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The Minting of a President: Imperialism and the Presidency

The Trump administration's relationship to established mass-media within the United States has proven to be strained at best.¹ While the relationship has proven adversarial, the representation of President Trump's foreign policy within the mass-media presents an extremely useful look at what it means to be "presidential" in the United States. The definition of what constitutes "presidential" behavior is so vague as to be nearly meaningless, construed as: "Of, relating to, or befitting a president or a president's authority."² To become president is to become a figurehead of a larger apparatus that the greater population projects its hopes and fears onto thus necessitating action on the part of the figurehead.³ With such a vague notion of what constitutes presidential behavior, the symbolic space this term navigates within becomes very wide and allows for a broad scope of actionable behavior. In order for such action to proceed a process must reify this term and give it a widely-used and precise definition so that individuals can interpret it. This process of reification occurs through a transference of symbolic characterizations that flow from presidential actions into their portrayals in mass-media. The media's general interpretation of this term has largely hinged on its favorable coverage of violent, imperialist policies that the president engages in. Specifically, since the fall of the Soviet Union and "anti-communism," the media has pivoted to using "anti-terrorism" as a way to gauge

¹ Reilly, "Presidents and the Press Have Long Been Adversarial. But Trump Is Something New," *Fortune*, Fortune, 30 Nov. 2016.

² "presidential," *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, 2020. 3 March 2020.

³ Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*. University of Illinois Press, 1964. pp. 73-6.

what is indicative of presidential behavior.⁴ In the Trump administration specifically, there are three events that clearly demonstrate how the media judges violent, imperialist actions as being “presidential” while peaceful, diplomatic efforts are seen as weak and not befitting of presidential character. Through an analysis of media coverage regarding President Trump’s assassination of General Soleimani and his retaliatory Shayrat Missile Strike, as well as his diplomatic efforts with North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un, the discursive practices and motifs examined show how the mass media and state actors obscure and justify imperialistic actions, denigrate attempts at diplomatic solutions, and construct one primary aspect of what it means to be Presidential: to utilize state violence abroad.

Methodology

Why Examine Language to Explain the Construction of Presidential Character? In order to come to an understanding of what presidential character is, one must analyze the symbolic to find its constitutive element. Language is “the makeup of our internal lives,” structuring everything we use to understand the world around us including our subconscious.⁵ Thus language is the symbol that underlies all other symbols and is “the distinctive characteristic of human beings,” without which we could not engage in conceptual processes that mark the human experience.⁶ Any analysis, no matter the material, would be unable to proceed without ultimately structuring that analysis around language and, in a way then, this paper is a meta-analysis of language. Specifically, the way in which language is never neutral: it always functions as an “intrinsic part of some particular social situation.”⁷ In this case-study, language is used in a

⁴ Daalder, Ivo and James Lindsay, “Nasty, Brutish and Long: America’s War on Terrorism,” *Brookings*, Brookings. 10 May 2017.

⁵ Gasperoni, John. “The Unconscious is Structured Like A Language,” *Qui Parle*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1996, pp. 77-104.

⁶ Edelman, “The Language of the Helping Professions.” *Politics and Society*, vol. 4, no. 3, pp. 296.

⁷ Edelman, “The Language of the Helping Professions,” 296.

definite way to construct the presidential character; a character which, as a symbol, cannot be neutral.

The Symbolic World of Politics. The study of the political necessitates one to study the symbolic processes that shape it in the way a majority of the population are most familiar with. As Edelman writes: “For most men most of the time politics is a series of pictures in the mind, placed there by television news, newspapers, magazines and discussion.”⁸ Since language is the foundational symbol, it ultimately shapes the political through its exposition in the media through varying forms of communicatory technology. Through language comes the separation between actors and spectators.⁹ The president here belongs to the designation of actor and becomes the primary symbolic representative of the state whose success can be measured by their ability to provide symbolic reassurance to the spectators.¹⁰ Engaging in violent international actions through foreign policy initiatives provides such symbolic reassurance while also satiating the appetite of the spectators who demand symbols through media instead of news.¹¹ Engaging in political acts like the ones which will be analyzed are surefire ways of generating a symbolic discourse within the media at large that reaffirms the leaders’ “presidential” character, while engaging in non-aggressive actions leads those who are tasked with disseminating symbols to cast doubt on the ‘presidential’ character of whomever may be in office.

