THE WAR ON TERROR IN POSTMODERN MEMORY:
EXPLANATION, UNDERSTANDING, AND MYTH IN THE WAKE OF 9/11

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ABSTRACT

War, like all human endeavors, is at some point of consideration a cultural event; understanding it fully requires an appreciation of war’s events, its cultural context, and the interaction between them. In all wars there is a simultaneous and reciprocal process by which culture and war inform each other. What this means for the War on Terror is that how the United States conducts counterterrorism is not merely an expression of policy, security, or other typical understanding of modern conflict, but also an expression of culture—the ways in which the war has been explained, understood, and mythologized. Traditional approaches in political science, international relations, and security studies can be supplemented and amplified by methods more familiar in philosophy, history, and cultural studies for a deeper insight into events and their meaning, specifically in the war’s mythologization and the power of its narratives to help shape and be shaped by events.

Explaining and understanding the war are central to the narratives we have created about counterterrorism. These narratives are the foundations for the War on Terror’s myths—storyline accounts we articulate that impart meaning to events independent of their observable circumstances. Five key myths support our explanations and understandings of the war. They focus on who our enemies are and why they attack us, what sort of effort we must mount in our defense, what type of methods this effort will require, what effects this effort will have on us, and how and under what conditions this...
effort will end. Examining them shows how their explanations and understandings inform the War on Terror and its events, how perceptions of the war’s conduct help reshape the narratives as they are told in popular culture, and how these reshaped narratives go on to continue informing the war. The inter-informative nature of narratives and events may be familiar to the literary or cultural historian examining the past, but is an atypical line of inquiry for the political scientist or security specialist examining the present—including conflict in general and US counterterrorism efforts specifically. In this way this procedure can be seen as introducing a new paradigm in the study of security issues and contemporary conflict.

The evaluation proceeds first from the narratological and epistemological realities of the general association of myth and events and the specific interdependence of cultural narrative and war. It goes on to examine the War on Terror’s five identified guiding myths and how each in their own ways inform and are informed by the war’s developments. Included in the examination are such events as suicide bombing, the invasion of Iraq, torture, surveillance, and drones and such pop cultural expressions as movies, television, video games, and music. A useful examination of implications includes not only some keys ways in which to mitigate some of the worst effects of the inevitable influence of myth on rational cognition in specific understandings of security affairs and counterterrorism issues, but also how a few useful circumstances of this reality in human ideation and epistemology might be protected and sustained. In this way, the import of the overall inquiry can itself be explained, understood, and placed in the service of a deeper, more meaningful, and practically useful knowledge and appreciation.
DEDICATION

To SFC Steven Michael Langmack, US Army, shot dead on Objective English, Anbar Province, Iraq, June 1, 2005
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INTRODUCTION:
THE WAR ON TERROR AS AN INTERDISCIPLINARY TOPIC

War, like all human endeavors, is at some point of consideration a cultural event, and understanding it fully requires an appreciation of war’s proceedings, its cultural context, and the interaction between them. Therefore, all wars are multi-faceted subjects that can be understood not only through deep analysis within a particular academic perspective, but also—and more fully—through broader examinations that intersect scholarly fields. For the 20th century’s wars alone, for instance, every single-discipline work by a John Keegan, a Charles Moskos, or an Erich Maria Remarque may be matched by an interdisciplinary one by a Winston Churchill, a Paul Fussell, or a T. E. Lawrence.¹ This is not to say that these separate historical, sociological, literary, or other focused views are not cultural in a strict sense, but instead to suggest that specialists in these fields tend to conform their work in ways consistent with the sources, methods, and other approaches to scholarship specific to these fields and separate from others. This in turn tends to reinforce separate perspectives, understandings, and values owing to how security specialists, political scientists, historians, sociologists, philosophers, etc. see the multi-faceted circumstance that is war through the peculiar prism their own field imposes.

Freeing the study of warfare from a single-discipline view and engaging an analysis of broader scholarship, however, helps illustrate conflict’s cultural nature and shows how in all wars there is a simultaneous and reciprocal process by which culture and war inform each other. What this means for “The War on Terror,” the popular name for the defining conflict of the young 21st century, is that how the United States conducts counterterrorism is not merely an expression of policy, security, or other traditional idea
of modern conflict—which, at a certain level of appreciation, it most assuredly is—but also an expression of culture. Therefore, the War on Terror is both a function of a rational weighing of cause and effect, benefits and trade-offs, political goals, legalities, costs, and other practicalities, and at the same time a product of the ways in which the war has been explained, understood, and mythologized in American culture. Indeed this interplay exerts such a powerful pull on human thought and action that many of the key aspects of the War on Terror can be understood fully only in this context. This is not to say that realist, idealist, or other accepted scholarly approaches to conventionalize or in other ways gain insights into conflict are misplaced or mistaken; indeed such approaches are central to how any war, including the War on Terror, traditionally is explained and understood.

It is to say, however, that these accepted approaches in political science, international relations, and security studies can be supplemented and amplified by approaches more familiar in sociology, literature, and cultural studies for a deeper appreciation of events and their meaning—specifically in the war’s mythologization and the power of its narratives to shape and be shaped by events. The challenge to this view is strong, at least in the academy, where scholars who have developed, found places, and spend time producing within specific disciplines tend to stick close to these disciplines’ tools and perspectives in offering their contributions to scholarship. This is natural, and we are all richer from the specialists’ deeper mining of their particular academic veins. But at the same time we bear lost opportunity costs that accrue from failing to see when the contents of these different veins can be forged together to produce stronger alloys.²

This study will focus on how explaining and understanding the war are central to the narratives we have created about counterterrorism, and that these narratives are the
foundations for the War on Terror’s myths—storyline accounts we articulate that impart meaning to events independent of their observable circumstances. These narrative conventionalizations inform US counterterrorism efforts, and how these efforts are seen to unfold informs the narratives, which go on to re-inform the efforts. The notion of the inter-informative nature of narratives and events—of myth and action—in the context of our explanations and understandings of the terms may be familiar to the literary or cultural historian examining the past, but are atypical for the political scientist or security specialist examining the present—especially present conflict in general and recent and current US counterterrorism efforts specifically. In this sense this approach can be seen as introducing a new paradigm.

I have expropriated the title of Fussell’s WWI treatment for my work here, although I have elided his use of the term “modern,” meaning current, into “postmodern.” This term apprehends not only relevant ideas regarding the philosophical underpinnings of narrative and myth and the roles they play in our understanding, but also the notions of ambiguity, contradiction, and disillusionment that characterize popular understanding of Postmodernism as well as the state toward which the War on Terror has evolved. I am also indebted to Fussell for suggesting this paper’s thesis and its analytic typology:

This book [The Great War and Modern Memory] is about the British experience on the Western Front from 1914 to 1918 and some of the literary means by which it has been remembered, conventionalized, and mythologized…. I have tried to understand something of the simultaneous and reciprocal process by which life feeds materials to literature while literature returns the favor by conferring forms upon life…. At the same time the war was relying on inherited myth, it was generating new myth, and that myth is part of the fiber of our own lives.3

In this sense, Fussell’s tripartite formulation of remembrance, conventionalization, and mythologizing constitutes the foundation of this inquiry’s methodology. The War on Terror is also being remembered, not in the way the Great War had been remembered
throughout the decades-long extended lens of the 20th century, of course, but in the way that as a current and still ongoing experience our counterterrorism efforts have been and are still being recollected and explained. These explanations similarly may also be too fresh to be fully conventionalized, but they both inform and are informed by understandings that themselves draw from previously formulated and often deep-rooted conventionalizations. This process of mutual information is where the business of mythologizing comes into fullest play and accounts for the structure of the methodology that guides the main part of the investigation. Just as Fussell contends that the war he studied both relied on and generated myth, this study argues that the same process obtains in the conflict it investigates. It also traces the cultural narratives our counterterrorist efforts have both drawn on and shaped as well as the war’s events that have both tailored and been formed in important part by the same narratives.

Despite claims of value in this type of inquiry and its analytic approach, this particular study will be more descriptive than prescriptive, and it has its limits. This is not an effort to suggest how the United States and its allies should conduct the War on Terror, but rather an attempt to identify the broader provenance of the conflict’s actions and operations in order to derive deeper, more insightful appreciations of contexts, motivations, and aims. Of course perceptive and useful understandings may promote ameliorative effects on eventual decisions in US counterterrorist efforts, but that is not the immediate intention here. Also, this study will not focus on areas of narrative, culture, war, and terrorism that, important and broadly instructive as they may be, fall outside the analysis at hand. For instance, it will take no ultimate position on the greater veracity, authority, or conviction of micro- over metanarrative, as it is less a philosophical study
than a practical one. Its basic argument on narrative is that metanarrative collapses, but narrative survives on the strength of the unshakable power of words and leaves micronarrative as the only narrative capable of survival in this Postmodern Period that has embraced it and the intellectuality of which informs the War on Terror. Also, this study focuses less on terrorism and more on counterterrorism, and is aimed not so much at critiquing America’s War on Terror but more on examining it within a framework of explanation, understanding, and myth. This inquiry is not necessarily intended to set up these myths to be punctured and deflated, but instead will allow them to be probed and explored for their meaning and how this meaning is both informed by the war’s events and helps shape the war in return.

To investigate and examine fully the relationship between narrative myth and the War on Terror, their mutually informative natures, and what is to be gained from such an effort, the study will proceed along narrative and analytic lines. Chapter I will clarify the inquiry’s focus, define some pertinent terms, and show how war and myth can be placed historically within contemporaneous contexts. Chapter II will focus on myth and meaning, the rhetorical and epistemic power of narrative, its particular expression in Postmodern intellectuality (i.e. the breakdown of metanarrative and the rise of micronarratives), and the myths that are most instructive in an effort to explain and understand US counterterrorism efforts as an expression of culture. This is where a range of scholarship and academic disciplinarity will be discussed in depth and plumbed for insights into the War on Terror as a cultural event. Chapters III, IV, and V will focus respectively on how these myths inform the war, how the war’s events feed back into the continuing formulations of these myths, and how these reformulated myths go on to re-inform and
reshape the war. Here is where much of the war’s conventionalizations will be treated, along with how they evolve—in light of the preceding chapter’s analysis—from explaining and understanding to mythologizing. Chapter VI will summarize the analysis and explore the implications of the effect of myth on thinking, decisions, and action in counterterrorism in terms of disadvantages to mitigate and advantages to promote.

Studies of specific wars and cultures tend to be undertaken in historical perspective, yet their narrative-event interplay begins, of course, during the conflict as it takes place. This means that wars typically are fought by people frequently too close to the fight to grasp the interplay of culture and conflict and to derive many lessons from it. Narrative myth—either an over-arching one commanding general agreement of a perceived objective reality, or smaller ones of greater individuality and idiosyncrasy that allow us better to apprehend the confusion, ambiguity, and ultimate uncertainty that we see in and project onto our world—exert a power over us in ways that are as profound as they may appear subtle. We have been and remain so deeply wrapped up in our narrative myths—and they in us—that their strength helps them defy more than a few of our better efforts to understand our world in a more objectively analytic fashion and to exercise a greater dispassion in human affairs. Recognizing this helps us prepare ourselves for this reality, however we might ultimately define it as or perceive it to be.
CHAPTER I:
WAR, TERROR, AND MYTH.
DEFINITIONS AND CONTEXTUALIZATIONS

Demonstrating the mutually informative natures of narrative myth and the War on Terror, and the insights and understanding that emerge from investigating this process, entails an examination that engages several areas of knowledge and points of argument. An appropriate foundation for such an examination requires defining its terms, establishing its context, illustrating its development, and identifying the main stages of analysis. These stages will focus on the power of narrative myth, some of the war’s most powerful myths and their expressions, key aspects of the US struggle against terrorism, and in what ways each has helped shape the other. More immediately, a foundation of terms, context, and process will also highlight the range of academic disciplines, investigative approaches, information sources, and analytical methodologies an inquiry of this type will engage, as well as indicate some of the directions it will take in making sense of its material and arriving at its conclusions.

Also helpful for an examination of how cultural and intellectual ideations and the conduct of war are intertwined in a perhaps subtle but no less profound fashion is a brief overview of how this connection has played out historically. The mutually informative nature of any war’s events has always proceeded in ways that can be placed soundly within a framework of how the people of the time explained and understood their reality. Demonstrating this circumstance, how some of its key aspects have unfolded and built on their predecessors, and how key meanings and considerations of what we know as modern conflict cannot be wholly discerned outside this context offers key insights on how the
War on Terror has been fought. It should also help clarify why aspects of related but tangential topics will be left outside the scope of investigation, and identify the challenges and value in conducting this examination during the war’s prosecution.

With a clear and firm underpinning of definition, context, historicity, and analysis, the main thesis of the War on Terror as an aspect of culture and how the events of the former and the narratives of the latter both interact with and help shape each other in meaningful and important ways assumes a greater clarity and force. That war like any human endeavor is at some level a cultural event may be a commonplace observation worthy of only passing acknowledgment absent an incisive investigation into its conditions, an analysis of its circumstances, and an explanation of its implications. This is true for war in general, although general inquires tend to yield general—and generally only so useful—insights. By bringing the focus of the interaction of culture and events down to a discreet conflict—one in which we are currently engaged and, therefore, stand readier to derive more useful lessons from the study of—we promote a better chance of this focus conveying more practically worthwhile lessons for more immediate application. If theorizing in such a fashion remained only an intellectual exercise, it would stay a circumscribed endeavor worthy of only limited attention. As an applied activity, however, it acquires a greater utility that can not only be brought to bear on the conflict at hand, but also be referenced as a contribution to a deeper understanding of war and counterterrorism. It can also help reveal potentially helpful ways to think about, decide upon, and take action in these important enterprises.

Setting the Stage: Defining Terms and Establishing Context

Our discussion demands workable definitions, and foremost for discussing the War
on Terror are definitions of war, terror, and how they combine in the subject conflict. By war, I mean an open and organized state of armed conflict fought directly between the military or paramilitary forces of states or clearly identifiable sub-state entities. By terror, I mean violence aimed at creating fear for political, religious, or ideological goals directed against non-combatants or non-military infrastructure targets by sub-state elements. Neither of these definitions is controversial in and of itself; indeed most any reputable lexicon’s initial entry for each term will read fairly closely to the ones here. They are, of course, loaded terms with histories and nuanced meanings dependent on user, audience, and a host of circumstances, and some of these other meaning sometimes will intrude upon the inquiry at hand. For instance, the word “war” has been expropriated for descriptions of any number of struggles or ultimate exertions of various political, societal, economic, personal, or other types. This study shows how these other uses sometimes are conflated and confused in constructing relevant war narratives, but these other uses are not the focus.¹ “Terror” has proven at least as tricky a word, frequently politicized according to how one views the justness of the perpetrators’ cause (i.e. one man’s terrorist being another man’s freedom fighter) and, ultimately therefore, elusive. Indeed, the international community’s inability to agree on a common definition of terrorism is the main cause of the protracted deadlock in UN negotiations over the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism.² For our purposes in this study, it is enough to recognize the fact that these key words come with several connotations and implications, but at the same time underscore the traditional definitions offered above, if only for practicality’s sake.

In using the popularized term “War on Terror,” I mean those efforts undertaken by the US government in response to al-Qaeda’s attack on the United States on September
11, 2001. Those efforts constitute a broad range of official governmental action—not simply military and paramilitary, but also policy, intelligence, law enforcement, regulatory, etc.—aimed at deterring, disrupting, and defeating those elements around the globe that use terrorist tactics as their primary method to attack the United States and its allies. Clearly, this goes beyond those actions taken in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, but not so far as to embrace every US security effort over the past 13 years. For instance, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will feature in the analysis offered here, but much of the combat in those wars has involved counterinsurgency, not counterterrorism. Moreover, those wars’ activities of a specifically counterterrorist nature have been augmented by an array of general security actions outside the war zones not only against not al-Qaeda, but also against associated violent Muslim extremist groups. All of this activity, insofar as it is focused on chasing down—or in other ways safeguarding the United States and its allies from—the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks and their allies, is most under scrutiny here, although situations and narratives included in explanations and understandings of the war writ large will almost necessarily impose themselves. This circumstance aside, the study’s focus is counterterrorism, not so much the wider wars that have grown up around it.

Any claim that this War on Terror is a unique cultural expression also solicits common understandings of what is meant by culture and its expressions. By culture, I mean not only that shared set of beliefs and behaviors that characterize a society, people, or nation, but also the integrated institutional arrangement of knowledge and attitudes that identifies a collective learning and understanding within that society, people, or nation. This definition, though perhaps broad by the standards of some anthropologists, sociologists, and other specialists, is nonetheless consistent with how leaders in these
fields have come to use the term and, important for our purpose here, allows us to proceed to examine the cross-fertilization between the War on Terror’s actions and narratives with a sufficiently expansive understanding of culture and its expressions. Such expressions run the gamut of human undertakings from art and literature, to history and politics, and beyond. In this context, war is certainly an expression of culture—perhaps underexplored, at least in security studies literature, but discoverable nonetheless—and its uniqueness has much to do with how it differs from, but is also related to, other expressions of culture.

In terms of this study, popular manifestations of American culture in the early 21st century feature textual (books, magazines, and journals), post-textual (film, television, and video), and extra-textual (music, games, and oral discourse) expressions capable of conveying narrative, which is the repository of myth. Some will loom more important that others in an analysis of the process by which war and myth are mutually informative; they will be the ones that most clearly express the stories our culture tells in order to give meaning and derive meaning from the events it experiences. It is this conveyance of meaning at separate but related levels of articulation and perception that reveals best not only our explanations of war as an event, but also our understandings of war as a cultural phenomenon. For this, let us return to and clarify the above-mentioned three-part taxonomy of how war, like any cultural event, is explained, understood, and mythologized.

Within these conveyances of cultural expression is their substance, which runs a similarly broad gamut depending on its intended purpose. This study will concern itself primarily with what may be generally considered the main focus of the medium in question, although not necessarily its mode of conveyance. For instance, in typical textual
expressions such as news, commentary, and scholarship, the focus may be on reporting, relaying details and arguments, or shaping opinion and action. In extra-textual expressions such as music and games, the focus may be on entertainment. Post-textual expressions may offer an even wider array of substance, from reporting to entertaining or even between or beyond. Included here are some special forms of expressional substance such as protest and parody, the former serving as an extreme form of opinion- and action-shaping and the latter aiming perhaps first at entertaining, but perhaps as well also reporting, advancing arguments, and influencing views along the way. All of them, however, at their hearts are informational, in that they are out to communicate, and none necessarily may loom larger in the study on the whole. Textual and some post-textual expressions tend to constitute rich loads for mining examples of how culture informs conflict, in that these articulations highlight opinions, understandings, and actions, while post- and extra-textual expressions will offer more and better illustrations of the effects of conflict on culture. All will be on display and will figure in the inquiry.

**Explanation: The War Described, Detailed, and Given Clarity**

Explanation begins when those who are part of the war or are observing any aspect of the war report on it in some fashion, seeking to clarify or elucidate this aspect for some intended audience. It is an action that not only is a process itself, but one that also initiates the larger process of mutual information between actions and narrative—or at least, in the context of our examination here, is the best place for us to start. These explanations represent the participants’ and reporters’ efforts to describe, depict, or in other ways identify US counterterrorist efforts, and it is through them that most of us come to our initial knowledge of the war and its concurrent events. Therefore, typically—but not
exclusively—the war’s explanation through first-hand accounts is the basis of our understanding of its circumstances and events.

Initially, the War on Terror’s eyewitnesses who see the war first-hand engage in an effort of telling people about the war in a fundamentally descriptive fashion. How the war is first explained by observers as disparate as soldiers, intelligence and law enforcement officers, other government officials, journalists, even terrorists, and anyone else caught up in the conflict can be broad ranging in terms of their perspective, aspects of the war they think important, and what they want to say about it. All, however, bring immediacy, intimacy, and authority to their observations that help characterize their individual reportage as part of an identifiably collective culture—although perhaps a culture in which at least some of its participants, given the sometimes disparate nature of their enterprises, may not embrace common membership. The body of work continuously produced by these eyewitnesses compiles the record most of us turn and return to in order to learn about the war. It is the war’s primary and generative explanation that ignites and fuels the engine of the process under examination. The manner in which this occurs, how it bends to identifiable cultural norms, and how these norms are shaped by the culture’s experiences are central to how the war is initially apprehended. It lays the foundation for how we come to know and derive meaning from the larger event.

The sources that seek to explain the war emerge from this eyewitness culture. They include news and other on-scene reporting (both print and broadcast); blogs and other web-based, self-published accounts; and, to the extent that mining them in any meaningful way is possible in this day and age, diaries and letters from any participants in the war. This last source vein, from which various archives from past wars have been
amassed and have proven rich for scholars of these conflicts, is too poor in the increasingly post-textual 21st century to be of much worth examining the war that is still with us. Blogs, which now fill the diaries’ role, and news reporting might be the most worthwhile sources in this culture, although those that purport to deal specifically with counterterrorism—as opposed to larger military activities arising from the War on Terror—appear few, sometimes shallow, and too often suspect, given the strictures placed on public discussion of the counterterrorist enterprise.6 It matters only so much, however, that these reporters offer “true” accounts, as it is their explanations’ power this study will be after, not necessarily their veracity. It is also necessary to separate the fewer stories of those actually involved in counterterrorist operations from the far larger number of those who are engaged in more conventional security pursuits within combat, intelligence, law enforcement, and other security activities.

Understanding: The War Organized, Rationalized, and Given Sense

Explanation’s understandings of the War on Terror broaden and deepen as the war is understood, a process of structuring and validating our comprehension of counterterrorism through a more collective and insightful knowledge that is usually developed through digesting in-depth treatments. Understanding occurs when commentators analyze the war’s explanations and others try to make sense out of them within established contexts of reasonable assessment. This sort of conventionalization allows us to rationalize the war, to see it within a larger context or against associated contexts, and to understand its conduct in normative fashions.

The packaging and interpreting of eyewitness observations in understanding and conventionalizing the war is the work of a culture that is in many ways academic in
nature. It is not the case that the work is the exclusive bailiwick of scholars, although several exceptionally useful and informative works on the War on Terror have been produced by recognized and respected academics, researchers, and a few bona-fide intellectuals. It is more the case that these experts engage their subject in a fashion grounded in the scholarly method of judicious citation, effective argumentation, and logical presentation aimed at establishing propositions, marshaling evidence, and concluding reasoned claims of truth. Moreover, this commentary on the war trends toward a recognizable and somewhat traditional disciplinarity. Journalists tend to interpret reporting, historians tend to place events within chronological perspectives, political scientists tend to explain events within the functions of national and international systems, and military and security specialists tend to focus on forces and operations—all pursuing generally parochial and idiosyncratic interests in ways that comport with and reinforce traditional academic approaches. It is the nature of these commentators to understand and conventionalize previously established explanations of the war for broad digestion within the larger culture, and in ways that form our comprehensions and perceptions along generally established, and eventually accepted, lines.

The various works that conventionalize our understanding of the war—commentary, analysis, and other formal studies of the topic—are the purview of this academic culture, and are perhaps more straightforwardly surveyed and reviewed than reportage. Key sources here include standard compositions of journalistic interpretation (both print and broadcast), academic and other professional articles, and books examining the War on Terror. An impressive library of this genre has been produced in recent years, and more works emerge on a seemingly continual basis. Winnowing grain from chaff,
especially among commentaries, may present a challenge to this study, but perhaps not a
daunting one if the task remains to categorize and characterize these conventionalizations
rather than assess them by any objective criteria. Also, rather than comprehension being
the goal, an examination of salient works and analyses that touch on broad aspects of the
war, not simply military and paramilitary operations, is more in order.

*Mythologization: The War Understood, Internalized, and Given Meaning*

How this understanding of the War on Terror is preserved in narrative articulations
of cultural expression is where our conventionalization of the war becomes mythologized.
Both explanation and understanding are myth’s partners in our internalized
comprehension of the war, and each feed off of and fuel the others while frequently
blurring the lines separating them. None can be fully assumed or appreciated in isolation
from the others. In apprehending and informing the war—and in turn being apprehended
and informed by the war—explanation, understanding, and mythologization figure in all
aspects of the conflict. Each builds on and creates its own War on Terror myths and co-
opts them in turn in their own way.

I do not use the term “myth” in what has become an accepted rhetorical sense of a
demonstrably false understanding typically begging to be “exploded” by knowledgeable
and insightful commentary—although any useful analysis (this one included) should
prompt at least some minor detonations along these lines. Instead, I use myth more in line
with its classical meaning of a story or other narrative that attempts explain the unknown
in a fashion understandable within the culture seeking this understanding. Myth is a
complicated topic that can be approached and characterized anthropologically,
psychologically, religiously, or literarily, and all understandings will have some bearing
on the subject as dealt with here. But whether the focus is on interpretation of rituals aimed at explaining humankind’s place in this world, the sharing of certain innate unconscious forces, spiritual beliefs surrounding supernatural phenomena, or language’s stylistic apprehension of behavioral archetypes, these and other concepts of myth are about discerning the elusive meaning we impart to events that helps allow us to make sense of them within the grasp of our explanation and understanding, sometimes independent of “facts.” It is not a case of our myths being necessarily “true” or not, but of their power in our comprehension of reality, in this case the reality of the War on Terror.

How these lines intersect within a culture that is generally artistic in nature and what this culture produces is at the heart of mythmaking in the War on Terror. In this case, the artistic culture trends strongly toward the manifestations of what has come to be known as popular culture—the ideas, images, words, and attitudes that are seen as articulating a general view that coincides with a recognized, current, and still-developing mainstream and that find their expressions in mass media. Popular culture at work in interpreting and mythologizing the war mines not only the work of reporters, commentators, and scholars, but also general themes in fiction, folklore, and storytelling in a creative exercise that adds meaning to the war and its events. It is not that the war makes sense only within this context, or that analyses of risk versus gain, examinations of cause and effect, or other traditional and practical understandings of counterterrorist policies and action do not yield insight into the war’s conduct. They certainly do and will continue to do so. But a fuller meaning of the war, at both a personal and a societal level, only occurs when our knowledge and appreciation of events is linked to cultural norms and their recognized, accepted expressions. Artists have always been deeply involved in
both imparting and deriving meaning from human experience. Mainstream artistic expression of war may have changed over recent years from stories, novels, and poetry to film, television, and video games, but the interplay of experience and interpretation that informs and is informed by cultural events and pop-cultural narratives can be discerned at work in the War on Terror as much as it has been as in all human undertakings.

It is within this artistic culture that the outlines of true mythologizing emerge, as do the broadest range of academically atypical and unfamiliar sources. Myths and allegories are traditionally enshrined and apprehended in various forms of fiction, although the present culture is discontent to reserve such expressions for novels and poetry, as was the case in earlier wars. This war’s myths are best found in movies, television, video games, and music—all of varying content, focus, and imitation—with more examples of each surfacing all the time. Those issues and aspects of the war that materialize first or are magnified in artistic works that then can be traced back into other source cultures or into the various counterterrorism decisions and actions will be at the core of the kind of mythologizing this study analyses.

Memory, Narrative, and the Mutual Information of Myth and War

This description of the explanation, understanding, and mythologization of war suggests three separate events, but a closer examination shows their interconnectedness. Understanding requires some explaining, obviously, and mythologizing in a way that assigns meaning to events depends not only on how these events are understood, but also on how they are described and rationalized. But explanations themselves, especially of human endeavors like war, are themselves normative efforts fettered at least by perspective of time, place, and observer, if not also by bias, intention, and value. So,
rather than taking place in isolation, each of the three efforts proceed in the presence of the others and are constantly both fueling and being fueled by them. This simultaneous and reciprocal process is how we apprehend and relate to any situation, including the War on Terror, both by its events and by the meaning we give to these events.

The workings of human memory and how the act of recording and recollecting events proceeds help illustrate this combined activity of explaining, understanding, and mythologizing. Indeed, the field of psychology has its own three-part taxonomy to illustrate the process of forming and recalling memory that tracks closely with the one used here to highlight how we understand and evaluate events. Encoding is the act of registering perceptions and information in ways that allow us to make initial sense of it. Storage is when we commit these encodings to permanent records of thought in the context of similar or related perceptions and information. Retrieval is the step in the process wherein the stored information is called back in response to some cue for our use. How useful this recollection may be found to be determines its value. So, memory and the process of remembering is in this way more important than the information or the event being remembered in terms of its utility, value, and “truth,” much like is claimed in the discussion of explanation, understanding, and mythologization.

Our remembrance of events, including those of war, draw on how we recollect what we have encoded, stored, and retrieved, which highlights how we apprehend myth in the classical understanding of the term—which is a form of storytelling or narrative. Myth, like all human knowledge and belief, is conveyed and internalized in narrative—stories that make sense to us because of howsoever we comprehend and believe things. In his seminal work on the topic, Roland Barthes observes that “the narratives of the world
are numberless,” and that humankind has never been without them, while Postmodernist philosopher Jean-François Lyotard describes narrative as “the central function or instance of the human mind.” Indeed, Barthes’s view of myth in this context is particularly instructive and central to our acceptance of the term and the process of mythologizing, which Barthes sees as the inclination of socially constructed ideas, assumptions, and narratives to become “naturalized” within contemporary value systems—not merely a window into or the context of our understanding, but instead the core of our understanding itself.

Moreover, Barthes’s approach to “facts” in this sense is particularly instructive. He contends their meanings are entirely contextual in the ways they are constructed in narrative form because of the absence of any foundational aspect of meaning on the part of the author. Instead, the author perforce selects a subset of known and pertinent facts and presents them in a narrative fashion, and it is the individual reader who imparts this meaning to these facts in the context of a subjective understanding of the narrative. In this sense, explanations and conventionalizations of the War on Terror naturally draw on a wellspring of understandings that have already been internalized from earlier myths and allegories; had they not, we could not comprehend them in any meaningful fashion. We would be unable to assign such basic roles and circumstances in our observations as agency, causation, importance, meaning, closure, or anything else to help us make sense of war’s events. In short, our narratives would quickly unravel and be rendered useless.

But as war’s events continue to occur, they emerge, unfold, and are appreciated in ways that generate new myth. This is not simply the realm of becoming aware of new facts about the war and having to shift our knowledge and analyses to incorporate them—
which is a natural and common occurrence and the essence of all rational thought—but in a deeper sense it is also how we begin to shape and alter guiding narratives that undergird our basic views of reality. In this case, it is the reality of the War on Terror and our place in it, with guiding narratives such as who is our enemy, what does he want, who we are, how we fight, what will this fight demand, and how this fight will end. To get at these deeper meanings, it is necessary to appreciate how these superficial understandings of fact and circumstance may be important in workaday developments, but meaning is assigned to events only when they return to fundamental narratives of identity and value and either reinforce or reshape these narratives in the process. Guiding myths start much earlier than the events that are interpreted in their light, but they are only generated and tailored through our observation of events, so continuous events mean continuously formed observations, narratives, and myths.

These new or re-informed myths, of course, go on to re-inform the war. It is a natural, ongoing, and simultaneous process which reflects what has been the hallmark of human development, in the grand scheme of things. That it is similarly evident in the context of our narrow inquiry regarding US counterterrorism efforts after 9/11, however, is what matters here. So, how best to bring this down to scale? Deeper explorations of Postmodern intellectuality, the nature and role of narrative myth in human understanding, and the War on Terror’s operative myths and how they play out shaping and being shaped by the war will figure prominently in following analysis. Any claims about these phenomena and their ability to provide penetrating and useful insights, however, will be more convincing if it can be shown how they have been at work in war throughout history. If indeed our current war is no different from other conflicts in this regard, a review and
examination of these other conflicts in earlier periods should also feature an admixture of myth and war and an ever-ruminating and unfolding process by which each confers forms on the other and is shaped by the other’s development. A brief investigation can show this to be the case, and will help establish this thesis of war and myth’s inextricable connection of memory and meaning that forms the heart of the analysis to follow.

The Interrelationship of Myth and War: Themes in Modern Western Tradition

Myth and war are fundamentally related in the way that myth as a conveyor of culture and war as an expression of culture are engaged in a dynamic of mutual information. A society’s cultural narratives help it understand the events it experiences and shape its interpretations of these events and actions taken in response to them, and these events in turn feed back into the cultural narratives to help drive these narratives’ development. War is as much an event in this cultural interplay as any other human experience, yet it is an event only so often examined in this context as scholars, journalists, and other observers have come to focus more on war as a topic of the sciences rather than of the arts. This is especially true the more Western culture has developed in ways that appear to have prompted it to distinguish itself from its events, coming to see them more as something to form rather than to be formed by.

Therefore, understanding war in a full sense requires an appreciation of cultural narratives and of wars’ events as well as their interaction. It is not a case of war not being a proper subject of study from a specific analytic perspective or academic discipline, especially those of the sciences; it clearly is and will doubtless remain so. But a deeper understanding emerges from a mix of views and scholarly fields that draws out and identifies narratives and their cultural contexts, traces war’s events in their historical or
contemporary milieus, and analyses these situations within an interdisciplinary approach.

If war is an expression of culture, at least in the way it is argued here, then war’s various episodes and aspects should be able to be traced both from and back to its society’s guiding cultural and intellectual narratives. Not only have these narratives and the understandings that have emerged from them helped shape our internalizations of war’s events, but also how these efforts are perceived to play out informs the narratives, which in turn continue to influence and affect war. To keep the broader and examination of war and myth’s interplay in general perspective and prevent it from overtaking the more specific and detailed analysis that will unfold in later chapters, the focus in this section will be on how wars have started, been fought, and have concluded from long ago in our history up to our current age. More depth and specificity are possible, of course, but a tour of warfare and narrative myth in these three contexts within and across periods is not intended to offer a retrospective evaluation of past wars, but instead to serve as a treatment of war as a memory to highlight the relationship between war and myth.

This examination remains in Western tradition, since that is not only where warfare as an activity and a repository of designated events as we have come to know it best in the United States has developed, but also where the intellectuality that has formed this investigation’s eras has been established and with which it has been most closely identified. Its starting point is the Renaissance, which works best since this period marks the beginning of the West’s emergence from the Middle Age’s long period of cultural and intellectual stagnation wherein it reached back specifically to the earlier classical age of European civilization’s flowering. Of course, 500 years of history are not necessarily divided neatly into clear periods of development; the edges of chronologically contiguous
periods blur in terms of technology and thought, and the beliefs and myths of earlier ages never totally disappear in the face of those that follow. Indeed, at an important level of perspective and remembrance, these earlier ages and the way we have named, characterized, and come to understand them are themselves creatures of later time and place and, as such, might be seen as a form of relative understanding or mythic expression consistent with this study’s use of the term. Still, despite the absence of full philosophical displacement over time and the shortcomings of subjective interpretations of history, four distinguishable metanarratives have emerged since the Renaissance that have commanded sufficiently broad intellectual and cultural assent from a critical mass of observers and commentators. These metanarratives’ periods also carve out eras that correspond roughly to shifts in the West’s experience with conflict. It is in the context of these four periods—the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Modern Age, and the Postmodern Period—that the relationship between myth and war can best be demonstrated, and from which appropriate lessons may be drawn.

*War in the Renaissance: Rediscovery and Re-Interpretation of Classical Themes*

The Pre-Enlightenment period covers broad ground, but culminated in the Renaissance, that period of Western cultural rebirth just before the Enlightenment, starting in 14th century Italy and eventually spreading to the rest of Europe to color and condition fundamental assumptions about art, scholarship, and society. Renaissance culture and intellectuality were products of a rediscovery and reinterpretation of classical European themes that eventually overthrew concepts that had settled in Western societies and minds for the previous thousand years. These previous concepts were largely the realm of what today might popularly be characterized as superstition, having much to do with the
unquestioned power of prelates and princes in a society not known for its widespread dissemination of knowledge or learning. The Renaissance, however, sparked a reawakening in this society’s thought and action aimed at rediscovering what once was lost and employing it in the service of new ideas and, in a still-religious people, new ways to apprehend God’s creation. Europe was seen as the inheritor of a long and proud history of learning and achievement that existed before its crowns and church, and mining this classical yesterday would open doors to old ideas and concepts that could be made new again in pursuit of a better today and tomorrow. Indeed, this theme of rediscovery and reinterpretation was the dominant myth of the Renaissance, including those narratives that informed and were informed by war.  

In the context of wars’ initiation, Renaissance society was eager to look to classical ideas to help de-emphasize the role of princes’ prerogatives in instigating conflict, or at least to acknowledge the crown’s authority in this matter while removing the crown’s whim. These efforts focused on identifying criteria for the right manner for Christian princes to consider making war on each other, which eventually coalesced in a generally accepted set of rules under just war theory known as jus ad bellum. Although religious authorities drew mainly on the works of Augustine, Gratian, and Aquinas in developing just war theory, secular thinkers such as de Vitoria, Gentili, and Grotius went back further to the writings of Aristotle, Cicero, and Livy in identifying the origins of these concepts that they in turn renovated and reinterpreted. Indeed, the closer these Renaissance thinkers could tie their ideas to their classical-era forbearers, the more content they were that these ideas had merit. In this manner, the dominant myth of the Renaissance informed the initiation of war, which in turn re-informed the myth by creating the experiences and
events around which contemporary thinkers began shaping what they came to term *jus gentium*—itself the foundation of what became international law.

Regarding the conduct of war, the Renaissance also looked to Europe’s classical past for sources and guidance, with the experience of war both shaped by and shaping the cultural narrative. The above-mentioned *jus gentium* scholars did not confine their just-war theorizing to war initiation, but continued developing their ideas from classical-era thinkers to confront the issue of how wars should be fought, leading to development of what became known as *jus in bello* criteria.\(^\text{16}\) Moreover, rediscovery of classical texts and the culture’s submission to the power of their authors’ ideas led to developments in Renaissance warfare at levels from the strategic down to the tactical—from Machiavelli’s reconceptualization of Greek city-state polity becoming the cornerstone of European nation-state conflict, to Vauban’s employment of classical geometry and architecture in his fortification constructions, to Gustavus Adolphus’s borrowing and tailoring of Roman military ideas from national conscription to battlefield maneuver. Indeed, Henry VII commissioned the translation of Vagetius’s *De re militari* into English “so every gentleman born to arms and all manner of men of war, captains, soldiers, victuallers and all others would know how they ought to behave in the feats of wars and battles.”\(^\text{17}\) At the same time, Europeans’ experience of war—especially as it became more widespread, more technological, and more deadly—re-informed Renaissance myth by helping shift it away from simple classical rediscoveries and reconstructions toward narratives more specific to the age, its events, and its developments.\(^\text{18}\)

In seeking insights for war termination, Renaissance thinkers continued to uphold the era’s grand cultural narrative of the need to receive and spend its classical inheritance.
As common inheritors, Europeans were loath to see their states war on each other to the point of annihilation and sought instead a cessation of hostilities where major realms—or at least the system in which they existed—were preserved, apparently to fight another day in the endless experience of the clash of arms. It might be one thing for the dominions of princes, dukes, electors, and other minor rulers to be subsumed in those of kings and emperors, but the mainstay monarchies of Europe and their peoples were intended to survive at war’s end even if their territories and rights might be adjusted in the process. The Peace of Westphalia that ended the Thirty Years’ War can be seen as the practical epitome of this narrative, wherein a prince’s sovereignty over his lands and peoples, the confessional rights of religious minority citizens, and a system of relations among nation-states was enshrined in ways that had more in common with classical-era notions of citizenship within a common society than with early Renaissance understandings of princes’ divine rights. This experience of war termination fed back into Renaissance myth by helping form a new narrative of inter-state conflict that not only departed from the one it grew out of, but also in its basic form has carried through to the present day.

*War in the Enlightenment: The Dominion of Reason*

The intellectual culture that began taking hold in Europe after the Thirty Years’ War and the Glorious Revolution and sought to free itself from classical and other pasts became known as the Enlightenment—an era wherein, in Kant’s formulation, the guiding narrative became “man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage.” This movement, like its predecessor, also hunted after something new, but something even newer that was not necessarily recoverable from its past. Reason, not rediscovery, was the dominant myth, and finding the correct application of human rationality to apprehend objective reality was
its central theme. This myth found its articulation in myriad cultural expressions, including war, and—just as in any era—this expression found ways to return the favor by re-informing and reshaping the myth. Again, we can identify this process at work in the ways in which the age believed it should initiate, conduct, and terminate its wars.\textsuperscript{21}

The overriding influence of Enlightenment thinking on the issue of war’s initiation was that such actions would become unnecessary as reason, not emotion, was allowed to hold sway in peoples’ minds and as democratic governments gave these minds power. According to the Enlightenment myth, rational people’s focus on industry, science, the capitalist market, religious tolerance, and other enterprises of reason through empirical induction would eventually outweigh any preference to enter into the destructive activity of war. What would keep a nation’s rational self-interest from prompting the violent imposition of collective will over another nation was the concept of natural law, also discernible through the application of reason. This popular Enlightenment idea held that behavior was moral, correct, and proper not simply for an individual according to time and circumstance, but instead was moral, correct, and proper for all people at all times in the same circumstances. This meant that the divine right of kings was not merely to be held in check through laws and systems, but that it might be overthrown by free peoples exercising their rational minds to create an international order of republics that would find recourses other than armed conflict to settle their differences. Indeed, even some powerful rulers unrestrained by constitutions and other democratic constructs found favored places in court for Enlightenment thinkers to expound their ideas and help codify laws in accordance with them, although more in order to forge stronger states and national institutions. “Enlightened despots” in Berlin, Vienna, and St. Petersburg gave hope to
many lumières, re-informing the narrative that triumphant reason would preside over a future wherein starting wars would become an activity of the past.\textsuperscript{22}

Such was not the case, of course, as conflict continually erupted, so the Enlightenment also saw its dominant cultural narrative guiding the way it fought its wars—and saw these wars conferring their forms on this narrative in return. If the application of reason could bring unprecedented advances in disparate areas from technology to social organization, all in an effort aimed at understanding reality and imposing order on it, the same could be made true for the application of inter-state violence in war. New instruments of battle and techniques for exploiting their effects were a hallmark of this increasingly industrialized age, and larger forces of smaller and more specialized formations brought progressively more effective advances in the activity of combat. War increasingly became a serious subject for thinkers of an empiricist bent, and the age’s most successful military leaders returned the favor by applying this type of reasoning to their tasks—not only taking up new technologies, but also embracing the full range of cultural developments a refined philosophe was expected to embrace. For instance, Charles XII of Sweden was an innovative if amateur mathematician, Frederick the Great was a correspondent of Voltaire’s and a composer and performer of flute symphonies, and George Washington was an accomplished though formally unschooled architect and agriculturalist, and each attributed his success in battle in no small part to the trained application of a broadly experienced and clearly rational mindset.\textsuperscript{23} Their battlefield victories—typically against long odds—comported with the Enlightenment myth of the triumph of deftly applied reason, and the record of their achievements helped fuel the myth that with reason, all things are possible.
The Enlightenment grand narrative of broad advancement through reason also informed, and was re-informed by, the period’s experience with ending its wars. Termination of conflict continued to be ruled by agreement, treaty, and other formal arrangements between sovereign entities in a manner consistent with Renaissance culture and narrative, and European princes and their subject were at no greater existential threat from wars and their results than they had been earlier. In fact, this imminently rational state of affairs benefitted from a broad cultural embrace by those who recognized reason and its power in their societal and political interactions.

As this European culture encountered peoples outside its embrace, however, and the more it either tried to exercise its cultural norms with or impose them upon these foreigners, Western concepts of reason and its appropriate application quickly reached limits. It was one thing to deal in rational constraint with white Christians of a common cultural inheritance ruled by a unitary class of related royalty and nobility, but war with outsiders in the Americas, Africa, and Asia was a different matter. Here, the dominant cultural myth appeared to leave these foreigners outside the realm of the rationally engaged, and therefore outside its defenses and protections. Benighted inhabitants of these far realms—blessed by their state of nature though they may have been—frequently found themselves facing two choices: accept the European culture, its conceptions of reason, and their own place in these constructs, or perish.\(^{24}\) Reason appeared to have helped Europeans achieve guarantees at war’s end that preserved their rights, privileges, and cultural inheritance, but non-Europeans defeated by these colonial powers in war could only hope for the last—and it was a foreign cultural inheritance, not their own, they were expected to receive.\(^{25}\) Such events helped shape a Western narrative that the triumph of
reason was a global common good, and that those who refused it should be dealt with severely. This re-informed narrative began feeding back into the cultural expression of war, working changes along the way.

