



**Agenda-Setting, Political Communication, and
Legitimization: How Governments Shape Public
Opinion and Set Agendas on Military Actions:
Insights from the 2003 Iraq War**

**The Power of Political Communication: an Analysis of
Strategies Employed by the Bush Administration to Shape
Public Opinion and Agenda-Setting in the Context of the
2003 US-led intervention in Iraq**

by

Constance Rotin

under supervision of

Felix-Christopher von Nostitz

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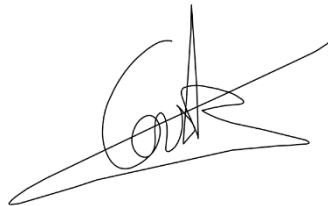
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Abstract

This dissertation examines the relationship between agenda-setting, political communication, and the legitimization of military actions during the 2003 Iraq War. The study draws on the theoretical frameworks of agenda-setting theory and discourse analysis methodology to investigate how the US governments pushed the Iraq issue onto the agenda, as well as the rhetorical strategies used by Bush administration to shape public opinion, justify war, and garner support for its actions. The findings suggest that political communication and media coverage of the war played a crucial role in shaping public opinion and legitimizing the government's military actions in Iraq. Specifically, the study highlights the agenda-setting function in framing the war in terms of national security and the threat of terrorism, as well as the government's use of legitimacy strategies to garner public support for the intervention in Iraq. The findings of this study contribute to a better understanding of the complex relationship between communication, politics, and public opinion, and the role of political communication in shaping public opinion and legitimizing military actions during times of war. The research highlights the need for critical analysis of political discourse and media coverage to uncover how power and influence are exercised.

Keywords: Political communication, legitimization, public policy, public opinion, Iraq war

Résumé

Ce dossier de recherche examine la relation entre l'établissement de l'ordre du jour (*agenda-setting*), la communication politique et la légitimation de l'intervention militaire pendant la guerre d'Irak de 2003. L'étude s'appuie sur les cadres théoriques de la théorie de l'*agenda-setting* et sur les méthodes d'analyse du discours pour enquêter sur les stratégies rhétoriques utilisées par les dirigeants politiques pour façonner l'opinion publique et obtenir un soutien pour leurs actions. Les résultats suggèrent que la communication politique et la couverture médiatique de la guerre ont joué un rôle crucial dans la formation de l'opinion publique et dans la légitimation de la décision de partir en guerre en Irak. Plus précisément, l'étude met en évidence la fonction d'*agenda-setting* en encadrant la guerre en termes de sécurité nationale et de menace terroriste, ainsi que l'utilisation par le gouvernement de stratégies de légitimité pour obtenir le soutien public pour l'intervention en Irak. Les résultats de cette étude contribuent à une meilleure compréhension de la relation complexe entre la communication, la politique et l'opinion publique, ainsi que du rôle de la communication politique dans la formation de l'opinion publique et de la légitimation des actions militaires pendant les périodes de guerre. Ce dossier de recherche met en lumière l'importance et la nécessité d'une analyse critique du discours politique et de la couverture médiatique pour souligner les différentes manières à travers lesquelles les gouvernements peuvent influencer la société.

Mots-clés : Communication politique, légitimation, politique publique, opinion public, guerre d'Irak

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1. Introduction

The saying goes, "If you can frame it, they will accept it." This statement is particularly relevant when it comes to agenda-setting and political communication. This research paper is written at a time when the world marks the 20th anniversary of the US-led intervention in Iraq, a war that has left lasting scars on the region and the world, and that continues to raise questions about the role and responsibility of political communication in shaping public opinion and agenda-setting on matters of war and peace. The 2003 US-led intervention in Iraq was one of the most controversial and consequential foreign policy decisions in recent history. It sparked a global debate on the legitimacy and morality of preemptive war, the role of international law and institutions, and the impact of media and public opinion on political decision-making. The intervention also had profound consequences for the region and the world, such as the rise of insurgency and sectarian violence, the displacement of millions of people, and the destabilization of neighboring countries. How did the US government manage to persuade its domestic audience and some of its allies to support such a risky and costly venture? What strategies did it employ to shape public opinion and set its decision agenda on military intervention in Iraq? These are some of the questions that this research paper aims to address by analyzing the agenda-setting process and the political communication of the Bush administration in the context of the 2003 Iraq War. This research paper will highlight the critical importance of effective communication in shaping the public's perception of war and its associated actions. Ultimately, the goal of this study is to take each speech chosen and link them with a different step of the agenda-setting theories. To show how an issue can be brought to the agenda through political communication. The results of this research will contribute to the ongoing discussion on the role of political communication in shaping public opinions and decision-making in matters of war and peace.

2. Literature review

Key concepts

1. Agenda-setting

Scholars do not all agree on a same definition of this concept. Agenda-setting is a term used to describe the process by which specific issues become more prominent on the public or political agenda, while others may receive less attention. The driving idea behind agenda-setting is that there are too many problems in the world to address them all at once (Boydston, 2006). Agenda-setting involves developing policy alternatives that compete for attention on congressional, agency, and organizational agendas. (Cairney, 2022). The agenda-setting theory can also describe how news media have the power to influence the public's perception by emphasizing specific topics (Zhang, 2016). By giving a story prominent coverage, media organizations can shape political discussions and make the audience view it as a significant issue that deserves attention. Scheufele and Tewksbury give a definition of it: "agenda setting is the effect of the media on the relative importance of issues perceived by the public." This definition emphasizes the role of the media in constructing social reality. It focuses on how the media select and present issues that are important to the public opinion. It also examines the effects of agenda setting on individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. This definition assumes that the media do not tell people what to think, but what to think about (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

2. Political communication

The Frankfurt School and supporters of critical theory, such as Benjamin, Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Habermas, Stuart Hall, and Bourdieu, were highly regarded for their work in connecting language, politics, and culture (Chilton, 2004). Debates exist on the definition of political communication. Jamieson and Kenski suggest three set of definitions in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication* (2014). “The creation, shaping, dissemination, processing and effects of information within the political system- both domestic and international- whether by governments, other institutions, groups or individuals (American Political Science Association)”. “The interplay of communication and politics, including the transactions that occur among citizens, between citizens and their governments, and among officials within governments (International Communication Association)”. “The communicative activity of citizens, individual political figures, public and governmental institutions, the media, political campaigns, advocacy groups and social movements (National Communication Association)” (Jamieson & Kenski, 2014, p. 5).

3. Legitimization

There are many definitions of legitimization. Carr defines legitimization by “the process whereby political actors seek to gain and maintain the acceptance and support of their policies and actions by various audiences, such as the public, the media, or other actors. It also involves the use of various sources of authority, such as law, morality, expertise, or tradition, to establish the validity and appropriateness of their claims” (Carr, 1993). This definition emphasizes the role of public administrators in legitimizing public policies. It focuses on the skills and responsibilities of public administrators in analyzing and evaluating public policies, as well as their ability to influence the political process and exercise leadership. It also examines the sources of legitimacy that public administrators have to justify their policies and actions, such as law, morality, expertise, or tradition. Another interesting definition may be Cap’s one. He defines legitimization as a “process whereby political actors seek to create a sense of proximity and urgency between their policies and actions and the perceived threats or challenges faced by their audiences. It also involves the use of various linguistic devices, such as metaphors, scenarios, or presuppositions, to construct a reality that favors their interests and goals.” (Cap, 2017). This definition is based on the model of “proximization”, which is a theoretical and analytical approach to political communication based on the notion of threat. According to this approach, political actors use language to create a sense of fear or insecurity among their audiences, in order to persuade them of the necessity and urgency of their policies and actions. “Proximization” involves the manipulation of the spatial, temporal, and axiological dimensions of the threat, as well as the use of various rhetorical devices such as metaphors, scenarios or presuppositions, to construct a reality that legitimizes their interests and objectives.