The Analysis of Articles in Popular Media. In the following section, “Examination of Cases,” I analyze numerous articles from a variety of sources within popular media, including: NBC, The Hill, CNN and more in order to examine their discursive content. I will focus on how they frame the events they are relaying, how they use euphemism to subvert criticism and

⁸ Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, 5.

⁹ Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, 173.

¹⁰ Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, 76.

¹¹ Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, 9.

achieve palatability in relation to violence, and ultimately the way they define presidential behavior. These primary sources will be further analyzed in the following section titled “Synthesis and Discussion” through a framework that draws broadly upon several different modes of thought including media criticism, cognitive metaphor theory, and political symbolism in order to situate the analysis of this discourse amongst greater themes in the creation of the Presidential character.

Examination of Three Cases

The Assassination Qasem Soleimani. The death of Qasem Soleimani and its reception in the media at large presents a key opportunity to observe the way in which acts of violence abroad are portrayed in the U.S. media, especially as they occur. Here, 3 sources will be examined in depth: an NBC Nightly News broadcast, as well as an article each in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*.¹²

On January 3rd, 2020, President Trump directed the Joint Chiefs of Staff to conduct an airstrike targeting the Baghdad International Airport.¹³ The strike was conducted in order to kill Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, someone who supposedly presented an “imminent threat” to United States military assets in the greater Middle-Eastern region.¹⁴ The depiction of this event in every source here failed to scrutinize the justification for the strike in any meaningful way, simply parroting U.S. military officials such as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo who stated that:

¹² These are all reports made immediately following Soleimani’s death. While some media outlets pivoted towards a more critical stance on Trump’s actions, it is essential to look at reports that immediately follow any given action since they are what dictate the public response and what permeates public discourse. All claims here are made about these initial media responses and portrayals, not the media as a monolithic entity. Criticism, generally, is retroactive.

¹³ “U.S. Drone Strike Kills Top Iranian General Qassem Soleimani.” *NBCNews.com*, NBCUniversal News Group, 3 January 2020.

¹⁴ “U.S. Drone Strike Kills Top Iranian General Qassem Soleimani.” *NBCNews.com*.

“President Trump’s decision to remove Qasem Soleimani from the battlefield saved American lives,” essentially restating Trump’s tweet that claimed Soleimani had “killed or badly wounded thousands of Americans over an extended period of time, and was plotting to kill many more.”¹⁵ This alarmist rhetoric certainly made it difficult for any counter-analysis to compete, but no attempt was made here whatsoever to give it any credence. In fact, David Sanger of the *New York Times* rationalized Trump’s actions, stating: “The calculus was straightforward: Washington had to re-establish deterrence, and show the Iranian leadership that missiles fired at ships in the Persian Gulf and at oil facilities in Saudi Arabia, along with attacks inside Iraq that cost the life of an American contractor, would not go without a response.”¹⁶ Each piece of media offers differing discursive reasons as to why this tactical strike was a necessity: Sanger mentions the “revival of Iran’s nuclear program” as something else that constituted an “immanent-threat;”¹⁷ the continuous assertion that Soleimani was dangerous and planning to kill Americans without any qualifying evidence;¹⁸¹⁹²⁰ that Soleimani was a “regional leader” and thus a “terrorist” by connection;²¹ again, no qualifiers are given in any of these assertions, being stated as if they are factually correct for the very reason that they have been stated in the first place. The continuous characterization of Soleimani and those around him as “the personification of evil” paint the picture of a bad man who needed to die in return for the deaths that he had caused.²² Never mind this portrayal is from David Petraeus, former commander of U.S. forces in

¹⁵ Loveluck, Louisa. “Iran Vows Revenge after U.S. Drone Strike Kills Elite Force Commander.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 3 January 2020.

¹⁶ Sanger, David. “For Trump, a Risky Gamble to Deter Iran.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 3 January 2020.

¹⁷ Sanger.

