

## **Thinking the Unthinkable About National Security Narratives**

National security elites and policymakers in the United States strategically construct narratives to identify threats, to advocate particular policy actions in response to those threats, and to maintain support for selected policy options. The paper aims to demonstrate that security elites have the motive, means, and opportunity to distort these narratives. The individuals serving in policy roles have access to secret information unavailable to others and direct access to considerable material resources, helping to establish a “large authority advantage in debate with anyone else” (Kaufmann 2004: 41). Moreover, a large volume of empirical evidence produced by scholars and journalists suggests that security elites frequently employ dubious analogies and exaggerate threats and U.S. policy successes for reasons other than narrow national security interests. The paper then discusses the potential damage to democracy caused by reliance upon distorted or inappropriate narratives. Finally, the conclusion briefly addresses whether the public sphere is a viable mechanism for promoting more open and inclusive discussion of national security stories.

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# Thinking the Unthinkable About National Security Narratives

“The management of foreign relations appears to be the most susceptible of abuse, of all the trusts committed to a Government, because they can be concealed or disclosed, or disclosed in such parts & at such times as will best suit particular views; and because the body of the people are less capable of judging & are more under the influence of prejudices, on that branch of their affairs, than of any other.”

—**James Madison**, letter to Thomas Jefferson, May 13, 1798. *The James Madison Papers*, 1723 to 1859: Series 1, *General Correspondence, 1723 to 1859*. Library of Congress.  
<http://www.loc.gov/item/mjm013484>

Many international relations scholars have recently taken a “narrative turn,” studying the stories employed to explain or simplify complex ideas and policies.<sup>1</sup> Researchers, for example, examine the social power of narratives to “authorize, enable, and justify specific practices and policies...while precluding others” (Autesserre 2012: 207). Scholars also explain the policy value of strategic narratives, stories created purposefully by state officials to influence various target audiences about foreign policy and/or security policy (Antoniades, Miskimmon, and O’Loughlin 2010). In this paper, I am particularly interested in strategically constructed narratives employed by national security elites and policymakers in the United States to identify threats, to advocate particular policy actions in response to those threats, and to maintain support for selected policy options. When seeking those purposes, executive branch security elites and policymakers have substantial advantages over other participants in policy debates. The individuals serving in these roles have access to secret information unavailable to others, for instance, and direct access to considerable material resources, helping to establish a “large authority advantage in debate with anyone else” (Kaufmann 2004: 41). A large volume of empirical evidence produced by scholars and journalists suggests that security elites frequently

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<sup>1</sup> In broader terms, the field of public policy took an overtly narrative turn some years ago. More recently, policy scholars have asked important questions about the empirical analysis of narratives and the potential strategic utility of narratives (Jones and McBeth 2010).

employ dubious analogies and exaggerate threats and U.S. policy successes in order to “sell” and maintain support for weapons systems, military interventions, and even wars, which may be favored for reasons other than narrow national security interests. Unfortunately, empirical evidence revealing these deceptions and distortions is not typically made public until months, years, or even decades after the narratives are employed.

The promotion and prosecution of the most recent Iraq war brought some of these issues into the wider public debate. A significant number of critics in government or the larger policy world, in the media, in academia, and even among the general public, eventually acknowledged that threats attributed to Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) or connections to al Qaeda were overstated by prominent members of the George W. Bush administration in 2002 and 2003, including by the President. Yet, the socially sustainable narrative about Iraq, in retrospect, blames weak intelligence information (Jervis 2010: 124) and claims that mistakes about the evidence were both bipartisan and multinational. If accepted, the standard account effectively absolves American policymakers of any intentional malfeasance. It is apparently almost unthinkable to imagine that leaders of the U.S. intentionally manipulated Iraq threat narratives to sell a costly and deadly war that they favored despite the absence of WMD or terrorism threats cited to justify the war.<sup>2</sup>

With this paper, I intend to think the unthinkable about Iraq and other national security narratives. This does not mean that the paper will work to identify otherwise hidden political or economic motives for policymaker action. Rather, the paper aims to demonstrate that security elites had the motive, means, and opportunity to distort national security narratives. The paper

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<sup>2</sup> See Cramer and Thrall (2013: 2) who argue that many academics postulate explanations for the Iraq war that they do “not raise publicly for fear of damaging their professional reputations and being labeled conspiracy theorists.” The lack of expert debate about alternative explanations for war, argue Cramer and Thrall (2013: 7) contributes to the general public’s long-lasting embrace of Bush administration’s justifications for war (WMD and terrorism).

