault blurs the continuity between the so-called global war on terror and a national history of external violence against evil enemy-others" (Hixson, 2008: 279).

After 9/11 this "moment of social solidarity and patriotism was seized upon to construct an American nationalism that could provide the basis for a different form of imperialist endeavour and internal control" (Harvey, 2003: 193). The mainstream media eerily legitimized everything the government said and did. There was an obvious similarity in the rhetoric coming from the Whitehouse and the major television news channels. Those in the news media were in a frantic competition to outdo each other with grandiose displays of patriotism, in hopes of appearing to be the most pro-"American" network.

The media in the U.S. played a pivotal role in interpreting 9/11. The narratives that were repeated following the attacks provided the basis on which the savior-nation

would enter into two separate wars and justify its decision to increase military spending. Just as they had contributed to war throughout U.S. history, nationalist narratives, which reinforce "American" identity, led to further militarization, creating a more violent and dangerous world.

FROM DEFENSE TO THE SAVIOR-NATION

Christian millennialism and Enlightenment progress merged together, culminating in the creation of the savior-nation: The United States of America. The nation became a god, the redeemer of the world. By Providence the savior-nation would bring freedom and Progress to others. As Hegel wrote, "The state is the march of God in the world; its ground or cause is the power of reason realizing itself as will" (Hegel, 2001: 197). Indeed, while in office, referring to the U.S. military occupation in Iraq, former President Bush declared "freedom is on the march" (Bush, 2004b). "The notion that the story of the United States is the primary manifestation of God's will on earth has an enormous hold on the American psyche" (Berman, 2010: 13).

Berman writes about the religion of the savior-nation:

> *...the American religion is that of fulfilling a mission, of bringing a new world into being. It is an activist and moralistic religion, rather than an inward or contemplative one. For many Americans, the nation came to occupy a place in their lives that traditionally had been occupied by their church. This is why, while other nations have a sense of themselves derived from a common history, being an American is regarded as an ideological/religious commitment and not a matter of birth (Berman, 2010: 40).*

The heroic narrative of the savior-nation has deep roots in utopianism. Rather than simply defending the nation against its enemies (threat/defense sequence), the savior-nation's primary aim is to search and destroy evil in the world. The posture of the nation is aggressive instead of defensive. The narrative, however, is veiled in defensive rhetoric. As Bush proclaimed, "We're taking the fight to the terrorists abroad, so we don't have to face them here at home" (Bush, 2005). In other words, to borrow a sports analogy, offense is the best defense. This type of language and reasoning ignores the fact that the U.S. was already attacking people in Arab and Muslim countries, occupying their lands, and backing the tyrants in those countries before the wars began. Yet, whitewashing history is regularly used by the U.S. government. It deceptively serves to turn the nation into a victim rather than an aggressor, providing the necessary cover for the advancement of "American" imperialism and militarization. It is clear that "talk of fighting wars 'in defense' often refers to defense of our standard of living and way of life, a point that rhetorically helps to blur the question of whether we are fighting against or as an aggressor" (Swanson, 2010: 47 – 48). And the true definition of defense was revealed when Bush, commenting on the 9/11 attacks, stated that "our way of life, our very freedom came under attack" (Bush, 2001a).

U.S. history is based on the premise that the nation's destined role is to act as the savior of the world—to not only defend its conception of freedom—but more importantly, to eradicate evil. In the U.S., the Hegelian notion of history survives implicitly within the culture. Specifically, that Spirit (Geist) has realized its Idea: freedom. For many "Americans," the U.S. represents the actualization of freedom. When the U.S. wages war it is necessarily a rational act. Therefore, "American" identity reinforces the belief that those outside of the borders of the U.S. with different ways of being and relating to the world and structuring society will remain in a type of slavery or continue in an imperfect realization of freedom until they are liberated by the U.S. Bush echoed the Hegelian concept of freedom when he proclaimed, "the advance of human freedom...now depends on us" (Bush, 2001d).