Academic debates

Debates exist around the role of media in agenda-setting and the causality between the media and politics. Some scholars argue that the media plays a significant role in shaping public opinion and setting the political agenda by choosing which issues to emphasize and how to present them. This agenda-setting theory proposes that the media influences what individuals consider important. On the other hand, some experts argue that the media primarily reflects what the public already believes or cares about. The minimal effects theory suggests that the

media has limited power to shape attitudes and behaviors because people choose what to pay attention to and interpret media messages based on their existing beliefs. An example of the second-order media effect on the political agenda is the French pension reform in 2010. According to the article entitled "Not (Yet) a New Era of Minimal Effects: A Study of Agenda Setting at the Aggregate and Individual Levels" (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2013), the media had a limited effect on public opinion regarding the pension reform proposed by the government. Factors such as strong political polarization, social mobilization, the role of unions, and government resistance attenuated the media's effect on public attention and evaluation. This example shows how the media influenced how the issue was interpreted and evaluated by political actors. Conversely, the media has had a significant impact on public opinion, as evidenced by the refugee crisis in Europe. According to an article titled "Media and sources: The limits of the agenda setting model," the media played a crucial role in shaping public opinion on this issue by emphasizing certain shocking images, such as that of Aylan Kurdi, a young boy who was found dead on a Turkish beach in 2015. This image elicited emotions and solidarity towards refugees, while also sparking controversy over the media's influence on public perception. The article demonstrates that the media influenced public opinion by prioritizing the topics to be discussed and addressed by political figures, as well as by shaping how the public perceives and evaluates those issues. It highlights the refugee crisis as an example of media influence, while also acknowledging the limitations of the agenda setting model. Some scholars have also argued that the media has a first-order effect on the political agenda, meaning they determine which issues are discussed and addressed by political actors. Others have suggested that the media has a second-order effect on the political agenda, meaning they influence how issues are interpreted and evaluated by political actors. The debate is shared between those who believe that the media has significant and independent power to shape social and political reality (first-order effect) and those who believe that the media has limited and dependent power on social and political reality (second-order effect) (Sevenans, 2018). Both rely on empirical studies that show a strong correlation between media attention and political attention, or that show that media and political attention vary depending on the type of issue, of political actor, and the institutional context (Walgrave & Aelst, 2006) (Wolfe, et al., 2013). There is a theory, called the CNN effect, that states that constant coverage of news events by round-the-clock news channels, such as CNN, could impact the general political and economic climate. The CNN effect works through the molding of public perception, which, in turn, affect policymakers' agendas. In his research paper, Livingston distinguishes three distinct facets encompassed within the broad concept of the CNN effect (1997). Specifically, the media can function in the capacity of "policy agenda-setting agent", an "impediment" to the achievement of desired policy objectives, an "accelerant" for policy decision-making, and it makes it harder for policy makers to make decisions (an increase in media influence coincides with a decrease in policy certainty, and vice versa).

Another debate that can be analyzed is the one around the power of political communication. Scholars have studied the impact of political communication on public opinion and political outcomes. Some may argue that political communication can be manipulative and lead to misinformation. They contend that political communication can be used to manipulate public opinion and that politicians and interest groups can use communication to further their own agendas at the expense of the public interest. Other scholars may suggest that political communication is necessary for democratic governance and can provide citizens with information about political issues and candidates. They contend that political communication

can educate the public and help to promote informed decision-making (Bramlett, 2021). Additionally, they argue that political communication can facilitate the exchange of ideas and promote political participation by encouraging citizens to become involved in the political process. (Edgerly & Thorson, 2020) (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008).

There are ongoing debates surrounding the potential influence of mass media on public opinion. Manufacturing consent is a term that refers to the process of shaping and manipulating public opinion, notably through mass media. The term was coined by Lippmann in his book *Public Opinion* (1922), where he argued that democracy requires the consent of the governed, which can be influenced by the media and propaganda. The term was popularized by Herman and Chomsky in their book *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1988), where they developed a propaganda model of media that explains how the media serve the interests of the dominant elites and filter out information that challenges or contradicts their agenda. In addition to manufacturing consent, there have been debates about the role of the media in shaping public opinion and the extent to which the media can influence policy decisions. Some scholars argue that the media play a crucial role in setting the policy agenda and shaping public opinion, while others argue that the media simply reflect the preferences of the public and the policymakers (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). There have also been debates about the impact of new media technologies on the media's role in shaping public opinion and policy decisions (Hindman, 2009).

Finally, the effectiveness of agenda-setting strategies leads also to some debates between scholars that judge these strategies powerful tools for influencing public opinion and those who suggest that their effectiveness is limited by factors such as existing beliefs and values. For scholars supporting the idea of agenda-setting strategies being able to influence public opinion, the way an issue is framed can influence how people perceive it. Priming can activate certain ideas or associations in people's minds, making them more likely to support a particular view or position. On the other hand, other scholars believe that people may resist messages and are inconsistent with their pre-existing beliefs or values, or they may be skeptical of messages that seem manipulative or biased. There is also debate about the extent to which these strategies are consciously or unconsciously processed by audiences. Some scholars argue that people are often unaware of the influence of framing and priming on their opinions, while others suggest that people are capable of recognizing and resisting these tactics (Bali & Halpin, 2021).

3. Theories and Framework of analysis

3.1. Setting the Agenda

3.1.1. *The Multiple Streams Approach*

One influential theory around agenda-setting is the "Multiple Streams Approach" (MSA) developed by John Kingdon (1984). His theory can explain agenda changes. According to Kingdon's model, policymakers do not make public policy, they rather are just coupling ideas and solutions. They do not make policy themselves, by they chose problems, design solutions and perhaps couple both. This is then a contingency process. According to Kingdon, the following three streams, when converging, create policy decisions. First, the *problem* stream. It regards problem recognition. It is when a problem is identified, recognized, and defined by policymakers. These problems do not have a solution yet. The second stream is the *policy*

stream. This represents the formation and refining of potential ideas, solutions, and policy proposals, i.e., when a solution for a problem is available. Finally, there is the *political* stream. This is when the political climate makes the time right for a change. It could, for example, be a favorable public opinion, also called a “national mood.” Changes in the political sphere - such as an important event, new presidency, crisis, war, and so on - can have an important impact on the political stream. These three streams flow independently, and they have the potential to converge when a “window of opportunity” is opened. It is when these three streams come together – partly as a product of events, partly under the influence of policy entrepreneurs who are trying to bring the three streams together- that national policy is made. However, it might be important to note that a subject that moves onto the agenda does not mean that concrete actions will be taken. Enacting legislation does not imply or guarantee effective implementation. Moreover, windows of opportunity do not stay open for a while. People’s attention either. A window of opportunity can open and close. Afterwards, it can be hard for the decision to happen again. Agenda-setting is therefore a necessary but insufficient condition for policy change.

3.1.2. The Advocacy Coalition Framework

The advocacy coalition framework (ACF) has been developed by Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993). This framework emphasizes the role of the advocacy coalition (groups of actors who share a common set of beliefs and who seek to influence policy change) in the decision-making process. According to the AFC, policy change is driven by the interaction of competing advocacy coalitions.

3.2. Political Communication and media

3.2.1. Representing the enemy

Representing the imaginary enemy by Ahmadypour, et al., offers a clear explanation of how a country can negatively portray another. The study identifies twenty-six ways in which media and language shape perceptions of geopolitical adversaries, such as Creating Fear and Terror, Disinformation, Dehumanization, and Delusive Generalization (Ahmadypour, et al., 2010).

3.2.2. Conventional media and Down’s model

According to Mowlana (1992), it is often a common practice among major international media to portray the third world as chaotic and confusing, while depicting the West as rational and respectful of human rights. However, this portrayal is often unfair and inaccurate. In contemporary society, the collective media have become a critical factor in the process of cultural expansion. They serve as a vehicle for the dissemination of various messages, which are often not culturally neutral and can have a significant impact on public opinion and attitudes (Heydari, 2004). Hall (2003) posits that media operates within the framework of “political semanticism”, signifying incidents occurring around the world and creating meaning through selective distribution and reproduction. This is because every fact or truth has diverse meanings, and it is up to the media to award a particular meaning to an event based on its authority (Mahdizadeh, 2008). Thus, media representations are deeply rooted in existing cultural and political structures and are used to maintain political and cultural hegemony against other cultures (Ahmadypour, et al., 2010). Studies have revealed that U.S. news content, particularly during wartime, tends to be aligned with the prevailing discourse among the elite (Entman, 2004). Entman also observes that newspapers’ editorial pages are where

criticism is often voiced, whereas the news coverage itself tends to uncritically convey the White House's news frames (pp. 78-84). Therefore, conventional media has a major impact on forming public opinion and perspectives towards foreign policy, yet it tends to favor the West and is subject to the influence of political and cultural elites, leading to the dissemination of specific news frames, portrayals, and representations.