additionally highlights some egregiously deceptive narratives and considers the implications for democratic decision-making about national security policy. The first section below overviews the importance of strategic narratives and explains why executive branch elites are particularly privileged when constructing stories about national security. I also explain why these advantages produce dangerous incentives for elites to deceive the public about national security. I specifically address the liberal institutionalist claim that the marketplace of ideas will mostly reveal and deter deception. I also consider the Copenhagen School's position that elites can "securitize" issues to their political advantage. Next, the second section briefly surveys a reasonable body of empirical evidence to demonstrate that many important national security narratives were quite deceptive at the time they were employed. These narratives were crafted to identify threats, to advocate particular policy actions in response to those threats, and to maintain support for selected policy options. I outline the use of various kinds of deception, including the reference to inappropriate or inaccurate analogies and the inflation of threats, which academic realists often call fearmongering. The brief survey suggests that U.S. national security narratives have repeatedly featured elite distortions and deceptions, from the cold war through the war on terror. In the third section, I briefly discuss the implications of the analysis and evidence offered in this paper. Unfortunately, repeated employment of deceptive narratives arguably poses a significant threat to democratic governance of national security policy. Finally, in the conclusion I speculate about how national security narratives might be made more accountable to democratic politics. The solution may well seem radically unthinkable to national security policymakers and elites.

### **Strategic Narratives and Deception**

The field of security studies is increasingly interested in narratives, including those pertaining to the origins of war or the utility of nonviolent alternatives to war (Kuusisto 2009; Suganami 1997; Suganami 2008). The literature reveals that security narratives are commonly employed to justify, enable, or legitimize security ideas and policies, though they are sometimes invoked to critique the favored ideas and policies of political opponents or to delegitimize them. Policy elites utilize narratives as they do other tools of statecraft to advance national security goals (Antoniades, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin 2010). Such narratives are strategically designed and employed to develop “a shared meaning of international politics, and to shape the perceptions, beliefs, and behaviour of domestic and international actors” (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2012: 1). The scholarly literature includes interesting work on a number of issue narratives very high on the contemporary security agenda – revealing, for example, how and why so-called rogue states came to be demonized after the cold war ended (Homolar 2011), discussing the development of the fear of “cyberwar” and biological terrorism in the 1990s (Lipschutz 1999), considering the strength of the “war on terror” narrative after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon (Krebs and Lobasz 2007), and analyzing the different types of narratives employed to sell or contest the recent Iraq war (Ringmar 2006).

In addition to the recent academic work, contemporary foreign and security policy elites frequently confirm the value they place on well-crafted narratives. American leaders, for instance, often explain that the terrorists, militants, and insurgents who serve as the enemy in the so-called “war on terror” themselves develop narratives strategically to build support. Thus, various American officials have specially attempted to challenge the narratives employed by Afghan insurgents, Iranian-backed militants, and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)

(see Nagl et al 2008; White House, March 10, 2011; White House 2014; and White House 2015). Moreover, prominent security policy actors and scholars openly reference the need for the U.S. to develop convincing strategic narratives. For instance, Anne-Marie Slaughter (2011: 2), who served as Director of Policy Planning in the Obama administration's State Department from 2009-2011, recently emphasized the domestic political need for a compelling national story: "The United States needs a national strategic narrative.... We need a story with a beginning, middle, and projected happy ending that will transcend our political divisions, orient us as a nation, and give us both a common direction and the confidence and commitment to get to our destination." Scholar and occasional policymaker Joseph Nye (2010: 12) emphasizes the global benefit of a persuasive narrative. After all, he argues that the U.S. "cannot achieve the outcomes it wants without the help of others" and therefore it must develop "'smart power' strategies" that use the "soft-power resources" of "an information age." Put simply, as Nye writes (2010: 11): "It is time for a new narrative about the future of U.S. power." Security elites such as Slaughter and Nye recognize the value of well-crafted narratives to assure public and legislative support for policies or practices, to entice other states or global actors into alliances and partnerships, and to provide notice to potential foes about firm commitments and obligations. Moreover, when a foe like ISIL creates an effective narrative, security elites identify the need to challenge and undercut the narrative and likewise acknowledge the difficulty inherent in that project.

