

Going to the “Dark Side”: Star Wars Symbolism and the Acceptance of Torture in the U.S. Security Community.

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Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association, March 2016, Atlanta, GA.

Many scholars note the important role of analogies and metaphors in the thinking of foreign policy experts. Following the attacks on September 11th 2001, Vice President Cheney famously argued that it was necessary for the United States to work on the “Dark Side” in order to stop future attacks. That Cheney would choose this piece of symbolism, from popular movies entrenched in popular culture indicates he was trying to make a point that would resonate. Although this quote inspired countless Cheney-as-Darth-Vader spoofs and memes, and numerous references in analyses of the “War on Terror”, no study attempts to understand the degree to which the U.S. security community internalized the analogy, especially in regards to the use of torture. The use of language to distance policymakers from horrifying realities (such as nuclear weapons) is well established in the literature. We investigate whether Cheney’s Star Wars analogy facilitated this distancing-through-language as the US increased its use of torture. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) uses text to understand the implicit assumptions regarding truth, morality, and power that make up social relations. We use CDA on national security focused blogs and media from the period to examine the importance of this famous quote and Star Wars symbolism on U.S. strategies during the war on terror.

Introduction

No politician in recent memory occupies a more mysterious and foreboding place in U.S. politics than Vice President Dick Cheney. His now well-documented role in pioneering the legal argument and institutional changes that effectively embedded torture, extraordinary rendition, and other policies long considered taboo by the U.S. government, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 make him the focal point for critics of the way the Bush administration waged the “war on terror.” Moreover, Cheney’s famous line that we must “go to the dark side” suggested he knew the nation would consider it a moral gray area, but that under the circumstances trade-offs were required to keep the nation safe.

It is our contention that Cheney's call to spend time embracing the "dark side" tapped into ready-made metaphors from popular culture, specifically, those contained within Star Wars, in an attempt to make his point more clearly to the American people. Furthermore, we argue that Cheney's arguments for using the dark arts to control chaos and uncertainty, closely mirror those used by the characters of Anakin Skywalker (Darth Vader) and especially Chancellor Palpatine. The fact that Cheney chose this analogy at a time when George Lucas' prequel Trilogy was chronicling Anakin Skywalker's fall to the dark side and the rise of the Empire in theatres make his use of this analogy even more fascinating. Ultimately, we believe that this event can tell us not only about the use of Star Wars metaphors in American politics, but can help us to better understand how politicians use analogies, symbolism, and metaphors in general to make their case to the American people.

Our primary goal in this paper is to determine the meaning behind Cheney's deployment of Star Wars symbolism and the degree to which those were references were internalized by other policymakers. We begin by discussing the changes in U.S. practices around terror in the periods preceding and following the attacks on September 11th 2001. We then discuss literature on how popular culture analogies, symbolism, and metaphors are thought to influence public perception about political agendas being pushed by their leaders. We then move to a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of Cheney's statements and the congressional record on tactics used in the war on terror. Finally we close with our analysis and some concluding thoughts.

Torture and Detainment in the United States: A Brief History

The popular narrative surrounding the war on terror is that the United States underwent a sea-change when it came to prisoner treatment following the attacks on the Pentagon in Washington D.C. and the World Trade Center in New York on September 11th, 2001. Yet the

United States has a long history of using harsh tactics against its own citizens and foreign nationals. As noted by commentators, “In times of war, fear, and stress America has always done things like this” (Beinart 2014). In the early history of the nation, harsh tactics, abuse, and the suspension of the right to habeas corpus were initially seen as equal parts information-seeking and punishment, particularly during slavery. In more recent times, torture for punishment is taboo, and depriving prisoners of a hearing seems to go against ingrained social norms, so justifications for these tactics rest on utilitarian notions of gaining information and detaining individuals for the maintenance of public safety and security.

The dilemma of balancing security concerns and rights prohibiting harsh treatment is nothing new, and is not unique to the United States. Many democratic governments have wrestled with the political morality of harsh interrogation techniques and torture. The British treatment of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) during “The Troubles” and the Spanish with the ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna), come to mind, among many others (Rejali 2007). The United States has had periods of bright spots, where it resisted the urge to use widespread torture, harsh techniques, and extrajudicial procedures against prisoners, notably in World War II, where the U.S. had a relatively good record of treating prisoners of war well in accordance with the Geneva Conventions (Forsythe 2011, 11). There were exceptions of course, such as the *Quirin* case when FDR authorized a military tribunal to speedily convict and execute Nazi saboteurs captured near New York (and the Supreme Court approved it) (Bravin 2013). But these incidents were notable exactly because they were used so infrequently.