¹⁸ Sanger.

¹⁹ “U.S. Drone Strike Kills Top Iranian General Qassem Soleimani.” *NBCNews.com*.

²⁰ Loveluck.

²¹ Loveluck.

²² Sanger.

Iraq.²³ It is hard to challenge these claims when they are not based on any substance from the start, presupposed as being truisms. Especially when, after the fact, the justifications are proven to have been smokescreens in the first place.²⁴ In this way, the initial media response was complicit in Trump's use of imperialist violence abroad by avoiding conflicting opinions, taking the bulk of their content straight from U.S. government officials, and using discourse to characterize Soleimani as a run-of-the-mill "terrorist" whose crimes needed no proof in order to play the part of international executioner. This decontextualization seems to be one of the most powerful discursive forms at play within these articles. Statistics are thrown out to the audience without qualification or context, and the account is taken as factual because he is depicted as someone who one can suppose would engage in such acts of terrorism.²⁵ The complicit language and sourcing within the articles that covered this event as it unfolded not only justify the behavior, but normalize it as part of the presidential character. The linkage in this example is rather subtle on its surface, in the next example it is essentially admitted plainly on live television.

The Shayrat Missile Strike. On the morning of April 7th, 2017, President Trump ordered a retaliatory launch of 59 Tomahawk missiles targeting a Syrian airbase following Syria's use of chemical weapons.²⁶ For this case, I will be examining two particular articles, through which I will interpret the words of one CNN anchor: one from The Hill, and one from NBC.²⁷ In order to identify general discursive practices, I will identify the similarities between the articles. To

²³ Sanger.

²⁴ Cooper, Helene, et al. "As Tensions With Iran Escalated, Trump Opted for Most Extreme Measure." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 5 January 2020.

²⁵ Loveluck.

²⁶ Kube, Courtney et al. "U.S. Launches Missiles at Syrian Base Over Chemical Weapons Attack," *NBC News*, NBCUniversal News Group, 7 April 2017.

²⁷ Once again, these articles have been picked because they show the unfolding media response surrounding the event: coverage that sculpts public discourse and shapes the public's perception of the symbolic. However, this means these chosen articles are not representative of the media's coverage of the event as a whole over time.

begin, both report in a very matter-of-fact manner. President Trump, and his reasons for ordering the strike, take center stage. In particular, it is divulged, Trump felt compelled to act after viewing the “aftermath” of the gas attacks perpetrated by the Assad government.²⁸ There is very little discussion from anyone on the ground in Syria, with facts being laid out bare in a cold and detached fashion that feature the number of missiles launched and official statements from government institutions and those in office.²⁹³⁰ There is no questioning, and only in the NBC article is a token position examined by including statements from Russian and Syrian officials before quickly pivoting to counter-statements from Syrian rebel groups and American officials.³¹ The NBC article relates from the pentagon that the launch was a “proportional response,” while repeating then-secretary of state Rex Tillerson’s assertion that the U.S. had a “high degree of confidence” that sarin gas was used by the Syrian government on its people.³² Here one can see the process of framing up close: both publications fail to effectively scrutinize these two key assertions: whether this really was a “proportional response” and whether or not the U.S. could prove with certainty that sarin gas had been used. Additionally, the amount of missiles that actually hit their target is a statistic which varies widely depending on the government speaking, and NBC places the U.S. assessment up top, treating it like unquestionable fact.³³ There are major pathos appeals made in the included Trump statement, focusing on how “Assad choked out the lives of helpless men, women and children” through the use of “deadly chemical weapons.”³⁴ Again, the practically non-contested inclusion of this official statement frames the way in which the public views the event and invariably shapes their perception of Syria’s

²⁸ Kube, Courtney et al.

²⁹ Hensch, Mark. “CNN Host: Donald Trump Became President Last Night,” *The Hill*, 7 April 2017.

³⁰ Kube, Courtney et al.

³¹ Kube, Courtney et al.

³² Kube, Courtney et al.

³³ Kube, Courtney et al.

