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War and its Metaphors: news language and the prelude to war in Iraq, 2003

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ABSTRACT *Metaphors can kill, said George Lakoff in response to official justifications for US-led wars in the Persian Gulf. This article studies metaphor in news coverage of the prelude to the 2003 war with Iraq. The article outlines a methodology for the study of metaphor and applies the method to six weeks of coverage by NBC Nightly News, the top-rated US evening newscast. Predominant metaphors in NBC coverage are then identified, including: the Timetable; the Games of Saddam; the Patience of the White House, and Making the Case/Selling the Plan. The article then examines implications of those metaphors, and finally, considers the role of metaphor and news language in the conception and construction of war.*

KEY WORDS: *Metaphor, War Reporting, News Language, International News, Gulf War*

War is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship in the kingdom of peace and in the kingdom of war. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.

Those words, and my title, are a reworking of Susan Sontag's text, *Illness as Metaphor*, and its companion, *AIDS and its Metaphors* (Sontag, 1990, p. 3; 1978, 1989). I have replaced *illness* with *war* and *well* with *peace*. But my project, like Sontag's, takes as its starting point that metaphoric language shapes thought and that calling something by another name can have profound implications. In *Illness as Metaphor*, Sontag looked at metaphors surrounding cancer. She found language of invasion, violation, and victimage. In *AIDS and its Metaphors*, Sontag again uncovered language of invasion and violation, as well as desolation and plague. She argued that such language had significant, even mortal, consequences.

Sontag's subject, she emphasized, was not physical illness but *language* about illness—the uses and implications of illness and its metaphors. Similarly, my subject is not war but language about war, news language—the uses and implications of war and its metaphors in

the news, and the use of metaphor in the configuration of war. To rework Sontag's words once more (1990, pp. 3–4):

My point is that war is *not* a metaphor, and that the most truthful way of regarding war is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking. Yet it is hardly possible to take up residence in the kingdom unprejudiced by the lurid metaphors with which it has been landscaped. It is toward an elucidation of those metaphors, and a liberation from them, that I dedicate this inquiry.

In the first months of 2003, the administration of President George W. Bush attempted to build support, nationally and internationally, for war against Iraq. Through speeches, press conferences, committee reports, United Nation sessions, televised addresses and other venues, the president and his spokespeople proffered rationales for war. Saddam Hussein, the president said, had weapons of mass destruction and was a threat to US security and world peace. Saddam was linked to terrorism, particularly the activities of al Qaeda. Saddam was a despotic ruler over the people of Iraq. Saddam was an impediment to peace in the Middle East (Bush's Speech on Iraq, 2003, p. A14; Bush's Speech on the Start of War, 2003, p. A20; Excerpts from Bush's News Conference on Iraq

and Likelihood of War, 2003, p. A12; In the President's Words, 2003, p. A10).

Others were unconvinced. Members of the United Nations (UN) Security Council, including France, Russia, and Germany, argued for a process of inspection and eventual destruction of Iraqi weapons; they refused to pass a war resolution. Other US allies too were not persuaded of the need for war. In March, millions of people held peace rallies in cities around the world. The Bush administration, allied with the leaders of Britain and Spain, pressed forward. On March 19, US jets bombed Baghdad and war began.

How did US news media report events in the crucial weeks before war? It is almost a commonplace that the determination to go to war is perhaps the most critical decision a nation can make. The news media should play a vital role in the decision-making process. As a nation prepares for war, the news media should offer sites in which rationales for war are identified and verified; official claims are solicited and evaluated; alternate views are sought and assessed; costs, both human and material, are weighed; legalities are established; possible outcomes and aftermaths are considered, and wide-ranging debates are given voice. The consequences of war seem to require no less from the news (Galtung, 1986; Galtung and Vincent, 1992; Mathews, 1957; Pedelty, 1995; Roach, 1993).

Metaphor provides one means of analyzing such news coverage. As Sontag (1978, 1989), Lakoff and Johnson (1980), and numerous others (Burke, 1945, 1950; Deetz, 1984; Ortony, 1993; Ricoeur, 1978, 1981) have made clear, metaphor is integral to human understanding, an inescapable aspect of human thought. Neither good nor bad, metaphor may be the only way for humans to comprehend profound and complex issues, such as life, death, sickness, health, war, and peace. As a review of literature below will indicate, metaphor thus has offered an important tool to probe subtleties of news reporting on complex subjects such as social movements (Neveu, 2002), the information highway (Berdayes and Berdayes, 1998), AIDS (Sontag, 1989), conflict in Kosovo (Kennedy, 2000; Paris, 2002), cloning (Hellsten, 2000; Ner-

lich et al., 2000), and international affairs (Kitis and Milapides, 1997).

