

## Foreign Policy and Political Possibility

### Abstract

This article explores the relationship between foreign policy and political possibility in two parts. First, the relationship between foreign policy and political possibility is theorised around three analytical moments: political possibility is linked to the framing of conceivable, communicable and coercive foreign policy. Second, this framework is developed and demonstrated through a brief analysis of Coalition foreign policy in the War on Terror, considering American, British and Australian foreign policy between 2001 and 2003. This analysis dissects distinct and divergent Coalition foreign policies through a linked three-part conceptualisation of political possibility. It enables an understanding of how the War on Terror was rendered possible through the construction of foreign policy in thinkable, resonant and ultimately dominant terms. The article concludes by looking to the wider analytical applicability of this particular theorisation of the relationship between foreign policy and political possibility.

### Introduction

Works considering political possibility generally afford significantly more time and space to discussions of the political than to issues of possibility (e.g. Goldblatt 1997). And while works considering political possibility and foreign policy are rare, when found, they tend to either replicate this political bias (e.g. Hill 2003) or reject the disciplining and constraining effects of (uncritically) linking 'foreign policy' to questions of political possibility (e.g. Walker 1993). There are two issues at stake here. First, the relationship of foreign policy and political possibility is more complex than accounting for various domestic parochialisms that might create 'deviations' from an assumed optimal state policy designed to best pursue an objective national interest. Second, it is of course right and important to contest the limiting effects that 'foreign policy' demonstrates as a category of analysis reproducing the geopolitical fictions of inside/outside (e.g. Campbell 1992; Dillon and Reid 2001). This fiction constrains the potential for alternative ways of thinking, talking and acting. Yet 'foreign policy' remains a sufficiently engrained 'phenomenon' to be seen as a 'social fact' with significant and far-reaching implications. This article therefore treads a third path, attempting not to reveal the contribution of 'foreign policy' (as an analytical category) to political impossibility, but rather to understand the relationship between 'foreign policy' and political possibility more comprehensively and fundamentally than existing debates (important as they are) concerned with the deviating effects of domestic parochialisms.

This article then is concerned with the relationship between foreign policy and political possibility. It is a relationship that has been central to debates about the nature and meaning of foreign policy since the mid 1990s. Taking these debates on the relationship between foreign policy and political possibility as its starting point, this article seeks to achieve two related aims. The article attempts to:

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank two anonymous referees for their excellent feedback on an earlier version of this article.

(i) conceptualise and theorise the relationship between foreign policy and political possibility; and (ii) develop and demonstrate this theorisation, by achieving an understanding of how the foreign policies of the 'War on Terror' were rendered a possibility. These aims are pursued initially through a discussion of political possibility oriented around key ontological and epistemological debates. Appreciating the discursive nature of foreign policy is a necessary starting point for foreign policy analysis and one crucial to the formulation of a research question capable of delivering a more comprehensive understanding of political possibility. From here, the article turns to consider the debates that have shaped our understanding of foreign policy and political possibility to date. This is done to retrace their insights, reveal their limitations and blind spots, and in order to ultimately bring them together in a new, powerful and necessary way. To this end, the work of Doty, Barnett and Krebs is discussed in turn in order to develop a three-part theorisation of the relationship between foreign policy and political possibility. This theoretical framework and the three analytical moments that comprise it are then developed and demonstrated through a discussion of Coalition foreign policy during the War on Terror.<sup>2</sup> Dissecting distinct and divergent Coalition foreign policy demonstrates the significance of its construction in thinkable, resonant and ultimately dominant terms for the political possibility of the 'War on Terror' and indeed foreign policy more generally.

### Asking Different Questions

Since the 1990s, debates concerning the relationship between foreign policy and political possibility have been approached by a number of IR scholars, usually dissatisfied with traditional approaches in the discipline. Roxanne Doty (1993) was the first to explicitly challenge the dominant research questions guiding social, political and policy analysis. Instead of asking *why*, she argued that IR should consider 'how possible?' This re-framing moved analysts away from a focus on a particular action or a specific decision to instead consider how that action or decision was rendered a possibility in the first place. Asking 'how' instead of 'why' ensured that analysis in IR was opened up to consider the construction of ideas and identities that enabled a specific decision to be taken and a particular course of action to appear reasonable, logical and ultimately imperative or even inevitable.

What Doty proposed was both novel and radical. It promised to shift the attention of social scientists away from the usual pursuits of so-called 'rationalist' approaches towards deeper, underlying and processual concerns. For Doty, the limiting impact of much IR analysis arose due to the fact that rationalist approaches attempt to explain state actions as *predictable* or even *probable* given a particular set of circumstances (Doty 1993: 298). These investigations as to *why* a certain policy was adopted take as unproblematic the *possibility* that such a policy could be decided upon and/or undertaken. For Doty then, asking 'why', as these approaches do, circumvents analysis of the ways in which the context for foreign policy decisions comes about. Asking 'why' takes as given the particular identities, interests and relationships that are themselves the 'result' of complex and contestable (i.e. deeply political) operations of power. The simple, elegant and powerful remedy Doty proposes is that IR should ask different questions in order to better understand these crucial operations of power.

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<sup>2</sup> The article analyses the foreign policies of the three principal members of the Coalition of the Willing – the United States, Britain and Australia – from September 2001 to mid 2003 is analysed.

