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The Nuances in the Realization of Discursive Legitimization Strategies Used to Justify U.S. Foreign Intervention

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ABSTRACT

This paper employs critical discourse analysis to analyze how discursive legitimization strategies shape societal attitudes and ideology surrounding a certain topic. Specifically, I examine the various methods of realization of three broad legitimization strategies in political discourse used to justify two U.S. military interventions (the Iraq War in 2003 and the Iran War in 2026): altruism, emotion, and rationality (Reyes 785–787). I will compare and contrast the use of these strategies in four presidential speeches given by President George W. Bush and President Donald J. Trump on the Iraq and Iran wars, respectively, by analyzing speech extracts that represent salient patterns in the use of the three aforementioned legitimization strategies across all four speeches.

This paper concludes that the same broad legitimization strategy may be realized in differing ways depending on how presidents discursively frame the relationships between actors (e.g. the U.S., the enemy, the beneficiaries) in a military intervention. Lastly, I discuss the importance of these nuances in realization and offer suggestions for future studies.

INTRODUCTION

Ever since Washington's First Inaugural Address in 1789 on his vision for the new government, U.S. presidents have been using public speeches as a way to shape public opinion, influence societal narratives, and set national agendas. Language has the immense capacity to shape public perception by reconstructing public opinion and influencing the direction a certain policy may take (Rahmani 2065). Political discourse, a genre that involves political actors speaking publicly, allows politicians to utilize the power of language to encourage support of their policies by projecting their political agendas (Reyes 783).

One way that language use can have grave consequences for the legitimization of policy is pertaining to military intervention. Reyes defines legitimization as "the process by which speakers accredit or license a type of social behavior… legitimization is a justification of a behavior" (Reyes 782). It is crucial to study the ways in which politicians utilize language to legitimize intervention in order for us to understand the potential consequences of discursively (re)constructing international conflicts. For example, certain linguistic choices could lead to the dehumanization of civilians from other countries where foreign

intervention is being legitimized (e.g. villainizing civilian populations by referring to them as vengeful to justify conflict). Additionally, the use of certain linguistic strategies to legitimize military intervention to the public (e.g. constructing this course of action as altruistic) may obscure the human consequences of intervention (e.g. bombing, civilian deaths) by focusing on portraying an ideal humanitarian situation post-intervention.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is particularly well-suited as an approach to investigate the legitimization of foreign interventions in presidential speeches. As van Dijk finds: CDA "ask[s] questions about the way specific discourse structures are deployed in the reproduction of social dominance" (van Dijk 468). I will be using CDA to analyze how presidents utilize various discursive strategies to consolidate their power and public influence in policymaking.

This paper will analyze how President George W. Bush (2001–2009) and President Donald J. Trump (2017–2021, 2025–present) have utilized discursive legitimization strategies to justify foreign intervention initiatives in Iraq (2003–2011) and Iran (2026–present) respectively. The Iraq War was driven by U.S. claims that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction and had ties to terrorism following 9/11. The Iran War was driven by U.S. claims of Iran's nuclear capabilities and development, Iran's support for militant groups, and the nation's hostility towards Israel. Both of these conflicts are examples of U.S. foreign interventions that took place in the Middle East to respond to a perceived threat from that foreign government.

The research question for this study is: How do U.S. political actors realize various discursive strategies of legitimization in different ways to justify foreign intervention? Through comparing the different ways in which each of these strategies is realized in each speech, I hope to reveal how the persuasive power of political language lies not only in the broader arguments that presidents make, but also in the specific linguistic strategies through which those arguments are constructed. By examining how the same broad legitimization strategy can be realized differently through subtle differences in grammatical person, lexical choice, and framing of certain actors, this study will reveal how subtle variations in political discourse may shape public understandings of larger geopolitical threats (e.g. who constitutes the threat, who has agency, who is responsible for the conflict), and what forms of intervention are legitimate. More broadly, these findings highlight the often-overlooked extent to which language can shape broader societal worldviews and cultural understandings, while encouraging the public to be more critical of the political messages they hear and/or read about in everyday life.

Now I will provide a general outline of my paper. First, I present a literature review of the most relevant work on the topic of political discourse in relation to military intervention. Following that, I explain how I selected my data for my analysis. Then, I present my analysis of three subsections. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of my key findings and implications and potential directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review will survey key literature and studies on the topic of discursive legitimization strategies used in political discourse. First, I will define the five legitimization strategies (i.e. emotion, hypothetical future, rationality, voices of expertise, and altruism), highlight the three specific strategies that will inform this paper (i.e. altruism, emotion, and rationality), and explore existing theories about legitimization. Second, I will explain critical discourse analysis (CDA) and discuss how and why it is suited to answer the research question.