3.3. Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis shares the same goal of critical theory in seeking to examine and challenge the existing societal order, rather than solely observing and clarifying it as traditional discourse analysis has done (Ali, 2018). Meyer and Wodak (2009) quote Habermas, who asserts that language functions as a means of both domination and social influence. It serves to legitimize organized power relations, and when the legitimization of these relations is not explicitly stated, language becomes ideological. Wodak and Meyer's definition of the main principle of CDA, which is to "produce and convey critical knowledge that enables human beings to emancipate themselves from forms of domination through self- reflection", and as a result to produce "enlightenment and emancipation" (Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

4. Methods and Procedures

4.1 Setting

I set out to analyze every step of agenda-setting that occurred prior to the Iraq War, and official speeches made by George W. Bush and his administration before the war in Iraq started. To highlight the rhetorical strategies they may have used, coding speeches and discourse analysis methods have been conducted. The timeframe has been restricted to 2001, 2002 and 2003 to capture only the main statements made before the Iraq War. The period between August 2002 to March 2003 corresponds to the core public sale period for the Iraq War.

4.2. Data collection

This paper has collected primary and secondary data, mainly official statements and speeches given prior to the start of the 2003 Iraq War, conventional media resources on the matter, and polls and survey on public opinion regarding the war. Written speeches were found in the public domain and via government websites. All non-English speeches were translated into English using an official translation of it or using DeepL Translator, and when possible, cross-checked by speakers fluent in the original language.

4.3. Data analysis

This study employs a qualitative analysis of Bush administration official speeches and statements made between 2002 and 2003.

4.4. Research methodology

The research methodology adopted in this paper will delve into agenda-setting theories and will analyze the linguistic used by American politicians to justify the war through a critical discourse analysis.

4.5. Procedures

To analyze the collected data, I will take the following steps: first, carefully choose the main speeches given by American politicians prior going to war. Second, analyze the rhetorical strategies used within these statements. Third, connect the linguistic analysis with existing theories and models. Finally, consult public opinion before and after the speeches.

6. Research Findings

6.1. Problem constructing

“Whoever initially identifies a social problem shapes the initial terms in which it will be debated” (Jones, 1971). This quote illustrates the fact that problems do not exist by themselves and that they are anthropologically constructed. A public problem is defined as such when it is considered abnormal by public authorities, when it implies deprivation or dissatisfaction, and when it entails conflicts or cleavages, and they are value-based. This issue then becomes a public problem due to its politicization. However, these conditions are not sufficient for the emergence of a public problem. A public problem needs adequate framing (by telling the right story), it needs to be assigned causality, the issue needs to be legitimized (by providing figures for instance), it needs measurement and implies the availability of a solution. Finally, the public problem must be popularized. Problem identification occurs when a particular issue is defined based on the opinions of those who hold significant influence, expressing dissatisfaction with the current situation, status quo, or policies in place (Cairney, 2022).

Many argue that a public problem often emerges after a “trigger” event. This idea can have many names such as “crisis trigger date,” “focusing event” or “potential focusing event” as it can be found in Birkland’s book (1997). Birkland introduced the idea of a “potential focusing event” explaining that the latter can be the key triggers to opening a policy window. In the case of the 2003 Iraq war, the focusing event or the “crisis trigger date” can surely be the tragic events of 9/11. Indeed, this date is key in the launch of the American Global War on Terror. The September-11 attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center are trigger events in American policy change. Bush was convinced that democracy and Islam could not coexist. He believed that if democracy were established in one country, other countries in the Middle East would follow suit. That is why, in the wake of 9/11, Bush initiated a war in Afghanistan. Encouraged by its success, he sought to implement a similar strategy elsewhere, ultimately targeting Iraq. The United States launched a second operation against Iraq, citing the possession of nuclear weapons as justification. A problem was then constructed.

In his 2002 State of the Union address, President George W. Bush warned that the U.S.A. and other countries face threats from Iran, Iraq, and North Korea.¹ Thanks to this statement, Bush emphasized that Iraq was a pressing concern. The statement made by President Bush regarding Iraq could be seen as a way of constructing and framing the problem in a particular way that opened a window of opportunity for policy change. In this statement, Iraq was presented as a major threat to global security, which created a sense of urgency around the need to address this threat. Additionally, this statement helped to shape the agenda for future policy decisions related to Iraq by emphasizing the need for action to be taken against the country to avoid potentially disastrous consequences of inaction. Through this Bush’s statement, it could be argued that problem construction plays a significant role in creating a window of opportunity for further policy measures to be taken. By framing Iraq as a potential terrorist threat and emphasizing the importance of acting, the American government established the parameters of the discussion about the necessity for military intervention.

¹ George W. Bush. 2002. *State of the Union Address*. House Chamber of the United States Capitol in Washington D.C

Problem constructing is thus the first step to set the agenda on military actions in Iraq. Formulating the problem pushed the Iraq topic onto the decision agenda.

The problem of the 2003 Iraq War was constructed through a series of events and actions, including the tragic events of 9/11 and Bush's statement in his 2002 State of the Union address. The framing of Iraq as a potential terrorist threat and the emphasis on the need for action played a significant role in creating a window of opportunity for further policy measures to be taken. This highlights the importance of problem construction in shaping the agenda for military intervention and ultimately setting the decision agenda. This section sets the stage for further analysis of how the U.S. government used political communication and other strategies to shape public opinion and legitimize the decision to go to war.

6.2. Setting the agenda

As previously explained in the theory and framework analysis, there are many ways a decision agenda can be set. In this section, it will be first discussed how the Multiple Streams Approach (MSA) and Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) could be relevant to explain the decision to go to war in the Persian Gulf in 2003. Then, the political communication made to go to war, or conversely to not go to war, will be analyzed.

6.2.1. The Multiple Streams Approach

The invasion of Iraq by the United States and its allies could be explained using the Multiple Streams Approach. This has been described in an article from Lewis and Twing in *Streaming into Baghdad: Kingdon's Model of Agenda-Setting and the U.S. Invasion of Iraq* (2008). Lewis and Twing apply Kingdon's framework to the decision-making process of the Iraq War. They explained how the streams converged to make the Second Gulf War a priority issue for the Bush administration.

The *problem* stream: Al Qaeda and Islamic terrorism.

Neither Clinton nor Bush administrations took military actions to fight against Al Qaeda before 9/11. However, both were preoccupied with the deadly threat that this terrorist organization posed to the world. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Al Qaeda and terrorism matter became the focus point in American society.

The *policy* stream: Policy change in Iraq.

American scholars and political specialists thought that only a regime change in Iraq – which implied removing Saddam Hussein from power- would be a solution to counter the threat that this state posed to the United States and to stabilize the Gulf region. Former President Clinton and his administration publicly advocated in mid-November 1998 in the Iraq Liberal Act (ILA) that regime change in Iraq was a component of U.S. policy toward this state (Katzman, 2003). While it is true that September-11 is often referred to as a “focusing event, the threat of terrorism was already a well-known aspect in the policy stream. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 simply presented an opening (window of opportunity) for policy change based on preexisting ideas (Birkland, 2004).

The *political* stream: Bush's administration, Congress, and the National Mood.

In 2000, George W. Bush ran for president and won. With an “insider's view” of the presidency, the Bush administration prioritized foreign policy. They felt it was important to use American power for both domestic and international interests. However, they were wary of multilateral institutions that they felt were “neither essential nor necessarily conducive to American interests.” (Daalder & Lindsay, 2003). After the September-11 attacks, American policy shifted its focus towards counterterrorism, also reflecting a change in the “national mood”. This event

brought about a surge in patriotism and national unity, leading to heightened partisanship (“hyper-bipartisanship”). Ultimately, the U.S. Congress came together with an almost unanimous decision to authorize the use of military force against those responsible for the attacks, as well as any nation that supported or provided a haven for them. 9/11-terrorist attacks, which resulted in the loss of thousands of lives, left a profound impact on the American population, evoking a range of emotions including anger, fear, and grief. According to Jeffrey Knopf’s analysis, this emotional reaction played a key role in shaping the attitudes of American leaders and citizens towards launching a preventive war in Iraq (2002).

The three streams converging:

According to Lewis and Twing, the post-9/11 political climate created a sense of urgency around the need to address the threat of terrorism (problem stream), while the neoconservative policy agenda provided the solution of military intervention (policy stream). The political opportunities and constraints facing the Bush administration and the perceived window of opportunity to act before public opinion turned against the war, both provided the political climate for policy change to occur (political stream).