Metaphor may prove particularly useful for the study of news coverage of the prelude to the 2003 conflict in Iraq. At the end of 1990, Lakoff (1991) published an "open letter to the Internet" arguing that the political and media discourse surrounding justification for the eventual 1991 war against Iraq "was a panorama of metaphor." In a scathing critique, he charged that metaphors such as *War is Business* and *War is Politics* helped create public support for the war while hiding the true justification and costs of the conflict. Iraq was often reduced through *State is a Person* metonymy to the figure of Saddam Hussein. Saddam Hussein himself was depicted metaphorically. Saddam, it was said, had invaded Kuwait. In more lurid speech, Saddam had raped Kuwait. Saddam was a threat to his neighbors and the world. The United States, in contrast, was cast metaphorically as hero and savior. By liberating Kuwait, the United States, thus personified, repulsed the villain, saved the victim, and took the lead role in *the fairy tale of the just war* (Greenberg and Gantz, 1993; Kellner, 1992; MacArthur, 1992; Mowlana et al., 1992).

The day before the 2003 war began, Lakoff (2003) issued another critique over the Internet, this time of the metaphor system "being used to justify Gulf War II." He stated that many previous "metaphorical ideas are back, but within a very different and more dangerous context." He found that *A Nation is Person* allowed continued demonization of Saddam Hussein and hostility to states such as France that were not "loyal friends." He found the *Rational Actor* who goes to war, weighing assets and gains. He found the *Rescue Scenario* in which American forces rescue the Iraqi people and Iraq's neighbors. He concluded that metaphor once again had driven US foreign policy.

Research Questions

Can Lakoff's critique be extended to news? Have metaphors shaped news reporting of the build-up to the second Gulf war? The research questions then that guide this article: What

metaphors, if any, can be identified in US news language concerning the rationale for war with Iraq in 2003? If metaphors did indeed inform news reporting in the weeks before the conflict, what were possible interpretations and implications of those metaphors? If metaphor is an inescapable aspect of human thought, what are the implications of metaphor for news language of war?

The article first reviews briefly the rich literature on metaphor, focusing in particular on metaphor and news. Then, drawing from the work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Deetz (1984), van Dijk (1988), Ricoeur (1978), and Cameron and Low (1999), the article outlines a methodology for the study of metaphor in news. The article then applies this method to a sample of US news reporting—coverage by *NBC Nightly News*, the top-rated US evening newscast¹—in the six weeks before the start of war with Iraq, and appraises possible metaphors in NBC coverage. Finally, the article examines implications of the metaphors used in reporting the prelude to war and, more broadly, considers the role of metaphor and news language in the conception and construction of war.

Study of Metaphor

The voluminous literature on metaphor, which can only be touched upon here, offers a number of starting points from which to commence research. Sontag and many others begin with Aristotle whose *Poetics* provides a simple and clarifying definition: “Metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else.”² Building on Aristotle, instructive study of metaphor has long been undertaken in rhetoric, speech, literature, linguistics, pragmatics, psychology, cognitive science, and other fields (Boys-Stones, 2003; Burke, 1950; Eubanks, 2000; Ortony, 1993; Searle, 1993; White, 1978).

Considerations of the social and political influence of metaphor also have varied starting points. George Orwell’s classic essay, “Politics and the English Language,” published in 1946, remains invaluable. “Political language—and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists—is de-

signed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind,” Orwell wrote (1957, p. 157). Indeed, the field of political communication is particularly fertile ground for research on metaphor; of particular interest to this study is study of political language and US foreign policy, including the justification for war (Bostdorff, 1994; Green, 1992; Hart, 1987; Ivie, 1974; Medhurst et al., 1998; Swanson and Nimmo, 1990; Wander, 1984).

Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) *Metaphors We Live By* became an important touchstone for social and political discussions of metaphor. In that volume, the authors argued that the human conceptual system is fundamentally metaphoric, that metaphors structure the way people think. Their proposition that metaphors “are not just a matter of language, but of thought and reason” helped support study of social and political discourse through metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 208; Lakoff and Turner, 1989). Lakoff’s (1991, 2003) critique of metaphors employed by the Bush administrations to justify wars in the Persian Gulf exemplifies such work.