In contrast to asking 'why', asking 'how' seeks to understand the way in which it became *possible* for a particular decision, policy or action to be undertaken. This possibility is inevitably reliant upon 'a background of social/discursive practices and meanings'; such a background 'makes possible the practices as well as the social actors themselves' (Doty 1993: 298). This background is taken as given by asking 'why', whereas asking 'how' understands this background as an indispensable element of political analysis. Asking 'how' interrogates that which rationalist approaches reify: 'the way in which power works to constitute particular modes of subjectivity and interpretive dispositions' (Doty 1993: 299). Thus for Doty and indeed for subsequent analysts sensitive to the discursive construction of a particular political context, the relevant questions became 'how did policy A become the only reasonable course of action?' and, 'how did policy A come to appear necessary and policy B unthinkable?' (Doty 1993: 297-8).

Doty's insights were bold and daring. She recognised that rationalist approaches are 'incomplete in an important sense' due to the suppositions they rely upon (Doty 1993: 298). Asking *how-possible* allows analysts to move beyond the confines of 'more conventional approaches to the analysis of foreign policy' to consider processes of meaning production, such as the discursive construction of particular subjectivities, that were fundamental to the fact a decision *could* be made and a specific policy adopted. This re-framing of the question opens a space for the analysis of foreign policy as a process of discursive construction, which is crucial to understanding how foreign policy might become politically possible in the first place, rather than prematurely jumping to considerations of why it was decided and acted upon.

### **Beyond Conceivability**

While groundbreaking, Doty's insights remain a crucial first step. Although enabling an exploration of processes of discursive construction, applying Doty's re-framing of the question, *on/in her own terms*, cannot tell the full story and comprehensively conceptualise the relationship between foreign policy and political possibility. Doty's portrayal of 'how possible' is equated and conflated with 'how thinkable'. This equivalence, while liberating analysts from the ontological and epistemological straightjacket of asking 'why', is in itself limited and limiting. This constraint is vitally important to overcome if we are to achieve a fuller understanding of the relationship between foreign policy and political possibility. It is evidenced in the re-framed questions Doty asks and her notable silences in answering them.

First, Doty seeks to understand how certain subjects and modes of subjectivity were constituted. This is an important and imperative undertaking that enables Doty to reveal the clusters of predicates attached to key actors and the binary presuppositions that undergird them. The ultimate subject positions constituted for the major players, Doty shows, served to make particular policies possible while others impossible. In her case study of US-Philippines relations, since for the United States to 'do nothing' would 'hardly make sense' it was ultimately 'not possible' (Doty 1993: 315). The significance and power of particular narratives of foreign policy discourse then lay in their ability to 'frame interpretive possibilities, create meanings and thereby naturalise a particular state of affairs' (Doty 1993: 314). Alternative narratives and an alternative foreign policy discourse may have, at the very least, made doing nothing a possibility. It could have made it *thinkable*.

Again, Doty's analysis is important, erudite and timely, but it leaves further significant questions unanswered and unanswerable because of the equivalence drawn between possibility and conceivability. While doing nothing may well have become impossible, it is not purely down to the construction of one particular discourse. It is down to the construction of one particular *dominant* discourse. Alternatives, if voiced, were drowned out or marginalised. Likewise, official narrations did not inevitably have to shape the contours of the politically possible. To do so, they had to resonate and mesh with the cultural terrain. It is unlikely that doing nothing was impossible in all contexts; but rather, doing nothing was rendered an impossibility in an American context for which dominant official narrations were skilfully and deliberately crafted. Audience and opposition matter: to ask 'how possible?' is not to ask 'how thinkable?' alone, as Doty's analysis ultimately does.

While conceivability is the most significant and analytically *a priori* consideration, it does not operate in isolation, it would not 'work' without considerations of audience and alternative, and it is intimately linked to the need for resonance and dominance. Understanding how a particular and contingent foreign policy becomes conceivable is an important and imperative analytical task, but it represents only one analytical moment in the relationship between foreign policy and political possibility. The broader question of 'how possible' and the process of rendering particular and contingent foreign policy possible must instead be re-thought to contain three analytical moments. Foreign policy must be conceivable, communicable and coercive. To answer 'how possible' it is necessary to ask three further, related and distinct questions: 'how thinkable', 'how resonant' and 'how dominant'. If Doty's work is most associated with the first, it is Barnett (1999) who has most informed the second and Krebs (2005) the third.

## **Resonance**

Barnett's work explicitly connects the political possibility of foreign policy to the process of framing discourse for a particular (national) target audience. This would seem to be an obvious consideration for any approach attempting to understand the relationship between foreign policy and political possibility. It is only necessary to consider the failure of President George W. Bush's foreign policy to resonate in many European states in the run up to intervention in 2003 to realise the importance of framing a resonant foreign policy for a specific target audience. Context and strategic agency are crucial components in the relationship between foreign policy and political possibility.

Doty, of course, is not alone in leaving questions of agency and audience unanswered and unaccounted for. Poststructural and discourse-analytic approaches such as the Copenhagen School's theory of securitisation have also been criticised for failing to acknowledge the role of resonance (e.g. Balzacq 2005). Speaking security is not doing security, unless those who are listening and for whom such utterances are intended accept it as such. Similarly, Richard Jackson, in *Writing the War on Terrorism* (2005), has delivered the most sustained and complete analysis of language and the 'War on Terror' to date. He provides an excellent analysis of the dominant discourses underpinning counter-terrorism policy at home and abroad. However, Jackson's work retains the limitations of Doty's conflation: in Jackson's analysis the possibility of the War on Terror is equated almost exclusively with its conceivability.

