

A call to arms: Hero–villain narratives in US security discourse

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Abstract

The rhetoric leaders use to speak to domestic audiences about security is not simply bluster. Political agents rely upon stories of enmity and threat to represent what is happening in the international arena, to whom and why, in order to push national and international security policy agendas. They do so for the simple reason that a good story is a powerful political device. This article examines historical ‘calls to arms’ in the United States, based on insights from archival research at US presidential libraries and the United States National Archives. Drawing on narrative theory and political psychology, the article develops a new analytic framework to explain the political currency and staying power of hero–villain security narratives, which divide the world into opposing spheres of ‘good’ and ‘evil’. Shifting the conceptual focus away from speakers and settings towards audience and affect, it argues that the resonance of hero–villain security narratives lies in the way their plot structure keeps the audience in suspense. Because they are consequential rhetorical tools that shape security policy practices, the stories political agents tell about security demand greater attention in the broader field of international security studies.

Keywords

Emotion, international security, micro-moves, narrative analysis, United States

The whole world is divided into two camps separated by fundamental principles and methods. You are the leader of one camp. The American people should not be asked to make the momentous decision of opposing forcefully the actions of the evil leaders of the other half of the world possibly because by some accident or mistakes American ships or men have been fired upon by soldiers of the other camp. They must be brought to that momentous resolution by your leadership explaining why any other course than such forceful resistance would be forever hopeless and abhorrent to every honored principle of American independence and democracy.

Letter from US Secretary of War Henry L Stimson to
President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 24 May 1941 (Stimson, 1941)

Introduction

This article provides a new conceptual framework for understanding the mechanisms of *narrative persuasion* in security politics. Scholars of rhetoric have long reflected upon the question of how

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language moves audiences and what particular words and frames are implicated in this process (Alcorn, 2002: 20). Grappling with what Laclau (2005: 110) referred to as ‘force’ rather than form of discourse, this article shows that, for the genre of hero–villain security narratives,¹ a critical part of the answer lies in their emotion-inducing plot structure. As the following analysis demonstrates, this oscillates between two sides that both stand a chance to emerge – at the end – as victorious, and the anxious sentiments that this tension stimulates serve to grip the audience. Suspense, alongside the affective repertoires used to tell security stories that divide the world, emerges as a key device of narrative persuasion.

A focus on the split of the international arena into two opposing spheres, at the level of policy and rhetoric, to convey understandings of security and enmity is not new in itself (Campbell, 1998; Neumann, 1999; Said, 2003). However, the nexus between political agents’ discursive practices and affective processes has only recently gained traction across the disciplinary field of international relations (Åhäll, 2019; Bially Mattern, 2011; Bleiker and Hutchison, 2008; Brassett, 2018; Hall and Ross, 2019; Koschut et al., 2017; Solomon, 2014). Existing works in the study of security dynamics have shown what role emotions play in building, sustaining, limiting and regulating communities (Fierke, 2013; Hutchison, 2016; Koschut, 2019) and in the politics of conflict and violence (Åhäll and Gregory, 2015; Bleiker and Hutchison, 2008; Ross, 2014; Steele, 2019; Van Rythoven, 2015). While directly speaking to such scholarship, the article moves beyond disciplinary boundaries and brings insights from narrative research to the study of policy language in international security in order to conceptualize the emotive appeal of security narratives that create perceptions of enmity and threat through their dualistic structure.

International relations scholarship has recently picked up on the pervasiveness of narratives that Roland Barthes (1966) stressed over half a century ago. Such works have demonstrated how states utilize ‘strategic narratives’ to shape international politics (Freedman, 2015; Krebs and Jackson, 2007; Miskimmon et al., 2013), how modes of rhetorical expression can shape national security policy (Krebs, 2015a, 2015b; Solomon, 2015; Widmaier, 2016), and what role narratives play in processes of identity construction (Berenskoetter, 2014; Campbell, 1998; Hønneland, 2010). They have also made the case for integrating narratology into feminist security studies (Wibben, 2010) and the study of terrorism (Homolar and Rodriguez-Merino, 2019) and interrogated the narratives of the discipline itself (Linklater, 2009; Suganami, 2008). Yet despite the emergence of a ‘narrative turn’ in the study of international politics (Galai, 2017; Subotić, 2016), which increasingly perforates the disciplinary mainstream, such scholarship has told us little about what it is that makes a powerful story, and how audiences are drawn into lending stories weight. Drawing on US security rhetoric as an empirical anchor, I use illustrative examples of text to show how appeals to emotion underpin security narrative practices over time. This also demonstrates the need for further interdisciplinary research into identifying the affective dimensions of language across different narrative genres in the study of international security.

