

# Perfecting the Narrative: The Bush Administration's Construction of the 2003 United States Invasion of Iraq



# Puzzle and Research Question

- The puzzle that this thesis grappled with stemmed from an initial inquiry into the applicability of Just War Theory (JWT) to classify a conflict as just or unjust.
- Specifically, this thesis was interested in moving beyond JWT's macro approach to conflict analysis, that is its focus on the broader justifications put forth by actors of a conflict, and whether they produce a just cause for the war's occurrence.
- Instead, this thesis sought to focus on the specific narratives and tools (such as tropes and imagery) utilized in building these broader constructions.
- Therefore, using a conflict that has been widely debated by JWT scholars, as well as the broader international community, this thesis sought to analyze the narratives and tools utilized by the Bush administration in the constructions employed by these actors surrounding their justification/understanding of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq.
- As such, my research asked the following question:
  - **How did the Bush administration construct the 2003 US invasion of Iraq?**

# Significance of Study

- The significance of this study is twofold:
  - **Personal significance:** As a woman of Middle Eastern and Muslim background, I felt it necessary to raise attention to the potential problematic narratives constantly being employed by Western actors to facilitate their continuous hegemony, as well as justify modern imperial conquests that have destructive impacts both domestically and abroad.
  - **Contribution to knowledge:** This study contributed knowledge surrounding the use of problematic tools in the field of conflict studies, that is the predominant use of JWT. Specifically, this study highlighted the limited approach a broad macro analysis, as utilized by JWT scholars, has when assessing the just nature and legality of a certain conflict. This was achieved through dissecting the narratives and tools utilized to construct these macro justifications under focus, in order to highlight their roots in problematic discourses and knowledge that would render any conflict unjust, and therefore of an illegal nature (see Egan, 2007, Khalid, 2011; Welch, 2010).

# Research Design

- This study employed a qualitative framing and critical discourse analysis of public addresses from President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell regarding the 2003 US invasion of Iraq.
  - These actors were selected for the following reasons:
    - The administration were the main actors behind the invasion.
    - Bush and Powell provided the most public addresses leading up to the invasion and were the most accessible.
- The sampling range was February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2003 to May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2003.
  - Significance of February 5<sup>th</sup>: Colin Powell presents to the United Nations Security Council the first ever US public evidence against Iraq and its possession of weapons of mass destruction/ties to Al-Qaeda.
  - Significance of May 2<sup>nd</sup>: The day after President Bush delivered his 'Mission Accomplished' speech announcing the end of major combat operations in Iraq.
- Purposeful sampling was utilized to select sources directly related to the invasion. 20 sources were selected in total, split equally between both actors. Half of the proposed data sources were also selected prior to the March 19<sup>th</sup> invasion, and half after.
- Framing analysis as outlined by Robert Entman (1993) was utilized to highlight any repetitive frames employed by the administration in their construction of the invasion.
- Critical discourse analysis as outlined by Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer (2001; 2009) was employed to dissect the discourses, i.e., narratives and tools, used to construct the dominant frames found by framing analysis, and whether they were rooted in an ideological preference that reproduced problematic knowledge and practices, specifically ones that date back to the colonial era.

# Theoretical Tools

- This study was primarily concerned with the utilization of colonial narratives and practices by the Bush administration in their construction of the invasion. Therefore, the following three theoretical tools were applied to aid in such findings:
  - Edward Said's (1979) *Orientalism*
  - Makua Mutua's (2001) *Savage-Victim-Savior Metaphor*
  - Achille Mbembe's (2003; 2009) *Necropolitics*
- Both Said and Mutua's work were utilized to pinpoint the presence of specific colonial discourses and practices by the administration in their construction of the invasion.
- Afterwards, Mbembe's work on necropolitics was applied as a final tool to analyze whether the administration partook in the application of necropolitics during the 2003 invasion and subsequent occupation.