*War in the Modern Age: Progress Toward Perfection*

Although many of its beliefs and values persist to this day, the Enlightenment as a discreet cultural and intellectual era ended with the Napoleonic Wars and was followed by the Modern Age—its a more expansive and refined expression of the Enlightenment and with a narrative to match. If the Enlightenment’s narrative was the triumph of reason, the Modern Age’s was reason as the engine of a grand mechanism at work throughout history that was driving progress toward perfection. As with earlier eras, the Modern Age’s dominant myth found expression in the way it made war. Just as similarly, the events and experiences of war in the Modern Age also helped shape the period’s dominant myth—turning it in time into something new, with both continuities and differences.26

Modern Age culture came to terms with the reality that reason could not prevent the outbreak of war, and then turned to the matter of employing reason in service of ensuring that when these outbreaks came, they did so in a manner that accrued greatest advantage to the side that put reason and its practical manifestations to best use. European states fielded standing forces of considerable size, strength, and capability on the continent, and colonial powers kept armies and local constabularies overseas all in the service of deterring war or responding to its initiation swiftly and effectively. The Modern Age saw the initiation of the *levée en masse* to mobilize the country’s men in time of war, and then saw that give way to large-scale peacetime conscription to fill out numerous units that were kept at the ready to defend the state and its interests as war might loom.
Technology, operational planning, social structuring, and other manifestations of applied rationality all were harnessed in service to an increasingly centralized state and its correct initiation of war. Security-focused diplomacy, intelligence gathering, stronger border defenses, and the ability to marshal large armies at a moment's notice became the defining features of Modern-Age states’ preparations for war’s inevitability and of making the most of circumstances—and opportunities—whenever they might arise. Reason and action, not emotion and passion, held the key to a nation’s success at war’s initiation, harkening to a narrative that held that applying reason in more progressively successful manners would gain successively greater achievements on the battlefield whenever the time for fighting came. When the epitome of efficient and effective national mobilization came in August 1914, the myth of progress toward perfection suffered a profound shock that it eventually had to accommodate in ways that fueled its subversion.

The activity and experience of war’s conduct in the Modern Age also embodied and shaped the era’s grand narrative of ever-perfecting progress, nowhere more obviously than in the bending of industry to the goal of battlefield success. Every technological edge that one side gained in combat was met by another that matched or over-matched that gain and, in the process, advanced weaponry’s effectiveness and the fortunes of the users—a perfect manifestation of the era’s metanarrative. From poison gas and tanks on the ground to offset the advantages of the defensive trench line, to submarines under the sea to defeat massive maritime supply and powerful surface fleets, to the introduction of aircraft in the sky to gather information about and rain down destruction on it all (or take up the new war of aerial combat), applied reason in the form of scientific, technological, and industrial innovations was seen as perfecting the art of war. These perfections, however, came at a
steep price as the destructive capacity of these innovations in the hands of skilled users on increasingly larger scales showed it could extinguish millions, squander treasuries, collapse entire states and empires, and in other ways directly confront the Modern Age’s defining myth. Perfection in war came to be seen as bringing Western culture ever closer to the brink of its own destruction and, although the culture could be understood as being able to survive this onslaught, the cultural narrative could not. War’s now overwhelming destructive activity and experience would be the single greatest force behind the Modern Age narrative’s eventual overhaul and succession.

Looking at war termination in the Modern Age, the period’s over-arching myth of evolution to excellence can also be seen as manifested as well as profoundly challenged. The “othering” of national enemies earlier seen in the Enlightenment’s view of non-European peoples and cultures began visiting itself more and more inside the Western context. Opposing states were not simply neighbors to be bested and then re-engaged, but instead foreign nations whose manners and outlooks were so different that they not only had to be defeated, but also to be compelled to surrender in highly conditioned—or even unconditional—fashion. Modern Age wars began ending with the destruction and incorporation of entire sovereign entities, the carving out of new ones from the territories of defeated states, or the creation of other new ones through official unions (sometimes coerced or forced) of states with sufficiently shared national identities—all of this accomplished through effective force of arms. Clearly the growing idea that defeated states were little more than fodder for the victors’ appetites had helped replace the previous myth of war termination that had held sway for so long, leading to a new myth consistent with a metanarrative of progress toward perfection. As wars’ resolutions
continued leading to more, and more destructive, wars, reality became increasingly irreconcilable to this metanarrative, which prompted development of an even newer myth.

*War in the Postmodern Period: The End of Grand Narrative*

The Modern Age, like its Enlightenment predecessor, has never fully departed from Western culture and intellectuality, but its metanarrative’s failure to explain fully our reality as we continued coming to know it eroded its power to command general assent to its dominant myth. A Postmodern Period—emerging first in the late 19th century as Modernism’s limitations became more apparent, and taking stronger hold certainly in the wake of the First World War—began succeeding the Modern Age in the wake of the collapse of the metanarrative of reason advancing progress toward perfection. The central trait of Postmodernist intellectuality is the deep suspicion it harbors for grand narratives, especially those that seek to apprehend an objective reality that, according to Postmodernists, does not exist because of reality itself being a construct of the mind’s attempt to understand it. This leaves reality not an objective “Truth,” but an array of ultimately subjective, relative “truths” according to individual perception and circumstance. Postmodernism prefers smaller, local, and personal narratives, if only because it accepts the power of myth in shaping perceptions of reality while recognizing that no myth can hold for everyone everywhere. Indeed, Lyotard rejected the explanatory power of overarching storylines with the assertion that, “Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives.”28 To the extent that the grand myth for this age is the absence of a grand myth, we can still see how this view has both shaped and been shaped by Postmodern Period war.29

Despite the fact that many Modern Age views have persisted into the Postmodern
Period, the latter era’s thinking and cultural outlook frequently stand in contrast to those of its predecessor and mark a complicated continuity and departure. This is especially true in the ways in which Postmodernist intellectuality apprehends the concept of war’s initiation and conforms this concept to the related experience. The formal declaration of war—a hallmark of conflict initiation for all earlier periods—has become the exception in Postmodern warfare, a circumstance that appears a reflection of the breakdown of defining systems, agreements, and understandings that previously obtained. 30 Instead, combatants seem to encounter each other in uncertain and confusing confrontations that sometime lead to combat, at other times do not, and at still other times usher in some stage of violence that may not be seen as rising to the level of war—intense though it might be for many individual participants. The fact that war’s initiation appears frequently in the eye of the beholder—even between opponents—is consistent with an intellectual view that reality is an individual construct that may be shared, but is not an objective actuality. Such a view not only helps inform the current state of war initiation, but also helps re-inform it the more the act of commencing conflict proceeds in such idiosyncratic fashion.

In the conduct of war, Postmodern Period concepts are also in the forefront in the events and experiences of combat, and these events and experiences help shape the age’s confusing narrative and absence of an overarching myth concerning war. Indeed, this overarching myth deflated in ways consistent with the breakdown of the Modern Age’s metanarrative of a grand context struggling—and failing—to assert itself in the face of anomalies it could not completely incorporate. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in what may be the Postmodern Period’s defining conflict, the Cold War. At the time explained as a global struggle between freedom and tyranny, this grand narrative worked
well enough, but only to the point that it had to account for the fact that it was shared by both sides of the conflict in a way that only one side’s could be true. Moreover, this explanation was continually challenged by the fighting that took place in its context. For instance, neither the two Koreas nor the two Vietnams that fought each other as partners of superpower forces in two bloody wars were ever really solely the US, Soviet, or Chinese foils or surrogates they were often made out to be.

Indeed, nationalism, confessionalism, anti-modernism, cultural identity, and myriad other factors frequently proved at least as strong in Postmodern combat’s calculus from Asia, to Africa, and to Latin America as did any grand and encompassing political ideology. Even the fighting itself often featured clashes between some of the most technologically advanced militaries and forces decidedly overmatched in terms of hardware, logistical support, command and control capabilities, and other attributes of current armed conflict, yet the apparent underdogs prevailed more often than not. In the process these “victorious victims” who wound up besting military superpowers themselves emerged as a popular narrative trope in postmodern conflict myth. Looming over these conflicts was the one that did not happen—general thermonuclear war between the opposing superpowers. Here was perhaps the Cold War’s other metanarrative, but one that never got told and, therefore, the power of which in both a Postmodern intellectual as well as a horribly practical sense was never fully expressed.  

In terms of the forces that fought and why they fought, the Cold War can be characterized by an amalgam of arms and ideas, many of which would have found comfortable homes in previous times. The same can be said for combat in several of the Postmodern Period’s wars and conflicts that have continued after the Soviet
disintegration—from the Middle East, to the Balkans, to the current War on Terror—
typifying a breakdown of metanarrative and the rise of competing intellectualities and
-cultural myths. Even the global devastation and abrupt narrative shift promised by a
misjudgment in the Cold War’s balance of nuclear terror echoes loudly today in warnings
of rogue nuclear states and terrorists armed with weapons of mass destruction. Such
circumstances help ensure the persistence of various game-changing, apocalyptic, and
eschatological narratives that continue to challenge any dominant cultural and intellectual
myth—especially a Modern Age one—and support an admixture of competing smaller
narratives that naturally arise at metanarrative of any type ceases to hold pervasive sway.

Regarding Postmodern Period myths and experiences in terminating war, the same
confusion over competing narratives and what events are and mean plays out. Just as is
has been infrequently clear when Postmodern Period wars start and how they are or
should be fought, their conclusions have also been subject to debate, ambiguity, and
uncertainty. The First World War ended in an armistice that became a punitive victory as
the defeated states’ governments collapsed, and World War II ended in the unconditional
surrender and physical occupation of the beaten nations, but most wars since have ended
in stalemate, forfeit, exhaustion, and both victories and defeats that were unclear and
impermanent. The Cold War ended less like how wars had theretofore been expected to
end, and more like a recovery from a long illness. The end or eventual eclipsing of the
War on Terror will probably defy precise definition or general agreement, whenever that
event may be seen to occur. As experiences, these endings are understood in this fashion
in part due to the effect of an intellectual culture that rejects the assent to, or the need for,
broadly agreed-upon narratives to impart meaning to our events. As events, they help
inform and shape the intellectual culture in return by fueling its notion that the absence of a grand narrative to help explain our reality is something to be expected.

*Continuities, Distinctions, and Value in Tracing War and Myth*

We see in the above examination how each of four eras of post-Middle Ages Western culture can be defined by its dominant myth—or, in the case of the Postmodern Period, the rejection of dominant myth—that characterized how that age came to understand the reality of its experiences and events. We also see that these experiences and events themselves, in the context of war, along with their contemporary myths were and have been engaged in a process of mutual information, each shaping and in turn being shaped by the other.

This is the fundamental relationship between myth and war: they are both part of a cultural dynamic where concepts and expressions of concepts both mirror each other and fuel each other’s development. Continuities persist between each age, and none of these eras’ ideas completely lose their ability to command at least some assent from citizens of subsequent periods, which affirms their enduring role in this reciprocal process of information. Still, differences in the myths and their circumstances emerge with some clarity, and sometimes sharp distinctions can be drawn between how each period explained its own reality of conflict in narrative fashion and how each period’s experiences played out. The dynamic of war’s mutual shaping of myths and events, however, appears to hold strong in each period.

As too often unexplored—and, it would appear, too often undervalued—this relationship between myth and war may be, the scholarship that touches on it provides a rich vein for who may try to mine it. In the introduction to his landmark study, *The
American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy, the historian Russell Weigley states:

This book of history, like probably most histories that look back beyond only yesterday, is based on an assumption that what we believe and what we do today is governed at least as much by the habits of mind we formed in the relatively remote past as by what we did and thought yesterday. The relatively remote past is apt to constrain our thought and actions more, because we understand it less clearly, and it has cut deeper grooves of custom in our minds.33

It is within these “deeper grooves of custom” that our minds have interpreted and internalized our experiences and understandings of war, and from which these experiences and understandings emerge in narratives that at one level retell events. At another level, however, they add meaning and impart value to these same events—and help explain them and our agency in ways that traditionally focused inquiries may be unable to as fully. It is precisely this sort of mythologizing that students of culture and history often bring to their topics, remote from current security affairs as these topics may be, and that students of politics and international relations tend to dismiss, despite the useful perspectives and complementary understandings they provide. Any successful effort to redress this shortcoming will allow for broader, more complete, and more perceptive insight.

The Study to Come: Procedure and Significance

If war in general can be seen and usefully understood not only as an exercise in applied theories of international relations and security issues, but also as an expression of the mutual interaction and information of events and cultural narratives, then the same can be seen for any war. This includes conflicts like the War on Terror, to which we may be too close to derive or apply familiarly or comfortably pertinent insights from this circumstance. This familiarity or comfort, however, inversely correlates to the importance and value of the exercise. The purported lessons of history, philosophy, cultural studies, or
other humanities disciplines are important to students of the past, of ideas, or of societies in general, all of which are traditionally understood as having perhaps significant but typically indirect application for students of politics, global affairs, conflict studies, or other social sciences. Their significance and application, however, emerge more prominently by a closer look at the relation between war and culture in general, and the reciprocated effects of the War on Terror’s events and its cultural narratives. Indeed, it is the circumstance of the current conflict’s continuing demands on our attentions that drives the immediacy and potential significance of such an inquiry.

Demonstrating this immediacy and significance may take some readers into what is for them new areas of disciplinarity and scholarship, but all students of the full range of subjects involved should come away richer for the effort. This effort now departs from the foundations of definitions and contexts and enters into the realm of not only more and deeper theory, in this case of narrative and its power both to explain and to aid understanding, but also narrative’s ability to convey insights and meanings in ways that are both logical and mythical, in the classical understanding of the terms. How these insights and meanings play out in popular narratives of security, war, and terrorism lays important groundwork for the heart of this study—how received myth informs our explanation and understanding of events, how these conventionalizations confer shapes on the cultural narratives conveying these myths, and how these reshaped myths continue fashioning the contours of events in an endless exercise in mutual information. Through such an analysis, we can come to see the War on Terror in ways that aid broader and deeper awareness and comprehension and support further exploration of potentially useful evaluations and implications.
CHAPTER II:
MYTH, MEANING, AND THE WAR ON TERROR
NARRATIVE’S POWER AND ITS EFFECTIVE FORMS

At the heart of myth is narrative—that rhetorical mode of discourse comprising the
countless constructively formatted stories large and small that we tell to describe the
sequences of our events and which are key to human notions of identity, memory, and
meaning. So inextricably linked with our self-awareness, narrative has been with
humankind since our origins, and it has retained its power to explain our reality into the
Modern Age. Modernity may reject the fables, stories, and myths that characterized
Western Classical- and Medieval-era civilizations’ intellectuality, but it has certainly
created and embraced its own narratives—the most powerful of which are often the most
overarching and/or explanatory. Lyotard refers to these largest as “metanarratives”
because of their reliance on some form of “transcendent and universal truth.”¹ Chapter I’s
discussion of the interrelationship between myth and war touched briefly on some of these
grand narratives, and a deeper examination of the more recent ones—specifically in the
transition from the Modern Age to the Postmodern Period—should highlight myth’s
persistent ability to describe, clarify, and signify our experiences. These are the key
aspects of the role that narrative plays in human understanding and memory—including
those having to do with security, the American way of war, and the War on Terror.

The Rise of Micronarratives and Their Enduring Power to Explain

Starting with the Renaissance and into the Enlightenment, a narrative of
progress—rejecting the indemonstrable old and creating or recreating the provable new—
became the large-scale storyline that described, explained, and imparted meaning to
events. Indeed, Enlightenment thought came to be characterized by a contest between objective and subjective approaches to truth and knowledge that came to assume overarching power in their pretensions to explain reality. It is this the power this Enlightenment metanarrative’s “transcendent and universal truth” that lashed together these opposing approaches as part of a totality that contended all things were explainable for all people in all ways for all time if only the correctly disciplined application of human reason could be achieved. This has come to be seen as the metanarrative of the Modern Age—that there is a unifying cultural narrative schema that commands and rationalizes knowledge, experience, and action, and that it is one of progress through reason. Still, even as this metanarrative retained its power, neither objective approaches aiming at an undeniable Truth arrived at a priori via an understanding of universal laws and rational analysis on the one hand, nor subjective approaches to an equally undeniable Truth that sees a posteriori that all claims of validity are the ultimate property of the claimant on the other hand, appeared to win out. Moreover, epistemically, each came to be seen as insufficient.

As the Modern metanarrative of progress through the expansion of human knowledge and reason toward achievable universal truth was reaching its intellectual limits around the late 1800s, practical circumstances emerged that undermined and eventually overcame the power of this metanarrative to sustain widespread belief. The traumas of the 20th century, although accompanied by astonishing technological developments and improvements, precipitated a failure of the concept that humanity was growing more reasonable and its state of affairs ever better. Indeed, two world wars, a global depression, the rise and fall of fascism and communism, the specter of nuclear
annihilation, environmental degradation, epidemics, and—toward century’s end—the threat from terrorism all served as practical accompaniment to contemporary philosophical arguments. Altogether, they combined to eviscerate both the notion of worldwide advancement and broad faith in existing institutions’ abilities to improve our circumstances. In this most recent period emerged a newer thinking that surfaced the notion that the shortcomings in Modern-Age intellectuality were not owed to objective or subjective approaches having no merit, but to their reliance on a belief that there is such a thing as a grand Truth and that it could be apprehended through the ideation of one approach or the other as an expression of human reason. In this fashion, objectivism and relativism came to be seen not only as marking a false dichotomy, but also as two versions of the same overarching story that were similarly weak.

With the collapse of the Modern Age’s metanarrative, the Postmodern Period thinking that emerged surfaced the notion that letting go of the two defining poles of Enlightenment thought also involved rejecting the story of human progress through human reason. The explanatory storylines of this newer age tended to be reduced, but still large narratives—progress through communism or the open market, deliverance through broadly accessible religious beliefs and institutions, the beneficial effects of technology and mass communications—suffered similar diminutions of power as they in turn failed to explain sufficiently major slices of global reality. This in turn reinforced the concept of only even smaller narratives having any hope of interpreting whatever truths may still be out there. Of course, not everyone stopped believing in large global narratives—regarding the above examples, for instance, communists, Christians, and technologists certainly exist, in varying numbers and allegiance to whatever may still amount to their global
narrative category—but even sizable narratives came to be seen as unwieldy, vulnerable, or feeble either the less completely they clarified or the more narrowly they held sway. Indeed, these metanarratological shortcomings are at the heart of French philosopher Michel Foucault’s influential Postmodernist critique of narrative discourse as a shallow, naïve, and ultimately exclusive way of projecting our own consciousness onto the past—and by extension other understandings of human circumstances.\(^2\) Regarding the role and power of narrative myth in Postmodern practicality as well as intellectuality—the purpose of this study—it is enough to say that smaller appears to be better.

I say “the purpose of this study” because “smaller is better” may be a necessary but insufficient proposition in an ultimate effort to achieve a full understanding of reality, but in a more modest effort to describe and explain things closer to hand—like the interplay between culture and war—micronarrative proves effective. The Modern Age metanarrative of progress through and toward universal human reason may be discredited as a slave to language, time, and context, yet narrative understandings still retain a capacity to reveal and convey knowledge while they help explain our world and its reality. As explored briefly in Chapter I, Barthes’s and Lyotard’s claims regarding narrative’s unshakable epistemic power obtain for Postmodern micronarrative’s ability to arise in the wake of Modern-Age metanarrative and continue, in smaller and more focused fashions, to fuel explanations throughout the arts, humanities, social sciences, and sciences.\(^3\) The Postmodernist critique of Modern-Age thought argued effectively that metanarrative fails and “Truth” does not exist, at least in a universally identifiable or understandable fashion, but it clearly leaves room for micronarratives and “truths” that work for individuals and common communities or obtain for circumscribed periods and places.\(^4\) In Richard Rorty’s
contention, “Truth” does not exist, but narrative must prevail because it is “words all the way down”—words remaining the amino acid of narrative. Not only do these smaller, more personal stories more accurately reveal and articulate the uncertainty and ambiguity of the world and its reality, but also they can be more easily tailored and adjusted—or rejected and replaced—by truth-seekers still informed by the power of narrative explanations. Moreover, it is only with the collapse of metanarrative that these more facile and “truthful” localized stories can emerge.

Ushered out with the Modern Age’s metanarrative, however, is also a sense of familiarity with a guiding cultural storyline, so the first question about the succeeding Postmodern Period’s micronarratives might be what they are and what stories they tell. It is to these questions that micronarrative’s champions help supply some useful answers. According to Lyotard, who expended much effort promoting the idea of smaller, more focused narratives, they can be about any number of beliefs or circumstances, but they must be adequate to represent and contain whatever their stories are about. Rorty clearly identified a role for micronarratives and argued that they are effective so long as they are situationally and linguistically contingent within their shared communities. Juergen Habermas supports them as long as they can be competently communicated and remain subjective with no pretense to universality. Drawing from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s foundational arguments on the inadequacy of language to explain fully, however, it would appear that even smaller narratives are themselves limited in their ability to apprehend in total fashion even a localized idea or event. In addition to the collective impact that these and other philosophers have had on the idea of narrative, the works of other thinkers—such as Claude Lévi-Strauss’ analyses of language and myth, Paul Ricoeur’s
investigations into our interpretations of narrative in forming inherently mythic understandings and explanations, and Jean Baudrillard’s observations on semiotics and mass communications and how symbols have come to replace empirical reference in our understandings—can be plumbed for ideas on myth.7

Narrative and myth may not conflate completely, but it is the enduring power of the former to inform and shape the latter that infuses myths articulated in narrative form with the ability even into the Postmodern Period to explain the unknown in culturally understandable ways. What emerges as most important is not metanarrative myth’s truth, which cannot be proven to exist in an ultimately objectivist sense, but micronarrative myths’ capacity to be affirmed as truthful in terms of their authority to command assent. “Truth” remains beyond full grasp, but the conviction that narrative myth conveys in identifying the acknowledgement of legitimated authority is far less elusive and is an imminently workable substitute.

The Evolution of Dominant Micronarratives: Which Win Out and Why?

The start of an answer to the question of which, as opposed to whether, smaller narratives should lay claim to any assent lies in the interaction of these narratives’ elements with communal dialogical dynamics. Narrative elements may include such essential components as character, plot, setting, theme, and narrator, as well as the structural framework that underlies both the order and the manner in which the narrative is presented. According to prevailing thought, such a narratological taxonomy is strongly associated with a structuralist quest for a formal system of useful description in approaching stories, which in turn suggests interpretative approaches to narrative that identify two strands of inquiry: thematic, dealing with semiotic formalization of the
sequences of narrative action, and modal, focusing on the manner of the narrative’s telling (i.e. voice, point of view, rhythm, frequency). Employing logical constructs in compiling these elements allows for applications not only in expected fields, such as literary theory and criticism, but also in atypical areas of inquiry that include sociolinguistic study and discourse analysis.

Ricoeur’s emphasis on the importance of communal dialogical dynamics, however, argues that narratology’s thematic and modal elements, although distinguishable, should not be examined separately because of their inter-relatedness in dealing with the functions and interests of narrative sequence and plot. For Ricoeur, this sort of dialogue is key. Dialogue is generally understood as a conversation, which typically takes place in interpersonal communication, but it also takes place between people on one hand and texts, traditions, and times on the other in the former’s efforts to derive meaning from the latter. Both of these types of dialogue are important, despite their different tools and forms, in that they demonstrate the criticality of hermeneutic and dialogic elements in understanding narrative. These elements involve both the interpretation of narrative elements as well as the conversation among those seeking understanding from the narrative and between those seekers and the narrative itself. Also important for Ricoeur is the suspicion that any understandings that come from these interpretations arrives through “signs deposited in memory and imagination by the great literary traditions”; this is a key influence in his work on the hermeneutics of language.

Ricoeur’s views here on hermeneutic dynamics are both consistent and complementary with those of other prominent and influential thinkers on narrative. For instance, his “deposited signs” of “great literary tradition” echo in the main tropes of
metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony that Hayden White sees as assimilating
general modes of functioning in a structural approach to historiography.¹¹ For Hans-Georg
Gadamer, the notion of dialogue both among people and between people and narratives is
fundamental and the “clue to ontological explanation.”¹² In Martin Buber’s view, both
scientific rationalism and abstract philosophical thought too often overlook the fact that
dialogue, which takes place in the “sphere of between” (das Zwischenmenschliche) in the
mutual, holistic existence of two beings, is a basic fact of human existence.¹³ Richard
Bernstein expounds on Gadamer’s points on this issue, specifically his appropriation and
explanation of Aristotle’s understanding of praxis and phronesis, and relies on them to
indicate a way toward useful applications of these ideas about dialogue and interpretive
dynamics. For Bernstein, “if the quintessence of what we are is to be dialogical…then
whatever the limitations of the practical realization of this ideal, it nevertheless can and
should give practical orientation to our lives.”¹⁴ Even dissenting views on dialogue’s role
in narrative align over the issue of its power. For instance, Mikhail Bakhtin may have seen
any effort to engage dialogically as a means to “appropriate the words of others and
populate them with one's own intention,” yet, as Leslie Baxter offers, since for Bakhtin
“because all language use is riddled with multiple voices (to be understood more generally
as discourses, ideologies, perspectives, or themes), meaning-making in general can be
understood as the interplay of those voices.”¹⁵ Clearly, this dialogic interplay is at the
heart of micronarratives’ epistemic contest struggle for belief and truth.

It is Bernstein’s view of “practical orientation” that suggests the role of narrative
elements and communal dialogical dynamics in the evolution of dominant narratives.
Clearly, in the absence of a single over-arching grand narrative, smaller narratives are left
to compete for our assent. Just as clear, however, is that not all smaller narratives are created equal; some are more compelling and attract greater belief and adherence. Most commonly, they do this by the stories they tell being seen as comporting most closely with both a rational, fact-based analysis of cause and effect—the essence of credible narrative—and the prevailing cultural norms of the society that is seeking understanding through these stories. The dialogue between the individual and the narrative is the way in which a narrative is determined more or less reasonable and consistent with these analyses and norms, while the dialogue among individuals is what allows any one determination to gain greater sway over others. This interaction is both constructive, in that it allows for individuals and groups to grant assent and drive decisions, and critical, because no efforts to grant this assent or make decisions based on it would make sense otherwise. Both of these types of dialogue, however, are central to this process of dominant narratives’ evolution.

So, with micronarrative surviving—in some ways thriving—in the wake of metanarrative’s collapse, and an understanding of narrative elements’ and dialogical dynamics’ interaction providing a means to discern relative values among micronarratives, we are left with the task of determining how best to consider the issue of discriminating among rival candidates for the most important and compelling narratives in understanding more fully the War on Terror. Note here that the point is not so much that some narratives are more important and compelling than others, although that is certainly the case, but rather that a broad understanding of narrative and its role in informing the decisions and events in US counterterrorist efforts lends important insight into how the war is being fought. In this sense, it is not the case for the value of specific narratives over others, but
of the value of seeing narrative at play in an arena that is typically seen as the reserve for what Modernist rationality typically seems to think is clear-eyed, fact-based analysis. It is in that view that we see the survival of Enlightenment rationality: that reason and logic can identify truth in an ultimately objectivist sense, and that story-telling and narrative are undeserving of similar conviction because they reside in the realm of myth.

It would be a mistake, however, to embrace analytical dialogues and understandings as compelling “logic” and dismiss normative ones as mere “myth,” at least in the sense of how we commonly use these terms. Instead, demonstrative fact and reasoned analysis as well as story-making and confabulation each—although perhaps not always equally—can be seen as having their own “logic” and depend on their own “myth.” Both approaches are “logical,” in that they accommodate observations and attempt to make sense of them, although an analytic approach does so in a more open and less biased fashion while a more faith-based approach is less accepting of apparently anomalous evidence. Both are also “mythic,” in that they rely on inherited assumptions, although belief is more normative and requires less reduction to reveal its foundations while analysis is more rigorous in objectively examining hypotheses and resolving contradiction. Both approaches also convey their own narrative—either, say, the superiority of the scientific method in understanding an ever-revealing reality, or the courage of adhering to faith and principle in the face of a persistent uncertainty. Again, it is how these two approaches inform storylines, which in return inform the two approaches, that fuels narrative’s power.

Moreover, separating logic and myth in a full and meaningful sense is impossible, in that doing so always has been and will remain beyond human grasp for the simple fact
that all knowledge rests at some point on a foundation of belief. We tend to believe our own eyes and ears, what trusted observers tell us, in certain theories of science and mathematics, or at times in simple tenets of faith. Some theories have withstood scrutiny so well for so long or form the basis of so great a portion of our beliefs and actions that they are rarely questioned (e.g. the heliocentric universe, the germ theory of disease, photosynthesis). It is instructive to recall, however, that there were periods in human history where these theories did not enjoy their current pride of place, that they gained this status only after protracted periods of weak or contentious assent, and that they are subject to overthrow as much as were their epistemic antecedents. Reflect also on the fact that beliefs, understandings, and even knowledge dearly held in different places on this planet—or even within the same society—can be contested bitterly, yet still serve their purposes of informing us and revealing an ever-unfolding reality.

Indeed, in this context of cultural transmission not only of facts, knowledge, and ideas, but also of memory, values, and identity, narrative emerges as the form that best conveys and preserves these ideations in this combined logical and mythical sense. The imminent cognitive psychologist and education philosopher Jerome Bruner has explored this concept in several influential works, most notably in his “Narrative Construction of Reality,” in which he highlights the connections among narrative skills, social intelligence, and the everyday sense-making we all engage in both to interpret and to negotiate our ways through our unfolding reality. Bruner characterizes human knowledge and skills within societies as “cultural tool kits” that many of us recognize—in fact must acknowledge and share at certain levels for the society to function—but few of us master deeply or broadly. In this sense our working intelligence may be personally
specific, but can never remain strictly individual, as none of it can for any of us “be understood without taking into account his or her reference books, notes, computer programs and data bases, or most important of all, the network of friends, colleagues, or mentors on whom one leans for help and advice.”

His work stresses not only the power of narrative to explain and aid our understanding, but also the roles of competing narratives in these efforts in a way consistent with Postmodernist notions. For Bruner, it is our “context sensitivity,” or our relative receptiveness to competing narratives, that he says:

…makes narrative discourse in everyday life such a viable instrument for cultural negotiation. You tell your version, I tell mine, and we rarely need legal confrontation to settle the difference. Principles of charity and presumptions of relevance are balanced against principles of sufficient ignorance and sufficient doubt to a degree one would not expect where criteria of consistency and verification prevailed. We seem to be able to take competing versions of a story with a perspectival grain of salt, much more so than in the case of arguments or proofs.

So, it is not the case that facts, formulas, physical laws, or other such rational bedrock do not help make up and inform our reality regardless of our understanding of it. Neither is it that dealing with such bedrock in the context of metanarrative apprehensions of it does not still offer powerful guidance and support to knowledge, insight, and behavior. It is the case, however, that we identify and build on this bedrock through narratives, which continuously compete for our assent, incorporate demonstrable fact and rational analysis in varying ways, and shape our views of our world and our places in it.

In the context of collective societal and government action, that motivating force in the War on Terror, it may be comforting to consider economics, policy analysis, intelligence collection, or other enterprises that contribute to national strategy are the realm of demonstrable fact and rational calculation, but this is no more the case here than
in any other area of human inquiry. Relativity and subjectivity are hard at work, despite the efforts of warfighters, policymakers, intelligence officers, and others to work just as hard against them. Even as these national security players attempt to stick to “just the facts,” the reality is that not all relevant facts are known or can ever be fully, properly, or consistently understood, nor will these actors ever share a complete set of underlying assumptions. Therefore, their initiatives remain at some level perhaps reasonable, yet inherently ambiguous. Recalling Barthes’s notion of facts and their role in narrative from Chapter I, in this context facts rarely speak for themselves. Instead, we speak for them as we select, phrase, and present them in the narratives of our purpose. As Plato observed, *logos* may be the higher knowledge, but we all eventually fall back on *mythos* if only because of the limitations of human reason and how we can never know all the facts. Moreover, any notion that these facts exist on their own not only suggests a naïve idea that some established facts in this sense might be more “true” than others, but also that they have meaning outside of the narrative context in which they are placed. Narrative’s role might be minimized, but never excised.

This understanding of narrative and its role in informing, being informed by, and re-informing the events, circumstances, decisions, and “reality” of the War on Terror is central to the examination at hand. The power of micronarratives, which operate at smaller, more focused levels, clearly over-matches that of a larger, unwieldy, and vulnerable metanarrative in this sense. Not only do these reduced, more personal stories more accurately reveal and articulate the uncertainty and ambiguity of the world and its reality, but also they can be more easily tailored and adjusted—or rejected and replaced—by truth-seekers still informed by the power of narrative explanations. Moreover, it is only
with the collapse of metanarrative that these more facile and “truthful” localized stories can emerge. In other words, this non-objectivist truth needs to be explained in regard to its claim on our assent and its criteria for such a claim, and only smaller narratives are up to this task in a way that larger narratives never can be.

In a way, the idea that the world is made up of rational actors at the state and sub-state level pursuing actions aimed at advancing their individual and collective self-interests is a powerful one in the field of international relations and can be seen as a strong candidate for a dominant narrative in this area. In this context, the argument that actions in global affairs are also both shaped by and shape beliefs and assumptions of ultimately mythic proportion can be seen as a competing narrative—one that works at the micro-rather than meta-level, thereby not offering so much an opposing rational but more another way of explaining and understanding circumstances more fully—that also deserves assent. However, it is more accurate to say—especially given the effort spent on uncovering the fundamentals of narrative’s power and roles—that narrative “myth” and “rational” analysis are so intertwined and inseparable in their ability to motivate and reveal events and reality that separating them into two different storylines is both wrong and wrong-headed. Therefore, identifying better narrative candidates among competitors is less important than identifying that the range of competitors should include some that mainstream academics in the field tend to dismiss. In this sense, this is not an effort to subvert neo-realist notions of how the War on Terror works, but to see them added to.

**The Search For Security: Western Traditions and American Narratives**

If understanding through mythologizing is a pervasive aspect of culture as it apprehends and conveys knowledge, then greater insights into the origins and articulations
of a particular subject’s myths should convey deeper and more meaningful understandings than mere comprehension and assessment of its data. This is no less true in understanding the War on Terror than it is for any other cultural event, so exploring the sources and expressions of its myths is a fundamental undertaking in a full analysis and appreciation of the conflict. Despite the fact that this inquiry is about the War on Terror as an expression of culture, as opposed to a more traditional examination of it as an expression of policy or security, it is from “security” and our recognition of the term and what it means to us as a society that the origins of the war’s myths emerge. As much as there are practical understandings of security that are central to a range of policies and actions, there are narrative understandings of the topic that are at least as important and influential as they are subtle and under-examined. To the extent the war is and remains an expression of security, its myths’ foundations can be found in the myth of security.

Security is not mythic in the sense that it does not exist, but more in the sense that we have come to know it in ways that are at least as important narratively and rhetorically as they are analytically and practically. In this way, it can be seen as a subject of dialogic pull in a discourse of memory, language, and assent. It certainly does exist, and most of us would claim we know it when we see it or feel it; it is within that feeling that the myth of security finds its home. From the Latin securus (safety), security deals with safety, protection, and freedom from threat, typically in the context of guarantees thereof. The reality of security is clear: when one’s person, property, liberty, society, etc. is imperiled or in some fashion at risk, security is compromised. Much like the above-proffered idea of narrative being a part of human consciousness and understanding since their origins, it is impossible to imagine that same consciousness and understanding existing without an
accompanying aim of keeping them and all they may come to hold dear safe from harm. This fundamental human notion has developed into aims and goals far beyond the individual, and we use terms such as collective, national, and global security to describe recognizable and important aspects of the international relations field. Indeed, it is within these areas of the larger topic that most of the literature on counterterrorism exists. So, security both as a concept and as an event is real; what meaning we have come to attach to it is the realm of myth.

These larger expressions of security lie at the heart of Modern-Age Western ideas of the state, how it came into existence, and what its main roles include. From Rousseau’s concept of man’s emergence from the state of nature to form societies of increasingly complex and artificial ways; to Hobbes’s theory of a Leviathan-like political super-entity guaranteeing humankind’s freedom from its original “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” actuality; to Paine’s belief in republican governance as the proper corrective to monarchical tyranny, security and appropriate sovereign assurances thereof remains both a central theme and the ultimate aim.  

Each of these ideas and their myriad Enlightenment companions both host and convey their own myths, of course, and some of them comport uneasily with Modernist knowledge and understandings, but it is their influence rather than their accuracy that characterizes their narrative power. Indeed, these authors’ works and others are still studied today, and the ideas they offer on the state—along with its power, competence, and authority—as the ultimate guarantor of individual and collective security remain pervasive in Western political thought and help form the foundations of American notions of security and government’s role in it to this day. Indeed, competing narratives in this arena still contend, each in its own way pushing a micronarrative that
works better at its own lower level than it can hope to in any over-arching sense given the multiplicity of voices in the dialogue and the range of explanations and understandings at play.\textsuperscript{23}

In this American context, however, ideas about security and governance have emerged in a bit more complicated fashion. Central to the American notion of security, as they often appear to be to American identity itself, are the concepts of freedom and liberty—freedom to do what we want and liberty from those who would restrict us from doing so. How easily these concepts rest with and within the fundamental idea of security, without which freedom and liberty would remain only conceptual, is typically a matter of circumstance, situation, and perspective, and individual American understandings and narratives are numerous and often conflicting. Look no further than the many and sometimes messy compromises between personal and collective rights and responsibilities enshrined in the Constitution to see how these conflicts played out for the United States at its origins.\textsuperscript{24} Indeed, differing views of the prerogatives of the individual, organizations, and government is essential to current American political expressions and partisan sparring, and which entity is trampling on the right of another and needs to be put in its place remain dominant features of prominent party and party factions’ narratives.\textsuperscript{25} Founding Father Benjamin Franklin’s still-oft-paraphrased observation about whoever would sacrifice freedom for security deserving neither captures firmly and eloquently the uncomfortable negotiations and concessions over these most fundamental American aims.\textsuperscript{26}

So security as we have come to know it, rather than being a realizable end-state in any practical sense, is instead an uncertain and endless process of trade-offs between
freedoms and restrictions designed to maximize liberty while safeguarding against threats. Indeed, many professionals in the subject of security risk—such as investors, insurance actuaries, and safety officers—employ various formulae to calculate this risk based on factors typically including threat, vulnerability, and consequence. These factors, of course, not only are relative in terms of observer, time, position, and circumstance, but also are constantly changing and subject to shifts in calculus and context. Moreover, security risks and those efforts undertaken to undercut or remove them are always measured against the value of whatever we might surrender or gain, over the short or long term, in the process. Even under the most optimal conditions, these efforts at best improve chances, and they can even make them worse, but they can never guarantee success. Indeed, that such a process will ever get matters right to general satisfaction for any length of time, especially in emergency circumstances, defies expectation. Yet that is precisely what some engaged in the enterprise—from those calculating risk and implementing measures to mitigate it to those who seek to live in a secure world and hold the others accountable for providing it—appears to believe we should be able to achieve and, therefore, should demand. Security is and should be approachable, but it will always remain unachievable.

Under these circumstances, however, the narrative of security remains at least as powerful as its analysis. The fact that we value it, seek it, identify threats to it, and undertake measures to create it fuels beliefs about it that are frequently incongruous. For instance, people report a greater fear of catastrophic events than of mundane ones—say, earthquakes over slipping in the shower—yet the chances of the latter occurring and causing serious injury far outweigh those of the former. Also, consider circumstances
from a computer user downloading multiple security programs in an effort to reinforce
cyber security despite the reality that key features of each program can act in mutually
interfering and canceling ways, to signs posted prominently outside some businesses
warning of the presence of a specific security system that in effect advertise which
identifiable shortcomings of which particular system a resourceful and determined
intruder should aim to overcome, to governments pouring precious resources into a
particular defensive measure that pulls the entire security enterprise in a counterproductive
direction and undermines other measures that help serve the ideal of a more in-depth and
flexible mitigation strategy (the last being why the term “Maginot Line” has reached
metaphor status in the security lexicon).29 All these examples demonstrate how the
strength of individual and subjective notions of security frequently win out over general
and objective ones—a circumstance consistent with what passes for human rationality as
well as a reality that empowers petit narratives over grand narrative.

In fact, the frequent disconnect between “imagined” and “real” security and the
perhaps counterintuitive preference sometimes for the former over the latter has given rise
to a branch of security analysis and practice that epitomizes the myth of security, referred
to as “Security Theater.”30 This term has been used to describe a range of steps
government agencies have taken in support of enhanced safety from terrorists, but that
have produced no, even negative, effective results—from National Guardsmen in the days
after the September 11th attacks patrolling airports armed with either unloaded rifles or
perhaps loaded rifles, but with no evidence of clear rules of engagement or drilled practice
therein; to Spanish railway officials after the March 11, 2004 bombings instituting
baggage checks at major stations, but neither at smaller stations that fed the same system
nor at stations on the commuter rail system that was actually attacked; to British screeners at Manchester Airport in August 2008 lowering the correct match standard of their newly introduced facial recognition system from a cloggingly restrictive 80% to a workable 30%, then quietly turning off the system entirely when the lower standard produced matches between Barack Obama and Winona Ryder or Osama bin Laden and Kevin Spacey.31

Lest these and other actions be dismissed as examples of mere misguidance or mistake, it should be recalled that in several cases authorities freely admit the practical futility of their measures, but sometimes point to their serving a greater utilitarian good in the context of human belief and behavior.32 One can imagine the myriad benefits accruing from continuing popular support of airline and rail travel and how the goal of ensuring continued patronage is advanced by any measures—practical and effective or not—that assuage customers’ concerns over their safety. In this sense, the pragmatic intentions, mistaken measures, failed methods, and counterproductive steps may conflate with their opposites in the realm of reasonableness—bringing the rationality and irrationality of security narrative and analysis full circle.

So, the myth of security persists as a foundation narrative in the myths that have arisen around the War on Terror, but like all myths under scrutiny here it should not be mistaken for a mere false story. Instead, to the extent this and other relevant myths retain power, they do so based on their ability to draw from earlier or even more fundamental guiding narratives as well as their capacity to command assent from potential adherents, who in turn align their actions in concert with commonly understood storylines. Whether or not these storylines can be proven or disproven in the context of any particular standard
of reason or practicality is at best secondary, at least in an epistemic sense. What are in question here are not human rationality and its effects *per se*, but rather the fact that what passes for human rationality adopts both logical, analytic coherencies and unreasoned, mythic inconsistencies, with the latter assuming the guise of the former most convincingly so long as they comport with received narratives. In this sense, security as we know it frequently approaches the fetishistic—meaning that it remains an object of desire emblematic of something larger, which in this case is mythic. Again, security clearly exists, but our understanding of it makes sense to us only to the degree we can follow its narrative—whatever it happens to be and however it happens to be best told. It is in the telling where micronarratives’ greater rhetorical nimbleness and the relative logical sways of their competing stories underscore the role of narrative as our fundamental mode of constructing reality.

The American Way of War: Origins and Expressions

Aside from the myth of security and responses to threats thereto, the other main source of foundational narratives that inform our understanding of and actions in the War on Terror have to do with the American way of war. Like all national myths of identity, purpose, and values, the narratives of how the country fights its wars are wrapped in other national myths and themselves draw on larger, older Western cultural storylines that feed into and intertwine with native variants to produce a strain that is not only uniquely American in its expressions, but also shifting in the face of developing intellectuality into the Postmodern Period. It is this nature of these expressions and their development that will shed the most revealing light on how they can be seen as informing key myths related to US counterterrorist efforts. This is an area of considerable scholarship, and several
useful and instructive works lend insights into the issue—although what proceeds here is less a survey of the literature and more a tracing of topical highlights pertinent to the inquiry at hand and their emergence over time.\textsuperscript{33}

The origins of American war myth start with those Western military narratives central to homeland defense, popular sovereignty, and the citizenry’s role in state affairs. General European experience is relevant in this context, but more so—given the historical origins of American political and social thought during colonization and independence—are British understandings and practice and Renaissance and Enlightenment intellectuality. As discussed at length in Chapter I, Renaissance thinking and acculturation drew from Europe’s classical past and sought to rediscover and reclaim aspects of this earlier golden age, while Enlightenment rationality focused on new knowledge and the power of reason. In the context of Western military narratives, these two intellectual and cultural periods’ combined influence helped first to resurrect memories of the militia of ancient Greek city states and the emergency levees of peninsular Rome raised to protect local interests and secure defendable borders.\textsuperscript{34} But it went on to contrast these democratic and republican customs with Roman imperialist developments of large, professional standing armies and English feudal traditions of temporary forces called up by regional nobility either to secure local prerogatives or to satisfy obligations to royal sovereigns for whatever purpose the crown saw fit. In a generally cultural as well as a specifically martial sense, Europe both inherited a rich past from its ancient ancestors and bequeathed it to its American descendants, along with the nurturing idea that reasoning from experience provided the most effective way to fashion a path to the future—including why and how to fight.
From their earliest arrival in the New World to their struggle for its freedom from the Old, Americans drew from these inherited memories and narratives in fashioning their military identity and organization. In searching for exemplars and developing clues of who they saw themselves as and what they were about—as well as who and what they were not—colonial- and independence-era Americans came to see themselves more as latter-day expressions of ancient democratic and republican ideals and not simply transplanted Englishmen with the same social and political purposes and responsibilities. Like their older forebears, American soldiers were citizens first, and they were subject to call-up primarily in defense of hearth and home, service under leaders in whom they had some hand in selecting, and subject to early return when the emergency ended. The colonists raised and maintained permanent units—a new practice for Englishmen—but in keeping with resurrected classical ideals they were small, aimed squarely at defending the settlements from attack, and manned with militia who brought their own arms when summoned and both trained and fought according to their own standards. Standing, professional regiments around which a still-largely militia army might be formed came to be deemed necessary during the War for Independence, but these units were demobilized after the conflict per the new nation’s democratic and republican values. Indeed, the American colonial army was disbanded after the Revolution in favor of state militias, not to be reconstituted as a standing, regular force until the early 19th century. Despite their remoteness in time, democratic Greek and republican Roman ideas about soldiers, armies, command, campaigns, etc. helped shape American military identity, organization, and action in ways more significant than counterpart ideas imparted by European empires or royal Britain.
At least as important in the foundational American military myth are narratives about who these democratically created and republican-ideated forces were supposed to fight. For English-speaking America, the first enemy was the colonies’ indigenous population, who were left out of an emerging society and polity of which they knew little and upon which they probably looked with a mix of bemusement, suspicion, and hostility—feelings that were likely mutual. Indeed, the new Americans’ attitudes and actions toward the old centered on expulsion and assimilation, and these ideas carried through to the natives’ French patrons and allies, with all of them seen as outside the ambit of the emerging Anglo-American state that understood coexistence in a decidedly different way that its European ancestors did.38 This “othering” of the nation’s enemies and those against whom arms are rightfully taken is not an exclusively American characteristic, but its emergence and initial unchallenged sway in the American context has led naturally to a peculiarity in strength and persistence. The special circumstance of the Civil War perhaps stands in some contrast, although even that conflict’s narrative took on a strong crusading streak despite the competing “brother-against-brother” myth that has emerged largely in the war’s aftermath—as even a cursory examination of the lyrics of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” (e.g. “crush the serpent with his heel”) or several variants of “Dixie” (e.g. “stamp upon the cursed alliance”) might attest.39 America’s enemies at home and abroad are at their most threatening the more they can be painted in ways that make them least like the civilized inheritors of Enlightenment thought and practice Americans tend to see themselves as and, therefore, most worthy objects of American warfare.