These policymakers do not grapple with some significant problems for democracy endemic to strategically crafted narratives about national security. Specifically, policy elites appear to have the motive, means, and opportunity to offer greatly distorted national security narratives. While motive is perhaps the most difficult aspect of deception to demonstrate, national security elites almost certainly face a tempting moral hazard. Policymakers and public

officials arguably have perverse incentives to misrepresent their own intentions. Among the various possible incentives, successful threat inflation (or perhaps “securitization”) may result in increased, but wasteful, defense spending, or the use of military force in a situation that does not in any reasonable way qualify as a war of necessity. Yet, both increased military spending and newly initiated wars are likely to increase leaders’ political popularity and power, at least in the short term, even as they pose significant costs to the state and society. Increased popularity and political power might be the desired endpoints of particular elites near the top of a presidential administration. Military spending creates a form of pork-barrel politics that can be used to redirect a portion of a nation’s tax revenues selectively to benefit favored constituents, corporate supporters, consultants, or interest groups. Political science research demonstrates that this can have electoral benefits (Nincic and Cusack 1979; Mayer 1992). Likewise, the use of force typically creates a “rally ‘round the flag” effect that increases presidential popularity (Mueller 1970). The rally effect is strongest when accompanied by White House statements defining the crisis (Baker and Oneal 2001) – an apparently important act of securitization. Higher presidential popularity ratings, of course, can bolster an administration’s political power, thereby enhancing the likelihood of achieving goals on a broader political agenda, and increasing the chance of reelection. While he points to multiple possible causes, Jeffrey Kubiak’s (2014: 159) book on war narratives concludes that “the discourse over what are commonly called wars of choice, creates powerful incentives to oversell the war. Overselling war has become almost inherent in the American post-World War II war narratives.”

As for means and opportunity, the elites who construct the state’s security narratives have enormous political advantages that can tempt them to act selfishly and relatively free from external scrutiny. Effectively, elites may be able to silence or overwhelm potential critics even as

they shape the public impression of threats and needed policy responses. Security elites are in a superior political position relative to active and latent domestic political opponents, which seemingly allows them to inflate threats, securitize issues, suppress conflicting information, advocate for militarism, and embellish favorable accounts of ongoing policy. All too often, powerful U.S. government figures at the center of the national security state can tell security stories without significant challenge from domestic or global political actors, largely thanks to the secrecy inherent in security politics, the elites' presumed authority, and their access to significant material resources (Kaufmann 2004).

Among international relations theorists, realists maintain that states are not distinguished from one another by political regime type. In turn, realists argue that leaders of democratic states can deceive their publics fairly easily if necessary to garner support for policy. Essentially, democratic leaders have the same freedom to act that autocratic leaders enjoy. Hans Morgenthau (1985: 168) wrote, for example, that government is the “leader and not the slave of public opinion...public opinion is not a static thing to be discovered and classified by public-opinion polls as plants are by botanists...it is a dynamic, ever changing entity to be continuously created and recreated by informed and responsible leadership.” John Mearsheimer (2011) argues that security elites in democratic states can readily engage in what he calls “fearmongering” precisely because the public generally trusts its leaders. In fact, Mearsheimer (2011: 102) warns that “the leaders who are most likely to lie to their publics are those who head democracies bent on fighting wars of choice in distant places.”<sup>3</sup> He claims that leaders of democratic states are more likely to lie about the justification for war simply because they are more beholden to public opinion than are leaders of autocracies. The latter don't need to garner public support for policy.

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<sup>3</sup> According to Mearsheimer (2011: 102), “That description obviously fits the United States.”

The public is prone to believe them because they trust the authority of the leader. Wars of choice rather than wars of necessity require more lying and fearmongering because leaders must exaggerate threats in order to convince the public that a war is necessary.

Generally, liberal institutionalist scholars are skeptical about the possibility of threat inflation and other elite distortions of public debate – potentially including securitization. They argue that it is certainly not easy for democratic leaders to deceive their publics given various systemic checks and balances. The political costs of failure will reliably deter attempts at deception. Reiter (2012: 601-602) specifically points to three liberal institutions that likely assure exposure of falsehoods and provide other democratic checks: domestic political opponents, a professionalized military, and the openness of society featuring free speech and a free press. Altogether, these elements help constitute a marketplace of ideas, where “governmental and non-governmental elites advance arguments about the benefits of policies and commit themselves to these policies in order to gain political support” (Snyder and Ballentine 1996: 12). Thrall (2007) argues that the marketplace of ideas in the U.S. acts more like a “marketplace of values,” which does not operate much like a rational truth-seeking entity. Nonetheless, Thrall agrees with Reiter that threat inflation is bound to fail because of the highly contested nature of politics in the U.S. A robust marketplace assures substantial political elite opposition to any attempt at threat inflation and the existence of a sympathetic audience among a sizeable number of the general public. The mass media can be counted upon to report elite competition, which will send sufficient cues to the relevant audiences (see also Druckman 2004). Finally, Krebs (2005: 202) argues that even when the marketplace of ideas fails to prevent a war brought on by elite deception, a democratic system is self-correcting – political opponents will eventually find their voice and provide convincing criticism of policy.