Legitimization Strategies And Their Existing Theories in Political Discourse

Reyes outlines five key legitimization strategies in political discourse (Reyes 785). First, political actors legitimize intervention through appeals to altruism (787). This is when actors frame their actions as being done for the greater good or the broader community, rather than being driven by self-interest (787). Second, political actors legitimize intervention through appeals to emotions (785). Reyes discusses how emotions can be leveraged to create a fear of outsiders, for instance, depicting them as "scary" or having bad intentions (785). Third, political actors legitimize intervention through appeals to rationality (786). This strategy is enacted when actors present intervention as a coherent and reasonable process, establishing clear chains of logic as to why intervention is justified (786). Rationality frames the final decision as the most "logical" outcome after careful deliberation (804). For example, a political actor might say something like, "Iraq has evaded inspectors for decades; we will give them one last chance to comply, otherwise we will be forced to intervene." Here, there is a clearly established chain of logic explaining how alternate methods have failed in the past, and intervention has become the last resort.

Reyes also outlines two additional legitimization strategies: hypothetical future and voices of expertise. Political actors legitimize intervention through voices of expertise by invoking the authority of external experts or specialists in a certain field to validate their claims (786). Actors also legitimize intervention through the construction of a dangerous "hypothetical future" by posing a threat in the future that requires our imminent action in the present (786). However, I will not be referencing voices of expertise or hypothetical future in my paper as the analysis did not identify salient patterns in relation to these.

These five legitimization strategies rely on shared social beliefs and values that allow the audience to recognize a certain argument as justified (Reyes 787). By tapping into pre-existing societal norms, political actors can make these strategies feel natural and justified to the public (787). For example, Reyes studied the use of legitimization strategies in presidential wartime rhetoric from President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama (784) and finds that "[p]olitical leaders, since 2001, have exploited the tragic events of 9/11 to trigger people's emotions in order to legitimize future actions" (789). Reyes finds that both Bush and Obama reference how 3,000 American citizens were killed during the events of 9/11. Through collective memory of and trauma from 9/11, the reference to these deaths is enough to allow the audience to understand and internalize the allusion the political actor is making. Reyes' overall takeaway establishes the existence of five strategies of legitimization in political discourse, and finds that these strategies can occur independently or in conjunction with one another (Reyes 803–804).

Other discourse analysts, such as Oddo and Cap have also studied legitimization strategies in political discourse. Oddo's study of war legitimization and the use of an Us vs. Them binary establishes how politicians create separate groups within a conflict to frame intervention as morally and politically justified. The Us vs. Them binary reveals another common way that political actors legitimize military intervention (Oddo 287). The binary strategically presents Us as positive and Them as negative (van Dijk 6). Essentially, Us vs. Them polarization portrays Us as the "good" subject in a situation by using positive and neutral nouns to describe Us, and Them as the "bad" subject by using negative nouns to describe Them (Oddo 294). For example, another scholar, Schubert, finds that Bush frequently utilizes dichotomies such as "freedom and fear" and "justice and cruelty" in his speech "Address to a Joint Session of Congress" on September 20, 2001. These metonymies allow Bush to nominate (i.e. create categories) an Us group based on those "good" nouns (e.g. freedom, justice) and a Them group based on those "bad" nouns (e.g. fear, cruelty) (Schubert 320). The nouns featured in these dichotomies are not literal antonyms as with "us" and "them", but they are positioned as such in the context of their usage in relation to the overall conflict (320).

Polarizing tactics like the Us vs. Them binary are effective in political discourse because they create clear-cut categories in a military intervention and construct a "simple and binary world view" (Schubert 313). This study will examine how Bush and Trump utilize the Us vs. Them binary to draw divisions between the audience and the adversarial nation, and how this binary helps position intervention as a necessary and preventative measure against a hostile "other" group.

Cap's theory of proximization describes how minimizing the symbolic distance between a threat and the audience can legitimize intervention as a protective measure. Cap defines proximization as a "discursive strategy of presenting physically and temporally distant events and states of affairs as directly increasingly and negatively consequential to the speaker and their addressee" (Cap 3). By posing the threat as gradually and insidiously encroaching upon the audience both physically and ideologically, this "prompts issues of preventative response and its justification" (4). This study will examine how Bush and Trump use proximization to depict the threat of an adversarial nation as gradually encroaching upon the audience in order to portray intervention as a protective measure against an impending threat. In this study, I found Us vs. Them (Oddo 287) and proximization (Cap 3) to occur in conjunction with emotion as a legitimization strategy (Reyes 787).