Call-to-arms speeches are a particularly important class of security rhetoric, through which political leaders mobilize political support and legitimate the use of force. The article’s analytic focus on American call-to-arms speeches in their written form developed gradually – and unexpectedly – while I was engaged in a three-year project conducting extensive field research in 13 presidential libraries, spread across ten states, and the National Archives in Washington, DC and Maryland. The distinctive theme of ‘heroes’ and ‘villains’ emerged slowly from analysing many thousands of pages of presidential speeches, including drafts, memos, margin notes, letters and other related textual artefacts. It formed a more concrete line of critical inquiry (one that was quite separate from the main project) when it became clear that this specific type of narrative dualism is a common thread linking US security rhetoric from the 18th century onwards, from Samuel Adams

to Donald Trump. While the selection of call-to-arms speeches from the vast number of security texts housed in US archives is therefore deliberate, the rationale for focusing on narratives within the hero–villain genre is heuristic; they provide a critical entry point for analysis, interpretation and classification of complex narrative processes.

The article is divided into three sections. The first section discusses ‘narrative essentials’ through a focus on the interactive processes of following, framing and mapping, which are integral to the narrative genre. The second section provides examples of the plot structure in US security discourse to demonstrate the tendency of security narratives to oscillate between heroes and villains. This empirical analysis is centred on examples of call-to-arms speeches and is based on primary textual documents physically collected in 13 US presidential libraries and the National Archives. The final section of the article conceptualizes how the effectiveness of hero–villain security narratives is structured around their core stylistic resource: the dual-focus rhythm. I argue that the pull of hero–villain security stories is located in the way in which the plot structure oscillates between tragedy and triumph. This ‘seductive’ rhythm, which works to amplify emotive identification with the side of the protagonist, is specific to the genre of hero–villain security narratives and serves to keep the audience hooked by leaving it in suspense over the victory of the protagonist. My argument rests on the premise that political agents actively transform the raw material of external dynamics into security narratives to make them intelligible; they have no intrinsic quality that automatically fixes their meaning as security events.

Narrative essentials

A focus on how political agents ‘speak’, including through performative silences (Guillaume, 2018), has become widespread in the field of international relations. As the interest in what language *does* in international politics and international security has begun to slowly move from critical scholarship into the disciplinary mainstream, the application of the terminology of narratives – both as a research method² and as an analytical focus – has also enjoyed increasing popularity. Against the backdrop of several discursive ‘turns’, works that are situated at the intersection between narratives and international security dynamics are generally associated with approaches that emphasize the productive power of language. Indeed, over the past two decades, research in this field has made the robust case that narratives of enmity should not be understood as a mere representation of an objective threatening reality but as a discursive practice in which threats are constituted through language (Doty, 1993: 302) that is intertwined with ‘the process of identity formation and even the constitution of subjectivity’ (Hansen, 1997: 376).

Narratives should be understood as the cogs in the wheel of a security discourse.³ Because they provide sets of multiple overlapping and interconnected stories, security narratives establish a discursive connection between: (a) a country’s national interests; (b) the identification of specific security threats to these interests; and (c) how potential risks to the broader international environment are understood and addressed. But what precisely is a narrative? Despite the recent rise in research that engages with narratives as a consequential rhetorical tool, a clear definition of narratives in international relations scholarship has remained elusive. While Ronald Krebs’s work (2015a, 2015b) is a welcome exception to the reluctance of international relations scholarship to analytically pin down the concept of the political narrative, we continue to find a multiplicity of applications of the narrative terminology, often with little explanation of the meaning of the term itself or how an analytical focus on narratives may help to better understand security dynamics. Before moving onto exploring the grip of security stories that put heroes and villains in international security in the spotlight, it is therefore imperative to elaborate upon the narrative essentials that underwrite the subsequent analysis.

At a very basic level, the narrative genre is concerned with a text delivered by a single speaker. What sets narratives apart from other modes of communication in monologue form, such as argumentation, explanation or description, is their capacity for meaning-making and sense-making. Whether we approach them from the perspective of literary theory, anthropology, history or psychoanalysis, narratives are the core mechanism, carrier and ingredient of constructing reality at the sociocognitive level (László, 2008: 9). As Mayer (2014: 66, 71) puts it: 'By translating experience into the code of story – with plot, and character, and meaning – we make the unfamiliar familiar, the chaotic orderly, and the incomprehensible meaningful.' People rely upon narratives to make sense of the world, to reduce complexity and to comprehend new information and events. As vehicles for structuring information, action and experience, narratives render matters 'real', and they give meaning to what would otherwise be incomprehensible (Selbin, 2010). In short, narratives enable us to cognitively capture the many complex relationships and events that are integral to our everyday lives, and they allow us to make sense of seemingly unconnected phenomena (Fludernik 2009: 1; Miskimmon et al., 2013: 5).

Yet the stories we tell and are being told also provide a lens through which we see the material world. They shape our opinions and feelings towards others and ourselves, towards what is right and wrong and towards what happens, when and why (Capps and Ochs, 1995: 53). As such, narratives are more than simply a form of communicating information and experiences, more than a mere means for 'someone telling someone else that something happened' (Herrnstein Smith, 1980: 232). They are a wider societal tool for sense-making and an instrument for creating self-identity (Mattingly, 2007; White, 1987: 26; see also Bruner, 1991). Narratives do not simply 'exist', nor do they materialize organically. Rather, they are constituted through the interaction between the text,⁴ the narrator and the audience's interpretative activity, and this also holds for political narratives, including those centred on enmity and threat. At the heart of this dynamic and relational process lie the three essential narrational practices of *following*, *framing* and *mapping*.