Realists explicitly contend that the marketplace of ideas can fail and did fail catastrophically in the case of the buildup to war against Iraq in 2002 and 2003 (Kaufmann 2004). In that instance, the executive branch wielded a tremendous authority advantage over its political foes, controlled the relevant intelligence information about the alleged threat, and faced weak political opposition that also muted the power of the press. Political communication scholars who study the media have found that it is not always an effective check on executive power, often because elite competition is lacking on foreign and security policy issues. Moreover, mass media outlets rely upon official government sources for information and often fail to challenge those sources even when they possess the evidence and/or opportunity to do so. Bennett (1990) theorized that journalists "index" their news coverage to the range of opinion within the government. Indexing occurs when the range of views shown in news content is determined by the degree of institutional conflict. The implication of indexing is clear – when internal dissent is lacking, particularly to views of the executive branch, press reports will reflect one-sided coverage of a foreign policy topic and the government's favored narrative will dominate discussion. An empirical study of press coverage of dozens of foreign policy crises from 1945 through the end of the cold war (Zaller and Chiu 2000: 61) found "strong evidence" of an indexing effect. In a more recent study, Bennett et al (2007: 9, 36 and 16) identify the effects of indexing in terms of press coverage of the George W. Bush administration. Using case studies of the reporting on the September 11 attacks, the buildup to war with Iraq, and the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, these scholars find that the press accepted a "self-imposed dependence on officially sanctioned information," which resulted in their tendency "to record rather than critically examine the official pronouncements of government." Moreover, "the absence of credible and potentially decisive opposition from inside government itself leaves the mainstream

press generally unable to build and sustain counter-stories.” In the case of the buildup to the Iraq war, this meant that the press essentially ignored sources and “evidence outside official Washington” that might have effectively challenged the administration’s preferred narratives about WMD and an alleged Iraqi link to al Qaeda.

Additional interesting research on the self-limiting behavior of mass media was recently published by sociologist Steven Clayman (2007: 37) and colleagues. This work, which examined presidential press conference questioning from the Eisenhower through Clinton administrations, found that the press is far more deferential in asking questions about foreign policy than about other issues. For at least 50 years, they conclude, “White House journalists have been more cautious and deferential in the foreign news arena, and their relative cautiousness has remained substantially unchanged through periods of war and peace, recession and prosperity.”<sup>4</sup> The authors speculate that the reluctance to challenge the President might result from the media’s limited access to independent information on foreign affairs, or their patriotism may induce self-restraint. This last point is consistent with Cramer’s (2007) findings about media’s historical deference, which she says originated during the cold war.

In any case, even the liberal scholars who defend the marketplace of ideas concede that it is not a perfect system and that elites can sometimes successfully distort threats in an anti-democratic fashion. The risk of deception is certainly not zero. Reiter (2012: 622) states bluntly that “the liberal marketplace of ideas is not an infallible truth machine.” He notes, for example, that the Gulf of Tonkin incident used to justify American entry into the Vietnam War was provoked by the U.S. and then mischaracterized in the public positions of President Lyndon Johnson and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara. Political opponents in Congress were unable

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<sup>4</sup> The scholars studied more than 4600 press conference questions from 1953-2000. They have been updating their data to account for the post-2000 era.

to stop the war, making this a “clear case of democratic deception to open the door to war” (Reiter 2012: 604).

