



The construction of threats and enemies in US presidential discourses (1993-2013)

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ABSTRACT

The construction of threats and enemies is a constant in international politics, and presidential rhetoric plays an important role in this process. In this article, we show how recent US presidential speeches articulate narratives and representations of threats and enemies. We will focus on the State of the Union addresses given by Bill Clinton (1993-2001), George W. Bush (2001-2009), and Barack Obama (2009-2013), thus encompassing 20 years of US foreign policy agenda. To do so, we will use two discourse analysis techniques. The first will highlight processes of linking and differentiation inherent to identities while the second, from the field of narratology, is employed to identify the narrative grammar that underpins the roles performed in narratives. We will show that rather than fixed, stable categories, threats and enemies are constantly in flux, being constructed against a permanent state of crisis.

Keywords: United States; discourse; foreign policy; threats and enemies.

A construção de ameaças e inimigos nos discursos presidenciais dos EUA (1993-2013)

RESUMO

A construção de ameaças e inimigos é uma constante da política internacional, e os discursos presidenciais possuem um papel importante nesse processo. Este artigo tem como objetivo mostrar como os discursos presidenciais dos Estados Unidos articulam

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/2237-101X02405205>

Artigo recebido em 2 de maio de 2021 e aceito para publicação em 19 de outubro de 2021.

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narrativas e representações de ameaças e inimigos ao público norte-americano. Com base nos pronunciamentos do Estado da União de Bill Clinton (1993-2001), George W. Bush (2001-2009) e Barack Obama (2009-2013), veremos o funcionamento desse processo por vinte anos de política externa norte-americana. Serão empregadas duas técnicas de análise de discurso. A primeira destaca os processos de ligação e de diferenciação inerentes a identidades coletivas, enquanto a segunda, oriunda da narratologia, identifica a gramática narrativa que articula os papéis desempenhados na trama. Ao contrário de serem categorias fixas e estáveis, mostraremos que inimigos e ameaças são categorias em constante fluxo, que são construídas em um estado permanente de crise.

Palavras-chave: Estados Unidos; discursos; política externa; ameaças e inimigos.

La construcción de amenazas y enemigos en los discursos presidenciales estadounidenses (1993-2013)

RESUMEN

La construcción de amenazas y enemigos es una constante en la política internacional, y los discursos presidenciales juegan un papel importante en este proceso. Este artículo tiene como objetivo mostrar cómo los discursos presidenciales estadounidenses articulan narrativas y representaciones de amenazas y enemigos para el público estadounidense. Con base en los pronunciamentos del Estado de la Unión de Bill Clinton (1993-2001), George W. Bush (2001-2009) y Barack Obama (2009-2013), veremos el funcionamiento de este proceso durante veinte años de política exterior de los Estados Unidos. Se utilizarán dos técnicas de análisis del discurso. La primera destaca los procesos de conexión y diferenciación inherentes a las identidades colectivas, mientras que la segunda, derivada de la narratología, identifica la gramática narrativa que articula los roles que se juegan en la trama. A diferencia de ser categorías fijas y estables, mostraremos que los enemigos y las amenazas son categorías en constante flujo, que son construidas en un estado de permanente crisis.

Palabras clave: Estados Unidos; discursos; política externa; amenazas y enemigos.

Introduction

It is quite possible that there is no detectable or recognizable point at which a relationship of friendship or animosity emerges between peoples and individuals. Indeed, Murray and Meyers (1999) argue that the construction of threats and enemies is a constant in international politics. They suggest that the disappearance of an actor that has been configured as threat is no guarantee of peace, and narratives adapt to the environment and demands of each time.

At the same time, Edwards (2008, p. 831) claims when it comes to discursive practices, the president has a key role in changing meanings: “[...] presidential enemy construction is one of the central components of a president’s foreign policy vocabulary, and becomes a primary guide for understanding American foreign policy at large”. Indeed, presidential speeches provide explanations, cite examples, and make reference to collective memory to make sense of foreign policy choices.

In the case of the United States, the State of the Union address, an annual message delivered by the president to the US Congress near the beginning of each calendar year, is the most cited example of this tradition. It gives a report on the nation’s economy, political agenda, current news, the year’s budget, policy proposals, as well as world politics¹. In this article, we investigate how presidential speeches articulate narratives and representations of threats and enemies. We will focus on the State of the Union addresses given by Bill Clinton (1993-2001), George W. Bush (2001-2009), and Barack Obama (2009-2013). To do so, we will use two discourse analysis techniques, which together provide clues about how the self and the other are differentiated in presidential speeches. The article is divided into three parts. In the first, we explore the concept of identity and its relationship with the construction of threats and enemies in foreign policy discourse. Next, we present the results of empirical research using a corpus of 21 speeches given between 1993 and 2013, totaling around 135,000 words. Finally, we offer some considerations about the dominant patterns encountered in the analysis of the selected corpus of speeches.

1. Enacting identities in US foreign policy discourses

Identity studies – of collectives, individuals, ethnicities, nationalities, or genders – seem to have caught the imagination of the social sciences in recent times, most likely because of the debates about multiculturalism and globalization². In International Relations (IR), the concept of identity has been one, if not *the*, conceptual shooting star in IR scholarship since the 1990s, at least among scholars seeking an alternative to the realist-rationalist vocabulary³. David Campbell notes that “identity is an inescapable dimension of being. No body could be without it” (1998, p. 9). Ted Hopf suggests that a world without identities would be a “world of chaos, a world of pervasive and irremediable uncertainty, a world much more dangerous than anarchy” (1998, p. 175).

¹ Many important policy shifts have been first announced during the State of the Union Address, such as the Monroe Doctrine (1823), Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms speech (1941) and the Second Bill of Rights (1944), and Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty (1964).

² For a review of this literature, see Brubacker and Cooper (2000).

³ For a recent sample of this scholarship, see Epstein (2010), Hagström (2015), Bucher and Jasper (2017), Berenskoetter (2014), Lebow (2016), Hansen (2006); on identity and foreign policy, see Hayes (2012), Cha (2015), Resende (2012), Subotic (2016) and Guzzini (2016).

