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The Rhetoric of Perpetual Warfare: A Political Discourse Analysis of the Obama Administration's Legitimation of U.S. Drone Strikes

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The Rhetoric of Perpetual Warfare:
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ABSTRACT

Since 2002, the United States has engaged in a new form of warfare that is not fought by armies or navies but by pilotless aircraft able to conduct surveillance and direct missile strikes across the globe. To date, US military drones have launched hundreds of attacks against locations in Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen (Bureau of Investigative Journalism 2016). During the Obama presidency, a program that began as a strategic alternative to direct military intervention became the dominant means of confronting imminent threats to national security before they came to fruition. Increased reliance upon this new technology has resulted in international criticism (IHRCRC 2012; Amnesty International 2013a). Using a theoretical framework based upon critical discourse analysis, I examine the discursive features employed by President Obama and his advising legal and counterterrorism staff to legitimate the use of drone missile strikes. Taking into account previous research on metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson 2003), legitimation (van Leeuwen 2008; Reyes 2011), and temporal discourse (Dunmire 2011), I examine the political discourse incorporates metaphorical conceptualizations that dehumanize, uses fear to create to discourage regulation of drone strikes and projections of the future to cast the drone program an imperative to national security.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Since 2002, the United States has used remotely piloted aircraft, or drones, to launch missile strikes against targets suspected of being affiliated with al Qaeda and engaging in activity that poses a threat to US national security. Several reviews have been done on the legal arguments supporting the use of force via drones (Gogarty and Hagger 2008; Larson and Malamud 2011; Winter 2011; Blank 2012; Sterio 2012), but there remains a need to critically analyze rhetorical features of the supporting political legitimation. The following analysis of eleven speeches delivered by President Barack Obama and his advising staff of legal and counterterrorism advisors examines discursive features and emphasizes the potential impact these features have on shaping the conceptual models audience members form concerning the use of drone strikes. Through a critical discourse analysis, I found metaphors as well as emotional and temporal language contributed to a strategy of avoiding additional oversight and countering political concerns raised by opponents of the program. The diversion of additional oversight and accountability of the drone program is accomplished through discursive acts of dehumanization, eliciting the fears of victimization and confirming the belief that the threat of future attacks is made all the more likely if restraints are placed on the military capabilities of the state apparatus.

The US drone campaign has had a significant physical impact on communities. Since 2009, there have been over 500 drone strikes carried out against people in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia (Bureau of Investigative Journalism 2016). Additional strikes have taken place in support of military operations in countries such as Afghanistan, which has

been subjected to over an estimated 350 drone strikes. As of 2016, the United States

owns over 7,000 drones, many of which are armed (New America Foundation 2016).

Over 3,500 people have been killed by hundreds of US drone strikes (Center for the

Study of Targeted Killing 2016[1]). Targets of US drone strikes are adherents and affiliates

of al Qaeda that have been identified through multiple intelligence sources to be a

valuable target. High-Value Targets (HVIs) require the authorization under the command

of the executive branch. However, due to the lack of transparency over how each strike

is authorized and carried out, it is impossible to know how often drone operators or their

immediate supervisors are called upon to act immediately in a time sensitive situation in

which a pattern of suspicious behavior has been identified. A number of strikes have

targeted US citizens, either cooperating with or detained by al Qaeda, and innocent

civilians. The loss of innocent life is but one of many public criticisms that have been

waged against the US drone program. Additional scrutiny needs to be placed on exactly

how US drone strikes are authorized and carried out in order to account for the loss of

innocent life and the reliance on drone technology. I believe that in order to do so, we

must focus on the data available to use and focus a lens on the political legitimation of

these strikes through a critical discourse analysis.

      As the US began to increasing rely upon drone strikes, public debate emerged

over the program's strategic effectiveness, ethics and legality (Plaw, Fricker and Colon

2016). Although drone strikes appear to offer short term tactical successes by eliminating

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[1] Drone strike totals for Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen are gathered from multiple sources and
are estimates. Due to the lack of an official repository how many US drone strikes have occurred, I have
relied upon independent datasets that contain links to all news reports, statements, documents and press
releases sourced.

people that threaten the US population or interests, concerns have been raised as to whether tactical successes equate to long-term strategic effectiveness. A *myth of drone effectiveness* began to take hold in which targeting effectiveness comes to imply strategic effectiveness (Boyle 2013). There is nothing to determine whether or not the actions being taken by the US are strategically effective at addressing the sources of extremist violence and this may be by design. Drone technology is purported to be the most effective strategic tool to the United States but there is a lack of transparency on exactly how each of the strikes carried out has led to the complete dismantling of al Qaeda command hierarchy or eliminated their operational capabilities. Lacking any benchmarks of success, the promotion of drones as strategically effective serves merely as an ideological trigger designed to garner public support.

The ethics of the US drone program have been evaluated in terms of just warfare and the legality has been questioned both in terms of international and US domestic law. Others concerns raised include signature strikes, the targeting of Americans, civilian casualties, the lack of oversight and whether the administration has a preference for killing (Plaw, Fricker and Colon 2016). Criticisms of the drone program have been made by foreign and US political officials, international humanitarian organizations and academics (O'Connell 2010; Benjamin 2012; Cohen 2012; Imtiaz 2012; IHRCRC. 2012; Amnesty International. 2013b; Boyle 2013). In turn, the Obama administration sought to address concerns through a series of speeches.

Through a high-profile media campaign, consisting of public speeches, leaked comments and redacted documents, the Obama administration outlined the legal

arguments supporting the US drone program as legal and ethical use of force (Plaw, Fricker and Colon 2016). Attorney General Eric Holder sent letters to some members of the government (Shane 2013). Unofficial comments and memos, such as the Office of Legal Counsel Memo on Targeting an American, were leaked by administration officials to the media (Savage 2014), and a white paper was released from the Department of Justice outlining the lawfulness of a using lethal force against a US citizen (US Department of Justice 2013).

