

# **Holding the Lash:**

The Semiotic Construction and Social Significance of the Atrocity Label  
Under George W. Bush's War on Terror

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<b><u>Table of Contents</u></b>	<b><u>Page</u></b>
Introduction.....	1
1) Research Methodology.....	7
a. Theoretical Problematique.....	8
b. Case Studies.....	11
 <b><u>Part I</u></b>	
Chapter 1 – Word Meaning, Genealogy, and Codification.....	13
Chapter 2 – The Social Significance of Violence and Arocity.....	19
Chapter 3 – Discursive Reproduction of Violence Meaning & Significance.....	28
Conclusion to Part I.....	36
 <b><u>Part II</u></b>	
Chapter 4 – The War on Terror Discourse under the Administration of George W. Bush.....	37
Chapter 5 - Talking with the Taliban.....	48
Chapter 6 – Haditha and Fallujah – Pinnacles of American Hypocrisy.....	54
 <b><u>Part III</u></b>	
Conclusions – The Power of ‘Atrocity’.....	59
 <b>Bibliography.....</b>	 64

## **A Short Introduction to the Topic of this Study**

On 2 February 2008, bombings in two crowded Baghdad markets provoked UK and US media responses of shock and outrage. As reported in the UK newspaper, The Daily Mail,

*“Al Qaeda fanatics plumbed to sickening new depths yesterday when they turned two women with Down’s syndrome into human bombs to kill 99 people in Baghdad. The unwitting pawns were apparently fooled into wearing explosive vests which were then detonated remotely by mobile phones as the women mingled with crowds. The two blasts caused carnage at two busy markets in the Iraqi capital’s deadliest atrocity since last spring. A U.S. military spokesman conveyed the sense of outrage over the depravity of the masterminds. “They have shown their true demonic character,” said Lieutenant-Colonel Steve Stover...”*

(Mail Online, 3 February 2008)

The Post & Courier, a Charleston, North Carolina based newspaper also commented on the attacks, saying:

*“It is the most terrible of ironies. When faced with defeat, terrorists commit even greater atrocities. Thus, at a time when the military surge in Iraq had achieved a dramatic fall in violence, Islamist extremists, almost certainly al-Qaida, have committed even more barbaric atrocities.*

*...According to the AP, women have been used in ever greater frequency in suicide attacks. Records show that since the start of the war at least 151 people have been killed in at least 17 attacks or attempted attacks by female suicide bombers — eight of them since the U.S. military surge began in July 2007. As the AP report noted, the use of “unknowing agents of death” is a new and even more reprehensible violation of civilized standards.”*

(The Post and Courier, 3 February 2008)

Further reporting of this event in following days from the U.S. and around the world maintained a similar tone, all expressing disgust and horror at the *atrocities* committed by Al-Qaeda fighters against innocent civilians.

Three years earlier, in November of 2005, the Italian news agency RAI televised a documentary titled *Fallujah, The Hidden Massacre* detailing the use of banned

chemical weapons against civilians in the late 2004 attack on the Iraqi city by U.S. troops. The UK newspaper, The Independent, wrote that:

*"In December the US government formally denied the reports, describing them as "widespread myths". "Some news accounts have claimed that US forces have used 'outlawed' phosphorus shells in Fallujah," the USinfo website said. "Phosphorus shells are not outlawed. US forces have used them very sparingly in Fallujah, for illumination purposes...But now new information has surfaced, including hideous photographs and videos and interviews with American soldiers who took part in the Fallujah attack, which provides graphic proof that phosphorus shells were widely deployed in the city as a weapon.*

*In a documentary to be broadcast by RAI, the Italian state broadcaster, this morning, a former American soldier who fought at Fallujah says: "I heard the order to pay attention because they were going to use white phosphorus on Fallujah. In military jargon it's known as Willy Pete. A biologist in Fallujah, Mohamad Tareq, interviewed for the film, says: "A rain of fire fell on the city, the people struck by this multi-coloured substance started to burn, we found people dead with strange wounds, the bodies burned but the clothes intact."*

(Popham, 8 November 2005)

Despite the damning evidence of the Italian documentary and persistent international outrage, the U.S. continued to maintain that no illegal action had been taken in the siege of Fallujah, preferring instead to claim the success of the mission as a crucial step in ridding Iraq of the insurgent threat and leading towards a U.S. victory in the country. A CNN video report, aired February 2008 stated:

*"This is Fallujah, once an Al Qaeda stronghold in the Sunni Triangle, today US commanders say Fallujah is a success story. Violence is down, Iraqis are back to the chores of daily life; shopping, rebuilding, a man fixing shoes. But this is a town where hundreds of Marines and soldiers lost their lives, fighting to take the town block by block. Today, commanders say Fallujah is just one example of why U.S. troops have to stay longer in Iraq to ensure these fragile security gains really take hold. "*

(CNN Video, 21 February 2008)

These two separate, and apparently very different events, contain many similarities, most strikingly, the killing of innocent civilians <sup>1</sup> and the widespread news coverage which followed each event. The question then arises, that if these two events have similarities of such fundamental importance, what is the point at which they diverge? In answer to this question, it becomes clear that the crucial difference lies not in the perpetrator of the act, the victim, nor the violent act itself, but instead in the language that is used in describing the event, thus determining both its significance and reception in the mind of the reader. The first act is called *atrocious*, its perpetrators “barbaric and uncivilized.” The second, however, is mired in cloudy controversy, with the result of the action claimed a success, and those involved hailed for their sacrifices in pursuit of that “success.”

It is with the label of atrocity that is the focus of this study. In doing so, all violence is seen as detrimental to humanity and thus the interest lies not in the actual act of violence called atrocity, but in the “calling” of an act or perpetrator “atrocious.” How is atrocity semiotically constructed? What is the social significance of the word and how has this meaning changed over time? Who is permitted the power to define atrocity within society, and once defined, who has the ultimate power to met out violence in response to atrocity? In the course of this thesis, questions such as these will be addressed in hopes of further illuminating the concept of atrocity. Though the dividing line between the two above examples may at first appear stark, the language used gives way to an ambiguous gray area, thus necessitating further study and providing this work with the base of its inspiration.

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<sup>1</sup> The killing of innocent civilians in Fallujah remains factually unconfirmed, though evidence criticizing the U.S. siege would seem to point to a great deal of veracity in these claims.

## **Introduction**

### **Problem statement of the research**

In considering the questions introduced in the above introduction, directly stated, the central question being asked within this work is:

*What purpose is served in labeling violence as “atrocious,” and what informs the semiotic construction and social reception of this label?*

The primary application of this question is to the overall case study of the United States’ War on Terror as perpetrated under the administration of George W. Bush. Within this, several other case studies, as will be discussed shortly, are introduced in order to assist in addressing this central question.

### **A dual significance of the research**

#### Theoretical Significance

From a theoretical perspective, the study of atrocity proves problematic to a certain degree. This is due primarily to a lack of research focused directly on the use and meaning of the word in combination with its frequent usage both in the arenas of politics and news media (as shown earlier), but also in scholarly works on the topics of international law (Ratner & Abrams 2001)<sup>2</sup>, human rights (Fiss 2009)<sup>3</sup>, and post trauma studies (Unger, Gould & Babich 1998; Bracken, Giller & Summerfield

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<sup>2</sup> Though the focus of Ratner & Abrams is to show the difficulties in dealing with Human Rights abuses from the perspective of International Law, it is interesting to note again the usage of the term atrocity and its application to such abuses. I bring this up to raise the question of who determines and prosecutes such atrocities. In doing so, I would seek to argue that the labeling of one violent act as atrocity, and the legitimization of another might in reality be one and the same seen from a different perspective.

<sup>3</sup> Discussions of atrocities within the topic of human rights are often closely linked with that of international law as it is international law that seeks to stop/punish the execution of such crimes. In the article by Friss, it is once again shown the usage of the term atrocity and its connection with criminalized violence.

1995).<sup>4</sup> By utilizing the term and applying it within these other contexts, perhaps allowing for a subsequent legitimization of certain actions in response to atrocity<sup>5</sup>, there remain many unresolved questions regarding the true significance and function of the word within society. It is certainly not to say that these works do not achieve their aims, but instead to show the regular usage of the word atrocity and the subsequent lack of serious scholarly attention to the significance and effects of its usage.

As a study of atrocity, this research attempts to contribute to current academic debates regarding the politics of labeling and the discursive framing of actors in violent conflict such as (Bhatia 2005, Alexander 2004, Apter 1997, Dexter 1997, Jabbri 1996, and Brass 1996) through the use of language containing certain “lexical significance”(McConnel-Ginet 2008)<sup>6</sup> within society. A differentiation between types of violence on a gradient scale (Card 2002)<sup>7</sup> is not acknowledged as a productive step in understanding atrocity - to the contrary, in doing so, one would acknowledge atrocity as a specific type of violence whereas this work prefers to see it as a label and consequently all violence as having an equally negative effect on

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<sup>4</sup> The first citation, Unger Gould & Babich is interesting as it concerns the development of a scale to assess the impact of wartime atrocities. The authors state that in order to avoid the extremely negative connotations of the word atrocity, they opt to use the term “War Events Scale.” In doing so, they recognize the potential problematic with the term atrocity, though still refer to atrocities within the work and do not clearly define an atrocity. The other citation is interesting because its title clearly refers to psychological responses to atrocity, though the term arises but once in the whole of the article.

<sup>5</sup> Taliban atrocities are an oft-cited legitimization of the United States invasion of Afghanistan. See “U.S. documents alleged Taliban atrocities” [//archives.cnn.com/2001/US/11/22/ret.wh.taliban.attrocities/index.html](http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/11/22/ret.wh.taliban.attrocities/index.html). This article was published on 23 November 2001 approximately one month after the initial invasion by U.S. troops.

<sup>6</sup> McConnel-Ginet opts for the term “lexical significance” in lieu of *word meaning* due to the inherent requirement for definition in the latter. Due to the inherent moralistic and politicized difficulties in defining certain types of violence as atrocity, this work likewise prefers to use this term.

<sup>7</sup> “The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil” by Claudia Card will be discussed periodically through this work as a recent point of reference in studies of atrocity. Though I agree with Card that the negative impact on both victim and perpetrator alike is a way by which to understand the effect of violence, I decline to rank violence based on this criteria, or further, to place atrocity as *the worst* violent act as she chooses to do. Further, I decline a notion of the existence of “evil,” which Card identifies as a component of atrocity.



humanity. Instead, I choose to place atrocity within Galtung's<sup>8</sup> broad definition of violence, "the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual," (1969) seeing it's potential as perhaps the most broadly applicable way by which to understand violence as a logical starting point to researching atrocity. Violence is not what it is, but rather the lacking it creates, that being the "distance between what could have been and what is" (ibid.) At the same time, violence is seen as containing both "polysemic and amorphous"(Gerard 2000) qualities in so far as regards its portrayal and social significance. Rather than putting focus upon the act itself, focus is instead given to the "lexical significance"(McConnel-Ginet 2008) of atrocity through its construction and subsequent social reception. Considering this, the point of importance I wish to put forth in discussing atrocity is not an issue of what is or is not atrocity, but to call into question to whom and for what reason such superlatives are applied in the description of violence by one conflict party, yet not in the case of another.

### Practical Significance

Thus moving from these fundamentals, this work attempts to question how the label of atrocity is constructed in contemporary U.S. society<sup>9</sup> and subsequently the effect of this label regarding its social reception. Applying the above theoretical problematique to a case study provides the second point of significance to this study.

The second part of this work focuses on the case studies of the Haditha Marine Massacre, the aforementioned battle of Fallujah, and the discourses and rhetoric used in the labeling of the Taliban under the Bush Administration in the ongoing U.S. military operation in Afghanistan. These case studies show themselves worthy of attention due to the apparent contradictions in U.S. rhetoric and action.

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<sup>8</sup> Galtung 1969 "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research"

<sup>9</sup> The points made in this work may as well equally fit within the context of other Western Societies, though for the sake of feasibility, the contemporary society of the United States is taken as a primary point of reference.

This is to say, and as will be later shown, that U.S. troops and the U.S. military engage in debatable abuse, massacre, and commit human rights abuses under the War on Terror, but this violence is sanctioned<sup>10</sup> within society due to its portrayal as heroic and as a necessary step in the fight against “evil-doers.” At the same time, the label of atrocity will be shown in its application to these violent acts when “enemy” forces such as the Taliban or Iraqi militants commit them.

The importance of this discussion cannot be underscored enough, for this work sees the basis for the very real violence met out by the United States and its allies under the War on Terror in the creation of the imaginary<sup>11</sup> specter of the terrorist<sup>12</sup> enemy figure. In response to this violence, those that it is being enacted against in turn met out their own violent acts and thus a cycle of violence continues. Additionally, this comes at a crucial juncture in the foreign policy of the United States as the election of President Barack Obama signals at potentially great policy changes from the previous two terms of the administration of George W. Bush. Unless an understanding of the rhetoric and discursive strategies of the previous administration is developed, it is a very real possibility that the continuation of such semantic choices will lead to prolonged violence and death due to what can be ultimately reduced to the demonization of the other, and the lack of respect inherent in that.

## **Research Methodology**

In order to realize the aims of this research, it was first necessary to break down the central question into its subsequent parts. Stated again, violence is seen as

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<sup>10</sup> This point is certainly open to critique as clearly the protests within the United States and other Western Countries against the War on Terror, and the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan show. I would still argue however that the violence of the War on Terror is ‘sanctioned’ by society because no element in society successfully changes that status.

<sup>11</sup> Here I refer to the creation of violent imaginaries as discussed by Schroeder & Schmidt, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> The label of ‘terrorist’ is another particularly important aspect to the functioning of the War on Terror and is a good example of the discursive framing that drives it. Scholars such as Bhatia 2005, and Chomsky 2001,

inherently destructive no matter the aim, perpetrator, or victim; in short, that all violence is deplorable. Thus informed, 'atrocious' is comprehended as a label attaching further significance to a particular violent act, or actor. To define what is or is not atrocious is in this case irrelevant, and is thought as, if not to be factually impossible, then to be at best, counterproductive.<sup>13</sup> Violence, used here, is seen as a learned trait (Browning 1993) as opposed to an inherent quality in humanity. This is an important distinction to clarify early on, as debate about what violence *is*, is again seen as a counterproductive step in developing greater understanding to the role and social depiction that violence has in society. Atrocious, along these lines, is reinforced as a social construction. This reading of atrocious is particularly useful in that by divesting the concept from its myriad manifestations, such as the atrocious act or actor, one is able to begin considering the significance of the label itself.