Lakoff alluded to the complicity of news in his essays on Gulf war metaphors. Other studies, including much recent work, have taken up in detail the influence of metaphors in the news. For example, Kitis and Milapides (1997) analyzed a *Time* magazine piece on Greece and Macedonia to explore how metaphor constructs ideology in news discourse. Berdayes and Berdayes (1998) examined the information highway metaphor in contemporary magazines. Paris (2002) touched upon news coverage in his study of metaphors surrounding the 1999 conflict in Kosovo. Neveu (2002) studied press coverage of farmers’ protest in Brittany. Winfield et al. (2002) studied history as metaphor in news reporting after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The journal *Metaphor and Symbol* devoted a special section to “Metaphors in the News.” In that issue, Kennedy (2000) studied reporting on the war in Kosovo and argued that ill-chosen or conflicting metaphors can negate intended messages of journalists and politicians; Hellstern (2000) looked at metaphors used in reporting

on "Dolly," the cloned sheep; Nerlich et al. (2000) also analyzed news of cloning and bio-engineering; Batstone (2000) studied how problems are often framed as metaphors in an examination of a conflict between two metaphors: university as business and university as community. The variety of topics and perspectives confirms the power and potential of research on metaphor in the news, and provides methodological direction for study of metaphor in news reporting of the prelude to the 2003 war in Iraq.

Method

Methodology for study of metaphoric language has been set forth in previous research as well as in work by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Ricoeur (1978, 1981), Deetz (1984), van Dijk (1988), Cameron and Low (1999), and others. Following these scholars, a researcher first identifies the text for study, such as a novel, play, news story, or network broadcast. Often "the text" is actually a series of texts, such as the works of an author or a set of news reports (Ricoeur, 1981). The researcher then identifies and isolates within each text narrative elements that provide context for figurative language: Actors (or agents), settings (or scenes), actions (or acts), chronology (or temporal relations), and causal relations (or motives). Metaphoric elements are then identified. Depending on the researcher, the concept of *metaphor* can be used for an array of figurative language such as metonymy and synecdoche. This broad conception of metaphor will be followed here. Metaphors are considered on two levels. The semantic level considers the lexical choice (choice of word, such as *the showdown*) and the propositions proffered by the choice. This can be particularly important for study of news. "Lexical choice," van Dijk writes (1988, p. 177) "is an eminent aspect of news discourse in which hidden opinions or ideologies may surface." Analysis also considers the syntactic level, the relationship of word choices within a single text and within a series of texts. Common and recurring metaphors are noted, organized, and clustered. The relationship of the metaphors to other narrative elements is made

clear and finally the role of metaphor in the text is suggested and explored. Such steps are necessarily inductive and interpretive. Scholars explore and explicate possible interpretations of language (Ricoeur, 1978). Researchers therefore acknowledge the ambiguity of metaphoric language and the possibility, indeed the necessity, of differing interpretations.

For this analysis of metaphor in news reporting of the prelude to war with Iraq, *NBC Nightly News* was selected for study. At the time of this research, *NBC Nightly News* was the most watched evening news show, averaging close to 12 million viewers nightly. The time period selected was February 5, 2003, the day of Secretary of State Colin Powell's report to the UN Security Council, laying out the Bush administration's rationale for war with Iraq, to March 19, 2003, the day bombs first fell on Baghdad. In that time period, reporting focused on a number of topics: Inspectors were trying to ascertain if Iraq possessed "weapons of mass destruction," as charged by the Bush administration; the United States and Britain pressed for a UN Security Council resolution for war with Iraq; other members of the Security Council, particularly France, Germany, and Russia, were attempting to provide more time for inspections; the United States and Britain continued the build-up of forces in the Persian Gulf; President Bush and his administration attempted to build support for the war among the American people. Broadcasts were studied nightly and transcripts were obtained for each newscast. More than 400 reports—404—were aired over the six-week period. Of that total, 171 stories—42 percent—focused on some aspect of the possible conflict with Iraq, a significant percentage that reflected the importance of the subject. These were the stories analyzed each evening and through subsequent transcripts.

Results

Framework: structural metaphors

Like other networks and cable television broadcasts, *NBC Nightly News* employed an overarching theme to promote, introduce, and organize

its newscasts on the build-up for war with Iraq. These themes, now a staple of broadcast news, are often spoken by news anchors or appear on the screen as banners, accompanied by dramatic or martial music. In early 2003, for example, MSNBC introduced its Iraq coverage with the words, "Showdown with Saddam." CNN used "Showdown: Iraq" while Fox offered, "Target Iraq: Disarming Saddam." For the time period studied, *NBC Nightly News* alternated a variety of themes and banners, including "Countdown: Iraq," "Showdown: Iraq" and, most often, "Target: Iraq." It might be easy to overlook or dismiss these banners and logos. But they are important organizing devices to which the cable and broadcast networks devote considerable editorial, design, and marketing considerations (Lowry, 2003; Pennington, 2003; Solomon and Erlich, 2003).

