DIVIDING THE WORLD

Hero-Villain Security Narratives as Security Policy Tools

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ABSTRACT. The design and pursuit of security policy agendas requires identifying the sources of enmity and threat. But why do some narratives of enmity find resonance with audiences while others do not? This article draws upon narrative theory, political psychology, and communication theory to conceptualize how the way in which political agents ‘speak’ security matters. Specifically, I focus on security narratives that divide the world into a ‘civilized’ community of nations and an uncivilized, lawless ‘wild west’. Using the United States as an empirical reference point, I locate the pull of such hero-villain security narratives in their distinct three-fold stylistic pattern: (1) their particular rhythm keeps the audience hooked by leaving it in suspense over the victory of the hero; (2) their portrayal of the enemy as barbaric, even horrific, draws in the audience emotionally; and (3) their characterization of the protagonist as both principled and morally superior fosters audience-identification with the side of the hero. Because they are consequential rhetorical tools that drive the formulation and the legitimation of security policy agendas, I argue that security narratives demand greater attention in the broader field of international studies – beyond a focus on ‘linguistics’.

KEY WORDS: International Security; Political Psychology; Narrative Theory; Discourse; Emotion

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INTRODUCTION

Any rationale for waging and preparing wars relies on locating the sources of threat. Few narratives of enmity have been as popular and exhibited as much staying power in international security discourses as those which evoke a conception of the world as split between a ‘civilized’ community of nations governed by the rule of law and common values and an uncivilized, lawless, and ‘barbaric’ ‘wild west’ (Mgbeoji 2006; Miller 1983). US security policy, for example, has relied in a remarkably constant and homogenous fashion since the Founding on the discursive representation of America as the shining city upon the hill, the beacon of democracy, and the hope of the free world while its many different declared foes have been labelled as tyrannical and uncivilized outcasts of international society (e.g. Ivie 2005; 1999; 1980). Recently, many political leaders of the global north have also applied this terminology to characterize the threat of the Islamic State (IS or ISIS), pointing to their ‘horrible acts’ (Obama 2014) and labelling them as ‘barbaric killers’ (Cameron 2014).

The division of the international arena into two opposing spheres, at the level of policy and rhetoric, to convey understandings of security and enmity has long captured the attention of a diverse range of International Relations scholarship. This includes, for example, research on the normative foundations of international society (e.g. Rawls 1999; Reus-Smit 1997; Bull and Watson 1984; Manning 1962), the notion of a dyadic democratic peace (e.g. Müller 2004; MacMillan 2003; Owen 1994, 1997; Peceny 1997; Risse-Kappen 1995), the construction and expansion of ‘standards of civilization’ in international society (e.g. Bowden 2009; Suzuki 2009; Said 2003), and the constitutive effects of enemy construction on identity (e.g. Hansen 2006; Hopf 2002; Neumann 1999; Campbell 1998). Against the backdrop of several ‘discursive turns’ (Salter and Mutlu 2013) in the International Relations discipline over the past decade, the focus on how political agents ‘speak’ security has here become increasingly popular (e.g. McDonald 2008; Huysmans 2006; Williams 2003, 2011; Balzacz 2005; Buzan et al. 1998).

As the interest in what language ‘does’ in international politics has begun to move from the critical branches into the disciplinary mainstream, the application of the terminology of ‘narratives’, both as a research method and as an analytical focus, has enjoyed increasing popularity. The latter, which is this article’s primary concern, has included works on how states utilize ‘strategic narratives’ to shape international politics (e.g. Freedman 2015; Miskimmon et al. 2014; Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle 2011/12; 1 Methodologically, narrative approaches in International relations have become a popular research tool to zoom in on individual experiences and the way people tell their stories. They have begun to frequently utilize auto-ethnography and narrative writing, centring on the researchers subjective experience and the dynamics between the researcher as narrator or storyteller and the subject under investigation as well as problematizing the language of research (see for example Brigg and Bleiker 2010; Ruback 2010; Inayatullah 2010).
Kreps and Jackson 2007), the role of narrative in identity construction (e.g. Hønneland 2010; Campbell 1998), and interrogations of the narratives of the IR discipline itself (e.g. Linklater 2009; Suganami 2008), to name a few. Despite the rise of the narrative as a focal point of International Relations research, however, it has remained unclear how precisely narratives sit within the broader notion of discourse in international politics, what the textual ingredients and processes are that define the narrative genre, and how narratives impact upon policy practices. In short, International Relations scholarship tells us very little about how security narratives ‘work’, in particular at the level of social (inter)action.

