

War of Words:

The Impact of Dehumanizing Military Metaphors on U.S. Military Deployments Post 9/11

A Capstone project presented in
fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts in Policy Studies

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August 20, 2024

Abstract

This capstone project investigates the use of dehumanizing military metaphors in U.S. political speeches and media discourse following the September 11, 2001 attacks, focusing on the rhetoric of Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama during their first terms. The study explores how these metaphors, often framed within themes such as “us-vs-them”, a faceless “Other”, “good-vs-evil”, and the “protection of freedom”, serve as powerful tools of political persuasion. Through content analysis and the application of the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), the research reveals how these metaphors simplify complex geopolitical conflicts, influence public perception through media coverage, and justify military engagements. The capstone project highlights the evolution and persistence of these metaphors across administrations, emphasizing the real-world human costs of military actions, and ultimately advocating for more ethical and transparent communication strategies in political discourse.

Acknowledgments

To the many individuals whose support and encouragement have been instrumental in the completion of this capstone project, I would like to express my deepest gratitude.

First and foremost, I am profoundly grateful to my advisor, Dr. Camille Walsh, for her continuous guidance, insightful feedback, and constant support throughout this process. Her expertise and patience have been invaluable, and this project would not have been possible without her mentorship.

A special acknowledgement goes to Dr. Denise Vaughan, who, although no longer at this institution, played a crucial role as a mentor, unofficial advisor, and friend throughout my academic journey. Dr. Vaughan's profound insights and encouragement were instrumental in shaping the foundation and direction of my research. Her contributions, including writing many letters of recommendations for me, have left a lasting impact. Her motivation statement to me during my undergraduate studies, "find something that you're passionate about, something that really excites you or something that just pisses you off. Take that energy and turn it into creating knowledge to better your community," continues to resonate with me. I am forever appreciative of her support.

I want to extend my sincere thanks to Dr. Keith Nitta, Dr. Camille Walsh, and Dr. Joe Ferrare, who have been my professors during both undergraduate and graduate studies. Their dedication to teaching and their inspiring courses have significantly influenced my academic growth and passion for this field. I am particularly grateful to Dr. Keith Nitta for writing me a letter of recommendation that enabled me to be a part of this master's program, and for his countless advice on topics both within and beyond the classroom. Their endless support and encouragement have been a source of motivation throughout my academic journey. Their belief in my abilities and their encouragement to pursue this path have been greatly influential in my academic and professional development.

I would also like to extend my sincere thanks to the faculty and staff of UW Bothell's School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences, whose dedication to academic excellence has inspired and supported my research endeavors. I am especially grateful to Dr. Shauna Elbers-Carlisle, Dr. Charlie Collins, Dr. Wadiya Udell, Dr. Ron Krabill, and Dr. Eric Stewart,— without your guidance, mentorship, and words of wisdom outside of the classroom, I would not be where I am today.

As a veteran, I want to express my deepest gratitude to my fellow veterans – my brothers and sisters in arms. I am proud to stand alongside you and am forever grateful for the camaraderie and support we share. This project is dedicated to honoring your service and the values we uphold.

Finally, and most importantly, a heartfelt and profound thank you goes to my family. Your love has shaped who I am today, and this capstone, this achievement is as much yours as it is mine. To my wife, Tanya, your constant love, patience, and support have been my rock throughout this academic journey. Your sacrifices and understanding during the long hours and stressful times have been invaluable. To my boys, Raiden and Koa, thank you for your patience and for being a constant source of joy and inspiration. Your smiles and encouragement have given me the strength to persevere, and I hope that this project serves as an example of dedication and hard work for you both. To my parents, Robbie and Joanne, thank you for always believing in my potential and for your constant help with the boys. Your willingness to take care of them during my busiest times allowed me to focus on my studies, and for that, I am deeply grateful.

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Purpose of Study

“Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.”

– President George W. Bush, September 20, 2001

In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks, the United States has embarked on a series of military deployments that fundamentally altered its global engagement and internal politics. A key aspect of how these actions were communicated to the public was through the use of military metaphors in political speeches and media discourse. These metaphors, often dehumanizing, serve not just as linguistic decorations but as tools of political persuasion. They play a crucial role in the media’s manufacturing of consent, shaping policy, molding public perception, and influencing support for military actions.

The media, as a powerful institution, amplifies these metaphors, embedding them in the public consciousness. The use of dehumanizing military metaphors has a profound impact on both the perception of enemies and on U.S. troops themselves. In the context of U.S. political and media discourse post-9/11, adversaries are frequently portrayed with dehumanizing terms such as “cancer” and “enemy combatants” to strip them of individuality and justify their treatment as threats rather than as human beings. This process of dehumanization strips the opposition of individuality, rights, and beliefs, ultimately reducing them to a faceless “other”. Similarly, racialized group-identifying terms like “the common Jew”, “the common Arab”, or “the common Asian” use overly broad and essentialist language that dehumanizes entire groups, denying each individual their equal human dignity and unique characteristics. In the context of the Global War on Terror, the designation of “enemy combatant” was used to detain and handle individuals captured without affording them the protections typically granted to prisoners of war

under the Geneva Conventions (Roth, 2004; International Committee of the Red Cross, 1949, art.3). On the other hand, metaphors such as “boots on the ground”, “assets”, or “war machines” reduce U.S. soldiers to simple instruments of war. This de-emphasizes their individuality and conceals their humanity. The media’s repetitive use of these metaphors not only reinforces their dehumanizing effect but also legitimizes military actions by framing them as necessary and justified responses to threats.

The influence of language in political persuasion, particularly through the use of military metaphors, has been extensively explored in the context of post-9/11 military deployments. Metaphors play a crucial role in shaping our understanding and communication in political discourse, fundamentally influencing how we perceive and react to political messages. This influence has intensified in the post-9/11 era, with a noticeable increase in militaristic metaphors, especially associated with "the War on Terror". These metaphors have evolved from describing direct military action to addressing broader societal challenges. In this context, military metaphors are phrases or expressions that use language associated with warfare to describe other aspects of society – political, social, or economic situations. For example, terms like “war room”, “divide and conquer”, and “line of fire” are used to help simplify complex ideas by comparing them to familiar concepts of conflict and strategy. A war room is originally a room where military strategies were planned, but now it is also used to describe a place where strategic planning and decision-making occur in business or politics. Divide and conquer is a military strategy that is aimed at breaking up an enemy’s forces to weaken them, but now it is also used to describe strategies for dealing with problems by breaking them down into more manageable parts. Line of fire, in military terms, refers to the path of a weapon’s discharge, but now it is also used to describe being in a position of direct criticism or pressure in both professional and personal situations. Political discourse strategically employs such language to mold public

perception, leveraging emotions and rationalizing decisions under the guise of the common good. The media's strategic use of such language simplifies complex ideas, making them more accessible and emotionally resonant with the public. This strategic framing by the media helps manufacture public consent for military actions by making aggressive policies appear rational and necessary.

Despite the insights offered by existing literature, there is a need for more focused studies that link the general effects of metaphoric framing used in political discourse to military policy and public support for deployments. Unfortunately, there are not many studies that are similar in this regard. Much of the existing literature either covers a broad array of political discourse or concentrates on specific case studies, such as the psyche of the soldier and the characteristics that make it easier to kill (Fromm et al., 2013; Hall, 2012; McIntosh, 2021; Wadham, 2016). Ultimately, it lacks a longitudinal perspective that tracks the evolution and long-term impact of these metaphors in foreign policy, specifically military deployments. In this case, it would be a useful addition to the existing literature on the topic. Such an analysis would help to elucidate the legitimacy of military engagements by providing a clearer understanding of how language shapes public perception and policy decisions. By examining the metaphoric framing used in political discourse, we can uncover how these metaphors influence perceptions of threats, justify military actions, and foster support for military deployments. This insight is crucial because it reveals the underlying mechanisms through which public support is manufactured.

We must examine why the military is being deployed overseas, what the strategic interest is, determine what 'success' is, and finally weigh these factors against the risk of losing the lives of our soldiers. This broader implication extends beyond immediate policy decisions as it requires a comprehensive evaluation of the motivations, objectives, and outcomes of military engagements. By having a more nuanced understanding of the impact of military metaphors, we

can ensure that future military deployments are justified, strategically sound, and aligned with both national interests and ethical considerations. This, in turn, allows for a more informed discussion about the true costs and benefits of military deployments, ensuring that decisions to deploy troops are based on comprehensive, transparent considerations rather than rhetorical manipulation. As Donald Rumsfeld, former Secretary of Defense, said in *Transforming the Military* (2002):

And finally, be straight with the American people. Tell them the truth – and when you cannot tell them something, tell them you cannot tell them. The American people understand what we are trying to accomplish, what is needed to get the job done, that it will not be easy, and that there will be casualties. And they must know that, good news or bad, we will tell it straight. Broad bipartisan public support must be rooted in a bond of trust, understanding, and common purpose (p.32).