In the perspective of this study, these newscast themes can be understood as structural metaphors. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 61), structural metaphors "use one highly structured and clearly delineated concept to structure another." They provide coherence across concepts and texts, and offer a context in which other metaphors may be understood. Ironically, *war* itself is often employed as a structural metaphor in US culture. Politicians have declared *war on drugs*, *war on poverty*, and *war on crime*. *War* also permeates the language of sports, debate, and medicine. Yet *NBC Nightly News* and surely other news media reached for metaphor to make sense of war. The structural metaphors invoked by "Countdown: Iraq," "Showdown: Iraq," and "Target: Iraq" have important implications that differ for each title.

"Countdown: Iraq" was used often in leads to the NBC broadcast during the early weeks of the study period. For example, Tom Brokaw began the newscast of February 18: "Countdown Iraq. President Bush says worldwide protests by millions did not change his mind about war. And a new flash point: Saddam's missiles."³ *Countdown* was also used within many stories themselves, such as a report on February 10 that stated, "In Baghdad, this is another countdown week."

A *countdown* of course is an audible back-

ward counting in fixed units (such as seconds or days), from an arbitrary starting number, to mark the time remaining before an event. It can also mean the preparations carried on during the count and before the event. Of particular interest to this study, a countdown *assumes* the upcoming event is scheduled and inevitable. A countdown moves inexorably to its conclusion.⁴ By using "Countdown: Iraq" as a structural metaphor, particularly in the middle of February 2003, *NBC Nightly News* affirmed the inevitability of conflict with Iraq at a time when many Americans and nations around the world were still attempting to prevent the conflict.⁵

Showdown was used 18 times during the time period. "Showdown: Iraq" frames the situation as a final confrontation, a reckoning between Iraq and an unnamed opponent—the United States? The world? The metaphor has links to American Western texts, in which two gunmen face off. In this perspective, the metaphor complements portrayals of President George Bush as a cowboy figure. For example, a report on February 9 referred to a "crucial week in the showdown with Saddam." A February 15 newscast stated that President Bush was considering "his next move in the showdown with Saddam Hussein." *Showdown* also has linguistic roots in card games, especially the placing of poker hands face-up on a table to determine the winner. From any root, the metaphor suggests the situation in Iraq seems inevitably headed toward a confrontational denouement.

"Target: Iraq" was perhaps the most aggressive theme employed by *NBC Nightly News*. It was used 26 times in a variety of combinations, even as negotiations were still underway in the Security Council and elsewhere. As a noun, *target* implies that Iraq is a place or object selected for military attack, especially by aerial bombing or missile assault. As a verb, *target* can be seen as a command to identify, mark, and aim at Iraq. As noun or verb, "Target: Iraq" anticipates, assumes, and metaphorically takes up conflict with Iraq.

The three primary structural metaphors employed by *NBC Nightly News* thus can be seen as anticipating an inevitable conflict with Iraq, even as that conflict was still in doubt. The aggressive nature of the language can be fur-

ther illuminated by consideration of organizing metaphors that were *not* employed by the newscast. For example, "Negotiations: Iraq," "Inspections: Iraq," or "The Debate Over Iraq" might have still yielded some of the dramatic allure seemingly needed by modern newscasts without the overtures to war.

Infrastructure: four metaphors

Structural metaphors provided frameworks, overarching themes to NBC broadcasts. Within individual stories each night, other metaphoric language was used as anchors and reporters strove to make sense of events for viewers. Each report, of course, might have drawn upon a huge trove of figurative language. The analysis revealed, however, a surprisingly limited cluster of metaphors in reporting the prelude to war with Iraq. Four metaphors in particular dominated reporting, connecting coverage night after night: the *Timetable*; the *Games of Saddam*; the *Patience of the White House*; and *Making the Case/Selling the Plan*.

In the reporting of *NBC Nightly News*, the administration had a *timetable* it was trying to follow, a timetable with a final and inevitable destination: war. The timetable, however, was threatened by the *games of Saddam* who adroitly played hide and seek with weapons, and bluffed and gambled his way through weeks of negotiations. The *White House was losing patience* with the process, the UN, and eventually, its allies. Subsequently, the administration was forced to *make its case, sell its plan* to the American people, the UN Security Council, and the world community. In the midst of making the case, the administration led the United States into war.