³⁴ Kube, Courtney et al.

government. Another mechanism of such framing is to euphemize, using specific terms to ultimately give support to or avoid critical examination of terms used in varying statements.³⁵ In this instance, euphemism is used in such a way as to mark the United States as, above all, ultimately altruistic. This is in stark contrast to the Syrian “regime” in power, a word with its own negative connotations that would never be used to describe an American government.³⁶³⁷ To examine the way in which euphemism is beneficial to exercises of power, one can examine how this gas strike, which has been questionably confirmed at this point, is associated again and again to the Syrian government’s perpetuation of “bloodshed” and the killing of civilians.³⁸ There is no euphemism here: the facts provided to the media are laid out bare. On the other hand, when discussing America’s actions, the fact that six were killed in the strike is only mentioned once, with NBC reporting that the U.S. had not targeted civilians as a means of not having to examine the alternative claim that the strike had killed seven civilians, including four children.³⁹⁴⁰ At the end of the article, a statement from Sen. Marco Rubio is included, reading that “Trump should now work with other countries to ‘create alternatives to the Assad regime.’”⁴¹ The phrase “regime change” here acts as a euphemism for terms with nastier connotations such as “coup”⁴² or “overthrow,”⁴³ allowing imperialistic attitudes to be laundered through the rhetoric of “regime change.”⁴⁴ How these discursive practices frame violence as being intertwined with the notion of presidential character is easy to assess, considering the media states this plainly. The day

³⁵ Edelman, “The Language of the Helping Professions.” 301-303.

³⁶ Kube, Courtney et al.

³⁷ “regime,” *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, 2020. 2 March 2020.

³⁸ Kube, Courtney et al.

³⁹ Kube, Courtney et al.

⁴⁰ Mckernan, Bethan. “Syria Claims U.S. Airstrike Killed Seven People, Including Four Children.” *The Independent*, Independent Digital News and Media, 7 April 2017.

⁴¹ Kube, Courtney et al.

⁴² “coup,” *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, 2020. 2 March 2020.

⁴³ “overthrow,” *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, 2020. 2 March 2020.

⁴⁴ Kube, Courtney et al.

following the missile strike, Fareed Zakaria, a host on CNN, stated that “Donald Trump became president of the United States last night.”⁴⁵ By equivocating an act of violence abroad to a capstone to the process of becoming president, Zakaria stated plainly what most media attempts to hide through euphemism, exclusion and framing: that the mark of a president is to engage in military actions abroad, including acts of imperialist violence where the pretense for action is not even built on solid ground.⁴⁶⁴⁷ The message is clear: in order to be “minted” as president, and to thus embody the presidential character, one must engage with the world in a violent way. To act in a contrary fashion, as we shall see, is received much less warmly by the media and those in government institutions.

President Trump’s Diplomatic Efforts with North Korea. Negotiation is a cornerstone of international diplomacy, allowing nations to come to consensus agreements in order to prevent war. One would assume that efforts to find peaceful solutions would be met by support within the media and those in government; however, one would be wrong. There will be five articles assessed here from different sources, including: *The National Review*, *Salon*, *NY Mag*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Hill*.⁴⁸ All cover Trump’s meeting with Kim Jong-un either in North Korea itself or their summit in Vietnam. Across all of these articles, there is one primary commonality: the term appeasement, defined as: “To make concessions...often at the sacrifice of principles.”⁴⁹ This term has become synonymous with Neville Chamberlain’s failure to negotiate effectively with Hitler thus leading to the second world war, an association that is used here to

⁴⁵ Hensch.

⁴⁶ Kube, Courtney et al.

⁴⁷ Hensch.

⁴⁸ These articles were chosen since they represent the dominant media response to the major events of 2019 between the two world leaders. Namely, their meeting in the DMZ, their summit in Vietnam, and their summit in Singapore.