Next, I will discuss the concept of framing. Framing is another prominent theory relevant to the legitimization of military intervention. Lakoff describes framing as the intentional or nonintentional implications behind language that support a certain worldview (Lakoff 2). As Chávez puts it, "[f]rames of reference are constructed, shared understandings of reality" (Chávez 1498). In other words, frames are mental lenses that inform how we view the world. Frames build off of preexisting cultural and social norms that people generally accept as true, and use these norms to justify what beliefs and values should be prioritized most in a situation (1498). For example, when Bush entered office, Republicans commonly used the term "tax relief" when they wanted to cut taxes; the term "relief" inherently implies a solution to some kind of pain or affliction harming a victim. This frames taxation as an affliction, and anyone opposing the tax cut is now arguing against relieving people from said affliction (Lakoff 1). Thus, the

frame of "tax relief" implicitly assigns the person in charge of that relief policy the role of a savior from a burden (i.e. taxes) and assigns the person going against that policy the role of a villain for preventing relief (Lakoff 1).

By casting general "roles" in a situation such as in the case of tax relief, the political actor is able to tap into pre-existing norms in society; the hero is typically viewed as always good and justified, and the villain is always bad and unjustified. This overarching framework influences how we approach certain policies. This paper will examine how Bush and Trump use framing to assign certain "roles" to the United States and its respective enemy or the country being intervened in, and how the differences in each president's respective framing strategies change the realization of the legitimization strategy being applied.

Existing Definitions, Interpretations, and Constructions of Critical Discourse Analysis

Van Dijk describes critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a multidisciplinary approach on social and power dynamics in society (van Dijk 466–467). More specifically, CDA analyzes how power structures are shaped by their relation to discourse and cognition (472). As van Dijk outlines, individuals that hold power in society may try to use discourse to control the "generic knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies shared by whole groups or all citizens" (472–473). Van Dijk states that power is conceptualized as control over the minds and actions of others, with language (discourse) serving as the primary method that dominant groups exercise and maintain power over society (472). Many other studies of political discourse have been rooted in or integrated in CDA; for example, Reyes' previously mentioned study where he analyzes how the linguistic construction of legitimization in discourse impacts social action (Reyes 785). Reyes' study helps reveal how presidents (i.e. Bush and Obama) employ certain linguistic choices to shape public opinion and understanding of what is acceptable or justified, and maintain power and control over the American public through discourse.

This paper will contribute to the existing literature by applying several different understandings of and concepts related to critical discourse analysis (ie. Reyes' five legitimization strategies, Lakoff's framing concept, Oddo's Us vs. Them binary, and Cap's theory of proximization) and using them all to analyze four sets of speeches that have not previously been considered in the context of one another. My research question is: How do U.S. political actors realize various discursive strategies of legitimization in different ways to justify foreign intervention? Overall, I will reveal how broad legitimization strategies may be linguistically realized in different ways depending on the nuances in how political actors frame the relationships between actors in military interventions, and highlight the significance of further study on these nuances. I will utilize critical discourse analysis by emphasizing "the need to relate discourse structures and discursive practices to social and political structures at the macro-level" (van Dijk 478). Essentially, I will be analyzing specific discursive strategies in speeches (e.g. proximization and Us vs. Them binary construction) and relating these micro-level structures to broader macro-level political structures like military intervention.

METHODOLOGY

To answer the research question, I selected four speeches to analyze for this study: "President Bush Outlines Iraqi Threat," delivered on October 7 2002; "Remarks on the U.S. Military Operations Against Iran," delivered on February 28 2026; "Remarks by the President on the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1441," delivered on November 8 2002; and "Address to the Nation on Iran," delivered on April 1 2026. I chose to analyze Bush and Trump in this study to observe the differences in realization of the legitimization strategies between two Republican presidents. The first two speeches for Bush and Trump were chosen because they were the earliest public speeches that were delivered with the purpose of legitimizing military intervention, and the last two speeches were speeches that occurred roughly one month (around 32 days) after the delivery of the first speech.

I originally selected four speeches in order to remain open to the idea that the use of legitimization strategies could change over time in a given military conflict; however, further analysis revealed that this was not the case. Thus, because no salient patterns were found relating to the timing of the speech during the conflict, I ultimately focused on the differences in the realization of broad legitimization strategies between presidents, rather than how the use of these strategies might change throughout an intervention. I analyzed the transcripts of each of these speeches, which are publicly available and can be found in The White House Archives, the U.S. Department of State Archives, and The White House Official Website.

One discrepancy I could not make constant between Bush's and Trump's speeches was at what point in the conflict the first speech was given. Trump's first speech on the Iran war occurred after military intervention in Iran had already occurred, while Bush's first speech on the Iraq war occurred before military intervention in Iraq had occurred. Subsequently, Trump's second speech occurred around a month into the active conflict, while Bush's second speech occurred around a month later, but still before intervention actually occurred. However, I posit that this discrepancy does not affect my findings, since this analysis ultimately focuses on how each president utilizes the same legitimization strategies in different ways, rather than how legitimization strategies are used throughout each conflict.