The dominant myth of the American way of war can be sketched most clearly in
the prevailing image of how the country sees itself initiating, prosecuting, and concluding armed conflict. In keeping with Enlightenment ideals and the presumed natural inclinations of a free society, starting wars in the American context typically is seen not so much the first step in a calculated application of force, but more the last step in a failed effort to stave off the worst case. In this sense, Americans traditionally see war as something we try our best to avoid, but is nonetheless thrust upon us. Faced with this unavoidable circumstance, however, Americans tend to see themselves fighting hard to win and to do so bending toward one of two strategies: attrition or annihilation. The first was more the norm early in America’s history when the country was too weak to contend evenly with its adversaries (e.g. the Revolution and the War of 1812) and re-emerged in later years when US military power had become so great that its full application would be inappropriately destabilizing (e.g. Korea and the Cold War). The second has been used less often yet has emerged as the apparent national favorite, at least if judged by the country’s most identifying and referential conflicts (e.g. the Civil War and World War II).

The general type of strategy aside, American warfare typically has been understood in popular contexts as a nasty but serious business worthy only of extreme effort and measures as befitting a national undertaking and, for its citizen soldiers, the demand of the ultimate sacrifice. Such exertion is commendably pursued only to a clear and effective end, meaning that American wars are rightly concluded with agreement to favorable terms, if not—once again, the Civil War and World War II experiences being most instructive—unconditional surrender, after which Americans are quick to make amends with and assimilate the defeated into the new order we are out to build from the war’s ashes. The high chance of anything less either diminishes the war’s sacrifice or
shows the conflict to have been an undeserving undertaking to begin with.

Another set of narrative themes in American warfare have emerged that simultaneously diverge from and support the dominant myth of the slow-to-rouse, fierce-of-fight, magnanimous-in-victory Americans that also have much to do with identity and selective memory. These mythic elements focus on the popular US self-image of practical, professional, technological competence that can identify any problem, overcome any challenge, and defeat any foe through disciplined application of knowledge and skill. This image’s intellectual expressions range from the philosophical pragmatism espoused by Charles Saunders Peirce, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Henry James, and John Dewey to the notion of American Exceptionalism, a term first coined by Communist commentators to explain why the political and social development of the United States does not comport with Marxist theory, and later expropriated by various American commentators from the generally patriotic to the specifically chauvinist.42

Its more concrete application in the American way of war plays out in such circumstances as the development of a professional officer corps, the institution of effective planning cycles, pride in the world’s best arms and equipment, and the ability to prepare for and engage in combat with clear measures of success or failure. Of course US military history is replete with examples where none of these attributes held full or effective sway, and these themes at times conflict with others, such as when emphasis on the most concentrated and forceful prosecution of combat competes with a perhaps more strategic focus on a desired specific post-war state or other political considerations, thereby prompting a distractive amelioration, if not unwarranted curtailment, of the messy, but necessary, and ultimately heroic business of fighting.43 The thesis of the
soldier winning or being capable of winning the war while the politician either keeps him from winning it or loses the soldier’s gains after his victory is a popular one in American military narrative, and has been used to explain any number of successes and failures in US warfare throughout the country’s history.⁴⁴

In a way these differing micronarratives comport with a splintering of grand narrative in the shift from the Modern Age to the Postmodern Period. Neither set of assumptions or beliefs rises fully to the level of overarching storyline, in that they and their constituent elements remain open to interpretation, disagreement, accretion, or subversion despite their general popularity or power to inform and explain. Still, it is this enduring power to guide our rationalizations and help conventionalize our understandings of war and Americans’ role therein that fuels these narratives’ influence and authority. Again, like with all myths, it is not so much the case of their demonstrable accuracy in any objective sense, but more the case of them commanding sufficient assent to inform and instruct thought and action. It is this circumstance that tracks after a fashion with a transition from the Modernist search for larger, objective truth via appropriate application of knowledge and reason to the Postmodernist breakdown in any effective attempt to apprehend anything more than smaller, relative truths because of the natural conflicts in perspectives and understandings. Indeed, these smaller, relative truths and their foundational micronarratives more cleanly mesh with empirical logic and reason and are more easily tailored to situation and circumstance by a broad range of observers, but each in his or her own way.

Moreover, all these themes play out in the narratives that have emerged in the context of the War on Terror. From a general myth of security to more specific myths of
war, all feed into and help shape and establish not only American counterterrorism myths themselves, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the milieu from which they are drawn and the context in which they perform. Efforts to identify terrorists’ capabilities and motivations, and thereby the threat these people present, as well as what it is that the United States should do to combat terrorism and safeguard its territory, citizens, and interests certainly draw from reasoned assessment of fact and analysis. Still, human rationality being what it is, this reasoned assessment remains indelibly colored by the assumptions we bring to it and how closely these assumptions suit the stories we tell ourselves about security and war. These stories reside at varying levels—but reside nonetheless—in the jurisdiction of narrative myth and the narrative dialogues in which we engage. Moreover, both the explanations they offer and the understandings we develop are part of the knowledge and belief exchanges that have emerged from the multiplicity of micronarratives vying for our allegiance. Similarly, war exists as a demonstrable fact, as do the actions that take place in it, but the meaning we impart to those actions and the lessons we draw from them outstrip a mere chronicling and the application of empirical formulae. They also inform and are informed by the stories we tell about them. In the realm of personal understanding—in this case of the American way of war in general—making sense of it helps us make sense of our current war and the myths that drive our perceptions of it.

**Terrorism and Counterterrorism Narratives: Sources and Articulations**

Just as the myths of security and war flow from earlier cultural narratives, those myths that motivate much of America’s War on Terror draw on these narratives and combine with others. Deeper origins aside, a useful starting point regarding US
counterterrorism efforts and their inherited understandings and narratives is more recent and specific: Western governments’ efforts in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to confront anarchists and stop their attacks on international political leaders. The three decades prior to the outbreak of World War I and the ushering in of new international political and conflict dynamics saw anarchist assassins—acting out a “propaganda of the deed” concept of physical violence against political enemy leaders to inspire the masses and catalyze revolution—claim the lives of a dozen or so presidents, prime ministers, and various crowned heads in America and Europe. These killings were part of a wave of what can be seen as international terrorism at the hands of loosely affiliated, ideologically motivated zealots living within the very societies they were attempting to bring down.45 Western governments felt prompted to confront this scourge, and 100 years before George W. Bush most recently popularized the term “War on Terror” in his address to a joint session of Congress a week after 9/11, an anarchist’s assassination of William McKinley in September 1901 moved Theodore Roosevelt to invoke a similar campaign in summoning a worldwide effort to exterminate anarchist agitation and violence everywhere.46

Of course the War on Terror’s motivating myths are myriad, with some more starkly articulated, more easily teased out and explained, and more significant in terms of their ability to inspire and influence action than others. At their hearts are events or circumstances, but they develop as stories we tell about these events and circumstances that in turn go on to shape understandings and impel deeds. There is truth in each of them, although their historicity or demonstrability is less at issue. Indeed, each of them can be rebutted, if not refuted, with other understandings that are at least as reasonable and
consistent with fact and analysis, but that only underscores their status as myth in the
classical understanding of the term, as their power persists regardless. This inquiry will
examine five eminently arguable yet powerfully persistent myths that deal with key
aspects of the War on Terror—from how the war started and who the enemy is, to how the
war is fought and what its effects will be, to how it ends and why. They win out over
competing narratives less because of their accuracy, but more because of their greater
ability to shape and be shaped by the war. Moreover, this ability and how it plays out
offers insights into US counterterrorism efforts that more traditional analysis may not.

**Myth #1: The Terrorists Hate Us for Who We Are**

As frequently heard about those who attacked us on September 11th and their
Muslim jihadi sympathizers as about anarchists in the 19th century is the charge that they
are prompted to act against us out of an irrational abhorrence, especially for us as a
people. Indeed, to Theodore Roosevelt the anarchists are “utterly depraved criminal[s]
belonging to that body of criminals who object to all governments, good and bad alike,
who are against any form of popular liberty if it is guaranteed by even the most just and
liberal laws,” while for George W. Bush the terrorists “hate our freedoms: our freedom of
religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each
other.”

This narrative may draw on Americans’ historical predilections to see their
enemies as outside the bounds of discourse, law, or common society, but are not
necessarily determined by them. Indeed, countering this view is the explanation that
terrorists tend far more to hate the United States for what it does. For instance, Arabs
and Muslims consistently express more positive opinions of the American people than
they do of the United States government, and Osama bin Laden himself in his manifesto declaring war against the United States named three practical reasons—US support for Israel, US troop presence in Saudi Arabia, and US-led sanctions and attacks on Iraq—for al-Qaeda’s hostility, circumstances that suggest American acts, not Americans themselves, are more at issue in the War on Terror.49 But implacable hatred makes for a more powerful narrative context than do practical differences; the latter are a possible subject of negotiation, while the former is more the purview of war. This is not to say that the terrorists we fight do not hate us, but the popular myth of their motivation characterizes our enemy as someone who cannot be reasoned with or deterred, but only killed. This myth also establishes a framework for the struggle against a particular form of Muslim extremist violence as war, which typically is prosecuted through intense application of irresistible force.

**Myth #2: Our Response to Terrorism Must Be War**

As the conflict’s popular name implies, the War on Terror is just that—a war—and therefore military force is the primary tool in the appropriate response to 9/11 specifically and terrorism in general. The term “war” has evolved significantly in the last hundred years or so from a clash of fielded forces, to the two world wars’ mobilization of national might, to any concerted effort demanding focus and sacrifice along the lines of a “War on Poverty” or a “War on Drugs,” and is consistent with the American war narrative of the nation being forced into a fight. With the War on Terror, however, the term morphs again, retaining its notions of large-scale, supreme exertion and a literal call-to-arms—this time against not an identifiable enemy, but against what is more precisely the enemy’s favored or most troublesome tactic: terror.
Still, the term’s military connotations persist. Moreover, they do so in contrast to the totality of the nation’s response to 9/11, which more precisely is probably something closer to combating with a range of actions and policies, not simply military ones, a particularly virulent and violent form of anti-Western Muslim extremism, not simply terrorism. Moreover, this full range of actions and policies risk being short-changed vis-à-vis various uses of force in a “wartime” contest over resources, or their applications might become unnecessarily militarized the more the term “war” is applied to the US counterterrorism effort. To many observers—especially those quick to embrace popular myth—a War on Terror may resemble less a long-term effort of integrated legal, regulatory, diplomatic, intelligence, and other measures along with military operations to restrict the actions of a loosely affiliated array of extremists, but instead look more like a concerted and focused campaign of force against countries or sub- or trans-national groups that are the typical targets of such campaigns.

**Myth #3: This is an Existential Struggle Demanding Extreme Action**

Consistent with the notions of the terrorists being motivated by irrational hatred of Western freedoms and that we are engaged in war with them is the myth of this war being a struggle for “our way of life.” Indeed the term “way of life” is an immensely powerful one in that it invokes something dearest to all of us, yet is sufficiently vague that it can mean different things to each of us—a quality that lends itself usefully a range of narrative functions, from revisionist historical views to some of their current imports and interpretations. It also flows neatly into the narrative stream of American security and war myth in the way that it engages the popular notion of the nation roused to give its all and its best in the practical pursuit of its sure protection.
Such a struggle is mythically understood as a mutually existential one between implacable aggressors and innocent victims, the righteousness of self-preservation adhering to the defenders’ cause and actions. This righteous war myth is powerful and figures prominently in our popular understandings of our largest and most important conflicts, from the Revolution’s fight for freedom from tyranny to World War II’s salvation of Western civilization from aggressive fascist militarism. With having on one’s side not only the rational ends of specific political achievements, but also righteousness and the defense of a cherished way of life, it becomes much easier to adopt an end-justifies-the-means ethic that helps validate a range of exceptional, extra-judicial, and risky measures that under less dire circumstances might be seen as unconscionable—and, in a more reasoned analysis, either of little practical utility or counterproductive. What a righteous war of mythic proportions legitimizes in the popular mind may have to do less with what is of pragmatic benefit over the long run in the true counterterrorist struggle at hand and more with satisfying the twin desires to strike back and to gain an at least perceived upper hand regardless of cost. This situation is what political scientist and terrorism specialist David C. Rapoport observes as how “terrorist tactics invariably produce rage and frustration, often driving governments to respond in unanticipated, extraordinary, illegal, and destructive ways.”

**Myth #4: Protracted Struggle Eventually Brings Out Our Worst**

The idea that our enemies in this war are myriad and that we are obliged to do everything in our power to beat them prompts the narrative of the “long war” and, at least for a just and democratic people, its attendant corruptions. Protracted struggle and the inherent dangers it presents to civilized society fits squarely into America’s inherited
Western cultural narrative stretching back to the classical period. Forms include the depredations of the Peloponnesian War leaving its combatants trading their best traditions for worse, inexorably weakened by exhaustion and Pyrrhic victory, and over-ripe for inner rot and outside conquest, as well as Alexander’s unending string of battlefield successes ending only in mutiny by loyal troops too spent and homesick to go any farther and their leader’s personal shortcomings and vices both forestalling a lasting empire and leading to his own early death. Of course Western antiquity also featured the three Punic Wars, in which republican Rome ultimately prevailed against oligarchical Carthage, but even then popular understandings of this series of conflicts tend to emphasize contrary narrative motifs, from the wily and ennobling heroics of Hannibal to Rome’s ability to prevail leading inevitably to the Republic’s demise at the hands of its successor Empire.54

Still, nothing about a war’s duration or the supremacies of its efforts or sacrifices dictates the victor’s self-destruction. For the United States, this is borne out in traditional narratives of American successes in the Revolution, the Civil War, World War II, and the Cold War and how the state emerged stronger in the fighting’s wake. The full opportunities of victory are surely squanderable in many explanations of these conflicts, but well-respected and -studied analyses of liberal industrialized states’ ability to wage protracted war in relative (if unfortunate) safety tend to wither when compared to easy analogies to dystopian narratives that serve up various “we-have-met-the-enemy-and-he-is-us” storylines and lessons.55

Myth #5: This War Must End in Our Victory

The last major interpretive myth of the War on Terror is that, like all wars, it must end, and, like all good American wars, it must end with the United States as the clear
winner. In the general Western and specifically American war narrative, consistent with the above-examined one of the deleterious aspects of protracted conflict, war is an aberrant state that is inconsistent with liberal society and demands clear termination. Moreover, although the tendency to see oneself and one’s country as winners is not exclusively American, it is stereotypically so.\(^{56}\)

Indeed, American conflicts most identifying as nationally self-referential are generally remembered as ending in complete American victories. An incomplete victory such as the War of 1812 may be remembered more by the lopsided triumph of the Battle of New Orleans than the \textit{status quo ante} resultant Treaty of Ghent (signed days before Andrew Jackson’s signature success), while defeats such as Vietnam are popularly recalled as anything from a “noble cause” to an unfair contest wherein oblivious American leadership was “afraid to win”—both narratives boldly underscored in Ronald Reagan’s famous August 1980 speech to the Chicago convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars.\(^{57}\) Mixed results of the Civil War tend to see the winner’s narrative prevail over the loser’s in national ideation, although the South’s own “noble cause” myth is tolerated as long as it avoids the uncomfortable issue of slavery—no matter, it seems, how inelegantly it does so.\(^{58}\) Of course more analytic treatments, including the brief one offered in Chapter I, acknowledge the frequently uncertain nature of war termination in the Postmodern Period, but they appear to prompt re-examination of the dominant cultural narrative only in academic circles. Americans will embrace MacArthur’s legendary “In war, there is no substitute for victory” dictum over other views, regardless of how well reasoned or supported these other views might be, if they are seen promoting a different—certainly negative—memory or identity.
These are the myths—the stories or other narratives that attempt to explain the unknown in a fashion understandable within the culture seeking this understanding—that have been the most powerful in the context of the War on Terror. Again, it is not the case of them being arguable, unconvincing, or untrue, although the examination above certainly shows them at least to be the first. The circumstances that other interpretations of the events in question exist and that these other interpretations may be more “logical” and less “mythical” in their ability to comport with demonstrable fact may be worth noting, but this does not diminish these narratives’ ability to explain events and for observers to impart value to and derive meaning from these events in imposing fashion. Arguments aside, these myths cannot be refuted in any objective sense. More important than their arguability, however, is their power to command assent, especially in the face of what may be more analytic, more strongly reasoned alternatives. What is at stake is not truth, but power. This power will be borne out in the way these myths can be seen as informing the War on Terror, how the events of the war return the favor by informing the myths, and how these re-informed myths continue to shape the war. The significance of this ever-ruminating process is revealed in how better it may clarify or explain American counterterrorist efforts in ways that more traditional neo-realist constructions may not as fully be able to do.

The Power and Value of Micronarratives in the War on Terror

The collapse of metanarrative, the rise of micronarrative, and narrative myth’s ceaseless ability to clarify and shape not only our understandings of reality, but also the ways in which we respond to that reality as we come to understand it, play out in ways that may not be not fully reconcilable with more analytic models of conception and
interpretation. Clearly, our Postmodernist world can be fairly characterized by the failure of grand, overarching storylines to exert the same influences over human intellectuality and action as they did in earlier periods. Just as clearly, the emergence of smaller, localized stories better allows us to apprehend the confusion, ambiguity, and ultimate uncertainty that we see in and project onto our world. Some of these storylines, such as those that energy from the five guiding myths identified in the War on Terror, might interrelate and, in the process, loom larger collectively than they might individually. Still, they never succeed in forming the kind of metanarrative that characterized and informed the intellectual ties and word views of previous periods.

The power and the value of micronarratives in this sense emerge not just from metanarrative’s collapse, but additionally from the enduring ability of narrative elements and dialogical dynamics to identify those smaller narratives that can motivate greater acceptance. This comes from the dialogic conversations individuals have with encountered narratives as well as with each other. This remains ultimately a subjective exercise, anchored fast to individual identifications of perspective, position, and time, but it remains an exercise that deserves the effort. Neo-realist truths of the sovereignty and self-interestedness of international actors and the systems based on them help explain the reality of global affairs, including the War on Terror, but so do narrative understandings that are written and read in ways that are frequently symbolic. These storylines—from those regarding security, to those about the American way of war, to those specifically articulated in the War on Terror—can also be seen as mythic in the way they reveal insights into our archetypical comprehensions and behaviors, underscoring the power of narrative, even on lesser scales. This is an insight worth describing and knowing before
any effort to evaluate the relative merits of particular narratives can be most effectively undertaken.

With this understanding in mind, the issue of which narratives operative in the War on Terror should command the greatest assent relies ultimately on perspective, position, time, and other discreet factors that exist at both the communal and individual level. Individuals and communities will continue to identify more and less compelling narratives through their dialogues and conversations; the fact that narratives compete and some weigh more heavily than traditionalists might assume is a more important issue in this specific inquiry. So, explaining the nature of narrative and demonstrating its mutually informative relationship with events in US counterterrorism efforts, rather than critiquing specific actions undertaken in these efforts and their informative myths, emerges here as of greater value. The reality is that narrative understandings influence the War on Terror both directly and indirectly. The question of which narrative understandings are important, as opposed to which ones should be important, is the subject of inquiry. Each individual and community will find the conviction to take stands on the value of individual narratives howsoever these narratives make sense to these individuals and communities. Critically examining these narratives is the key to ensuring they make sense, and that cannot take place until narrative’s value as a legitimated authority in informing decisions and actions in the War on Terror is acknowledged. This is where a fuller understanding of the war comes from; in coming to this understanding we may make it more worthy of our sacrifices and prepare ourselves to draw some useful insights and practical lessons.
CHAPTER III:

MYTH INFORMS ACTION
NARRATIVE'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE WAR ON TERROR

The five myths identified at the end of the previous chapter are at central play in key aspects of the War on Terror’s prosecution. This is not to say that practical considerations are not at play as well, and in quite important ways, but the proof that these and other myths’ influences are outsized can be seen most clearly in how they inform the war—especially in fashions contrary to more dispassionate calculi. All of these myths have commanded some degree of assent and still retain defenders. None can be shown to be false in a fully evident sense, although some of their applied versions, logical extensions, or functional details might strain credulity, and others may be shown as outright empirical mistakes. Again, the emphasis in this inquiry is less on debunking these or other views and more on showing them to be myths in the classical understanding of the term—tracing their narrative arcs from story through explanation to action and back to story. It will also show how the various counterterrorism efforts they inform are incompletely understood outside of an epistemology or a conceptual framework that takes into account myth and its power to convey received wisdom and understood truth.

Despite the claim that narrative exerts a perhaps abstract but nonetheless inexorable privilege in human knowledge and understanding, this is not the same as saying that reason is somehow displaced. Rational actors remain, of course—including, at least at times, those who are typically at the heart of the study and practice of international relations—although their full or consistent presence and rationality should best be placed within a larger, more inclusive context. Still, this larger context, wherein what might be
considered “irrational” factors play perhaps undervalued but still significant roles, undeniably comports with “rationality.” Indeed, to the extent that a fuller realization of the role of narrative can enhance our ability to explain our actions and their motivations, this realization can be seen as imminently reasonable and consistent with a logical construction of reality. It comes to us to use this knowledge and trace myth’s functions and effects in at least this aspect of the international relations field in order to glean appropriate insights and, one might hope, to learn from them.

The process of narrative myth fueling our understandings of and our actions undertaken in the War on Terror cannot be shown to start cleanly from a precise point of origin, as narrative understanding and informed action have been feeding into and drawing from each other for all of human existence. Still, as the previous chapter has shown, pertinent highlights of this long-standing, multi-faceted, and mutually informative process are indeed traceable. Both demonstrable fact and our analytic understanding of it as well as mythic perceptions and our narrative sense-making build on each other and are intertwined in what we see taking place and what we take it to mean. The assumptions we bring to and the values we both impart and derive from our stories about security, war, and terrorism fuel this process and undergird the part of the process at which we have arrived. So, having examined the sources and derivations of the war's foundational myths and offered up explicit articulations of them, we can call this larger process of mutual information initiated, at least in terms of our study. The next step proceeds to identifying how and in what ways these myths help shape US counterterrorism efforts.

Terrorists’ Hatred and the Senselessness of their Acts: One Irrationality Begets Another?

Starting with the myth of the terrorists hating us for who we are, not what we do,
helps lay a foundational explanation for several popular perceptions of those who attacked us on 9/11. Along with President Bush were any number of officials, commentators, or more casual observers characterizing terrorists’ irrational, implacable hatred for freedom, democracy, decency, and all things American, from before the attacks into the opening years in the War on Terror.¹ In describing those terrorists who attacked the American Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman said that they “have no specific ideological program or demands. Rather, they are driven by a generalized hatred of the US, Israel and other supposed enemies of Islam.”² Even before Bush’s address to the nation wherein he invoked the terrorists’ hatred for representative government, Secretary of State Colin Powell condemned the attackers’ within hours of their strikes as “people who don’t believe in democracy.”³ In announcing the formation of a “Defense of Civilization Fund” a month after the attacks, the public policy group “The American Council of Trustees and Alumni” declared “It was not only America that was attacked on September 11, but civilization. We were attacked not for our vices, but for our virtues.”⁴

Lest these statements be dismissed as rhetorical excesses in the heat of the moment, similar characterizations of terrorists’ motivations were being repeated months and years later. The Bush administration’s September 2002 National Security Strategy discussed terrorist-sponsoring “rogue states” that “reject basic human values and hate the United States and everything for which it stands,” and in July 2003, the White House’s Homeland Security Council spokesman stated that “Terrorists hate our freedoms.”⁵ At least at the start of the war, this narrative of the incentives and inspirations of our enemies stemming from irrational emotion received wide acceptance with scant amelioration or
redress. As an explanation, it appeared to drive American decision makers’ understanding of the threat more than any other offered.

Of course the alternate rationale of terrorists’ actions being in response to US policies existed, and was even acknowledged from time to time both before and early in the war. Still, this acknowledgement was too often meager, idiosyncratic, or untrustworthy, and never found the kind of broad and effective appeal enjoyed by the dominant narrative. For instance, a Defense Department report’s claim in 1997 that “Historical data show a strong correlation between US involvement in international situations and an increase in terrorist attacks against the United States,” or the State Department’s warning after the US attack on Iraq in April 2003 that “Tensions remaining…may increase the potential threat to US citizens and interests abroad, including by terrorist groups,” credited the more practical, reciprocal relationship between US and terrorist actions, but they neither rebutted directly nor refuted the myth of the terrorists hating us for who we are, not what we do.  

More pointed official views of this more pragmatic narrative also tended toward the understated or unascribed. For instance, after the June 2002 car bomb attack near the US Consulate in Karachi, the Washington Post reported that unnamed “US officials said the attack was likely the work of extremists angry at both the United States and Pakistan’s president, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, for siding with the United States after September 11 and abandoning support for Afghanistan’s ruling Taliban.” Some of the clearest voices for this view were from the terrorists themselves, such as when the perpetrators on the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center claimed in a letter to the New York Times that they acted “in response for the American political, economical, and military support to
Israel the state of terrorism and to the rest of the dictator countries in the region,” or when shoe-bomber Richard Reid wrote in December 2001 in what was intended as a posthumous email that he acted “to help remove the oppressive American forces from the Muslim land.” The prevailing myth of these terrorists’ irrationality, however, undermines their views and renders them unreliable at best, and deceitful or treacherous at worst.

But what of more responsible voices, both inside government and out? Surely they can account for the makings of more reasoned analysis, one might answer. They might, of course, but only if senior decision makers based their views and determinations solely on such studied inquiries uninformed or unshaped by mythologized understandings and perceptions. Of course more nuanced understandings indeed existed from before the start of the war and into its first days. Jimmy Carter, commenting on Ronald Reagan’s introduction of forces into Lebanon during his first administration, observed that “because we bombed and shelled them unmercifully …we became kind of a Satan in the minds of those who are deeply resentful. That is what precipitated the taking of our hostages and that is what has precipitated some of the terrorist attacks.” Of course Carter, a Democratic president and critic of Republican policies, might be dismissed by Bush and those in his circle, but Colin Powell, commenting in his memoirs about the same episode, offered a similar view when he judged that “What we tend to overlook in such situations is that other people will react much as we would.”

Bush presumably had access not only to his own secretary of state’s deeper insights into terrorists’ motivations beyond their supposed hatred for democracy, but also to the case for the terrorists hating us for what we do, not who we are. Indeed this was a view offered specifically by Michael Scheuer in his book *Imperial Hubris: Why the West
is Losing the War on Terror.\textsuperscript{11} Although the book was published anonymously at first, Scheuer was revealed as the author after he resigned from the CIA in 2004, his final assignment from 2001 being special advisor to the chief of the Agency’s Osama bin Laden unit, a unit he ran from its inauguration in 1996 to 1999.\textsuperscript{12} One may be safe in presuming that Scheuer’s views reached the president and his senior-most security advisors through any number of CIA reports and analyses, but they were not enough to sway these decision makers’ views on terrorists’ blind motivations, which remained a powerfully informative narrative for American action.

Indeed, President Bush’s frequent articulations of the terrorists’ unreasoning hostility narrative not only reinforced the prevailing myth in the face of countering views and analyses, but also complicated and undercut the potential strength of the type of international coalition his rhetoric appeared aimed at forging. Just five days after 9/11, Bush described the conflict to reporters from the White House steps with the observation that “This crusade, this War on Terrorism, is gonna take a while.”\textsuperscript{13} The term “crusade” may invoke a righteous and supreme struggle against “evil-doers,” but it is also a loaded term throughout the Arab world, conjuring up recollections of perhaps the darkest period of the West’s relations with the forebears of the very Muslim populations the United States and its allies have been striving mightily to enlist in their counterterrorist efforts. Lest these remarks be written off as an impromptu slip, Bush repeated their theme in more considered but no less measured terms four days later in his speech to a joint session of Congress when he stated unequivocally that “Our war on terror begins with Al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated.”\textsuperscript{14} Even with the troublesome term “crusade” excised,
Bush’s more carefully vetted comments described the conflict in ways that would give pause to any ally, Muslim and non-Muslim, considering signing up to such a protracted, far-reaching, and open-ended campaign. A wiser strategy might have prompted more considered rhetoric, but both would have had to have come from more reflective views of the cause and effect of reciprocal action. It is not the case that those views did not exist, even within the administration, but it is the case that they either were in the minority or that their power, fueled though it may have been by reflection and analysis, was no match for that of a governing myth of our enemies’ irrational hatred toward us as a people.

The power of the dominant narrative is probably most pernicious in the way it helps explain how it is the United States, or at least its senior-most decision makers and those they led, identified the country and its interests and indulged in some unhelpful but determinative assumptions in the opening days of the War on Terror. Those assumptions had to do not only with terrorist rationale, but also how American leaders saw themselves and their actions and what sort of conflict was in the making. President Bush may have put it most clearly a month after the 9/11 attacks, when reflecting on the first days of the War on Terror he pondered:

How do I respond when I see that in some Islamic countries there is vitriolic hatred for America? I’ll tell you how I respond: I’m amazed. I’m amazed that there’s such misunderstanding of what our country is about that people would hate us. I am—like most Americans, I just can’t believe it because I know how good we are.15

What this indicates is not just the overriding notion of the terrorists’ emotional motivation, but also the idea of American righteousness that both accompanied and stood in contrast to our enemies’ evil. At its earliest stages, the narrative took on a curious twist. Seeing one’s enemy as driven not by practical considerations, which can be dealt with
through perhaps a wider range of measures short of or supporting military action, but instead by an unreasoning, undying hatred that can only be blunted and destroyed, helps set the stage not simply for any response, but for war. Seeing oneself as not only the sole aggrieved party, but also as a party who is unquestionably good and with good intentions as its singular motivation helps shape that war as the only kind possible between good and evil—a crusade. Setting aside elegant but unhelpful metaphors, the motivational utility of calling out one’s foes, and the complicated nature of comprehending reality and making decisions about it, the stage was being set for the brewing war ahead. The fact is that this preparation may have been informed at some level by a reasoned weighing of cause and effect and experiential analysis, but at another level—one of subtle power and significance—by a potent narrative that exerted strong sway. Actions taken in this context also can be understood more fully when traced back to an embrace of myth than only to a more clear-eyed appreciation of the practicalities of terrorism.

**A Rush to Arms and the Invasion of Iraq: Analytic Imperative or Narrative Inducement?**

The second motivating myth, that the appropriate reply to 9/11 is war, builds on the first myth about why the terrorist hate us and has helped fuel a particularly compounded and problematic response. No obvious leap or transcendence of logic or reason necessarily figures in the decision to answer attack with counterattack, of course, and the War on Terror can indeed be seen as at least initiated within a framework of rational purpose aimed at defeating an enemy and removing a threat. The fact that it misidentifies both the enemy—actually not a tactic or method of attack, but those who perpetrated a specific strike and looked to launch more—and that enemy’s motivations, however, draws also from a peculiarly narrative understanding of the war’s causes and
circumstances. It is this understanding in the context of the crusade/war metaphor’s primacy-of-force notion that has pushed military and paramilitary action to the forefront of the US response to the attacks of September 11. Not only is a focus on armed intervention more consistent with the image of a War on Terror, but also it has unfolded in ways that can be seen as directly contradictory to the rationality the war’s leaders proclaimed was at the heart of their response, further underscoring the power of myth in informing US counterterrorist actions.

To the extent that war was indeed the rational response to the attacks of 9/11, that war was first launched at its most logical target—Afghanistan. It was from there that al-Qaeda had planned its strikes and prepared its attackers and where the terrorists were enjoying continued safe haven from which to launch more attacks. When the Taliban government in Kabul refused US and international demands for justice in the form of handing over al-Qaeda leaders to appropriate authorities or taking necessary actions against them itself in concert with these authorities, the United States and its allies invaded Afghanistan with the aims of taking down what had shown itself clearly as a rogue regime and capturing or killing those who were behind the 9/11 attacks along with anyone who sided with them. Up to this point, the war aspect of the War on Terror appears a relatively reasoned response, in that it would make sense even to dispassionate observers, and appears no more informed or shaped by myth than any other logically reasoned decision. However, it is after this point where assumptions appeared, decisions were made, and actions were undertaken that shifted the war’s focus in ways that are best explained through the war myth’s power of conditioning, shaping, and informing the following phase of the US response to 9/11. Indeed, the war narrative began intruding in
disproportionate ways immediately after the attacks, even before any decision to invade Afghanistan was made or the progress of or results from that action were measured and evaluated.

In their typical Modern-Age meaning, wars are undertaken between states with recognized governments and military forces, and Afghanistan immediately presented a challenge to that narrative. The Taliban regime in Kabul was already an international pariah with scant legitimacy, and its forces were weak and organized for internal security and countering anti-Taliban insurgents in the north and east—hardly the stuff of war on a classic scale, and certainly not one that would give full voice to its myth narrative.

Another potential enemy existed, however, that better fit the role of nemesis in the unfolding story, and it loomed quickly. Richard Clarke, then-chief counterterrorism director at the National Security Council, claims that in a meeting of senior officials at the White House the day after the attacks, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld observed that “there aren’t any good targets in Afghanistan” for a US military attack, but that “there are lots of good targets in Iraq.” When, according to Clarke, he and CIA Director George Tenet told Rumsfeld, President Bush, and others at the meeting that al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, not Iraq, were behind the attacks, and that the focus of any US military response needs to be on Afghanistan, Bush pulled him and a few others aside and told him “I want you to find whether Iraq did this.” Clarke replied, “We looked at this with an open mind. There’s no connection.” Undeterred, according to Clarke, Bush insisted.

He came back at me and said, “Iraq! Saddam! Find out if there's a connection,” and in a very intimidating way. I mean that we should come back with that answer. We wrote a report. It was a serious look. We got together all the FBI experts, all the CIA experts. We wrote the report. We sent the report out to CIA and found FBI and said, “Will you sign this report?” They all cleared the report. And we sent it up to the President and it got bounced by the National Security Advisor or
Deputy. It got bounced and sent back saying, “Wrong answer. Do it again.”

Clarke’s account tracks well with others that maintained the Bush administration had been looking early to pin the blame for 9/11 on Baghdad or to somehow shift the focus of the developing War on Terror toward Iraq, but is this enough to make the charge of myth’s power here stick? After all, it may have simply been a case of the proponents of the Iraq War being less than fully informed, or simply mistaken in their reasoning, as opposed to in sway to myth. Misinformation certainly loomed and mistaken reasoning clearly obtained, but this reasoning is best understood when narrative apprehensions of logic are factored into the US security calculus along with more analytical elements.

Between 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq in spring, 2003, a rationale for the invasion was set plainly within a *jus ad bellum* case of the Saddam Hussein regime’s dangerous and illegal reconstitution of its weapons of mass destruction programs and its ties to terrorist groups to which it might transfer these weapons in support of an even more lethal attack on the US Homeland. President Bush, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, and others invoked the imperative of the nation being unable to await an Iraqi “mushroom-shaped cloud” in al-Qaeda’s next attack for proof of Saddam’s WMD capabilities and terrorist links, and Secretary of State Colin Powell’s case to the United Nations for action against Iraq rested squarely on the dangers of Iraq’s continuing pursuit of WMD in violation of UN sanctions and its operational ties to terrorists who had already attacked and would attack again. This rationale, however, would have unraveled fairly quickly under a sober assessment more informed by facts at hand than by an at-its-heart basic, myth-fueled urge to respond militarily to an attack and to wage a War on Terror. Breaking the case for war on Iraq down to its two components, it is clear that it constitutes defendable rationale only
if both parts were true: Iraq had WMD and it was in cahoots with anti-US terrorists.

Regarding the first part, it can of course be said that the case for Iraq having reconstituted its proscribed WMD programs was based on faulty intelligence, but that should not be seen as important a judgment as it may appear to be. This faulty intelligence aside, even a casual observer not privy to the various intelligence assessments (and unhampered by a preconceived bias toward retaliation) could have seen that the viability of Iraq’s WMD programs—ascendant, nascent, or latent—depended little on whether or not they had been reconstituted. It depended more on the fact that because Saddam’s regime had been able to create and advance these programs greatly in the days before the 1990-1 Gulf War, all it had to do was to await the collapse of technology embargoes set up to keep it from gaining access to the hardware necessary to rebuild these weapons, and then return to the task it presumably never lost the know-how to pursue.

Indeed, such a long-term strategy helps explain Saddam’s insistence on receiving a clean bill of health in return for enduring inspections from UN and other international control regime overseers—an insistence that was continually rebuffed in the US-led effort to keep the Baghdad regime straight-jacketed. Put simply, Saddam never needed to risk trying to build something he no longer had the tools to build when the tools would return eventually and were less important to his possession of WMDs than was the knowledge he still retained. The scenario of Saddam chafing at the box the international community had him in while awaiting the day when its walls grew thin enough to allow his escape is a product of a more reasoned assessment of fact and analysis. The notion of Iraqi scientists and technicians—in an era of satellite imagery, international inspectors, and other intelligence collection assets—laboring in undetermined, secret locations on a weapon
capable of producing the “mushroom-shaped cloud,” however, has more to do with the spy fiction narratives and the power they can exert.\textsuperscript{20}

The second necessary part of the case for war against an imminent Iraqi threat—that Saddam had a close cooperative relationship with either al-Qaeda or other terrorists active against the United States—also might have withered in the heat of more objective assessment had it not been sustained by myth’s cold comfort. In fact, the same US intelligence community that eventually, after much pointed questioning by senior policymakers, offered up the judgment that Iraq had probably taken steps to reconstitute its WMD programs remained clear, adamant, and strongly supported by evidence in its judgment that the Saddam regime maintained no operational ties to Osama bin Laden or other terrorists.\textsuperscript{21} Not only did the secular Ba’athist Saddam and the Salafist radical bin Laden harbor a public, mutual, and implacable antipathy toward each other, but also the only cases of Iraq’s support to terrorists ever revealed were that it gave money to the families of Palestinian suicide bombers and that the eventual commander of what became Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, had been harbored in Iraqi territory while being treated for wounds he received fighting NATO forces in Afghanistan in 2002. The facts that several Muslim states, including Saudi Arabia and other US allies, routinely gave more money to the families of dead Palestinian terrorists than did Iraq and were never labeled as terrorist supporters and that Zarqawi’s recuperation period was spent entirely in Iraqi Kurdistan, safeguarded by US airpower and other security guarantees and beyond Baghdad’s authority, apparently never figured in any Bush administration’s decision to lump Iraq with the terrorists and to attack it.\textsuperscript{22} These factors are also more consistent with a primacy-of-force myth that seeks to identify a worthy target for military
strikes and the war that would follow than they are with counterterrorism realities of pursuing those actually responsible for terrorist attacks.

Indeed, the unsettling power of the war myth as misapplied in Iraq wound up disadvantaging the effort to chase down those responsible for 9/11 as well as the larger counterterrorist enterprise, another testament to its persuasive abilities. The need to prepare for the war in Iraq was the main reason to turn the operation against al-Qaeda in Tora Bora in early 2002 over largely to Afghan and Pakistani ground forces and withdraw US light infantry and other first-wave intervention units from Afghanistan contingencies to prepare for the invasion of Iraq. Moreover, considering the Iraq War’s example as an anti-Islamic depredation in pro-Jihadi circles, the concentration of US forces in the region as targets of terrorism, and the radicalizing and training effects of combat on those fighters who came to Iraq to fight the Americans and then return to their home countries to help fuel unrest and terrorism there, the US invasion of Iraq appears to have done more to increase the terrorist threat to the United States and its allies and interests abroad than it did to decrease it. Add to this the massive expense, manpower, focus, and overall effort that war commands frequently short-changes emphasis on investigation, regulation, and basic security measures that has been behind many significant successes in defending against, disrupting, and defeating terrorist activity. The influence of the war myth in US counterterrorism not only informs and misdirects the War on Terror, but also signs us up for protracted conflict with unrealistic, counterproductive aims.

“The Gloves Are Off!”: The Torture Narrative and its Persuasive Power

Turning to the myth of righteous, existential struggle requiring a “gloves off” approach to the counterterrorist effort—which may benefit as well as overreach—it
informs the War on Terror in the way it helps countenance a range of extra-judicial measures. Government overreach in response to terrorist attacks has a long history; indeed, provoking it and thereby unmasking the illegitimacy of the state to safeguard its citizens and their freedoms has been a major aim of terrorist provocations since the late-19th- and early-20th-century anarchist wave. In the United States, such measures have ranged from restrictive immigration quotas from suspect regions and arbitrary arrests and deportation a hundred years ago to intrusive domestic surveillance, “extraordinary renditions” of detainees to foreign authorities, and open-ended detentions with no charges levelled in the years since 9/11. There may be some utility in such steps, although evaluating their advantages fully and clearly and then weighing them against their attendant disadvantages—not only in prosecuting counterterrorist efforts with effective popular support, both domestic and international, but also in preserving the kinds of civil liberties the defense of national security and interests may be expected to accomplish—does not appear to be undertaken with a high degree of consistency or transparency. Practicalities aside, however, absent evidence of such a comparative analysis on the government’s part—an analysis it would appear to be strongly in the government’s favor to produce—it would seem valuable to inquire into the role that less analytic and more narrative understandings play in motivating and guiding extreme measures undertaken to counteract the extreme forces of terrorism. It is these understandings where the power of the myth of an existential struggle against a vicious foe and demanding extreme action can be seen as competing stalwartly for our assent.

The most obvious and perhaps controversial extreme measure included in this myth, and one that appears to rely on it most strongly, is that of “torture.” Its practice has
a long if under-storied history in the West’s war tradition, in that it was often resorted to and sometimes highlighted, but rely celebrated. Indeed, taking the War on Terror’s infamous waterboarding as an example, similar techniques from Grimmelshausen’s depiction of “The Swedish Draught” during the Thirty Years War in *Simplicissimus* to the US Army’s use of “The Chinese Water Cure” during the Philippine Insurrection have been a feature in warfare for centuries, but typically serve as illustrations of regrettable excess (the latter conflict) or outright barbarism (the former).\(^{25}\) The word “torture” itself is so odious that its very use both charges and may bias any discussion of it; even those who engage in these acts prefer terms like “coercive management techniques” or “enhanced interrogation program.”\(^{26}\) Such verbal legerdemain appears aimed more at deflecting opprobrium, however, than at offering any clarifying definition to the acts themselves. Specificities aside, torture’s most effective defenders offer the view that torture, however defined, is an ugly, brutal, and shameful practice that—like it or not—is effective in eliciting information from its subjects, which therefore makes it something that under unusual, particular, and high-consequence circumstances can be critical in forestalling even more ugly, brutal, and shameful events. With its effectiveness assumed, torture emerges as a useful and reasonable tool in the counterterrorist arsenal. A closer, more analytical look, however, shows this is not as logical or as reasoned as its proponents may believe it to be, and that instead its force draws more from a source of understanding that places narrative considerations at its heart.

Let us look first at the claim that torture produces useful results, one of the most emblematic and oft-cited versions of this claim was made shortly after 9/11 by Alan Dershowitz in a few articles and, finally, in his book *Why Terrorism Works.*\(^{27}\) Dershowitz
makes several assertions of torture’s utility: “After the Supreme Court of Israel outlawed the used of physical pressure, the Israeli security services claimed that, as a result of the Supreme Court’s decision, at least one preventable act of terrorism had been allowed to take place, one that killed several people when a bus was bombed.” “The French Army used torture extensively in seeking to prevent terrorism during a brutal colonial war from 1955 to 1957.” “Philippine authorities tortured a terrorist into disclosing information that may have foiled plots to assassinate the pope and to crash eleven commercial airliners carrying approximately four thousand passengers into the Pacific Ocean, as well as a plan to fly a private Cessna filled with explosives into CIA headquarters…. After successfully employing this procedure they turned him over to American authorities along with the lifesaving information they had beaten out of him.” “A US diplomat said ‘It [rendering suspected terrorists to countries that will torture them] allows us to get information from terrorists in a way we can’t do on U.S. soil.’ As former CIA counterintelligence chief Vincent Cannistraro observed: ‘Egyptian jails are full of guys who are missing toenails and fingernails.’” Other arguments in support of torture have been offered over the years, but Dershowitz’s—aimed ultimately not so much at establishing torture’s utility, but instead at making a case for court-approved “torture warrants” in the War on Terror”—cites the typical array of assertions.