For this study, I will focus on the public speeches that were given, as these had the largest audiences and had several rhetorical features absent from the official and unofficial documents released. Given the serious implications of the drone program for innocent civilians and the potential strategic consequences for global security, I have analyzed the political speeches justifying the use of drone strikes. My study builds upon prior research by looking specifically into the discursive features that enhance legal theories through ideological premises and mental conceptualizations that function to discourage increased oversight and strengthen public support for drone strikes. But before I discuss the political discourse, I will first discuss the political issues surrounding drone use and how criticisms prompted responses from the Obama administration. In the following literature review I will discuss criticisms that have been made by legal scholars and social scientists about the legality, ethics and morality of the US drone program. At times, I will also discuss how the Obama administration responded to these criticisms, but only those responses that are not part of my discourse analysis and which mentioning is necessary to inform the reader of the public debate. I will also discuss how political

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discourse within the United States has been studied and how this research informed my

analysis. Finally, before discussing my findings and conclusions, I outline my analytical

approach and why I limited my focus to eleven speeches delivered by members of the

Obama administration.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The US drone program has been a point of contention with legal scholars and academics for years and has garnered much criticism. I begin my review of the literature by discussing the concerns raised by academics and public officials alike on the use of this controversial technology. One of the most significant political issues advocates of the drone program face is whether drone strikes are illegal, either under US law, international law or both. Both Democratic and Republican officials have questioned the legality of drone strikes. For example, Dennis Kucinich, along with six others, argued that drone strikes violate executive order preventing any person employed by or acting on behalf of the United States government to engage in assassination (US Congress 2010). Diplomats from allied nations have claimed that drone strikes violate human rights, and UN officials have reported that strikes violate international law (Gogarty and Hagger 2008). Mary Ellen O'Connell (2010), an international law scholar, testified before Congress that drone strikes are extrajudicial killings. These criticisms are valid and informative, but fail to critically examine how violence is foundational to law. By focusing only on how drone strikes may violate laws, be they US or international, the harm of legitimate state killing becomes masked.

In response to criticisms of the program legality, White House legal advisors, such as Harold Koh, began in 2010 to specifically outline the legal rationale behind drone strikes. In terms of domestic legality, the administration initially cited the Authorization to Use Military Force (AUMF) of 2001, which states that the president has the authority to use any force necessary against those responsible for the attacks of September 11,

2001. To defend the program as legal under international law, the administration claimed that drone strikes have been carried out in accordance with the laws governing the use of armed force. The official position of the White House was initially that drones are considered acts of self-defense because al Qaeda attacked the United States on September 11, 2001, which initiated an armed conflict. Because each strike is part of an ongoing armed conflict, defenders of the drone program claim causalities of strikes cannot be classified as assassinations or extrajudicial killings (Johnson 2013). However, since the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the use of drone strikes has been interpreted as one of the inherit powers granted to the commander in chief of the Army and Navy of the United States when called into the actual service of the United States, as stated in Article II of the US Constitution. Since June 2014, Obama has deployed drone strikes against ISIL without congressional authorization, and because no ground troops were deployed, the strikes do not violate the War Powers Resolution (Kaag and Kreps 2014). In addition, Eric Holder has argued that there is no limitation to geographic scope, meaning that strikes may be carried out on US soil[2] (Holder 2012).

Accompanying questions of legality are concerns about the manner in which strikes are carried out. Typically, there are two ways in which a drone strike may be authorized. First, intelligence gathered from various means is verified and compiled into a targeting packet that identifies a specific person believed to pose a threat to the United States (Plaw, Fricker and Colon 2016). The second form of drone strike is called a

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[2] There is an implicit assumption in the discourse produced by the Obama administration that killing Americans, especially on US soil, is worse than killing other people. This is not an assumption I share and I argue it speaks to how the discourse shapes harm to others as permissible.

signature strike, which is when the United States believes it has identified potential

enemy combatants based upon an observed pattern of behavior but does not know the

exact identity of the target or targets (Plaw, Fricker and Colon 2016). In 2012, twenty-six

members of US House of Representatives and members of the House Judiciary

Committee wrote letters to President Obama and Attorney General Holder demanding the

criteria and legal justification for signature strikes (Imtiaz 2012). Obama and his

advising counsel confirmed that signature strikes occurred but asserted that those strikes

remain legal under the authorities granted by Congress in the AUMF of 2001 and are

rarely relied upon. Obama (2013) has stated the United States would cease or limit the

use of signature strikes outside of the Afghanistan-Pakistan theater. Independent

accounts suggest fewer signature strikes are being conducted, but it is impossible to know

with certainty, and the practice of signature strikes has had devastating effects on

innocents (Plaw, Fricker and Colon 2016). For example, on January 15, 2015 a signature

strike in Pakistan killed two American hostages (Shane 2015).

Drone strikes that result in the deaths of innocent civilians raise considerable

political backlash. Medea Benjamin, CODEPINK co-founder, a women-led grassroots

movement to end US wars and militarism, has actively protested on multiple occasions

against the US drone campaign (Plaw, Fricker and Colon 2016). In 2012, Benjamin

traveled to Pakistan to speak with the victims of drone strikes and found that claims made

by administration officials concerning civilian causalities were not accurate. Upon return

Benjamin confronted John Brennan, counterterrorism advisor to the White House, at his

home about loss of innocent life due to drone strikes (Benjamin 2012). Brennan publicly

responded that it was untrue that drone strikes killed civilians (ibid). However, in April 2013 leaked government documents showed civilians had died as a result of drone strikes, including a strike that occurred only two months prior to Brennan's public denial that strikes endangered civilians (Searle and Woods 2013). Since then, President Obama and John Brennan have assured media outlets that civilian causalities are rare and within the requirements of the laws of war (Brennan 2012b; Obama 2013). Obama described drone strikes as a risky but argued that every effort was made to ensure that there is "near certainty" no civilians will be killed or injured as a result of a strike (Obama 2013). The US drone program has garnered protest from even elected officials. In 2013, after receiving a letter from Eric Holder refusing to rule out strikes on American soil, Senator Rand Paul filibustered John Brennan's confirmation as Director of the CIA for thirteen hours (Michaels 2013).

Some have even gone as far as to accuse the Obama administration of preferring kill operations over capture. US Senators, such as Saxby Chambliss, have suggested the administration prefers to kill terrorist leaders rather than deal with the legal issues associated with taking prisoners (Becker and Shane 2012). The preference has been linked to President Obama's efforts to close Guantanamo Bay and limited options in terms of alternative detention facilities (Roberts 2013). The Human Rights Watch (2013) determined that certain attacks in Yemen could have been capture operations, and some strikes did not even meet the threshold set by the Obama administration. Noah Feldman (2013) stated that it was the desire to end torture, which began under the Bush administration, that ultimately made killing more attractive. The Obama Administration

strongly denies having any preference for killing. The administration has, however, argued that capture operations would place military personnel at risk and threaten international relations by violating national sovereignty (Obama 2013).

