Selling the War on Terror: Foreign Policy Discourses after 9/11

Jack Holland
(University of Surrey)

j.holland@surrey.ac.uk
@DrJackHolland
Drjackholland.com
Main Argument

• The War on Terror was not a monolithic political project: it relied upon distinct and divergent foreign policy discourses within the Coalition of the Willing.

• These differences were absolutely crucial to enabling interventionism and making the War on Terror possible.
Main Theoretical Argument

• The possibility of a War on Terror was achieved through distinct and divergent foreign policy discourse in three analytical moments

• Foreign policy discourse in the US, UK and Australia was constructed in terms that made it:
  – Conceivable → made policy thinkable (e.g. Doty)
  – Communicable → made policy resonant (e.g. Barnett)
  – Coercive → made policy dominant (e.g. Krebs) to co-opt and acquiesce potential opponents
Main Empirical Arguments

• Despite significant cultural, historical and political overlap, the ‘War on Terror’ was rendered possible in British and American 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. This rationality was combined with resolution, as Blair emphasised a conviction for British *leadership* on the world stage.

  – In Australia, Prime Minister Howard relied upon particularly *exclusionary* framings mutually reinforced through repeated references to *shared values* and *mutual sacrifice in war*.
Literature
Organisation of the Book: “Chronology” of the War on Terror

1. FP as Culturally Embedded Discourse
2. FP and Political Possibility
3. Context: Before 9/11
4. 9/11: From Void to Crisis
5. Response: Afghanistan
6. Translation: Iraq
Theory 1: Language and Legitimacy: Foreign Policy as Culturally Embedded Discourse

- Foreign policy is **discursive**
  - Foreign policy as ...‘writing security’
  - ...‘writing the war on terrorism’
  - ...‘writing worlds’

- Foreign policy is **culturally embedded**
  - Cannot construct *any* foreign policy
  - Drawn from and framed to plug into a specific political and cultural context
  - Aimed at and inspired by particular groups, traditions and imaginations within the state
Theory 2: Agency, Audience, Alternative: Foreign Policy and Political Possibility

- **Language** matters
  - Doty: ask ‘how possible?’ (e.g. ‘how was the war on terror possible?’) to focus on a process of discursive construction rather than seek a root cause
  - Trace the writing of the world – the fixing of identities and meanings to parts of the world which make a particular foreign policy conceivable
  - But this only accounts for the first analytical moment of political possibility, answering ‘how thinkable?’

- **Legitimacy** matters (in democracies at least)
  - Failure to garner legitimacy can be debilitating for foreign policy and politician
  - 2\text{nd} & 3\text{rd} analytical moments: resonance (audience) & dominance (alternative)
  - Audience: Politicians actively target key population groups to win support
  - Alternative: Politicians actively attempt to silence potential oppositional voices

- FP of WOT as: (i) **conceivable**, (ii) **communicable** and (iii) **coercive**
Reading Foreign Policy as Culturally Embedded Discourse

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<th>How was the ‘War on Terror’ possible?</th>
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<td><strong>How thinkable?</strong></td>
<td><strong>How sold?</strong></td>
<td><strong>How dominant?</strong></td>
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<td>What are the themes, nodes and emphases of official foreign policy discourse?</td>
<td>For whom was it framed? Who is the target audience?</td>
<td>Whom and how does it marginalise?</td>
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<td>What ‘work’ are they doing?</td>
<td>What is the foreign policy culture of the target audience?</td>
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<td>What meaning is being produced?</td>
<td>What foreign policy tradition(s) and geographical imagination(s) inform that foreign policy culture?</td>
<td>How is the national identity invoked?</td>
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<td>What maps of international relations are being drawn?</td>
<td>How is the domestic political (cultural and discursive) landscape strategically selective?</td>
<td>How are issues linked to broader, accepted understandings?</td>
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<td>What foundational values are invoked?</td>
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Before 9/11: The American Context

• Of recent presidents, Clinton is usually most associated with the instrumental use of language
  – His approach to polling and framing policy was unique in scope and extent

• Despite initial appearances, Bush was equally adept at framing his foreign policy to appeal to a distinct American audience
  – Clinton targeted middle American and moderate independents
  – Bush’s political strategy was to ‘hold the right’

• Bush crafted an important, deliberate and distinct foreign policy discourse
  – Clear after 9-11
  – But already being formulated on the campaign trail in 1999
Bush’s America: The Jacksonian Tradition

• Bush explicitly counterposed Clinton’s foreign policy in three principal areas. Bush:
  1. Lamented Clinton’s *lack of strategic vision*
  2. Criticised a ‘permanent campaign’ presidential style
  3. Targeted the Clinton Doctrine on *the use of force*.