In such cases, identity is considered in terms of “being a subject”. Thinking of identity in this way stems from the evolution of identity studies, which began to reflect on the issue of identity in conjunction with the issue of the construction of a project of the self (BENWELL; STOKOE, 2006, p. 18). Charles Taylor (1989) highlights the relationship between identity and the notion of the individual as a self-interpreting subject, which we should attribute to Descartes and Locke. Individuals can be conceived as self-sufficient agents endowed with instrumental rationality, whose self is created on the basis of accumulated experience and knowledge in their intellect in the context of the Enlightenment. By conceiving of a ‘human agent who is capable to remake himself by methodical and disciplined action’ (TAYLOR, 1989, p. 159), Descartes and Locke formulated a specific concept of identity: identity as an instrument for the execution of the project of the self. In other words, a sovereign subject.

However, it was Jacques Lacan who made the first real break from the Enlightenment paradigm of identity as a sovereign subject by trying to perceive how individuals recognize or identify themselves as members of a collective. Lacan (1977) was keen to understand how the fluid, chaotic unconscious of an infant can be submitted to and dominated by the illusion of a unified, coherent identity. Conceiving of the unconscious as a structured language, following the Saussurian tradition of structuralism, Lacan postulated that the self has no original point of reference to which it may return to after a trauma or crisis. This conception implies the rejection of a prior, essential, or pre-social identity. The self is born with no references, and as such it becomes stable through the illusion of unity, which is constructed in discourse. By foregrounding the unstable, incomplete, precarious state of identities, Lacan rejects the notion of a prior, essential identity. Subjectivity is not given; it is in flux, thus in need need for constant reaffirmation.

As Richard Ned Lebow (2016) points out, this more or less recent scholarship on identity in IR is a reflection current politics as characterized by calls for particularism and contestation of – if not, as put by Pankaj Mishra (2016), *anger* – against dominant orders, most notably orders informed by a colonial past. Following groundbreaking works by Said (2003) and Fanon (1952), postcolonial critique allow us to understand how identities are not monolithic but heterogenous (BHABHA, 1994; SPIVAK, 1988), constructed in the interaction of colonizers and the colonized, where categories such as race, gender, and class (CHOWDHRY; NAIR, 2002), intersect to reproduce identities⁴.

⁴ In IR, Vivienne Jabri (2013) has argued that the “international” is the site of postcolonial encounters that, drawing on Bhabha’s notion of hybridity, allow the colonial subject, whether in the form of a colonized state or individuals, to gain agency. At the same time, postcolonial scholars have problematized how *othering* reproduces hegemony through the rationalization of Western standards as normal, constituting them as the ultimate standard for knowledge production (SCOTT, 1999). The Eurocentric (or Westcentric) idea that conceptualizes Europe and North America as modern has substantially reinforced the assumption that the West constitutes the source of modernity that eventually went global (BHAMBRA, 2007). For a recent discussion on postcolonial critique, see Schilliam (2018) and Weheliye (2014).

Identities are hence socially constructed rather than natural, fixed; they are contestable and polymorphous, rather than unitary and singular; they are interactive and processual, rather than static and essential. By addressing the concept of identity from this perspective, one is able to problematize the political practices that would make its content stable. In other words, there is a power issue at the heart of the social construction and enactment of identities that must be subject to critical scrutiny. William Connolly explores this venue by positioning identity in relation to a series of socially recognized differences: “the maintenance of one identity (or field of identities) involves the conversion of some differences into otherness, into evil, or one of its numerous surrogates. Identity requires difference in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty” (CONNOLLY, 1991, p. 64).

To Connolly identity arises from the continuous production of otherness: an identity that wants to be fixed, to inscribe itself as true and unique, branding everything that is different as strange, bad, irrational, abnormal, sick, primitive, mad, or dangerous, while claiming for itself the traits of good, coherent, complete, rational, sane, civilized, peaceful, natural, and true. Yet when an identity converts difference into otherness, it expresses itself as natural in a quest for stability, presenting itself as legitimate and true and repressing others by force. In times of crisis and uncertainty, the self feels hemmed in and starts to feel “uncertainty, contingency, and fragility residing in the status, power, and opportunities bestowed upon [it]” (CONNOLLY, 1991, p. 22). The sense of uncertainty and anxiety, exacerbated and heightened in late modernity, ends up fostering a widespread resentment that is expressed through hostility towards the other and the attempt to recognize oneself as a unique, true, authentic, secure, real identity free of uncertainty.

From this perspective, foreign policy can be seen as a social and political practice of border building, as it discursively produces differences based on dichotomies such as “inside/outside”, “friend/enemy”, “self/other”, where the identity/alterity nexus operates in the co-constitution and (re)affirmation of social relations between political entities. Underpinned by identity markers (MANSBACH; RHODES, 2007) with specific ideological content whose function is to establish the dimensions of the self in relation to the other – what it can include and what it should exclude because of its supposed inferiority – foreign policy discourse converts difference into otherness by creating and naturalizing a superior self.

As Neumann (1996, p. 151) reminds us, if “the other is what I myself am not,” it disturbs the order by its very existence. In other words, building up the other as an antagonistic force is a way of assuring and legitimizing the meaning of the identity based on fear-and anxiety-mongering strategies about this enemy other. In this sense, the borders of states, invented to demarcate and legitimize an atemporal physical space capable of defining the

horizon of identity (WALKER, 1993), restate the superiority of the sovereign in containing uncertainties, threats, or risks that might jeopardize this identity⁵.

Foreign policy can therefore be conceived as a political practice central to the constitution, production and maintenance of political identity. As Campbell (1998, p. 8) explains, “[...] the constitution of identity is achieved through the inscription of boundaries that serve to demarcate an inside from an outside, a self from the other, a domestic from a foreign”. This is why discourse is used to produce and transform meanings and representations to reflexively constitute threats and enemies, (re)produce collective identities, and present the state as a space as well as an actor capable of providing security and a sense of belonging to its subjects (RESENDE, 2012). As a result, boundaries are erected, spaces are demarcated, authorities are confirmed, certain stories and narratives are prioritized, and alternative discourses are marginalized.