Although there is general public support for the US drone program, specific aspects of the campaign influence the level of support. For example, in 2013, nearly half of all registered voters indicated that they felt drone strikes targeting US citizens were illegal, while only a quarter thought the drone strikes were legal (Publicmind 2013). Two years later, 64% of Americans reported being very or somewhat concerned about the legality of drone strikes as a whole (Pew Research Center 2015). Multiple polls have suggested that Americans are concerned with the incidental targeting of civilians. In May 2015, 48% of Americans reported being very concerned that US drone attacks endanger the lives of innocent civilians; a finding corroborated by two additional polls (Pew Research Center 2015).

Public concerns and protests have led to calls for increased oversight and transparency of the drone program. For example, former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has publicly stated there is a need for oversight over future presidencies when deploying drones (Associated Press 2013). Gates' argument is that strikes against American citizens should be decided by some additional oversight process, either judicial or congressional. Chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee Dianne Feinstein also called for additional measures of oversight. One recommendation included the creation of a court that would grant authority to conduct a drone strike on a case by case basis, similar to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) Court (Muñoz 2013).

Department of Defense General Counsel Jeh Johnson (2013) devoted an entire speech directly responding to the suggestion of an additional court. Johnson called the FISA court a rubber stamp court that approved most, if not all, applications. Johnson also stated that since strikes are time specific, requiring lawyers and officials to assess situations in real time, judges are not well suited since many prefer time to contemplate a case and not rule on dynamic, ongoing operations. Johnson speculated that an additional court would create restraints for drone pilots to act in time sensitive manner and, in turn, hypothetically allow terrorists to go on unabated. Johnson presented this hypothetical as a drone pilot not being able to launch a strike against a training compound in time because he/she was waiting on authorization from the drone court.

Although the Obama administration has aggressively countered calls for increased oversight, there have been occasions when an increase in legal propriety seemed possible. In March 2013, there was an effort to shift operations from the C.I.A. to the Department of Defense (Miller 2013). C.I.A. drone strikes are carried out covertly and are not subject to public oversight due to the agency's civilian status. The effort to limit drone strikes by the C.I.A. was promoted by both activists and politicians as a means to increase transparency since C.I.A. strikes are conducted covertly. However, the effort was stalled because intelligence committees resisted the plan. Reportedly, Michael D'Andrea, the head of the C.I.A. Counterterrorism Center, and other top agency officials convinced lawmakers that the C.I.A. strikes are more precise than those conducted by the Pentagon's Joint Special Operations Command (Mazzetti and Apuzzo 2015). In November 2013, the Senate Intelligence Committee approved a bill that increased

oversight of drone strikes (Hosenball 2013). According to the new legislation, spy agencies would be required to release causality statistics, and there would be increased scrutiny for attacks against US citizens on foreign soil. However, in April 2014, the language was removed at the request of the director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, who disclosed that the Obama administration was voluntarily exploring ways to disclose more information (Ackerman 2014). Two months earlier, when the Senate Armed Services Committee held a hearing calling upon C.I.A. and military counterterrorism representatives to defend the use of drone strikes, the White House reportedly notified the committee that C.I.A. were not required to attend (Dilanian 2014). Michael Cohen (2012) described actions of the executive branch as attempts to stonewall or uses legal justification to avoid oversight. Kenneth A. Schultz (2003), a professor of political science at Stanford University, argues Congress tends to shy away from oversight regarding national security out of fear of the political blowback if there is another attack. I argue that fear of political blowback is fostered, in part, through discourse that emphasizes the potential consequences of increased regulation in order to illicit a fear of future terrorist attacks.

Several studies have examined how the language of war has shaped political responses and formed sociopolitical realities. Smith (2005) describes the cultural narratives used to support war. Smith identifies how specific narrative structures are used to overcome cultural constraints on violence and how genre choices, or "wars", inform the "autonomous cultural structures" that shape national responses to conflicts. Smith demonstrated how the narrative structures employed by the US, Britain and France either

determined what action was suitable when facing the potential or war or justifying the harm already being carried out during warfare. The perpetual war that the US drone program presents is best captured in what is called a legitimation or credibility trap. The need for war continues because the political discourse used to draw forth national support has rhetorically determined all appropriate responses, regardless if the present circumstances suggest otherwise. If a political administration tells a story and tell it repeatedly, it limits options available. What my analysis shows is that the discourse produced by the Obama administration, one that draws upon metaphors of cancer, fear, and time, are a perfect formula for endless war. Prior research has shown how the political legitimation of past administrations have entrapped the American populace into military engagements that were ultimately not beneficial to the US or those regions subject to the intervention, such as Nicaragua (Kenworthy 1983). The same vulnerability to entrapment is possible if al Qaeda or ISIS is characterized as nothing more than evil, than the US cannot tolerate these organizations in any form. Bent on absolute annihilation, the US closes itself from other strategic possibilities that may be more suited to bringing peace and sow the seeds for the perpetual war through a dependence on the drones to maintain security. The legitimation of the US drone program is not only the justification and rationalization of state violence; it is the formation of a socio-political reality that is created in the minds of the American people (Hodges 2011). And it is the American people that become entrapped in this world, or mental models (van Dijk 1998) created out of their own fear of the unknown, be it the "Other" or the future.

Hodges (2011) examined the narratives specifically supporting the US "War on Terror." Hodges analyzed multiple speech acts by different speakers and showed how intertextuality was an important element of the War on Terror. Hodges specifically focused on how al Qaeda (AQ) was discursively constructed, how discursive links were created to link AQ to Iraq, and how these worked together to form a sociopolitical reality that informed the war effort and public support.

Reyes (2011) compared speeches by Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, identifying legitimation strategies outlined by van Leeuwen (2007). Reyes found that both presidents employed similar legitimation techniques despite being members of opposing political parties. In addition to the legitimation strategies categorized by van Leeuwen, Reyes identified techniques that were unique to his sample and extended the study of political discourse. Reyes showed that while rationalizations are culturally bound and have limited reach, emotions, particularly of fear, are responses to a sense of protectionism, more remote and inherent within the human psyche and more broadly influential.

