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# The Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement in George W. Bush's "War on Terror" Rhetoric

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## The Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement in George W. Bush’s “War on Terror” Rhetoric

### **Abstract**

Despite considerable literature on the Bush administration’s war on terrorism rhetoric, little attention has been paid to its discourse of moral disengagement, leaving an important and still relevant gap that this paper aims to address. Rather than approaching this gap in terms of an archival historical analysis that is disconnected from the present, it proposes an exploratory revisit of the rhetoric that the benefits of hindsight might enrich and, we argue, aid in understanding connections to the current post-invasion turmoil and the gradual ISIS takeover. Having subjected nineteen presidential speeches to qualitative content analysis, we identified a number of moral disengagement mechanisms: moral justification, advantageous comparisons, and attribution of blame, dehumanisation of the enemy, the use of sanitizing language, diffusion of responsibility and minimization of harm. We also identified novel themes relating to American excellence/patriotism, religious ideals and fear-arousing appeals, offering original contributions to the existing literature and advancing our understanding of dynamic, real-world, and highest stakes moral disengagement whose parallels can be identified in today’s political discourses. The detailed analysis unveils the apparent paradox of propagating moral disengagement through a thread of arguments that interweave diversity with uniformity, complexity with simplicity, in effect alerting the reader to the processes of moral desensitisation that the past, current and future “warmongering” political discourses may often rely upon.

### **Keywords**

George W. Bush, War, Terror, Terrorism, Iraq, Afghanistan, Rhetoric, Political Discourse, Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement, War on Terror, Speeches

## The Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement in George W. Bush's “War on Terror” Rhetoric

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*Despite considerable literature on the Bush administration's war on terrorism rhetoric, little attention has been paid to its discourse of moral disengagement, leaving an important and still relevant gap that this paper aims to address. Rather than approaching this gap in terms of an archival historical analysis that is disconnected from the present, it proposes an exploratory revisit of the rhetoric that the benefits of hindsight might enrich and, we argue, aid in understanding connections to the current post-invasion turmoil and the gradual ISIS takeover. Having subjected nineteen presidential speeches to qualitative content analysis, we identified a number of moral disengagement mechanisms: moral justification, advantageous comparisons, and attribution of blame, dehumanisation of the enemy, the use of sanitizing language, diffusion of responsibility and minimization of harm. We also identified novel themes relating to American excellence/patriotism, religious ideals and fear-arousing appeals, offering original contributions to the existing literature and advancing our understanding of dynamic, real-world, and highest stakes moral disengagement whose parallels can be identified in today's political discourses. The detailed analysis unveils the apparent paradox of propagating moral disengagement through a thread of arguments that interweave diversity with uniformity, complexity with simplicity, in effect alerting the reader to the processes of moral desensitisation that the past, current and future “warmongering” political discourses may often rely upon. Keywords: George W. Bush, War, Terror, Terrorism, Iraq, Afghanistan, Rhetoric, Political Discourse, Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement, War on Terror, Speeches*

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When on the tenth anniversary of the US-led invasion of Iraq, 12 bombs wreaked havoc within Shia areas of Baghdad, leaving 56 dead and 200 injured (Beaumont, 2013), their blasts once again called into question the Bush administration's *War on Terror* political script, demonstrating the continued relevance of inquiry into this political narrative. Currently, that legacy, combined with the Arab Spring, appears to have metastasized into what at the time of writing this text seems like a virtual disintegration of the Iraqi state and the gradual ISIS takeover, drawing renewed attention to the apparently never-fading importance of exploring the rhetoric of *warmongering*. Although the analysed script is grounded in the institution of American civil religion<sup>1</sup> (Edwards & King, 2007) and appears to carry a message of absolute righteousness, in this paper we shall analyse it in terms of a broader spectrum of moral

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<sup>1</sup> *American civil religion* is a term given to an assortment of beliefs, ideals, and rituals held by those who live in the United States of America. Whilst initially this civil religion was based upon Christianity – due to an overwhelming majority of Christians in society - it is not specifically Christian. Rather it exists alongside, the assumptions of other distinct faiths (Bellah 1967).

disengagement rather than a narrower 21<sup>st</sup> century sermon harking back to the medieval calls for crusades.

Political speeches remain the backbone of modern ruling strategies and are the key to political processes, agendas, and outcomes (Brown, 2009; Krebs & Jackson, 2007). Presidential speeches in particular have been found to increase legislative success (Barrett, 2004; Canes-Wrone, 2001; Eshbaugh-Soha, 2006), influence public opinion and set public agendas (Cohen, 1995, 1997; Hill, 1998; Lawrence 2002), providing evidence for a significant connection between U.S. Presidential rhetoric, and increased public interest. Thus, presidential speech content is central to attracting public interest and agenda-setting. Public attention can be captured by compelling arguments that *frame* a specific problem into an issue of substantial importance to the average person and high profile speeches dedicated to one policy problem have been followed by a rise of that issue on the public's agenda (Behr & Lyengar, 1985), the result being that simple, but emotionally-charged speeches may be convincing enough to change the public agenda or to direct the people's attention in a selective manner. Grabias (2001) further highlighted this in discussing politicians' use of a process known as stylistic competence, which refers to the careful choosing of words in order to suit specific situations and current needs and as a means of boosting their own persuasiveness. Moreover, Wlodarek (2010, p. 143) argued that politicians mould their speeches to the "receivers' inter-textual or cultural knowledge and beliefs so as to modify their points of view."