6.2.2. The Advocacy Coalition Framework

In the context of the Second Gulf War, scholars have used the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) to explore how different advocacy coalitions influenced the decision to go to war and the subsequent policy outcomes. As part of this study, Haar’s essay *Explaining George W. Bush’s Adoption of the Neoconservative Agenda After 9/11* is the most relevant to address the AFC in the context of the Iraq War (2010). Haar studies the political process that led to this policy change. She argues that the adoption of the neoconservative agenda was the result of a coalition of advocates who had long been promoting these ideas in the policy arena. She is using the word “advocates” to refer to members of neoconservative think tanks and advocacy groups, as well as officials within the Bush administration who shared their worldview. As a matter of fact, Harr is identifying two main coalitions in the pre-9/11 period which are the traditional national security coalition and the neoconservative coalition. For her, the traditional national security coalition was prioritizing the containment of potential adversaries and the use of force only as a last resort, meanwhile, the neoconservative coalition was advocating for a more aggressive foreign policy based on the promotion of democracy and American values. Finally, in a more recent study, Harr argues that the AFC is a complementary policy process framework that can explain foreign policy change (Haar & Pierce, 2021). Overall, the AFC offers a useful lens for analyzing the role of advocacy coalitions in shaping policy outcomes and for setting the agenda, such as the decision for the United States to go to war in Iraq.

6.2.3. Publicly setting the agenda

As previously discussed, the Iraq war became a major topic of discussion in the aftermath of a “focus event” -the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Due to this “focus event,” the issues of Afghanistan and Iraq succeeded to reach the agenda (Mazarr, 2007). Mazarr defines a “focus event” as a sudden and unforeseen occurrence that draws the public’s attention, leading to extensive, widespread, and substantial media coverage and ultimately stressing a particular issue to the forefront of the public agenda. However, initially the public only associated 9/11 with terrorism, particularly Al Qaeda and eventually Afghanistan. It was not immediately apparent that Iraq engaged in the attacks (this statement being untrue). To implicate Iraq, Bush administration had to carefully construct a narrative. This will be explored further in the next section (6.4.

Framing the issue). The Bush administration, as seen in the previous part, put the Iraq threat at the forefront of its agenda. President George W. Bush's State of the Union address on January 29, 2002, reiterated his claims about the Iraqi threat and the need for military action taken against Iraq.² The President emphasized the necessity of military action, and this set the agenda for the decision-making process. Similarly, other countries opposing the military intervention in Iraq also set publicly their agenda. French Minister of Foreign Affairs Dominique de Villepin's speech before the United Nations Security Council on February 14, 2003, advocated for a peaceful resolution to the Iraqi conflict. Villepin called for a strengthening of weapons inspections in Iraq rather than military action. This statement announces the French position towards the Iraq War and is part of the French agenda-setting process.³ In this speech, Villepin emphasizes the importance of diplomacy in solving conflicts rather than resorting to war. He believes that while war may seem like the expedient option, we must bear in mind that peace must be built after the conflict (2003). His idea diverges from those of the United States government, leading to an increased discussion on finding a peaceful solution instead of relying solely on military action. Villepin also engaged in other steps of agenda-setting theory in his speech, such as problem deconstruction and framing the issue. However, his speech emphasizes on the setting of a different agenda from the American one and promotes a peaceful solution to the conflict.⁴ In this quote, Bush set the agenda for the debate over whether to invade Iraq. Indeed, states he cited as the "axis of evil" and mentioned as places that harbor terrorists. Nonetheless, neither of these nations had direct ties with the September-11 terrorist attacks.⁵ President Bush, by the end of his speech, mentions the almost duty of the United States and its allies to protect itself and the world from the threat some countries may pose to them. This publicly sets the agenda for a future engagement against these threatening states. This speech also allowed the framing of a broader "war on terror" that was not only focused on Afghanistan anymore, but also on Iraq. To do it, the Bush administration needed to link the September-11 terrorist attacks, the Afghan state, al-Qaeda, and Iraq. This leads us to the following section: framing the issue.

The Multiple Streams Approach and the Advocacy Coalition Framework are relevant to understanding the decision-making process that led to the invasion of Iraq by the United States and its allies in 2003. The MSA highlights how the three streams converged to make the Second Gulf War a priority issue for the Bush administration. On the other hand, the ACF explains how a coalition of advocates with a shared worldview, particularly neoconservative groups, influenced the decision to go to war. Furthermore, it has been discussed how political communication played a vital role in setting the agenda for the war, especially after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The national mood shifted towards counterterrorism and American policy, and the Bush administration felt the need to use American power for both domestic and international interests. The political opportunities and constraints facing the Bush administration provided the political climate for policy change to occur. These factors and the

² George W. Bush, April 05, 2003. Interview for ITV's Tonight with Trevor McDonald

³ Dominique de Villepin's Speech at the UN Security Council. February 14, 2003.

⁴ George W. Bush. 2002. *State of the Union Address*. House Chamber of the United States Capitol in Washington D.C

⁵ George W. Bush. 2002. *State of the Union Address*. House Chamber of the United States Capitol in Washington D.C

advocacy coalitions provided the necessary impetus to move forward with the decision to invade Iraq. Overall, the MSA and ACF provide a framework to understand the complex interplay of various factors that set the agenda for the war in the Persian Gulf in 2003.

6.3. Framing the issue

The conceptualization of an issue through selective framing, while disregarding alternative framing, is referred to as 'issue framing'. The designation of issues that attain the agenda is critical in delimiting the contours of political discourse. According to Entman, framing is about "selection and highlighting, and use of the highlighted elements to construct an argument about problems and their causation, evaluation, and/or solution" (1993, p. 53). For him, in the realm of communication, framing refers to the act of highlighting certain elements of a given reality, often intending to present a specific problem, its causes, a moral judgement, or a solution. This process involves selectively emphasizing some aspects of the topic at hand over others to promote a particular narrative or interpretation (p. 52). Framing the issue is then how the issue is portrayed and categorized.

6.3.1. Publicly framing the issue

In 2002, when President Bush used the phrase "axis of evil" in his speech, he employed a rhetorical strategy known as "Delusive Generalization" (Ahmadypour, et al., 2010, p. 29). Based on Lavimi's definition, generalization refers to the act of constructing a belief or policy in a way that the audience can accept it without requiring evidence or reasoning to support it (2007, p. 103). Additionally, the use of misleading generalizations by the White House public relations strategists is a common tactic for creating alternative narratives. In this statement, President Bush expanded the scope of America's anti-terrorism efforts beyond just the Taliban and al-Qaeda to include other countries as targets in the country's foreign policies. The communications of the Bush administration diligently conveyed a "concerted strategy to link once crises into another." (John, et al., 2007, p. 199). The administration employed the concept of a "spillover policy window" by linking the events of 9/11 to the war with Iraq, in order to convince the public that military action against Iraq was a reasonable course of action (Rex, 2011). One of the instances of this spillover effect was the migration of counterterrorism from fighting against al-Qaeda to invading Iraq.

To frame the issue of the military intervention in Iraq, Bush administration consistently inked three key themes that are "9/11, the presence of external threats, and America's battle against evil" (Rex, 2011). These three themes provided a rhetorical bridge and allowed a spillover from the issue around al-Qaeda to the Iraq invasion. More direct links between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein were also made prior to the war.^{6 7} This strategy has been successful and can be demonstrated by the broad public belief in the connection between the 9/11-terrorist attacks and Iraq. In October 2002, a Pew research poll found that 66% of respondents

⁶ Paul Wolfowitz interview with the San Francisco Chronicle. February 23, 2002 ; and George W. Bush. 2002. *State of the Union Address*. House Chamber of the United States Capitol in Washington D.C.

⁷ President George Bush Discusses Iraq in National Press Conference. The East Room. March 06, 2003.

believed Saddam Hussein was involved in the 9/11-attacks⁸, while a CNN poll taken in February 2003 found that 76% of respondents believed Iraq was assisting al-Qaeda⁹ (Fritz, et al., 2004). The Bush administration also employed a humanitarian narrative that included claims of the repression and suffering of the Iraqi people and the need to liberate them from Saddam Hussein to justify the war. They also used the notion of preventive war to frame the war as a strategic necessity and humanitarian mission. They justify the military intervention in Iraq as a preemptive strike against a perceived threat to national security. The administration argued that Iraq's alleged possession of WMDs and links to terrorist groups posed an imminent threat to the U.S. and its allies, and that a preventive war was necessary to eliminate that threat before it materialized. This framing of the war as a preventive war, rather than a preemptive war, was a key element of the administration's political communication strategy, as it helped create a sense of urgency and moral justification for the war among the public and the media.