Yet these assertions, on closer inspection, remain just that—assertions—with no demonstrable facts to lend their narratives analytical support. For instance, claims that the Israelis have used torture to good effect are sourced to officials who offer no proof and with much at stake in these assertions being seen as true. On the claim that a bus bombing would have been prevented had the Israeli Supreme Court not outlawed the use of
physical pressure, Dershowitz himself offers “Whether this claim is true, false, or somewhere in between is difficult to assess.” French Gen. Paul Aussaresses indeed claimed that his program of torturing captives elicited intelligence that broke the back of the insurgency in Algiers, but he says it was intelligence that helped fill in blanks in knowledge of the insurgent cells over time, not specific information to forestall particular short-term acts. Moreover, other French authorities claim this type of information was attainable through developing contacts with Algerian informants and standard interrogation techniques, and that torture, summary executions, and other extra-judicial excesses contributed to France losing the moral high-ground and the war in its fight against the Algerian insurgency. Philippine authorities may have tortured information out of a suspect, but the claim that the information was “lifesaving” is unsupported. Indeed, much other information appears to have come from the Philippine interrogation sessions that obscured any actionable details of any plotting, and US authorities had obtained details of the plots—to the extent they actually had passed any aspirational stage—via more trustworthy sources and means. Lastly, no informed observer, whether an unnamed US diplomat or a named CIA officer—including those who appear to favor torture—has been able to show openly and definitively that its use was key in preventing any act of terrorism. Offered instead are assertions of the “take my word for it” variety from those charged with seeing their efforts succeeding. Moreover, when pressed, at least one of these officers recanted, admitting that no such evidence can be produced.

Torture’s utility not only is questionable, but such utility also would not stand alone in any practical counterterrorist scenario even if its ability to produce useful information was proven. Any bit of information acquired through any means in any
investigation or analysis is part of the broad array of information pertinent to the investigation or analysis. Knowledge, data, facts, etc. that do not match with known, verifiable information is suspect and is treated as such until it can be fitted firmly within the body of relevant intelligence and thereby be understood as more reliable. This means that for anyone trying to make sense out of any information acquired through torture and attempting to discern whether it is truthful or not must compare this information with already known, more solidly acquired information, leaving the investigator with at best confirmatory, not unique, intelligence.

Add to this circumstance the fact that virtually all studies of the subject come down hard on the point of torture’s unreliability. Rather than producing dependably truthful information, torture instead typically elicits anything the subject believes will make the torturers stop.\textsuperscript{33} Moreover, the practical scenario for torture’s effectiveness includes the feature that anything derived from such \textit{in extremis} measures is accurate only episodically and accidentally.\textsuperscript{34} Anything important enough to prompt torture would already have been investigated thoroughly, “confirmed” by torture-produced intelligence or not, and available to the investigator or analyst. Introducing the kind of dubious information that torture produces into the analytic mix complicates whatever sense-making effort in which the law enforcement or intelligence officer is engaged, and prods the inquiry down questionable alleys more than it helps keep it on the right path.\textsuperscript{35} So, it is not enough to show that torture “works.” To be of practical use, torture has to “work” sufficiently reliably and consistently, which no analysis, study, or testimony has shown it can do. Indeed it bids fair at least to disrupt—and at most hopelessly derail—any counterterrorism analysis or investigation.
For the sake or analytic argument, even if it could be shown not only that torture worked, but also worked well enough to be useful or that the particular threat its use was aimed at forestalling was sufficiently dangerous to risk the effects of its shortcomings, it has other hurdles to overcome that its popular narrative does not appear to confront. Logic would seem to dictate that torture also would have to be shown as the best or the only way to acquire the necessary information and that its benefits would outweigh its harm. In the context of rendering uniquely critical information in an exclusive fashion, it is difficult to see where that is the case, especially in light of the problem of corroborating less reliable information with more reliable information discussed above. For instance, some US intelligence officials, citing unrevealed classified information, have claimed that the enhanced interrogation program was the key tool in producing otherwise unattainable and necessary details that has disrupted active terrorist plots, but such claims are notoriously short on details—leaving us to accept assertions of the program’s success from the very people who have been charged with the program’s success.\textsuperscript{36} According to press reports, such claims and rebuttals of them appear to feature prominently in the current US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence’s analysis of the CIA’s enhanced interrogation program currently under review.\textsuperscript{37} One publicly discussed case is that of captured al-Qaeda terrorists Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, Abu Zubayda, and Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri revealing operationally useful information after being waterboarded, although a closer review of these interrogated terrorists’ publicly available revelations show them to be confessions to deeds already done or to aspirations of plans never put into place—not actionable intelligence on plans in motion.\textsuperscript{38} Again, assumptions of torture’s uniquely useful product appear to have more narrative than analysis behind it.
In the context of torture’s utility offsetting its damages, the hurdle is even higher in the sense that for the United States in the War on Terror, these damages have been great. Anti-Western jihadis both in Iraq and throughout the world frequently cite the 2004 revelations of detainee abuse at the US-run Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq as an example of America’s counterterrorism campaign’s true, abusive, anti-Islamic nature and as a prime motivator in gathering more fighters to the struggle against the West.\(^{39}\) The waterboarding of the three senior al-Qaeda terrorists mentioned above not only does not appear to have elicited actionable intelligence of active terrorist plots, but also has placed these prisoners beyond the reach of any legal actions as their torture has rendered their confessions inadmissible in any judicial proceedings. Also, engaging in torture surrenders the moral high ground necessary to ensure cooperation from the very people US counterterrorism efforts depend on for their best information. For instance, one suspects that the next father of a suspected terrorist who considers going to American authorities with information about his son’s radicalization and possible plan to target the United States—as was the case in 2009’s “Christmas Day Bomber,” Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab—might think twice if he believes his son would not be simply thwarted or perhaps apprehended, but also tortured and possibly never seen again, since his torture would fatally taint any trial that might lead to a survivable sentence and his simple admission of guilt—not any operational details he might have revealed—would mean he could never be released.\(^{40}\) Again, a judicious examination of fact and analysis undercuts the case for torture’s utility and necessity, but it has always been a case that feeds more on the sustenance of myth than on deeper assessments and practical understandings.

Torture has enjoyed a complicated and controversial history, especially in Western
liberal thought, and has featured in some memorable and important discussions in the development of current democratic ideals. These discussions, however, have traditionally tended toward the philosophical, the didactic, or the hypothetical, at least in exploring scenarios for torture’s practical utility or ethical viability, and less effort appears to have been given over time to sound, reasoned study of how it must overcome which problems to emerge as a useful counterterrorism tool. To the extent that it indeed has been seen as such, that understanding is one fueled more image, story, and myth than it has been by analysis. Fighting fire with fire and defending the nation by any means necessary may ring nicely, but the fact that it does is because it adheres to a narrative that proceeds from a motivating myth in the War on Terror. Indeed, understanding the decision to engage in torture in this fashion during the months immediately after the September 11 attacks, as well as defending its use years later after its eventual discrediting and abandonment, in many ways helps explain it better than does any other proffered justification.

The Costs of War: Misunderstanding, Misidentifying, and Mismanaging the Conflict

In one sense, the need to define the effort against al-Qaeda and its associates as a war and to prosecute it in the most brutal fashion dovetails neatly with the need to end it quickly before it corrupts us. After all, why bother engaging in a war that drags out? All wars, even good ones, tend to be bloody, expensive, uncertain businesses that take their combatants to places and in directions they otherwise may have left alone. Considering this interpretation of war, all such enterprises are best ended quickly. The issue with the version of this narrative associated with the War on Terror, however, is not simply that this is a difficult and distractive effort like other wars, but that this is a particularly nasty war against a shadowy, ruthless enemy who operates among us, uses our freedoms and
technologies against us, and will stop at nothing to ensure our total destruction. Surely this kind of war that demands our utmost effort—including suspensions of the very freedoms and the employment of new and challenging types of technologies that our enemy uses against us—needs to be ended quickly not only so we can return to our peaceful status quo ante lives, but also before the extraordinary measures this type of war demands overwhelms us and erodes the foundations of our open, freedom-loving, and forward-looking society. In some ways the this myth’s extends in more subtle fashion than has the previous ones’, certainly at the war’s beginning, but its effects can be seen in the ways initially it appears to have helped shape attitudes toward and explanations about the war and its costs.

The need to fight the war in a harsh and relentless manner may condition popular notions of the measures, methods, and tactics the war might demand, but the need to get it over with quickly before it demands too much of us goes on to help form positions and viewpoints on these efforts over time. Consider first, for instance, how this understanding colored initial opinions of many of the extraordinary actions first proposed and undertaken in the war. Contrary to what many might expect, and perhaps to what some might remember, in the period immediately following 9/11—when fear of another attack was greatest and the threat of a determined and resourceful enemy against our demonstrated vulnerabilities was seen by most authorities as particularly high—public attitudes toward Muslims were generally favorable. Moreover, there was considerable concern expressed both in popular fora and the halls of government over the potential downsides of many proposed extreme measures taken in our defense. Not only were a few highly publicized acts of bigotry or hate against Muslims or Islam, or mistaken targets thereof, roundly
condemned and an over-equal number of spontaneous acts of defense and solidarity mounted in support of American Muslims and those Arab states supporting the United States in its hour of peril, but also they came disproportionately from politically conservative voices. This trend from the right can be traced at least to when the American Muslim and Arab communities came out strongly for George Bush over Al Gore in the 2000 election, Bush’s victory in that contest credited months later by Republican activist Grover Norquist to the Muslim vote. Moreover, responsible voices in government from all branches as well as more than a few in the public square shouted down immediate suggestions that torture and other extrajudicial excesses might be used in the American fight against global terrorism.

So, what changed as the war progressed and the threat of another devastating terrorist strike at least appeared to recede in the face of the US counterattack? Over time, American excesses seemed to pile up, certainly after the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the installation of the military as the lead element in the war, and the country geared itself up for the long haul. There emerged a sort of self-fulfilling aspect about the war as its full dimensions settled in, and public attitudes toward extreme measures shifted in one direction at the same time the threat of terrorist attack shifted in the other. Although this might seem another aspect of the “take the gloves off” narrative—and there is certainly a commingling of mythologization in this context of the perception calculus—it can be traced more closely and cleanly to what law professor and post-9/11 litigator and scholar Joseph Margulies suggests was a shift in the public attitude in the direction of a more acute “punitive turn” aimed at the latest communal predator, in this case the terrorist. Harking to what took place a decade or so earlier in the country’s attitudes and action
toward the previous public threat, marauding youth, American citizens had already become inured to excessive strengthening of judicial codes, prosecutions in special courts, and other extraordinary measures undertaken to save the people from a threat the occurrence of which was actually diminishing. What Margulies concludes is that the punitive turn had been deeply integrated in the American identity by the time of the September 11 strikes and “it involved certain well-defined rituals.”

With great regularity, demons are created in the public square, each of which threatens greater apocalyptic peril than the last. And each new demon triggers the all-important call to action, in which the elements of civil society join in a shared plea that the executive branch save the country from imminent calamity. New laws are passed, new powers bestowed. The community is calmed, at least somewhat, by the knowledge that law enforcement at the local, state, and national levels has been given greater power to track, seize, prosecute, convict, sentence, and execute the demon in our midst.  

What this observation indicates is that the public remains aware of the excessive nature of the measures it asks its institutions and authorities to undertake in pursuit of its safety and knows that they remain a double-edged sword that can cut both its intended targets as well as the ones who wield this weapon. Yet the community comes together out of a shifting sense of identity to demand such efforts the longer and stronger the target is identified, as opposed to how threatening it may actually be. This ideation of the terrorist threat separate from the danger it truly presents means that the public may understand the corrosive nature of the excessive measures it allows, but that it is willing to risk their affects so long as those who identify the threat and wield the extraordinary powers aimed at defeating it do so in a manner that remains confined within the bounds the communal process places on this sentiment. To overstep these bounds is something done at peril, since it invites public condemnation motivated by a sense of the longer the war lasts and the greater the measures undertaken in prosecuting it are pursued, the worse it will be for
the public. This is not to say this is a false narrative and that these circumstances do not inevitably occur. It is to say, however, that since the public willingness to undertake these extraordinary measures is not necessarily tied to the nature of the threat, but instead to the identification and ideation of it, then any eventual sense of a line being crossed is similarly more a circumstance of a narrative rather than an analytic understanding.

It is this narrative understanding of the protracted struggle bringing out the worst of us that is at the heart of an appreciation of the tipping point in this circumstance that is more ambiguously perceived than it is straightforwardly reasoned. As a communally collective enterprise, of course, it will probably remain an imprecise evaluation even in the best of circumstances, although such circumstances can hardly be seen as emerging in the context of an identified but not precisely named or described threat. This imprecision, it has already been pointed out, starts with identifying the enemy by little more than his tactic of choice. It continues with pushing a military option against that enemy to the forefront ahead of less narratively powerful but nonetheless more potentially successful measures in the diplomatic, paramilitary, intelligence, law enforcement, regulatory, or other fields, the support for and potential of which is under-realized and undercut the more military measures are pressed. Under these conditions, not only are the war and the extreme action narratives reinforced, but also any number measures undertaken in the war become understood as either potentially useful or too hazardous less within an analytic risk-assessment framework and more within a narrative appreciation of the inevitable excess. This circumstance imperils a democratic people and bedevils their best effort to defend themselves against a ruthless and pernicious enemy who seeks and exploits precisely this bedevilment. Margulies puts it as follows:
It is vitally important to understand that the punitive turn is a communal process. The community joins in casting a new demon beyond the pale. And it is this communal sentiment that President Bush overlooked in his response to 9/11. By insisting on unilateral power, by adopting such a cavalier attitude toward judicial accountability and congressional oversight, and by developing such an uncommon attachment to secrecy, the Bush Administration outran the limits of the punitive turn by placing itself outside the community it was ostensibly trying to protect. This was the great mistake.44

Fuller dimensions of this mistake emerge in greater clarity later as we trace how the mutually informative dynamic of myth and war continues, but the myth of unchecked power and its inevitably realized capacity to work against that which it is intended to defend starts here. Again, it is not the case of unchecked power not having a corrosive effect on democratic institutions, but more the case of this circumstance being understood in ways that have more to do with the power of narrative than of analysis. Not getting too far out in front of public sentiment on any issue—or indeed guiding and directing that sentiment—has always been a hallmark of effective political leadership, especially in policymaking in a democratic society, and that is no less true in the case of American presidents and senior officials fulfilling their responsibilities in waging the War on Terror. To the extent this is indeed the case, the argument in favor of identifying a role for mythologizing in human reasoning—certainly in the decisions and events involved is US counterterrorism efforts—appears that much stronger.

“Tell Me How This Ends”: Protracted War and Elusive Victory

In a further extension of the war narrative comes the last defining myth of US counterterrorism, which is that the conflict will end clearly and do so in an American victory. Naturally, if the War on Terror is to be understood as a discrete episode, basic narrative conventions insist it have a beginning, middle, and end in a comprehensible, if not compelling, story arc. As discussed in the previous chapter, it is how we understand
any aspect of human endeavor, and even in what we might refer to as more analytic conceptions of understanding, the story and how it is told is the fundamental precept and instructional guideline of this cognitive undertaking of explanation and comprehension. So, in one sense, the idea of the war having an end, is unremarkable. Of course it will eventually have to be understood as having one, and if that state is insufficiently clear to us at the time, future generations will assign it eventually with the benefit of their knowledge and perspective of hindsight, if only to understand and explain both the events and meaning of the war. It is in a more remarkable sense, however, that the idea of the war’s eventual conclusion took hold in the ideas and decisions by senior policymakers in the immediate aftermath of its beginning, conventionally the attacks of September 11, and began shaping the events that came later, which can be understood as the war’s narrative middle. In this case, the myths of what motivated our enemies, what our contest with them was, how it had to be fought, and what its potential long-term costs were came together to help fashion another compelling narrative of the country’s ability to conclude the war in a successful manner. To the extent there were misapprehensions, confusions, and errors in and accruing from less analytic and more narrative understandings of circumstances and events involving the first four myths, they continued into and combined with those of this fifth myth to color and shape key US counterterrorist actions.

Identification of an end to the War on Terror and what achievements might indicate American victory emerged in the immediate wake of 9/11 and persisted through what can be considered the war’s formative stages, and this identification proceeded in ways as informed by myth as by more dispassionate reasoning and a fuller appreciation of national capacity and international geopolitics. In response to President Bush’s immediate
calls for a “crusade” and warning about how the war he intended to fight was “gonna take a while,” Congress authorized the use of military force, but not in a way that tracked particularly closely with what Bush’s request suggested he wanted. Instead of approving a protracted, open-ended conflict against terrorism anywhere it could be found, the “Authorization for Use of Military Force” passed on September 14, 2001 specifically allowed for the president “to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons, in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States by such nations, organizations or persons.” In authorizing military force and in stating “that this section is intended to constitute specific statutory authorization within the meaning of section 5(b) of the War Powers Resolution,” Congress appeared also to consider this conflict a war, but one confined to actions aimed explicitly at those responsible for 9/11, not terrorism writ large or terrorists everywhere. If Congress seemed to think the country was at war with al-Qaeda, the administration appeared to be laboring under a different understanding where narrative perceptions of the enemy, his motivations, and what it would take to root him out and defeat him held stronger sway.

This different understanding was articulated, and under close examination its dimensions and differences from Congress’s authorization loomed starkly. About a year and a half later, a period in which the United States invaded Afghanistan and toppled the Taliban regime, pushed al-Qaeda into the Afghanistan-Pakistan border regions, and supported Islamabad in its own operations against the terrorist, the administration issued its National Strategy for Combatting Terror. In this document, President Bush identified
five main aims: defeat bin Laden, Zarqawi, and associated terrorist leaders and their organizations; identify, find, and take down other terrorists and their networks; deny international sanctuary, sponsorship, and support to terrorists; attack, ameliorate, or otherwise weaken the conditions that help nurture terrorism; and defend US citizens and interests at home and abroad. In addition to formulating a much broader, deeper, and more involved enterprise than that initially authorized by Congress, Bush’s strategy laid a foundation for a broad array of organizations, policies, and actions the US government would undertake in the ensuing years that took it in a direction far beyond bringing to justice the perpetrators of 9/11.

Indeed, only a month after the strategy’s publication, the United States launched what it been preparing for in one way or another since the attacks and what was to become the next phase in the war, the invasion of Iraq. Although the administration had already secured another Congressional authorization specifically aimed at using military force against Iraq to defend US national security and enforce UN Security Council Resolutions to warrant the invasion of Iraq, the operation’s justification was always presented publicly as an extension of the War on Terror. The narrative of war was informing not only actions undertaken, but also the measures for success by which they would be judged. Moreover, these standards both broadened and prolonged the war and, as the five identified strategic aims compounded, presented criteria for victory that were ambitious to the point of being unattainable in fully measurable senses.

Of course neither this nor any other national strategy commits the country to its every aspect, purpose, or aim, and it may be seen more fairly as an indication of direction and intent around which all parts of the government might better focus and coordinate
their various efforts. Still, overbroad and overambitious goals make for a war larger than initially intended and an end state difficult to reach or even identify. Moreover, these circumstances are the type that can confound more analytic approaches to government or other action while instead enshrining a more narrative, “know-it-when-I-see-it” concept of victory that is as ephemeral as it is elusive. This not only helped prompt a state of affairs where the invasion of Iraq; military operations in places as far afield as the Philippines, Yemen, and Africa; and even US and allied support for uprisings and revolutions in several countries—that last the sort of “spread of democracy” President Bush offered the toppling of Saddam was supposed to help spark—but also helped shape understandings of end points and success in those endeavors that have never been fully articulated or defended. Indeed, as the war in Iraq appeared to be morphing from short-term regime change to long-term counterinsurgency, and in the process ushering in fresh and untested ideas and actions in the inevitable pursuit of what the war narrative solicits as conclusion and victory, then-Maj. Gen. David Petraeus—at the time commanding general of the US Army’s 101st Airborne Division and later overall commander in the region and Director of the Central Intelligence Agency—was quoted as demanding, “Tell me how this ends!”

So the myth of the War on Terror having an end state that is reached when achievable goals are met—which means victory—has helped prod senior decision makers specifically, and the country generally, into a series of actions that at one level are not entirely explainable in the context of a more open, insightful, reflective, and fully reasoned process of determining policy. At another level, the results of these actions in turn suffer their own connection to the closable, winnable war narrative that demands termination and victory in their own specific arenas—Afghanistan or Iraq, the Arab
Spring or Middle East democracy, global terrorism or the march of freedom—that in many ways defies the reality that eventually settles into these sorts of overambitious efforts. It also locks those engaged into a seemingly endless series of bets they can apparently neither win nor easily cut their losses in and walk away from. It is not the case that thinking strategically, identifying attainable goals and sustainable efforts to reach them, recognizing milestones along the way that might prompt a change in or an abandonment of goals or efforts, and an open-minded and inclusive process that constantly checks assumptions and monitors progress is beyond human capacity. Neither is it that the Bush administration or other decision makers then or since did not have these standards in mind when the War on Terror was launched and has been fought since. It is the case, however, that proceeding in this way is a fraught endeavor, and that assumed narratives that shape and guide thinking and decisions have effects on resultant actions in ways that more analytic models of national security conceptualizations and behaviors do not as completely or convincingly explain.

Narrative: A Compelling Factor in Counterterrorist Actions, Events, and Understandings

The capacity of narrative myth to condition, shape, and otherwise inform ideas and decisions, which in turn spark and guide events, may be understated at first glance, but on close inspection can be seen as no less apparent. Again, it is not so much that mythologizing is an activity confined to superstition, primitive comprehensions, or shallow thinking, although its power may wax when these circumstances obtain. Indeed, it is an activity that cannot be separated fully from human rationality, in that each of us comes to any situation, happenstance, or event with a set of assumptions, beliefs, and understandings that are necessary to allow us to make sense of what it is we are
encountering. Specific assumptions, beliefs, and understandings are not necessary, but some ideations that serve these roles are, and those ideations emerge from conceptions of reality that are essentially narrative in nature. This is how all thinking and reasoning proceeds and always has, which of course makes this no less true for foreign affairs, national security, or counterterrorism despite contentions from some who might wish to see these enterprises subject more to identifiable rules and conventions, formulas for international conduct, or other perhaps more scientific models of behavior. Again, in this formulation and approach, myth is not simple fiction, but a form of understanding that may not hold up well under close scrutiny or more coherent rationality, but an understanding nonetheless that not only harbors and displays its own logic, but also informs thought and action sometimes as much as does what we may typically see as more demonstrable fact and more reasoned analysis.

Each of the War on Terror’s myths under examination here draws from a deep wellspring in Western and American culture, and they have developed into the foundational and informative storylines that they have because of the ideologies, perspectives, and experiences of those who have assented to them and have found themselves in positions of responsibility and authority from which to act on this assent. Their characterization as “myth” as opposed to “fact” should not be seen as an indictment of their actuality or their rationality, although the completeness of their factuality and logicality can be shown as short. Indeed, it is this too-often narrowness of view and injudiciousness of reason in these perspectives that nonetheless fail to diminish their power to explain and inform that help define them as myth rather than logic in the classical understanding of the terms. Terrorist may hate us, but probably not because of
our freedoms. We may be at war with them, but probably not in a traditional sense that undercuts the potential achievements of other actions. Counterterrorism may demand harsh measures, but probably not ruthless ones that tend toward the unhelpful or counterproductive. Protracted conflict of this kind may bring out the worst in us, but probably not necessarily or even in reliably identifiable fashion. And the war will end, perhaps with us as the winners, although termination and victory will probably remain ever so much in the eye of the beholder.

Still, this is not so much a case of these guiding narratives being truth or fiction, but more one of them being meaningful. Moreover, their meaningfulness is remarkable in the sense that an understanding of these particular myths and their ability to condition and confer forms on counterterrorist thought and deed help explain why certain decisions were made and actions undertaken in the War on Terror in some ways better than other more traditional security studies approaches may be able to do. In this way, the activities of explanation, understanding, and mythologization feed into a larger process in which narrative conventionalizations of reality inform our attitudes and behaviors toward events, which in turn help shape the development of these events. Developments carry on with the informed decisions and shaped events feeding back into our narratives, which then go on to re-inform and reshape events, but understanding this process starts with understanding myth’s power to instruct and guide action. Doing so, in this case with five foundational narratives in the War on Terror, allows insights into the war and its events that otherwise would not be as clear or as meaningful. This is also true as the process continues.
CHAPTER IV:
ACTION RE-INFORMS MYTH
THE WAR ON TERROR SHAPES ITS OWN NARRATIVE

The myths that inform action in the War on Terror draw on long traditions and have been shaped over time and circumstances. These circumstances of course include events that continue to occur and, in their transpiration, are understood as unfolding in a way that reveals their underlying reality. It is this unfolding and our understanding of it that allows us to take notice of these events and attempt to explain them initially for what they may be and, over time, conventionalize them for what we come to believe they are. Events themselves, certainly ones that emerge in any way from a context of human agency, are the products in large part of decisions made by individuals and groups, and these decisions are taken both in reaction to events and from perspectives that have been fashioned from previous understandings of similar events. Some of this fashioning takes place within an empirical analysis of cause and effect, but outside of these narrow examinations larger cultural influences of value, meaning, and identity are at work where narrative understandings hold greater and less-examined sway. Yet whether the knowledge and comprehension are more analytic or more narrative, the process is the same: understandings help shape events, and events help shape understandings.

So, as this continues, the war’s events that have been informed and shaped by narratives in due course re-inform and reshape these narratives. It is a procedure that begins with explaining events, moves on to understanding those explanations, and reaches a point where these understandings interact with such subtle and elusive factors as memory, significance, and identity to emerge as myths. These myths can exert at least as
much power on our understanding of events as more immediately rational, experiential, pragmatic modes of thinking might generally be considered to do. Indeed, it is this ability to respond to events and various interpretations of them by morphing and shifting in their own way that helps guarantee these myths’ continuing influence over the way we perceive events and react to them. So, the more powerful and influential the myth, the greater its ability to alter in reaction to events. In doing so, it emerges in new versions of cultural storylines that continue to dominate both popular ideations and the thinking of key decision makers in endurably informative ways.

This process of continuing development ensures that these narratives are not simple misunderstandings or mistakes awaiting correct data input or treatment, but myths that allow us to impart and derive meaning to and from events. As I have argued, myth is not simple fiction, but a form of understanding; therefore it draws at least some of its strength from that reality it seeks to explain. Indeed, some of the most powerful myths are the ones that are fueled in part by the situations that, as we have seen in previous chapters, the myths themselves help inform. Each of the War on Terror’s myths under examination here has developed during the war’s prosecution due to circumstances in the war that help the myths make sense. This development has emerged and can be identified in a range of cultural conventions and expressions across several media. Although conducting full and comprehensive surveys of them is an effort beyond this study’s scope, a few such examinations exist and can be drawn from as we identify in what ways the five myths at hand redevelop in reaction to the war.¹ This is not necessarily a case for these myths being truth or fiction, but more one of them being meaningful, and a closer look at the links between the war and its myths show how the latter derive meaning from the former.²
Terrorists’ Irrationality: Cultural Interpretations of the Suicide Bomber

The myth of the terrorists hating us for who we are, not what we do, thrives on the idea of their actions in the War on Terror being irrational. As we saw in the previous chapter, this narrative helped shape the war’s events by coloring how Americans, or at least key US policymakers, came to see and interpret terrorists and their motivations, and what should be judged of them in determining how best to combat them. As the war proceeded, the narrative persisted, and the process of myths’ and events’ mutual information helped prompt the narrative of terrorists’ irrationality to shift and reform powerfully around the circumstance of suicide bombing. Indeed, in discussing a spate of terrorist suicide bombings in the fall of 2005, President Bush said they “seem like random and isolated acts of madness,” and that their perpetrators’ goals are “fanatical.”\(^3\) Even University of Chicago suicide terrorism specialist Robert Pape pointed out in August 2003 that “the small number of studies addressed explicitly to suicide terrorism tend to focus on the irrationality of the act” as well as on “individual motives—either religious indoctrination (especially Islamic Fundamentalism) or psychological predispositions.”\(^4\) This is not to say that the dramatic upswing in suicide bombing during the first years of the war can be traced directly to this understanding, but instead that some of the war’s decisions informed by its narrative led to events that featured the terrorists’ increased use of this tactic, which in turn fed back to re-tailored versions of the narrative as Americans tried to understand and make sense of events. Suicide attack as a tactic had typically provoked shock, bewilderment, or even disgust in Western culture, but the general attitude and specific opprobrium shown in America can be seen to mutate toward a focus on the action’s irrationality as the country attempted to come to grips with the war. An
examination of this circumstance helps reveal events’ re-information of the narratives.

Little may fuel the idea of our enemies’ irrationality in the current popular mindset more that the phenomenon of suicide attack, but it is a tactic that has some history in the American experience before 9/11. The previous and most informative episodes of that experience prior to the War on Terror were in World War II, specifically Japanese suicide pilot missions and, to a lesser but still important extent, a few of the German plots to assassinate Adolph Hitler. In the former, kamikaze aircraft and kaiten manned torpedoes were employed to spectacular effect in the later stages of the war in the Pacific and were commonly seen as manifestations of our enemies’ determination—even fanaticism—but not so much their irrationality. Indeed, these attacks coincided with Allied forces’ approach to the Japanese home islands and underscored what desperate measures their servicemen, and presumably their civilians, would take to defend their territory against a relentless onslaught—a cause-and-effect logic that helped support the decision to try to force surrender through atomic bombing rather than invasion. Regarding the war with Germany, none of the planned suicide attacks on Hitler may ever have been completed, but if they had, Americans almost certainly would have greeted them with elation and celebrated their perpetrators as good soldiers and selfless patriots prepared to offer the ultimate sacrifice on behalf of the German people and Western civilization rather than as irrational actors. As it is, despite the fact none of them succeeded, the various would-be suicide assassins in these plots are remembered today as heroes. So, whether conducted by bad guys or good guys, suicide attacks in previous American understanding were seen perhaps not exclusively, but nonetheless significantly, as part of a grim but nonetheless explicable rationale.
This rationale, of course, is the same one that underscores current US military reform efforts and is a cornerstone of forward-looking combat doctrine: asymmetric warfare. Under this concept, strengths are not necessarily pitted against strengths in a contest to overmatch the opposition with power, but against weaknesses. This marks an effort to undercut and eventually undermine the enemy by way of economies of force involving calculations to avoid pitched battles and close, bloody fights while scoring advantages with the least amount of committed troops and treasure. It was the doctrine that shaped the American-led campaign in Iraq in 2003 that delivered the fall of Baghdad with fewer forces than were committed in the effort to eject the Iraqis from Kuwait in 1991. It was seen in many circles as the demonstration of the type of thinking and execution that would propel new ways of developing, organizing, and resourcing US military forces for the 21st century. It is also the favored technique of the weak against the powerful, in that elements with few resources or in other ways fighting at a decided disadvantage in a contest of strengths develop ways to redress the imbalance in perhaps desperate and controversial, but practically effective, methods. In this sense, suicide bombing as a tactic markedly improves the attackers’ chances of success by turning virtually any potentially dangerous medium—from a crude explosive to an airliner—into a guided weapon at the expense of as little as the life of a single person. To a group confined to low-technology attacks from the world’s hidden corners on the militarily overpowering West, a suicide bombing may be less an act of irrational desperation and more one of rational trade-off between cost and benefit.

There are many ways to interpret suicide bombing, and since few measures—and even fewer desperate and controversial ones—are undertaken as the result of a single-
factor decision calculus, suicide attacks are probably the product of complicated and disparate motivations. According to Robert Pape, as much as 90% of suicide terror attacks from 1980 to 2004 can be attributed to the goal of ending foreign occupation. 8 University of Chicago scholar Arata Takeda, after reviewing analogous behavior in various Western literary works over the centuries, concludes that “suicide bombings are not the expressions of specific cultural peculiarities or exclusively religious fanaticisms. Instead, they represent a strategic option of the desperately weak who strategically disguise themselves under the mask of apparent strength, terror, and invincibility.” 9 Anthropologist and terrorism specialist Scott Altran contends that the vast majority of suicide bombers since 2004, including those involved in the spike of these attacks during the war in Iraq, have been inspired by Islamist ideology—specifically that religion’s idea of martyrdom. 10 University of Alabama criminal justice professor Adam Lankford contends that suicide attackers may embrace the rhetoric of martyrdom, but most of them appear to be suicidal in a more strictly clinical sense and, although manipulated by terrorist leaders, are acting out of attempts to escape personal crises. 11 Afghan pathologist Yusef Yadgari conducted a study of the remains of 110 suicide bombers from attacks in 2007 and claims the vast majority either were missing limbs or suffered from various ailments before the attacks, which might indicate either the conditions for clinical depression or a rational calculus of the right job for a fighter who might not be capable of much else in combat. 12 This is an issue of some dispute, and the war continues to provide not only more data, but also more ways to interpret it that keep relying on and reshaping the idea of irrational hatred.

But what shows how this tactic fuels the myth of terrorist suicide bombers’ unfounded and unreasonable—if not outright crazy—inspirations as opposed to their
determination and resourcefulness—if not their bravery—is not simply in how it may inform scholarly studies, but also how strongly it figures in the popular ideation of terror. For that it would be instructive to look at how these sorts of interpretations were seen once the War on Terror began exerting its influence on the common narrative of terrorists’ beliefs and motivations. After 9/11, there was no room in popular discourse for any World War II-era notion of suicide attacker’s valor or rational calculus, only their treachery. Indeed, political commentator and comedian Bill Maher found himself in hot water within a week of the attacks when, on his TV show Politically Incorrect, he made the perhaps accurate but certainly impolitic (and, at least at the time, broadly seen as offensive) remark that the terrorists who flew the planes into the twin towers could not fairly be termed cowards since they knowingly gave their lives to strike their enemies, as compared with US forces engaging (and sometimes missing) targets from safe distances with cruise missiles. In rejoining on a point about the 9/11 terrorists’ cowardice made by his guest, political commentator Dinesh D’Souza, Maher replied, “We have been the cowards. Lobbing cruise missiles from two thousand miles away. That’s cowardly. Staying in the airplane when it hits the building. Say what you want about it. Not cowardly.” Days later, White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer condemned Maher’s comment with “…they’re reminders to all Americans that they need to watch what they say, watch what they do. This is not a time for remarks like that.” More criticism followed, advertisers began pulling their support, and ABC cancelled Maher’s show the following year.

Even years after the emotionally charged days initially following 9/11, in the context of an increasingly unpopular war in Iraq, the increase in the number of suicide bombers in their explosive vests and vehicles had its effect on various expressions of the
irrational hatred myth. Five years into the war, American terrorism and Middle Est scholar and commentator Walid Phares offered a view of terrorists’ motivations that seemed even more expansive than the versions of the narrative offered immediately after the attacks, writing “the terrorists who have been conducting suicide attacks…are acting on behalf of an old, sophisticated and totalitarian ideology…. It is not about British policies so much as Russians, Indians, Americans, Spaniards, Arabs and all those who do not bow to the ultimate goal of the return of the caliphate and its dominance of humanity.”\textsuperscript{16} Even the term “suicide bomber” came under attack in some circles because of its focus on the subject’s motivations, which might be explainable in a rational sense, rather than on the object’s effects, which could only be condemned. Ari Fleischer began using the “homicide bombings” in April 2002 to describe suicide terrorist attacks, a term quickly picked up by News Corporation’s Fox News and The New York Post. It never gained much traction, probably owing to the fact it was insufficiently descriptive in that all bombings intended to cause death—even those from US military forces—can be accurately termed “homicide bombings.”\textsuperscript{17} About the same time, Canadian Parliament Member Irwin Cotler offered the designation “genocide bomber” for Palestinian and other terrorists whose attacks—suicide and otherwise—were part of a larger effort to “wipe Israel off the map.”\textsuperscript{18} It also failed to catch on, but these sorts of term-coinage and other feats of verbal legerdemain can be seen as expressions of a narrative of terrorists’ irrational and implacable hatred on which the deepening war conferred new forms.

Making War: Counterterrorism and the Postmodern Understanding of Force

Just as seeing the campaign against international terrorism as a war in the context of American war narrative has helped promote armed military conflict as the lead effort,
how this military effort has played out has affected the narrative and shaped it in ways consistent with the War on Terror’s events. Here is where the myth has shifted not only in the American context, but also in the contexts of our enemies and our allies. As noted, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were decisions that emerged in significant part from an embrace of a war narrative, and the same can be said for US counterterrorist military actions in the Philippines, Yemen, the Horn of Africa, and other places around the globe. Again, this is not to say that more analytically determined security calculi did not also feed into these decisions, but in the same vein many key, specific choices made among the range of policy options available to American leaders cannot be fully explained or understood absent an acknowledgement of the role of myth in their deliberations. That myth had been shaped over years by the results of earlier strategic decisions and their effects, however, and this process continued as the war added new events to the American experience of war. The more the country engaged militarily, the more its memory and myth of conflict shifted to accommodate the events of this engagement and the meaning we derived from them.19

The War on Terror has of course featured not just military action, but also intelligence operations, legislation, law enforcement, regulatory efforts, and a host of other initiatives and engagements. But with the military in the apparent lead—a circumstance consistent with the American narrative of war—its greatest cultural effect has been on our war myth and the way we tell it. Indeed, the broader counterterrorism effort tended to fall out of favor in retellings of cultural narratives as the war proceeded and the more these narratives departed from military or more strictly and traditionally force-related storylines. Hollywood—about the surest purveyor and measure of American
myth as we know it today—has produced various narrative depictions of the war and its events and has reshaped our cultural understanding of war in general, and the War on Terror specifically, in the process. As it has done so, broader security-related themes have struggled for space in various productions against more intense and contrived force-related narratives.

A quick look at the war on America’s small screen bears out this imbalance. For instance, ABC’s series from 2004, Threat Matrix, and 2009, Homeland Security USA, as well as ABC’s TV movie and proposed series pilot from 2004, Homeland Security, focused on intelligence gathering, law enforcement, and more regulatory security aspects of the struggle against terrorism. Although portrayed with some dramatic excess, these are fundamentally still the types of efforts that make up the bulk of the overall national counterterrorist campaign and more closely track, in terms of practicalities of specific actions, with the realities of the war. Yet these two series featuring what some may consider the hum-drums of collecting and analyzing information, identifying patterns of terrorist-related activities and our vulnerabilities to them, and marshaling security at docks and airports to safeguard against some of the more likely manifestations of the terrorist threat only lasted 16 and three episodes, respectively, before cancellation, and the movie pilot’s intended series never even launched.

Meanwhile, more fictionalized—even fantastic—programs thrived. Shows like ABC’s Alias and Fox’s 24, both from 2001, which ran for five and eight full seasons, respectively, with the latter reprised for another season in 2014, and Showtime’s Homeland, that started in 2011 and has been renewed for a fourth season, have been among the most popular and critically acclaimed shows on television. These programs
follow the fictional exploits of armed clandestine operatives and their shadowy colleagues as they ferret out and eliminate terrorists at home and abroad through frequent resort to force and extraordinary means. Indeed, the more compelling drama of force in the war and the myth this drama’s power stokes appear to have played out in these shows successes.\textsuperscript{22} The relatively diminished drama in more realistic shows and their inability both to grasp and play out within the traditional war narrative were probably key factors in their early demise. Moreover, their themes fail to resonate in popular retellings of the War on Terror’s continuously developing mythology.

More compelling, higher drama or simply better done narratives aside, popular retellings of even those most traditional versions of the American war myth have also undergone clear and signifying changes as the War on Terror has continued. These retellings surely remain within an identified narrative mainstream, which, as explored in Chapter II, features elements of citizens’ defense of the nation, full exertion in a righteous cause, and practical competence. Still, farther into the war, some popular versions of the American narrative of combat have shifted profoundly, deemphasizing Modern-Era themes of progress, determinism, achievement, and resolution while stressing Postmodernist notions of ambiguity, contradiction, disconnection, and disillusionment.

Returning to small-screen depictions, although this time of big-screen productions, nowhere is this phenomenon more apparent than in two grand stories of that most iconic of American combat experiences, World War II, as told in the expansive visual and narrative format of the miniseries—HBO’s 2001 production \textit{Band of Brothers} and its 2010 companion piece \textit{The Pacific}. Both shows are based on real events recorded in written volumes by professional historians as well as accounts of those who directly
experienced these events. Each film deals with the same war, but offers markedly different views that also have less to do with their different theaters (although some of that difference emerges in the narratives) and more to do with the effects on the American combat narrative of a decade of actual war.

*Band of Brothers* was written, produced, and filmed just prior to the War on Terror and saw the first broadcast of its initial episode just two days before 9/11, making it not only one of the fullest and most articulate, but also about the latest version of the pre-war American combat narrative. Its story is a typically Modern Age one. In it, a company of US paratroopers enlisted from across the country coalesces in training, deploys to England for extended preparation for combat, and drops into France on D-Day. It fights hard, replaces its casualties, drops and fights again in Holland, and is part of the storied division that served as the heart of that most heroic and lionized epic of the American war in Europe, the defense of Bastogne. The unit is part of a larger effort that pushes a generally clear and established line of forces across the continent—in a feature in the DVD release one can call up maps and literally see the narrative’s arrow move—and into the German heartland to compel the Nazis’ unconditional surrender. The combat story culminates with the liberation of a death camp, to underscore the reason for the war’s sacrifices, and the seizing of Hitler’s “Eagle’s Nest” in Berchtesgaden. The final episode shows the peaceful surrender of a German general and his unit, wherein they acknowledge their defeat clearly and cleanly, and announces the end of the wars in Europe and the Pacific. It then sends the boys home with a sense of accomplishment that offsets their pain and loss and adds a postscript recounting some of the details of the lives the main characters resumed after the war. The combat scenes are grim, and several soldiers the narrative invested in are
grievously wounded or killed. In terms of themes like progress, competence, and the end more than justifying the means, however, the story remains an heroic expression that fits neatly within a Modern Age mythology that internalizes and memorializes the past and looks forward to the future all that more capably and strongly because of the experience. 

_The Pacific_ involved many of the same people behind its companion series, and its narrative theme takes up the same generation’s devotion to service in the same war, yet it tells a darker, grimmer, and more nuanced story.²⁵ It focuses on the experiences and exploits of three Marines in different units and several associated characters whose stories proceed individually—sometimes intersecting, sometimes not—through periods of preparation, combat, and recovery across the theater. The film’s center shifts among the characters, stressing not only their individual stories, but also how these clearer tales are subsumed by the larger and more confusing one of the war writ large. One character, for instance, has already fought on Guadalcanal, been awarded the Medal of Honor, and goes home to help sell war bonds before another even enlists and ships out. Non-combat experiences in Australia, stateside, and on unit recuperation are told from the perspectives of, respectively, lost love, survivors’ guilt, and disease and suicide. Combat proceeds with no apparent sense of concerted advance, culminating in two episodes depicting the iconic battles of Iwo Jima and Okinawa wherein one hero is killed and another survives brutal combat that sees his company descend to the depravity and dishonor of war crimes. Their war ends not with victory and occupation, but with a bomb that spares them further sacrifices and allows them to return home to take up their lives pretty much where they left off, and with only so much to show for what may have been their accomplishments. Again, different experiences and stories aside, the shift in the essential nature of this
retelling of the American war myth betrays at least in part the collective impact of years of the War on Terror on American understanding of conflict and combat. The US counterterrorist offensive’s effect on shaping narratives of Postmodernist war helps demonstrate the mutually informative nature of myth and war even up to current times.

As far as the War on Terror fueling the myth of military intervention’s necessity, more intervention tends to feed into our enemies’ and our allies’ views of the United States and drives more terrorist attacks as well as a falling off of international support—which in turn informs a perceived need for more intervention consistent with the myth. As for our enemies, the US invasion of Iraq became a rallying cry for a generation of anti-American terrorists, attracting would-be jihadists from around the globe, and allowing a chastened and beleaguered al-Qaeda to put its stamp on the insurgency. It also appears a major factor in the identity formation of various terrorist groups that emerged in different parts of the globe for different reasons and might otherwise have had little to do with each other, such as “Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia,” “Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula,” “Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb,” “Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent,” and most lately and menacingly “Al-Qaeda in Syria” and “Al-Qaeda in Iraq and Syria” or, as of summer 2014, a radical morphing of the last two groups into an organization so extreme that al-Qaeda condemns and rejects it known as “The Islamic State.”