Like Doty, Jackson equates 'how possible' with 'how thinkable', exploring the processes of discursive construction, which gave rise to the particular and enabling ideas and identities that were central to the foreign policies of the War on Terror. This equation, however, means that Jackson has little to say on the second and third moments of possibility: how sold and how dominant. It is a limitation that partially accounts for the lack of a comparative focus in Jackson's work. He approaches the dominant foreign policy discourse of the War on Terror as a singular phenomenon, collapsing distinctions between British and American counterparts. Given his theoretical set up and normative aim, this is perhaps unsurprising. It means, however, that his analysis (while excellent) is not only reluctant to empirically trace distinct and divergent narratives, but is also theoretically unable to account for them and silent on their implications for the political possibility of foreign policy adopted under the rubric of a 'War on Terror'. In fairness, Jackson does highlight that discourses are never monolithic and that the transmission of words from 'speaker to listener' is crucial (2005: 19-20; see also Jackson 2005b; 2005c).<sup>3</sup> Constructing a set of interpretive dispositions – particular and contingent identities, meanings and relationships – is only enabling if those constructions are understood and accepted by a given population. Political possibility is not achieved in the utterance alone, but rather relies upon the resonance of particular narratives of foreign policy.

The need to move beyond conceivability is a recognition that has been made by numerous scholars engaged in the analysis of foreign policy. For example, Francois Debrix (e.g. 2003) has attempted to better conceptualise the processes of cultural mediation that are interwoven in understandings of the international. And on the borders of Geography and International Relations, scholars working in 'Critical Geopolitics' have been explicit on the need to theorise foreign policy as 'culturally embedded discourse' (e.g. Toal 2002; 2003a; 2003b; Dalby 1998; Toal and Dalby 2006). In similar if distinct ways, a cluster of scholars, identifiable through their links to the 'Minnesota School' of constructivist International Relations, have similarly contributed to attempts to move beyond conceivability. While Alexander Wendt remains perhaps the most widely known, the likes of Duvall, Laffey and Weldes have contributed to attempts to move beyond conceivability (e.g. Weldes et al. 1999; Weldes 1996). And Doty (2003; 2009) herself has in fact attempted to move beyond conceivability in her analyses of anti-immigrantism, the politics of exceptionalism and the role of desire in statecraft. However, it is Michael Barnett (1999) who remains synonymous with attempts to theorise the communicability of foreign policy and move beyond conceivability.<sup>4</sup>

Clearly, it 'would be extremely unlikely and politically unsavvy for politicians to articulate foreign policy without any concern for the representations found within the wider public sphere as they attempt to present their policies as legitimate to their constituencies' (Hansen 2006: 7). It is not possible for practitioners to construct and make possible *any* foreign policy. Rather, as strategic agents, Barnett has theorised that practitioners 'are constantly attempting to guide political mobilisation toward a particular outcome and for a particular goal by using symbols, metaphors and cognitive cues to organise experience and fix meaning to events' (Barnett 1999: 8-9). For instance, Jackson readily acknowledges that the act of going to war is so costly as to warrant extraordinary discursive effort to persuade audiences and populations of its necessity, virtue and practicality (2005: 1). This extraordinary discursive effort is rarely random in nature. While Jackson may be

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<sup>3</sup> However, on the former Jackson is eluding to sites of resistance, rather than alternatives or variants. And on the latter he focuses on the importance of reproduction within key institutions such as the media. Jackson's appropriately wide understanding of 'discursive practices' is useful, but discourses must do more than fit cogently with the existing discursive landscape.

<sup>4</sup> Doty and Barnett are also linked to the 'Minnesota School'.

correct that the foreign policy of the War on Terror helped to construct a new social reality – a new world – for Americans, it did so using carefully chosen narratives that were designed to persuade a population of key arguments. This is because ‘actors strategically deploy frames’ not only to: ‘situate events’, ‘interpret problems’ and ‘fashion a shared understanding’, but also and crucially to ‘mobilise and guide social action’ (Barnett 1999: 15).

The concept of framing is ‘critical for understanding the cultural foundations that make possible and desirable certain actions’ (Barnett 1999: 9, see also Toal 2003a; Toal and Dalby 2006). The ‘calculations of strategically-minded political elites’ are, of course, delineated by the domestic cultural and political context that shapes and guides ‘which narrative and frames are selected and become politically consequential’ (ibid). The context with which foreign policy practitioners are concerned is usually domestic as a function of democracy, but often is also far more specific than that as a function of the domestic political landscape of the time. The target audience for whom practitioners frame foreign policy is usually defined more narrowly than Barnett argues: it is usually defined more narrowly than the state as a whole. Rarely do foreign policy practitioners attempt to hail the entire population, but rather isolate and target key imagined constituencies. If foreign policy practitioners target domestic audiences as a function of democracy, it is a function of the domestic electoral landscape that ensures they target key audiences within that electorate.

Understanding political possibility then requires the identification of these key target audiences through an appreciation of the domestic political and cultural landscape. It also requires an analysis of the political and electoral strategies of instrumental foreign policy practitioners. It is this interaction of politician (as strategic agent) and the domestic political landscape (as strategically selective context) that determines the success or failure of the second analytical moment of political possibility (see Hay 1999; Jessop 2001); namely, whether or not foreign policy *resonates* and is, as a result, granted perceived legitimacy by an audience that could otherwise hinder or derail it.