6.3.2. Media and issue framing

The media also play a role in issue framing. According to numerous scholars, the framing of an issue by the media is contingent on the structure of the political and electoral party system of a nation. Specifically, in states with a greater number of electoral parties, news coverage tends to exhibit a greater emphasis on policy issues and a reduced focus on personality or human interest-oriented content. Additionally, the media is less likely to support government policy and a more diverse array of policy frame tend to be represented in news coverage. According to Baum (2013), citizens are more prone to encountering information that diverges from the framing of foreign conflicts preferred by leaders in multiparty democracies. This leads to a higher likelihood of holding leaders accountable for failed risky foreign endeavors. As a result, media coverage generally carries more weight in the political calculations of leaders in multiparty democracies than in two-party systems. The observed patterns are not solely attributable to variations in press freedom, as suggested by Baum (2013). In the context of the Iraq War, it can be inferred that the media exerts an influence on a state's conflict behavior in distinct ways and to different extents, which are partly shaped by the institutional setting in which they function. In multiparty states, greater availability of television coverage for the public corresponded with reduced backing for the war effort and a decreased tendency to deploy troops to the Coalition of the Willing. Conversely, in two-party states, increased media accessibility is linked to lower resistance to the war effort and higher troop commitments, albeit with a less robust connection between the two (Baum, 2013). This finding about the differing effects of media in multiparty and two-party states is in line with the predictions of the Downs model. This model suggest that in multiparty systems, political parties are incentivized to present policy-centric media coverage to differentiate themselves from their competitors and win electoral support. It then enables citizens to monitor their leader's activities more effectively, as they are exposed to a wider range of perspectives and policy proposals. Since the United-State is a considered a two-party system (with the Republican Party and the Democratic Party dominating the political landscape), it can be inferred that the media's

⁸ Pew Research Center, 2021. *Two Decades Later, the Enduring Legacy of 9/11*. [Online] Available: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/09/02/two-decades-later-the-enduring-legacy-of-9-11/> [Accessed 29 January 2023].

⁹ Lister, T., 2022. *Al Qaeda needs a new leader after Zawahiri's killing. Its bench is thinner than it once was*. [Online] Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/08/02/middleeast/al-qaeda-new-leader-options-intl/index.html> [Accessed 29 January 2023].

influence on political decision-making may be less critical in the U.S. compared to multiparty democracies where citizens may be more prone to encounter information that contradicts their leaders' favored portrayal of foreign conflict. As a result, the media coverage tends to carry greater weight in the critical examination of the leaders' decisions in multiparty democracies than in two-party systems, as per Baum's 2013 findings. Furthermore, it is important to note that disparities in press freedom alone could not offer a satisfactory explanation for these trends.

6.3.3. Uncritical media broadcast

Regarding the press during the prelude to the second Iraq War – despite its potential to shape the agenda- it did not do so, instead taking an uncritical stance towards the administration's justifications for war. This could be attributed to the two-party system as explained previously, but also in part to the general trend in journalism toward more entertainment-focused news coverage, as well as a decline in funding for investigative journalism at many newspapers (Lance Bennett, et al., 2007). In his article, Rex made a list of instances where the press played a subservient and uncritical role around the U.S. intervention in Iraq (Rex, 2011). Massing (2004) provides an example of major newspapers, including the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, who only ran critical articles about the administration's claims further back on their pages, leaving them off the front page. According to Kurtz, the *Post* published more than 140 front-page stories supporting the administration's claims, but only a few critical stories, which were not, for the most part, on the front page (Kurtz, 2004) (Moyers, 2007). According to Massing (2004), the biased coverage was especially clear in the coverage of Colin Powell's speech to the United Nations, with both papers featuring front-page articles in support of his speech, with the *Times* publishing three and the *Post* running four praising the speech.

Issue framing is then a critical aspect of shaping political discourse, where the way an issue is portrayed and categorized can influence public opinion and policy decisions. Framing involves selectively emphasizing some aspects of a topic over others to promote a particular narrative or interpretation. The Bush administration's framing of the military intervention in Iraq included three key themes that were 9/11, the presence of external threats, and America's battle against evil. The media also played a role in issue framing. Indeed, the framing of an issue is contingent on the structure of the political and electoral party system of a nation. In states with a lesser number of electoral parties, such as the United States, news coverage tends to exhibit a lesser emphasis on policy issues and a greater focus on personality or human interest-oriented content. The media's influence on a state's conflict behavior varies and is partly shaped by the institutional setting in which they function. During the pre-Iraq War period, the American media was very uncritical of the Bush administration discourse.

6.4. Shaping the narrative

6.4.1. The Narrative Policy Framework

The Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) is a theoretical framework that specifies common assumptions, concepts, and hypotheses for the study of policy narratives (Schlauffer, et al., 2022). The overall aim of NPF is to explain how policy narratives influence policy outcomes (Ertas, 2019). Jones, McBeth and Shanaham (2014) identify four different major narrative form

elements, that are part of a narrative structure: the plot, the characters, the setting and the moral. These four elements of the narrative structure can be applied to the US-led intervention in Iraq.

Setting

The environment in which policies are developed comprises significant elements, including geography, legal framework, available evidence, and other components of the policy subsystem. While some aspects of this environment are static, such as the provisions of the United States Constitution, others are subject to ongoing debate and may be highly contested (Crow & Jones, 2018). The setting of the Iraq War narrative included various policy consequential features such as geography, laws, and evidence, as well as the historical context of the 9/11-attacks and the Iraq-Iran War. For the US-led intervention in Iraq, the post-9/11 period is a desirable setting for the narrative: the country wants to avenge those attacked and deceased, and the Bush doctrine is leading a 'War on Terror'.

Characters

In stories, characters are commonly categorized into three roles: victims who have been or may be harmed, villains who are accountable for the harm or danger, and heroes who offer solutions to alleviate the victims' suffering (Crow & Jones, 2018). In the context of the Second Gulf War, the presence of these three characters can be observed. Firstly, the Bush administration pointed out various victims in 2002 and 2003, including the victims of the September-11, 2001, terrorist attacks. The American government continuously referred to them in its statements, but also included the entire country as wounded, rather than solely the actual victims. Secondly, the citizens of Iraq living under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein's regime were also portrayed as victims. In fact, political opponents were often tortured or forced into exile, while Kurdish people were massacred, and biological and chemical weapons were used during the First Persian Gulf war. The villain in the American (and its allies) rhetoric was undoubtedly Saddam Hussein and his government. Lastly, the heroes were the American soldiers, who achieved remarkable success in Afghanistan, the American population and their allies who were willing to fight or support American values, and to some extent, the entire American country.

Plot

Plots can be viewed as structural mechanisms that establish connections between characters through their motives and relationships, while also providing a temporal and spatial context for the story and its inhabitants (Crow & Jones, 2018). The Bush administration will rely on three themes to construct their plot: the uncertainty of WMDs in Saddam Hussein's possession, the possible relations between Iraq and al Qaeda, and the link between the devastation of Ground Zero and Saddam Hussein. The Bush administration's use of these three themes can be seen as a deliberate attempt to construct a compelling narrative that would justify their decision to invade Iraq.

The uncertainty of WMDs

The dominant war narrative in the lead-up to the 2003 Iraq War was centered on the premise that Saddam Hussein's regime posed a significant threat to both the United States and international security. This narrative portrayed military intervention as necessary to protect against this threat and emphasized the United States' ability to carry out such intervention based on the perceived success in Afghanistan. One of the main narratives, used as the

primary justification, put forward by the United States and its allies for invading Iraq was the belief that Iraq was developing and stockpiling weapons of mass destruction, including chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons. This belief was based on intelligence reports and statements by various officials in the United States, but also in the United Kingdom government. By emphasizing the uncertainty of WMDs, they created a sense of urgency and fear, suggesting that Saddam Hussein's possession of such weapons posed an imminent threat to the safety and security of the United States and its allies. To prevent Iraq from using these weapons, or giving them to terrorists, the United States and its allies argues that military action was necessary. Overall, the plot around the possibility of finding WMDs in Iraq was a central narrative in the lead-up to the war but proved to be a flawed justification for military action. Despite the lack of evidence supporting the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the narrative surrounding their supposed presence remained a key part of the broader justification for military action. Ultimately, mass media often uncritically broadcast the same narrative that was given by the government. ¹⁰

Links with al Qaeda and with 9/11

The narrative alleging a link between Saddam Hussein's regime and Al Qaeda constituted another persuasive strategy employed by the United States to legitimize its military intervention in Iraq. The emotional potency of this narrative lay in its ability to evoke feelings of fear and anger among the American public, given the role of al-Qaeda in the 9/11-attacks. The use of *pathos* was a prominent feature of the Bush administration's rhetoric in this regard, as they sought to mobilize support for the invasion by emphasizing the need to avenge the victims of the terrorist attacks. ¹¹

Moral of the story

Finally, the moral of the story refers to the key message or the lesson that the story intends to convey which can be in the form of a proposed policy solution or a call to action (Crow & Jones, 2018). Therefore, the message that the story intends to convey is that if nothing is done against Saddam Hussein, then the United States and the world will be victims of other terrorist attacks. The policy solution that is suggested by the United States and the United Kingdom is then to enter war. ¹²

6.4.2 Rhetorical analysis of the war narratives

In order to examine the narrative related to the US-led intervention in Iraq, this dissertation will use the techniques employed by governments, media, and linguistic representations to construct a geopolitical framework and shape the concept and narrative of a fictitious adversary, as proposed by Ahmadypour et al. (2010).