The storyteller's *following* a character activates both the character and the narrator as the core constitutive elements of a narrative (Altman, 2008: 15–17). In the case of security narratives, the narrator is commonly a political agent who lends her voice to a specific story, independent from who may have created it – like the narrator in the latest work of fiction we may grab off the shelves in an airport bookshop. Through the narrator we learn who the protagonists and antagonists of a story are that we need to focus on. A security narrative is a story about hopes, fears, expectations and uncertainties in the international arena that political agents convey to recipients by ordering 'different narrational elements such as time, location, and actors into a story centred on the main character(s)' (Bal, 2009: 9, emphasis removed).

The narrator also delimits and systematizes the chaotic raw materials of events to make them legible and recognizable as part of the story. This act of *framing* provides the narrative with a beginning and an end, transforming a series of events into a causally related sequence of events (Altman, 2008: 18). A narrative is thus more than a chronicle of one event after another: it contains a plot that details the temporary transition from a starting situation to a final situation, which also juxtaposes an initial problem with its route to resolution (Greimas, 1971: 83; Vogel, 1994: 255). Like well-known works on narratives from literary theorists such as Labov and Waletzky (1967/1997), Prince (1982) and Ricoeur (1984–1988), Krebs points to the selective integration of at least two events that are temporally brought into a meaningful relationship as a core marker of security narratives (Krebs, 2015b: 137; see also Richardson, 2000: 169–170). However, the notion of the security event should not be understood as ontologically prior to the security narrative. Although security narratives require a temporal structure, whether and how events are included in the security story implies narrational agency. This 'emplotment' underscores that interpretations of an event as a security episode, while linked to the phenomenology of the event, are the result

of an intersubjective process of meaning-making in which the rhetorical choices made by political agents play a crucial role. A security narrative, as a genre and type of text, cannot exist independently from a narrator's activity; it requires the interactive teaming up of the political agents who tell stories with the material world. As László (2008: 12) emphasizes, 'narrative always creates its own reality'.

A narrative contextualizes its characters and their traits as well as the actions, events and places it focuses on. It does so through language that pushes us to discover connections between different parts of the narrative as well as other texts, occasions and experiences. This psycho-linguistic process of *mapping* involves the use of semantic units that function as cognitive cues in the message text, which invoke pre-existing mental prototypes that bind together disparate clusters of ideas, objects, behaviours, concepts and relationships by reimagining them in recognizable terms: what is novel is presented within a familiar code (Altman, 2008: 18; Scovel, 1978: 129; Spradley, 1980: 100).

This implies that narrative cover terms – or schemas – do not so much provide audiences with reasoning shortcuts but rather 'tell' people how to reason, thereby serving both as a roadmap to meaning-making (Walker, 2000: 126) and as an obscure filter through which we see the world (Efran, 1994: 222). A prominent example from the security realm is the use of the terminology of 'appeasement' to justify the use of military force, which triggers the reasoning shortcut that conciliatory responses to hostility will only encourage further aggression. Because people do not make judgements about a new situation in a discursive vacuum, when political agents rely upon such discursive anchoring through salient cognitive reference points in their security stories, they prime us to evaluate what is new within familiar frames and to link together contemporary security events with earlier episodes, even if this involves disregarding or downplaying the substantive differences between them (Homolar and Rodriguez-Merino, 2019).

The discussion of narrative essentials underscores that the selection of what particular elements and events the stories of security contain and how they are presented necessarily colours them with subjectivity on the part of the narrator and the audience (see Bal, 2009: 8). Differences in the selection of words by political agents will push public sentiment and reasoning about security issues in a particular direction, even more so if the audience is poorly informed about them (e.g. Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996: 250; Eagly and Chaiken, 1993). Indeed, depending on what they put the spotlight on, security narratives can plot the world very differently (Krebs, 2015b: 138). This, in turn, suggests that security narratives should be understood as 'multidimensional purposive communication' (Phelan and Rabinowitz, 2012: 3) that remain at their core a work of fiction. Funkenstein (1992: 79) emphasized that narratives are 'an exercise in "world-making"', and, as the following suggests, hero–villain narratives in US security discourse are a case in point.

Dividing the world in US security discourse

Political agents have long understood the significance of creating and controlling the narrative. They are mindful that political speeches – in particular those that are epideictic such as 'calls to arms' and legitimations of a country's position towards a named enemy – are a primary vehicle with which to seize narrative control over an unfolding or existing security situation (see Martin, 2016).⁵ In a letter to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, for example, Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter (1941: 1) recounts the purpose and power of an upcoming speech by the US President. Defining presidential leadership as a 'task of education done on a vast scale', he suggests that the Americans 'must have their convictions renewed and incontestably established', and that the key to reach their minds is the 'repetition and concreteness' of the story. The narrative core of the speech Frankfurter wrote about was that Hitler did not only represent an 'immediate menace'

to Europe alone but was also a threat to everything the United States cherished and stood for; that an intervention was necessary in order to preserve America itself (1941: 1). Frankfurter's letter points explicitly to the importance of tapping into and reaffirming existing societal values as well as to the necessity of reiterating the story for it to stick, in particular when seeking to move audiences into action.