For the purposes of this article, we draw on different discourse analysis methods to observe how enemies and threats are created in U.S. presidential addresses. The advantage of taking discursive approaches is that they cast reality as a social construct, where all objects, subjects, and relationships have meanings. By using discourse analysis techniques, we will attempt to make sense of what Foucault (1972, p. 49) describes as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak”: the production and reproduction of meaning. Here, we adopt Richard Jackson’s (2006, p. 164) definition of discourses as “related sets of ideas that are expressed in various kinds of written and spoken texts, and which employ a distinct arrangement of vocabularies, rules, symbols, labels, assumptions, narratives and forms of social action”. They dictate what can and cannot be said about a given object, and set the parameters, structures, and interests to be politically articulated as common sense.

In this study, we draw on two distinct methodologies. The first, formulated by Hansen (2006), proposes to understand the processes of linking and differentiation inherent to identities. The second, based on Greimas’ (1984) narratology, identifies the narrative grammar that underpins the roles performed by the self and the other in relation to reality.

Hansen sees identity as a product of linking and differentiation. Her model ‘provides a theoretical and methodological account of the way in which discourses seek to establish stability, and also how this stability can always be deconstructed’ (HANSEN, 2006, p. 33). The first step is to create a structure to build an understanding of what signs in a discourse are linked to construct each of the identities (self and other). Next – the differentiation phase – the identities are offset against one another in order to show how they are differentiated discursively. The features identified relate to how the identities of each of the actors in the model are constructed. The traits that are specific to each actor are interrelated within the

⁵ As Prozorov (2011) has shown, the othering process may also happen in a temporal mode, in which the self engages in othering with its own past.

same identity, but must be deconstructed in relation to the other so that the self is taken to have a “positive” construction in a relation to it, in terms of hierarchy and position. The signs that constitute the identity of the self and other are identified, in view of the fact that identity construction is not restricted to designating one sign to one’s self and another to the other, but rather “through the location of this sign within a larger system” (HANSEN, 2006, p. 37).

The second method will focus on the role of the narratives. Working on narratology, Greimas (1984) emphasized that language is an assemblage of structures of signification, which implies that the language system cannot be given in advance but must be *articulated as discourse*. Focusing on the structures of narratives, he developed a model by taking *actants* as fundamental structural units. The actant is neither a specific narrative event nor a character; it is the narrative element that describes and carries out three basic patterns in any narrative: (1) desire, search, aim (subject/object); (2) communication (sender/receiver); and (3) auxiliary support or hindrance (helper/opponent).

Thus Greimas postulates a standard plot in which those three pairs of dichotomous actants⁶ (subject vs. object, sender vs. receiver; helper vs. opponent) interact along three axes (desire, command, and power). The actants are as follows: a) the Sender, who occupies a transcendently or theologically superior position⁷, and sends the subject on a quest or journey to fulfil his/her mission; b) the Subject, who receives the mission to quest for the Object⁸; 3) the Object, which is marked by its absence or loss⁹; 4) the Receiver, who is the main beneficiary of the successful obtainment of the Object¹⁰; 5) the Helper, who assists the Subject throughout the story¹¹; 6) the Opponent, who places obstacles in the Subject’s way¹².

⁶ These actants are notably elastic, in that they act, as described by De Geest (2003, p. 3), as “empty” functions that can be filled by different characters and in equally various narratives.

⁷ From his position of superiority, the Sender imposes a “contract” on the subject that sets forth the terms of the mission and the values that shape the plot. At the end, he passes down judgement on the Subject’s performance in fulfilling the contract, reserving the right to reward or punish him. Examples: gods, king, priest, prophet etc.

⁸ Their motivation comes from the desire or need to obtain the Object, and thereby fulfil their mission and be rewarded by the Sender, or else their fear of being punished should they fail. Examples: prince, knight, plebian, warrior etc.

⁹ The object of desire of the Subject, with which they have a relationship of co-constitution. One cannot be defined independently from the other. Examples: sword, crown, love, fortune etc.

¹⁰ The Subject may take on the mission in their name or, in the case of an outcast Subject, the obtainment of the Object may lead him back into favor with the Receiver (redemption). Ex: village, kingdom, community, group, or family.

¹¹ The Helper shares the Subject’s values and recognizes the legitimacy of his mission. Examples: friend, squire, employee, confidante, guardian angel, luck etc.

¹² The Opponent does not share the Subject’s values or recognize the legitimacy of his mission. He can act by directly opposing the Sender or because he wants the Object for himself, denying the Receiver its benefits. Examples: sorcerer, wizard, dragon, exile, monster, bad luck etc.

By applying the model, Greimas identifies the patterns of behavior that sustain any plot, or what he called its narrative grammar. By simplifying narratives to the extreme, he identifies the building blocks of plots, which dictate the functions to be taken on by the actants and the structure of the narrative. As a result, even abstract constructs like “freedom”, “capitalism” or “modernity” assume narrative functions as any other character in a plot. Greimas was thus able to develop a syntactic analysis of discourse by identifying the characters’ functions that govern action in a story. The dynamics of this model is applicable to stories, in general, and to political speech, in particular¹³.

Although their work is rooted in different traditions, Hansen and Greimas’s models can nonetheless be seen as complementary. While the former highlights the relationships articulated between self and other, the latter seeks to identify the narrative by which these relationships are played out. An analysis involving both perspectives can therefore give a richer, more complex perspective on the rationales that feed the discourses of threats and enemies in U.S. presidential discourse. As for the sample of speeches selected for analysis, we will use State of the Union addresses given by Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama between 1993 and 2013 as our corpus.