During the 1960’s a shift occurred, and as Forsythe argues, U.S. decision makers began using harsh tactics against prisoners that were considered “torture lite” or “no touch torture” (2011, 14). These tactics had the goal of breaking prisoners psychologically by using sleep

deprivation, threats, manipulation of temperature, and stress positions, among others. Much of this was justified as a response to the harsh treatment of American POWs being held by the Chinese, Koreans, and Soviets (McCoy 2006). The Vietnam War saw a particularly ugly uptick in U.S. use of torture against civilians in South Vietnam. As with earlier in the Cold War this was also a response to the Vietcong's notoriously harsh torture methods used against American POWs. It was also a reaction to the asymmetrical warfare tactics being used by the Vietcong and its sympathizers against South Vietnamese and American targets. The necessity of getting information to battle a smaller, more flexible threat hiding among civilians became the justification for the CIA's expansion of its torture programs and its encouragement of South Vietnamese officials to use the tactics as well (Valentine 1990; McCoy 2006, 62-65). Unsurprisingly, given the parallels, the cost-benefit analysis undertaken by U.S. officials to justify torture and extrajudicial detainment during this period foreshadowed the thinking of the Bush Administration during the War on Terror.

Despite the widespread use of torture during the middle-late portions of the 20th century by authoritarian regimes and democracies alike, the international community continued to publicly denounce the practice and also enshrine the original prohibition on torture and calls for decent treatment of POWs and other prisoners into international law. In addition to the ban on the use of torture under any circumstances in common article 3 of the Geneva Conventions, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and most explicitly in the Convention Against Torture (CAT) also prohibit the use of torture under any circumstances. However, despite bans on torture and other cruel and unusual punishment there is no agreed upon definition of torture specific enough to outlaw all harsh interrogation tactics, a loophole the Bush Administration lawyers would exploit after the attacks on September 11th 2001.

Following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the Bush Administration almost immediately began to shift not just practices, but official U.S. policy around the detainment and interrogation of suspected terrorists. Prior to 9/11, even during the dark periods of the Vietnam War, the official policy of the U.S. government, especially the military, was to treat prisoners well and in accordance with the Geneva Conventions. However, after the attacks, the Bush administration used rhetoric that suggested openly to the American people and the world that things were going to change. Cheney's famous discussion of "spending time on the dark side", which is discussed at length later, and Cofer Black's testimony that "the gloves came off" made clear the administration's intention to use harsh techniques to gain information (U.S. Congress, 2002). The United States began the process of detaining large numbers of suspected terrorists and fighters (83,000 by the end of 2005) (Hathaway 2007, 232). What to do with this large number of prisoners became an immediate problem. Using the base at Guantanamo Bay Cuba offered the "least worst place..." according to Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld (2007, 234). Advantages included its relative isolation and the fact that it was technically not on U.S. soil, but on land leased from Cuba so detainees would not be afforded the same legal protections they would have if they were on U.S. soil (Ibid. 2007, 235).

In addition to the logistical problem of where to locate prisoners was the problem of international law and U.S. law relating to enemy prisoners. John Yoo, a member of the Office of Legal Counsel in the Department of Justice under Attorney General John Ashcroft during the early 2000s, embraced the theory of the unitary Presidency, which reinterpreted the constitutional power of the President during times of war (Forsythe 2011, 90-91). This interpretation granted the President almost limitless power to determine tactics and judicial procedures used to interrogate enemy prisoners in the War on Terror (Wittes 2008). At the

direction of Vice President Dick Cheney, a group of lawyers within the Department of Justice and the White House began reinterpreting the Geneva Conventions and U.S. law in order to create a permanent system of military tribunals that operated separate from the normal legal system (Bravin 2013).

Specifically, Yoo, along with White House Counsel Alberto Gonzalez, and Vice President Cheney's legal counsel David Addington and Assistant Attorney General Jay S. Bybee, participated in the creation of the so-called "Bybee Memo" outlining the Bush Administration's interpretation of torture as a much narrower category of techniques and what became known as the Military Order No. 1 which created the military tribunals that would hear the cases of detainees. The Bybee Memo also advanced the argument that the Geneva Conventions did not apply to enemy prisoners in the War on Terror because they were not fighting for a recognized country. It further outlined the rationale that would ultimately enable the CIA's so-called "enhanced interrogation" program. Recalling the *Quirin* case referenced above, the 16 page document known as Military Order No. 1 created military commissions that would grant the defendants no rights, and make admissible hearsay and statements gained via coercion, were originally illegal under U.S. law (Bravin 2013, 60-63). Military Order No. 1 also specifically avoided any language implying international law should be considered at all in decisions made by the tribunals (Mayerfield 2007). Crucially, the decisions and reasoning in these memos were made in secret, often in consultation with Vice President Cheney (Forsythe 2011, 50). They were secret because there were serious doubts raised about their reasoning from other members of the Department of Justice, including Attorney General Ashcroft, and lawyers in the Department of Defense. It is now well-established that Cheney was the principal advocate of Yoo's legal

interpretation of torture and the powers of the President and the implications of those arguments (Blakeley 2011).

Ultimately, most of these programs would be ended or rolled back. Two key Supreme Court decisions in *Rasul v. Bush* in 2004 and *Hamdan v. Rumsfeld* in 2006 would undermine what Bush administration lawyers and Cheney saw as key elements of the torture and detention program operated at Guantanamo Bay. These decisions determined that the U.S. did have de facto sovereignty over Guantanamo Bay and that the Geneva Conventions did apply to detainees being held there respectively. Specifically that the Geneva Conventions granted all detainees the potential for a judicial review by a fair and impartial court. The Supreme Court ruled that the military commissions set up by Military Order No. 1 were woefully inadequate. When President Obama assumed office he decried the enhanced interrogation program as torture, and canceled it. While no more detainees were ever brought to Guantanamo once Obama was elected he has still been unable to close the detention camp there.