Of course, framing foreign policy in ways that mesh with the cultural make-up of a particular target audience is important but not exclusively so. Alternative voices and oppositional groups will attempt to formulate and foster equally compelling and persuasive narratives. Silencing dissent is a crucial third analytical moment in the quest for political possibility. And to this end, sculpting a foreign policy that is not only conceivable and resonant but also dominant is an imperative task.

### **Dominance**

In comparison to increasing attempts to theorise communicability, the coercive nature of foreign policy remains relatively under-explored. However, good examples include, for instance, Janice Bially Mattern’s (2005a; 2005b) work on the representational force of foreign policy discourse and Ron Krebs’ attempts to understand how foreign policy becomes dominant: the third analytical moment within a broader understanding of political possibility (see Krebs 2005; Krebs and Jackson 2007; Krebs and Lobasz 2009).<sup>5</sup> Foreign policy becomes dominant when its particular framings remove the cultural and discursive materials that opponents might otherwise have access to in order to formulate a socially sustainable rebuttal. By setting the terms of debate and establishing certain

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<sup>5</sup> Krebs is another ‘Minnesota School’ constructivist.

meanings, foreign policy can be framed to acquiesce and co-opt potential oppositional voices, leaving them to contest minor, procedural matters rather than the fundamental direction of policy. For Krebs, this situation was apparent as Congressional Democrats opted to vote for intervention in Iraq in late 2002. Krebs argues that Democrats were rhetorically coerced such that their opposition was a political impossibility. This process of acquiescing potential opponents into a position of reluctant but voluntary support began a year earlier as the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> were framed in particular and contingent ways. These framings meant that, one year on, the terms of debate remained heavily stacked in the favour of the Bush Administration and ultimately, on assessing this unfavourable playing field, Democrats opted to swallow any lingering doubts and avoid the risks of adopting an oppositional stance.

Achieving a coercive foreign policy is not an inevitability. The influence of the bully pulpit, for example, does not guarantee official arguments will drown out oppositional voices. Yet the ability of practitioners to frame foreign policy in ways that make it very hard to contest is a crucial component of achieving a politically possible foreign policy. Frequently, the most powerful way of achieving a dominant foreign policy is through its framing in ways that link it irrevocably to national identity. When foreign policy, along with events perceived to be linked to international affairs, are articulated in ways that invoke a particular (and often widely shared and accepted) understanding of the national Self, it becomes particularly difficult to challenge the basic assumptions upon which any foreign policy debate would take place. In short, foreign policy becomes not something the state *does*, but rather what the state *is*; in such a situation, to contest foreign policy is often to contest a prevalent and popular understanding of the national identity.

Framing foreign policy in terms that link it to national identity is a prevalent and powerful political manoeuvre (e.g. Campbell 1992). If, for example, intervention is framed as the latest instance in a long history of heroically defending treasured values, and that framing resonates, the deck is already stacked in the favour of those advocating intervention. To challenge intervention on its own terms is extremely difficult, as it has become about what that state stands for and represents. To change the terms of debate is likely to, at best, be seen to present a weaker argument and, at worst, to fail to pay adequate respect to the foundational values of the nation and the historical sacrifices that have previously preserved them. Such a situation has been particularly evident in the political context of the War on Terror. To different degrees, all three principal participants in the Coalition of the Willing framed a dominant foreign policy by explicitly tying it to widely shared and accepted understandings of the national identity. Doing so ensured that foreign policy was rendered politically possible in a third analytical moment: foreign policy was enabled through its construction in dominant terms.

### **Foreign Policy and Political Possibility in the War on Terror**

Taken together then, I argue that the relationship between foreign policy and political possibility can be understood and empirically investigated through three analytical moments: to become politically possible, it is necessary to frame a conceivable, communicable and coercive foreign policy. During the War on Terror, from 2001 to mid 2003, official foreign policy was particularly hegemonic and unusually hard to challenge. Indeed speaking about 9-11 or the War on Terror was a potentially dangerous activity (e.g. Butler 2004).<sup>6</sup> To understand how the War on Terror was enabled and

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<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting, although I am reluctant to do so, that the dangers of speaking out continued as the 'war' progressed. In 2006, David Horowitz published a book titled *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous*

comprehend this one-sided political environment, it is necessary to consider political possibility in each of these moments. Accounting for the conceivability of the War on Terror alone would not do justice to the degree of resonance foreign policy achieved, the ways in which it acquiesced potential opponents or the importance of communicability and coercion for the very possibility of the War on Terror. To understand the political possibility of the War on Terror, we must invoke Barnett and Krebs alongside Doty. We must ask: how thinkable, how sold and how dominant?

(i) How Thinkable?