⁴⁹ “appeasement,” *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, 2020. March 6 2020.

describe Trump's "peace in our time moment," or Tim Ryan's comparison of Trump meeting Kim Jong-Un in North Korea as being like "Chamberlain going to talk to Hitler."⁵⁰⁵¹ This all calls to mind notions of weak leadership and "bowing" to the demands of a "rogue state."⁵² Here the agenda is clear: when it comes to international affairs, approaching the bargaining table is seen as unseemly to the presidential character; one must be tough and engage in violence similar to those cases covered prior. If not, the assumption is that we are "getting played."⁵³ In this instance, the amount of ground that is lost is vastly overstated. The only result was America postponing military exercises along the DMZ which, as it turns out, were still happening digitally and were not widely publicized so as to not upset the North.⁵⁴⁵⁵ Even so, Madelaine Albright characterized Trump coming to the table as a "Kim-win."⁵⁶ Throughout these articles North Korea is identified as being a strictly enemy force in a multitude of ways. At times, North Korea's nuclear weapons program is used to stoke fear in the audience and establish North Korea as a credible threat worthy of exercises in American imperialism;⁵⁷ they are equivocated to the Nazi regime through the Neville Chamberlain comparison and discussion of "appeasement;"⁵⁸⁵⁹ and finally, there is a focus on the "bow" Trump has made to North Korea by "cancelling" military exercises.⁶⁰ Through these discursive practices, it is clear that the biggest sins Trump

⁵⁰ Goldberg, Jonah. "Trump's Peace in Our Time Moment." *National Review*, National Review, 13 June 2018.

⁵¹ Mills-Rodrigo, Chris. "Tim Ryan: Trump Going to North Korea 'like Chamberlain Going to Talk to Hitler.'" *The Hill*, The Hill, 30 June 2019.

⁵² Youssef, Nancy and Gordon Lubodld. "U.S. South Korea Shelve Military Exercise in Bid to Break Nuclear Deadlock With North." *The Wall Street Journal*, Dow Jones & Company, 17 November 2019.

⁵³ Levitz, Eric. "U.S. Scraps Military Exercise in Order to Appease North Korea." *Intelligencer*, Intelligencer, 18 May 2018.

⁵⁴ Rozsa, Matthew. "Julián Castro Blasts Donald Trump for His Meeting with Kim Jong-Un." *Salon*, Salon.com, 30 June 2019.

⁵⁵ Youssef.

⁵⁶ Rozsa.

⁵⁷ Goldberg.

⁵⁸ Goldberg.

⁵⁹ Mills-Rodrigo.

⁶⁰ Levitz.

engaged in by attempting to establish diplomatic relations with the North are two-fold: first, he actually met the North at the bargaining table.⁶¹ Second, he declined to wield the U.S.' implicit threat of violence in order to secure diplomatic ends, and this seems to be the most unforgivable of sins.⁶²⁶³ The message here is just as clear as in the previous two cases, though different in its scope: that to try and minimize the U.S.' military involvement in diplomatic, foreign affairs is to be weak and fall outside of presidential behavior: the presidential character has no room for peaceful negotiations.

Synthesis and Discussion

In this section, three questions will be entertained and answered in regard to the presidential character: how does the symbolic shape this character, how and why does the media portray issues around the presidential character the way in which they do, and why does the populace at large glean symbolic reassurance through violence undertaken by the executive abroad.

The political realm is one that is constructed through symbolism and whose primary function is to ensure “symbolic reassurance,” that which produces quiescence through some symbolic maneuvering on the part of the government, in order to sate the needs of the populace.⁶⁴ As Edelman notes: “Emotional commitment to a symbol is associated with contentment and quiescence regarding problems that would otherwise arouse concern.”⁶⁵ This

⁶¹ Mills-Rodrigo.

⁶² Levitz.

⁶³ Goldberg.

⁶⁴ Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, 42.

