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Trump's Rhetoric at 100 Days: Contradictions within Effective Emotional Narratives

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100 days after his inauguration, there is still a tone of disbelief underlying accounts of the Trump White House. The election of a brash, reality TV star to the highest seat of power has, thankfully, yet to be fully normalised (Williams 2017). The president's statements frequently seem surreal (Nelson 2017). When asked about launching 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles against Assad's forces, the President of the United States had perfect recollection of the chocolate cake he had been eating at the time, but had to be reminded which country he had bombed (Phillips 2017). Trump uses Twitter as a medium for public diplomacy, and as an outlet for frustrations with his political partners (Trump 2017a; 2017b). His press secretary, Sean Spicer, is openly aggressive with the press, at times making ludicrous statements (e.g. Hitler never used gas), but has so far remained safe in his post because he 'gets great ratings' (Shugerman 2017). More troubling, Trump and his team have lied to the media since inauguration (Washington Post 2017). Subjects as diverse as crowd-sizes, voter fraud and imaginary terror attacks have all been falsely presented to the public (e.g. Sharman 2017). In addition to these issues with the truth, Trump is a known conspiracy theorist, having entered the political sphere as a 'birther', arguing that Barack Obama was hiding secret documents that would have made him ineligible to lead the United States (Hasan 2017). In office, he has falsely accused Obama of spying on him (Diamond et al 2017).

All this poses a problem as to how to study Trump's discourse. How can we understand the security and foreign policy priorities of the new regime in a world of 'post-truth' politics? Here, we put forward the argument that the Trump White House must be conceptualised as engaged in a discursive war of position with its detractors. Through processes of othering and differentiation the president attempts to construct and sustain a regime of truth on US security that can consolidate a base of support strong enough to make possible his foreign policy agenda. We look at the nature of the discursive struggles surrounding the White House and how competing parties may take advantage of unfolding events. For this, we suggest,

opponents must simultaneously exploit Trump's discursive weaknesses – lies, contradictions, and conspiracies – and counter his largest discursive strength – an ability to craft powerful and resonant security narratives, centred on the construction of threatening Others and the manipulation of emotions such as fear, nostalgia and hope.

Trump's rhetorical style is striking in both its simplicity and its bluntness. However, despite being almost completely inarticulate by conventional standards, it is effective. The president's speeches are frequently characterised by self-interruptions, angry tangents, and repetition of the same limited vocabulary of adjectives. This style is, at times, reminiscent of that of George W Bush, who was also mocked for his ineloquence, but was still re-elected in 2004 having set the core self and other narratives of the war on terror to his own advantage (Holland 2012: 51). Although he is prone to meandering, Trump, like Bush, is particularly adept at repeating the most important elements of his discourse, and therefore succeeds in driving his core identity messages home for key audiences (e.g. opting to rally his base on day 100, see Kenny 2017). The problem inherent to this apparently natural technique (Collinson 2017) is that it is disorganised and therefore Trump's 'narratives' can be sporadic and contradictory.

On the rare but important occasions in which he follows the pre-arranged script, Trump is able to deliver succinct and powerful messages to a core constituency. Most significantly, Trump's election hinged upon the resonance of his key campaign slogan, Make America Great Again (MAGA). Trump told a (narrative) story which reached back into the foundational myths of US history (and exceptionalism), through a romanticised nostalgia for the recent past (e.g. Reagan), and (via an active verb) promised to deliver a glorious patriotic future, befitting of a great nation. Derided for its parsimony (Leith 2017), this slogan is remarkably affecting and effective. It worked in just four synecdochal words (or letters), which fitted on (ubiquitous) baseball caps and was widely understood by even the most disengaged of voters. In only four letters, MAGA tells a story of greatness, followed by a struggle in dark times, before reassuring Americans that their – and Trump's – patriotism will deliver a better, safer and more prosperous tomorrow. Trump's MAGA story speaks to nostalgia, fear, and hope, in apparent contrast to Hillary Clinton's – and the DC swamp's – mastery of policy detail. Far more than just campaign rhetoric, the MAGA theme was continued to serve as the bedrock foundation for Trump's first 100 days. This was instantly

made apparent in his inaugural address. American political culture dictates that a victorious presidential candidate should reach out to the losing side in order to unify the nation. Instead, Trump made sure his supporters would continue to see him as ‘their man’ behind enemy lines. ‘America First’ might have shocked the neo-liberal orthodoxy, but it did what it was designed to do: connect with those disenfranchised by the Washington status quo, as part of a self-styled populist Jacksonian uprising. This politically effective image has been actively promoted throughout Trump’s first 100 days by the president and his team (Exum 2017).