The temporal dimension of political discourse can have a powerful influence on the conceptual models we form, such as the necessity for action in the present to forego the risk of unknown harms in the future, and Dunmire has done extensive research on how the future has been used to influence public policy. Dunmire (2011) shows how descriptions of future events were crucial components of the Bush doctrine and post-Cold War US security discourse in general. Patricia Dunmire (2011) analyzed the National Security Strategy of 2002 (NSS02), which was created during George W. Bush's

presidency. Dunmire found that the policy used threat as a nominalization, shifting the

use between a verb and a noun. In the way that nominalization was used in NSS02, the

future actions that were going to be taken by the United States were presupposed, rather

than potentialized. Through the use of nominalization, a political actor may situation a

proposition within the "presuppositional epistemic modality" and render it as background

or assumed information (Givon 1989:133). Threats function to invent political realities

(Reisigl 2006). By reinforcing the danger of the potential threat, the political actor is able

to draw upon hypothetical evidence in support of proposals. When the same analysis was

applied to Obama's 2011 National Security Strategy, Dunmire found similar defuturizing,

but instead of the word *preemption*, the Obama administration emphasized *prevention*.

Dunmire shows how hypothetical futures can be given presence and thereby rhetorical

force. Politicians often reconstruct the past as a means of bringing forth a potential future

(Edelman 1971). Claims that should be presented as assumptions about the future are

instead framed as inevitable outcomes. This play with (un)certainty over time is

accomplished through modality. Modality is the expression of a speaker's attitude toward

and/or confidence in the proposition being presented. An expression of confidence may

be overt, such as the use of modal auxiliaries like may, might, can, could or will, or

subtly implied within the context of the discourse. In my analysis, I find that modality is

an important aspect of discourse manipulation that serves to render future violence a

certainty if the state apparatus is restrained. This modal manipulation serves to legitimize

the violence in present in exchange for the avoidance of violence in an unknowable

future. A persuasive aspect of policy discourse is in the manner it limits uncertainty about the future in support of action in the present (Bergmann 1992).

My research into the political discourse of drone strikes critically examines the executive branch's legitimation because the administration has on more than one occasion stalled efforts to increase transparency and accountability. The use of the technology to prevent future attacks may actually inspire a new generation of violent extremists and place US citizens in greater danger. Several military officials testify to the fact that drones come with a cost of growing animosity in the communities where they occur and result in the creation of new enemies (Shaw 2013). The drone program could even damage the United States' stance in the world by weakening US moral authority and popularity. Beyond what impact drones have on the sociopolitical reality of war and peacetime, the legitimation of this technology through law and discourse only serves to mask the violence that is foundational to the state apparatus. As the technology of war returns to the state from which it originated, so to will the harms and the discursive techniques used to legitimize the violence, which was already begun with the incorporation of drone technology into law enforcement within the US (Wall and Monahan 2011). For these reasons, I seek to address a gap that exists with current research on US political discourse, which has focused on the legal dimensions of the drone debate with limited interest in the rhetorical and ideological dimensions of the administration's defense. I consider how prior studies examined the use of fear and time in political discourse in my analysis in order to understand the new ways these discursive features serve to fetishize security and deepen pacification. My analysis is not an attempt

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to resolve the ongoing debate but merely identify the rhetorical features of the political discourse supporting the use and how these features compliment the underlying legal theories.

Building upon Foucault's (1977) panoptic model, research in recent years has sought to continue the study of emerging societal surveillance (Haggerty, Wilson and Smith 2011; Lyon 2003; Magnet and Rodgers 2011; Browne 2015; Monahan 2010). Critical criminology has considered how surveillance has transformed crime control as the state consolidates power around concealed surveillance practices (Haggerty, Wilson and Smith 2011; Magnet and Rodgers 2011). New surveillance technologies are presented as objective and neutral, but in reality reinforce existing social inequalities (Magnet and Rodgers 2011). Systematic surveillance of minority communities in the United States has served to reify racial inequality and become a social and political norm (Browne 2015). The impact of societal surveillance varies greatly based on social status and can become constraining on every part of an individual's lived experience (Lyon 2003).

In terms of how surveillance has transformed national security practices and the military, research on visualizations suggests that drones are but one component in a larger shifting trend of the military industrial complex. The wide availability of personal recording devices, such as digital cameras and microphone technology, has turned the combatant and citizen into a point of surveillance that makes combat more transparent (Ericson and Haggerty 2006). For this reason, it has become a strategic priority for the state to acquire information superiority and combine it with precision weapons to create a

complex panoptical and actionable form of surveillance with a centralized command structure (ibid). The end goal being a common picture of the battle space that facilitates the coordination of variety of actors. This common picture being a manifestation of the privatization of national security (Monohan 2010). It is the partnership of government agencies and private companies that have spread fear of terrorist attacks and promoted technological means of prevention. Monohan (2010) analyzed these processes of privatization by analyzing security conferences, the origin of the modern day drone technology, which are where the public and private sectors come together to create national security needs through consumption of the newest technology.

Drones have also been shown to facilitate the processes of securitization, pacification and militarization (Neocleous 2011, 2014; Feldman 2015). Rather than being a new form of military technology that has penetrated civilian spaces, Neocleous (2014) argues that drones are a continuation of policing that has been intrinsic to air power since the beginning. What drones offer more than anything is disposability, which is paramount to their main function to gather information (Neocleous 2011). Neocleous (2014) shows how modern drone warfare originates from colonial air power used by Britain in the 1920s. The same techniques of legitimation that were used during British colonialism can be found today, with the distinction of "combatants" and "non-combatants" disappearing and the entrance of perpetual warfare as a form of policing (Neocleous 2014:162). No-fly zones became a form of "air occupation" that are made possible through the war powers of sovereign states in order to sustain order (187). And the order being sustained is not one of liberty, but security of the socio-economic order

(Neocleous 2008). Neocleous (2008) points out that is has been the executive branch that has been the driving force behind engineering repressive security measures and shows that law has been a means of abolishing rights and freedoms in name of security.