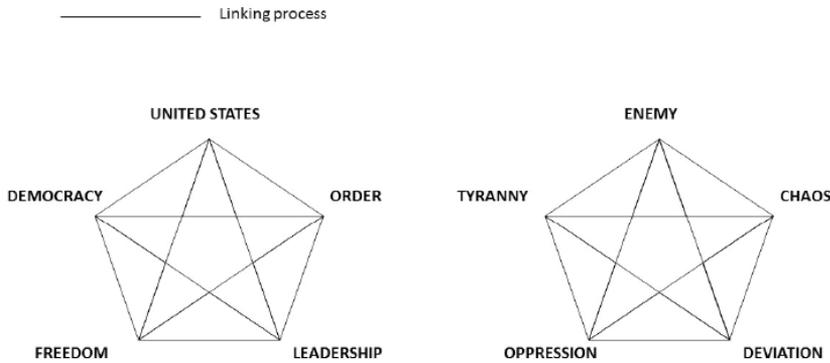
2. The construction of reality in State of the Union addresses of Clinton, Bush, and Obama

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 imploded the Cold War order, and the United States stood as the world’s only superpower, boasting superior military force and global hegemony. The end of the Cold War had some crucial implications for U.S. foreign policy in the following years. With the demise of the USSR, which would America’s new enemies and threats be? The 1991 Gulf War was helpful for disseminating the idea that, rather than George H.W. Bush’s (1989-93) new world order, the U.S. was now facing global disorder. Debates ensued to try to identify the features of the new scenario, and to give the United States a new meaning. What did America stand for now that its all-too-familiar enemy, the Soviet Union, no longer existed?

Bill Clinton’s campaign slogan for the 1992 elections, “it’s the economy, stupid!” was in line with most people’s view that now that the communist threat was dead, the country should concentrate on domestic issues and bring back home most of the troops stationed abroad, especially in Europe. With a political agenda mostly centered on domestic concerns, Clinton took office in January 1993, and made commercial diplomacy a priority. As time went by, his foreign policy oscillated between cooperative security, primacy or even neo-isolationism.

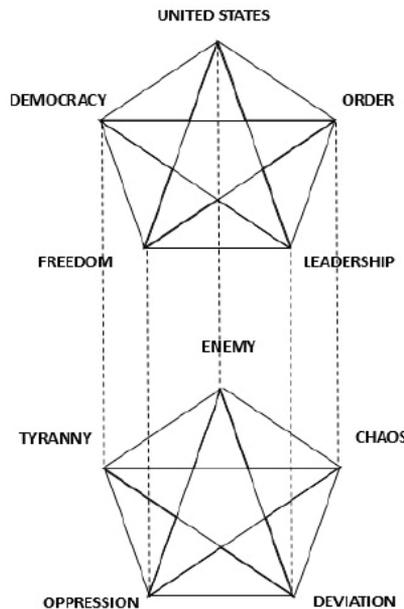
¹³ See Urban (1986), Resende (2012), and Urban and Khestanov (2011).

Image 2: Linking in identity construction in Clinton’s State of the Union addresses



When it comes to constructing difference via negative signifiers, words like “tyranny”, “oppression”, “chaos”, and “deviation” are used to represent the identity attributed to threats. Despite the variety of negative attributes, there is a common thread in the identification of this putative “enemy”. The attempts to fill the gap left by the collapse of the Soviet Union were designed to highlight the notion that the end of the East-West conflict had left a world that was marching towards the ideas defended by the United States, and that anything that disturbed this was to be deemed a “deviation” that should be corrected by the U.S. leadership.

Image 3: Enemy and threat construction in Clinton’s State of the Union addresses



In terms of narrative, we identified the following plot that dominated Clinton's State of the Union addresses.

- Sender: History¹⁶

Like every individual man and woman, nations must decide whether they are prepared to rise to the occasion history presents them

- Subject: Congress, federal government, me (the president)

This Congress produced a budget that cut the deficit by half a trillion dollars, cut spending, and raised income taxes on only the wealthiest Americans.

This Congress produced tax relief for millions of low-income workers to reward work over welfare.

...we launched a campaign to reinvent Government.

We cut staff, cut perks, even trimmed the fleet of Federal limousines.

I came to this hallowed Chamber 2 years ago on a mission...

I was determined then to tackle the tough problems too long ignored.

- Object: a new direction, prosperity, growth, employment, social welfare

Our Nation needs a new direction...

For too long we have drifted without a strong sense of purpose or responsibility or community...

Our immediate priority must be to create jobs, create jobs now...

And just as we must transform our unemployment system, so must we also revolutionize our welfare system.

As we enter a new era, we need a new set of understandings, ...

- Receiver: the people, American families, children, communities

You will be given a chance to give the children of this country, the law-abiding working people of this country...

Many of our initiatives, from job training to welfare reform to health care to national service, will help to rebuild distressed communities, to strengthen families, to provide work.

...let's give our children a future.

...we have to do more to accept responsibility for ourselves and our families, for our communities,

...

- Helper: armed forces, strong economy, education, democracy, free trade

Backed by an effective national defense and a stronger economy, our Nation will be prepared to lead a world.

...we know that economic growth depends as never before on opening up new markets overseas and expanding the volume of world trade...

But nothing, nothing is more important to our security than our Nation's Armed Forces.

Ultimately, the best strategy to ensure our security and to build a durable peace is to support the advance of democracy elsewhere.

- Opponent: ethnic conflicts, weapons of mass destruction, fanatics etc.

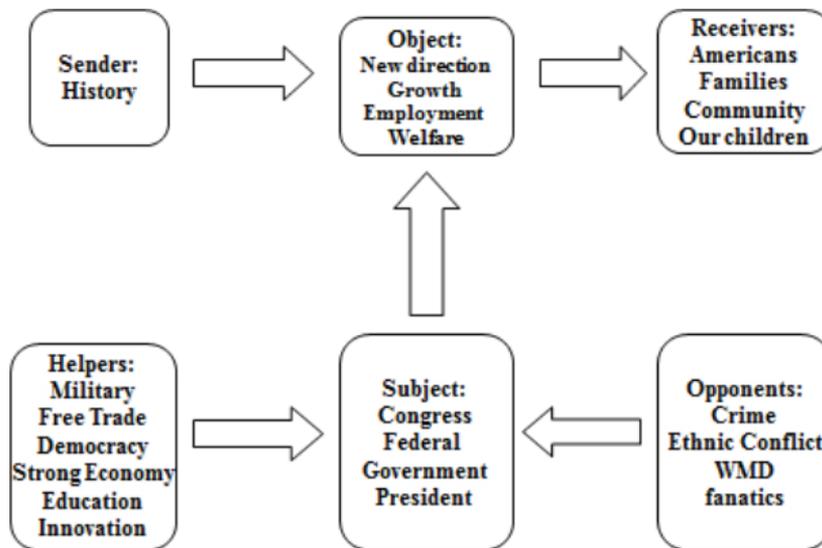
¹⁶ In a progressive, evolutionary, linear sense.

