

War Narratives

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Abstract

The characteristic political response to events of the magnitude of September 11, 2001 is to adopt a story that offers a degree of explanation. The plausibility of the explanation — its capacity to encourage a course of action that society would otherwise be reluctant to follow — turns on the presence of certain narrative principles. This paper argues that to understand September 11 as an act of war is to be persuaded by a narrative, communicated through various genres — official and otherwise — but always exhibiting the same principles. There is a kind of instinctive appetite for these organising principles and a strong inclination to be contented when they are found. War narratives have a trajectory that is accompanied by an emotional progression. To be persuasive, a particular war narrative must also resonate with prototypical or archetypal themes. The military solution proposed by the September 11 war narrative depends for its dramatic force upon the many war narratives which have preceded it, and of which it is the most recent chapter.

Résumé

La réponse politique qui suit un évènement de la magnitude des attaques du 11 septembre 2001, est typiquement d'adopter une narrative qui offre à certain degré d'explication. La plausibilité de telle explication — sa capacité à encourager le cours d'une action qu'une société aurait normalement du mal à suivre — s'articule autour de la présence de certains principes de narration. Cet article explique que pour comprendre 'le 11 septembre' comme un acte de guerre, c'est comme être persuadé par une narrative, communiquée à travers divers genres — officiels ou autres — mais répondant toujours aux mêmes principes. Il existe une sorte d'appétit instinctif pour ces principes directeurs et une forte inclination à s'en contenter une fois qu'on les a trouvés. Les narratives de guerre possèdent une trajectoire accompagnée par une progression émotionnelle. Afin d'être persuasive, une narrative de guerre donnée doit trouver une résonance dans des thèmes de prototypes ou d'archétypes. La force dramatique de la solution militaire proposée par la narrative de guerre du '11 septembre' dépend des nombreuses narratives de guerre qui l'ont précédée, et pour lesquelles cette nouvelle narrative représente le chapitre le plus récent.

Resumen

La respuesta característica política a raíz de los eventos de la magnitud del 11 de septiembre de 2001 es la de adoptar una historia que ofrece un grado de explicación. La verisimilitud de la explicación, su capacidad de fomentar un curso de acción que la sociedad de otra manera estaría reacia a proseguir, da inicio a la presencia de ciertos principios de la narrativa. Este artículo, sostiene que para comprender al 11 de septiembre como un acto de guerra es la de ser persuadido por una narrativa, comunicada a través de varios géneros — tanto oficial como de otras formas — pero siempre presentando los mismos principios. Hay un tipo de apetito instintivo hacia estos principios organizativos y una inclinación fuerte de sentirse satisfecho cuando son hallados. Las narrativas de guerra tienen una trayectoria que son acompañadas por una progresión emotiva. Para ser persuasivas, una particular narrativa de guerra también debe resonar con temas prototípicos y arquetípicos. La solución militar propuesta por la narrativa de guerra del 11 de

septiembre depende de su fuerza dramática sobre las muchas narrativas de guerra que le han precedido y de la cual representa el más reciente capítulo.

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Introduction

Occasionally, the stage curtains behind which the business of society is transacted are parted sufficiently to afford a clearer view of the role played by symbolic stories in shaping the surface events and directions of our collective life. These generally shadowy influences can materialise in moments of social challenge — like calls to greater effort and sacrifice, or acceptance of a course of action that many would ordinarily be reluctant to adopt. An example is the attempted justification of war and the attempt to secure support for it, through the medium of a persuasive story, or what is called a ‘war narrative’. Today, war narratives are important both for the potential support they lend to the so-called ‘war on terror’ and because they act as ‘cultural prisms’, refracting values, sentiments and shared stories of enduring significance to people.