The primary aim of this article is to outline an original analytical framework that can help us understand the appeal and staying power of security narratives that create perceptions of enmity and security through dualistic terminology. The article thereby contributes to international politics research that engages with the contextualisation of the practice of enemy construction through a focus on political culture (Katzenstein 1996; Hogan 1998; Widmaier 2007; Bigo and Tsoukala 2008) and on the language of difference (e.g. Butler 1995; Chilton 1996, Weldes 1999). Yet in order to conceptualize security narratives, the article moves beyond disciplinary boundaries and introduces insights from narrative theory, political psychology, and communication theory to the study of policy language in International Relations. As I argue, the framing of enmity that divides the world tends to rely upon portraying opposing sides in simple and dualistic terms to draw a firm moral line between friends and foes. Using US security rhetoric as empirical anchor, I locate the pull of such hero-villain security narratives in their distinct three-fold stylistic pattern: (1) their particular rhythm keeps the audience hooked by leaving it in suspense over the victory of the hero; (2) their portrayal of the enemy as barbaric, even horrific daws in the audience emotionally; and (3) their characterization of the protagonist as both principled and morally superior fosters audience-identification with the side of the hero.

The article is divided into four sections. The first section introduces ‘narrative essentials’ through a focus on the interactive processes of framing, following, and mapping that are integral to the narrative genre. The remaining three sections conceptualize the effectiveness of hero-villain security narratives structured around their core stylistic resources – dual-focus rhythm, emotion-appeal, and hero-attachment. The article locates the staying power and policy leverage in how they draw in audiences and suggests that hero-villain security narratives are consequential rhetorical tools that bypass the complexity of the real world with simple, stark divisions. Because they can drive the formulation and the legitimation of security policy agendas, I argue that security narratives in general demand greater attention in the study of international politics. The ability to tell a good story is a powerful thing.

Narrative Essentials
‘The world’s narratives are countless ... they are present regardless of time, place, and society; they began with the history of mankind’ (Barthes 1966: 1). The first paragraph of Roland Barthes’s introduction to the 1966 landmark special issue on the structure of narratives in the journal Communications points to the pervasiveness of narratives in everyday life. But what precisely is a narrative?

At a basic level, the narrative genre is concerned with a type of text delivered by a single speaker. What sets narratives apart from other communication in monologue form, such as argumentation, explanation, or description, is their capacity for meaning-making and sense-making: Whether we approach them from the perspective of literary theory, anthropology, history, or psychoanalysis, narratives are the core mechanism, carrier, and ingredient of creating meaning and constructing reality at the socio-cognitive level (Lazlo: 9). As Mayer (2014: 66, see also 71) put it, ‘By translating experience into the code of story – with plot, and character, and meaning – we make the unfamiliar familiar, the chaotic orderly, and the incomprehensible meaningful.’ Thus, while they are an important form of communication, they are also a mode of reasoning and a societal tool for ‘ongoing sense-making and structuring practical action [as well as] a vehicle for creating self identity’ (Mattingly; see detailed Bruner).

An analytical focus on narratives therefore acknowledges the centrality of language in constructing and symbolising experienced reality, including in the realm of politics, which involves influencing ‘how we think and feel about ourselves and others; about actions and conditions; about time, space, and causality; about illness and health; and about right and wrong’ (Capps and Ochs 1995, 53). In IR scholarship, a research interest in the intersection between narratives and international security dynamics is generally associated with discursive approaches, which likewise emphasize the productive power of language. Indeed, over the past two decades, works in this field have made the robust case that narratives of enmity should not be understood as a mere representation of an objective threatening reality but as a discursive practice in which threats are constituted through language (Doty 1993: 302) that is intertwined with ‘the process of identity formation and even the constitution of subjectivity (Hansen 1997: 376).