The methodology followed in this research is broken down into two parts, each with three chapters. The first, dealing with the theoretical problematic of atrocious, looks like as follows:

1. Codification, Meaning & Genealogy – How do words obtain special societal significance? What semantic power do certain words have in society? How is this meaning constructed and how does it change over time?

In considering these questions, I attempt to develop a framework from which to analyze the significance of violence in society as discursively constructed and reproduced. In this the study is informed by the concept of Foucauldian genealogy in which the meaning, or significance of concepts are in essence, the sum of their historical collective parts (Foucault 1977, 1978). Over time, through this semiotic construction, labels assume their contemporary meaning, sometimes in

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<sup>13</sup> When I say it is impossible to define atrocious, I do not mean to say that atrocious, as used in common speech, is not given some definition. Certainly, when politicians or news reporting uses the term, it is to define a certain action and thus give significance to the act.

contradiction to previous meanings.<sup>14</sup>As Haslanger writes, “a genealogy of a concept explores its history, not in order to determine its true meaning by reference to origins, and not for sheer historicist fascination, but in order to understand how the concept is embedded in evolving social practices” (2005:13). In considering the genealogy then, analysis is applied through the dual necessity of both the “semantic and pragmatic in the production of meaning” (Chapman 2001) or rather as identifying the difference between the “manifest and operative” (Haslanger 2005) in order to discover the “gap between rule and practice” (ibid.).

2. Violence- asking the questions – how is violence understood, depicted, and reproduced in contemporary U.S. society? What aspects inform the genealogical construction of the significance of violent acts?

Applying the ideas of genealogy, lexical significance, and codification to violence, I then turn to the ways in which different manifestations of violence are thought of and reified in contemporary U.S. society. This includes aspects of violence related to “beliefs, attitudes and behaviors” associated with it within society (Whitmer 1997). Beliefs connecting sexuality and gender with violence (Cohn 1987, Myrntinen 2003) and the development of a masculine heroic violence (Whitmer 1997) seek to reinforce the understanding and significance of violent acts within society. The connection between the body and acts of violence perpetrated against it is seen as a relevant and important component in deciphering the atrocity puzzle due to the combination of the operative act of violence and the manifest social significance that the act holds.<sup>15</sup> Referring again to Foucault, the importance of a

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<sup>14</sup> A particularly salient example of this is provided by Foucault in *Discipline & Punish* (1977) in reference to capital punishment and the use of the guillotine. Though beheading is now considered a horrendous crime, verily an atrocity judging by the societal reaction to highly publicized beheadings such as the case of Nick Berg in 2004, it was as recently as 1977 that the last beheadings were used in France as the primarily recognized form of capital punishment.

<sup>15</sup> In this I refer to Malkki 1995 who discusses the meaning significance of violent acts against the body in relation to Hutu/Tutsi violence in Burundi. Recognizing that this is not a

dichotomy between sanctioned and criminalized forms of violence<sup>16</sup> becomes apparent as the next component in the construction of the atrocity label. In this the study attempts to identify the distinction between that violence criminalized by the United States, and that violence which is sanctioned and legitimized. Reinforcing this, the monopoly of violence held by the state (Weber 1918), and the ability of the state to enact violence on its behalf both internal to and external to the society (Brass 1995) is seen as a determining feature in the definition of the atrocity label. Moving from codification, social reproduction of the significance of violent acts, both at the manifest and operative levels, through discourse and rhetoric in media and popular culture are identified:

3. Display and Reproduction of the significance of Violence – How is violence portrayed in society? How are societal conceptualizations of violence reinforced and reproduced and how does this reinforce the significance of atrocity in society? What connections are made at the manifest level in order to reinforce other societal values in the context of sanctioned and criminalized violence?

Having identified the significance of violence within U.S. society, and the various meanings that different violent acts hold, the study then turns to developing a framework for understanding the ways that the meaning of violence is displayed, reinforced, and reproduced within society. At the theoretical level, this looks to scholars such as Feldman (1994), Chomsky (1991), Dimitrova (2001), and Wilcox (1940) who discuss the ideas of “cultural anesthesia,”<sup>17</sup> “propaganda,” and the use of

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Western society, nor emblematic of the United States, I take the ideas present here and identify the same significance of meaning to violent act against the body through media reporting of “atrocious acts” in the United States and other Western countries.

<sup>16</sup> This dichotomy is paralleled by Foucault’s dichotomy of Power/Obedience, a topic also discussed by Arendt (1969) when she argues that “violence can create obedience, but never power”(Arendt, 1969 *On Violence*).

<sup>17</sup> Cultural Anesthesia as discussed by Feldman refers to the molding of perception of an event through various techniques and technologies. In his discussion of Desert Storm and

“atrocities stories”<sup>18</sup> as a means of political persuasion and violence justification. From this, the study turns to examine the role of popular media including film, television, and video games in the dissemination and reinforcement of the meaning and significance of violence, as well as those concepts connected with it, within society.

### 1.b. Operationalizing the Case Studies

Having operationalized the theoretical problematique of the study, the framework developed for understanding the significance of both violence and atrocity within society as outlined in Part I is applied in Part II of the work through the case studies mentioned earlier of the War on Terror, the Taliban, Fallujah, and Haditha. The following sections briefly outline the operationalizing of these case studies.

4. The War on Terror Discourse – How did the administration of George W. Bush utilize the significance of certain violent acts to label and frame both the U.S. government, but also potential allies, and enemies under the War on Terror (du Pont 2007)? What components from the earlier discussion are found in this discursive framework?

This chapter, informed by the above framework, develops a model for understanding the primary discourses used by the administration of George W. Bush to conduct the War on Terror. A genealogy of meanings is developed to demonstrate the positioning of Bush administration discourse and rhetoric in

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Rodney King, he shows how the media was used to affect public perception and understanding of reality of the King beating and the invasion of Iraq.

<sup>18</sup> Atrocities Stories, as written here and by Dimitrova, refer to the use of heavily reinforced and exaggerated stories of atrocity by politicians in order to draw in public support and foster legitimization for engaging in violence in war. Wilcox (1940) also identifies this as a technique used in the buildup to engagement in violent conflict.

utilizing the meanings of sanctioned and criminalized violence existing in U.S. society. This is accomplished through examining the combined discourses centered on human rights, American Exceptionalism, and religion.

5. Talking with the Taliban – How does the discourse and rhetoric of the Bush administration compare with that of the Taliban themselves? How does each side describe itself, and conversely, how is the other portrayed? What rationale drives each party in the conflict to begin or continue fighting?

In considering the case study of the Taliban, the thesis refers to the Canadian newspaper *Globe & Mail*, which electronically published a series of 50 raw interviews with Taliban fighters under the title “Talking with the Taliban” (2008). These interviews are analyzed alongside transcripts from speeches given by President George W. Bush concerning the Taliban and the war in Afghanistan in order to gain insight into the discursive strategies employed by the United States, and further, to show commonalities between the two, thus showing how the label of atrocity is used in developing U.S. public opinion about the Taliban.

6. Iraq - Fallujah and Haditha – Pinnacles of Hypocrisy – How does the United States depict the Haditha massacre by U.S. Marines? How did the U.S. legal framework deal with the Haditha case? What labels are used in the depiction of Iraqi militants? What labels are used in the portrayal of U.S. troops in Iraq? How does international reporting refer to the siege of Fallujah? How does the U.S. refer to this battle?

This chapter, building upon the ideas concerning the framing of atrocity and the portrayal of U.S. violence presented in the previous chapters, attempts to show the inherent hypocrisy in the use of the term atrocity by the United States in its portrayal of those labeled terrorists under the War on Terror. The questionable

nature of both of these cases illustrates the construction and employment of the atrocity label in U.S. society under the War on Terror. This is accomplished in this study through the analysis of New Media<sup>19</sup> sources such as YouTube and Google Video, as well as through news media reporting of these events.

In the concluding chapter of the study, the main points presented, along with the framework developed in the first section and reinforced in the second is once again briefly described, and final thoughts concerning the label of atrocity are put forth.

## **Part I**

### **Chapter 1 - Word Meaning, Codification, and Genealogy**

As a basis for researching the social construction and reception of the atrocity label, it is first pertinent to consider the concept of semantic power in society, as well as the related processes of codification and Foucauldian genealogy. In referring to semantic power, I mean that at the core, words ‘matter’ and have great social significance. Sally McConnell-Ginet (2008:498), discussing Richard Boyd (2006), speaks of “the (potentially negative) social impact of a wide range of meanings.” That is to say that words have the power to instigate conflict (though perhaps not directly violent, this is seen in George W. Bush’s creation of the ‘Axis of Evil’)<sup>20</sup>, that words have the power to break down barriers (one could cite

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<sup>19</sup> ‘New Media’ here is defined as those videos posted by private and public users on websites such as YouTube, Google Video, and Veoh.com. The term is not my own, I take it from discussions during a lecture held at Utrecht University on 13 October, 2009 and held by Prof. Liesbet van Zoonen of University of Amsterdam titled ‘Fitna, the Videobattle’ and hosted by the Center for the Humanities.

<sup>20</sup> Given in the 2002 State of the Union Presidential Address. Maura Reynolds of CommonDreams.org writes “The “axis of evil” language upped the rhetorical ante significantly. Some believe it played a role in undermining Iran’s moderate leaders and squelching the country’s nascent democracy movement. Many believe it helped provoke North Korea into nuclear confrontation.”



President Obama's recent call to the Muslim world, stating that "The United States is not the enemy of Islam,"<sup>21</sup>) and even so, some would claim that words have the capacity to do nothing at all. What Boyd discusses, is that words, in their aptitude for great social power, also contain the possibility for corruption in what he refers to as "malignant meanings" (2006, in McConnel-Ginet 2008). The endowment of meaning to words, as McConnel-Ginet writes, is not a static thing, but instead "much of a word's content and significance must be seen as loaded into it during the course of its deployment in social practice" (2008:500). In applying this to 'atrocities,' then, it is possible to conceive that though there are myriad possible uses of the term, it is in the application of the label to a specific context that adds the greatest social significance. For instance, one might comment casually about "that atrocious dress she was wearing the other day." The intended meaning in this instance is clear, that the dress, in the opinion of the speaker, was ugly. However, if one comments about the "atrociousness of mass rape and execution of women and men in the Democratic Republic of the Congo," the connotation of the word shifts, gaining much greater social significance and stronger meaning.

This is a particularly important point in understanding the construction of meaning and the labeling of violent acts. The word, in and of itself, means nothing, but it is the attachment of specific social significance that permits its usage, and dictates the effect or power, of the word. Anton Blok writes that we "should see violence as a changing form of interaction and communication," (Blok, 2006) and thus it would seem plausible to state that the words we use in describing violence, and the social significance we attach to them, are a means by which to transmit information not only about the violent act, but ourselves and the other as well.

Clearly however, some words have greater significance than others, and it is certainly not to say that the significance of the word is something that is created at

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<sup>21</sup> From his speech in Cairo, 4 June 2009: "I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world; one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect; and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles - principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings." (Huffington Post; 2009) Full text of speech available at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/06/04/obama-speech-in-cairo-vid\\_n\\_211215.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/06/04/obama-speech-in-cairo-vid_n_211215.html)

the moment of application. In questioning how the significance of a word develops, we look to the concept of genealogy, originally outlined by Nietzsche (1887) in the *Genealogy of Morality* and further developed by Foucault (1977). Genealogy, as understood in the context of this study, is the history of meanings that develop through time into the contemporary meaning or significance held by a word. As Sally Haslanger writes, “Very roughly, a genealogy of a concept explores its history, not in order to determine its true meaning by reference to origins, and not for sheer historicist fascination, but in order to understand how the concept is embedded in evolving social practices” (2005:13). This process of embedding is what Foucault discusses as the process of codification by which certain value and meaning are attached to a concept, thing, action, or idea.<sup>22</sup> Considering this, it may then seem simple to look back into the history of a word to decipher the development of its social significance, though in doing so, a fundamental problem arises. That is to say, to use the common idiom, “history is not written by the losers, but rather, by the victors.” Concerning this, Nietzsche writes, that as the ‘thing’ comes “into existence, having somehow come about, it is continually interpreted anew, requisitioned anew, transformed and redirected to purpose by a power superior to it” (2006:92). As Nietzsche would seem to imply here, without the dialectic between interpretation and re-interpretation, the genealogy of a thing, and by default the significance it holds in society, would not exist. As Haslanger notes, “We would need to ask: What are the range of meanings? Whose meanings are dominant, and why” (2006:16)?

In conceptualizing the idea of genealogy and codification as discussed above in the context of atrocity, the need to critically call into question the significance of the word in its current usage becomes increasingly apparent. As mentioned earlier in this study, the concept of capital punishment and the methods in which it should be applied have shifted dramatically through time within Western society. In 1897, The Chicago Tribune ran a story entitled “Tales of French Guillotine” in which was written “In these days the legal beheading of a man doesn’t happen often; the crime

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<sup>22</sup> In *Discipline & Punish* (1977) Foucault discusses the codification of the body as a component in the genealogy of punishment within Western Society. The codification of the body is a topic which will be returned to frequently in this study.

must be very atrocious to bring the penalty, because the French laws are wondrously lenient in matters concerning the spilling of blood". At this time, beheading is clearly not the atrocity, but it is the crime which must be atrocious in order to bring on the socially accepted form of capital punishment. It is worthwhile to note that at this period in U.S. history, lynching was a commonly accepted form of capital punishment. A similar article from The Chicago Tribune on 6 November 1881, titled "A Wretch Lynched in South Carolina" describes the "peculiar atrocity" of the rape of a young girl and the subsequent lynching of the man supposedly responsible for it. Again, the *atrocious crime* justifies the use of the socially sanctioned form of capital punishment at the time, in this case, lynching. The following two news extracts, from February 2007 and June 2005 show the shift in meaning that these two acts now hold. The Christian Science Monitor writes, concerning a February 2007 terror plot in Britain,

*"British security officials were claiming Wednesday to have foiled a terrorist plot which would have imported for the first time to Britain the grisly Iraq-style tactic of kidnapping a victim, torturing and beheading him and filming the atrocity for broadcast on the Internet."*<sup>23</sup>

(Rice-Oxley, Mark 1 February 2007)

In this instance one can see that the significance of the act of beheading appears to have shifted from serving as a punishment for atrocity, into atrocity itself. A Washington Post article illustrates a similar example in the case of lynching.

*"The U.S. Senate last night approved a resolution apologizing for its failure to enact federal anti-lynching legislation decades ago, marking the first time the body has apologized for the nation's treatment of African Americans. Sen. George Allen (R-Va.), who with Landrieu led the resolution effort, said the vote finally put the Senate "on the record condemning the brutal atrocity that plagued our great nation."*<sup>24</sup>

(Thomas-Lester, Avis 14 June 2005)

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<sup>23</sup> From Christian Science Monitor "A foiled plot in Britain may signal chilling new tactic."