Long before the events of 9/11, it had been observed that ‘terrorism is theatre’ (Jenkins 1974) and, to paraphrase Shakespeare, all the world’s a stage but one on which day-to-day theatricality is ‘embedded in media’ (Aoun 2004). The media have become a stage for dramatic contest over the higher moral ground on terrorism and counter-terrorism issues. The theatrical presentation of people, events and outcomes is a major component of the ‘war on terror’. Unless we take this aspect into account, we cannot really assess the reasonableness or otherwise of the terrorism counter-measures of unprecedented scope and severity that have recently been adopted in many countries, including Australia, shaking long-assumed foundations of our civil society.

A characteristic human response to changes of such magnitude is to try to make sense of them by means of a story that offers a degree of explanation. The plausibility of that explanation may turn, in part, on the presence of certain characteristics that have been found generally to constitute a *good story*. The most straightforward of these characteristics is the logical ordering of a storyline, but a narrative may also borrow credence and strength from two other sources: the emotions that accompany the satisfying progress of a story; and its links to archetypal or classic stories which we share as a people and with which a particular narrative resonates. Thus it is possible to question whether an account of events — like how we came to be at war — makes a ‘good story’ *judged at the level of storytelling*. The focus on this occasion is the justificatory narrative promulgated by the US and Australian governments in support of the actions that have been taken, and our first step is to consider that account in the light of what is known about the elements of a persuasive story and a persuadable audience.

Elements of a persuasive narrative

One common characteristic of persuasive stories is that they weave events into an intelligible whole, a common basis of such unity being the causal connection between events, or what is commonly encompassed by the concept of *plot*. But that is not the only way in which a story can achieve coherence and explanatory force (Velleman 2002). Organising principles of other kinds can imbue a story with the same qualities. There are three such organising principles that recently have been the subject of sophisticated research by cognitive psychologists and students of artificial intelligence. The first refers to the trajectory of the story, the second to an accompanying emotional progression, and the third to resonance between the particular story and prototypical narratives of the culture or society:

1. *A narrative must move forward*, not only in the sense of telling one event after another, but also in the sense of approaching — or at least seeming to approach — some conclusion to those events, ‘some terminus, finish or closure’.

2. *At the level of feeling, the process just described involves movement from an initial emotion to an essentially concluding one.* The point is not that a particular emotional outcome must be reached, but that an emotional cadence should be attained.
3. *The narrative fits into established general story schemas.* Put simply, common story types and themes are so ingrained in people's minds by their repetition in society that we tend to frame reality based on these archetypes (Baseman, 2006). One way in which we understand events is by assimilating them to familiar archetypal scenarios, or what are called *story skeletons* or the bare bones of a widely shared prototypical story (Sillars and Gronbeck 2001). Someone bent on persuading others to a course of action can improve the prospects of doing so by couching their interpretation of reality in ways that fit accepted story types, thereby making their vision more appealing to an audience. Schank (1990) says that making the connections with already familiar stories is facilitated by many words or phrases that index complex stories, and thereby help to standardise particular situations. A word like 'heroism' and phrases like 'defence of our nation' or, in the case of Australia, military mythology encompassed by an 'ANZAC tradition' that originated in a thwarted invasion of Turkey in 1915, are relevant examples for our present purposes. The primary organising principle is the gist of stories (such as 'avenging a wrongdoing') and not just their narrative structure.

War narratives

Governments have long attempted, with varying success, to generate a compelling story that 'makes sense' of the demands placed on those they govern, especially in times of war (Vlahos 2006). Intuitively, governments have used an existing *vocabulary of emotion* to enable an audience to assimilate events to familiar patterns. The sequence of emotions through which a successful story leads its audience is invariably a familiar one, and by the conclusion of the tale an audience knows how it feels about the series of events in its entirety. A cycle of events starting with the ceremonial farewelling of 'our brave defenders', continuing with 'messages of support from home' and official 'appreciation rituals' at the front line, and finally the 'welcome home to heroes' ceremonies helps to align feelings to patterns well established in our collective psyche. This emotional resolution can confer credibility on a story that might otherwise be withheld on a strictly rational reading of the narrative. Governments have also employed general schemas, or 'story skeletons', into which various particular stories or events can fit. For example, specific rationales for warfare can be subsumed by a 'brave warrior' tradition, such as the ANZAC legend within Australia. That is to say, citizens can be encouraged to understand events by assimilating them to familiar scenarios.