We nevertheless find a multiplicity of applications of the narrative terminology in International Relations, often with little explanation of the meaning of the term itself or how a focus on the narrative genre may help to better understand security dynamics. Ronald Kreps’s (2015) article is a welcome exception to the reluctance of IR scholarship to analytically pin down the concept of the political narrative. Specifically, he elaborates on essential narrative ingredients, such as plot, tension, and characters, and is able to illustrate how modes of rhetorical expression can shape national security policy. Like well-known works from literary theorists on narratives, such as Labov and Waletzky (1967, 1997), Prince (1982), and Ricoeur (1984-88), Kreps also points to the selective integration of at least two events that are temporally brought into a meaningful, ‘causal’
relationship (sequence) as a core marker of security narratives (Kreps 2015: 137; see also Richardson 2000: 169-70). This appears to put the notion of the event ontologically prior to the security narrative. Yet while narratives certainly require some temporal structure, the raw material of external events more accurately needs to be transformed by political agents into security episodes, with particular symbolic meanings and policy priorities attached to them. As (Laszlo 2008: 12) highlights, ‘Narrative always creates its own reality’ and this holds for political narratives, including those centered on enmity and threat.

Security narratives neither merely ‘exist’ nor do they materialize organically. They are constituted through a narrator’s activity, and they rely upon both a mapping language, which provides necessary reference points to understanding and interpreting the story, and those who recognize and engage with the narrative. Security narratives thus materialize through the interaction between the text\(^3\), the narrator, and the audience. At the heart of this dynamic and relational process lay the narrational practices of framing, following, and mapping.

The act of following of – or zooming in on – a particular character by a storyteller activates both the character and the narrator as the core constitutive elements of a narrative (Altman 2008: 15-7). In this sense, a security narrative is ‘a story that is ... conveyed to recipients, and this telling requires a medium ... an agent technically known as the narrator’, who also orders the different narrational elements such as time, location, and actors into a story centred on the main character(s) (Bal 2009: 9, original emphasis removed). Through the act of framing, the narrator delimits and systematizes the chaotic raw material of a story to make it legible and recognizable as part of the narrative text, in particular providing it with a beginning and an end and transforming series of events into a narrative (Altman 2008: 18). This underscores that a security narrative, as a genre and type of text, cannot exist independently from a narrator’s activity and, in turn, that the characters, actions, and (perceived as non-randomly connected) events integral to its story are a core marker of narrational activity.

Finally, a security narrative, while distinct from other stories within and outside the security realm, also puts the characters and their traits as well as the actions, events, and places it into context. This process of mapping conveys narrative meaning through enabling the discovery of connections between different parts of the text itself as well as other texts, occasions, and experiences on the one hand and an audience that recognizes and drives the narrative on the other. At the cognitive level, mapping in narrative construction transforms unfamiliar material into familiar situations (Altman 2008: 294, 311). It relies heavily on the use of ‘cover terms’ – semantic units, which bind can bind together disparate clusters of ideas, objects, behaviours, concepts, and relationships and

\(^3\) Text is here broadly conceived as a performative semantic unit of meaning, medium of expression and communication, and manifestation of discourse (Halliday and Hasan 1976: 1-2; 1985: 10; Kress 1985; Hatim and Mason 1990: 153-8).
presents them within a familiar code (Spradley 1980: 100;  Green 1982, Ch.4;  Sovel 1978: 129). Albeit reductive, such mapping language is central in the narrative production of meaning and sensemaking because it helps identify commonalities between dissimilar objects and similarities where none would exist without the cover terms contained in the narrative (Altman 2008: 295, 298).

With the growing maturity of a security narrative, here defined as the increasing visibility and popularity of a specific story within and beyond a particular audience, processes of framing, following, and mapping tend to require less effort on part of the narrator and audience. This is because both are more likely to align newly narrated material with the components the narrative already contains to evaluate the security environment. This suggests that the potential for ‘narrative path dependence’ or ‘narrative legacy effects’ over time may be significant.

The security ‘narrative system’ (Bal 2009: 3-4) is characterized by four main components: (1) an identification of the agent of a threat; (2) a definition of what actions or events constitute a threat; (3) a moral evaluation of the agent of a threat and their actions; and (4) a prescription of the means for countering the threat. The precise combination as well as the prominence of these elements tends to fluctuate within and between narratives. Importantly, the arrangement of what specific elements a security narrative contains and how these are presented “colours” the story with subjectivity (Bal 2009: 8). As Kreps (2015: 138) has recently underscored – utilizing Kenneth Burke’s dramatic ‘pentad’ as a framework to identify central features of security narratives – depending on the what precisely they put the spotlight on, security narratives can plot the world very differently.