The executive branch has raised support for war through political discourse that creates a sociopolitical reality, but wars alone function as cultural imaginaries (Feldman 2004). War produces forms of inhumanity in pursuit of a security that depends upon the creation of new technologies, laws, and narratives about war and enemies (Feldman 2015). Feldman (2015) criticizes the regimes of truth that justify securitization and examines how state sovereignty is ensured the through physical, symbolic and structural violence.

The US drone program, which enables perpetual war, builds from and deepens, domestically and abroad, state policing power. The convergence of these structures deepens ideological work of pacification. In the same manner air power was used to police the colonized, drones are entering the "boomeranging" phase of military technology in which the populace from whom it originated now become the target of its use (Wall and Linnemann 2014). The process by which US law enforcement have been militarized with drone technology began with use of aerial surveillance, but militarization research suggests that it will not stop there (Wall 2016). Wall (2016) argues that more research should examine the power of the state to use emergency logic to justify any form of violence. My research seeks to answer this call by examining the political rationalities and legal architectures of the US drone program as a means to understand the cultural imaginaries that arise. In my analysis I find that emergency power, as described by Eric

Holder, serves to legitimize a potential future in which drones may be used to launch lethal force on US soil. This emergency power is founded upon the discursive formation of a threat that could be anything, anyone or anywhere. The limitless number of threats offer a fertile field for perpetual warfare.

CHAPTER 3: DATA AND ANALYTICAL APPROACH

My approach to this thesis was informed both by study of discourse analysis and by my experience in the military. For four years, I served in the US Army as an intelligence analyst tasked with the daily responsibility of sifting through hundreds of reports gathered from multiple intelligence platforms. Drone surveillance and targeted strikes had a significant impact on the products I produced and how those products shaped the battlespace by informing future operations. As a soldier, I understood the role drones played in war and aided in completing my mission, but afterwards I was left with a curiosity of how drones are presented and legitimized to the general public. This curiosity led me to spend four years researching how drones, and war in general, is represented in discourse. My original research began with one of three classified reports produced by the United States that analyzed the discourse of al Qaeda through their English recruitment magazine, Inspire. However, after I was unable to access the two remaining reports via a Freedom of Information Act request, I turned my attention to the US Congressional committee hearings that focused on the US drone program. What I discovered was not a legitimation of drone use but several inquiries by elected officials seeking to better understand the program and the effect on targeted communities. The congressional hearings were often in response to political speeches made by representatives of the Obama administration justifying the use of drone strikes.

My data consists of eleven speeches delivered by members of the Obama administration that I found were significant to the legitimation of drone strikes. The speeches occurred between December 2009 and May 2013. Speakers are President

Barack Obama, State Department Legal Advisor Harold Koh, Attorney General Eric Holder, Department of Defense General Counsel and now Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson, and former White House Counter-Terrorism Advisor and current Director of the CIA John Brennan. These eleven speeches were selected because of their direct reference or defense of drone strikes. Koh, Brennan, Holder, and Johnson each spoke on the legal and ethical concerns of the US drone program. Of the three speeches given by President Obama, only one directly addressed the legitimacy of US drone strikes. The two speeches Obama delivered in 2009 concerned US war efforts in general but were included for their relevance to the legitimation of US military initiatives, both inside and out of declared warzones. I focus on eleven speeches in order to distill from the representatives the macro-level discourse that has emerged from the White House during President Obama's first five years in office (Hodges 2011). These eleven speeches were chosen because they either made direct reference to the use of drones by that US, in defense of the program's legality or morality, or referenced US war efforts that appeared related to the use of drones. I will not be assessing the truthfulness of their claims, but instead, focus on how the claims that are made create a social truth that has real consequences.

I gathered transcripts from various internet sources and all speeches were available in video form, transcript or both. Some of the transcripts were direct quotations of how the speeches were delivered, while others were prewritten scripts. When available, transcripts were compared to video recordings for accuracy. Transcripts were gathered from University of California Santa Barbara's American Presidency Project, US

Department of State, the Wilson Center, and Nobelprize.org (Obama 2009a; Obama 2009b; Koh 2010; Brennan 2011; Johnson 2012a; Johnson 2012b; Holder 2012; Brennan 2012a; Brennan 2012b; Johnson 2013; Obama 2013).

Table 1. Speeches Selected for Analysis.

Speaker	Date	Audience
Barack Obama	December 01, 2009	United States Military Academy
Barack Obama	December 09, 2009	Nobel Peace Prize Speech
Harold Hongju Koh	March 25, 2010	American Society of International Law
John Brennan	June 29, 2011	John Hopkins University
Jeh Johnson	February 22, 2012	Yale Law School
Eric Holder	March 05, 2012	Northwestern University
John Brennan	April 30, 2012	Wilson Center
John Brennan	August 08, 2012	Council on Foreign Affairs
Jeh Johnson	November 30, 2012	Oxford University
Jeh Johnson	March 18, 2013	Fordham Law School
Barack Obama	May 23, 2013	National Defense University

For my analytical approach, I read through each transcript multiple times and identified rhetorical devices and general themes. After multiple readings, three particular themes emerged among the legal and ethical arguments. The themes of cancer as a metaphor, fear, and time became increasingly salient with each read through for their persuasive contributions and therefore became the focal points of my coding process. I considered how rhetorical devices functioned to support the underlying legal argument, as well as how discursive features influence audience conceptualizations. Based upon prior research on fear and the use of future (Reyes 2011; Dunmire 2011) and upon what

appeared most influential in the discourse once I had read over all of the material multiple times, I coded for use of metaphors and references to fear and time. I found that legal arguments over the legitimacy of US drone strikes were often preceded or followed by explicitly emotional discourse or claims of future phenomenon. Metaphors structure one concept in terms of another and make approaches taken to similar situations appear rational (Lakoff and Johnson 2003). A metaphor can serve as the conceptual structure for systemizing ideology into text (Chilton and Schaffner 2002). I looked for excerpts that referenced fear, informed by the research of Lakoff (2001). Lakoff showed how George W. Bush framed the war on terror as a fight against evil, "the discourse obligates the morally strong to take a stand" (ibid:61). Cast as an evil force, inaction becomes unthinkable for it would invite enemy forces to commit more attacks because they think they can get away with it (ibid). The description of opposing forces as evil is ideological and operates to illicit fear from the reader or audience.