¹⁰ Dick Cheney. Speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars national convention. August 26, 2002 and *The Vice President Makes Remarks at an event for Representative Saxby Chambliss*. July 19, 2002

¹¹ Donald H. Rumsfeld. Press Conference. May 2, 2002 and Rumsfeld's statement, September 16, 2002. Washington D.C.

¹² Colin L. Powell. February 05, 2003. *Remarks to the United Nations Security Council*. New York City.

Dehumanization, Labeling, Identicalization, and concretization

A rhetorical strategy that can be used to build a narrative to justify the war is dehumanization. Braden and Celli (2004, p. 156) define the process of dehumanizing by the depiction of a rival as inhuman. It does not solely involve perceiving them as an outsider in contrast to one's national identity, but it also entails their exclusion from the realm of humanity. Such representation not only promotes the process of fanaticism but also constructs a barrier between oneself and the other. Labeling is another rhetorical strategy that involves using language to create and reinforce social distinctions between different groups. This involves evaluating one's own group, 'we', positively by ascribing positive attributes and traits to them or conversely evaluating those outside our group, 'they', with negative values and traits (Mahdizadeh, 2008, p. 56). The use of labeling can create a sense of belonging and solidarity within one's group but can also create a sense of hostility and animosity towards those outside the group.

Although Saddam Hussein was a ruthless dictator responsible for the deaths of thousands of people, he was not the only leader to fit this description. Nevertheless, he was subjected to persistent demonization, dehumanization, and negative labelling, which contributed to a biased view of him. He was already diabolized as Hitler and labelled as a "beast", a "monster" or a "madman", during the First Gulf War¹³, so a preconceived notion had already been ingrained within the population that Hussein was of an inherently negative character. (Goldstein, 1994, p. 114). This process that has been used during the Persian Gulf War is called "identicalization" (Pratkantis & Aronson, 2000). It is the act of expelling or marginalizing a perspective, individual, or nation by drawing analogies with other perspectives, individuals, or nations (Ahmadypour, et al., 2010). This strategy continued after 9/11. In the context of the Iraq war, Bush administration used this rhetoric by comparing Saddam and his state to the concept of "evil".¹⁴ As suggested by John et al. (2007), calling external threats "evil" places the administration on the side of "good". The fact of labeling the Saddam Hussein regime terrorist or terrorist sympathizer helped this. As pointed out by Altheide and Grimes, cited in Turnbull (2012, pp. 34-35), "[t]his enabled politicians and media outlets to "market and frame fear and dread of terrorism as part of a national identity... Terrorism became a very broad symbol that encompassed fear, consumption, and international intervention" (Altheide & Grimes, 2005, p. 620). According to van Dijk, the portrayal of criminal actions was achieved by narrating horrifying stories, using a strategy called 'concretization'. This approach highlights the wrongdoing of the enemy by vividly and specifically describing their horrific acts with words that can be visualized and easily remembered (Van Dijk, 1995, p. 156).¹⁵

Transition

The concept of 'transition' in this study (Ahmadypour, et al., 2010), or as Kumar posed it, "guilt by suggestion" (Kumar, 2006), suggests that if two phenomena or ideas are presented to an audience with a short interval or at the same time, one is likely to be linked to the other. Ahmadypour, et al. coined this term to describe the process of transforming the characteristics of one phenomenon into an unimaginable form of the other. As an illustration of this

¹³ Goldstein, Philip. *Styles of cultural activism: from theory and pedagogy to women, Indians, and communism*. Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press u.a., 1994, p. 114

¹⁴ George W. Bush. 2002. *State of the Union Address*. House Chamber of the United States Capitol in Washington D.C

¹⁵ President George Bush Discusses Iraq in National Press Conference. The East Room. March 06, 2003.

phenomenon, consider the study conducted by Leventhal (2010, p. 15). This study conducted a content analysis of over one hundred articles published in major American media outlets between 2001 and 2003. In their 2005 study, Gershkoff and Shana found that President Bush mentioned Iraq and terrorism in the same paragraph 12 times and in the same sentence 10 times in 13 speeches given between September 12, 2002 and May 2003 (Gershkoff & Shana, 2005). The result was clear: by late 2003, a poll showed that 69% of Americans believed that Hussein was personally involved in the 9/11 terrorist attacks, as opposed to simply suspecting his involvement as in the poll conducted on September 13, 2001 (Milbank & Deane, 2003)¹⁶ In a similar study, 82% of the American interviewed believed Saddam Hussein provided assistance to Osama bin Laden¹⁷.

Negativity and Positivity

Within the realm of political communication, this technique of message framing entails the portrayal of a rival's communication as negative, while simultaneously presenting one's own messages as positive. For instance, members of the Coalition of the Willing will use the rhetoric of the positive "us" and the negative "them". One of the examples given by Kersten and Sidky is the famous sentence pronounced by Bush after the 9/11 attacks (Kersten & Sidky, 2007).¹⁸

Creating Fear and Terror

Ahmadypour, et al. draw on the well-known adage that fear is akin to death, it can be argued that fear represents a tactic of warfare that targets the psyche (Husseini, 2004, pp.33). This approach involves instilling fear through a geopolitical discourse of imaginary danger. It has been employed by Bush administration which repeatedly referred to the risk to not taking action against Iraq, reminding 9/11 terrorist attacks.¹⁹

Disinformation

According to Jacob Notre (2005), disinformation is a method where the truth is mixed with lies and deceit, and the propaganda aspect of it affects the minds of the audience, with inaccurate information being used to portray the enemy in a negative light. This technique will be further developed in the last section (*Providing evidence*).

In this section, the Narrative Policy Framework has been discussed. It is a theoretical framework that explains how policy narratives influence policy outcomes. The NPF consists of four major narratives elements, including the setting, characters, plot, and moral. These elements can be applied to the US-led intervention in Iraq. The setting of the Iraq War narrative included various

¹⁶ Milbank, Dana, and Claudia Deane. "Hussein Link to 9/11 Lingers in Many Minds." The Washington Post. September 06, 2003. Accessed March 20, 2023.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2003/09/06/hussein-link-to-911-lingers-in-many-minds/7cd31079-21d1-42cf-8651-b67e93350fde/?utm_term=.71694139972a

¹⁷ The Washighton Post Company, 2003. *Washington Post Poll: Saddam Hussein and the Sept. 11 Attacks*.

¹⁸ George W. Bush. Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People, September 20, 2001. Capitol. Washington D.C.

¹⁹ Dick Cheney, August 25, 2002.

policy consequential features such as geography, laws, and evidence, as well as the historical context of the 9/11-attacks and the Iraq-Iran War. In terms of characters, the Bush administration portrayed American people and the citizens of Iraq as victims, while Saddam Hussein and his government were portrayed as villains, and the American soldiers and American nation were the heroes. The plot revolved around the links with al Qaeda and with 9/11, and the uncertainty of WMDs. The moral of the story was that military intervention in Iraq was necessary to protect against the threat of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. Ultimately, the narrative surrounding the supposed presence of WMDs in Iraq, proven to be a flawed justification for military action, was successful in mobilizing support for the invasion by emphasizing the need to avenge the victims of the terrorist attacks. The Bush administration employed many rhetorical strategies, including the use of emotional appeals, repetition, disinformation, and simplification of complex issues, to shape public opinion and garner support for the war effort.

6.5. Providing evidence

In agenda-setting process, providing evidence is the ultimate step that allows for the legitimization of a discourse, reform, or a policy action. Evidence can be helpful for the justification of policy actions and to shape the narrative of the war as a necessary response to a threat.