This implies that not all security narratives work equally at the level of social interaction. Indeed, few stories of enmity and threat enjoy a long shelf life and instead tend to fade from the public sphere once a rhetorical reinterpretation of the security environment is introduced (Homolar, 2011). However, one story type that has been a particularly persistent feature in US security discourse is the hero–villain security narrative. To develop a more in-depth understanding of how these political narration processes work in practice and why they resonate and may, in specific circumstances, endure over time, the following discussion uses historical episodes of calls to arms by US presidents. As we shall see, while the different stories of security in hero–villain narratives may change, the basic dual-focus structure of their narrative arc – their narrative engine – remains clearly identifiable.

Throughout American history since the founding of the republic, political speeches that are centred on calls to arms and security policy legitimations have relied heavily on oscillating between tragedy and triumph for the United States as the hero in these security stories, in which the possibility of a tragic outcome always features. A passionate speech by Samuel Adams on American Independence before the Continental Congress at the State House in Philadelphia on 1 August 1776 provides an example of the long history of this narrative dynamic. Adams begins by calling attention to a surprising set of achievements by the Settlers, and he weds these to a common goal. 'We are now on this continent, to the astonishment of the world three millions of souls united in one cause', Adams declares. 'We have large armies . . . our success has staggered our enemies.' After opening his remarks with a positive statement of current affairs, he shifts the spotlight onto the infamous 'political Sodom', which the Settlers had fled, and explains that the revolutionaries 'cannot suppose that our opposition has made a corrupt and dissipated nation [the British Empire] more friendly to America, or created in them a greater respect for the rights of mankind'. Adams does not linger on this point for long, however, and instead intertwines his story about how the 'adversaries are composed of wretches' with the colonies' sacrifices for the 'justice of their cause', switching the narrative focus between the opposing sides. Rather than ending by expressing a clear conviction of victory in the war against the British, Adams instead concludes by expressing the desire 'that these American States may never cease to be free and independent', representing an idealized image of the future.

To make his case against the continued submission of the colonies to Englishmen, Adams thus drew significantly upon the abstract dualism of tyranny and freedom. The Declaration of Independence on 4 July 1776 had already used this dichotomy to draw a line between the British Crown and the revolutionaries, stating that a prince whose every act defines him as a '[t]yrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people'. Adams, however, assigned specific characteristics generally associated with uncivilized behaviour to the British rulers. They would, he noted, 'claim authority to manage them [the colonies] though disgraceful to humanity by their ignorance, intemperance, and brutality'. Englishmen, he declared, were people who had 'either ceased to be human' in the case of the ruling tyrants, or were those 'who have not virtue enough to feel their own wretchedness and servitude'. In contrast, Adams claimed, the revolutionaries were on the side of freedom and human progress. In his call to arms against the British he underscored that what was at stake in the uprising of the colonies was a much broader fight for freedom, a rhetorical tool that US political leaders today still frequently employ. 'Our contest', he stated, 'is not only whether we

ourselves shall be free, but whether there shall be left to mankind an asylum on earth, for civil and religious liberty?’

An exemplar of the dual-focus narrative style to articulate and interpret a broader threat from the international environment is President Harry S. Truman’s (1949) Inaugural Address, commonly known as the ‘Four Point Speech’, which articulated an expanded vision for the international role of the United States amidst the ‘grave uncertainty’ of the postwar world. As the text of this speech is significantly longer than the previous example, it helps to illustrate the rhythm at work in hero–villain security narratives in greater depth. Truman set the scene by creating an unsettled picture of the present. ‘Today marks the beginning not only of a new administration’, he observed, ‘but of a period that will be eventful, perhaps decisive, for us and for the world.’ From the outset of his story, he sows doubt over America’s fate in the unfolding history while placing its actions at the heart of US destiny. ‘It may be our lot’, Truman declared, ‘to experience, and in a large measure bring about, a major turning point in the long history of the human race.’ This creates the momentum to carry the audience forward to an affirmation of core American values, which are represented as timeless and shared across society, to make this story as much a collective one as one that each spectator can relate to. Then, suddenly, the initial state of affairs is disrupted, and a reversal of America’s fortune looms. ‘In the pursuit of these aims,’ Truman warns, ‘the United States and other like-minded nations find themselves directly opposed by a regime with contrary aims and a totally different concept of life . . . That false philosophy is communism.’ Here, the 33rd US President reaches the centre of his plot, which from this point moves the focus repeatedly between the protagonist and antagonist of the story, between (American) democracy and (Soviet) communism.

A handwritten note attached to the 16 January 1949 speech draft advised the President and his speechwriters to ‘state these differences not to draw issues of belief as such, but because the actions resulting from the communist philosophy are a threat’,⁶ which was reiterated by Dean Acheson’s instruction from 17 January 1949 to ‘bring out . . . that the President is not directing his words at what Communists *think* to themselves but what they do to other people’ (see Clifford Papers, 1949, emphasis in the original). By the time General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Truman’s successor, addressed the American Society of Newspaper Editors on 16 April 1953, the sombre notion of a rift in the world between ‘East’ and ‘West’ that firmly placed the blame on the actions of the former had become the central theme of US security discourse:

The nations of the world divided to follow two distinct roads. The United States and our valued friends, the other free nations, chose one road. The leaders of the Soviet Union chose another. (Eisenhower, 1953a).