Statistics kept by the National Counterterrorism Center show that anti-US terrorist attacks increased steadily along with coalition forces’ presence in Iraq, and diminished as forces left—only to increase again as forces surged later in Afghanistan. Ironically, the more we fight terror with force, the more terrorists, terrorist groups, and attacks by the terrorists—at least in the war theaters, including against our forces—appear to proliferate. Interestingly, NCTC
statistics also show that, a few high-profile interdictions of terrorist plots aside, terrorism in the United States decreased during this same period.\textsuperscript{28}

As for our allies, it is fair to say that their commitment to the War on Terror that, in Bush’s words “begins with Al Qaeda, but…will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated” has waned and waxed, but has generally dropped off since the days just after 9/11 when so many were eager to answer the call to arms.\textsuperscript{29} This leaves the United States not only more internationally isolated in its counterterrorism efforts, but also forced to shoulder the burden of its military interventions all the more with its own forces—more intervention begetting the need for more intervention. This is not to say that every military intervention in the War on Terror must be counterproductive, or to offer a tautological argument along the lines of fighting breeds violence. It does, however, underscore how the reality of intervention’s necessity helps feed its own primacy of force myth, and how myth-informed decisions and events return the favor by reshaping these formative myths in their own times and fashions.

\textbf{Extraordinary and Extra-Judicial Action: Dominant Narrative Crowds Out Competition}

From the War on Terror’s outset, and certainly as it has continued, the experience of protracted and seemingly open-ended conflict and threat has had profound effects on American cultural narratives about the war—not only that it is a war, as examined above, but also what type of war it is. Understanding the counterterrorist effort as a particularly insidious, unavoidably necessary, and essentially existential struggle wherein a range of techniques and measures previously either unimagined or discredited in other war contexts certainly informed the effort’s prosecution, and in turn helped reshape that understanding and various cultural manifestations of it. The most salient and the most broadly influential
of these manifestations appear in that quintessentially accessible arrangement of social myth that is popular culture. Pop culture’s expressions run a broad gamut within what Chapter I’s discussion identified as a set of social representations and articulations that are at their heart artistic, although favored Western 21st century exhibitions of this artistic culture trend away from earlier ages’ paintings, sculpture, and literature and more toward television, film, and video games. Even a brief review of pop culture’s interpretations of conflict, war, and terror shows how years of the American counterterrorist effort has worked changes in their storylines consistent with the understanding of the war as a particularly nasty one wherein our enemies’ defeat requires us to undertake extra-judicial measures, demonstrating the return effect of that narrative from action back to myth.

Pop culture’s fixation on the narrative of war and armed force in characterizing counterterrorism has already been identified, but the nature of this force’s frequent portrayal deserves special attention. It is not the case that force is an underserving narrative through which to interpret US efforts against terrorism, especially since force clearly has a place in countering terrorist violence. But in addition to crowding out popular expressions of other measures, the war myth’s manifestations in pop culture bend not just toward force, but also toward particularly intense, sweeping, and even vicious forms of it. So, it is not so much that Alias, 24, and Homeland have beaten Threat Matrix, Homeland Security USA, and Homeland Security in the Nielsen ratings, but more the case that the narratives of force in those more successful shows bear far less semblance to counterterrorism realities.

Indeed, all these more popular programs include frequent instances of improbable—often to the point of fantastical—actions and situations. From Alias’s
multiple identities (voluntary and forced), erased memories, secret-within-secret organizations (that at times may be friendly or hostile), assassinations, medieval prophesies, ghosts, and immortality; to 24’s terrorist plots involving deadly toxins, radiological weapons, massively destructive computer viruses, and the frequent broaching of international—even nuclear—war all forestalled by a single Los Angeles-based field agent; to Homeland’s brainwashing, assassinations (including of the vice president), high-profile double- and triple-crosses, inside-job bombing of CIA Headquarters, and the constant official reliance on and promotion of an apparently clinically bi-polar officer, none of these plot lines should be expected to sacrifice dramatic license and arc for even basic credibility. As the war proceeded, however, the line for basic credibility shifted away from the science fictional aspects of Alias toward the more believable but just as improbable and perniciously suggestive of 24, Homeland, and other similar programs—including the counterterrorism storylines of the popular JAG and NCIS series—wherein the government’s honesty and basic good faith is under constant question, and nothing anyone is led to believe is real can ever be taken so for long.31

Of course this circumstance can be fairly written off to popular preference for intense narratives and high dramatic arcs regardless of how far they may tread from reality, but the perniciously suggestive aspect of this situation is in how it lays firm groundwork for a broad expression and understanding of the myth of the existential war and the end justifying the means. Probably nowhere is this more clearly seen as in the narrative plot device, and the supposed counterterrorism technique, of torture. It may remain a tool the utility of which is informed more by myth than by practicality, but as the country continued to prosecute the war, and some of its representatives employed
techniques some have called “torture” in the process, the practice appeared to enjoy enhanced favor in more than a few pop cultural expressions. For instance, among his many exploits and actions that border on at least the improbable, 24’s protagonist hero, Agent Jack Bauer (played by actor Kiefer Sutherland) frequently goes to extraordinary and extra-legal means to ferret out information required to forestall terrorist attacks of grievous dimension and, by one tally, would torture terrorist suspects on the order of 12 times a season to do so. Given the time-scale of the show being one hour of real time per episode, one day per season, Agent Bauer engaged in an act of torture 12 times in a 24-hour period—far more often than he is shown sleeping, eating, or most anything else similarly mundane. Clearly torture emerged, at least in the minds of 24’s writers, as a device with advantages in terms of plot development that outweighed its disadvantages in terms of undermining the verité aspects of the narrative that underwrote the production. Torture’s use here—not so much its apparent success, but more its almost casually frequent employment—may defy credulity at one level, but at another highlights how a powerful counterterrorist narrative is fueled in return as the war and its actions feed and change the myth.

The theme of the existential war demanding extraordinary means flourishes as well in American film, another storehouse and interpreter of pop culture. A brief look at some of the best known post-9/11 cinema offerings dealing with counterterrorism—from fact (or the closest thing Hollywood can approximate for this genre), to fiction, to farce—reveals how this theme has been understood and conventionalized in ways that deliver stronger dramatic impact more than they remain true to more realistic circumstances. For instance, in 2012’s Zero Dark Thirty, a supposedly only-somewhat fictionalized account
about the hunt for Osama bin Laden, a captured terrorist suspect is shown delivering information under “torture” that winds up as the key factor in determining the whereabouts of bin Laden, although the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence’s investigation and CIA information report that extreme interrogation of terrorist detainees produced no such dramatic breakthroughs. In 2005’s *Syriana*, a CIA officer sent to assassinate two arms dealers and a Gulf state prince is scapegoated by headquarters to advance this mission and eventually is targeted in a US drone strike—extreme measures that may track with popular understandings of counterterrorism’s requirements, but fall short of comportment with any evident record. In 2004’s *Team America: World Police*, a satiric send-up of the genre complete with gross-out scenes, extra-terrestrial agency of international and terrorism, and mass mayhem— all performed by puppets—the story of course maintains only the barest tangential connection to reality. Yet the fact that it works at all is because the idea of extraordinary, extra-legal action—in this film’s case, carried to the most bizarre extremes—being necessary to confront the terrorist threat has insinuated itself so strongly in the common ideation of counterterrorism that the *ad nauseum* device succeeds as humorous rather than simply falling flat in shock or confusion.

The notion of the “gloves-off” approach to fighting evil and the effects of the protracted War on Terror also informed the plots of popular films that had little or nothing to do with counterterrorism. Post-9/11 reboots of storied franchises show best how the decade’s experience of threat and efforts to combat it fed back into the newer films in ways that marked departures from their forebears. Regarding James Bond, for instance, 2006’s *Casino Royale*, 2008’s *Quantum of Solace*, and 2010’s *Skyfall* feature torture, assassination, and general over-the-top action at levels far beyond what the old Broccoli
productions ever did, with *Quantum of Solace* being credited as the franchise’s most violent film and *Skyfall* as its most financially successful. In one example from the Batman films, 2008’s blockbuster *The Dark Knight*, one of the biggest money-making films of all time, shows the surreptitious and seemingly wholesale audio/video collection on Gotham City being the key tool in tracking down the Joker—a extreme method of the type not only never broached earlier in the franchise, but also taking its cue from what the public was led to expect from the US counterterrorism effort’s “information dominance” approach even years before many of its details were publicly revealed as a result of Edward Snowden’s exposés. Even the latest movie craze of the zombie apocalypse shows traces of this effect, such as in 2005’s *Land of the Dead*, when a post-Armageddon America appears as a post-9/11 America informed by war, with “Fiddler’s Green”—the rich and powerful humans’ refuge against marauding zombies and urban squalor, secured by constant technical surveillance, armed might, and relentless savagery—taking its name from the fabled Valhalla-like land where US Army tankers and cavalry troopers are supposed spend their final rest.

Other extreme and extraordinary measures also featured prominently in video games as the War on Terror has continued, fueled in a way by the events and collective memories of the war. Indeed, among the best-selling interactive role-playing media over the past decade or more of war as listed at Gamespot, the country’s most active games retailer, are several that focus on counterterrorist special operations—including the popular *HALO, Call of Duty, Modern Warfare*, and *Battlefield* series—where a range of activities not in strict compliance with the Geneva Conventions are available to first-person role-players. Moreover, games such as *Splinter Cell* and *24: The Game* even
feature torture as a useful interrogation technique in helping push the role-playing
narrative to successful resolution, which prompts George Mason University new media
scholar Mark Sample to argue that “the way torture-interrogation is modeled in-game and
acted out by the player relies on a wishful logic that mirrors official rationales for
torture.” 39 Indeed, in his article “‘War on Terror’ in Video Games,” Canadian scholar
David Annandale characterizes the violence and mayhem in games such as Ghost Recon
and Full Spectrum Warrior as “ideological allies [of the] cheerleaders of the ‘War on
Terror’” and that “one sees a particularly detailed effort at physical simulation that
incorporates a specific brand of ideological simulation. Even as they reflect social fear
about terrorism and envisage horrific scenarios, these games are often paradoxically
optimistic as they present a fantasy that is a corrective to the messy reality in Iraq and
elsewhere.”40 Violence in video games is nothing new, but the circumstance of this
violence involving American security personnel and the country’s shadowy enemies—
even with both sets of characters sometimes being of the fantastic kind—highlights this
medium’s assumption of the myth of existential war and extraordinary measures.

All these pop cultural narratives draw on the war and its prosecution in
reformulating the myth of extreme and extra-judicial means being necessary to defeat a
vicious enemy who has placed himself beyond our laws. Intensity typically proves a
stronger dramatic force than the humdrum, of course, and the extreme has been and will
remain prominent in any number of storylines, pop cultural or other. Years into the War
on Terror, however, the goalposts on extremity in television, film, and video games have
moved noticeably in ways consistent with events helping reshape cultural narratives. In
these ways not only is pop culture probably the greatest repository of myth, it is also its
strongest conveyor. Moreover, it is a culture that has clearly embraced the drama of force in its most egregious expressions over the more workaday—but also more realistic and more useful—aspects of the broad swath of counterterrorist actions.

The Long War’s Corruptive Influence: New Interpretations of Extraordinary Measures

The myth of a protracted, open-ended War on Terror leading inevitably to some sort of over-reach, corruption, and perhaps come-upance may initially shape the war in directing its punitive turn in response to the perception of increased threat, but the war fuels the myth by informing its take on the nature of some of the most important steps undertaken to win it. In this sense, this myth still remains connected to the “gloves off” narrative of extraordinary measures and extra-legal tactics being necessary to defend the country and its interests, but is reshaped in ways both different and similar. At the same time that the previous myth informs pop-cultural storylines that appear increasingly accepting of and inured to extreme measures irrespective of these measures’ utility, this myth assumes a guidance behind popular perceptions of the impact of at least some of these measures on the society that countenances them. It also does so in a way that fails to take fully into account these measures’ costs versus their benefits. This is not to say that this type of risk assessment cannot be or is not being done somewhere, but its presence in the general conversation is more apparent than it is real. Certainly whenever the discussion takes into account circumstances that are either unproven or even counterfactual, the presence and power of a narrative understanding of events, as opposed to a more analytic calculus, looms perhaps subtly but no less strongly.

A worthy example of this phenomenon can be traced in a brief look at how public observations and opinions of intelligence collection formed in the initial stages of the War
on Terror and how they shifted as years of the war’s events helped confer forms on these views. In the weeks and months immediately after 9/11, much was made about the intelligence failure that allowed the perpetrators of the attacks to plan them without the knowledge of the sizable American information collection apparatus and to execute them while the country’s various security elements remained powerless to impede them in any serious way. The popular observation at the time was that the CIA, FBI, and other organizations did not “connect the dots” of a plot that, upon reflection and post-facto examination, appeared at least discernible, if not in some fashion preventable. Clearly, sufficient relevant information was available in some form, goes the narrative. What our agencies had to do was have it readily at hand, been able to identify it for what it is, fit it into the larger puzzle, and shared it and their interpretations of it with each other to come up with an accurate picture of what our enemies were plotting against us.

This appears a reasonable interpretation of the intelligence and security problem and solution at the time. Indeed, it is in so many words one of the key judgments and recommendations the 9/11 Commission handed down in its report on what went wrong in the days before the attacks and how to redress these shortcomings. What ensued was a dismantling of bureaucratic barriers among various security organizations, these organizations’ swift growth and integration, and the broad and encompassing expansion of the amount and type of information collected and analyzed. Attitudes formed in earlier years of purported security excesses were abandoned in favor of fresh understandings of the new threat and the kind of collection and cooperation it would take to defend against it. Little discussed then as now is that it was during these first days after 9/11 that the heads of several US telecommunications companies came to the government demanding it
to accept their telephone, email, and other similar data, apply the security apparatus’s considerable search tools and information analysis capabilities to it, and ferret out any following wave of terrorists who might be among us plotting even worse attacks than we endured on 9/11. New times and new threats demanded new measures, and previously unavailable information and modern ways to make sense of it would allow us to take the necessary steps to ensure our safety and defeat terrorism.

Problems with this “connect-the-dots” understanding of how intelligence works and how it uses information to inform decision makers’ actions emerged in short time. As elegant as the dots metaphor may sound, it misapprehends the nature of intelligence collection and analysis in the way it assumes there is one set of dots out there for each conceivable picture available as well as a single correct way to connect them to see the one accurate image. Of course information—the “dots” in the metaphor—remains at the heart of intelligence, and the way it is acquired, sorted through, and understood to mean is indeed the core business of the various intelligence and security agencies. But the idea that with enough information would come all the right elements for all the right pictures to emerge takes on a narrative power that overmatches its analytic reality. Indeed, it tends to play to the notion of “predictive intelligence” that understands human events as unfolding according to larger circumstances beyond smaller control or even immutable laws of behavior and reaction whereby the future can be forecast accurately and reliably. In reality, what intelligence has always been out to do is to inform those who receive it of something they did not previously know, believe to be true, and can use in formulating decision and actions relevant to their responsibilities and authorities. However, the more common understanding went that if giving the security apparatus access to this wide array
of private telecommunications data was going to be worth the effort and risk, it had to be key in predicting events so we could forestall the worst of them.

As the war proceeded and the country took note of its events, this popular misapprehension of intelligence also extended to a similar misreading of the nature of the terrorist threat that helped shape the emerging arc of the narrative of extreme measures over time conveying more risks than advantages. As a practical concept, both in business as well as in security policymaking, risk is traditionally understood as a product of threat, vulnerability, and consequence, with threat being a product of one’s adversaries’ capabilities and intentions. In this construct, discussed briefly in Chapter II, the role of timely and accurate intelligence is critical in the ability to discern these capabilities and intentions. To the extent attacks anywhere near like those seen on 9/11 have not occurred or that a larger number of lesser attacks seen elsewhere in the world have not taken place on American soil, one can safely assume it is not because terrorists’ intentions have waned, but because their capabilities have. Therefore, actions taken by US officials to degrade these capabilities emerge as a significant factor in helping lower the threat, while simultaneous steps to redress our worst vulnerabilities—also informed by intelligence, although of a different type—have combined with this reduced threat to lower our risk.

Intelligence analysis does not have to predict the future to play such an important role, but it does rely on critical information and sophisticated tools to make sense of it to be usefully informative. Among that information and those tools, according to a broad array of senior officials, legislators, and other specialists, are telecommunications data and the wherewithal to analyze it in close detail. Although this contention may remain arguable on at least some levels, to the extent it is true in even a basic sense it is as true
later in the war as it was earlier, so long as there remained any terrorist threat to identify, measure, forestall, and defeat. Yet public opinion on this circumstance comported over time not so much with this more analytical understanding of events, but with a more narrative one that tracked well with a view of protracted conflict eventually requiring too much of us.

That over-expensive requirement, apparently, was the privacy American society claims to have traditionally cherished, but apparently has been willing to compromise in the quest for security. As the war dragged out and demanded other sacrifices—troops, treasure, international good will, convenience in air travel, and the general sense of ease remembered from pre-war year—with no end to the expansively conceived and articulated conflict in sight, the country might have been excused if it began to wonder what these costs were really purchasing. With sympathy for the seemingly existential and unending struggle withering in the face of years of overseas military deployments and casualties, a range of extreme measures that were excused as necessary (while still nagging at the collective conscience) and an earlier sense of unity and national purpose all eventually began dissolving in hard-edged partisan attacks. These attackers brandished as weapons security’s effects and the tools used to pursue them, and the immediate post-9/11 consensus over what the sustainability of the war’s costs began to unravel, although it is difficult to see how great a part a more rational calculus of risk versus gain was playing in this conclusion.

When the Edward Snowden revelations started hitting the press in 2013 and the public was confronted with how much power it had turned over to the federal surveillance state, time and circumstance were ripe for a narrative of protracted conflict bringing out
the worst in us to assert itself. Refueled by the open-ended war and its wearying events, this narrative began to play as significant a role in undergirding public debate as more sober-minded calculations of the threat of broad data collection and its role in our security. This is not to say that there are no rational, practical reasons to oppose what many criticize as the over-reach of the surveillance state. It is to say, however, that the assumptions that underlie these reasons appear to have shifted from previous assumptions that informed a greater sympathy and support for these measures, and in ways that trace more clearly with a narrative appreciation and understanding of events in the context of the war’s corruptive influence than a more analytic one of how some extreme techniques might actually produce actionable counterterrorism intelligence.

In addition to affecting understandings of intelligence collection, security measures, and what costs we might reasonably be asked to bear in our collective defense against terrorism, the corruptive influence of the overlong war—just like previously explored myths—also plays out in popular narratives that have shifted the more protracted the conflict has become. This phenomenon is probably most clearly seen in cinematic expressions, especially in film series where dominant themes of robust and straightforward handling of our enemies in earlier treatments over time has given way to more nuanced, reflective, and self-referential understandings of the enemy as the War on Terror has dragged on and placed more demands on us. For instance, in 2005’s Batman Begins, the story ends with Gotham City saved, the League of Shadows defeated and its leader dead, and the title character a public hero. In the franchise’s next installment, 2008’s The Dark Knight, Batman winds up prevailing through a massive and invasive technical surveillance scheme that prompts the resignation of his trusted assistant Lucius
Fox, the killing of Gotham’s crusading District Attorney Harvey Dent after he turned into a murderous criminal in league with the Joker, and convincing Police Commissioner James Gordon to hide Dent’s defection while identifying Batman as a murderer on the run. Indeed, Dent’s observation that “You either die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain” succinctly expresses an elegant and accessible articulation of the myth of prolonged conflict eventually bringing out our worst. 46

Another popular movie franchise even more directly takes up the theme of the United States emerging as its own enemy the deeper it engages in ruthless tactics necessary to defeat an even more ruthless foe, demonstrating the influence of the War on Terror’s events on popular myth. In 2011’s Captain America: The First Avenger, our titular hero is created by the US military-industrial apparatus as a super weapon in World War II, helps defeat both the Nazis and their evil overlords of Hydra, and sacrifices himself to save the country from a devastating WMD attack only to be brought back to life in the current day to defend national interests as an agent of the secret security organization SHIELD. In the sequel, 2014’s Captain America: The Winter Soldier, our hero discovers SHIELD has been infiltrated and is being influenced by Hydra, SHIELD’s own data-mining intelligence collection and hi-tech weaponry are turned against it and the country, and Hydra’s assassin is revealed as Captain America’s best friend and World War II buddy whom Hydra had captured and tortured into corruption. 47 This dramatically shifted plot focus offers a new version of the “we have met the enemy and he is us” narrative more in synch with the nation’s mood in its 13th year of war, in the process re-articulating a powerful myth that helps animate both the explanation and the understanding of the debasing nature of open-ended conflict on a free society.
The plot element of good guys either turning into or being revealed as bad guys has always been a relatively popular one in various cinematic treatments. But the fact that it continues showing up in these and other storied film series to shift the previously preferred narrative arc of heroism against the evil “other” to the less traditional heroism against the corrupt “within” the longer the War on Terror persists shows our increasing cultural receptiveness to new articulations of who our enemies might really be and to the myth of the long war bringing out our worst. The new James Bond series films’ plot elements move over 2006 to 2012 from Casino Royale’s simple double agents, to Quantum of Solace’s infiltration of the British government’s inner circle by international criminals and a CIA senior officer’s accommodation of these criminals’ activities, to Skyfall’s wholesale breach of MI6’s cyber network and destruction of its headquarters building by a former agent bent on revenge as well as the apparent counterproductive meddling by government oversight elements. This last development leads to a scene where MI6 Director M offers a full-throated defense of intelligence and covert action (or at least film’s understanding and depiction of them) to a Parliamentary committee considering steps to circumscribe her organization’s authorities, thereby playing into enemy hands, and asking “So before you declare us irrelevant, ask yourselves—how safe do you feel?”

The same shift can be seen in other popular movie franchises as well. Note how the rebooted “Star Trek” franchise moved from 2009’s Star Trek, with James Kirk and his crew fighting the Romulans, to 2013’s Star Trek: Into Darkness, with our heroes triumphing over a far-reaching conspiracy between senior Starfleet officers and the Federation’s arch-nemesis, Khan. Returning to the Marvel cinematic universe, 2012’s
The Avengers, where the heroes unite to save Earth and destroy the invading extraterrestrial Chitauri, is scheduled to be followed up by 2015’s Avengers: Age of Ultron, where a vast and powerful artificial intelligence created by Tony Stark to help direct his Iron Legion after SHIELD’s destruction turns on humankind as Earth’s true enemy and seeks to eradicate it. By these measures, the myth of conflict’s contaminating nature and war’s corruptive influence gains power the longer the war lasts.

War’s End and the Defeat of Terrorism: Narrative and the Point of Diminishing Returns

With the War on Terror placed within the broader cultural narrative of America’s wars—especially its most recent large-scale existential wars—it also assumed this narrative’s expected end-state of victory. As discussed earlier, victory in war is an atypical and, by itself, unremarkable narrative even in the American context. Indeed, if a war is neither explained nor understood as being winnable, it is likely to be seen as an enterprise as senseless as it is dangerous and deserving neither popular nor official support. A closer inspection of the cultural idioms of this understanding, however, and what notions of culmination and victory they imparted to the conflict reveal how a fundamental inconsistency crept back into the narrative from the war’s events. The more the war was linked to earlier long-fought and hard-won victories and the longer and more extended it became, the more success was seen as the only acceptable conclusion. Yet, the more protracted and broad the war grew, the more ill-defined and elusive victory appeared—certainly in the cultural arena. This was nowhere clearer than in the memories and metaphors both invoked and fueled the longer the war dragged and the more confusing and frustrating its end-state appeared.

From its start, the war was referred to and thought of in ways that connected it
directly to the country’s most recent conflicts that featured dangerous threats, long struggles, and important victories: World War II and the Cold War. References in the days after 9/11, from Bush’s “war has been waged against us by stealth and deceit,” and “a group of barbarians have declared war on the American people” to then-US Ambassador to Japan and long-time senior policymaker Howard Baker’s “each of us will remember what happened that day…where we were and what we were doing,” invoked the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor that brought the country into World War II. Others statements, such as Bush’s famous “Axis of Evil” remarks in his 2002 State of the Union address, raised and reminded us of our enemies in that famous mid-century conflict and how we had to defeat them unconditionally lest they do the same to us. Also, from Donald Rumsfeld’s October 2001 discussion of the efforts against global terrorism being long but “if you think about it, 50 years, 40 years, however long it was with the Cold War…but here we are. No Soviet Union,” to Bush’s offering in June 2002 that “because the war on terror will require resolve and patience…in this way our struggle is similar to the Cold War,” and to Dick Cheney’s May 2003 analogy that “freedom’s ultimate triumph was vindicated when the Berlin Wall was toppled, when an Evil Empire vanished from the face of the earth [but] today, freedom has a new set of totalitarian enemies,” the US counterterrorism campaign was portrayed as the new century’s inheritor of the late-century protracted existential war against a vicious and unrelenting despotic ideology. Just as these struggles required much and took years to win, went the prompt, the War on Terror would do the same, but end in victories as sure and vital as the ones those earlier wars produced.

The war indeed played out over years, but it did so with invasions, excursions, and
other conflicts perhaps heralded in the days after 9/11 with the reminder of the requirements of a long-term war of historic proportions, but over time featured fewer direct connections to the attacks that forced the conflict on us. In the process, these extensions further muddied the notions of end-state and victory, certainly in the context of cultural narrative. If Bush’s original articulation of success was the practically unattainable “Crusade” to be fought “until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated,” then what the original war led to often overmatched the myth’s ability to understand and conventionalize the metastasized conflict’s various accretions in terms of culmination and success. The invasion of Afghanistan brought down the Taliban government and put its forces and those of its al-Qaeda allies on the run, but the escape of those elements into apparent safe-haven in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region looked less like victory the more our enemies remained beyond our reach and actively resisting.

More importantly for the cultural narrative, it did not feel like victory, either. Pakistani forces muscled into the area and also met with resistance and frustration, assumed more casualties than NATO forces were taking farther west, and brooked internal destabilization of a country and government whose strength and antiterrorist determination were supposedly central to our strategy in the region. Yet the United States assumed a wider and heavier strategic burden elsewhere. As the focus of what purported to be a following phase of the war shifted to Iraq, the swift capture of Baghdad and the fall of the Saddam regime certainly felt like victory—a feeling given fuller narrative play in Bush’s May 2003 Top Gun-like “Mission Accomplished” display on the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln. But both the reason and emotion of that accomplishment waned as Iraq
devolved into chaos and the mission shifted to a counterinsurgency for which the United States and its allies appeared unprepared and, for too long, incapable of winning. Popular support for the Iraq and Afghanistan operations lagged.

That support for the war—or, by this time, wars—dropped off the more victory seemed elusive appears an unremarkable development, but one that had to do with circumstances both easily understood as well as more nuanced. The obvious reasons, of course, are the ones typically traced in traditional political and security analyses, including costs versus benefits, short-term versus long-term gains, and a paucity of measurable achievements that seem worth the risks. But how these calculations were factoring out in the public mind owed much to subtle circumstances of understanding and value and the role of the victory narrative in popular ideation. So far, the only goal for the War on Terror was Bush’s maximalist position offered in the immediate wake of 9/11. After that, people were left wondering whether victory would be the large-scale roundup of the leaders of a terrorist network that seemed beyond effective reach and capable of proliferating around the world, the defeat of far-away insurgencies that appeared to grow along with American troop deployments, the establishment of stable democratic governments in countries that had never enjoyed them before, or even the location and demolition of WMD that could not be shown to have existed despite outright military occupation of the country that was accused of developing them.

Indeed, responding to the 9/11 attacks and hunting down those who would repeat them took a back seat to larger missions as the wars expanded, yet these larger missions were seen in the context of our national defense in the War on Terror. To the extent official goals were left unspecified or malleable, they remained more a matter of public
opinion than of policy, which in turn allowed for the elevation of broader cultural
narratives that had existed before the war and fueled the war’s initial actions at the
expense of more analytically derived ideas and conventions. Under these circumstances,
the myth of an end to the war and a resulting American victory suffered as events were
seen to frustrate both expected outcomes.

As the myth changed in its reaction to events, these changes emerged in a range of
popular narratives in ways both more and less expected and understood. Indeed, much of
the extended arc of protracted storylines discussed above in the various TV shows,
movies, and video games that picked up the narrative of war and its need for extreme
measures can be seen in the context of this myth as well, in that the requirements of
protracted war might be keeping us from losing, but they were apparently bringing us only
so close to winning. To the extent that winning is what the narrative demanded, however,
the war was never portrayed as something to which we could apply a cost/benefit
assessment and walk away from when the analysis showed the time was right. If this
understanding of the war’s events offered the advantage of continuing material for scripts
and stories for these series’ and franchises’ uninterrupted and long-term development and
production, it also internalized and conveyed the notion that not only victory, but also
even an end to the war, might always be looming beyond the horizon.

On the one hand this narrative reflected the war’s apparent circumstances; on the
other it nurtured the notion that whenever these circumstances might change, the end
might have come longer than expected, but perhaps with a victory that could be
understood as sweeter for the ordeal. Or the end might be something that was not what we
expected earlier, and something we might not recognize. Returning to the film *The Dark
Knight for a pop-cultural narrative of this circumstance, Batman’s assumption of public blame for Harvey Dent’s death and crimes hides Dent’s defection to the Joker and gives the people of Gotham the success they need to continue the never-ending battle against corruption and evil, bringing a finality and victory of sorts to the episode while laying the foundation for a new understanding of victory in a shifting arc to our hero’s narrative.\(^{52}\)

If video-based pop culture examples could assume, co-opt, and re-articulate the idea of a concluded and won War on Terror in this way, other artistic expressions of public sentiment that depended on more circumscribed, short-term narratives could only reflect the change in circumstances and the shift in popular mood. The experience of 9/11 and the notion of fighting the war to victory emerged early as memories and explanations in cultural schema, but they morphed over time toward themes of confusion and resignation in these types of occasional and intervallic art forms the longer that victory withheld.

Nowhere is this more evident than in music, where songs produced since the onset of the war have felt and shown the effects of the war’s events and understandings of them in reinterpreting the myth of shouldering the burden of war and fighting it to a successful end. Early years of the war saw songs of grief, resilience, and determination, from Alan Jackson’s “Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)” (2001), to Bruce Springsteen’s “The Rising” (2002), to Neil Young’s “Let’s Roll” (2002), as well as the defiance and snide sarcasm of Jackyl’s “Open Invitation (I Hate You Bin Laden)” (2001) and Ray Stevens’s “Osama Yo’ Mama” (2002). The narrative themes conveyed in later music, however, focused more on frustration, alienation, and target-shifted anger, from Green Day’s “Wake me Up When September Ends” (2005), to Bruce Springsteen’s
“Devils & Dust” (2005), to Neil Young’s “Let’s Impeach the President” (2006), as well as the rejection of what the war had regrettably turned into, and perhaps an embrace of a new “victory” of returning to cherished American values, of Cold Play’s “Violet Hill” (2008) and Merle Haggard’s “American First” (2005). Lacking extended story arcs, pop-cultural expressions of more singular nature such as music assumed and projected the narrative of the war’s end and the worth and appearance of victory in ways different from other art forms, but the war’s ability to reshape and re-inform myth here are no less apparent.  

Redeveloped Myth: Resilience and Reinterpretation

To remain a factor in human understanding, myth must shift with and stay relevant to events, which these five myths do in ways that perhaps seem understated and at times elusive, but on careful investigation are nonetheless identifiable and powerful. That this is so is a condition of human thinking and comprehension, in that efforts to explain our reality stem from understandings both narrative and analytic—and none fully one or the other—which inform these explanation and in return echo in ways that reshape those narratives which conventionalize their understandings. In the context of apprehending and making sense of the War on Terror, the narratives that work best are the ones that work most, which means they work not only to inform events, as was traced in Chapter III, but also to be informed by events as those seeking this understanding deconstruct those events and their meaning and impart that meaning back to the ever-shifting narratives. To the extent myth is seen as a function of meaning, this is a reflection of the workings of human thought and understanding as much in international relations, security affairs, war, or counterterrorism as much as it is in any other cultural expression. Indeed, just as narrative is commonly understood as a social interpretation of events in these other expressions, it
can serve the same function in analyses of the War on Terror’s development.

The five myths assumed their initial forms and articulations in response at least partly to the American experiences of security and war, first shaping counterterrorist decisions and actions, and then retaining their pride of place by reforming and re-articulating themselves in response to new experiences of security and war that the US counterterrorism campaign went on to produce. How we understand suicide bombing as a tactic that owes less to rationality and bravery and more to hatred and cowardice is a function of the myth of the terrorists’ emotionality and overriding hatred for who we are. Interpretations and memories of war reflect the internalization of our current overseas military experience and memories of these events in ways that reinvigorated the myth of counterterrorism as war. Pop-cultural expressions of existential conflict’s demand for extreme measures reshape in ways consistent more with narrative than with analytic constructions of the need for extreme measures. Information collection and analysis is popularly reinterpreted within a storyline of a corrupt and corrupting surveillance state as well as in the context of intelligence practicalities. Lastly, the idea of an end to and ultimate victory in the war came to be seen in cultural memorialization as goals deferred, and perhaps as goals denied. All together these reshaped storylines of American culture serve to underscore the ability of formative myths to take on new versions of themselves as they react to events they previously helped inform. Their ability to do so helps mark them less as mere mistakes, misunderstandings, or misrepresentations, although some of these shortcomings clearly figured at times in society’s internalization of the war’s events, and more as myths that allow us to attach value and meaning to events at times independent of fuller—and more fully rational—understandings of their circumstances.
and constitutive factors.

In this fashion, the War on Terror’s events are rationalized for larger societal consumption in the ever-ruminating process of explanation, understanding, and myth-making. Just as the war relies on inherited myth, this generation’s forebears shaped that myth through their internalized experiences of previous events, which laid the cultural foundation for our ability to understand the war’s more current events and assign them meaning. That these meanings remain at some levels in dispute and open to ongoing interpretation and negotiation is a comment less on the reality of this form of understanding. It is more a testament to the inherent subjectivity of knowledge, perception, and discernment in forming judgments and drawing conclusion from even common experiences, to the extent that any experience can be truly common as it is treated by as many different sets of perspectives and insights as there are people who hold them. In this sense Plato’s observation of how we all fall back on myth despite logic’s higher wisdom is instructive. It will become even more so as we examine how re-informed and reshaped myths go on to condition the beliefs, understanding, and decisions that underlie the events and actions of the US counterterrorism campaign as the war has proceeded.
CHAPTER V:
THE RESHAPED NARRATIVE RE-INFORMS THE WAR
AND THE PROCESS CONTINUES

Not only is the process of myth informing the War on Terror’s events and the war informing its myth simultaneous and reciprocal, it is also continuing, which means that the informed myth goes on to re-inform the war. This can be seen in the cases of each of the five myths under examination as they continue to hold sway in helping explain and conventionalize understandings of the war as US counterterrorism efforts persist and as the conflict carries on. Indeed, these myths’ ability not only to withstand the impact of events, developing knowledge, and analytic scrutiny, but also to shift in their expressions and interpretations while continuing to help explain the war to those seeking this understanding underscores their narrative powers. Again, this is not a circumstance that exists parallel to and separate from attempts at unbiased analysis from objective facts, but instead an inherent aspect both of how we as humans understand and make sense of events in the context of their ability to conform to narrative conventions, and of our irresistible preference for transmitting the meaning and value of events in story forms. Mistakes and misunderstandings may convey, but they emerge more starkly the more the stories help tell of events, as opposed to the more events are relied on to help tell the stories.

These mistakes or misunderstandings morph in the retelling of the myths as the war continues, but they are less at issue than the idea of what their presence means. Inaccuracies, imprecisions, skewed perceptions, simplistic explanations, or other epistemological shortcomings are features in any conceptual apprehension of reality, even ones that cleave more closely to empirical reasoning and fact-based analysis, and much
will be made—and rightly so—about such observational and logical deficiencies. They figure in this inquiry, of course, but they are not its focus. Instead, this investigation identifies them less as shortcomings in logic, despite the myriad and serious practical problems they help create, and more as testimony to the power of myth in shaping human understanding and often carrying an explanatory weight that may sometimes overmatch their load-bearing capacity. As simple mistakes, these narratives would collapse quickly under the weight we accord keen observation, insightful examination, and reasoned argumentation. As myths, however, they remain close to the heart of the way we see and interpret reality and explain these understandings to ourselves and others. As such, they tend to resist scrutiny and alternative readings while changing just enough along with shifting events to remain true to their original articulations and stay pertinent to new circumstances.

This subtle but inexorable influence that certain narratives retain in security affairs in general and the War on Terror specifically not only has a history, as we have seen, but also a currency. Just as our five narratives relied on inherited myth for their specific formulations and helped condition and shape understandings and explanations at the start of the war, they also reacted to and reformed in accordance to the war’s developments to position themselves to continue their informative role as the war has played out. Again, their ability to do so attests to their standings as myths, at least in terms of how the word is defined here—not mere errors, but expressions of value, identity, and ideation that have inserted themselves into the American cultural narrative and have emerged as explanatory storylines in our current security scenario. Having traced these myths’ emergence, their effect on some of the war’s thinking and actions, and their
reaction to the war’s ongoing events, the inquiry turns now to their continuing impact on these unfolding events. An understanding of this process of mutual information and its persistent manifestations continues to offer insights into some of the more important and circumstances that remain at play in how we have continued to fight the War on Terror.

**Terrorists Hate Who We Are: Protracted Confusion Over Radicalization**

The myth of the terrorists’ motivation of irrational hatred, sparked by their murderous attacks on the innocent and fueled by their favored tactic of suicide bombing against our forces in the combat theaters and others elsewhere, continues to play out in the war’s prosecution mainly through prolonged confusion over who and where the terrorists really are and why they do what they do. Now, 13 years after the attacks of 9/11, any of the conspirators who remain at large apparently have been cornered in the remote border regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Although restricted in their ability to launch elaborately planned, spectacular attacks, they remain a potent force not only as terrorist trainers and facilitators, but also as an ideal of a perceived undefeatable Islamic struggle against Western depredations that lends its blessing to all who join this struggle.\(^1\) Indeed, terrorists and would-be terrorists from the perpetrators of the July 2005 London Underground bombers, to the December 2009 failed underwear bomber, to the May 2010 unsuccessful Times Square bomber, to the April 2013 Boston Marathon bombers all admitted to being trained by al-Qaeda operators in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, or being given materials by bomb-makers who got their training and guidance from border-region-based leaders, or following instructions offered remotely by explosive specialists in the same area. Former senior counterterrorism analyst Philip Mudd refers to this franchising of al-Qaeda in the wake of the group’s restricted operational fortunes as
the “metastasized” jihad, but for years and even to this day, what remains of both the heart
and the head of the movement has been not all that far from where Osama bin Laden was
living when he was killed in Abbottabad, Pakistan in May 2011.2

Despite this circumstance, for years the war was prosecuted most forcefully in
Iraq, the clearest example of confusion over the terrorists’ identity and location and,
despite the removal of the Saddam regime and other attendant benefits—many of which
remain to be seen and assessed in terms of their costs, especially in light of the emergence
of The Islamic State in 2014—one of the biggest impediments in prosecuting the War on
Terror. The invasion and resultant US troop presence, an at-least-initially feckless Iraqi
authority, and the dynamics of the polity they fostered helped nourish an active and lethal
insurgency that engaged in terrorist acts, but at its heart had more to do with the political
future of Iraq than with US forces too often caught in the middle of an internal Iraqi war.
However, it was the attraction of foreign fighters to this insurgency and the role in it
played by Zarqawi’s al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorist group that most complicated the issues of
who in, and how much of, the Iraq War was part of the War on Terror. That complicating
factor persisted at least up until the point in 2008 when the United States chose to
prosecute the war as a counterinsurgency, as opposed to a counterterrorist campaign
against what was mistakenly—and at least in part mythically—understood as an enemy
comprising mainly foreign terrorists and some local armed factions that Defense Secretary
Donald Rumsfeld dismissed early in the conflict as “a few dead-enders.”3

Indeed, the refuted notions that Iraq must have been implicated in some way with
9/11 or was in cahoots with anti-US terrorists even to the point of being able to transfer
weapons of mass destruction to them—collectively one of the rationales offered in support
of the 2003 invasion, tying it to the War on Terror—has persisted for years. A poll conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland a decade after the attacks, for instance, found that a “large and undiminishingly minority of Americans continues to believe these were both the case.” Former Vice President Dick Cheney still maintained as late as July 2014 that “Iraqi government documents captured after the invasion” show that the Saddam regime and al-Qaeda had a “deep, longstanding, far-reaching relationship,” even through that claim has been debunked in the 9/11 Commission Report and by other observers. Although recent reporting in The New York Times shows that US troops report finding as many as 5,000 chemical artillery shells or other warheads in Iraq since the 2003 invasion, these weapons appear to have been left over from the previous Gulf War or earlier periods and had escaped not only international control regime scrutiny, but also the notice of Iraqi authorities themselves, probably through poor record keeping. Their presence came to light as these munitions were looted by insurgents and used in improvised explosive devices, for which they were ill suited because of their lack of explosive power; despite their remaining toxicity, their “mass destruction” potential was never realized. Clearly, given findings of several commissions that attest to the contrary, these beliefs owe far more to the power of the narrative or Iraq being part of the war than to more analytical explanations of who and where the terrorists are. True to their nature, myths die hard, if at all, this one included.

In addition al-Qaeda affiliated groups emerging in various parts of the Muslim world, there is also the issue of radicalization of Muslims in the West and the role the popular view of the implacably hate-filled radical plays in Western governments’ abilities to grasp this radicalization phenomenon. For all the attention, expense, and effort given to
various prosecutions of the War on Terror by force, no one appears to have a clear idea what mix of circumstances prompts erstwhile law-abiding and otherwise loyal citizens from European and American Muslim communities or coverts to the faith to enlist in terrorist ranks by, say, planting bombs in the London Underground, decapitating people on Amsterdam streets, or traveling to Somalia to wage jihad. Indeed, the commander of the US Army intelligence unit charged with internal military security—including investigating the type of activity that Maj. Nidal Malik Hassan engaged before his attack at Ft. Hood, Texas in November 2009—focused on gathering information on terrorist-affiliated student groups in the United States in an effort that replicated the work of FBI and DHS elements and ignored the more sensitive and difficult, but apparently necessary, task of identifying who among the Army’s ranks might be motivated to terror. A US military officer may not appear to fit a profile of an irrational radical motivated by hatred of the United States and its institutions, yet he is apparently as subject to a radicalization process leading to terrorist acts as someone who might more comfortably fit popular notions of a potential terrorist. Also, despite the apparent worthiness of radicalization as a focus of intelligence analysis, the National Counterterrorism Center and the CIA did not form analytic groups dedicated to the issue until 2007, which left senior counterterrorist decision makers in those years since 9/11 with fewer fact-based, critical views to counter presumably more narrative-influenced ideas of terrorists’ identities and motivations.

This is not to say that that radicalization only works in certain ways and that narrative serves no useful purpose in informing understandings of the phenomenon, but the idea of terrorists indulging a hatred for Americans and the West for who they are as opposed to what they do continues as a particularly pernicious myth that persists even as
events indicate otherwise. The war in Iraq served to radicalize countless numbers of Muslims across the Middle East, South Asia, and beyond and stands as the quintessential example of an American action, as opposed to an identity, that provoked widespread opprobrium among those who might become our enemies—and, to the extent they joined the insurgencies in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, have indeed become—and who, under the circumstances of the war, we would be advantaged as having as our friends. Specifically, as mentioned in Chapter III, some of the most egregious American behaviors in Iraq, such as the depredations photographed at Abu Ghraib, have been cited by underwear bomber Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the Boston bomber Tsarnaev brothers, and other terrorists who enjoyed living comfortably in the West as they came to know it as key factors in their decisions to launch their attacks. Again, not only are the insurgencies one phenomenon while terrorist attacks against the United States are another, but also any hatred or generally emotional motivation among insurgents and terrorists appears aimed less at who Americans are and how they live and more at what they do, despite this myth’s persistence.

To the extent the narrative of terrorists’ hatred of American identity rests on facts, some facts suggest an analytical understanding at some variance to the myth. For instance, according to information collected and analyzed by the New America Foundation (NAF), individuals motivated by al-Qaeda’s ideology have killed 21 people in the United States from 9/11 through April 2014. Many of these terrorists, including Nidal Hassan Malik and the Tsarnaev brothers, indeed may have harbored a hatred of American identity at some level, yet they lived in America and apparently thrived on its freedoms at least up to the point of their attacks. Moreover, although al-Qaeda’s views certainly convey a harsh
and violent anti-US animus, any stated reasons for it appears based on opposition to
specific American actions in the Middle East and not who Americans are as a people.
Still, the 21 deaths matter, as much as do the words of those who committed the murders.
When they do, however, attention also draws to another number: 34, which is NAF’s
count of the number of American dead since 9/11 at the hands of right-wing extremists.
Not only is this number over half again higher than that of the al-Qaeda victims, but also
there is no mistaking the motivations of these home-grown American reactionaries. To a
man, up to and including the shooter at the Jewish community center in Kansas in April
2014, these terrorists state clearly they are motivated by their hatred of Jews, blacks, or
those who defend the interests and fundamental human rights of any of this country’s
peoples whom the murderers think do not belong here—in short, precisely what
Americans are. So, to the extent there are indeed terrorists out there who hate us and kill
us over our core identity, they are not whom the War on Terror’s myth of terrorist
motivation seems to have included in its narrative. As a narrative, however, it is not
required to reconcile itself fully to facts, but to tell a good story.