The events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 took place in the United States and it was in the United States that the War on Terror was subsequently born. The rush to fill the empty discursive space left by the fall of the Twin Towers, rather than commencing instantly, gathered pace in the days and weeks after 9-11 (Campbell 2001; Holland 2009; Nabers 2009). Initial attempts to place a framework of intelligibility around the events struggled to match the perceived significance of what had taken place. For instance, Frum recalls that Bush's evening Address to the Nation was a 'doughy pudding of stale metaphors' (Frum 2003, 127) that rehashed an inappropriate compassionate conservatism characteristic of a now ended era. It did not take long, however, for the meaning of the events to slowly harmonise across society, through an overwhelmingly top-down process of government-led narration (Lipschultz 2007). This process saw President Bush delve into the 'foreign policy archive' to draw on and rearticulate some of the policies and language of Clinton and Reagan's earlier wars on terrorism (Jackson 2005; Toal 2003b; Silberstein 2002; Croft 2006). 'Freedom' was said to have come under 'attack' in what was now declared to be no less than an 'act of war' (Bush 2001a). This was clearly not an obvious interpretation and it was not even one shared by those states most obviously seen to empathise with America.<sup>7</sup> British Prime Minister Tony Blair's presence in the Capitol, for Bush's Address to Congress on September 20<sup>th</sup>, was met with a drawled, 'thank you for coming, friend'. Yet, Blair did not replicate Bush's framing of 9-11. In Britain, 9-11 was framed as an attack on 'democracy' and, at times, on 'civilisation' (Blair 2001a; 2001b). Moreover, for Blair, it was not the acts themselves that were surprising, appalling as they were; rather, it was the *scale* of the loss of life (Blair 2001c). Similarly, Australian Prime Minister John Howard was actually in Washington as events unfolded and his intense displays of emotion and empathy were noteworthy (DeBats et al 2007; Gleeson 2008). Yet Howard also failed to share Bush's framing of 9-11. In Australia, 9-11 was framed as an attack on 'shared values' (Howard 2001a; 2001b).

These distinctions were important, but they all served to help make thinkable a particular, militaristic and interventionist response to 9-11. Discursive convergence helped to construct the politically significant notion that the United States was attacked because of who they are, not what they have done (Doig et al 2007). While this convergence was reached along different paths, whether for freedom, democracy or shared values, these constructions helped to naturalise a muscular mobilisation and deployment of armed forces to strike back, defensively but decisively, within the context of 'war'. They also all served to increase conceivability in a national context. Defending freedom, democracy and shared values made intervention conceivable in the US, UK and Australia respectively. While these arguments could be rotated, the fact that the political leadership

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*Academics in America*, which attempted to 'out', confront and silence academics seen to be presenting an insufficiently positive image of the United States and American foreign policy.

<sup>7</sup> It was, however, one that would continue to shape the War on Terror (from the American side) through to intervention in Iraq. Bush spoke of a responsibility and a privilege to fight 'freedom's fight' (Bush 2002a; 2002b).



in each state chose to emphasise that a different and distinct ideal had come under attack reflects the ability of practitioners to plug into the unique stock of cultural knowledge in each state. For instance, speaking of freedom in Britain would likely resonate far less effectively than in the cultural terrain of the American domestic political landscape.

Alongside distinct themes, Coalition states did converge around particular foreign policy narrations. The American-led metaphor of 'harbouring' was adopted in all three states to render intervention in the 'sovereign' state of Afghanistan conceivable, as a means to fight terrorism. Derek Gregory (2004) has effectively highlighted the ironies, leaps of faith and 'performances of cartography' entailed in this collapsing of a shadowy network into the territorial confines of Afghanistan. As Al Qaida, the Taleban and Afghanistan were conflated until slowly they became synonymous, 'harbouring' reached its apogee and intervention became not only an obvious course of action, but to fail to augment regime change was rendered unthinkable.<sup>8</sup>

Imagined as an empty, alien, backward space and explained through analogies to Nazi persecution, Afghanistan was constructed as a state accessible to a liberating intervention (Gregory 2004). Over-lexicalisation of a demonic Bin Laden, a perverse Al Qaida and a cruel Taleban, juxtaposed to the goodness of the Coalition, ensured that fighting 'terror' was readily understood as ridding the world of evil. Striking moral contrasts complemented the respective Coalition framings of 9-11 and helped to make a militaristic response conceivable. Taken together with the folding of Al Qaida into Afghanistan and the related conflation of Al Qaida with the Taleban, Coalition foreign policy discourse served to ensure that foreign policy was more than simply thinkable. In addition, as Doty has argued with respect to the US intervention in the Philippines, foreign policy was constructed in such a way as to render inaction inconceivable. This was done through foreign policies that converged around certain themes, such as 'harbouring', but were necessarily distinct and divergent in a number of important ways. These differences were crucial to the second analytical moment of political possibility: framing a resonant foreign policy.

## (ii) How Sold?

Despite significant cultural, historical and political overlap, the 'War on Terror' was rendered possible in American, British and Australian contexts in different ways, drawing on different discourses and narratives of foreign policy and identity. In the US, President Bush employed highly reductive moral arguments within a language of frontier justice, which was increasingly channelled through the signifier of 'freedom'. In the UK, Prime Minister Blair framed every phase of the 'War on Terror' as rational, reasoned and proper, balancing moral imperatives with an emphasised logical pragmatism. In Australia, Prime Minister Howard relied upon particularly exclusionary framings mutually reinforced through repeated references to shared values. There was a strong political (and electoral) logic to these framings that helped to ensure their communicability to key target audiences.

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<sup>8</sup> For example, through remarkable confluences evident in statements on Al Qaida, such as: 'In Afghanistan, we see their vision for the world' (Bush 2001c).

