

Jack Holland, draft version of:

From Void to Crisis: From September 11th 2001 to 9-11

Introduction

This chapter marks the start of the substantive analysis of how the ‘War on Terror’ was possible. It assesses the role of foreign policy discourse in the immediate post 9-11 period, through a consideration of the notions ‘void’ and ‘crisis’. It does so by exploring the impact of the events of 11 September 2001 and the start of the ‘War on Terror’ in the unique American context. The chapter focuses on the interplay of the cultural and discursive context with the (perceived) events themselves, as well as the agency of politicians and the public to generate meaning. The simple fact that the ‘War on Terror’ was begun in the United States is an important reminder of the significance of the American context. The events of 9-11 took place in the US and the ‘War on Terror’ was born through the words of politicians situated within (a uniquely stunned) American society. The decision that faced British and Australian practitioners was not whether to launch a ‘War on Terror’, but whether or not to join the US-led coalition. As the principal member of the coalition, founder of the ‘War on Terror’ and location of the ‘terrorist attack’ that inspired it, the unique American experience after 9-11 requires elaboration if we are to understand how the ‘War on Terror’ was possible.

This chapter does not follow the comparative approach of subsequent chapters. It does however move us towards an understanding of how the ‘War on Terror’ was possible and facilitates the comparative analysis that follows. Here, it is simply not possible to explore public reactions in the UK and Australia way as the US as the data simply does not exist. Limited limited insights can be drawn from media and (archived) internet sources (alongside official language) to indicate that such an exploration might not necessary. Although shocking, Britons and Australians did not experience the events of 11 September 2001 in equally personal or incomprehensible ways.¹ Instead, as the following chapter will argue, the British response articulated

¹ See, for example, the British National Archives internet archive; the Australian National Archives Pandora Archive; and archived material in the Library of Congress ‘Witness and Response’ collection.

that the *scale* of 9-11 was shocking, rather than the existence of terrorism or the successful striking of a Western nation. This can be understood in respect of a British foreign policy culture that is familiar with the experience of terrorism in a way that the US is not.² Thus, in Britain, an existing language for comprehending terrorism ensured a highly mediated ‘void’.³ Similarly, in Australia, 9-11 was ‘read’ through a longstanding Hobbesian geographical imagination: 9-11 was *further proof* that the world beyond Australian borders was dangerous. For Australians, having recently survived the Asian financial crisis and intervention in East Timor, 9-11 was the latest ‘shock’ to the West and the Anglosphere of which Australia was intimately a part. These differences are picked up on in chapter 5, where we return to a comparative empirical investigation. Here, however, it is imperative to investigate the complex relationship between American politicians, the media and society with regards to the events of 11 September 2001. The ‘War on Terror’ was, after all, born in these moments in this state.

This chapter attempts to ‘soften’ the hard break in history that official foreign policy discourse has written into ‘9-11’, whilst taking seriously the ethical task of recognising the experiences and voices of ‘ordinary Americans’. The chapter begins by introducing the terms ‘void’ and ‘crisis’, addressing some important if misplaced criticisms of the former, and restating the centrality of issues of agency, resonance and culture to the analysis. The chapter is subsequently organised around the moments of ‘void’ and ‘crisis’. The first half of the chapter investigates and theorises the nature of the post 9-11 ‘void’ in two principal stages. Firstly, the investigation of the ‘void’ begins by exploring the unusually personal nature of 9-11 and the possible reasons it may have both been experienced as such at the time and constructed as such afterwards. Secondly, the theorisation of the ‘void’ continues by considering the pre-existing ‘truths’ of American security culture that were seemingly shattered on the morning of 11 September 2001. This half of the chapter thus explores the American contextual (cultural) condition – characterised by a lack of organising discourses – in which the official and successful narration of 9-11 would occur. I argue that the void

² See, for example, Kleinfeld, ‘Strategic Troping’ and Erjavec, K., and Volcic, Z. “‘War on Terrorism’ as a Discursive Battleground: Serbian Recontextualization of G.W Bush’s Discourse’, *Discourse and Society*, 18:2, (2007), pp.123-37 on processes of ‘contextualisation’ in Sri Lanka and Serbia.

³ See also, Kleinfeld, ‘Strategic Troping’, on the pre-existence of language capable of subsuming the events of 9-11.

was characterised by a lack of harmonised meaning in the immediate aftermath of 11 September 2001, due to the failure of language and a particular American cultural context. Where partial meanings were achieved they were often highly individualised, with viewers frequently drawing on popular cultural sources and latent understandings.

Having explored the ‘nature’ of the void, its impact is assessed. It is argued that the discursive vacuum not only heightened the significance of attempts to frame foreign policy, but also that the ‘nature’ of the void enabled, shaped and constrained attempts by politicians and the media to frame events. Crucially, the initial incomprehensibility that characterised the void was seized upon as 9-11 went from being *incomprehensible* to *inexplicable*. The second half of the chapter thus considers the first stage of the framing process – the construction of 9-11 as crisis – drawing on the work of Jenny Edkins, Stuart Croft, Colin Hay and Gerard Toal. It is argued that through the construction of crisis – through a decisive intervention that re-established ‘politics’ over ‘the political’ – the events of 11 September 2001 became ‘9-11’, whereby 9-11 serves as a somatic marker of crisis. As a somatic marker, ‘9-11’ circumvents possibilities for critical reflection or debate, bringing to the fore a range of highly reductive tacit geopolitical assumptions and arguments. That 9-11 might seem self-evidently to be a moment or marker of crisis is something that must be made strange. In tracing and theorising the shift from void to crisis, this section thus serves to denaturalise the first and prerequisite stage of the response to 9-11, enabling an understanding of how the ‘War on Terror’ was possible and opening a critical space for its contestation.⁴

⁴ The chapter draws extensively on quotations taken from interviews – held in the Library of Congress’ Folklife Center’s ‘Witness and Response Collection’ and ‘September 11, 2001, Archive’ – that were conducted with ‘witnesses’ in the days and weeks after 9-11. These interviews were conducted by an extensive network of amateur, semi-professional and professional folklorists, ethnographers and anthropologists throughout the US. They detail the experiences of the US general public from 11 September 2001 to 1 November 2002. The collection extends well beyond November, but this paper focuses on the early stages of the framing process and the thoughts of the US general public. While it should be noted that, of course, the sample does not claim to represent a cross-section of US citizens, a demographically, socially and geographically diverse range of interviewees are represented. Interviewees were contacted by the Library of Congress Folklife Center, using the same model that was implemented after Pearl Harbor in an attempt to document the feelings, thoughts and opinions of the general public. All direct quotations are taken from the collection, with references given to the cassette number in the Library of Congress catalogue.

Time and 9-11

There are two common responses to 9-11. Firstly, the notion that 9-11 was a date on which everything changed.⁵ Secondly, the notion that 9-11 was a date on which nothing changed at all.⁶ Time then seems to be central to thinking and talking about 9-11, even when temporal conceptualisations are left implicit. These two antecedent tendencies are prevalent amongst both the official responses of practitioners and media framings but also in the reflections of academic analyses.⁷ However, for the vast majority of the US general public in the wake of 9-11, once the initial confusion began to be replaced with harmonised meaning, 9-11 clearly represented a temporal rupture. Noting this, two principal concerns are investigated and addressed throughout the chapter. Firstly, the chapter deals with issues of agency – both of practitioners and the media but importantly also the general public – considering issues of framing and resonance in an unusual post 9-11 context that was both selective and informing. Secondly, the chapter considers issues of temporality and rupture at a cultural and discursive level; the cultural shock and discursive failure 9-11 induced during the ‘void’ and the strategic writing of temporality in the construction of 9-11 as crisis.⁸

The term ‘void’ suggests a ‘phase’ and connects to wider debates on the temporality of 9-11. The notion of the ‘void’ represents the immediate post 9-11 confusion experienced by the vast majority of ‘viewers’ as language failed to adequately or consistently regulate the meaning of the unfolding events.⁹ It does not imply, as critics of the term may suggest, that there existed a *total* lack of meaning after 9-11. Rather, it suggests a lack of homogenised meaning, governed by relatively systematic

⁵ Frequent references were made to this by foreign policy practitioners. In his Address to Congress, President Bush noted that, on September 11th, ‘night fell on a different world’. Bush, George. W. ‘Address to Joint Session of Congress and the American People’, 20 September 2001.

⁶ Time Magazine published explicitly on these two competing interpretations. A. Sullivan, ‘Yes, America has changed’, and M. Elliott, ‘No, America has not (thank God)’, *Time*, 1 September 2002.