Vice President Cheney's Central Role and Parallels with Star Wars

Many accounts of the period immediately prior to the attacks and in the aftermath now exist of the principal decision maker personalities before and after the attacks (Hayes 2007; Mayer 2008; Woodward 2002; Dyson, 2009, 2010). Vice President Cheney's rise in the Bush administration reads like a classic Hollywood account of the mysterious advisor pulling the strings behind the leader. He began as head of Bush's Vice Presidential search committee before maneuvering his way into the job. Adept at bureaucratic politics and with a President who was more than willing to delegate tasks to him and defer to his seniority (Cheney had been Secretary of Defense and close advisor to George H. W. Bush after all), Cheney was able to situate himself at the center of many policy decisions. Cheney is generally considered to be the most powerful

Vice President of all time (Goldstein 2010). Cheney was well aware that many considered him the real mastermind of many of the Bush Administration's policies on National Security, quipped in 2004, "Am I the evil genius in the corner that nobody ever sees come out of his hole? It's a nice way to operate, actually" (Hayes 2007, 3).

In her book "The Dark Side" (2008) Jane Mayer begins the process of tracing Cheney's descent into a mindset that justified the worst elements of the "War on Terror" during his years of participating in mock scenarios that simulated calamitous nuclear attacks on the Capital during the Reagan administration, or biological and chemical attacks on the White House. Cheney spent large amounts of time in bunkers in the mountains of Virginia during the 1980s testing the ability of a skeleton staff to run the government of the United States in the aftermath of a serious attack on Washington D.C (2008, 2-3). Even before 9/11, Cheney's time spent dreaming up potential attacks caused him to see threats everywhere. One account has him varying his routines and motorcade routes on a daily basis to avoid attacks (2008, 3-5). 9/11, then, was a tipping point for Cheney. All his worst fears had been confirmed and consequently he felt that almost any actions were justified to prevent more attacks. Cheney's friends commented that paranoia consumed Cheney and led him to the conclusion that unbridled executive power and harsh treatment of suspected terrorists was the only way to ensure safety (Goldberg 2005). Reinforcing Cheney's paranoia was an incident, not long after the attacks on 9/11 and the discovery of anthrax in a letter sent to Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle's office, when Cheney was in the White House situation room and the biological exposure alarms went off. Everyone in the room, including Cheney, thought they had been exposed to deadly amounts of poison, and were forced to await their deaths in isolation until it was confirmed it was a false alarm 2008, 3).

Indeed highlighting the depths of Cheney's paranoia is his recent revelation in a *60 Minutes* interview that he had become convinced that terrorists would hack his pacemaker and send him a fatal shock.¹ Ultimately, in this context it is unsurprising that Cheney would angle for as much executive and, given his influence over President Bush, personal power as possible. Moreover, it begins to explain his seeming willingness to encourage government lawyers to bend the rules to put in place programs that would send the United States down a previously avoided path of institutionalized torture and extrajudicial detainment for enemy prisoners.

Anyone familiar with the story of *Star Wars*, particularly the prequel trilogy consisting of *Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, *Episode II: Attack of the Clones*, and *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*, will find the parallels between the War on Terror and Cheney's role in it, and story of Anakin Skywalker's descent to the dark side and the fall of the galactic republic, uncanny. All of these films were written and directed by George Lucas, creator of the original Trilogy (but not the writer or director of all three original movies).

Anakin Skywalker began as an idealistic Jedi padawan (student) who is remarkably powerful, but also unmoored by the separation from his mother at a young age. Under the tutelage of Jedi-Master Obi-Wan Kenobi he gains great power, but despite his power he loses his mother after she is abducted by Tuscan Raiders. He also falls in love with Padme Amidala, first a Queen then member of the Galactic Senate. In the wake of his mother's death Anakin becomes obsessed and paranoid about the potential death of his new lover. When her life is threatened by the increasing insecurity caused by the Galactic Civil War the evil Sith Lord Sidious masquerading as Chancellor Palpatine, begins to seduce Anakin to the dark side by claiming to

¹ Cheney went on to point out that he found the popular show security/political drama *Homeland* credible because it had used a similar plot line that reflected his concerns while in office of his pacemaker being hacked and used to kill him.

² In the first few episodes humanity has been all but destroyed and just a small flotilla of ships flees the enemy Cylons. The people aboard these ships grapple with the tension between military and civilian control during war

be able to teach him to stop his loved ones from dying. Anakin greatly desires this power and begins to entertain authoritarian ideas, speaking of becoming all-powerful so he can save his loved ones. Padme tries to hold him in check saying “there are just some things no one can fix”, but with Palpatine’s prodding, Anakin comes to believe that only extraordinary measures, like the destruction of the Jedi and Palpatine’s own installation as Emperor, can stop chaos and war.