In choosing my extracts, I first analyzed and identified the core analytical patterns that were present in each speech for three legitimization strategies: altruism, emotion, and rationality. Then, I chose two extracts for each president from the four speeches that I believed best exemplified the core analytical pattern for that legitimization strategy. While these extracts are representative of salient patterns that I found in the data as a whole (i.e. all four speeches), it is important to acknowledge that these patterns also occur in multiple different parts of the speech they were taken from. In this study, I will be using CDA to show how Bush and Trump linguistically frame legitimization strategies in political discourse to shape public perception surrounding military intervention. These linguistic choices (e.g. the use of metaphors, pronouns, proximization, and the Us vs. Them binary) allow Bush and Trump to maintain power over the American public through discourse and foster support for intervention policies. Each extract is labeled with the name of the corresponding president, and lines are numbered.

ANALYSIS

In this section, I will present three subsections, each focusing on a specific legitimization strategy and its salient patterns that can also be identified in the context of all four speeches. The first subsection will compare and contrast altruism as a legitimization strategy between two speeches, the second will do so for emotion, and the third will do so for rationality. This analysis will reveal how the same broad legitimization strategy may be linguistically realized in different ways depending on how presidents frame the relationships between actors in a military intervention.

4.1) Portraying Civilian Populations as Passive Recipients or Agents of Change Through Altruism

In this subsection, I will compare and contrast the methods in which Bush and Trump both use altruism as a legitimization strategy (Reyes 787). Both Bush and Trump legitimize intervention using altruism by framing U.S. intervention as a benefit to the Iraqi and Iranian civilians respectively, rather than being done to pursue U.S. national interests. However, while Bush portrays the Iraqi people as passive recipients or beneficiaries of intervention (e.g. through the use of third-person pronouns to refer to them), Trump urges the Iranian people to be agents of their own political change post-intervention (e.g. through the use of second-person pronouns to address them and imperative verb forms). These differing linguistic strategies frame (Lakoff 2) the relationship between the U.S. and the Iraqi and Iranian people in different ways, and ultimately legitimize intervention through altruism using different linguistic means.

The following extract is part of Bush's "President Bush Outlines Iraqi Threat" speech on October 7, 2002. This extract comes from the section of the speech nearing the conclusion, where Bush addresses the future of Iraqi civilians following intervention. In this example, we see how Bush portrays the Iraqi people as oppressed and suffering under the current regime. He claims that intervention will give them a better life, thus depicting the U.S. as selflessly intervening to help Iraqi citizens. Focal elements are in bold:

Extract 1:

1) Bush: Some worry that a change of leadership in Iraq could create instability and make
2) the situation worse. **The situation could hardly get worse, for world security**
3) **and for the people of Iraq. The lives of Iraqi citizens would improve**
4) **dramatically if Saddam Hussein were no longer in power**, just as the lives of
5) Afghanistan's citizens improved after the Taliban. The dictator of Iraq is a
6) student of Stalin, using murder as a tool of terror and control, within his own
7) cabinet, within his own army, and even within his own family.

In this extract, Bush legitimizes U.S. demands and actions by positioning the Iraqi citizens as having nothing to lose and everything to gain from intervention. Bush claims that "the lives of Iraqi citizens would improve dramatically if Sadam Hussein were no longer in power" (lines 3 and 4), indicating that Iraqi citizens are currently suffering under Hussein's (the leader of Iraq at the time) rule, but intervention will remove that source of suffering and deliver the Iraqi people to a better future. Note the grammatical person Bush uses here to describe the Iraqi citizens. Bush uses third-person noun phrases (i.e. "the people of Iraq", "Iraqi citizens") to refer to the Iraqi citizens, rather than directly addressing them using second-person pronouns. This choice of grammatical person positions the Iraqi citizens as being

recipients or beneficiaries of intervention, and thus frames intervention as a rescue mission for the Iraqi citizens that Americans (who are being directly addressed in this speech) can help set in motion. Bush legitimizes intervention through altruism by portraying intervention as serving to liberate Iraqi citizens from an abusive dictator and subsequently improving their quality of life, rather than being conducted to advance U.S. strategic objectives.

Next, I will show how Trump legitimizes intervention through altruism by appealing directly to the agency of the Iranian people. The following extract is from Trump's "Remarks on the U.S. Military Operations Against Iran" speech, on February 28 2026. This extract comes from the section of the speech nearing the conclusion, where Trump addresses the Iranian civilians directly. In this example, we see how Trump commands the Iranian people to seek freedom by directly addressing them with the second-person pronoun "your" and imperative verb forms (e.g. "stay sheltered", "take over your government"). Trump's realization of altruism as a legitimization strategy differs from Bush's, as while Trump encourages the Iranian people to take agency of their own futures post-intervention, Bush encourages the U.S. public to view the Iraqi people as suffering and portrays the U.S. as having the capability to rescue the Iraqi people.

Extract 2:

1) Trump: Finally, to the great proud people of Iran, I say tonight that **the hour of your**
2) **freedom is at hand. Stay sheltered. Don't leave your home**. It's very
3) dangerous outside. Bombs will be dropping everywhere.
4) When we are finished, **take over your government. It will be yours to take.**
5) This will be probably your only chance for generations.