Thrall notes pragmatically that it is best to assume that at least some elites will attempt to deceive the public at any given time. He relies upon the media’s coverage of elite competition to prevent deception, not the good behavior of all elites. Thus, he also argues that the marketplace of ideas is most likely to fail to stop attempted deception in the form of threat inflation when elites do not compete with one another. This might occur, he writes, when nationalist rhetoric is able to draw upon unity inspired by deep-seated American cultural myths. Again, this position seems fairly consistent with Cramer’s (2007) argument that the marketplace failed to stop the recent Iraq war because political opponents and journalists embraced longstanding militarized norms of patriotism and deferred to the statements emanating from the executive branch. While Thrall’s views about the need for elite competition and media coverage seemingly offer a promising means by which to restrain deception, his discussion of nationalist appeals to cultural myths offers counterexamples that raise questions about whether elite competition is actually reflected in the status quo. Thrall (2007: 487) notes: “Many have argued that the Cold War provides a long running example of this dynamic as American anticommunism provoked needless military spending and military intervention. The success of U.S. propaganda in promoting public support for World War II also falls into this category.” Those are fairly large exceptions to the successful operation of his marketplace of values. These empirical examples will be discussed more in the next section.

Based on the academic debate, it would seem that even liberals are willing to concede that the marketplace of ideas cannot altogether prevent elites from employing deceptive national security narratives. At the same time, realist notions that view fearmongering and the

propagation of other distortions as quite simple are most likely insufficiently attentive to domestic political power. Surely, democracies offer at least some checks that are unavailable in autocratic states. Before concluding this section, it is worth directing some additional attention at the Copenhagen School. Members of this school argue that the elites who hold power in a state have unique influence over the national security agenda. They can declare any one of a large array of topics or problems to be a security issue or threat, which Wæver (1995: 54) claims would assure that the security apparatus will “gain control over it. By definition something is a security problem when the elites declare it to be so.” Successful securitization of a problem will commonly assure that the state will make it a high priority, worthy of both heightened attention and larger commitment of resources. Wæver (1995: 54-55) explains the temptation to wield this tool of statecraft: “Power holders can always try to use the instrument of securitization of an issue to gain control over it...Those who administer this order can easily use it for specific self-serving purposes” and “that cannot easily be avoided.” A few years ago, Dunne (2009: 113) noted that the marketplace of ideas failed to refute securitization claims in the contemporary rush to war in “the USA, the UK, Australia and at times also Spain, Denmark and Poland.” Recent research (Van Rythoven 2015: 8; Hayes 2012: 66) on securitization, however, suggests that “The success, as well as failure, of a particular security speech act depends upon: 1) invoking the grammar of security; 2) the social position of the speaker; and 3) the nature of the threat.”<sup>5</sup> Of course, the elites under scrutiny in this paper presumably hold the requisite position and can almost certainly frame narratives about the need for new weapons systems, military intervention,

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<sup>5</sup> The “grammar of security” refers to the speaker’s ability to construct a narrative that includes an existential threat, a point of no return, and a potential solution.

or war in terms of concrete security threats. This is particularly true when the political actors in question work together as a fairly cohesive unit during a concerted period of time.<sup>6</sup>

All in all, the means, motive, and opportunity for narrative mischief about security affairs is surprisingly high, even in democratic states. Have they therefore employed deceptive narratives? Jon Western (2005: 232), who is not a realist and is sympathetic to liberal pluralism, states bluntly that American elites show “a tendency to oversell the message.” Western (2005: 220) points to “a dramatic and consistent tendency of elites trying to sell intervention and war to the American public and using all of the resources at their disposal to deliberately control and manipulate information.” As will be demonstrated in more detail in the next section, the empirical evidence suggests that United States security elites have distorted threat and war narratives for many decades.

### **Threat Inflation and Other Dubious Strategic Narratives**

American national security elites, including policymakers, strategically construct narratives to identify threats, to advocate particular policy actions in response to those threats, and to maintain support for selected policy options. A very large literature reveals that those narratives have often been significantly distorted. For examples, entire books have been dedicated to specific examples of alleged threat inflation in various particular cases. This section will briefly overview some examples of deceptive narratives in order to provide sufficient cause to think about the unthinkable. If national security elites have the motive, means, and opportunity to invoke deceptive narratives and the evidence reveals that narratives are significantly distorted, then scholars have a fairly good reason to think about the implications and potential solutions.

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<sup>6</sup> Hayes (2013) finds that securitization is much better viewed as a process than the result of a single speech act.

*Threat inflation:* The question of threat inflation or fearmongering has received increased scrutiny in the wake of the most recent Iraq war and has awakened scholarly interest in the concept (Thrall and Cramer 2009). The literature on threat inflation is especially large and this section does not attempt to review it in any kind of systematic way. Rather, I will make three opening observations about the evidence and then briefly survey some of the most prominent cases of alleged threat inflation.