Whether the savior-nation spreads "freedom" ("American" style modernity) by coercive methods or by consent, the aim remains the same—global hegemony. In other words, creating the world over again in the image of the U.S. is the primary solution to eradicating evil on earth. After all, if the U.S. is the exemplar of freedom and goodness, why wouldn't others want to be like it? "The American belief in our quasi-religious mission brings with it an equally strong belief in our inherent goodness and innocence" (Berman, 2010: 44). Therefore, it is assumed that creating the world again in the image of the U.S. is the best way to save the world from evil. Writing about the perspective of the U.S. as the savior-nation, Berman states: "There is, in short, a One Right Way, and those who refuse to follow it are either wicked or stupid. Our mission, then, is to convert others to the truth as we understand it" (Berman, 2010: 41). It is an imperialist endeavor and the ultimate utopian project. This belief is

rooted extremely deep within the culture, even if it is not always explicitly acknowledged. It serves to reinforce all other nationalist narratives.

In a speech three days after the 9/11 attacks Bush asserted that the U.S. mission was evident, its destiny was clear, and that it had a "responsibility to history". By Providence, the heroic-nation was to "rid the world of evil". He goes on to acknowledge that the U.S. has always had enemies, stating "In every generation, the world has produced enemies of human freedom" (Bush, 2001e).

Heroic narrative is often based on the idea that the hero has no other choice than to fight against the villain. Deterministic comments from both Bush and Obama demonstrate this point. As part of the justification of the war in Afghanistan, Bush said "We did not ask for this mission, but we will fulfill it. ...We defend not only our precious freedoms, but also the freedom of people everywhere to live and raise their children free from fear" (Bush, 2001f). Obama used similar fatalistic language when justifying U.S. military involvement in Libya. "The United States did not seek this outcome. Our decisions have been driven by Gaddafi's refusal to respect the rights of his people and the potential for mass murder of innocent civilians" (Bohan, Zenegerie, and Holland, 2011). As the savior-nation in the heroic narrative, the nation never really has a choice of going to war; by Providence the U.S. is forced into war as the defender of freedom.

The "War on Terror" became the justification for multiple military interventions around the world. The two most notable cases are the ongoing U.S. military occupations of both Afghanistan and Iraq. The first target of the "War on Terror" began with the U.S. military invasion of Afghanistan, named, "Operation Enduring Freedom" by the Bush administration. Noam Chomsky observes the ironic nature of giving the military operation this name. He notes the ambiguity of the word "enduring". "It can mean 'lasting' or it can mean 'suffering from'" (Chomsky, 2001). In fact, he sardonically claimed that the latter meaning is more accurate when considering the experiences of the Afghan population. The decade long war (that still continues) in Afghanistan resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of Afghan civilians, the militarization of the country, the destruction of the environment, and the installation of a corrupt puppet government.

Consider the evolution of each of the narratives used in the justification of both wars. The war in Afghanistan, for example, began as a defense narrative. The U.S. government argued that the Taliban government in Afghanistan was harboring terrorists (Al Qaeda) who planned terrorist attacks on the U.S. from their territory, posing an existential threat to the security of the U.S. The purpose of this defense narrative was to create a state of fear and widespread feeling of vulnerability amongst the U.S. population, and it was repeated over and over so that it would become fixed in the synapses of the brain. Once the defense narrative was no longer needed or when counter narratives began to undermine it, the government created a new justification for the war and increased militarization by appealing to the tried and tested savior-nation narrative, already familiar to "Americans".