⁷ For discussion, see, L. Jarvis, ‘Times of terror: writing temporality into the War on Terror’, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 1:2, (2008), pp.245-262, at pp.245-246.

⁸ The notion of ‘void’ derives from David Campbell’s recognition of a ‘void in meaning’. It implies a lack of homogenised meaning. As will be argued, fragmented and individualised meanings of 9-11 were evident during this period, but there existed a void in meaning at a discursive level. The notion of the void should not detract from the multitude of individualised meanings that many viewers initially attached to 9-11. See Campbell, ‘Time is Broken’.

⁹ The term ‘viewers’ incorporates those who experienced the events either at the scene or on television, whether live or repeated.

meaning production: a *discursive* void. The term also raises the question of ‘uniqueness’. Can other events be described as inducing a ‘void’? Do *all* events lead to a process of meaning generation that characterises a void, perhaps as a result of their inevitable lack of essence? While other events may generate a void, it is an unusual condition requiring the perception of disproved cultural ‘truths’. In this, 9-11 was arguably unique and at the least very unusual. It was the first time in sixty years that Americans had witnessed their vulnerability, at the hands of an external enemy, on their own soil.

Although it is possible to state that the void generally began once viewers had ‘witnessed’ the events, it is not possible to state when the void ended; it ended at different times for different people. For some, it ended abruptly; for others, it was replaced slowly as comprehension gradually became possible. Attempts to fill the void, frame events and load 9-11 with meaning began almost immediately as news channels ran suggestive rolling headlines.¹⁰ On the evening of 9-11 President Bush delivered his first ‘considered’ articulation of what would become the dominant ‘War on Terror’ discourse. At this time, even Bush was struggling to find the words to create a compelling narrative.¹¹ By 20 September, however, building on the growing and solidifying official response discourse, Bush was able to deliver a crucial and compelling framing of 9-11 as crisis, simultaneously filling the events with meaning and articulating the solution to the underlying morbid condition they represented. As such articulations began to resonate with the population,¹² the incomprehensibility of 9-11 that characterised the void was replaced by the harmonisation and hegemony of meaning production that characterised the construction of 9-11 as crisis. In articulating 9-11 as crisis, the act of its construction was erased from memory and the void it filled was partially forgotten as it was retrospectively re-imagined.

It is imperative to de-objectify and ‘soften’ the constructed temporality of ‘9-11’ as rupture, revealing the writing of discontinuity that the discursive construction of 9-11 as crisis entailed. It is also imperative, however, to question and refute the notion that

¹⁰ See, Lipschultz, ‘Framing Terror’, for discussion and a rebuttal of arguments that claim the media led in the narration of 9-11.

¹¹ See Frum, *The Right Man*, p.125.

¹² As evidenced by the increasingly widespread articulation of official arguments and even the use of exact phrases first mobilised by government practitioners.

nothing changed on 9-11. Arguably, to imply such a scenario fails to acknowledge the agency of those viewers – the US general public – who experienced considerable trauma on 9-11. A genealogical approach, tracing discursive continuities from Clinton’s (and earlier presidents’) employment of pre-emptive arguments through to the language of the ‘War on Terror’, would risk overlooking the significance of the context that informed the selective and strategic re-articulation of such earlier arguments. This is not to argue that the void was a natural, objective condition. Rather it is to argue that the void was an organic *cultural* condition that logically followed from events which existing discourses failed to regulate. Had US foreign policy culture and/or discourse been different, the void may well have not occurred. But given the existing US security culture and the failure of language to adequately ‘manage’ 9-11, it is unsurprising the events generated a void within which the construction of 9-11 as crisis would have to occur.¹³

Within the context of the void, the agency of politicians, the media and the general public was brought to the fore. The agency of the media and foreign policy practitioners was especially crucial in framing 9-11 given the lack of competing discursive structures.¹⁴ The dominant framings of the events and the construction of 9-11 as crisis were not inevitable, but instead relied on the strategic agency of foreign policy practitioners and the media. The agency of the general public was similarly significant, initially as the level of meaning production shifted to the individual – with ‘latent narratives’ emerging as the dominant sense-making mechanism – and increasingly as ‘viewers’ evaluated cultural expectations with reference to emerging official framings of 9-11. While startlingly widespread, resonance was not unanimous. Important dissenting voices were heard. As stressed in chapter 2, in a democracy such as the US, going to war is such a costly exercise that it requires

¹³ A security culture is a shared body of assumptions, belief and norms, as well as associated practices, related to the security of the state and/or other social actors. Security cultures are thus ‘patterns of thought and argumentation that establish pervasive and durable security preferences by formulating concepts of the role, legitimacy and efficacy of particular approaches to protecting values. Through a process of socialization, security cultures help establish the core assumptions, beliefs and values of decision-makers’ and the general public about ‘how security challenges can and should be dealt with’ and, more fundamentally, about what *is* a security challenge or what is likely to become one. This definition is developed from Williams, P. ‘From Non-intervention to Non-indifference: the Origins and Development of the African Union’s Security Culture’, *African Affairs*, 106:42, (2007), pp.253-279, at p.256.

¹⁴ Barnett argues that framing takes on heightened significance where numerous competing discourses are evident. It is equally important to note the increased pertinence of framing when there is a lack of competing discourses. See, Barnett, ‘Culture’, pp.5-36; and chapter II of this thesis for discussion.

‘widespread public consent or at least acquiescence’.¹⁵ Official framings drew upon the cultural condition of the void and widely understood foreign policy traditions to, very effectively, maximise popular resonance. As the construction of 9-11 as crisis gained popular resonance, harmonising and regulating the meaning of the events, the void was filled and 9-11 retrospectively became a moment the world changed.

Void

Failure of Discourse

Why is it that analyses of 9-11 so often begin with personal reflections and recollections of the events which unfolded that day?¹⁶ It is unusual for academic analyses to begin in such a way. Firstly, perhaps, it is because the (immediately perceived and retrospectively afforded) scale, significance and nature of the events are such that 9-11 is a date for which people can recall what happened, where they were and their personal experience of the day. Crucially, however, this importance has coupled with an explanation of 9-11 founded on the (paradoxical) assumption that the events are inexplicable. Diken and Lausten lament the fact that 9-11 has been elevated to a level of Absolute Evil, similarly to the Holocaust.¹⁷ This elevation places the events beyond the potential for understanding. Once regarded as pure evil, analysing and explaining 9-11 is seen as futile, impossible and even as apologising for the conduct of evil.¹⁸ It is thus possible to see how, in the weeks and months after 9-11, attempts to understand the events became equated with a lack of US patriotism.¹⁹ Perhaps in implicit anticipation of a cacophony of disapproving voices, citing a lack of patriotism (the ultimate post 9-11 sin), authors have attempted to circumvent criticism by proving that they too recognise that the events cannot be understood

¹⁵ See Jackson, *Writing*, pp.8, 20 on resonance.

¹⁶ See, for instance, John Lewis Gaddis’ opening account of the day and Laura Shepherd’s article, which begins by recalling her whereabouts on 9-11. Gaddis, *Surprise*; Shepherd, L. ‘Visualising violence: legitimacy and authority in the ‘war on terror’’, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 1:2, (2008), pp.213-226.. In critical geopolitics, see, Agnew, ‘Not the Wretched’.

¹⁷ Diken and Lausten, *The Culture of Exception*.

¹⁸ On the political implications of naming ‘evil’ see, for example, Krebs and Lobasz, ‘Fixing the Meaning of 9-11’, pp.427-429.

¹⁹ This has been widely discussed in discourse-oriented works analysing the ‘War on Terror’. See, for example, Butler, *Precarious Life*.

through objective analysis and that they must revert to the smallest scale of understanding, the individual, in order to recreate the events of 9-11. In short, because (as will be shown) 9-11 has been constructed as inexplicable, analyses have tacitly recognised this through an unusual tendency to begin academic inquiry with personal accounts and recollections of the day.

Secondly, analyses of 9-11 are personalised because that is how the events were 'lived'. 9-11 was not widely foreseen; it came as a shock to the American people and the watching world.²⁰ Established truths of US security culture were disproved as symbols of US political and economic strength were successfully targeted. Witnessing large-scale carnage on US soil invalidated notions of anarchy and chaos existing outside of America. Whether the outside had permeated the inside – and history had returned to the US – or the inside was turning in on itself was not immediately known.²¹ This incomprehensibility, the lack of certainty over what the events were – what they meant, symbolised and implied – arose due to the difficulty, and often impossibility, of subsuming the events within existing frameworks of intelligibility.