In the United States, the political strategy that saw Bush to office was concerned with ensuring he was not outflanked on the right. In two distinct ways he continued to target his political base during the War on Terror. First, through appeals to evil (Coleman 2003), Manichean binaries (Flibbert 2006; Panizza 2005) and a portrayal of Bin Laden as literally satanic (Croft 2006, 104; Frum 2003, 140), Bush attempted to tap into the culture of modern evangelicism that Karl Rove identified as crucial to mobilising the foot soldiers of the GOP. Bush framed his foreign policy, most bluntly, to plug into strong religious affiliations that he had readily identified himself with whilst running for the presidency. Second, Bush framed his foreign policy to resonate with an overlapping target audience broadly identifiable as 'Jacksonian America', sceptical of academic nuance and possessing clear views on the use of force related to a strong moral compass. Bush's frequent deployment of the language of frontier justice was a direct attempt to frame foreign policy in terms communicable to this audience (West and Carey 2006). Mining Wild West mythology, Bush spoke of routing terrorists, calling their hand and reining them in (Bush 2001b). Terrorists would be smoked out of their caves and encircled. It did not matter if they were captured or killed – Dead or Alive – as they had forfeited the protections of the law by virtue of having so very bluntly broken it (Mead 2002). The terrorists were quite literally out-lawed in this mode of talking and thinking.<sup>9</sup> And it was a framing that resonated with Bush's target audience- a constituency that had previously helped him to be able to claim to (just about) speak for a majority of the population.

In the United Kingdom, Blair's target audience was more narrowly defined and distinct from that of Bush's. In fact, Blair's political and electoral strategy was closer to Bill Clinton's than it was to the forty-third president's. New Labour had come to power by winning back the centre ground of British politics that the Conservative Party had previously laid claim to for eighteen years (e.g. Claven 2000; Gould 2000). This positioning was strategic and effective. Contrary to popular perceptions, Blair's foreign policy was not enabled solely through the political capital acquired in the electoral landslides of 1997 and 2001, but rather was made possible (in significant part) through its construction in terms that appealed to the key target audience of Middle England. To appeal to this mythical bulls-eye of British politics, Blair employed two recurrent and exaggerated themes: rationality and British leadership.

On the former, there were three strands to Blair's crafting of a reasoned, pragmatic and logical foreign policy. First, Blair invoked and constructed the rational nature of the British national identity. This was a direct appeal to British – and especially Middle England – self-perceptions. Justifying policy as the decisions and actions that any sensible, sane person would reach ensured Blair paid homage to the holiest of Middle England's Gods: Common Sense (Johnson 2002). Second, Blair argued that British interests were directly engaged: the threat to the UK was clear and a response was in the British national interest (Blair 2001d; 2001e). While this may sound like a commonplace strategy for foreign policy practitioners, Blair was unusual in that he actively and assertively portrayed a direct threat to British territorial sovereignty after 9-11. Appeals to rationality were backed up in the unusual British reliance on publishing information and intelligence in dossiers. The now infamous 'forty minute' claim – suggesting that an attack could be launched by Saddam Hussein against the United Kingdom within forty minutes – very directly placed Iraq within the construction of direct territorial threat and appeals to a hard-headed realist reading of the British national interest. Third, Blair attempted to wed the moralism of an explicitly 'ethical' New Labour foreign policy with an emphasised rationality. To this end, he presented an argument in which British foreign policy was not only moral *and* rational, but moreover that a mutually

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<sup>9</sup> Saddam Hussein would also later be portrayed as an outlaw.

reinforcing position had been reached transcending such false dichotomies. The compromise and reasonability of such a maneuver struck at the heart of a Middle England constituency suspicious of apparent extremes.

On the latter, Blair's second strategy was to invoke and embed contemporary foreign policy in a long history of British leadership on the world stage (Blair 2003a). Like Clinton's positioning of the Democrats in the US, Blair's re-articulation of the British Labour Party relied upon a particular discourse of globalization, which ensured that 'their' problems were seen to be 'our' problems (Blair 1999; Fairclough 2000). In this conceptualisation of the world, engaging was not optional; rather, internationalism was inevitable. The choice that remained, when dealing with issues that posed global ramifications, was simply whether to lead or follow. Blair again spoke of leadership in three ways to appeal to a Middle England constituency. First, he asserted that Britons should be confident in their identity and history of leadership (Blair 2002f). Second, a commitment to British leadership, Blair argued, would ensure that Britain once again took its place in a Coalition with the United States (Blair 2002g). Third, Britain would go further still, seizing the mantle of leadership on the world stage, beyond Coalition participation (Blair 2002h).

Rationality and leadership were emphasised to win over Middle England, but there are discrepancies in the literature concerning who 'Middle England' actually is. First, it is an imagined and constructed group that is in motion. And, second, it means different things to different people. Recently, and crucially as it is understood by Blair's New Labour, Middle England has been understood as the affluent residents of English market towns and suburbia. This is a more elite grouping than the median voters of social class C2 that were traditionally thought of as the heart of British politics. Crucially, Blair knew that to win the support of the former, through a resonant foreign policy, was to win the support of the latter by default and a politics of overshoot. Blair thus framed his foreign policy in unusually Conservative terms in order to win the middle ground of British politics and ensure a majority of the British public were on side. Although by the narrowest of margins, this was the case even on the eve of war in 2003 (Dunne 2008).