Colin Powell's speech to the United Nations Security Council in February 2003 -in which he presented evidence purportedly demonstrating the existence of weapons of mass destruction programs in Iraq- illustrates perfectly this last step of legitimization. All of this information projected that Iraq had no intention of disarming. This speech provided more evidence than any other official administration speech before, and is often cited as an example of deceptive rhetoric, as the evidence presented was found to be unfounded. Bush administration did not provide specific intelligence to verify the claims against Iraq until Powell's speech before the UN Security Council. The Secretary of State presented evidence to the UN Security Council that Saddam Hussein detained WMDs, had produced thousands of liters of anthrax and other agents, had the capability to deliver them using missile, bombs, or drones, and that he had connections with Al Qaeda.²⁰

Powell's speech had a significant impact on U.S. public opinion. Based on a report by the Pew Research Center, among those who opposed using military force in Iraq, Powell's argument was particularly persuasive, with 39% indicating that he provided a clear explanation for why the U.S. may need to take military action. This was twice the proportion of those who felt the same way about Bush (2021). Gershkoff and Kushner conducted a study to evaluate how the Bush administration's rhetoric in the Iraq conflict shifted public opinion (2004, pp. 14-15). The study aimed to investigate the impact of political communication on public opinion regarding the connection between Iraq and al Qaeda. The researchers found that individuals who were exposed to the Bush administration's rhetoric would be more likely to believe in Saddam Hussein's involvement in the September-11 attacks. The study analyzed the effects of Powell's February 5, 2003, speech to the United Nations, which provided more evidence of the links between Iraq and al Qaeda, and made such links explicit. The data showed that those who heard Powell's speech were more likely to believe in strong connections between Iraq and al

²⁰ Colin L. Powell. February 05, 2003. *Remarks to the United Nations Security Council*. New York City.

Qaeda. The study also revealed that the speech had a causal effect on individuals' perceptions, with 10 percent of Americans changing from not supporting the war to supporting it after hearing Powell's speech, and crediting the speech as the reason for their transition. Gershkoff and Kushner found that the stronger an individual's perceived link between Iraq and the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the more likely they were to support the war in Iraq. In fact. This result is significant because it suggests that the Bush administration's efforts to link the war on Iraq to the War on Terror were successful in influencing public opinion.

Visual and auditory aids

During his speech, Powell provided with many visual and auditory evidence. He showed satellite images, intercepted communications, defector testimonies and documents. Powell also have display a vial during his speech and he emphasized that it contained anthrax. By doing so, he sought to provide visual evidence of the danger posed by Iraq's alleged possession of WMDs. The use of visual aids in speeches is a common technique used by speakers to make their points more memorable and persuasive, and Powell's use of the vial was likely intended to have similar effect. Powell was then able to produce a striking and imaginative impact on his audience. This effect stood out against his intricate and theoretical arguments. Furthermore, the vial stirred up apprehension and unease among people, as it reminded them of the anthrax attacks that happened in the U.S. after the September 11 attacks.²¹

Authority and credibility

In order to be more persuasive, the Secretary of State used testimonials and quotations to support his claims and appeal to different authorities and perspectives. For instance, he quoted from Iraqi defectors, UN inspectors, Iraqi officials, al-Qaeda operatives, and former U.S. presidents. He also played recordings of intercepted conversations between Iraqi officers and officials. Powell relied heavily on his own credibility and reputation as a respected military leader and diplomat. He relied also on the authority and credibility of the United Nations and its resolutions. He also presented himself as a reliable and trustworthy source of information.²² The Secretary of State relied also mainly on the credibility and authority of intelligence agencies such as the CIA, as well as on expert testimony to lend authority to his claims about Iraq's WMDs program. Assertions of this nature emanate from sources that carry weight in the international arena, such as American intelligence agencies or other authoritative figures who lend credence to the statement. These sources may refer to as "specialists", or "experts". Powell frequently referred to the intelligence sources and experts that supported his claims. He used statistics and numbers to make his claims more specific and convincing.²³

Media response

The media response to Powell's speech was once again uncritical. The main American newspaper all published editorials praising Powell's evidence. Greg Mitchell conducted a study on these media and how they reported Powell's speech: "*The Boston Globe, The San Francisco Chronicle, The Denver Post, The Tampa Tribune, The Oregonian, The Hartford*

²¹ Colin L. Powell. February 05, 2003. *Remarks to the United Nations Security Council*. New York City.

²² Colin L. Powell. February 05, 2003. *Remarks to the United Nations Security Council*. New York City.

²³ Colin L. Powell. February 05, 2003. *Remarks to the United Nations Security Council*. New York City.

Courant, *The San Jose Mercury News*, *The San Antonio Express-News*, *USA Today*, and of course, the *Washington Post* and *The New York Times*—they all published editorials praising Powell and characterizing his evidence as essentially irrefutable, while also parroting the government line on Hussein’s terroristic tendencies.” (Mitchell, 2008, pp. 25-27)

General public response

Gershkoff and Kushner’s article discusses the impact of Powell’s speech to the United Nations (2004, pp. 14-15). The authors argue that Powell’s speech was a significant factor in convincing the American public to support the war in Iraq. They present survey data that shows that 10% of Americans changed their minds about the war after hearing Powell’s speech and credit the speech as the reason for their transition. The gain in support was highest among Democrats, indicating that Powell’s speech was effective in convincing even members of the opposition party. The authors also suggest that the stronger a respondent’s perceived link between Iraq and terrorism, the more likely they were to support the war in Iraq. They found that how important a respondent considered the al Qaeda terrorism problem to be was a better predictor of whether they favored invading Iraq than the importance of the Iraq problem itself. This result is significant because it shows that the Bush administration successfully convinced the American public that the war on Iraq was not only about Iraq, but also about the War on Terror.

In conclusion, providing evidence is a crucial step in the agenda-setting process as it legitimizes discourse or policy actions. Powell’s speech to the UN Security Council in 2003 is a significant example of how the use of evidence can shape public opinion and lead to the adoption of policy actions. In his speech, Colin L. Powell delivered a powerful and compelling presentation, presenting the facts systematically and without unnecessary dramatics. He played intercepted recordings and showed surveillance photos of Iraqi weapons sites, effectively proving his point. In his conclusion, Powell emphasized that the evidence presented was factual and well-documented, rather than based on conjecture (Daalder & Lindsay, 2003). He also relied heavily on his authority and credibility as a respected military leader and diplomat, as well as on the authority and credibility of other instances. Ultimately, all these techniques significantly and successfully influenced public opinion and shaped policy actions.

7. Summary and Conclusion

The main question that this thesis aimed to address was: how did the US government shape public opinion and establish its decision-making agenda on military actions in the Iraq War in 2003? Using theoretical approaches such as the multiple streams model, advocacy coalition framework, critical discourse analysis, policy narrative framework, as well as the Down’s model, this thesis analyzed the political communication strategies employed by the Bush administration to construct the problem, establish the agenda, frame the issue, shape the narrative, and provide evidence. The results of this study have shown how a foreign policy issue can be pushed onto the public agenda. Political communication allows us to better understand every step of agenda-setting while foreign policy decisions are discussed internally. Within the statements made by the Bush administration, every step of agenda-setting process can be found. Bush administration exploited a “window of opportunity” that had been created by 9/11, to join the three streams of Kingon’s model together, to broader the “war on terror” to Iraq. However, the government could not launch such a mission without the

support of its citizens, and obviously, of the Congress. Thus, as findings have shown, the US government used a combination of rhetorical, discursive, and narrative techniques to legitimize its military intervention in Iraq and influence public opinion and the media agenda. These techniques included creating an imminent threat and moral urgency, using historical analogies and moral arguments, constructing an international coalition and national consensus, mobilizing experts and credible sources, and staging spectacular and symbolic events. These techniques helped create a coherent and persuasive narrative that justified military action as a strategic necessity and humanitarian mission. The Bush administration created a “counter-bureaucracy” to create evidence to justify the war. 72% of Americans interviewed in a new CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll conducted on March 24, 2003, supported the War against Iraq, indicating the exceptionally high and fervent, particularly given the unusual circumstances. The public perception of the war was shaped by the Bush administration’s framing of it as part of the War on Terror. This level of support could be attributed to the concept of “manufacturing consent”, which refers to the process of shaping and manipulating public opinion through political communication and mass media. Scholars and critics have applied this concept to the US-led intervention in Iraq, arguing that the media manufactured consent for the war by repeating false claims about WMDs and links to al Qaeda and marginalizing or silencing voices of dissent and opposition.

This research paper aims to contribute to the literature on agenda setting, political communication, and legitimation by demonstrating how governments shape public opinion and set agendas on military actions. It also provides an in-depth analysis of the specific case of the Iraq War in 2003, which remains a controversial and relevant topic in the current context. It highlights the ethical and political implications of governments’ use of communication power to promote their interests and ideologies.

