changing worlds & signs of the times

Selected Proceedings from the 10th International Conference of the Hellenic Semiotics Society

EDITORS
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Changing Worlds
&
Signs of the Times

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Abstract

In this paper my aim will be to clarify and evaluate some of the key policies and practices of the USA integral to its self-proclaimed global “War on Terror” and argue that collectively these practices represent not merely an elaboration of what some have identified as ‘new wars’ or ‘hybrid wars’ but rather a re-codification of America’s approach to war. Almost immediately after the terrorist attack of 9/11 the Bush administration began deploying particular lexical triggers as it prepared for war and in its representation and construction of an enemy. References to “the Homeland”, the passage of the Patriot Act, the use of drones, Guantanamo, and an array of nomenclature utilized for delineating enemy combatants the US military became engaged with, testify both to the disciplining of the home front and to new applications of American power. Taken together these components form a repertoire of signifying practices geared toward the re-codification of war.

Keywords

war on terror, homeland, lexical triggers, war rhetorics, Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib
We also have to work, though, sort of the dark side, if you will. We’ve got to spend time in the shadows in the intelligence world. A lot of what needs to be done here will have to be done quietly, without any discussion, using sources and methods that are available to our intelligence agencies, if we’re going to be successful. That’s the world these folks operate in, and so it’s going to be vital for us to use any means at our disposal, basically, to achieve our objective.¹

In 1943 Salvador Dali completed a painting titled Geopoliticus Child Watching the Birth of the New Man. The painting “Figure 1” explores the changing nature and balance of global power at a time when much of the world was engulfed in the events of the Second World War. Dali’s intriguing use of signs foregrounds his apparent belief in USA’s rise to imperial status in the twentieth century. Even though the war’s conclusion was still a few years away and its victors uncertain, Dali’s symbolic forms communicate a confidence in who will be victorious. Emerging from a crack in the egg-like globe in the center of the canvas is an arm and partial torso of what is clearly “the new man”. Reaching outward from North America with bodily strength and a firm grip on the world contrasts remarkably what is happening on the other side of the Atlantic. Standing at the right margin of the canvas is an emaciated figure, perhaps a female depicting Europa, points at continental Europe, the Old World. Dali could not have been clearer about the signification of the ‘Old World/New World’ dichotomy present in his painting. The USA was on the rise while Europe, torn by a long and brutal war, was at its nadir.

My use of Dali’s explicit representation of the arrival of American power in the middle of the twentieth century is a beginning point for this paper in that I will attempt by its conclu-
sion to contrast it with specific policies and practices that have been central in key aspects of the foreign policy of the USA. Focus will be placed on the USA’s “War on Terror”, which was declared following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In particular, I will identify a repertoire of signifying practices, discursive formations, and representational codes embedded in America’s “War on Terror” as it was deployed by the Bush administration during the first eight years of the twenty-first century. As Stuart Hall reminds us, language, as symbols or signs, stand for or represent our concepts, ideas and feelings in such a way as to enable others to read, decode, or interpret their meaning (Hall, 2013). In this paper it is by and large within the discourses, codes, and practices of America’s “War on Terror” that the production of meaning will be identified and interpreted.

The country that Dali made the subject of his painting, has, throughout its short history, referred to or named itself in a variety of ways. A ‘City upon a Hill’, ‘the American Republic’, ‘the United States of America’, ‘America’, ‘the great last hope in the world’, and the most recent addition, the Homeland, are examples of how this territorial space has signified and re-signified itself. It was not long after 9-11 that President Bush began using Homeland in referring to the USA. As a matter of fact, it took him less than two weeks to announce the creation of a new state bureaucratic organ: the Office of Homeland Security. Historically, the word homeland was never part of American political-nationalist discourse. So for most Americans, at best, it must have initially sounded peculiar. “The country,” President Bush pointed out, “is now at war and securing the homeland is a national priority” (Bush, 2002). This ‘inward turn’ in some respects was new terrain for the country. With a few exceptions, threats from abroad, including international terrorism, rarely crossed the national boundary. For many, September 11 altered the mythology of national security and predicated a feeling of and desire for insularity. The meaning of homeland, according to Amy Kaplan also has an exclusionary effect or connotation which marginalizes the immigrant and underwrites nativist sentiments (2003). Subtle forms of patriotism can easily be ‘hijacked’ and mobilized by the nation-state for particular political ends. In continuation, Kaplan asks: “where is there room for immigrants in the space of the homeland as a site of native origins, ethnic homogeneity, and rootedness in common place and past? How could immigrants possibly find inclusion in the homeland?” (2003, p. 85). Bush’s usage of homeland gave American national-territorial space a new kind of meaning, essentially operating as a sign for inciting collective solidarity around notions of national defense and national security.