I approached explicitly emotional excerpts in the manner of Reyes' (2011), who showed how use of fear was an important legitimation technique and Dunmire's (2011) study of the use of future in political discourse also informed my analysis of time in the text. I also paid particular attention to modality, referential strategies, and the use of historical comparisons. Modality is an important concept because it expresses certainty over claims made (Machin and Mayer 2012). Modality is the expression of a speaker's attitude toward and/or confidence in the proposition being presented. I coded for all modal auxiliaries as well as any passages that expressed the speakers certainty over the propositions being put forth. Referential strategies are the ways in which others, such as

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al Qaeda, are represented in the conversation. Referential strategies are often ideological, such as the reference of an opposing force as evil, and at times function to dehumanize by comparing others as animals or natural phenomenon. Historical comparisons relate present persons, organizations or phenomenon to past events to rationalize similar responses. Historical comparisons are often used to suggest that the approach to a current issue should be like one already taken before because of similarities the two situations share, while ignoring the many differences.

During my initial coding of the text, I identified all nominalizations or examples of verbs being used as nouns to describe and project how future events will develop. Most of the time, when we speak we include specific temporal moments, which allow the listener to determine the degree of likelihood and certainty of outcome. Nominalizations give concepts the agency of social actors (Dunmire 2011). For example, the concept of *threat* in policy discourse can take on roles, functions, and characteristics traditionally reserved for nouns. In doing so, political actors are able to justify action based on an abstract concept of a threat without providing details on how specific individuals or organizations are a threat to peace and security.

Much of the rationalization I found in the analysis of the Obama administration discourse centered on legal theories. Since legal scholars have extensively examined arguments made in support of the US drone program, I focus on how metaphors, fear, and time are used to as a part of these legal theories to increase the persuasiveness of the arguments. I also argue that these discursive features influence the likely conceptualizations one has about US war efforts and state power.

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CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS

My analysis consists of three sections that highlight the discursive features I
found to be crucial to constructing a sociopolitical reality unfavorable to oversight or
increased transparency, while emphasizing the necessity of the drone program. I begin
with referential strategies used to dehumanize enemies of the US and innocent civilians
by using metaphorical conceptualizations. In the section that follows, I focus on the
passages that emphasize fear in order to illicit an emotional response from the audience
and dissuade increased regulation of drone strikes. Finally, discuss how temporality,
particularly with regard to the future, is used to stress the necessity of drone strikes while
not requiring a projection as to when those strikes would end. The selected quotes are
not a comprehensive summary of metaphors, fear, or time found within the text but are
representative of themes found throughout.

Metaphor of Cancer

First, I want to begin with a focus one on the metaphor AL QAEDA IS CANCER,
which has been used by both President Obama and John Brennan. In 2012, Brennan
(2012a) remarked,

> *"and so I spoke today, for the first time openly, about, again, what's commonly*
> *referred to in the press as drones, remotely piloted aircraft, that can give you that*
> *type of laser-like precision that can excise that terrorist or that threat in a manner*
> *that, again, with the medical metaphor, that will not damage the surrounding*
> *tissue, and so what we're really trying to do - al Qaeda's a cancer throughout the*

world, it has metastasized in so many different places, and when that metastasized

tumor becomes lethal and malignant, that's when we're going to take the action

that we need to." (Brennan 2012a)

Brennan's use of the metaphor AL QAEDA IS CANCER depicts drones as

"laser-like" surgical tools capable of curing the global community. The metaphor

dehumanizes al Qaeda as a lethal and malignant tumor. The adjunctive "malignant" is a

characterization that serves to support the legal argument that drone strikes target those

that pose an imminent threat. However, imminence, as defined by the Obama

administration, is contentious because it does not mean the strike halts an impending

attack. Imminent threats are "considerations of the relevant window of opportunity to

act, the possible harm that missing the window would cause to civilians, and the

likelihood of heading off future disastrous attacks against the United States" (Holder

2012). The only requirement under this threshold is that harm must be possible, not

likely or inevitable. Dehumanization is an unfortunate technique that has become all too

common in the defense of war efforts (Lakoff 2001). However, what is most troubling

about Brennan's use of the metaphor AL QAEDA IS CANCER is how it simultaneously

dehumanizes both members of al Qaeda and the innocent civilians who inhabit the same

regions. In Brennan's quote, innocent citizens are surrounding tissue that will not be

damaged. Though in this quote Brennan expresses high modality that drone strikes do

not and will not harm civilians, at an earlier point in the same speech Brennan (2012a)

stated,

"It's this surgical precision, the ability, with laser-like focus, to eliminate the

cancerous tumor called an al-Qaida terrorist while limiting damage to the tissue

around it, that makes this counterterrorism tool so essential." (Brennan 2012a)

The second quote expresses a lower modality, through the phrase 'while limiting

damage', indicating there is a possibility that civilians will be harmed.

The referential strategy to represent enemy forces as a cancer also serves to

reinforce the legal principle that there is no geographic limitation to the use of drone

strikes. For example, in 2009, Obama stated,

"we're in Afghanistan to prevent a cancer from once again spreading through

that country. But this same cancer has also taken root in the border region of

Pakistan. That's why we need a strategy that works on both sides of the border"

(Obama 2009a).

This quote includes verb processes that are found throughout the text that

emphasize that al Qaeda is not geographically limited and will spread if left untreated

(i.e. spreading, taken root). Brennan (2011) stated,

"We are taking the fight to wherever the cancer of al-Qa'ida manifests itself,

degrading its capabilities and disrupting its operations" (Brennan 2011)

Like cancer, the speakers suggest that al Qaeda has the potential to form

anywhere and the United States will respond with a military "cure." This proclamation is

accompanied by claims that the United States has been successful in dismantling and

destroying al Qaeda, but that the threat of attack remains. Despite strides made, the

speakers emphasize implicitly through the metaphorical concept of cancer that the enemy is only in remission, not eliminated.

> *"But we've pummeled the heart of al Qaeda in the Fatah, but the appendages of it, you know, are — still exist and continue to grow"* (Brennan 2012b)

Brennan's quote conceptualizes separate enemies over vast distances as a unified whole and supports the legal theory that affiliates and adherents are viable targets. Al Qaeda is described as being "badly damaged and bloodied," but still able to "pack a lethal punch" (Brennan 2012b). According to Johnson (2012), al Qaeda's "senior leadership is today severely crippled and degraded." The multi-armed organization is damaged, bloodied, crippled and degraded and yet still lethal. The success of the drone program is captured in image of a mangled enemy while the same incapacitated enemy is held up as the ultimate threat to the global security and peace. No matter the successes offered by the drone program, any potential threat al Qaeda may pose legitimates further use of drone strikes.