<sup>24</sup> From The Washington Post "A Senate Apology for History on Lynching: Vote Condemns Past Failure to Act."

The point here is not to illustrate what is or is not atrocity, certainly the racial history of the United States, like so many nations, deserves great critique, but instead to show the societal shift in the meaning behind the word atrocity. As in the first example, one can see that the role has changed, with lynching contemporarily termed as *atrocitiy*.

In Western society, Michael Foucault writes on punishment, of a shift through time of the codification of punishment from that of the corporeal to a contemporary, non-corporeal punishment in western society, which seeks “to punish the soul.” This transition sees a move from punishing the body directly, as in the previous case of beheading and lynching, to the current system of penal incarceration. One need only visit one of the many “Torture Museums” present throughout Europe to hear the gasp and exclamation from a visitor about how “barbaric and uncivilized” the instruments on display appear to them. It would be wise in this case, however, to heed the tongue-in-cheek words of Regina Janes who writes on the recent history of beheading in France, that “the improvement of manners, while real, is also deceptive: it is only an improvement of manners,”(1991:46) meaning that though perhaps we have ‘advanced’<sup>25</sup> beyond using such techniques of punishment and execution, we would be foolish nevertheless to think that we have moved beyond the execution itself. The question remains, what is more barbaric, the means of execution, or is the barbarity born from the act of execution itself?

Having established the genealogical process and the issue of semantic importance within society, one is still faced with the question of how then does the social significance of a word become established or solidified throughout history and in the contemporary. In this one can turn to the existence of discourses in society that work in shaping and reacting to social perception in the creation of social codes. Referencing Edward Said in his work, “Orientalism” (1978), one can see the introduction of a distinction between discourses in society. These are what

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<sup>25</sup> I place ‘advanced’ in single quotations because I wish to highlight my skepticism in this context about the true level of advancement beyond such means.

he refers to as *latent* and *manifest* discourses. The latent discourse involves the internalized assumptions and perceptions that inform the individual's everyday conception of reality. In interplay with this, the manifest is naturally that which is produced and can be seen within society. Examples of such can be found in, though are not limited to, narratives and performances. In considering the work of Vivienne Jabri (1996), it is possible to identify the operation of these discourses in the production and reproduction of societal structures. She writes in reference to Anthony Giddens,

*"The structuration of social systems means studying the modes in which such systems, grounded in the activities of situated actors who draw upon rules and resources in the diversity of action context, are produced and reproduced in interaction...The pattered regularities of social systems are, therefore, a result of the interaction between underlying structures and intentional conduct."*

(Jabri, 1996; 81)

The significance of this to the discussion of semantic significance is that words have an internalized meaning that would appear unquestionably to the individual as everyday reality, but referring again to Nietzsche and Foucault, one can see that these perceptions of significance are built upon already existing societal frames of reference. As internalized, or latent discourses within society, these points of social significance are manifest through the process of codification by which they are solidified and embedded within the structure of society. As an example of such codification in the case of atrocity, one can look to the legal framework of the International Criminal Courts. As Mark A. Drumbl writes, "The turn to criminal trials to promote justice for atrocity has acquired striking support among scholars and policy makers" (2007:9). Verily, the identification of an act labeled a Gross Human Rights Violation, such as genocide, can easily be seen in connection with atrocity in courses such as that taught by Fred Grünfeld of Utrecht University titled "The Atrocity Triangle: Perpetrators, Victims and Bystanders" with the aim to "try to get some more insight in the causes of international crimes and other gross human rights violations (GHRV)" (2009:syllabus). In this one can reference not only the shift in significance of what is considered atrocity as discussed earlier, but also the codification

of atrocity as a criminal act.<sup>26</sup> Thus the word moves from the latent into manifest operation, as it becomes a component of the international criminal courts.

Returning to McConnell-Ginet's mention of "the (potential negative) social impact of a wide range of meanings" (2007), and applying it to this discussion, one might point out the contemporary connection between Islam and beheading<sup>27</sup> alongside the connection between beheading and atrocity. Examined from this angle, the potential for Bolinger's "meaning manipulation" (1972 in McConnell-Ginet 2008) and Boyd's "malignant meanings" (2006, *ibid.*) becomes disturbingly apparent in that the possibility exists for the latent societal connection between Islam, atrocity, and the criminal – thus perhaps permitting great leeway for the manifest codification of such within society.<sup>28</sup>

In chapter 2, the study will build upon the ideas presented within this chapter of word meaning, genealogy, and codification to further address the social significance of violence and atrocity within the society of the contemporary United States and to further establish a framework for questioning not only the theoretical problematic, but as well the case studies in Part II.

## **Chapter 2 – The Social Significance of Violence and Atrocity**

Chapter 1 illustrated the ways in which meaning is attached to words within society, and further, how the significance of a word is affected by its meanings and uses throughout society's history in the processes of *codification* and *genealogy*. In

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<sup>26</sup> The criminalization of atrocity will be discussed in greater detail in Part I, Chapter 2.

<sup>27</sup> Theodore Dalrymple (2005), discusses and would seem to promote this connection in an article published in the journal *National Review*.

<sup>28</sup> This can be seen in a number of countries, such as the Netherlands, France, and Great Britain where debates concerning the legality of the headscarf are a common sight in the news.

this chapter, these themes will be expanded upon within the context of violence in society. In considering the social significance of violence in society, it is first perhaps best to expand upon our definition of violence from before, so as to be clear about what the study is speaking of in discussing violence.

Taking Galtung's "lacking created" definition a bit further, Goran Aijmer writes on the effect of violence, "that to be the victim of violence is mostly a humiliating and frightening experience of physical and psychic pain" (2000). The humiliation written of here may also be interpreted as a loss of agency – that in experiencing violence as the victim, one loses the ability to exercise their agency in meeting their desires or needs. In support of this, as defined by J. Ginges and S. Atran, "Humiliation is generally considered to be a feeling of being unjustly demeaned, devalued or subjugated by another's actions in a social context" (2008:282). The loss of agency, in turn, can also be identified as the primary means by which the state establishes power and reinforces its position through the system of punishment, which we see in the contemporary United States, in the penal system. As Foucault shows in *Discipline & Punish*, however, the loss of agency can be plausibly read as the primary expression of punishment as exercised by the state throughout history. The role of the public execution, as envisioned by Foucault,

*"is not so much to re-establish a balance as to bring into play, as its extreme point, the dissymmetry between the subject who has dared to violate the law and the all-powerful sovereign who displays his strength....by breaking the law, the offender has touched the very person of the prince, and it is the prince – or at least those to whom he has delegated his force – who seizes upon the body of the condemned man and displays it marked, beaten, broken."*

(Foucault, 1977:49)

Just as in the case of the public execution and the exercising of the state's power to take agency from its subjects, contemporary forms of punishment seek to accomplish the same in what Foucault discusses as "the punishing of the soul" (1977). As described, this is the incarceration of those who break the laws of society (codified by the state) in order to establish the dominant position of the state over the citizenry. This representation of state power can also be interpreted as a form of

violence exercised by the state. Bernasconi and Cook write that, “Over centuries, dominance, violence, and terror have become institutionalized in the United States...and are manifested most extremely within prisons” (2003:250). As a component of the significance of violence within society, the ability of the state to met out violence is once again mirrored in Weber’s definition of the state in the “successful administration and upholding of a claim on the *monopoly of the legitimate use of violence*<sup>29</sup> in the enforcement of its order” (1964:154). In the United States, as in most Western countries, the state is assumed to be representative of the will of the society<sup>30</sup>, and thus, one can comprehend violence exercised by the state as being *sanctioned* by the society.

This brings the study to the introduction of a framework for understanding the social significance of violence. This framework is made up of three parts comprising the aforementioned *sanctioned violence*, it’s opposite, *criminalized violence*, and the process or idea of *sterilized violence*. In considering criminalized violence, it is possible to see an institutionalized dichotomy between it, which is that violence either against the state or not in line with its aims, juxtaposed to that violence which operates under the auspices, or in the maintenance, of the state. As illustrated briefly in the previous chapter, Atrocity is codified within the legal infrastructure of society as criminal violence. The key point here, however, is that, as mentioned before, what acts are considered atrocity, has shifted so that the current societal conception of violence recognizes only those forms of violence sanctioned and exercised by society as legitimate. It is useful here to refer to Martin Gerard who, writing on socially acceptable forms of violence in Colombia’s history, highlights two types of violence in the country – that of ‘normal’ violence and that of ‘extreme’ violence. Extreme violence in this case is “characterized by a transgression of norms...the (re)appearance of massacres, torture, and cruelty” (2004:169). Though violence may permeate all sectors and the history of a society (as scholars Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn would argue in the case of the United States), it is

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<sup>29</sup> Italics mine.

<sup>30</sup> Based upon Rousseau’s “Social Contract, Or Principles of Political Right” (1762)



that violence considered extreme<sup>31</sup> – or outside the realm of normalized violence within society, that then becomes unacceptable in the eyes of society. What we see here is that it is the violence that is not ‘ours,’ that becomes criminalized in society.

Bringing ideas of “us and them” into the fold of discussion, and applying them to represent “our violence,” and “their violence” is an important component in examining the significance of the label of atrocity, especially as exercised by the United States under the War on Terror. The social significance of atrocity, as presented in this work, relies heavily on the idea of a “violence of the other” in juxtaposition to “our violence.” Here we can again refer to Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism in the representation of the “East”<sup>32</sup> by which the “West” looks to frame it’s self-conception of superiority over a perceived ‘backwardness’ of “the other.” Said states that, "My whole point about this system is not that it is a misrepresentation of some Oriental essence — in which I do not for a moment believe — but that it operates as representations usually do, for a purpose, according to a tendency, in a specific historical, intellectual, and even economic setting" (1978:273). Applying this idea to the subject of sanctioned and criminal violence, one can see the way in which atrocity, framed both as criminal violence at one level and at another, shown as a violence of “the other,” operates as a label, and in this function, also serves to reinforce the propriety of the violence exercised and sanctioned by the society.

As mentioned earlier, there is another aspect to the social significance of violence and that is what I refer to here as the sterilization of violence. It is connected closely with Foucault’s discussion of the transition from corporeal punishment to that of the *soul* in that by moving away from the methods utilized in the punishment of the body and transitioning to a violence of punishment based on incarceration, the *violence*, per say, becomes clouded. The ‘blood and guts’ of

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<sup>31</sup> The labeling of violence as ‘extreme’ is another interesting point of reference in discussing atrocity as the question arises, what exactly constitutes ‘extreme’ violence as opposed to other forms of violence.

<sup>32</sup> Critique levied at Said for his exclusion of many “Eastern” cultures is acknowledged here, though it is not with the East that is the focus of this discussion, but the ideas Said puts forth in his work.

punishment is transformed into concrete, medical wards, and white washed walls, and though the actual violence exercised by the state, and sanctioned by society, still exists, it takes on a much more aesthetically pleasing visage (Foucault 1977). In its juxtaposed form, violence is portrayed in an excessively graphic way so as to incite emotion from viewers in society.

Dimitrova, writing on the use of atrocity stories in CNN coverage of the Kosovo air war, writes that in addition to stories emphasizing the occurrence of 'atrocity,' and thus necessitating U.S. intervention, these stories were accompanied by graphic footage in order to emphasize the 'atrocity' in the mind of the reader (2004:36). While this sort of portrayal is representative of the violence of the other, or criminal violence, thereby justifying intervention to 'punish' those responsible for it, there also exists an opposite portrayal of 'our' violence. It is a common heard discussion, that though U.S. news media networks run on a policy of "if it bleeds, it leads," it is also commonly talked about that the media avoids conveying graphic images from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The media portrayal of U.S. troops engaging in combat during the Vietnam War, and the public resentment that this helped to foster, is a commonly cited rationale for the lack of graphic visual or textual combat portrayal in these contemporary conflicts. In *The Power of News*, Michael Schudson writes, "Television's graphic portrayal of the war in Vietnam sickened and horrified American viewers, who were led by harsh photographic reality to oppose the war" (1995:116). And as Carol Cohn writes in reference to portrayal of the 1991 Gulf War, the "language of war...acts as a diversion that filled our minds with slick high-tech imagery...as a conjurer's trick that made dead bodies vanish and hid human suffering; and finally, as a selective medium, which allowed certain kinds of discussion but not others" (1991:15). I would argue, in consideration of the discussion above, that society is conditioned to see sanctioned violence, or that violence which is 'ours,' as a less destructive form of violence, or at the very least, a 'clean' form of violence – and in this, I refer back to the term sterilized violence – while the violence of the other is relegated to the same position as that violence which is criminalized, graphic, and horrid; and it is in this category that atrocity finds its social meaning.

The conception of sterilized violence within U.S. society is assisted further by connections made between specific acts of violence and parts of the body. The genealogy of these connections is easy to trace in the same vein as mentioned in Chapter 1 in that as the societal meaning of certain acts – such as beheading, quartering, or lynching lose their previous significance as acts of sanctioned forms of punishment and violence, they nevertheless retain their significance in so far as the connection between the violent act and the body are concerned. This connection is apparent in the reaction to events such as the 2004 beheading of contractor Nick Berg in Iraq<sup>33</sup>, or the similar case that same year in which three Western contractors<sup>34</sup> were captured and beheaded by al Qaeda militants.

In discussing this connection, one can refer once again to Foucault who writes of the “codification of the body” (1977, 1978) both in terms of violence brought against the body, and as well in the context of sexuality within society. Writing on this topic in the context of the Hutu Genocide in Burundi, Liisa Malkki (1995) explores the “mapping of the body” in which meaning and significance are applied to acts committed against the body, thus strengthening the dichotomy between the dominant and subordinate actors in the conflict. She writes, “While ‘techniques’ or ‘manners’ used were once again described in detail, it was the symbolic meaning of these events which was the more crucial aspect here” (ibid.133).

In considering this, one can then extend the discussion further to include acts of sexual violence as being coded with specific meaning in society. This is significant in conjunction with previous discussions of ‘our’ violence and the

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<sup>33</sup> The Dallas Morning News reacted to this event, saying “Though Arab media have generally downplayed this atrocity...Nick Berg was but the latest victim in the terrorist war on civilization” (Dallas Morning News, 13 May 2004). The reaction to this act was one of revulsion and disgust and shows the significance of this particular violent act within U.S. society.