Overall, then, security narratives enable individuals to make sense of the security environment by tying together disparate concepts and experiences as well as events, actors, and audiences of what is recognized as a threat and what is deemed an appropriate response (Fillmore 1982: 111; Gamson and Lasch 1983; Altman 2008: 18; Rein and Schoen 1993: 151). Yet as the above suggests, the selection of which elements and events they contain and how these are presented “colours” the story with subjectivity (Bal 2009: 8) and is replete of a narrator’s activity. While security narratives are, to a large degree, self-referential interpretative packages, they should thus be understood as ‘multidimensional purposive communication’ that imbues events and experiences with a particular meaning (Phelan and Rabinowitz 2012: 3, see also Phelan 2008). Security narratives are, in short, ‘an exercise in “world-making”’(Funkenstein 1992: 79).

The Style and Pull of Hero-Villain Security Narratives
Security narratives are the cogs in the wheel of a security discourse. They are sets of multiple overlapping and interconnected stories that establish a discursive connection between a country’s national interests, the identification of specific security threats to these interests, and how potential risks to the broader international environment are understood and addressed. Because of the role played by the stories of security in sense-and meaning-making processes about, and in extension their capacity to set the boundaries of political possibility, political agents have long understood the significance of creating and controlling the narrative. To paraphrase Alasdair MacIntyre (1981: 201) political agents recognize that in both their actions and practice they are to a large extent story-telling animals.

Political agents are also aware that political speeches, in particular those that are epideictic-leaning, such as calls to arms and legitimations of a country’s position towards a named enemy, are a primary vehicle for security narratives to emerge through and find expression in. In a letter to President Franklyn Delano Roosevelt, Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter (1941: 1), for example, recounts the purpose of an upcoming speech by the US President. Describing presidential leadership as a ‘task of education done on a vast scale’, he suggests that the American ‘must have their convictions renewed and incontestably established’, and that the key to reach their minds is the ‘repetition and concreteness’ of the story. The story that Frankfurter talked about was, of course, that Hitler was not only an ‘immediate menace’ to Europe alone but also to everything the US cherished and stood for; that an intervention was necessary in order to preserve America itself (ibid).

Frankfurter’s letter points explicitly to the importance of tapping into and reaffirming existing societal values as well as to the necessity of reiterating the story for it to stick. This, in turn, suggests that not all security narratives ‘work’ at the macro- and micro-level of social interaction. Indeed, few stories of enmity and threat enjoy a long shelf life and instead tend to wane from the public sphere with a rhetoric reinterpretation of the security environment. One type of security narratives, however, has been a persistent feature in the US since the original Thirteen Colonies revolted against the British Crown: hero-villain security narratives. Deeply ingrained in America’s political culture, they rely on a core set of narrative building blocks, including the narrator’s following of two antithetical sides, a dualistic terminology that fosters identification with the side portrayed as heroic, and a mapping language that triggers emotional responses against adversaries.

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4 A security discourse can be understood as a series of practices and representations that produce and reproduce specific meanings of security, vulnerability, and threat, and which thereby delineates the field of political and ethical possibility within which security policy can take place (see Milliken 1999; Bialasiewicz et al. 2007: 406; Butler, 1995: 138; Weldes et al 1999: 16-17).

5 Political speechwriting is a complex process that involves input from a range of political agents and the performance of their delivery also varies significantly, both of which impacts upon the audiences’ ability to make sense of and support the narrative they contain.
The Seductive Rhythm of Tragedy and Triumph

One of the most prominent recurring features of security narratives is their organisation around dichotomies that separate the heroes of the story from its villains. In these dual-focus stories, the narrator’s following activity does not zoom in on a single character. Rather, it alternates between two clearly identifiable opposing groups. We find the echo of such hero-villain security narratives in labels like the industrialized ‘North’ versus the underdeveloped ‘South’, the homogenizing symbolism implied by the ‘bipolar’ struggle between the capitalist ‘West’ versus the communist ‘East’ during the Cold War, and the ‘with us or with the terrorists’ logic of the War on Terror during the George W. Bush Presidency.

What makes this type of security narrative so popular is that its plot – the sequence of causally related events from the story’s beginning to its resolution – oscillates between tragedy and triumph for the side of the protagonist. It often begins with an affirmation of societal values and progress, but then plunges downward from good to bad, giving the enemy the edge, but the prospect of a turning tide is kept alive. The narrative plot is set and kept in motion by first tilting the balance between the two opposing sides toward the side of non-alignment, enmity, and threat. It then continues to eschew a lasting resolution of the conflict between the opposing sides (Altman 2008: 79-80). This narrative structure keeps the audience hooked and captivated by the story.