As the sinews of the country were tightened by the rhetorics of nationalism, the passage of new laws complimenting the pre-existing national security state apparatuses arrived in timely fashion. In less than two weeks following the events of 9-11, President Bush signed into law the USA Patriot Act of 2001, which stands for: “Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism” (107th Congress Public Law 56, 2001). Not only is the word Pa-
riot in the bill, but also the first letter of each word in the bill’s title forms an acronym: PATRIOT. Perhaps even more remarkable was the total lack of debate or even serious discussion amongst the country’s political leaders and in the media about the implications of particular laws part of the legislation which severely undermined democratic rights and civil liberties. The shock, anger, and fear of the American public generated by the events of 9-11 created a space for the US government not only to carry out war in Afghanistan against the Taliban and al Qaeda, but also to enhance state authority and domestic control within the USA. A particular tool that was utilized for this end was the use of a color-coded system of indicators to inform the American public about imminent terrorist threats called the Homeland Security Advisory System “Figure 2”. On a given day green might be signaled, indicating an all clear and that there was a “low” risk of a terrorist attack. On the other hand, red signaled a serious warning to the public that there was a “severe” risk of a terrorist attack. These two statuses were the extremes. There were also three other possibilities in between: blue indicated “guarded”, yellow warned of an “elevated” status, and orange indicated a “high” state of alert. What then does this add up to: homeland, the Department of Homeland Security, the Patriot Act, and the Homeland Security Advisory System? In considering these practices and discourses conjointly, while it might be argued that these responses to 9-11 exhibit a particular logic, I would suggest that each element contributes to the shaping of a culture of fear which in turn facilitates the enhancement of state power and control. But this is only half of the code; it only represents the internal-domestic articulations of the War on Terror. What about confronting threats from abroad, abroad?

![Homeland Security Advisory System Scale](image)

The reach of the War on Terror beyond the national boundaries of the USA is extensive. It has included two large wars, one in Afghanistan and another in Iraq, as well as military interventions through the use of drones in countries like Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen. President Bush’s use of the term war dates back to a comment he made shortly after
9-11 when he stated: “This crusade - this war on terrorism - is going to take a while. And the American people must be patient. I’m going to be patient. But I can assure the American people I am determined” (Bazinet, 2001). The use of the locution “crusade” has clear connotations. Was this war the USA was about to embark upon to be equated with the medieval crusades of European Christians and the wars against Moslems to re-capture Jerusalem? Interestingly enough, crusade was dropped from Bush’s lexicon and the ‘war on terror discourse’ altogether. Other criticisms emerged over the use of this term. Is it not an oxymoron; and isn’t terror and abstract noun? Others argue that terrorism is not an enemy; it is a way of fighting. According to Victor Davis Hanson, “terror is a method, not an enemy, a manifestation of how a particular belligerent chooses to wage war rather than some sort of independent entity” (2005, p. 90). The events of 9-11 were not just framed as terrorist attacks, but also as acts of war. That being the case, the Bush administration prepared the nation for what clearly was going to be a long war, or even ‘a permanent state of war’. “Our war on Terror,” warned Bush, “begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated” (Bush, 2001). On one hand, the War on Terror is a military-socio-political reality; a war between a nation-state and a sub-national global terrorist network. On another level, it was framed by the Bush administration as a struggle between ‘us and them’, ‘civilized and savage’, ‘light and darkness’, and ‘good and evil’. Bush’s rhetorical practices honed in on these dichotomies in an almost religious-like manner. “A compassionate land,” he suggests, “will rise united to not only protect ourselves, not only make our Homeland as secure as possible, but to bring the evildoers to justice so that our children might live in freedom” (Bush, 2001). This reference to “evil-doers” is reiterated by Bush in many of his speeches during the early phase of the War on Terror. Although denials abounded about how America’s response was not to become a war against Islam, the use of evildoer signifies a biblical orientation, hence placing Bush’s war rhetorics within a religious framework despite claims to the contrary.