The *lack* of appropriate discourse(s) to make sense of 9-11 in its immediate aftermath meant that where cues were taken they came from unofficial sources and 'lower' levels of cultural life. Religion, films and personal forms of knowledge were drawn upon as viewers struggles to comprehend 9-11 took place at the level of the individual in contrast to the more commonplace intersubjective understandings that are produced through discursive regularities. As Hansen summarises, discourses regulate the production of meaning in a relatively systematic way where language becomes comparatively stable.²² Unable to be incorporated into existing discourses, the events of 9-11 were quite literally 'unspeakable': language failed.²³ Personal understandings substituted for the lack of a discourse capable of persuasively articulating the events

²⁰ 'Shock', 'shocked' and 'shocking' were repeatedly used by interviewees to describe the events of 9-11. Gaddis uses the word 'surprise' to encapsulate the unexpected nature of events; Meyer uses the analogy of the US as an island; while Crockatt compares 9-11 to the shock experienced at the end of the Cold War. Gaddis, *Surprise*, p.1; Meyer, *DC Confidential*, pp.182-207; Crockatt, *America Embattled*, ch.1.

²¹ For instance, Croft talks of the violence of the (foreign) outside spilling into the (domestic American) inside. Croft, *Culture*, p.37.

²² Hansen, *Security*, pp.18-23.

²³ Steinert, 'Unspeakable September 11th', pp.651-665.

and fixing a shared meaning. As Callahan et al. argue, ‘in lieu of a clearly posited narrative, human thought is structured by the latent narrative that emerges from the individual’s underlying story about the way the world operates. Thus one’s own latent narrative emerges as the sense-making mechanism if no other coherent narrative is proffered’.²⁴ These latent narratives drew upon personal experiences alongside wide and varied popular cultural sources in an attempt to inscribe meaning onto events.²⁵ Personal accounts of 9-11 and the heightened use of popular cultural sources to generate meaning thus reflect the fact that both the media and political elites fell silent in the face of an event which could not readily be incorporated into pre-existing foreign policy discourse(s). Succinctly, personal accounts are symptomatic of the discursive void induced by 9-11 and the subsequent re-construction of that void, which occurred with the elevation of 9-11 to a position of Absolute Evil as part of the articulation of crisis.

Silence and Security Culture

‘Suddenly, a sleek silvery flying object appeared from the left-hand side of the TV screen, approaching the other Twin Tower. Before the eye could recognize it as a passenger airplane (or even if it did, the mind obstinately refused to acknowledge it), it violently penetrated the upper third of the building and disappeared in a red-orange-and-black ball of fire surging against the crispy blue autumnal sky’.²⁶

The official assessment of 9-11 records the fact that the events could happen as ‘a failure of imagination’.²⁷ Arva recalls that even as the events unfolded they were hard to imagine. Firstly, for ‘viewers’, this generated disbelief: “I couldn’t believe it”,²⁸ “I didn’t believe it at”.²⁹ Secondly, it inspired denial:

²⁴ Callahan, K. Dubnick, M. and Olshfski, D. ‘War Narratives: Framing Our Understanding of the War on Terror’, *Public Administration Review*, 66:4, (2006), pp.554-568, at pp.562-563.

²⁵ See Croft, *Culture*, for a detailed account of how popular cultural sources were used to fix the meaning of 9-11.

²⁶ Arva, E. ‘Life as Showtime: Aesthetic Images and Ideological Spectacles’, *Perspectives on Evil and Human Wickedness*, 1:2 (2003), p.64.

²⁷ Kean, T. and Hamilton, L. *The 9-11 Commission Report: final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, (New York: Norton, 2004).

²⁸ Melody, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR202, 18 September 2001).

²⁹ Branden Hayden, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR086, 20 September 2001).

“I was overwhelmed. It seemed like something from a movie. It could not be real; it had to be something from a movie ... I knew it was real, but a part of me didn't want to believe it”.³⁰

“[I]t couldn't be true, it had to be Hollywood”.³¹

Having ‘no correspondence in the existing discourse of the time’, events were met with a mixture of disbelief and denial.³² This led to a situation in which, although clearly significant as they contradicted the widely held view that the US was ‘exempt from this kind of violence’,³³ the events could not be articulated and were thus relatively meaning-less. As one interviewee described it, “the weight of imagining” was too great; there were no words:³⁴

“It was unspeakable”.³⁵

“What stands out is the lack of information that's being given to the media, by the media, to the people”.³⁶

“[It] made it difficult to talk ... speaking clearly wasn't really happening at that point, it was very difficult”.³⁷

The effect of this inability to articulate the events – to place them within an existing foreign policy discourse – was to prevent an understanding of them. Confusion, numbness and a void in meaning dominated the immediate experience of 9-11 for many watching Americans:

“[It was] so unbelievable that it didn't want to sink in”.³⁸

“At first I wasn't angry, because I couldn't believe what was happening”.³⁹

“I felt nothing because I couldn't understand”.⁴⁰

Where partial understandings were achieved, rather than from foreign policy discourse, they were generally taken from popular cultural sources. Science fiction,

³⁰ Hays Ginn, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR087, 27 September 2001).

³¹ Hunter Farrell, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR321, 22 October 2001).

³² Peker, E. ‘Following 9-11: George W, Bush's Discursive Re-articulation of American Social Identity’, unpublished thesis, Department of Management and Economics, Linköpings Universitet, (2006), p.34.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Hunter Farrell, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR321, 22 October 2001).

³⁵ Dan Hiller, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR381, 15 September 2001).

³⁶ Adeel Merson, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR381, 15 September 2001).

³⁷ Naree Bisson, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR144, 11 October 2001).

³⁸ Karl Day, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR101, 2 October 2001).

³⁹ Daniel Dominguez, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR247, 8 October 2001).

⁴⁰ Kyoko Sato, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR247, 16 October 2001).

horror shows and movies, as well as songs, poems and religious faith were all drawn upon to fill the events with meaning.

“[It was] so sci-fi”.⁴¹

“[M]y mind went to ‘War of the Worlds’”.⁴²

“I didn’t believe it at first ... I was waiting for the lights to go up and some director to say ‘cut’ or something. It was like out of a movie; like Independence Day”.⁴³

“It was like something out of a horror show”,⁴⁴

Citizens turned to personal levels of understanding and popular cultural sources of meaning due to the lack of prevalent discourses capable of adequately articulating the events. “[I]n countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, the media are a part of the *co-production* of security discourse.”⁴⁵ “In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, however, commentators struggled to establish adequate historical frames of reference, that is, to place ‘media templates’ over the unfolding coverage to shape explanations”.⁴⁶ In fact, the incomprehensibility of 9-11 was *reinforced* by the media, through images (on television, in newspapers and magazines of witnesses to the event ‘looking speechlessly... in lieu of language’.⁴⁷

‘Voiceless’ images and the media hush more generally were compounded by elected representatives as a ‘strangely ominous silence filled the discursive space where political declarations were expected’.⁴⁸ 9-11 fell outside of prevalent existing discourses; it could not easily be subsumed within the definitions, parameters and storylines of existing frameworks of intelligibility. Both the media and political elites refrained or were unable to place the events into a meaningful and coherent discourse; thus, the two principal (and expected) generators of meaning fell silent. This lack of an appropriate language, the silence of elected representatives and the resulting

⁴¹ Lucas Anderson, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR375, 13 September 2001).

⁴² Hunter Farrell, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR321, 22 October 2001).

⁴³ Branden Hayden, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR086, 20 September 2001).

⁴⁴ Amy Bauch, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR380, 18 September 2001).

⁴⁵ Croft, *Culture*, p.388.

⁴⁶ Hoskins, A. ‘Temporality, Proximity and Security: Terror in a Media-Drenched Age’, *International Relations*, 20:4, (2006), pp.455-466.

⁴⁷ Morris, R. ‘Images of Untranslatability in the US War on Terror’, *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 6:3, (2004), pp.401-423, at pp.401, 404.

⁴⁸ Agnew, *Geopolitics*, p.61.

sparsity of background understanding for witnesses to contextualise the events left Americans ‘baffled’.⁴⁹

John Troyer, writing only seventeen days after 9-11, encapsulates the nature of the void and the feeling that ‘September 11 strode onstage without lines, without script, without character’.⁵⁰

‘I have read the same story, in different news sources, attempting to create a language that adequately describes the events. While every term imaginable to describe violence, death, grief and anxiety is still in use by most Americans, the words are not helping to make sense of the situation ... this persistent repetition of language [generates] a frustration about the inability to accurately define a 17-day-long stream of transient information.