The same shift from the defense narrative to the savior-nation narrative is central to the U.S. government's discourse regarding the war in Iraq—a war that replicated the destructive effects of the war in Afghanistan by resulting in over a hundred thousand civilian causalities (Iraq Body Count, 2012). The accusation that Iraq had already acquired Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), that it had intentions to use them against the U.S., and that a link had been confirmed between Saddam Hussein and the 9/11 terrorist attacks was based on deception and fear, aimed at justifying a war with Iraq—a country rich in oil. In fact, David Swanson points out that the pro-war argument exists that "we must defend our standard of living by protecting oil supplies" in other peoples countries (Swanson, 2010: 48). After the U.S. overthrew Saddam Hussein, who had, like Bin Laden, become the face of evil in the minds of many "Americans," it was eventually realized that the U.S. government had clearly lied about the threat that Iraq posed to the U.S. and the world. Therefore, the narrative was altered by the Bush administration. Replacing the defense narrative with the historically successful savior-nation narrative provided the U.S. government with a moral explanation for destroying and occupying Iraq.

The U.S. government has repeatedly disguised its military endeavors with positive language. For example, "the code name for the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Operation Iraqi Freedom [...] employed language intended to highlight the altruistic side of the war" (Hinshaw, 2005: 411). The savior-nation narrative asserted that the people of both Afghanistan and Iraq were yearning for the U.S.

FIGURE 4. KEY EVENTS FOLLOWING 9/11

to rescue them from their oppressors: the Taliban and Saddam Hussein. The brutality of these regimes was reported and emphasized over and over again. For example, abolishing the Taliban's tyrannical patriarchal system was the most powerful justification put forth. After all, who would defend the Taliban's brutal subjugation of women? The population was again presented with a false choice of *either* allowing the Taliban to oppress its population *or* supporting the U.S. military occupation of the country. Similarly, the brutal crimes of Saddam Hussein were highlighted. Of course, important details of U.S. complicity in the use of chemical and biological weapons, which Saddam had used against Iran and the Kurdish population in northern Iraq, for example, were not mentioned.

The transition from the defense narrative to the savior-nation narrative involves the most important emotions of the heroic narrative. The progression of the narrative from fear to self-righteousness is actually the exact evolution of emotions that one experiences in a story. For example, at the beginning of the narrative the victim and those who sympathize with the victim (the audience) experience a state of fear. The villain has upset the moral order or normalcy of life. This creates the feeling of uncertainty, vulnerability, and fear. It causes one to experience a desire to be protected. When the hero arises to defend those who are threatened by the villain it creates a sense of security. In the same way, when the hero aims to defeat the villain, in a battle of good versus evil, a feeling of self-righteousness is created. The audience cheers for the "good guy", everyone sympathizes with the hero's cause and desire for revenge. In short, the victim (fear) becomes the hero (self-righteousness).

In war, when the defense narrative loses its effectiveness, it will likely make a transition to the savior-nation narrative. This is the evolution of emotions. Fear transforms into self-righteousness. In the savior-nation narrative the hero (the U.S.) is sanctioned, not to defend the victim (U.S. population), but to rescue the new victims, those being terrorized (Afghan and Iraqi people) by the villain (Saddam Hussein and the Taliban). Now, the hero's desire for revenge is necessarily offensive. Therefore, the narrative moves from fear, the negative feeling that there is an existential threat to the nation, to self-righteousness, the positive emotional belief that the savior-nation is acting upon a moral imperative to rescue the people living under oppression—those who have an imperfect realization of freedom. The emotion of fear, created by the defense narrative remains unconscious, still playing an important part, while the emotion of self-righteousness takes over as the conscious, seemingly dominant emotion.

There is a broader narrative at play here. The Enlightenment idea of Progress manifests itself in the savior-nation narrative. The feeling of self-righteousness is directed at improving the world by appealing to a universal ideal of freedom. The utopian project of spreading "American" style freedom around the world is based on the premise that the ends justify the means. Specifically, the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocent people, the permanently mutilated human beings, the destruction of the environment and societies infrastructure essential for daily life, increased militarization, and the creation of countless refugees whose lives have been ruined is regrettable, but it is worth the sacrifice if the end result is the world being recreated in the image of the United States of "America". This is the price of so-called Progress. The U.S. perceives itself as the main actor in an epic drama between the forces of good and evil.