This was the metaphoric system that connected NBC news reports on Iraq in the weeks preceding the war. *NBC Nightly News* was particularly interested in dramatizing and personalizing *the process* by which the nation eventually, seemingly inevitably, entered into conflict. The network devoted less time and language to verifying claims, assessing evidence, establishing legalities, or weighing outcomes and aftermaths. Instead, as the following sections will show, the evening broadcast was

most interested in the unfolding of the timetable, the machinations of Saddam, the frustration of the White House, and the administration's failure or success at making the case to go to war.

The Timetable

NBC Nightly News used the metaphor of a *timetable for war* to describe the evolving situation between the United States and Iraq. The language of *time* pervaded broadcasts. Some of this language came directly from the Bush administration, whose officials spoke often of *deadlines* and of Saddam *running out of time*. Newscasts adopted and extended such language. For example, on February 17, after world-wide protests against military action, a report stated, "the US reassesses its *timetable for war*." The following day, the newscast said, "*the timetable for war* has been slowed by the epic diplomatic struggle between the United States and others on the UN Security Council." Other metaphors of time supported the notion that the nation was on a timetable for war. On February 15, a report said, "some military experts believe the use of force in Iraq is now just *a matter of time*." The following day, a story said, "Military action is *likely weeks away*." On February 18: "The idea of war and the casualties it will surely bring, *perhaps days away*." Iraq and Saddam Hussein were said to be *running out of time*. "Even as President Bush warns Iraq it's *running out of time* to disarm," said a report of February 22. The following day: "After weeks of saying that *time is running out* for Iraq to disarm, President Bush now says *it's time for the world to act*."

The metaphor could be seen in numerous other reports. "So *the clock does seem to be ticking faster* on two fronts tonight," said a February 26 story. On March 4: "Target Iraq. *The shifting timetable*. Will the US skip the UN and attack Saddam within days?" In that same broadcast, a story asked: "So what is *the timeline* for war?" On March 5: "It has been an up and down day for the Bush administration as *the countdown to war now appears to be in its final stages*." And on March 6: "On the brink of war, President Bush calls a rare prime time news conference. Will he

reveal a new *timetable*?" On March 11: "Pentagon officials say the current UN debate has pushed the military's *timetable for war* back by only a matter of days, not weeks."

The notion of the *timetable* and *deadline*, complementing the structural banner theme of the *countdown*, went unquestioned by the newscast. Anchors and reporters did not pursue the rationale behind a timetable or deadline for war. Why set a deadline? What was its purpose? Why name a particular date? Why not wait, as other nations urged? Rather, the timetable and deadline proved to be convenient devices for network coverage, providing a sense of urgency and drama that spanned the weeks.

The Games of Saddam

In the portrayals offered by *NBC Nightly News*, the timetable for war was threatened by the *games of Saddam*. The metaphor actually combines two tropes. The *game* metaphor was applied to Iraqi actions during weapons inspections. *Saddam* was the metonymic replacement of ruler for state of which Lakoff (1991, 2003) has written. (Metonymy is understood here as a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is substituted for another with which it is closely associated.) Although metaphors of war and sports often overlap, with military action taking on the language of sports and sports adopting the language of war, *games* in the sense employed by *NBC Nightly News* refer more to children's diversions or card games than to sports. With *the games of Saddam*, Saddam Hussein was said to be playing hide and seek with weapons of mass destruction during inspections. He was bluffing the United States and the UN, as if in a poker game, gambling with his future and the future of his people.

For example, on February 9, a story stated that "President Bush kept up the pressure on Iraq today, accusing Saddam Hussein of playing a *game of hide and seek* with weapons of mass destruction." The words *hide and seek* came from the reporter rather than the president. March 21 saw the same words: "US military intelligence sources say the Iraqis have played a

game of hide and seek, firing mobile launchers in southern Iraq even as American forces invade." Reports of March 1 and 2 referred to Saddam's "*game of deception*."

Other reports cast Saddam's actions as card games. For example, on February 24, anchor Tom Brokaw said, "Tonight the great debate about Iraq resembles a *three-handed game of showdown poker with Saddam now sitting at the table playing his cards out in the open*." On March 10, Brokaw continued the metaphor: "*We've gone from showdown poker to 52 pickup, the kid's game in which all the cards are on the floor and all the players are turning them over, trying to find a winning hand*." On March 6, a story said, "Secretary of State Colin Powell made a very strong case for war, saying Saddam Hussein *has thrown away his last chance*."