The language of everyday life seems entirely irrelevant given the inability to even categorize Sept. 11, 2001, as anything other than Sept. 11, 2001 ... Sept. 11, 2001, is a singular day that resides in the present without a proper name, embedding no specific meanings other than that words do not adequately articulate the shock ... The accustomed uses of language to make impossible events seem real for the American public via television, newspaper and radio sources are breaking down.’⁵¹

Troyer’s article is incredibly erudite given the general lack of critical analysis that existed in the immediate wake of 9-11.⁵² With hindsight, Troyer raises three important points. Firstly, Troyer recognises that attempts in the media to cover and understand events fuelled incomprehensibility. As the Bush administration set about narrating the response, and constructing crisis, ‘incomprehensibility’ became a widely accepted feature of 9-11 and was incorporated into the official foreign policy discourse of the response. The void – as a void in meaning – was actually *used* in the construction of the response as, through foreign policy discourse, 9-11 went from being *incomprehensible to inexplicable*. Secondly, in noting the breakdown of ‘the accustomed uses of language’, Troyer highlights the failings of ‘official politics’ and

⁴⁹ ‘It has been argued elsewhere that, before the 9/11 attacks, U.S. news media lacked “a language” for terrorism’ and that the ‘failings of elites’ left Americans ‘baffled’. See Schudson, M. ‘What’s unusual about covering politics as usual’ and Carey, J. ‘American journalism on, before, and after September 11’, in Zelizer, B. and Allan, S., *Journalism after September 11*, (London: Routledge, 2002), pp.19, 76, cited in Lipschutz, ‘Framing Terror’, p.23.

⁵⁰ Lincoln, Y. ‘Performing 9-11: Teaching in a Terrorized World’, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10:1, (2004), pp.140-159, at p.140.

⁵¹ Troyer, ‘Language Fails’.

⁵² For a notable exception see Lakoff, G. ‘Metaphors of Terror’, (Chicago UP, 2001), www.press.uchicago.edu/News/911lakoff.html.

the shift to ‘the political’ that 9-11 wrought.⁵³ Thirdly, Troyer’s use of ‘Sept. 11 2001’ is striking in its unfamiliarity. The dominant shorthand abbreviation has become (an almost universally adopted) ‘9-11’. ‘9-11’ has come to act as a somatic marker of crisis.⁵⁴ Before turning to explore the second and third points in theorising the construction of crisis, the first observation requires further elaboration.

The void that 9-11 created resulted from two primary factors: the shattering of the foundational myths of US security culture and the resulting silence of both the media and political elites. ‘Violence of this magnitude collided with, and mutually excluded, almost two hundred years, the subconscious reality and awareness of being isolated from a chaotic world.’⁵⁵ The security culture of the US has propagated a belief in invulnerability. Sheltered behind two vast oceans,⁵⁶ the US as a self-perceived ‘island exempt from this kind of violence, witnessing it only from the safe distance of the TV screen’ became ‘directly involved’ on September 11th, 2001; ‘old security seemed to be momentarily shattered’.⁵⁷

The shattering of American security culture was foremost in shaping the reactions of the general public to 9-11. As interviewee Eric Offner noted, the experience of 9-11 “has to be set off against what one has been conditioned to”.⁵⁸ People were “completely shocked it was a terrorist attack”⁵⁹ precisely because Americans “had no contact with that”.⁶⁰ The fact that 9-11 occurred *in America* was what generated much of interviewees’ incomprehension:

“I can’t believe it ... it’s happening here, in the US. You see these things out there, but not here in your own country”.⁶¹

“I’m still in a state of shock; I don’t believe this could happen on American soil”.⁶²

⁵³ Edkins, J. *Poststructuralism & International Relations: Bringing the Political Back In, Critical Perspectives on World Politics*, (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999), p.2.

⁵⁴ Toal, G, “‘Just out Looking for a Fight’: American Affect and the Invasion of Iraq”, *Antipode*, 35:5, (2003), pp.856-870.

⁵⁵ Peker, ‘Following 9-11’, p.33.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Gaddis, *Surprise*, on distance and US security culture.

⁵⁷ Zizek, S. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (London: Verso, 2002), pp.49, 45.

⁵⁸ Eric Offner, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR280, 18 October 2001).

⁵⁹ Anon.

⁶⁰ Jenny Fan, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR247, 18 October 2001).

⁶¹ Jorge Vila Senior, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR015, 11 October 2001).

“[Y]ou know in our country we have never been actually threatened, except for one time”.⁶³

Americans were accustomed to seeing images of chaos, violence and terrorism ‘out there’, but not ‘here’. American security culture located the dangers of anarchy away from the US both geographically and historically. Often, images of 9-11 were greeted with spatial or temporal distancing, perceived either as “news from some other country”⁶⁴ or with the assumption that “it was something in history”.⁶⁵ Although witnessing the destruction of the Twin Towers and the Pentagon on fire, the events remained difficult to comprehend, as no overarching official discourse existed to fix meaning to them. Rather, US security culture was dominated by an illusion of invulnerability that had flourished during the ‘interwar years’ following the Cold War.⁶⁶ ‘The indispensable nation’ was increasingly accustomed to enjoying the confidence and security of its ‘unipolar moment’. This confidence culminated in the myth that the US was untouched and untouchable.⁶⁷ 9-11, interpreted accordingly, destroyed that myth, and shattered the truths of American security culture.

“I did not really believe it because we live in the United States and basically the whole concept of living in the United States is freedom, living in a very sheltered world where you just never would think of a war, or attack ... I have always felt safe in America ... [now] I don’t know if I could necessarily say if I am safe ... a lot of people in America were feeling so secure, they were feeling like the US is invincible ... we are not invincible ... we need to get out of our bubble and realise that we are just in the same ballpark as everyone else”.⁶⁸

“[I] couldn’t believe it; these are people, these are Americans ... Americans think we’re invulnerable, we’re like superman, you know? We’re too good for that ... we, as anyone else, can be affected by these events”.⁶⁹

“[T]his has made everyone open their eyes ... We are not invincible”.⁷⁰

“We no longer appear to be chosen people. We are just as susceptible to mass devastation as any other part of the world”.⁷¹

⁶² Travis Farley, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR242, 13 October 2001).

⁶³ Dan Hiller, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR381, 15 September 2001).

⁶⁴ Victoria Castello, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR321, 19 October 2001).

⁶⁵ Neil Waters, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR025, 27 October 2001).

⁶⁶ Choller, D. and Goldgeier, J. *America Between the Wars*, (New York: Perseus Books, 2008).

⁶⁷ “I feel spoiled; that I’ve been a spoilt American ... we’re an untouched, unspoiled culture”. Monroe Grayson, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR327, 1 November 2001).

⁶⁸ Amy Bauch, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR380, 18 September 2001).

⁶⁹ Christa Thomas, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR086, 20 September 2001).

⁷⁰ Josh Moe, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR380, 18 September 2001).

That such enduring, deeply held assumptions about the nature of American security were so obviously disproved caused widespread alarm and made talking of the events difficult. ‘The emergence of events which could not be domesticated, symbolised or integrated within the discourse’ caused both foreign policy practitioners and the media (the two expected sources of meaning) to fall silent.⁷² However, as the response was formulated this incomprehensibility – the impossibility of incorporating 9-11 into the logic of an existing foreign policy discourse – was seized upon. The media and foreign policy practitioners worked in symbiosis to transform an incomprehensible event into an inexplicable event. 9-11 went from making no sense, to being beyond any justification and impervious to understanding. As Morris summarises:

‘Repetitious broadcasting also made [the events] resistant to analysis. Saturating every television screen, they seemed to testify only to the incomprehensibility of the event/image. This was quickly mobilized for ideological effect, so that the incomprehensibility of the image/event also became a way of conveying the idea that the terrorist act is that which exceeds moral calculation ... the event quickly became its image, and questions of causality were consequently deferred along with the need for reading. The substitution was made possible by virtue of those other substitutions on which photographic logics rest: of appearance for truth, of what can be seen for what can be known.’⁷³

The manipulation of the void by foreign policy practitioners and the media in the discourse of the response is an important and infrequently acknowledged move. Where scholars, such as Diken and Lausten, do criticise the policing of ‘acceptable knowledge’ of the events, rarely are the initial factors that gave rise to this situation considered.⁷⁴ The context of the void – as a void in meaning – provided the situation in which such a construction was possible. Drawing on the widely perceived belief that 9-11 defied existing understandings (of America, the world and their relationship), the construction of 9-11 confirmed that the events were indeed beyond the parameters of understanding. By transforming 9-11 from an incomprehensible

⁷¹ Lucas Anderson, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR375, 13 September 2001).

⁷² Peker, ‘Following 9-11’, p.33.

⁷³ Morris, ‘Images’, p.405.