As such, this capstone project seeks to explore the relationship between the dehumanizing military metaphors in U.S. political speeches and the legitimization of these metaphors by media repetition for U.S. military deployments since the tragic events of 9/11. Specifically, this capstone project will examine how these metaphors, propagated through the media, are connected to the frequency and nature of military deployments. By analyzing political speeches and media coverage, this project will highlight the connection between rhetoric, media framing, and manufacturing of consent, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of political communication's role in military engagement and policy support. This work is important now as the global political landscape continues to be shaped by the legacy of post-9/11 military actions and ongoing conflicts.

This study not only adds to the academic literature in political communication but also serves as a valuable resource for policymakers, journalists, and military strategists. By revealing how language and media framing influence public support for military deployment, this capstone project can inform more ethical and transparent communication strategies. This, in turn, can indirectly contribute to military policy by encouraging a re-evaluation of the rhetoric used in justifying military actions, promoting more responsible and reflective decision-making processes. Ensuring that military engagements are based on comprehensive and ethical considerations rather than manipulative language is essential for fostering a more informed and critically engaged public. In this current era, where both misinformation and polarized media are prevalent, understanding the impact of dehumanizing metaphors is crucial for fostering a more informed public.

Literature Review

The nuanced relationship between language and public opinion is a focal point in understanding the dynamics of political persuasion, especially in the context of military deployments post 9/11. Military rhetoric, particularly the use of dehumanizing military metaphors, plays a pivotal role in political and media discourse, influencing public support for military actions. This review examines the scope and impact of such metaphors in shaping public perception and policy.

The use of military metaphors in political discourse is not a recent phenomenon. Lakoff and Johnson (2003) argue that metaphors are central to our understanding of political discourse. It not only shapes communication but also perception. According to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphors are not merely figures of speech but are fundamental to how we think and understand the world. When we use metaphors in communication, we are not just choosing colorful language; we are framing our experiences and structuring our thoughts in specific ways. For instance, describing time as money (e.g., “saving time” or “spending time”) shapes how we perceive and value time, making it seem like a finite resource that can be managed and wasted. Post 9/11, scholars like Ivie (2005) note a significant increase in militaristic metaphors, particularly in the context of “the War on Terror”. For example, the War on Terror is often framed as a moral crusade, invoking imagery of a righteous battle between good and evil, casting the conflict in simple moral terms with the United States and its allies as the forces of good fighting against the forces of evil. Additionally, terrorism is frequently described using metaphors of disease and infection, implying that it is a pervasive, dangerous threat that must be eradicated to protect the health of the nation, thus suggesting a need for aggressive measures to “cure” the problem. Ivie highlights how these metaphors have evolved from simply describing military action to encompassing broader societal and political challenges. According to Ivie (2005), the

war-as-a-crusade metaphor, initially used to justify military engagements overseas, began to influence domestic policies, framing political dissent and civil liberties debates as obstacles to the moral mission. The disease metaphor, beyond justifying international military campaigns, also shaped domestic security policies leading to measures that treated entire communities as potential “carriers” of terrorism. This normalized surveillance and profiling practices and emphasized an “us-versus-them” mentality.

David Livingstone Smith, author of *Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others* (2012), provides a profound analysis of dehumanization and its role in enabling extreme violence and cruelty. Smith argues that dehumanization is rooted in our cognitive ability to essentialize, or compartmentalize, the world around us. “We divide living things into species, and species into kinds. We then rank species and kinds from highest to lowest” (Pryer, 2012). This mental categorization allows humans to perceive certain groups as less than human, thereby justifying acts of violence and cruelty against them. This typification is not only applied to the enemies that we fight, but also how we describe our nation’s troops. Military recruits undergo both physical reconditioning and psychopolitical reconditioning, which transforms their self-perception as well as their perception of their enemies. Janet McIntosh (2021) writes, “the prequel to dehumanizing the enemy is the dehumanization of American service members themselves, who over the course of their training become semiotically framed as both expendable and exchangeable.” This framing reinforces a narrative where service members are seen as mere tools of war, which can contribute to a diminished sense of individuality and increased pressure to conform to a heroic yet dehumanizing ideal.

Reyes (2011) further highlights how language in political discourse is strategically employed to shape public opinion and more importantly, justify actions. Reyes’ identification of key strategies such as leveraging emotions, especially fear, rationalizing decisions, and justifying

actions as for the common good complements the observations on militaristic metaphors. He provides numerous examples of these strategies in action. For example, in terms of leveraging emotions, political leaders frequently invoked the traumatic events of 9/11 to elicit fear and justify ongoing military actions. Specifically, to sustain support for the “War on Terror”, Reyes discusses President George W. Bush’s emphasis on the innocent lives lost and the continued threat posed by terrorists, stating, “these are the same folks that came and killed about 3,000 of our citizens” (January 11, 2007) and President Barack Obama’s highlighting “and this danger will only grow if the region slides backwards, and Al-Qaeda can operate with impunity” (December 1, 2009). Reyes also demonstrates how politicians rationalize behavior by presenting their actions as thoughtful and necessary responses to a grave threat: “We’re in Afghanistan to prevent a cancer from once again spreading through that country” (December 1, 2009), from President Obama on military strategy. His analysis underscores how these strategies and metaphors collectively work to garner support and legitimize political agendas, aligning closely with the trends identified by Ivie in the increasing use and impact of military metaphors.

The power of language in shaping public opinion is well-documented. Ottatti, Renstrom, and Price (2014) elaborate on this in their Metaphoric Framing Model. They assert that metaphors used in political discourse do more than just add flair to language. Instead, they serve as frameworks that significantly change how the public understands and assesses political events. The Metaphoric Framing Model explains how metaphors in political discourse influence public opinion and understanding. It states that the activation of a root metaphor can occur through several ways: (1) explicitly by directly stating the metaphor (e.g., a presidential campaign as a beauty contest), (2) implicitly by using language that implies the metaphor (e.g., using football terms to describe a military operation), (3) incidentally through “surface metaphoric utterances” not directly related to the main topic, and (4) contextually by priming the metaphor source

through a related context or physical cue (e.g., a person holding a warm – as opposed to cold – cup of coffee increases the likelihood that they would view a target person as warm). Once activated, these root metaphors influence the individual's or public's impression of the target event or topic. This process can shape political judgments, highlight certain aspects of an issue while downplaying others, and guide attributions and elaborations of political arguments.

Building on this understanding, the systematic literature review by Boeynaems et al. (2017) further deepens our perspective by comparing the critical-discourse approach (CDA) and the response-elicitation approach (REA) in the study of metaphorical framing. They highlight the variability in metaphorical framing's effectiveness depending on approach, context, and framing characteristics. The CDA involves analyzing real-world changes that are a result from metaphorical framing (and other systematic patterns) in language use. It examines the relationship between language and social structures, focusing on language and its impact on societal issues. The CDA does not create controlled research situations but instead studies how language is used in real-life contexts affects social relations and power dynamics. On the other hand, the REA studies the effects of metaphorical framing by eliciting responses from participants exposed to certain language in controlled research settings. This approach aims to establish causal relationships between metaphorical frames and their effects on individuals through manipulating and controlling variables in a research environment. This comparison between CDA and REA approaches suggests that the impact of metaphors, such as those used in military contexts post-9/11, is complex and multifaceted. While Ottatti et al.'s model emphasizes the transformative power of metaphor in political rhetoric, Boeynaems et al.'s review sheds light on the diverse methodologies and outcomes in metaphorical framing research, demonstrating that the framing and perception of military metaphors can significantly differ based on their contextual presentation and audience interpretation.