Of course the rest of the story is well known; Anakin gives in to the dark side and becomes Darth Vader. After helping to destroy the Jedi, he is defeated and horribly injured by Obi-Wan Kenobi on the lava planet Mustafar. He is turned into the iconic helmeted cyborg we remember from the original trilogy and only finds absolution when his son, Luke Skywalker, faces Darth Sidious (Emperor Palpatine) and Anakin chooses to save him, thus rejecting the Dark Side and the orders of his master. The overarching theme of the story is that dark and light must remain in balance, hence the Jedi preoccupation with bringing “balance to the force”, one cannot extinguish the other and bad things will happen and must be accepted as part of life. This type of thinking is anathema to those seeking perfect predictability and order at the expense of freedom, but it is a very seductive idea to desire order and predictability. It is exactly the same process that, by all accounts, Cheney went through as he orchestrated the Bush administration policies during the war on terror, with similarly tragic results—two decade-long and very costly wars, and the loss of much of the moral high ground the United States claimed prior to the detainee program.

One could argue the similarities between the themes in *Star Wars* and Cheney’s personal story as a policymaker are merely an interesting coincidence, a reflection of George Lucas using these timeless themes. Yet, once Cheney invokes *Star Wars* imagery and symbolism by claiming we have to spend time on “the dark side,” the intersection between the two becomes worth

investigating. The puzzle is why invoke this symbolism, presumably telegraphing his meaning, to other members of government and the American people by using this now infamous “dark side” line? Furthermore, why employ symbolism from a piece of popular culture as well-known as *Star Wars* that spends the entirety of its story essentially arguing that forays into the dark side only bring suffering and loss? Below we use critical discourse analysis (CDA) to better understand why Cheney used the dark side line. But before that a brief discussion on the links between pop culture and politics.

Pop Culture, Politics, and Performance

There are a growing number of scholars who claim that looking to popular culture, specifically science fiction and fantasy, to better understand politics is a useful endeavor (Kiersey and Neumann 2014; Dyson 2015). Certainly, using ideas from stylized versions of reality is, in many ways akin to Weber’s notion of using ideal types to better understand complex political interactions and phenomena (Jackson 2014). In addition to using pop culture as inspiration and testing ground for theory-building we also see it as a way to better understand what leaders are trying to convey when they invoke it.

In the analysis of Cheney’s use of *Star Wars* imagery, we begin with the assumption that when political leaders in democracies are trying to convince the population of the merits of their cause. Relatedly, we assume that when leaders use analogies and symbolism from popular culture they are consciously evoking shared images that lend their arguments weight and clarity. “Politicians need to care about popular culture because it is one of the common bonds that tie increasingly segmented Americans together. Whether you live in a red state or a blue state, or an urban or rural environment, you are aware of popular culture. And a politician who can skillfully

navigate the use of pop culture references and appearances in pop culture venues can increase his appeal to the American public” (Rubin 2013).

Indeed a master of invoking popular culture is a master of what is popular. Politicians that make use of popular culture effectively are often far ahead of the game when it comes to inspiring a following, since that is what creators of popular culture are trying to do. It is no surprise that Reagan was a popular movie actor and then a popular President. His membership in the popular culture complex of Hollywood made him a phenomenal communicator to the masses.

That something is popular is not to say that it is benign. Pop culture, particularly pop music, is often associated with being “vanilla” or inoffensive and unsophisticated. But popular culture is closely related to propaganda and can often be used to darker purposes. As Street notes in a discussion on the uses of popular culture by politicians, “We have only to recall the propaganda machines of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia to remember the ways in which the machinery of culture can be deployed to legitimate political order and to orchestrate popular sentiment” (1997, 13). Indeed, popular culture is the primary vehicle by which many people for whom political concepts feel foreign, are exposed to complex ideas in a way that makes sense (Foy 2008, 3). Cheney was trying to paint a well-known picture of the moral dilemma at issue following 9/11, and he made it clear on what side of that dilemma he fell by talking about the dark side.

Given the continued proliferation of popular culture during the 2000s, it is not surprising that issues in Bush Administration’s War on Terror featured prominently in television shows and movies. The popular reboot of *Battlestar Galactica* delved deeply into issues of law and order

versus chaos, torture, and the problem of separating terrorists from freedom fighters.² The influence of the show *24* on popular conceptions of torture is also well-documented (Dunn 2008). George Lucas himself is often charged with entering the debate around torture and the War on Terror directly, particularly in *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*. During Anakin's fall to the dark side his line "either you're with me or against me" was an almost word for word reference to President George Bush's famous State of the Union Address where he identified the "axis of evil" and began making the case for war in Iraq. Lucas repudiates this line of thinking when he has Obi-Wan reply (infamously) "only a Sith deals in absolutes." When asked about the obvious parallels (often maligned as "ham fisted" (Brown 2012)) Lucas has always acknowledged them, but argued that it was a prescient coincidence since the prequels were written prior to 9/11 and the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan (Crean 2005).