In Australia, John Howard framed foreign policy to resonate with two overlapping target audiences: so-called 'battlers' and disillusioned Hansonites (Brett 2003; Garran 2004; Wesley 2007). Howard's targeting of the former was so effective that the label 'Australian battlers' was increasingly used interchangeably with 'Howard's battlers'. As in the UK and US, this classification was far from an objective, stable political grouping. 'Battlers' were generally identified as those lower middle class and more affluent working class voters, naturally inclined to vote Labor, but concerned over issues such as immigration and social values. They were seen then as a similar political group to Reagan Democrats: less well off citizens, located outside of major metropolitan areas and holding socially conservative values. Concerns over immigration led to a significant overlap with, often disenfranchised, voters who had been sympathetic to Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party. Launched on a strong anti-immigration platform, Hanson had helped to establish immigration and cultural identity as important national issues from 1998. As her party and support rapidly fell away, the Howard Government were quick in their attempts to win back these disillusioned Hansonites.

Appealing to these two, overlapping audiences, Howard employed a number of strategies to frame a resonant foreign policy, by tapping into the cultural make up of battlers and Hansonites. First, the most obvious and explicit of these strategies revolved around a repeated emphasis on 'shared

values' (Howard 2001a; 2001b). Through appeals to 'shared values' Howard tapped into an enduring traditionalism, which stressed strong ties with culturally similar, great and powerful friends (Howard 2003a). In this imagining of the world, the United States and Britain were natural allies, who shared cultural, historical and institutional commonalities (Dyrenfurth 2007; Howard 2002c). In this imagining, Australia's natural home was located in the Anglosphere, not the Asia-Pacific. Second, closely tied to this framing were two important themes: 'mateship' and the notion of Australia as a 'Deputy Sheriff'. Australian foreign policy in the War on Terror frequently invoked widely understood narratives of mateship, incorporating Coalition allies within a wider, international imagining of the term (e.g. Dyrenfurth 2007; Holland and McDonald 2010). Deploying an important marker of Australian-ness at the level of an international coalition helped to sell participation to Australians who understood corresponding calls to show loyalty in the defence of deeply held mutual values. In this defence, Howard positioned Australia as an important (if junior) partner in the fight against terrorism, constructing an image of Australia as a 'Deputy Sheriff' to the United States. And third, these themes supported the more overtly and explicitly exclusionary framings that conflated immigration and terrorism and spoke of asylum in the language of national defence (Howard 2001c; Dyrenfurth 2005; McDonald 2005). All three helped to ensure that Australian foreign policy during the War on Terror was communicable to Howard's twin target audiences, both of whom harboured traditionalist cultural leanings and concerns over the impact of immigration in Australia. Again, whilst convergent ideas were evident in Coalition foreign policy – for instance in appeals to a 'West' based on shared values – divergent themes were central to crafting resonant foreign policy in distinct domestic contexts.

### (iii) How Dominant?

It has long been noted that 'America' is as much an idea as a nation. This unusual perception of not so much having ideologies but *being* one has made American politics and foreign policy a particularly dangerous and potentially exiling arena for debate (Hofstadter, cited in Huntington 1997). The fact that it is possible to be seen as un-American is unusual. It is much harder to become un-English or un-Swedish (Huntington 1997). This elevation of the role of ideas, mythologies and narratives in the formation of American national identity has long meant that American foreign policy can be exceptionally coercive. One only need think of McCarthyism at the start of the Cold War to bring to mind the shadows these events continue to cast on the War on Terror (Kennedy-Pipe 2007). Now, potential opponents of official government policy harbour fears of being seen as soft on Terror rather than Communism.

By framing 9-11 as an attack on freedom, motivated by pure evil, in particularly resonant terms, potential oppositional voices were acquiesced to support an interventionist and militaristic response. First, to oppose the foreign policy of the Bush Administration was to risk being seen to side with evil in a political context where evil was understood in both a literal and metaphorical sense. Second, to oppose the foreign policy of the Bush Administration was to risk being seen as not embracing and protecting the fundamental and foundational values of America. Since fighting terror had been successfully equated with defending freedom, to voice alternatives or to express scepticism was to risk being seen as not valuing freedom or lacking the will to take the measures necessary for its defence. It was a short step from failing to defend freedom to being deemed un-American or even anti-American. Such a situation was readily evident in lists of 'dangerous' (and usually liberal) academics who did dare to voice alternatives in a political context that had stacked the rhetorical deck against them (e.g. Butler 2004). In short, in the United States, opponents risked being marked as unpatriotic and even framed as a *threat* to America.

The hyper-masculinised response to 9-11 in the United States was not replicated in Britain. In the US, the determination to avoid being seen as weak on security after 9-11 manifest in Democratic attempts to out-do GOP counterparts in their willingness to confront the terror threat. In this respect it is unsurprising that John Kerry would wipe blood from his hands and attempt to be seen as an alpha male hunter at every opportunity, whilst opponents ran videos of an apparently effete windsurfing wimp (Faludi 2007). Blair, however, represented a very different masculinity to Bush (Johnson 2002). Centred on reason and intellectuality, British foreign policy was coercive of potential opponents in a different (and less effective) way than that of the United States. Blair's War on Terror was framed as both a rational, logical and pragmatic response to terrorism and an exercise in British leadership on the world stage. Hence, in the UK, opponents risked being portrayed as illogical, irrational and prepared to resign Britain to a position of irrelevance belying its history. It was, of course, the latter theme that acquiesced most acutely. Whereas Blair could attempt to position himself in a Churchillian light, opponents risked being seen as appeasers, embarrassed at a colonial past and consequently prepared to permanently remove the Great from today's Britain.