...our Nation will be prepared to lead a world challenged as it is everywhere by ethnic conflict, by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, by the global democratic revolution, and by challenges to the health of our global environment.

Of course, there are still dangers in the world: rampant arms proliferation, bitter regional conflicts, ethnic and nationalist tensions in many new democracies, severe environmental degradation the world over, and fanatics who seek to cripple the world's cities with terror.

The following actantial model shows the predominant narrative grammar in Clinton's discourse:

Image 4: Actantial model of Clinton's State of the Union addresses



As seen above, both Hansen's and Greimas' models confirm the focus on the domestic agenda. Only peripheral mention is made of foreign threats, since the discourse is dominated by domestic concerns such as growing public debt, unemployment, crime, high personal indebtedness, drug use, breakdown of the family unit, lack of security, etc. For Clinton, the nation has lost its way after the high spending of the 1980s. It is now up to the president and the Federal government to put the country back on track for the benefit of the families and children. In this sense, the return to prosperity and growth is directly linked to the expansion of democracy and free markets, which will assure more jobs and better social conditions domestically.

The 2000 election, won by George W. Bush under controversial circumstances, was marked by a strong polarization around moral values. Rhetorically, the 9/11 terrorist attacks

changed things overnight, prompting a marked shift in the discursive tone¹⁷. The discourse that became hegemonic following 9/11 was that states were no longer the threat, as they had been in the Cold War, and that a new enemy was at large: transnational terrorism, which had taken advantage of easy cross-border movements, more open societies, globalization and greater interconnectness and opportunities between nations¹⁸. This “new” threat is harder to identify and fight, and the U.S. had to react accordingly to fight a war against terror, where “[e]ither you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” (BUSH, 2001, n/a).

Indeed, 9/11 had given rise to a tidal wave of literature trying to understand the attacks on the US soil. Characteristic of this literature is the qualification of the attacks as part of a new chapter in the history of terrorism¹⁹. This is not to stress that the label “new” is inextricably linked to those specific events. The now widespread stress on the new character of terrorism might be due to the enormity of the shock and the damage experienced that day, both physically and emotionally. In fact, Copeland (2000, p. 22) argues that “the new terrorism is primarily a US policy frame”, a position also shared by Bruce Hoffmann, who argues that albeit “without precedent” in terms of causalities, 9/11 was meant that terrorism was a “perennial, ceaseless struggle” that has existed “for 2,000 years” (HOFFMAN, 2002, p. 304, 314)²⁰.

The word cloud depicted below indicates a break from Clinton: where domestic issues had been prioritized, emphasis was now on international affairs. This change can be seen in the predominance of terms like *terrorists*, *security*, *freedom*, *terror*, *Iraq*, *weapons*, *world*, *peace*, *protect*, *life*, and others. The only dominant term from the Clinton era to remain as a feature in Bush is “tax”, which can be attributed to the traditional GOP policy of tax cuts.

¹⁷ This does not mean that one should assume that terrorism after 9/11 was a new phenomenon with the power to debunk all the other threats on the agenda. Writing immediately after 9/11, Copeland (2001, p. 8, 19) argues that “although there are some important recent developments in terrorism, they primarily reflect older trends in terrorism which never really went away but which had been ignored or submerged during the height of political terrorism in 1970s and 80s”. Thus, there are clear “logical and empirical reasons for questioning a shift to the new paradigm of terrorism”.

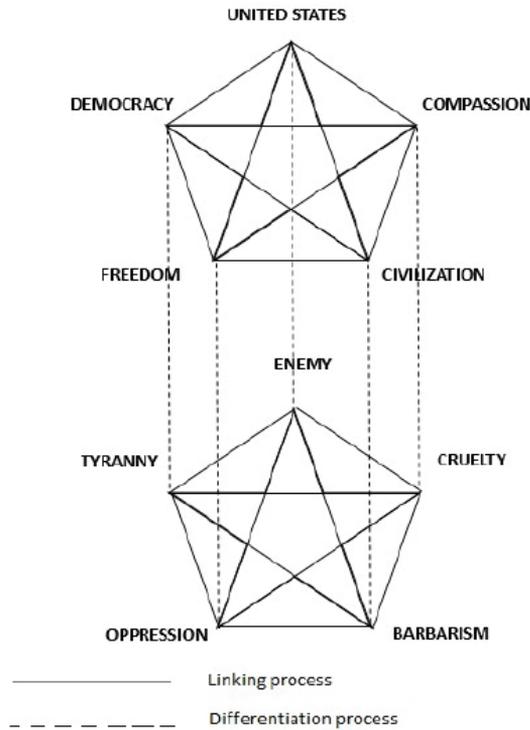
¹⁸ Neumann (2009) makes a credible case that globalization has been a facilitating factor in the transition to “new” terrorism.

¹⁹ According to Duyvesteyn (2004), from a historical perspective there are several reasons to be hesitant about the application of the label “new”. In fact, the label new has been used many times before; even at the beginning of the twentieth century with the advent of nationalist political violence this same label was used (LAQUEUR, 2001, p. 20). Notwithstanding, she argues that new terrorism is supposedly new because of its transnational component, its extremist aspirations, its spectacle demonstration of force, and its indiscriminate targeting of civilians.

²⁰ For a discussion on the impact of 9/11 and the War on Terror in U.S. foreign policy, see Crawford (2004), Litwak (2007), Owens (2008) and Jackson (2005). For a more historical perspective on terrorism in U.S. foreign policy, see Kaufman (2010).

This distinction was crucial for convincing his audience that his proposed goals were essential for the security of the United States. Bush did not just construct an enemy; he did so by offsetting it against all the traits he believed to be the most positive to his people – the ones receiving his message.