In summary, a good story needs to marshal causal elements and the deeply embedded qualities of persuasive narratives into an intelligible whole. By this standard, what types of war narratives have been generated so far in this century by the American and Australian Governments, and how credible and persuasive are their stories?

Post-9/11 stories

To start with the general picture, since 9/11, a narrative has emerged in many countries — including Australia — focused on a 'war on terror'. While the idea of a 'war on terror' is just a link in a chain of similar metaphorical devices that have been used from time to time, an unusual feature so far as the responses to the events of 9/11 were concerned was the absence of the usual

‘gestation period’ (Callahan, Dubnick and Olshfski 2006). Until September 2001, there was no substantial ‘storyline’ in the popular press or from government about a war on terror.

Frequently, a war narrative emphasises a bipolar divide of some kind: a dichotomous representation of the international scene, a global clash between two antagonistic forces that invariably carry with them a moral identity. The September 11 Commission (National Commission 2004) reported that America faced a new enemy, Islamic terrorism, a definition that is highly compatible with a dichotomous representation of the international scene. In the process of identifying enemies, alternative interpretations of the meaning of 9/11 were pushed to one side. Those who perpetrated the events of 9/11 were characterised totally in terms of an evil ideology: ‘They are the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the twentieth century.’ (Bush 2001)

Such a declaration, obviously made in a moment of great collective distress, nonetheless identifies ideology as the threat and force as the only appropriate response. ‘Enemies’, so conceived, must be defeated rather than transformed. And that narrative has proved resilient to both the passage of time and misfortune. In August 2006, President Bush declared: ‘The war we fight today is more than a military conflict; it is the decisive ideological struggle of the 21st century.’ (Reynolds 2006)

The casting of the ‘war’ in these terms needs to be understood as a species of political rhetoric. Those who have analysed war oratory identify it as a rhetorical hybrid, combining the qualities of what Aristotle called *deliberative discourse* arguments to justify the expediency or practicality of an action, and *epideictic* rhetoric, appeals that unify the country and amplify its virtues. In the wake of the 9/11 attack, President Bush’s speeches were largely in epideictic terms. His comment that ‘Adversity introduces us to ourselves’ focused on character past while hinting at a character test to come. By emphasising *who* and *why* questions above other considerations, the president crafted the characterisation of al-Qaeda (Murphy 2003). Terrorists acted as they did because character drove them: ‘They could not be reasoned with [and] they attacked us because that was what rabid murderers do.’ In a mere 48 hours (September 11–13), transcendence of the attacks moved from ‘an assault on our country’ to ‘we will rid the world of evil’ (Smith 2005).

Commentator Michael Vlahos (2006) aligns President Bush’s emphasis on ‘ideological struggle’ with what he terms the first transformation of the war narrative. Initially, the war on terrorism derived from a simple story skeleton of ‘righteous retribution’, which was transformed into another story skeleton, a ‘fight against the Axis of Evil’. ‘This represented a transmutation from ‘terrorist’ enemy to the image of an evil league of enemy powers, and thus the entire significance of the war was elevated. The war could now be given a commanding meaning equal to the mythic claim of World War II itself.’ By positioning al-Qaeda with past enemies, a comparison was drawn between the past mission to defeat the evils of Nazism and present dangers, thereby obliging the present generation to honour their predecessors’ tradition by committing themselves to the defeat of terrorists and their supporters (Baseman 2006).