First, the literature on threat inflation is inherently speculative. The problem of secrecy remains difficult to overcome even decades after an alleged instance of threat inflation has occurred. For this reason, the academic participants in debates about threat inflation often arrive at very different conclusions about whether security elites tell deceptive stories about inflated threats to justify their preferred security policies. Indeed, different scholars can look at the same alleged instance of deception and some will conclude that it did not occur, while others are convinced that it happened. In a prominent recent exchange, scholars writing roughly 70 years after the events in question disagree about whether Franklin D. Roosevelt deceived Americans to facilitate United States entry into World War II (Reiter 2012; Schuessler 2010). Obviously, the passage of time should have decreased most of the evidentiary problems typically associated with interpretation of contemporary cases. But even 70 years has been insufficient to settle the issue definitively and the evidence remains open to dispute for at least some scholars.

Second, more recent cases are even more open to interpretive uncertainty. Though they have different readings of the World War II case, the liberal institutionalist Reiter agrees with the realist Schuessler that secrecy creates a relatively high level of uncertainty when trying to determine whether threat inflation occurred in the buildup to war against Iraq in 2002 and 2003. Vital information about internal Bush administration decisions remain secret and will not be

available for scholars, journalists, or the general public to evaluate for some time. Reiter (2012: 599) bluntly concedes that “we will not for some years know whether the Bush administration knew at the time these arguments were false.” The realist Schuessler (2010: 165) likewise states that “No firm conclusions can be drawn, however, until the documentary record is more complete.”

The third point addresses the socially constructed nature of the phrase “threat inflation.” As Krebs and Lobasz (2009: 118) have argued, “we are uncomfortable with the concept of ‘threat inflation’...It implies that threats exist independent of the visibility of their articulation, that they can be objectively measured, as can the degree to which they are exaggerated.....we hold that threats are necessarily socially constructed and that the assertion of threat and of threat inflation are equally and inherently political interventions.” I am somewhat sympathetic to this view and am primarily interested in instances when a retrospective public consideration of a more complete evidence base reveals that threats would likely have been viewed differently at the time had elites not exaggerated the intelligence information or otherwise distorted the debate. Even Krebs (2005: 202) acknowledges that “Nearly every administration in U.S. history seeking to unify a fractious public for the collective enterprise of war has exaggerated the scope or the immediacy of threats.”

Empirical research by scholars and journalists reveals that numerous American national security elites and policymakers have employed narratives that created a false or substantially distorted vision of reality about threats posed by potential U.S. foes. The existence of the evidence obviously means that democracies could not keep these secrets forever, which in some ways means that democracy features its own self-correcting information mechanism. Of course, the evidence revealing that threats were significantly weaker than reflected in the original

narrative may not come to light for some months, years, or even decades after the events. The continuing debate about Roosevelt's policies from World War II should give pause to anyone who dismisses the idea of threat inflation based on the fact that even large secrets will ultimately be exposed to sunshine.

The literature on threat inflation suggests that national security policymakers frequently exaggerate the scope and urgency of threat narratives in order to justify preferred policy actions. As reflected in U.S. foreign policy for decades, policymakers commonly inflated threats about Soviet weapons systems to justify various American weapons systems from the beginning of the nuclear age until the end of the cold war. More broadly, these claims about threats justified the U.S. containment strategy and helped support numerous related policies, including decisions about East-West trade and arms control. The so-called bomber gap of the 1950s, the missile gap of the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the window of vulnerability of the 1970s and 1980s influenced debate and decisions, but largely reflected inflated or false threat narratives (Gervasi 1986; Prados 1986; Johnson 1994). Similarly, John Mueller (2006) has written frequently about the threat inflation that undergirds the so-called "war on terrorism." For Mueller, the deception has directly led to trillions of dollars in dubious spending in the last 15 years, ranging from dubious homeland security measures to prolonged war in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Various elites likewise inflated military threats in order to justify particular wars. As already discussed, numerous contemporary scholars make that charge regarding Iraq even though a more complete evidence base will not be revealed for some years (Thrall and Cramer 2009). In August 1964, the Lyndon Johnson administration failed to disclose U.S. military provocations in the Gulf of Tonkin and simply reported an attack on American forces that they privately could not even confirm had occurred (Cavanaugh 2007). Somewhat more definitely, Paterson (2008)

