



War Narratives: Shaping Beliefs, Blurring Truths in the Middle East

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The Problems with Narratives

- Diversity of Opinions about the Iraq War
 - What do you believe?
 - Is one set of opinions better, more true than another?
- Narratives are the choices that are made about what facts we choose to tell a story and how those choices help us understand the story
- Narratives drive our opinions of the wars
- Narratives align with our worldviews, confirm our social, political, and cultural perspectives

The Problems with Narratives

- Why are narratives so powerful regarding Iraq?
 - Civil-Military Divide/All-Volunteer Military Force
 - Mediated landscape, new media
- Consequences:
 - Allow us to be manipulated by those who wish to use narratives for their own political objectives
 - Could drag us down the same roads toward wars in the future

The Narratives

- War of Choice Narrative
- Cowboy Narrative
- Phase IV Narrative
- Surge Narrative
- Hero and Victim Narratives
- Master Narrative
- New Narratives

War of Choice Narrative

- Narrative: *George W. Bush engaged in a War of Choice*
- War of Choice vs. War of Necessity
- Places blame directly and solely on Bush
- Supported by Bush Admin, coercive diplomacy, and actions
- **Books:** Memoirs of Senior Bush Administration Officials
- **Problem:** Doesn't reflect actual events and uses of war powers
 - Congressional abdication of war powers → AUMF
 - All-volunteer force allowed it to happen
- **Consequences:** Used to win Congress in 2006

Cowboy Narrative

- Narrative: *George W. Bush was willing to engage in total war no matter the costs*
- Continues the War of Choice Narrative
- Supported by Bush rhetoric and actions
- **Books:** Bob Woodward journalism on Bush Admin wars
- **Problem:** Doesn't reflect actual prosecution of the war
 - Bush used Cowboy rhetoric, but engaged in a very limited war
 - Focus on limiting casualty counts
- **Consequences:** Failure to mobilize the American people

Surge Narrative

- Narrative: *By 2006, the situation was so desperate that the U.S. could only be saved by a new hero and a new strategy.*
- Presented David Petraeus as the new hero and the Surge as the new strategy
- Binary perspective (telltale way to identify narratives)
- **Books:** Journalistic accounts of the war
- **Problem:** Not supported by actual events
 - Key objective of the Surge failed
 - COIN well underway before Petraeus
 - Petraeus is both the savior and a part of the problem he is to save us from
 - Domestic political victory or a strategic military victory?
- **Consequences:** Belief that COIN might be the future of warfare

Hero and Victim Narratives

- Narrative: *All who served in war are either hero or victims.*
- Conservative vs. Liberal worldviews
- Seen in popular media → music, movies, etc.
- **Books:** Oral histories of veterans from the war
- **Problem:** Veterans do not often see themselves as victims of these wars
 - Heavily edited oral histories focus on victimization
 - Unedited transcripts show something different, not heroic, not victims
 - Post-Traumatic Growth
 - Personal growth based on negative experiences
 - Resilience and grit
- **Consequences:** Continuing to separate military veterans from civilian society

New Narratives

- Narrative: *Real war can't be described in works of fiction.*
- Walt Whitman, Paul Fussell: The Real War Will Never Get in the Books
- CMD is too large
- **Books:** Literary fiction about the wars by military and civilian authors
- **Problem:** Fiction from this war is significantly different
 - Literary authors working to bridge the CMD
 - Literature seeks to empathize with all participants
 - "Journalism is where we go to find the lies, fiction is where we go to find the truth."
 - In America's first truly postmodern war, literary fiction may actually represent the best chance to find the truth
- **Opportunity:** Fiction may allow us to get past the divisive politics of this war and prevent them in the future