The way metaphors are used in language and how they influence public opinion are key factors in understanding how political persuasion works, especially in relation to military deployments post 9/11. Studies conducted by Landau et al. (2009) illustrate how using metaphors can influence how people feel about different social issues, even if they seem unrelated. For example, in one study, participants were made to feel a heightened concern for protecting their own bodies from contamination by reading an article about harmful airborne bacteria. After, they read a description of the U.S. framed metaphorically as a body (e.g., “the nation experienced unprecedented growth spurts and needs to digest new laws”). This metaphoric framing led participants to express harsher attitudes towards immigration compared to those who read a literal description of the U.S. This specific study demonstrates that the metaphorical framing of the country as a body vulnerable to contamination can trigger negative responses towards immigration. It also illustrates how metaphors can link unrelated concepts (bodily contamination and immigration) to influence social attitudes. This suggests that when political leaders use metaphors strategically, they can significantly sway public perception. This finding is further supported by research indicating that military metaphor, commonly used in political discourse, greatly influences how veterans perceive themselves and how they are perceived by society (Nayback, 2008; Mittal et al., 2013; Xue et al., 2015, McIntosh, 2021). The influence of military metaphors on veterans, according to Mittal et al. (2013) and McIntosh (2021), operates through the lens of discursive psychology. Military metaphors, such as “fighting for freedom” or “defending our way of life”, contribute to the societal image of veterans as heroes. This hero narrative aligns with societal expectations and reinforces a positive self-image for veterans. However, this idealization can have a downside as it strips veterans of their individuality and reduces their individual, complex experiences to simplistic, valorous terms. Veterans may feel pressured to live up to these heroic standards, which can complicate their transition to civilian

life and their self-perception, especially when dealing with mental health issues like PTSD. Conversely, metaphors that frame veterans as “broken” or “damaged” can perpetuate negative stereotypes and social stigmas. These metaphors can influence public perception, leading to discrimination and marginalization. For example, the societal view of veterans with PTSD as unpredictable or dangerous can result in difficulties in finding employment or housing (Mittal et al., 2013). Additionally, Tileagă (2010) argues that metaphors related to moral exclusion in political rhetoric play a role in justifying policies that leave people out. Tileagă emphasizes that moral exclusion involves categorizing certain groups as outside the boundaries of moral consideration, which not only legitimizes prejudice but also dehumanizes these groups by denying them an equal moral standing in society. According to Tileagă, this discursive process can lead to extreme forms of prejudice, where the excluded group is seen as “out-of-place” and subject to depersonalization and delegitimization. This highlights the powerful psychological impact of linguistic choices on societal attitudes and behaviors, especially on policy approval. The psychological impact is powerful because it not only shapes perception but fosters an environment where exclusion and inequality become normalized through everyday language and social interaction.

In addition to the strategic use of metaphors by political leaders, the media plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion and discourse. As media evolves, particularly with the rise of many different digital platforms, its impact on political communication and public perception becomes increasingly significant. This is where Daud’s study (2021) provides further insight into the relationship between traditional and digital media in influencing societal attitudes and political beliefs. Daud’s research emphasized the growing importance of digital media in shaping public opinion, especially among younger generations, while highlighting the enduring influence of traditional media. It highlights how digital platforms, like social media, add

complexity to political discourse, especially with the issues of misinformation that they bring. These digital platforms work alongside traditional media outlets, like newspapers and television, influencing how political topics are discussed and understood. Tewksbury and Scheufele (2019) suggest that the framing process in media significantly shapes how issues are perceived and discussed. They argue that news framing is not just about presenting information but about shaping audience interpretation and reaction through specific narrative constructs. This ties into Daud's findings, indicating that both traditional and new media platforms utilize framing techniques to influence public perception, often using military metaphors to evoke specific emotional responses and support for policies.

Overall, the existing literature demonstrates a strong connection between language, media representation, and public opinion – particularly through the use of dehumanizing military metaphors in political and media discourse. Despite these insights, there remains a gap in the literature regarding the longitudinal impact of these dehumanizing metaphors on military policy and public support for deployments. Existing studies focus on the immediate effects or specific case studies, lacking a comprehensive, longitudinal perspective that tracks the evolution and long-term influence of these metaphors on military deployments and public perception. There is a need for more focused research that directly links metaphorical framing in political discourse to military deployment decisions and media coverage trends over time.

Methodology

This study was an archival research project. The archival research design was selected for this capstone project not only due to the inherent fallibility of human memory, but also because it allowed for the analysis of how military metaphors influenced deployment decisions over time. Human memory is subject to various distortions, such as the tendency to reconstruct past events based on present beliefs or external influences (Bernstein et al., 2008). These distortions can significantly affect the reliability of surveys or interviews. This design, archival, enabled a systematic examination of the evolution and long-term impact of dehumanizing military metaphors in political and media discourse, providing insights into their sustained effects on policy decisions. Therefore, by relying on archives (the University of Washington, Department of Defense, and National Archives) and media databases (New York Times and Washington Post), this research avoided the biases and inaccuracies that can arise from retrospective self-reporting. The primary sources included archived media articles, transcripts of political speeches, and military documents from national archives and historical databases. For this study, I examined 8,502 pages (Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States – Bush), 8,063 pages (Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States – Obama), over 40 articles from the New York Times, over 40 articles from the Washington Post, 4 reports from the Costs of War project based at the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University, 1 casualty database from the Iraq Body Count project (IBC), 4 casualty reports from the Department of Defense, and 3 reports from the Congressional Research Service.

This study specifically focused on the first four years of President George W. Bush's and President Barack Obama's presidencies for political speeches to provide a comparative analysis of the usage and impact of military metaphors, in terms of military deployments, across different administrations. The decision to focus on the first four years of the Bush and Obama presidencies was driven by two considerations. Firstly, the first term of any presidency is crucial in setting the

tone and establishing the at-time administration's policies. The initial years of a presidency are often when key policies are formulated and implemented. It is also the term where they have re-election on the horizon. Secondly, the early years of both presidencies were marked by significant events that shaped U.S. foreign and military policies. Bush's first term began shortly before the 9/11 attacks, which led to the "Global War on Terror" and subsequent military deployments in Afghanistan and Iraq. In contrast, Obama's first term was characterized by the continuation and eventual drawdown of these conflicts, as well as efforts to redefine U.S. military strategy and foreign policy. Analyzing speeches from these periods allowed for an examination of how military metaphors were used in response to these pivotal events.

Secondary sources included books and scholarly articles that discuss the historical contexts and previous research findings on rhetoric and political persuasion. The archival data provided a more accurate and object analysis of how dehumanizing military metaphors in political and media discourse have evolved over time and influenced public opinion and military deployment decisions. Both, the New York Times and the Washington Post, are among the most widely read and influential newspapers in the United States. Their extensive reach ensures that the articles analyzed are representative of mainstream media coverage. Additionally, both newspapers have extensive, well-organized archives that are easily accessible for academic research, crucial for conducting a thorough and efficient analysis of historical media content.

To explore the relationship between dehumanizing military metaphors and media framing, this study employed several steps: (1) conducted a content analysis of political speeches and media articles to identify and categorize dehumanizing military metaphors, (2) utilized military deployment data from the Department of Defense (DoD) to cross-reference with the identified military metaphors, (3) incorporated secondary sources to provide additional context and depth to the analysis, and (4) examined the narratives surrounding key events and decisions

in military deployments to understand how these metaphors are used to legitimize military actions through media framing.

Data analysis utilized the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF). The NPF is a theoretical approach that examines the role of narratives in the policy process. It provides a structured way to analyze how stories and metaphors in political and media discourse influence public opinion and policy decisions (Shanahan et al., 2018). The NPF was preferable to other discourse analytic methods, such as Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, because it explicitly focuses on the policy implications of narratives and metaphors, providing a clear framework for linking discourse to concrete policy outcomes. While Critical Discourse Analysis provides valuable insights into the power dynamics and ideological structures within language (Fairclough, 2001), the NPF's structured approach to narrative elements and strategies offered a more direct application to understanding military deployment decisions. There are three key components of the NPF: (1) narrative elements (setting, characters, plot, and moral of the story), (2) narrative strategies (scope of conflict, causal mechanisms, and devil-angel shift), and (3) levels of analysis (micro-, meso-, and macro-level). Specifically, this framework was useful for analyzing the narrative construction and effects of dehumanizing military metaphors as presented in both primary and secondary sources. The NPF helped in identifying narrative strategies and policy implications embedded in the language of political speeches and news media surrounding military engagements.

While this study aimed to provide a comprehensive analysis of how dehumanizing military metaphors in political and media discourse have influenced military deployment decisions, it is important to acknowledge potential limitations. This research was limited to English-language sources (primary and secondary) and primarily focused on military deployments from the United States Armed Forces, which might not fully represent global

perspectives. Another limitation was the lack of access to certain classified and/or restricted documents that could provide a more complete picture of the policy-making process. The primary sources may contain inherent biases, and the media sources can reflect the ideological perspectives of the publishers, potentially influencing the framing and interpretation of events. Furthermore, the reliance on secondary sources such as books and scholarly articles introduced another layer of potential bias – these interpretations are influenced by the perspectives and theoretical frameworks of the authors. Additionally, this capstone project’s reliance on already available data, due to time constraints, might also create selection bias which could affect the comprehensiveness of the study. Despite these limitations, the archival research design with the NPF as the guiding framework remains appropriate for this capstone project. The research design provided a robust framework for analyzing historical and contemporary data, and more importantly, offers insights that are less susceptible to the distortions and biases inherent in human memory and retrospective self-reporting. The application of the NPF further strengthened the research design by providing a structured method to analyze the role of narratives and metaphors in shaping policy and media framing.