• Morality and values:
  – Conflates Clinton’s philandering with polling to produce an image of political deceitfulness
  – Emphasises ‘goodness’ and ‘duty’ appealing to the evangelical right and members of base (‘values voters’)

*Jacksonian Tradition*
Before 9/11: The British Context

• New Labour came to power emphasising a responsibility to act as ‘a force for good in the world’

• This ethical dimension had two centres:
  – Cook’s project tied to human rights
  – Blair’s project tied to ‘humanitarian’ intervention

• After Kosovo, Blair’s variant fleshed out as the doctrine of international community (e.g. Chicago Speech)

• Instrumental framing: to sell the normative argument for intervention, Blair employed a number of strategies to tie the issue to British interests and frame his language for a specific target audience
  – As Blair himself later reflected:
    • ‘[Whilst it was possible to argue that intervention in Kosovo] was an act of self-interest, in the sense that I think had we not intervened in Kosovo there would have been serious consequences for Europe as a whole. But I’m frank about it, that’s not what really motivated me during it ... To allow genocide to happen on our doorstep and do nothing about it would have been criminal on our part’
Middle England

- Blair’s principal target audience was **Middle England**

- To appeal to Middle England, he emphasised **rationality** and **leadership** in his foreign policy discourse.

- The former balanced the ethicality of New Labour foreign policy and the latter mined a popular, widely understood narrative and identity of British leadership:
  - Recognised that Middle England were deeply sceptical of extremes, favouring reasoned arguments that follow common sense, middle ground consensus and pragmatism.
  - Appealed to romanticised images of a glorious imperial past, to which Britons could now return guilt free.

- Both themes would be crucial to Blair’s foreign policy discourse during the ‘War on Terror’. 
Before 9/11: The Australian Context

- Elements of Howard’s foreign policy discourse:
  - The **national interest**
  - From geography to **history**
  - Australian (western) **values**

- Elements of foreign policy culture:
  - **Fearful** geographical imagination
  - **Traditionalism**

- Target audiences:
  - **Battlers** \(\rightarrow\) akin to Reagan Democrats (former ALP, rural, resentful of impact of globalisation on jobs)
  - **Hansonites** \(\rightarrow\) disillusioned One Nation voters
9/11
Void to Crisis

- In America, 9-11 induced a ‘discursive void’ related to a particular American security culture:
- Constructed as a moment and marker of *crisis*:
  - E.g. act of *war*, moment the world changed etc
  - Anthrax attacks read as confirmation of emerging WoT

- In Britain a language and understanding of terrorism already existed:
  - E.g. Blair emphasised *scale* of 9/11 as shocking

- In Australia, the ‘void’ that followed was highly mediated by an enduring Hobbesian geographical imagination
  - 9-11 read as further proof that the world beyond Australian borders was dangerous → the *latest in a long line of external shocks* (E. Asian Financial Crisis, East Timor etc)
  - Tied in with asylum and immigration debates e.g. boat people and MV Tampa
The American War on Terror: Frontier Justice

• American foreign policy discourse after 9-11 was notable for the direct and indirect influence it took from Wild West mythology, including notions of ‘frontier justice’

• Bush emphasised three themes:
  – ‘Hunting down’ terrorists
  – Bringing them to justice
  – Literal outlawing:
    • Declaring them beyond the protection of the law because they had broken it:
      ‘there are no rules of war for [them]’ … ‘they’re nothing but a bunch of cold blooded killers and that’s the way we’re going to treat them’

• Finding humour in the deaths of terrorists was one of many accentuated appeals to Jacksonian America that came to the fore precisely because of the desire to win electoral support e.g. 2002 Congressional campaign speeches:
  – ‘We've hauled in over a couple of thousand of them. Like number weren't as lucky. In either case, they're not a problem to the United States’
The British War on Terror: Rationality and Leadership