Image 7: Linking and differentiation in identity construction in W. Bush's State of the Union addresses



Good/evil is also characterized as friend/enemy, which means that allies are all those that share American values and understand the need for interventions to assure a better and more peaceful world. It is understood that these values are shared by all men and that is why they are “right”. Another recurring feature, which has very specifically to do with Bush's own personal, religious background, is the appropriation of a Christian compassion as inherent to the American people. It highlights the beneficent nature of the United States, even when mercy is enacted through military force.

Manichaeism is also expressed as a way of contrasting Americans against terrorists. Americans are depicted as compassionate people who pity all those who are not free and are not yet capable of forging their own future alone. Terrorists represent all that is evil in the world. Indeed, the term “terrorist” is broadened to include entire states and their leaders, so a terrorist can be seen as encapsulating everything that is considered a foe and/or capable of threatening the United States and its friends/allies. This is the key difference between

the “friendly” world of the Americans, encompassing its allies and countries it deems “democratic”, and the world of “oppression”, marked by contrasting values like tyranny and barbarism.

The analysis using Greimas’ model yielded the following results:

- Sender: History

History has called America and our allies to action, and it is both our responsibility and our privilege to fight freedom’s fight.

History has also issued its call to your generation.

- Subject: U.S.A., America, Americans

America has stood down enemies before and will do so this time.

The hour is coming when America will act, and you will make us proud.

We will rally the world to this cause by our efforts, by our courage. We will not tire, we will not falter and we will not fail.

We did not ask for this mission, but we will fulfill it.

We are reminded that we are citizens, with obligations to each other, to our country, and to history.

... we’ve been called to a unique role in human events.

In keeping with our heritage and principles, we do not use our strength to press for unilateral change.

The United States welcomes our responsibility to lead in this great mission.

- Object: the end of oppression as a solution for the Hegel’s dilemma of slave/master

... our way of life, our very freedom came under attack.

Tonight, we are a country awakened to danger and called to defend freedom.

... night fell on a different world, a world where freedom itself is under attack.

The advance of human freedom, the great achievement of our time and the great hope of every time,...

So long as training camps operate, so long as nations harbor terrorists, freedom is at risk.

No people on Earth yearn to be oppressed or aspire to servitude, or eagerly await the midnight knock of the secret police.

The great struggles of the twentieth century between liberty and totalitarianism ended with a decisive victory for the forces of freedom – and in a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise.

- Receiver: the world and humanity

They understand that if this terror goes unpunished, their own cities, their own citizens may be next.

This will be an age of liberty here and across the world.

We defend not only our precious freedoms, but also the freedom of people everywhere to live and raise their children free from fear.

America will lead by defending liberty and justice because they are right and true and unchanging for all people everywhere.

We will lift this dark threat from our country and from the world.

People everywhere want to be able to speak freely; choose who will govern them; worship as they please;...

These values of freedom are right and true for every person, in every society ...

- Helper: progress, civilization, allies, alliances, great powers, the nation-state and values, morals, and character of American society

America and our friends and allies join with all those who want peace and security in the world, and we stand together to win the war against terrorism.

The civilized world is rallying to America's side.

This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom.

Given the nature and reach of our enemies, we will win this conflict by the patient accumulation of successes, by meeting a series of challenges with determination and will and purpose.

In the months ahead, our patience will be one of our strengths, ...

Because the war on terror will require resolve and patience, it will also require form moral purpose.

Today the great powers are also increasingly united by common values, instead of divided by conflicting ideologies.

When the great powers share common values, we are better able to confront serious regional conflicts together, better able to cooperate in preventing the spread of violence or economic chaos.

- Opponent: terrorists, oppressors, dictators, tyrants, totalitarian regimes, extremists, regimes that support terrorists, etc.

Our enemy is a radical network of terrorists and every government that supports them.

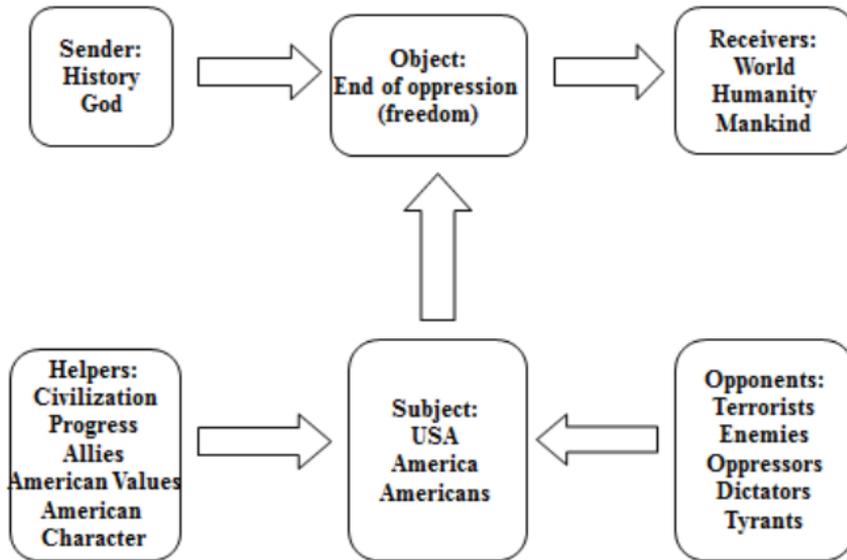
From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime.

If any government sponsors the outlaws and killers of innocents, they have become outlaws and murderers themselves.

States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world.

We will defend the peace by fighting terrorists and tyrants.

Based on the above data, we propose the following actantial model:

Image 8: Actantial model of W. Bush's State of the Union addresses

The election of Barack Obama in 2008 represented an attempt to give back to the people the idea that “yes, they could” (after his campaign slogan, “Yes, we can!”). It is not unlike the notion of American exceptionalism, in that it expresses the idea that they can do anything just because of who they are: America²¹. Obama repeatedly touched on these issues in his annual addresses, often highlighting the qualities of the American people, and stressing their capacity to overcome adversity. Interestingly, Barack Obama took office in the midst of a global financial crisis, which particularly affected the Global North. It is no surprise that the major focus of his speeches was the economy: the need to create jobs, get the economy back on track, boost productivity, and catch up with nations with high economic growth.