⁶⁵ Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, 32.

emotional commitment to symbols “induces a feeling of well-being” and “the resolution of tension.”⁶⁶ This process is apparent in the presidency, since: “When an individual is recognized as a legitimate leading official of the state, he becomes a symbol of some or all the aspects of the state,” meaning they are the ultimate creator and revoker of symbolic reassurance for the populace at large.⁶⁷ Upon the executive, there is a projection of “private emotions, especially strong anxieties and hopes,” and the responsibility of baring this load necessitates action.⁶⁸ Edelman notes that “inaction hurts a president more than anything else,” and asks: “What symbol can be more reassuring than the incumbent of a high position who knows what to do and is willing to act, especially when others are bewildered and alone?”⁶⁹ In order to keep the potency of the executive symbol thus requires one to act; ideally in a manner that further augments this remoteness, since “it is central to its potency as a symbol that it is remote, set apart...not susceptible to effective influence through any act we as individuals can perform.”⁷⁰ Since the symbolic is remote and able to effectively make impotent individuals at large, the content of the action is less important than taking action for action’s sake.⁷¹ Imperialism then is a logical route for executive action, since its effects: occur at a distance, are actionable and can be shown to be so, are difficult for citizens to meaningfully influence, and can be portrayed as an act of protection on the part of the figurehead for the sake of the people at large.

This portrayal flows actively from the language of imperialism that has found its place in popular discourse. Language is never neutral, since “language, thought and action shape each other.”⁷² The language of imperialism is relatively broad in scope and cross-applicable to a

⁶⁶ Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, 32.

⁶⁷ Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, 73.

⁶⁸ Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, 5.

⁶⁹ Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, 76.

⁷⁰ Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, 6.

⁷¹ Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, 13.

⁷² Edelman, “The Language of the Helping Professions,” 296.

multitude of different situations depending on the needs of the government and, in particular, the President.⁷³ In the two cases of violence abroad that were examined, the categorization of U.S. targets as “terrorists”⁷⁴ or unfriendly and backwards “regimes”⁷⁵ are ones which fit a pattern of orientalist attitudes in the United States. Specifically, the characterization of the Arab as the “civilized man fallen again in to a savage state” has led to those in the region being seen as “problems to be solved,” and whose “very designation...as something oriental involved an already pronounced evaluative judgement.”⁷⁶⁷⁷ These terms also evoke in the U.S. public a confidence that those in power have “the ability to distinguish those who will commit crimes in the future from those who will not.”⁷⁸ Such confidence coalesces to form a “calculatedly” and “aggressive...attack on the contemporary societies of the Arab and Muslim for their ‘backwardness’ and ‘lack of democracy,’”⁷⁹ both being used to justify imperialist intervention through terms such as “terrorist”⁸⁰ and “regime,”⁸¹ terms that have become embraced by the U.S. media as a replacement to popular anti-communist dog-whistles.⁸² Past this point, the symbolic proves to become even more elusive as it constructs the current ideological framework, since: “Once established, a categorization defines what is relevant about the people who are labeled. It encourages others to seek out data and interpret developments so as to confirm the label and to ignore, discount, or re-interpret counter evidence.”⁸³ Here, the role of counter-evidence included in articles can be seen as a means to maintain a perception of impartiality on

⁷³ Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Vintage Book, New York City, 1979, pp. 346.

⁷⁴ “U.S. Drone Strike Kills Top Iranian General Qassem Soleimani.” *NBCNews.com*.

⁷⁵ Kube, Courtney et al.

⁷⁶ Said 171.

⁷⁷ Said 207.

⁷⁸ Edelman, “The Language of the Helping Professions,” 306.

⁷⁹ Said xix.

⁸⁰ “U.S. Drone Strike Kills Top Iranian General Qassem Soleimani.” *NBCNews.com*.

⁸¹ “U.S. Drone Strike Kills Top Iranian General Qassem Soleimani.” *NBCNews.com*.

⁸² Said 346.

⁸³ Edelman, “The Language of the Helping Professions,” 299.

behalf of the news agency while doubling-down on ideological assertions; this becomes all the more clear when examining how, in an article such as Louisa Loveluck's *Washington Post* story on the killing of Soleimani, alternative viewpoints are placed after those coming directly from U.S. officials, after the dog-whistle has already been blown by using a term such as "terrorist" to arouse specific feelings and images that interfere in the audience's ability to entertain other arguments.⁸⁴ Again, the discursive practice of assigning and calling upon these "roles" is a means to evoke specific emotional responses from the audience; a practice the media is well accustomed to.⁸⁵