The *games of Saddam* metaphor personalizes, dramatizes, and perhaps trivializes, the weeks of negotiation that preceded the war with Iraq. The metaphor continues the theme of *the showdown*, the finale of a card game, with Saddam Hussein at the table against President Bush, the United States, and the world. The metaphor also offers a sinister depiction of the Iraqi leader. It portrays Saddam Hussein as a ruler willing to treat war as a game, play with the future of his country and the region, and gamble with the lives of his people.

The Patience of the White House

Another important metaphor on *NBC Nightly News* represented the weeks before war as a time that tested the *patience of the White House*. The metaphor suggested that *the White House was losing patience* with the negotiation process, the UN, and its allies. This metaphor again combines two tropes. The *White House* is another metonymy; it replaces President Bush and his administration with the building. The metaphor then personalizes the metonymy by attributing *patience* to the building or administration.

Early in the period studied, on February 7, a report said, "President Bush, *impatient with the United Nations*, said today it better make up its mind soon about whether to side with the United States." Throughout the month, the

metaphor continued to be used. The lead report on March 9 stated: "For weeks now, the White House has said it wanted to give diplomacy a chance. Well, now it appears that *the White House's patience is running out.*"

Other reports drew upon similar language. On February 9, the newscast stated, "Mr. Bush also said the United Nations *must soon decide whether it's going to be relevant.*" The introduction to the broadcast of February 13: "Countdown Iraq. The eve of the weapons inspectors' report, President Bush *tells the UN to show some backbone.*" Another report, on February 19, began: "Countdown Iraq. The US will bring a new war resolution to a vote of the UN. President Bush *calls it the last chance.*" That report included a brief quotation from President Bush: "At some point in time, obviously, this must come to an end. Yeah, it's *sooner rather than later, I think is the best way to describe it.*" On March 6, the newscast reported, "Privately, White House sources say the president has *voiced his frustration with the diplomatic stalemate at the UN.*"

The metaphor of *the patience of the White House* personalizes the prelude to war but also casts the Bush administration in an authoritative, almost paternal role, in relation to Iraq, the United Nation, and its allies. Parents, for example, lose patience with the games played by children. The metaphor also trivializes the possibility of conflict. Losing patience hardly seems justification for war.

Making the Case/Selling the Plan

The final dominant metaphor in *NBC Nightly News* coverage of the prelude to war with Iraq depicted the Bush administration *making the case* for war or, in another variation, *selling the plan*. A *case* can mean providing facts or evidence in support of a claim for law or a product. In this metaphor, the administration and its spokespersons were portrayed either as prosecutors presenting a case against a defendant or as salespeople trying to sell a product: war.

This metaphor was apparent in reporting on Secretary of State Colin Powell's February 5 presentation to the UN. That night, *NBC Nightly News* said Powell "spelled out with

visual aids and *a prosecutor's rhetoric the administration's case* against Saddam Hussein." Another report, an interview with a former weapons inspector, said, "*His case was devastating.*" And later: "I think that *the case that [sic] was made* and was compelling" and "Almost all, Republicans and Democrats, praising *the strength of Powell's case.*" That same day, the report said of the president and secretary of state: "The two men *tried to build a case* of Iraq's deception and denial." The *case* metaphor was used throughout the time period studied. On March 5, the newscast began: "Countdown Iraq. The secretary of state *makes the strongest case* yet for war." The report said of Powell that "today, he *marshaled the administration's case* against Saddam."

The *case* metaphor was used for other stories, such as reports on allegations of ties between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda: On February 6, a story reported allegations and asked: "*How strong is that case?*" The story continued, "In *making his case*, Powell claimed the ties between Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein go back nearly 10 years and the threat continues today." On February 8, a story summarized the reactions of the German ambassador to Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, "You have to *make the case.*" On February 9, weekend anchor John Seigenthaler asked: "And does this make it more difficult for the United States to *make its case* for the use of force?"

The Bush administration was not the only entity portrayed with the metaphor. On February 14, Iraq too is reported to be "*making its case* to a global audience." The following day, massive peace protests were framed with the same metaphor: "*Washington has failed miserably to convince most of Europe* about the need for force when it comes to Saddam Hussein," and so, "On this one day, so many people in so many different parts of the world *making their case* for peaceful solution to Iraq." And, "To them, *the president's case* against Saddam Hussein remains unconvincing." Reacting to the protests, on February 18, the United States and Britain "are now on the defensive, *trying to make their case for war* against overwhelmingly negative world opinion."