For future work on this subject, it would be interesting to study how public opinion and media agenda have evolved over time during and after the Iraq War. It would also be useful to compare the political communication strategies employed by other governments involved in similar or different military actions. Finally, it would be relevant to examine how social media and new technologies have changed the landscape of political communication and agenda-setting in the field of international affairs.

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Appendix

¹ George W. Bush. 2002. *State of the Union Address*. House Chamber of the United States Capitol in Washington D.C

*“States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an **axis of evil**, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a **grave and growing danger**. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, **the price of indifference would be catastrophic.**”* (Bush, 2002)

² George W. Bush. 2002 State of the Union address. House Chamber of the United States Capitol in Washington D.C and George W. Bush. April 05, 2003. Interview for ITV's Tonight with Trevor McDonald.

“Our war against terror is only beginning [...] Our war on terror is well begun, but it is only begun.” (Bush, 2002)

*“Iraq continues to flaunt its hostility toward America and to **support terror**. The Iraqi regime has **plotted to develop anthrax, and nerve gas, and nuclear weapons for over a decade**. This is a regime that has already used poison gas to murder thousands of its own citizens -- leaving the bodies of mothers huddled over their dead children. **This is a regime that agreed to international inspections -- then kicked out the inspectors. This is a regime that has something to hide from the civilized world.**”* (Bush, 2002)

“I made up my mind that Saddam needs to go” (Bush, 2002)

³ Dominique de Villepin's Speech at the UN Security Council. February 14, 2003.

*“In this context, the **use of force is not justified today**. There is an alternative to war: disarming Iraq through inspections. Moreover, a premature recourse to the military option would be fraught with consequences. [...] In this temple of the United Nations, we are the guardians of an ideal, we are the guardians of a conscience. The heavy responsibility and the immense honor that are ours must lead us to **give priority to disarmament in peace**”* (Villepin, 2003) Translated with www.DeepL.com/Translator (free version)

⁴ George W. Bush. 2002 State of the Union address. House Chamber of the United States Capitol in Washington D.C

*“States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an **axis of evil**, arming to threaten the peace of the world.”* (Bush, 2002)

⁵ **George W. Bush. 2002. *State of the Union Address*. House Chamber of the United States Capitol in Washington D.C**

*“History has called America and our allies to action, and it is both our responsibility and our privilege to **fight freedom’s fight**.” [...] “Together with friends and allies from Europe to Asia, and Africa to Latin America, we will demonstrate that the forces of terror cannot stop the momentum of freedom.” “We’ve come to know truths that we will never question: evil is real, and **it must be opposed**.” (Bush, 2002)*

⁶ **Paul Wolfowitz interview with the San Francisco Chronicle. February 23, 2002 ; and George W. Bush. 2002. *State of the Union Address*. House Chamber of the United States Capitol in Washington D.C**

*“I think one way of putting it is that **September 11** has now given us a very visceral and un-theoretical understanding of what commercial airliners can do and what **suicide bombers** are capable of”. [...] “And you can’t wait until we have a clear visceral, un-theoretical understanding of what massive anthrax attack, or a radiological or nuclear attack would do to an American city before you work to prevent that from happening. So the countries that pose that **connection** are a problem.” (Wolfowitz, 2002)*

*“States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an **axis of evil**, arming to threaten the peace of the world.” “They were as wrong as they are **evil**” “I know we can overcome **evil** with greater **good**” “We’ve come to know truths that we will never question: evil is real, and **it must be opposed**” (Bush, 2002)*

⁷ **President George Bush Discusses Iraq in National Press Conference. The East Room. March 06, 2003.**

*“He [Saddam Hussein] is a murderer. **He has trained and financed al Qaeda-type organizations before**, al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations” (Bush, 2003)*

⁸ **Dick Cheney. Speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars national convention. August 26, 2002 and *The Vice President Makes Remarks at an event for Representative Saxby Chambliss*. July 19, 2002**

“Simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction. There is no doubt he is amassing them to use against our friends, against our allies, and against us. And there is no doubt that his aggressive regional ambitions will lead him into future confrontations with his neighbors -- confrontations that will involve both the weapons he has today, and the ones he will continue to develop with his oil wealth.” (Cheney, 2002)

“In the case of Saddam Hussein, we have a dictator who is clearly pursuing these capabilities [of making WMDs] – and has used them, both in his war against Iran and against his own people.” (Cheney, 2002)

¹¹ Donald H. Rumsfeld. Press Conference. May 2, 2002 and Rumsfeld's statement, September 16, 2002. Washington D.C.

“there are six or eight countries that are on the terrorist list. It’s widely known who they are: countries like Iraq and Iran and Syria and Libya, North Korea. And many of them have chemical and biological weapons programs where they have actually weaponized these weapons, and second, most of them or some of them have very aggressive programs to develop nuclear weapons; certainly Iran does, certainly Iraq does, and there are others including North Korea. Now these countries have very close relationships with global terrorist networks such as Al Qaeda, Hezbollah, and others... We know that they wouldn’t hesitate a second to use weapons of mass destruction, if they had them, and we also have enough evidence to know that the global terrorists have in fact, been trying to acquire weapons of mass destruction”. (Rumsfeld, 2002)

“Since we began after September 11th, we do have solid evidence of the presence in Iraq of Al Qaeda members, including some that have been in Baghdad... We have what we believe to be credible information that Iraq and al Qaeda have discussed safe-haven opportunities in Iraq, reciprocal nonaggression discussions. We have what we believe to be credible evidence that al Qaeda leaders have sought contacts in Iraq who could help them acquire weapons of -weapons of mass destruction capabilities.” (Rumsfeld, 2002)

¹² Colin L. Powell. February 05, 2003. Remarks to the United Nations Security Council. New York City.

“Leaving Saddam Hussein in possession of weapons of mass destruction for a few more months or years is not an option, not in a post-September 11th world.” (Powell, 2003)

¹⁴ George W. Bush. 2002. State of the Union Address. House Chamber of the United States Capitol in Washington D.C

*“States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an **axis of evil**, arming to threaten the peace of the world.” “They were as wrong as they are **evil**” “I know we can overcome **evil** with greater **good**” “We’ve come to know truths that we will never question: **evil** is real, and it must be opposed” (Bush, 2002)*

¹⁵ President George Bush Discusses Iraq in National Press Conference. The East Room. March 06, 2003.

“He [Saddam Hussein] has weapons of mass destruction, and he has used weapons of mass destruction, in his neighborhood and on his own people. He’s invaded countries in his neighborhood. He tortures his own people.

He's a murderer. He has trained and financed al Qaeda-type organizations before, al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations" (Bush, 2003)

¹⁸ George W. Bush. Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People, September 20, 2001. Capitol. Washington D.C.

"Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." (Bush, 2001)

¹⁹ Dick Cheney, August 25, 2002.

"There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction. There is no doubt he is amassing them to use against our friends, against our allied, and against us" (Cheney, 2002)

²⁰ Colin L. Powell. February 05, 2003. Remarks to the United Nations Security Council. New York City.

"What we are giving you are facts and conclusions based on solid intelligence." (Powell, 2003)

²¹ Colin L. Powell. February 05, 2003. Remarks to the United Nations Security Council. New York City.

"Let me begin by playing a tape for you. What you're about to hear is a conversation that my government monitored... The photos that I am about to show you are sometimes hard for the average person to interpret, hard for me... This photograph was taken in April of 2002. Since then, the test stand has been finished and a roof has been put over it so it will be harder for satellites to see what's going on underneath the test stand."

"Less than a teaspoon of dry anthrax, a little bit about this amount--this is just about the amount of a teaspoon--less than a teaspoon full of dry anthrax in an envelope shutdown the United States Senate in the fall of 2001."

"I am no expert on centrifuge tubes, but just as an old Army trooper, I can tell you a couple of things".

"My colleagues, every statement I make today is backed up by sources, solid sources. These are not assertions. What we're giving you are facts and conclusions based on solid intelligence. I will cite some examples, and these are from human sources... Ladies and gentlemen, these are not assertions. These are facts, corroborated by many sources, some of them sources of the intelligence services of other countries."

"Iraq declared 8,500 liters of anthrax, but UNSCOM estimates that Saddam Hussein could have produced 25,000 liters"

“The source was an eye witness, an Iraqi chemical engineer who supervised one of these facilities” “First, all the experts who have analyzed the tubes in our possession agree that they can be adapted for centrifuge use.” “We also have intelligence from multiple sources that Iraq is attempting to acquire magnets and high-speed balancing machines”. “One of these lies is graphically and indisputably demonstrated by intelligence we collected on June 27, last year.”

“This is true. This is all well-documented.” (Powell, 2003)