While the foregoing highlights aspects of the war narrative that help to marshal support for it, there remains the issue of the credibility of the person or persons who carry its message. Kenneth Burke’s (1969) pentad of concepts for analysing the elements of a story provides a window on the structure of a speaker’s motives. Of the five terms — Agent, Act, Scene, Purpose and Agency (the who, what, where, why and how of a story) — one can often be identified as the organising element by which the others are given meaning (Baseman 2006). That potential of Burke’s pentad has been taken further by some scholars in showing how skilled message

presenters can appeal to the dominance of *scene* to absolve them of any responsibility for what has happened or might happen. The framing of policy as an obligation casts it in a scene-dominant light. You cannot be blamed for outcomes when you had no choice but to act the way you did: ‘This nation fights reluctantly, because we know the cost and we dread the days of mourning that always come.’ (Bush 2003) The appeal to obligation lies in the fact that there is no choice: we have to act. Obligation rhetoric can put a leader in a position of limited future liability while retaining the potential for praise for having recognised the obligation and observing its dictates (Baseman 2006).

Sustained failure and the ‘Long War’

With sustained failure to achieve control in Iraq, the war narrative has undergone a further incarnation. The ‘Long War’ has been unveiled and accompanied by an expanded rhetoric of the ruinous global consequences of failure to be victorious. President Bush has spoken of the Long War as ‘the unfolding of a global ideological struggle, our time in history. The enemy is not only powerful, a great evil, it is also a mortal danger to all humanity’, the ‘enemy of civilisation’ (Bush 2006). By the very extremeness of the imagery employed, this version of the war narrative has a high potential for galvanising collective action — subject to its fulfilling the requirements of a good, persuasive narrative.

The fulfilment or otherwise of those narrative requirements will be considered in the analysis of Australia’s ‘war on terror’ which follows, but there are some inherent difficulties in the American story that warrant brief comment. The major one is assimilating the story of what is envisaged to World War II, which ran a definite course and had its V-Day as opposed to conflict enduring for ‘generations’. On the present evidence of events in Iraq, the war on terrorism implicitly translates into what Vlahos (2006) calls ‘a slow bleeding vision of forever war’. From whence does the recipient of the war narrative derive a sense of movement towards ‘some terminus, finish or closure’? What previously experienced emotional scenarios does the recipient draw upon to ‘place’ and make emotional sense of a story of continuous suffering without any foreseeable conclusion?

Then there is the question of the successful or otherwise *staging* of the war narrative. An excellent analysis of this aspect of the conflict has been made by Kamiya (2007), who begins by acknowledging that George W. Bush is a master of staging with his ‘Mission Accomplished’ landing on an aircraft carrier being worthy of Cecil B. DeMille. Showbusiness has always been an essential part of ruling people. However, in the era of George W. Bush, a world of virtual reality has threatened to eclipse empirical investigation. In the introduction to his book *The Greatest Story Ever Sold*, Rich (2006) quotes a White House aide who declared ‘the reality-based community’ of broadcasters and newspapers to be ‘old hat’ in an era where ‘we create our own reality’. No expense is spared, no visual detail overlooked. Bumiller (2003) reports specialist White House staff choreographed every aspect of the ‘Mission Accomplished’ event, even to the members of the aircraft crew arrayed in coordinated shirt colours over Mr Bush’s right shoulder. The speech was timed for what image-makers call ‘magic hour light’ which cast a golden glow on the president. One member of the image team commented: ‘If you looked at the TV picture, you saw there was flattering light on his left cheek and slight shadowing on his right. It looked great.’ (Bumiller 2003) This care illustrates the image team’s understanding that ‘what’s around the head is just as important as the head’. But stagecraft can only serve you so long in the face of an overwhelming reality. As Kamiya (2007) puts it: ‘Bush wanted his Iraq war to be a lofty Shakespearean history. He got a vicious, corpse-strewn revenge tragedy ...’

Australian war narrative

The arguments in favour of Australia going to war with Iraq overlapped with some aspects of America's war narrative, but the foreign policy language showed little of Bush's moral universalism (Gyngell 2003–04): 'Instead, the arguments offered in favour of Australia's involvement were almost all functional and national.' From time to time, there are echoes of Bush's rhetoric such as the prime minister's references to our 'proud history of defending freedom against its enemies' (Howard, 2006). However, the main emphasis was on Saddam Hussein posing a threat to Australian security interests, underlined by his alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction, and this line was largely emulated by Australian cabinet ministers.