Within the media, ever since the decline and destruction of the Soviet Union, there has "been a rush by some scholars and journalists in the United States to find in Orientalized Islam a new empire of evil."⁸⁶ This is conducive to remote symbolic-transference, as the media "focuses historically and sensationally on the distant electronic wars that give viewers the sense of surgical precision but that in fact obscure the terrible suffering and destruction produced by modern 'clean' warfare."⁸⁷ The Shayrat Missile Strike in Syria is a perfect example, with footage of a rocket strike conveying a sense of this "precision" while failing to show or acknowledge the death of seven civilians, four of which were children, in the operation.⁸⁸

The structuring of the media message only furthers this ability to effectively convey symbols which build the presidential character. News concerning the political focuses primarily on leaders, enemies and problems "as sources of hope and fear," allowing the obfuscation of their roots in discourse.⁸⁹ One of the primary features of all the articles examined in the previous

⁸⁴ Loveluck.

⁸⁵ Edelman, "The Language of the Helping Professions," 302-3.

⁸⁶ Said 346.

⁸⁷ Said xxvi.

⁸⁸ Mckernan, Bethan.

⁸⁹ Edelman, Murray. *Constructing the Political Spectacle*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1988, pp. 120.

section was their reluctance to question their sources of information. The ideology of anti-terrorism, which succeeded the ideology of anti-communism, makes this lack of qualification easy to mask since it “helps mobilize the populace against an enemy,” since “the concept is so fuzzy it can be used against anyone” who counters the hegemonic position of the U.S.⁹⁰ Further, whenever anti-terrorism is invoked, the demand for evidence to prove such a claim is “suspended, and charlatans can thrive as evidential sources.”⁹¹ This ability to suspend counter-claims based on a reliance of singular, state-centered sources ensures a never-ending and provocative “parade of news.”⁹²

Ultimately: “Media, no matter the form, all classify the world for us, sequence it, frame it, enlarge it, reduce it, color it, argue a case for what the world is like.”⁹³ If the picture being presented is outside the bounds of what is actually occurring, this leads to a situation in which disinformation takes the form of “misplaced, irrelevant, fragmented or superficial information” that is used as a discursive mechanism to “lead one away from knowing.”⁹⁴ Imperialism thrives under such conditions since its selective coverage and distance allows its symbolic potency to reach unprecedented power. With a lack of real counter-sources in media:

News workers are predisposed to treat bureaucratic accounts as factual because news personnel participate in upholding a normative order to authorized knowing in society...newswriters will recognize an official's claim to knowledge, not merely as a claim, but as a credible, competent piece of knowledge...officials have and give the facts; reporters merely get them.⁹⁵

The audience is thrust into a passive position here for a number of reasons. First of these is our conception of morality and authority. Our moral thinking is “imaginative” and depends on

⁹⁰ Herman, Edward and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent*. Pantheon Book, New York City, 1988, pp. 29.

⁹¹ Herman-Chomsky 30.

⁹² Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, 8.

⁹³ Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Penguin Books, 1985, pp. 10.

⁹⁴ Postman 107.

⁹⁵ Herman-Chomsky 19.

our ability to comprehend metaphor.⁹⁶ For humans, our “most fundamental form of morality concerns promoting the experiential well-being of others and the avoidance and prevention of experiential harm to others.”⁹⁷ Since most children benefit from obeying their parents, a route which usually causes less harm than disobeying them, part of our morality becomes conceptualized “as obedience;” specifically obedience to an authority figure.⁹⁸ When an authority figure gives an order then, “that order imposes an obligation to obey,” an obligation to accept a role in which obedience to the state becomes the prerequisite in acting morally.⁹⁹ This ultimately allows the state to engage with its citizens by way of the parental metaphor and through this gives its figurehead, the president, the status of a protector.¹⁰⁰ News then is structured to “keep everything brief, not to strain the attention of anyone but instead to provide constant stimulation...you are required...to pay attention to no concept, no character and no problem for more than a few second at a time.”¹⁰¹ This spectatorship and passive consumption further renders the symbol ever-more remote while giving it an illusion of being close through the newspaper or television set.¹⁰² As Edelman notes: “Spectators grow bemused with interactions among...entities and retain ideologically constructed political worlds. Reported political language and other actions foster bemusement and obliviousness.”¹⁰³

Up until this point, two questions have been explored: how and why the media portrays issues around the presidential character the way they do, and why does the populace at large glean symbolic reassurance through violence undertaken by the executive abroad. What does this

⁹⁶ Lakoff, George. *Moral Politics*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1996, pp. 41.