Making the case eventually also became *selling*

the case. The lexical change was significant. The administration figures were no longer prosecutors marshaling facts and pressing a case against defendants but salespeople “pitching” an idea, selling a product or plan. On February 6, the newscast described Bush and Powell: “First team. The president and Colin Powell, side by side, *selling the case* on Iraq.” On February 14, a report said, “*Attempting to sell the war* at home, Mr. Bush argued again today that any battle against terror must include Iraq.” The February 12 newscast said, “While Bush administration officials are convinced this latest bin Laden tape is proof of Iraq’s ties to terrorists, it’s a *hard sell* to the rest of the world.” On February 26, the newscast began: “Target: Iraq. President Bush talks about Iraq after a war, part of the administration’s final *campaign to sell the plan*.” The next day, the broadcast reported, “The administration’s stepped-up efforts to *sell the war* extended to Capitol Hill today.” But the next day, the broadcast said, “It’s not an *easy sell*.”

Making the case and *selling the plan* borrow language from law, business, and marketing to proffer portrayals of the weeks before war. *Making the case* proposes an interesting metaphor: Is the United States the prosecutor? Saddam Hussein the defendant? And who is the jury? The American people? The world? *Selling the plan* provides a more invidious perspective. No longer a time for the presentation of facts in a legal case, the weeks before war became a time for the huckster or the salesperson making a pitch or hawking a product. And what is the product? “President Bush is *selling the war*.”

Discussion: metaphors can kill

In February and early March 2003, war was not inevitable. American allies worked furiously to forestall war. The UN Security Council refused to back conflict. The UN Secretary General and the Pope both urged restraint. Millions protested for peace in the United States and around the world. And yet, through metaphor, through the language of its newscasts, *NBC Nightly News* portrayed the United States on a seemingly inevitable path to war. Rather than

investigate, analyze, or debate the rationale for war, the broadcast instead offered, through metaphor, a dramatization of war unfolding. Accepting that the nation was on a *timetable*, dismissing inspections as the *games of Saddam*, giving voice to the frustration of the White House as it *lost patience* with the process, the broadcast then simply reported how the administration might *make its case* and *sell its plan*.

This research adds support to those who have already charged the news media with failing in its duty to provide debate, history, context, and reporting on the decision to go to war with Iraq (Solomon and Erlich, 2003). Kamiya (2003), for example, has decried “the vulgar flag-waving bombast of the mass media” and “the pro-war chest-beating or too-little, too-late reservations of the nation’s leadings newspapers.” Writing of *Washington Post* coverage, Greider (2003) noted omissions and commissions with stark similarities to *NBC Nightly News* coverage. He wrote, “Instead of examining the factual basis for targeting Iraq, the *Post* largely framed the story line as a Washington drama of inside baseball.” The *Post*, Greider (2003, p. 22) charged, “sold this war.” Metaphor provides a means to understand how the prelude to war was framed and portrayed by news media that anticipated rather than debated the prospect of war.

“Metaphors can kill,” said Lakoff (1991, 2003) in the introductions to essays on metaphor and the Gulf wars of 1991 and 2003. And Sontag (1990, p. 102), writing on illness and metaphor, said: “The metaphors and myths, I was convinced, kill.” For Lakoff, metaphors used by the first and second Bush administrations led to unjust—unjustified—wars that resulted in the killings of thousands. For Sontag, metaphors used for cancer and AIDS led people to reject treatments, follow useless remedies, and resulted in the killings of thousands. In these perspectives, metaphors indeed can kill.

Yet metaphor is a routine and unalterable aspect of human understanding. This article has not then critiqued *NBC Nightly News* or other news outlets for employing metaphor in reporting the prelude to war with Iraq. It might as well critique the newscast for using words. But the article *has* critiqued—and pointed out grim

implications of—particular metaphors used by the newscast.

The metaphors used by *NBC Nightly News* displaced other possible tropes that might have better profited a nation considering war. For example, the metaphor of a *claim* might have been a fruitful term to employ. Through this metaphor, the Bush administration could have been understood as making particular *claims* about the regime of Saddam Hussein. News-casts could have asked what evidence was introduced in support of those claims? Could the claims be verified? How did Saddam Hussein respond to those claims? How did other nations view the claims? The metaphor of the *claim*, as opposed to, for example, the *games of Saddam*, would have suggested more questioning and reporting by the news media. Another possible metaphor might have been a *debate*. The Bush administration could have been seen as engaging in a debate with Iraq, the UN, or its allies. What were administration arguments in support of war? What were counter-arguments? Who made the counter-arguments and to what effect? Many other metaphors might have been employed. Perhaps metaphors of *negotiation*, of *process*, of *decision-making* and *deliberation* could have offered other directions. The purpose would have been to self-consciously employ language that invited debate, encouraged the investigation of claims, invited the assessment of outcomes, and ultimately strived to fulfill the crucial role of the press for a nation considering war.