Coding the War on Terror required incorporating other elements in order to complete its configuration and increase its effectiveness. Homeland, the Patriot Act, and delineating the enemy required added markers. For example, the locution evil-doer had its limitations and required some other designation. Terrorists, al Qaeda, and Taliban were used in alternation, but once US military forces were engaged in combat in Afghanistan and the conventional/unconventional war intensified a rather problematic challenge emerged: what were the evil-doers once they were captured and taken alive? Were they soldiers, terrorists, combatants, insurgents, or something else? In short, the USA found it convenient to assign the label unlawful combatant. The immense demand for information meant that extracting it from the enemy would be easier if they were not protected by the Geneva Conventions. Designating them as “unlawful combatants” translated into denying them their legal status as combatants, which in turn excluded
them from proper treatment afforded by international war conventions. It marked the beginning of a gradual slide down a slippery slope that all became part and parcel of America’s War on Terror. If 9-11 was an “act of war” and not a crime, categorizing the enemy as unlawful and depriving them of legal rights at best passes as unjust and in violation of international law. Nevertheless, for more than a decade the US authorities have been operating beyond the rule of law by illegally incarcerating combatants, depriving them of access to legal counsel, suspending habeas corpus, and in practically all cases engaging in torture and other forms of physical and psychological abuse. Much of the abusive treatment and intelligence gathering was done in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as selected third countries. Bringing those in detention, *detainees*, as they came to be called, to the USA, was out of the question. So where could they be sent, especially those marked as “high value detainees?”

The answer was Guantanamo Bay Naval Base in Cuba. Those unlawful combatants apprehended in Afghanistan were sent to Guantanamo as detainees. From a de-legitimized status on the battlefield, stripped of prisoner of war status, they entered the world of Guantanamo suspended in a state of legal limbo. As Kaplan observes, these “non-prisoners of war” who fought with the Taliban and Al Qaeda are being held without charges against them” (2003, p. 90). What exactly is Guantanamo? As a territorial space beyond the reach of law, it has come to signify everything wrong with the US’s War on Terror. While located within Cuba’s territorial boundary, it is, however, part of America’s extra-territorial imperial space beyond the reach of national and international law.11 Since its opening as a detention center in 2002 hundreds of ‘non-prisoners of war’ have passed through the gates of Guantanamo.12 In 2003 the US opted to open a second military front in Iraq in its prosecution of the War on Terror. While the US may have gotten away with invading Afghanistan in 2001, citing its pursuit of al Qaeda which had been given sanctuary in that country by the Taliban regime, Iraq was a very different case. Weapons of mass destruction and a supposed Sadaam Hussein–al Qaeda link proved to be entirely false. Coupling the realization of commencing a war under false pretense was the disclosure of reprehensible images from Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq where a plethora of prisoner abuse, torture, and incidents of inmate deaths had been occurring.13 The circulation of these images undermined America’s discourse of the *liberation* of Iraq and shattered any possibility of the US redeeming itself for its flawed justifications for invading that country in 2003.14 The painting by Fernando Botero, “Figure 3”, represents the horrors of Abu Ghraib. In total, Botero produced 87 paintings and drawings dealing with this particular subject (Baker, 2007). “The Abu Ghraib Series” visually captures humiliating treatment and torture inflicted on Iraqi war prisoners in utterly stark terms, and is testimony to how adrift America’s policies and practices were.