In this extract, we see Trump directly speaking to the Iranian people and claiming that intervention will help them attain autonomy and prosperity. Trump accomplishes this through his frequent use of the second-person pronoun "your," which is used five times in Extract 2, compared to zero times in Extract 1. For example, in lines 1 and 2 Trump tells the Iranian people, "the hour of your freedom is at hand." In line 5, he urges the Iranian people to "take over your government." By appealing to the autonomy of the Iranian people, Trump appears to be urging them to use intervention as an opportunity to improve their living circumstances. This legitimizes intervention through altruism, as it frames intervention as a mission of empowerment, portraying the U.S. as selflessly assisting an oppressed population to escape tyrannical rule.

Furthermore, Trump uses imperative verb forms to command the Iranian people. He tells the Iranian people to "stay sheltered" (line 2) and "take over your government" (line 5). Trump's use of imperative verb phrases portrays intervention as a call to action to the Iranian people, which may serve to mobilize the Iranian population to overthrow their government. This depicts intervention as helping rally a marginalized populace to fight against their oppressor rather than being conducted to advance U.S. national interests. Importantly, while grammatically this speech is indeed apparently addressed to the Iranian public, it is contextually addressed to the American public (delivered in Florida). While both Bush and Trump contextually addressed their speeches to the American public, Trump is the only one out of the two who linguistically addressed the Iranian people directly as well.

Both Bush and Trump use altruism as a legitimization strategy by framing intervention as a moral necessity and an act of benevolence for the people of Iraq and Iran, respectively, rather than a politically motivated action that would benefit the U.S. However, despite using the same broad legitimization strategy, both presidents realize this strategy in different ways. Bush frames (Lakoff 2) intervention as a rescue mission, portraying the Iraqi people as passive recipients or beneficiaries of intervention in his speech through the use of third-person noun phrases (e.g. "the people of Iraq", "Iraqi citizens"). In contrast, Trump frames intervention as an empowering initiative, using language that directly urges the Iranian population to use intervention as a chance to seize their freedom. Trump accomplishes this through the use of second-person pronouns (i.e. "your") and imperative verb phrases (i.e. "stay sheltered", "take over your government"). This difference in grammatical person between the two speeches is significant, as while Bush creates a detached relationship between the U.S. and the Iraqi citizens and poses Iraqis as passive beneficiaries to intervention, Trump creates a more personal relationship between the Iranian people and the U.S. by portraying the Iranian people as active agents in seizing their own liberation. These variations in how each president linguistically realizes the same legitimization strategy produce different frames of the relationship between the intervener and the population of the country being intervened in. Next, I will show the differences and similarities in the use of emotion as a legitimization strategy.

4.2) Portraying the Adversarial Regime as Intrinsically Hostile or the Actors Behind the Regime as Evil Through Emotion

In this subsection, I will compare and contrast the methods in which Bush and Trump both use emotion as a legitimization strategy (Reyes 785). While both Bush and Trump invoke emotions, particularly fear, in their audience to legitimize military intervention, each president frames (Lakoff 2) the source of this fear in different ways: Bush frames the Iraqi regime collectively as a threat (i.e. using negative adjectives to describe the regime, e.g. "merciless", "hostility", "problem") while Trump frames the actors behind the Iranian regime as a threat by personifying the regime (i.e. using the third-person pronoun "they" and characterizing "they" as dangerous and evil through the Us vs. Them binary).

The following extract is part of Bush's speech, "President Bush Outlines Iraqi Threat". This extract comes from the beginning of the speech, where Bush outlines the large and impending threat that Iraq poses to the U.S. In this example, we see how Bush elicits emotions of fear among American citizens by alluding to 9/11, a commonly known and nationally traumatic event.

Extract 3:

1) Bush: Iraq's weapons of mass destruction are controlled by a **murderous tyrant** who has
2) already **used chemical weapons to kill thousands of people.** This same tyrant
3) has tried to dominate the Middle East, has invaded and brutally occupied a small
4) neighbor, has struck other nations without warning, and **holds an unrelenting**
5) **hostility toward the United States.** By its past and present actions, by its
6) technological capabilities, by the **merciless nature of its regime, Iraq is unique.**

7) As a former chief weapons inspector of the U.N. has said, **"The fundamental**
8) **problem with Iraq remains the nature of the regime, itself…"**