<sup>34</sup> The reaction to the beheading of Kenneth Bigley, a British contractor was met in the UK with a similar reaction to that mentioned in the case of Nick Berg. The CNN news agency reported on 8 October, 2004, that “UK Foreign Secretary Jack Straw condemned the killing of Bigley as “barbaric murder.” The official condemnation of the act as barbaric would imply the significance that this act holds within UK society, and conversely, US reporting of such would seem to show a similar significance in the case of that society.

violence of the other when one examines long running African conflicts from a Western perspective. In considering the current conflict in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, it is possible to identify a plethora of media reportage discussing the plight of both men and women in the country and the use of rape as a weapon of war. On 24 July, 2009, the website Earthtimes.org quoted Ron Redmond, a UNHCR spokesman who said, "There are widespread reports [in DRC] from IDPs<sup>35</sup> of atrocities, including accusations of murder, rape and torture, on the part of the FDLR rebels." I would argue that the application of the atrocity label in this case once again highlights the Western connection between criminalized violence, atrocity, and certain violent acts committed against the body. Doing a Google search of "Rape in DRC" results in over two hundred and fifty thousand results, giving one the impression that this is an "African problem."<sup>36</sup> This "othering" of certain violent acts also takes place in academic works concerning the conflict between the Lords Resistance Army and the Ugandan Government in Northern Uganda. Anthony Vinci writes that, "Victims were forced to watch family members being killed and witnesses were left after the *atrocities*<sup>37</sup> to tell the story" (2005:375) and Kasper Thams Olsen (2007), writing on "Understanding Atrocities By the Lord's Resistance Army," seeks to shed light on the strategic purpose of utilizing certain violent acts, thereby possibly reinforcing this connection between the label of atrocity,<sup>38</sup> particular acts of violence, and the other in the Western mind.

While the acts committed by these conflict parties are no doubt horrible, it is useful at this point to remember that in the context of this study, all violence is seen as horrible and it is the particular labels attached to violent acts, and the significance they hold, which creates a "scale of horribleness" in the societal mind. As a case in

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<sup>35</sup> Internally Displaced Persons

<sup>36</sup> News headlines such as: "Rape 'epidemic' in African conflict zones – Unicef" (NZherald.co.nz, 13 February 2008); "Rape as a weapon of war: It persists in Africa where HIV/AIDS takes a heavy toll" (SFGate.com, 26 June 2005), show this implication of the connection between Africa and rape as a weapon of war.

<sup>37</sup> Italics mine.

<sup>38</sup> It seems most likely that this connection is not intentionally made, but is the product of social conditioning in which these acts are already signified with particular meaning. What articles like these do though, is to reinforce and reproduce discourses connecting atrocity, particular acts of violence, and at a peripheral level, the other.

point in reference to *African Atrocities*, I draw upon interviews I conducted while visiting Northern Uganda in February 2009. One man, university educated in Europe and having lived off and on in the Gulu District during the period of LRA violence in the region, was able to impart an interesting perspective on atrocity as violence.<sup>39</sup> In asking about the ‘special violence’<sup>40</sup> exercised by the LRA, he explained that in his mind, the violence used by the group is not so unique as I would enquire, and other scholars have written. Slightly caught off guard by this atypical response, I asked the same question in a different way to perhaps further clarify his answer. He responded by saying that “everyone uses this violence, so why point only to [the LRA]?”<sup>41</sup> Though this was not what I initially expected, as I learned more about the country’s history and the region as a whole, it became clear that my interviewee had a good grasp on the place of violence within the country. Though the tactics utilized by the LRA are constantly mentioned in news reports which highlight the “atrocious barbarism” portrayed as inherent in the group, it is nevertheless true that government forces have from time to time been accused of violence against civilians, and if one is to examine the recent history of Uganda, it is likewise clear that brutality and extreme violence were hallmark elements of a series of dictatorships including the infamous son of the West Nile Region, Idi Amin (Kyemba 1977; Kasozi 1994).

Though I continued to ask questions related to perceptions of atrocity, his answers always seemed to imply some futility in attempting to single out the group as *the* atrocious group out of many violent groups using relatively similar tactics. Another interview provided further insight in the same vein. Asking once again about the violence exercised by the LRA fighters, the young man told me that “war is war” and later, to clarify his position, “there is no a difference between an African war and any other war.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> From Interview on 13 February 2009, Nebbi Town, Uganda

<sup>40</sup> This was a term used by another interviewee to describe what others, as previously mentioned, call the ‘barbarism, atrocity, savagery, extreme violence, etc.’ used by the LRA. 13 February 2009, Nebbi, Uganda

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> 16 February 2009, Nebbi, Uganda

Though there are certainly specific differences between conflicts throughout history and the world, I found this statement to contain a great deal of value in developing my thoughts on violence and atrocity. In considering this, it is pertinent to return to earlier discussions on the use of rape in war. Though it is only of relatively recent scholarly interest due to increasing feminist critique, the use of rape on different levels within war appears to have a long history, perhaps as old as conflict itself, though easily qualified in instances of contemporary conflict. As Roland Littlewood notes, “Hebrew, Anglo-Saxon, and Chinese chronicles recognized the rape of women as a consequence of defeat in war...recognizing them as an inevitable part of military conflict” (1977:8). In the Serbian “rape camps” of the 1997 conflict, Bosnian-Herzegovinian and Croat women, old and young were systematically raped and murdered by Serb soldiers (Salzman 1998). During World War II, soldiers of the Third Reich took unwelcome advantage of the Jewish women forcefully entrapped in Nazi Concentration Camps spread throughout Europe (Morrisette 2004), and as playwright Zakhar Agranenko wrote, “Red Army soldiers don’t believe in ‘individual liaisons’ with German women...Nine, ten, twelve men at a time – they rape them on a collective basis” (Beeover 2002 in Hynes 2004). And finally, to underscore the construction of sterilized violence, one can see in examples from the U.S. war in Vietnam, as well as from the current conflict in Iraq, that rape is not limited to the other, but is a part of ‘us’ as well.<sup>43</sup>

What I wish to highlight in conveying these examples, is that the connection between atrocity, specific acts of violence (such as rape or mutilation) directed at the body, and the ‘other’ is a social construction serving in part to further enhance the view of self. That is to say, that ‘our violence’ is ‘clean,’ while the violence used by others is atrocious and brutal. As illustrated in this chapter, the significance of violence within the United States (and other Western societies) is built upon the

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<sup>43</sup> A CNN report from 8 August 2006 titled “Investigator: U.S. soldier poured kerosene on raped, slain Iraqi” conveys this point, as does a report by NPR, which reported on the same case, drawing parallels to the “war crimes committed by U.S. troops in Vietnam.”(NPR.org, 9 August 2009) What is disturbing in these accounts, however, is the frequent mention of the “Inevitable”(NPR) nature of war crimes like these due to “Combat Stress”(CNN August 2006) amongst U.S. soldiers. This would seem to normalize these events and make them seem like an unfortunate component of the oft-heard expression “collateral damage.”

dichotomy between sanctioned and criminalized forms of violence. In putting meaning to criminalized violence, the juxtaposition is made between what I refer to as the sterilized, sanctioned violence of society, and the 'ugly,' criminal violence of the other. Through applying Said's Orientalism to the context of the meaning of violence, I have illustrated this social juxtaposition, which works in sanctioning and providing legitimization for the violence of the U.S. state against a backdrop of global, criminal violence outside of which the U.S. places itself, and it's allies.

In creating a framework for understanding the social significance of atrocity, this chapter has built upon the discussions put forth in chapter 1. The next and final chapter of Part I takes this discussion further to examine the ways in which violence is discursively constructed, portrayed and reproduced in U.S. society. It is from the combination of these parts that the case studies will be addressed in Part II.

### **Chapter 3 - Discursive Connections and Reproduction of Violence Meaning & Significance within U.S. Society**

Having illustrated the significance of violence and atrocity in society as at the core, a dichotomy between sanctioned and criminalized violence within a context of 'otherness,' this chapter moves forward to attempt to identify ways in which discourses related to these meanings are transmitted, molded, and received within society. In considering this component of atrocity's significance within society, I will first briefly touch on the role and power of labeling, framing, and naming in society, particularly within the context of the 'terror' label (Bhatia, 2005). Additionally, the 'latent/manifest' discourse model is referred to once again in examining some of the discourses connected with violence in society. The manifest discourse is seen as representative of those discourses officially reproduced within society. In this we can refer to Haslanger's "manifest & operative concepts" (2005:14).<sup>44</sup> In referring to

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<sup>44</sup> Haslanger (2005) presents the manifest and operative concepts within discourse as such:

latent, it is meant those discourses that are connected subconsciously with violence meanings within society. These include, as will be discussed, discourses of masculine violence (Myrntinen 2003), closely connected with that of sexualized violence (Cohn 1987), the heroic ideal (Whitmer 1997), and the framing of good and evil (du Pont 2008), as components of violence centered discourses within contemporary U.S. society.

Regarding the above mentioned 'molding' of these discourses, it is put forth that propaganda and "public editing" (Chomsky 1989, 1997) are actively utilized within society to reinforce codified meanings of both sanctioned and criminalized violence. It is through this process that a state of "cultural anesthesia" (Feldman 1994)<sup>45</sup> is fostered in which it becomes difficult to infer the true meanings and realities in the public portrayal of events. Verily, as both authors imply, the use of modern technology allows for the continual molding and transforming of realities in order to shape public opinion and perception. In discussing the transmission of these discourses on the social meaning of violence, this study refers to television, film, and modern video games as powerful means of discourse reproduction and dissemination, operating concurrently on both the manifest and latent levels, within society.

The power of labeling and naming in the context of violent conflict is widely recognized within scholarly works. The dichotomy of sanctioned and criminal violence is reinforced in what Bhatia (2005:12) calls "new mental geographical

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Manifest - We do violence on behalf of good and don't engage in atrocity.  
Operative- We do violence on behalf of what we think is necessary to  
maintain our society and will engage in atrocity if necessary.

In this, Haslanger refers to Chapman's Truth-Truth Sentence in which the intentional and existential meanings must align in order to be a "truth" sentence. In the above example we can see a misalignment between the two, thus representative of discursive or rhetorical inconsistency and falsehood.

<sup>45</sup> As Feldman (1994) writing on Cultural Anaesthesia says, "As a driving force in this historical dynamic, the mass media's depiction of the agents and objects of violence is crucial to the modernizing embodiment of the political subjects who occupy both sides of the screen of public representation. This is all the more pertinent when the very embodied character of violence is evaded, ignored, or rewritten for collective reception." (Feldman, 1994, 207)



divisions...dividing a 'tame from a 'wild' and 'violent' world" brought about using labeling and framing techniques. Writing on Nicaragua's Sandinista movement, Schroeder states that, "Despite its blatant misrepresentation of the truth, the Reagan administration's delegitimizing labels of 'communist' and 'terrorist' applied to the Sandinistas were generally potent and effective. They formed the most visible elements in an internally coherent and totalizing narrative...that allowed no room for compromise and contained within itself effective responses to every plausible critique" (ibid. 2005:73). The rhetorical combination of the 'terrorist' label with a refusal to negotiate with those labeled terrorists<sup>46</sup>, effectively serves to cut off the labeled group from any hope of legitimacy and further, criminalizes the actions of that group.

As a word signified with criminal meaning in society, 'Terrorism' and 'Terrorist' are closely connected with the social significance of atrocity.<sup>47</sup> As shown previously in this study, acts committed by the other – in this those labeled terrorists - are often labeled using adjectives such as barbaric, atrocious, and uncivilized. Interestingly, the significance of these acts is made more powerful in the identification with gender based discourses seeking to draw attention to a constructed ideal of masculine, sanctioned violence in opposition to criminalized, weak, and impotent violence utilized by the 'other' or 'terrorist.' Henri Myrntinen writes, in reference to the September 2001 attacks in the United States, "the attackers were displayed in the American public and media as being 'cowardly' and 'unmanly' and the subsequent war in Afghanistan as 're-masculizing' for the United States, whose dominance had been symbolically challenged" (2003:41). Likewise, Carol Cohn identifies a heavily sexualized connection between weapons and masculinity. She writes, "The imagery can be construed as a deadly serious display of the connections between masculine sexuality and the arms race. At the same time,

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<sup>46</sup> This is a commonly heard statement from politicians worldwide. The refusal to negotiate with terrorists can be perhaps seen as originating from the previously discussed dichotomy between 'our' sanctioned and 'clean' violence, and 'their' criminal violence.

<sup>47</sup> A Google search results in 230,000 hits for this combination. Likewise, a search of 'weak terrorists' results in 2,680,000 hits. Certainly not all of these results can be characterized as done in this study, though it shows a high frequency in connecting these terms.

it can also be heard as a way of minimizing the seriousness of militarist endeavors, of denying their deadly consequences” (1984:356). In referring the ‘minimizing the seriousness,’ one can connect this notion with the process of sterilizing violence as mentioned earlier. Verily, as Cohn writes, phrases such as “clean bombs...can even seem healthful/curative/corrective” (ibid.:355), thereby reinforcing and strengthening the sterilized nature of that violence done on behalf and with the sanctioning of society. This connection between masculinity and sanctioned violence is reinforced further in the description of criminal violence, such as those acts labeled as ‘terrorism,’ as “cowardly” a characteristic that is shunned in Western society as un-masculine. In response to the 17 July 2009 terrorist attacks in Jakarta, Kevin Rudd, Australian Prime Minister decried the attacks as “an act of cowardice.” At the same time, in referring to the death of Australian troops in Afghanistan, he says “Seven brave Australian soldiers have now been killed in Afghanistan fighting Taliban resurgents.” Mr Rudd said, “Our troops in Afghanistan are engaged in dangerous work, they're engaged in important work. They perform their role with distinction and dedication, bravery and professionalism.”(smh.com.au, Nov. 2008) In this, one can identify the depiction of Australian troops as representing ‘manly’ qualities, while that of the ‘enemy’ is done so through language identifying those responsible as weak and unmanly. Nevertheless, in the context of this study it is important to consider that a supporter of the bombings in Indonesia might cite the bravery and dedication of those responsible for the attacks, and at the same time condemn the role of Western countries and their troops, such as Australia, in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Timothy Noah (2001), of Slate Magazine, notes in relation to the September 11 attacks, “Somehow it isn’t enough to abhor an act of terrorism or even promise to make the terrorist pay dearly. The rules demand that the terrorist be branded a sissy.” Even while it is widely noted in academic works that the victimization of civilians, especially women and children is utilized strategically, for both communicative and instrumental purposes (Kalyvas 2006, Olsen 2008, Vinci 2005) in contemporary warfare, the perpetrators of these acts are often portrayed as cowardly, unmanly, atrocious, or inhuman despite equally deplorable acts

perpetrated by the labeling party, as suggested throughout this study.