With the victory of Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential election some promised changes in the US’s war policy occurred, while other commitments never materialized.
In assuming the presidency, Obama recoded the War on Terror as: Overseas Contingency Operation. The awkward label of War on Terror was abandoned for something noticeably vaguer, less finite, and less ‘domestic’ in its orientation. Re-coding the war, however, changed little. Guantanamo remained open, new violations of civil liberties occurred in the US, and as recent events reveal NSA activities and intelligence gathering policies seem to know no bounds. Perhaps even more sinister is the fact that Obama has become more reliant on the use of what are colloquially referred to as drones to carry out the War on Terror. Drones have been and are presently being used to target and assassinate Taliban and Al Qaeda leadership figures. Initially drones were deployed as a tool for surveillance, but in the post 9-11 context they were loaded with missiles to carry out counter-insurgency operations. The ‘Cyborgian’ qualities of drones, the fusion of human and machine, provide us with a central characteristic of how war in the modern age has been re-codified. In this sense, the War on Terror has seemingly come full circle with the US’s growing dependence on using drones as a means of downgrading its enemies’ abilities to prepare and conduct attacks against US interests around the world. If the War on Terror opened as a result of civil aircraft crashing into buildings in New York City and Washington DC, perhaps it has reached a new level of terror with drones firing missiles at targets from Pakistan in the east to Yemen in the west? What then is there to conclude? What does the War on Terror have to do with ‘Changing Worlds and Signs of the Times’? At the very least we can observe the interplay of codes and their operation within a discourse of war in which inside/outside, domestic/foreign have become fused, and yet at other moments opposed or in a relationship of tension. Consider the re-signification of the USA as the Homeland, that is, the re-articulation of American national space as both insular-leaning and yet simultaneously imperialistic at its core.

Figure 3. Fernando Botero. Abu Ghraib 46
America, an open and free society, having become roped in by a discourse of ‘national security’, yet in reality enveloped in *national insecurity*. While presidential rhetorical practices since 2001 have successfully infused the War on Terror with binaries such as light and darkness, good and evil, governmental authorities have engaged in unscrupulous legalistic maneuvering to assign that enemy a label and nomenclature which has produced more ambiguity than clarity. The new lexical triggers including homeland, drones, Guantanamo, and Abu Ghraib expose the encoded patterns of American war policies and practices. In pursuing the perpetrators behind the terrorist attacks of 9-11, a grammar of behavior has been deployed by America’s national security state apparatuses which has undermined and de-stabilized any pretense of pursuing justice. By “work[ing]...the dark side” and “spend[ing] time in the shadows” as articulated by former Vice President Dick Cheney in a quote at the beginning of this paper, America has perniciously set itself down a path from which it will become difficult to extract itself. The ‘New Man’ of Dali’s painting has seemingly evolved into something unsettling. America’s preoccupation with power, interests, and security has transformed the ‘New Man’ into the henchman of Botero’s representation of the *tortured bodies* in Abu Ghraib. In seeking to achieve its political ends, has America itself crossed the line where war ends and terrorism begins? Or is it simply the re-codification of war?

Endnotes


2. To be precise, eleven days “after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, President George W. Bush announced that he would create an Office of Homeland Security” (Borja, 2008, p. 4). By the end of 2002 this office was made into a full-blown federal department, the Department of Homeland Security.

3. Bush took great pleasure in referring to the American West of the 19th century in his rhetoric during the early phases in the hunt for Osama Bin Laden and other leaders of al Qaeda. *Homeland*, therefore, fit neatly into this western imaginary Bush posed to the American public by taking them back in time to the mid-nineteenth century when white colonizers, (or pioneers as they are popularly known), making their way into the interior of the continent would ‘circle their wagons’ in a desperate defense against Native Americans reacting to white encroachment of their lands.

4. The war on terror has gradually morphed into a global war on terror, and in many respects has become a floating signifier of sorts in that it is “able to be attached at will to a wide range of actions and policies” (Zalman and Clarke, 2009, p. 101).