To illustrate the use of the NPF, consider the speech that was delivered by President George W. Bush on September 20, 2001, where he famously stated, “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists”. The context of the speech was the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which created a heightened emotional state across the U.S. and the world. The physical location of the speech was the U.S. Congress, symbolizing national unity and the formal government response to the crisis. The heroes in this narrative are the United States, its allies, and its military forces (portrayed as the righteous defenders of freedom). The villains are the terrorists, specifically Al-Qaeda. The victims are the American people, the direct victims of the attacks, and the global citizens who are also threatened by terrorism. The plot was the sequence

of events from the 9/11 attacks to a U.S. response, which was framed as a moral and necessary action. The proposed policy solution in the speech was unwavering support to the U.S. government's actions against terrorism – thus “either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists”. Bush's narrative framed the conflict as a global struggle, which underscored the global stakes and the necessity of international support. The devil-shift strategy emphasized the power and threat of the villains (terrorists) to rally support for aggressive actions, whereas the angel-shift highlighted the heroism and righteousness of the U.S. – the leaders in the fight against terrorism. Ultimately, this was the start of the “Global War on Terror”. By utilizing the NPF, this study provided insights into how dehumanizing military metaphors shaped public discourse and impacted policy decisions regarding military deployments.

Results/Discussion

Author's Note:

It is important to note that when beginning this research, I initially anticipated that a significant portion of the military metaphors used in political speeches and media coverage would refer to U.S. military personnel. My expectation was to find metaphors that dehumanized soldiers by reducing them to mere tools, such as “boots on the ground” or “war machines”. However, as this study progressed, it became clear that the majority of dehumanizing metaphors between 2001-2004 and 2009-2012 were actually directed towards conflict opposition, rather than U.S. soldiers. These metaphors often portrayed the enemy as faceless, malicious forces, using terms like “terrorists”, “killers”, and “evildoers” to strip them of their individuality and humanity. This finding is significant because it highlights the way language is strategically used to shape perception of the enemy, making it easier to justify military actions against them. While the dehumanization of U.S. military personnel did occur, it was far less prevalent than expected, with the primary rhetorical focus being on creating a clear, morally dichotomous narrative of “us-vs-them”. These findings highlight the crucial role that language plays in shaping public understanding and policies for military actions, particularly in the context of the “Global War on Terror”.

Understanding the true impact of language in shaping public perception and policy requires a deep dive into the context in which this language is used. Military deployments, particularly those undertaken by the U.S. in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, provide a critical backdrop for examining the power of dehumanizing military metaphors. By examining these deployments, we can contextualize the use of dehumanizing military metaphors in political speeches and media discourse. The following tables present the data on military deployments during the first four years as president for President Bush and President Obama. These tables provide an overview of the number of troops deployed under various military engagements during the early years of each administration, setting the stage for a deeper analysis of the rhetorical strategies used in political and media discourse during these periods. It is important to note that military deployments during the first four years of both presidents in regard to previous military engagements such as those in Kosovo, East Timor, and Bosnia are not included because this study focuses specifically on the actions taken in response to the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent “Global War on Terror”. These earlier military engagements, although significant, do not align with the thematic and temporal focus of this capstone.

Military Deployments During President George W. Bush’s First Term		
Operation	Initial Troops Deployed	Maximum Troops Deployed Within First Term
Operation Enduring Freedom – Afghanistan	(Year 2001) 2,000	(Year 2004) 16,000
Operation Iraqi Freedom	(Year 2003) 1,300	(Year 2004) 136,000
*There are many operations under the umbrella of Operation Enduring within this time frame (2001 – 2004) such as Operations Crescent Wind, Rhino, Anaconda, etc. * There are many operations under the umbrella of Operation Iraqi Freedom within this time frame (2001 – 2004) such as Operations Shock and Awe, Viking Hammer, Phantom Fury, etc. Note: Data from Allen, M. A., Flynn, M. E., & Martinez Machain, C. (2022). Global U.S. military deployment data: 1950-2020. <i>Conflict Management and Peace Science</i> , 39(3), 351-370.		

Military Deployments During President Barack Obama’s First Term
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Operation	Initial Troops at Start of Term	Maximum Troops Deployed Within First Term
Continuations of Operation Enduring Freedom	(Year 2009) 59,054	(Year 2012) 99,366
Continuations of Operation Iraqi Freedom	(Year 2009) 101,206	(Year 2011) 101,206
<p>*There are many operations under the umbrella of Operation Enduring within this time frame (2009 – 2012) such as Operations Cobra’s Anger, Diesel, Dragon Strike, etc. * There are many operations under the umbrella of Operation Iraqi Freedom within this time frame (2009 – 2011) such as Operations Iron Gator, New Hope, New Dawn, etc. Note: Data from Allen, M. A., Flynn, M. E., & Martinez Machain, C. (2022). Global U.S. military deployment data: 1950-2020. <i>Conflict Management and Peace Science</i>, 39(3), 351-370.</p>		

To understand the impact of dehumanizing military metaphors in political discourse, it is crucial to analyze the frequency and context of specific key words in the speeches of President Bush and President Obama. This provides insight into how often these metaphors were employed and highlights the thematic emphasis of each administration. By counting the occurrences of words such as “enemy”, “terrorist”, “killers”, “evil”, and “freedom”, we can gauge the intensity and focus of the rhetoric used to justify military engagements.

During President Bush’s first term (2001-2004), the language used in his speeches was heavily influenced by the tragic events of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent “Global War on Terror”. The Bush administration frequently employed terms that framed the conflict in bleak, binary terms, casting the U.S. and allies as the righteous defenders of freedom against a malevolent, faceless enemy. Words like “terrorist” and “evil” appeared with significant frequency, which reflects a deliberate strategy to garner support for military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq. The use of such metaphors not only reinforced an “us-vs-them” narrative, but also dehumanized the opposition, making it easier to justify harsh measures and continuous military engagements. On the other hand, President Obama’s first term (2009-2012) saw a continuation of military operations initiated by his predecessor, but with a nuanced rhetorical shift. While terms like “terrorist” and “enemy” were still prevalent, Obama’s speeches often incorporated a broader range of language that emphasized the protection of fundamental

freedoms and the moral dimensions of the conflicts. His administration's rhetoric aimed to balance the necessity of military action with a focus on international cooperation and the promotion of democratic values. This shift is evident in the frequency and context of key words used in his speeches, which sought to frame military engagements as part of a larger, morally justified effort to protect global security and human rights.

By examining the count of key words in the speeches of both presidents, we can see patterns in their rhetoric that reflect their individual approaches to military engagement. It not only highlights the continuity and changes in the use of dehumanizing military metaphors but also underscores the enduring influence of such language. The two tables below offer a detailed look at how these key words were employed over time, which provides a foundation for understanding the broader themes that shaped U.S. military actions in the post-9/11 era.

Count of Key Words in Speeches by President Bush									
Years 2001-2004									Total
	2001	2002a	2002b	2003a	2003b	2004a	2004b	2004c	
Enemy	70	297	630	107	121	245	408	218	2,096
Enemies	134	51	43	54	109	136	139	55	721
Murderers	27	35	4	4	11	9	2	2	94
Terrorist	402	475	352	224	304	309	356	301	2,723
Terrorists	465	267	220	217	520	503	584	437	3,213
Killers	7	212	282	55	137	128	100	21	942
Coldblooded	0	40	83	6	22	15	21	3	190
Evil	252	563	412	43	28	28	34	10	1,370
Evildoers	50	8	2	0	0	0	2	0	62
Freedom	361	105	1,019	561	967	1,043	872	662	5,590
Freedoms	21	475	153	13	7	15	9	9	702

Count of Key Words in Speeches by President Obama									
Years 2009 - 2012									Total
	2009a	2009b	2010a	2010b	2011a	2011b	2012a	2012b	
Enemy	36	16	6	29	13	10	14	3	127
Enemies	23	7	6	8	6	3	7	21	81
Murderers	0	0	2	3	1	1	0	1	8
Terrorist	54	57	71	73	56	31	33	37	412
Terrorists	69	23	35	42	28	19	39	29	284
Killers	1	0	0	2	0	1	1	5	10
Coldblooded	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Evil	11	7	5	8	8	2	5	13	59
Evildoers	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Freedom	92	63	61	110	172	105	88	129	821
Freedoms	7	13	14	17	29	19	12	16	127

While the identification of key words across President Bush's and President Obama's speeches highlights the continued use of rhetoric, it is important to note the shifts in these metaphors over time. During President Bush's first term, his speeches were dominated by simple, binary metaphors that framed the conflict following 9/11 in terms of "us-vs-them" and "good-vs-evil". For instance, in 2001 alone, Bush used the word "terrorists" 465 times and "evil" 252 times in his speeches. This aggressive rhetoric reflected the immediate shock and anger following the attacks, with Bush frequently positioning the U.S. as the righteous defender against a wicked enemy. The terms "enemy" and "terrorist" were emphasized with a combined total of over 2,700 uses for "terrorist" and more than 2,000 for "enemy" throughout his first term.