Gradually, as noted by Kampmark (2004), the emphasis shifted to the emancipation of Iraq and its people. The Australian soldier became a symbol of the dissemination of liberty, an element of the rhetoric of ANZAC. John Howard proclaimed at the ANZAC Day march in Canberra (Howard 2003b) that 'They went in our name in a just cause to do good things to liberate a people. They are part of a great tradition of honourable service by the Australian military forces'. Hitherto, the Australian government's actions could be interpreted as manifesting the Liberal Party's tradition of 'foreign policy realism', the pursuit of security by a small country by forming an alliance with a more powerful one — *a great and powerful friend*.

With the collapse of the Weapons of Mass Destruction rationale, legitimization of the war called for a new framework. The former prime minister was in the habit of praising aspects of Australian identity, including 'mateship', connection with the land and sporting prowess. However, first place among such attributes would be occupied by the ANZAC tradition (Smith 2006). There has been a tendency for governments generally to invoke the tradition when taking difficult decisions, especially when war is being contemplated (Howe 1995). The effect has been to cast dissent as 'un-Australian'. The very act of defining a set of special control measures and military campaigns as a 'war on terror' brings the ANZAC legend to bear on popular thinking (Smith 2006).

ANZAC themes have been deployed in recent years, particularly by using the time-honoured theatre of troop-farewell and welcome-home events to blend the efforts of those fighting in Iraq and those who have fought in past wars within a common theme of valour. The rhetorical strategy took on the character of a liberation discourse framed as a humanitarian narrative. As McKenna says:

All wars become one. The distinction between the volunteer citizen soldier, the conscript and the professional soldier is lost ... The specific political, legal and social context of each is forgotten. What matters is not only why we fought but that we fought. Performance, duty and sacrifice above all else ... (McKenna 2003, cited in Smith and Lowe 2005)

In terms of the earlier discussed hallmarks of a credible and persuasive narrative, the Australian war narrative has suffered from many impediments. The first was the short gestation period and a commitment to war that was undertaken in the absence of a link to a deeply felt and widely shared cultural story that invited popular support. Indeed, the societal mood was antagonistic to military engagement, as shown by almost unprecedented turn-outs for oppositional rallies and majorities confirming that opposition in opinion polls. Notwithstanding that climate, the government rushed Australia's involvement in the 'coalition of the willing' by 'forward positioning' our troops before the war narrative had even had time to take root. Apart from wariness about the human and other costs of warfare generally, a well-informed agency (the

UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission) was perceived to be painstakingly assessing the situation.

Thereafter, the war narrative began to resemble a storyline in search of a rationale. In his May 2003 speech from the deck of the aircraft carrier *Abraham Lincoln*, President Bush declared the battle of Iraq was ‘one victory in the war on terror that began on September 11’ (Schoor 2003). By 16 September 2003, Defence Secretary Rumsfeld was stating that he had no reason to believe Saddam Hussein was implicated in the 9/11 attacks. The following day, Mr Bush said ‘we have no evidence that Saddam Hussein was involved with September 11’, but within a week was telling the UN that Iraq was the ‘central front’ in the war against terrorism. Other storyline meanderings followed.

Once Australian troops were actually engaged, an appeal to support our soldiers at war resonated with pre-existing general schemas of the ANZAC mould, a change of attitude reflected in the opinion polls. That is to say, the Australian people were encouraged — with some success — to understand what was happening by assimilating events to familiar scenarios. Increasingly, this version of the war narrative was emphasised, with the implication that any form of dissent amounted to disloyalty to those fighting on our behalf. Opinion surveys showed that a substantial proportion of respondents who had opposed the war before it began, but supported it once the conflict started, attributed their repositioning to a wish to support the troops during wartime. That support diminished once the initial phase of the war had finished (Lewis 2004).