5. This only refers to the overt military applications of American power. Covert operations, intelligence gathering or espionage, surveillance, and other secretive practices involving third countries are equally extensive.

6. For example, terror can simply be identified as a fear, and terrorism as a tactic; so how does one wage war on an emotion or a tactic? (Jett, 2012, p. 136).

7. Note the following comment by Vice President Cheney: “I think this is going to be a struggle that the United States is going to be involved in for the foreseeable future. There’s not going to be an end date when we’re going to say, ‘There, it’s all over with’” (quoted by Perez-Rivas).
8. Joanne Esch deploys the term *lexical trigger* to identify those words and phrases part of a political discourse “that serve as linguistic cues to evoke prestructured and mythologized understandings of a narrative” (2010, p. 387).

9. In remarks he made outside the White House on September 16 to members of the press he repeatedly refers to the label evil-doer in various ways. “We’re a nation that can’t be cowed by evildoers... We will rid the world of evildoers...Evil Folks still lurk out there...We’ve never seen this kind of evil before. But the evildoers have never seen the American people in action before either. And they’re about to find out” http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/youtubeclip.php?clipid=63346&admin=43


11. Historically, the USA had assisted Cuba achieve its independence from Spain at the end of the 19th century. In the end, however, the US decided to stay and extend its imperial domain in the Caribbean and elsewhere. The Cuban authorities were compelled to accept the Platt amendment of 1903 to their constitution which granted the US several rights to future intervention in Cuban affairs should it be necessary, but also the rights to indefinitely lease a naval base at Guantanamo Bay (Ninkovich, 2001, p.98).


13. While some of the photographs may be explained as an unseemly by-product of war, other images require deeper analysis. For instance, the subjects of many of the photographs are not corpses, they are “living persons in the thrall of powerful and sadistic captors...terrorized, abject, forced to perform humiliating acts, and subjected to physical torture” and psychological abuse (Tétreault, 2006, p. 34).

14. Collectively, such practices did a tremendous amount of harm to the US’s standing in the world community. As observed by many by “adopting a “take the gloves off” approach, top U.S. civilian and military leaders established unprecedented parameters for the treatment of detainees at U.S. detention facilities in Afghanistan, Guantánamo Bay, and other locations. This permissive environment allowed, if not encouraged guards and interrogators to dehumanize and, in some cases, torture detainees in their custody” (Fletcher, et al. 1).

15. In a letter to the Speaker of the House of the US Congress President Obama specifically uses this title alongside that of “Global War on Terrorism.” http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/assets/budget_amendments/oco_designation_09282012.pdf

16. Here I refer to the revelations of the former employee of the NSA, the National Security Agency, Edward Snowden.

17. The formal name is unmanned aerial vehicle.

18. Some scholars have argued for the need to make distinctions between ‘old wars’ and ‘new wars.’ By ‘new war’ Mary Kaldor, for example, suggests that the distinction between internal and external is unclear and that such wars are both global and local simultaneously (Kaldor, 2012). While this is only part of Kaldor’s analysis, it is an approach that can assist us in understanding the nature of contemporary wars and conflicts. However, it seems to have a theoretical ‘blind-side’ in processing the nature and practices of America’s War on Terror. Hence, my argument being, the need to move beyond the ‘old war, new war’ dichotomy and instead framing it as a re-codification of war.

19. Such behavior, policies, and practices have earned the support of not just policy-makers and governmental officials, but also intellectuals of the realist persuasion. Francois Debrix has identified such figures whose books articulate a discourse supportive of the tactics deployed in the war on terror. “Promoting policies, ideologies and wartime strategies,” he observes, “designed to hate, expel and eradicate...these masters of statecraft, terror and abjection offer an image of the USA that may no longer be distinguishable from the image of those who attacked it in the first place” (Debrix, 2005, p. 1170).
References


The International Committee of the Red Cross is an independent organization concerned with humanitarian protection and assistance for victims of war as covered by the Geneva Conventions. (http://www.icrc.org/ihl.nsf/INTRO/375?OpenDocument)

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