However, as Bush's first term progressed, a shift in his rhetoric is noticeable. While the word "terrorist" remained a focal point, its frequency decreased slightly in 2004 compared to earlier years, with 301 instances in the latter half of 2004. Additionally, the use of the word

“evil” dropped significantly from 563 instances in the second half of 2002 to just 10 instances in the final part of 2004. This shift suggests a transition from the initial post 9/11 rhetoric to a more nuanced narrative that began to consider the implications of long-term military engagements and nation-building efforts. For example, in the later years of his first term, Bush increasingly emphasized the concept of “freedom”, with its usage peaking in the early months of 2004 at 1,043 mentions, reflecting a rhetorical pivot towards framing military actions as necessary for the spread of democracy.

In contrast, President Obama’s rhetoric marked a clear departure from the more aggressive metaphors used by his predecessor, especially at the beginning of his term. Initially, President Obama sought to distance his administration from the Bush-era language, with a notable decrease in the use of terms like “terrorist” and “enemy”. In 2009, the term “enemy” was used only 36 times and “terrorist” 54 times, which indicates a shift towards a more calculated and diplomatic tone. However, as Obama’s first term progressed, there was a reintroduction of some metaphors, perhaps as the global threat landscape evolved. Ending 2010, Obama’s use of the word “terrorist” had increased to 73 instances in the first half of the year, reflecting his administration’s response to the rise of new threats such as ISIS. Similarly, while the term “evil” was used sparingly early, it saw a slight resurgence in the end of 2012, with 13 mentions, in the context of justifying military interventions as necessary to combat global threats. This evolution in Obama’s rhetoric shows how his language adapted to the realities of global conflict – balancing his initial emphasis on diplomacy with the necessity of addressing persistent threats.

When comparing the shifts in metaphors used by President Bush and President Obama, it becomes clear that while both presidents relied on similar rhetorical strategies, the context and timing of their use differed significantly. Bush’s metaphors were consistent with an angry nation responding to an unprecedented attack, imposing a rhetoric of clear moral dichotomies. Over

time, his language changed to include a focus on promoting freedom and democracy as justifications for ongoing military action. Obama, on the other hand, began with a rhetoric aimed at healing and rebuilding, both domestically and internationally, which gradually incorporated more metaphors as global threats persisted. His use of metaphors was often more deliberate and reflective, as seen in the comparatively lower frequency of terms like “enemy” and “terrorist” in his speeches, especially in the early years of his term.

Themes

Through content analysis, this study identified four major themes in which dehumanizing military metaphors were predominantly used in U.S. political speeches and media discourse post-9/11. These themes are (1) us-vs-them, (2) a faceless “Other”, (3) good-vs-evil, and (4) “protections of freedom”. Each theme plays a significant role in shaping public perception and support for military actions by embedding these metaphors into the public consciousness through media representation and repetition.

As Ivie (2005) noted, the “War on Terror” is often framed as a moral crusade, where complex conflicts are simplified into clear-cut moral battles. This is evident in the “us-vs-them” theme, which establishes a binary framework that simplifies the conflict. Lakoff and Johnson (2003) stated that metaphors are not just rhetorical devices but are central to how we conceptualize and understand the world around us. This binary narrative of “us-vs-them” makes it easier to dehumanize the enemy, cast the U.S. as a moral force, and justify military actions as necessary for the protection of freedom. The “us-vs-them” narrative is crucial in garnering support by framing military engagements as a unified effort against a common enemy. Building on this foundation, the faceless “Other” theme dehumanizes the enemy, a step that Reyes (2011) identifies as essential for justifying extreme measures, in the context of military engagements. By stripping the enemy of individuality, it becomes easier to rationalize actions that would otherwise be seen as morally or ethically questionable. This dehumanization helps in creating a collective enemy that the public can easily support fighting against. The “good-vs-evil” narrative takes the dehumanization a step further by framing the conflict as a moral battle. This theme justifies military actions as not just necessary, but righteous and virtuous. It plays on deep-rooted narratives about good and evil, making the military engagements seem like a fight for justice. This moral framing helps to stir up support and at the same time, silence opposition by positioning opposers of military actions as opposing good itself. Lastly, the protection of

freedom narrative ties all the previous themes together by framing the military engagements as not only morally righteous but also essential for the preservation of fundamental freedoms. This theme is particularly powerful because it appeals to core democratic values, which does make it difficult to argue against military actions without seeming to oppose freedom. By linking military engagements to the defense of freedom, this theme frames the actions as urgent and necessary.

Us-vs-Them

The “us-vs-them” theme uses dehumanizing military metaphors to dichotomize the conflict, simplifying complex international-political issues into a binary opposition. This theme frames the U.S. and its allies as the collective “us”, who are inherently good, rational, and justified in military actions. On the other hand, the “them”, the adversaries, are showcased as irrational, malevolent, and more importantly, a direct threat to national security. This separation of “us-vs-them” fosters a sense of common purpose and unity against a somewhat-defined enemy. Media coverage reinforces this binary framing by consistently presenting news that highlights the differences between “us” and “them”. This simplification helps to create a clear and compelling narrative of conflict that requires the use of military actions. By establishing a clear “enemy”, this theme not only justifies military engagement but also encourages domestic support for policies that might otherwise be contentious.

President Bush’s rhetoric frequently reinforced this binary framework, stating, “Those who make war against the U.S. have chosen their own destruction,” and “Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make: Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” (Bush, 2001)¹. By defining the enemy as those who “hate our success; they hate our liberty” and asserting that “our fight is not against a religion or a nation. Our fight is against evil people and a government that houses them” (Bush, 2001)², Bush effectively framed military engagements as a necessary, collective effort against a common threat. He further emphasized the threat by stating, “They hate our freedoms – our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other” (Bush, 2001)³. President Obama echoed this sentiment in his addresses. He reinforced the binary opposition with statements like, “And for

¹ President Bush, September 15, 2001; September 20, 2001.

² President Bush, October 30, 2001; October 19, 2001.

³ President Bush, September 20, 2001.

those who seek to advance their aims by inducing terror and slaughtering innocents, we say to you now that our spirit is stronger and cannot be broken. You cannot outlast us, and we will defeat you” (Obama, 2009)⁴. Additionally, President Obama highlighted the ideological divide by stating, “those who defend these values for their people have been our closest friends and allies, while those who have denied those rights, whether terrorist groups or tyrannical governments, have chosen to be our adversaries” (Obama, 2010)⁵. The “us-vs-them” dichotomy was a powerful rhetorical tool that helped to justify military actions.

⁴ President Obama, January 20, 2009.

⁵ President Obama, September 23, 2010.

A Faceless “Other”

Building on the “us-vs-them” narrative, the theme of a faceless “Other” dehumanizes enemies by stripping them of individuality and humanity. Terms like “terrorists” or “evildoers” reduces human beings into more abstract entities, thus making it easier to justify harsh measures and policies. This dehumanization process involves portraying enemies as massive and uniform, devoid of any personal identities or rights. It not only rationalizes military action but also diminishes empathy and ethical considerations regarding the treatment of these individuals. The media’s repetitive use of these metaphors reinforces their dehumanizing effect, normalizing the idea of enemies as less than human, and subsequently legitimizing military actions by framing them as necessary and justified responses to threats. This theme further intensifies the “us-vs-them” divide by removing the human aspect from the “enemy”, making it easier to propose extreme measures taken against “them”.

President Bush often described adversaries using dehumanizing language, calling them a group of barbarians” and “terrorists [who] have no true home in any country or culture or faith” (Bush, 2001)⁶. This emphasized their inherent evil and lack of humanity. He frequently used terms like “evil” and “killers” to strip these individuals of any semblance of personal identity, portraying them instead as pictures of pure wickedness. This portrayal assisted with the justification of extreme measures, as it became easier to rationalize the use of military action against an abstract, faceless threat. Bush’s statement that “the terrorists are the heirs to fascism” deepened the perception of an enemy that was outside the bounds for ordinary consideration for humans (Bush, 2001)⁷. President Obama continued the faceless “Other” narrative by pointing out that “right now, in distant training camps and in crowded cities, there are people plotting to take American lives” and characterizing the perpetrators of terrorism as attacking “the very idea of

⁶ President Bush, September 15, 2001; October 11, 2001.