A key purpose of the speech was to seriously invite Soviet cooperation in building a peaceful world – alongside serving as a ‘salutary reminder . . . of the need for continued effort and sacrifice’ (Nitze, 1953: 1, 4). Shortly after Eisenhower’s second term in office, however, a wall had been erected in Berlin to split Germany and the world into two opposing spheres of a communist East and a capitalist West. The comparative parallelism with an irreconcilable difference between two sides of the hero–villain narrative had become a material dividing line.

Towards the end of the Cold War, President Ronald Reagan (1987) famously asked the leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, to ‘tear down’ the Berlin Wall. Yet the prospect of a new world order that could transcend a binary division of the international arena proved to be remarkably short-lived. The threat of the ‘evil empire’ was quickly replaced by dangers emanating from isolated Third World ‘rogue’ countries (Homolar, 2011) and international terrorist ‘savages’ (Finlay, 2009). On 2 August 1990, President George H. W. Bush criticized the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait as an unprovoked surprise attack ‘in blitzkrieg fashion’ against a peaceful neighbour (Bush, 1990). Bush characterized the event as an ‘outrageous and brutal act of aggression’. Importantly,

the President underscored that this stood in stark contrast to what he described as a new era with the potential to become ‘an age of freedom, a time of peace for all peoples’. ‘As was the case in the 1930s’, Bush declared, raising the spectre of appeasement and Adolf Hitler, ‘we see in Saddam Hussein an aggressive dictator’. Behind the scenes, the US security establishment feared that without prompt and decisive action that forced the Iraqi dictator to retreat from Kuwait, ‘Saddam will start appearing as a hero able to stand up to the superpower’ (Haass, 1990a: 3). At the same time there was an acute awareness that gaining authorization for the use of military force would require a long and sustained process of ‘conditioning all constituencies, including the public, Congress, allies, key Arabs and others to the fact that . . . a peaceful resolution of the crisis was fast running out’ (Haass, 1990b: 2).

The example of Bush’s framing of Iraq’s action is significant not just because of the centrality of dichotomies such as aggression and peace and its implicit representation of a simple choice between action and inaction, whereby inaction would likely squander the opportunity for entering a new world order. It is also representative of the post-World War Two trend for US presidents to intertwine vocabulary associated with Nazi Germany with contemporary notions of aggression, tyranny and savagery. A case in point is Bush’s successor President William J. Clinton, who justified NATO’s military intervention in Kosovo on 24 March 1999 in similar fashion (Clinton, 1999). While placing the innocence and weakness of victims ‘sprayed with bullets’ in direct opposition to the savagery and strength of their attackers, the 42nd US President linked the events in Kosovo via the tragedy of Bosnia a few years earlier to the atrocities committed by Nazi Germany. What happened in Bosnia, he stated, ‘was genocide in the heart of Europe, not in 1945 but in 1995; not in some grainy newsreel from our parents’ and grandparents’ time but in our own time, testing our humanity and our resolve’.

President George W. Bush perhaps most infamously divided the world into opposing spheres in response to the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, bringing to life a powerful dual-focus narrative about the threat posed by the savagery of international terrorism that was embedded in the rich heritage of dualistic terminology in US security rhetoric (notably Bush, 2002). Operating largely in the background during the Obama presidency (e.g. Obama, 2014, 2015) the emphasis on driving a moral wedge between the United States and its enemies reminiscent of Bush’s rhetoric gained renewed momentum under Donald Trump, even though his rhetorical abilities only occasionally rose above those of a fourth-grade student (Wang and Liu, 2017; cf. Homolar and Scholz, 2019). During his first official overseas trip, Trump (2017) declared the fight against terrorism to be ‘a battle between barbaric criminals who seek to obliterate human life and decent people . . . a battle between good and evil’. The 45th President not only replicated the rhetoric of savagery in framing enmity, but also nurtured the image of a black-and-white world in which the solutions to complex problems are simple.

These examples of calls-to-arms speeches illustrate that while we may disagree about who warrants the label of hero in these stories, the use of the dualistic plot structure of hero–villain narratives – the form or framework of their unfolding story – in US security discourse has remained remarkably consistent over time. Each of the historical examples discussed portrays two antithetical sides in competition with each other, with the United States serving as the story’s protagonist and the enemy of the time as the diametrically opposed antagonist who is dehumanized as an evil villain. The pervasiveness of hero–villain narratives in US security discourse suggests that political agents appreciate them as a powerful rhetorical tool to move audiences towards taking action – towards doing something to tip the scales in favour of the protagonist. How do they achieve this? As we shall see, the key to understanding the ‘grip’ of hero–villain security narratives can be found in their dualistic structure: they achieve audience impact because their side-by-side positioning of elements that are in palpable tension, even incongruity, with each other fosters our absorption and emotional investment in the story.