The descriptions "murderous tyrant" (line 1), "used chemical weapons to kill thousands" (line 2) and "holds an unrelenting hostility toward the United States" (line 5) are all referring to Hussein. These adjectives are being used to build and associate an image of fear with Hussein, which then allows Bush to frame the Iraqi regime as a whole as systemically flawed and evil. We see this when Bush emphasizes that "the fundamental problem with Iraq remains the nature of the regime itself" (lines 7 and 8), showing how Bush applies the threat posed by Hussein to the Iraqi regime as a whole. In lines 1 and 2, Bush describes Hussein as a "murderous tyrant who has used chemical weapons to kill thousands." The noun phrase "murderous tyrant" and the subsequent verb phrase of "kill thousands" invoke emotions of fear in the audience. Similarly, in lines 4 and 5 Bush describes Hussein as holding an "unrelenting hostility toward the United States." This phrase implies that the dangerous threat mentioned in the previous lines is directed strongly (due to the word "unrelenting") at the U.S. This legitimizes intervention through emotion, as Bush depicts the Iraqi regime in its entirety as an existential threat to the U.S., which may trigger the visceral emotional response of fear and frame intervention as a necessary protective measure. While Trump also legitimizes intervention through fear, he does so by personifying the Iranian regime and framing them as a hostile "other" that seeks to harm the U.S.

The following extract is from Trump's "Remarks on the U.S. Military Operations Against Iran" speech, on February 28 2026. This extract comes from the beginning of the speech, where Trump explains the dangerous threat that the Iranian regime poses and its history of aggression. In this example, we see how Trump frames the actors behind the Iranian regime as seeking to inflict mass harm upon the U.S.

Extract 4:

1) Trump: **We tried. They wanted to do it. They didn't want to do it. Again, they**
2) **wanted to do it. They didn't want to do it. They didn't know what was**
3) **happening. They just wanted to practice evil.** But Iran refused just as it has for
4) decades and decades. **They rejected every opportunity to renounce their**
5) **nuclear ambitions**, and we can't take it anymore. Instead, **they attempted to**
6) **rebuild their nuclear program** and to continue developing long-range missiles
7) that can now threaten our very good friends and allies in Europe, our troops
8) stationed overseas, and **could soon reach the American homeland.**

In this extract, Trump legitimizes intervention through emotions by characterizing the actors behind the Iranian regime as evil and posing an existential threat to the U.S. He exemplifies this threat by highlighting how Iranians "[they] just wanted to practice evil" (line 3), which invokes emotions of fear in the audience as the adjective "evil" characterizes Iran as malicious and potentially seeking to harm the U.S. Furthermore, Trump mentions how Iran's weapons "could soon reach the American homeland" (line 8). Here, Trump utilizes the theory of proximization (Cap 3) to pose the threat of Iran as gradually and insidiously encroaching upon the audience and the speaker both physically and ideologically; this "prompts issues of preventative response and its justification" (Cap 4). One prominent pattern in all of

Trump's speeches is his frequent use of the third-person pronoun "they" to refer to the Iranian regime; Trump uses the pronoun much more frequently than Bush (Trump used the pronoun 13 times in "Remarks on the U.S. Military Operations Against Iran," compared to Bush who only used it 4 times in "President Bush Outlines Iraqi Threat"). By consistently using the pronoun "they" to refer to the Iranian regime in Extract 4 and throughout his speech, Trump personifies the threat of the Iranian regime and frames the danger as a group of intentionally malicious actors seeking to harm the U.S.

Every time Trump uses "they" to refer to the Iranian regime, the pronoun is used as a subject in a sentence describing a negative action; for example, Trump highlights Iran's refusal to sign a deal by saying "they didn't want to do it" (lines 1 and 2), which portrays the characters behind the Iranian regime as noncooperative for not wanting to pursue peace with the U.S. As previously mentioned, Trump states that the actors behind the Iranian regime "just wanted to practice evil" (line 3), indicating that the Iranian regime has no intention for peace and senselessly pursues violence. Here, Trump is utilizing the Us vs. Them binary to create two distinctive sides of the conflict–the Us side (representing the U.S.) and the Them side (representing Iran)–to polarize both sides and facilitate aversion to Them (Oddo 289). Us vs Them polarization paints Us as the "good" subject in the situation by using verb phrases that emphasize persistence and repeated attempts to avoid conflict (e.g. "we tried", "we can't take it anymore") while it paints Them as the "bad" subject by using verb phrases that emphasize noncooperation and maliciousness (e.g. "they didn't want to do it", "they just wanted to practice evil") (Oddo 294). The Us vs. Them binary amplifies the divide between the U.S. and Iran, and exacerbates emotions of fear by creating the idea of hostile external actors deliberately against Us. This legitimizes intervention through emotion, as Trump frames the malicious actors within the Iranian regime as seeking to harm the U.S., which evokes emotions of fear among Americans and portrays intervention as a natural response to protect the U.S.