Ultimately, there is a growing consensus that elements of popular culture offer not only powerful analogies for the study of politics, but also provide political leaders with ready-made metaphors and analogies that help them explain complex concepts, including moral and ethical dilemmas, to the population. Using popular culture metaphors and symbolism can help convey arguments in a clear, resonant fashion and help a leader win support for a favored policy. Certainly, Vice-President Cheney referenced a well-known piece of popular culture when he invoked "the dark side", and as demonstrated above the metaphor fit well with Cheney's experiences and his intentions, yet we are left with some additional challenges. The following two sections attempt to illustrate in more detail how Cheney used Star Wars symbolism and how

² In the first few episodes humanity has been all but destroyed and just a small flotilla of ships flees the enemy Cylons. The people aboard these ships grapple with the tension between military and civilian control during war time. Also early in the series an enemy Cylon, in the form of a female human, is captured, tortured, and raped. One scene in particular makes direct reference to waterboarding, a well-documented facet of enhanced interrogation techniques. In a story arc where the human protagonists of the series are subjected by the enemy Cylons they resort to suicide bombings against their fellow humans who are working in league with the Cylons to control the humans who oppose them.

it was internalized by policymakers by, respectively, using critical discourse analysis on Cheney's infamous "dark side" interview, and by examining the congressional record for references to the dark side.

The Cheney-Russert Interview- Critical Discourse Analysis of 'The Dark Side'

The reasons underlying policies are fraught with disputes about truth and 'morality. As Fairclough (2003, 9) writes, the essential ideologies buttressing positions and behaviors establish, maintain, and change social relationships. Power and hierarchy infuse our understanding of what is right and true, of what is best for the country. Understanding how certain phenomena become accepted and internalized provides insight into both elite and mass attitudes, uncovering relationships between groups, individuals and belief systems.

One method to understand these relationships is to understand how elite and mass attitudes are verbalized, as verbalizing ideas serves both to convey specific meaning, express emotions and beliefs, and sway feelings. Speakers choose their words to ensure that listeners understand their meaning, especially when those speakers are trying to also act as norm entrepreneurs. When words are chosen, particularly by speakers carefully selecting particular words for precise purposes, studying those words can aid the understanding of belief systems (Heracleous 2006, Herman and Chomsky 1988, Irving and English 2008).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) examines underlying values and philosophies of speakers and listeners, with special attention to morality, truth, certainty, and power. By focusing on how and when specific words and phrases are used, CDA can analyze how beliefs and motivations are transmitted from speakers to listeners, as well as the dialectic between changing norms. This occurs since, "[w]hat is 'said' in a text always rests upon 'unsaid' assumptions, so part of the analysis of texts is trying to identify what is assumed." (Fairclough 2003, 11).

In his 9/16/2001 interview with Tim Russert, then-Vice President Dick Cheney attempted to explain forthcoming policy shifts regarding the role of the United States towards terrorists, terrorist groups, and state supporters of terrorists. Throughout the interview, conducted less than a week after the 9/11 attacks and in the shadows of fear and uncertainty, Cheney consistently references a new world order, one in which constant global vigilance is required to keep the country safe. Though the most famous quote from the interview is Cheney's assertion that the government was morally obligated to work "...sort of on the dark side...in the shadows", Cheney evidences several other allusions to Star Wars lore, often echoing the need to engage in immoral actions to save lives. Like Anakin's turn to Dark Vader in *Revenge of the Sith* to save Padme's life, Cheney returns at various times to the belief that one must engage "...in the shadows..." and to work with disreputable characters for the better good of society. Further, as Yoda describes in *Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, "Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to the Dark Side," Cheney shows how fear, concern, and confusion have led him to believe that the only way to proceed is to bring the full wrath and fury of the US military down upon all people who support terrorists, even if those people only "...sometimes share common ideologies..." (Cheney interview, paragraph 9).

Several areas are of key focus for scholars of Critical Discourse Analysis. First, an emphasis on power hierarchies helps show who is involved in decision-making, as well as who is kept out, and why. As Richardson says regarding the production of news and journalism, "Specifically, the sourcing and construct of the news is intimately linked with the actions and opinions of (usually powerful) social groups..." (2007, 1). Second, modal terms describe morality. When used, modal terms such as 'ought' and 'should' provide glimpses into the underlying moral sentiment about certain topics (Richardson 2007, 59-60). Modal words provide

judgments of events and people; they can stress truth, obligation, and power. Observing how and when these words occur, especially in regards to government policies, helps explain the rationale behind decisions.

Finally, CDA scholars are also concerned with ideas about ‘reality’. As a post-structuralist analysis, CDA assumes that reality is usually socially created, at least by those deemed to be elites in the society (Richardson 2007, 27). Therefore, reality is both constructed and a construct: it is constructed by elite beliefs, but also helps construct how those elites and other non-elites view the world.