All these circumstances aside, the myth of the irrational, hate-filled, America-
rejecting terrorist persists, meaning that the terrorism phenomenon remains in the public
mind less something to be understood, dissuaded, isolated, and undermined and more
something to guard against, fight, and perhaps hate in return. This is not to say that US
leaders and security services have no understanding of the terrorists’ identity and
motivations or are incapable of assessing the threat accurately. It is to say, however, that
our ability to recognize terrorism and terrorists will remain at some level informed by a
powerful cultural narrative in addition to observable facts and more reasoned analysis.
This means the longer the war lasts, the more Americans’ suspicion over who our enemies are shifts not only with events, but also with myth. For instance, according to ABC News polling in October 2001, a plurality of Americans (47%) held a favorable opinion of Islam. As the questioned was posed again over subsequent years, during which our engagement with the Muslim world deepened along with the war’s psychic toll, the number consistently dropped to a point where after a decade pf post-9/11 security enhancement, according to the University of Maryland’s Program on International Policy Attitudes, only a third (33%) of Americans retained a generally favorable opinion of Islam, while 60% held unfavorable views. Clearly, the nation’s experience with what it increasingly has come to see as the font of its terrorist threat continues to take its cues from a narrative of terrorists’ character and motivations. Counterterrorism analysis may have also improved, presumably, and our and our enemies’ mutual animosity may have worsened along the way, but the myth of the terrorists hating us for who we are and their actions stemming from a fundamental irrationality continues to exert a pull on American understanding of terrorism in ways unexplained by more reasoned assessment.

**Making War on Terrorists: Counterterrorism, Counterinsurgency, and Identity**

The refueled myth of the War on Terror demanding a military response feeds back into the war mainly by helping confuse or in other ways complicate understandings not only of the various conflicts associated with the war and what they really are, but also of those who are waging it and what it is that they are about. The various conflicts include most noticeably the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, although those war’s shifted quickly into counterinsurgencies with smaller counterterrorist dimensions, and lower-intensity struggles and force deployments around the globe as well as at home also figure. As far as
understandings of the elements fighting the war, they focus on the images of the military forces and civilian organizations tasked with the counterterrorist mission and how they have come to be seen over the years since 9/11—by others as well as by themselves. Along the way, these understandings in some fashions have come to help promote lingering uncertainties over what kinds of force, and in what measures, are most effective in combating terror, and to help inform, sometimes counterproductively, how those wielding this force recognize their identity and their roles in the conflict. Again, this is not an assertion that the War on Terror is not a war in any dimension or that the use of force is neither necessary nor ever productive. It is instead a claim that the more that articulations of, decisions in, and identities about the war derive from what appears to be a less-examined conflict narrative rather than analytic explanations and understandings of the nature of counterterrorism, the greater the work of myth can be seen in how the country continues to view the counterterrorist effort.

Regarding the war’s various conflicts, it has been discussed above how Afghanistan was invaded to get at the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks and how Iraq was invaded because of the Saddam regime’s undetermined and under-explained role in terrorism, regional instability, or threat to US interests. That each conflict became much more difficult than originally anticipated, morphed into a different sort of contest in large part because of the type of forces the United States used and the type of conflict initially waged, and ultimately required a greater and more varied commitment than was first engaged had much to do with US decision makers seeing counterterrorism and post-9/11 US security within a narrative context of war. Again, it was as late as 2008 that the Iraq war was approached as a counterinsurgency, requiring the integration of political
accommodation, the greater inclusion of non-military elements, building effective institutions of governance, buying off former enemies, etc. along with a more focused and judicious use of force, as opposed to an ad hoc mix of conventional, counterterrorist, and peacekeeping tactics. This approach helped stabilize the situation there enough to allow the fight to shift from Iraq back to the War on Terror’s original heartland of Afghanistan. This is not to say that counterinsurgency is not war, but it is to say that it is a non-traditional type of war that did not, at least initially, fit the operative war narrative that required an overriding commitment of force with military elements in the lead. Moreover, counterinsurgency only fits the American war narrative at its earliest heart, which is from the perspective of the insurgent willing to spend more time, lives, and commitment than the hostile invader—whether those invaders are 18th century British redcoats or 21st century American GIs.

The fight in Afghanistan now appears to require the same sort of counterinsurgency that eventually succeeded in Iraq, which overshadows the type of smaller, focused counterterrorist campaign that was interrupted in 2003 and must still figure in operations today if al-Qaeda and a resurgent Taliban are to be effectively run to ground. Even then, success could look like what many choose to see it looks like in Iraq—protracted but overall modest unrest and instability purchased at steep cost and conditions that could still unravel quickly and foster the development and export of political violence. Again, this is less intended as a critique of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and it would be wrong to advance a claim that their prosecutions have neither demonstrated nor produced anything beyond a simple-minded adherence to an obscure or contrived cultural narrative. More at point, however, is that this re-informed narrative of
counterterrorism as war taps into longstanding and powerful storyline accounts of how the country sees itself and its actions when under threat and tends to impart biases on US actions even a decade and more after 9/11.

Also, whenever the US military is in the lead, the myth of counterterrorism as war shows its influence. The United States is surely capable of waging counterinsurgency in Afghanistan, making proxy war in Libya, supporting rebels in Syria, conducting internal defense actions in Africa, and mounting various types of stability operations around the globe. But, being able to conduct these actions is one thing; doing so wisely, well, and as part of a concerted strategy involving other instruments of national power aimed at securing certain key vital interests while not unnecessarily disadvantaging the pursuit of others is another. Moreover, not all of these actions have always been part of the War on Terror, yet counterterrorist campaigns appear required in the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and wherever else al-Qaeda affiliates have been allowed to emerge. Whether, how, and by whom these campaigns are fought—and what role intelligence, regulatory, and general security measures will play in any larger effort in which military forces will also figure—will probably continue as a function in part of the narrative of force retaining at least a major—if not the primary—role in fighting terrorism.

So, despite the ouster of the Taliban, the toppling of Saddam, and other military successes, a terrorist threat of some dimension remains, and remaining with it is the question of how best to confront and defeat it. A more analytically informed understanding earlier in the war might have gone some distance in helping correct for some of the more important misapprehensions—that Pakistani forces could mop up al-Qaeda and Taliban forces pushed over the Afghanistan border, that US and coalition
forces would be welcomed in Iraq as liberators, that democracy could flourish in places where it has never before existed and at the point of a bayonet—but the war continues even as understandings of it shift. The Obama administration has de-emphasized the term “War on Terror,” preferring “overseas contingency operations” and then “countering violent extremism,” and the British appear to have rejected the term altogether, with the head of MI5, Britain’s internal security intelligence service even saying in 2011 that 9/11 was “a crime, not an act of war.”

Still, the war’s fundamental objectives of dismantling al-Qaeda networks, enhancing intelligence collection and security defenses, and building international coalitions against terrorism have not changed. Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson said in 2012, when he was General Counsel for the Department of Defense, that the military will take a back seat in the conflict as al-Qaeda has been “effectively destroyed.” But as the conflict continues in Afghanistan and action shifts to the Philippines, the Horn of Africa, and Trans-Saharan Africa, the military not only leads, but also refers to operations in these areas as part of “Operation Enduring Freedom”—the name for the war in Afghanistan—and awards service members deployed in those areas and elsewhere the Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary Medal. Despite shifting understandings, the war narrative of righteous conflict, forced upon us, waged with military forces in the lead, and to the clear defeat of our enemies has not only persisted as a useful conceptual construct, but also continues to exert a strong influence.

A dozen or so years on the US government may have a clearer idea of the nature of the terrorist threat and how to go about confronting it, although more in focus in this investigation is the influence of the particular war narrative and how it is felt. This
influence ranges from how senior leaders see counterterrorism as war to how others see the United States as a warrior the longer the war continues and the more it is discussed and portrayed in popular media. In one study on the effect of the war on the US mediated image, University of Piraeus Professor Athanassios Samaras has found as follows:

The more positive the evaluation pattern of an intermediating construct the lower the degree of transfer of image attributes towards the image of the USA, while the more negative the evaluation of an intermediating construct the higher the transfer of image attributes to the nation image of USA. The war on terrorism’s master frame triggers particularly negative evaluations [which] affects the overall nation image of a country and decreases its soft power.14

This issue of image and identity also spills over to how counterterrorist operators might see themselves as warriors—at least in ways consistent with how the popular narrative has emerged. As discussed in Chapter IV, the conflict narrative that developed as the war proceeded was one where force led the way and fashionable portrayals of the narrative emerged at times in ways both Postmodern and, by the standards of popular TV series, increasingly fantastic, which can produce some strange circumstances. Alias, despite offering storylines that departed most dramatically from reality, was seen as such a popular show and its impact so positive that the CIA even got its star, Jennifer Garner, to appear in a recruitment video to be shown at job fairs and on college campuses.15 It is probably not the case that the CIA is in any real danger of seeing itself as the series portrayed its espionage organization, but such circumstances can lead to other situations that may appear trivial by themselves while producing profound results.

Take, for instance, the relief of Gen. Stanley McChrystal from his command of the war in Afghanistan. Hand-picked for the job by President Obama, with the previous commander precipitously reassigned to make room, McChrystal was a well-regarded officer widely considered to have the right background, skills, and expertise to fight just
the right mix of counterinsurgency and counterterrorist campaigns that theater needed, having previously served as the commander of the US Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) and charged with counterterrorism operations worldwide. In a famous article published in the July 2010 issue of Rolling Stone, key members of his staff—many of whom had followed McChrystal from his JSOC days—were quoted insulting and disparaging President Obama and other senior government officials and in other ways conducting themselves in less than fully responsible fashion. Apparently more than a few US senior special operations fighters identified enough with the over-the-top heroes from the counterterrorist puppet farce film Team America: World Police to a point where they were reported as referring to themselves as “Team America,” with some officers, after a night of drinking and carousing in a Paris bar, joining in a song with the chorus “Afghanistan…Afghanistan!” drawn from the film. Of course the article’s mention of McChrystal’s and others’ offensive characterizations of senior officials was the immediate factor behind his relief from command and untimely retirement, but the hubris displayed, fueled in no small part by an unfortunate embrace of an equally unfortunate mythic archetype, appears to have been the ultimate source of McChrystal’s fate. Whether his departure has been a benefit or a detriment to the War on Terror of course is less important in this study than its overall importance, which in the context of these warriors’ self-image and their commander’s relief is difficult to deny.

The Requirement for Extreme Action: Do We Torture, How, and Why?

The myth of the extreme war requiring extreme action has persisted as the War on Terror has proceeded, and several ways in which this myth has found voice in the evolving cultural narrative have continued to help inform key areas of American
explanation, understanding, and identity in the continuing conflict. Extreme and at least potentially extra-judicial measures undertaken at the start of the war continued as their events fed back into the narrative, and the informed narrative has retained its influence in continuing to shape events even as fighting the war extends to new areas of extreme action and regardless of how much decision makers may also rely on empirical data and more systematic analysis to inform their actions. Some of these new measures, such as expanded technical intelligence collection and armed drones, came more to the forefront as the war continued and they were seen as useful. Others, such as “torture” or enhanced interrogation techniques, extraordinary rendition, or extra-judicial imprisonment, were de-emphasized as their utility and legality came into question. Decisions about usefulness, of course, were informed by facts and experience, but the “gloves off” myth not only has persisted as an additional factor in these decisions, but it also can be traced in how key actors in several levels of responsibility and authority understand their actions as fitting in the larger context of the war and its demands. Nowhere, perhaps, is this circumstance clearer than in the ways in which enhanced interrogation, or “torture,” (whichever term used itself being a narratologically driven choice) has continued to be explained and understood, especially in terms recognizable from its informed cultural narrative.

The first explanation that appends to torture in this narratively re-informed context is that whatever acts of enhanced interrogation that might have been performed were not “torture.” Of course fair minds can differ on this issue, but only up to a point. That point was probably clearest early in the war, when the conflict was most strongly understood as a new and desperate struggle and minds were open on what new and desperate measures might be effective or appropriate. Indeed, former acting CIA general counsel John Rizzo
claims that immediately after the September 11 attacks, when the country feared another terrorist strike, the “public and their elected representatives demanded that the government prevent it from happening, whatever that took,” an attitude he claims made him receptive to proposals by CIA lawyers to permit Agency officers to use nine specific enhanced interrogation techniques on captured terrorists.\textsuperscript{19} Rizzo says, “I was confident I could squelch at least the more aggressive proposed [techniques] then and there, if I wanted to…. It would have been a relatively easy thing to do, actually,” yet he acquiesced not out of a specified belief that such techniques would work, but instead out of a sense that doing so and then seeing another attack occur was something he could not countenance\textsuperscript{20}

If true, Rizzo’s judgment seems to draw at least as much from narrative as from analysis, which even he himself appears to acknowledge. Rizzo went on to ask the Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel for memoranda permitting the lawful use of the techniques, which Deputy Attorney General John Yoo prepared and sent to Rizzo and—upon declassification, release, and repudiation by the Obama administration in 2009—have become known as the “torture memos.” Many of the techniques would have been understood as “torture” even at the time, of course, but this characterization stuck more tightly at a point in the war when Rizzo claims the “protect us at all costs” attitude had shifted after eight years of criminal prosecutions, publicized waterboarding, and no attacks to a narrative of “what the hell have you guys been up to, anyway?”\textsuperscript{21} In this sense, both public and official understandings of what constituted “torture” appeared more narrative than analytic.

As the war proceeded further, the question of “torture’s” demonstrated utility was eventually raised—the answer to which might move the torture debate to a more evident,
experiential, fact-based context—yet the myth of extreme measures’ necessity continues to exert a powerful influence on popular ideation of the issue. Dick Cheney has appeared to characterize waterboarding as mild discomfort from a “dunk in the water,” a description that underplays any true practicality of the event, but does comport with a narrative that such measures are not really “torture”—which he also has specifically said they are not. 22

Donald Rumsfeld, in the Errol Morris documentary *The Unknown Known*, pointedly rejects Morris’s use of the term “torture memos” and instead describes the documents as “coming from the US Department of Justice, blessed by the Attorney General, the senior legal official of the United States of America, having been nominated by a President and confirmed by the United States Senate overwhelmingly. A little different cast I just put on it than the one you did.” 23 This wraps the memos in authority, but neither examines the techniques and their utility or any other practical aspect that might inform any normative judgment on whether or not they constitute torture. Jose A. Rodriguez, Jr., former chief of CIA’s National Clandestine Service, also discusses Rizzo’s point of context and Rumsfeld’s point of authority in publicly defending the CIA’s interrogation program, but also adds a point on effectiveness, saying “I know that it produced critical intelligence that helped decimate al-Qaeda and save American lives.” 24

As claims asserted rather than demonstrated, however, these statements also fall back on a narrative of utility. An appeal to effectiveness moves the discussion a little distance, but not enough to place it outside of an argument that has more to do with myth than it does fact and analysis. Moreover, any claim of utility still fails to address the questions over waterboarding’s consistent reliability, what other interrogation techniques might have produced similar information, and the results of enhanced measures’ worth
over their costs.

In terms of facts available and an effective counter to the extreme measures myth, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence has compiled a report based on full access to all classified information on the subject and concludes the enhanced interrogation program produced no actionable intelligence, yet narrative understandings of the matter retain strong influence. The report apparently finds that any information from named al-Qaeda operatives was neither unique nor important in disrupting terrorist plots or saving lives, or was extracted before any enhanced techniques were employed in these prisoners’ interrogations—a finding that undermines any claims of torture’s utility—and detailed example and referenced citation. CIA Director John Brennan has said he and others in his organization dispute parts of the SSCI report, but it is not clear if any rebuttal specifically refutes the report’s key finding on torture’s utility.25

Also, only if any CIA reclama is ever declassified and published can its case can be judged against the Senate’s, and in the process help undercut narrative’s persistent role in the debate. One of Brennan’s predecessors, Gen. Michael Hayden, has reasserted an unsupported claim of “torture’s” effectiveness while characterizing SSCI Chair Sen. Diane Feinstein’s case against the enhanced techniques’ utility as being an “emotional” one—this despite the fact that the SSCI report is fact-based, cited, and checkable while his own and others’ assertions are simply offered up with an appeal to authority, a claim that falls more in the “emotional” category than Feinstein’s.26 The positions of torture’s defenders appear aimed more at asserting the contradicted notion of torture’s utility or denying that waterboarding, immersions in ice water to the point of unconsciousness, or beatings constitute “torture.” Moreover, avowing that any measures the United States has
undertaken in the War on Terror must perforce be good, of course, preserves Americans’ identity as the good guys. Clearly, the “gloves off” narrative thrives despite deliberate analytic efforts to counteract it, which stands in strong testament to myth’s power in our understanding of the war’s events.

In the context of pop cultural echoes of the regenerated “gloves off” myth and torture’s role in its key narratives, their reverberations re-inform significant aspects of the War on Terror’s unfolding events in ways both conceptual and practical. Chapter III examined myth’s role in the “ticking time bomb” scenario offered up in torture’s defense and then played out in popular narratives, but these narratives’ articulations can be seen at work again in continuing to shape the war’s developing discussion of torture. Officials at some of the highest levels of government are not immune from the power of this myth when they recall and invoke the latest versions of the fabled scenario to promote the dubious power of literally squeezing, beating, or flushing out of a captured suspect the location of a nuclear bomb—this time hidden specifically in Los Angeles, a scene straight out the script of 24’s second season. For example, during a discussion panel in 2007 in Ottawa on terrorism, torture, and law, US Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia defended the show’s terrorist-suspect torturing hero with “Jack Bauer saved Los Angeles…. He saved hundreds of thousands of lives…. Is any jury going to convict Jack Bauer?”27 Rather than trot out a more sober version of the ticking time bomb from any number of legal writings or citing traditional, reflective, or insightful sources, such as Francis Bacon or Jeremy Bentham, Scalia instead referenced a fresher variety of the long-standing myth shaped by the war’s events.28 In doing so, he highlighted the cultural narrative’s ability to morph in reaction to the war, and thereby to continue informing the war.
The freshened torture myth shows its power to feed back into the war at lower, more practical levels as well. For instance, in the early years of the establishment facilities at the US Navy base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, where some of the prisoners captured in the War on Terror could be detained and interrogated free from legal restrictions that might have obtained on American soil, interrogators operated under guidance drawn from American prisoners’ experience at the hands of Chinese captors during the Korean War and the techniques employed that at the time the country had no problem characterizing as “torture.”29 As the War on Terror dragged on and interrogators felt pressured to get more, and more useful, information from their prisoners, they believed they needed newer, more productive, and harsher “coercive techniques.” One military lawyer at the detention center has been quoted as explaining the origin of some of these newer techniques with “24…gave people lots of ideas…. We saw it on cable…it was hugely popular.”30 A former US Army interrogator in Iraq says that DVDs of shows like 24 circulate among soldiers stationed in the war zones who “watch the shows, and then walk into the interrogation booths and do the same things they’ve just seen.”31 Clearly the re-informed myth re-informing the war can be observed not just in the lofty judicial sphere, but also direct and immediate areas—and, once again, post-9/11 pop culture and one of its most celebrated counterterrorist avatars, 24’s Jack Bauer, is at the forefront. In this way and others, the American cultural narrative’s voicing of this myth of the War on Terror requiring extraordinary measures as the war progresses fine-tunes not only “torture’s” explication, but also its employment.

Protracted War Undermining American Ideals: Lessons From the Surveillance State

As the country continues to wrestle with “torture’s” practical place in the
counterterrorist arsenal and its image in the ideation of extreme action—and apparently mostly coming to the view that it has neither—the connected myth of the War on Terror’s eventual corruptive influence also feeds back into understandings of the war’s costs and our willingness to pay them. In the previous myth’s case, the judgment on “torture’s” utility and effectiveness, professed early in the war by several authorities and reasserted years afterward even while this view retained less influence, appeared to be on the side of the argument that relied more on narrative than on analytic understandings of affairs. In the case of the war’s corrupting influence myth, however, it is opposing views on the appropriateness of these measures that have tended to draw on more mythologized understandings of how intelligence works, what role its collection and analysis plays identifying the terrorist threats, and what tools should be used to target and kill terrorists. At the same time, it is the government authorities who appear to be making their argument for measures such as enhanced technical intelligence collection and use of armed drones on practical and identifiable citations of fact and experience—albeit not often publicly, apparently—as well as on an appeal to narrative at some level.32 Less in focus in this investigation is a critique of cases for or against these types of measures on their utility, but more the circumstance of narrative’s influence over views and actions.

As far as the usefulness of technical intelligence collection and armed drones in combatting terrorism, the case rests not only on a narrative of desperate times requiring desperate measures, but also on years of attested experience in the practicalities of the counterterrorist mission by people from a range of political and other ideological perspectives. Although there have been some recent questions raised on the level of utility of certain signals intercept programs in the War on Terror, the lion’s share of opinion
comes down firmly on the point that having more information, in greater detail, in closer
time, and the ability to sort through and make sense of it quickly all redound to strong
advantage in discerning adversaries’—including and, perhaps especially terrorists’—
capabilities and intentions.\textsuperscript{33} Additionally, armed drones have gone from an adjunct CIA
effort to a mainstay US Air Force mission area the more advanced they are made and the
more effectively they are employed as the war has continued.\textsuperscript{34} Indeed, the Obama
administration’s expansion of this program over the effort undertaken by President Bush
and his team attests to the understood usefulness, by different actors with different
perspectives, of this weapon in taking out terrorist leaders and fighters.\textsuperscript{35} Important legal,
ethical, and perhaps utilitarian questions about these measures persist, but it is difficult to
claim that trustworthy information and stand-off precision weapons are of no help in
counterterrorist operations. Yet as the American public struggles with the appropriateness
of employing these sorts of tools in the counterterrorist effort, the influence of the myth of
the war’s eventual undermining of the country’s values and identity persists over the war’s
actions and events—re-informed by a decade or more of conflict.

At least one recent survey supports the contention that opinions on the efficacy and
practicality of enhanced technical intelligence collection and its ability to support effective
security activities too often owe less to demonstrable fact and accurate information than
they do to popular narrative. A poll conducted in October 2013 sponsored by Amy Zegart,
an American intelligence scholar at Stanford University, not only shows that 39\% of those
questioned believe that NSA’s bulk collection of US telephone metadata records includes
listening to those calls, when actually the information deals with the numbers dialed and
the timing and duration of the calls, not their content, but also that 35\% believe that NSA
itself interrogated detainees, with another 42% not being sure, when in fact NSA has no such responsibilities.\textsuperscript{36} More tellingly, a majority of those surveyed who had watched at least six spy movies over the previous year held favorable views of NSA, compared to about a third of less-frequent espionage filmgoers. Moreover, approval of NSA telephone and internet metadata collection and opinions about its honesty in claiming it does not listen to phone calls as part of this collection was also higher among those who frequently or occasionally watched spy-themed TV shows.\textsuperscript{37}

Zegart’s study produced interesting insights on public perceptions of the accuracy of technical intelligence.\textsuperscript{38} For instance, she also found that the number of respondents who were “very confident” of the overall accuracy of intelligence information dropped from 23% to 15% from a similar survey the previous year while the share of those who were “not at all” confident increased from eight to 11 percent, leading her to infer that recent NSA disclosures have prompted a decline in public confidence “in the accuracy of the intelligence enterprise writ large.” Among her conclusions is that not only has NSA failed to show “how its programs are effective, efficient, and prudent,” but also that “NSA has shown its programs are legal. It has not shown they are valuable.” To the extent this observation is accurate, its accuracy appears to depend in no small part to a popular narrative of the ultimate futility and corruptive influence of measures undertaken the longer the War on Terror has lasted.

That this influence stems from a particular myth is evident not only in certain polling results identifying these views and some of their false assumptions, but also in how this myth plays out in perceptions of measures undertaken in the War on Terror and not in similar enterprises going on at the same time. For this, it is worthy to examine the
Senate Commerce Committee’s recent investigation into companies gathering personal information on hundreds of millions of Americans to sell to marketers, a program comparable to the NSA data collection effort that has sparked so much concern. The committee’s report has garnered only a fraction of the attention that the NSA disclosures have prompted, despite the fact that it highlights these marketers’ specific targeting of individuals they divide into categories such as “rural and barely making it,” “retiring on empty,” and “credit crunched: city families” with tailored and apparently predatory selling and lending efforts. That using broad and unannounced technical information collection to market financially risky merchandise and products to low-income consumers fails to reap neither near the notice nor the opprobrium of NSA efforts aimed at identifying and targeting terrorists suggests that there is more to views and understandings of these programs than a simple record of facts and straightforward analysis of information collection might otherwise indicate.

This disparity of disapproval also means that to the extent the influence of fact and analysis is de-emphasized, the effect of myth and narrative—in this case the changing and persistently persuasive story of the long war’s eventual corruption—commands a perhaps understated but nonetheless outsized degree of assent. In the words of former acting CIA Director John McLaughlin, “If it is true, as many allege, that the United States went a little nuts in its all-out pursuit of al-Qaeda after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, it is equally true that we are going a little nuts again in our dogged pursuit of the post-Snowden NSA.” Whether this view is mistaken or not is less in question here. More at point is that views on the issue may include mistakes as they shift their articulations to allow for the continued derivation and assignment of meaning.
A similar debate has been forming over the use of armed drones in the War on Terror, although it differs somewhat in scope and focus, and the influence of open-ended war’s social and moral debasement may be less discernible than in the case of massive phone data and other signals intercepts. For instance, there has been more than a little analytical ink spilled over the issue of these weapons’ precision and the number of non-combatants vs. terrorist killed in drone strikes. Some claim that these platforms’ ability to loiter long over suspected targets—many identified at least in part through advanced technical communications collection—make for a powerful and necessary counterterrorist tool. Supporters also cite drones’ abilities not only to direct weapons specifically at identified structures vehicles, key senior terrorist leaders, and other individuals the destruction of which have greatly advanced the counterterrorist mission, but also to continue loitering for damage assessment while risking no friendly personnel and maintaining deniability in certain situations and places.

There are opposing views, of course, some of which conflate observable facts and reasoned analysis with speculation and hyperbole. Critics assert that armed drones’ accuracy is overstated and diminishes rapidly the larger the bombs that are carried, and that civilian casualties are understated. Moreover, these casualties are at least perceived to be so great, especially in areas of high terrorist and drone activity, that these weapons’ use is alienating precisely the local population whose allegiance is most critical is disafflicting from the terrorists and enlisting in a more strategic campaign against them. Also, the issue of the legality and appropriateness of targeting US citizens, even if they are abroad and engaged in some sort of imminent terrorist planning or action, absent a more transparent due process features as a legitimate part of the discussion. When discussion moves toward
topics like government overreach against political enemies or conflating the domestic use of surveillance vs. armed drones in demanding curtailment of this effort, however, the narrative of the extended war’s unavoidable promotion of dishonesty and venality raises its profile and demonstrates at least its vitality, if not an as yet undetermined degree of influence, over events.\textsuperscript{44}

Just as the myth of the protracted War on Terror’s eventual corruption of the societal fabric of a freedom-loving people—and how the exchange of liberty for security at virtually any level is an ultimate fool’s bargain—reacts to events, it also helps shape events the more that decisions creating them are informed by narrative understandings that at times undercut the role of data and analysis. President Obama and his national security team appear to be in the midst of what may be reviews over the communications metadata targeting and collection and armed drone attack programs, perhaps similar to its reassessment of the enhanced interrogation program early in its administration, so any findings and decisions about these programs’ futures are as yet unclear.\textsuperscript{45} To the extent a careful weighing of accurate and demonstrable fact and circumstance; an assessment of costs vs. benefits; and a strategic calculus of ways, ends, and means figure in these reviews, the influence of this myth may be seen as diminishing. If circumstances develop that these programs are ratcheted back mainly over outcry and disaffection, however, and the more critical views of inappropriate government deception and overreach are informed by narrative rather than analytical understandings of value and meaning, the greater the role of a continually morphing and effective myth emerges.\textsuperscript{46} It is not the case that these programs are not legitimate subjects of reasonable opinion or debate, or that any points made in these debates cannot be proven or disproven as empirical truths with more
information. It is to say, however, that as debates emerge and decisions form, discussions and judgments reveal the opportunity for narrative interpretations to sway understandings of events and subsequent actions.

Victory in Our Time: What Does It Look Like and When Will It Get Here?

What the myth of the eventual end of the War on Terror and America’s triumph in it feeds back into the war’s events is the way it helps shape understandings and ideations of culmination and victory that at certain levels appear incompatible with practical applications of the lessons of counterterrorism. As discussed earlier, the more the war in its various iterations has dragged on, it has appeared to produce more conflicts than clear successes—or sometimes even progress—and popular notions of end-state and victory have grown broader, more confused, and elusive. Moreover, with success or even conclusion ill defined, at least in the public eye, the door has opened to impatience, fatigue, disinterest, or even broader ideological or partisan interpretations to work their effects to a point that victory might be anything that people might want it to be so long as it is not outright failure, does not usher in an overly burdensome state of affairs in terms of cost and commitment, or its achievement or collapse can be useful in pursuit of larger political gains. Under such circumstances, the working narrative has shifted from the realization of stated aims and goals and more toward simply declaring victory, or at least being able to do so at the right time. To escape the opposite—defeat and the issue on whom to hang it—an open-ended war might actually appear preferable so long as it could percolate at a low level and not be too demanding. Even then, given narratological convention’s demand for an end to any story, the War on Terror included, any attempted exercise of an open-ended war option would prompt suspicions and at some point falter
A brief examination of the War on Terror’s expressed goals and some of the more salient points of popular narrative understandings of what constitutes progress and success in the conflict suggest what the war’s conclusion and US victory over terrorism might look like. Returning to the five objectives in Bush’s 2003 counterterrorism national strategy discussed in Chapter III provides a broad checklist against which progress and success might be evaluated. In the sense of this early view of aims and accomplishments, it would appear that defeating bin Laden, Zarqawi, and other senior terrorist leaders identified at the time has been achieved, although their organizations in various forms survive and continue to threaten American security.

Identifying, finding, and taking down terrorists and their networks together appear a work in progress. As some are suppressed, like al-Qaeda central or al-Qaeda in Iraq, they or their spawns emerge elsewhere, like in al-Qaeda affiliated groups in Africa, al-Qaeda in Syria, or the Islamic State. Measurable progress toward the final three goals—denying international sanctuary, sponsorship, and support to terrorists; attacking, ameliorating, or otherwise weakening the conditions that help nurture terrorism; and defending US citizens at home and abroad—clearly shows that despite serious and concerted efforts there is more work to do. In terms of popular narrative, however, progress is much more in the eye of the beholder. Surely bin Laden’s death produced some communal sense of closure, at least if understood by public displays of satisfaction and congratulation at the time, and various take-downs, convictions, and preventions are both heralded and welcomed at different levels of celebration. Still, as long as terrorist activity and threats persist, troops and treasure flow overseas (even at reduced amounts),

absent new conditions and narratives. 

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and a public sense of frustration exists over perceptions both of the costs vs. the benefits of our overseas adventures and especially an eventual return to any sense of normalcy, the end of and success in the War on Terror will remain abstract, a topic of public debate, and influenced by continually developing myth.

As the narrative of conclusion and victory shifts in reaction to events, it informs and helps shape understandings and explanations of end-states of the War on Terror’s conflicts in ways that may not always coincide with more analytical judgments. This is not to say there have not been successes, such as bin Laden’s and Zarqawi’s deaths and the substantial dismantling of what had been their networks. It is to say, however, that comparing stated goals in the larger counterterrorist struggle to circumstances on the ground as the war has both altered and extended its focus will not always produce an agenda for success. Neither will it deliver an internalized feeling or memory of victory that the guiding myth seeks. This means than in addition to the achieved successes, there will be conditions that may be understood or in time conventionalized as successes-to-be, as well as declarations of minor victories where some share of the loaf was delivered that may be enough to slake an appetite while not necessarily satisfying it.

Moreover, to extend the metaphor, the meal might be filling, but not necessarily nourishing. For instance, US troops are largely out of Iraq—although operations against the Islamic State my prompt their return on smaller numbers—and are leaving Afghanistan in substantial numbers, but arguments over victories achieved in either war contend not only with counterarguments over the reality or permanence of whatever type of successes will have been achieved, but also against the feeling of victory produced. Recollections of the costs, and for what end, contend with the relief of having the
experiences behind us in influencing how the conflicts are remembered as both over and ending in victory, even without politicians’ input. Indeed, public opinion on success and worthiness of war in Iraq was highest just before the invasion, lower before and just after US troop withdrawal, and even lower since; similar results are developing about the Afghanistan war. Changing memories of the sacrifices made and what type of security improvements these sacrifices won in these two countries will continue to influence ideas of finality and victory in those wars, just as they remain at a vital level a function of narrative and its power to inform.

So, in the context of more rational analyses, assessments of collected data, and objective criteria—or the closest thing a subjective reality might reasonably accommodate—what might the defeat of terrorism look like? US National War College professor Audrey Kurth Cronin has examined the last 200 years of terrorist movements and argues that successful counterterrorism campaigns are those that decapitate the movements’ leadership and then coerce, compel, or in other ways transition the movements’ rank-and-file and other supporters who cannot be rounded up into a legitimate political process. In some cases they may simply stay active and stave off defeat long enough to reap the benefits of the terrorists’ implosion, overreach, marginalization, or their succumbing to popular backlash. In terms of al-Qaeda specifically, Cronin maintains that a long-term, broadly directed, and patient effort that looks less like war and more like a multi-faceted approach using several elements of national power besides military force holds the best chance of success, and she advises senior US and allied decision makers thusly:

…stop overreacting to the myth of a ubiquitous threat, force al-Qaeda to describe the outlines of its political solutions to real-world grievances, and tap into the deep
connection between local peoples and their territory. Whether or not al-Qaeda’s terrorism ends in this way depends upon the behavior of states, including the United States and its allies, who must tolerate some level of risk and resist being provoked into ill-considered policies that accelerate the movement and are destabilizing. If the United States continues to treat al-Qaeda as if it were utterly unprecedented, as if the decades-long experience with fighting modern terrorism were irrelevant, then it will continue to make predictable and avoidable mistakes, as well as miss important strategic opportunities.51

What this means is that as a war fought with armies, the War on Terror will end, and absent a catastrophic, completely avoidable, and largely self-created failure—or a successful, even if politically expedient and cynical, partisan effort by one party to identify a defeat in order to blame it on the other party—this end probably will be seen in time as something resembling victory. As a protracted, open-ended expression of new security realities, law enforcement efforts, regulatory practices, and intelligence operations, the war on terror (deliberate lower case) as simple ongoing counterterrorism efforts will continue. Indeed, counterterrorism specialists Andrew Liepman and Philip Mudd, in discussing what victory over the Islamic State might look like, observe that while “[t]he traditional goal in warfare is…[f]orce the adversary to capitulate…[w]ith a nontraditional foe…we need not limit ourselves to traditional measures of victory. Containment could work.”52 So, as counterterrorism continues, it will not look very much like a war nor resolve itself like one. More to the point, it also will neither feel like a war nor be remembered or mythologized as one.

Until that time, however, what we seem to be left with are opinions, impressions, and feelings about the culmination and success in the War on Terror, along with not insignificant degrees of uncertainty, concern, and trepidation the longer this end-state remains ill-defined and elusive. As long as this protracted state of affairs continues and the more the war shifts to other areas and activities, dispassionate analysis will exert less

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influence on our understanding and eventual conventionalization of conclusion and victory the more they grow subject to a powerful but malleable narrative about how the war ends and who wins. As mentioned, our fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan will certainly cease, although continued local violence—and certainly any fall of the governments there to extremists—will undercut both feelings and memories of our success in those long-term efforts, rather like in Vietnam. Moreover, sympathy and support for the troops may be offset somewhat by the at least current feet-of-clay heroism ascribed to some of the higher-profile erstwhile victors in those struggles, such as Petraeus and McChrystal. The eventual wrap-up of US troop presence in Afghanistan will probably look much like the end of Operation Iraqi Freedom—announced, but not necessarily celebrated as victory. Future successes—such as, but never equal to, the killing of bin Laden—will be heralded while not necessarily being declared culminating triumphs. Indeed, as raised in Chapter I’s discussion on the end of the Cold War and general Postmodernist conflict, the end of the War on Terror probably in reality will more resemble the recovery from a long illness and the long-term accommodation of its aftereffects than a clear end and victory.

Still, narrative’s ongoing influence will ensure that the war will end and we can probably consider ourselves winning it—if not at the time, at least by future generations out to impose order and derive meaning and identity from the past. As mentioned in Chapter II, if the War of 1812 can be remembered at least as much by the victory at New Orleans than by the burning of Washington or the status-quo-ante Treaty of Ghent and the Vietnam War—or even the South’s War Between the States—can be remembered more by asserted good intentions, assumed battlefield prowess, and supposed long-term societal results than by the fall of Saigon—or the surrender at Appomattox—then our current
conflict sparked by 9/11 can be interpreted in time in at least as advantageous a fashion. Myth’s power in human understanding may offer comforting assurance that the War on Terror will end in our victory. Counterterrorism, however, will continue in various iterations and expressions of the security state we have become, and no status quo ante or return to the country we used to be—or, more importantly, are rightly or wrongly remembered as being—will ever truly come to pass.

For how effects of this circumstance of the influence of understandings of the war’s end on how the war has continued to be explained and prosecuted, look at the differences between President Obama’s December 2009 and May 2014 addresses at West Point. In the first, given when US combat presence in Iraq was shrinking while it was growing in Afghanistan, Obama discussed “the strategy that my administration will pursue to bring this war to a successful conclusion” and how the shift to Afghanistan was possible because “today, after extraordinary costs, we are bringing the Iraq war to a responsible end.” That end was not described as victory, but in saying “we have given Iraqis a chance to shape their future, and we are successfully leaving Iraq to its people,” Obama was clearly labeling it a success—the only way such an end could be correctly understood, according to the dominant narrative.

To be fair, a reasonable analysis at the time of circumstances on the ground could have explained the Iraq war as a success or even victory. Still, such an analysis would have had to have taken into account the precariousness of the security situation there and the vulnerability of the government in Baghdad to hostile threats and its own inherent rivalries and other shortcomings—circumstances the President’s presentation and apparent judgment left out. In the second West Point speech, Obama told the cadets that “You are
the first class since 9/11 who may not be sent into combat in Iraq or Afghanistan,” and underscored the end of the open armed conflict phase of the war by emphasizing the diffused terrorist threat that will require a strategy that sees “invading every country that harbors terrorist networks [as] naïve and unsustainable” and “that expands our reach without sending forces that stretch our military too thin, or stir[s] up local resentments.” Outright expressions of victory or success respectively were absent or slight, although in referring to how in Afghanistan “America struck huge blows against al Qaeda core and pushed back against an insurgency that threatened to overrun the country,” the President gave the requisite nod to the victorious-end narrative.

Beyond the current administration’s efforts to place its actions in the most favorable light is the question of why doing so is necessary in this circumstance: because wars are understood narratively to end in victory or defeat, whether those choices or even the end comport fully with an informed and useful analysis of the situation or not. This narrative understanding and the myth it fuels and is fueled by informs several explanations of the war and its circumstances in a way that more analytical assessments do not. For instance, in early 2012, according to New York Times Baghdad Bureau Chief Tim Arango, Vice President Biden’s National Security Advisor, Tony Blinken, argued publicly and privately with Arango’s reports of deteriorating security conditions in Iraq because they conflicted with the Obama administration’s claims of success. According to Arrango, “when the American troops left at the end of 2011 and Obama was trying to claim that as a victory…he was leaving and the narrative had to be that Iraq was—that this was an American victory. That the war was over and that Iraq was in good hands.” Similarly, Sen. John McCain said in June 2014, in referring to the deteriorating security situation in
Iraq, that “We had it won. General Petraeus had the conflict won, thanks to the surge.”55 On one hand, Blinken and McCain might be excused for, respectively, trying to defend the administration’s Iraq policy and to score points against President Obama. On the other, to the extent there is any substance behind these views, it is substance that negates acknowledgment of the ephemeral nature of war’s gains, the circumstances of Iraq’s internal politics, or how strategic success demands favorable conditions that can be influenced by achievable actions. This would mean that neither McCain nor Blinken were engaging in the kind of analysis one might expect from long-experienced security affairs specialists, but instead were indulging their own versions of the narrative of war’s end and its victory.

In a corresponding sense, recent developments in Iraq and Afghanistan continue to present themselves in ways that can be understood as more consistent with an end-of-war victory narrative than with more reasoned analyses of ongoing conflict. For instance, in President Obama’s September 23, 2012 remarks outlining US partnership in a new coalition conducting air and special operations strikes against Islamic State and al-Qaeda's Khorasan Group in Iraq and Syria, he announced the re-opening of that theater to major combat operations for the first time since the 2011 US troop withdrawal while at the same time not once using the word “war.”56 Moreover, to date the new action in Iraq has not been given an operational name, perhaps yet another signal that for some—apparently starting with the President, and at least regarding Iraq—that the War on Terror has indeed ended.57 There may be strong political reasons that the president who came into office on a promise to extricate the country from its protracted and problematic overseas armed conflicts not to be seen as a war president, but these reasons butt up quickly against the
reality of what can only be termed renewed armed conflict after that region’s war supposedly had already been successfully concluded.\textsuperscript{58} Similarly, the May 2014 release of US POW Bowe Bergdahl in exchange for five Taliban detainees can be understood in one way as a trade that either violates or supports a “we don’t negotiate with terrorists” or “we don’t leave a man behind” adage—a debate that so far has produced more heat than light. But in another way it fits squarely in a narrative of war’s end and how such a state typically starts a repatriation of prisoners, and how the victor can afford to be the more magnanimous party in this arrangement. Again, these are not cases where analytic understandings do not work, but ones where the influence of myth—in this case a narrative of the war’s end and of victory—shows itself as active and, to a significant degree, explanatory.

Re-Informed Events: Favors Extended and Returned

So, the process of the reciprocal influences of myth and event continues, and the War on Terror’s guiding narratives and its resultant actions play out in seemingly endless episodes of cause and effect. As mentioned in Chapter I, this is typically an area for historical or more broadly cultural inquiries, but the process takes place in real time and in all areas of human agency. For the investigation at hand, this means that this process not only can be discerned by a discriminating examiner much closer to its time of occurrence, but also in areas of investigation more traditionally the subject of security studies. This inquiry in the case of the War on Terror is advantaged in a way by the war’s otherwise unfortunately protracted nature, and indeed a little probing of the type conducted here reveals circumstances of this enduring cycle of continually developing popular beliefs and mythic articulations shaped by the war’s experience returning this favor by conferring
forms upon the war. The decisions behind the war’s forms were also informed by reason and analysis, of course, but even this logic rests at some level on a foundation of myth. Also, sometimes this foundation forms a greater part of the assembly—something that may be more apparent from a distance, but is still there the closer one approaches the inquiry’s subject in both time and space.

As examples of truth or fiction, these guiding narratives deserve scrutiny and dissection, but as myths they warrant a different review and an even more different assessment. In terms of where to identify and how to rectify empirical mistakes, examining these narratives and their re-information of the war can be instructive. Characterizing terrorists as in thrall to irrational hatred may hold us to a view of our enemies’ motivations and identities as persistent as it is inaccurate. Continuing to see counterterrorism as a war commits us to an open-ended military enterprise that reverses the familiar hand-tool axiom: if everything is supposed to be a nail, we must be and should remain the hammer. Fighting the bare-knuckled fight via extraordinary and extra-legal means either mischaracterizes these means or ourselves the more we try to reconcile these ultimately incompatible images. The notion of protracted war being our eventual downfall becomes less a cautionary tale and more an assumed fate the longer the war lasts and the more we fit situations to that narrative. And the idea of end and victory undercuts our ability to recognize the conflict for what it is as well as what it needs to become if we are to help guarantee our security at a point beyond the narrative’s end. These lessons aside, the myths behind them should be seen less as simple ignorance and misunderstandings. They are also examples of human thought and action whereby we can better recognize our decisions for what they are, which are less rational as we may like to
see them, and what they might be, which are judgments and actions worth reflecting on and reconceptualizing.