Existing literature in the study of speech content highlights the importance of negative information within political rhetoric (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2010), suggesting that there are various factors involved in persuasive communication, two of which play an important role in this context: credibility of the communicator and fear-arousing appeals (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953). The former refers to the notion that the level of persuasiveness is positively correlated with perceptions of credibility, which might be strengthened and maintained by two essential factors (i.e., becoming an expert in your field and appearing trustworthy). Whereas trustworthiness can be measured by how much people perceive communicators as having the intention to persuade or believe them to have something to gain, expertise is based on, among other things, similarities in social background, such as values, status or beliefs, and also on differences in (and perceptions of) age, experience and leadership (O'Quinn, 2009).

In relation to speech content and persuasiveness, Hovland et al. (1953) further noted in extensive post-World War II research on communication and propaganda that the use of threatening rhetoric and fear-arousing appeals, used particularly in times of an alleged military threat posed by a construed enemy, to influence opinions and to receive public consent for a chosen course of action, are most successful when promoted with a parallel desire to avoid situations that could lead to danger and deprivation. Following this fear of danger and deprivation, it has been found that political leaders will often attempt to put forward an agenda during times of "moral panic" (Cohen, 1974, 2002, p. 1), such as wars, terrorist attacks or other security threats, in the hope that the public will become more sympathetic to a single course of action if they believe this agenda will lead to an increase in their well-being.

Moral panic refers to processes whereby a social problem or threat, real or imaginary, is either highlighted or created and presented, by the media, in particular, as a threat to the traditional morals and values of a society (Cohen, 2002). It has been identified that moral panic is often present in times of decivilization, such as times of war, revolution, inflation or unemployment, as these times quickly induce fear in the populus due to a perceived lack of control in social events (Mennell & Goudsblom, 1998). Through a process of deviance amplification the subject of the panic is viewed as a source of moral decline and social disintegration (Jewkes, 2004). This results in the public feeling the need for protection against the supposed problem or threat and more inclined to legitimize stringent and coercive measures to achieve this (Altheide, 2009). Fear of threats, both known and unknown, can be exploited

and manipulated by *moral entrepreneurs* (Becker, 1963) who claim to speak on behalf of the public, but instead have an agenda of their own that they wish to promote. Such entrepreneurs (including heads of states, such as Prime Ministers and Presidents) will further project the problem onto the public, making it seem much larger and graver than it in fact is (Cohen, 2002).

### **Moral Agency and Moral Disengagement in a Time of Moral Panic**

Drawing on the above, the current study will examine the use of mechanisms of moral disengagement (Bandura, 1990) in presidential speeches given by George W. Bush (henceforth referred to as Bush) in response to the threat of terrorism (particularly post 9/11), the subsequent war on terror, and wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

To clarify, moral agency is an individual's ability to act based on judgements of right or wrong which are commonly held to be true (Taylor, 2003). While it is acknowledged that combat situations give rise to difficult dilemmas, as they lead not only to military casualties, but also inevitably take a large civilian toll, the suspension of moral agency can be regarded as extremely useful when a nation goes to war. Not only are changed conceptions of moral agency useful in creating conditions conducive to garnering public support, but reduced moral agency can also make it easier for soldiers to inflict destruction, suffering and death. (Bandura, 1990)

In the development of moral agency people establish standards and values of right and wrong, which serve as normative guidelines for how to behave in social situations (McAlister, Bandura & Owen, 2006). People judge and rate their actions against their own personal standards and situational circumstances and for the most part behave in ways that bring them a sense of satisfaction and pride (Bandura, 1986, 1991), using self-evaluation and self-sanction to motivate and regulate their moral agency and conduct (McAlister et al., 2006). Thus, selective moral disengagement allows people to conduct morally corrupt behaviour within the same moral standards they have developed for themselves (McAlister et al., 2006).

There are various points or *loci*, at which moral disengagement occurs (Bandura, 1986). At the behaviour locus, people turn lethal means into *benevolent* ones through moral justification, advantageous comparison and sanitizing language. As part of this process, violent means are portrayed as socially and personally acceptable, supposedly serving some morally worthy purpose. Advantageous comparisons promote immoral conduct by comparing one's own injurious actions as a means of preventing future atrocities of greater magnitude (Bandura, 1990, 1999). Sanitizing language is used to replace labels with negative connotations (Lutz, 1987; Smith, 2002), for example, when military personnel use phrases such as *collateral damage* to describe civilian casualties and *clean surgical strikes* for military attacks, (Bandura, 1990, 1999).