This portrayal of actors in violent conflict through techniques of labeling and framing is accomplished at the manifest level, through depictions juxtaposing the bravery of 'our troops' utilizing sanctioned violence in opposition to the combatants of the 'other' who are cowardly and weak, but more importantly, made illegal through their connection with that violence which is criminalized within society. In reference to the active construction of this set of meanings, Chomsky writes, "it is held to be [terrorism] a weapon of the weak because the strong also control the doctrinal systems and their terror doesn't count as terror" (2001:219). To see the violent acts lumped together under the label of terrorism as being the weapon of the weak is a great fallacy, as Chomsky points out in his comment, for the threat of death or injury through violence has the capacity to instill fear regardless of means by which it is achieved or by whom the action is perpetrated. The difference, to reiterate, is found in the active production and reproduction of rhetoric and discourse that seeks to label different acts of violence according to the actor responsible for them and the meanings and significance attached to both act and actor within society.

This reproduction of societal meanings of violence is achieved not only through official discourse and rhetoric as discussed above, but is also transmitted through popular culture in the forms of television, film, and videogames. As the website [turnoffyourtv.com](http://turnoffyourtv.com) notes, "The bad guys, whether they are cops or robbers, have to be 100% bad to justify the violence against them. Television violence is the struggle of good versus evil. It's OK to shoot the bad guy -- after all, he's the "bad guy" (Kaufman 2004).<sup>48</sup> Illustrated here, the framing of violence through television creates a stark division between good and bad, often relying upon a constructed conception of evil, which intensifies the 'bad' violence perpetrated by the 'bad' guys

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<sup>48</sup> Taken from:

<http://www.turnoffyourtv.com/healtheducation/violencechildren/violencechildren.html>, a website dedicated to addressing the portrayal of violence on television. Accessed 1, August 2009

in the social significance of violence<sup>49</sup> This same construction exists in film depictions of violence. As an example, I take Pierre Morel's 2008 film, *Taken* in which a former U.S. government agent must rescue his daughter who has been kidnapped by Armenian sex traffickers in Paris. The audience watches as the main character kills, through all possible ways, all other characters, however minor, that might stand in the way of reuniting him and his daughter. As a review of the movie notes, "The film is an adrenalin rush with an unusually high body count (Albanians and Arabs) -- but we've all seen that before" (Braun 2008). What one might find disturbing in this instance is the casual connection between a high body count of Albanians and Arabs, presented as a normalized facet of North American cinema. This connection reinforces previously mentioned social connections between the use of atrocity by 'the other' as representative of criminalized violence, which stands in opposition to the sanctioned violence of society and the state. In another example, Jack Shaheen, writing on the 2000 film *Rules of Engagement*, describes it as "a film which 'justifies' US Marines killing Arab women and children."<sup>50</sup> In these examples we see the connection between the legitimization of violence exercised by the agents representative of U.S. society, but also connections between atrocity, and the legitimization of violence in response to it (seen in the example from *Taken* in which the father must utilize sanctioned violence in order to save his daughter from sexualized atrocity in the form of rape and sexual enslavement).

The construction of criminalized violence is also visible in popular video games. As a personal example, while visiting my family during Christmas, I noticed my younger brother enjoying, from my point of view, an excessively violent game called *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, in which the main character (a young African American man) is guided by the player with either the option to accomplish violent acts in order to advance one's criminal position within the game, or otherwise

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<sup>49</sup> Evil is identified by Claudia Card (2004) as a main component in her conception of 'atrocity,' though in the case of Card's work, evil is not a construction, but an identifying factor that distinguishes evils, such as atrocity, from "ordinary wrongs." (Card, 2004) As will be illustrated in Chapter 1 of Part II, the idea of evil is a component of the War on Terror discourse as constructed and propagated under the administration of George W. Bush.

<sup>50</sup> From the Patrick Harrington Interviews, available at <http://www.thirdway.eu/2008/01/30/reel-bad-arabs/>. Accessed 1 August 2009.

simply to roam the streets of a city clearly representative of a fictionalized Los Angeles, robbing, killing, and doing things socially associated with criminality. In the hour that I watched my sibling play, I witnessed the fatal beating of a pedestrian with a golf club, the imbibing of digital alcohol followed by digital sex with a prostitute who was then run over by the game character in a recently stolen truck, multiple drive by shootings conducted by my brother as the player, and only at this point did actual game play begin in which the character was directed to assassinate a rival gang member (it's interesting to note that the majority of gang members I viewed in this game were non-white), which was accomplished in short order through the use of a chainsaw. As Leigh Schwartz (2006) writes, "game environments are embedded with metaphors and ideas for political and mythological constructs." In this, one can identify both the trivialization of violence within the game, but more importantly in the context of this study, the reinforcement of the criminalized label to certain violent acts and actors. Based on this, I would surmise that this is done at the subconscious, or latent, level but the potential power of this method of discursive social reproduction should not be ignored.

A more recent, unreleased videogame, which raises similar questions in regards to its content, is that of *Six Days in Fallujah*, a game being produced by Atomic Games. As IGN.com, a popular videogame website reports,

*"Six Days in Fallujah lets players experience the historic battle of Fallujah as a US Marine fire-team leader and places them in the heat of the action against the insurgency. Players are able to physically shape the battlefield just as US Marines did during the battle in Fallujah. Create new lines of attack by kicking in doors, blowing up walls, eliminating enemy cover and destroying the environment around them. To make the battle even more authentic, heavy emphasis has been put into the environments using real world satellite maps, weapons from US Marines and vehicles used in the conflict to fully immerse players in this epic confrontation and experience what it was like to be a Marine on the ground."*

Here one can identify a wide range of social constructs in relation to socially sanctioned violence that seek to portray the battle of Fallujah as a conflict between the brave and heroic Marines, and what is here described simply as "the

insurgency.” Certain elements in this description add a genderized element to the fold, in descriptions of ‘manly acts’ such as “kicking down doors, blowing up walls,” and “eliminating” the “enemy” (IGN.com). The effect of the final description of the battle as an “epic confrontation” can be seen as possibly serving to enhance and ‘granduerize’ the violence which occurred at Fallujah in late 2004. A Newsweek article quotes the mother of a Marine killed at Fallujah, who says “By making it something people play for fun, they are trivializing the battle” (Eprohn, June 2009). In addition to trivializing the battle, a game in which the player acts as a marine, and who’s goal is to win the battle by killing vaguely termed ‘insurgents,’ the game would seek to further sanction the violence done by the U.S. at Fallujah, and in this legitimization, further reinforce the idea of the terrorist other who engages in atrocity and must be dealt with through ‘good’ force.

In illustrating the social reproduction and transmission of social discourses on violence, this chapter has shown the significance of labeling and framing and how these are used within official contexts to legitimize and justify the violence exercised by the state and sanctioned by society. The connection of violence with gender is shown as a major point of significance for this framing as violent actors representative of society are imbued with masculine descriptors while those acting against the society, or engaging in criminalized violence are portrayed as weak or unmanly. In transmitting these messages within society, new technologies, such as television, film, and videogames play a powerful role. In the first two, film and television, images of necessary, sanctioned violence are reinforced, so that no matter how excessive, violent acts on behalf of a perceived ‘good’ are further legitimized in society. This can be extended to say that acts that would otherwise be termed ‘atrocity’ become sanctioned, when absolutely necessary,<sup>51</sup> to ensure the victory of ‘good’ over ‘evil.’ In considering the role of video games in the reproduction of discourse, one can once identify the reinforcement of societal codes

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<sup>51</sup> I would argue further, in this instance that through legitimizing criminalized violence as practiced by the agents of society, these portrayals trivialize these acts when done by and on behalf of society. In Chapter 4, Part II, this idea will be explored in the context of ‘American Exceptionalism.’

of criminal violence, the trivialization of violence, and further, the ‘grandeurization’ of violence practiced by the agents of society as in the case of the game based on the battle of Fallujah. Though this chapter is not exhaustive in regards to this topic, the extent and power of discourse transmission within society has been highlighted so as to further illustrate the ways in which atrocity, and by necessity, violence, obtains its significance within society.

## **Conclusion to Part I**

Part I of this study has focused on presenting a framework for addressing the social construction of atrocity and violence within the context of U.S. (and other Western) societies. In doing so, the study has broken down the topic into three theoretical discussions so as to address the theoretical problematique outlined in the Introduction. These are, the topics of word meaning/codification/genealogy in which it is discussed how words obtain their social significance. From this, in Chapter 2, the social significance of violence and atrocity was discussed in which the dichotomy between sanctioned and criminalized violence was introduced, and finally, the last chapter, Chapter 3, was concerned with the portrayal, reproduction, and transmission of these meanings through official labeling and framing, as well as at the subconscious level through new technologies such as television, film, and videogames within society. In discussing the portrayal and reproduction of meaning through discourse, Edward Said’s Orientalism is referred to in reference to the interplay between latent and manifest discourses in shaping a societal view of ‘the other.’ In this study, Said’s thoughts are applied to ‘the violence of the other.’

In presenting these ideas, it is put forth in this study that atrocity is juxtaposed as a form of criminalized violence, to the sanctioned violence as exercised by the state, on behalf of society. Through genealogy, it is shown, as illustrated in the case of beheading, that the social significance of words changes through time, though the significance of the acts associated with those words remains the same. In discussing sanctioned violence, the idea of ‘sterilized violence’

is put forth, in which violence exercised by society and the state is seen to be 'clean' as opposed to violence exercised 'of the other' which is described through descriptors such as brutal, uncivilized, and atrocious.

Through considering 'atrocious' in this way, this study shows that atrocity, rather than a 'worse' type of violence, is instead a label utilized in society to both legitimize the violence exercised by society, and further, the use of that violence in response to that which is portrayed as atrocity. In Part II of this study, this theoretical framework is applied to the case studies of the War on Terror, the Taliban, and the events from the current Iraq war of Fallujah and Haditha in order to show the labeling of atrocity and criminalized violence such as terrorism, and the subsequent sanctioning of violence exercised by the U.S. and its allies in response to it, even if that violence would otherwise be considered anything but legitimate.

## **Part II - Case Studies**

### **Chapter 4 - The War on Terror Discourse under the Administration of George W. Bush**

In considering the construction of atrocity as a label utilized in the legitimization of sanctioned violence and the criminalization of violence utilized by the imaginary other, it is possible to see the War on Terror as a discourse in itself representing the sanctioning of violence by the United States in justifying its own aims. In fact, to examine the other case studies presented later in this study, those of the Taliban and the cases of Fallujah and Haditha, it seems first pertinent to develop a framework for understanding the discursive structure of the War on Terror through which those cases occurred. This chapter outlines the creation of a War on Terror Master Discourse utilizing exceptionalist, religious, and human rights rhetoric and discourse. These discourses work in conjunction with the atrocity label directly through the human rights legal framework, as mentioned throughout this



work, and additionally in the framing of good versus evil as discussed in Chapter 3 of Part I. The exceptionalist discourse in this case acts as a component of the sanctioning of violence and a legitimizing factor towards the use of violence on behalf of the United States in response to criminalized violence, such as atrocity.

Concerning this discursive triumvirate, it is first useful to look back to the beginnings of the United States, where in 1630, Puritan leader John Winthrop stood before his devout audience and proclaimed the following. “For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.”<sup>52</sup> Perhaps with some expectation, or very likely completely unbeknownst to Winthrop, the notion of the ‘city on a hill’ and its later association of exceptionalism applied to the young, and newly united, states, gave rise to a socio-cultural continuity that has resonated throughout American history both in policy, action, and legitimizing discourse. In a very real sense, to understand U.S. foreign policy, especially important in the age of a global War on Terror, is to understand Winthrop’s quote, but perhaps more importantly, to understand the notion of American Exceptionalism to which it gave birth.

Therefore, it is only after a critical examination of the concept of an America due a right of exception, one based solely upon its self perceived and expounded glorious and singular existence, that a conceptualization of the current state of human rights in relation to the War on Terror of the new century can be formulated. To a certain extent, it is crucial to see both current notions of exceptionalism, as well as of the War on Terror, as historical continuities with an array of manifestations and actors, but nonetheless with similar aims and intentions. Interestingly enough, it would seem that in using the War on Terror as a vehicle, and consequently as well American discourses on human rights, the United States has permitted other nations to take part in its notion of exceptionalism – to ally their nation with the United States in a ‘global fight against evil and terror’ and as a reward, to receive the bounty of applying exceptionalist principles to their own governments and policies. This allowance of exception is, on the part of both the United States and the host

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<sup>52</sup> An excerpt from Winthrop's sermon in *Speeches That Changed the World* (1999)

countries, a self perpetuating, and to a very large degree, self destructive cycle; a sort of hegemony through repetition. As will be discussed in this chapter, the abuse of human rights in the name of the War on Terror, and as well as, ironically, in the name of human rights, serves largely to reproduce and exacerbate conditions leading to acts of terrorism and 'the global insurgency'<sup>53</sup> against the perceived threat of 'Western' (i.e. American) military, cultural, and economic hegemony.

In analyzing the topic of 'exceptionalism' in the context of the United States War on Terror and contemporary Human Rights, this chapter will first concentrate on developing an understanding of exceptionalist discourses employed with the aim of perpetuating U.S. hegemony throughout the global community. The primary focus of this examination will not, however, be Winthrop's "City on a Hill" as this topic is somewhat beyond the means of this exercise and further, this theme has been critically explored on many occasion in a number of works by other scholars. Instead, interest will be given to the development of exceptionalism as it is applied through a War on Terror discourse in its employment of a combination of religious, human rights, and exceptionalist rhetoric and discourse. Following this discussion, attention will be turned to the effect of the War on Terror on the Human Rights agenda and conversely, a short analysis will be conducted in an attempt to show these two contemporary themes as historical continuities in United States foreign policy though often portrayed under different label and guise. After this, the case study of the Moro conflict in the Southern Philippines will be drawn upon to show in concrete detail the themes discussed in preceding portions of this chapter. The Filipino war on terror will be critically analyzed in the context of Human Rights and it will be shown that heavy reliance is made on a U.S. strategy of 'extended exceptionalism' towards the government of The Philippines, in which "a right to exception is 'extended' by the U.S. to another country, in return for siding with and approving of U.S. foreign policy.