The metaphor AL QAEDA IS CANCER is both a description of bodies with the potential of committing acts of violence and an ideology that infects the mind:

> *"Al Qaeda has an ideology that infects the globe. Nevertheless, this ideology persists, and in an age when ideas and images can travel the globe in an instant, our response to terrorism can't depend on military or law enforcement alone. We need all elements of national power to win a battle of wills, a battle of ideas."* (Obama 2009b)

Obama's description of al Qaeda's ideology as infectious is presented in a speech that argues the necessity of war and the use of force. The use of force is described as a means to render "the heart of al-Qa'ida incapable of launching attacks against our homeland, our citizens, or our allies, as well as preventing the group from inspiring its affiliates and adherents to do so" (Brennan 2011), but is also part of a broader strategy to win a "battle of wills" and "ideas." In terms of drone strikes, which have come to define Obama's response to a dangerous ideology that threatens the well-being of the global political order, the actions taken to make an environment inhospitable for terrorists has simultaneously made that environment undesirable, if not inhospitable, for innocent civilians. Many civilians have either been injured or killed as result of drone strikes. Children have testified before Congress about witnessing their loved ones being killed by drone strikes (McVeigh 2013). Amnesty International (2013a) reported that there is a fear among many in Pakistan for blue skies because it means clear visibility for drones to conduct strikes. When the speakers suggest that the drone program is strategic effective, both in terms of eliminating the enemy's operational capabilities and winning over the affected communities, they are conflating of counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency. Counter-terrorism aims to defeat opponents by killing the enemy and destroying their cadres (Boyle 2010). Counter-insurgency (COIN) aims to defeat its enemy by winning over the targeted population (Boyle 2010). The speakers have sought to defend drone strikes in a language of COIN while executing counterterrorism measures.

Fear

Next, I want to draw attention to phrases that use fear influence national responses to the threat of an international terrorist attack. In 2009 Obama stated,

> *"Evil does exist in the world. A nonviolent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. Negotiations cannot convince Al Qaeda's leaders to lay down their arms."* (Obama 2009b).

Evil is an ideological descriptor. This is an example of what Smith (2005) calls an apocalyptic narrative that claims "When the stakes are so high, the evil being faced so monstrous that nothing short of its complete destruction can be contemplated." (26) Evil allows those responsible for justifying acts of violence to overcome cultural constraints on violent acts. While demonization frees the speaker to commit harm, it limits the agency of its target to turn away from harm in the future.

Jeh Johnson is a vocal proponent of the belief that al Qaeda is an evil that will never renounce violence and therefore all use of force is authorized. In 2012, Johnson argued,

> *"We cannot and should not expect al Qaeda and its associated forces to all surrender, all lay down their weapons in an open field, or to sign a peace treaty with us. They are terrorist organizations ... I am aware of studies that suggest that many 'terrorist' organizations eventually denounce terrorism and violence, and seek to address their grievances through some form of reconciliation or participation in a political process. Al Qaeda is not in that category ... There is*

no compromise or political bargain that can be struck with those who pursue such

aims." (Johnson 2012b)

Johnson asserts the belief that, despite what we have learned about violent

insurgencies of the past, al Qaeda's position as evil places them in a category all in their

own. Whether or not the claim is empirically true, which is unverifiable, Al Qaeda is

conceptually denied the ability to surrender or compromise. The message is paradoxical:

Al Qaeda, however formidable a foe, is incapable of agency to determine their future,

while the threat of Al Qaeda expresses agency to grow, shift, and evolve.

Although in the text, al Qaeda is given no agency to turn from violence, the

organization is given agency to "inflame anti American sentiment" and "bleed" the US

financially (Brennan 2011). The responsibility for inflaming anti American sentiment is

placed onto al Qaeda for drawing the United States into war. On multiple occasions, the

speakers state that they never wanted war, but war was thrust upon them by the attacks of

9/11. Inflame is an adverb that denotes illness alluding to the cancer that is al Qaeda.

The United States is described as bleeding money to support war efforts, but because that

war is described as one thrust upon the United States and necessary, the debt incurred is

not the fault of the United States.

The most frequent uses of fear are found in descriptions of al Qaeda's violence.

On more than one occasion, Brennan accounts the victims of al Qaeda's violence in detail

to illicit an emotional response. In 2011, Brennan stated, "There is nothing Islamic or

holy about slaughtering innocent men, women, and children." (Brennan 2011). A year

later, Brennan repeated the technique, stating al Qaeda has "brutally murdered thousands

of Americans, men, women and children" (Brennan 2012a). These quotes are examples

of what Reyes' calls an Explicit Emotional Enumeration (EEE). Here the whole of

innocent people is broken down into subgroups in order to emphasize that the enemy

does not make distinctions among its victims (Reyes 2011).

Time

Finally, I want to discuss how the speakers have used both past and present to

emphasize the necessity of the use of force and the finality of their approach. In 2009,

Obama stated, "A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies.

Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda's leaders to lay down their arms." (Obama

2009b). The comparison between Hitler and al Qaeda serves to rationalize that equal

measures of force should be used. Just as the description of al Qaeda as evil removes

agency of the terrorist organization from renouncing evil, so too does the comparison

limit the potential responses by the United States to acts of force.

Another example of a historical comparison was an analogy used by several of the

speakers that compares the use of force to resist an ongoing attack against Pearl Harbor

during WWII to the use of drone strikes against an imminent threat. Koh first introduced

this comparison in 2010, stating,

> *"During World War II, for example, American aviators tracked and shot down*
>
> *the airplane carrying the architect of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, who*
>
> *was also the leader of enemy forces in the Battle of Midway. This was a lawful*
>
> *operation then, and would be if conducted today. Indeed, targeting particular*

individuals serves to narrow the focus when force is employed and to avoid

broader harm to civilians and civilian objects." (Koh 2010).

This analogy serves to form an equivalence between the danger of an ongoing attack by a military force and the potential harm posed by unidentified people with suspicious patterns of behavior. I argue this is a false equivalence that legitimates preventative force with no guarantee that the strike prevents an inevitable violence and potentially poses greater risks to international security by stoking anti-American sentiment among the affected communities.