Playing on Ronald Reagan's "Evil Empire" trope that was used in reference to the Soviet Union during the

Cold War, the Whitehouse identified Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as the "Axis of Evil"—publically expanding its list of enemies. This new label led to heightened tensions between the aforementioned countries and the U.S. Consequently, it is likely that this language designating North Korea as "evil" provoked the regime to acquire nuclear weapons as a defensive measure. Indeed, the possession of nuclear weapons may be the reason that the U.S. has not yet attacked the hermit kingdom. Reacting to such jingoistic threats, North Korea justified its own militarization by creating a defense narrative, with the U.S. given the role as the villain. Furthermore, labeling Iran (a country that had previously been cooperating with the U.S. in Afghanistan) as "evil" played an important role in undermining "the Iranian moderate politicians who had been enjoying significant popular support in the years before Bush's 'Axis of Evil' speech" (DeFronzo, 2007: 316). It is argued that this "threatening orientation toward Iran probably contributed to the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a relatively hard-line Islamic fundamentalist, in Iran's 2005 presidential election" (DeFronzo, 2007: 316). The current U.S. claim that Iran is developing nuclear weapons that could be used against Israel and the U.S., and Iranian insistence that its intentions to develop nuclear power is for peaceful purposes, has created narratives on both sides that portray each other as evil and themselves as good. If the U.S. claim is correct that Iran is developing nuclear weapons, however, labeling Iran as "evil" and invading its neighbor Iraq, surely played a significant role in contributing to its motivations in seeking a deterrent. Iran "might be trying to develop nuclear weapons to deter the United States" from attacking it (DeFronzo, 2007: 316).

CONCLUSION

Neuroscience offers a fresh perspective on identity by revealing the workings of the human brain. The importance of language and narrative in shaping thought cannot be overstated. Although the dominant narratives being used by the government and the mainstream news media, for example, have had an enormous impact, there is still hope of overcoming these problems rooted in identity. If identity can be constructed, then it can also be deconstructed. Indeed, new identities that contribute to peace can be constructed. Recognizing the potential of the human brain, that it can be physically changed by language, presents opportunities to change the brain in such a way that orients people towards peace and away from militarization and war by creating new neural pathways. Hence, peoples' brains could become more receptive to different language and narratives. "Narratives can provide justifications to perpetuate the status quo or be compelling reasons for social change" (Winkler, 2006: 9). Therefore, by creating a new discourse, it is possible to challenge the negative aspects of identity. "Hope lies in the understanding that as identity is rooted in representation, if we can change the discourse we can change our reality, or at least nudge it in more positive directions" (Hixson, 2008: 307).

This study is a qualitative exploration in "American" identity and its relation to war. In searching for an explanation to what causes the U.S. to recurrently choose war, one must appreciate the religious and philosophical ideas that helped construct "American" identity—expressed in the narratives that sustain it. After September 11, 2001 the U.S. chose to make the world less safe by declaring a "War on Terror". Rather than seeking to understand the motivations and grievances of the assailants the Bush administration "forfeited the goodwill, the empathy the world felt for" (Hedges, 2010: 83) the U.S. after 9/11 by demonizing the enemy and vowing for revenge—which culminated in war and militarization. The interpretation of 9/11 as an "act of war" allowed the government and the mainstream news media to summon the heroic-nation narrative, which had always directed U.S. foreign policy. Narrative provided the stage for "Americans" to define themselves through negative identity, thereby, filling the existing void in meaning with a destructive affirmation of nationalism.

ENDNOTES

1. The terms "America" and "American" as an exclusive way of identifying both the United States of American and its citizens is vigorously disputed, particularly by the inhabitants of Latin America. Therefore, this study will continue to use these contested terms with quoatations.
2. Declaring a "War on Terror" is markedly different from declaring a "War on Terrorism". "Terror" is an emotion and "terrorism" is a fighting tactic.

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