A key component of current exceptionalist thought within U.S. discourse is what Olaf du Pont characterizes as the "blurring of distinction between the sacred

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<sup>53</sup> As discussed by David J. Kilcullen in *Countering Global Insurgency*, Journal of Strategic Studies (2005)

and the civil religion” (2007:130). It can hardly be argued that the role of religion is anything but enormous in modern U.S. society, and thus it comes as little surprise that politicians might turn to a Christian Religious discourse in running for office, proposing new actions and conversely, justifying those actions. There is of course no exception to this idea concerning the use of religious rhetoric in the formation of a Christian War on Evil discourse that permeates the much larger discourse of the War on Terror. The inclusion of a religious discourse, particularly a *Christian* religious discourse, underscores a crucial component in the construction of the master Terror discourse. Not only does it imply a sort of divine justice, but likewise gives an ultimate legitimizing authority for actions undertaken by the propagator. Equally interesting and important to an analysis of the religious discourse is the scope of the audience who are held to the values and ethical judgments met out by it. Not only does it define the values of the collective United States, but implies those that the nation’s allies should strive to achieve, and likewise, delineates the values to which others will be held, against their will even, if the case may be. As du Pont clarifies, “Next to the divine source of human and civic rights, their universality is stressed and upheld as a standard to judge others in American civil religion” (2007:131). In the context of the religious discourse, this explanation produces two somewhat disturbing implications. First, it shows a complete disregard for the typically “American” discourses of national unity through pluralism, and instead replaces this notion with an omnipresent discourse of constructed, even forced, solidarity and acquiescence to the dominant, disseminated, strain of thought. In an international context, this may in fact prove to be an alienating force to international acceptance of forced U.S. hegemony. A strong point of the United States perception abroad has long been the notion of “the American Dream” in which anyone, regardless of race or religion, may achieve success through hard work and dedication. Second, the utilization of a Christian religious discourse in pursuing the War on Terror, a war largely targeted at Fundamentalist Islamic Jihad, implies in a not-so-subtle way a return of Christian crusade against a Muslim threat. The potential alienation implicated in this is clear. A quote by ex-President Bush just

days following the September 2001 terror attacks on New York gives perhaps the clearest insight:

*“This crusade, this war on terrorism, is going to take awhile.”*

(President Bush, 16 September 2001)

Likewise a crucial component in the creation of the self-legitimizing War on Terror discourse is the veritable hijacking of the human rights agenda and its associated discourses in an attempt to justify the war propagator’s aims and further, to cloak them under a guise of striving for progress towards a universal respect for human dignity. This, somewhat ironically, is achieved in the very same instance that calls are made to wipe “terrorists” from the earth, wherever they may hide, and to bring them to justice with, to use the military euphemism “extreme prejudice.” To begin, it is useful to look at another, equally self explanatory, quote by President Bush as the mouthpiece for the U.S. War on Terror:

*“We believe in human rights, and the human dignity of every man, woman and child on this Earth. The terrorists believe that all human life is expendable. They share a hateful ideology that rejects tolerance and crushes all dissent. They envision a world where women are beaten, children are indoctrinated, and all who reject their ideology of violence and extremism are murdered.”*

(President Bush, 24 August 2005)

Again, in this instance it is possible to identify two distinct and intersecting strains of thought that promote the War on Terror. First, one can see a concerted effort to connect the role of the United States with the promotion of universal human rights, but more importantly, and underscored in the speech, human dignity. On the other hand a strategic effort is made to juxtapose this with an enemy that inherent to their prescribed goals of “beating women, indoctrinating children, and following an ideology of violence and extremism,” must therefore implicitly reject human dignity, let alone the pursuance of human rights. This, with debatable effectiveness, identifies the United States, and further, the War on Terror with the

cause of promoting universal human rights. Continuing with this, efforts to both win against the threat of terror and to realize the human dignity of all become imbued as one, thereby necessitating the success of one to achieve the other. Likewise, all who would oppose the War on Terror thereby necessarily oppose the cause of human rights, thus championing the United States sole insurer of realizing human dignity and promoting human rights throughout the world.

This discursive technique serves to further ally the United States with the cause of relative “good” in the world and provides a sort of ultimate “othering” against all opposition, or for that matter, neutral actors. It is important to realize, however, that this would not be possible were it not for the military superiority that the United States holds over the rest of the world. A country with limited military force and international clout making such claims would very likely not be taken as seriously as the United States is when it utilizes such rhetorical strategies. A particularly salient implication of this thought, however, is the historical continuity<sup>54</sup> of U.S. military and economic intervention in what is considered the “backyard.” Since the beginning of the War on Terror, and arguably much earlier, the “backyard” has been enlarged to span across the globe. Like the fight against communism before it, the War on Terror allows the United States a veritable infinity of self-imposed moral authority and justification in the pursuance of its interests. Likewise, it is understandable why the international community might be somewhat apprehensive about expressing great opposition towards the only nation in history to drop an atomic bomb, no less two, onto a defenseless civilian populace.

As a final discussion concerning the combined major discourses making up the self-legitimizing War on Terror *master* discourse, it is important to further discuss the ways in which a discourse of exceptionalism has been utilized, perhaps as the key component in this triumvate, to further the aims of the United States government and its allies at the ultimate expense, in reality, of universal human dignity. One need not look far to see a wide litany of purported human rights abuses by the U.S. military under the War on Terror. Of primary interest perhaps is the

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<sup>54</sup> See Howard Zinn and “A People’s History of the United States” (2005) for more on this topic.

potential abuses dealt against inmates at the U.S. detention center at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba; the Bush administration's offshore prison for "enemy combatants." It is particularly this term, "enemy combatants," which is of concern here as its very existence exemplifies the notion of American exceptionalism under the War on Terror. In the context of law as presented by the U.S. Government under the Bush Administration, by terming captives as "unlawful enemy combatants,"<sup>55</sup> they are designating them through a different categorization than what some would argue should be that of "prisoner's of war" as articulated under Convention III of the Geneva Conventions.<sup>56</sup> The inherent problem in this situation is that if the administration can "rename" what might accurately be called a "prisoner of war," then it is simply this process of renaming that can serve to "legally" legitimize the otherwise "illegal" actions of the country in its proceedings in the War on Terror. Furthermore, as Gill and Van Sliedregt conclude in their study of the term "unlawful enemy combatant," prisoners held under such a designation "do not fall outside the scope of the Geneva Conventions and customary international law" (2005:52). Should this be accurate, then the renaming process is simply a weak effort on the part of the Bush Administration to further its aims despite their potential illegality. As George Harris notes, "The [Bush] Administration justifies its current policy toward suspected terrorists on the basis that the current threat of terrorism requires an emphasis on prevention *rather*<sup>57</sup> than justice" (2003:35). An obvious consequence of this policy, however, is the continued alienation of the international community in regards to the United States, and likewise, a potential strengthening of will in those that would engage in the use of terrorist strategies to pursue their aims. In taking a stance that essentially says that the United States doesn't have to, or need to, play by the "rules," and that the "rules" can be rewritten to suit the needs of a situation, the United States permits itself a mechanism for continual and immediate exception.

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<sup>55</sup> See Terry Gill and Elies Van Sliedregt (2005) for a detailed analysis of this term

<sup>56</sup> See Geneva Conventions (1949)

<sup>57</sup> Italics Mine.

Clearly the notion of American Exceptionalism as it applies to the contemporary War on Terror is an extremely complex combination of multiple strategies by which the U.S. government is able not only to forcibly circumvent international law, but further, to legitimize and justify its actions based upon the utilization of a civil-religious discourse in conjunction with a stance of protecting human rights and human dignity through the use of U.S. military might. As the remaining discussions will show, this notion of exceptionalism is, under the War on Terror, extended to other foreign governments in exchange for support despite the fact that many of these regimes have an extremely poor respect for human rights.

In critically analyzing the use of exceptionalist policies under the War on Terror, it becomes clear that a key component of the war machine is the sales and donation of weapons and training by the U.S. government to foreign regimes. While the United States has long topped the list of arms dealing nations, under the War on Terror this business is utilized under a guise of helping fellow “Anti-Terror” countries to bolster their defenses and stamp out the threat of terrorism in their territories. This of course, like many other components of the War on Terror previously discussed, is fraught with inconsistency and hypocrisy. The Arms Control Association<sup>58</sup> notes that since the inception of the War on Terror, the U.S. government has pledged arms and training to any of its twenty-five identified “front-line” states and partners in the fight against terror. This unfortunately means supplying governments with records of human rights abuses with arms and giving them a green light to search out terrorists within their country. The human rights state of some countries, as detailed in the annual U.S. State Department report on human rights, have declined but nevertheless continue to secure weapons and training from the U.S. government. Azerbaijan is one such country, which has received somewhere near twenty-five million U.S. dollars in military assistance<sup>59</sup> but at the same time, the State Department notes that “the government's human rights record remained poor and worsened in some areas” (2007).<sup>60</sup> By approving

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<sup>58</sup> Report by Rachel Stohl available online at [armscontrol.org](http://armscontrol.org)

<sup>59</sup> CDI Report 2007 Azerbaijan

<sup>60</sup> State Department Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2007 Azerbaijan

of these country's human rights abuses through continued aid, the U.S. government, in effect, utilizes a policy of "extending" the idea of exceptionalism to fellow allies in the War on Terror. The rights abuses of these countries, in the eyes of the United States, become acceptable, just as they are perceived when committed by the U.S. itself, because of the overriding stated goal of eliminating the world's terrorist threat. At the same time however, this policy proves extremely hypocritical in light of the stated aims to spread human rights and ensure universal human dignity.

In further conceptualizing the idea of "extended exceptionalism" as a vital component of the U.S. War on Terror, it is useful to examine the case of the Moro Conflict on the island of Mindanao in the Southern Philippines. In this example one can identify all components of the War on Terror exceptionalist discursive framework identified above, and likewise, it is possible to clearly identify the effect of the War on Terror on the conflict itself, as well as, and perhaps more importantly, on the human rights deficit existing on the island and encouraged by these factors. The conflict between Muslim Moro separatist groups and the heavily Christian dominated Filipino government forces is what can accurately be termed a long running conflict. According to a U.S. State Department report on religious freedoms in the Philippines, "Historically, Muslims have been alienated socially from the Christian majority, and some ethnic and cultural discrimination against Muslims has been recorded" (2007). This has led to frequent instances of open, violent conflict and currently as many as four Muslim insurgent groups<sup>61</sup> operate against government forces on the island. This in turn has led to an increased presence of government troops on the island to insure control, but at the same time, these combined elements have greatly impacted the stats of human rights existing on Mindanao. In a special report devoted specifically to this conflict, Amnesty International estimates that more than "610,000 [people] had fled their homes in the last two months of fighting..." (October 2008) Besides the massive number of IDP's as a result of the conflict, the largely Muslim displaced population faces

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<sup>61</sup> Moro Islamic Liberation Front, Moro National Liberation Front, Abu Sayyaf Group, and the Indonesian organization Jemaah Islamiyah. *Council on Foreign Relations Report "Terrorism Havens: Philippines" (June 2008)*



increased threat from the military. This same report outlines cases where the army specifically threatens clearly identifiable Muslim citizens, subjecting them to humiliation and threatening bodily harm.<sup>62</sup>

The Amnesty report is particularly interesting in light of the most recent UN Universal Periodic Review for the Philippines in which it is stated that “the Government... placed the highest priority on the promotion and protection of the right of all Filipinos to live their lives free from fear and free to achieve full potential.” Likewise, other human rights reporting organizations cite the failure on the part of the Government of the Philippines to take serious measures to promote human rights in their country. The annual Human Rights Watch UPR notes in regard to the human rights offices in the Government of the Philippines that they, “have done much to advertise the government’s rather cosmetic measures taken on the issue of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances, but have done little to help bring the perpetrators to justice” (HRW 2008). This apparent contradiction in reporting creates many questions, but perhaps most importantly, how then, is this obvious lack of human rights protection and implementation in the Philippines justified by the Government?

An answer to this question can be surmised by examining the relationship between the U.S. government and the government of the Philippines. President Bush, in a visit with President Arroyo remarked, “In the war on terror, the US-Philippines military alliance is a rock of stability in the Pacific,”<sup>63</sup> signaling both a strategic relationship, but also defining the Philippines as a satellite state in the War on Terror alliance. It should be noted that the Philippines receives a great deal of military aid from the U.S. government in order to fight terror.<sup>64</sup> Interestingly enough, if one is to examine the major War on Terror exceptionalist discourses from earlier, it is easy to see this combination existent in the discourses presented by the Filipino Government.

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<sup>62</sup> Amnesty International 2008 “Shattered Peace in Mindanao: The Human Cost of Conflict in the Philippines” pg. 25

<sup>63</sup> As reported by The Sydney Morning Herald, October 2003

<sup>64</sup> See CDI Report concerning U.S. arms exports and assistance to Philippines

Regarding the use of religion in creating an exceptionalist discourse, one can again turn to reports such as that by Amnesty International above in which Christian Filipino troops are seen to act in discriminatory and threatening ways towards Muslim segments of Filipino society. As these actions seem to be condoned through the government's silence on the matter, one might interpret them as examples of a powerful performative discourse in which the government of the Philippines displays its strength and power over a people that it sees as apart from itself. In allying itself with the United States, the government of the Philippines can recognize and apply the religious discourses present in the civil religious discourses of the Bush Administration, thus giving legitimization and justification for otherwise illegal actions. In considering the effect of a human rights discourse, this is easily discerned in the government's claims to be working towards "A Philippine Society where the dignity, human rights and fundamental freedoms of all persons are enjoyed and respected, protected, promoted and fulfilled by all with a government committed to human rights standards, norms and practices."<sup>65</sup> Clearly this is in contrast to the reality of the situation, though by identifying itself with the higher aim of pursuing human rights, and likewise fighting a war against those it would claim seek to hinder that realization, the government is able to again legitimize its actions, no matter how deplorable. Finally, and most importantly, is the utilization of a discourse of exceptionalism as modeled after that used by the U.S. government under its War on Terror. Like its bigger brother, the government of the Philippines has also enacted a "Human Security Act" that it uses as justification in carrying out actions against suspected "terrorists." As Human Rights Watch reports, "The vague language of the Human Security Act invites the government to misuse it."<sup>66</sup> In light of these three factors, and in conjunction with the Filipino-U.S. military relationship, it could be surmised that the overall War on Terror discourse of exception has been

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<sup>65</sup> As stated in the vision statement of the Human Rights Commission of the Philippines.

<sup>66</sup> "Philippines: New Terrorism Law Puts Rights at Risk (HRW July 2007)"

extended by the U.S. and at the same time, co-opted by the Philippines government.<sup>67</sup>

Through critical analysis of reality versus rhetoric in the War on Terror, it becomes clear that three primary discourses, that of religion, human rights, and exceptionalism, work in conjunction to formulate an overall master War on Terror exceptionalist discourse which is then used in the justification and legitimization of illegal acts carried out in the name of fighting terrorism. At the same time it has been shown that as a mechanism for gaining partners, or at least international support for it's war, the U.S. government under the Bush Administration has utilized this overarching exceptionalist discourse as a bargaining chip whereby governments with severe human rights deficits<sup>68</sup> may legitimize, and if necessary hide their illegal actions through partnership in the War on Terror. That which might otherwise be termed atrocity, is instead permitted as the allowance of 'necessary evil' in the fight against the perceived 'greater evil' of terrorism.