The seductive rhythm of tragedy and triumph in hero–villain narratives

Characteristic of the genre of hero–villain security stories is that a social hierarchy of states with gradations of difference in values is markedly absent (see Towns and Rumelili, 2017; Broome et al., 2018). Hero–villain narratives instead represent the world in categorical terms of difference, as fundamentally split between mutually exclusive visions, like the struggle between the forces of good and evil represented in J. R. R. Tolkien’s dual-focus narrative of Middle-earth in *The Lord of the Rings*. This holds for both the binary division of the world into two opposing spheres in which the ‘evil’ continuously stands a good chance of gaining the upper hand, as well as the lexicon that defines the character and actions of the two opposing sides. Hero–villain security narratives are therefore “‘ethically constitutive’ stories’ (Smith, 2003: 59): they are narratives which ‘have special capacities to inspire senses of normative worth’.

The plot of hero–villain narratives – the sequence of causally related events from the story’s beginning to its resolution – oscillates between tragedy and triumph for the side of the protagonist. As we saw above, this typically begins with an affirmation of the societal values and progress of the protagonist. It then shifts abruptly from ‘good’ to ‘evil’, giving the antagonist the edge, but the prospect of a turning tide is kept alive. The story is set and kept in motion by first tilting the balance between the two opposing sides towards the side of non-alignment, enmity and threat. It then continues to eschew a lasting resolution of the conflict between the opposing sides, creating uncertainty over the hero’s final victory.

The portrayal of the villain in these security stories is typically that of a powerful enemy – malevolent, ruthless and capable – who seeks to plunge the world into darkness and barbarity. In the narrated contest between good and evil, the antagonist, be it Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Saddam Hussein or Osama Bin Laden, stands eye to eye with the protagonist and is evil by choice – the same as fictional villains ranging from Sherlock Holmes’s Professor Moriarty to Batman’s Joker, Harry Potter’s Lord Voldemort and the Avengers’ evil demigod Thanos. The world of hero–villain security narratives is thus one of ordered uncertainty with clear-cut boundaries – rather than a complex, ambiguous and chaotic universe – in which the antagonist colours the story and gives it purpose. The plot of the hero–villain security narrative features a world spiralling towards catastrophe if no action is taken; it is the exceptional responsibility of the hero to prevent the catastrophe and to ensure the defeat of the villain.

What makes this type of security narrative so effective, and by extension so popular in the realms of both fiction and politics, is that the dual-focus structure does more than simply sustain the momentum of the story. It also keeps the audience hooked and captivated by the story because it creates suspense over logically opposed outcomes. Dual-focus security narratives stimulate a desire by the audience to know the conclusion of the story, while continuously frustrating this desire by not resolving the tension. The lack of resolution creates purposeful suspense, an ‘emotional state provoked by the uncertainty of an expected outcome’ (Prieto-Pablos, 1998: 100). This has two key constituents of emotion that we experience in relation to future events, towards what could happen (Ortony et al., 1988: 131–132): *hope* that the hero will emerge victorious and *fear* that events will instead take a negative turn.

From the perspective of narrative research, suspense is one of the core narrative affects – ‘a curious mixture of pain and pleasure’, of euphoria and dysphoria, generated by the prospect of disturbing outcomes, peril and harm to characters that are liked, and which triggers an affective reaction (Barnet et al., 1971: 107; see also Raney, 2011; Zillmann, 1980, 1996). Dual-focus security narratives are thus built upon an emotionally charged plot structure that revolves around the audience’s experience of apprehension about undesired alternatives, a plot structure that creates emotional tension and anxiety by signalling uncertainty and a loss of control. While the audience might hope,

or even expect, their side of alignment will be triumphant in the end, hero–villain narratives draw the audience in emotionally by oscillating between heroes and villains and between tragedy and triumph, continuously creating the anticipation of the protagonist’s doom (Brewer, 1996; Carroll, 1996). As Keen (2015: 154) notes, ‘Suspense hinges on the cognitive states of “what if”, enlivened by the anxious feelings of “how long?”’. Whereas the classical hero-story takes the protagonist on a well-trodden path through perdition only to emerge from it victorious and enlightened (Campbell, 1949), in hero–villain narratives the more absorbed audiences are by the uncertain outcome of the story, the more likely it is to generate a strong emotional response.

In addition to the outcome (un)desirability integral to the hero–villain narrative’s plot structure, character identification is a particularly important factor in shaping our felt suspense and emotional investment in the story (Doicaru, 2016). While we may initially disagree about who warrants the label of hero in the narrative, the use of dualistic terminology encourages the audience from the outset to categorize events, actions and characters that drive the narrative’s plot along a fault line, pushing us to sympathize and ally with one of the story’s opposing sides over a second (Altman, 2008: 66, 336). This attachment is an essential part of narrative identification; that is, ‘the process of taking on a character’s identity and situational perspective’ (Bilandzic and Busselle, 2017: 19), which also fosters the process of absorbing the narrative (Tal-Or and Cohen, 2010: 404). Hero-identification, rather than shared attitudes, exerts significant persuasive influence on audiences (De Graaf et al., 2012: 803). Fostering the vicarious experience of attachment is a powerful rhetorical device to move audiences because it makes us feel.