## Key Findings: The Construction of the Colonial 'Other'

- The most dominant frames employed by the administration were the human factor frame (which discussed Iraqi civilians) and the brutality of Saddam Hussein's regime frame, with the administration constructing these these frames/groupings (i.e., Iraqi civilians and Hussein's regime) alongside narratives and practices that have been utilized in the past to construct the Colonial Other.
- When employing the brutality of Hussein's regime, the administration articulated the discourse of the colonial savage.
  - Utilized narratives of the Orient/Savage metaphor when describing Hussein.
  - Reinforced the colonial understanding that the savage can be found within the cultural fabrics of Third World societies, in this case the culture of the Middle East, i.e., the Oriental world.
- When employing the human factor frame, the administration imposed the victim metaphor on Iraqi civilians, a metaphor Mutua (2001) discusses within his work.
  - Specifically, Iraqi civilians were characterized as helpless, innocent beings who faced tremendous horrors at the hands of a savage state, i.e., common colonial narratives when discussing the 'Other'.
- Furthermore, the imposition of this victimhood narrative was reinforced through another common colonial practice, that is the erasure of the colonial 'other' from the discussion.
  - The administration silenced the 'Other' by continuously speaking for Iraqis, imposing the exteriority that Said (1979) claims Orientalism achieves, which reinforced the belief in the victimhood narrative.
  - The administration wiped out the individuality and culture of Iraqi civilians, instead replacing it with knowledge and identity based on Western understandings (ones that reinforced the belief in the victimhood narrative., an application of Fanon's theory on the construction of the colonial subject.
  - The administration only provided identity and context to Iraqi Americans who had immigrated to the US and adopted a western style of life. Doing so allowed the continued belief in colonial understandings of the 'Other', specifically their victimhood, as well as the humanity they are attributed by virtue of assimilating into Western societies.

## Key findings: Iraq as a 'Deathworld'

- A process of othering can be seen as having been undertaken by the administration when constructing the invasion using the two dominant frames dissected (i.e., constructing the colonial 'other' within Iraq).
  - As such the the utilization of necropolitics by the administration can be highlighted within Iraq.
- Specifically, through the process of othering achieved when constructing the colonial other, a state of exception was created within Iraq, pointing to a potential explanation as to the inapplicability of the rule of law within this conflict.
- By creating this state of exception, the administration was able to apply necropolitics within this conflict, allowing the Iraq invasion to operate outside the rule of international law.
  - Instead, Iraq can be seen as having been turned into a 'deathworld' filled with a population of the 'living dead', enabling its maximal destruction.
- This state of exception was further reinforced through a common pattern of Bush and Powell. This pattern was the constant critique of the UN and the inapplicability of its doctrines and laws within Iraq by both these actors.
- The application of necropolitics within Iraq illuminates one of the various tools that West has utilized in justifying neocolonial/imperial violence in zones that are accepted as inferior and therefore suitable to said actions.

# Key Argument

- Given the findings of this thesis, the key argument is as follows:
  - The 2003 US invasion of Iraq was constructed by the Bush administration using narratives and practices that date back to the colonial era.
  - In constructing the two most dominant frames, the Bush administration constructed the colonial 'Other' when discussing Iraqi civilians and Saddam Hussein's regime.
  - Furthermore, this construction of the 'Other' in turn indicates a process of othering that enabled a state of exception within Iraq, allowing the application of necropolitics that ensured the maximal destruction of this zone of conflict and its civilians.
  - As such, the dominance of JWT to assess whether the invasion was just or unjust fails to account for the various tools and narratives utilized in the broader justifications that JWT evaluates.
    - Therefore, JWT as a tool used for conflict analysis can enable the continued presence of unequal power relations and problematic colonial discourses that continue to legitimize illegal and unjust imperial wars.



# Limitations and Future Directions

- Limitations:
  - By focusing only on the Bush administration, the narratives and tools employed by other actors who can sway public opinion, such as the mainstream media, as well as anti-war discourses, are absent.
  - Furthermore, the sampling range, although appropriate given the size of this study, also illustrates another limitation.
    - The Iraq invasion was a lengthy conflict, and as such, narratives changed as time progressed, especially after the Abu Ghraib incident.
- Future Directions:
  - A continuous need within the field of conflict studies to question the suitability of various tools used for conflict analysis, and their ability to mask unequal power relations in the form of justifying and/or allowing the continued presence of modern imperial violence.
  - Furthermore, there is a necessity in this field of research to move past the administration, as touched on above, and focus on a broader range of actor's utilization, understanding, and acceptance of these narratives.

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