⁷⁴ Diken and Lausten, *The Culture of Exception*.

event to an inexplicable attack, numerous features of the response were naturalised.⁷⁵ This transformation was one, particularly important, framing of 9-11 that underpinned a series of subsequent discursive moves. These moves helped to render a contingent response common sense and began by reaffirming the mastery of politics over the political by constructing 9-11 as a somatic marker of crisis.

Crisis

Reinstating Politics

‘Politics’, for Jenny Edkins, marks the arena of ‘elections, political parties, the doings of governments and parliaments, the state apparatus, and in the case of international politics, treaties, international agreements, diplomacy, wars, institutions of which states are members and the actions of statesmen and women.’⁷⁶ ‘The political’, on the other hand, ‘has to do with the establishment of that very social order which sets out a particular, historically specific account of what counts as politics and defines other areas of social life as *not* politics’.⁷⁷ ‘September 11 *has* been one of these situations of *the political* that suspended, though temporarily, the stable arena of *politics*’.⁷⁸ For Peker, the 9-11 void saw ‘the disintegration of discursive structures, social meanings, and subject positions; where *hegemonic intervention* to rearticulate them surface[d] as an urgent necessity’.⁷⁹ It was, for Peker, ‘the moment of global crisis overcome by the act of founding a new harmony’.⁸⁰ This interpretation, however, belies the construction that resides in the identification of crisis; constructing a crisis was, in fact, the first stage of the response, not the condition upon which the response was

⁷⁵ For example, by constructing 9-11 as an attack, a militaristic and interventionist response was naturalised, and by constructing 9-11 as inexplicable, questions over causes were rendered unnecessary absolving US foreign policy itself of any potential for blame.

⁷⁶ Edkins, *Poststructuralism*, p.2.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Peker, ‘Following 9-11’, p.4.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*; see also for an analysis that confirms the homogenisation of meaning with time from 9-11, Traugott, M., and Brader, T. ‘Patterns in the American News Coverage of the September 11 Attacks and Their Consequences’, Harvard Symposium ‘Restless Searchlight: Terrorism, the Media & Public Life’, 28 August (2002); and Traugott, M., and Brader, T. ‘Explaining 9-11’. In *Framing Terrorism: The News Media, the Government, and the Public*, edited by Norris, P. K., M. Marion, R., (London: Routledge, 2003).

formulated. Moreover, it was only with the founding of a new ‘harmony’ – the articulation of a new trajectory – that 9-11 was retrospectively constituted as crisis.

‘The concept of ‘crisis’ is most welcome in this sense because it represents a situation in which our everyday beliefs of how the world works are rigorously disrupted by an event that is out of our control. In that sense, it can be compared to trauma, i.e. a situation that is hard to describe and yet demands to be communicated: ‘... it is outside the frameworks of normal social reality and thus outside the linguistic and other symbolic tools we have at our disposal for making sense of the world’’.⁸¹

This ‘demand to be communicated’ and the ‘urgent necessity’ of articulating are central to an understanding of 9-11 as crisis. It has been argued that 9-11 generated a discursive void as the events could not readily be subsumed into existing foreign policy discourse. However, 9-11, in and of itself, was not a crisis. Initially unregulated by discourse, the ‘events’ did not mean anything for certain. Instead 9-11 *became* a crisis through a process of discursive construction which reinstated ‘politics’ over ‘the political’. Crises, I argue, are constructed.

Using Edkin’s terminology, 9-11 was a ‘political moment’. A political moment is a founding, open and contingent moment in which the political order and community are constituted. In this moment ‘acts’ are foundationless: they are just ‘acts’.⁸² Crucially, however, the constructed meaning of ‘acts’ and the newly forged political reality are veiled in the writing of history; the openness of the interregnum ends with the re-establishment of politics over the political and this re-establishment demands the process of establishing becomes retrospectively invisible.⁸³ To become invisible, foundational myths of the new political reality must be widely accepted.⁸⁴ With such resonance, the ascription of meaning to acts, the re-establishing of politics over the political and the very contingency of the interregnum are forgotten. Re-opening the contingency of the 9-11 void is an important step to understanding how the new political reality of the ‘War on Terror’ was possible; it requires an appreciation of the process of constructing 9-11 as a crisis, a process which filled the ‘acts’ with meaning and, crucially, articulated the solution.

⁸¹ Edkins, J. ‘Forget Trauma? Responses to September 11’, *International Relations*, 16:2, (2002), pp.243-256, at p.246, cited in Nabers, ‘Culture’, p.307.

⁸² Edkins, *Poststructuralism*, pp.7-8.

⁸³ Edkins, *Poststructuralism*, p.8.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*; and see Jackson, *Writing*, pp.8, 20 on the need for foreign policy acquiescence or approval.

So what is a crisis? 9-11 was not, self-evidently, a crisis. 9-11 *became* a moment of crisis. However, as I have argued, 9-11 did herald a discursive void as the ‘American post-cold-war security order discourse collapsed under the new challenge’ and the ‘expected sources’ of meaning fell silent.⁸⁵ Despite the silence that followed such a stark disproving of the previously perceived certainties of US security culture, 9-11 ‘demanded resolution through a new understanding’.⁸⁶ This demand was met through a ‘discursive shift ... initiated by those with social power [and] reproduced by others’.⁸⁷ The new policies of the ‘War on Terror’ were set under way not by the ‘acts’ or ‘events’ of 9-11 themselves, but through the discursive construction of 9-11 as crisis by those with social power. Elected representatives, as foreign policy practitioners, acted as issuers of statements in a Foucauldian sense; they acted as ‘experts’ whose words spoke truth. These statements drew on each other, supported each other and together comprised a logical and coherent system of statements that regulated meaning in a coherent way.⁸⁸ This system of statements (an emerging and solidifying discourse) proffered foundational myths and meta-narratives capable of subsuming the events, re-constructing the political order and the political community. All of this was crucial to the unfolding ‘War on Terror’. It belies, however, the double articulation at the heart of the initial construction of 9-11 as crisis: the simultaneous identification of both the problem and the solution. 9-11 was a political moment; sovereignty, which had been so bluntly put into question through the use of illegitimate violence, was reasserted and performed. It was also, however, retrospectively constituted as a moment of both dusk and dawn,⁸⁹ 9-11 became an historical moment, a moment of crisis, when events marked the end of one era and the start of the next. 9-11 was interpreted and constructed as a day when the world changed.⁹⁰ Articulating this change and the new era required a decisive intervention, without which 9-11 could not have been constructed as a crisis.

⁸⁵ Croft argues that ‘pre-existing narratives about internal security and external alliances suddenly seemed fraught with contradictions and failure’. Croft, *Culture*, p.55.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p.54.

⁸⁸ See Hansen, *Security*, pp.18-23 on defining discourse as discussed in chapter II of this thesis.

⁸⁹ Repeated references were made to the end of the post Cold War peace and the end of an era of American innocence by practitioners and the media. Such framings were embedded within more general narratives such as that of the myth of the reluctant superpower. On dawn and dusk see Hay C. ‘Narrating Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the ‘Winter of Discontent’’, *Sociology*, 30:2, (1996), pp.253-277, at p.255, who uses the term ‘dammerung’ or ‘twilight’.

⁹⁰ For instance, Bush, George. W. ‘Address to Joint Session of Congress and the American People’, 20 September 2001.

Decisive Intervention

The term ‘crisis’ is frequently deployed, rhetorically rich and attention grabbing; it ‘has an immense lay, media and academic currency’.⁹¹ However, the term is also ‘illusory, vague, imprecise, malleable, open-ended and generally unspecified’.⁹² Hay suggests that the term’s ubiquity may even derive from ‘this notorious imprecision’.⁹³ In social and political academic literature, the term is frequently understood as ‘an accumulation of contradictions’.⁹⁴ To understand crisis as a process and product of discursive construction, Hay turns to consider the etymology of the term in an attempt to ‘inject some (long overdue) conceptual clarity’.⁹⁵ Tracing ancient Greek usage of the term, Hay notes that crisis was invoked to describe ‘the moment in the course of the disease at which it is determined whether the patient will recover’.⁹⁶ Thus the ‘contradictory constellation, is however, held to represent an opportunity for a healing transformation’.⁹⁷

Crisis appears perhaps most frequently in Marxist, neo-Marxist and post-Marxist state theory.⁹⁸ It is here that crisis is most frequently identified as a self-evident accumulation of contradictions. Hay rejects this ‘dominant and purely objectivist view of crisis, which *conflates*, and in certain cases actually *equates*, contradiction and crisis’.⁹⁹ In tracing the etymology of crisis, Hay identifies crises as a moment of objective contradiction and subjective intervention.¹⁰⁰ Whilst the assertion of ‘objective contradiction’ derives from Hay’s ontological position, ‘the crucial point is that a given constellation of contradictions can sustain a multitude of differing and

⁹¹ Hay, C. ‘Crisis and the structural transformation of the state: interrogating the process of change’, *British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 1:3, (1999), pp.317-344, at p.318; Hay, C. ‘From crisis to catastrophe? The ecological pathologies of the liberal-democratic state’, *Innovations*, 9:4, (1996), pp.421-434, at p.318.