The protagonist of dual-focus narratives generally attracts empathy, affinity and feelings on the positive valence spectrum because of the way in which qualities assigned to the character resonate emotionally with the audience (even if the boundary between hero and villain is ambiguous). We tend to imagine ourselves as the hero of the story to the extent that we vicariously experience and absorb the character’s emotions and personality (Slater and Rouner, 2002: 178). Elaine Kinsella, Timothy Ritchie and Eric Igou (cited in Allison and Goethals, 2014: 173) argue furthermore that heroes – in fiction and in our everyday lives – who are associated with behaving ‘in ways that benefit others, sometimes at great personal risk, are likely to increase positive feelings towards the hero’ as it reminds us of the good in the world. Indeed, the ‘good guy’ who figures in hero–villain security stories is usually portrayed as a (self-)sacrificing character who comes to the rescue of others and the world.⁷ This is echoed in how President Eisenhower (1953a, 1953b) narrated America as a hero that deserved to defeat the communist ‘scheme of regimentation’ precisely because of its ‘sheer value to mankind’, or in President’s Clinton’s (1999) assertion that America’s involvement in Kosovo was imperative to ‘save innocent lives and preserve peace, freedom, and stability in Europe’. The appeal of the hero, then, ‘lies in [its] fulfilment of important cognitive and emotional needs, such as our need for wisdom, meaning, hope, inspiration, and personal growth’ (Allison and Goethals, 2016: 188).

The process of identification with the hero through ‘good’ qualities – addressing, in a Lacanian sense, a desire to overcome lack – is relational in that it (re)creates the connection with a broader community and the values it wears on its sleeve. The most relatable heroes are those who tap into our collective consciousness – often featuring whiteness and masculinity as implicit constitutive categories (Nakayama and Krizek, 1995: 293). Calling upon what is familiar in order to generate identification serves to invoke mutual experiences such as the notion of a common past and shared values, foster recognition and a sense of rightness, and sway the feelings of the audience (Keen, 2012). Hero-identification thus serves as a confirmation of a shared worldview at the societal level in conjunction with ‘important healing and self-esteem-building functions at the individual level’ (Allison and Goethals, 2016: 195). The dark side of this bounded strategic empathy is its tendency to bias audiences against an outgroup that is represented as a distant ‘outside other’, including in

terms of space, time, morality and code of conduct, as is the case in hero–villain security narratives. While we project ourselves into the hero, we cast off the villain. As Kristeva (1982: 2) puts it: ‘I must violently reject it to assert myself as “I”, and “Not that”.’

This overlaps with a now long line of research in international security investigating the performative constitution of identity at the level of the self and the collective (e.g. Campbell, 1998). Yet a focus on narrative processes of identification emphasizes that these ‘create the direct intimacy of collective experience in a conscious dimension through reference’ (László, 2008: 9) and increase the potential persuasive effects of stories and messages (Cohen, 2001: 260). The capacity of the audience to retrieve cognitively stored information about belonging is triggered by the narrative, including the plot structure and the words it contains.

The significant persuasive influence of hero–villain security narratives stems from the multidimensional emotive effects evoked by the suspense-generating rhythm of the story, which is pushed further through dualistic language that fosters processes of hero-identification. By fostering a cognitive-emotive process of differentiation and identification, hero–villain security narratives achieve dissociation with the antagonist and attachment to the protagonist – evoking collective sentiments of both aggression and empathy. To paraphrase Cohen (1963), the way in which hero–villain security narratives work to create the characteristics of the opposing sides is not to tell us what to think but rather what to think about, because they communicate a ‘cultural code’ and channel how information contained in a narrative is interpreted. While they are neither tangible nor concrete, the dualistic abstractions that hero–villain narratives feature so prominently are linked to our prior experiences, individually and collectively, and help stir audiences into action by evoking an extreme sensual affective experience, bodily and emotionally. By drawing an unambiguous line between the ingroup and the outgroup, this type of security story (re)creates what a community imagines as admirable and desirable as much as it reflects its fears and conceptions of deviance.

What matters most here in terms of their broader sociopolitical consequences is that dual-focus security narratives inculcate a preference for taking urgent political actions that might tip the scales in favour of the protagonist. When audiences are in a state of suspense, they are primed to release emotional tension through the prospect of regaining control over the direction of the story (Prieto-Pablos, 1998: 101). This distinguishes dual-focus security narratives from texts that generate feelings of resignation and hopelessness on the one hand, and confidence and optimism on the other, which imply that nothing can be done to change the course of events (Ortony et al., 1988: 132). The importance of striking a delicate balance between the prospects for defeat or victory, of not falling into a weakness trap that pushes the audience towards passive acceptance of a negative situation from the viewpoint of the protagonist, has not escaped political agents. In a confidential memorandum about the 1951 State of the Union addressed to then Secretary of State Dean Acheson, his special adviser Marshall D Shulman (1950) stressed that President Truman’s State of the Union speech to Congress ‘should clarify our position on questions raised by the isolationist challenge. [The] message should have enough confidence and reassurance to correct recent over-emphasis on our weaknesses.’ Keeping the rhythm in balance is key to the effective use of a security narrative: projecting either too much unrivalled strength or too much vulnerability might reduce the power of a security narrative to serve as a catalyst for political action.