⁷ President Bush, December 7, 2001.

America itself, all that we stand for and represent in the world” (Obama, 2009-2010)⁸. Obama also described the nature of these threats, stating, “the most pressing dangers we face no longer come from competition among great powers. They come from extremists who would murder innocents, from traffickers and pirates who pursue their own profits at the expense of others, from diseases that know no borders, and from suffering and civil wars that breed instability and terror” (Obama, 2009)⁹. This framing not only justified military actions but also diminished empathy and ethical concerns regarding the treatment of these enemies, which subsequently made harsh policies more acceptable.

⁸ President Obama, May 21, 2009; September 11, 2010.

⁹ President Obama, July 27, 2009.

Good-vs-Evil

A tale as old as time, the “good-vs-evil” theme further intensifies the moral dimensions of the conflict. The metaphors that fall into this theme frames military engagements as moral crusades, casting the U.S. and its allies as the righteous forces battling evil (the enemies). This separation is evident in the political rhetoric both Presidents Bush and Obama used to describe military actions as necessary to defend against evil forces that threaten global peace and stability. This framing both simplifies the complexity of international relations and justifies extreme measures under the guise of moral righteousness. Describing the fight against terrorism as a battle between good and evil definitely creates a compelling narrative that mobilizes public support by appeal to seemingly universal values of justice and morality. Media coverage often echoes this narrative, portraying conflicts in bleak moral terms and highlighting the “righteousness” of U.S. military actions appear both necessary and virtuous. This theme builds on the faceless “Other” theme by positioning the U.S. (and its military) as the heroes in a morale struggle, which further establishes the justification for military engagement.

President Bush frequently cast the U.S. and its allies as righteous forces battling evil, a role the history books - “History has called us into action, and we will not stop until the threat of global terrorism has been destroyed” (Bush, 2002)¹⁰. He declared that “our responsibility to history is already clear; to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil” and described the war on terror as “a war to save civilization itself” (Bush, 2001)¹¹. Bush asserted that “evil is real, but good will prevail against it” positioning the U.S. as the defender of global justice, and that we must “secure our country and eradicate the evil of terrorism” (Bush, 2001)¹². He often emphasized the stakes of this moral battle, saying, “ We have a chance to write the story of our

¹⁰ President Bush, February 4, 2002.

¹¹ President Bush, September 14, 2001; November 8, 2001.

¹² President Bush, November 10, 2001; September 15, 2001.

times, a story of courage defeating cruelty and light overcoming darkness.”, and highlighted the necessity of confronting evil – “we’re a nation united in our conviction that we must find those evildoers and bring them to justice” (Bush, 2001)¹³. President Obama conveyed the same perspective, recognizing that “evil does exist in the world” and emphasizing the necessity of military action at times to combat it. In his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, he acknowledged that “to say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism; it is a recognition of history” (Obama, 2009)¹⁴. He further articulated this moral struggle by stating that, “this place teaches us that we must be ever vigilant about the spread of evil in our own time, that we just reject the false comfort that others’ suffering is not our problem and commit ourselves to resisting those who would subjugate others to serve their own interests” (Obama, 2009)¹⁵. This “good-vs-evil” framing created a compelling narrative that appealed to the universal values of justice and morality.

¹³ President Bush, November 10, 2001; October 4, 2001.

¹⁴ President Obama, December 10, 2009.

¹⁵ President Obama, June 5, 2009.

Protection of Freedom

The “protection of freedom” theme frames military actions as essential to safeguarding fundamental freedoms and democratic values. This metaphor suggests that military engagements are not only about defeating enemies but also about preserving the way of life for the free world. This framing aligns military actions with the protection of cherished liberties, which subsequently legitimizes the use of military force as a necessary effort. By linking military action to the defense of freedom, this theme does create a sense of moral priority and urgency among the public. Media outlets reinforce this narrative by highlighting stories that underscore the threats to freedom and democracy, thereby manufacturing consent for military actions. This theme ties back to the “good-vs-evil” and “us-vs-them” narratives by framing the U.S. as the defender of global freedom, again, justifying military engagements as necessary to protect liberty.

President Bush consistently linked military engagements to the idea of protecting liberty, asserting that “America was targeted for attack because we’re the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world” and emphasizing that “there are people who hate freedom. This is a fight for freedom” (Bush, 2001)¹⁶. His rhetoric often framed the conflict as a fight between “freedom and fear” and called for unwavering resolve to protect the nation’s core values. Bush stressed the stakes of the conflicts by saying, “Freedom and fear are at war”, “Our Nation faces a threat to our freedoms, and the stakes could not be higher”, and “The enemy has declared war on us. And we must not let foreign enemies use the forums of liberty to destroy liberty, itself. Foreign terrorists and agents must never again be allowed to use our freedoms against us”, emphasizing that the U.S. must remain vigilant in defending its way of life (Bush, 2001)¹⁷.

¹⁶ President Bush, September 11, 2001; September 17, 2001.

¹⁷ President Bush, November 10, 2001; November 8, 2001; November 29, 2001.

President Obama continued this narrative, highlighting the sacrifices of fallen soldier in preserving that way of life – security, prosperity, and freedom. He stated, “the legacy of these fallen soldiers, these fallen heroes lives on in each of us. The security that lets us live in peace, the prosperity that allows us to pursue our dreams, the freedom that we cherish, these were earned by the blood and the sacrifice of patriots who went before. And now it falls on us to preserve that inheritance for all who follow” (Obama, 2010)¹⁸. Obama further emphasized the continuity of these values, saying, “We uphold our fundamental principles and values not just because we choose to, but because we swear to, not because they feel good, but because they help keep us safe and keep us true to who we are” (Obama, 2009)¹⁹. This framing aligned military actions with the protection of freedoms, making the use of military actions appear both urgent and necessary. By consistently linking military engagements to the protection of fundamental freedoms, both presidents were able to justify their military policies as crucial for the preservation of democracy and the American way of life.

¹⁸ President Obama, May 31, 2010.

¹⁹ President Obama, May 22, 2009.

Dehumanizing Military Metaphors and the Media's Role

In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. entered a period of shock, grief, and uncertainty. There was a deep sense of vulnerability, and the desire for justice and security became a dominant topic in public and political discourse. During this period, the media played a critical role in shaping how these events were understood by the public. Through its coverage, the media not only reported on the unfolding disasters, but also played a role in framing the narratives surrounding the U.S.'s response to terrorism. Analyzing several articles from the New York Times and the Washington Post during these periods reveals how the media reinforced the dehumanizing metaphors. This reinforcement contributed to a culture of fear and aggression, which subsequently influenced support for military policies that might have otherwise faced more scrutiny.

In the article "Abroad at Home; A Different World" by Anthony Lewis (2001), the author captures the immediate emotional and psychological impact of the 9/11 attacks on the American public. The personal story of a man trapped in the World Trade Center who called his wife to say goodbye starkly illustrates the human cost of the attacks. Lewis writes, "Thousands upon thousands of Americans will have a personal connection to a victim. Or we will imagine the feelings of the passengers on those planes, knowing they were flying to death." This emotional framing establishes a powerful "us-vs-them" narrative – the U.S. (and its citizens) as victims of an unprovoked, heinous attack and the attackers as evil forces intent on spreading terror. He asks the reader "What does a military command do about a faceless enemy that does devastating damage with no more than perhaps a dozen attackers?". This "us-vs-them" rhetoric is echoed in the article, "Political Memo: Despite Polls, Pataki Backs Bush on Iraq All the Way" by James C. McKinley Jr. (2003). New York Governor George E. Pataki was quoted as saying, "it's far better to be fighting that war against Al Qaeda terrorists with our soldiers and sailors and marines and Air Force on the streets of Baghdad than with our firefighters and police officers on the streets of

Brooklyn”. This statement, despite the lack of concrete evidence linking Iraq to the 9/11 attacks, reinforces the narrative that the U.S. is defending itself from a direct threat by military engagements abroad.