points to “new documents and tapes” that “reveal what historians could not prove: There was not a second attack on U.S. Navy ships in the Tonkin Gulf in early August 1964. Furthermore, the evidence suggests a disturbing and deliberate attempt by Secretary of Defense McNamara to distort the evidence and mislead Congress.” This deception, in turn, was used as the primary justification for the congressional Gulf of Tonkin Resolution authorizing the use of force in Vietnam. Along the same lines, in 1990, after the August Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the George H.W. Bush administration claimed that 250,000 Iraqi troops posed a threat to Saudi Arabia. Ultimately, this claim was used to justify the deployment of hundreds of thousands of American and coalition partner troops, a force buildup that presaged the first Persian Gulf War. However, the *St. Petersburg Times* (Florida) purchased satellite photos from the Soviet Union and reported January 6, 1991, that “no Iraqi troops were visible near the Saudi border, just empty desert” (Peterson 2002). On multiple occasions, President G.H.W. Bush also invoked a tragic war story told by a young Kuwaiti woman that claimed Iraqi troops had stormed a hospital, stolen incubators, and left hundreds of babies “on the cold floor to die.” Peterson (2002) provides the details that reveal the extent of the deception: “Later, it was learned that Nayirah was in fact the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to Washington and had no connection to the Kuwait hospital. She had been coached – along with the handful of others who would ‘corroborate’ the story – by senior executives of Hill and Knowlton in Washington, the biggest global PR firm at the time, which had a contract worth more than \$10 million with the Kuwaitis to make the case for war.”

*Policy Justification:* Specific well-known historical case stories are vulnerable to overuse, particularly when they are employed by policy advocates as shorthand analogies in inappropriate situations. Hawkish American advocates for using force during international crisis regularly

draw an analogy to the Munich Agreement of 1938, emphasizing the dangers of appeasement and comparing their opponents to former British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain.

Proponents of war against Iraq in the 2002 and 2003 buildup to war commonly implied that Saddam Hussein was a contemporary Adolf Hitler and invoked the Munich analogy against dovish political opponents. Recently, former Vice President Dick Cheney employed the Munich analogy to criticize the Obama administration for its deal with Iran limiting its nuclear program. As historians have demonstrated, American foreign policy debates have frequently featured this particular narrative:

To President Truman, the Munich analogy justified “police action” in Korea; Eisenhower invoked Munich to justify U.S. support of France in its colonial war over Indochina; Kennedy, to justify a hard line (though one that stopped short of war) over the Cuban Missile Crisis; Johnson and Nixon, to justify their respective escalations of U.S. involvement in Vietnam; and Reagan, to justify U.S. military action in Grenada and Nicaragua (Conolly-Smith 2009: 35).

A few years ago, Jeffrey Record suggested that it was time to “retire Adolf Hitler and ‘appeasement’ from the national security debate” because repeated usage of the so-called Munich analogy had yielded inaccurate history and distorted sound thinking about threats and policy responses. Not every threat is posed by a modern-day Hitler and not every non-military reaction is a catastrophic form of appeasement. According to Record’s analysis, the pathway to war in Vietnam and Iraq was built upon misapplication of the Munich analogy.

*Maintain support:* During the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, U.S. security elites fabricated heroic narratives about particular U.S. soldiers or missions in order to maintain support for the war. It is also possible that these narratives served to distract the general public

from bad news or to make national leaders look good. While these prominent examples were revealed in relatively short order by journalists, it is clear that security elites initially crafted deceptive narratives. Moreover, it is certainly possible that there are other cases, perhaps many other cases, which occurred without anyone uncovering the truth. Both of these two cases clearly involved top-level politicians or military bureaucrats promoting apparently heroic tales. Early this century, for example, reporters ultimately revealed that the Bush administration and Pentagon created a hoax comparable to a “Hollywood film” by staging a rescue of a young female American soldier who had been taken captive, Jessica Lynch (Kampfner 2003). Months later, Bush administration and Pentagon officials propagated lies about the circumstances surrounding the “friendly fire” death of former professional football player Pat Tillman (White 2005). Tillman was painted as an especially heroic figure because he voluntarily surrendered his lucrative sports career in order to serve his country in conflict as the member of a Special Forces unit in Afghanistan.

Are there additional examples? Most recently, Pulitzer prize-winning journalist Seymour Hersh (2015) charged the Obama administration with lying about the circumstances leading to the killing of Osama bin Laden. To-date, however, Hersh’s version of event is not widely accepted as true (Fisher 2015).