Throughout American history since the Founding, political speeches that are centered on calls to arms and security policy legitimations have relied heavily on the seductive rhythm of tragedy and triumph. Take Samuel Adam’s passionate speech on the American Independence before the Continental Congress at the State House in Philadelphia on 1 August 1776, for example. He begins by calling attention to a surprising set of achievements of the Settlers and weds these with a common goal. ‘We are now on this continent, to the astonishment of the world three millions of souls united in one cause’, Adams declares. ‘We have large armies… our success has staggered our enemies’. After opening his remarks with a positive state of affairs, he shifts the spotlight on the infamous ‘political Sodom’, which the Settlers had fled and explains that the revolutionaries ‘cannot suppose that our opposition has made a corrupt and dissipated nation [the British Empire] more friendly to America, or created in them a greater respect for the rights of mankind.’ But Adams does not linger there for long and instead intertwines his story about the ‘adversaries are composed of wretches’ with the Colonies’ sacrifices for the ‘justice of their cause’, switching the narrative focus between the opposing sides. Rather than with a clear conviction of victory in the war against the British, Adams concludes with an expressing a wish ‘that these American States may never cease to be free and independent’ as a scenario of the future.
The application of the dual-focus style is not limited to narratives of enmity about adversaries situated outside the territorial boundaries of the United States. Take Union Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain’s off the cuff ‘Little Round Top’ speech on 2 July 1963, for example. It was delivered at the height of the American Civil War – the addressees were a large number of deserters he needed to his 20th Main Regiment – and the chain of events that followed the speech is considered to have played a vital role in winning a core battle and securing the North’s victory. Chamberlain eases into the speech by jokingly telling the deserting soldiers that although he was allowed to, he would not shoot them if they didn’t participate in the upcoming battle against the ‘Whole Reb army [which] is up that road away waiting for us.’ He reminds them of how they all got here, how many men they lost along the way, and importantly of how the army of the North is different to most armies in history, because ‘We are an army out to set other men free’.

Alongside the repeated use of ‘we’, this serves to establish a strong bond between the war aims and the choice faced by the deserters. Without naming the South, Chamberlain then switches the narrative focus toward the enemy, drawing attention to its opposed values. ‘America should be free ground, all of it,’ he notes, ‘not divided by a line between slave states and free’. And he clarifies that the deserters’ choice is key to which side will win the war at a moment where the enemy’s victory seems a likely outcome. ‘Gentlemen, I think if we lose this fight we lose the war’, Chamberlain concludes’, so if you choose to join us I will be personally very grateful’.

US President Harry S. Truman’s 1949 longer inaugural address is another case in point for the dual-focus narrative style – here with respect to a threat from the international environment. It helps to illustrate the rhythm at work in some more depth. ‘Today marks the beginning not only of a new administration’, he observes, ‘but of a period that will be eventful, perhaps decisive, for us and for the world.’ Truman sets the scene by creating a rather unsettled picture of the present. From the outset of his story, he sows doubts over America’s fate in the unfolding history while placing its actions at the heart of US destiny. ‘It may be our lot’, he notes, ‘to experience, and in a large measure bring about, a major turning point in the long history of the human race.’ This creates the momentum to carry the audience forward to an affirmation of core values, both timeless and shared across society, to make this story as much a collective one as one that each spectator can relate to. Then, suddenly, the initial state of affairs is disrupted, a reversal of America’s fortune looms. ‘In the pursuit of these aims’, Truman warns, ‘the United States and other like-minded nations find themselves directly opposed by a regime with contrary aims and a totally different concept of life… That false philosophy is communism.’ Here, the 33rd US President reaches the centre of his plot, which from now on moves the focus constantly between the protagonist and antagonist of the story, between (American) democracy and communism. Truman does not fully resolve the tension between the two sides at the end of his speech. Rather, he raises the hope that the right side will win: ‘we
will advance toward a world where man's freedom is secure... With God's help, the future of mankind will be assured in a world of justice, harmony, and peace.'

These historic examples of US political speeches highlight that the main textual feature of dual-focus security narratives is a comparative parallelism that portrays the two antithetical sides in competition with each other – and through relatively static spatial structures – while also sidelining the temporal flow (see detailed Altman 2008: 55-58). America is the story’s protagonist in shining armor and the enemy of the time is the diametrically opposed antagonist. As the following suggests, hero-villain security narratives also rely heavily on a very particular mapping language that reflects the dual focus of the story.

_Siding with the Hero: The Utility of Dualistic Terminology_

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