At the agency locus, an individual's accountability is removed through the displacement and diffusion of responsibility. Displacement of responsibility is the dissociative practice of obscuring or distorting the relationship between action and the effects they cause (Bandura, 1990). The power of self-sanctions is mediated by the diffusion of responsibility achieved through, for example, the division of labour. In essence, group decision making enables people to behave inhumanely because no single individual feels responsible for decisions arrived at collectively. This lends itself to a *risky shift* in decision making whereby groups collectively act more harshly when "responsibility is obfuscated by a collective instrumentality" (Bandura, 1990, p. 176). In turn, the minimization of the harm an individual's conduct may cause serves the purpose of distorting the reality of the effects of the damaging behaviour. In this way these distortions serve to psychologically protect the individual for the effects of their damaging behaviour.

At the outcome locus, the injurious effects of detrimental conduct are disregarded, distorted or misconstrued in order to reduce the possible psychological repercussions of the actions. De-humanizing the *other*, by stripping them of all their human qualities and in some cases bestowing upon them negative and bestial ones<sup>23</sup>, makes it easier to disengage moral agency in subsequent interactions with this out-group (Haritos-Fatouros, 2002; Keen, 1986). Similarly, blaming the *other* for causing their own suffering is another way of disengaging self-sanctions, allowing the aggressor to be seen, by themselves and others, as a victim forced into a morally questionable, but situationally justifiable, course of action (Bandura, 2004).

The mechanisms of moral disengagement can also be very effective in the promotion and occurrence of detrimental conduct by reducing an individual's positive social behaviour (Bandura et al., 1996, 1999), this is further supported in findings that high levels of moral disengagement are directly linked to an increased sense of support for the use of military force (McAlister et al., 2006; Peled-Elhanan, 2010). Specifically, it was found that military strikes are deemed acceptable if they are seen to be morally justifiable, for example as natural defensive and deterring reactions to atrocities committed by the enemy out-group (McAlister et al., 2006).

Taking the above findings into consideration, we shall analyse the main speeches made by Bush between 2001 and 2006 regarding responding to terrorism and the *war on terror*. Although research on the *war on terror* discourse has covered membership categories (Leudar, Marsland, & Nekvapil, 2004), strategic speech acts (Lazar & Lazar, 2004), grammar (Butt, Lukin, & Matthiessen, 2004), informational accuracy and flow (Altheide, 2006; Kellner, 2007), as well as metaphors (Lakoff, 2004), cultural symbols (Wallerstein, 2002) and reasoning practices (Chang & Mehan, 2008), the focus on moral disengagement per se appears to have been neglected. Addressing this serious deficit, the current research was conducted in order to gain insights into the mechanisms of persuasion built into the rhetoric of Bush, specifically the rhetoric regarding the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq following the attacks of 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001. The aim of this analysis was to assess: (1) the use of mechanisms of moral disengagement in this selection of speeches, (2) which specific mechanisms of moral disengagement are used, (3) whether other mechanisms have been found embedded within the speeches, and why these may be influential, and finally (4) the extent to which different mechanisms of persuasion are used when addressing different populations

## Method

This study consists of a series of Thematic Content Analyses (TCA). TCA is an effective tool to examine large amounts of data in a systematic fashion, identify patterns and trends within the data and explore individual, group, and social attention (Stemler, 2001). It is “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 18).

Nineteen transcribed speeches were used, all of which were given by Bush between the 11th of September 2001 and the 11th of September 2006. The 19 speeches included in this analysis were chosen based on their subject matter, which directly related to the war on terror, the war in Afghanistan, and the war in Iraq<sup>4</sup>.

Our analysis took a deductive approach starting with the theory of moral disengagement which was used for initial coding purposes. The transcripts were read carefully and coded

<sup>2</sup> “They become *satanic fiends*, *gooks* and other bestial creatures.” (Bandura, 2002)

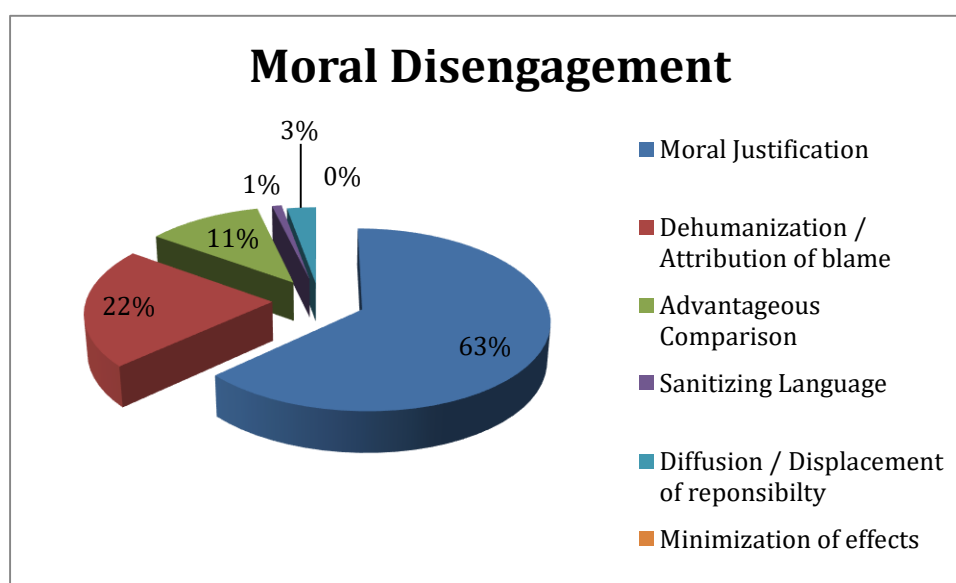
<sup>3</sup> Greek torturers trained by the military police were often reminded that their victims were worms that needed crushing (Gibson & Haritos-Fatouros, 1986)