Both Bush and Trump legitimize intervention in Iraq and Iran respectively through evoking visceral emotions of fear in Americans, and framing (Lakoff 2) intervention as a necessary protective measure. However, Bush achieves this by framing the Iraqi regime holistically as an evil and systemically corrupt nation (e.g. claiming "the fundamental problem with Iraq remains the nature of the regime") while Trump achieves this by framing the actors behind the Iranian regime as dangerous, bringing the Iranian regime to life using the third-person pronoun "they" to personify the regime and create a hostile out-group that seeks to harm the U.S. In both cases, intervention is legitimized by emotion (fear), yet the cause of this fear is attributed to two different sources (i.e. the Iraqi regime as a whole, versus the actors behind the Iranian regime). This reveals how the same broad legitimization strategy of emotion may be achieved in numerous ways depending on the different linguistic methods that political actors use to frame the relationships between the actors in a conflict. Next, I will analyze how Bush and Trump differ in legitimizing intervention through rationality.

4.3) Portraying the Adversarial Regime as an Established Risk or a Malicious Actor Through Rationality

In this subsection, I will compare and contrast the methods in which Bush and Trump both use rationality as a legitimization strategy (Reyes 786). This subsection will reveal that while both Bush and Trump use rationality to legitimize intervention, their basis of rationality is different; while Bush rationalizes intervention by framing (Lakoff 2) the Iraqi regime as a historically proven threat against the U.S. (e.g. through the use of metaphor and allusion), which justifies preemptive action, Trump rationalizes intervention by framing the Iranian regime as murderous and malicious, and thus unfit to possess nuclear weapons (e.g. through the use of hyperbole and repetition).

The following extract is part of Bush's speech, "President Bush Outlines Iraqi Threat". This extract comes from near the middle of the speech, where Bush is arguing for the U.S. to preemptively strike Iraq. This extract will reveal how Bush references historical events and uses metaphors to frame the Iraqi regime as an imminent threat and establish a logical chain of reasoning to justify intervention.

Extract 5:

1) Bush: **We've experienced the horror of September the 11th**. We have seen that those
2) who hate America are willing to crash airplanes into buildings full of innocent
3) people. **Our enemies would be no less willing, in fact, they would be eager, to**
4) **use biological or chemical, or a nuclear weapon**. Knowing these realities,
5) America must not ignore the threat gathering against us. Facing clear evidence of
6) peril, **we cannot wait for the final proof -- the smoking gun -- that could**
7) **come in the form of a mushroom cloud.**

In this extract, Bush alludes to 9/11, a nationally traumatic event, and uses this as evidence to justify a preemptive strike on Iraq. Bush claims that "we've experienced the horror of September the 11th" (line 1) and states that "our enemies would be… eager, to use biological or chemical, or a nuclear weapon" (lines 3 and 4). This is a supposedly logical conclusion that Bush draws from his allusion to 9/11; Bush assumes that the audience remembers the horrors of 9/11, and uses this assumption to argue that according to historical precedent, Iraq will likely conduct attacks against the U.S. in a similar fashion. This statement leads into Bush's main argument, which is that "we cannot wait for the final proof – the smoking gun – that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud" (lines 6 and 7). Bush reasons that based on our previous knowledge of how our adversaries act, it is logical for us to change our behavior in the future to prevent the same events from repeating themselves. Bush uses the metaphor of a "smoking gun" to simplify the argument and provide the audience a clear and powerful mental image that makes the argument feel more impactful and intuitive. This legitimizes intervention through rationality, as Bush uses historical precedent to frame the Iraqi regime as an impending and perilous threat, which allows him to establish a clear chain of logic as to why preemptive intervention in Iraq is justified.

Trump also establishes a clear chain of logic in his speech to legitimize intervention, although his grounds for rationalization are slightly different. The following extract is from Trump's "Remarks on the U.S. Military Operations Against Iran" speech. This extract comes from near the beginning of the speech, where Trump is contextualizing the conflict and justifying his initial intervention. This extract will reveal

how Trump utilizes hyperbole and repetition to frame the Iranian regime as very dangerous and reckless by nature.

Extract 6:

1) Trump: **It was brutal. Something like the world has never seen before**. Iran is **the**
2) **world's number one state sponsor of terror** and **just recently killed tens of**
3) **thousands of its own citizens on the street as they protested.** It has always
4) been the policy of the United States, in particular, my administration, that **this**
5) **terrorist regime can never have a nuclear weapon. I'll say it again. They can**
6) **never have a nuclear weapon**. That is why in Operation Midnight Hammer last
7) June, we obliterated the regime's nuclear program at Fordow, Natanz and Isfahan.

This extract reveals how Trump legitimizes intervention through rationality by framing the Iranian regime as too dangerous to possess a nuclear weapon. Trump emphasizes the grave danger the regime poses by using a hyperbole to describe the regime's actions as "something like the world has never seen before" (line 1). This framing of the regime as an existential threat lays the foundation for Trump's main argument, which is that "this terrorist regime can never have a nuclear weapon" (lines 4 and 5). Trump repeats this point once more for emphasis, which makes the argument seem more assured and difficult to dispute. Trump establishes a clear chain of logic: the Iranian regime is extraordinarily dangerous and murderous, therefore such a regime should not be given dangerous weapons that will empower them. This legitimizes intervention through rationality, as Trump provides a clear logical explanation as to why Iran should not possess nuclear weapons, which makes intervention seem necessary to prevent the regime from obtaining nuclear weapons.