• Rationality and leadership were brought front and centre in British foreign policy discourse to maximise resonance with ‘Middle England’

• There were three components of a ‘rational’ British response. Blair:
  1. Asserted the government response was logical, reasoned and pragmatic to craft a particular British identity
  2. Portrayed a direct threat to British territorial sovereignty
  3. Used a ‘not only, but also’ discursive strategy to wed ‘realism’ and ‘moralism’

• Building on New Labour’s discourse of globalisation, there were three components of British ‘leadership’:
  1. British identity:
    Britons should ‘not let these events shake our confidence in ourselves, in our country and in our way of life ... the most important thing is that we carry on with confidence’
  2. Participation in the Coalition:
    ‘we were with you at the first. We will stay with you to the last’, ‘we in Britain will play our full part, we will not walk away’
  3. Unashamedly taking the lead on the world stage:
    ‘the mantle of leadership’ should be seized by Britain ‘at this difficult time for the international community’
The British War on Terror: Rational and Resolute

• Twin themes were frequently combined, multiplying discursive force.
  – Blair argued of the need ‘for cool heads, for calm nerves, and for an absolute and fixed determination to see this thing through’:
    ‘This is therefore the time for courage, for leadership, for taking the decisions necessary to achieve what any sensible sane person acting with reason and justice wants to see ... The cause is just, the strategy is there, the determination is there, and there is a complete and total commitment to making sure that this is a battle in which we will prevail. And we will; I have no doubt about that at all’.

• The conviction rhetoric of British leadership was politically enabling – it embedded foreign policy within the British cultural terrain:
  – Appealing to the foreign policy culture of Middle England, drawing upon popular and enduring beliefs of the importance of Britain in world affairs
  – Making opposition difficult by positioning alternatives as opting to reduce the UK to irrelevant, cowardly bystander
The Australian War on Terror: 9/11 and Afghanistan

• Emotion:
  
  ‘I think it is important that countries like Australia play a role in identifying ourselves with the Americans. I mean, just because you are big and strong doesn’t mean that you can’t feel lonely and you can’t feel that your heart has been ripped out. And I think that it’s very important, therefore, that Americans know that they have got some really good, reliable friends’

• Shared values:
  
  ‘[T]hat attack of eleventh of September was as much an attack on Australia as it was on America. It not only killed Australians in the World Trade Centre, but it also assaulted the very values on which this nation is built’.
The Australian War on Terror: Iraq

• Mateship:

‘Most of all, we value *loyalty* given and loyalty gained. The concept of *mateship* runs deeply through the Australian character. We cherish and where necessary we will *fight to defend the liberties we hold dear*’

‘We resolve to work ever closer together to *root out evil*, we resolve ever more firmly to *extend the hand of Australian friendship and mateship* ... We are Australians and Americans and others *together* in the campaign *against evil*’

• ANZAC myth/legend:

‘You are seeking to bring to the people of Iraq, who have suffered so much for so long, the hope of liberty and the hope of freedom, and your example, your behaviour, your values, belong to that great and *long tradition* that was *forged on the beaches of Gallipoli* in 1915’

‘We are *fighting now for the same values the ANZACs fought for in 1915*: courage, valour, *mateship*, decency (and) a willingness as a nation to do the right thing, *whatever the cost*’
Conclusions

• The **political possibility** of the War on Terror was contingent upon its construction in particular terms and specific ways.

• **Divergent foreign policy discourses** within the CoW were necessary to sell the foreign policies of the WoT.

• Distinct discourses were necessary to craft foreign policies that were:
  
  – **Conceivable**: constructing the world in particular ways, which enabled interventionist policy
  
  – **Communicable**: framing foreign policy instrumentally to resonate with different target audiences
  
  – **Coercive**: Silencing potential opponents by inhibiting the production of a socially sustainable rebuttal
Current Projects

- Obama’s Foreign Policy: Ending the WoT
- Affect (with Ty Solomon)
- Memory and narrative forgetting (with Lee Jarvis)
- Libya – “rhetorical balancing” (with Sir Mike Aaronson)
- Blair’s Ghost (with Laura Chappell)
- Next: Traditions of intervention (US and Aus)