⁹⁷ Lakoff 41.

⁹⁸ Lakoff 43.

⁹⁹ Lakoff 52.

¹⁰⁰ Lakoff 43.

¹⁰¹ Postman 105.

¹⁰² Postman 105.

¹⁰³ Edelman, Murray. *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, 123.

ultimately mean for the presidential character and its construction through the transference of symbols in the media? The answer is rather straightforward.

Problems ultimately mean the creation of authorities to deal with them, and any threats that are named within the media are “often personified as enemies,” ultimately used by the executive office to “achieve and maintain their positions by focusing upon fashionable or feared problems.”¹⁰⁴ When the media creates issues and whips-up a frenzy by using a term such as “terrorist,” they provide the space and agency for the executive to act while necessitating this very action so they do not look weak and lose their office.¹⁰⁵ When these threats are foreign and roles are categorized in provocative ways, the President, acting out their role, undergoes “a work of purification: of ridding the inherently or ideologically contaminated of their blight or of ridding the world of the contamination they embody” who, in the cases covered, are “Orientalized” terrorists¹⁰⁶. The Presidential character is thus constructed by the media as the President takes action abroad and whose coverage necessitates more action be taken in order to protect and give symbolic reassurance to the population at large. The presidential character is characterized by imperialistic violence because: it is a potent, remote symbolic show of power;¹⁰⁷ it creates space for the executive to take unilateral action in order to sate the symbolic appetite of the public and media¹⁰⁸¹⁰⁹; it further reinforces the parental role of the state¹¹⁰; it augments social

¹⁰⁴ Edelman, Murray. *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, 121.

¹⁰⁵ Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, 78.

¹⁰⁶ Said 346.

¹⁰⁷ Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, 6-13.

¹⁰⁸ Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, 9

¹⁰⁹ Said xxvi.

¹¹⁰ Lakoff 43.

cohesion amongst a commonly defined enemy¹¹¹; it is justified through our experiential morality¹¹²; and it places the population at large into a passive, consumptive position.¹¹³¹¹⁴

Conclusion

The presidential character is constructed through actions said to be “presidential,” a nebulous term that is reified through symbolic exchange between the executive office and the media, as well as symbolic broadcasting to the population at large. Enemies “construct leaders,” and so the presidential character must be minted through actions taken against an enemy who, in the articles examined, are foreign and assigned specific roles through a subjective, top-down process.¹¹⁵¹¹⁶ The presidential character does not exist materially; it is a symbol that is reified through discursive practices that the media engages in; a media which acts as the primary agent in constructing the presidential character. Since it occurs in a distant place, its symbolic impact only increases in potency. This distance also allows a great deal of space to take action for the President and further presents an obstacle for individuals back home to influence the process of violence occurring abroad. The population at large is also thrown into quiescence due to a deeply embedded metaphor that ties the state to the parental relationship and thus, through each of our own experiential moralities, equates moral action to following the directives of the state. As figurehead, the president is obligated to act in accordance with and take advantage of these developments; to act on the contrary is to engage in behavior that is seen as unbecoming of a President. So long as violence abroad remains a powerful symbol that induces such effects in the population at large, the symbolic transference between the media and the presidency will

¹¹¹ Edelman, “The Language of the Helping Professions,” 302-3.

¹¹² Lakoff 41.

¹¹³ Postman 105.

¹¹⁴ Edelman, Murray. *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, 123.

¹¹⁵ Edelman, Murray. *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, 121.

¹¹⁶ Edelman, “The Language of the Helping Professions,” 302-3.

continue to occur. The Presidency will continue to be marked by its willingness to use force abroad, and Presidents will continue to be judged by this willingness. To not engage in this behavior will ultimately mean a failure to be seen as being presidential, a failure to “become president” in the manner which Fareed Zakaria so eloquently described.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Hensch.

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