This theme is further explored in the article “Taking the Measure of Obama’s Foreign Policy” by Eliot A. Cohen (2010), which critiques President Obama’s handling of foreign policy. Particularly, it focused on his struggle to define and articulate the nature of the enemy in the ongoing conflict against Islamist movements. Cohen notes that Obama’s rhetoric often fails to move beyond “the trope of ‘extremists who have perverted a great religion’” – a phrase that simplifies and abstracts the enemy into a faceless force. This mirrors the tendency of President Bush to dehumanize adversaries by reducing them to abstract entities like “terrorists” or “evildoers”, which reinforces the “us-vs-them” narrative that has been a cornerstone of U.S. military engagements post 9/11. Cohen’s article highlights the challenge of maintaining a coherent narrative when dealing with enemies who do not fit neatly into traditional categories. This reflects how the media, through the repetition of those same verbal images, contributes to the legitimization of military actions by presenting them as morally necessary responses to an amorphous threat.

In “A Nation Challenged: Ground Forces; U.S. Ready to Send Additional Troops to Hunt Bin Laden” (2001), Thom Shanker and James Dao discuss the U.S. military’s readiness to deploy more soldiers in the hunt for Osama Bin Laden, as the title states. Their depiction of the military’s planned operations combined with the description of the enemy as faceless, elusive, and “hiding in a lawless corridor” serves to dehumanize the adversaries. One senior military official is quoted as saying “when you send in ground troops, you’re looking the guys you want to kill in the eye” – emphasizing the impersonal and detached nature of military deployments. The authors write, “during the past 48 hours, the American planes left their carriers and bases

with no planned targets, instead circling combat areas, or “kill boxes”, and awaiting...”. This language strips the enemy of individuality, reducing them to mere targets, which reinforces the perception of the enemy as a collective, faceless “Other”. David Stout’s article “Cheney Defends Administration’s Handling of Iraq” (2003) highlights the then-Vice President Dick Cheney’s rhetoric in which he describes the terrorists as people who would use weapons of mass destruction “without the slightest constraint of reason or morality”. Cheney is further quoted stating, “Our terrorist enemy has no country to defend, no assets to destroy in order to discourage an attack. There is only one way to protect ourselves against catastrophic terrorist violence, and that is to destroy the terrorists before they can launch further attacks against the United States”. Cheney’s portrayal of the enemy as devoid of humanity and moral consideration contributes to the dehumanization of these groups, again reinforcing their status as a faceless, yet monstrous “Other” that must be eradicated at all costs.

The theme of a moral battle between good and evil is prominently featured in the article "Wartime Rhetoric" (2001), where the author critiques President Bush's early rhetoric following the 9/11 attacks. The article discusses Bush’s stark, moralistic language, specifically his “wanted: dead or alive” remark about Osama bin Laden. It notes that while such rhetoric may rally public support, it also creates “unrealistic expectations” and complicates diplomatic efforts. It highlights the risk of framing the conflict in simplistic good-vs-evil terms, stating, “The hotter the rhetoric now, the harder President Bush will find it later if his better judgment winds up telling him to delay action.” This caution underscores the danger of using dehumanizing metaphors that portray the conflict as a clear-cut moral crusade, which can make nuanced responses more difficult. This moral dichotomy is also highlighted in Richard W. Stevenson’s article "The Struggle for Iraq: The President; Bush, In Britain, Urges Europeans to Fight Terror" (2003). Stevenson reports on President Bush’s speech in London, where Bush emphasizes that the war in Iraq is part of a

broader effort to “root out the forces breeding terrorism within Islamic states and reshape the Middle East into a region of freedom, peace and prosperity” and that the U.S. might eventually use force (military action) to address “evil in plain sight”. By framing the conflict as a battle for the Middle East (in terms of freedom, peace, and prosperity), Bush positions the U.S. as the defender of global freedom against the forces of evil, further embedding the good-vs-evil narrative in public consciousness.

Similarly, in the article, “Obama Defends ‘Just War’ at Oslo” (2009), authors Elizabeth Williamson and Jonathan Weisman discuss how President Obama’s Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech marked a rhetorical shift from his earlier criticisms of Bush-era policies to a more assertive defense of military actions against “evil” in the world. Obama’s statement that “there will be times when nations...will find the use of force not only necessary but morally justified” reflects the continuation of the “good-vs-evil” framework in U.S. political rhetoric. This speech, as noted by the authors, was pivotal in reinforcing the narrative that military engagements are not only justified but are a moral imperative – a narrative that the media helps legitimize through its coverage. William McGurn’s article “Obama’s War of Words” (2009) explores the significance of political rhetoric in wartime, particularly how President Obama’s speeches might be remembered alongside those of past wartime leaders like Lincoln or Roosevelt. McGurn argues that while Obama is a “gifted orator”, the effectiveness of his speeches will ultimately be judged by the outcomes of the wars that they address. He writes, “in wartime, people soon tire of lofty words that do not seem borne out by events”. This analysis highlights how the media amplifies dehumanizing language yet questions its long-term resonance if not supported by successful policy or warfare outcomes. McGurn’s comparison of Obama’s rhetoric to that of previous presidents highlights that while dehumanizing metaphors

may be powerful in the moment, they must be supported by tangible results to maintain their influence over time.

Gerhard Spörl and Bernhard Zand's article, "The Helpless Victors" (2003) represents this theme through its depiction of Saddam Hussein as the "evil one." The authors write, "You cannot lose hope, people of Iraq, because you have seen the evil one disappear." By casting Saddam Hussein and his regime as embodiments of evil, the article reinforces the narrative that U.S. military actions were not only necessary but virtuous and morally justified. The authors further illustrate the dire situation in Iraq, describing the insurgents as "a tremendous problem to the occupying forces," and emphasizing the brutal methods used by these "terrorists" against both the occupying forces and the local population. This portrayal of the enemy as not only evil but also as a significant threat to peace and stability further reinforces the justification for continued military actions.

The "protection of freedom" narrative, which is another core theme, is also evident in the media coverage. The article "Wartime Rhetoric" (2001) discusses how President Bush's rhetoric, while intended to fire up the nation, emphasized that the U.S. was fighting not just for its own security but for the preservation of freedom globally. The article states, "He [President Bush] must lift the spirits of Americans, direct the military effort against terrorists, and pull together an international alliance against nations that harbor them," highlighting how the protection of freedom narrative was used to justify military actions as both necessary and virtuous. David Stout's article, "Rumsfeld Urges U.S. to be Ready for New and Deadlier Attacks," highlights the theme of protecting freedom through military readiness. The then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's rhetoric framed military actions as essential for safeguarding essential freedoms. Stout writes, "Mr. Rumsfeld emphasized the need for new ways of thinking as well as new heights of spending" in terms of military budgeting. Rumsfeld is quoted as saying "Americans

must be prepared for the use of ground forces because there is no substitute for ‘boots and eyes on the ground’”. He goes further, stating “in the years ahead, it is likely we will be surprised again”, which not only links military engagement directly to the defense of freedom, but also highlights the potential severity of these threats by asserting that they will “grow vastly more deadly”. In "Cheney Defends Administration's Handling of Iraq" (2003), Stout reports on Vice President Cheney’s backing of the Iraq War as central to the protection of the United States. Cheney asserts, “Iraq has become the central front in the war on terror,” linking the conflict directly to the broader mission of defending American freedoms from an existential threat. Cheney’s argument that inaction would lead to “catastrophic terrorist violence” reinforces the idea that military engagement is essential to protect the nation’s core values and way of life. Similarly, in "The Struggle for Iraq: The President; Bush, In Britain, Urges Europeans to Fight Terror" (November 20, 2003), Stevenson discusses how President Bush framed the war in Iraq as a necessary fight to protect freedom and democracy. Bush’s statement that “liberation is still a moral goal, and freedom and security still need defenders” ties military action to the defense of fundamental democratic values, making it a moral imperative rather than a political choice.

Daniel Henninger’s article, “Whatever Happened to 9/11?” (2011), reflects on the erosion of national unity and the deep partisan divides that emerged in the years following 9/11. He critiques the shift in public discourse, noting how initial solidarity eventually gave way to intense political battles, particularly over counterterrorism policies. He writes, “virtually every aspect of the Bush antiterror policies became a target for litigation...opposition to the Iraq war rose, too, but the effort to thwart the provisions of the Patriot Act was a separate front”. This illustrates how the media’s portrayal of these issues, through dehumanizing metaphors and partisan rhetoric, contributed to the splitting of national consensus, highlighting the long-term impact of these metaphors in policy.

The Human Cost of Military Engagements

The use of dehumanizing military metaphors not only shapes public perception and policy but also has real-world consequences. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have resulted in significant casualties, both in terms of lives lost and injuries sustained. Operation Enduring Freedom saw a total of 2,350 U.S. military members killed in action (KIA) and 20,149 wounded in action (WIA). Similarly, Operation Iraqi Freedom resulted in 4,418 KIA and 31,994 WIA (Department of Defense, 2024). Although these figures starkly highlight some of the human costs of these military engagements, the number of civilian casualties is equally, if not more, devastating.