<sup>4</sup> All of the speeches in this research can be retrieved from three websites [www.americanrhetoric.com](http://www.americanrhetoric.com); [www.presidentialrhetoric.com/speeches](http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/speeches); [www.september11news.com](http://www.september11news.com).

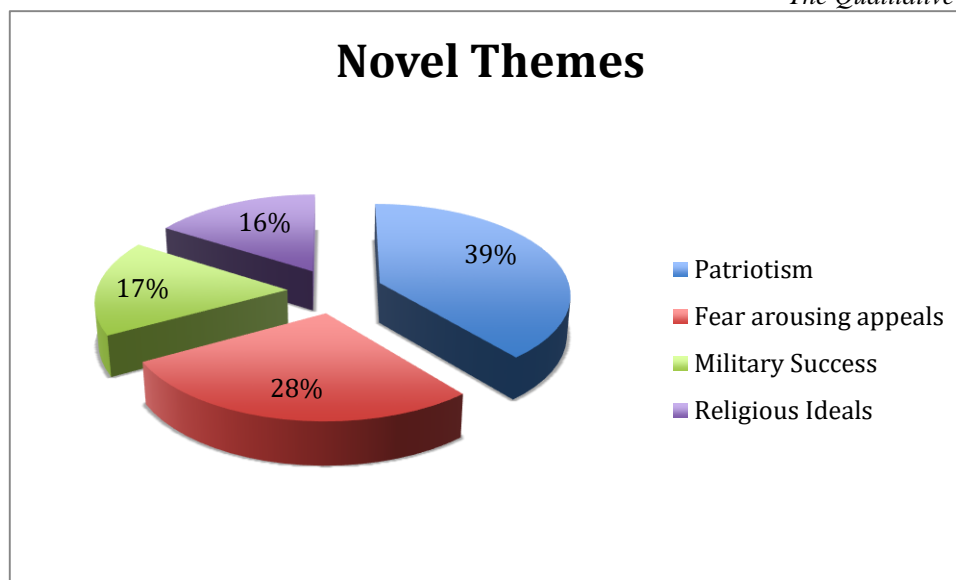
broadly using themes reflective of the theory of moral disengagement. These coded items were systematically checked back and counted within the transcripts. Organizing the themes according to the categories provided by Bandura (1996), and taking into account that speeches may have different mechanisms of persuasion embedded within them depending on the audience the speech was intended for, we also analysed the transcripts for topics not specified by previous research. In the context of the present paper, and drawing on Chang and Mehan's (2008) exploration of Bush's reasoning practices and argumentation system, we took a middle ground approach that neither overemphasised thematic discourse at the broader social level nor at the micro level of interaction. We selected the quotes presented in this paper on the basis of how well they might help reveal an overall pattern of moral disengagement in Bush's speeches and how well they might encapsulate the essence of the discerned themes.

### Analysis/Discussion

Although our analysis is qualitative, we also wanted to enrich our results by including some very basic statistical information that might better contextualise our research. From a total of 453 coded items, 300 (67%) were identified as relating to "mechanisms of moral disengagement." Moral justifications were most frequently used (accounting for 29% of the total number of identified mechanisms). This was followed by dehumanization and attribution of blame (23%) and advantageous comparison (12%). The remaining mechanisms of moral disengagement (sanitizing language, diffusion/displacement of responsibility and minimization of effects) account for less than 5% of the total number of mechanisms coded.



The analysis also provides evidence of further themes within Bush's speeches that may arguably contribute to encouraging mechanisms of moral disengagement within audiences. A total of 153 items (33%) were coded as "other" or "novel" mechanisms of persuasion designed to influence people's opinions and reduce self-sanctions. The three most prevalent of these themes relate to the excellence of Americans and the U.S.A. (or Patriotism, 39% of novel themes), the use of fear-arousing appeals with danger presented as clear and present (28%), the description of progress brought about in the occupied countries thanks to the allied troops (Military Success, 17%), and the use of religious metaphors (Religious Ideals, 16%).