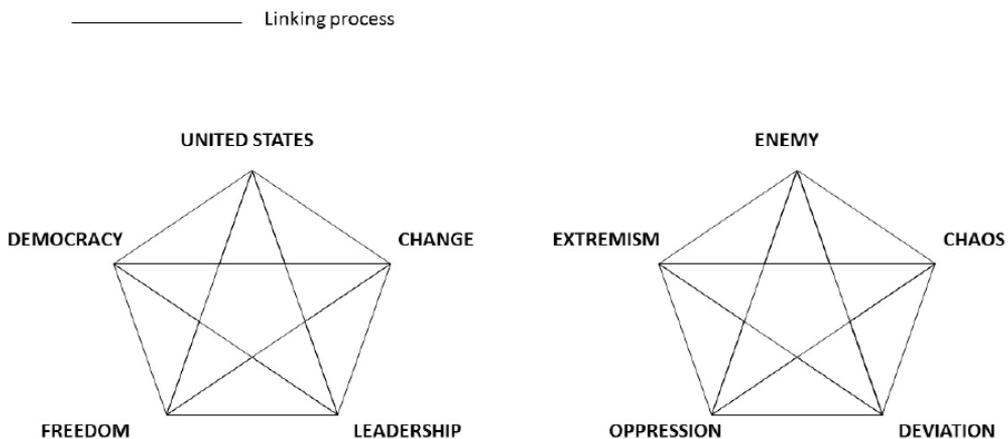
Despite the renewed focus on domestic and economic issues, our analysis indicates some interesting changes in the way foreign threats have been constituted. Although the discourse is still strongly self-referential – see the dominant articulation around the terms “America” and “American” – the focus on foreign threats declines, and certain domestic policy issues, such as jobs, growth, the economy, work, education, energy, and business, take their place. The discourse also suggests times of change and hope. The campaign slogan resonates into the following years, with the repeated use of words like “new” and “change”.

²¹ For a recent discussion on exceptionalism and other elements of American national identity, and its impact on foreign policy, see Resende (2012), Restad (2015) and Motta (2018).

Narratives on America's national identity – and its enemies – bear more similarities to the Clinton's rhetoric. “Democracy” and “freedom” are maintained as important signifiers for all the periods analyzed in this study because they represent core values and also have counterparts that can be changed while leaving the American identity little altered. While in Obama the aspect of change, novelty and the need to rebuild trust between Americans themselves and between them and other peoples has been prioritized. It is not just a matter of assuring order, pure and simple, but of setting parameters for its existence in a way that the place of the United States in this system is respected. For Obama, this is impossible without a change of attitude or at least a change in discourse.

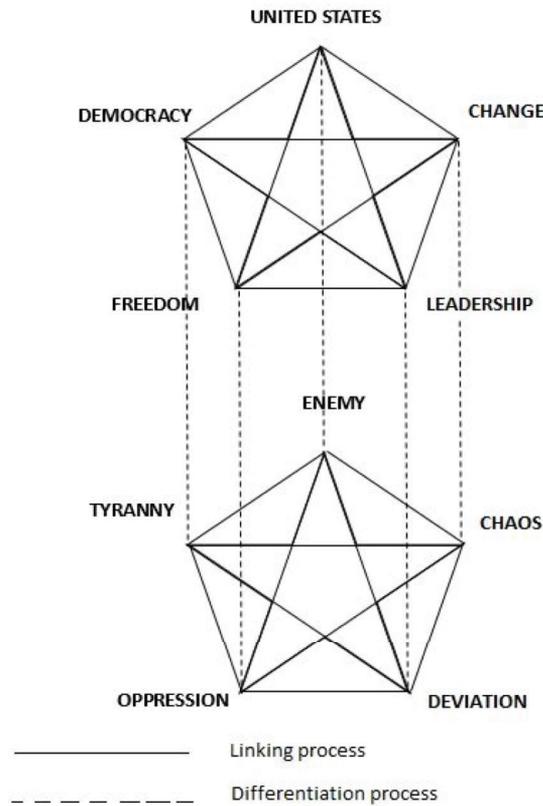
“Leadership” also remains in Obama's discourse because it has an essential link with change. In practice, the intrinsic message is “change to remain where you are”: in order to maintain the *status quo* it is necessary to rethink the position the country takes and the way its people see themselves and want to be seen.

Image 10: Linking in identity construction in Obama's State of the Union Addresses



As for the process of differentiation, there are parallels with Clinton, especially linking the idea of chaos to the 2008 financial crisis. Indeed, Obama's rhetoric focuses on the idea of controlling and stabilizing the markets and reestablishing levels of employment and income in the country, especially in the face of a crisis that vied with the 1929 crash for its size and severity. Like Clinton, Obama sees that America had deviated from its own values in the previous administration, and is now being known by its interventionist unilateralism. To Obama the international system – the same one that is flaunted by Iran, North Korea, and Syria – is based on international institutions, diplomatic negotiations, and respect for human rights.

Image 11: Linking and differentiation in threat and enemy identity construction in Obama's State of the Union Addresses



In the actantial model, the narrative and plot contain the following elements:

- Sender: History

History reminds us that at every moment of economic upheaval and transformation, this Nation has responded with bold action and big ideas.

Again, we are tested. And again, we must answer history's call.

We are instead called to move forward with the sense of confidence and candor that serious times demand.

Those of us gathered here tonight have been called to govern in extraordinary times...

- Subject: the United States of America, America and Americans, the president

We will rebuild, we will recover, and the United States of America will emerge stronger than before. What is required now is for this country to pull together, confront boldly the challenges we face, and take responsibility for our future once more.

...that day of reckoning has arrived, and the time to take charge of our future is here.

My job--our job is to solve the problem. Our job is to govern with a sense of responsibility.

America takes these actions because our destiny is connected to those beyond our shores.

- Object: the end of the crisis (economic, credit, employment, energy, war)

...the immediate steps we're taking to revive our economy in the short term.

...confidence will return and our economy will recover.

...to ensure that a crisis of this magnitude never happens again,...

My job, our job, is to solve the problem. Our job is to govern with a sense of responsibility.