Civilian deaths stemming from Operation Enduring Freedom, according to data from the Watson Institute (2015), show that between 2001 and 2004, a total of 3,455 civilians were killed. Between 2009 and 2012, civilian deaths were tallied at 11,106 according to the Watson Institute (2015), but the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) reported a higher figure of 13,512 for this period. It is important to note that in the early years of the Afghanistan War (Operation Enduring Freedom), there were few counts or estimates of civilian casualties, and no comprehensive, detailed accounts of civilian deaths due to war. The UNAMA began systematically recording war-related injuries and deaths in Afghanistan in 2008. For Operation Iraqi Freedom, the Iraq Body Count project (IBC) recorded 23,890 civilian deaths from 2001 to 2004. Between 2009 and 2012, civilian deaths totaled at 18,333 (Iraq Body Count, 2024).

Beyond the immediate fatalities and physical injuries, the psychological toll on U.S. military members has been immense. Between 2001 and 2004, the incidence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among military personnel rose from 90 cases to 4,634 cases. The number of Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) cases also saw a significant increase from 10,958 to 51,309. Additionally, during these years, there were 240 major limb amputations as a result from military engagements. The subsequent years under President Obama's first term, from 2009 to 2012,

continued to see a significant impact on the mental and physical health of military members. The incidence of PTSD increased from 13,984 to 62,620 cases, and TBI cases rose from 28,958 to 122,108. Major limb amputations were also significantly higher, with 715 cases reported during this timeframe (Congressional Research Service, 2015).

These numbers are more than just statistics. They represent the tangible and severe consequences of military engagements. Each figure reflects a life profoundly affected, a family forever changed, and a community impacted by the loss or injury of one of its members. The increasing rates of PTSD and TBI highlight the ongoing mental health crisis among veterans, illustrating the long-term effects of prolonged exposure to combat and the stresses of military service. Major limb amputations are more than just the immediate physical toll of war. It signifies the enduring challenges faced by those who have to adapt to life with significant disabilities. Similarly, the civilian casualties reveal the widespread impact of military actions on innocent lives. These deaths highlight the humanitarian crisis that follows military engagements and the often-overlooked suffering of non-combatants – innocent people. The discrepancies in civilian death tallies also underscore the challenges in accurately documenting the full extent of the human cost of war.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks, the U.S. embarked on a series of military deployments that fundamentally altered its global engagement and internal politics. This study has explored how these actions were communicated to the public through dehumanizing military metaphors in political speeches and media discourse. These metaphors serve as tools of political persuasion, playing a crucial role in the media's manufacturing of consent, shaping policy, molding public perception, and influencing support for military actions.

The analysis identified four major themes in which dehumanizing military metaphors were predominantly used: (1) "us-vs-them", (2) a faceless "other", (3) "good-vs-evil", and (4) "protection of freedom". These themes simplify complex geopolitical realities into compelling narratives that garner policy support and justify military engagements. The media amplifies these metaphors, embedding them into the public consciousness and legitimizing military actions.

A key contribution of this capstone is its ability to reveal the evolution and persistence of these metaphors over time. Unlike more time-limited studies, this research provides a comprehensive view of how metaphorical language in political discourse has adapted and persisted across different administrations and changing contexts. It demonstrates how the use of dehumanizing military metaphors not only sustains but also evolves to meet the shifting needs of political agendas. In terms of literature on the NPF and metaphorical analysis, this research highlights the critical role that time and context play in the effectiveness and impact of rhetorical strategies. The findings of this study suggest that the frequency and evolution of metaphors in political discourse are key factors in their power to shape policy and continue military engagements. This highlights the importance of considering the temporal dimension in metaphorical analysis and contributes to a deeper understanding of how political rhetoric operates within and across different historical moments.

The real-world human costs of military engagements underscore the importance of re-evaluating the language and metaphors used in political discourse. The dehumanizing military metaphors that simplify complex international-political realities into compelling narratives also contribute to the nations' desensitization to the true costs of war. By framing military actions in terms that strip away individuality and humanity, these metaphors can make it easier to justify and support military engagements without fully considering their profound and lasting impact on lives. By recognizing the severe cost involved, it becomes crucial to foster more ethical and transparent communication strategies. This is a moment – a moment to repeat the mistakes of the past, or to work together for a better future. Future generations are waiting.

This study underscores the powerful role of language in political persuasion and the significant impact of media framing. By understanding these dynamics, we can foster more ethical and transparent communication strategies. Based on the findings of this capstone project, two policy recommendations are proposed.

Policy Recommendations

1. Guidelines to Avoid Dehumanizing Language

As soon as feasible, political leaders and major media outlets should develop and adhere to guidelines that avoid dehumanizing language and metaphors when reporting news. This includes refraining from using terms that strip individuals of their humanity and instead, opting for language that respects the dignity and individuality of all people involved. The persistence of dehumanizing rhetoric in modern political discourse, as evident in Michael Gold's (2023) article, "After Calling Foes 'Vermin', Trump Campaign Warns Its Critics Will be 'Crushed'.", highlights the need for such guidelines. In the article, Gold highlights how former President Trump's use of terms like “vermin” to describe his political opponents perpetuates the dehumanizing narrative of a faceless, malevolent “other”. Trump’s vow to “root out the communists, Marxists, fascists and the radical left thugs that live like vermin within the confines of our country”, exemplifies how such rhetoric creates an “us-vs-them” mentality, even within domestic policies, reinforcing division and dehumanization.

This language not only vilifies and marginalizes opposition, but also creates a climate of hostility and fear. By implementing guidelines that avoid such dehumanizing language and metaphors in news reporting, we can significantly impact various contemporary social and political issues by promoting more respectful, transparent, and inclusive discourse. However, media outlets face a particular challenge when political figures use dehumanizing language, as directly quoting such language could inadvertently perpetuate its harmful effects. Media outlets should commit to avoiding the use of dehumanizing language themselves, but when covering statements made by politicians that include such language, they can take a responsible approach by explicitly identifying and critiquing the use of dehumanizing rhetoric. For example, when reporting on a presidential speech that includes dehumanizing terms, the media could report the statements while also clearly noting that the language used

dehumanizes certain groups and contributes to divisive and harmful narratives, similar to a surgeon general's warning on a pack of cigarettes. This approach would allow the media to maintain transparency in their reporting while promoting more ethical and respectful discourse.

This issue is not limited to military operations. Some contemporary examples outside of U.S. military operations could include the caste-system in India, gender inequality (including LGBTQ+ individuals) in various cultures, homelessness, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. With such guidelines in place, avoiding such language can help shift public perception and promote equality (caste-system in India), challenge and change societal attitudes (gender inequality), foster a more compassionate and accurate portrayal of homelessness, and finally, de-escalate tensions and promote a deeper understanding of the issues (Israeli-Palestinian conflict). By drawing parallels to these contemporary issues, it becomes clear that respectful and inclusive language is a powerful tool for promoting social justice and equality.

2. Resources to Support Ongoing Research

At the earliest opportunity, the U.S. government, academic institutions, and independent research organizations should allocate funding and resources to support ongoing research into the effects of media and political rhetoric on public perception and policy. This research is crucial for understanding the intricate ways in which language and communication strategies shape public perception, influence societal norms, and drive policy decisions. By investing in comprehensive studies, we can uncover the long-term implications of rhetorical choices made by political leaders and media outlets, and how these choices contribute to either the polarization or unification of society.

One of the key areas that ongoing research could explore is the relationship between specific types of rhetoric – such as dehumanizing language, fearmongering, or the use of metaphors – and the public’s emotional and psychological responses. Understanding this relationship would provide policymakers, media outlets, and academic institutions with evidence-based strategies to avoid harmful language that might exacerbate divisions or incite violence, while promoting rhetoric that fosters inclusivity, empathy, and constructive dialogue. Research could also delve into the historical and cross-cultural perspectives on political rhetoric, offering insights into how different groups have responded to similar communications. By comparing the impacts of rhetoric across different contexts and time periods, we could potentially identify patterns and provide guidelines that are adaptable to various cultural and political landscapes.

This research could also extend to the role of digital and social media platforms in amplifying or mitigating the effects of political rhetoric. In today’s hyper-connected world, where information and mis-information spreads rapidly and widely, understanding the dynamics of digital is essential. Understanding how algorithms, social media platform

policies, and user behaviors interact with political rhetoric to either reinforce or challenge societal divisions.

Appendices

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