## Chapter 5 – The Taliban

In considering the discursive framework presented in the previous chapter, the war in Afghanistan as conducted by the United States, can be seen to utilize the framing of the Taliban in order to emphasize the 'correctness' of the War on Terror, and further, to legitimize the invasion and occupation of that country. The label of 'atrocity' is frequently used in reference to the Taliban in both official government statements, as well as in news media reporting. In a February 2008 report, the British Newspaper, The Independent ran a story, which read,

*"The carnage was savage even by the bloody standards of the spiralling and vicious violence in Afghanistan. More than 80 people watching a dog fight on the*

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<sup>67</sup> Further study in regards to this topic might reveal more significant and interesting linkages.

<sup>68</sup> It's important to once again underscore here that the "human rights record" of the United States is anything but pristine. An internet search of abuses yields a great deal of information to this regard.

*outskirts of Kandahar were killed yesterday when a suicide attacker detonated his bomb, causing the worst atrocity in Afghanistan since the ousting of the Taliban in 2001."*

(Gereshk, The Independent, 2009)

In this example, one can identify numerous discursive attempts to highlight a constructed dichotomy between legitimate and atrocious violence. First, there is the initial sentence that portrays the country of Afghanistan as "savage," "bloody," and "vicious." By calling this the "worst atrocity since the ousting of the Taliban," the article would seem to attempt to imply that before the invasion by Western forces, the country was an even more savage and vicious place. This rhetorical framing, in the context of previous discussions in this study, can be seen to subconsciously juxtapose the civilized order and 'legitimate' violence of the West, with a criminalized conception of militant fighters, and the violence used by them, in Afghanistan. Another article, reported in 2003 by the same Newspaper, states,

*"Afghans are not easily shocked. Repeated invasion, decades of civil war and centuries of poverty harden a place. Yet the latest atrocity to hit this nation was stunningly brutal, even by their dismal standards...They told their victims that they were Taliban, supporters of the Islamist regime that the Americans sought to destroy after the twin towers of New York's World Trade Centre were brought crashing down two years ago."*

Again in this second example, one can identify the same framing of a civilized world vs. the uncivilized world, and the 'atrocious violence' that is exercised by the fighters there. In this example, the article would seem to connect the term 'atrocity,' and the phrase 'stunningly brutal' with the Taliban and at the same time, once again juxtapose this with an image of order and civilization, one that was violated, through the description of the World Trade Center.

Thanks to Google.com, one can see a timeline of the frequency of a word or phrase in news stories. A search of Taliban Atrocity<sup>69</sup> for all dates in news stories provides very interesting results in the context of this study. Prior to 2001, there

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<sup>69</sup> This search over *All Dates* results in 8,800 stories with the term "Taliban Atrocity." The search figure mentioned earlier refers to a normal Google search of the term while this refers only to those found through a Google News Search.

appears to be very little mention of either the Taliban, or the group in connection with atrocity. In 2001, however, there is a dramatic spike in results, which continues at a somewhat more subdued level in 2002, and then levels out at a lesser, but continuous rate through 2007. When one looks closer at this data, an interesting occurrence can be noted. Stories prior to November, 2001 are nearly non-existent, though in September, they begin to rise, by October they seem to be reported at a feverish pitch relative to previous time periods, and this trend then appears to continue through to the end of the 2001 calendar year. Examining the stories reported at this time proves even more interesting. Tony Blair, as reported in *The Independent* states that the “Taliban ‘chose terror’ (October 2001) and the *Washington Post* writes that, “anarchy and atrocity” (October 2001) must be prevented in Afghanistan. On the day of the initial bombings of Afghanistan preceding the land invasion, *USA Today*, reported, quoting former Pakistani President Musharraf, says, “We should not allow the kind of atrocities that prevailed in Afghanistan to return” (October 2001). Perhaps most interesting in these examples is the clear framing of a dichotomy between a civilized and uncivilized world. In the above examples, the labels of atrocity and terrorist are used in conjunction with this frame to attempt to present the image of a dire necessity for the use of sanctioned violence, represented by military action by the U.S. and its allies, against the Taliban.

This media blitz of atrocity labeling occurred at the same time that the Taliban began claiming that U.S. bombs had “killed hundreds of Afghan civilians” (October 2001). On November 23, a month after initial U.S. bombings of the country, The U.S. Government released a report detailing atrocities committed by the Taliban not only in recent times, but as far back as 1996, detailing massacres of hundreds of civilians by the Taliban in an attempt to, as “Jim Wilkinson, White House deputy director” said, “highlight their vision so the whole world can see just how disturbing it is” (Wallace 2001). In this example, one can read the framing of Taliban atrocities in order to justify any potential ‘atrocities,’ instead referred to as “collateral

damage,” that may have occurred as a result of the U.S. bombing campaign, such as the ‘accidental’<sup>70</sup> bombing of civilians.

Mary Anne Franks, in discussing the Taliban, mirrors previous discussions given in this study. She remarks that “America’s patriotic self-identity allows for no similarity with the enemy; it is a rhetoric of absolute contrast, an archetypal civilization-versus-barbarism construction” (Franks, 2003, 137). In these examples, it is possible to identify this construction in the use of the atrocity label to portray the criminality of the Taliban in contrast to the ‘sanitizing’ and sanctioned violence of the United States. It is interesting to note that prior to the September 11 attacks and the identification between the Taliban and the al-Qaeda soldiers that they were supposedly hiding, the Taliban received little attention for their human rights abuses and ‘atrocities’ in the world news media. Franks, writing on the position of women in Afghanistan, notes, “Western (especially feminist) outrage against what was perceived to be the Taliban’s primitive disregard for basic human rights and an archaic devaluation of women was often criticized in the name of multiculturalism. Many Muslims, for example, protested against what they saw as a Western, especially American, assumption of moral and cultural superiority.” (Franks, 2003, 141) She goes on to say, however, that “However, while multicultural debates did check protest practices before September 11, Western condemnation of its oppression of women after September 11 has become almost unanimous. A superficial defense of “multiculturalism” is apparently less sustainable when issues of so-called national security are at stake” (ibid.). Here, atrocity’s use as a label in the discursive portrayal of the Taliban can be clearly seen. The need to portray the enemy as inhuman in order to justify U.S. invasion led to the widespread application

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<sup>70</sup> An infamous example of such is the bombing of an Afghan wedding party. The BBC reported on 1 July 2002, that “Reports from Afghanistan say the United States air force has mistakenly bombed a village wedding party, killing many of the guests.” The report quotes a US military spokesman, who says “At least one bomb was errant, we don’t know where it fell.” (BBC, July 2002) Another incident reported by The Independent cites “Catastrophic Error” in the accidental “Carpet bombing” of a town which resulted in the deaths of 150 innocent persons. Here there is no mention of atrocity, but instead, this incident is simply the sad side effect of sanctioned violence, ‘collateral damage.’ (The Independent, November 2001)

of the atrocity label, alongside that of the Taliban label, in order to criminalize the Taliban and construct a 'need' to utilize sanctioned violence against them.

Contrary to this framing, a 2008 Internet documentary by the Canadian Newspaper Globe and Mail, titled "Talking with the Taliban," shows the constructed nature of this label, and perhaps more interesting, allows for an analysis into the similarities in discourses presented by the United States and the Taliban. The documentary, in addition to its own analysis, provides raw interview footage and translation with actual Taliban fighters. Prior to this chapter, the study has put forth theoretical discussion on the construction of the atrocity label, as well as the construction of evil/good framing in the War on Terror. Using the interviews provided freely by Globe and Mail, the study now compares responses to interview questions related to why one chooses to fight with the Taliban against the non-Muslims with the rhetoric concerning the Taliban espoused by the United States and Allied Western governments under the War on Terror.

When one begins to watch the raw interview footage, it becomes clear that the rationale for joining the Taliban is not so very different from the rationale used by the United States in invading Afghanistan in 2001 following the 11 September attacks of that same year. In an address to the nation on 20 September 2001, President Bush explains that the Taliban must hand over Al-Qaeda operatives to the United States, "or they will share their fate" (2001, National Address). At this point in time, it would appear that the Taliban themselves are not yet of great interest to the United States, but rather, the U.S. simply wishes to punish the Al-Qaeda operatives that it claims are responsible for the World Trade Center attacks. This commentary is elaborated upon as Bush explains that, "These terrorists kill not merely to end lives, but to disrupt and end our way of life. With every atrocity, they hope that America grows fearful..." (ibid.) The connection made here is between the committing of atrocity and those who want to destroy our way of life. Those who commit atrocities want to destroy *our* way of life. By this logic, *we* never commit atrocities because *we* do not want to destroy our own way of life. Atrocity as discussed earlier, is criminalized and relegated to the action of the enemy figure, or 'the other.' While this does not necessarily include the Taliban at the time, the

Taliban effectively become the 'evil other' alongside Al-Qaeda when they refuse to bend to the will of the United States, thus acquiring the label of atrocity.

The two major discourses one may identify here are:

- 1.) That of defending the homeland against invading forces
  - a. (includes fighting to avenge those killed in attacks on the homeland)
- 2.) Trying to preserve a way of life

Conversely, when one examines the rhetoric conveyed by Taliban fighters themselves, the lines, as stated by the United States, seem to become blurred. In the interviews, Taliban fighters are asked a series of questions. One question of interest here asks why one stopped their previous work to join the Taliban. One fighter, who says that he used to be a shepherd before joining the Taliban, responds to this question by saying that "Because the non-Muslims came and want to destroy our Islam."<sup>71</sup> Another, previously a farmer, says, "Foreign troops came to Afghanistan and killed many innocent people and elders and bombed them"<sup>72</sup> and that this is the reason he fights with the Taliban. Two others both state that they began fighting "because the non-Muslims came"<sup>73</sup> and that because "non-Muslims have killed our people and children."<sup>74</sup> The interviews continue in the same fashion in ten-minute intervals with most respondents stating a motivation to fight because they must defend their homeland against invading forces and that they see the attack by the non-Muslims (U.S. and allied countries) as trying to destroy their way of life (Islam).

The implication of this is that the discourses presented under the Bush administration sought to draw upon the same justificatory elements as those used by the Taliban in their fight against the invading forces. Once one identifies these

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<sup>71</sup> Interview 16, Talking with the Taliban, accessed 5 May 2009

<sup>72</sup> Interview 10, Talking with the Taliban, accessed 5 May 2009

<sup>73</sup> Interview 42, Talking with the Taliban, accessed 5 May 2009

<sup>74</sup> Interview 29, Talking with the Taliban, accessed 5 May 2009



concurrent discursive strategies, the previous meaning attachments applied to each become slightly erroneous, and as such, the framing of good/evil violence used by good/evil actors loses the significance that it once may have had. The 11 September attacks are explained of as atrocity and thus reason to fight, while the bombing of an Afghan village can likewise be seen, from the opposite point of view of those on the receiving end, as the same in both significance and legitimizing capability.

In considering the case studies of the War on Terror and the Taliban, it is possible to see the label of atrocity as a component in the framing of a worldview that portrays a civilized society consisting of the United States and its allies in juxtaposition to a barbaric and criminalized world constructed from a perceived enemy other. The construction of the War on Terror discourse is shown to legitimize and sanction violence exercised by the United States and at the same time, to criminalize violence against or not in line with that of the United States. The Taliban, likewise, are portrayed as both criminal through the labels of terrorist and atrocity, especially as illustrated following the 11 September attacks in the United States in the buildup for the invasion of Afghanistan. While the killing of civilians by the United States, accidental or not, is portrayed as unavoidable, and regrettable, collateral damage, when civilians are killed by the Taliban, it is portrayed as atrocity. In the end, this study understands that the violence exercised by both sides is the same in regards to its negative effects, and thus the difference, once again, is shown to be in the labeling of the violent act as either sanctioned or criminal violence. In the last chapter, the case studies of Fallujah and Haditha will be explored in order to further illustrate the use of the constructed atrocity label under the George W. Bush War on Terror.

## **Chapter 6 – Fallujah and Haditha**

Returning to the earlier discussion of Fallujah put forth in the introduction of this study, one can now begin to answer the question of “why are violent actions

with equally destructive and horrible effects, framed in such vastly different ways as 'heroic' versus 'cowardly' and some, through the labeling of 'atrocities,' while others are instead a 'response' to atrocities." As put forth in this study, the answer lies in the social significance of atrocities, and in turn, its use in labeling violent acts as criminal in juxtaposition to the framing of violent acts perpetrated by the U.S. as sanctioned and necessary. As will be illustrated in this chapter through video and news evidence, the battle of Fallujah was in a greater sense, not a battle of soldiers on the ground, but a battle to frame the United States as a rescuing force for the people of Fallujah held captive by 'terrorist' and insurgent forces. This is shown in a quote by US Marine general John Sattler, who, in the run up to the U.S. ground invasion of the city, gave a speech to his troops, saying, "This town's being held hostage by mugs, thugs, murders and intimidators. All they need is for us to give them the opportunity to break the back of that intimidation" (Mathaba, 2009). Likewise, three days into the fighting in Fallujah, President Bush was quoted, saying, "US commanders 'will take whatever action is necessary to secure Fallujah on behalf of the Iraqi people'" (America.gov, 2004) The battle was similarly framed as necessary to secure the country in anticipation of upcoming elections which would "help the Iraqi people realize a free and peaceful society" (Ibid.). In this, it is possible to identify the framing of a battle for a 'civilized world,' represented through the image of a fledgling democratic election needing the protection of the United States, and juxtaposed to the barbarity of a militant Fallujah.