⁹² Hay, ‘From crisis to catastrophe’, p.318.

⁹³ Hay, ‘Crisis and structural transformation’, p.318.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p 317.

⁹⁵ Hay, ‘From crisis to catastrophe’, p.2.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p 3.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Hay, ‘Crisis and structural transformation’, p.319.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.323.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

incommensurate conceptions of crisis'.¹⁰¹ Thus, a crisis is a strategic moment;¹⁰² the events of 9-11 had to be perceived and constructed as a rupture, but simultaneously, 9-11 was 'perceived as a moment in which a decisive intervention *can*, and perhaps *must*, be made'.¹⁰³ This perception must occur at the level at which the crisis is identified; by actors capable of delivering a response to the problems they identify.¹⁰⁴ In short, to be constructed as a crisis, 9-11 required a *decisive intervention* to be made, which articulated the events 'as 'symptom'-atic of a more general condition of crisis'¹⁰⁵ and a 'War on Terror', conducted through the agency of the American military led by President Bush, as the solution to the impasse.

'A crisis is therefore itself constructed in and through social interaction. It is given meaning through social processes, through a decisive intervention which gives meaning to the situation and which also provide a route for future policy. That is, there are no objective ontological criteria that a crisis must fulfil to be a crisis: a crisis is one when it permeates discourse, and creates new understandings and, thereby, new policy programmes'.¹⁰⁶

'Crisis, then, is a moment and process of transformation'; the shifting of historical epochs is written in the construction of crises.¹⁰⁷ 'If we are to understand' the project of the 'War on Terror' that followed 'we must start by considering the moment of crisis itself'.¹⁰⁸ Crisis, like the subsequent stages of the response that would lead to Afghanistan and Guantanamo, is 'subjectively perceived and hence brought into existence through narrative and discourse'.¹⁰⁹ The possibility of the state imposing a new foreign policy trajectory 'resides not only in the ability to *respond* to crises, but to *identify, define and constitute* crisis'.¹¹⁰ The 'right' and 'ability' to impose such a new trajectory relied upon the success of the articulation of the events of 9-11 – as symptomatic of a wider crisis – and on the success of the articulation of the decisive intervention that deemed a 'War on Terror' as urgent.

¹⁰¹ Hay, C. 'Crisis and political development in post-war Britain', in Marsh, D. et al., *Postwar British Politics in Perspective*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), p.91, cited in Croft, *Culture*, p.57.

¹⁰² Hay, 'Narrating Crisis', p.254.

¹⁰³ Hay, 'Crisis and structural transformation', p.323.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Hay, 'Narrating Crisis', p.254.

¹⁰⁶ Croft, *Culture*, p.5.

¹⁰⁷ Hay, 'Narrating Crisis', p.255.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

To be ‘successful’ constructions of crisis, which compete with each other, must achieve resonance with key populations.¹¹¹ Bush achieved considerable resonance in narrating a crisis discourse. He did ‘a remarkable job of defining the attacks of September 11 to his advantage’.¹¹² Bush’s framing of a crisis discourse was ‘a key factor in his success’, elevating him from a perceived poor leader to an increasingly popular wartime President.¹¹³ This resonance was aided by the scale and shock of 9-11 combined with the relative paucity of alternative crisis narratives; the void strategically selected in favour of the construction of crisis mobilised by the Bush government. Hay notes that ‘crisis discourses operate by identifying minor alterations in the routine texture of social life’, iterative changes are recruited by the discourse and presented as symptomatic of the general condition of crisis.¹¹⁴ Just as the void operated as a highly individualised lived experience, as is reflected in the nature of personal testaments and widely located popular cultural sources of meaning, the 9-11 crisis became lived in the terms articulated in the crisis discourse.¹¹⁵ With 9-11, clearly social life was impacted, foreign policy practitioners did not have to work hard to accrue incremental changes in everyday life symptomatic of a wider crisis condition; the hole in the cityscape and trauma that followed ensured a sense of rupture was easily established.¹¹⁶ The crisis, like the void before it, was lived at a relatively (unusually and surprisingly) personal level.¹¹⁷ The major difference from the void to the crisis arose in the harmonisation of meaning across the population; if on 11 September the events of the day were relatively meaning-less, in the days that followed, the meaning of 9-11 was increasingly homogenous and hegemonic.¹¹⁸ Only three days after the events, the general public began to read and articulate 9-11 through emerging official discourse(s):

“[It] was an attack on our society, on our way of life ... an attack on free life in general”¹¹⁹

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Murphy, J. ‘Our Mission’, p.608.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Hay, ‘Narrating Crisis’, p.255.

¹¹⁵ For instance, the myth of the reluctant superpower was widely adopted in interviews: “[we were] awakened to grim reality”. Kenneth Barker, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR143, 11 October 2001).

¹¹⁶ See Edkins, ‘Ground Zero’, pp.247-270 on trauma and the hole in the cityscape.

¹¹⁷ For instance, interviewees increasingly saw 9-11 as an attack on a ‘way of life’.

¹¹⁸ Bush’s seminal address was delivered to Congress and the American people nine days after 9-11.

¹¹⁹ Bill Kyriagis, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR 375, 14 September 2001).

Even though 9-11 was initially meaning-less, the ‘nature’ of 9-11 selected for and against certain constructions, in exactly the same manner as the wider context of foreign policy culture and the domestic political landscape.¹²⁰ Just as Gerard Toal notes that it was unsurprising for Bush to reach into foreign policy culture and re-articulate enduring or forgotten foreign policy discourses, the attacks, whilst contingent, made certain courses of action more likely (and possess a greater chance of resonating widely) than others.¹²¹ ‘Discursive constructions of crisis are doubly constrained by the ‘symptoms’ it must narrate and by its ability to find resonance with the experiences to which such symptoms give rise’.¹²² This is why the incomprehensible nature of 9-11 in the void fed so well into the inexplicable nature of 9-11 constructed in the crisis discourse. The success of a crisis discourse depends not on an ability to accurately map the complexity of perceived webs of causation – it is of course to the constructions of crisis, not some extra-discursive ‘reality’ of failure that narratives must attest to – but ‘on their ability to provide a simplified account sufficiently flexible to ‘narrate’ a great variety of morbid symptoms whilst unambiguously attributing causality and responsibility’.¹²³ In this, the ‘War on Terror’, as a discursive project, excelled.

Before subsuming new events into its narrative, the first events that the emerging (and increasingly hegemonic) discourse had to account for were previous instances of ‘terrorist evil’. The 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the 1998 attacks on US embassies in Tanzania and Kenya, and the 2000 attack on the USS Cole were quickly incorporated within the emerging dominant discourse. The construction of a chronological lineage of events leading up to 9-11 was so strong that interviewees noted it was “startling [that people] didn’t link [the] previous ... pattern of activities”.¹²⁴ Crucially however, certain ‘morbid symptoms’ were deliberately excluded by the official discourse. The agency of the general public to interpret, modify, reject and resist the official response is of course important to acknowledge. While the official discourse was widely accepted, alternatives were proffered. Those

¹²⁰ Hay, ‘Crisis and structural transformation’, p.325.

¹²¹ Toal, ‘A Critical Geopolitics of ... Gwot’.

¹²² Ibid., p.323.

¹²³ Ibid., p.335.