### Moral Justification

Moral justification is the process of making detrimental behaviour seem acceptable by portraying it as “serving socially worthy or moral purposes” (Bandura, 1999, p. 3). This process is most useful during times of war (Kelman, 1973), as it is at these times when the morality of killing must be redefined so that it can be carried out free from (or at least with minimal) self-condemnation (McAlister et al., 2006). We found that Bush attempted to use moral justification to try to convince people that they are fighting against ruthless oppression: “Less than two years ago, determined enemies of America entered our countries, committed acts of murder against our people” (Bush, 2003a). He also presented himself as protecting their cherished values: “This is civilisation’s fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom” (Bush, 2001b), arguing for preserving the world peace: “We go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in our world” (Bush, 2001a). Portraying himself as fulfilling a mission to save humanity from merciless servitude, “Iraq only last year was controlled by a dictator who threatened the civilised world” (Bush, 2003a), he tried to justify further engagement in combat operations by drawing on US army losses and by ideologically vesting the operations with an aura of righteousness and supposedly speaking on behalf of the killed troops in a war-supporting voice: “the best way to honour the sacrifice of our fallen troops is to complete the mission and to lay the foundation of peace for generations to come” (Bush, 2005b).

### Advantageous Comparisons

Advantageous comparisons rely heavily on moral justifications by utilitarian standards that exploit the contrast principle, which states that how behaviour is viewed depends largely on that to which it is compared (Bandura et al., 1996). For example, in order to make the invasion of Iraq morally justifiable, Bush was compelled to compare his actions with events that appear negligible, using advantageous comparisons in several different ways. First the non-violent means of resolving the conflict situation in the Middle East were presented as ineffective and insufficient: “the world has tried economic sanctions...limited military strikes...no fly zones...containment...sanctions [and] inspections” (Bush, 2002a), arguing that a declaration of war is the only logical option left as all other ones have apparently failed. The “witch-hunting” rhetoric is clear in the conclusion that the absence of evidence of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) is presented as evidence of Iraqi deceit rather than as evidence of their absence. Thus, the inspectors’ unsuccessful attempts to confirm the presence of WMD



are framed in terms of Saddam's evasion and sinister trickery aimed at fooling the West. "This is a massive stockpile of biological weapons that have never been accounted for, capable of killing millions" (Bush, 2002a). The unambiguous references to the certain possession of WMD, and calls for decisive action against the evil in Iraq reflect the rhetoric of *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486), urging people to hunt down and battle witches and their magic. It is noteworthy that such evilness is rooted in the allegedly monolithic terrorist character rather than in sociological, economic, or political factors that remain completely unmentioned, suggesting strategic deployment of social categories and selective denial (Palasinski, Abell, & Levine, 2012).

Secondly, the portrayal of supposed threats - acts of violence and inhumanity carried out by America's adversaries in the Middle East - is used to bolster the belief that in the long term, a US (pre-emptive) military intervention would stave off more human suffering than it might potentially cause in the short term:

The surest way to avoid attacks on our own people is to engage the enemy where he lives and plans. We are fighting that enemy in Iraq and Afghanistan today so that we do not meet him again on our own streets, in our own cities. (Bush, 2003b);

"If we're not fighting and destroying this enemy in Iraq, they would not be idle. They would be plotting and killing Americans" (Bush, 2005a).

Furthermore, in relation to these ideas of the utility and necessity of war to protect not only America but the free world more generally, Bush used extensive examples of America's involvement in international conflict to demonstrate the supposed greater good of such action. It is noteworthy here that appeals to history offer a sense of continuity to experience and rationality to action, often illustrating thoughts, opinions and ideologies as part of a shared group identity (Bhatia, 2007). Using words and phrases to remind people of the atrocities committed during the reign of notorious dictators: "a civilized world knows very well that other fanatics in history – from Hitler, to Stalin to Pol Pot – consumed whole nations in war and genocide before leaving the stage of history" (Bush, 2005b); and the role that America played in bringing these inhumanities to an end, Bush attempted to connect with past wars and bring them into the foreground, presumably for the benefit of the 24.5 million war veterans that were living in the USA in 2005 (U.S Census Bureau, 2005). Arguably, this would not only increase the likelihood of war veterans being more supportive of the war, but might also contribute to the persuasion of others, particularly as war veterans are seen as credible and expert sources of information on what could happen if the war is not supported (O'Quinn, 2009).

### **Attribution of Blame & Dehumanisation of the Enemy**

The attribution of blame in Bush's rhetoric focused on the portrayal of America as being "dragged reluctantly" into a conflict to deal with a global terrorist threat: "We did not ask for the present challenge, but we accept it" (Bush, 2002a). This process aims to depict Americans as being faultless victims "driven to injurious conduct by forcible provocation" (Bandura, 1999, p. 203). Violent reactions to such provocations can thereby be seen as reasonable, excusable and defensible: "As long as terrorists and their allies plot to harm America, America is at war" (Bush, 2003a). Attributing blame to the adversary is important to the creation of a discourse supportive of a course of action that involves further conflict and also serves the manipulation of how those being blamed are viewed, not only by others, but also by themselves: "No act of ours invited the rage of killers" (Bush, 2005b).