In the Coalition of the Willing, nowhere was the third moment of political possibility and the significance of a dominant foreign policy more apparent than in John Howard's Australia. Howard framed intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq as the latest instance of reluctant but willing sacrifice in war, in order to preserve treasured and foundational shared values (Howard 2002a; 2002b). This framing placed intervention as the latest instance in a long history of Australian participation in coalition-led wars and linked the War on Terror intimately to Australian national identity through the Anzac legend. This widely understood legend portrays the birth of the Australian nation and identity on the beaches of Gallipoli during World War One. John Howard went further than any previous Australian Prime Minister in his invocations of the ANZAC myth and in his attempts to locate the legend as a 'central narrative of Australian identity' (McDonald 2010: 288). The impact of this linking was so stark and so dominant that his successor was compelled to accept the centrality of the legend in a way in a way that his predecessor was not (McDonald and Merefieid 2010:187-8). And, crucially, opposition at the time were acquiesced to a position whereby the central premises of the War on Terror were accepted. For instance, former leader of the opposition Kim Beazley stressed the need for Australia to stand 'shoulder-to-shoulder' with Britain and the United States in order to 'root out and destroy terrorism' (Cited in Gleeson 2008; see also Holland and McDonald 2010, 199).

In terms of political possibility, framing foreign policy around a narrative and identity centred on sacrifice made arguing against the official government line particularly challenging. This difficulty can, of course, be expressed in a similar manner to the risks of being seen as un-American or of regretting a long history of British leadership. However, while intervention was clearly linked to what it meant to *be* an Australian and this 'essence' was dripping with clichéd stereotypes of masculinity, in an Australian context there was another dimension to the coercive nature of foreign policy. This additional coercive element can be understood through the term 'sacrifice trap' (see McCrisken 2010; Moyle 2010). This entrapment works as the perceived costs already expended in pursuit of a cause mean that calculations about incurring further costs are biased towards ensuring that losses have not been in vein. Moyle (2010) argues that Australian participation in the Coalition and perseverance with occupation in the face of apparent futility can be understood through this desire to ensure past sacrifices are reaffirmed and the gains they won are cemented in the present. This sacrifice trap then makes it difficult to talk of failing to defend the gains made by previous generations of brave and fallen comrades. Even more than British and American counterparts, Australian foreign policy in the War on Terror was coercive. Yet, as efforts to confront Terror

became bogged down in the quagmires of Afghanistan and Iraq, appeals to notions of sacrifice would serve to acquiesce oppositional voices in each Coalition state long after 2003 (see McCrisken 2010 on Obama).

## Conclusion

Rethinking the relationship between foreign policy and political possibility is an important task for International Relations and Foreign Policy Analysis. While the term 'foreign policy' continues to harbour limiting assumptions it is nonetheless an important analytical category that must be rethought, interrogated and engaged with directly. To this end, this article has argued that the political possibility of foreign policy should not be reduced to the conceivability of foreign policy alone. Rather, it is necessary to consider this conceivability as the first analytical moment of political possibility by asking: how thinkable? Second, for foreign policy to be politically possible, conceivability is inevitably complemented by communicability. Asking 'how sold' enables an understanding of the second analytical moment of political possibility: the construction of a resonant foreign policy. Practitioners are not free to construct *any* foreign; rather, they must frame foreign policy to appeal to key target audiences, which while usually domestic as a function of democracy are frequently also more narrowly defined as a function of the domestic political (and often electoral) landscape. The third and final analytical moment proposed to analyse political possibility concerns the construction of a dominant foreign policy. It is not only necessary for practitioners to frame a conceivable and communicable foreign policy, it must also be coercive of potential oppositional voices, acquiescing them to accept a position they might otherwise contest.

Developing, testing and demonstrating this understanding of foreign policy and political possibility, this paper has also been concerned empirically with examining how the 'War on Terror' was possible: how it was conceivable for policy-makers, how it was sold to domestic audiences and how it was silencing of alternatives. In the US, UK and Australia – the three principal members of the Coalition of the Willing – foreign policy was framed in thinkable, resonant and dominant terms. This relied on the framing of distinct and divergent foreign policy; the War on Terror was not a monolithic political discourse. These differences were fundamental to the political possibility of the War on Terror. They enabled foreign policy to resonate with key target audiences and to win the 'war of position' with competing alternative voices (Holland and McDonald 2009).

These are important insights for International Relations. Failing to account theoretically and conceptually for the second and third moments of political possibility has led to a veiling of the heterogeneity of the 'War on Terror' through a conflation of possibility and conceivability. The three-part understanding of the relationship between foreign policy and political possibility presented here enables the Coalition of the Willing to be opened up, distinct and divergent foreign policy narratives to be identified, and these differences to be understood in relation to the particular context of respective domestic political and cultural landscapes. This work also provides a basis for future research as a theoretical framework for the analysis of the political possibility of foreign policy. It is hoped that by adopting this conceptualisation of the relationship between foreign policy and political possibility in future research, richer analyses can be achieved that extend understandings of contingent and contestable meanings and identities to consider as well the ways in which those subjectivities are framed in communicable

and coercive terms that resonate with key target audiences and acquiesce potential oppositional voices. Better understanding the relationship between foreign policy and political possibility, it is hoped, might not only inspire fuller analyses of the political possibility of foreign policy but, in helping us to understand how foreign policy becomes possible, may also start to open space for its contestation or at the very least foster an appreciation of why such contestation is often so very difficult.

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