

The Dominant American Narrative between 9/11/01 and the Invasion of Iraq

Introduction to a potential dissertation that aims to analyze the dominant American narrative between 9/11/01 and the invasion of Iraq through positioning theory and the literature on humiliation and conflict

By Pamela Creed

In March 2003 the United States (US) used preemptive unilateral force to invade a sovereign nation and overthrow its leader – Saddam Hussein. The justification for the invasion rested on two major assumptions: Iraq was secretly and illegally building a weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program that threatened the security of the region and Europe; and a link existed between Iraq and Al Qaeda, the terrorist group responsible for the attacks on US soil on September 11, 2001. Throughout the period leading up to the invasion a passionate debate engulfed the US and ultimately the international community.

The debate involved competing distinct discourses, which evolved from different understandings of the underlying causes for the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Eventually, a hegemonic discourse emerged that went on to shape reality for the nation and the individuals directly involved. As a nation we remain embroiled in the debate of the legitimacy of the war that resulted from the dominant narrative. Individuals at many levels - political, business and military - were caught in the uptake and went on to live the reality of the narrative as events unfolded in Iraq.

The dominant discourse after 9/11 embraced a narrative that featured Saddam Hussein as an ally in the terror campaign against the west and a dangerous enemy of the

US. The Bush administration created and pushed this narrative through the media and through the White House rhetoric. Eventually the narrative gained enough support among the American public to become the accepted and legitimate narrative. The competing narrative was marginalized into near oblivion and the march toward a patriotic war increased in fervor. Many young Americans eagerly joined the military to serve their country in what the discourse, both literally and implicitly, called a glorious and noble cause – the protection of the ‘homeland’ and ultimately freedom.

This study will consist of two phases. The first phase will be a descriptive study of the dominant discourse that evolved after 9/11 and preceded the 2003 invasion of Iraq. This part of the study will explore the language and meta-myths used to create a narrative and position it as the dominant, legitimate discourse. An analytical review of speeches made by President Bush will be done in order to examine language for indicators of the possibility that deep-rooted feelings of national humiliation caused by the attacks of 9/11 were a significant factor in the public uptake of the narrative and the subsequent mobilization for war. I will seek to demonstrate that this discourse shaped an understanding of national identity through powerful myths that also subtly reveal feelings of collective humiliation and the desire to defend a perceived impugned sense of honor.

The second phase will explore more specifically the interface of the national narrative with the personal stories of the soldiers who fought in the Iraqi war itself. By conducting interviews with individual soldiers recruited in the months leading up to the war, I hope to learn their personal feelings after 9/11, the impact of those feelings on their decisions to serve in their war and the relationship, if any, of their personal feelings to the feelings invoked through the 9/11 narrative. The intent of this part of the study will be to

describe the soldiers' understanding of the legitimating discourse and to explore the relationship between the narrative, their personal reactions to 9/11, and their feelings about the lived experience of the war. It is hoped that this complex exploration through the interaction of text, discourse and context will reveal the dynamics of the relationship between a reality constructed around a narrative of perceived national humiliation and the need to restore honor, and the lived experience and feelings of individuals caught in the narrative's uptake. It is further hoped that this exploration will provide an opportunity for conflict analysts to better understand the often over-looked impact of humiliation on national and individual choices – choices that far too often compel us to unwittingly continue a cycle of destruction and death.