Cheney makes several references to power hierarchies in his interview, most clearly in paragraphs 9, 13, and 28. In paragraph 13, Russert has asked Cheney how Cheney believes Americans should feel about proposed governmental policies regarding terrorists. Cheney then says, “I think the way to think about it, Tim, is to think about the target and what our objectives are... Obviously, we’re interested in individuals who were directly involved... We need to go find them and root them out.” Here, Cheney has both stated power hierarchies and engaged in modal speech. By repeating the word ‘think’ three times in the first sentence and using ‘I think’, Cheney has determined that Americans should think the way he does, thereby making himself and his beliefs the most important in society. He uses the communal word ‘our’ towards the end of the first sentence when stating ‘our objectives,’ and the communal word ‘we’ twice when discussing the necessity of finding terrorist supporters, but then reverts back to the individual – “What changed in terms of US policy, is the president’s determination to also go after those nations...”. Here, the juxtaposition of the communal with the individual shows that Cheney believes that while the nation as a whole must bear the moral obligation to find the perpetrators, only the elites (e.g. Cheney, the president) are responsible for making decisions, thereby

focusing social power and authority on the Executive Branch. Finally, Cheney adds two additional components to his references to power in the same paragraph- morality; and the distinction between an individualized and a collective enemy.

During the interview, Cheney juxtaposes words such as ‘reality’, ‘clearly’, and ‘sometimes’, and ‘possible’, when referencing government policy and when discussing what he believed to be a new world order. In paragraph six, Cheney says, “Clearly, what we’re faced with here is a situation where terrorism is struck home... It’s a qualitatively different set of circumstances.” Here, he spells out his belief that the entirety of the world has changed; it’s a completely new situation because ‘home’ has been attacked. ‘Home’ now has a new normal, with new qualities. And yet, only a few paragraphs later, Cheney qualifies the certainty of ‘clearly’ with uncertainty by using words such as ‘may’.

In paragraph 18, he discusses the view that the 19 attackers on 9/11 could have had additional compatriots who were not able to accomplish their objectives. He qualifies his earlier certainty about the world changing by saying, “So there may well be others.” ‘May’ indicates a lower level of possibility, while ‘clearly’ indicates the highest level of certainty; ‘may’ indicates obtuseness while ‘clearly’ indicates indisputability. He continues this contrast between surety and uncertainty in paragraph 20: “I have no doubt that he [Bin Laden] and his organization played a significant role in this.” Yet, in the earlier paragraph 18, “There are some times, for example, to some of the people involved here back to the USS Cole bombing in Yemen...” Here, earlier ‘some times...some people’ transitions to the ‘no doubt’ of following paragraph. By coupling terms of certainty with terms of uncertainty, Cheney allows for both fear and assurance. His terms of uncertainty revolve around the threat- he cannot know for sure exactly what the threat is, or where is it located. And yet, he can be certain of his administration’s policies- not

only is US policy ‘clearly’ to root out terrorists and their sympathizers, but it is a moral necessity. In paragraph 9, Cheney says,

And what we have to do is take down those networks of terrorist organization [sic], and as I say I think this is going to be a struggle that the United States is going to be involved in for the foreseeable future... It’s going to require constant vigilance on our part to avoid problems in the future, but it’s also going to require a major effort and, obviously, quite possibly use of military force.

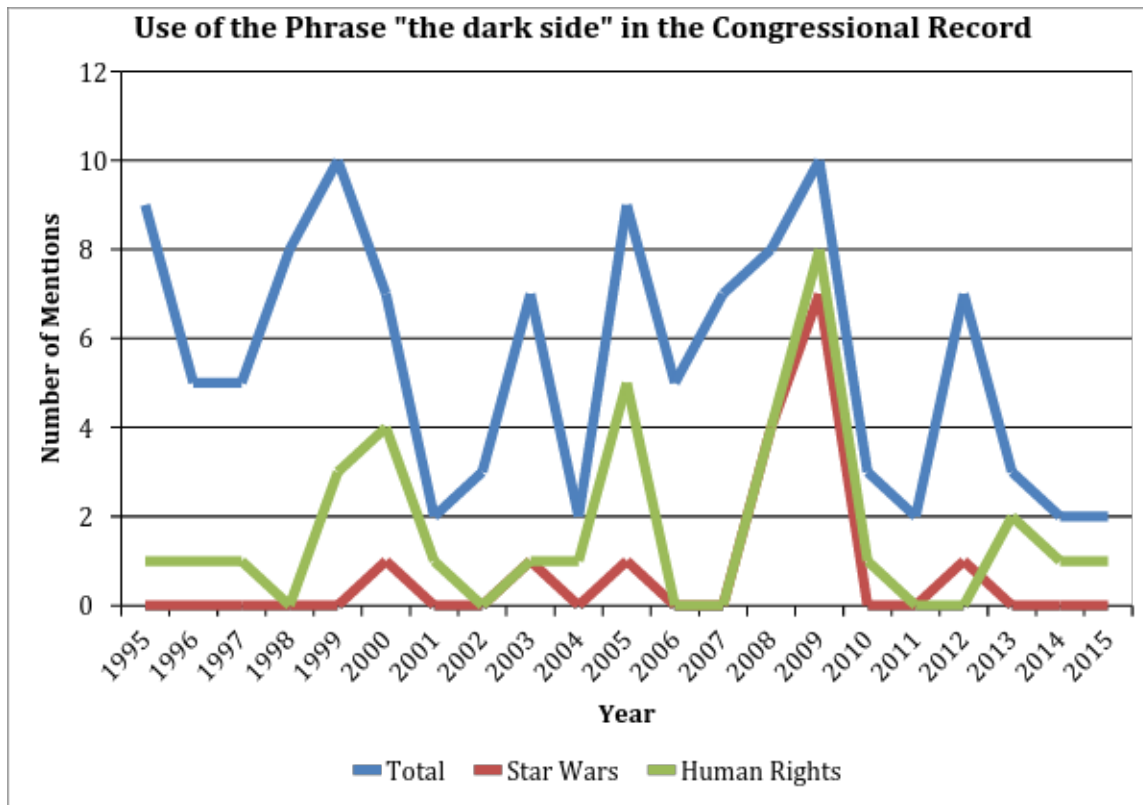
There are several examples in these few sentences of certainty and moral necessity. Between the first and second sentences, Cheney moves from uncertainty to certainty- “...I think this is going to be a struggle” versus “It’s going to require constant vigilance,” is a leap. “I think” allows for a high level of uncertainty- for example, I can think that something is going to happen, when in reality that thing never occurs. ‘It’s going’ (the shortened form of ‘It is going’) coupled with the phrase ‘certain vigilance’ implies a high level of certainty. Here, Cheney has moved from relative uncertainty about a struggle, to the near inevitability that an unbreaking, perpetual threat exists. Again, uncertainty about the threat exists, while certainty about the policy remains. Cheney also includes the modal terms ‘have’ and ‘require’. ‘Have to’ indicates a responsibility; we must complete an action. ‘Require’ indicates responsibility, but also power. If something is required of us, it is vital, necessary. Without it, something else cannot exist. In the referenced paragraph, Cheney is requiring Americans to support a substantial, global, militarized push. Without this push, we are led to believe that country’s destruction is imminent. Senator Palaptine referenced a similar idea in *Episode II- Attack of the Clones* when he says to Mace Windu, “I will not let this Republic, which has stood for a thousand years, be split in two.” Then, in *Star*