### **Thinking the Unthinkable?**

The title of this paper references Herman Kahn’s (1964) classic treatise on nuclear strategy, *Thinking About the Unthinkable*. While the prospect of winning or surviving a nuclear war between the United States and Soviet Union seemed absurd even to many defense analysts during the cold war, Kahn nonetheless took the problems very seriously and offered a wide array

of potential options. In the same manner, this paper considers the possibility that security policymakers in the United States have all-too-frequently misled the public and other audiences by brazenly employing exaggerated if not altogether fictional narratives and analogies about threats, the need for war, and the prosecution of war. A good deal of evidence suggests that these stories are knowingly constructed and can be employed to advance selfish political interests that have little to do with real threats even though they have enormous implications for security policy. The idea that this practice is commonplace would likely be dismissed as inconceivable by most national security scholars and policymakers. Again, for instance, the socially sustainable story about the buildup to the recent Iraq war (Jervis 2010) is that the intelligence agencies were wrong and that the mistakes in interpretation were shared by members of both major American political parties as well as many other nations.

In addition to the costs in lives and dollars, which are enormous over a period of decades, the power both to define security threats and to act upon them potentially poses significant problems for democratic governance. As evinced at times during the cold war, such as the McCarthy era, and during the ongoing “war on terror,” threat narratives can be used to justify a prolonged “state of exception” (Caldwell 2006) that involve extraordinary measures to protect society. Indeed, it may well be that the exception has become the rule. In his discussion of American militarism and the current condition of perpetual war, Ivie (2013: 87) worries that “alternatives to living in a state of war have become nearly unthinkable.” The costs of militarism and an ongoing state of exception include a wide array of measures that arguably threaten political and civil liberties, including mass government surveillance, unlawful detention of suspects, and torture.

Short of the most extreme result, Mearsheimer (2011: 13, 83) argues that by lying to their own citizens, leaders “corrupt political and social life at home, which can have many harmful consequences for daily life.” Repeated lying risks fostering a “poisonous culture of dishonesty” that undermines the marketplace of ideas within a state and thereby threatens democratic accountability, the rule of law, and the legitimacy of government. Citizens cannot hold leaders responsible for their actions if they do not believe them. Sometimes, political actors who challenge elite narratives resort to dubious if not dangerous alternative narratives in order to contest elite stories. Fluck (2014: 7) argues that “conspiracy thinking is a common response to the opacity and complexity of international affairs.” Indeed, Richard Hofstadter’s (1964) classic essay on the “paranoid style in American politics” explained the importance of both secrecy and international events in the construction of conspiracy theories. Is this paper a reflection of the paranoid style, or an effort to thwart it?

### **Conclusions: Democratic Accountability?**

As I have in other contexts (Payne and Samhat 2004), I advocate the development of an inclusive and open public sphere in order to promote democratically accountability in the exclusive and secretive national security policy domain. Frankly, however, this feels like an impossible solution, worthy of Lewis Carroll or Monty Python. Indeed, I have likely arrived at another virtually unthinkable point. What potential mechanisms could promote more contentious discussion of national security stories and limit the potential damage caused by reliance upon distorted or inappropriate narratives? How can the U.S. possibly create a more inclusive and open public sphere in national security? Presumably, addressing secrecy and exclusivity would

require radically altering the way the U.S. polity views security, secrecy, and authority. How can the U.S. democratize the process of identifying threats and deciding how to respond to them?

Recently, addressing the possibility of desecuritization, Tjalve (2011: 446) argued in behalf “of a system of checks and balances, of playing interest against interest” as “the only viable means of restraining the monopoly of elite ideas or the advance of uncontested demonizing, securitizing moves.” Van Rythoven (2015: 15) describes this as “an agonistic and competitive public sphere,” which he and many other scholars place in contrast to the liberal marketplace of ideas. Citizens interacting in a public sphere are presumably committed “to the common good, to a ‘civic culture,’” and the public sphere is itself a social mechanism for producing the identity of citizens and the notion of civic culture (Dahlgren 1995: 23). The marketplace of ideas, in contrast, depends upon the rational consideration of superior information and reasoning. For many liberals, contending ideas in the marketplace of ideas will be those “based on the strength of their representation” (Ferree et al 2002: 317).<sup>7</sup> Essentially, the status quo marketplace of ideas needs to be supplanted by a far more democratic and effective public sphere. Is this unthinkable?

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<sup>7</sup> They may even depend upon the material resources of the participants. Given recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions ruling that limits placed on campaign financing are restrictions on speech, “The marketplace metaphor may be particularly apt when financial strength is accepted as a legitimate factor in the competition of ideas for a hearing” (Ferree et al 2002: 321n).

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