Conclusion

Stories that divide the world between heroes and villains, between good and evil, have persistently formed a cornerstone in the repository of how political agents speak security in the United States. The moral of the story in these hero–villain security narratives is represented in absolutes with nothing in between. This holds for the lexicon that defines the character and

actions of the two opposing sides as much as for their bipartite structural features. While they should not be understood as one-size-fits-all blueprints for political agents to call audiences into action or rally a nation behind a vision, they have played a lasting role in grounding arguments within US security discourse.

The article has illustrated how integrating extra-disciplinary insights, particularly those from narrative research and political psychology, can help us to develop a more granular understanding of the popularity and endurance of genre-specific narratives as a representational device. Rather than relying on the conventional understanding in international relations that different types of political narratives work in similar ways, the article has illustrated how the rhythm of tragedy and triumph in the genre of hero–villain security narratives is an integral part of narrative persuasion that is at work when political leaders divide the world into ‘us’ and ‘them’. A useful methodological strategy for security narrative analysis is to engage in a reflexive and intertextual approach to archival research, and further scholarship is needed to investigate the dynamics of hero–villain narratives in other cases.

Challenging the problematic assumptions of earlier international relations scholarship, this analysis of how narrative persuasion works for the genre of hero–villain security narratives reveals that it is not merely ‘the social condition regarding the position of authority’ in relation to the audience that facilitates the social construction of enmity and threat (see Buzan et al., 1998: 33). Rather, the relationship of the audience to the narrative content is fundamental for understanding why a particular security narrative resonates with the wider public. The notion that affective responses frequently enter – if not commandeer — conscious awareness has recently begun to gain greater traction in the field. Drawing inspiration from the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, Solomon (2018) has illustrated how a cognitively uncertain environment not only impacts upon individuals’ sense of agency and security, but can create a broader societal affective resonance, binding together collectives in ways that alter the conditions of political possibility. The analysis in this article contributes to this emerging body of critical security studies research by examining how political leaders can potentially use rhetoric in deliberate ways to trigger audience anxiety and uncertainty, in order to provide a persuasive articulation of security threats and how to respond to them.

Ted Sorensen (1962), President John F. Kennedy’s speechwriter and one of his closest advisers, claimed that ‘We all know that words are symbols which call forth emotional responses in all of us.’ The main argument developed here provides an important step towards further advancing scholarship on the systematic analysis of affective sources and dynamics of narrative persuasion. Hero–villain narratives emotionally ‘grip’ their audiences through the seductive rhythm of tragedy and triumph, by keeping them in suspense over the likelihood with which an undesirable outcome can be averted. Whether a presidential call to arms resonates with an audience in ways that might foster the conditions of possibility for political action depends on the extent to which emotive responses are triggered by the rhetorical choices political agents make to ‘speak’ security.

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Notes

1. The concept of a hero–villain narrative is one of many discursive practices and does not suggest that language preserves a stable meaning over time and escapes its context-boundedness.
2. Methodologically, narrative approaches have become a research tool in international relations to zoom in on individual experiences and the way people tell their stories. They frequently employ auto-ethnography and narrative writing, centring on researchers’ subjective experience and the dynamics between the researcher as narrator and the subject under investigation, as well as problematizing the language of research (see Brigg and Bleiker, 2010; Inayatullah, 2010; Ruback, 2010).
3. A security discourse is defined as a series of practices and representations that (re)produce specific meanings of security, vulnerability and threat, and which thereby delineates the field of political and ethical possibility within which security policy can take place (see Bialasiewicz et al., 2007: 406; Butler, 1995: 138; Milliken, 1999; Weldes, 1999: 16–17).
4. Text is broadly conceived as a performative semantic unit of meaning, medium of expression and communication and manifestation of discourse.
5. Political speechwriting is a complex process that involves input from a range of political agents and the performance of their delivery also varies significantly, both of which impacts upon the audience’s ability to make sense of and support the narrative they contain. Of the over 80 presidential speechwriters since Judson T. Welliver wrote for President Warren G. Harding in 1921 – who is generally considered the first official presidential speechwriter in the modern sense of the occupation – very few have been women and only since the 1980s. These include Peggy Noonan, Mari Maseng Will and K. T. McFarland (Reagan); Katherine Reback (Clinton); Charlie Fern (G. W. Bush); Sarah Hurwitz (Obama); and Brittany Baldwin (Trump) as well as female speechwriters in lower positions such as Sarada Peri (Obama) and Mary Kate Cary (George H. W. Bush).
6. This section, as many others in the speech, were significantly more wordy in draft form than in the delivered speech. Earlier drafts prompted advice for changes so that the text is ‘shorter, more punch, means the same, tis not gobbledygook’ (Clifford Papers, 1949).
7. A note printed in *The National Intelligencer* on 9 February 1831 (National Intelligencer, 1831) drew an image of a worthy American as that of a (white male) ‘[c]rusader, who went away in youth, and came back with grey hairs, to bring the first news of his deeds and the fate of innumerable warriors who went with him’.

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