Wars: The Clone Wars: Senate Murders (#2.15), Palpatine says to Padme Amidala after the Senate and Senators are threatened, “How can we justify fortifying our security here in the Senate if we don’t also provide reinforcements on the front lines? You see, the victory of the clone army, for now, is the only thing that can lead us to peace.” This implication, that the only way to security and peace is through global or universal military might, is indicative of Cheney’s belief system – the existential threat (however vague and uncertain) of terrorists must be defeated by a global, unified military force and through the employment of dark, shadowy assistants, and dark, shadowy tactics.

“The Dark Side” as Metaphor by US Policymakers

We searched the Congressional Record of the past 20 years for references to “the dark side” and found 116 instances of that phrase (note: even when the phrase “the dark side” was used multiple times in succession, if all uses were in reference to the same topic, made by the same speaker, they were counted as one instance). Although the phrase “the dark side” is not unique to Star Wars, and was indeed used more generically, the majority of the instances to mean something more like “the unintended consequences” or “the downside,” the phrase was used in 15 instances explicitly making reference to Star Wars.³ Ten of those instances were specifically referencing the use of torture by the U.S. and Cheney’s invocation of the Star Wars reference. Thirty-three of the instances referred to human rights abuses more generally (including the 10 references to torture).

³ The phrase “the dark side” was also used jokingly (e.g. someone becoming a Senate staffer, or getting a Ph.D. in Political Science), as well as literally to refer to the dark side of the Earth in an anecdote about one of John Glenn’s spaceflights, as well as to describe parts of Alaska as resembling “the dark side of the moon,” and once in reference to the Pink Floyd album.



The use of the phrase “the dark side” has varied over time within the Congressional Record, but with regular explicit references to Star Wars, which suggests that the use of the dark side metaphor would resonate with policy makers, as well as the public. However, Cheney’s choice to refer to the U.S. going to the dark side diverges from the common use of that phrase as metaphor. Other references, either seriously or humorously, position “the dark side” as something morally abhorrent, unintended consequences that must be fixed. Instead, Cheney embraces the dark side, positioning it not only as a viable alternative, but as *necessary* for U.S. security. Rather than the role of Anakin Skywalker, he positions himself as Chancellor Palpatine/Darth Sidious, attempting to seduce the country into seeing the dark side not as equal, but as a legitimate choice, and the only way to accomplish our goals.

Cheney’s use of the Star Wars metaphor helped to trivialize the use of torture. Cheney embraced his “Darth Cheney” image. In 2007, while still in office, he dressed one of his dogs as

Darth Vader for Halloween, and his wife presented Jon Stewart with a Darth Vader doll, calling it “an old family heirloom” (NBCnews 2007). In 2011 he told radio host Laura Ingraham "I was honored to be compared to Darth Vader." (Miller 2011). Instead of being seen as evil, or an abuse of human rights, he played on the popularity of a character. Notably, Darth Vader not only tortures people (including Leia Organa and Han Solo) in the original trilogy, he commits multiple mass atrocities within the prequel trilogy (e.g. the massacre of the sand people, the murder of the younglings, order 66). In real life, he would be monstrous. But because he is an interesting and charismatic fictional character, popular culture can and does ignore the moral consequences of his behavior. By identifying his actions not with other human rights abusers, but with a popular fictional character, Cheney successfully avoided mass condemnation for his call toward the dark side for many years.