¹²⁴ Keith Baker, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR102, 23 October 2001).

voicing alternative interpretations of 9-11 were more likely to draw parallels to the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing than instances of ‘foreign terrorism’ or even Pearl Harbor.¹²⁵

The response of the general public was at times particularly erudite, and amounted to a form of resistance to the emerging official foreign policy discourse:

“[All President Bush] uses are buzz words like evil, good, resolve and you’d think he was talking about a Star Wars movie or something”.¹²⁶

“Bush said ... ‘War on Terrorism’ ... [it’s a] contradiction in terms”.¹²⁷

Nonetheless, the emerging official discourse resonated widely in both its ability to fill the void with meaning and to incorporate new events within it. Elements of official discourse were widely repeated by interviewees when discussing the US and the new enemy; nationalism and unity were paramount, opposed to a denigrated, subhuman enemy:

“We’re dealing with people who have the mind of a snake; not human beings ... We’re in a different world; we’re in a free world ... we don’t think that way ... very cowardice ... there’s no sense of humanity whatsoever ... We’re not barbaric; we’re just not that sort of people”.¹²⁸

“How can they live among us and not see kindness?”¹²⁹

“They’re substandard people ... they’re subhuman ... anti-human ... from a diseased corner of the world ... with a diseased mindset”.¹³⁰

The strength of patriotic feeling generated after 9-11 was reflected in the question, “If not, why are you not flying the flag?”¹³¹ Flying the flag was now the default position. Not doing so made a larger and louder statement than doing so.¹³² Nevertheless, although ‘unity’ and ‘freedom’ were increasingly used in opposition to ‘terror’, there was a risk that the emerging official discourse would lose its grip with time. Two and

¹²⁵ For instance, Erica Johnson, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR276, 20 September 2001). For a discussion of ‘foreign terror’ and its construction, see, Bulley, D. ‘Foreign Terror? London Bombings, Resistance and the Failing State, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 10:3, (2008), pp.379-394.

¹²⁶ Adeel Merson, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR381, 15 September 2001).

¹²⁷ Anon., in group discussion, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR078, 22 October 2001).

¹²⁸ Dan Hiller, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR381, 15 September 2001).

¹²⁹ Patti Chapman, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR025, 27 October 2001).

¹³⁰ Valerie Madison, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR150-156, 19 October 2001).

¹³¹ Virginia Dunn, ‘Witness and Response’ (SR021, 23 October 2001).

¹³² When asked, interviewee Jack Donald embarrassingly admitted he had taken his flag down in the bad weather and forgotten to put it back up. He promised that he would be putting it back up shortly.

a half weeks after 9-11, one interviewee noted that “it’s kind of wearing off ... people are getting more ... it’s hit them already ... and they’re slowing down ... nothing else has really happened”.¹³³ The start of October, however, brought a series of ‘anthrax attacks’ and numerous ‘white powder scares’ across the country.

Just as certain past events, such as embassy bombings and the USS Cole, were incorporated within the increasingly dominant discourse, so too were new events. The official discourse was capable of narrating these new ‘morbid symptoms’ as part of the underlying condition. It is with the anthrax scares that it is possible to see the dominant discourse becoming increasingly hegemonic. Far away from New York and Washington DC, ‘white powder scares’ were experienced, made sense of and commented on through the wider discourse of the emerging ‘War on Terror’. By mid October in Newfoundland, Canada, after being detained in response to a ‘white powder scare’, one interviewee observed, “the war reached here ... [we could] see it from the inside”.¹³⁴ Successfully narrating the anthrax scares as new symptoms of the identified terror threat solidified the dominance of the official ‘War on Terror’ discourse at a time when alternatives were forming in opposition to intervention in Afghanistan.¹³⁵ The ability of the emerging official discourse to narrate old and new symptoms of crisis ensured its survival and dominance; it would not be until 2003 that the hegemony of meaning production in foreign policy discourse would once again come under significant challenge.

‘9-11’ as Somatic Marker

Drawing on William Connolly’s research in neurophysiology, Gerard Toal argues that ‘9-11’ has come to act as a somatic marker.¹³⁶ Succinctly, Toal argues that through our ‘biophysical’ encounters with the world, humans mix the cultural into the

¹³³ Anon., ‘Witness and Response’ (SR087, 27 September 2001).

¹³⁴ Shiela Tulk, uncatalogued sound recording, in response to an anthrax scare in Newfoundland, (19 October 2001); even in 2008 one worker at the vast mail sorting plant serving Washington DC, drew direct comparisons with his previous military experience. He, in effect, saw himself as continuing to work on the front line. ‘Herb’, interview with the author, June 2008.

¹³⁵ Several interviewees questioned the logic of killing Afghani citizens, suggesting that it was no different to what happened in New York.

¹³⁶ Toal, ‘Just out Looking’, pp.857-860,

corporeal. Where these mixtures of the cultural and corporeal come together somatic markers may occur. For Connolly, a somatic marker is a ‘a culturally mobilized, corporeal disposition through which affect-imbued, preliminary orientations to perceptions and judgment scale down the material factored into cost-benefit analyses, principled judgments, and reflective experiments’.¹³⁷ Thus a somatic marker underpins higher-order thought and deliberation as an organising and categorising capacity. As a mixture of the cultural and the biophysical, a somatic marker operates ‘below the threshold of reflection and structured by affect-saturated memory and “gut feelings”, it simplifies and speeds the process of calculative reasoning so that every decision is relatively instantaneous, rather than a rational-choice marathon’.¹³⁸

Here we come full circle as we see that the elevation of 9-11 to a position of Absolute Evil is facilitated through the somatic marker of ‘9-11’. Connolly makes his argument by drawing on the example of the intense collective memories of the Holocaust held by many European Jews. The term ‘Holocaust’ acts as a somatic marker conjuring ‘complex memories on the higher, linguistic register and taps into the visceral dimension of the trauma, an intense set of feelings that gather in the gut, the muscles, and the pallor of the skin’.¹³⁹ The intense collective memories held by many Americans of 9-11, experienced through the shared position as ‘viewers’, have frequently been triggered and invoked in the ensuing ‘War on Terror’. ‘When people with such intense collective memories face new circumstances that trigger them, a set of dispositions to perception, feeling, interpretation, and action are called into play’.¹⁴⁰ The set of dispositions to perception, feeling and action generated by the somatic marker of ‘9-11’ serve to promote particular policies whilst marginalising others.

In the ‘War on Terror’, speaking of ‘9-11’ is to invoke ‘an obsessive collective experience of trauma and loss’ that operates without the need for higher-order contemplation.¹⁴¹ Speaking of 9-11 in the ‘War on Terror’ has been to unleash an

¹³⁷ William Connolly, *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p.35, cited in Toal, ‘Just’, p.858.

¹³⁸ Toal, ‘Just out looking’, p.858.

¹³⁹ Connolly, *Neuropolitics*, p.35, cited in Toal, ‘Just out looking’, p.858.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Toal, ‘Just out looking’, p.858.

‘affective tsunami’.¹⁴² The dominance of official US foreign policy discourse in the ‘War on Terror’, including the hegemonic framing of 9-11, has ensured that speaking of 9-11 brings to the fore issues of resentment and desire. Speaking of 9-11 is to speak of the desire to avenge an instance of Absolute Evil through the muscular reassertion of US sovereignty; 9-11 as a somatic marker is fixed with and brings forth the truths of Jacksonian America.¹⁴³

As was argued in chapter 3, Bush was comfortable with and adept at operating within the Jacksonian foreign policy tradition. It is unsurprising that intervention in Afghanistan followed a Jacksonian logic of the counterpunch: of defending American honour. The central tenets of Jacksonian foreign policy thinking were central to the official foreign policy discourse of the Bush administration. Those who had failed to obey the rules were no longer protected by them; they must be brought to justice and they could be brought to justice in any way as they had forfeited their rights by decree of their actions. ‘9-11’ as somatic marker not only brought to the fore the notion of an instance of Absolute Evil, it also brought forward the solution: fight terrorism and kill terrorists.¹⁴⁴ ‘9-11’ as a somatic marker, memorialising a moment of crisis, invoked both the tragedy and the solution to prevent its reoccurrence. In the ‘War on Terror’, ‘9-11’ could be invoked to justify a hyper-masculinised, warrior culture in society and in foreign policy thinking. The affect of ‘9-11’ as somatic marker thus mirrors the wider societal shifts Susan Faludi astutely documents.¹⁴⁵ These shifts were reflected not only in the need for John Kerry to ‘prove his metal’ by attempting to out-hunt President Bush, but also in the increasingly harmonised meaning of 9-11 and the solution to the crisis it now represented. As the meaning of 9-11 began to harmonise, interviewees frequently espoused distinctly Jacksonian views:

“This event spurned a lot of anger in me ... I hope they get him, I hope they torture him ... As discomfoting as it is for me, I want them to bomb the hell out of Afghanistan ... kill them all”.¹⁴⁶

“If I was twenty I’d be signing up for the army ... I feel that we should deal with them accordingly, as to what they have done to our country ... that type of people do not deserve to live ... I think we should attack and take those

¹⁴² Ibid., p.859.

¹⁴³ Ibid., pp.860-864.

¹⁴⁴ Toal, ‘Just out looking’, p.859.

¹⁴⁵ Faludi, *The Terror Dream*.