As a process of explaining events and understanding these explanations, narrative's effect on decision making and those decisions' feeding back into the narrative remains one of human agency. Therefore, regardless of how natural this process may be, it retains a normative dimension that can be assessed and evaluated. Still, such a values-based judgment should best account for the circumstance that to the extent that ideation and action are inseparable in this process, perhaps only so much ignorance, stupidity, or sinister intent should be read into the actions of any key players in the War on Terror—especially those who may simply see the world and its reality in different ways than we do—as some less charitable analyses have done. This is not to say the Bush or Obama administrations have not attempted to line up American media with their particular epistemologies of terror, visions of retaliation, or a tailoring of cultural norms within which to translate particular actions. To the extent they may have succeeded, however, probably is less evidence of the triumph of news and message manipulation and more an expression of the power of particular myths in people’s thinking on and understanding of their circumstances. In this context, examining how the War on Terror has been explained, understood, and mythologized may offer deeper insights not only into the war and how best to wage it, but also into our leaders and ourselves in terms of how we think, decide, and behave. Benefitting from these insights appears to lead toward a greater ability to act more responsibly as part of larger a common national security enterprise engaged in the task at hand, as well as whatever new tasks we may undertake in times ahead.
CHAPTER VI:
THE SYMBIOSIS OF MYTH AND THE WAR ON TERROR
EVALUATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This inquiry into the mutual information of the War on Terror and the five myths under investigation ends here, although this does not mean that it is complete. Demonstrating how the myths inform events, how these developing events return the favor by informing the myths, and then how these re-informed myths go on to re-inform further events shows the communal, bi-directional influence of cultural narrative and counterterrorism—a perhaps under-examined but no less important aspect of security issues’ agencies and affects. Narrative understandings of circumstances and proceedings vie with more analytic perceptions and judgments in helping shape decisions, actions, and their collective meanings. Decision makers and other observers interpret the resulting events in their own ways—at least partially, but no less importantly—in narratological fashion, which imposes configurations back onto these narrative ideations and understandings. These reshaped storylines then carry on the work of their narrative predecessors in construing meanings, identities, and values, which continue to inspire and guide the judgments and actions behind the war’s unfolding events. The process is ceaseless, meaning that just as the original myths can be traced to earlier versions and iterations of similar narrative understandings, themselves shaped by what had been seen to have happened, the war’s re-informed events will persist in shaping the continuously developing narratives even after the war ends. For narratology’s as well as practicality’s sakes, however, this particular exploration of myth and the War on Terror concludes, as it must somewhere. The task now turns to broader issues of evaluating its results and
identifying some of its more important implications.

The evaluation starts with an acknowledgement of the role of narrative myth in human explanation and understanding and its power to interpret and inform. The fact that this circumstance is as accepted in cultural studies’ inquiries as it may be under-credited, and under-examined, in security studies analyses should in no way diminish its effect or its importance. Neither should this effect or importance be over-emphasized, as humans are certainly capable of more reasoned assessments of events and occurrences within a context of applied lessons of measurable or at least perceived costs, benefit, causes, effects, risks, gains, or other aspects of what is commonly understood to be analytically based estimations and judgments. Indeed, much of what we believe and understand about effective international relations and security affairs accounts for precisely this rationality, and our confidence in and reliance on it makes for a strong conceptual foundation in these academic disciplines as well as a firm underpinning for practical conduct in these enterprises. At the same time, however, no human endeavor involving either scholarly pursuit or real-world application ever fully comprises wholly rational thought and behavior; the variables are too many and the calculi too diverse ever to amount to anything approaching universal objective truth. To the extent that our understandings and explanations of our events remain fundamentally subjective and relative, Platonic epistemology continues to pose this question: Despite *logos* remaining the higher wisdom, how much does *mythos* irresistibly influence our rationality? Strive as we might for logic, in the classical sense of the word, we all fall back on myth if only for the simple fact that we cannot know everything. The issue is not whether myth imposes itself, but instead where, how, and to what degree.
As traced in the preceding chapters, the where can include topics outside the tradition of classical epistemology and the humanities overall, such as security studies generally and counterterrorism specifically, and the how can involve the ways in which people from senior policymakers down to casual observers have understood, decided, and acted in the War on Terror. To what degree is open to debate, of course, and the investigation here may point the way toward some worthy arguments and contentions on the matter. What is less debatable is that these decisions and actions have responded not only to the war’s events themselves, but also to explained and understood meanings of these events that have been determined in significant part by longstanding cultural storylines about security, war, value, and identity that have emerged in our time as identifiable narratives. These narratives do not negate reason; indeed they are part of it, in the sense that we do not apprehend events and meaning separate from each other. Of course these narratives might be play out in our individual or collective reasons in different ways, and some of these ways might be seen as more or less advantageous than others in arriving at more accurate, perceptive, or helpful understandings of events. This sort of evaluation is not the focus of this inquiry; others have offered critiques of the War on Terror’s various conceptualizations and prosecutions by any number of its actors, and more will surely follow. More at issue is that at whatever levels, at whatever dimensions, or to whatever ends narrative’s effect on the war has been, it has played out largely beyond focused investigation and informed inquiry. Myth has informed the war and the war has informed myth in simultaneous, reciprocal, and essential ways, and our insights into this circumstance advance our insights into the war.

Although judgments on the War on Terror and how it has been fought are beyond
this investigation’s stated scope, an evaluation of its relationship to myth can be undertaken along with a brief exploration of key implications. The evaluation proceeds not only from the above restatement of the epistemic realities of the general association of myth and events and the specific interdependence of cultural narrative and war, but also from a recapitulation of the war’s five identified guiding myths and how each in its own way informs and is informed by the war’s developments. Taking the myths out of the preceding chapters’ back-forth-back examination and looking at their ebbs and flows within their own contexts should make for a suitable review and some worthy concluding (although certainly not conclusive) insights. A similarly useful examination of implications will include not only some keys ways in which some of the worst effects of the inevitable influence of myth in specific understandings of security affairs and counterterrorism issues might be ameliorated, but also how a few practical circumstances of this reality in human ideation and perception might be protected and sustained. In this way, perhaps the import of the overall inquiry can itself be explained, understood, and placed in the service of deeper, more meaningful, and serviceable appreciation and insight.

The Five Myths in Their Own Contexts: Narratives and Events Shaped and Shapeable

The five identified myths in the War on Terror, as discussed earlier, are not the only ones at play, or even the only ones worthy of examination, but they emerge as the most motivating because of their ability to inform and be formed by the war along its full spectrum of involvement. From who our enemies are and why they attack us, to what sort of effort we must mount in our defense, to what type of methods this effort will require, to what effects the effort will have on us, and to how and under what conditions the effort
will end, these myths cover the most significant aspects of the war as a discrete event. That the war is as much a cultural event as it is a policy, security, or other type of event more familiar to those who study current conflict means that these motivating myths retain an outsized influence on events in ways infrequently discussed and incompletely understood. Reviewing this influence and its ability to change in reaction to events in order to continue informing them should reinforce the significance of the previous chapters’ more detailed analyses and place the myths in their own contexts as narratives with not only discernible pasts and identifiable presents, but also perhaps perceptible—maybe even changeable—futures. Until the War on Terror is understood to end, all these myths will continue shifting in the face of the war’s events and, in the process, continue to inform its unfolding developments in new and important ways.

Myth #1: The Terrorists Hate Us for Who We Are

This myth about how our enemies see us and why they attack us characterizes both the terrorists and their motivations in a fundamental fashion, in that it sets the stage for the myths, explanations, and understandings that follow. In the cultural narrative, war is an aberrant state for peace- and freedom-loving Americans, and we were managing our place in international affairs consistent with our interests, commitments, and obligations in a sufficiently conventional and agreeable manner up to the point of the 9/11 attacks, after which we found ourselves in a war that we had not sought and that pitted us against an irrational and implacable foe. Again, the truth or demonstrated historicity of this narrative is not at stake, and it retains its promoters as well as its detractors, but its expression has served as a mutually informative understanding between the events and the culture’s internalization of them. So, although terrorists may indeed hate us, the explanation that
they do so because of our freedoms underscores their essential irrationality, which helps predetermine how to understand what they do and how to deal with them. Their tactics, including suicide bombing, must therefore be senseless, which means that any reasons for them are worthy less of examination and lesson-drawing and more of dismissal or confrontation. Insisting on terrorism as an irrational expression of hatred helps form views on the phenomenon that may in their own way be just as emotional and passionate as what we attribute to our enemies. In these ways, the myth of the terrorists’ abiding animosity devoid of examinable breadth or depth has both fueled and been refueled by the war’s events, and in the process has helped determine not only how we see the terrorists, but also how we understand what it may take for us to defeat them. It establishes a way of thinking about the conflict that takes into account fewer and less supportable assumptions than some other views and sets the stage for war and what comes with it.

Myth #2: Our Response to Terrorism Must Be War

With the conflict labeled and understood as the War on Terror, the door opened to our response to 9/11 being explained and understood as one in which military force would play a dominant role. Our cultural narrative holds that although we are slow to anger and to make war, we will respond to attack vigorously and with whatever effort may be necessary to defend ourselves and defeat our attacker. That this effort is war has meant that diplomacy, intelligence, law enforcement, regulation, or other tools in a multifaceted approach to the problem of terrorism may be either be under-emphasized or placed in service of military instruments of power. It also has meant that the lead effort of armed force on occasion has been used against targets where it may not be the most effective tool, and that appropriate targets at times have been selected for it regardless of whether
striking them with this tool advanced an effective response to terrorism or did not. The military surely retains an important place in counterterrorism, but the nature of armed forces’ role appears as informed by cultural understandings of war and its requirements as it has been by what constitutes an effective national counterterrorism effort. As the war’s narratives and events re-informed each other, we indeed found ourselves at war, but in ways that underserved the potential of what other actions might have achieved. Our conventionalization of security actions internalized our experiences of their events that fueled our understanding and explanation of the conflict less as counterterrorism and more as war. This conventionalization has fed back into our counterterrorism effort in ways that have helped ensure armed force has remained our tool of choice. In this way, the militarization of counterterrorism may have less to do with the nature of the problem and, especially over time, more to do with how we think of possible solutions to it.

Myth #3: This is an Existential Struggle Demanding Extreme Action

If we are engaged in the utmost expression of national effort and resolve against an unreasonable and emotionally motivated enemy bent on our ultimate destruction by the cruelest of means, then our counter-effort may have to be at least as relentless and vicious if we are to succeed. If indeed we as a nation and a people are reluctant to make war, goes the inherited narrative, when we do, it must be in a way that takes comfort in the righteousness of our cause and produces victory regardless of cost or other considerations. Employing new and extreme measures against a new and extreme enemy may convey a logic, and cutting-edge technology and the skills to use it have certainly led to important breakthroughs in counterterrorism. Still, measures that sound better than they actually work, the understanding of many of these measures in a range of cultural explanations,
and the feedback of these expressions into various extra-legalities that may undercut the Constitution we are ostensibly trying to protect frequently appear to have at least as much to do with how we may feel about combatting terror than how we might more reasonably think about it. So, the War on Terror may indeed require tactics we might not have considered in earlier wars, but those that hurt more than they help—if they help at all—should best be avoided if they cannot be shown to work in ways that withstand scrutiny and command widespread assent. Pop cultural portrayals of these extreme measures and their utility in counterterrorism help explain support for these measures in ways that more reasoned and judicious assessments do not, in that these cultural narratives show these techniques to work and to be worth the cost, while actual experience and practical analysis tend to underscore the opposite view. In turn, protracted employment of such measures has tended to prompt attempted rationalizations of them and our national self-image in ways that distort both. Ultimate legitimacy of what a righteous, existential war may countenance may owe as much to narratives that have developed about this circumstance than to the circumstance’s actual experience.

*Myth #4: Protracted Struggle Eventually Brings Out Our Worst*

As necessary as war and extreme measures against an extreme enemy may be, long-term and open-ended engagement in such a conflict presents a threat to a free people. Again, this view rests on a strong tradition, and history serves up several episodes that comport with this narrative. Still, total or long wars are no stranger to the American experience, and to any extent the country survived such wars—indeed prevailed in them, and against ruthless enemies—with its values relatively intact, it may have more to do with other factors that sometimes attend to these types of conflicts rather than to the
conflicts’ inherent nature. These other factors and the ultimate demonstrability of some form of the narrative are less in focus than is the phenomenon of the narrative helping shape perceptions of and events in the War on Terror at the same time these perceptions and events are informing developing versions of the narrative. Moreover, myth’s role here goes some way in helping explain some of the war’s understandings and circumstances in ways more analytical approaches do not. In this manner, protracted conflict can exert a corruptive influence on a nation and people who are neither established nor socialized for such an undertaking. Identifying how and in what ways which actions are corruptive appear more open to suggestion and subjective understandings than to more objective analysis. Even helpful efforts may be conventionalized in the cultural narrative as bringing out the worst in us the longer this narrative influences. As the influence persists, measures that were once embraced may be rejected less from reasoned assessment and more by virtue of their featuring in retellings of the story of protracted conflict eventually bringing out the worst in us. To the extent any contest between such an assessment and such stories ever emerges, the role of demonstrable fact and reasoned analysis may command weaker assent the greater the cultural narrative persists and its apparent assumptions hold sway.

*Myth #5: This War Must End in Our Victory*

The idea of an end to the War on Terror and our eventual victory in it by itself may be the least remarkable of the war’s foundational myths, but the ways in which it both has informed and been informed by events as are important as they may be subtle. Entering into an undertaking even less significant and serious as war without a vision of a successful end-state and the ability to reach it may appear at initial encounter the height of irrationality. To the extent that our explanations and understandings and of this strategic
aim rest more on comforting rhetorical ideations than they do on a careful weighing of risks vs. gains and the ways and means to achieve any stated aim, however, the greater they are subject to a narrative that is able to reshape itself in reaction to developments and, thereby, continue influencing decisions. The war however we understand it will eventually reach some sort of end, and the United States and its allies may indeed be seen as the victors, although the nature of counterterrorism and popular understandings of war will remain at sufficient variance to instill a profound degree of relevancy in the proceedings. The cultural expressions of these proceedings will have as much to do with feelings of conclusion and victory than with actual strategic achievements. Moreover, the continuing influence of such a narrative understanding on decisions, policies, and actions will complicate our ability to see the conflict on its own terms. It will also complicate our ability to identify when we will have reached either success or the point of diminishing returns such that the War on Terror can be brought to some sort of end while we continue to undertake residual counterterrorist efforts aimed at safeguarding our people and our interests. That the war must or should end in our victory is not the same as saying it will, although true achievements will contend with this narrative and variations of it in any common perception of when and how the conflict has terminated long after it does.

*Where the Mutually Informative Process Takes Us*

Identifying with any useful degree of precision where these myths and their related events are heading as the War on Terror continues is a fraught endeavor. Not only are unpredictable events continuing to impose shapes on each of these myths and the way they tell their particular truths, but also expressions and cultural manifestations of these myths, individually and collectively, are always informing ideas, decisions, and actions
that author these unpredictable events in equally unpredictable fashion. Moreover, epistemic realities suggest prophesying about issues surrounding human agency fail to apprehend the true nature of the future, its primary quality being that it is unknown. As discussed in Chapters I and II, this sort of explanation and understanding may have been the hallmark of Modern-Age philosophy, which tended to hold that the same sort of observation and analysis that could predict the movement of the heavens, forecast the weather, introduce new technologies, cure diseases, navigate the globe, or in other ways reveal the secrets of the physical world might be put to similar use in creating a workable theory of human behavior. Postmodernist understandings about anything involving how we think and act do not hold to this potential. Still, this brief review of the five myths offers some possible answers to the question of what may lie ahead, and starting with the last myth and working backward may afford the most useful opportunities to consider some ideas of what may be in store.

Narratologically, a story’s end should fit its beginning, so how the War on Terror finishes displays the fruits of whatever have come beforehand. It may be difficult to see how the country is so beleaguered by forces that can make it suffer, but can never pose a truly existential threat, that it fails to best them in some politically acceptable and socially agreed-to fashion. When and how this happens will then be seen as a triumph over what inevitably awaited us should we have continued a long and corruptive war. Should circumstances develop such that we are seen as losing the war, a redeveloped effort by eventually new leadership can always blame initial failure on its predecessors while it refocuses itself on ultimate victory, or it can abandon the effort and tend to domestic affairs and traditional American values—a sort of victory to those wanting to see it that
way—while pointing to protracted conflict simply bringing out our worst and still blaming its predecessors for allowing this circumstance to come about. This worst or the avoidance of it will in some manner depend on how we came to understand the necessity of extreme measures and how they played out both in our security and in our self-image: the more likely victory scenario will underscore their worth, while something less than victory will be ascribed at least in part to how we sold our cultural birthright by choosing security and the extreme pursuit of it over our freedoms and our dignity. Whatever option is selected here will flow from how we chose to pursue terrorists with force—either well or not, but not whether to have pursued them or not—which in turn emerges in some manner from who we understood the terrorists to be and why we understood they attacked us. This narrative and associated events will continue to shift in their responses to each other, but victory in the War on Terror probably will mean that tracing back to the myth of the terrorists’ motivations will show them to have been base, irrational, and ultimately worthy of the war that their hatred unleashed as well as the victory our extreme actions secured and our narratives relate.

So, events will play out however they may, but our understanding of them, the meaning that we instill in and invoke from them, and the value we ascribe to the stories we tell of them will develop in a way that both influences them and is influenced by them. The details may be unknown and unpredictable, but the preceding chapters’ back-forth-and-back-again dynamic will surely persist in identifiable ways. To the extent cultural historians will inquire into the War on Terror, they will see the interplay of myths and events and note its import. Policy analysts may see these myths instead as under-examined assumptions that deserve scrutiny under the cold light of fact and analysis to determine
their truth. Indeed at some level they are, and such scrutiny is as deserved as it may be unremarkable, depending on which assumptions survive and how. What makes them myths in the sense of the term at use here, however, is not only their ability to inform decisions and events in the ways that assumptions do, but also their ability to change in reaction to these events and continue to inform newer events in a dynamic, symbiotic, and ongoing fashion. That they withstand judicious and informed examination better than other narratives or views about the war helps underscore their mythic nature, as they can then be seen as thriving at least as much on issues of identity, belief, and conviction as on fact, analysis, and reason. And again, their ability to do so allows insights into and helps explain the War on Terror and how it is still being fought in ways that more traditional security issues analyses may not explain as well.

Limiting Myth’s Worst Effects: Identifying Narratives and Minimizing Their Influences

So, with cultural narratives and the War on Terror’s events playing out in a process of mutual information and conformation that mirrors the broader interplays of myth and war and, indeed, human understanding and activity, where are we left? Are fact, analysis, and reason always to remain in thrall to confabulation, bias, and myth? This investigation would be in some sense as depressing as it is incomplete absent an exploration of some practical implications of the phenomenon of myth’s role in helping explain and impart meaning to our actions and how we might restrict some of the more untoward potential manifestations of this epistemic reality. Narrative cannot be fully excised from our approach to and understanding of our world and the effects of our actions in it; were that possible, reality as we think we know it would appear hopelessly unintelligible. Still, some of the worst potential effects of myth of the type discussed in Chapters III and V can
be ameliorated through a disciplined application of analytic techniques that account both for the psychology of human thought and for how we go about making sense of our world and our place in it. The first step in this application has already been taken: similar to that of several self-help efforts, this step is a variation of admitting the problem. With that accomplished, an exploration of bias and how it draws strengths from our psychologies, cultures, and narratives suggests some practical measures that, if undertaken openly and rigorously, can go some corrective distance in restricting myth’s role in conferring forms on events, or at least help identify it and hold it up to scrutiny for counteraction.¹

The next circumstance to recognize is the fundamental conundrum of perception. Often misunderstood as a passive process of our senses, perception is frequently an active exercise in seeing, hearing, feeling, etc. what we might expect or even want to perceive instead of what actually is. Moreover, as discussed earlier, even perceiving things as what they may actually be will not always make for sufficiently dispassionate acuity, as the perceived then becomes subject to what we make of it or the meaning we impart to it, further removing it from an objective context. Influences on this perception and accompanying understanding include perspective, experience, previous knowledge, values, and other particular, cultural, or non-cognitive biases that often go un- or under-acknowledged. Again, this is where narrative plays the clearest role in events, and it maintains its ability to do so by incorporating events and what we come to see as their meaning into developing cultural storylines. Accompanying this implicitly (and at times explicitly) active tendency to see things as we might expect to are related perceptual biases, including the difficulty of assimilating new information into existing mind-sets, how formed mind-sets are resistive to change, and how attempts to make sense of initial
and ambiguous stimuli can interfere with later and better information in making for more accurate perceptions.

All of these circumstances tend to promote premature closure on a topic of understanding. In turn, this prompts decision makers to fall back on broadly understood narratives that appeal to predilections, conform with preferences, and perhaps have withstood earlier scrutiny—although at different times and under different circumstances—in making sense of a situation, selecting options, and acting on them. For instance, believing the war in Iraq to have ended after taking Baghdad and deposing Saddam comported with understandings developed during the 1990-91 Gulf War and coincided with what US officials may have wanted to believe. It was inconsistent, however, with information on a brooding insurgency and a terrorist campaign aimed at US forces unprepared to deal with it.

Beyond these perhaps more easily recognized and dealt-with influences, however, are cognitive biases of a more intrinsically mental nature that are less distinguishable and, therefore, more pernicious in the context of working against bias’s sway. These have to do with a range of physiological and psychological topics and circumstances that may in a fully exploratory sense remain outside the area of this inquiry, yet can be generalized as various brain-workings that, in the context of this study, focus on memory. We have already discussed cultural memories and the effect they can have on communal understandings, ideations, and identity, but it is useful to recall the more familiar, personal sense of the word. Succinctly, what is at issue here is how we as individuals—from senior decision makers to anyone attempting to make any sense of or take any action regarding the topic at hand—organize our perceptions and experiences as data and then both store
and retrieve those data for analytic use. Far from a type of clinical or anodyne exercise this description may imply, it is a process fraught with pitfalls, missteps, and other shortcomings that undercut our ability to restrict relative and subjective influences in our thinking.

Just as our senses are at the same time both limited and all we have, our ability to store and retrieve sensory inputs quickly, accurately, and appropriately is restricted in both capacity and efficiency while also comporting with a fundamental understanding of who we are as people. To err is human, goes the saying, meaning also that to be human is to err. Processing sensory input correctly in short-term memory, organizing and storing it in long-term memory, and recalling the right memories in the right ways at the right times for the right applications all suffer from practical strengths and weaknesses at the personal and individual levels just as they do at the professional and organizational. This conveys fundamental and significant implications for anyone attempting to identify ways to restrict the influence of bias in making sense out of our security environment, discerning threats, and acting against those threats in the most effective fashion.

Given these challenges, understanding how bias exerts a perhaps elusive but nonetheless strong and altogether natural pull on our thinking dovetails neatly with the role narrative plays in understanding and influencing cultural events—in our case that of war and counterterrorism. Protective measures to guard against and minimize bias’s influence and the role of more narrative understandings on our thoughts and actions in this security enterprise must take these challenges into account. For instance, a tyranny of consistency that places higher credence in familiar or expected perceptions or forecasts suggests the benefits of exploring the implications of anomalous evidence or the potential
for unanticipated events—from suspects taking flying lessons concentrating on piloting, but not take-offs or landings, to terrorists flying hijacking planes into buildings. The tendency to attach greater importance to our own perceptions, as removed and imperfect as they may be, than to those of others, including some with better perspectives or deeper insights, should prompt measures to de-emphasize this vividness criterion when it comes into play. This is especially true when our personal observations appear to conflict with the weight of expert views, well-argued and -cited assessments, or empirical data.²

Similarly, a bias for causality and identified agency behind circumstances and events or the problems of dealing with uncertain evidence might be appropriately counterbalanced by recognizing that just as not all facts are known or knowable, the absence of evidence or the reality that facts rarely simply speak for themselves must be recognized and factored into any understanding or analysis. Note here how the logical fallacy of the absence of evidence being taken for the evidence of absence can creep into important issues and understandings of security-related events from different angles, such as judging whether or not the Saddam regime supported anti-US terrorism or had reconstituted its WMD programs based on available intelligence reporting. Also critical in overcoming the challenges of perception bias is a determined effort to work against the persistent influence of outdated or even discredited evidence, the effects of which can often outlast the period where scrutiny might indicate these data or understandings are no longer true or worth believing. For instance, Dick Cheney apparently continues to believe in a preliminary and caveated report that a suspected Iraqi intelligence officer had been seen meeting with a known al-Qaeda operative in Europe in 2001 long after the report has been debunked and withdrawn. His extended credence in this report may fly in the face of
reason at one level, but at another level it supports his belief that Saddam and the Iraqis were in some way behind 9/11 and, therefore, commands his assent beyond the point of what many might consider reasonable bias. Evaluating evidence will always remain subject to the inherent relativity of human understandings, but deliberate measures to account for its challenges should go some distance in limiting their worst effects.

The role of myth in human understanding also promotes biases in tracing accurately the proper identifications of and relationships between causes and effects. Our bias for agency, despite the perception problems it may at times convey, is well grounded and has gone far in helping us make useful sense of our world and its events. That said, our zeal to impose order and consistency on our surroundings can promote a belief in causes we might identify for events that are owed to unknown or mis-detected reasons or are accidental or random. This bias for causality coupled with incomplete knowledge and the limitations of our ability to categorize and apply information correctly might sway us toward simple explanations that fit our preconceived understandings. Such explanations may include believing anti-US sentiment is being fueled primarily by our enemies’ implacable hatred toward us as a people, not their desperate opposition to our actions, or concluding from simplified notions of specific mortal enemies necessarily being behind specific mortal actions that Saddam explicitly or the Iraqi regime generally must in some way have been behind the terrorist attacks of 9/11. This bias may also help account for believing that a powerful nation like the United States can accomplish anything it puts its mind and muscle behind rather than accepting the fact that in some circumstances the limitations of power—at least as we traditionally understand it—in terms of our security can be reached and exceeded quickly to negative returns.
Causality biases can also lead us to assign big causes to big events and small causes to small events, when in reality trivial happenstances often have outsized consequences and vice-versa—especially depending on perspective. For instance, most US policymakers and other Western observers may have seen President Clinton’s August 1998 missile strikes against al-Qaeda in Sudan and bin Laden specifically in Afghanistan either tactically as a well-intended shot that missed its target or perhaps a cynical effort intended more at taking the public mind off the exploding Lewinsky scandal and, therefore, something worth only so much attention. Bin Laden, his senior leaders, and their movement’s sympathizers, however, apparently saw the attack as tantamount to a declaration of war against the network, its chief, and its Islamic hosts, and al-Qaeda began plotting its response accordingly. We may also see causality in mere correlation, or mis-assign cause and effect because of the order in which we detect related events or understand their connections. Perhaps endemic to mighty powers involved in many parts of the world, as is the United States, is a tendency to overestimate our own role in events and how our presence, weight, and (often self-) importance not only must be at some level a motivator of events, but also the key to shaping them. Misunderstanding cause and effect has underwritten several influential narratives in the War on Terror, from why terrorists hate us, to how extreme measures are the solution to our extreme problem, to how our actions perforce will be what secure us our rightful victory. Seeing these pitfalls as part of the relationship between myth and war in our perceptions, explanations, and conventionalizations should help detect and promote measures to ensure our beliefs and actions stay on sounder analytical footing.

Other biases emerging from the fundamental circumstances of human psychology
and cultural narratives about our reality and our ability to explain and understand it are at play in evaluating our security circumstances and taking effective action against real and addressable threats. Over-reliance on simplified rules of thumb that are at one level key to the endless assumptions we make to get through our day on another level can distort probability judgments to distractive and ultimately inaccurate points of assessment. Which natural starting points are used for these estimations and approximations indelibly affect what we see and come to believe is true at our calculations’ end, and uncertainty is held suspect regardless of how reasonable it may actually be under given circumstances. The possible and the probable often conflate, especially when considered in the context of what we might want to achieve or avoid, and where one stands on a point may too frequently be a function largely of where one sits in a social or cultural construct—or in an organization or even a political party. For instance, those who wield supreme executive power, like US presidents, tend to look for ways to wield that power, such as directing American military forces, in ways that may overestimate what that force may be able to achieve because of a focus on their authority rather than on the nature of the problem that demands redress—whether it be global terrorism in general or terrorist activities in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Syria specifically. Views of senior policymakers and advisors in the Defense Department, the State Department, or the intelligence community might differ as much on bureaucratic perspectives and equities than on analysis of events and circumstances.

We also tend to harbor a bias for previously held positions, overestimating the accuracy of our perceptiveness and analysis and underestimating what we have learned and may be able to learn from other information and observers. Favoring hindsight may be
in some ways central to such necessary endeavors as experiential learning, building on what we know, or even the scientific method. At the same time, however, it enforces assumptions and supports artifices in thought and belief that at least holds new data, perceptions, ideas, and ways of thinking suspect, and at times may be hostile toward them. It is this hindsight bias that Thomas Kuhn saw behind existing paradigms’ ability to incorporate new information and generate new knowledge as all the while they tee themselves up for an eventual failure to reconcile to anomalies and an ultimate overthrow in favor of new paradigms that more fully make sense of continually unfolding information and understandings. In a more practical application to the issue at hand, this process has been behind key decisions in the War on Terror—from, for example, invading Iraq in the first place to surging forces and operations there in 2007 to secure something like stability in Baghdad and Anbar Province and lay the foundation for the beginnings of eventual US withdrawal four years later. Such biases may come naturally to us, but the pathologies they engender are worth noting and targeting with insightful reasoning and rigorous thought.

Lest this brief exploration of biases, their origins, and a few of their more harmful effects remain little more than admonition, the question of what to do to correct for these shortcomings deserves an answer. If this discussion simply indicated the origin of bias to be ignorance, stupidity, or self-interest, the corrective would be better informed, smarter, nobler decision makers, but this is not so much the case. Indeed, it is useful to remember that those with whom we disagree may know as much as we do about an issue, remain mentally capable of thinking their way through it reasonably, and have similar interests at heart in coming to their conclusions, but rely on different theoretical constructs or ideas.
about how the world works—as well as at least some different facts—and, therefore, see things differently. This is not to say that baser instincts, shallow or political calculations, or ideological thinking are never at work in governance or that senior officials could not do with more good intelligence, reasoned thinking, or altruism. It is to say, however, that how our mental processes work relies on bias and the role it plays in our perceptions, explanations, understandings, and decisions. Therefore, overcoming biases is more precisely an effort in overcoming the inherent problems in how we think. To borrow from Plato, the point at which we all inevitably release our hold on *logos* and fall back on *mythos* needs to be extended as far as possible if we are to retain any hope of restricting narrative’s natural pull on our explanations and understandings.

Plato’s approach to this task drew on the guidance of his teacher, Socrates, and the Socratic Method offers a workable solution to the problem that is simple while not always easy: ask questions. “Can I believe this information?” “What other information do I need to know?” “Are there better interpretations of this information?” “Are there other explanations for what appears to be occurring?” “What should I try to do about the situation?” “What are my options for action?” These and countless other questions are at the heart not only of overcoming bias, but also of good intelligence, wise policymaking, and effective warfighting. Even the certain among us who feel themselves pressed for time and keen to act quickly are advantaged by a rigorous and disciplined interrogative effort in any situation of serious import—an apparently unremarkable assertion with which few would disagree. Still, for instance, no one can point to a meeting before March 2003 (or even afterward) where all the information and options regarding Iraq were laid out and subjected to inquiry, or even a session wherein the decision to invade Iraq was
expressly discussed or even made. Passing up opportunities to inquire, scrutinize, and deliberate—as well as involve partners who may also have a stake in the process and its outcome—will not necessarily result in misadventure or ruin, but it will do little to counteract our natural biases. It will also do little to ameliorate the worst effects of myth in the way we think of war and terrorism, or to promote clearer, more analytic, and better reasoned understandings and action in security affairs.

Embracing the Ambiguity: Myth in Service of Deeper Understanding and Greater Utility

Recognizing the problem of narrative’s more pernicious roles in our explanations, understandings, and decisions not only helps reveal ways to combat its worst effects, but also suggests ways for us to employ the inherent ambiguity and relativism of our perceptions in service of a practical appreciation of reality and what actions we might best take in effective security affairs. These ways also include deliberate efforts to think of events in different ways—in this case in ways that account for narrative understandings and allow us to use them to structure problems, develop alternative scenarios, and place these scenarios in epistemic competition. We can then see which ones make the most reasonable and comprehensive use of demonstrable facts, their logical implications, and our ever-unfolding reality as we continually come to know it. Identifying what we do not know emerges as important as what we do know in this sort of approach, as does ascertaining points of departure where new knowledge and ways of thinking demand re-evaluation of our understandings, as well as maintaining an open mind to discern these developments and embrace their meanings. In this way, smaller narratives better allow us to reject ideologies or other larger ways of thinking and consider developments in a freer, more open fashion for more practical understandings and better results.
An effective approach to making analytical judgments that both minimizes narrative’s worst effects and maximizes its best effects on our thinking is one that seeks a balance between epistemological extremes. This means that avoiding pitfalls found at each end of a spectrum that traces the span of demonstrability and “truth” in what we know and how we come to know it. For instance, analytic advantages accrue from starting with an issue’s known facts, developing a series of pertinent cause-and-effect relationships, and sketching out a scenario that serves as a plausible narrative for the issue. This sort of approach, however, fails to make the best use of theoretical knowledge acquired from studying similar issues in other places and times. It also fails to account for the fact that others—perhaps most importantly those key actors in the issue under investigation—may think of the issue and its surrounding facts differently and, in doing so, draw different conclusions from them that suggest different actions and, therefore, lead to different outcomes.

Similarly, coming at an issue with a wealth of theoretical knowledge and understandings derived from broad and deep study of relevant topics and similar issues allows for an efficient and logical categorization of emerging facts, a sensible explanation of their circumstances and the situation at hand, and tested actions that can be taken to redress related problems. Of course such an approach does not acknowledge the subjectivity of our perceptions and understandings, and it is prone to imposing ways of thinking and understanding correct for certain circumstances on apparently similar but actually different circumstances. Also, fitting observations into preconceived patterns in ways that fail to recognize the accrual of factual anomalies or identify new or different theories that may better explain and suggest action toward emerging problems may remain
a persistent shortcoming. Applying logic and theory in the right admixture is an endeavor fraught with potential for misunderstanding and misstep, but it best assumes the fundamental ambiguity of perception and knowledge and represents the good that should never be allowed to fall prey to the perfect.

Embracing epistemic ambiguity also offers a solution to the persistent problem of never knowing enough information about a given circumstance or problem. Recalling Plato’s observation of the limitations of human perception suggests that since no one will ever know everything, no one will ever know all possible facts about any issue. This means that every understanding and every decision has been and always will be made on the basis of ultimately incomplete knowledge. So, the search for knowledge should not be aimed at completeness, but at sufficiency. The key is in knowing when enough information has been acquired in the context of developing circumstances, problems, and threats to determine when what type of decisions should be made and actions undertaken. Identifying this point of diminishing—if not outright negative—returns in acquiring new knowledge in any situation is another relative judgment that remains in the eye of the beholder, but acknowledging its reality suggests that too heavy an investment in collecting information at some level comes at the expense of analyzing and making appropriate sense of available data. Moreover, in recalling Barthes’s contention about facts only making sense in a narrative context, greater attention to this context and how compellingly it may command assent at some point becomes the greater effort.

This sense-making may result in imprecise, multiple, or only-so-useful analyses, so restraining a rush to conclusions based on insufficient existing information remains an imperative for anyone out to formulate accurate perceptions and make sound judgments.
Exercising this restraint while avoiding potentially endless delays in acquiring more data represents another delicate and imperfect balance that will never be achieved for long or to everyone’s satisfaction. Skepticism of the frequently implicit assumption that paucity of data is the greatest impediment to accurate assessments comes as sound guidance. Any recipe for finding that “just-right” spot of sufficiency will remain elusive, but the probability that it is not when one develops the first scenario or explanation that appears to work with whatever information may be available any given time—and the certainty that it cannot be any scenario that only works with conveniently selected data—is a thought worth considering.

With these ambiguities in mind, the question then turns to how best to structure problems to deal with them in a way that enhances analytical rigor while at the same time brings narratives and their powerful explanatory abilities to bear on the issue at hand. The key here is the one suggested by the word “analysis,” and that is to unravel the issue into its elemental parts. Since keeping all known and relevant facts for any large or complex problem in mind when attempting to understand and explain things quickly outstrips our cognitive abilities, breaking such a problem down into a more easily comprehensible and manageable number of sub-problems appears a workable approach. As with other efforts to incorporate inescapable uncertainty into our thinking about an ultimately ambiguous reality, knowing the right point of dismantlement of any complex problem will never be fully clear and will remain relative to time, circumstance, topic, and perspective.

Still, this analysis in the literal sense is the start of a three-step effort that remains the best way to reduce uncertainty to its most manageable level. The second step is the opposite of analysis: synthesis, or restructuring these elemental parts back into a working
model of the problem that can then be addressed in the context of the facts and understandings brought to bear on the problem’s components. The third step involves structuring the problem model in such a way that the sub-parts’ roles in the reconstituted larger issue are clear and that their relations among themselves are drawn accurately and practically. In this way the process of structuring the problem and externalizing it outside our ruminative, narrative-bound minds as a working model that promotes disciplined analytic thinking in service of an accurate and useful story worth telling, hearing, and learning from becomes easier. Easier does not mean complete, though, and ambiguity can only be limited, never fully removed. If that were possible, however, the model would no longer reflect a narrative-based, essentially relative, and fundamentally subjective reality, and its utility would diminish accordingly.  

Structuring models for an analytic approach that grasps smaller narratives involves developing these narratives for fuller examination relative to each other. In a way this reflects both the power of myth in human understanding as well as a Postmodernist rejection of grand narrative in favor of reduced and more focused storylines that more deftly and accurately apprehend an ever-revealing reality. In relation to each other, these smaller narratives vie for our assent—and for that matter, the assent of our adversaries—based on how closely and fully they incorporate facts as we come to know and believe them. Initiating such a process calls for decision makers or those analysts charged with informing decisions to propose several hypotheses that appear to make sufficient sense of available data and compare them. As more information is collected and refined, these competing hypotheses can be developed into fuller scenarios in an analytic effort that seeks to identify which among them make the best sense of unfolding circumstances.
Such an open, disciplined effort accomplishes at least five things. It helps those engaged in it ameliorate some of the worst effects of cognitive limitations (such as settling on the first hypothesis or scenario that makes sense), identifies which hypotheses or scenarios can be safely discarded as inconsistent with available facts, indicates what new information needs to be acquired to test surviving hypotheses and scenarios, shows how scenarios might logically develop if certain new facts emerge or existing facts are disproven, and provides an audit trail of how thinking has proceeded along which avenues so that it can be back-tracked more quickly or reflected upon as those involved make decisions and take action. The open, methodical, and thorough nature of this analysis of competing hypotheses works against the premature internalization of myth while at the same time welcomes narrative and its informative power, particularly suiting it to controversial, data-poor, or especially consequential issues. This analytic approach will never fully overcome myth, but it can help not only to identify more clearly its role in our thinking, but also to put narrative understanding to work in support of stronger rationality.

Placing narrative at the employ of analysis in such a way that suppresses ideologies and promotes critical thinking allows for a more natural, dynamic, and ultimately more realistic approach to thought and action in security affairs. It acknowledges what we do not know as much as what we do know and more fully embraces the uncertainty and ambiguity of our understandings and explanations, but it still works toward a practical end. This practical end is the development of alternative futures suggested by competing ideational hypotheses and fleshed-out scenarios that ensure our thinking remains rationally informed by myth while at the same time narratively informed by facts. These alternative futures can serve as both engines and repositories of myth, the
emerging narratives of which can be more easily shaped and the effects of which can be more readily identified in the context of imparting meaning to our events. Such open and disciplined efforts to focus on the events while remaining aware of this imparted meaning would help affirm that the decisions we make and actions we take are aimed more precisely at which among several alternative futures we might wish more to come to pass. It also helps ensure that this aim is flexible enough for us to train the always blurry sights of our perception on the ever-moving targets of our events. Similar approaches exist, and collectively they represent how myth’s role in human understanding and narrative’s power in human explanations can exist within a practical construct of thought, judgment, decision, and action.⁹

How does one prepare for engaging in these and other efforts that embrace ideational ambiguity and place narrative-accommodating analysis in service of more disciplined and profitable thinking? Much like in the above section, where asking questions holds the key to restricting myth’s worst effects, making the most out of this situation is also simple but not always easy: keep an open mind. This is not so much a call to general receptiveness and credulity as it is an observation that with myriad micronarratives available to explain events and interpret them in ways that allow us to assign value to them, selecting the most reasonable or appropriate ones is an exercise in forestalling the carving of mental ruts—Weigley’s “deeper grooves of customs in our minds,” from Chapter I—and finding too comfortable a place in them.

Tools to maintain this open-mindedness in thinking about agency, motivation, cause and effect, weighing alternative explanations, and reaching judgments are many and stem from a discipline in perception, logic, and thinking along with a flexibility toward
perspective, reason, and ideas. These tools include seeing matters from a different view, questioning assumptions or trying new ones, and identifying points of departure within logic trains to consider when new information (or perhaps the absence of any) might suggest a change of mind. Techniques for using these tools range from avoiding mirror imaging and thinking backward from a desired end, to role-playing and devil’s advocacy, to identifying tactical indicators and planning for strategic surprise, to cross-fertilizing ideas and even deferring judgment. This last technique may appear an intellectually lazy excuse for inaction—and at times it can be. But, if employed as the result of insufficient data but with time and opportunity to collect them—or sufficient data and the time and opportunity to consider them—it can result from analytic rigor and constitute a form of action. Still, recall how data are never complete, and that more intelligence failures appear traceable to shortcomings in analysis rather than in collection. In this sense, rather than a bias for action, a bias for thinking in service of action appears the wiser option.

If Postmodernist intellectuality holds overarching narratives as ultimately unworkable, then embracing smaller, more individualized narratives appears to permit us to discard previous ways of thinking and understanding in favor of newer ones that function better and allow for deeper understandings, at least for the moment. It is only in this way that we draw on myth in making sense of and deriving meaning from events and in turn allow these events and their meanings to help determine the narrative arcs of our myths. By constructing such an unrestricted but ordered approach to analysis for use by policymakers, intelligence officers, or anyone else trying to make sense of these events and placing this approach within a Platonic epistemology where myth and logic coexist in necessary parts, the role of narrative in human understanding and power of myth to
explain and understand our experiences reaches a utility rarely explored to the depth of its philosophical underpinnings and inconsistently practiced to fully effective result. With more open, nimble, and perhaps pragmatic minds informed by but less wedded to ideologies, patterns of thought, or familiar approaches to situations and problems, we can better make grand narrative’s collapse and petite narratives’ rise work in our favor. By doing so, we prepare ourselves for the important and practical efforts of securing our safety and defense and promoting our interests and values in an uncertain world.

**Myth, War, and Postmodern Memory at Work in Our Time**

The above two general themes in approaching the twin tasks of ameliorating the disadvantages and maximizing the advantages of myth’s role in human thought and action—asking questions and keeping an open mind—can serve as useful guideposts for placing this study in a larger and practical perspective. Again, current scholarship in the fields of political science, international relations, and security studies only so often acknowledges—and seldom embraces—the power of ambiguous cultural factors or narrative understandings of events and circumstances in national defense or global policy affairs, especially when compared to perceived “hard facts” these disciplines hold in higher favor. Similarly, those working in the academic areas of philosophy, literary analysis, or cultural studies only so often consider war as a worthy subject of inquiry and assessment, despite the fact that armed conflict is just as much an expression of thought, story, or culture as any other societal pursuit. And while, for instance, the sociologist may sometimes study soldiers or the historian more frequently examine war, the conventional bounds of these and other specific disciplines too often focus such efforts in ways that leave current undertakings like the War on Terror outside their scrutiny—the sociologist
on people, not larger phenomena, or the historian on the past, not the present. In the process, such contemporary topics are denied the benefits that non-traditional, cross-disciplinary, or interdisciplinary scholarship can bring to such an area of study or sphere of action. In tracing the interaction between the war’s events and its cultural narratives, this study raises some important questions and offers some possible answers. Seeing its advantages while rejoining with better answers—as well as posing some better questions—will only happen if readers and others interested in the war as an academic subject and a practical enterprise keep an open mind about this type of approach.

We can see in the above inquiry not only the power of myth to inform the War on Terror, but also the war’s influence in shaping myth. In this ever-ruminating process, at least five powerful narrative understandings are at play: the terrorists hate us for who we are, our response has to lead with force, we have to resort to extreme measures, protracted war will spell our undoing, and the war will end in our victory. These understandings may emerge from mythic origins as well as convey important truths, but their demonstrable factuality has only so much to do with their power, which is a function of their ability to explain our circumstances in comfortable and practical ways. This practicality shines when, as shown here, the myths help establish our approach to the war, this approach plays out in ways that adjust the myths, and the myths go on to help refashion the war.

The effect of war on myth may be interesting, but it is myth’s effect on the war—from helping characterize who the terrorists are, to driving military interventions, to promoting a belief in torture and extreme measures, and so on—that is perhaps more practical. Most important is the understanding that myth and the war are inseparable, and their ability to continue informing and shaping each other can be both subtle and profound.
Our narrative myths’ power shows in their flexibility and disposability in the face of unfolding knowledge, which conveys important implications in understanding the War on Terror. Micronarratives present fewer and weaker challenges than metanarrative ever did to a larger conceptual status quo and allow more rigorous analysis and a freer weighing of data and their applications to play stronger roles in our understandings. This interaction between observation, knowledge, and analysis on the one hand and convention, belief, and dogma on the other is central to grasping the power of myth and the role it plays in our epistemology. Smaller, more focused storylines may be more nimble and useful in explaining our world as we continually come to see it, and they enhance the role of “fact-based” analysis over “received wisdom.” Again, the closer the interaction of analysis and narrative within our myths, the greater is the logic in both our storytelling and in our decisions that drive events. Identifying, containing, and diminishing the more problematic effects of narrative in human understanding in the context of general security affairs, and counterterrorism specifically, is a useful endeavor. At the same time, embracing the reality of uncertainty and ambiguity in safeguarding our interests and taking action against those who would do us harm make for a worthy approach in making more sense of this state of affairs.