In 2008 and 2009, as President George Bush was leaving office, Democrats in Congress began seriously condemning the choice of the U.S. to use torture in response to the war on terror, and they specifically referenced Cheney’s 2001 speech in their condemnations:

Senator Feinstein: It is central to who we are as a nation. The question is whether the United States should continue to go to the “dark side,” down the road of torture, and continue to allow the CIA and other intelligence agencies to practice or outsource state-sanctioned torture. To me, the answer is clear, and I hope it is to everyone. The answer should be no. [...] Using torture cuts away from our moral high ground. It takes America into the “dark side,” and thus it reduces our ability to win this war. I believe we should end this now. (2008-02-13)

Senator Diane Feinstein was one of the most outspoken against the use of torture and explicitly pushed against the morality of “the dark side.” She positioned the U.S. national identity on the

light side, much as Luke Skywalker was tempted to the dark side by Darth Vader, but ultimately repudiates it as being counter to his identity as a Jedi. She also uses a call to the moral high ground, as well as a question of effectiveness in an attempt to declaim the use of torture.

Senator Sheldon Whitehouse: *Let's step back from the dark side, away from the grim tactics of tyrant regimes and into the light of our faith in America.* (2008-09-15)

Senator Whitehouse's argument follows a similar line of reasoning – that the US is ultimately not a tyrant regime and does not belong on the dark side, and that success will follow from returning/remaining on the light side.

Senator Levin: *In my judgment, the report represents a condemnation of both the Bush administration's interrogation policies and of senior administration officials who attempted to shift the blame for abuse—such as that seen at Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, and Afghanistan—to low ranking soldiers. Claims, such as that made by former Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz that detainee abuses could be chalked up to the unauthorized acts of a "few bad apples," were simply false. The truth is that, early on, it was senior civilian leaders who set the tone. On September 16, 2001, Vice President Dick Cheney suggested that the United States turn to the "dark side" in our response to 9/11. Not long after that, after White House Counsel Alberto Gonzales called parts of the Geneva Conventions "quaint," President Bush determined that provisions of the Geneva Conventions did not apply to certain detainees. Other senior officials followed the President and Vice President's lead, authorizing policies that included harsh and abusive interrogation techniques.* (2009-04-21)

Senator Carl Levin, responding to the declassified report of the Senate Armed Services Committee on the treatment of detainees in U.S. custody, fully acknowledges that the U.S. did go to the dark side. The report his committee released forced the U.S. to take responsibility for its choices, and identified Cheney's "dark side" speech as a critical element in the direction that the country decided to take after the September 11th attacks. However, he, along with other members of Congress, urged the country to take responsibility for its actions while on the dark side and move back into the light.

Embracing the moral message of *Star Wars* – that the Dark Side leads to destruction and suffering, which is morally unacceptable – our lawmakers pushed against Cheney's attempt to seduce the country to the dark side. The fact that they continued to use the metaphor of *Star Wars* in their arguments, shows the deep resonance it has with the American people, as well as their fellow policy makers.

Conclusion

Vice President Cheney was a controversial and complex character at the center of one of the most maligned policies in U.S. history; the decision to detain and torture thousands of suspected members of terrorist groups during the "War on Terror." These policies had all the hallmarks of themes consistently presented within the *Star Wars* movies, such as the desire for order over freedom, the moral dilemmas of terrible means for allegedly justifiable ends, and how fear and despair lead these desires to materialize and win out over the better angels of our nature. The parallels between Cheney's personal story and actions and those of Anakin Skywalker (Darth Vader) and Emperor Palpatine, are uncanny. Indeed Cheney has now embraced his relationship with Darth Vader, even having a custom tail hitch cover made in Vader's likeness (O'Connor

2015). We argue Cheney chose to reference “the dark side” in his interview with Tim Russert largely because the concept resonated with him and he felt it would resonate with the American people in a similar way.

In addition to resonating with him, we argue the evidence suggests that Cheney used the “dark side” interview to convey clear messages about power, hierarchy, and his meaning to the public and to other policy makers. This fits with existing theories about how popular culture, analogies, metaphors, and symbolism influences politics, namely as a vehicle for clearly conveying complex concepts--in this case the dilemma about whether to use torture and restrict civil liberties--to the public. Many Americans had sympathy for Cheney’s argument, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the attacks on 9/11 just as there are some Star Wars fans who identify with the Empire’s power to institute order in the galaxy. Moreover, the evidence also suggests that Cheney’s reference to the “dark side” was evocative for policymakers as well. The fact that it comes up many times in the congressional record of debates around how the War on Terror was waged indicates that Cheney’s selection of this metaphor made his argument powerful, in that it convinced his allies and enraged his detractors. Of course, whether or not Cheney was, on balance, more successful than not when he invoked *Star Wars* is, beyond the scope of this paper. However, this and many other questions related to the intersection of popular culture and politics makes it an area ripe for future research.

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