Trump’s narration of an uprising has required the construction of numerous threatening Others. At home this has been the ‘swamp’ of DC politics. Abroad, Trump has revelled in emphasising the threat from ‘radical Islamic terrorism’, immigrants, and China. While it can be difficult to pinpoint exactly what is at risk, this vagueness serves a useful political purpose, encouraging Americans to see themselves as unified in opposition to myriad mutual threats. Such subject positioning enables Trump to place himself alongside the audience, as the only person who can point to the dangerous and threatening other(s) on the horizon. Trump simply insists, ‘I am [the only one] on your side’ (Graham, 2017). Such claims undergird and support a political and foreign policy rhetoric that is seemingly at odds with – and unencumbered by – the usual parameters of established discourse. That, of course, is part of the populist appeal.

Krebs (2015) theorises that the success of discursive interventions depends largely on the settled or unsettled nature of the narrative situation. The inauguration of a Washington outsider with no political experience did much to unsettle the domestic narrative situation even if it may not have immediately affected the discursive structures of US foreign and security policy. Since taking power, Trump has periodically taken steps that have further unsettled the foreign policy narrative situation. The decision to launch airstrikes against the Syrian regime threatened to rupture a prolonged discursive and political deadlock that had been in place since Obama chose not to militarily enforce the chemical weapons ‘red line’ in 2013, whilst still insisting ‘Assad must go’ (Ralph, Holland & Zhekova, 2017). Likewise, the ‘Mother of All Bombs’ dropped in Nangarhar province created a new threshold for what constituted acceptable counter-terrorist force. As North Korea tested their nuclear weapons, Vice-President Pence explicitly pointed to the shows of force in Syria and Afghanistan when warning the communist regime not to ‘test [Trump’s] resolve or the strength of the armed

forces of the United States' (Rampton & Wong, 2017). This has led to claims that nuclear war is 'becoming thinkable' on the Korean peninsula (Ricks, 2017). With each challenge to established foreign policy narratives, Trump, advertently or otherwise, undermines their dominance and creates new opportunities for strategic discursive interventions.

Resisting the normalisation of Trump's foreign policy (and presidency) is important. That can and should work in two principal ways. First, it is necessary to take seriously the power of the emotional narratives that propelled him to office. Rational policy pronouncements in lieu of resonant emotional and patriotic narratives risk facilitating the rise of populist challenges. Both Hillary Clinton's doomed campaign and the UK's EU referendum pay partial testimony to that, in contrast with Macron's more effective campaign slogans ('Together, the Republic' and 'En Marche!'). It is necessary to marry logos with pathos to sustain an alternative to the emotive appeal of right-wing populism. Second, and crucially, by framing himself as the defender of the American people, Trump leaves himself open to attack when he fails to respect the symbols and traditions of the nation. Immanent critique is clearly possible. John Ikenberry (2017) has written on the president's seeming disregard for norms and values. Whilst this can work in his favour when he breaks with international conventions in order to put America first, it damages him when he forgets to place his hand on his heart during the national anthem, publicly criticises the military, or inexplicably compares his own television ratings to the news coverage of 9/11 (Associated Press, 2017). The Jacksonian tradition is as fiercely patriotic as it is anti-establishment. Stephen Walt (2017) has suggested that the president does not care about the nation's place in the world so long as he can take credit for America's successes and blame others for his failures. This rings true and should be exploited, by highlighting trivial habits such as referring to himself rather than the nation, and emphasising the on-going saga over the investigation into potential collusions with Russia and the highly unusual dismissal of James Comey as director of the FBI. As America transitions from disbelief to resistance, this offers a potentially powerful synergy, drawing attention to the contradictions within the resonant emotional narratives that sustain Trump's presidency.

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