Research has shown that when victims are plausibly and convincingly blamed for the suffering they are experiencing, they may eventually come to accept, believe and incorporate these negative characteristics into their self-concept (Hallie, 1971), ultimately resulting in them also attributing blame to themselves. From an observer's perspective, if a victim is seen to be responsible for their suffering, it can lead to them receiving further condemnation from others. Bush frequently used a discourse that supports dehumanisation of the enemy and does so in ways comparable to those previously used during the Twentieth Century during times of war and genocide. Such apparent effectiveness of dehumanization strategies in reducing the amount of remorse, regret, pity, or empathy felt for an out-group, is well documented (see for example Dutton, 2007) and is used to justify the doctrine of pre-emptive strikes.

The strength of a person's self-censure can in part depend on how that person views the others who are being mistreated (Bandura et al., 1996). During the course of our lives, we have interpersonal experiences with many different people, resulting in joy, pain, excitement or suffering, and it is these experiences that create a foundation for empathy for others (McAlister et al., 2006). The more we can identify with a person or people, the more responsive we are to their emotions (McAlister et al., 2006). Therefore, when a nation goes to war, it is the job of its leaders to ensure that its population identifies as little as possible with the people of the country being invaded, which can be facilitated by attempts to dehumanise the other (Bandura, 1999). McAlister et al., (2006) found that dehumanization of the enemy is the most effective factor in facilitating moral disengagement, as it makes it much easier to inflict pain, suffering and death upon those not seen as human (Keen, 1986; Staub, 2003). The forms of dehumanization found to be effective range from bestializing the enemy, to characterizing the enemy as "inherently evil" and "devoid of any moral sense" (McAlister, 2006, p. 160).

In his speeches, Bush uses dehumanization to portray his adversaries as mindless savages and cowardly yet dangerous barbarians without any moral scruples: "Just last week they massacred children and their parents at a toy giveaway ... this is an enemy without conscience" (Bush, 2005a); monsters devoid of any form of morality, feelings, or religion:

The terrorists kidnapped a young boy from the hospital and killed him .... In Tal Afar, the terrorists have schools for kidnapping and beheading and laying Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). One Iraqi teenager was taken from his family and routinely abused and violated - he was given the chance to prove his manhood by holding the legs of a captive whilst he was beheaded. (Bush, 2006b)

He also refers to them as disenfranchised nomads whose only faith lies in acts of blowing themselves and others up: "These people don't have tanks. They don't have ships. They hide in caves. They send suiciders (*sic*) out." (Bush, 2002b). With respect to this mechanism of dehumanization, Bush seems to prefer to use metaphors of barbarity to describe the outgroup<sup>5</sup> enemy and distinguish it from the West, which is described as civilised and wanting nothing more than safety and dignity, "The civilized world is rallying to America's side" (Bush, 2001b)

### **Sanitizing Language, Displacement & Diffusion of Responsibility and Minimization of Harm**

The final three mechanisms of moral disengagement were used in a limited capacity, and in total accounted for less than 5% of the total number of mechanisms identified. To clarify: sanitizing language is used to rename violent and detrimental actions to convey

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<sup>5</sup> An "outgroup" in this context is a social group with whom you do not identify.

respectability and moral correctness (Bandura, 1990). Displacement of responsibility is the distortion of the relationship between actions and the effects they cause (Bandura, 1990) which can be achieved through the diffusion of responsibility; “when everyone is responsible, no one really feels responsible” (Bandura et al., 1996, p. 365).

McAlister et al., (2006) argue that moral sanctions are reduced if the destructive effects of the subsequent behaviours are sufficiently diminished, and that these reductions can lead to increased support for military force. The possible reason behind the non-existence of the minimization of destructive effects within presidential speeches may be because “[W]ith the advent of satellite transmission, battles are now fought over *collateral damage* in the airways to shape public perceptions of military campaigns and debates about them” (McAlister et al., 2006, p. 159). This means that news reporters and television footage now control what people see in terms of injurious conduct and the effects of the war, the result being that such negative effects have arguably no place in the President’s speech. Thus, the military, the President and the government can effectively control what the public is exposed to as the U.S. military have “banned cameras and journalists from battlefield areas in the middle east” (McAlister et al., 2006, p. 159) in an attempt to minimize the leakage of reputation-tarnishing Abu-Ghraib style images, lending weight to Bandura’s (2004) argument that television has become a vital tool in the social containment of moral disengagement.

The minimal use of diffusion and displacement of responsibility and sanitizing language can furthermore be attributed to the fact that these mechanisms act mainly to absolve combatants and those directly involved in creating military campaigns of any responsibility for the destruction that they cause (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989; Bandura, 2004). Arguably, then, as the general public is not involved in devising strategies of attack or military campaigns, these mechanisms of moral disengagement are less relevant to disabling self-sanctions and increasing support for the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. In fact, in this study we found that on the few occasions in which these particular mechanisms of moral disengagement were used, it was a military audience that Bush was addressing (over 50% of the occurrences of diffusion and displacement of responsibility were used when addressing a military population). Importantly, minimization of destructive effects is a main contributor to the lowering of self-sanctions in the use of military force, which may be controlled via the mass media, as was seen during the Vietnam War when U.S. military banned cameras and members of the press from the battlefield in order to control the images seen by the American public (McAlister et al., 2006).