The battle of Fallujah, as it was discovered over a period of time,<sup>75</sup> was perhaps not the honorable enterprise that it had been so fervently portrayed as in the days preceding the fighting and during the height of the battle. Dahr Jamail, an independent journalist in the Middle East writes of the "indiscriminate killings" of civilians "by US forces during the peak of fighting" (2004). In his report, he quotes an Iraqi Civilian who says, "I saw dead bodies on the ground and nobody could bury

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<sup>75</sup> Reporting of the battle of Fallujah remains murky and though a great deal of information exists on possible U.S. crimes against civilians in Fallujah, it is not absolutely possible to prove them. Videos, however, would seem to suggest that chemical weapons were in fact used on militants and civilians alike in Fallujah, just as certain reports outlined above would point to the killing of civilians by U.S. troops.

them because of the American snipers. The Americans were dropping some of the bodies into the Euphrates near Fallujah” (ibid.). Another person interviewed “said he had witnessed the shooting of civilians who were waving white flags while they tried to escape the city. “They shot women and old men in the streets,” he said. “Then they shot anyone who tried to get their bodies” (ibid.). It would appear, that this violence is acceptable and justifiable in the case of the United State’s fight to save the Iraqi people from terrorists, yet the killing of innocent civilians by Iraqi ‘insurgents’ is portrayed as atrocity. As Madeleine Bunting notes in discussing Fallujah, “The reality is that a city can never be adequately described as a “militants’ stronghold”. It’s a label designed to stiffen the heart of a soldier, but it is blinding us, the democracies that have inflicted this war, to the consequences of our actions” (2004). In this, one can once again identify the battle to frame Fallujah as a necessary battle, one that pits the good, sanctioned violence of the United States against the atrocious, criminalized violence of the insurgents and terrorists. Unfortunately, for those civilians caught in the middle of this discursive and rhetorical melee, the violence is all the same in its destructive, irreversible effect.

Returning to the example from the introduction of this research, a streaming video available online shows supposed images of Iraqis caught in the bombing of the second siege of Fallujah.<sup>76</sup> Many have burn marks as described in witness accounts that would seem to suggest the use of illegal chemical weapons such as Phosphorous, or ones with similar effect. Clearly, the phosphorous weapons were not used simply for “illumination purposes,” as stated in the report by the U.S. Government. The point I wish to make here is two fold. First, it should seem clear at this point that the term atrocity, if one is to understand it as used by the U.S. Government to depict violent acts perpetrated by the other, the word can equally be used to describe the violence exercised by the U.S. in the battle of Fallujah. While it is obviously difficult to confirm the truthful extent of these claims due to the heavy

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<sup>76</sup> This video is titled “The Massacre of Fallujah, Iraq” and is available from [//www.dailymotion.com/video/x5axbm\\_the-massacre-of-fallujah-iraq\\_news](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x5axbm_the-massacre-of-fallujah-iraq_news). The term ‘second siege of Fallujah’ refers to the second effort by the U.S. military to take the city. The first attempt was met with defeat.

silence placed on the media<sup>77</sup> in reporting on the battle itself, the indiscriminate killing of civilians, the wanton destruction of homes, and the use of outlawed phosphorous weapons could lead one to apply that same label of atrocity to the actions of the United States. Of course, this is not what occurs, however. In my second point, this example further underscores the construction and utilization of 'atrocity,' through the significance it holds and through which it is codified in society, as a label to frame the violence of the other as 'evil' or 'atrocious' in contrast to the violence sanctioned by U.S. society which is reinforced as 'good,' 'necessary,' and in pursuit of bringing 'security' to the Iraqi people.

Expanding on this theme, one can look to the Iraqi city of Haditha for further example in which the label of atrocity might very well be applied to the actions of the United States, despite the framing of atrocity as a characteristic of the enemy. Disturbingly in this case study, the actions of U.S. soldiers at Haditha are not so important in relation to legal decisions made in the United States following what was described by the Pentagon as the unprovoked killing of 24 innocent Iraqi civilians by U.S. Marines in the town of Haditha (CNN 2006). Verily, other reports of the operation "claimed that U.S. snipers shot anyone in the streets for days on end" (ProjectCensored 2005) and CNN reported on the massacre, that "Witnesses to the slaying of 24 Iraqi civilians by U.S. Marines in the western town of Haditha say the Americans shot men, women and children at close range in retaliation for the death of a Marine lance corporal in a roadside bombing" (Knickmeyer 2006).

The level of violence at Haditha, at least in so far as it was reported, appears to have been generally conceded in both media and governmental portrayal, as unnecessary and excessive in the level of violence perpetrated against civilians by U.S. troops. The incident was largely portrayed in reminiscence of the Mai Lai Massacre that occurred during the US war in Vietnam.<sup>78</sup> In connecting these events,

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<sup>77</sup> As ProjectCensored writes, "Abdel Hamid Salim, spokesman for the Iraqi Red Crescent in Baghdad, told Inter Press Service that none of their relief teams had been allowed into Fallujah three weeks after the invasion. Salim declared that "there is still heavy fighting in Fallujah. And the Americans won't let us in so we can help people." (2005)

<sup>78</sup>As an example of such, Martin Shaw writes "a thread of degenerate war and military impunity links atrocities in the Vietnam and Iraq conflicts" in his article titled "My Lai to

the social significance of the Haditha killings can clearly be seen in that the Mai Lai massacre is often discussed as a dark moment in America's military history. The fact that the Pentagon stated the massacre of civilians, and further, that these troops were put on trial<sup>79</sup> in the United States should have signaled at a sense of justice on the part of the United States. To do so would be, verily, to punish 'atrocities,' thus reinforcing the societal construction of 'atrocities' as belonging to the criminal enemy and in opposition to the legitimacy of violence as exercised by the U.S. As the trial played out daily through newspapers around the world, it became clear that not only would many of the 8 Marines charged with murder have their cases dropped, but that the media portrayal of the event was beginning to shift, showing a clear effort to repaint the incident as another unfortunate, but necessary side effect of the fight to save the Iraqi people. On 19 October, 2007, the Wall Street Journal wrote a story under the title "What Happened at Haditha: The Massacre that wasn't, and it's political exploitation" with which it opens, "The incident at Haditha--or the massacre, as it is often called--is due for a wholesale rethinking" (Wall Street Journal, 2007). Then, on 4 January, 2008, the Washington Post reported that "the Marine Corps [had] decided that none of the Marines involved in the incident [would] be charged with murder" (White 2008). In considering the implications of this decision, it becomes clear that what is now officially referred to euphemistically as 'an incident' bears the same hallmarks as the case of Fallujah. The dismissal of murder charges in the Haditha case can be seen to be more or less a reinforcement of the idea of sanctioned violence as exercised by the United States under the War on Terror. That is, so long as it is violence perpetrated by "us," it is acceptable and necessary, but when that violence occurs at the hands of the enemy, then it is an 'atrocities.'

In both of these case studies is it possible to see the portrayal of US troops who are, to use the commonly heard phrase, 'just trying to do their job,' a characteristic

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Haditha."(2008) The Boston Globe also ran a story in March 2006 titled "Haditha killings recall Vietnam's Mai Lai."

<sup>79</sup> Oliver Duff and Jerome Taylor write on 31 May 2006 that "US Marines will be court-martialed over the massacre..."(The Independent, 2006).

which is honored on the Fourth of July in the United States for their dedication of life for the good of the country. At the same time, one may find it difficult to swallow the portrayal of these events in the context of the portrayal of other events in the War on Terror, perpetrated by those labeled as terrorists or insurgents, as acts of 'atrocities.' The violence in either case, whether perpetrated by the United States or by one of its many enemies, should be seen as one in the same, and likewise, the framing of violence and violent actors through discourse and rhetoric should be recognized and challenged. As illustrated in all of the case studies of The War on Terror, the Taliban, and the last two of Fallujah and Haditha, the role of the atrocity label in the legitimization of violence and conflict framing is very powerful indeed. The social significance of the word, 'atrocity' allows for its use in justifying violence on behalf of society as the complete polar opposite of that which is termed atrocity. In the case of Fallujah and Haditha, it can be seen that acts, which some actually do call atrocities, are nonetheless referred to using language that would seek to minimize the emphasis on the potential severity or illegality of the violent act as exercised by the United States, and instead place emphasis on the heroic acts of U.S. troops in defending the world from 'terrorism.'

## **Conclusion - The Power of Atrocity**

The social significance of the atrocity label, as examined and illustrated in this study, is shown to be a crucial component in the framing of violence, and the perpetrators of violence, in the United States' War on Terror. In function, the atrocity label acts to criminalize violence perpetrated by an enemy other in polar opposition to the violence exercised by the United States, which is thus framed as legitimate and justified in the constructed need to eliminate the threat of atrocity and those who utilize forms of violence categorized as such. The social significance of atrocity has been thus shown, not to exist in the actual act of violence itself, but in

the semiotic construction and meanings attached to the act. This meaning is additionally enhanced through its connection with other social constructs, such as the masculine hero ideal (Whitmer 1997), and the constructed social dichotomy of good and evil (du Pont 2007, Nietzsche 1886). In concluding, this chapter provides a brief review of what has been discussed in the course of the study, as well as adding additional thoughts on both the study and the function and significance of the atrocity label for future research.

Part I of this study introduced a theoretical framework for addressing the theoretical problematique of the significance of the atrocity label within society. Chapter 1 provided a basis for understanding the concepts of genealogy, codification, and the significance of words within society. It was shown that words obtain their contemporary societal meaning through the process of genealogy by which meaning develops according to the meanings assigned to it throughout history. As an example, former forms of punishment, such as beheading and lynching are examined to show that through time, the significance of these acts has changed from means for punishing atrocities, to being of conceived of as atrocities in and of themselves. The actual significance of the act itself in connection with the body, however, is shown to remain the same, thus when an act of violence such as beheading is done, it is seen as an atrocity in the eyes of society.

Building upon these ideas, Chapter 2 explored the social significance of violence and atrocity in the context of sanctioned and criminalized violence. It is shown that atrocity is codified within society as criminalized violence, and then juxtaposed to sanctioned violence, which is that violence exercised by the state on behalf of society. It is here that one can identify the state and the monopoly of legitimate violence (Weber). Chapter 2 also introduces the societal connection between ideas of masculinity in conjunction with violence, where sanctioned violence is represented through the image of the brave, warrior man and criminalized violence is likewise represented as practiced by the weak and cowardly. This is accomplished in part through the application of Edward Said's discussions of "the other" in which Western society seeks to juxtapose a self-perception of the civilized with the perceived uncivilized nature of "the other"

(1978). Additionally, the labeling of atrocity in conjunction with comments about the “weakness” or “cowardliness” of the perpetrators, as in the case of the intentional killing of civilians, is seen as an important component of the social significance of the violent masculinity.

Finally, Chapter 3 builds upon previous discussions to illustrate the discursive reproduction and transmission of social discourse on violence and atrocity through official speech, news media, television, film, and videogames. It is shown that discourses on sanctioned versus criminalized violence, and the legitimization of violence in response to atrocity is a common thread in fictionalized depictions of violence in film, television, and video games. As discussed, all three of these appear to reinforce societal meanings of criminal violence and additionally permit a trivialization of violence itself. This trivialization is shown to work in conjunction with the process of ‘sterilizing’ violence, by which ‘our’ violence, or the violence of society, becomes ‘less violent,’ or ‘clean’ within the mind of society. At the same time, when acts that would otherwise be characterized as atrocity when practiced by ‘the other’ are done through the agents of society, this violence is then represented as regrettable but necessary for securing the safety of society. In short, the discursive portrayal of violence and atrocity is focused primarily on legitimizing the violence practiced by the state on behalf of society.

In Part II of the study, the theoretical framework for understanding the social significance of violence and atrocity was applied to the four separate case studies of the War on Terror, the Taliban, Fallujah, and Haditha.

The War on Terror case study serves to illustrate the discursive framing of legitimate violence as exercised by the United States through a War on Terror master discourse. This discourse is built primarily on the ideas of American exceptionalism, human rights as protected by the United States, and that of a religious discourse which works to frame the United States as representative of “good” in the fight against a constructed “evil.” This “evil” is represented in the War on Terror in the creation of the constant threat of terrorism against the United States and its allies. This chapter illustrates how violence is both sanctioned and criminalized by the United States in the War on Terror.



Conversely, the case study of the Taliban shows how the discourse and rhetoric used in the framing of the Taliban sought to portray the group as criminal through the labels of terrorism and atrocity. This juxtaposition with the sanctioned, “good” violence of the United States is shown to be constructed, in reality, from the same legitimizing rhetoric as that explained by Taliban fighters for their rationale to fight. Likewise, it is shown that the framing of atrocity occurs only in the case of violence perpetrated by the Taliban against civilians, yet violence practiced by the United States, which results in enormous civilian death and injury, is termed “collateral damage.”

Finally, in the case studies of Fallujah and Haditha, it is shown that despite U.S. discourse and rhetoric to the contrary, there is evidence that U.S. troops commit this same “atrocious” violence that is claimed to belong to the terrorist enemy other. This is shown to occur not only at the individual soldier level, as in the massacre at Haditha and the subsequent denial of any guilt in the matter by the U.S. Marines, but also at higher level in potentially illegal phosphorous bombing of Fallujah and subsequent civilian injury and death. Through these case studies, it is illustrated, that for the United States to label a type of violence or violent actor as atrocious in the context of the War on Terror is in reality, an example of constructed fallacy and hypocrisy in that the U.S. practices the same types of violence, possibly at a much greater scale due to the immense capacity of the United States to wage violence, but instead legitimizes these acts in the framing of the enemy other and in constructing a need to practice such acts in order to ensure victory and security in what is otherwise, in the opinion of this study, an unwinnable war.

Though the War on Terror has changed with the recent election of President Obama in January of 2009, the need to address the discourses and rhetoric espoused by the United States in legitimization of violence is still of crucial importance. The effects of the atrocity label as utilized under the Bush Administration will no doubt effect the waging of, and responses to, the War on Terror for many years to come. Efforts at further research would perhaps do well to examine in greater detail the perceptions of atrocity as practiced by the United States and held by peoples labeled as Terrorist. It can be surmised from the “Talking with the Taliban” (Globe and Mail,

2008) interview data that conceptions of what atrocity 'is' depends entirely on which end of the gun, or bomb, one finds him or herself. It is hoped that in conveying the results of this research, greater understanding into the social significance of the atrocity label as a component of the criminalization of violent acts and actors in the War on Terror is gleaned. At the time of writing, there seems to be little hope that this "war" will be finished at any near date. This being the case, it is hoped, with some optimism, that studies such as this will provide impetus for questioning within society concerning the language we use and the significance we attach to that language. The power of language, as shown here, is too great not to be taken seriously, though in the blind acquiescence to the shallow justification of violence, one might question if it is not.

I close this research with a quote by Noam Chomsky, who writes,

*"The world looks very different depending on whether you are holding the lash or whether you are being whipped by it for hundreds of years, very different."*

(Chomsky 2001, 217)

In considering these words, it seems pertinent to consider language as the same, that the meaning of a word has very different significance depending on whether you are doing the framing, and labeling the act, or in turn, being framed and defined by it. In the case of *atrocities*, one might then ask, who will be remembered and defined as such when the War on Terror is simply a passage in the history books?

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