The recent international and national climate of scepticism about the rationale for the Iraq war and the growing conviction that it has already been lost would seem to require a major readjustment to Australia’s war narrative. The continued invocation of the ANZAC tradition is inappropriate. The absence of a compelling linkage to a mythic archetypal story is one consequence of the pragmatic ‘foreign policy realism’ origins of Australia’s involvement in the war. The prime minister continues to remind us that the first duty of government is to ‘protect and defend the nation’s security, its people, its borders, its interests and its values’ (Howard 2007). He has spoken of the need to contribute to security training as a principal means of strengthening the capability of the Iraqi Security Forces. It is noteworthy that, of some 1,575 defence personnel in Iraq, there are just 100 trainers working at various locations (Department of Defence 2007).

That such fragile symbolism should be invoked testifies to more than the audacity of politicians. It says something of the tenacity, the generative power, of the war narrative itself and its capacity to trump evidence-based analysis, at least in the minds and sentiments of significant numbers of people. The war narrative retains some vitality by redefining such basic categories as what it is to win or lose and who the enemy is. The promised outcome seems somewhat akin to those of some advertising — hidden or long-term benefits rather than an ability to address the immediate need.

Nevertheless, the causal connection between events and actions, story and strategy, is in decline. There is no sense of approaching some concluding phase, no sense of attaining an emotional cadence or compatibility with established general story schemas. In these circumstances, some writers find it more productive of insight to view the war as a telling instance of ‘life imitating art.’ Sometimes the focus is on a particular aspect of character or plot such as Huffington’s (2004) ruminations about whether Henry V’s decision to lead an English army into France in 1415 and President Bush’s invasion of Iraq were wars of necessity or wars of choice. Huffington decides the latter to be the case but notes Shakespeare’s apparent unease with the morality of such a decision, reflected in the commoner’s remarks to a disguised Henry:

If the cause be not good, the King himself have a heavy reckoning to make, when all those legs, and arms, and heads, chopped off in a battle, shall join together at a latter day and cry all, 'We died at such a place.'

The major lesson that Huffington draws is that war, by its very nature, is so dehumanising that only actual threats can justify engaging in it. Henry urges his men to 'imitate the action of the tiger ... disguise fair nature with hard-favoured rage'. At the present time, in Huffington's view, the 'shattering of civilised restraint' — the deaths, the torture — is covered over by the pretence that it's 'just a few bad apples' and not the inherent nature of war. He concludes that Shakespeare knew better.

Many of the elements of the Howard government's predicament were explored in Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* (2000). Willy Loman's interpretation of his world turns on appearances and power rather than principles: 'It's not what you do, Ben, it's who you know and the smile on your face.' (2000: 67–68) He remains optimistic about the potential benefits of alliances with powerful figures. His demise is a product of the continuing priority he attaches to impression management over purposeful action. In Australia, this same orientation increasingly appears to dominate some of the control organs of the state and those who manage them. Is it possible that the dramatising of threat is becoming the 'stock in trade' of political roles and social institutions hitherto perceived as performing routine, background regulatory functions?

Nothing in the war narratives developed by the Australian and American governments prepared people for the tragic quagmire the Iraq war has become. A succession of evolving and new storylines has failed the tests of credible and persuasive narratives. Perhaps it is time to craft a 'withdrawal narrative' based on a story skeleton of judicious judgment and worldly acumen. The story of Solomon comes to mind. At the very least, the scribes should reverse that version of the war narrative with which President Bush began and stop treating all dissident forces which employ terrorist means as part of an undifferentiated global manifestation of evil which can only be addressed by military might. As Hastings (2005) has said: 'There should be no 'war on international terror', but rather campaigns tailored to address the nature of differing hostile groups which use terrorist means. Firepower — stealth bombers and tanks — is seldom relevant. A blend of politics, diplomacy, bribery, intelligence, police work and spasmodic special forces deployments is most efficacious' (pp.18-19). The generalised characterisation of our foes as 'terrorists' may be self-serving and allow our politicians to abdicate responsibility for seeking non-military solutions, but it is also a form of deadly political laziness.

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