This kind of approach also helps promote effective ways to incorporate this greater sense in practical solutions to problems at hand. This might advance a greater rationality and utility in policies and decisions as well as ensure that if our myths cannot be isolated from these undertakings, they can at least be identified, subjected to scrutiny, and perhaps more consciously shaped in service to better policies and wiser decisions. Historians, anthropologists, and sociologists assume these approaches and apply these lessons in
inquiries into their particular subjects; perhaps security specialists, policymakers, and warfighters might do something similar in their own fields and, in the process, improve things for everyone. Indeed, doing so while the war is still being fought imparts a significant aspect of practicality to the undertaking that may too often elude historians and other scholars in their areas of study.

A future historian looking back on the War on Terror with the advantage of time’s perspective will one day more accurately and fully trace the arc of myth and war’s mutual information in the early 21st century and how it has become so rich a part of this future era. Those of us closer to the circumstances at play, however, have a more difficult, and perhaps more important, task. War as a unique cultural event may be a commonplace for those who seek to describe and interpret the past, but it is an often overlooked yet essential phenomenon for those who seek to understand the present and help shape the future. This is where the value of this study ultimately lies. Every citizen who is part of the War on Terror, and at varying levels in this democratic republic that is all of us, will fail to understand it more completely—and fail to hold our leaders accountable for its appropriate and effective conduct—if we believe the war’s prosecution is a simple and sole matter of practical, measurable, and easily understood circumstances divorced from our larger culture and the stories we tell ourselves. We will live with this war and its results in some fashion forever. We would be well served in ensuring that we understand it more fully, that we prosecute it to the best of our abilities, and that we do our utmost to help make it worthy of the many and too-often dear sacrifices it continues to require.
INTRODUCTION: THE WAR ON TERROR AS AN INTERDISCIPLINARY TOPIC

1 I am reflecting here on such seminal works as Keegan’s first-rate military histories, including The Battle for History: Refighting World War Two (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1995) and The First World War (New York: Knopf, 1999); Moskos’ ground-breaking military sociological studies, such as The American Enlisted Man: The Rank and File in Today’s Military (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1970) and, with John Allen Williams and David R. Segal, The Post-Modern Military: Armed Forces After the Cold War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Remarque’s indispensable fictional treatment of the Great War, All Quiet on the Western Front, trans. A.W. Wheen (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987) in comparison to Churchill’s outstanding multi-volume narrative histories/war memoirs, The World Crisis (New York: Scribner, 1923-29) and The Second World War (New York: Time, Inc., 1959); Fussell’s brilliant volumes of literary criticism and cultural history, The Great War and Modern Memory (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975) and Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); and Lawrence’s astonishing amalgam of autobiography, strategy, and philosophy, The Seven Pillars of Wisdom (Oxford: Oxford Times, 1922). I offer them here as representative of the range of academic perspectives that can be brought to bear on modern warfare and how their various admixtures can result in uniquely insightful works that have advanced our understanding of conflict immeasurably. The examination I present of the intersection of our cultural understanding of force and our practical application of it in the War on Terror falls squarely in this interdisciplinary tradition.

2 Such interdisciplinary studies exist, of course—again, witness the valuable contribution to the field of history that a cultural and literary scholar like Paul Fussell has made—but they tend to be the exception rather than the rule. For more on the cultural, organizational, and professional difficulties facing the attentions and benefits of interdisciplinary scholarship in the academy, especially at the graduate level, see Ali Khorsandi Taskoh, “Interdisciplinary Higher Education: Criticism, Challenges and Obstacles,” Policy Studies, The University of Western Ontario (July 18, 2011), accessed August 14, 2014, http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1014&context=researchday.

3 Fussell, The Great War and Modern Memory, ix.

CHAPTER I: WAR, TERROR, AND MYTH
DEFINITIONS AND CONTEXTUALIZATIONS

1 In the context of the current conflict, some aspects of which resemble traditional war while others do not, these other aspects are frequently referred to by terms like “crisis” and “emergency.” Even these terms can be freighted with sub-textual meaning, for instance in the way that, say, the term “crisis” conveys the notion of a threat that needs to be dealt with immediately and perhaps harshly, while the term “emergency” is commonly understood as a problem that needs to be managed over time.


4 For further insights on protest narratives and their role in politics and culture, see Francesca Polletta, *It was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). For a useful look at parody and its ability to inform in a substantive fashion, see Sophia A. McClennen and Remy M. Maisel, *Is Satire Saving Our Nation?: Mockery and American Politics* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).


6 Of course even these suspect offerings might make their way into popular narratives and myth, although it is the retelling of the myths themselves that are more important in this investigation, as this study will explore, than whichever unproved or even disproved “facts” might be behind them.


9 For a few of the most salient articulations of the War on Terror by this artistic culture, see such films as 2012’s *Zero Dark Thirty* and 2013’s *Lone Survivor*, TV series such as *24* and *Homeland*, video game series *Call of Duty* and *Halo*, and music such as much of Bruce Springsteen’s 2002 album *The Rising* and Green Day’s 2004 album *American Idiot*.


For more on this characterization of the guiding narrative of Renaissance thought (as well as the characterizations I offer for the intellectualities and myths of the succeeding three periods examined below), see the online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (hereafter cited as SEP), accessed February 28, 2014, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotelianism-renaissance/.

The most recent “final word” on just war theory, including its classical origins and pre-Enlightenment development, is Michael Walzer, Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument With Historical Illustrations (New York: Basic Book, 1977). For more specifically on Renaissance scholars of this subject drawing on classical thinkers, see Marcia L. Colish, The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages (Boston: Brill, 1980), 150.

Again, see Walzer, Just and Unjust Wars.


For examples of this circumstance, one has to look no further than the Thirty Years’ War in fiction and how the experience of that conflict helped develop newer explanatory narratives that depart from distinctly classical themes and presage ones more familiar in an Enlightenment context. See Grimmelshausen’s Simplicius Simplicissimus, Defoe’s Memoirs of a Cavalier, and Schiller’s Wallenstein. (See Rostand’s Cyrano de Bergerac and Brecht’s Mother Courage and Her Children for, respectively, Modern and Postmodern interpretations of the conflict.)

It should be remembered that the Holy See remained hostile to the settlement, calling it “null, void, invalid, iniquitous, unjust, damnable, reprobate, inane, empty of meaning and effect for all time.” See Larry Jay Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, Philip J. Costopoulos, World Religions and Democracy (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 103.


For well-crafted and insightful studies that place these three military leaders strongly within their age’s intellectual contexts, see Michael Roberts, From Oxenstierna to Charles XII: Four Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Giles MacDonough, Frederick the Great: A Life in Deed and Letters (New York: St. Martin’s Griffon, 2001); and John E. Ferling, The Ascent of George Washington: The Hidden Political Genius of an American Icon (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009). In the case of Washington, a day strolling about his estate of Mt. Vernon provides eloquent testimony to the breadth of his interests, his accomplishments therein, and their influence in his successes.

The idea of “the other” has been explored in philosophical contexts by thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida, but for an insightful discussion of the topic in the practical context of European encounters with foreign societies and the wars that resulted from them, see Edward W. Said, Orientalism (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

Indeed, some European powers chose to engage each other in combat within their overseas colonial spheres, at times de-emphasizing direct confrontations and campaigns on the continent. This helped preserve the safety and integrity of Europe and its peoples in ways consistent with a narrative of sparing those of
common culture, outlook, and rationality the worst effects of war.


27 For an early but definitive articulation of this view of the importance of efficient and effective initiation of war in the successful prosecution of battle, see Clausewitz’s On War, particularly Book Eight, Chapter III, “Interdependence of the Parts of War.” The preferred English version is Carl von Clausewitz, On War, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

28 Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition, xxiv. I grant that the short-hand characterization of Postmodern thought given here may be off-center or incomplete to some, especially as there appears to be broader debate over the meaning and impact of Postmodernism than that which obtains for the previously discussed eras—especially as whatever Postmodernism will eventually become continues to develop. However, I submit this definition is sufficient to proceed with the task at hand, namely explaining how myth and war in the Postmodern Period interact in a mutually informative fashion as much as they did in previous periods.


30 This phenomenon may be most clear in an American context, where the last hundred years that has marked an almost endless series of wars, conflicts, and military actions by the United States has only seen its government formally declare war twice—for the two world wars—but it is just as true for other countries whose constitutions have emerged from the Western tradition.

31 For particularly useful studies of the Cold War, how it played out, and how it can be interpreted in relation to myth and memory, see Norman Friedman, The Fifty-Year War: Conflict and Strategy in the Cold War (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2007); John Lewis Gaddis, Russia, the Soviet Union and the United States. An Interpretive History (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990) and We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997); and Alexander Fedorov, Russian Image on the Western Screen: Trends, Stereotypes, Myths, Illusions (Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2011).

32 For more on how Postmodern Period wars tend to terminate and how this fits with contemporary intellectual and narrative understandings, see Dan Reiter, How Wars End (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009). Also, the “end” of the War on Terror and how it takes place will feature as a key myth in this thesis’ the main examination.


CHAPTER II: MYTH, MEANING, AND THE WAR ON TERROR
NARRATIVE’S POWER AND ITS EFFECTIVE FORMS

1 Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition, xxiv-xxv.


3 In the formulation of Duke University consciousness researcher Owen Flanagan, “Evidence strongly suggests that humans in all cultures come to cast their own identity in some sort of narrative form. We are inveterate storytellers.” See Owen Flanagan, Consciousness Reconsidered (Cambridge, MA: Bradford Books, 1993), 198.
4 I may be remiss if I do not address (and here is as good a place as any) the criticism of the claim of metanarrative’s collapse as contradictory and untenable, since the claim itself is a metanarrative of sorts. I find this criticism unconvincing, as the claim is not so much a narrative as it is a statement about narrative that conveys no explanatory storyline to give the claim narrative power. For more on this and similar “language games” in the context of narrative, see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), and Friedrich Waismann, *The Principals of Linguistic Philosophy* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995).


6 Narrative as an interpretive method retains its strength, and myth remains for many of us a powerful means of apprehending reality. So, as larger storylines of global affairs collapse, smaller ones must emerge in their wake. A precise typology of narrative allowing for a tracing of mythic explication from meta- to micro- through clear stages of magnitude may be impossible, because any narrative appears larger or smaller depending on one’s vantage point. Still, broad characterizations of narratives’ sizes are probably achievable, at least if we hope to be able to understand them in any practical fashion. For more on narrative in this context, see Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, especially Chapters 4 (The Rhetoric of Narrative), 11 (Narrative Contestation), and 12 (Narrative Negotiation).


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19 Ibid.

20 Timaeus, 28a1-3. See also the SEP entry on “Plato’s Myths”: “And one time, in the Timaeus, he appears to overcome the opposition between mathos and logos: human reason has limits, and when it reaches them it has to rely on myth.” SEP, accessed February 28, 2014, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-myths/.


22 For instance, in the context of accuracy, Rousseau’s “state of nature” man would never have come together with others of his like to form associations of first familial, then tribal, and on to larger aggregations because he himself would have been born into at least a family, if not an extended one approximating a tribe with its own cultural accretions Rousseau so ardently decried. For more on the narrative myth of Enlightenment political thought and its influence on Western ideas and practices, see Jonathan I. Israel, Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670–1752 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

23 For instance, current Western opinions on government’s proper role in security are broad ranging, of course, and several are at direct odds with each other. For a worthwhile collection of anti-statist views on security, see Hans-Hermann Hoppe, ed., The Myth of National Defense: Essays on the Theory and History of Security Production (Auburn, AL: Mises Institute, 2004).

24 For a useful look at this process and its muddled and confusing compromises, see Pauline Maier, Ratification: The People Debate the Constitution, 1787-1788 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

25 For a current popular view of this narrative with the government in the role of villain, see Rand Paul,


For more on the origins of this metaphor and its context, see Anthony Kemp, The Maginot Line: Myth and Reality (New York: Stein & Day, 1982).

Schneier, Beyond Fear, 38.


See Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian Wars, Books 1-21, and Livy, Ab Urbe Condita, Book 3, for the earliest expressions of these classical myths of Greek and Roman citizen soldiers defending their state from outside aggressors.

For a fuller examination of some of these myths and their effect on the foundational narratives of the American way of war, see Gary Wills, Cincinnatus: George Washington and the Enlightenment (New York: Doubleday, 1984).

United States Army Center of Military History, American Military History (Washington: Center of Military History, 1989), 28-30. Indeed, the Massachusetts Army National Guard’s 182nd Infantry Regiment, its progenitor formation established on October 7, 1636, is the oldest standing military unit in the English-speaking world, and at least a dozen US National Guard units can trace their origins to formations created before Cromwell’s New Model Army established what today are the progenitors of the oldest British Army regiments. See US Army National Guard, accessed February 28, 2014, http://www.army.mil/aboutus/history.

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37 Its veterans were given compensation in the form of land grants in the Ohio Territory and, in keeping with their identity as citizen soldiers who heeded their country’s call in its time of peril, their governor named one of the towns they settled after George Washington, in what was seen as his personification of the fifth century BCE Roman dictator and hero Cincinnatus—a patrician who left the consulship and politics to become a simple farmer, was given supreme power to lead Rome against the invading Aequians, and returned to his plow without interfering in the re-emergence of republican institutions. The city of Cincinnati is today the country’s 25th largest and, at least according to interpreters at the Cincinnati History Museum, remains a proud inheritor and expression of this American tradition and identity. For more, see The Cincinnati History Museum, accessed February 28, 2014, http://cincinnatiusa.com/things-to-do/atrractions/cincinnati-history-museum-cincinnati-museum-center.


40 For more on this topic, see Weigley, The American Way of War (especially the introductory essay, xvii-xxiii) and United States Army Center of Military History, American Military History, 13-7.

41 For perhaps the quintessential articulation of this narrative in the popular medium of American cinema, see the opening monologue in the movie “Patton,” wherein George C. Scott’s eponymous character expounds on how and why America fights. For details, see Frank McCarthy (prod.), Patton, film, directed by Franklin J. Schaffner (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 1970).

42 For a helpful survey of pragmatism in this context, see John J. Stuhr, ed. One Hundred Years of Pragmatism: William James’s Revolutionary Philosophy (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010). For the concept and terminology of American Exceptionalism, especially its origins, see Donald E. Pease, The New American Exceptionalism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 10.

43 Indeed, Gen. Albert C. Wedemeyer, US commander of China Theater in World War II and, as a major, primary author of the US “Victory Plan” in 1941, decried pre-war American focus on “the narrower concept of strictly military science” he learned in his domestic military schooling versus “the broad concept of strategy embracing political, economic, and psychological means for the attainment of war aims” he learned as a visiting student officer at the German War College in 1936-8. See Albert C. Wedemeyer, Wedemeyer Reports! (New York: Holt, 1958), 49. In Weigley’s reference to this circumstance, he observes that, at least at times, “military strategists gave little regard to the non-military consequences of what they were doing.” See Weigley, The American Way of War, xviii.


45 For one of several excellent treatments of this campaign by anarchist assassins and its place within the context of international terrorism, see James H. Billington, Fire in the Minds of Men: Origins of the Revolutionary Faith (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Books, 1998).


48 For a fuller treatment of this notion of al-Qaeda’s and affiliated groups’ motivations against the United States, see Michael Scheuer, Imperial Hubris: Why the West is Losing the War on Terror, (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2007), wherein the author claims many US shortcomings in the War on Terror stem from this fundamental misunderstanding of terrorists’ inspiration. In a videotape released in early September 2007, bin Laden stated his views of this book by saying, “If you want to understand what’s going on and if you would like to get to know some of the reasons for your losing the war against us, then read the book of Michael Scheuer.” See ABC News, accessed February 28, 2014, http://abcnews.go.com/images/Politics/transcript2.pdf.


50 Indeed, the 9/11 Commission report states specifically that the country is faced with “more than a war on terrorism,” and that although use of the term “war” may be apt in describing military operations against “terrorist groups…in the field,” a more balanced, long-term strategy “demands the use of all elements of national power: diplomacy, intelligence, covert action, law enforcement, economic policy, foreign aid, public diplomacy, and homeland defense. If we favor one tool while neglecting others, we leave ourselves vulnerable and weaken our national effort.” See National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. (Philip Zelikow, Executive Director; Bonnie D. Jenkins, Counsel; Ernest R. May, Senior Advisor), The 9/11 Commission Report (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 363-4. For more on these non-military efforts and their successes and necessity, see 71-107 and 361-428.

51 Also critical is the absence of a more apt and accurate identification of the enemy beyond the methods he uses to attack us, which opens the door for force to lead its way ahead against not a country or an organization, but an activity the definition of which is slippery and often in the eye of the beholder.

52 One can argue that this righteous war myth informs understandings of our Civil War from both sides’ perspectives, from the North’s fight to end slavery and preserve the Union to the South’s struggle to preserve States’ rights and resist invasion. The government’s failure to articulate a convincing version of this myth for the Vietnam War probably helped undermine popular support for that conflict over time.


54 See Edward Gibbon, The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, 8 vols., ed. Betty Radice (London: The Folio Society, 1999) for an early and particularly influential version of this narrative of the Fabian strategy sowing the seeds of Italian revolt while the creation of a professional military
tradition gave the government the means first to put down the revolt and later extend its own power at egalitarianism’s expense.


56 Again, see the title character’s opening speech in McCarthy, Patton: “Americans love a winner and will not tolerate a loser. Americans play to win all the time. I wouldn’t give a hoot in hell for a man who lost and laughed! That’s why Americans have never lost, and will never lose, a war. Because the very thought of losing is hateful, to Americans.”

57 The relevant passage is “For too long, we have lived with the ‘Vietnam Syndrome.’ Much of that syndrome has been created by the North Vietnamese aggressors who now threaten the peaceful people of Thailand. Over and over they told us for nearly 10 years that we were the aggressors bent on imperialistic conquests. They had a plan. It was to win in the field of propaganda here in America what they could not win on the field of battle in Vietnam. As the years dragged on, we were told that peace would come if we would simply stop interfering and go home. It is time we recognized that ours was, in truth, a noble cause. A small country newly free from colonial rule sought our help in establishing self-rule and the means of self-defense against a totalitarian neighbor bent on conquest. We dishonor the memory of 50,000 young Americans who died in that cause when we give way to feelings of guilt as if we were doing something shameful, and we have been shabby in our treatment of those who returned. They fought as well as bravely as any Americans have ever fought in any war. They deserve our gratitude, our respect, and our continuing concern. There is a lesson for all of us in Vietnam. If we are forced to fight, we must have the means and the determination to prevail or we will not have what it takes to secure the peace. And while we are at it, let us tell those who fought in that war that we will never again ask young men to fight and possibly die in a war our government is afraid to let them win.” (Emphasis added.) For the full text of the speech, see The Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, “Major Speeches, 1964-89,” “8/18/80, Ronald Reagan’s Speech at the VFW Convention, Chicago, IL,” accessed February 28, 2014, http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/reference.

58 One particularly egregious example may be how from 1984 to 2000 Virginia celebrated Robert E. Lee, Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson, and Martin Luther King, Jr. together on an incongruously combined “Lee-Jackson-King Day.” The commonwealth continues to commemorate these heroes on the same day, but with one celebration for the two Confederate generals and another, separate one for the American civil-rights leader.

CHAPTER III: MYTH INFORMS ACTION
NARRATIVE’S CONTRIBUTION TO THE WAR ON TERROR


11 Scheuer, Imperial Hubris.


14 The Washington Post, “Text: President Bush Addresses the Nation.”


17 For an excellent analysis of declassified US documents on this topic and what they indicate in way of a decision to invade Iraq, or the absence of one in the deliberative sense, see The George Washington University’s The National Security Archive, accessed March 21, 2014, http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB328/. Also, recall here charges against British MI6 that it inserted unfounded reporting into a briefing dossier for PM Blair on the case for war against Iraq in an effort to, as some put it at the time “sex it up,” because a US decision to invade had already been made. See UK Parliament website, accessed March 21, 2014, http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmhansrd/vo060719/halltext/60719h0352.htm.

18 In a September 8, 2002 interview with CNN’s Wolf Blitzer, then-National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice said in reference to Saddam’s suspected WMD arsenal, “The problem here is that there will always be some uncertainty about how quickly he can acquire nuclear weapons. But we don't want the


20 For the referenced spy fiction, see any number of stories of a crazed techno-genius in his remote lair, armed with a weapon of tremendous power, and ready to unleash it on the terrorized world—from Ian Fleming’s Dr. No to Mike Myers’s Dr. Evil. Regarding the latter, it has been widely reported that Bush enjoyed getting laughs with his Dr. Evil imitation; see Robert Draper, Dead Certain: The Presidency of George W. Bush (New York: Free Press, 2007), 88 and 286, as well as a video clip of the imitation itself during Bush’s May 15, 2008 interview with Politico’s Mike Allen on Youtube, accessed March 21, 2014, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8hmz6DVpzOs. For the argument of the ultimate irrelevance of whether or not Saddam had reconstituted his WMD programs, see Paul R. Pillar, “Intelligence, Policy, and the War in Iraq.” Foreign Affairs 85, no. 2 March/April 2006, 15-28. Pillar, now retired from Georgetown University’s faculty, was at the time of the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq the Director of Central Intelligence’s National Intelligence Officer for the Near East and South Asia, and as such was responsible for coordinating the US intelligence community’s analysis on Iraq. One might safely presume the assessment presented in his article figured in some fashion in the intelligence that was reaching senior policymakers at the time (much like was probably the case with Michael Scheuer’s book, mentioned above). Still, it does not appear to have informed these policymakers’ views and judgments as much as did popular myth.


22 For more on this lack of any operational link between Saddam and anti-US terrorist groups, see Warren P. Strobel, “CIA review finds no evidence Saddam had ties to Islamic terrorists,” Knight Ridder Newspapers, October 4, 2004, and Pillar, “Intelligence, Policy, and the War in Iraq.” Strobel’s article is clear that senior administration officials were aware of this information. My comment above on the likelihood that Pillar’s analysis was available to US policymakers obtains here as well.

23 For more on this claim, see United States Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Tora Bora Revisited: How We Failed to Get Bin Ladin and Why it Matters Today (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 2009).

24 For more on these non-military efforts and their successes and necessity, see The 9/11 Commission Report, 71-107 and 361-428.

25 For more on these early forms of water torture, their use in these conflicts, and the reactions they have provoked, see David Lederer, “The Myth of the All-Destructive War: Afterthoughts on German Suffering, 1618–1648,” German History 29, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 380-403 and Daniel A. Rezneck, “Roosevelt was right: Waterboarding wrong,” Politico, October 31, 2007. Indeed, the US Army, drawing from its experience with the technique in the Philippines, has characterized waterboarding as a form of torture and has forbidden its personnel from employing this interrogation method ever since.


27 Alan Dershowitz, Why Terrorism Works (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009). All quotations in this paragraph are from Chapter 4 (“The Case For Torturing the Ticking Bomb Terrorist”), specifically 134-9.
28 Ibid.


34 Ibid.

35 Indeed, the shorthand among CIA analysts for this type of questionable information that may fill in some holes in the inquiry, but takes it in wrong directions to mistaken conclusions is “Frog DNA,” taken from the film “Jurassic Park” (Kathleen Kennedy and Gerald R. Molen, prod., Jurassic Park, film, directed by Steven Spielberg (Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 1993)). In that story, missing sequences in recovered dinosaur DNA are filled in with frog DNA to allow for the prehistoric beasts to be resurrected, but the introduced information causes the creatures not to remain sterile, as intended, but to become capable of reproduction and, thus, prompting the entire enterprise’s downfall and a mortal threat to all involved.

36 For one look at such claims, see Praveen Swami, “Bush claims supporting waterboarding backed by intelligence officials,” The Telegraph, November 9, 2010.


38 “Khalid Sheikh Mohammed’s ‘31 Plots,’” BBC, March 15, 2007. Other intelligence officials with access to much the same classified information have made counter claims. Again, see Kiriakou and Ruby, The Reluctant Spy.

39 Most of the detainees were captured in counterinsurgency, not counterterrorism, operations, however unconfirmed press reports indicate that at least one, Mandel al-Jamadi, was taken into custody by US Navy SEALs serving in the joint counterterrorist task force that was operating in Iraq, and apparently died at the prison at the hands of his interrogators. See Seth Hettena, “Reports Detail Abu Ghraib Prison Death; Was it Torture?,” Associated Press, February 17, 2005.


 CHAPTER IV: ACTION RE-INFORMS MYTH
THE WAR ON TERROR SHAPES ITS OWN NARRATIVE


2 In this chapter I will touch on several examples of culture that will connect to and support my argument about how just as narrative explanations inform analytic understandings of events, these understandings feed back into the narrative explanations and tailor them to continue playing their informative role. I will not, however, delve too deeply into any single example of cultural narrative, as the focus of the examination is on the breadth and power of this mutually informative process in the context of a specific security studies topic—the War on Terror—not on any specific cultural studies topic. Commentary, television, film, video games, or popular music (in the order I use these media forms in this chapter as examples of the war’s effects on culture) might allow for an interesting and otherwise worthwhile subject for a fuller examination, but not here. Again, this effort at hand aims to offer a cultural studies approach to a security studies subject. To shift either the approach or the subject would take the inquiry in an unintended and discursive direction.


5 For more on Japanese suicide attacks and popular understandings of them in the United States and Japan, see Robin L. Riley, Kamikaze Attacks of World War II: A Complete History of Japanese Suicide Strikes on American Ships, by Aircraft and Other Means (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010) and Kamikaze,

6 For details of the efforts and memories of Rudolf Christoph Freiherr von Gersdorff, Axel Freiherr von dem Bussche-Streithorst, and Eberhard von Breitenbuch, among other suicide-bomb plotters against Hitler, see Roger Moorehouse, Killing Hitler (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006).


8 Robert Pape, Dying to Win (New York: Random House, 2005). Pape also has made similar claims about the motivations of suicide bombers in the Iraqi civil war; see Robert Pape and James K. Feldman, Cutting the Fuse: The Explosion of Global Suicide Terrorism and How to Stop It (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).


12 Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson, “Who Carries Out Suicide Bombings?” npr.org, accessed April 15, 2014, http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=18310289. Also, according to the report, these Afghan bombers were “not celebrated like their counterparts in other Arab nations. Afghan bombers are not featured on posters or in videos as martyrs.”


17 Peter Johnson, “Homicide bomber vs. suicide bomber,” USA Today, April 15, 2014.


19 The country’s memory of war has certainly figured into this circumstance, and that includes the memories of the present war as it continues. The War on Terror’s currency precludes, however, the same types of recollection and remembrance that obtain for previous conflicts, as they are functions not only of
memory, but also of memorialization, which occurs and influences in longer hindsight. This process is starting for the War on Terror—witness, for instance, the monuments at New York’s Ground Zero, next to the Pentagon in northern Virginia, and near Shanksville, PA and the thoughts and emotions they are intended to prompt and nurture—but it is too early to tell where it might lead in a way consistent with what we see having proceeded from earlier wars’ memorializing. Similarly, tracing the emergence of any meaningful, memory-conveying archetypes from the War on Terror would be an exercise in speculation while the conflict is so fresh and still ongoing. Whether this war produces prototypical cultural embodiments along the lines of the drugged-out, PTSDed Vietnam War vet who struggles and fails to cope with the post-war civilian world—say, perhaps the coddled, never-in-danger contractor who enriches himself via the sacrifices of those who truly risk and suffer and at the expense of a government too casual and over-generous with the tax-payers’ money—remains to be seen.


21 For details of the programs mentioned here, see J.J. Abrams, creator, Alias, TV series, starring Jennifer Garner, Michael Vartan et al. (New York: ABC, 2006); Joel Surnow and Robert Cochrane, creators, 24, TV series, starring Kiefer Sutherland, Mary Lynn Rajskub et al. (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox Television, 2001-10, 2014); and Howard Gordon and Alex Gansa, developers, Homeland, TV series, starring Claire Danes, Damian Lewis, et al. (New York: Showtime, 2011).

22 For more on how unrealistic elements—specifically, but not exclusively, torture—are understood by the producer, writers, and others involved in the show 24 as both departing from reality and crucial to the program’s dramatic narrative and commercial success, see Jane Mayer, “Whatever it Takes: The Politics of the man behind ‘24,’” The New Yorker, February 19, 2007.


26 The first group had been known as Jama’at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (“The Group of Monotheism and Jihad”), but changed its name to Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn (“The Organization of Jihad’s Base in the Country of the Two Rivers”) when it came under Zarqawi’s command. For more on Al-Qaeda in Syria, also known as the al-Nusra Front, or Jabhat an-Nusra li-Ahl ash-Shâm (“The Support Front for the People of Levant”), see “Islamist group claims Syria bombs ‘to avenge the Sunnis.’” Al Arabiya, March 21, 2012. For the proliferation of groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and Al-Qaeda itself, see John Rollins, coord., Al Qaeda and Affiliates: Historical Perspective, Global Presence, and Implications for U.S. Policy (Washington: Congressional Research Service, February 5, 2010) and “Al-Qaeda announces a branch in India,” The Washington Post, September 4, 2014. For the


28 Ibid.

29 The Washington Post, “Text: President Bush Addresses the Nation.”

30 J.J. Abrams, creator, Alias; Joel Surnow and Robert Cochrane, creators, 24; Howard Gordon and Alex Gansa, developers, Homeland.

31 This is despite the fact that Alias, with the most fantastic of all the storylines, received production assistance from the CIA. See Tricia Jenkins, The CIA in Hollywood: How the Agency Shapes Film and Television (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2013), 106.


33 For details of the films mentioned here, see Kathryn Bigelow et al., prod., Zero Dark Thirty, film, directed by Kathryn Bigelow (Culver City, CA: Columbia Pictures, 2012); Michael Nozik et al., prod., Syriana, film, directed by Stephen Gaghan (Los Angeles: Warner Brothers Pictures, 2005); and Trey Parker et al., prod., Team America: World Police, film, directed by Trey Parker (Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures, 2004).

34 Greg Miller et al., “Report alleges CIA misled on interrogation.drone”

35 For details of the films mentioned here, see Michael G. Wilson and Barbara Broccoli, prod., Casino Royale, film, directed by Martin Campbell (London: Eon Productions, 2006); Quantum of Solace, film, directed by Marc Forster (London: Eon Productions, 2008); and Skyfall, film, directed by Sam Mendes (London: Eon Productions, 2012); Christopher Nolan et al., prod., The Dark Knight, film, directed by Christopher Nolan (Los Angeles: Warner Brothers Pictures, 2008); and Marc Canton et al., prod., Land of the Dead, film, directed by George A. Romero (Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 2005).

36 “Sean Connery was the girliest Bond,” Australia: Meeja, December 10, 2012. According to this article, a 2012 study by the researchers at New Zealand’s University of Otago identifies 250 “trivial or severely violent” acts in Quantum of Solace, compared with 109 in 1962’s Dr. No.


38 See gamespot, accessed April 15, 2014, http://www.gamespot.com/misc/top100_pop.html. Not only are many of these first-person-shooter games even bigger sellers in stores near military installations and in post- and base-exchanges, including those in war zones, but some are also produced in official cooperation with US armed forces, which underscores the power of their narrative portrayals and understandings among the warfighters.


40 Birkenstein, Froula, and Randell, Reframing 9/11, 98.
41 See The 9/11 Commission Report, specifically the opening to Chapter 13, where the authors say “Much of the public commentary about the 9/11 attacks has dealt with ‘lost opportunities,’ some of which we reviewed in chapter 11. These are often characterized as problems of ‘watchlisting,’ of ‘information sharing,’ or of ‘connecting the dots.’ In chapter 11 we explained that these labels are too narrow. They describe the symptoms, not the disease.”

42 Ibid.


46 For details, see Charles Roven et al., prod., Batman Begins, film, directed by Christopher Nolan (Los Angeles: Warner Brothers Pictures, 2005) and Christopher Nolan et al, The Dark Knight.


48 For details, see Wilson and Broccoli, Skyfall.


50 For details, see Kevin Fighe, prod., The Avengers, film, directed by Joss Whedon (Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures, 2012). For revelations on the next installment’s plot, see Anthony Breznican, “This week’s cover: Meet the new boss in Marvel’s ‘Avengers: Age of Ultron’,” Entertainment Weekly, July 16, 2014.

51 For a detailed analysis of these connections, including all the quotations in this paragraph, see Jackson, Writing the War on Terrorism, 29-58.

52 For an excellent discussion of this aspect of Batman’s deliverance of this victory, and of the larger theme of Christopher Nolan’s 2008 film as a counterterrorism narrative, see John Ip, “The Dark Knight’s War on Terrorism,” Ohio State Journal of Criminal Law 9, no. 1 (September 2011): 209-29.

53 Alan Jackson, Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)?, Arista Nashville, November 26, 2001; Bruce Springsteen, The Rising, Columbia, July 16, 2002 and Devils & Dust, Columbia, March 28, 2005; Neil Young, Let’s Roll, Reprise, April 9, 2002 and Let’s Impeach the President, Reprise, April 28, 2006; Jackyl, Open Invitation (I Hate You Bin Laden), Shimmer Tone, September 30, 2001; Ray Stevens, Osama Yo’ Mama, Curb, February 12, 2002; Green Day, Wake Me Up When September Ends, Reprise/Warner Bros., June 13, 2005; Cold Play, Violet Hill, Partiphone, EMI, May 9, 2008; and Merle Haggard, America First, Capitol Records Nashville, October 25, 2005. Springsteen’s and Young’s offerings are not narrative extensions, but rather idiosyncratic articulations over time. They do, of course, illustrate specific artists’ shifting views and are not simply different songs from different artists.
CHAPTER V: THE RESHAPED NARRATIVE RE-INFORMS THE WAR AND THE PROCESS CONTINUES.

1 Indeed, when characterizing the threat from al-Qaeda specifically, and terrorism in general, the authors of the 9/11 Commission Report said in a release titled “Reflections on the Tenth Anniversary of the 9/11 Commission Report” that “The threat remains grave, and the trend lines in many parts of the world are pointing in the wrong direction.” See Adam Goldman, “9/11 Commission report authors warn nation of cyberattack threats,” The Washington Post, July 22, 2014.


4 Nick Rivera, “Ten Years Later, Belief in Iraq Connection With 9/11 Still Persists,” themoderatevoice.com, accessed April 25, 2014, http://themoderatevoice.com/121921/ten-years-later-belief-in-iraq-connection-with-911-attack-persists/. The poll found that 38% believe that the United States has found clear evidence in Iraq that Saddam Hussein was working closely with al-Qaeda, 31% believe that Iraq gave substantial support to al-Qaeda but was not involved with the September attacks (while an additional 15% believe that Iraq was directly involved in carrying out the September 11 attacks), 26% believe that Iraq had WMDs just before the Iraq War, and 16% believe that WMDs were found in Iraq. In making his case that such beliefs may be diminishing but persistent, Rivera cites a Newsweek poll from 2007 that found that 41% of Americans still believed that Saddam Hussein’s regime was directly involved in financing, planning or carrying out the terrorist attacks on 9/11 and an August 2003 Washington Post poll that found that 69% of Americans believed that Saddam Hussein was personally involved in the September 11 attack.

5 Dick Cheney and Liz Cheney, “The Truth About Iraq and Why it Matters,” The Weekly Standard, July 21, 2014. The full quotation is “It is undisputed and has been confirmed repeatedly in Iraqi government documents captured after the invasion, that Saddam had deep, longstanding, far-reaching relationships with terrorist organizations, including al Qaeda and its affiliates.” For a useful and thorough refutation of this claim, including relevant citations from The 9/11 Commission Report, former Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet’s memoir, the Institute of Defense Analysis’ report “Saddam and Terrorism,” and other sources, see Glenn Kessler, “Claims of Saddam’s ‘far-reaching’ ties to al-Qaeda are a stretch,” The Washington Post, July 20, 2014.


8 I was a CIA officer serving in NCTC when both these groups were established. For more on NCTC’s Radicalization and Extremist Messages Group, see nctc.gov, accessed May 7, 2014, http://www.nctc.gov/overview.html. For Congressional Research Service concerns over NCTC’s ability to focus aggressively on this issue, see Federation of American Scientists, fas.org, accessed May 7, 2014, http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/intel/R41022.pdf. For an interesting sociological study of NCTC analysts, including how the intelligence community deals with the topic of terrorist radicalization, by a former member of NCTC’s Radicalization and Extremist Messages Group, see Bridget R. Nolan, “Information Sharing and Collaboration in the United States Intelligence Community: an Ethnographic Study of the National Counterterrorism Center” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2013). Interestingly, NCTC Director Michael Leiter claimed that when current CIA Director John Brennan was counterterrorism
director at the NSC and, therefore, one of the senior counterterrorist decision makers receiving this finished intelligence, Brennan was not particularly focused on the issue of radicalization. See Karen DeYoung, “A CIA veteran transforms U.S. counterterrorism policy,” The Washington Post, October 24, 2012.


13 The Global War on Terrorism Service Medal is awarded to service members whether deployed or not.


17 Michael Hastings, “The Runaway General,” Rolling Stone, July 8, 2010. The song’s reference is less obvious than the “Team America” one, but, having served as a reserve officer with the Command and sung this song myself with fellow JSOCers, I believe I recognize it as a version of the film’s title song (“America, Fuck Yeah!”) with the word “Afghanistan” substituted for “America.”


20 Ibid., 186.

21 Ibid., 209. As mentioned in Chapter III, waterboarding (or variations thereof) has been around for centuries and has long been considered a form of torture. Indeed, a US Army officer who used the technique on prisoners during the Philippine Insurrection and a Japanese officer who did the same with an American


23 Errol Morris, prod., The Unknown Known, film, written and directed by Errol Morris (Telluride, CO: Telluride Film Festival, 2013).


26 Speaking of what he thinks prompted Sen. Feinstein to oversee and produce the SSCI report, Hayden said on Fox News: “That motivation for the report may show deep emotional feeling on the part of the senator, but I don’t think it leads you to an objective report.” See Joan McCarter, “Former CIA director Hayden: Feinstein just too ‘emotional’ to objectively deal with torture,” Daily Kos, April 7, 2014.


31 Mayer, “Whatever it Takes.”

32 For one example of these authorities’ defense, see Alana Goodman, “Tom Cotton Defends NSA, Drone Strikes,” The Washington Free Beacon, September 10, 2013.

33 Again, see The 9/11 Commission Report; George and Bruce, Analyzing Intelligence; McLaughlin, “Misplaced fear of the NSA”; and other authoritative views.


37 Ibid.

38 Ibid. for all the data and quotations in this paragraph.


40 McLaughlin, “Misplaced fear of the NSA.” I am also indebted to this article and its author for calling attention to the Senate Commerce Committee report and its findings.


42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.


46 It is important to note here that the decision to abandon the enhanced interrogation program was not the subject of any identifiable review, but a position Obama took in his 2008 campaign. Also, a promise to close the detention center at Guantanamo Bay was abandoned not because of a changed security review, but because of Congress’s expressed but unassessed concern over the danger of trying suspects in American courts vs. keeping suspects in open-ended lock-up in Cuba. How much of this concern owes more to narrative than to examination and analysis is a worthy subject to consider.

47 The idea of a conflict lasting so long and extending into so many areas and episodes that it approximates open-ended war is an intriguing one that may defy common narrative understanding in one sense, but in another may simply fold itself into a “new normal” and become part of a business-as-usual perception of the status quo. For instance, few if any observers at the time probably saw the series of clashes over the French crown between the houses of Plantagenet and Valois and their various allies in the 14th and 15th centuries as anything but discrete actions, campaigns, and conflicts that characterized that aspect of their world. It was later historians, from their perspectives, knowledge, and understandings, who conflated these clashes into the Hundred Years War. Similarly, in more recent literary treatment, science-fiction author Joe Haldeman explored the idea of an inter-stellar and inter-species “Forever War,” but even that conflict ended—albeit after over a thousand years—in concert with narratological convention. See Joe Haldeman, The Forever War (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1974).


49 One recent USA Today/Pew Research Center poll published in January 2014 shows public opinion forming in this way. See Susan Page, “Poll: Grim assessment of wars in Iraq, Afghanistan,” USA Today, January 31, 2014. According to the article, “On Iraq, Americans by 52%-37% say the United States mostly failed to achieve its goals. That is a decidedly more negative view than in November 2011, when U.S. combat troops withdrew. Then, by 56%-33%, those surveyed said the U.S. had mostly succeeded. On Afghanistan, Americans by a nearly identical 52%-38% say the U.S. has mostly failed to achieve its goals. In 2011, a month after Osama bin Laden was killed, a majority predicted the war would succeed. ‘What is
especially interesting about these responses is that the public has continued to update its views on Iraq and Afghanistan despite the fact that these wars have received virtually no attention at all from our politicians over the past couple of years,’ said Christopher Gelpi, a political scientist at Ohio State University who has studied attitudes toward the conflicts. ‘This shows that the public is more attentive to costly wars than we might expect, even when politicians try to ignore the conflicts.’


51 Ibid., 195-6.


55 Brett Logiurato, “JOHN McCAIN: We Won Iraq — And Obama Lost It,” Business Insider, June 14, 2014. McCain went on to say that “If we had left a residual force behind, we would not be facing the crisis we are today. Those are fundamental facts,” which might have led to some analytic explanations, understandings, and insights. Instead, he followed and ended with “The fact is, we had the conflict won,” which returned to the narrative rather than followed up with any worthwhile analysis.

56 For more on this, see David Nakamura, “With measured tones, Obama makes the case for a new war,” The Washington Post, September 24, 2014.

57 For more, see Al Kamen, with Colby Itkowitz, “In the Loop: Killing without offending,” The Washington Post, October 15, 2014.

58 This may present problems from legal to narratological. For more, see Karen DeYoung, “In U.S. fight vs. Islamic State, words matter,” The Washington Post, October 7, 2014.

CHAPTER VI: THE SYMBIOSIS OF MYTH AND THE WAR ON TERROR
EVALUATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

1 This kind of approach and most of its measures should be familiar to students of applied logic, including lawyers, investigators, and intelligence analysts. Indeed, I have borrowed the basic outline of this section from a seminal work familiar to those in this last field, Richards J. Heuer, Psychology of Intelligence Analysis (Washington: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1999), also available online at www.cia.gov/csi. Other useful works are available on the more specific topic of intelligence analysis in current national security contexts, including Gregory F. Treverton, Intelligence for an Age of Terror (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Richard L. Russell, Sharpening Strategic Intelligence: Why the CIA Gets it Wrong and What Needs to be Done to Get it Right (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and Joshua Rovner, Fixing the Facts: National Security and the Politics of Intelligence (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011). For a specific treatment of cultural inertia in intelligence and foreign policymaking, including a proposed methodology to account for cultural factors in these enterprises, see Jeannie L. Johnson and Matthew T. Berrett, “Cultural Topography: A New Research
Tool for Intelligence Analysis,” *Studies in Intelligence* 55, no. 2 (Extracts, June 2011): 1-22. This section lays out a version of Heuer’s approach with examples from some of the counterterrorist episodes and circumstances explored in previous chapters.

2 Note, as does Heuer, the wealth of popular adages expressing distrust of second-hand observations (e.g. “Seeing is believing,” “You can prove anything with statistics.” “Don’t believe everything you hear.”) vs. the absence of counterpart axioms supporting the benefits of others’ knowledge and expertise. This obtains despite the fact that few of us could get through the average day—from trusting in our food supply, to manipulating automotive technology on a modern road system, to plying any number of trades or professions, etc.—absent the input of countless people beyond ourselves whose insights and efforts we may typically take for granted. What we may come to believe and internalize in terms of (at least casual) personal or cultural ideations often conflicts with what we might come to think and know with even a bit more effort.

3 For one among many worthy accounts of what eventually became known as the Muhammad Atta episode—including the initial reporting, its later debunking and withdrawal, and Cheney’s persistent belief in it—see Mark Hosenball “Atta in Prague,” *Newsweek*, September 13, 2006.

4 For more on this, see Kuhn’s seminal work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).


6 As in this chapter’s previous section, I am indebted to Heuer and again have borrowed the fundamentals of his approach in *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis* for use here. In this case, however, rather than illustrating the discussion with examples from the War on Terror, I am instead tying it to previous chapters’ exploration of the role of myth in human explanation and understanding.

7 Our English word deriving from the Ancient Greek ἀναλύως (análusis), in turn from ἀναλύω (analûô, “I unravel, investigate”), from ἀνά (aná, “on, up”) + λύω (líô, “I loosen”).

8 It is useful to recall here the oft-paraphrased observation of George Box, British mathematician and influential thinker in the areas of experiment design, time-series analysis, and Bayesian inference: “Essentially, all models are wrong, but some are useful.” See G.E.P. Box and N.R. Draper, *Empirical Model Building and Response Surfaces* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1987), 224.

9 Analysis of competing hypotheses, scenario building, and identification of alternative futures are tried-and-true methods in the field of intelligence analysis. They are raised briefly here not as original answers to the question of how best to think about security problems and how to solve them, but more as examples of how the best methods of analysis make the best use of narrative’s role in human ideation.

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