¹⁴⁶ Bill Kyriagis, ‘Witness and Response’, (SR 375, 14 September 2001).

people out of this world ... I don't think they deserve to live after what they have done to our country".¹⁴⁷

"[Our] main goal should be the eradication or locating of people responsible".¹⁴⁸

"[We should] take care of the situation no matter what the costs may be ... World War, whatever ... I'm all for war ... we need to strike back ten times harder than they struck us ... by any means necessary".¹⁴⁹

"We had to do something about it; we can't just sit back and let them punch us in the face".¹⁵⁰

"[We should] drop nuclear weapons on 'em ... Wipe Afghanistan off the face of the earth".¹⁵¹

"We should quit pussyfooting around ... when you go hunting, when you wound something, you don't leave it to suffer".¹⁵²

The strength of feeling in the above quotations is simultaneously startling and entirely predictable. They exemplify Jacksonian desires for retribution and the regaining of American honour through force. They also demonstrate why saying '9-11' has been such a potent political tool during the 'War on Terror'. Opposing increased military spending, suggesting less bellicose and more dialogical approaches to foreign policy and arguing for the rights of those who have committed acts of terrorism are incredibly difficult stances to take when the topography of the debate is shaped by a particular framing of 9-11. This framing elevated 9-11 to a position of Absolute Evil, similarly to the Holocaust. Within this framing, 9-11 is not only inexplicable, attempts at understanding and explanation are threatening as they fail to recognise the need for assertive, pre-emptive foreign policy.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁷ Dan Hiller, 'Witness and Response', (SR381, 15 September 2001).

¹⁴⁸ Brian Fornoles, 'Witness and Response', (SR085, 18 September 2001).

¹⁴⁹ Aaron Hill, 'Witness and Response', (SR203, 18 September 2001).

¹⁵⁰ Daniel Dominguez, 'Witness and Response', (SR247, 8 October 2001).

¹⁵¹ Gary Hewitt, 'Witness and Response', (SR016, 11 October 2001).

¹⁵² Varsenig Throne, 'Witness and Response', (SR093-4, 14 October 2001).

¹⁵³ These views were similarly evident in the news media. Ann Coulter was particularly noteworthy in voicing distinctly and aggressively Jacksonian views after 9-11: 'This is no time to be precious about locating the exact individuals directly involved in this particular terrorist attack. Those responsible include anyone anywhere in the world who smiled in response to the annihilation of patriots ... We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity ... this is war'. Coulter, A. 'This Is War: We Should Invade Their Countries', *National Review*, 13 September 2001. She went on to claim that, 'Not all Muslims may be terrorists, but all terrorists are Muslims'. Coulter, A. 'Future Widows of America: Write Your Congressman', *Jewish World Review*, 28 September 2001.

By showing that the meaning of 9-11 and the response that followed are cultural not natural, this chapter attempts to demonstrate the contingency of foreign policy. The construction of crisis identified both that 9-11 represented a critical underlying condition and the solution to confront and remedy it. Outside of the US (and even amongst minorities within) this dominant construction was contested. Whether or not 9-11 is an instance of Absolute Evil; whether 9-11 can be analysed and understood; whether 9-11 was an act of war, an act of God, a crime, or something else; whether or not 9-11 was an attack on freedom, on capitalism, on a way of life, on a state or a civilisation; whether the perpetrators were barbarians; whether they acted alone or represented a state, a religion or a networked group; and whether the perpetrators and their associates are capable of compassion, reason or rational thought all influence the possible, logical and necessary response to the events of September 11th 2001. ‘9-11’ as somatic marker operates to inhibit the possibility and need for such considerations, severely curtailing the ability to contemplate and realise different courses of action.

Conclusion

The *wrong* (the disproving of perceived security truths) and the *lack* (the failure to narrate) were the twin arms of the void that held Americans in a stunned, silent embrace. It cannot be happening (it is wrong, we are right) and it is not real (it does not fit within reality as we know it, it is unimaginable) came to epitomise these twin components of the void. The shattering of deep and enduring truths of US security culture were compounded by the impossibility of existing, contemporary foreign policy discourses subsuming the events and the initial inability of foreign policy practitioners to narrate 9-11 from scratch. The media too struggled to establish meaning, opting instead for looped images of the events and a drive to emphasise the very incomprehensibility of 9-11. The events of 9-11 thus appeared to return history to the US, shattering politics and returning the political to American life.

Succinctly, 9-11 created a discursive void; this ‘void in meaning’ acted as a vacuum for the official foreign policy discourse that would follow in the response.¹⁵⁴ The

¹⁵⁴ On the notion of a vacuum see Callahan et al., ‘War narratives’, pp.523-524.

analogy of a vacuum portrays the emptiness and the difficulty of talking in the void. It also helps us understand how official foreign policy discourse articulating the response entered the discursive vacuum, filling it almost instantly through dissemination, repetition and amplification. The void was unwelcome as the lack of meaning created unease. Hence the desire to fill it and (re)establish a compelling narrative was strong, helping to create a situation whereby the words of foreign policy practitioners took on heightened significance. The nature of the void not only heightened the significance of the framing that grafted meaning onto 9-11, it also shaped the construction of crisis as the first stage of the response.

Theorising crisis has raised three important points. Firstly, crises are discursive but context dependent. Crisis is ‘a process’, in which language dominates.¹⁵⁵ Crises are not objective ‘facts’ that result from the accumulation of contradictions; they are subjective and thus rely on the discursive construction of events as symptomatic of a wider condition of crisis. Contradiction, rupture and/or failure can sustain numerous competing constructions of crisis, but the context of the events and the wider domestic context strategically select for certain narrations over others. The cultural condition that created the incomprehensibility of 9-11 in the void facilitated the discursive construction of 9-11 as inexplicable in the emerging discourse of the response.

Secondly, as ‘the most important instrument in crisis management is language’, ‘those who are able to define what the crisis is all about hold the key to defining the appropriate strategies for its resolution’.¹⁵⁶ Defining the solution is fundamental to the construction of crisis. This solution depends on the display and re-location of agency through a decisive intervention; a decisive intervention and agency are central to the construction of crisis. Narrating the events of 9-11 had to be coupled to a vision for a new foreign policy trajectory that would prevent their reoccurrence. As Koselleck notes, ‘the question of the historical future is inherent in the crisis’.¹⁵⁷ In writing the solution and the direction of the future, the agency of foreign policy

¹⁵⁵ Hay, ‘Crisis and structural transformation’, p.338.

¹⁵⁶ t’Hart, P. ‘Symbols, Rituals and Power: the lost dimensions of crisis management’, *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 1, (1993), pp.36-50, at p. 41, cited in Hay, ‘Narrating Crisis’, p.261.

¹⁵⁷ Koselleck, R. *Critique and Crisis*, (Oxford: Berg, 1988), p. 11-12, cited in Hay, ‘Narrating Crisis’, p.255.

practitioners is vitally important. Moreover, the construction of 9-11 as crisis served to concentrate agency at the heart of government; ‘crisis is a process in which the site of political decision-making shifts from the disaggregated institutions, policy communities, networks and practices of the state apparatus to the state as a centralised and dynamic agent’.¹⁵⁸ The reassertion of politics over the political required the heightened concentration of state agency at the very centre of government. In summary, despite being discursive, as evidenced in a decisive intervention, both context and agency are central to an understanding of crisis.

Thirdly, the importance of discourse, context and agency to the construction of crises brings to the fore issues of framing. The Bush government wielded considerable power in ‘the ability to frame the discursive context within which political subjectivities are constituted and re-constituted’.¹⁵⁹ Alternative framings were possible, even if the context of 9-11 strategically selected for certain narratives.¹⁶⁰ It seems self-evident that 9-11 was intimately related to the ‘War on Terror’, but this common sense must be made strange. It was not inevitable that the ‘War on Terror’ would follow 9-11. Rather 9-11 had to first be constructed in a particular and contingent way. This construction relied upon the articulation of 9-11 as crisis. As Croft notes, ‘crises are pivotal points in understanding the development of policy’; ‘the war on terror emerged as the dominant discourse through the crisis of 2001’.¹⁶¹ Theorising crisis is thus a necessary step towards understanding how the ‘War on Terror’ was possible and contesting the policies and practices that comprise it. This chapter has thus laid the foundations for a comparative analysis of coalition foreign policy discourse. Chapter 5 analyses the foreign policy discourse of the response, begun and shaped by the construction of 9-11 as crisis.

¹⁵⁸ Hay, ‘Crisis and structural transformation’, p.338.

¹⁵⁹ Hay, ‘Narrating Crisis’, p.261.

¹⁶⁰ For instance, while different framings were possible, there was a higher chance of achieving resonance if foreign policy discourse acknowledged and accounted for the cultural condition of ‘shock’ experienced by the majority of the population.

¹⁶¹ Croft, *Culture*, pp.79, 57.