### ***Novel Themes:***

1. **American patriotism.** The theme identified as the most common within Bush’s speeches and which did not directly fit with Bandura’s theory of moral disengagement, was termed “American Patriotism” and accounted for 39% of the novel themes coded. Within this theme are ideas of American excellence in relation to its population and military prowess, comprising a range of references to courage, skill, strength, compassion, perseverance, dedication and service:

I am privileged to be in the presence of so many courageous military families, who have borne the hardships of war with dignity and devotion. By supporting a loved one in uniform, you are serving our country and America is grateful for your service and your sacrifice.  
(Bush, 2006a)

**2. Fear-arousing appeals: A clear and present danger.** A further novel mechanism of persuasion is anchored around instilling fear in the hope that it will increase support for the wars in the Middle East in general. This mechanism accounts for 28% of the novel themes coded and is focused on the notion that the enemy is a clear and present threat because of its actions and supposedly ubiquitous military presence. This mechanism is based on the idea of the existence of some form of universal danger from which nobody anywhere is safe: “This violence is directed...against anyone” (Bush, 2003b). Fear-arousing appeals or the use of fear as a mechanism of persuasion is deemed useful in relation to the effectiveness of persuasive communication to change the public opinion (Hovland et al., 1953). Statements made by Bush, such as “[we are] facing clear evidence of peril” (Bush, 2002a) and “we know they are preparing to attack us again” (Bush, 2004) depict a dangerous situation - a threat from which nobody is safe, illustrating the use of fear-arousing appeals to gain support for decisive military action. Similarly, Janis and Feshbach (1953) offer an explanation for the effect of fear on persuasion in terms of *fear-drive theory*, stating that messages tailored to induce a state of fear or anxiety in turn result in an internal drive to reduce such feelings. Thus, repetitions of fear-arousing appeals serve as reinforcement to encourage a favoured or promoted course of action as a means of dispelling this fear.

In relation to this clear and present threat, the military presence of the enemy and their potential to attack at will is promoted to encourage support for decisive military reaction from the United States: “Two months after our operation to clear the city, the terrorists had returned to continue their brutal campaign of intimidation.” (Bush, 2006b). By using terms such as *trained*, *recruited*, *indoctrinated* and *tactics* it is indicated that the adversary goes through a specialised recruitment process similar to Western military forces and that they are highly trained and skilled in ways that might (at least on some level) possibly rival the allied forces. By using values as descriptions, such as *thousands*, Bush exaggerates the size of the force being commanded by the terrorists and their whereabouts: “Terrorists are recruited from their own nations and neighbourhoods and ... are trained in the tactics of terror” (Bush, 2001b). Providing accounts of the places that have been attacked and by describing the attacks as an offensive strike, Bush depicts the enemy as being highly organised, strategic, and co-ordinated, the implication being that it is capable of carrying out multiple co-ordinated strikes: “al Qaeda and its associates trained, indoctrinated, and sent forth thousands of killers to set up terror cells in dozens of countries, including our own.” (Bush, 2004). Finally, by indicating how the enemy forces came back to reclaim the city after it had been cleared to continue their *campaign*, Bush attempts to make it clear that this enemy is not only untiring and devoted to their cause, but also large in numbers, and will not stop until its goal has been reached: “We have seen a new terror offensive with attacks on London and Sharm el-Sheikh, another deadly strike in Bali; and this week, a series of bombing in Amman, Jordan.” (Bush, 2005b).

**Military success.** Bush also makes multiple references to the progress that the allied troops have made in the Middle East and changes resulting from this (17% of novel themes). Depicting the effects of the war as actually making a difference and having a positive effect on both the country and its residents is used to reduce the chances of people (both military personnel and the general population) reconsidering their support of the war. This can be illustrated by the following example referring to *progress*, completely omitting destroyed infrastructure, regular sectarian violence, frequent power shortages and rampant corruption (Beaumont, 2013), to name just a few unintended long-term consequences:

When I spoke here a year ago, Iraqis still had a transitional government that was operating under administrative law issued before the restoration of sovereignty. Today, Iraqis have a permanent government chosen in free elections under a democratic constitution that they wrote and they approved. And the Iraqi people have a courageous leader in Prime Minister Maliki, who has formed the cabinet and laid out a clear agenda for the people of Iraq. (Bush, 2006a)

Offering examples of positive changes produced in the Middle East and framing these as a positive result of the US-led military intervention, while skipping the unintended consequences, raises the issue of “psychological traps” (Rubin & Brockner, 1985). Psychological traps refer to instances where an individual, after joining or supporting a specific cause with the aim of reaching a goal, realises that the process of achieving this goal requires repeated action, without the goal actually getting any closer. After a time, the individual may find themselves having to make a decision; either to continue investing in a cause which seems to bear no fruits, or abandon the cause and with it everything that has been invested so far. Seeing progress being made, and constantly being reminded of that progress, means that people can see their goal getting closer, the effect being that the taken course of action appears to be right (Rubin & Brockner, 1985) - an illusion that military personnel and civilians alike are susceptible to.