Both Bush and Trump legitimize intervention through rationality. However, each of their bases for rationality is different because each president frames (Lakoff 2) the adversary in different ways; while Bush argues that intervention is rational by framing the Iraqi regime as an impending threat that must be responded to with preemptive strikes, Trump argues that intervention is rational by framing the Iranian regime as belligerent and untrustworthy, which thus justifies intervention to prevent a dangerous adversary from acquiring catastrophic nuclear weapons. Both presidents use the same legitimization strategy of rationality, yet the realization of this strategy is different depending on the distinct linguistic methods they utilize to frame their adversaries and establish the fundamental chain of logic underlying their arguments.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

Overall, this paper has revealed that the same broad legitimization strategy (e.g. altruism, emotion, rationality) used to legitimize military intervention may be realized in numerous different ways depending on how political actors linguistically frame the relationships between actors (e.g. the U.S., the enemy, the beneficiaries of intervention) in a conflict. While both Bush and Trump utilize the same broad strategies throughout all their speeches to legitimize two foreign interventions in Middle Eastern countries, their achievement of these strategies differed because each president employed distinct linguistic choices in

their speeches to frame the relationships between actors in the intervention. I illustrated this through how each president legitimizes intervention through altruism, emotion, and rationality. Each of these three patterns are present across all four speeches. When legitimizing intervention through altruism, Bush frames intervention as a rescue mission by referring to the Iraqi people in third person (implying they are passive beneficiaries of the intervention), while Trump frames intervention as an empowering initiative by addressing the Iranian people with second-person pronouns and imperative verb forms. When legitimizing intervention through emotion, Bush frames the Iraqi regime collectively as a dangerous existential threat by using negative adjectives to criticize the nature of the regime itself, while Trump frames the actors behind the Iranian regime as malicious by personifying the regime using the Us vs. Them binary. Finally, when legitimizing intervention through rationality, Bush frames the Iraqi regime as an imminent threat by alluding to 9/11 and using the metaphor of a "smoking gun" to justify U.S. intervention as a preemptive measure, while Trump frames the Iranian regime as volatile and dangerous by using hyperbole and repetition in order to justify intervention as a necessary measure to prevent the regime from acquiring a nuclear weapon.

This study has revealed the benefits of considering findings from Reyes' and Oddo's prior work on legitimization in conjunction with one another, as linguistic strategies like the Us vs. Them binary also work alongside the broad legitimization categories that Reyes outlines. Additionally, whereas the majority of these previous studies focus on comparing a Republican and a Democratic president, my study compares two Republican presidents to reveal how members of the same party might still approach legitimizing military intervention differently in the future.

Reyes' aforementioned study primarily focused on establishing the existence of overarching legitimization strategies; this study adds onto Reyes' findings by highlighting meaningful nuances in how each of these broader strategies are realized. These nuances are significant because they demonstrate the flexibility available to presidents in realizing the same broad legitimization strategy in different linguistic forms, allowing political actors to adapt their rhetoric to different contexts, audiences, and forms of intervention. I also contribute to Oddo's findings by analyzing legitimization of military intervention through the use of many linguistic features (e.g. metaphor, hyperbole, repetition, allusion, framing) including Us vs. Them, while Oddo's study primarily revealed that both President Roosevelt and President Bush used Us vs. Them polarization to legitimate war (Oddo 308). Furthermore, I used framing to exhibit the differences in realization of the broad legitimization strategies, illustrating the utility of considering framing and Reyes' legitimization strategies in conjunction with one another.

Lastly, drawing on CDA, I contribute to existing literature by showing how powerful actors in society (e.g. presidents) can control the general knowledge and ideologies of the public through political discourse. By utilizing linguistic strategies like the legitimization strategies, Us vs. Them, framing, and proximization, presidents are able to persuade the public to support policies that favor their administrations. This study exposes how the persuasive power of political actors lies not just in the broader arguments they are making, but the subtleties in how they make those arguments as well, aligning with critical discourse analytic approaches. These subtleties depend on the distinct discursive strategies political actors employ in their speeches, such as their use of grammatical person and figurative language

to invite the public to believe their framing of certain actors in a conflict. Overall, these findings highlight the importance of the public to evaluate political language critically and be able to acknowledge and identify these strategies in use, as it is important for people to consider alternative worldviews and perspectives surrounding conflicts rather than automatically accepting narratives purported by political actors in power.

This study mainly analyzes the different methods of realization of three broad legitimization strategies in political discourse. It would be interesting for future studies to consider the comparative effectiveness of these different methods of realization in persuading the public to support intervention.

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