In a comparison to more recent historical events, Obama argues that the use of force is necessary because present threats mirror threats faced prior to the attacks of September 11, 2001.

"But as we shape our response, we have to recognize that the scale of this threat

closely resembles the types of attacks we faced before 9/11 ... These attacks were

all brutal; they were all deadly; and we learned that left unchecked, these threats

can grow. But if dealt with smartly and proportionally, these threats need not rise

to the level that we saw on the eve of 9/11." (Obama 2013).

This quote taps into America's collective victimhood and the fear of 9/11 while setting up a hypothetical future. References to 9/11 trigger "an emotional mode (fear, sadness, insecurity, revenge) in the audience, ideal to later on legitimize political actions based on the effects of those emotions" (Reyes 2011:789). The comparison is absent of specific threats facing America, but instead gives agency to "threat" through the verb process 'grow'. It is the purpose of the drone program to eliminate the growth of threats

and once it does so it can cease the war efforts. In 2013, Obama stated, "our commitment to constitutional principles has weathered every war, and every war has come to an end" (Obama 2013). Because the drone program is placed within the category of war, speakers promise that it is finite like all past wars. No matter the size and growth of threats facing America, every war has come to an end. However, the current armed conflict includes technology never seen before and this promise only serves as a rationalization. The future of the current conflict is unforeseeable. This promise only serves to "defuturize" the future (Dunmire 2011:35).

If the promise of drone program is to eliminate the threat of future attacks in order to bring an end to the current war, the promise is a hollow one by the Brennan's own admission:

> *"[A] responsible, effective counterterrorism strategy recognizes that no nation, no matter how powerful-including a free and open society of 300 million Americans can prevent every single threat from every single individual who wishes to do us harm."* (Brennan 2011).

This final quote is an admission that absolute security is not possible. The promises and fears that are played on throughout the speeches do not point to an inevitable end, but the perpetual stoking of fears of future attacks. If it is not possible for any nation to prevent every single threat, how will there be an end to a program designed to prevent future threats? Only through oversight, transparency and accountability may the American public ensure that the use of force is not the perpetual pursuit of eliminating all threats that face the nation, whether they be domestic or foreign.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

My thesis addresses a need to examine features of political discourse that legitimize state power and violence, in particular the use of drone technology to engage in targeted killings by the United States. The analysis of discourse produced by the Obama administration revealed how state power is rhetorically solidified and how violence becomes appropriated as a cultural norm. I found that the Obama administration has used metaphorical conceptualizations to dehumanize, fear to create a political environment unsuitable for the formation of new regulations and temporal propositions about unforeseeable threats to portray the drone program as an imperative component of national security.

Using the metaphor of al Qaeda as cancer, the Obama administration has been able to dehumanize the target population while also deemphasizing the significance of state violence against innocent civilians by casting collateral damage as necessary harm to surrounding tissue. Reference to an ill global body plagued by a threatening force is extended to ideological levels as enemy ideas, not only violent actions, are described as infectious. The conflation of counter-terrorism drone strikes with the counter-insurgency efforts to prevent the spread of ideas allows for the legitimation of strikes to extend to threats of the ideological form and focus attacks on individuals not directly engaged in carrying out an imminent attack. These medical metaphors serve to reinforce an emergency logic supporting the use of force beyond geographic limitations. An expansion that is designed to maintain the global socio-economic order.

The Obama administration uses ideological descriptors to illicit fear from the intended audience and draw historical parallels to past wars. Ideological descriptors, such as evil, enable a populace to overcome the cultural constraints on violence. Because al Qaeda is cast as evil, the potentiality of peace beyond the organization's utter annihilation completely diminishes. Discursively, agency is removed from the formula leaving the only option one of violence. To cement the emotion of fear, the speakers use enumerations on a number of occasions to stress how all types of people fall victim to terrorist attacks, while diverting attention from the collateral damage that comes as a result of drone strikes.

The American populace is called into action against imminent threats that have yet to materialize with comparisons to historical atrocities. Comparisons of evil operate to legitimatize equal responses of violence. The legality of past uses of air power during moments of ongoing attack serve to justify the use of air power to police regions that threaten the socio-economic order by attacking national interests. The administration promises to end the war, but not before eliminating all threatening forces, a condition that can never be fulfilled. This conditional promise maintains the perpetual war that has endless threats.

Based on my findings, as well as prior research on the parallels of political discourse across US presidencies (Reyes 2011), I expect that future discussion around the use of drones will continue to emphasize the potential consequences of increased regulation by inciting fear and projecting into the future. Political discourse such as this extends past exercising explanatory power over ongoing military operations to create a

reality in of itself that traps the American populace, and the world in general, to a future of war seeking to end all war. Absolute security is an absolute impossibility and to suggest otherwise serves only to justify the policing power of the state. My analysis is consistent with prior research on the processes of securitization, pacification and militarization (Neocleous 2011, 2014; Feldman 2015) and offers insight in to the contemporary discourse surrounding drone technology.

The findings of my study are limited in that they only account for the political discourse that legitimates and garners public support for the US drone program. Even without the political discourse, there exists a cooperation between government agencies and private companies that continues to produce new technologies regardless of the political climate. However, even though this study does not account for the political economy of drone warfare, the surplus of new technologies creates a need for the types of legitimation that I have focused on in my analysis. As long as the military industrial complex persists, more political discourse that dehumanizes, incites fear and de-futurizes potential alternative courses of action can be expected. New threats will be constructed and the perpetual war will continue.

Future research into the political discourse of state power and international policing may consider how legitimation techniques used to justify drone use compares between nation states. More research is needed into the defenses put forth by elected representatives that fail to place restraint on the power of the executive branch. Elected officials of the legislative branch have a duty bound obligation to restrain the executive branch powers in order to maintain a balance and prevent the rise of tyranny. An

informed electorate holds officials accountable for carrying out the duties of their position. In the years to come, it is imperative to continue to critically analyze political discourse and remain resistant to language that limits responses to international terrorism to be violent ones. Careful consideration of how emotional discourse and conceptual metaphors shape perceptions of the sociopolitical reality may eventually weaken the persuasive influence these features have on determining US foreign policy and ultimately reduce the allowance of state harm.

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