**Religious ideals.** The use of religious language and metaphors is a further theme (accounting for 16% of the novel themes) that advances the previous research on moral disengagement and is used to justify military action and to persuade others of the US righteousness. It is noteworthy that religion is probably one of the oldest justifications used for mass detrimental conduct, the most notable example being Pope Urban II's calls for the Holy Crusades at the end of the Eleventh Century:

On this account I, or rather the Lord, beseech you as Christ's heralds to publish this everywhere and to persuade all people of whatever rank, foot-soldiers and knights, poor and rich, to carry aid promptly to those Christians and to destroy that vile race from the lands of our friends. I say this to those who are present, it meant also for those who are absent. Moreover, Christ commands it. All who die by the way, whether by land or by sea, or in battle against the pagans, shall have immediate remission of sins. (Jacques Bongars, translated in Thatcher & McNeal, 1905)

Although Bush does not use such overt justification as Urban II, he does use metaphors, such as *evil* and *darkness* to characterize not only what he believes to be the overwhelming group and individual characteristics of the construed enemy, but also what he would like others to believe:

The people who did this act on America, and who may be planning further acts, are evil people. They don't represent an ideology; they don't represent a legitimate political group of people. They're flat evil. That's all they can think about, is evil. (Bush, 2001c)

As we can see from this statement, Bush presents the word “evil” as a type social categorization and uses adjectives such as *very* and *worst* to increase the portrayal of terrorists as being the opposite of everything that the “nation of good folks” (Bush, 2001c) stands for (Bhatia, 2007, p. 511). The adjective *flat* is further used to emphasize the evil nature of the terrorist, whilst at the same time disallowing them any way to justify their actions, indicating that they are in fact “evil” by nature, not consequence” (Bhatia, 2007, p. 511). These descriptions further increase the *us* versus *them* divide, ultimately decreasing the amount of empathy any American or European might feel for the *enemy*.

Also embedded within the topic of religious metaphor is the concept of *light versus dark* “America was targeted for attack because we’re the brightest beacon for freedom...no one will keep that light from shining” (Bush, 2001a). The concept of “Manichaeic discourse emphasizing the eternal duality between the *co-eternals* good and evil” (Bhatia 2007, p. 517) is extremely prominent in the rhetoric of Bush. This concept puts into effect the above-mentioned metaphor by implicating a biblical concept of heaven and hell: “You defeat an ideology of darkness with an ideology of hope and light. And freedom and liberty are part of an ideology of light” (Bush, 2006c). Furthermore, and as Bhatia (2007) points out, such terms used by Bush carry connotations with leadership, justice, triumph, courage and a general universal goodness, whereas his metaphors of darkness carry connotations of deceit, secrecy, cruelty and defeat. The use of religious language and justification is well implemented by Bush, as he and his speech writers were undoubtedly aware that in 2001 over 75% of the entire population of the United States of America were part of the Christian faith (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009), the point being that the possibility of provoking a strong reaction by using such rhetorical incentives could be exceedingly high.

### Conclusion

Having drawn on Bush’s *war on terror* rhetoric and subjected 19 of his speeches to thematic content analysis, in this article we critically considered the rhetoric of Bush through the lens of moral disengagement. Thus, we aimed to address an important and current gap by carefully unpacking a number of complex, subtle and context-dependent mechanisms of moral disengagement (including moral justification, advantageous comparisons, attribution of blame, dehumanisation of the enemy, as well as the use of sanitizing language, diffusion of responsibility and minimization of harm). We also took account of novel themes, like American excellence/patriotism, fear-arousing appeals and religious ideals which support and complement both the existing research and the ongoing, evolving and shape-shifting *war on terror* script that recent terrorist attacks, such as the Boston marathon bombing, contributes to keeping alive.

Further work in this area of understanding is needed. Not only do we need to understand the rhetoric and processes of moral disengagement that can be embedded in rhetoric for the purposes of promoting and gaining support for war, and other forms of decisive military action, it is imperative that we also look more closely at media amplification (Jewkes, 2004) of attacks, and the threats and portrayal of those believed to be involved in this. The concern of moral panics is not about dismissing the reality of a threat but rather the problems associated with amplifying the threat out of all proportion, in particular the long term and far-reaching repercussions of threat amplification are arguably evident in relation to the war on terror which has resulted in a long and protracted occupation of foreign territory with little sense of resolution or of the achievement of the original stated aims (i.e., to win a war on terror).

In turn, focusing on understanding the relevance, weight and importance of political rhetoric of this nature may be used effectively to equip entrepreneurs of peace with a greater awareness of such rhetorical nuances, thus enabling improved counter-rhetoric, the importance of which is continuously highlighted in attempts to win the hearts and minds of supporters of any perspective?

This might be applied in instances such as British Prime Minister David Cameron's call for the renewal of the nuclear weapons deterrent against the danger that North Korea allegedly poses to Britain. The awareness of such processes is fundamental to keeping us apart from those who promote indiscriminate death and to supporting the pillars of freedom on which our democracies rest.

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