More than words were at stake. Lakoff and Johnson made clear that metaphors are linked to action.

In most cases, what is at issue is not the truth or falsity of a metaphor but the perceptions and inferences that follow from it and the actions that are sanctioned by it. In all aspects of life, not just in politics or in love, we define our reality in terms of metaphors and then proceed to act on the basis of the metaphors. We draw inferences, set goals, make commitments, and execute plans, all on the basis of how we in part structure our experience, consciously and unconsciously, by means of metaphor. (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 158)

The Bush administration indeed took action, leading the United States into war with Iraq.

But if a different system of metaphors had been used by US news media, would war have been inevitable?

An irony has shadowed the thrust of this research. *War* itself has proved to be an encompassing metaphor for many aspects of US social life. We often use *war* to speak of business, law, sports, medicine, politics, and other fields. Sontag wrote:

Abuse of the military metaphor may be inevitable in a capitalist society, a society that increasingly restricts the scope and credibility of appeals to ethical principle, in which it is thought foolish not to subject one's actions to the calculus of self-interest and profitability. War-making is one of the few activities that people are not supposed to view "realistically"; that is, with an eye to expense and practical outcome. In all-out war, expenditure is all-out, unprudent—war being defined as an emergency in which no sacrifice is excessive. (Sontag, 1990, p. 99)

And so, our society has seen politicians and corporate leaders call for wars on drugs, poverty, fraud, waste, cancer, and AIDS. Though war can be, and must be, understood from numerous cultural, political, critical, and ideological vantage points, war is pervasive in our metaphorical understanding and we need to be especially vigilant to the use of *war* as metaphor and, conversely, to the metaphors that configure war. Lakoff (1991) stated:

There is no way to avoid metaphorical thought, especially in complex matters like foreign policy. I am therefore not objecting to the use of metaphor in itself in foreign policy discourse. My objections are, first, to the ignorance of the presence of metaphor in foreign policy deliberations, second, to the failure to look systematically at what our metaphors hide, and third, to the failure to think imaginatively about what new metaphors might be more benign.

For Lakoff and Sontag, interpretation and criticism can rescue people from metaphors that kill. Interpretation and criticism are a means "to dissolve the metaphors" (Sontag, 1990, p. 102) and a way to reveal "the unconscious system of metaphors that we use without awareness to comprehend reality" (Lakoff, 1991). As Sontag (1990, p. 182) noted, "the metaphors cannot be distanced just by abstaining from them. They have to be exposed, criti-

cized, belabored, used up.” Through scholarship, discussion and interpretation, perhaps, the language of television news can be “exposed, criticized, belabored, used up.” The presence of metaphor in news discourse can be clearly shown and understood. The metaphors chosen can be identified and studied systemati-

cally, their implications made clear. And new metaphors—more thoughtful, encompassing, benign or instructive—can be offered for use. Such attention to the language of news can help inform reporting of war and guard against metaphors that kill.⁶

Notes

- ¹ According to Nielsen Media Research, in early 2003, *NBC Nightly News* posted an average 8.3 rating and 15 share, averaging 11.7 million viewers nightly. ABC followed with 7.5/14 and CBS trailed with 6.3/11.
- ² In more difficult language, Ricoeur (1981) says, “a word receives a metaphorical meaning in specific contexts, within which it is opposed to other words taken literally” (p. 170).
- ³ The citation for the newscast: Brokaw, T. (Host) (2003) “Countries Continue to Debate Iraq, Slowing Down Timetable for War”, *NBC Nightly News*, 18 February, New York: National Broadcasting Company. Rather than provide citations for each news story quoted, filling the reference list with nearly 100 additional items, I will reference the day and story in the manuscript.
- ⁴ In American culture, the *countdown* is often associated with space rocket and shuttle launches. The aerospace dimension complements the newscast’s militaristic use of the countdown metaphor.
- ⁵ It is of interest to note that NBC anchor Tom Brokaw spent a week in February reporting from Turkey, Qatar, Kuwait, and Jordan. His presence overseas added to the impression of the newscast that war was in the offing.
- ⁶ The thought echoes a long-ago passage from James Carey (1974) on journalism and criticism. Press criticism, Carey wrote, “is essentially the criticism of language: it is a vital response on the part of the public to the language the press uses to describe events and to the events that accepted standards of journalistic language allow to be described” (p. 244).

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