As a candidate, I promised that I would end this war, and that is what I am doing as President.

This war is ending, and all of our troops are coming home.

- Receiver: families, community, young people and children, workers

It's not about helping banks; it's about helping people.

Because when credit is available again, that young family can finally buy a new home.

...and American families will see their retirement secured once more.

That is a promise we have to make to the children of America.

We were sent here to serve our citizens, not our ambitions.

Stronger families. Stronger communities. A stronger America.

- Helper: reforms, responsibility, investments, allies

I ask Congress to move quickly on legislation that will finally reform our outdated regulatory system.

So I ask this Congress to join me in doing whatever proves necessary,...

But the only way to fully restore America's economic strength is to make the long-term investments...

For we know that America cannot meet the threats of this century alone...

To meet the challenges of the 21st century--from terrorism to nuclear proliferation, from pandemic disease to cyber threats to crushing poverty--we will strengthen old alliances, forge new ones, and use all elements of our national power.

We're joined by allies and partners who have increased their own commitments...

In defense of freedom, we'll remain the anchor of strong alliances from the Americas to Africa, from Europe to Asia.

- Opponent: terrorists, enemies with nuclear weapons, cyberterrorists, etc.

Since the day I took office, we've renewed our focus on the terrorists who threaten our Nation.

...we're also confronting perhaps the greatest danger to the American people, the threat of nuclear weapons.

...those nations that insist on violating international agreements in pursuit of nuclear weapons.

Of course, as we speak, Al Qaida and their affiliates continue to plan attacks against us.

From Pakistan to Yemen, the Al Qaida operatives who remain are scrambling...

America is determined to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon.

America remains the one indispensable nation in world affairs, and as long as I'm President, I intend to keep it that way.

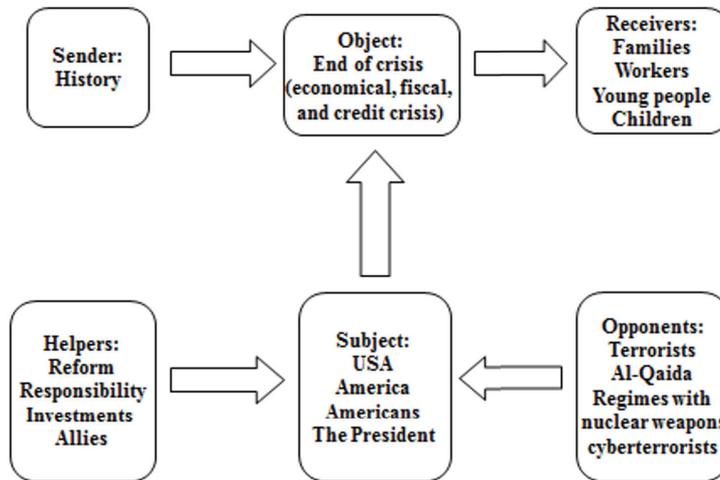
America will continue to lead the effort to prevent the spread of the world's most dangerous weapons.

America must also face the rapidly growing threat from cyber attacks.

We know foreign countries and companies swipe our corporate secrets. Now our enemies are also seeking the ability to sabotage our power grid, our financial institutions, our air traffic control systems.

Based on the above data, we propose the following actantial model:

Image 12: Actantial model of Obama's State of the Union Addresses



3. Concluding remarks

Encompassing 20 years, three presidencies, alternating between the GOP and the Democratic Party, our investigation of presidential speeches since the end of the Cold War, including the post-9/11 period, has identified a world trying to get a new footing, where meanings must again be anchored so to explain to the wider public the “new reality”. Clinton, Bush, and Obama were all keen to mark out their terms in office as exceptional and extraordinary, when the fate of humankind was dependent on how the United States operated in the world. Our research points to a very similar discursive pattern, showing continuity rather than rupture, notwithstanding 9/11 and the 2008 economic crisis.

Indeed, the pattern of presidential speeches at the State of Union tends to follow the same rationale and narrative. Some discursive shifts can be perceived, especially between Clinton and Bush, and later because of change in counterterrorism policy between Bush and Obama.

When we state that there is continuity, this does not mean that they follow a fixed narrative. Quite the contrary: we have shown that the categories of threat and enemies are fluid and crosscut with constructions from other historical periods. Presidents use existing “routes” to create discourses that are recognizable and acceptable, and which also allow for identification with meanings that are associated with the American culture and political language.

At the same time, we do not deny the importance of milestones like the end of the Cold War, the 2008 financial crisis, or even 9/11 itself. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize how these moments have been discursively constructed in order to create specific meanings in the political imaginary, especially the U.S. public, as the case here. Looking into the texts here analyzed one will recognize a clear division between established frameworks, as if the world had changed completely from then on, and American principles and values were therefore universal by default.

What distinguishes the pre- and post-9/11 is precisely the perception of threats and enemies. The construction of terrorism as being based on attacks against the United States, and thenceforth (re)written in other foreign policy topics, made it possible to direct meanings of threats against individuals, unlike the previous conflicts, when US involvement was justified by the need to maintain order, or perhaps for humanitarian reasons. If the discourse is different, it is because it is so flexible and adaptable, having the power to construct (new) meanings and reconstruct them to meet immediate needs and prevailing conceptions.

Yes, 9/11 made it easy to radicalize foreign threats as incarnations of evil on Earth – first bin Laden and later Saddam Hussein. “Chaos” and “deviation”, particularly relating to the ideas of order and discontinuity, give way to constructions that make “barbarism” (vs. “civilization”) and “cruelty” (vs. “compassion”) the focal points of the discourses. While chaos can be organized and deviations can be adjusted, barbarism and cruelty are presented as the character traits of irrational, malignant actors. In this rhetoric, the United States answers a divine calling to act against evil, and this is why it will not hesitate to take action when needed. The analysis of State of the Union addresses given by three U.S. presidents points to the fluidity of the categories of threat and enemies, as well as the self-referent quality of the State of the Union addresses, which articulate meanings of America and Americans under a constant and unparalleled threat but in constant change. Hence the permanent representation of current times as always times of crisis – be they economic, financial, fiscal, social, cultural or security crisis.

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